

# Vivian Maier Framed

A Novel by Axel Forrester

## I

Words are my enemy. Spoken. Written. It doesn't matter. They're out to get you. Birth certificates, applications, references, diplomas, licenses, interviews, gossip, whispers, family stories, newspapers articles, books, magazines, all of it, *all of it*, is just waiting to do you in. Words are a trap, a snare. They will catch you, crush you, cripple you. They push you around from the moment you're born. They name you, place you, assign you a sex, a country, a language, a class, a family. Words form your history. They are a trail. They shine a light right on you—telling people where you've lived, how you did in school, what you failed at, who your employers were. They add you up. Like stacks of newspaper. They form patterns, hint at who you are and what you're likely to be.

If the words on your birth certificate say you are female, then there is a whole set of unspoken words, rules you're expected to follow. Cross your legs. Wear dresses. Grow your hair long. Comb it every night. Smile. Always be happy. Have babies. Cook meals. Clean house. And you can't do the jobs that men do. The rules of being female are dictated by your family, your teachers, your friends and especially other females. People will get mad if you don't follow the rules of your sex. Rules are rules. Likewise, men have their own set of rules and they don't want to hear about female rules. While I've never seen these rules written down, I hear them in my head, all the time.

Words spell out who belongs in your family—the people you are meant to love. But what happens if you don't love your family? You have to go to confession. It's a sin. I had to

say a lot of Hail Mary's. After that, I decided it was easier not to tell anyone I didn't love my mother. I don't know what a normal mother is, but I know mine isn't one. She's 'unhinged.' I've heard that word more than once, and it's the right one for her. I don't think you have to love your father if he leaves your family, if he moves out. But that's probably a sin too. Who would I ask? Someone would write it down immediately and then it would be on *my* record. Abandoned.

Words build a story around you, brick by brick, word by word, until you can't escape, you can't even defend yourself. You can't say, *that's not right. I'm not a girl. I'm not stupid. I'm not wrong. I'm not American, I'm French.* You can't argue with words people say about you. They'll call you a *liar*. It's your word against the ones that follow you around. The ones on paper count more; matter more. They are the words that say whether you're married or not, if your marriage broke, if you're rich or poor, or whether you live in a good neighborhood or a bad one. Even the way you speak, how words come out of your mouth, will tell on you. Words want to keep you in your place.

Words tell people what color you are. Your color is a kind of code word, like 'woman,' with a whole other secret book about what you can and cannot do. Yet, you can't ever see this book; the one with the code words that tell people what you're worth. It's like that blue book where you can look up the value of your car. If you have color to your skin that isn't a sun tan, rich people won't even see you and they'll order you around and not pay you very much when you work for them. That's why I wear a hat. I have the kind of skin color that could give me one of those code words, if I'm not careful about the sun. I've got enough code words to deal with as it is. Woman. Speaks funny. Too tall. Mannish. Big feet. Can't cook. No references. All those words together mean I'll always have to be somebody's servant if I want money. I'll have to take care of rich people's children. And in an interview, I have to wear nice clothes if I want a job. But I'm French, really. So, I have nice clothes. My

mother taught me about that, at least. My mother's a bastard, you know, in every sense of that word. And the word has made a mess of her mind and her life.

Words. They follow you around from the moment you take your first breath to when you've had your last and sometimes, far beyond that. But I've learned a few tricks. I've found ways to get around words, to slip through their fingers. Here's a word for you: photographer. That's the word for what I do. I make pictures with my camera. Pictures don't lie like words do. They can peel off the words, the labels, the codes.

I take photographs that capture moments of life in time. Now. In 1952. Here. In New York City. Pictures capture things and set them on paper, hold them there, so you can get a good look. You can hold time in your hands when you hold a photograph, and make up your own mind about what you see and what it means. Taking pictures proves something to me about myself. It tells me that I'm going to be a photographer, a good one, I'm going to be more than the words that have followed me around up to now.

Today is my day off. Sunday. I'm just a nanny most days of the week, but on my *own* time I'm a photographer. The house is quiet now. I can finally hear myself think. The McMillans have gone to church. Before they left, I took a photograph of Joan in her new dress with my new camera. She hates that dress and it shows. Her face is such a picture of pure loathing that I couldn't resist. A little girl in a pretty dress with an old man's scowl. Her parents will love it, but they're idiots. They hardly know their daughter at all. She's a tomboy. The dress is a lie. Joan is happiest in her cowboy hat with her six-shooter. I took a picture of her in that getup too. Joan's a great model and she loves to go out shooting with me where we can be cowboys together, shooting everything in the neighborhood.

Joan knows she can be herself around me. Good or bad. Happy or mad. She has a hunger for life, for play. I started being her nanny when school was over last summer, six months ago, and we have an understanding. You need a good understanding of a child if you're going to be her minder. I think Joan likes it that I treat her like a real person and not like a child. I ask her opinions about what we'll do or where we'll go. She knows I like to find interesting people and buildings to take pictures of. We explore together, after school and on Saturdays. Sometimes I take Joan to a birthday party, or a dance lesson.

We like walking by the river, on Riverside Drive. Joan and I often walk that way after school and stop at the playgrounds. She's a great help to me, getting other children to pose while she plays with them. The negro children who live around Harlem are interesting. They study me for signs of code words. Am I really a white woman? Am I rich? They look closely at my clothes and my hat. I'm always looking down in my viewfinder and trying to catch them in the act of being themselves, but I know they're trying to catch me too. They figure I'm hiding something, and I suppose they're not wrong. I'm not just any nanny; I'm a photographer. I want their picture. I see them. They don't trust me at first. Something's off if a white woman wants to look at you, to take pictures of you. And Joan. She wants to play ball. She's strange too. But they don't mind. I snap the button.

Walking around with Joan I find all kinds of things to shoot, but Sundays are special. I can linger longer, finding things on my own. I have no idea where I'll end up or what I'll see. It's adventure day. I can get on just about any bus and go in any direction, but I do have my favorite places to start, places where I've already had some good luck finding interesting faces.

It's cold, on this particular Sunday, but the sun is out. My new Rolleiflex hangs around my neck, fitting like a second skin. The leather strap is already looking worn, and I'm always comforted by the feel and smell of it.

Like a fisherman, I catch things here on the street with my Rollei, like someone fishing on the river. Those two men sleeping head-to-head on that bench. The slats make an excellent pattern. I see them, I snap them. On Sundays, I like to go to 57<sup>th</sup>, or even Times Square where there're lots of things happening. Peep shows. Men passed out in alleys and doorways. The contrast between dark shadows and bright lights. The words are practically written on people; drunk, hobo, down and out, drug addict, loafer, criminal, street walker, sinner. And you sometimes see the angels and saints. A couple in love, holding hands. Snap.

I took a photograph of a couple on a carriage ride in Central Park last spring. I still remember it. The folding canopy behind them was leather like a camera bellows and it surrounding them, shielding their intimacy from prying eyes. Only my eyes saw them, through my Rollei. The woman's head turned down shyly. The man's cheek resting on her forehead. Love birds. Tentative. Wondering. Cautious. Hopeful. Experimenting. Those are the words for them, but the photograph says even more. Sitting on that seat, in that carriage, like so many lovers before them, they don't even realize they are a cliché. Snap. Maybe I can sell that photograph.

Sometimes on Sundays, I go around to see my new friend Carola, who lives on 70<sup>th</sup>. She's a professional photographer with her own studio and does wedding photography. She lets me use her darkroom sometimes on Sundays, when she doesn't have clients. She likes my pictures and believes I can become a real photographer, if I keep working at it. There's a photography school around here and she asked me once, whether I wanted to go. The words 'bad student' are stamped on my forehead forever, so, I tell her no. I don't need that kind of aggravation, nor do I have the time. I'd rather be free. I don't like being told what to do in

life, and I sure as hell don't want to be told what to do when I'm taking pictures. Even if I can't afford to print all of them, just taking them is good practice.

Here it is, my best picture of the day: a man is standing on his head in front of the Striporama. Standing in the doorway next to him is a woman wearing a silk dressing gown. The poster behind them reads: GORGEOUS COLOR. There's nothing gorgeous about them. I snap the picture. And I know it's good.