

The Middle of the Mosaic

by Jared Coren

The shop mannequin in the corner of the living room kept her eyes on Sebastian, who was listening to the voice on the phone. He was supine, staring up at the ceiling in a pair of cheap white underpants, two inches too big for him.

‘I mean, honestly, Sebastian, your situation is absurd...’ Her voice rattled around the receiver like tin soldiers in a tumble drier.

His heavy lids hung over his eyes and a thin, still stream of dribble stuck to the side of his face. He drifted. Eyes closed. Eyes half open. The waves of Artex washed across the ceiling.

The noise broke for a moment.

‘Sebastian? Sebastian!’ she shouted. ‘For fuck’s sake, I know what you’re doing! Put the phone to your ear and listen to some sense for a change!’

He put the phone to his ear.

‘Mother... I’m fine...’ His voice was a slow, drug-fogged drawl.

‘*Fine!* You sound half dead! There are zombies with more pep than you!’

‘I...’

‘Are you dressed yet?’

‘I... There are pants... on me...’

‘Good God! It’s half-past two in the afternoon!’

He couldn’t respond.

‘When was the last time you left the house?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘Approximately.’

‘2012.’

‘2012!’ she gasped. ‘He keeps you locked in there like some kind of felon.’

‘I’m not locked in... I just can’t get out...’

Sebastian could not keep up.

‘Look, you’re just going to have to trust me that I’m happy,’ he said, eyes dead.

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that,’ she said. ‘I have absolutely no faith in your ability to see what’s good for you.’

‘Terrific.’

‘Don’t give me sass, Sebastian!’

There was a moment’s silence. He liked the silence.

Then it started again. ‘Why don’t you come and stay?’ she said. She was softer this time, taking a different tack. ‘Your father would like to see you.’

‘Huh... He hates me...’

‘He does not hate you, darling. He just has difficulty with queers.’

‘I’m n...’

She interrupted. She was not about to entertain that line of conversation again.

‘Come on, darling. Come and stay.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got some things on... I’m a bit busy...’

‘Busy!’ she burst, all incredulous. ‘You haven’t left the house in three years!’

‘Rufus wouldn’t like it,’ he drawled. ‘I don’t want to upset him. He’s been a bit crabby lately...’

‘That man is a bloody beast! A big, black mountain beast!’

‘Mother! That’s racist...’

‘It is not racist. It’s the damn truth!’

‘It’s a bit truthist... racist...’ He was fumbling around for words now. Slow down.

‘Mother... I’ve got to go.’

‘Don’t you... ‘

The red button stopped the rattle. Eyes closed. Eyes half open. The Artex lapped across the ceiling. Eyes closed.

When Rufus came home, he found Sebastian in his two-inches-too-big pants. He stood over him. Rufus’ afro eclipsed the light from the bulb in the centre of the room and Rita, the mannequin, watched him scoop Sebastian up. They left the room. The door closed.

Under the light in the bedroom, Rufus engulfed Sebastian like a capital G. When Sebastian stirred, Rufus was waiting and his fingers moved aside the back end of Sebastian’s two-inches-too-big pants.

Sebastian took a big draw on the hot air.

‘Where...?’

He twisted his neck to see Rufus all intense, eyes big with desire.

‘Hello... Oh...’ He felt Rufus hard up against him. ‘I really don’t want that...’

Rufus didn’t listen.

The next morning, Rita watched Rufus use the back of a tablespoon to crush the tablets into a powder for Sebastian’s porridge. When Sebastian had dribbled down the stairs in his pants, Rufus would have him sit on his lap and feed him his breakfast.

When Rufus left for work, he would lock the doors from the outside: the house hot; thermostat up; thermostat hidden; the drugs working the drowsiness; Rita watching; the dirty porridge bowl; the infinite Artex reaching across the ceiling.

It was only when Sebastian’s dad died that the cycle broke.

The morning of the funeral, Rufus knotted the black tie around Sebastian's neck. His big eyes cried and he told him that he loved him, over and over again.

Before they left, Sebastian ate his own porridge all by himself, in a black suit that was too big for him.

Sebastian entered the garage through the door in the hallway. Winter's fresh air crept in with the sunlight that spilled under the metal door. It felt cold. He felt cold. It was a punch, like jumping into a clear lake.

They got into the car. Sebastian sat in the passenger's seat. Rufus sat in the driver's seat. He started the car. They waited in front of the closed garage door.

'We need to get going really,' said Sebastian slowly.

Rufus turned to him and held the side of his face and told him to sleep if he wanted to, but Sebastian's eyes were open.

Rufus locked the car doors.

Sebastian thought about that big, bright block of fresh air on the other side of the garage door.

Rufus pressed the buttons to wind down both the windows.

The big, bright block waited on the other side of the closed garage door.

Back inside the house, Rita stared across the empty living room and gradually, from underneath the door, a fog began to fill the space between the floor and the Artex.