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The Woman Across the Alley

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SHAWN WHITES

(excerpt from) **The Woman Across the Alley**

Allen leaned on the windowpane and watched as she played the guitar and sang melodically in a French whisper. Her window was on the second floor of the peach stucco building, directly across the alleyway, open to the salty ocean air. She smiled while reading the notes in front, her black hair disheveled and her olive skin glowing in the setting sun.

When the shadows of the sun hid her figure, he pulled back the brown curtains of the window and turned on the television to find images of trolleys and Golden Gate Hill, the place he called home. He missed the restaurant in Sausalito where he proposed to his wife, where they drank Chateau Laroque on their anniversaries, and he missed the Vista Point Lookout where the two of them watched the tiny diamonds of car headlights glow on the bridge above the bay.

He turned the picture off.

When it came time for dinner, he set two plates on the table and dropped the needle on the vinyl of Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*, an album that played on repeat during his honeymoon here in Nice, France. Shortly after that honeymoon, he bought the apartment. It was naked without Amy, and as Dylan's scratchy voice echoed off the apartment walls, he glanced at the untouched plate of food to his left and sang quietly to the empty air.

And then the night came, and he woke, gasping for air with a sharp pain in his ribs like tiny knives stabbing from the inside trying to get out. He violently clenched the damp sheets underneath him and looked at his fingers, remembering the image that had forced him to wake—his body pinned against the seat from the dented steering wheel, Amy's limp body

lying in the seat next to him, her eyes black, blue, covered with blood, and her legs snapped underneath her like two half-broken tree limbs barely attached to the trunk. He had used all his strength to stretch those fingers to grab Amy's lifeless hand, and he couldn't reach it.

He made his way to the restroom and put both hands on the sink and leaned over and watched as drops of cold sweat dripped from his hair and into the sink. When he splashed water on his face, he noticed his features in the mirror—the dark purple circles around his brown eyes and the goose bumps on the pallor of his skin. He ventured back to his room and opened the window and drifted off to the faded sounds of late-night French conversations and the thunder from a storm many miles away.

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The next day Allen walked the old brick streets nearby until he came to La Musique Guitare. Through its windows he saw many small Spanish guitars hanging on the walls and the woman from across the alley behind the cashiers counter. The sight of her compelled him to venture inside, and he didn't know why. He had never heard her words but in song, and she was a stranger, but she had an aura of familiarity about her that he could not pinpoint. Inside he went straight to the guitars hanging on the wall and pulled one down and strummed it lightly with his thumb as it lay in his lap. After several minutes he heard the quiet words of a female's voice.

“Puis-je vous aider?” she asked. “Can I help you?”

He turned and looked up at the woman's eyes. In them he could see his wife's eyes, the same shade of lively emerald green, the iris a deep, distinct brown, the way she used to look at him when he laid his head next to hers on the pillow.

“Je parle un peu francais,” he replied with a stagger in his voice. “I speak little French.”

The woman giggled. “My apologies. Do you want to purchase the guitar?”

“It’s beautiful, but I don’t need another guitar,” he said as he put it back on the wall. It was his first encounter with the woman from across the alley. He shook his head to himself and held his hand to his heart as he felt his chest tighten, and took a deep breath before he left the store hastily without another look at her.

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Ever since that day it seemed as though he could not go anywhere without running into her. From the patio of Restaurant Le Galion, he saw her sitting in the sand, reading before the sun-sparkled ocean water.

He could not fully make out her face at his distance; all he could see was her tan skin against the golden sand. The longer he stared the more he began to see his wife. He reached into his wallet and found a Polaroid of Amy that he took on a beach in Southern California. Her damp black hair covered half of her smiling face, and she wore a white-tank top that hung down to her thighs. He held out the picture at arms length and positioned it so that it was right next to the woman sitting on the beach. Bringing it back to his lips, he kissed it and put it back into his pocket. He sat there until she was the only one still sitting in the sand, and then he walked out with his shoes in his hands.

He sat down in the sand close enough to her so that she’d see him and listened to the waves thunder upon the shore. From the corner of his eye he saw her look up from the pages of her book.

“You can really lose track of time out here...get caught up in the beauty of the sea,” he said.

The woman placed her book in the sand and moved her towel closer to him. “I would say. Do you come to this place often?” she asked, taking off her sunglasses.

“Not this place. But there is a beach back home much like this.”

“You are not from around here, are you? I have just recently been seeing you.”

His arms shuck and his eyelids quivered as he stood up and walked

away. "I must be going," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

There was a moment before he heard the sound of her feet kicking up sand. "Wait!"

What is your name?"

He stopped and turned slowly to her, trying not to look in her eyes. "Allen."

"And I am Sylvie, Allen. Maybe I will meet you again?"

"Yes, maybe," he said with a forced smile, and he continued on his way.

On his walk back home, the sun was low and hidden behind the pastel buildings with no streetlights to illuminate the path, and he thought about Amy, about the woman from across the alley, about his attraction to both. When the thoughts entered his head, though, he told himself that this woman was not just another woman, she was Amy. The beach, the music, and her appearance were all too familiar. Nonetheless, whenever he thought about the woman from across the alley, he felt dizzy and nauseous.

When he got back to the apartment he went to his bed. The unoccupied pillow next to him, the empty white space, made him clench his eyelids together tightly in order to fight back the moisture. He brought his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs and rocked back and forth on the sheets.

Just then, though, he heard Sylvie singing from across the alley. Her voice started to rise, as though she was trying to be heard. He put his hands over his ears and tried to forget the sound, but he knew he couldn't keep from listening. He went to his window and brushed the curtain to the side and peeked out with one eye and watched. For a moment there was silence; he looked back down to the empty pillow, and then he ran to the kitchen and grabbed a napkin and a sharpie. He scribbled hastily: To the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, eyes bannered black with shades of green. Try these chords, G, G minor, D, B minor, and see where it takes

you.” Paper in hand, he went back to the window and opened the curtain. She wasn’t there, but he heard telephone ring. She spoke to someone in French, and though he couldn’t see her in the shadows of her apartment, he listened. Before long he watched from above as she came running out the front door and got into a car. As she drove off, he ran down the stairs and into her building. At room 211, he slipped the napkin underneath the door and ran down the steps and back to his apartment.

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The next day, Allen sat at a bar. The bartender, with his sweat-soaked white shirt and thick black mustache, stood behind the bar with his arms crossed and puffed on a cigar as he watched Allen. He sat there a long while listening to the problems of other men before he went to the restroom. When he came out, the first thing that he saw was Sylvie sitting at a booth by herself. He stood motionless until she brought her eyes up and smiled. He sat down at the bar without acknowledging her.

“Did you write this?” she asked quietly with a grin as she lay down the napkin on the bar.

“Well . . .” he looked down at the paper and wondered if he had made a mistake, if he should have been thinking about her at all. “No . . . I did not,” he said lowly without bringing his eyes up.

The woman laughed and put her hand down on his arm. “I see you watch me through the window... are you sure you didn’t write this?” she insisted.

“What makes you think it was me?”

Allen brushed the hair from his face and looked at the woman’s eyes. The muscles of her face had tightened. He thought about the empty pillow, about the beach, about the accident, and about being alone.

“Okay, I confess,” he replied.

“I was sure of it,” she said as she wrapped her lips around the straw of her plastic cup.

He felt his face turning red and his heart began to beat faster than before. At that moment he wanted to touch her, hug her, and take care of her like he should have taken care of Amy.

“Can I buy you a drink, right now?” he asked, while shuffling his hands in his pockets for money.

Sylvie tilted her head to the side and put her hand on his leg, “Thank you but no thank you. I do not drink when I have to work in the mornings.” She stood up and put her hands on his shoulders from behind, and whispered to him, “I have written a song. Using your chords. Come to my apartment tomorrow and I will play. You know where I live. Then, I may drink with you Allen.”

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In the aisles of the Supermarche he searched up and down the aisles until finally he caught sight of a bottle with faded iron gates across the sand-colored label, Chateau Laroque.

When he got to the door of her apartment he took a deep breath and knocked. She opened immediately, as if she was right behind the door eagerly awaiting his arrival.

“Bonjour, Allen. Come,” she said as she motioned him through the doorway.

“Bonjour, Sylvie,” he nodded.

It was the first time he said it aloud, and it sounded foreign. Sylvie, he repeated in his head. There were many paintings on the walls, many of them where of ocean waves and musicians. He walked over to the small-bodied wooden guitar that leaned up against the windowpane. He slid his hand gently down its neck and onto the frail pinewood of the sinuous body that was torn where the strumming of a pick had scratched through, and imagined that it was a woman’s body.

Across the alleyway was his window, and he envisioned himself sitting there, like a voyeur, watching her.

“You are my only audience member,” she said.

“Doesn’t anyone else hear you play?”

She glanced out the window and down into the alley, avoiding his eyes. “No, I am scared of audiences,” she said as she brushed her hair back behind her ear.

He curled his lips and realized that she had noticed him there, every time, even when he tried to hide behind the curtain. “Look at that,” he said, pointing out at the cloudless lavender, auburn, and blue sky. “It’s like someone painted the sky with a brush.”

Sylvie grabbed his hand. “You’re right. If we hurry we can catch the last of the sunset. Let’s go.”

She dragged him through the room and grabbed the bottle of wine. “Thanks for this,” she said with a smile.

As soon as they got to the sand, Sylvie sat down and slipped the bottle up about half way out of the bag. Allen pulled an opener from his pocket and Sylvie handed the bottle over to him. The last time he had opened a bottle of Chateau Laroque was the night that Amy had died. The sweet grape smell lifted from the bottle and up into his nostrils. It smelt like Amy’s breath when he leaned in to kiss her the night of the accident. He took a long swig and held the liquid in his mouth and moved his tongue in circles before he sat the bottle in the sand.

He passed it over to Sylvie, as he did many times for Amy.

“For you,” he said.

Sylvie took a drink out of the bottle and he watched as she closed her eyes, lifted her cheeks, and bit her bottom lip.

“Zut alors!” she cried.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve had it, hasn’t it?” he asked.

“No, no. I’ve never had this. What is it?” she asked while she analyzed the label. “I don’t want to be rude, Allen, but it is far too sweet for my liking.”

He shook his head. “What do you mean, you don’t like it?”

He grabbed the bottle out of her hands, took another drink, and stared directly into the fiery glow of the sun, which was too low now to

blind his eyes, and tried to understand how someone so similar to his wife could not like her favorite wine. He wondered if he had expected too much.

“I prefer white wine, but I will most certainly drink with you,” she said while she placed her hand on his leg. “I did not mean to offend you... can I have another drink?”

He handed it over to her. “It’s just that this is my favorite wine, that’s all.”

After awhile he put it past him, and they continued to pass the bottle as they talked about their time here in Nice. Allen found out that she was a student at a music institute and that she was originally from Paris. She told him that music was the one thing that stayed constant in her life, that everything else kept changing too fast, and that she couldn’t stay with one thing long enough to make it worth anything. But she wanted that to change. Often while talking, she’d touch the bare skin of his arm and his lower thigh where his shorts stopped, and when she did, the hairs on his body would rise.

“You said that you had a song for me, I’d like to hear it,” he said to her.

“That’s right. It’s getting cold anyway. Let’s get going.”

On the walk back home she reached down and grabbed his hand, locking her fingers into his without either of them saying anything. He looked at her and smiled, and as they walked down the street, he didn’t take notice of the couples walking towards them. All he could picture was Sylvie singing in a tongue he did not understand.

Inside her apartment, he walked over to her guitar and started to strum the chords of a song that he had once written. Sylvie interrupted him, wrapping her arms around his stomach from behind as she placed her head on his back. He closed his eyes and remembered what it felt like to be held, to feel the familiar touch of a woman.

Sylvie began to unbutton the first few buttons of his shirt. “How about I play for you later?” she whispered. “Come with me.”

She led him by hand to her bedroom and pointed to her bed.
“Stay here.”

He fell down upon her bed, closed his eyes and imagined what would happen next. First she could come in with the guitar. Or maybe she was tired. When he opened his eyes he looked at the empty pillow next to him, but before the image of Amy appeared in his mind as it so often did, Sylvie jumped down beside him and put her head on the pillow. She brushed back the hair from her eyes and smiled.

His hand trembled as he put his palm flat on her warm naked thigh, moving it farther up her leg. Almost immediately he felt her fingers as they flowed through the roots of his hair, and she pressed her lips to his. The first thing he caught was the smell of grape wine on her breath. He did not hesitate, though, and grabbed her waist, closer, and rested his mouth on hers for until they both needed air. They were cold and unfamiliar, but they were moist, and the slick touch of them numbed his body.

In that moment, he felt as if he were in the bed next to Amy in the minutes before they made love, and so he pulled her shirt up off of her and she did the same for him. It was much like the time he used to have with Amy, the way he rolled underneath the sheets and touched the bareback skin.

But the longer they continued the more he began to think beyond Sylvie’s lips, her smooth skin, and her green eyes. It was the smell of the wine that reminded him that she didn’t even like the wine; he had drunk most of it. He leaned back and looked at her as her pupils dilated.

She panted in and out.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He felt himself shaking, and the stabbing pain, like knives, came back to him.

“What is my favorite color?” he asked her.