

The Room Swap

The bottle had a fine coat of dust on it, like a sweater, keeping this Cabernet Sauvignon warm in this desolate locale. Tristan stepped over the bottle, glass crinkled beneath his combat boot. Everything seemed blue — not like the ocean or the sky, as if all the world's colors derived from blue. The cage surrounding the fireplace possessed an unearthly dark blue instead of the coal-like black Tristan had accustomed himself to. The walls radiated with a yellow that, for all that his eye could see, was actually blue.

Turning around and crouching down, Tristan picked up the bottle of wine, careful to avoid cutting himself on the broken glass scattered about the room. The window nearest-by had been broken. A light shone in, whether from streetlamp or sun or moon, he could not tell. He held the bottle before the light, taking in the less-than-a-swig left inside, then inhaled deeply.

For a moment, he felt he was swimming. This room was so unearthly. Foreign, in ways the previous rooms hadn't been. His experience *room-swapping* felt not unlike diving, deeper and deeper into a crevice as the familiar turned unknown. He exhaled a mighty wind and watched as the dust on the bottle scattered about the room. Falling, searching for new homes, occupying the space he had so recently given life to. His footprints began to disappear amongst the falling dust.

Not here. Tristan thought to himself. *Not yet.*

He retraced his steps as they disappear beneath him, returning to the only entryway to this room. At the doorway, he grasped the handle with his right hand and, with his left thumb, rotated the ring on his finger three times. He turned the handle and felt the lock recede. The door shot open, replaced by a curtain of fog. His heavy boot took the plunge forward and he disappeared behind the veil.

The next room imbued Tristan with a hope he immediately distrusted. Brighter than bright — the vibrancy of the room felt alien when the last room, for all its deplorable depression,

felt merely foreign. A child's playroom. Shimmering red sheets tucked neatly into a spaceship bed frame. An antique box filled to the brim with toys that could be described as anything but. They were new, clean and pristine like they'd just been opened not ten minutes prior.

Untouched, they could be described as. *Were toys still toys if they weren't ever played with?*

Tristan picked up the G.I. Joe from the box. The contents inside shifted, everything falling to a new place within the hierarchy of the antique case. This army doll had on combat boots not unlike Tristan's own, slim but durable and black like raw bull hide. In fact, he had a hard time remembering the last time he polished his boots. Certainly not recently. He looked at his hand and dropped the doll. Shiny, like he'd been waxed earlier that day, entirely unlike the skin he'd grown to feel so comfortable in. Tristan scoured the room for a mirror, something reflective to see his own face in, and that's when he realized why he'd found the room so eerie to begin with.

From what he could tell, there was no light source anywhere in the room or outside it. Everything, from his skin to the toys in the box to the pillow thrown askew on the bed, glistened as if it was its own source of light. This all seemed to him like a page torn from the comic books and graphic novels of his youth. No, wait, this seemed to *be* a graphic novel of his youth.

Tristan turned to the door he had entered from only to find a wall. Long and bare, a lone Spiderman poster providing artistic merit to the structure. He gazed about the room, every which way, determining where his door had disappeared to.

"This isn't where I need to be. Why did you bring me here?"

The door materialized in front of him, but still the handle was missing.

"I must leave. I have to find her."

Small *thumps* could be heard behind him, quickly transforming into louder *ka-thunks*.

The toys! They'd begun to expel themselves from the chest, piling atop one another on either

side. The antique box finally shucked the last of its contents then sat, motionless, with its top laid open like a casket. “Someone,” it seemed to beg, “look inside me.”

Behind Tristan, the door remained handleless. Beyond him, lay the trunk. *What choice have I?* He first threw his left foot into the trunk, then he swung his right foot in. Without warning, the casing on the trunk’s bottom released, sending Tristan down deeper into its depths — away from the comic book room.

A grand, ornate & golden door opened up and Tristan came flying through. He landed on his side and rolled a further ten feet, sliding up against a small throne. He breathed deeply. “Where now,” he uttered amidst catching his breath.

“Tristan?” a voice whispered, booming but for no reason than the grandiosity of the room. His name gave him new life, energizing him anew for the first time since this silly game began.

“Where are you?” he called back, yelling. The echo crippled him, sending him to his knees.

“Whisper, but say something yet. Ease your pain.”

He cried out. “Where are you” reverberated through the room and into his skull. Louder it seemed to get the longer he stayed silent.

“Whisper, dear. You’re close now.”

Gaining his focus again, he uttered, “Guide me,” silent enough a mouse might request he speak again.

The words stuck, again, to his mind but at such a volume he could handle.

He twisted the ring on his left hand twice more. “I’ll find you,” he said and let the words wash over him in comfort, steadying his mind for the task ahead.