

## The Flag Room

Connor Rystedt

A room is an odd thing. In essence, it's a few square feet that you can do anything you want with. You can paint stars and stripes on the wall and pretend they will keep you safe from the outside world. You can hang up movie posters in which Brad Pitt shows off his guns and bleeds from the forehead in an attempt to elevate your manhood. You can make love in a bed and dwell on it when you're finally disposing of the mattress that's been too small for you--let alone two people--for years. A room can seem so ordinary when it's filled with your own possessions. You get used to the layout, and you grow bored with things that you once found intriguing. But when a room is empty is when you really start to notice how special it is. There's something spiritual about an empty room; a ladder standing in the middle, a couple canvases spread across the carpet, a few buckets of paint lying around. There is an echo in an empty room that you'll never have heard before, and it can vaguely remind you of a church choir if you listen closely enough.

---

We lay in my twin-sized bed, listening to the soft patter of raindrops on the window. The tan comforter came up to our necks, covering our nakedness. I still remember how the small of her back felt on the curve of my stomach, how her fingers meshed softly into my own. The sky was grey, but a pale light still came through the cracks in the window blinds, illuminating the patterns that had been painted onto my walls so many years before.

I nuzzled into the skin between her neck and shoulder, brushing it with my lips, noticing she had been silent for a time. "What are you thinking about?" I whispered into her reddened ear, and her long dark hairs tickled at the tip of my nose.

I didn't see it, but lying behind her, I could feel the smile pass over her face. "Your room," she answered back.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, glancing about at the walls; the red and white horizontal stripes climbing to the ceiling in some places, only reaching to a dark field of navy blue at others. There were uniform columns of stars within those fields of blue. I had counted several times since my mom had painted my room that way, and my count always exceeded a hundred and fifty, over three times the normal amount. "What about it?"

She turned on the mattress, and the comforter rustled over us as she did, sending small breezes over our bare skin. Her brown eyes were big like a doe's, and I couldn't help but wonder how such a beautiful girl had ended up in my arms. She whispered to me in the way only lovers can. "Never change it."

Caught off my guard, I laughed. But my laughing stopped when I saw her look of innocent vulnerability replaced with the usual pissed-off girlfriend scowl. "Babe," I said to her, almost as if I had never laughed in the first place, "it's a kid's room. It's been like this since I was in sixth grade."

She made to shove at my shoulder, but it only served as a slight push. I had to stifle another bout of laughter. "It's not a kid's room. It's the Flag Room." Her eyes narrowed when

she didn't see in me the proper amount of sympathy, and under the covers she crossed her arms over her bare chest. "If this is a kid's room then I guess there will be no more of *this* going on."

I had to stop myself from sighing. "I didn't mean it like that." I kissed her on the forehead and brought her closer in my arms. "If you want the Flag Room to stay, then I guess that's just the way it's going to have to be."

She had been looking down, avoiding eye contact. After a moment, she let her gaze come back up and meet mine, trying to see if I was telling the truth. "Forever?"

This time I kissed her lips, long and deep. Warmth spilled across my chest, and everything felt right. If I were forced to spend an eternity in that moment, I think I would have been okay with it. I like to believe she felt the same way. "Forever," I told her when I pulled back and looked into the brown abyss of her eyes.

---

The Flag Room, as it was once referred to so intimately, was not always painted like the American flag. And although I've lived in the same house my entire life, I was not the Flag Room's first resident. Back when the house on Wedgewood Drive was built in the late eighties, my parents, married about a year at the time, rented the room out to my Uncle Collin. There he resided for a little over a year. Over the course of my own life, my parents have observed some interesting parallels between the two occupants of the farthest room on the right side of the upstairs hall. We both have had tendencies to play loud music that could be heard through the

cracks of a measly wooden door, sometimes even at the break of dawn when the rest of the world is still asleep. We've both left washroom towels and sweaty gym clothes to gather mold in the corners, only regarding it when the stench is noticed by another. I imagine I'm not the first person to stumble drunk through the threshold and topple into the bed at the opposite corner of the room, only to regain consciousness from someone's insistent hand upon my shoulder the next morning. And though I've never been informed, I can assume--not without cringing--that I was not the first person to christen the Flag Room with the act of love.

Although these parallels exist, the Flag Room has received several significant changes over the rough quarter century that it's existed. Back in the days when Collin Rystedt was blasting Motley Crue--compared to a young Me cranking Blink 182 through jukebox speakers--the walls could have been any color; the knowledge of such eludes me. I do know that when I was younger, when there was a crib in the corner in place of a mattress, a certain wallpaper ran horizontal around the square room, about halfway up from the floor. Teddy bears smiled all along that paper, flying kites and playing games. I seem to recall standing in my crib and following the paper, giving the bears each a different name, although the pattern of the wallpaper repeated itself often. I felt I could go on forever, watching the bears play and becoming familiar with them again and again and again.

Later, the crib was swapped out for a full-size bed, lined with Scooby-Doo bed sheets and Mystery Machine pillow cases. The walls were painted a light blue, almost grey, and a new wallpaper was glued high up on the wall, right where it ran into the ceiling. This new paper was dark as the night sky, and tiny astronauts floated through that darkness high above my head.

My mom, who's always been the redecorator around the house, had stuck small stars on the ceiling, and they glowed in the dark whenever my parents shut my door when it was time to go to sleep. Sometimes I would lay awake all night, watching those stars, thinking about forever, wondering what went beyond the night sky.

I'll never remember the reason why exactly we chose to paint the Flag Room like the American flag, but I remember that it was my parent's birthday present to me the summer before the sixth grade, and I was okay with it. I'll be the only person I know with a room painted like the stars and stripes, I thought to myself, and I believed that made me a patriot. At that point in my life, the only thing that made me an American was my birth and the fact of my freedom. Sadly, I shunned any attempt at learning about the founding fathers and their idea for a free nation. The house on Wedgewood Drive has always been my home, where the siding was once blue, but then it was green, and where the Flag Room used to represent outer space. I had no other notion than freedom. I knew nothing but childhood entertainment, the pleasure of boredom.

And so it was that the Flag Room came to be, and I became the young patriot on Wedgewood. I swapped out my full-size bed for a twin with bright-red bed sheets to match my stripes. I even had an American Flag themed blanket, but that was discarded for a bigger, thicker comforter over the years; one that could cover two bodies. Next to my bed was the same wooden dresser I use today, that's probably been around longer than I have. A shabby wooden shelf that looked like it would fold over on itself at any minute held a tiny T.V. across the room from my bed, next to the thin wooden door of my room. Cases to Playstation games

and DVDs were scattered about the floor in front of it, and there was a tangle of wires running through both ends of the thing. Eventually, by the time high school came around, both the tiny T.V. and the rickety wooden stand were replaced for something bigger and better--the true American way. The thin door was replaced for a thicker one that could suppress noise from jukeboxes more efficiently, and the doorknob even had a lock.

A lock on a door is a weird thing. When I first got it, I barely even used it. If my brother was chasing me through the hallway and I needed a quick getaway, I would slam my door and punch the lock as quick as possible, secluding myself for the necessary amount of time until I either heard his footsteps fade or I opened the door with a grin on my face ready to continue whatever foolishness we had been at. Like any adolescent my age, growing up in this same room my whole life--even through those tender teen years--gave me reasons to start using that lock. The doorway to my parents bedroom is just across the hall from mine, and yet with the click of a shiny button the stars and stripes transcended to something more than mere plaster; they were a stronghold where I was free to do whatever I pleased. It's a lock on a door that will make you discover exciting and terrifying new things about yourself. Eventually, the blue field of stars behind my thick wooden-paned door was occupied with standard-sized wall posters of very adult looking women in their swimsuits that I had won at the local carnival on the 4th of July. I thought they'd be safe behind that door. I assumed the only people who would see those posters are the people who I welcomed into my stronghold and shut it tight, instilling in them enough trust to see the busty blonde woman behind my door.

I remember one time, it might have been the summer after the seventh grade, my mom went on one of her cleaning sprees for a get-together she was having with some work friends. That night, when I went into my room, I couldn't believe what I saw when I shut the door: nothing but a bland field of stars. How could she have possibly found those, was my first instinctual thought, and then I wondered what right she had to have taken them down. Like a true patriot, I even confronted her about my stolen rights.

"Well," she told me, "I want to show my friends from work how nicely your room's painted." It went without saying that the paint job was her own. My mom isn't a selfish person, it isn't often that she would hold the fact against me; that the blonde woman was obscuring her paint job for a picturesque young adolescent room. "I didn't think they needed to see that stuff."

If I were just a few years older, I probably would have spoken aloud who it was that she really didn't want looking at those lusty posters, opining like a patriot about my rights. Instead I just gawked at her for a while and walked back to the Flag Room where I could ponder the situation in private. I never bothered asking for my posters back, but resolved instead to hide my things better when I wasn't able to lock myself away.

Through the years, quite a few things have been hidden away in the Flag Room for my private and personal use. Sometimes it may have been as innocent as a bag of candy, but this was *the* Flag Room after all, and I was a growing young man. Who was to say I couldn't look at the unsavory magazines that I hid in the red, white, and blue bookcase? It once belonged in my brother's room, when he was a tot, but when we repainted the Flag Room, we decided it fit the

general aura all too well. There were various books stashed there, some of them entertaining but nothing too awesome until my later years of high school. I put the private magazines underneath, behind the cabinet's red and blue doors where they hid among the jumble of all my dad's old comic books from the '70s. That same space later became a holding area for plastic bottles filled with tobacco spit because I was either too lazy or too cautious to throw it away outside. There were drawers of the same color just above the cabinet. In the right-hand drawer, empty tobacco tins were lined in three rows. Once I even arranged them by brand and flavor. Eventually that drawer filled up and I had to look for other hiding places. Empty tins would accumulate under my mattress and in other various junk drawers around the room. Pot was trickier, and I did my best to hide it accordingly to its tricky status, though in recent years my parents have informed I'm not so subtle as I sometimes think. I'd usually bundle that up in an old baseball sock and stuff the wad in the back of my closet somewhere behind the mountain of sleeping bags and boxes of old pictures and school reports, underneath the dangling mass of my wardrobe. I once hid a bottle of Jeremiah Weed liquor in my sock drawer back when my mom still did my laundry, and was surprised when she found it.

I don't know when I stopped being quite so naïve. Some days, maybe even most, I ask myself if I am still that naïve. I left the Flag Room once for a semester in Duluth, returning every couple of weekends so I could spend time with a doe-eyed girl. When I found out they wouldn't let me come back for the Spring semester on account of my astoundingly terrible grades, we gathered my things back up and I returned to the Flag Room with my tail between my legs. I'd like to believe I've done a lot of growing since then, perhaps I've come closer to realizing what it really means to be an American. When I was at my lowest, after I had come back from Duluth,

writing stories and reading books always made me feel better. It didn't take me long to realize that literature is where my passion lies. The autumn following my dismissal from the university in Duluth, I enrolled at the community college near my house and began to pursue that passion. In attempts to distinguish myself as someone who knew a bit of what he was talking about, I took American Literature courses and tested the waters of the great names in our nation's written world. After reading Ben Franklin's autobiography, something that would've made the young patriot on Wedgewood guffaw, I told myself that I, too, should try and develop my virtues. I can't really follow up on how I've done with that without being subjective, but in terms of temperance, one of Franklin's thirteen virtues, I haven't touched chewing tobacco in almost five months. Subjectively, I miss it a lot of days. I used to fancy that putting a pinch of chew in my lip made me a better writer. I know now, even if sometimes it feels like I'm just trying to convince myself, it's not worth it.

The Flag Room has meant a lot of different things to me over the years, and despite the stars and stripes covering my walls for almost a decade, the room has constantly been changing. The year the Vikings went to the NFC Championship with Brett Favre, I taped a collage of newspaper clippings on the wall above my bed. Eventually those came down, only to be replaced with more wall posters. My mom was more accepting of these; movie posters featuring heroic and controversial male figures that I looked up to was a representation of my artistic spirit, and not my blind adolescent lust. The plaster that my stars and stripes were painted onto started to become less intact in places; three specifically where my fist had gone through in anger. Over the years, more faded spots and scratches and gouges began to show up, until my mom resolved it was finally time to repaint.

When she first brought up the notion, I wanted to be adamant in a refusal. It had been a number of months since my thoughts of 'forever' had changed; a long time since the doe-eyed girl had been mine to hold. I wanted to cling stubbornly to a memory that once gave me joyous shivers, not to give up another part of what I had once thought to be a set reality. I didn't know if I could handle anymore change, but I'd been attempting to belong to a higher class of virtue, so I relented, hoping that by forcing the Flag Room to be just another memory, I could move on a bit easier.

We waited until the long and cold Minnesota winter was over, and for my brother's Spring Break to end so I could spend the nights in his room. When it was time to empty out the Flag Room, the first thing I went in with was a garbage can. Massive wads of paper and old magazines--some sports related, others more unsavory--were thrown away. Deep in drawers that I hadn't opened in what felt like years, I found long forgotten tins that rang hollowly, revealing their emptiness even before I opened them and took in the lingering scent of old tobacco. They clattered together when I tossed them in the garbage can. I threw away calendars with dates marked upon them; one with a smiley-face and a heart written in fat, girlish handwriting into the 30th of October, 2011. Against all my screaming instincts, I shoved it into the white trash bin and moved onto the next thing.

Once I'd thrown most everything away, I brought in a few empty boxes so I could keep safe all the books and movies and memorabilia that I intended to hold onto. I brought down the movie posters in their frames from the plaster walls that I once believed to be a stronghold. I removed old baseball trophies from the shelves that rested above my television. My dad and I

struggled to get the wooden dresser I'd been using all my life out into the hallway, where it would sit until my mom was done repainting. To this day, it is still a solid piece of furniture, even if there are rings on the surface of the wood from my water glasses. At the end of my bed, there had been an old desk fastened into the wall, but my parents had taken it down and thrown it into the garbage outside before I had begun stripping the room of all my possessions. To my surprise, the paint behind the desk wasn't the uniform field of navy blue with white stars running through it. Behind that desk, all those years, the light blue tint remained from when the Flag Room used to look like outer space. In the corner, sitting in plain sight now that the desk had been taken away, a small laundry basket full of things that I had intended to hide from myself sat unmolested. I set down the box of Stephen King novels that I was carrying and started to rummage through that basket. I knew what I was looking for when I began to leaf through it all. I passed over old folders from my semester in Duluth, a maroon tassel that was meant to keep me on track towards graduation, a video Yahtzee game that I hadn't fiddled with in ages. At the bottom of that basket, many months before, I had stashed the evidence of my time with the doe-eyed girl. When I finally found the envelope holding all our pictures, my eyes were already glossed over with tears. I only had to look at our smiles for a few moments to know these were worth keeping, so despite any hesitation I may have felt or any virtuous thoughts that were ringing through my head, I put them in the box on top of my Stephen King novels and continued on before someone found me that way.

When I walked through the Flag Room for the last time, my stars and stripes were covered with spackle. Some places had more than others; those were the places where the holes had been about the size of a fist. It was nice to think that all those old wounds could just

be patched over with something you can buy at the store. Some instinct cried out from the back of my head as I glanced over the Flag Room, telling me to turn back, that it wasn't too late. A more virtuous part of me took a deep breath and let it out smoothly. I thought there would be other ways to keep my stars and stripes alive, even if they weren't covering my walls.

I stepped into the middle of the Flag Room and picked up an unopened can of paint; Gingko Tree, an almost olive kind of green. I had told my mom that the final decision was really up to her, that it wouldn't even be my room soon enough. How could I choose a color anyway? There was too much for a single color to live up to. When I asked her why she wanted to paint it green, she told me, "A green room is supposed to be soothing."

That seemed like as good a reason as any to me.