

## How Vivian Vaughan Lost the Night Sky

To the faculty and graduate students clustered around the picnic tables in the clearing, Vivian Vaughan's presence was cause for suspicion and analysis, as if she were some little-understood natural phenomenon. Though, like them, she had hiked a quarter mile up the path through the woods, she seemed to have materialized instantaneously in their midst.

Vivian and Willa Evans, the astronomy chair's wife, set down the heavy basket they'd hauled from the car and spread an old sheet on the grass, not too close to the other blankets and beach towels. A minute later George joined them, Thomasina swaying on his shoulders. He swung her down next to the two women and sauntered off toward a pod of junior faculty who were busy filling a large punch bowl with spirits. The waning light glinted off its geometric facets, transforming it into an otherworldly object.

Willa fished two bottles of beer out of the basket and handed them to Vivian, who popped them open and gave the caps to the little girl. The women drank without speaking, looking into the pine copse they'd just walked through. They were young pines, planted at the end of the first war, as the sweep of flu winnowed the city. Their tops waved slightly in the breeze. Behind Vivian's back, where nobody could see, Willa painted a trail of condensation down her arm, teasing her wrist with one ragged fingernail. She shivered. In the city the October air was warm, almost dense. Out here, where asphalt and concrete didn't trap the heat, chill nibbled at their extremities. Soon enough the wind would roar off the lake and they'd cover their hair with scarves.

At the edge of the clearing a sparkler bloomed and a few children squealed, masking its hiss. Two of the wives ran over, scolding and laughing. Light pollution, lost fingers. Such a nice change from the usual stuffy faculty party at the dean's house.

Vivian wished Thomasina would go play with the other children. She'd had enough of her company. Earlier that week, in the worst of the heat wave, Professor Evans—more than the other graduate students, she was careful about his title—had brought the girl with him to campus. She played quietly in his office during the morning, as far as Vivian

knew, but during his one o'clock lecture she kept tugging at his sleeve, whispering over the buzz of the fans that she was hungry. He'd forgotten to give her lunch. He beckoned to Vivian right there, in front of a hundred undergraduates and Lawrence, the other teaching assistant, and asked her to take his daughter to lunch, pressing five dollars into her hand.

The humiliation stung more than the year's worth of snickers and stares she'd already endured, but she led Thomasina out of the lecture hall without a word of protest. At the diner she spent ten agonizing minutes just trying to figure out what the child wanted from the menu, only to watch her eat most of Vivian's sandwich and none of her own, followed by the single cherry that crowned an enormous sundae. Vivian spooned some of the ice cream into a cup of coffee and called it lunch.

"I knew I could trust you," Professor Evans said when they returned to his office.

She hadn't told Willa about what happened. They preferred not talking.

Their beers finished, Willa offered her an apple from the basket, a bit bruised, but still sweet. They watched Thomasina, busy building a landing strip out of twigs and small rocks. The bottle caps placed on the dirt made the runway look like twin exclamation points.

"Are you hungry? Do you want a sandwich or some fruit?" Willa asked her daughter.

"No. I need something for the lights," she said.

"It's a good idea you've got there, but the satellite isn't going to land. It'll fly over us, like an airplane," said Vivian.

"Just in case."

The talk and laughter dimmed to a low buzz as the sky turned orange and purple-pink and people started their second or third cups of punch. Vivian lay back on the sheet, the sharp grass poking her shoulders through her thin dress. Willa wiped her hands and fastened the basket. "Thomasina," she said, "go see if your father has a soda for you." The child didn't answer, but got up slowly, giving her creation wide berth as she headed for the outline of her father's stocky frame, still leaning against the table with the punch bowl centerpiece, now surrounded by a constellation of paper cups.

Willa lay down next to Vivian, draping her cardigan over her torso. "How long?" she asked, her voice clear, conversational. They were just two friends, waiting for Sputnik, looking up.

"Not much longer. Right after the sun sets. It should reflect the glow, just bright enough for us to see it."

There would be more of them, Vivian thought, rocketing on and on into the sky, until the globe was girdled with metal, like a medieval castle ringed with weaponry. And then they'd blink and there'd be men in the sky too, looking down and seeing nothing and everything. Vivian crawled her fingers under Willa's blouse to touch the soft underside of her small breast, the smooth and shiny skin she'd licked that morning. She felt dizzy at

the memory of her other hand reaching and reaching and reaching—God, how she never wanted to reach the end of this woman.

Someone had brought a radio, and a few couples danced to Sam Cooke's latest, giggling and twirling like teenagers. She half sang the lyrics to Willa, waiting for the moment when the radio was tuned to pick up the satellite's signal. She'd heard it once already, hovering outside the office she shared with the other graduate students. The sound was like a child bleating for her mother, wanting to come home. But Sputnik wouldn't come home; it would crash or burn up, eventually. Although a child never comes home the same either, does she? There is always something new, something seen or heard that they may share or not, or something changed. A missing tooth, skin sloughed off on the playground, strands of hair borne away for birds' nests. A mother never gets the same child back. Some atoms are always scattered, lost extensions expanding a person's imprint on the world.

Across the clearing Lawrence sipped the punch—stronger than he expected—to stop his hands from fiddling with the radio. He'd brought the radio because for him seeing was not enough. Because he wanted to be noticed for his resourcefulness. Because the radio had belonged to his older brother, who was dead, lost over Germany on a night raid. They shipped his things back from England. Clothes, watch, photos. A pinup, folded tight and tucked in his copy of a novel none of the other airmen wanted. Lawrence still had it. The girl was looking over her shoulder, just a hint of berry nipple visible against her arm, like a word lost in the crackle of static. He put down his drink and looked over at George Evans, this man they all worshipped as much for his bravery—shot down twice, imprisoned for the last year of the war—as for his theories. Someday, maybe, Lawrence would bring himself to ask the famous astronomer about what it was like to fall from a great height.

Watching his colleagues' excitement, George felt a great sense of love, of comradeship, for these people gathered in the October night in the woods outside Chicago. Fifteen years since he learned how to clean a rifle and kill a man, fourteen since he'd started guiding bombs over their targets, and somehow, after it was over, he'd been returned to his books and his telescopes and his data, welcomed as if he'd never left the ground to rain fire over cities. And tonight he would see the future in a bomb-sized sphere, a temporary celestial body the Soviets had added to the cosmos. Everything would happen quickly now; the stars he'd studied for years would come bounding closer, near enough to share their secrets. Quickly in the relative sense, he amended. He might not live long enough to see his theories set down in textbooks, or toppled.

Idly he tousled his daughter's hair. They were older when they started, he and Willa, and then there were the prison camp beatings to consider. The doctors said there was nothing to be done, but still Thomasina arrived, this miracle, this gift that took them from themselves. He never saw fire in Willa's tired eyes anymore. His body ached for hers in

the night. There she was, lying on the grass, pointing toward the first glimmering wink of Venus with help from Vivian.

Vivian, who'd been accepted to his program as V. E. Vaughan. Vivian, more promising than any student he'd had in years, fearless in her research proposals on the expanding universe. Vivian who had a voice like water—it filled what it needed to, found the right direction to flow. He'd heard her imperious as Bette Davis when the other graduate students challenged her findings, as winsome and breathy as Marilyn Monroe when she wanted a good teaching slot from the registrar. With her students she projected charming confidence, like Debbie Reynolds. With him she was proper as Deborah Kerr. He didn't think he ever heard her real voice except when she was with Willa, out on the terrace in the summer with a glass of wine, or in the den last winter, stringing cranberries to garland the tree.

Thomasina ducked away from her father's familiar distracted touch. She was bored. In all likelihood she'd forget this night, this party. Bigger and better and sleeker and silver gleaming—for the rest of her life, there would always be another ship, another mission leaving Earth.

The static flattened. Everyone, astronomers and wives and children, hushed, getting up and huddling around the radio, their faces lifted to the darkening sky the way plants turn toward the sun, as if everything depended on it.

Everyone except little Thomasina Evans, who stared at the bowl of punch, filled with dozens of cherries glowing like stop lights. But she didn't mean to stop. She scooped them out by the handful, breaking the satellite's reflection in the bowl. The strange beeping noise grew louder and louder as she ate the cherries, so cool on the outside and then warm, smoldering in her throat and her belly. The sound began to fade and the grownups burst into talk. Would they be angry with her when they found all the cherries gone? She felt very tired. She clambered off the table and rolled into a blanket, covering her face against the breeze and the bright spangle of stars.

It was Willa who missed her first, expecting to see her tucked against George's leg. She froze the way a sunning fox tenses at the sight of a gardener, registering a shift in the environment, but not danger, exactly. The child was missing, yes. But she was seen not five minutes ago; the perimeter of the search was not daunting. Willa had solved more difficult problems. During the war she built planes and after the war she taught calculus to the children of steelworkers and farmers. But that part of her was gone now, or supposed to be gone, since she was a mother. Realizing she was expected to go to pieces at the thought of her child wandering alone, she clutched George's arm and whispered, loud enough for Vivian to hear, "Where's Thomasina?"

Punch settled unpleasantly in bellies as the question spread like wildfire. An owl woke, heard too much, slept again. The other young children were all accounted for, herded

toward a picnic table and watched over by one of the other mothers and Willa, in case Thomasina reappeared. In minutes the adults and older teenagers organized themselves into search parties. The moths swooped for the beams of the flashlights, swooped and were thwarted, swooped and flickered away. Bats waited for their feast.

Lawrence stumbled through rivers of pine roots escaping their loam banks, his hands returning sticky with resin when he reached out his arms to steady himself. He hoped he wasn't stepping through owl pellets. They'd had to dissect them years ago, in high school, the biology teacher too squeamish for frogs or fetal pigs. He'd found a face among the beaks and feathers and bits of skin, just a small mouse face, like a baby's. He lifted it with tweezers, the same kind his mother took to her eyebrows. He still dreamed of his mother's plucked face crumpled on his lab bench. Shuddering, he slowed, hoping he wouldn't find what he couldn't unsee.

To his left George crashed through the bushes, ignoring the scrape of thorns. It was his fault. He'd held Willa's hand but instead of showing his daughter the satellite's wink as it tumbled end over end, instead of making sure she'd remember the marvel of it, he'd been watching his graduate student, imagining he could see the flicker reflected in her glasses. He wanted her. That was why he'd sent his daughter with her to lunch. As a shield, to shove her away and put her in her place, which was—ought to be—far from him. He had a marriage to protect. A family. And she should know better, ought to use that voice singing lullabies to her children or calling her husband to bed. No, he should not think of that. He heard her behind them now, calling for his daughter in a lilt that promised sunshine and milkshakes and fingertips trailing through clear water.

Vivian quieted for a moment. Her throat ached with thirst—and then she peeled away from the searchers, remembering the punch bowl, the untouched sundae at lunch.

The little girl wasn't hard to find, once she understood where to look. Vivian Vaughan knew something about hiding. So small she was not even boulder-sized, Thomasina lay curled in a plaid blanket, green and brown, in the shadows underneath the picnic table. Just another lump among the provisions they'd heaved up to the clearing.

Vivian knelt next to the child before she raised the cry. Instinct. There were two different voices for naming the dead and the living. (She had been the one who found her father. Heart attack, quick-contorted.) She pressed her head to the small chest, inhaling the warm skin that smelled like almost nothing. Hum, hum, hum. Slow heartbeat, but steady.

"Willa!" she called, and then they were surrounded. Shouts as people calculated how close they were to the nearest hospital. Someone ran for a first aid kit.

"Wake up, sweetie," said Willa. "Oh Jesus, please wake up."

"Is she hurt? Her mouth's all red," said George, Thomasina's wrist gripped in his hand, as if he could tether her to Earth.

Vivian said, “She’s eaten all the cherries. She’s just drunk, I think. But she needs to have her stomach pumped at the hospital.”

George nodded, instantly convinced, and lifted the girl tenderly. Willa ran ahead of them with a flashlight. She would realize later, as she watched the ruby shards slithering from Thomasina’s stomach into a glass bottle, that she had forgotten to thank Vivian for finding her daughter. She hadn’t even looked back.

Thomasina would wake in the morning and feel quite well, thinking her father and her mother were very beautiful, glowing warm in the cold hospital light. She did not know how much they would do for her, which parts of themselves they would kill for her.

In the clearing, after Willa had gone without saying goodbye, someone helped Vivian up. A drink was pressed into her hand, congratulations offered. Her colleagues and their wives had never looked at her like this: with respect, with understanding. Relief. For a moment, she’d been a mother. They had finally placed her; finally she had a place.

She felt the contraction belonging brings, and weary after the long fight, she gave herself over to its embrace. She helped finish the punch, and she laughed along as they made a game of naming new constellations. All around them, she knew, the pinecones fattened, ready for their fall, and the dark earth was turned by worms and beetles, mice and squirrels and brown birds too quick to be distinguished from each other, just flecks in the passing of the world.

Lawrence offered her a ride back to her apartment. As the city lights stained the sky, they cautiously spoke about hometowns and families, childhood antics. Not the phenomena they studied or their faculty advisor or what they had seen in the clearing or who they’d lost. As they talked, Vivian felt Thomasina’s bottle caps in her pocket. She tapped them together softly, pressing the sharp edges against her fingers, and imagined what it would be like to have no secrets to keep, nothing to prove. Already she felt the end of Willa like a puncture wound. But slowly stealing over her, numbing like an anesthetic, came enervating pleasure. To be released from her place, from scrutiny as the one, the only, the first—she could build a life without trying so desperately to touch the secrets of ancient light, always out of reach. She could return to Earth. She could be made visible by ordinary light.

Sputnik hurtled above them again, unnoticed. Metal cannot see, cannot taste the particulate emptiness, cannot hear the silence. It can only touch the void. But it raced and raced and maybe it felt the joy of being the only one ever alone. For a little while, anyway. Then, fire.