

The Elephant in the Room

A dark, narrow hallway with a radiator in the foreground and a doorway at the end. The walls are covered in a textured, possibly patterned wallpaper. The lighting is dim, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere.

Emily Sutcliffe

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In memory of my Dad
John Patrick Sutcliffe

Chapter One



He could hear her when she walked about above him, uninhibitedly unaware that he listened for her footsteps across his ceiling. He had to become very still, like stone. She was such a lithe shadow, a ghost, haunting his awareness. When he slept, he dreamt nightmares; a past he couldn't leave behind though he would try so desperately to. He slept rarely, afraid for what he wanted to forget to halt his progress now, such that it was. It was when he first heard her above him as he stared at his ceiling, willing the night to wane. Her patter came like whispers and lulled his quiet persecution, gifting him a tiny measure of peace from his demons, as redeeming as they were relentless.

So he came to listen for her and came to know the routine of her hours like his own. When he did sleep, he would wake when she woke and follow the echo of her stirring on his ceiling as though the tiles were made of glass. Then she would leave, as she did every morning, and he would press his face up to the peephole in his door and watch her descend down the stairs and pass the distorted blur of his view. As though she was caught in some moment of time, every day she would pull a scarlet coat about her shoulders and every day she left and returned with a paper satchel with a lone baguette sticking out the top. Her hair was always the same, thick

russet waves cut just above her shoulders; her skin was white as milk and splashed with freckles; and her eyes were always on the floor at her feet, so even now he didn't know their color. But he knew every curve of her slight frame, the shape of the features of her soft, sallow face, and the elegant curl of her fingers wreathed about the bushels she cradled as lovingly as an infant.

But most of all he knew her sadness, the quiet desperation of her footsteps, as though even while above him in the refuge of her own home, she was trying not to make a sound, trying to fool the world into forgetting she existed.

He knew her name only by what was listed beside the buzzer to her flat: R. LaMotte. He dared not imagine what the R could stand for.

When she would glide as she did, so graceful like she floated, and shadow the stoop of his door, he would cross to the window and wait until she appeared on the street below. Every day, like an explorer, she would walk in a different direction, her head turned down to the cobble-patched sidewalk, the sun, if it were shining, catching her hair like ravels of milky copper. He would watch her until she disappeared and only then would his day begin, only then would errands be tended and words written and his life, such as it was and what little he knew of it, unfold.

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