

Elena DeCook

Providence



“Well, shit.” He squints at me in that way that used to really get me, hands in trouser pockets, shoulders cocked back a little. Like we’re meeting for the first time and he’s getting knocked on his ass all over again.

“Well, shit,” I reply, amicably.

There’s a small part of me that’s still superstitious about the dress, which is stupid. I couldn’t possibly bring us any new bad luck, but I zip my coat up further over the seed pearls and tulle anyway, against the chill of the train station. I hunch down into my jacket, hands in pockets, neck retreating into the hood as if I’m trying my level best to shrink a few inches. The over-gelled back of my hairdo crunches a little as I roll my neck around.

He’s looking out at the tracks, stark in the unpromising November sun. The waiting platform, just this little Plexiglas box, has enough of that Amtrak smell—a little airplane cleaning fluid, a little pee—that his cologne wafts over only every once in a while. I still love it.

“How long have you been here?”

“Maybe five minutes,” he says, and punctuates it with a cough. This is somehow the best we have ever managed to sync up,

and I can't help but laugh at it. Unkindly, I guess, with a little bit of this ugly-stepsister snort. But he looks like he gets it and is remembering the same four years of *Why would you say that in front of my sister* and *Is that really worth being offended over* as he chuckles shakily down at his shoes. I bounce on my toes for warmth, wondering why this little fish tank doesn't heat up faster.

He looks like he's been crying. *You had time for that?* I wonder at him.

I guess he would. He didn't have half a family babysitting him. He probably had all the time in the world. I bet he stopped in that back hallway, with the jungle-green wallpaper. I bet he leaned against it, tilted his head back against the pinstripes, and loosened his bowtie like a dog trying to take the cone off after a particularly unfortunate trip to the vet. The tears would have felt nice, given how much control he usually has—given that I wasn't there to clumsily loop an arm around his shoulder and stumble through reassurances. The exit sign above the side door would have buzzed welcomingly, nonjudgmentally.

For my part, I had enough time to process one of the only emotions I feel with clarity: panic. I'd grown rusty at running away. I'd expected, somehow, to strain against that familiar end of the leash. The adrenaline hasn't left me yet; I feel like a time-lapse video of a partly cloudy day. Shadow, sun, shadow, sun, passing over so fast that my stomach churns, won't settle down against the rest of my organs.

"It's a little ironic, right?" I'm too nervous not to talk.

He looks slantwise at me, eyes that irritated red. "What's ironic?" he crackles out, and it occurs to me that maybe he didn't start to cry till I showed up. Maybe he had been having the happiest, surest moment of his life at the Amtrak station.

I look down at my shoes. "Just, I mean," I waver. "I was the flight risk, right? And now look. Look who got here first."

He's still looking at me the same way. "I guess everything with you ends up funny."

It specifically doesn't mean *everything is funny with you, huh*. I would recognize that; I'm familiar with it. And he never said it to me.

I feel, acutely, how great I look. Probably this is one of the top five times I will look beautiful in my entire life. While it was getting set up, the hairstyle felt like my mother mercilessly pulling my ridiculous hair into a ponytail for kindergarten. The feeling remains. It just makes my posture better.

This isn't very fair. He's all red, and I guess he didn't shave

because there are little blond bristles all over his jaw. I can hear them when he scrubs a hand down his face. The overall effect is something like a man-shaped cutout of sandpaper inside a tux, which makes a high-pitched laugh jump up my throat.

I hitch my dress up—the tennis shoes underneath my skirts feel like an equalizer—and sit on the bench. The air inside the Plexiglas fish tank is still bruisingly cold. The metal seat is an absolute punishment. I should probably feel like I deserve it.

My stomach still flickers uncomfortably, sending the occasional twitch up into my shoulder blades. I was never hyperactive as a kid, but this unsettled feeling became familiar sometime between seventeen and twenty, so I feel like I can sympathize. My niece, who is actually hyperactive, is probably careening off the walls in the bridesmaids' suite. I wonder where all the flower petals in her charge will end up.

He stopped looking at me sometime in the last twenty seconds, and he's got his fists balled up under his biceps, arms tightly crossed over his chest. I sigh guiltily and reach into the front pocket of my backpack.

"Hey," I say.

His shoulders don't loosen any as he turns around. His eyebrows twitch up at the flask I'm offering, but he swipes it and sits down next to me.

That's better. I don't know how, but something about it is better.

"I'm really sorry," he clears his throat in that masculine, post-liquor way.

I take it back from him for my own swig. "Should either of us actually be apologizing?"

He must feel braver, or something, because he turns all the way to look at me.

"Probably not, right?" I continue. "Nobody's going to end up with the moral high ground. We're both going to have to apologize enough to everybody else."

"Probably not," he agrees, taking back the flask.

Right on time, my phone starts buzzing. I have never hated how jaunty its little ring is more than I do right now.

"I already turned mine off," he says, a little surprised at me.

Of course he did. Lord, everyone's going to think he's dead. The fish tank must have warmed up, because I'm aware that I'm sweating a little as I pull the phone out of my coat pocket.

I show him the caller ID and roll my eyes. My cousin, the one with the crush on him. “Not my mother.” The phone continues to chirp through the steel-drum riff of the default ringtone. “Not my sister. None of my bridesmaids.”

That gets him chuckling, then actually laughing, then wheezing. I lose it, too, cackling as I clutch the phone to my chest. He leans forward, losing his grip on the flask. My dress has too many layers for that, so I lean back against the transparent wall, and my hairsprayed head crunches again. I’m still laughing too hard to see right when I reply with a text, one of the automatic choices that says “In a meeting.” I show this to him, too.

He buries his face in his hands, squeaking breathlessly.

For a minute longer, we just sit like that. I look up through the ceiling at the blue-white sky. He catches his breath audibly and I bet to myself that he’s leaning on his knees and rubbing the back of his head like he does after a good laugh.

The flask lies on its side on the grubby ground between us, and I pluck it up for one last gulp. “I’m kind of sorry anyway.”

There’s a single cloud fast-walking across the path of the sun, like it woke up late for something.

“Me, too,” he replies.

The silence is the kind that implies he’s going to talk again. I figure now’s as good a time as any to start being considerate, so I wait for once, tapping my French-manicured fingernails on the back of my phone.

“Like, I know this was for the best, right. If both of us ended up here. But, I’m—” he looks out toward the tracks again, towards their unromantic tangle of cables and beams and control boxes. “I’m sorry we’re going to have to miss each other.”

“I’m sorry I made your parents like me,” I say matter-of-factly.

“I already was,” he replies.

“Cute.”

He plays with the unraveled band of his bow tie. I run my hands over my skirts, which just bounce back up again.

“I wonder if they think we’re eloping.”

He shakes his head, half-smiles at me apologetically. “No, they know.”

He’s right. I want to confess that my mom called me while I was in the car.

The tracks start to shudder, and we both stand to see the Amtrak sliding towards us. It seems right to reach out and shake his

hand, so I do, and he complies. We always were pretty nice to each other. The fish tank has become a sauna while I was distracted, and I feel funny in the blanketing sunlight.

My coat is riding up around my waist, and I pull it with difficulty back down over the many skirts. “So, where are you off to?” I ask, the train snorting as it stops in front of us.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I was just gonna go on an adventure.”

I hike my backpack onto one shoulder. “Well, shit.” I nod agreeably. “Me too.”