



## VIVIAN RELF

by JONATHAN LETHEM

PAPER LANTERNS WITH CANDLES INSIDE, their flames capering in imperceptible breezes, marked the steps of the walkway. Shadow and laughter spilled from the house above, while music shorn of all but its pulse made its way like ground fog across the eucalyptus-strewn lawn. Doran and Top and Evie and Miranda drifted up the stair, in throngs smoking and kissing cheeks and elbowing one another on the porch and around the open front door. Doran saw the familiar girl there, just inside.

He squinted and smiled, to offer evidence he wasn't gawking. To convey what he felt: he recognized her. She blinked at him, and parted her mouth slightly, then nipped her lower lip. Top and Evie and Miranda pushed inside the kitchen, fighting their way to the drinks surely waiting on a counter or in the refrigerator, but Doran hung back. He pointed a finger at the familiar girl, and moved nearer to her. She turned from her friends.

The foyer was lit with strings of red plastic chili peppers. They drooped in waves from the molding, their glow blushing cheeks, foreheads, ears, teeth.

"I know you from somewhere," he said. "I was just thinking the same thing." "You one of Jorn's friends?"

"Jorn who?"

"Never mind," said Doran. "This is supposed to be Jorn's house, I thought. I don't know why I even mentioned it, since I don't know him. Or her."

"My friends brought me," said the girl. "I don't even know whose party this is. I don't know if they know."

"My friends brought me too," said Doran. "Wait, do you wait-ress at Elision, on Dunmarket?"

"I don't live here. I must know you from somewhere else."

"Definitely, you look really familiar."

They were yelling to be heard in the jostle of bodies inside the door. Doran gestured over their heads, outside. "Do you want to go where we can talk?"

They turned the corner, stopped in a glade just short of the deck, which was as full of revelers as the kitchen and foyer. They nestled in the darkness between pools of light and chatter. The girl had a drink, red wine in a plastic cup. Doran felt a little bare without anything.

"This'll drive me crazy until I figure it out," he said. "Where'd you go to college?"

"Sundstrom," she said.

"I went to Vagary." Doran swallowed the syllables, knowing it was a confession: she was one of those Vagary types. "But I used to know a guy who went to Sundstrom. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"I'm twenty-eight. You would have been there at the same time." This was hardly promising avenue. But he persisted. "Gilly Noman, that ring a bell?"

"Sounds like a girl's name."

"I know, never mind. Where do you live?" She mentioned a city, a place he'd never been.

"That's no help. How long you live there?" "Since college. Five years, I guess."  
"Where'd you grow up?"

The city she mentioned was another cipher, a destination never remotely considered.

"Your whole life?" he asked. Doran racked his brain, but he didn't know anyone from the place.

"Yeah," she said, a bit defensively. "What about you?"

"Right here, right around here. Wait, this is ridiculous. You look so familiar."

"So do you." She didn't sound too discouraged. "Who are your friends here?"

"Ben and Malorie. You know them?"

"No, but do you maybe visit them often?"

"First time."

"You didn't, uh, go to Camp Drewsmore, did you?" Doran watched how his feelings about the girl changed, like light through a turned prism, as he tried to fit his bodily certainty of her familiarity into each proposed context. Summer camp, for instance, forced him to consider whether she'd witnessed ball-field humiliations, or kissed one of the older boys who were his idols then, he, in his innocence, not having yet kissed anyone.

"No."

"Drewsmore-in-the-Mist?" "Didn't go to camp."

"Okay, wait, forget camp, it must be something more recent. What do you do?"

"Until just now I worked on Congressman Goshen's campaign. We, uh, lost. So I'm sort of between things. What do you do?"

"Totally unrelated in every way. I'm an artist's assistant. Heard of London Jerkins?"

"No."

"To describe it briefly there's this bright purple zigzag in all his paintings, kind of a signature shape. I paint it." He mimed the movements, the flourish at the end. "By the way, I do it better than him. You travel a lot for the congressman thing?"

"Not ever. I basically designed his pamphlets and door hangers."

"Ah, our jobs aren't so different after all."

"But I don't have one now." She aped his zigzag flourish, as punctuation.

"Hence you're crashing parties in distant cities which happen to be where I live."

"Hey, you didn't even know if Jorn was a guy or a girl. I at least was introduced, though I didn't catch his name."

He put up his hands: no slight intended. "But where do I know you from? I mean, no pressure, but this is mutual, right? You recognize me too."

"I was sure when you walked in. Now I'm not so sure."

"Yeah, maybe you look a little less familiar yourself."

In the grade of woods over the girl's shoulder Doran sighted two pale copper orb

flat as coins. Fox? Bunny? Raccoon? He motioned for the girl to turn and see, when at that moment Top approached them from around the corner of the house. Doran's hands fell, words died on his lips. Tiny hands or feet scrabbled urgently in the underbrush, though they were repairing a watch. The noise vanished.

Top had his own cup of wine, half-empty. Lipstick smudged his cheek. Doran motioned to wipe it off, but Top bobbed, ducking Doran's reach. He glared. "Where'd you go?" asked Doran, only nodding his chin at the familiar girl.

"We were trying to figure out where we knew each other from," said Doran. "This is my friend Top. I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Vivian."

"Vivian, Top. And I'm Doran."

"Hello, Vivian," said Top curtly, raising his cup. To Doran: "You coming inside?"

"Sure, in a minute."

Top raised his eyebrows, said: "Sure. Anyway, we'll be there. Me and Evie and Miranda." To Vivian: "Nice to meet you." He slipped around the corner again.

"Friends waiting for you?" said Vivian. "Sure, I guess. Yours?"

"It's not the same. They're a couple."

"Letting you mingle, I guess that's what you mean."

"Whereas yours are what-dates?"

"Good question. It's unclear, though. I'd have to admit they're maybe dates. But only maybe. Vivian what?"

"Relf."

"Vivian Relf. Totally unfamiliar. I'm Doran Close. In case that triggers any recall." Doran felt irritable, reluctant to let go of it, possibly humiliated, in need of a drink.

"It doesn't."

"Have we pretty much eliminated everything?"

"I can't think of anything else."

"We've never been in any of the same cities or schools or any-thing at the same time." It gave him a queasy, earth-shifty sensation. As though he'd come through the door of the party wrong, on the wrong foot. Planted a foot or flag on the wrong plan, one small step from the foyer, one giant plunge into the abyss. "Nope, I don't think so."

"You're not on television!"

"Never."

"So what's the basis of all this howling familiarity?"

"I don't know if there really is any basis, and anyway I'm not feeling such howling familiarity anymore."

"Right, me neither." This was now a matter of pure vertigo, cliffside terror. He did not hold it against Vivian Relf, though. She was his fellow sufferer. It was what they had in common, the sole thing.

"You want to go back to your friends?" she said. "I guess so."

"Don't feel bad."

"I don't," lied Doran. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"Very good then, Less-Than-Familiar-Girl. I'll look forward to that." Doran offered hand to shake, mock-pompously. He felt garbed in awkwardness.

Vivian Relf accepted his hand, and they shook. She'd grown a little sulky herself, the last minute.

Doran found Top and Evie and Miranda beyond the kitchen, in a room darkened and lit only by a string of Christmas lights, and cleared of all but two enormous speakers as though for dancing. No one danced, no one inhabited the room apart from the three of them. There was something petulant in choosing to shout over the music, as they were doing.

"Who's your new friend?" said Miranda.

"Nobody. I thought she was an old friend, actually."

"Sure you weren't just attracted to her?"

"No, it was a shock of recognition, of seeing someone completely familiar. The problem is she had the same thing with me, I think." The language available to Doran for describing his cataclysm was cloddish and dead, the words a sequence of corpses laid head to toe.

"Yeah, it's always mutual." "What's that supposed to mean?" "Nothing, nothing."

"Look around this party," said Doran. "How many people could you say you've never been in a room together with before? That they didn't actually attend a lower grade in your high school, that you couldn't trace a link to their lives? That's what she and I just did. We're perfect strangers."

"Maybe you saw her on an airplane."

Doran had no answer for this. He fell silent.

Later that night he saw her again, across two rooms, through a doorway. The party had grown. She was talking to someone new, a man, not her friends. He felt he still recognized her, but the sensation hung uselessly in a middle distance, suspended, a yellow amber, in doubt so thick it was a form of certainty. She irked him, that was all he knew.

It was two years before he saw the familiar girl again, at another party, again in the living room. They recognized one another immediately. "I know you," she said, brightening.

"Yes, I know you too, but from where?" The moment he said it he recalled their conversation. "Of course, how could I forget? You're that girl I *don't know*."

"Oh, yeah." *She seemed to grow immensely sad.*

*They stood together contemplating the privileges of their special relationship, its utter and proven vacancy.*

"It's like when you start a book and then you realize you read it before," he said. "You can't really remember anything ahead, only you know each line as it comes to you."

"No surprises to be found, you mean?" She pointed at herself. "Just a weird kind of pre . . ." He searched for the word he meant. *Preformatting? Precognition? Pre-exhaustion?*

*"More like a stopped car on the highway slowing down traffic," she said, seeming uninterested in his ending the unfinished word. Not a gaudy crash or anything. Just*

cop waving you along, say-ing nothing to see here."

"Doran," he said.

"Vivian."

"I remember. You visiting your friends again?"

"Yup. And before you ask I have no idea whose party this is or what I'm doing here."

"Probably you were looking for me."

"I've got a boyfriend," she said. The line that was always awkward, in anyone's language. Then, before he could respond, she added: "I'm only joking."

"Oh."

"Just didn't want you thinking of me as Ben and Malorie's, oh, sort of party accessory. The extra girl, the floater."

"No, never the extra girl. The girl I don't know from any-where, that's you."

"Funny to meet the girl you don't know, twice," she said. "When there are probably literally thousands of people you do know or anyway could establish a connection with who you never even meet once."

"I'm tempted to say small world." "Either that or we're very large people."

"But maybe we're evidence of the opposite, I'm thinking now. Large world."

"We're not evidence of anything," said Vivian Relf. She shook his hand again. "Enjoy the party."

*The next time was on an airplane, a coast-to-coast flight. Doran sat in first class. Vivian Relf trundled past him, headed deep into the tail, carry-on hugged to her chest. She didn't spot him.*

*He mused on sending back champagne with the stewardess, as in a cocktail lounge-from the man in 3A. There was probably a really solid reason they didn't all do that. A hundred solid reasons. He didn't dwell on Vivian Relf, watched a movie instead. Barbar-ian hordes were vanquished in waves of slaughter, twenty thousand feet above the plain.*

*They spoke at the baggage carousel. She didn't seem overly surprised to see him there.*

*"As unrelated baggage mysteriously commingles in the dark belly of an airplane to be redistributed to its proper possessor in the glare of daylight on the whirring mezzanine belt, so you repeatedly graze my awareness in shunting through the dimmed portals of my life," he said. "Doran Close."*

*"Vivian Relf," she said, shaking his hand. "But I suspect you knew that."*

*"Then you've gathered that I'm obsessed with you."*

*"No, it's that nobody ever forgets my name. It's one of those that sticks in your head."*

*"Ah."*

*She stared at him oddly, waiting. He spotted, beneath her sleeve, the unmistakable laminated wristlet of a hospital stay, imprinted Relf. Vivian. Rm 3 r5.*

"I'd propose we share a cab, but friends are waiting to pick me up in the white zone." He jerked his thumb at the curb.

"The odds are we're anyway pointed in incompatible directions."

"Ah, if I've learned anything at all in this life it's not to mon-key with the odds."

There was a commotion. Some sort of clog at the mouth where baggage was disgorged. An impatient commuter clambered up to straddle the chugging belt. He reared up suit sleeves and tugged the jammed suitcases out of the chute. The backlog tumbled loose, a miniature avalanche. Doran's suitcase was among those freed. Vivian Relf still waited, peering into the hole as though at a distant horizon. Doran left her there, feet giddy.

All that week, between appointments with art collectors and gallerists, he spied for her in the museums and bistros of the vast metropolis, plagued by the ghost of certain they'd come here, to this far place, this neutral site, apart-but-together, in order to form some long-delayed truce or compact. The shrouded visages of the locals formed a kind of brick wall, an edifice which met his gaze everywhere: forehead, eyebrows, glasses, grim-drawn lips, cell phones, sandwiches. Against this background she'd have blazed like a sun. But never appeared.

Oh Vivian Relf! Oh eclipse, oh pale penumbra of my yearning!

Pink slip, eviction notice, deleted icon, oh!

Stalked in alleys of my absent noons, there's nobody knows you better than

Translucent voracious Relf-self, I vow here

Never again once to murk you

With pallid tropes of *familiarity or recognition*

*You, pure apparition, onion-*

Veil of veils only!

Doran Close, in his capacity as director of acquisitions in Draw-ings and Prints, had several times had lunch with Vander Polymus, the editor of *Wall Art*. He'd heard Polymus mention that he, Polymus, was married. He'd never met the man's wife, though, and it was a Surprise, as he stepped across Polymus's threshold for the dinner party, a bottle of cabernet franc in a scarf of tissue thrust forward in greeting, to discover that the amiable ogre was married to someone he recognized. Not from some previous museum fete or gallery opening, but from another life, another frame of reference, years before. Really, from another postulated version of his life, his sense, once, of what he'd be. He knew her despite the boy-ishy short haircut, the jarring slash of lipstick and bruises of eyeshadow, the freight of silver bracelets: Vander Polymus was married to Vivian Reif.

Meeting her eyes, Doran unconsciously reached up and brushed his fingertips to her shaved skull.

"Doran, Viv," said Polymus, grabbing Doran by the shoulder and tugging him inside.

"Throw your coat on the bed; I'll take that. C'mon. Hope you like pernil and bacalao!"

"Hello," she said, and as Doran relinquished the bottle she took his hand to shake

"Vivian Relf," said Doran. "Vivian Polymus," she confirmed.

"Shall we pry open your bottle?" said Vander Polymus. "Is it something special? I got a rioja I'm itching to sample. You know each other?"

"We met, once," said Vivian. "Other side of the world."

Doran wanted to emend her once, but couldn't find his voice.

"Did you fucking fuck my wife?" chortled Polymus, fingers combing his beard. "You have to tell me all about it, but save it for dinner. There's people I want you to meet."

So came the accustomed hurdles: the bottles opened and appreciated; the little dinner-party geometries-No. but of course I know, your name or *If I'm not wrong your gallery represents my dear friend Zeus; the hard and runny cheeses and a bowl of aggravatingly addictive salted nuts; the dawning apprehension that a single woman in the party of eight had been tipped his way by the schem-ing Polymus and another couple, who'd brought her along-much as, so long ago, Vivian Reif had been shopped at parties by the couple she'd been visiting. Hurdles? Really these were placed low as croquet wickets. Yet they had to be negotiated for a time, deftly, with a smile, before Doran could at last find himself seated. Beside the single woman, of course, but gratefully, as well, across from Polymus's wife. Vivian Reif.*

*He raised his glass to her, slightly, wishing to draw her nearer, wishing they could press their heads together for murmuring.*

*"I used to think I'd keep running into you forever," he said. She only smiled.*

*Her husband intruded from the end of the table, his voice commanding. "What is it with you two?" Irra-tionally, Polymus's own impatience seemed to encompass the years since Doran and Vivian's first meeting, the otherwise forget-table, and forgotten, party. Doran wondered if anyone else on the planet had reason to recall that vanished archipelago of fume, conversation, and disco, tonight or ever. The ancient party was a radio signal dopplering through outer space, it seemed to him now.*

*"You fuck him, Viv?" said Polymus. "Inquiring minds want to know."*

*"No," said Vivian Relf-Polymus. "No, but we were probably flirting. This was a long time ago."*

*Polymus and his wife had captured the attention of the whole table, with evident mutual pleasure.*

*"We had this funny thing," Doran felt compelled to explain.*

*"You remember? We didn't know anyone in common. You seemed really familiar, but we'd never met before."*

*This drew a handful of polite laughs, cued principally by the word funny, and perhaps by Doran's jocular tone. Beneath it he felt desperate. Vander Polymus only scowled, as for comic effect he might scowl at an awkwardly hung painting, or at a critical notice with which he violently disagreed.*

*"What I remember is you had these awful friends," said Vivian. "They didn't hesitate to show they found me a poor way for you to be spending your time. What was that moody boy's name?"*

*"Top," said Doran, only remembering as he blurted it. He hadn't thought of Top*



years, had in fact forgotten Top was present at the Vivian Relf Party.

"Were you breaking up with some girl that night?"

"No," said Doran. "Nothing like that. He couldn't remember. "If looks could kill."

Those people mean nothing to me, Doran wished to cry. *They barely did a the time. And now, what was it, ten years later? It was Vivian Relf who mattered, couldn't she see?*

"Do you remember the airport?" he asked.

"Ah, the airport," said Polymus, with a connoisseur's sarcasm. "Now we're getting somewhere. Tell us about the airport." The table chuckled nervously, all in deference to their host.

"I haven't the faintest idea what he's talking about, my love."

"It's nothing," said Doran. "I saw you, ah, at an airport once." He suddenly wished to diminish it, in present company. He saw now that something precious was being taken from him in full view, a treasure he'd found in his possession only at the instant it was squandered. *I wrote a poem to you once, Vivian Relf, he said silently, behind a smile of excellent rioja. Doran knew it was finer, much more interesting, than the wine he'd brought, the cabernet franc they'd sipped with their appetizers.*

*He might have known Vivian Relf better than anyone he actu-ally knew, Doran thought now. Or anyway, he'd wanted to. It ought to mean the same thing. His soul creaked in irrelevant despair.*

"This is boring," pronounced Vander Polymus.

*The dinner party rose up and swallowed them, as it was meant to.*