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Dévoiler

Rachel Burns

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► **Outside - In IV** | Lauren Copley
Assistant Editor's Choice



► **Dévoiler** | Rachel Burns

We bathed in the shadow of a monastery, you and I. We looked up at it and laughed, wondering if we could be seen, half-hoping that we would. In the foreignness and the fragility of our state, we welcomed the exhilaration. To be looked at is one thing; to be seen is another matter entirely.

That summer in France, we wanted to be seen. We were both ready. You — you were finally more woman than girl, your face found itself under the flesh, your curves decided where they wanted to remain. Still, though, you were ignorant of your womanliness, and I loved you for it; I loved you for you. And I? I was ready, not as willing as you were but growing more and more certain every day that I could be loved, that I was worth loving. I struggled to find my center; years of being unseen had taken its toll.

After our shower, we stayed up on the chateau's terrace, watching the sun sink low over the vineyards. We sat silently and let the conversations of the adults waft in the air, mingling with the scents of Provence. The lavender breeze breathed through your hair, and I wanted to capture that moment forever — the pureness of your joy in the dying sun, lit up and unguarded, full of innocent sexuality. I was uncertain, but you were strong.

We had our first taste of wine that night, finding it not at all to our liking, the liquid too acidic for our virgin tongues. The adults broke the bread and spoke of life with voices full of wisdom and age over their fine cheeses. We listened, instead, to the plink-plink-plink of the ivy seeds as they fell from their shells and bumped against each other on the descent to earth. It was like the sound of rain, soft and promising.

Suddenly, though we ate dinner in the open air, I felt boxed in, caged by the enormity of nothing and everything all at once. So, I asked to be excused, that I was going to go for a walk, and we left. Above the chateau, farther up the winding hill perched an ancient fortress that begged for investigation. You ran your hand on the old stones. Its crumbling battlements held the hilltop together.

It was peaceful: us two, the old church, the history, the sun, the hills, the wind.

But then a motorbike disturbed our serenity. A man. His helmeted face followed us as he rode past, and we were frighteningly aware of our aloneness. We retreated up the hill to the stone cobbled houses the same families had occupied for generations. The gloaming deepened. We thought we were safe. You played with your lengthening curls that caused me so much trouble, but they crowned you so magnificently I could not allow you to relinquish them. I liked you in the shadows; you were softer, and your edges blending with those of the world around you.

I thought it would be safe to return back down to the remains of the fortress, so we made our descent, hastening now in the dying light. The others would begin to worry soon, but I so wanted to enjoy this moment of us together, in France, alone, with the world full of possibilities and the future unraveling slowly. We stood on the edge of it all, and then I heard the gravel crunching behind us, mocking my presumption.

You tensed instantly, and I pitied you, knew that he (his presence felt like a him) would see you, and I would not be able to bear the look in his eyes as he

examined you, judging your looks. You turned. He was nothing special, not like those French boys that they show on television. He was bespectacled with short smoker's teeth, black hair, and bad skin, which was tainted yellow. I couldn't tell if the color was natural or from the nicotine.

He spoke in rapid French, the kind I was terrified of in my high school French class. I spoke timidly; you couldn't look him in the eyes. "I speak English." Then he switched gears, talking in broken English, asking, "Where are you staying? Who did you come with? Can I stay with you up here?"

Panic set in, and I spat out, "My father will be looking for me soon, so hi and bye."

"Ciao," he replied, confused, as we brushed past.

I couldn't tell them what happened, so we went to the bathroom, and I locked the door. Outside, the sound of a motorcycle growled through the valley. You cringed. I couldn't look at you. I was too ashamed of my cowardice, of my neglect of you. We two, we could have been more than what we were, but my fears restrained us, my fears ensnared us. You were worth more than I could offer. You deserved better. Sick with anger at myself, sick with regret, I propped myself up over the sink and looked in the mirror, and there you were, my husk.

