



THE ONE

A WORK OF FICTION BY GREGG VOSS

According to the road sign Abigail Johnson had just passed on her evening walk into town, the population of Egg Harbor, Wisconsin, was 201.

"And I'm the one," she thought wistfully, as the sound of her boots crunched the fresh, pre-Christmas snow.

She had always been the one, sort of the town's dangling modifier. Immensely talented as a child, her family was told Door County, and even Wisconsin, was way too small to cultivate an acting career. So she moved to L.A. in the mid-'80s and starred in the sleeper hit of the summer of 1987, Ashley's Choice, where she played Ashley, the nerd who somehow had the two cutest guys in school chasing her by the end of the picture. Ultimately, she had to make her choice—which turned out to be Cam, played by Tate Marshall, 1980s heartthrob.

Tate, she thought, as Egg Harbor's blazing Christmas lights came into view on Highway 42, spitting snow just starting to fall. The best thing to come out of her SoCal adventures was Tate, the goofy blonde boy who had a penchant for jazz and nice cars. Mature things. Well, mostly. She smiled inwardly; he loved his Skittles.

He would do things for her, sweet things, like hold doors open, or wait to start eating until she was ready. The little things that mattered.

Tate was also the first boy she had kissed.

The first boy she had loved.

She still did, deep down, even after her divorce from Jim.

Where was Tate, right now?

Probably on the road, she thought. In addition to his acting career, he was already an accomplished guitarist, and he had gone on to superstardom as an adult, in jazz circles, anyway, traveling the world. His website said so.

Off and on before and after her marriage to Jim, she had tried contacting Tate through his talent agency, but those calls and emails and even letters were ignored. Must have thought she was a crazy fan.

It was hard to convey in a few words what he had meant to her back then. And now, she reckoned.

He pulled up that sun-splashed Los Angeles afternoon in his very own 1987 Corvette convertible, Dark Red Metallic. Hair feathered perfectly, he jumped out and opened the passenger-side door for her in his Guess jean shorts and white Vuarnet tee (total '80s). She was about to climb in when she noticed the cassette tape case on the seat.

"Miles Davis," Abigail said, as she picked it up. "A Tribute to Jack Johnson." What is this, anyway?"

"It's jazz," Tate said, pulling into traffic and then gunning the engine to a nice growl.

"Elevator music," she replied in a singsongy voice, which elicited excitement from Tate, as if he couldn't wait to prove her wrong.

"No, no – it's called jazz-rock fusion," he said. "It's like mixing the elements of jazz with the raw energy of rock and roll. You'd love it."

"Doubtful," she replied, but Tate was right.

Like the 'Vette, the opening bluesy guitar rumbled into her eardrums.

"That's John McLaughlin!" Tate said, depressing the accelerator. "Listen to him jam that axe!"

It didn't sound like anything she had ever heard before. And yet, musically, she felt as if

she had come home.

"This is jazz?" she hollered over the engine's growl as Tate came to a stop on Wilshire, palm trees swaying overhead. "Where are the horns?"

"Wait for it—wait for it," he said as the light turned green, and sure enough, the blast of a trumpet caught Abigail by surprise and she found her backside shifting back and forth in her seat.

"Now that, that's Miles," Tate said, speed picking up as the 'Vette darted in and out of traffic, other drivers giving him, and her, the stink eye. Then he turned to her and said, "You wanna meet him?"

Twenty minutes later they pulled up behind Amigo Studios in North Hollywood, next to a big blue dumpster. A couple of guys were milling about, sharing smokes, ranking on each others' mothers, guffawing. Except for one slender black man, with a thatch of curly hair and wide-rimmed sunglasses. He stood off to the side and said nothing.

"Mr. Davis," Tate said as he climbed out of the car and opened the door for Abigail. "How are you? We were just listening to Jack Johnson. Love that record."

Miles looked on with the bemusement of a man who realized he was being used to impress a girl.

"Yeah, man, cool," he said, before kissing the top of Abigail's hand.

She and Tate spent the rest of that day cruising, taking in the full impact of Jack Johnson before moving onto more introspective stuff, like "Kind of Blue" and "Sketches of Spain."

"You gotta remember," he said, as he eased the 'Vette into a parking spot in Venice in early evening after a spartan dinner of chili dogs and Icees. "Jazz is an art form. It's music, but it's more art than music. And it's totally American. See what I mean?"

As they walked along, the Hare Krishnas mingling with the roller skaters as somewhere a man breathed deeply into a saxophone, his hand met hers and their fingers embraced. And when they finally found a seat, away from everyone else, it seemed, that first kiss. Well, it was epic, his warm, soft lips meeting hers, much more meaningful than the canned kissing takes they had done for Ashley's Choice.

It had been perfect.

It had been the defining moment of her youth. Maybe even her life.

So what happened?

Life. Life happened.

Hollywood was done with them by the

early '90s. They dated for more than three years before he went off to chase his jazz dream. She came back to Door County and married Jim.

They were kids back then.

My gosh, that was so long ago, Abigail thought as she neared the crook in 42 by Harbor View Park. He's still famous, she thought. And me?

Well, she was content. The divorce had been hard, but there were no children to contend with and Jim had moved to Green Bay, so for all intents and purposes, he was out of the picture. She owned her parents' old farmhouse south of Egg Harbor, and every evening around 7 p.m. she would walk the mile or so into town, have a glass of Malbec somewhere and then head home for Netflix, or some jazz on her iPod. Over time, her tastes had expanded eclectically to include everything from John Coltrane to Weather Report.

But it was Tate's music she adored, especially his album "You're the One," which had been released in the early 2000s, and spoke to her because the title track reminded her of the opening notes of Jack Johnson and that day in L.A. She had always kind of thought he had written it for her. That was silly, though. He, too, was married, and he and his wife had two children and two pugs, Miles and Davis. His website said so.

She had a calico cat named Tate.

Her walk continued past the crook in 42 and she headed toward Vinter's Valhalla, the newest restaurant/bar in town. It tended to local rock acts on Saturday nights, usually bands from Green Bay that had no business being bands but thought they were artists nonetheless. She hadn't been to Valhalla yet, but she heard the food was good, very Nordic but with an American flair.

She had just about passed it when she heard the strains of something familiar, the opening notes that ushered in a sudden burst of southern California sun into the frigid Door County evening.

Jack Johnson.

She entered and there he was, Tate, in the far corner, opposite the bar, in a plain black T-shirt and loose-fitting jeans. His eyes were closed as he fingered the frets of his guitar with aplomb, as the bassist and drummer created a backbone that set him up perfectly, while the trumpeter put his instrument to his lips.

It couldn't be. But it was.

"Tate!" she yelled and he opened his eyes and smiled broadly, as he headed into a solo then out of it as the trumpeter took over.

She slumped into a chair stageside, got her glass of Malbec, and allowed her hips to orbit in time with the music until the end of the first set when Tate came over.

"What are you doing here?" she said, near breathlessly, as he turned his chair around and straddled it.

"I'm helping out at Birch Creek, for its Winter Jazz Festival," he said, referring to the renowned music school out on County E. "Guest instructor. I know Mona, the executive director."

"You came all the way here to teach kids jazz guitar?" she doubtfully replied.

"Well, partly," he said. "I actually came here to find you."

"But you're married."

"Not anymore."

Silence.

"But ..."

"I came here to find you," he broke in. "You were always the one."

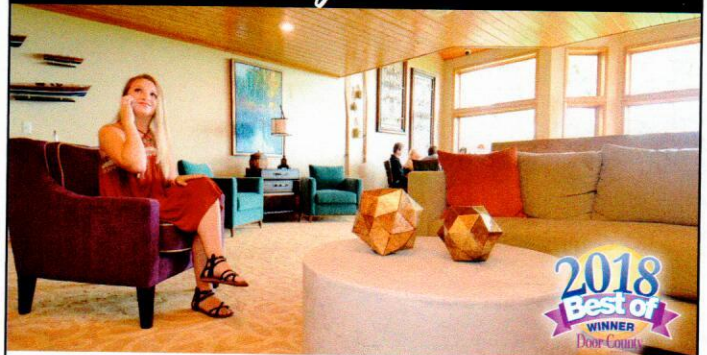


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