

Cold Air

There he sat, sinking slowly into the cushioned leather, letting the comfort of the armchair stand in for the comfort of humanity. He was not shy by any means, though; he was always commenting on the football game or telling some joke that he knew would make his friends laugh. Brett wondered if they really did like him, or if it was all just pretend. Sometimes he felt like he had nobody to talk to, *really* talk to, even though he knew he was well-liked. Brett had always been a logical person, but sometimes he gave into these irrational, depressive thoughts, unable to overpower his heart with his mind. Nevertheless he floated on, caught somewhere between popularity and paranoia; lonely, but not alone.

Brett sat in that armchair for over an hour, slowly dissociating from his environment as he buried himself under a thick wool blanket. It was the dead of February, and the heat of the burning fire was not quite enough to keep him warm.

“You look cold, Brett.”

“I am.”

He looked up to see Nick, who had perched himself on the sturdy left arm of the chair. His dusty brown hair flowed down his forehead and stopped just short of his pale blue eyes, which now met Brett’s with simple joy.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? The way the white of the snow and the black of the night balance each other out. Lighter than the night yet darker than the day, and with that inimitable quaintness, too.” He smiled. “It really is beautiful.”

Brett fixed his eyes on the window opposite him, peering at the heavy snowflakes falling on the back lawn, already carpeted by a thin sheet of white.

“I’d love to live a day in your head, Nick, I really would. I’d love to know what it’s like to find beauty in such simple things. When I look outside, I see snow. I see how wet my shoes will get when I leave to walk to my car. I see the darkness, and I see how late it already is and how mad my parents will be if they catch me sneaking back in. What you call quaint, I call desolate. What you see as glamour, I see as despair.”

“You think too much, my friend,” he chuckled. “Come with me.”

Nick walked across the room as Brett traipsed behind him. They moved slowly and lazily at first, but once out of public view, Nick reached his hand around his back and took Brett by the wrist. He led his friend up the stairs, up to the living room and through the kitchen and outside into the backyard like a child leading his mother around the house. When they got to the sliding door, Nick let go of Brett’s arm which fell meekly back to his side. Now, for the first time, Nick turned around and saw the hesitance on Brett’s face. Nick’s perpetual smile seemed to falter, only for a second, but as he opened up the door and smelled the crisp winter air, he was happy again, and the two walked together outside.

“It’s cold,” Brett said plainly, standing now with his hands tucked deeply into the pockets of his jeans.

“No, Brett. You just feel cold. I don’t feel uncomfortable out here, not when I’m face to face with such beauty. There’s something uniquely romantic about forbidden love, don’t you think? Some strange, distinct comfort in sinning alongside somebody you love.”

Brett paused, and then spoke softly, “It’s getting late, Nick, and I *feel* cold. I already told you that I’m not ashamed of what happened, but we both know it can’t happen again. And to answer your question, no. There is no beauty in forbidden love, it’s always a lose-lose. You either face the judgement of society or you face the wrath of your own conscience.”

“It doesn’t need to happen again. I just miss you, Brett. I know you think the world is a terrible place, but at least we’re here together, right? You’re cold, I’ll give you that. Then let me be your warmth. Let me prove to you that life is so much more than sorrow and indignation.”

“I’m not a nihilist, Nick. I’m a realist. And realistically, we can never be happy, at least not together. You seem to have this idea in your head that we can actually be something, and it kills me to know that we can’t. I want it too, and you know that. I want to live in a world where we could be one force, one bright light in the summer sky. But when you look up, what do you see? Clouds and darkness, and maybe the occasional fleck of snow right above your eye. And even when the sky is clear, you can only count so many stars. They say that there are billions of them. Wouldn’t that be beautiful? A night sky just as bright as the day, dense with starlight shining down onto the world. But the night is dark, and that’s the way it is. So please, Nick, use your head instead of your heart, just this once.”

Nick tried to respond, but he just couldn’t get the words to leave his mouth. He wanted to remind Brett of how happy they had been that night at the lake. He wanted to say,

“Brett, remember when you touched my face and told me it was the best day of your life? Remember when you looked me in the eyes and told me I was beautiful? Remember when you kissed me?”

The thought of their kiss usually filled Nick with pure joy, but that night something changed. In that moment, Nick was angry. Nick was angry, not at Brett, but at the world— at god himself for making love impossible for either of them. At last, he spoke, boldly and sternly:

“It’s not my fault you’re gay!”

At once, the last glimpse of hope faded from Brett’s face. He didn’t know if he was angry, or sad, or frustrated, or disappointed. He wanted to cry and scream and run away all at the same time.

“You know that’s not true, Nick. You know the way I live my life. You know how I surround myself with people who at least *pretend* to love me. You know I live to make my mom proud and my friends happy and to prove my worthiness to God. And now, you’re calling me gay? Is that what I am to you, a homo prick who doesn’t care about anyone besides himself? Do you really expect me to throw my entire life away for some faggot? How selfish do you think I am?”

Nick was silent. He wanted to hear something, anything, just to distract himself from Brett’s words now echoing in his head. But the world was silent too. He watched Brett as the

snowflakes dotted his dark brown hair and his black bomber jacket. He wanted so desperately to be mad, but he could see the anguish in Brett's pale blue eyes, so there was nothing he could say. To him, Brett was the darkness. He was the contrast with the light of the world that made everything that much more beautiful. But now, the cold tears forming in his own eyes blurred the line between black and white, and the backyard was nothing but a gray blur of emotional ambiguity.

They stood there for a while, silent. They faced each other, yet neither brave enough to meet the other's eyes. Eventually, Brett turned to head back inside, slowly though, as he was so cold that he was nearly frozen still.

"I love you, Nick. You need to know that. I love you more than I can explain. I never asked for this. I never wanted to hurt you. But I do love you. Please believe me, Nick. You have to believe me."

"I know you love me, Brett." He paused. "I just wish you actually could."

With blurry eyes, Brett turned around and walked back into the house, through the sliding door, around the kitchen, into the living room, down the stairs and back into the basement. He walked across the room, past the leather armchair, past the keg and the television and the dartboard and the people and past everything else until he was so close to the window that he could feel the coldness from outside phasing through the glass and biting at his face. He watched the snow falling harder now on the back lawn, focusing on a small figure that he could barely make out in the distance. Nick knelt in the snow, head tucked under his crossed arms.

As he held back tears, Brett realized that cold air was cold air; that there could be no beauty in pain. So he turned from the window, walked back to that armchair, and sank once more into the false comfort of an unloving world.