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Finding Vivian Maier

Mindful curiosity to an odd and ordinary life

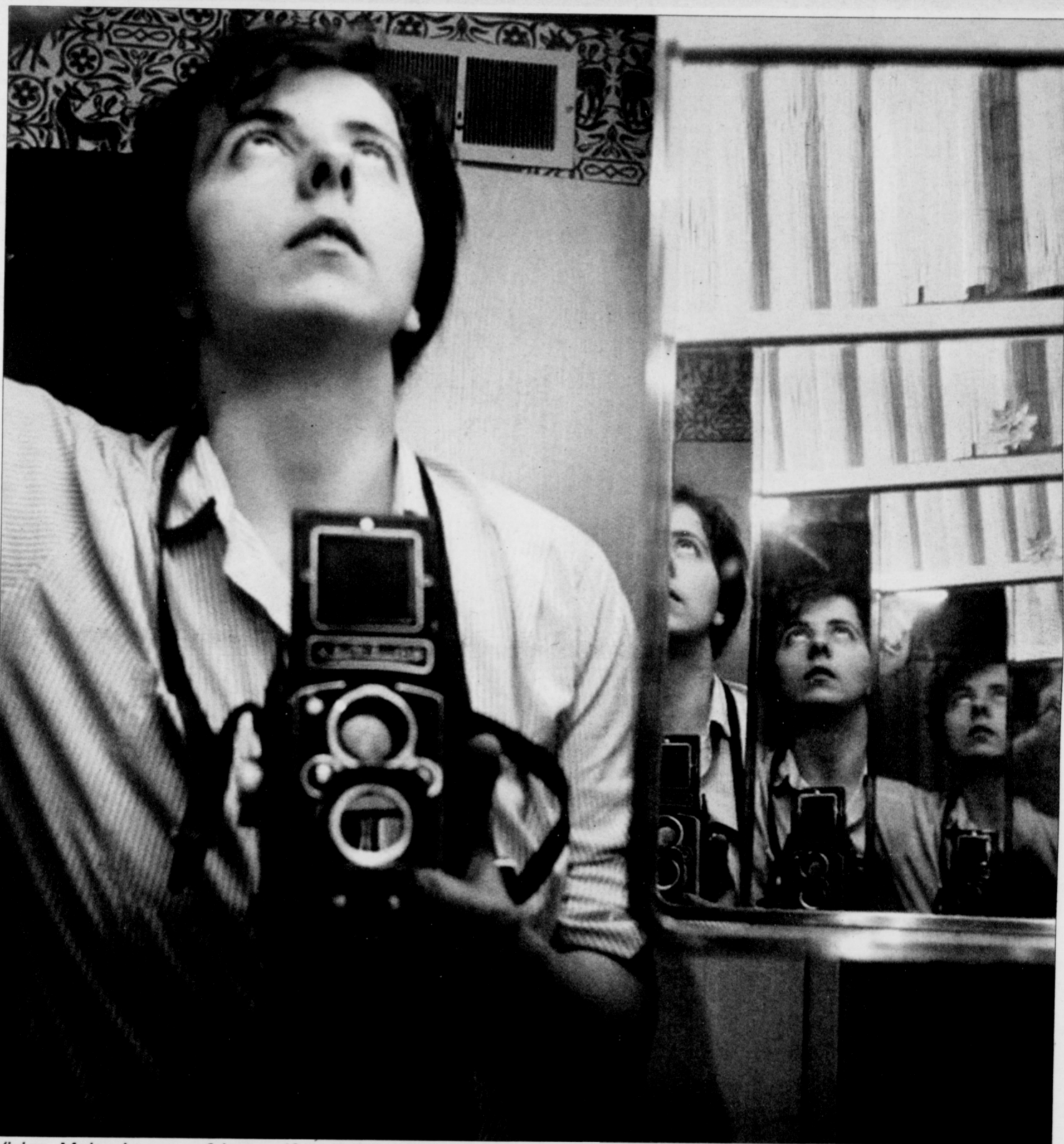
Shortly after I wrote my last *Portland Observer* piece two months ago, I quite tragically lost my life partner, Stan Thornburg. (For those who are interested, I have written about Stan's passing on my blog at opinionated-judge.blogspot.com/2014/05/complicated-grief). Among other things, my grief journey has given me occasion to reflect on the mysteries of the human soul -- and, also, on how remarkably *un*curious people are about each other. So it seemed fitting, on my return to writing film criticism, to introduce you to a lovely documentary -- "**Finding Vivian Maier**" -- that probes those mysteries with vigorous curiosity that some have termed obsessive.

Five years ago, a young man from Chicago named John Maloof posted several hundred photos on Flickr that he had purchased in the form of undeveloped negatives at an auction.

A veteran flea-market miner of discarded treasures since childhood, Maloof had an instinct that he had stumbled onto something, but cannily posed the question to the internet: "What do I do with this stuff?" The photos caused a stir, and quickly drew comparisons to important street photographers like Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, and Helen Levitt.

Maloof -- who acknowledges that he is "obsessive about stuff" -- ultimately unearthed 100,000 negatives of the artist, Vivian Maier, along with a roomful of the scraps of memorabilia that she had collected over years of hoarding before she died in her 80s. Maloof missed Maier herself by a matter of months (though he stumbled onto her obituary), but he located many people who knew her, including the proprietor of a Chicago antique shop that she frequented who termed Maier "a real pain in the ass."

The documentary, which Maloof co-directed with Charlie Siskel (nephew of Gene), regards Maier with kindness, with wonder, with respect for her talent, but also for her individuality, for what she would have



Vivian Maier in one of her self-portraits.

PHOTO BY VIVIAN MAIER/MALOOF COLLECTION

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wanted, for what made her tick.

Who was this woman, really? Why did she take so many careful, beautifully crafted photographs, and never show her art? Did she recognize her talent? Was she lonely? Was her French accent real? Was she Vivian, Viv, Ms. Maier, or Miss Meyers?

"She was my nanny." Maier spent most of her adult life as a nanny to a string of families in Chicago's North Shore neighborhoods. The picture that emerges is inconsistent. Some of her now-adult charges describe her

as playful and attentive. A certain quirkiness is evident. They remember the low-slung Rolleiflex camera that always hung around her neck. She took them on outings to the city -- but some of those outings included slums or even the stockyards. And some describe a woman who could be mercurial, or sharp, or even unkind.

Her employers worried about her. She was obsessively private, and seems to have shifted her identity slightly with each family. She demanded a lock on the door of her room

and forbade any entry. One of her former charges remarks that she would never have allowed for the fame that has followed the release of her art.

Yet there is a kindness, an open-heartedness, even a capacity to connect that shines through in her photographs. The camera she used allowed her to photograph from her midsection, while she evidently maintained eye-contact with many of her subjects, and she poignantly captures their humanity. She was interested in the poor, the odd, the marginalized. Many of her subjects are people of color. Her pictures frequently inspire a rush of love.

Maier took a lot of self-portraits, and they

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