

rarely soft or consolatory

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/83726376) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/83726376>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Rope (1948)
Relationship:	Phillip Morgan/Brandon Shaw
Characters:	Phillip Morgan , Brandon Shaw
Additional Tags:	Pre-Canon , Piano , Hands , Gloves
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-04-25 Words: 2,215 Chapters: 1/1

rarely soft or consolatory

by [Fanbase Universes](#)

Summary

Brandon has always loved Phillip's hands.

Notes

I'm in love with this murder couple, and with watching [full ballets online](#). Thought I might lean more into the Aestheticism of it all.

Title is from Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*: “Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory. Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming.”

Enjoy <3

“The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret.”

— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Brandon has always loved Phillip's hands.

They were the very first thing he noticed about them, that day in school, when he saw him at the front of the room playing on the piano, and then really noticed him, as if for the very first time.

God, but he played so vividly. Possessing a certain magic, he had that curious sense of glittering provocation from someone who knew what he was from a young age and had held himself to it, not out of self-possession, but from cowardice.

That much was clear, in the acquiescent hunch of his back, his lowered eyes, completely antithetical to any notion of defiance. Still, his fingers flew away on the keys, coaxing music from the ugly, out-of-tune thing, and that was such a beguiling thing.

He was surprised to find himself waiting for him to finish. When he did, Brandon leaned on the side of the instrument, carefully appraising his figure and the smart cut of his suit. He was much younger than in him, not just in years, but in worldliness. He wasn't heavysset, either, but lean all over, with a sharp jawline and a frame healthy enough to let Brandon know he could withstand a struggle during a fight, if he had to.

"You play?" the other asked. His eyes flicked once over him, so smoothly that if Brandon had been any other man, he would have missed it.

He shook his head. "Not in the least. But you should play over at my dorm sometime, if you like. I'm sure the lads would be very happy to have you. And I've hidden away all the best champagne for whoever pops on by."

"Well, alright." He agreed so quickly that Brandon had no doubt as to what other sorts of things the boy's hands would be good for.

"I'm Brandon."

"Phillip."

Brandon noticed how Phillip's fingers had callouses, no doubt from years of constant practice and study at his art. And yet when he took his hand in his own to shake it, Brandon could remember nothing else afterwards except for the piercingly striking quality of Phillip's eyes, and the absolute care with which he had him in his grip, holding him firm and fast to it, like he was already a little admiring of him too.

//

The term passed considerably quickly. There were the regular pranks with the boys, of course, tormenting the juniors, playing four-square on the roof, and so forth.

Brandon considered such plays all beneath him, but he let Phillip indulge in them as he so pleased. Any thoughts of the others' gauche behaviour were much mollified when the others' assessment of Phillip came back to him. Apparently David Kentley had called him a 'smart chap', and had invited him to come by and give the others' a few private concerts more often.

With such opinions like these circulating among the upper ranks, Brandon was pleased when Phillip refused all other company but his own.

"Really," Phillip said one evening, his fingers tracing a restless tremolo - *up down up down up down* - "we have such a perfectly charming arrangement here. I wouldn't want to bother anyone else."

"And you won't," Brandon insisted. "Not when you're here." He hesitated, adding, "with me."

The alternations didn't falter. "If you think so."

"Quite. And once I sublet an apartment of my own, you needn't bother with their company at all."

The playing wavered. Brandon's fingers slipped as he hit a wrong note. "Whatever do you mean?"

"My dear boy, I think you quite well know what I meant."

"I - yes," Phillip stammered. "I do."

Brandon said nothing more. He pulled out a cigarette and continued to listen to Phillip's playing. He really was a remarkable musician, he mused - but far too neurotic, far too self-conscious, to be able to ever make good name for himself.

"What's that you're doing now?"

"Oh, this?" Brandon played the phrase again. "This is *legato*."

The piano's tone had changed from the shimmering, seamless effect of his prior repetitions. Now he was articulating a set of scales, the notes smooth and connected, his wrists loose and fluid. They no longer snapped into place, but glided from one note to the next. The effect it produced was quite pleasant, the line of music meandering like the arc of a river.

"You know the word means 'tied together' in Italian."

"I know."

Brandon took a slow drag from his cigarette, watching him.

"Do you loathe the contradiction?"

"Not particularly."

"I see. And why's that?"

Phillip's eyes flickered upwards, watching the smoke curl up to the ceiling of his dorm. "It just makes sense when you play it. Doesn't it?"

"Ah. Right."

A pause, then Brandon added -

"Yes. Yes it does."

Phillip drew out the final flourish, letting it linger. Brandon watched, offering no objection.

//

Of course they went to the theatre in the evenings. Ostensibly, the cohort's purpose was to support the neighbouring girls' school, whose students sometimes leaned over the separating parapet to flirt with them by throwing favours - a delicate lace handkerchief. A rosebud. A pair of gloves. And even, for the daring, love notes.

It would have been in poor taste not to acknowledge such dazzling performances with a rising chorus of cheers and the occasional bouquet for every leading lady. In reality, plenty of the boys slipped away with them for a quick cigarette or a rather crude fondling in the dressing rooms, sometimes even before the curtain rose.

Brandon was perfectly content to watch the stage. Phillip, having nothing better to do, did the same.

For Brandon, art - high art - was one of the few things that distinguished the common man from the uncommon one. Not everyone could appreciate the subtleties of such works, despite Phillip's occasional remarks to the contrary.

"Yes, well a recital at Town Hall does nothing to prove my point."

"There are plenty of 'common folk' who would appreciate watching me play."

"But can they tell you why?"

A pause.

"That's precisely my point. Only a superior man knows how to put words into emotion." Any other sentiments, Brandon had long since concluded, were unreasonable. They had to be derided, if not outright distrusted. It was only the most rational course of action to take.

"You think so?"

Silence, again.

Phillip did not ask again. Nor did he contradict Brandon when the latter's eyes, at odd moments, would inexplicably grow wet. Brandon would not have listened, or conceded the point, if he had - but Phillip's own eyes were wet too.

They had watched plays for the stage - Greek crimes of passion and catharsis. Now there were the ballets. There was the breathtaking splendour of the princesses' costumes in Cinderella or The Sleeping Beauty, and the sumptuousness of the Sugar Plum Fairy's entrance at Christmastime during The Nutcracker.

There was the tragedy of Giselle's collapse, and the haunting, ethereal arrival of the Willis. Orpheus' air de danse during the three tableaux, and the pas de deux of Swan Lake. And then, of course, the classics.

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Don Quixote. La Bayadère and La Sylphide. The Green Table.

Fauns and fairies in flight across the stage, until at the curtain call they were disappointingly nothing more than mortal flesh.

It was rarely gentle or consolatory, and as such, Brandon insisted he did not care for the pantomimes. Even if they unrelentingly, mercilessly, elicited such emotions.

Still, he could not help but listen to Phillip's fresh additions pieces to his repertoire, all of them thrilling, even exhilarating, in their intensity. Or when he fixed himself on practising a new piece for hours at a time, until they'd both grown quite sick of it.

Poulenc. Mouvements perpétuels.

//

"Must you play that dratted thing now?"

"When else can I?"

"After dinner." It was going to be a sort of soirée to celebrate his acquisition of the apartment, as well as a test to see how well their new housekeeper, Mrs Wilson, could get things in order.

Brandon continued. "The guests will want to have a turn about the room, and you can entertain us then."

"Fine."

Phillip closed the lid. "Who's visiting anyway?"

"A few of the boys - you know David."

"Oh yes," he said lazily.

In fact, Phillip knew David more than he'd let on, but he wouldn't dare to let Brandon know - the man always got so angry whenever his name was brought up.

"And Rupert."

"Rupert Cadell?"

"What other housemaster do you know?" Brandon retorted. "All that playing must've dulled the notes in your head."

"All right, all right," Phillip groused. "No need to harp on."

It was not like Rupert was an easy man to forget. Aside from his decidedly unaristocratic mien - if he had been anywhere else, he would have been a revered romantic hero - he had taught them both everything he knew, and then afterwards, everything his colleagues knew.

They'd been invited to polite dinners with him and men of his ilk, who'd been polite, pompous men. Boring and dull, where Rupert had opened up their minds. Some time afterwards, Brandon would remember the picture they must have made then, as if recalling it from an impersonal, distant eye - the intelligentsia of their school, discussing the pressing issues of their day.

The superhuman. The way people's bodies hung lifelessly after executions, quite shockingly, irrevocably, dead. The honour of donating one's corpse to the superior act of scientific dissection and enquiry.

The boys had feasted and gotten drunk, considering the more absurd ideas from Rupert's correspondence. Julian Morrow's plans around Bacchanalian hazing rituals, for one thing.

I'm far removed enough from the whole situation to counsel them on the matter, should they seek my guidance. But I never deny the Greek scholars anything if I can help it. Action is a mode of purification.

"You don't approve?" Rupert had asked him once.

"Not particularly," Brandon had sniffed loftily. "He's just stopping himself from committing to the ideal."

"And you think I would?"

Brandon had nodded. His philosophical principles suggested so.

Perhaps he should have remembered that Rupert had neither supported nor refuted his claim; just given him an unfamiliar, paternally propinquitous pat on the shoulder.

His hands had been firm, but unencumbering, and easy to shake off.

//

Before that fatal, final dinner party, the school year ended. Phillip came along with Brandon up to the country. Farm work was new to him, but Brandon was gratified to see that Phillip took to the labour as easily as he thought he would.

He put the boy's hands to good use, and was sure to reward him handsomely for his efforts. Phillip was the only person Brandon could let himself lapse into a few indulgences for.

"I thought you'd be struggling here," he commented.

Phillip's cheeks flushed, but he didn't startle, as he'd done the first time.

The palms of his hands were stained with red; a snapped chicken's head rested on the mound of dirt he was kneeling on.

"Twisting a chicken neck?" Phillip asked. "You showed me how."

"No. Killing it."

His blush deeped, and he answered, evasively, "Well, I'm hungry."

"That's not the reason. What is it really, Phillip?"

"Brandon, you should mind your business!"

And this was probably the most fascinating thing of all about him. For such a delicate player, he was so anxious, but then also, at times, violently angry, and prone to a youthful, impulsive impetuosity.

"Fine. But I'll have to buy you a pair of new gloves."

"Oh, you don't have to, really."

And just as soon as he'd seen it, that part of him had gone again, hidden away. Sunk like a waterlogged body under the depths of his indecision.

"I insist!" Brandon smiled indulgently at him.

"Okay."

When they came back from the country, as he'd promised, Brandon bought him a pair.

The gloves were a thing of beauty. Sleek leather, dark trim, polished as if they'd been licked over with wax. They fitted well with Brandon's matching set.

"You don't begrudge me for choosing the colour, do you?"

"Why would I resent it?" Phillip said, somewhat balefully.

"I thought you mightn't want to be reminded of the farm."

"No," he said. "Everything I had done that night was as natural as it felt(*)."

"Really?" Brandon's eyebrows lifted.

There Phillip was, sitting beside him on the bed, telephone set off the receiver. And he looked as if he hadn't said something that made Brandon realise he'd entrusted the right person to his confidences.

Brandon lit Phillip's cigarette, then his own.

"Rupert's teachings will make something respectable of you yet," he commented idly. "Just think - all of town will know your name one day."

"Yes," Phillip said. "Except I can't play quietly with my fingers like this."

Their eyes flicked down to his hands. Unconsciously, Phillip's fingers flexed in the leather.

Both of them knew perfectly well they weren't thinking of him playing the piano.

Brandon spoke first.

"My dear. If I have it my way, they won't need to hear a single thing at all."

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!