

A Roommate by Any Other Name

I hated Gregoire. And who wouldn't, if it was their sweet, lovable Helene he had been sneaking visits to at night. I go so far as to suggest spelling his name backwards is LOSER, though I confess I have never attempted it.

We first met through the special ladies in our lives at the time. He and Sophie were living in a two-bedroom flat in the heart of old downtown. You pay extra for convenience; Sophie had finally admitted to herself additional rent money from someone like Helene was more important than her ability to have the space for unfinished and non selling art projects.

The girls no doubt discussed and agreed on their certainty of Gregoire and myself becoming fast friends, but I saw it as a disservice to my Helene that she should ever see me finding a common ground with that charlatan.

Before I continue, I must concede Gregoire was part of the place long before I showed up on scene, and he likely wanted as little to do with my intrusion as I with him.

Our initial meeting, a visit as Helene and I were passing through to a gala she wished to show me off at, was cordial enough. Though I would stop short of calling it amicable on either side. Gregoire hadn't even been told we would be popping in. In retrospect I too would harbour some resentment if company walked in without my being told. Company that then caught me on the couch, belly out, doing things to myself not meant for public speculation. Gregoire, wearing a white ascot and nothing else, had

quickly jumped up as we pretended not to see him. I think that moment marked a blocker dictating that was as far as our friendship would ever go.

Two weeks later we arrived to stay. I was on some heavy medications for what Helene called a minor procedure (I opted to disagree with her on that one) and it wasn't until we were walking with our suitcases down Sophie's street and up the steps to her apartment I realized what was underfoot.

Everybody carried on the façade of being elated with the new living arrangement, but Gregoire's constant stare through me overrode his smile. I found it quite unnerving, and I wondered if I could best him in a physical altercation if it came to be.

Days went by, becoming weeks. The living arrangements weren't bad. They weren't bad, bad; it's just that things were different when it was only Helene and me. I'm sure the others felt the same way. They must have. Sophie had a strong desire to have a neat and tidy home- if a cup was put in the sink and not immediately washed, she would stop what she was doing, and insist it was ok, that she liked doing dishes as she washed, dried, and stored it away. Drip drying clothes and even dishes were out of the question.

Moreover, I was accustomed to my fair share of alone time and still needed it-even more now as personal space in the flat became a commodity. Gregoire, being a home body, never seemed to leave the flat except for an overnight trip to Sophie's brother every few weeks. On these nights, I could sense Sophie's longing for companionship and once my Helene was asleep found myself wandering over to Sophie's room to console her for a few hours before leaving for my walk.

My nightly jaunt about the old town became longer and longer; the hours long stints became my refuge. As dangerous as the city can be at night, at least I could breathe and think when outside by myself. Helene likened my little personal expeditions to nothing less than prowling, but aside from that, we never discussed it. She understood. And she never complained, not even when the hours turned into entire nights and I slept many of my daylight hours away.

I never looked for adventures, but never shied away from them neither. And one night about three am heard chatter from around a weathered and broken fence. A fan behind a restaurant was humming with a sporadic clang, blowing the aromatic scent of pickled mackerel over the stench of restaurant garbage to the world around it.

My mouth watered, and I walked around the fence to investigate.

As I got closer, shadows in the dark formed into a small group of fellow insomniacs. I slowly made my way to the group and planned to walk past them unless I had indication I was welcome. As I went by, I noticed with a raised eyebrow they all wore ascots and was startled to see Gregoire in the group. He pretended not to know me. I wondered if Sophie was aware of his extracurricular activities and in my ponderings didn't notice till the last moment they had formed a circle around me.

I opted not to acknowledge Gregoire. I wouldn't give him that. I had my doubts a group of tie-wearing miscreants would be much of a threat but resigned to the fact that after I fought through two or three, a battle wound such as a stomp was likely in my head's future. A great ad for Doc Martins if I ever heard of one. Just as they were about to set upon me, Gregoire told them to let me through.

I nodded to him as I walked by, the released endorphins in my body making me forget all about my fish craving. The night was never again discussed between us.

With Gregoire having saved me from a guaranteed beat down, I laid low out of his way for weeks after that. And may have for an indefinite amount of time, if not for what happened next.

I was coming in one morning just before sunrise, ready to lay with Helene as normal. The shadow of a shadow flicked across the hallway in the dark as I made my way inside. It was little enough to cause me to doubt I had even seen it. However, one thing I couldn't dismiss was my side of the bed was still being warm from a previous visitor to the room. Gregoire.

I spent the next few hours wide awake considering the situation. Before my rebuttal of his egregious act, I needed cold hard proof. My walks outside became much shorter after that, and two days later I had a plan.

Helene had me nothing less than spoiled as far as food preparation went, but I still knew my way around a kitchen. After giving everyone the necessary time to fall asleep, I was able to sneak into the kitchen and fumble my way into the flour pot. I spread a dusting of flour from Sophie's and Gregoire's room to mine and Helene's. The flour would hopefully act as the talcum powder I had seen on police shows and lay prints for all of us to see.

Aside from some areas I stumbled and let globs of the powder out, I hoped most would be undetectable when stepped on. I needed more flour than I realized, and soon had switched out the container in the cupboard for the entire sack. Every grain was used

and I was panting and sweaty when I was done. I then made sounds as if I were going out, then waited on the couch.

Hours went by and there was no movement. One can only stare at the dark silence for so long, and eventually I fell asleep.

I woke up some time later to Sophie yelling and swearing. She had flicked the light on and was halfway down the hallway towards Helene's room. I had no doubt she had observed Gregoire's footprints as I had intended, and a smile spread across my face. My job was done, and it was time to sit back.

As it turned out, footprints in the flour were not the cause of the yelling. It was the flour itself. With the light now on and bringing the dark's secret to attention, one could see my attempt at a thin dusting was a terrible failure. Glob after glob of flour lay on the floor, leading from the kitchen to Helene's bedroom. Flour dust was still in the air, and it looked like a flour grenade had been set off.

Gregoire stood behind Helene, wide eyed and acting innocent, as if he had no part in all this. As if he were not the sole reason this was necessary.

Nobody enjoys cleaning up after someone else, and as such this was the cause of the inevitable and irreconcilable blow up between Sophie and Helene.

To summarize an impressively long and aggressive argument that at one point had scissors cutting up clothes and a saltshaker thrown at a head, Sophie blamed anyone

except her and Gregoire, and Helene blamed only Sophie or Gregoire on the uncleanable mess underfoot.

Before the fight was done, Helene had vowed we were moving back out. The next day, Sophie had calmed down and tried to apologize, but once some things are said and done that can't be unsaid. We were gone that day.

After a few hotel stays and some couch surfing with other friends, we were in a small apartment in a seedier street of downtown, but still the same district. Helene insisted none of this was my fault, but I'm no fool. I remained fully aware of my part in all this. I continued to keep an eye out for Gregoire in the streets to make him pay for his unnecessary shenanigans but never saw him.

Truth be told, after we moved out of Sophie's I tried an ascot on in the secrecy of home, and a week later I was wearing them regularly in and out of the house. I for one think its important we evolve and grow as we find ourselves.

It was a month of Mondays later when I was taking a presumed shortcut between a liquor store and a restaurant when I saw a pair of paws sticking out from newspapers that looked familiar- Gregoire.

I peeled off the newspapers that covered him and looked down at his haggard being. Whether he had also left the comforts of Sophie's flat some days ago or had just recently simply had the living shit kicked out of him, poor Gregoire was in a sad state of affairs.

Bloodied and matted, he lay there with nothing on. Not even an ascot. If he recognized me, he didn't let on.

I looked around and removed the ascot off my neck before tying it on him. I helped him to his feet, and with him leaning on me we walked back to my place where he would have a chance to rest properly and get something to eat.

Mind you, I would still watch him closely around Helene if she were home. Some cats, one simply cant trust.