

Bedfellows

“Aren’t they getting a bit old to be sharing a bed?”

The words ring incessantly in Aiden’s mind as he stares at the speckled ceiling, lying restlessly on a pillow that has grown damp with his sweat. His twisted sheets are quicksand, swallowing him nearly as fast as his shame. It’s an embarrassment he struggles to understand. From a logical perspective, he hasn’t done anything wrong. But his logic has long since gone to sleep, along with Nate who slumbers soundlessly on his side, facing Aiden, just as he always does. Aiden used to think it was impossible to feel lonely in the presence of friends, but impossible seems to have a different definition after midnight.

His parents went to bed a few hours before he and Nate, around the same time Aiden was walking down the hall from the bathroom. Their bedroom door was ajar, and he could just make out the movement of his mom brushing her hair at the end of the bed as he passed by. His steps faltered when he heard his dad’s voice. *“Aren’t they getting a bit old to be sharing a bed?”*

The words came out casually, but if being 13 had taught Aiden anything, it was that even the most mundane phrases could be lethal. It was the same tone his dad uses when he talks about the half-baked news he reads on Facebook, or someone brings up the in-laws, but instead of a perceived inconvenience, he was talking about Aiden. Just as hurtful as his dad’s tone was his mom’s

nonchalance. It was simply another bedtime conversation for them. A perfectly normal discussion about how their son was a freak. Aiden hurried away before he could hear more, or worse, be roped into a conversation he wasn't ready to have.

Once in the safety of his room, he was met with Nate's endearingly oblivious gaze as he kindly offered Aiden an Xbox controller. "It's paused," he said, missing the dazed look on Aiden's face. "I picked Zero Suit Samus for you, but we can go back if you want someone else."

"That's fine," he managed to croak, taking the controller from his friend's outstretched hand. *See Dad—he's a good friend, and this is what friends do.* They played Smash Bros for the rest of the night, sitting side-by-side, just enough space between them that their knees didn't quite touch. Every laugh, every aching second, felt like a lie. But who was he lying to?

What is so wrong with sharing a bed? Aiden has a big room and a queen-size mattress. What is he supposed to do, make Nate sleep on the floor? Mike never sleeps on the floor when he comes over. But a deeper part of Aiden knows it isn't just about comfort or age. Mike has put up a pillow barricade since the inception of their friendship. Mike plays soccer, likes violent video games, and has already begun his growth spurt. The problem lies with Nate. Tiny, high-voiced, delicate Nate. *Beautiful Nate.*

Or maybe Aiden is the problem.

Honourable Mention Prose

He turns to his side, face to face with his friend. To stare at Nate while he sleeps is a violation of his trust. Aiden hates himself for it but doesn't look away.

The two contrast deeply in their looks. Nate is a pretty boy. That is the only way to put it. Aiden, who is so gangly, awkward, and pimply, would give anything to be more like Nate. Aiden's hair is a stupid dark blond that constantly looks dirty, but grows in brown on his arms and legs, making him feel like a filthy, disgusting mutt. His teeth have only just begun to straighten with the help of a clunky set of braces, and to top it all off, he wears a big pair of glasses so that he can see four feet in front of him. Truthfully, he thinks his glasses look kind of cool, but every other part of his existence makes him feel inhuman; some sort of walking Frankenstein monster pieced together with parts that nobody wants.

But not Nate. Nate is perfect, with short brown hair that precisely matches his coffee eyes. He's a little small, sure, but that just gives Aiden something to tease him about. He likes to rest his chin on top of Nate's head, still having to crouch. Nate, who is probably the kindest, most passive person Aiden has ever met, never lets him off the hook. He'll knock his foot back to kick Aiden's shins or retort with any number of names, like Inflatable Tube Man or Skindiana Bones. Nate is the only one who can successfully put Aiden in his place, and Aiden is strangely content to let him. Yet despite all his appealing qualities, none of the girls in their class have a crush on Nate. They don't ask for his Snapchat or try to work with him on group projects like they do with Mike, which is

truly a waste. He wonders why they don't see Nate the way he does. It's both peculiar and comforting. At least this way, he can keep his friend all to himself. *Friends, Dad—he's my friend.*

Yes, Nate is his best friend. Maybe Aiden loves him, the way that friends love each other. He loves how Nate never pulls the blanket all the way up, leaving his pale arms exposed to the sliver of moonlight that slips through Aiden's curtains. He loves the way Nate's thick eyelashes look as they sit closed, unmoving. He loves that despite an upbringing utterly lacking in affection, Nate doesn't ration his endearment. In fact, he has an endless surplus when it comes to his friends. When it comes to *Aiden*. If two people can be made for each other, it must look a little something like this.

Aren't they getting a bit old to share a bed?

Aiden wishes he didn't hear, but more than anything, he wishes those words hadn't been spoken at all. The thought had loomed over their heads long before finally being said. It was only a matter of time before someone acknowledged the monster in the closet, which is that sharing a bed with Nate never used to be weird, and now it is. What has he done for his parents to assume that there's something disgraceful about the mere act of sleeping?

I want to sleep, Dad, I really do.

Whatever it is, his parents seemed to know it's his fault. Maybe Nate knows too, and if he doesn't, he'll realize eventually.

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“I’m sorry,” he whispers too quietly for Nate to hear. He is, after all, a coward. A tear slides down his face, and it takes all his might not to roll face-down and scream into the pillow like the primal monster he knows he is. Body shaking with suppressed sobs, he squeezes his eyes shut, praying for everything to just go away, *go away, just go away.*

“Aiden?”

He opens his eyes to see Nate, still laying inches away, blearily looking at him through sleep-clogged eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Aiden lies, a small gasp managing to escape him. “Just a bad dream.”

“You can talk to me if you like.”

“I just—” *think my dad is disgusted with me, so I’m disgusted with me, and if I could find a way to take a fraction of the love I have for you and give it to myself maybe this wouldn’t be so difficult.* “I just want to go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” he says. And then, softer: “You’re safe with me.”

Nate puts his arm on top of Aiden’s, not quite engulfing him, but reminding him that yes, he is protected. If Aiden is a monster then Nate is an angel, pure and good, the only one capable of making him feel not only loved but forgiven. For a fleeting moment, Aiden knows peace.

But as Nate drifts off once more, Aiden finds himself alone again, ravaged by the guilt of his deception, horrified by the mere idea that someone like him could deserve someone like Nate. The only thing he is sure of is that monsters don't deserve peace.

Aiden moves to the floor.