

Viktor's Marriage

Emil is on a plane, seated in 18A, accompanied by a woman in the middle seat carrying a DKNY purse with a chain strap and a buff man in the aisle seat wearing a white tank-top. The moment the buff man sat, Emil smelled a strong perfume and the woman between them coughed.

The buff man stands up and opens the overhead compartment with both hands, exposing his shaved armpits. The woman with the DKNY purse coughs again. Emil notices a tattoo of a nude man holding up an apple, centered on the buff man's neck; the Adam's apple. While he is standing, the woman with the DKNY purse quickly takes a picture of herself, opens an empty WhatsApp group chat titled "Familia" and sends it there. The buff man takes a pair of over-ear headphones from his bag and sits back. It is announced that boarding is complete. All in-flight entertainment displays simultaneously start playing the safety instructions video. Emil falls asleep and wakes up once the plane has already landed. His next flight is to Brussels, scheduled for 6 in the morning, and it's 2:20 now. He bought the ticket yesterday; there were no direct flights. He doesn't have a return ticket yet and plans to borrow money for it later.

Four days ago he found out that Viktor had got married—to a man shorter than Viktor, with a peculiar name, who has a registered web domain with his surname in it. The wedding took place in New York, where, according to his personal website, Viktor's husband is based, but they came to Brussels, where Viktor resides, yesterday. The news broke in the middle of a family vacation, during dinner at a beach restaurant under a thatched roof where Emil's father insisted on going to find the real octopus instead of the octopus served at the hotel restaurant, the taste of which he ruthlessly compared to that of a roasted foam kickboard. While listening to his mother retelling the conflict she witnessed between beach volleyball players, Emil got bored, took his phone and immediately stumbled upon a sequence of Instagram stories documenting Viktor's unforeseen wedding. The exchange of the rings, followed by a tender kiss, was captured in a video. Emil replayed it several times, then gave away his portion of the octopus.

The news significantly affected the remainder of the vacation. He couldn't help contemplating Viktor's marriage. As the thoughts set off by the news grew stronger, he felt increasingly confused and indignant. The day after the wedding, he got drunk

while sunbathing with his sister near the hotel swimming pool and almost brought up the topic with her, but was interrupted by a man gripping an inflatable ball, with a portrait of two children tattooed on his right shoulder, asking if Emil knew the length of the pool. A pragmatic advantage might be the primary reason Viktor got married. Emil looked through the screenshots of the wedding. The audience was quite homogeneous, the newlyweds seemed to belong to the same social class. There was no indication of the affair being a quick arrangement to simplify something for either of them, to resolve legal issues of some kind; it was a private wedding held in a church with a priest. Afterwards there was a small house party. Someone—Viktor or his husband—had spent a substantial amount of time planning the ceremony and picking designs for the invitation letters. It was clear that the wedding had been a planned event, with guests and a buffet, a celebration of two people in love.

The pool was gradually becoming crowded with people willing to play ball, drawn by the enthusiastic calls of the man with the tattoo of his children. Emil felt a gentle tapping of his sister's fingernails on his elbow and turned his head at her. She yawned and said she was going to take a nap. He leaned back. It is not a marriage of convenience. Viktor is not an independent and complete person, a person who does not necessitate an appendage, but rather a person who considered getting married, who, on his own initiative, decided to get married, and to a man. Before coming to this decision, he had dedicated a certain amount of time and attention to observing men from a marriage standpoint, picturing them as his husbands.

The ball game soon began, as the water started splashing onto Emil's toes. He rose from a sun lounger, finding the entire area of the pool uniformly occupied; it had also become significantly louder. He thought a swim in the sea might help distract him, handed the empty glasses to a hotel cleaner passing by, adjusted his sister's umbrella and left.

At the beach he found his mother and her best friend, whom they traditionally invite to every family vacation, lying face down under umbrellas. On a beach table between them were two plastic cups and two books, one piled on top of the other. His mother's best friend raised her head when Emil appeared, put her index finger to her lips, and shortly afterward his mother's muffled voice was heard, asking who had come. After learning it was him, with her head remaining buried in the towel, she found her beach bag by touch, dragged it through the sand, took out a lotion in an orange bottle and stretched her

hand towards Emil, instructing him to reapply the sunscreen. He sprayed each shoulder once, spread the lotion with a few quick strokes and rubbed the remaining lotion onto his nose. His mother's best friend, watching his careless rubbing, clicked her tongue and offered to apply sunscreen to his back. He thanked her, shook his head and went towards the water.

He swam a dozen meters away from the shore and dipped his head. The first time his mother's best friend was invited to their family vacation was after she divorced her husband of over 15 years, during Emil's last year in high school. His mother then insisted they had no right to abandon a family friend at such a terrible time. That first time, one thing his mother's best friend said was, "I have lost the most precious thing I was ever given." During their vacation last year, she concluded, "The greatest tragedy of my life was not getting divorced sooner."

Emil is 4 months younger than Viktor, taller than him; one has wavy hair and grey eyes, the other has straight hair and dark eyes. They have only met once. He was introduced to Viktor a few years ago at a birthday party of a mutual friend. They sat opposite each other at a table, had an engaging conversation, and Viktor's effortless intellectual charm inspired a strong liking in Emil — respectful and brotherly. Since then he has paid occasional but nonetheless special attention to the views Viktor expresses publicly and the choices Viktor makes.

At dinner the day after the wedding, Emil figured the proper way to find an explanation for Viktor's decision to get married was to go to Brussels, meet Viktor and test his assumptions firsthand; the idea he considered impetuous but worthy. He decided to contact Viktor when already in Brussels.

In the airport dining area, where Emil is looking for a place with free Wi-Fi, he is approached by a woman asking him to help her change the SIM card in her phone. They come to the nearest restaurant and sit next to each other on the leather banquette. She twirls a broken toothpick in her hands. "A stress it was," she exhales. "I've been walking through this huge, endless airport, disoriented, praying to meet someone who would help me," she says. He can smell her breath, she can smell his. "And the universe has listened, you see? The universe has sent you to me." He turns on her phone with a different SIM card installed, and notifications start popping up on the screen. She thanks him, they wish each other a nice flight, and she leaves.

Looking around, he realizes the place is a steakhouse. A laminated one-page menu is tucked into a napkin holder. He pulls it out and looks for the cheapest dessert, which happens to be a brownie with ice cream on top. He calls for a waiter, orders a brownie and an espresso and asks for the Wi-Fi password. “Gimme the taste” is carved into the wood paneling of a nearby wall. In a few minutes the waiter brings the order, a sticky note with the Wi-Fi password is attached to the plate. Emil takes a piece of brownie. A man with his arm in a cast enters the restaurant and sits two tables away from Emil. At the wedding, Viktor’s husband had his leg in a cast and probably blamed himself for the accident that had happened too late to reschedule everything, feeling sorry about the way they would look in the wedding photographs because of him and his carelessness. Viktor, Emil presumes, was cheering him up.

The obnoxious, pathetic idea of calling another man a husband; Viktor’s wedding is an acknowledgment of his non-independence, an indication of an inability to reach his goals entirely by himself. In his perception there exists a man who provides strength in achieving a particular quality of life and towards whom he has such strong feelings it is essential to make a pact to relabel each other and establish a documented household. The desired quality of life is difficult or even impossible to achieve out of wedlock, as Viktor seemingly believes. The marriage implies that Viktor and his husband are willing to, if they have not already, set up a family budget and occupy a rented or co-owned apartment in Brussels or New York, or arrange their lives between two continents. They might want to have children and might have a rough plan for making it happen: by adopting a child or signing an agreement with a familiar or unfamiliar woman to serve as a surrogate mother. They might have an approximate idea of the number of children they want, some might be conceived using Viktor’s sperm and others using his husband’s. They presumably agreed that technical difficulties associated with childbirth for same-sex couples are worth the effort. Although before asking Viktor in person one cannot claim this is true, which is why it is important to see him, since they might not want to have children and consider technical difficulties not worth the effort, in any case Viktor and his husband liked the life their marriage introduces them to. All of the alternatives from the procreational perspective were rejected. Instead of marrying a woman, becoming a father, raising children with this woman, separating after all of children came of age and then starting a relationship with a man, Viktor has made a choice in favour of a different trajectory. He decided he would

not waste his years on a deceitful marriage, will not make an innocent woman's life an abyss of unhappiness, will disappoint neither her, nor their children. An honest agreement with a female friend to conceive children and raise them in a co-parenting arrangement was rejected as well. Another plan Viktor had found unpromising was becoming a single father raising a child born from a donor egg. Having thoroughly examined all the options, he determined that the life he aspired to involved a marriage with a man; everything else he considered unfulfilling.

The ice cream on a brownie has melted. Emil finishes his coffee, scoops up a mush that no longer resembles the brownie, pays for his order and leaves the restaurant. He is headed to the duty-free shop, aiming to find a cheap and endearing wedding present. On his way there, he sees the woman who previously asked him for help, holding her phone very close to her face, fully immersed in an animated chat. "As much as the universe has listened and sent me to her, it has also sent her to me," Emil concludes as he passes her.

He spends some time loitering around the duty-free zone, not coming across a suitable present within the budget. He exits the shop at almost 4 o'clock, notices his phone battery is at 10% and decides to spend the rest of the wait near his boarding gate and takes one of the seats next to a power outlet. He notices a man rushing to the gate next to his, bound for Casablanca, with "Last Call" pulsating above the gate counter, and recognizes him as the man from the aisle seat with the Adam's apple tattoo.

A man in turquoise rain boots sits next to Emil and inserts a phone charger into the outlet. He appears to be the same age as Emil or a little younger. The man gets his boarding pass out of his pocket, puts it on his lap, takes a picture of it, then takes a picture of his left rain boot. Next he opens the Chopova Lowena website, browses the Shop section and takes a screenshot of the basketball track pants. Okay. The man's boarding pass remains on his lap; it's to Brussels too. Emil sees the man's seat number, 21D, then checks the number assigned to him: it's 21C.

Emil gropes for a charger in his bag and accidentally puts too much effort into pulling it out: the cable separates from the adapter and plunges towards the floor, bumping into someone's suitcase. The man in turquoise rain boots leans down to pick it up.