

The Wrong Room

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I begin using men's bathrooms when I'm almost 22, when I'm confident enough about my androgynous appearance to convince myself that I'll be unnoticed in men's bathrooms.

At the Union Square Whole Foods café, where I'm eating with a group of friends, I need to use the toilet. I have a disability that prevents me from learning to stand to pee at urinals like other female-to-male transsexual people often do, so I always sit down. I've been using men's bathrooms in this manner for several months without incident, and I'm in a supposedly gay-friendly neighborhood in a huge city, so I feel very confident today.

I join the line of others waiting to use the men's bathroom. When it's my turn, I walk into the bathroom whose toilet I've often used before. As I walk, the man who was behind me in line stares at me, but I'm not expecting to encounter him again, so I shrug off my passing fear.

There is a long list of unspoken rules governing the use of men's bathrooms, where violations of certain rules can get you beaten up or killed. Two of these rules whose violations are considered most egregious are (1) Do not look at another person while in the bathroom, and (2) Do not speak to another person while in the bathroom. These two rules are not difficult to follow for me as an autistic and socially anxious person.

Upon entering the bathroom, I notice that the toilet stall is occupied. I'm not prepared for that. I freeze in the middle of the room and stare at the locked stall, the only stall in the room. The man who was using the urinal—the only urinal—when I entered exits, and the man who stared at me enters. He violates the two cardinal rules of men's bathrooms, ones whose violations inspire terror in any current patron. He looks at me. He speaks to me.

“This is the boys' bathroom.”

I have one of those deer-in-the-headlights moments where my breath catches in my throat and all my muscles freeze. I don't respond. For a second, I can't breathe.

He then utters a variation of the one sentence that has likely preceded the countless assaults and murders of trans people that occur in public bathrooms.

“You don’t belong here.”

I try not to imagine all the bruised and bloody ways this could end. I want to be unharmed. I want at least to live. I decide that compliance is safest.

I decide, like many trans people before me have decided, that at this moment, it is not possible to ask for respect if the choice is between my asking for respect and my survival. He makes me think that I should wait until my entire culture is okay with people like me before I think about using a bathroom that doesn’t say the wrong gender on its door. He makes me believe that respect is something I don’t deserve. He makes me wonder if my voice is too high, my face too smooth, my hands too small, my hips too wide, for him to respect me as the gender which I have so clearly stated I am by walking into this bathroom.

I manage to squeak, “Okay.” I slip out of the bathroom unscathed, at least physically.

I use the women’s bathroom that day. I have never not been aware of the times when I have had to use women’s bathrooms in order to avoid threats of violence and harassment. Every time I use women’s bathrooms, I trade the possibility of being respected for an assurance of physical safety and an assurance of misgendering. Every time I enter a men’s bathroom now, even at my university, I enter and exit quickly. I am careful to lock the stall door tightly. I never stand in the middle of the room to wait for a stall to be free. If there is a person in the men’s bathroom already, I pretend that I’ve mistakenly entered the wrong room. Asking for respect of my gender identity in men’s bathrooms when a person does not grant it to me immediately is too dangerous. But none of that is apparent to me yet, as I step back into the brightly lit Whole Foods café, still in need of a toilet. The only thing immediately clear to me is that this won’t be the last time I am told that I’m in the wrong room.