

Across the Bridge

Both: It's funny the stories our mothers tell us when we're little.

Man: I remember when I was a kid, my mom always told me to watch out for the monster that hid under the bridge.

Woman: My mama always told me that there was a creature that lived under the bridge between our side of town and theirs. If we tried to cross the bridge we would be snapped up and eaten.

Man: The Germans lived on the other side of the bridge, and the monster was there to guard them. They brought it with them from across the ocean, just to keep them safe, my mom said.

Both: Of course we know it's just a story.

Woman: Still, growing up that creature terrified me. None of us kids ever tried to cross that (the) bridge, not without our parents holding tight to our hands. Then we got older, and some of us went across that bridge. Some of them I never saw again.

Man: It was odd, though, when the Germans started crossing the bridge. It didn't happen until we were older, until our parents had long since stopped warning us about the monster under the bridge. They came over to work, I guess. Their little settlement had too many workers and not enough businesses. I can't say any of us appreciated them coming over, but we always said that if they worked the mine, the rest of us could be respectable.

Woman: They went over to find work, to provide for their families. What else were they to do? Most of us had left so much in the old country, thinking that work would be easy to find if we went far enough west. We were wrong. They only jobs they would give us were the hard labor—I still remember when Dietrich went to work in the mine. It's such dangerous work, and his wife told me that every time he kissed her cheek in the morning before going to the tunnels she wondered if it would be the last kiss she'd ever get from him.

Man: It was a good reprieve, though. My older brother and myself both got better jobs for it—jobs that keep us affluent members of society. The firm was eager to hire him over the German applicants, and the doctor would rather have had a younger English-speaking apprentice than someone older who couldn't understand a word.

Woman: They look down at us for doing their dirty work. We're like dogs desperate for any scrap of meat that gets haphazardly thrown out the window; they have made us undignified.

Man: They all kind of huddle together, too, the way a group of rabbits will when they know there's a fox nearby. They're so dependent on each other, but so antisocial with the rest of us. It's like they don't want to be a part of society!

Woman: They even look down on us for keeping close bonds with each other, when they refuse to recognize their relationships with one another. It's less like a community and more like a group of people all trying to ignore everyone else as much as possible. The people on our side of the bridge will take care of their neighbors, even if it means giving up a loaf of bread, and we all know each other by name. Of course we do—some of these people I've known since I was a child, other I met in New York

when I first came to the new world. These people are precious to me; they're my only link back to the place of my birth. They've taken care of me, and I've taken care of them. That's community.

Man: And their eyes were kind of dead, you know. Like they were just apathetic to everything. They'd do what you said, if you said it loudly enough, but sometimes they didn't even speak English and some other worker would have to translate quietly. They were like skittish little animals.

Woman: I remember when Marie came back from the other side of the bridge. Her eyes were blank like they never had been before. She used to be so full of life—she played the accordion at parties and weddings, always smiling and dancing around. But having to take orders from people who don't care about you, it sucks the very soul out of you. She never quite smiled again. Died in child birth a few years later.

Both: Then there was that one man from (their/our) side who moved across the bridge. (Woman-Their, man-our).

Man: None of us ever really figured out why, but we think he moved across for a girl. He never came back—it's like he walked right off the edge of the earth. We couldn't believe it. Sure, she was pretty, and it was one thing to enjoy a night or two, but to marry her? That was unheard of. We had played together when we were younger, that boy and I. I had never taken him to be that reckless, that inconstant. I thought he was more loyal than that.

Woman: He moved to be closer to his sweetheart—little Annie Day. They ended up married, but everyone gave them such a broad berth that they moved away just a year after their wedding. They hopped on the train and disappeared. I was so confused. I used to play with Annie as a child, making dresses for the dolls our mothers made us. I thought she knew which side of the bridge was hers. Was ours. I never found out what happened to her.

[Baby cries offstage. Man and Woman both turn to opposite sides of the stage.]

Both: That's my baby. (She must be hungry again/Probably wants food again).

Man: Ever since my wife fell ill it's been so hard to take care of my children. I have a business to run, but my wife can hardly get out of bed. We may have to hire a nanny, but all the nannies are German. I'm not sure I would trust my children with a foreigner.

Woman: If I could find a simple job I would be able to pay for everything my baby needs. My husband worked in the mine, but since it's been shut down we're desperate for money. We're all so hungry, so cold and tired. I'm worried about my child—I can see his ribs. We might have to move across the bridge.

Man: I know it's just a story, that monster under the bridge. Still, I find myself telling my children about it anyway. I just want them to stay away from those people.

Woman: I had almost forgotten about the creature under the bridge, but now I murmur it to my child every night to help him sleep. He sleeps so fitfully, I thought stories might help him drift off. And besides, even if it isn't true, I don't want him going anywhere near those people.

Both: The monster isn't under the bridge, it's across it.

