

THE MOB CALLED

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This dispatch is adapted from a chapter of *The Road Here*, a larger work chronicling the unlikely chain of events that carried one man from collapse to a village halfway around the world into a life he never saw coming.

Willie's first stint out west, after Lexi took the other fork in the road in Vegas, had him bouncing around Northern Arizona and Utah for several months before finally heading across Nevada and landing in California. Once there it didn't take him long to find the next rabbit hole filled with someone else's unresolved trauma to scurry down. This one took the form of a rather featured, French-African blues singer named Nina Duplessis...eight years his senior.

Willie never had trouble finding work, he had the most intuitive mind I've ever come across. From a young age he could speak with authority on most topics and trades, from house framing to politicking to wrench turning and marketing strategies. He'd earn just enough to stay in whiskey and dry boots. Beyond that? He never thought much about it. Willie was endlessly social. His preference though, oddly, was to be alone with his thoughts. But his heart and his intellect simultaneously yearned to wade in, connect, observe and engage with folks across all social and economic lines. He had a knack for it.

He traded the LeMans for a pickup truck in Elko, Nevada before, remarkably, passing through Reno – I would have lost that bet – and making his way across into California. From there he headed south, sensing his next zip code wasn't far off. And damned if he didn't sniff it out. Like a beagle with a bead on a rabbit he had a compass for finding places not made to be found – where the quietly inspired lamented. This town wasn't on any map worth trusting – somewhere between Julian's old soul and Ramona's dusty underbite. You had to squint to see it, or maybe bleed a little first. It wasn't so much a town as a *pause* in the world, a stretch of

road that artists and oddballs passed through and never quite managed to leave. There were wind chimes made from bicycle gears, blown glass lamps hanging from tree limbs, and the low hum of a reel-to-reel echoing through a shack with no address. He called it “a place that smelled like turpentine and all the mistakes people meant to outgrow but didn’t.” It was the kind of hideout where ex-musicians worked tables at the diner or welded angels by daylight and by moonlight, cut demo tapes. Naturally, it’s where Willie ran across Nina – sultry, brilliant, and about as safe to touch as a copper wire in a thunderstorm.

Nina Duplessis was a long and curvy French woman of West African descent. Her strikingly beautiful skin was so dark it held a luster – like polished obsidian soaking in midnight that caught every room off guard. Nina was the queen of the blues. Semi-famous at one time. She had a singing career that never quite made the turn, though, touring with regional acts up and down the Delta. Even toured with Ike and Tina one summer in Europe as a backup singer. She had the pipes. She had the look. Hell, she had the whole damn package. But her temperament buried her. Regal as a queen and elegant as a cat walking silk, she could command a

room just by entering it – until the wrong word, or the wrong man, set her off. More often than not, she had a snifter of Courvoisier in one hand and one of her heels in the other, ready to hurl it at whatever promoter, manager, or poor bastard had crossed her that night. Talent like hers would have sold out rooms from Harlem to Montreux – if only her fire hadn't burned the bridges faster than she could build them.

 Their worlds collided one night at Josies, a little biker bar hidden up in the hills run by a local legend, a fiercely loved pioneering woman in her late 50s who was usually there behind the bar. Willie ambled in one night, Nina was on

the stage belting out her rendition of “I’ve got to use my imagination”, in a much more Bobby Bland flavor than Gladys Knight – slow and gritty with a tempo that grooved through the floor. Only a handful of people sat at the bar. They locked eyes when he walked in. Most men, too intimidated to gaze too long, he couldn’t look away. She noticed. He wasn’t trying to be cool, he had a genuine fascination with this unexpected brilliant ball of seductive electricity coming from the stage. He smiled. She smiled. The die had been cast.

She finished her set and walked to the bar where Josie had a Manhattan

waiting for her. Willie was a handful of barstools down on a bend in the bar where he had a head on view of her. She grabbed a cigarette and her glass, and with a lingering look towards Willie headed towards the back door. Willie grabbed his whiskey and beer and headed in that direction, stopping briefly to grab a book of matches from a tray on the bar.

The back door opened to a wooden patio where staff would break. Nina was leaning on the rail, back to the door, staring out at a small patch of moonlit woods on the other side of a small side lot. Willie slowed his pace a half step to observe the long, green, one-

piece, form fitting bodycon dress she was wearing, and wearing well. He walked up beside her and lit a match. She leaned in and touched the end of the cigarette to the flame, and after an easy drag she blew the match out, smoke curling towards the sky. She turned back towards the woods. He leaned over and looked in the same direction. Willie could talk in any situation. I'm sure Nina could too. But silence was the right move right then, a perfect fit, it felt right. Several minutes passed, both still gazing out towards the woods, Willie finally said "good choice on the tempo of My Imagination. Had more of a Bobby Bland vibe to it."

“Noticed that, did you?” she said

“Who wouldn’t” he quipped.

She chuckled in amusement.

“Nina”

“Willie”

“Haven’t seen you around”

“Just moved to town. Renting a room from a lady they call Miss Patty behind the farmers market.

“I love her”, Nina responded,
“She’s been here longer than anyone.
You were a lucky bastard to get a room there.”

“She seems like a great person.”

“The best. You plan on staying?”

“As far as I know. Only been here a few weeks but it seems like a good fit. My kinda’ people.”

“Where you from, you don’t need to respond.”

“Michigan. You? And you *do* need to respond”, Willie said with a chuckle.

She laughed, “Mississippi Delta!”

“Huh, would’ve never guessed”, Willie said with a grin.

With an approving grin and a slight shake of the head she said “I need to get back in for my last set. You sticking around?”

“For a bit”, he said.

She turned and walked back towards the door. As she was walking away she said, “Thanks for the light, Willie.”

“Thanks for the chat, Nina.”

Willie stayed at the rail, breathing in the night air and reflecting on the simpleness of the conversation. In fact, he stayed at that rail for the better part of the next hour, finally going in as Nina was finishing her last song. Another handful of people had filtered in. He walked past the stage and angled towards the door. He stopped short and leaned against the bar between two stools and listened to her sing her last note. He applauded with the rest of the

crowd, shot her a warm smile and eased his head backwards slightly with a nod, as if to say, I'll see you again, she understood the gesture and returned the same nod with a smile, and out the door he went.

You couldn't chart Willie's path in straight lines. His life never moved that way. It zigged when others zagged, looped when logic begged for a conclusion. So when he ghosted California after a wrecking-ball love affair named Nina Duplessis, no one was surprised. What was surprising, though, was the string of events preceding the demolition that led to the most unlikely commission.

It's no surprise Willie had an affinity for the low lit rough edges of, well, just about everything. It was particularly evident in his photography. He never sought attention. That was half his magic – he just *was*, and people somehow noticed. The same way a desert flower catches your eye not by shouting its colors, but by simply blooming in the middle of nowhere. That's how this whole unlikely saga started.

Unbeknownst to him, one of his old girlfriends back in Beaverton had submitted a handful of his portraits to *Amateur Photography Magazine*. She was enamored with his work. Willie

would've hated the gesture in theory, but the magazine apparently loved it. They ran two shots: one of a farmhand with blood on his jeans and sunrise in his eyes, and one of another hand framed perfectly against a backdrop on the same farm, leaning against a splintered corral post. They each looked like two dark desperate souls from the dust bowl era. Minimalist. Raw. Poetic.

Now, enter Frank Rizzo – retired muscle from Cicero, west of Chicago – turned olive oil importer turned patron of the arts. Big on Sinatra, bigger on Marlboros, and for reasons known only to his private musings and his box of vinyl records, *huge* on cowboy

lore. Something about the code of the old west made sense to a man who came up with omertà stitched into his DNA.

While waiting for his weekly manicure – I’m serious, the guy had standards – he sees Willie’s photos in the magazine and something clicks. The grit, the silence, the reverence for solitude. “This kid gets it,” he tells the lady sitting next to him. “I want a book full of these. Real cowboys. Not the ones staged in belt buckles the size of dinner plates. The ghosts who never came in from the range. I gotta find this Willie Lyonsan.”

But how do you find a guy like Willie? Even at 23 he'd already made a short career out of *not* being found.

Frank knew publishers around Chicago. He was able to connect a few dots and found out about the girl who submitted the photos. He had his niece call her. She told her the last she'd heard Willie was bouncing around out West near Vegas, or maybe Reno.

"Ya wanna find Willie? Simple", she said, "Find the dive bars on his trail and ask the right bartender. He won't be hard to find."

Willie left traces in the folds of whispered memory. He'd crash in a small town, shoot for a few weeks,

charm the locals, buy drinks, trade stories, leave a print behind the bar somewhere, then vanish. And these hideout towns – they talk. Word gets around. So Frank sends a couple feelers – quiet, polite ones – from Reno he knew to do a little diggin’ into the smoke-filled corners of seedy cantinas and desert roadhouses in the area. And eventually, someone says, “You lookin’ for the drifter with the camera? Might check around Ramona.”

They reported this back to Frank. Now, Frank’s no dummy. He doesn’t send suits. He sends family. Stephanie Giordano – his niece, half Italian, half velvet hammer. A fixer.

Mid-30s, sharp as a tack, and not afraid to throw an elbow in a boardroom or a barroom. She'd grown up around the business but steered clear of the darker corners. Music degree. She was a virtuoso on the violin. Fiercely intelligent. And, crucially, impossible to rattle. Frank sends her with a mission: *"Find the cowboy whisperer and convince him this book isn't a hustle."*

She rolls into town in a beat-up Jeep with Illinois plates and finds him, of course, sitting alone in the corner of the bar, sipping bourbon, camera bag slumped like a tired saddle next to him. It takes about sixty seconds for Willie to realize she's not local. Two minutes to

figure out she's not like the others. And ten minutes to realize he's in trouble again. But this time, it ain't a woman with eyes full of secrets. It's a mob niece with a publishing budget.

"You're Willie Lyonsan, right?" she said, not asking.

Willie looked up from his glass, gave her the kind of once-over you save for someone who could either hire you or have you buried in the desert.

"Depends. Who's asking?"

She pulled up a stool beside him without waiting for an invite. "Stephanie Giordano. My uncle Frank – he's a big admirer. Saw some of your work in *Amateur Photographer* a few months

back. You shot a black-and-white of a couple farmhands in Michigan?"

Willie furrowed his brow. "I'm not published anywhere. Must be someone else's work."

"Nope, it's you. Your ex submitted the photos to the magazine. Julia, I think. Or Julie."

Willie groaned, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Jesus."

Stephanie smiled. "Relax. It was good. Real good. Enough for Frank to send me cross-country to find you and make an offer."

She reached into her satchel and slid a weathered manila envelope down the bar. Inside was a rough proposal.

Title page read: *Cowboys of the West – A Portrait Series.*

"Frank wants a book. Big one. Real cowboys. No actors, no Rodeo riders. He's footing the bill – travel, film, development. You shoot, we handle the rest."

Willie thumbed through the pages. His jaw tensed.

"Not interested in some glorified mafia-funded coffee table vanity project."

Stephanie shrugged. "Then don't make it that. Make it yours. Frank's just the bankroll. You're the eye."

He didn't say anything right away. Just looked out the dusty window toward a horizon nobody had drawn yet. He'd been drifting, aimless. This... this was a direction. Even if it was built on mob money and ex-girlfriend submissions.

"I'll think about it," he muttered.

"Good," she said, standing. Then, almost as an afterthought: "Oh, and I'm staying in town. Don't worry, not with you. I'll be around. Helping out. Fixing things."

Willie looked back at her. "You're what now?"

She grinned. "I'm your assistant, Willie. Didn't I mention that?"

He stared at her a long beat. Then laughed. Not because it was funny, but because fate always had a flair for theater with him.

They spent the next few weeks together, based out of Santa Ysabel, bouncing between ranches, gathering stories, dodging trouble. He was shooting. She was fixing. Nina? Nina was watching from the shadows. When he could carve out the time, he'd do his best to make Nina happy. Dinners. Hanging out in town. Overnights. He'd go see her sing at Josies. But there was a slow boil brewing from underneath. No

one – especially Willie – saw how far this was going to spiral.

Day excursions with Stephanie turned into overnights. They'd be gone chasing ghosts and shadows for days at a time. Treks would take them all the way to the borderlands, through wild-eyed ranches, outlaw country, and stories so tangled they'd leave scars. But for now, it started with a drink, a folder, and a girl who didn't ask – she just stayed.

Willie started to fall for her. Not in the way he fell for Lexi or the others. This wasn't hearts and flowers. It was respect. Mutual fire. A grudging admiration that turned, quietly, into something else. And he was laser

focused on the mission of finding cowboys. He loved it. It suited him perfectly. I remember him calling me and telling me about it one night: "Oscar, these cowboys... they don't want to be found, they're ghosts. Living fossils. And they're vanishing, man. Nobody's telling their story. I feel like I was built for this project."

I saw some of the proofs once. Jesus. They weren't portraits, they were monuments. Lines on faces like dry riverbeds. Eyes that'd seen too much and said nothing. It was his finest work. And, unsurprisingly, it almost got him killed.

The next few weeks looked like the previous few – he and Stephanie bouncing between ranches, gathering stories, dodging trouble. There was this one trip, down by the border, where the cattle trails meet the no-man’s-land between Arizona and Sonora. Willie had heard about a rancher who ran his cattle close to cartel territory. Figured he’d make for a compelling subject. And he was right. But what he didn’t know – what he couldn’t have known – was that the rancher had just found a body. Or part of one.

Willie and Stephanie showed up just as the Federales were hauling it away.

He looked over at Stephanie and said, “you see that guy? He had no face. It was just...gone.”

Stephanie didn’t respond, just nodded.

Through sheer curiosity, and maybe a little adrenaline from the scene that had just unfolded before them, they stuck around anyway – holed up in an old bunkhouse. Stephanie – every bit as daring as Willie, maybe more so – seemed to forget they’d come to this barren border town to photograph a cowboy for Frank’s book. Instead, she got it in her head to detour from the mission and chase something more

interesting. Something worth framing.
Didn't take much to convince Willie.

They'd been staking out the edge of town near the feed depot, hoping to catch a glimpse of the rougher traffic that was said to roll through after dusk – coyotes, smugglers, cartel lookouts in civilian clothes. Willie had posted up on a crate near the corrugated fence line, camera poised just above the slats. Stephanie was tucked behind the old livestock scales with a flask of something that leached a strong, diesel like odor into the dead air around them.

That's when the headlights came – slow, deliberate, like someone wasn't in a rush to be anywhere they were

supposed to be. Willie steadied his lens and pulled focus. The truck coasted by once, turned around at the edge of the arroyo, and rolled back even slower, this time stopping just short of where the fence jutted out toward the main road. The window dropped. Nothing said. Just a long, cold stare from the driver's side – a man, the moon lighting his cheekbones like blades sat with one wrist curled around the steering wheel with the other resting just out of view.

Willie, itching to take the once in a lifetime shot eased himself up slowly, just a few inches more.

“Don’t,” Stephanie hissed, barely audible. “Wait!”

But it was too late. Willie squeezed off a shot – just one. The shutter snapped like a firecracker in the silence.

The truck's reverse lights blinked, and the engine gunned in a tight arc. The back tires kicked up a spray of gravel as it lunged toward the fence line. Willie darted back, tripping over a feed bucket, scrambling for the bunkhouse.

They didn't make it.

The front door splintered on the first hit, the frame cracking like a wishbone. Two men – one wiry, one wide – stormed in, guns low. Not amateurs. Not local. Stephanie grabbed

the camera, threw it behind the mattress and shoved Willie hard, out the broken side window and into the brush. They ran like hell was on their heels – it probably was. No flashlight. Just blind panic and the sound of boots thudding like horses galloping behind them, snapping mesquite and curses in Spanish.

They outran them and hid in a culvert all night, tangled in brush, shivering in silence while the desert buzzed and sighed above them. Stephanie kept her arm across Willie's chest like a seatbelt, as if sheer will could hold him in place.

That might've been the end of them both, if it weren't for Stephanie.

At first light they made their way back to town, got in the Jeep and headed back to Cali.

Now for reasons known only to whatever gods kept throwing matches at Willie's gasoline-soaked life, the timing of the two of them rolling back into Santa Ysabel could not have been worse. With Willie behind the wheel of Stephanie's Jeep, and the two of them snuggled up pretty close in laughter, Nina drove by. Seeing them together like that proved too much. As she wheeled around, tires screeching, eyes narrowed,

she gave chase. Pure instinct took over and Willie bolted like a rabbit.

“What are you running for?”
Stephanie exclaimed.

“You don’t know Nina”
“I know her type, pull over, I’ll set her straight!”

Just then a police cruiser happened by, whipped around and gained quickly.

“Thank God”, Willie breathed in relief.

The chase ended how you'd expect: flashing lights, two squad cars now, one shattered rear view mirror. Nina, fully off the edge and with two police officers attempting to wrangle

her, managed to grab a piece of the broken mirror from the ground and hurl it at Willie, still screaming as they cuffed her.

Willie stood dazed, heart pounding.

Stephanie, calm as ever, was typing away on her phone.

Willie told me later, "Oscar, that woman turned into a banshee with a V8."

He and Stephanie drove back to town, pulled into the tavern, ordered a couple whiskies and sat in silence recounting the last few days.

"I think we have enough for the book", Stephanie said.

“Agreed.”

“Think I’ll head back in the morning.”

“It’s been a hell of a run these last six weeks”, Willie said, looking down at his glass.

“I’ll never forget it”, Stephanie said in a softer tone.

The two of them had grown pretty close. I think she meant a lot to Willie. This was a girl who matched his intellect, and wasn’t afraid of living all in, like no one he’d met.

They spent the night at her place and when Willie woke up, she was gone.

He walked the quarter mile back to Miss Patty's, told her he was leaving and headed east with the few things he rolled into town with, the sun in his eyes, and the itch of something unfinished in his bones. The desert was getting into his spirit. Fit him like a glove. Arizona took him in like a stray dog with a busted paw. And for a while, he let it. The wind was warm, the desert wide, and the light – good God, the light – it carved everything into something worth remembering.

He crossed over at Blythe and meandered around for a few days. Headed north to Parker. Back down to Salome. He made his way into

Wickenburg, where he almost stayed, but felt the urge to press east further. He spotted a 'For Rent' sign in front of a tattered iron gate that blocked a short driveway that led maybe 50 yards back to a dilapidated, flat roofed, cobbled together shack of a house with a big porch jutting out the side. It was up the hill just on the edge of what looked to be Main Street in a town called Cave Creek. An old timer was locking up the place and headed towards the gate.

“Interested, young fella’?”

“I am. I’ll take it”, he said.

“Ya haven’t seen it and don’t know how much I’m asking.”

“Don’t need to and don’t care.
I’ll be on that porch most of the time.”

“I love that porch”, the old man
said. “Sat there 50 years.”

“\$400 a month.”

Willie reached into his pocket
and pulled out 8 100 dollar bills.

“Here’s first and last.”

“Ok then. I’ll drop the lease off
later. Try to keep the Javelina out from
under the house. If you need to turn off
the water, here’s the tool and here’s the
hole. There’s a couch in there, not much
else. You got any furniture?”

“Nah, I’ll make do.”

The old man handed him a key.
“Welcome home...”

The old man passed through the gate, walked to his truck, and drove off.

Willie went inside to find a halfway decent sized living room, wood floors throughout, a small kitchen to the left, a short hallway straight ahead with a small bedroom to the right and a small bathroom to the left. The walls were bare, plumbing barely-plumb, and he could hear the drone of a swamp cooler that sounded like a failing freight train humming above. But that porch. From that porch you could see the desert pull itself over the earth like a faded quilt. Willie sat out there most nights, drinking something brown, fiddling with

old lenses, and sketching out ideas to find the next ghost.

For the better part of the next three years, Willie uncharacteristically kept to himself. He loved everything about this dusty old cowboy town. Felt right at home. Was in sync with the energy of it from the moment he landed, but he was in a different headspace. He'd wander down the hill into town to listen to the band and grab a beer but didn't engage much with anyone. Between Lexi, Nina and the harrowing project with Stephanie I think he'd spent a lot of his emotional cache in the years before he rolled into Cave Creek.

Three years was longer than he'd spent anywhere outside of Beaverton. But if you know Willie like I do, you would know that stillness doesn't suit him for long. And though Cave Creek had been a kind of balm, a place where the dust finally settled and the nights felt honest, he still hadn't put all the ghosts to bed. Not by a long shot.

He made a couple off-hand remarks to his landlord about winding up his stay. They'd forged quite a friendship, sipping whiskey together, telling stories. Willie genuinely liked the old guy and he liked Willie. Out on the porch, they had an exchange one night.

“Tom, I’m thinking about wrapping it up and moving on.”

“Hate to see you go.”

“Been thinking about getting one of those old travel trailers, small enough for my pick up, and roam around a little.”

“Did that myself a number of years back. It’s a good life.”

“Tell ya what”, Tom alluded, “if you end up getting that RV, and ever want to come back this way, I’ll put you a hook up right there on that lot next door. Be a perfect spot for you.”

“No kidding! Thanks, Tom. I may just take you up on that.”

One day, about a week later,
without much fanfare – with a short and
half-drunk bottle of Dickel left on the
porch – Willie was gone. No destination
shared, no story offered. Just gone. I
didn't hear from him for about a year.
He eventually made his way back to
Beaverton.

He called it his sabbatical later.
Said he needed to find out if the rest of
the world could still surprise him. Said
there were still some debts to pay, favors
to return, wounds to bury in places that
had never heard his name.

What he didn't say, but what
I've come to believe, is that he was

looking for proof he could still feel something. Anything.

Arizona had steadied him. But steadiness ain't the same as healing. And Willie Lyonsan... well, he's never been one to settle for just getting *almost* anywhere.

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