

Box Cars and Park Benches

NK Hikari

The park bench was a bit like Hitler's box car for Aubrey that evening. He'd spent a better part of the previous morning thinking of the perfect place to meet up with Carlos to really make his little confrontation perfect and bitter, the better part of that afternoon wandering around the park to find the damn bench, and then most of the night to work up the courage to finally send that smug little coyote that text nobody wants to receive:

Me: We need to talk [5:03 AM]

Carlos: What? Why? Is something up? [5:04 AM]

Aubrey felt his phone buzz in his paw the moment the text was received. He unlocked his phone and pulled the text up, and then held his phone in his paw for a little while, just staring at it as he waited until the screen darkened and then went black, and then unlocked the phone again, just to do it again, just to make Carlos wait a bit longer before he replied. He waited until after the third time before he actually tapped out a response.

Me: I don't want to talk about it over text [5:09 AM]

He knew that'd make the coyote squirm. He got a little bit of sadistic pleasure in knowing that.

Carlos: Is it something I did? [5:09 AM]

Carlos: No, wait, never mind. You won't answer that. When and where? [5:10 AM]

Me: Park in an hour [5:13 AM]

Carlos: I'll be there. [5:14 AM]

Aubrey slid his phone back into his jeans pocket. He felt his pocket buzz a few more times against his thigh, but he ignored it. He'd said what he needed to, after all. Anything else Carlos said would just be prodding and half-hearted apologies for the slights he wasn't sure if he'd made or not. And while there was a part of him that really wanted to see the canine grovel, an even bigger part of him just wanted to pace and fume for the next hour, his tail lashing about behind him as he tromped from one end of the park to the other.

He'd written out a list of everything Carlos had said to him – every word that ever cut him – that he kept in his fist as he stiffly marched down the dirt paw-paths through the open fields and few, sparse patches of trees that circled the small lake at the center of the park. He'd read, somewhere, that writing down all your grievances and then burning the paper you wrote them on was therapeutic, but when one sheet became two, then three, then four full pages of line after line of little slights and half-meant insults, Aubrey felt that fire wouldn't be enough to burn the coyote for all he'd done. He thought about typing them all up in an email, thought about putting the hand-written list in an envelope and leaving it on Carlos' front door to find, early in the morning, after getting home from a long night's work, but he felt that would be too impersonal. He wanted to see the coyote's face as he screamed out his pain and frustration to him.

Aubrey ran his fingers over the crumpled surface of his list. He could feel the little indents his pen had made as he wrote the notes out furiously, the paper snagged and torn in a few key places he'd written over again and again to make his point to his notebook and the empty room he'd been sitting in.

"You always take things so personally," Carlos had said. "As if it's all about you; every action made around you revolves around the fact you're in relative proximity." He'd made a grand gesture to the room around them – to the people sitting with them – and looked Aubrey right in the eyes, his ears splayed back with smoldering annoyance. "News flash, cat: it's not."

He felt his claws extend and tear further into the list. No, it wasn't always about Aubrey. It was always about him. About how he was the leader of their little group, how he was the decision maker, how he was the emotional support, how he was the cohesive, connective glue that kept them all together.

"Oh, stop trying to fight it," Carlos had said. He'd grabbed Aubrey by the wrist and started pulling him towards the grocery store's entrance. "You always do whatever I tell you to, anyways. There's no point feigning resistance now."

Aubrey had pulled his wrist free of the coyote's grasp with a glare and a growl. "I don't want to work as a fucking midnight stocker." He'd started to walk away, back towards the bus stop, but Carlos had put a paw to his shoulder and spun the lion back around.

"Sure you do," Carlos had said. He'd had that coy little grin on his muzzle, the one that made his teeth poke out goofily and his whiskers splay. "Because it'd mean working with me."

Aubrey kicked a rock into the lake. His weeks had been so skewed since he'd gotten that job. Classes in the late morning and early afternoon, a few hours of rest, and then up to work when all the stars were out and when their quiet little suburban neighborhood was as dead as Aubrey was tired. He'd missed so many parties because of that job. Fallen asleep in so many classes, fallen behind in so many assignments, and only half-read a fourth of the textbook reading he needed to get done for his full schedule of five classes.

"Oh, quit your bitching." Carlos had thrown a french-fry at Aubrey's forehead as he sipped from his six AM "dinner" soda at the end of their shift. The sun had just started to rise in the distance, and Aubrey was having a hard time keeping awake as they waited for their bus to arrive. "You're taking five intro courses at a community college. Just wait until you get to a real university and take some real classes."

He wanted to punch the little bastard right then and there. Knock some teeth out, leave a few bruises, maybe even break his own paw on the coyote's boney little face or rip that cute little smile right off his thin little muzzle. It took a great force of will to keep himself from punching one of the trees he passed in his long trek around the lake. He didn't hit him, though there had been plenty of times he wanted to.

"Oh, you won't hit me," Carlos had said. He was in the middle of undressing in the store's backroom and had stuffed his day clothes into his backpack. He had stood there, in nothing but fur and tight, blue boxers – Aubrey's favorite on him; they always made the tans and yellows and subtle oranges of his fur pop out around his thighs and stomach – and had crossed his arms over his chest as he looked Aubrey in the eyes. It was the first time Aubrey had ever realized just how deep and blue Carlos' eyes really were. "You're not the kind to hit a cute face."

Aubrey had rolled his eyes and threw the coyote's uniform at him. "Who says I think you're cute?"

Carlos had just grinned a wide, toothy, coyote grin. "Oh, you do." He had pulled his tacky blue polo over his head and stuck his tongue out at the lion as he turned away and bent over, tail raised high, to pull up his black slacks. "I know you do."

Aubrey stopped next to a tree by the lake, just across the path from the bench. He sat down on one of the roots with his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his paws, and he let out a rueful sigh as he looked out over the calm surface of the water. He hated how Carlos always had to be right.

"So, how does dinner at IHOP sound?" Carlos had said. It had been about a week since he'd decided Aubrey did, in fact, find him cute. "I'm getting kinda tired of fast food runs after work, ya know? Could use a real stack of pancakes, eggs, a few strips of bacon ..." He had turned to Aubrey with a hungry look in his eyes – for what, though, Aubrey hadn't been sure for a while – and then flashed the lion a wide-mouthed, toothy grin he always seemed to have on around him. "Maybe some real coffee, not that watery McCafé stuff. Oh! And some real maple syrup, god! Where they actually heat it up before bringing it to you?"

Aubrey had put a few cans up on the shelf as he thought about it. He'd been running around so often that his meals had been reduced to what he could eat on the go or sneak into lectures. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a real, sit-down meal of his own, let alone with somebody else. "That does sound pretty amazing."

"Yeah?" The coyote had given up actually stocking anything and had begun to just lean against the support pillar between the shelves. "Glad you think so. It'll be your treat."

"Your treat to me," Aubrey had said, "Or my treat to you?"

"Why, you to me, obviously," Carlos had said.

"That so?"

"Well, yeah," Carlos had said. "I mean, you're the one asking me on a date, after all."

Aubrey's paw had stopped halfway to the shelf. "Am I, now?"

"Aren't you?"

"No," Aubrey had said. He had gone back to work, keeping his back turned to the coyote.

"You want to though, don't you?" Carlos had said. Aubrey had just kept working, refusing to look at the coyote for fear of him seeing the redness in his cheeks. But Carlos didn't have to see the lion's face to know his answer, and Aubrey didn't have to look to know that coyote's damn, toothy grin had only gotten wider.

And, Aubrey thought, he hated how he almost always was.

The coyote had taken a long gulp from his coffee and set the mug aside as he leaned in over the table towards Aubrey. He had met the lion's eyes with a spark of confidence that soothed Aubrey's anxieties of sitting across a couple's table – really just a two-seater, but who, besides a couple, gets a two-seater, anyways? – from another man. Another man of a different species, no less. But there was something in his eyes, in his vibrant, blue eyes, that quelled the

storms in Aubrey's mind and left him with a sense of calm. And feeling rather poetic, he had noticed.

"So, I'm thinking of getting a stack of pancakes and a whole heap of bacon," Carlos had said. "Maybe some eggs and toast. What about you?"

"I'm thinking this is all coming out of my week-old paycheck," Aubrey had said. "So, I think I'll just stick with coffee for today."

"Oh, that's no way to think about this!" Carlos had shoved his menu in front of Aubrey's coffee and stood up, leaning over the table to look at the menu with the lion. His nose, Aubrey remembered, was just inches from his, and he could feel the coyote's warm breath against his whiskers. "Come on, don't fruit-stuffed crepes sound delicious?"

"I think still having future meals sounds better," Aubrey had said.

"See, you're still looking at it all wrong." Carlos had sat back down and snatched the menu out of Aubrey's paws. "Look at it like this: you make seven twenty-five an hour, yeah?"

"You make the same," Aubrey had said.

"Exactly," Carlos had said. "So that means one hour of your job is worth, roughly, seven bucks, yeah?"

"Yeah?"

"So this is how I go about it." He had held up his coffee in both his paws and leaned in again. "If something's going to cost me seven bucks, that means it's worth an hour of my work. Fourteen, and two. About twenty-two and three, and so on, and so forth. So, as I see it, everything I buy is not just some arbitrary monetary number value, but how many hours I have to work to earn that. If I think something's worth four hours of work, then I'll pay up to twenty-nine dollars for it. Ya know?"

"I suppose," Aubrey had said.

"And I know you've wanted this for a while," Carlos had said. He had cracked a toothy grin. "And you know I'm well worth the, what, fourteen bucks it'll cost for my meal." He had grinned a little wider, but when Aubrey didn't come back with an immediate response the confidence in his face drained. "Right?" He had said.

Aubrey had just taken a sip from his own mug of coffee. Carlos had opened his mouth to say something else, but whatever it was stayed in his throat as the waiter came back around to their table, pad in paw. "Are we all set to order, yet?"

"No," Carlos had said quickly. He had scrambled for his menu to make himself look indecisive as he cleared his throat. "I-I, uh, I don't think we're ready, might change our minds a few more times, I think it may be best to come back la-"

"I'd like the ham and cheese omelet," Aubrey had said as he looked up at the waiter. "Side of biscuits and gravy too, please. And I think my partner, here, was wanting a two-stack, a side of bacon, and two eggs with toast." He had turned back to look at Carlos. "Right?"

"Yeah," Carlos had said. A smile had split his muzzle as he looked down at the menu with a giddy little giggle, his tail thumping against the booth leather. "Sunny side up."

“Hey,” Aubrey had heard off to his left. He snapped his head away from the lake and looked up to see Carlos standing a few feet away, his ears down, shoulders hunched, and a bouquet of yellow flowers clutched nervously in both his paws.

“Hey,” Aubrey said.

“I got you these,” Carlos said. He took a tentative step forward and held the flowers out towards the lion as if they, or Aubrey, might explode at any moment. “I, uh, I wasn’t sure what I should get. I thought ‘roses. Roses are always good!’ But they tend to be a bit more on the romantic side, especially the red ones, so I decided not to get those.”

“Carlos,” Aubrey said, but the coyote kept going.

“So, I thought lilies might be a good way to go, but then I remembered the whole funeral thing, and I realized that might be sending *all* the wrong messages for what I’m trying to say, since I’m trying to apologize.”

“Carlos ...”

“Then I got the idea: chocolate! Chocolate’s usually seen as apologizing, right?” The coyote shifted his weight from one paw to the other. “But then I realized that seemed to insensitive and like some sort of copout, so I threw that idea out.”

“Carlos.” Aubrey stood up from his root and started walking towards the coyote.

“They were out of your favorite kind, anyways,” Carlos said. He kept his eyes down, staring at the flowers as his voice wavered and his paws shook. “I-I checked, though, but all they had was milk and white and barely-counts-as-dark-chocolate dark chocolate, and I thought you deserved nothing but the best.”

“Sweetie,” Aubrey said. He stepped forward and placed his paws over Carlos’, steadying them as he leaned down and looked the canine in the eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Carlos said quietly. “Chrysanthemums. The flower lady told me the Japanese use them in the Festival of Happiness and that the ‘chrys’ means ‘golden’ in Greek, so I thought it was fitting.”

“They’re beautiful,” Aubrey said.

“Good,” Carlos said. “I knew you’d like them.” He looked down at their paws. “Do you have something for me?”

“What?” Aubrey stepped back, pulling his paws away with him. He looked down to see the list he’d written earlier, or what was left of it, at least; the papers were half-shredded by pen and claw alike and the ink had bled all through the pages to the point most of the words – the angry, hurt, hate-filled words – were illegible, anyways.

“You said we ‘need to talk’ in your text,” Carlos said. “Is that what that’s about?”

“Yeah,” Aubrey said. He kept his eyes locked on the pages as he heard the coyote shuffle around in front of him.

“Look, Bre, before you say anything, I just want to say I’m sorry.” There was a waver in Carlos’ voice he wasn’t used to hearing. “I’m not sure what I did, but I-I know it’s got to be my fault, somehow. And I probably just blundered and blustered about without realizing I’d said

anything wrong, making grand assumptions and just assuming I'm right like I always do, and I just want you to know I'm really, really sorry. For whatever it is. And that I just ... I can't ..."

"Carlos," Aubrey said. When he looked up, the coyote seemed like he was on the verge of tears.

"I can't lose you," Carlos said. He sniffled, wetly, and looked down at the flowers in his paws. "And I don't know what lie I can come up with this time to make it look like it's *you* who can't lose *me*."

Aubrey just stood there silently. He looked over the coyote from his shaking paws to his laid back ears to the wetness around his eyes and cheeks. His breath was uneasy and his chest heaved as he fought back the tears he knew were coming, and all he could manage to do was stand there lamely, dressed in his night stocker's uniform with his tail coiled around his leg. Aubrey looked between the coyote and his list and tried – tried! – to evoke that same anger he felt before, the same indignation he felt before, but at the sight of his lover's soul laid bare before him he couldn't muster up the bile.

"Do you have your lighter on you?" Aubrey said.

"What?" Carlos said.

"Your lighter," Aubrey said. "Do you have it on you?"

"Ye-yeah," Carlos said. He fished around in his front right pocket and held the old, battered zippo out. "Why?"

Aubrey took the lighter without a word. He flipped it open, sparked the igniter, hesitated for only a moment, and then held the flames under the packet of papers he held clutched in his right paw. He let the flames lick up along the paper until they threatened to engulf his paw, and then tossed them aside to smolder into ash on the rocky shore by the lake.

Carlos looked down at the fire with his brow furrowed in confusion. He turned back to Aubrey as the lion took a step towards him and looked as if he were about to say something, but whatever it was he never had the chance to say as Aubrey grabbed Carlos by the head and pressed his lips to coyote's. He kept the kiss short but passionate, purring into the coyote's mouth as he tilted his head and meshed their muzzles as deeply as he could. When the kiss finally broke, Aubrey kept his paws at Carlos' head and looked him right in the eyes, past the tears and fur and right to the core of the man who stood in front of him.

Aubrey had planned out so many thing he could have said to him, so many hateful snaps he could have made, but now that the moment was upon him there was only one thing he could think to say to the coyote: "I love you."

And that was all that needed to be said.