

## THE SCIENTIST: I

“I am trying to piece together what happened in stages. Evidence. Not of a crime, but of an existence.

An existence haunting me. A specter haunting me. I can't bear hyperbole but nothing suffices when I talk about Vivian who was once Violet who was once Tracy.

I never knew Tracy. I met her, sure. Obviously. She was dying or dead, last vestiges clinging to a frame. Violet I birthed, formed from silicone and blood and copper and spark. Vivian? I do not know Vivian. I do not know what has happened to Vivian. I know she—she. As if the body holding these lives can be contained by the single ‘She’.

“I know Vivian still breathes. I know she

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has an anger, an anger that has killed. I know she has called me and so I am here. Driving towards what? I don't know.

"I am trying—No. I am piecing together the evidence not of a crime but of an existence—event. I can't call it a life. I am piecing together a series of events housed within one body: Tracy who became Violet who became Vivian. Tracy who died. Violet who I birthed. Vivian who I do not know. Vivian who I fear. Vivian who has called me to her and I do not know why.

"I surprise myself every day now since the incident. Surprise myself every day since the incident by still walking and talking in the same lifetime. They don't tell you life is either long or short. It has nothing to do with the date you die. It is either long or short. 'I can't believe the time flew by!' Really? Believe it. Good riddance. What do you do when life is long, with all this time? You search for Vivian. I search for Vivian.

"I did everything right. I did everything right. I journeyed, I studied, I tested, I passed, I kissed, I loved then I sexed then I married. I loved the wrong person. That's what all of this is. I loved the wrong person.

"I am trying—no—I am piecing together

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the evidence not of a crime but of an event. A series of events housed within one body. Tracy who became Violet who became Vivian. Tracy who died. Violet who I birthed. Vivian who I fear. Oh why? The evidence.

“He was able to fall in love with her, her Violet, in a sexual way. I always thought, I always told him—not always in the beginning, but I made it known, made it clear it was perverse. And it was perverse. He was able to look at her and get erect. Ignore her origin story. Not of my lab, my lair, my, my, my womb. My partner-in-crime in every way turned sexual towards my creature of flesh, silicone, copper, spark.

“He loved her—wait. No. That's not evidence, that's suspect. Suspicion. I get ahead of myself. His cock. Dick. He was able to look at my creature and get hard and want her and desire her. Yes. Desire. The evidence. I do not know love. You can't prove love. I can't prove love. But obsession? ‘Play the tape, Mars. Play the tape.’ Again and again and again and again. ‘Tape?’ I would say. ‘Recording. Stretch out and shrink time, search through the sound, the shapes, the noises to find what, my

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darling? What? She's doing her job. There is no crime.' 'Play the tape.' Well.

"He stopped asking me. He learned the machine, how to operate the gear, the buttons, the commands, the keyboard. Hours and hours going through the records, the voices, the noises, the shapes. All lodged now in his brain. Why? What did it matter? What did it matter if her smiles were a reaction via programming or naturally generated? What is natural at this fucking point? You want true devotion from this creature? My creature? Get yourself a flesh and blood woman.

"Hours. That's the evidence. Hours. Too much time tricked himself into believing she was hiding feelings, secret love feelings for her secret agent lover man. Desire? For you? That was never in the specification. I did not put it there. No one asked me to.

"'You're scaring me, my darling. Are you obsessed?' I asked him. I told him, 'Why? This is what she does. What I designed. What I built her for.' Had I known I was going to destroy him when I had her I would not have done it. Any of it. No, it's true. Not any of it.

"Is this the crime? Falling for what was

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not real, would never be real? Clawing at the edges, at the opposite end of the real to find nothing on the other side? This nigga's problem was that his life was short. He wanted Everything Now. You and you, your daughter and your mother too.

“Why couldn't he posses me? Why couldn't he sort through the detritus of our relationship and puzzle out what went wrong? Why, why why not me? Why is it not a crime our marriage vow broke and the imaginary connection you had with this bitch merits investigation? Well, I am investigating the investigation. Sorting through the evidence finding the crime. The crime is: my love fell in love with her Violet or whoever the fuck she is now. Obsessed. Fell in obsessed with her. I can't prove love. Fuck.

“How am I still jealous? They're both gone. Gone. Gone. And I remain. Here. Right here. Driving towards the body that doesn't even remember him and what she did. I remain here sorting through the rubble, journeying towards this creature who I am sure will kill me. My jealousy clouds this investigation I know, but who else will do this? No one, no one, no one

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cares like I do.”

## THE SCIENTIST: II

The Doctor pulls the car over and shuts it off. She needs to call the hospital for details and doesn't want to call. She needs to know which exit to take, which street, which department, which floor, and in which room the girl rests. And she just doesn't want to know. Her search is near complete and she doesn't want to know.

She rests her head on the steering wheel. She'll hate herself more than she does now if the girl dies before she starts the car. And she really doesn't want the girl to die.

She really doesn't want the girl to die.

So she looks up and sees the cloudless blue sky. The long dead grass. The unsettled soil turning to dust in the wind. She feels the heat for the first time since she started

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traveling towards the girl. It seeps into the car, thick and heavy even though the air conditioning was only turned off a few seconds ago.

More soil whips into the air. The Doctor gets out of the car and walks into the middle of the road. Her sunglasses aren't strong enough to protect her from the blinding sunlight, but it's so large that she sees it in the distance: a dust storm.

If she just stands here she'll die before the girl does. Maybe her sacrifice will bring the girl back and wash everything away. Her mistakes. Her bad choices.

The dust starts cutting her face. Death is close and the Doctor is scared. So she turns back to the car, but she trips and her sunglasses fall off her face. The dust blinds her. She drags her hands across the gravel and dirt until her touch the glasses. The wind is stronger now, so she can't put them back on her face, but she can't open her eyes to find the car. And the Doctor will die if she doesn't get back in that car.

She crawls forward, towards what she hopes is the vehicle. The wind picks up and now it's hard to breathe. She forgets why she decided to drive through the New

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Desert. As she crawls against the whipping dust and wind, she remembers other cars and trucks may barrel down the road and not see her on the ground. She touches what feels like rubber and then metal. She grabs onto the metal and pulls herself up. She feels for a door handle.

She can't really breathe right now because the wind has become dust, the dust has become the wind and the storm hasn't even hit yet because she is still alive.

Her hands find the handle but the wind. The wind is so strong now she can't pull the door open, she can't stay on her feet. She doesn't want to die. She wants to go back in time and do everything truly right. She pulls and pulls with all the strength she has left.

The door opens and she jumps into a seat. She shuts the door just as the storm barrels through, shaking the car and hurtling dust and soil and dirt into the car's cracks. She holds on to the seat and hopes the car doesn't flip over. She just wants to go back in time. She just wants to go back in time. The car shakes and she shakes with it too. The sound of the soil raining down on the car is so loud she lets go of the seat and covers her ears. She just wants to go back in

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time and never make any mistakes.

The car stops moving. Silence. Dust is still. The Doctor rubs dirt from off her eyelashes. She opens her eyes. She's in the back seat. Her sunglasses are on the floor.

She shakes the dirt from her hair, chest, and lap. She climbs into the driver's seat. She presses down on the brake and notices she lost a shoe outside.

She starts the car and drives to the girl.

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PART ONE  
VIVIAN OR THE NEAR  
PAST

1

You wake up in The Black.

Pulsing and sweating and you can't tell where you end and The Black begins so are you pulsing and sweating or are you feeling The Black pulse and sweat?

It takes twenty seconds for the bedsheets to appear; twenty-five for the edges of the bed frame. Thirty for the walls and the window. Forty for the streetlight outside. Forty-five seconds and the thin sheets covering the window appear. From The Black. All from The Black.

You are inside. Vivian is inside, inside a room. You and or The Black is or are in a room.

The Black is retreating. You have a body

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after fifty seconds. You are of flesh and have always been.

It was a only nightmare, a very bad dream. A remnant of the attack. You are not part of The Black. You are Vivian alone. Vivian. Vivian is pulsing and sweating. Vivian is pulsing and sweating because she has a body and has had one for a long time, as long as she has been Vivian. Only Vivian is pulsing and sweating inside a room, a room that is hers.

The band on your wrist appears last, at sixty seconds. You know to pull it and let it go, so you do so. You pull it and let it go.

You pulse less.

You pull it and let it go.

You pulse less.

You pull it and let it go.

You pulse less.

Back to sleep.

As she sleeps now, a memory:

“What’s your favorite place to be?” This is your voice.

“My favorite place to be?” This is his voice.

“Yeah.”

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His teeth, his lips: a smile.

She smiles too.

You are not alone in this place. There are people behind him and there are people behind you, people flickering in and out of vision, but always present. The sound of talking. The sound of clanging silverware against ceramic plates. The place is not bright; it is either early morning or early night. Your hands are around something hot and you doesn't want this heat to leave you hands. Was this winter? This was winter. Was this winter?

"There's this town out west, that smells of jasmine. I don't know how they do that with the winds and the New Desert, but it smells of jasmine. And salt." This feels new like there are parts of him that are still unfolding in front of you.

You look down. Your hands around the mug. Black coffee simmering inside. Red lipstick mark outside.

"What's your favorite place to be?" His voice.

"With you. My favorite place is with you." Your voice.

"I'm flattered." He drinks from his coffee mug.

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Silverware clangs against ceramic plates.  
His index finger. His thumb. His hand  
around his mug. That hand on your cheek,  
through your hair, over and under your  
thigh. Before and after this. Not now.

You reach for that hand. Your nails meet  
his skin. It's not smooth. You rub the callous  
between his thumb and index finger.

"There was a—there is a place. A spot  
beside the river when I was growing up.  
Right by an old factory. I don't know, I just  
liked to think and to play there with my  
friend. Or by myself even."

"Good answer."

Why?

"Why?"

His shoulders go up, his shoulders go  
down. "I don't know. Wasn't expecting that.  
Don't seem like the outdoors type."

His teeth, his lips: a smile.

2

Morning.

First shift.

And your nostrils burn from the smell of sweat and alcohol. Tourists. Perfume girls.

The boredom makes you feel like you're about to fray and unbind and fall into pieces right there on the cosmetics floor so you pull the black band on your left wrist and then let it go. You pull the black band on your wrist again and then let it go. The stings steady you. The stings snap you back together. Its tingle radiates from the wrist and through your skin.

You look around the floor for him. Him, all pot-bellied and all man and all pale. Always nagging you about "Sell".

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“Sell, Vivian, I need you to sell. ‘Cause if you don’t sell, I don’t know how much longer I can keep you.”

You find him: fragrance. A perfume girl in trouble, you don’t know her name. The alcohol. They always spray too much to cover the smell of tourist sweat. The perfume girl looks down at her feet while The Manager talks and points at his clipboard, talks and points as his pot-belly jabs in and out, talks and points, talks and points. Is that belly hard or soft? You imagine sticking your index finger into his belly and then pulling it out along with fat and blood and flesh. A gelatinous mound unspooling.

You lean your front hips against the glass and the display lock digs into your thigh. Your lower back aches. Your arches ache. Is it pain or boredom? You do your best to wiggle your toes inside your shoe. The ankle strap is too tight. You pick at the thread covering the sticky rubber.

The Manager leaves the perfume girl and now stalks the floor. Oh god, he’s making rounds. No elbows down on the counter. The counter supports you enough that you appear to be standing straight so you

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shouldn't hear his mouth about that.

You rock back and the forward on your heels, hip bones hitting the glass, thigh hitting the chunky display lock. Three pairs of tourists: one man and one woman each; one fanny pack and one backpack and two sunburns each. They stomp around, sometimes slow, sometimes fast to each counter. Not one pair stays long enough for a sale to be made. You smile at one, but they turn their heads. Sell, Vivian, sell.

A bit of rubber gets on your two fingers. You roll it around on your fingernail. The red nail polish is chipping though you only painted them two days ago.

Some gentlewomen and gentlemen pass.

You look around the floor. The Manager and his belly are at skincare. Vanessa is talking and pointing to each finger in her other hand like she's counting something. You don't understand why Vanessa and Ashley and Asha wear white lab coats when they aren't doctors, they aren't nurses, they aren't facialists. They sell more than you but they get more returns. There are five old ladies standing behind The Manager clutching crinkled shopping bags to their chests.

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You pull the band as far as it will stretch and then let it go. That one hurt. Felt like a bite like his teeth biting your shoulder. His teeth and breath on your skin. It didn't hurt — did it hurt? His teeth and breath on your skin. You remember smiling. You smiling and him smiling back. His teeth stained from coffee. His lips tinted red from your lipstick. You two wrapped up in sheets that don't smell like him or you. His underarm hair tickled your nose. If you like his stink, you're really in love.

The alcohol. The sweat. The lock digging into your thigh.

Here. You are back here. But then you see her.

Immaculate. Her teeth; her red lips; a smile. Her skin: deep brown. Her edges, her bun, her hair: neat. A red nail pushing invisible wisps behind a small ear. She is purchasing. The Woman laughs and turns. Her eyes on you.

You grab some thing, any thing and move your hands around the counter. Look for some thing. Busy floor girls are always looking for some thing if they aren't talking to someone. You look down at your hand: a makeup wipe.

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You feel them, the Woman's eyes on you. Beauty and elegance and money and beauty aimed at you. What can you do with a makeup wipe? Why are the makeup wipes on this side of the counter?

"Violet?" The Woman's voice. Your stomach churns, but you look at her anyway.

The Woman is just as immaculate from the front as she is from profile.

"Violet?" There is anger in her voice. Sell, Vivian, Sell.

A sing-song Hi and red-lipped smile. "Would you like to try our new Sunset Dream collection?"

The Woman stares.

"I think colors 56, 57, and 62 would look great with your complexion."

"Violet," she says, soft now. With her eyes never off your face, she walks straight into the counter, her cross-body pocketbook thudding against it. "Violet. It's me."

"I'm Vivian"

The Woman's hands on the counter. Her nails scraping the glass. The Woman leans in. Will she jump up? Her perfume wafts over to you. Crazy people don't smell like the new BoomBoom Rouge.

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“Violet, do you hear me? Violet?” Tears in The Woman’s eyes.

You points to your badge. “I’m Vivian. My name is Vivian”

The Woman gags and drops her bag of potions. She stumbles away from the counter. You watch her stumble through the sweaty tourists and into the blazing morning light shining through the revolving glass doors.

You go around the counter and pick up the shopping bag because maybe picking up the bag will remind The Woman she dropped it. But the Woman doesn’t come back.

A piece of a red fingernail lingers on the counter. You flick it off.