

V-I-V-I-A-N

I woke with a start. I shiver and blink in the cold, dimly lit room and try to stand up, only to realize that I can't. My wrists and ankles are buckled to a small white rocking chair. I'm sitting in the middle of a small room, the ground is a soft white fluffy carpet and the walls are painted baby blue with illustrations of a cow jumping over the moon surrounded by stars. This is the room I grew up in. I frown and shiver again, but this time, it's not because I am cold. That house burnt down 9 years ago.

I hum along to an old rock tune on the radio; it's set to my dad's favorite station. He's in the seat next to me, driving the car as we turn onto the familiar street of our home. My feet swing to the beat as my dad leans forward in his seat, squinting his eyes to see better in the bright light of the afternoon sun reflecting off of the shimmering white snow. I play with my mittens, imagining what it would be like if I only had two fingers on each hand. I giggle to myself as the car slows to a stop. I look up, and my smile fades as I see fear in my father's eyes. Immediately I feel like crying.

"Daddy, what's wrong?" My voice quivers as my eyes start to water.

"Stay in the car sweetie, I'll be right back." My father's voice, usually so strong and confident, seems uncertain and tears start to roll down my rosy cheeks.

I watch him leave and sit up straighter so I can see him better. He runs off towards our house, and I know that something's wrong. There's a small crowd of people around our house; they look like our neighbors. I flinch as 2 police cars and a fire truck whiz by the car, sirens blaring. My stomach drops as I realize that they are going to my house. I see the smoke and rub my eyes, wanting it to just be my crazy imagination. I sink into my seat and close my eyes, covering my face with my hand knit mittens that my mom made me for Christmas. My mom.

I jump out of the car as fast as I can, falling as I trip over the still dangling seat belt. It's been broken for years. I don't bother closing the door as I pick myself up and run towards the house, screaming as an ambulance screeches to a stop as I freeze in the middle of the road.

"Vivian!" My dad runs toward me, his voice strained as he scolds me for not looking both ways before crossing the street.

He sets me down on the sidewalk in front of our house and my mouth opens in a silent scream as I look up at our house. It's burning. Flames have already engulfed the whole first floor and are quickly spreading to the top.

"Mommy!" I scream and try to run towards my house, but my stubby legs are no match against my father's long strides.

He picks me up and hugs me, turning to make sure that I can't see the house. I break down as my father apologizes to me, telling me that there was nothing we could do about it, that my mother had died.

I snap back into reality as I hear thumping footsteps outside of my room. I call out.

"Hello? Can you help me?" My voice sounds like it's coming from a different person, weak and scared.

The footsteps stop and the door to my room opens slightly and I am surprised to see a small girl. She looks like me when I was younger. She silently slips into my room and without a word undoes my buckles. I jump up and turn to thank her.

"Thank you." She just nods and turns to leave.

"Wait, why am I here?" I ask and she stops and turns back towards me.

"She wants to see you. But don't worry, she won't hurt you like she hurt me." I frown and stare at the little girl.

"My name is Vivian." She sticks out her small delicate hand and looks at me expectantly.

I just stare. Vivian? She looks exactly like me when I was 8 years old *and* she has the same name.

"You're Vivian too, right? Mother talks a lot about you." The little girl states everything clearly and calmly.

I stare at her incredulously. Mother? What's going on?

"You should follow me, and don't try to run away please, that didn't work for Isabel."

"Who's Isabel?"

"Exactly." I shudder and follow Vivian through a dark hallway. We pass a small window and I glance in.

There is a line of 6 rocking chairs in the room; the first one is empty. So is the second one. The third one has a small boy sitting in it, and it is rocking slightly. He's wearing a pale

blue dress. The child's head is hanging and he looks pale and sickly. My stomach drops and I feel sick as I continue to look at the rest of the chairs. The fourth one has a young girl slumped in it, she looks a lot like Vivian. The fifth chair has another young girl on it. I can't see her face but I wouldn't be surprised if she also looked like Vivian. The last chair has a girl in it too. Of course, she also looks like Vivian. They all look like Vivian and have pale blue dresses on. It looks like a dress that I used to have.

I turn slowly towards Vivian who has patiently been waiting for me.

"Who are they?" I ask and Vivian just gives me a sad look and turns to keep walking down the hallway.

"Wait! Vivian!" She just keeps walking and I have no choice but to follow. I wonder if one of those chairs was for Isabel.

We turn a corner and come to a stop at a plain door. Vivian knocks 3 times and waits for an answer. A moment later, it comes.

"Come in!" A somewhat familiar voice calls out in a singsong way but I can't quite figure out who it is. But I know that it must be mother because Vivian quietly responds.

"Yes mother." Together we walk in and the door swings shut behind us. This mother must be very dramatic. She is standing in the corner and the room is dimly lit, so I can't see her face.

"You are excused, go back to your chair Vivian." For a moment I am confused. I thought she was talking to me, but my confusion clears as little Vivian nods and opens the door to walk out of the room.

"Bye." I say in a quiet voice and Vivian gives me a small nod before walking out and the door swings shut.

I turn towards the woman standing in the corner and narrow my eyes, trying to see who she is.

"Why am I here and why do all of those kids look like me when I was 8 years old?" I try to be demanding but it just sounds pathetic.

The woman laughs and I recognize it. Where do I know her from? Has she been stalking me for 9 years, since I was 8?

"Oh Vivian, you've grown so much and you seem to have met V-I-V-I-A-N." She spells my name out and my mind whirls.

"What?" I probably sound like an idiot.

“Vivian, the girl who led you here, is the first V. Isabel, tried to run away so we need a new child to be the I in your name. Then there is Vincent. Sadly, I could not find another girl with a V name who was like you, so I had to settle for a boy. I am still searching though.” I shudder as she continues to name the poor children that were probably taken away from their families because of something that had to do with me. “Next, there is Ida. She is the fourth letter in your name. The fifth and sixth children are Annie and Nora. Nora and Isabel are twins. Poor Nora. With Isabel gone and all.” The woman stops talking for a minute, and I wonder if she actually feels bad for the children. “So that completes your name. The name that I gave to you. Vivian.” The name that she gave to me?

The woman steps out of the shadows and I gasp and stumble backwards. She laughs at my shock and I know where I recognized her laugh from. My childhood.

“Mom...” I stare at her and she spreads her arms wide and wraps her arms around me.

I don’t move or say a word and she steps back and frowns.

“Shouldn’t you be happy that your mother is not dead?” She seems genuinely confused and I realize that she actually believes that everything she has done is right.

“You died 9 years ago.” Is all I can say and she shakes her head.

“I’m here right now so obviously I didn’t die 9 years ago.”

“Well you’re dead to me.” I say and she smiles.

“Such a stubborn little girl you were, and you haven’t changed a bit.”

“You died in the fire.” I stare at her defiantly, and she just shakes her head again.

“No darling, I set the house on fire.”

“What?”

“It was a dark time for me honey, and your father did not want you to know that I went to a mental hospital after that, so he decided to tell you that I was baking cookies for you, to show how much I loved you, but then forgot about them so the house burnt down.” She says all of this like it’s the simplest most understandable thing. “Finally, I got out of the mental hospital and I tried to find you. But I couldn’t. I was depressed, but I got the idea to get a new you when I discovered little Vivian. After I got her, I couldn’t stop. To show you how much I loved you, I spelled out your whole name.” She smiles at me and continues her story. “Then I found you. It was the most wonderful day. I was so happy. I needed to get you. So I

did. Now here you are with me. Your mother.” She finishes and I half expect her to take a bow because she seems so proud of it. She doesn’t.

“What happened to Isabel?” My mother’s eyes darken and I take a step back.

“Isabel ran away. But I told all of the other girls that I caught her, to scare them, so they won’t run away.”

A sliver of hope. Isabel.

“You seem relieved.” My mother watches me and I nod slightly. “You’ve always been gentle, stubborn and gentle.” I look down at my feet. “Now lets ge-” She stops in mid sentence and holds a finger up to her mouth. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” But my heart is pounding. I did hear it.

“I guess I’m just a little paranoid.” My mother still seems concerned but she puts on a smile and looks at me. “Now where was I? Oh right. Lets ge-” This time she is interrupted by a loud crash and we both jump.

I hear running footsteps and it sounds like they are coming closer. Suddenly, my mother pulls me towards her and pulls out a knife from somewhere and puts it up to my neck. I yelp.

“Sorry honey, but I can not go back to a mental hospital.” I struggle but stop as I feel the sharp edge of the blade press slightly into my neck.

I tense up as the door is busted open and 3 armed men run into the room. All the guns are pointed towards us.

“You shoot and she’s dead!” My mother sounds scared and I wince as the blade slides slightly on my neck.

The men are still for a moment, and then all of a sudden the man in the middle raises his gun and shoots. I close my eyes and scream but don’t feel any pain, and the pressure of the knife against my neck is gone. I slowly open my eyes and look down. My mother is dead. She has always been dead to me. The men step forward and gently guide me out of the room. Soon, we are outside and there is a small crowd of people. I see little Vivian hugging someone who looks like her older brother and smile. Then I look for my dad.

There he is. I run towards him and he runs towards me, just like in the movies. We hug and his strong arms wrap around me and I feel safer than I have ever felt before.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I love you.” My father’s voice sounds rough, like he’s been crying and now I’m crying too.

“I love you too dad.” I say and I see Nora hugging another little girl who looks just like her. Isabel.

“Thank you.” I say it quietly, nobody else hears.