

# NARRATIVE PODCASTS



ILLUSORY

## Beyond the Atmosphere

### BEYOND THE ATMOSPHERE TRANSCRIPT

A Brief Note: Narration and interview tape is represented by the speaker's name, in bold. Scoring and sound effects are distinguished with italization.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** Part of me was a regular teenager. I had girlfriends, we'd giggle together, you know, we went ice skating together. And another part of me was talking to faces in the mirror that were not my own. And I knew that something was wrong. I knew that people don't switch back and forth like that — like, from being totally normal to totally in this fantasy world. And I had more emotional reliance on imaginary people than I did on real-world people. That became a problem.

*A percussive, keyboard-driven song plays in the background*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** That's Vivian Conan. Since she was a kid, she's seen the world differently than most people. It's like she's had this cloud around her.

*Simmering water and a steaming tea kettle replicate what the atmosphere might feel like to Vivian*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** An extra dimension that only she can see. She calls it the atmosphere. It's filled with imaginary versions of people from her life.

*A cacophony of voices occupy the background, replicating the overwhelming experience of inhabiting the atmosphere*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Therapists, teachers, friends.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** And atmosphere people were not in bodies. Their molecules were loose...

*Computer beeps and bubbly video game sound effects represent molecules floating through the air*

**VIVIAN CONAN:** ...floating around in the air, and all mixed in together.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Vivian believed that the versions of all these people in her mind were actually real. She couldn't see them or hear them. But she could feel them. They were kind of like spirits watching over her — protecting her.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** And they were in the air I breathed and they knew everything I thought and felt. And it was like I was part of them.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** When Vivian saw someone in real life, it's like they were jumping down from the atmosphere to live inside of a body for a while, like they were possessing it.

*An eerie crescendo in the vein of a ghost possession or alien abduction*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** And when Vivian wasn't around, she believed their body was just this empty shell.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I considered them as walking around in a skin container.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Atmosphere people were perfect. They never made a mistake. The problem

is that real people don't act like atmosphere people. They're inconsistent.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** In the atmosphere, they understood me perfectly, and I didn't have to talk. But in-person, if I didn't say something, they didn't get it. And in-person, they would sometimes do things that bothered me. They would misinterpret me, or they would say they would call me at a certain time and they'd forget to call.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Vivian would even get upset when real-life people changed their clothes or got a haircut. It meant they no longer looked the same as they did in her mind. And she'd start to question her entire reality. This happened a lot with her therapist.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I used to get upset if he wore different color socks, because to me, it meant he's not in the atmosphere. He went to a store and he bought socks? Around Christmas time, if he came back with a new sweater or a new tie, oh, somebody gave him a present. Like, he has other people in his life. It was very hard for me to deal with the in-person version, but whenever I got disappointed by the in-person version, I would revert to the atmosphere version where I got along fine with this person. And so I had two separate relationships with these people.

*Ethereal keyboard-based music*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** This is Illusory...a podcast about what happens when our brain plays tricks on us. We'll follow someone who is learning to live with a strange sensory experience...and explore what it can teach us about the power and the complexity of the human mind. In our first episode, we're speaking to Vivian. She's 78. She's lived in New York for most of her life. And she first noticed the atmosphere as a kid. In the beginning, it was filled with friendly doctors.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** In my mind, doctors and nurses were people that took care of you.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** But as she got older, people from her real life started living in the atmosphere. Like, if she started hanging out with a friend more often, an atmosphere version of him would form in her mind. This started to really bother Vivian.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** If I would go to the bathroom and pull my pants down to sit on the toilet, like, I would be embarrassed that they were seeing me. Or one time, when I was cooking fish, I opened the window to get rid of the smell – not for me, but for the atmosphere people.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** By the time she was in college, Vivian realized that she was getting more isolated.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** The problem with the atmosphere was that it was too comfortable. So the more I depended on it, the more I did not depend on real people.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** She started searching for an answer. Some kind of clear diagnosis. Just so she'd have an idea of what was going on.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** My aunt, who lived downstairs from me in the same building, she was in psychoanalysis, and she had a lot of books in her room. And when she was at work, I used to sneak down and read her books. I was just trying to find a description of myself, so I wouldn't feel like a freak. I just felt like I was a species of one – that there was nothing else, no one else like me. And I wanted to find a description that had an official name. And I did not find anything.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** So Vivian kept searching. In the meantime, she started a career as a librarian.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I worked in the New York Public Library for six years...and then I moved to a librarian in Westchester where I was the director of a small village library. Eventually, I left the library, and I went into data processing, which was a very big field at the time.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Over all of those years, Vivian could mostly push the atmosphere away. But it still bubbled up sometimes. And when it got really bad, Vivian would spend a couple weeks in the psych ward of a local hospital. By now, Vivian was in her 40s. She started to think she'd never really understand what was causing the atmosphere... but then she found a clue.

*Ambient walking and talking to simulate a video store*

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I was walking through the aisles of the video store looking for a movie to rent, and I happened to see Sybil.

*CLIP:*

**Sybil** - "I'm in New York. I'm in a hospital room.

**Doctor** - "Mhm."

**Sybil** - "Cut my wrist..."

**Doctor** - "Mhm."

**Sybil** - "Am I through? May I go?"

**Doctor** - "Well, I'd like to finish the neurological exam."

**VIVIAN CONAN:** ...about a girl who has 16 personalities.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Sybil was a big movie at the time. It starred Sally Field. Vivian got home and put it in her VCR.

*Inserting VCR into player and the tape turning in the machine*

**VIVIAN CONAN:** And the more the movie went on, the more I kind of understood that that was what was going on with me.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Sybil used different personalities to disconnect from the world. It was like a coping tool. She could escape when things got too overwhelming. Vivian realized that the atmosphere could be her way of disconnecting. She was really excited about her discovery. So she headed to her therapist's office. She wanted to tell her about it.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I had this little portable TV. I think it was called a Sony Watchman, or something. It was like, you also needed a VCR player. I brought in...I had a shopping cart. I put that in the shopping cart — the VCR player, the tiny, little TV and the video cassette.

*Creaking wheels of a shopping cart and hurried footsteps on concrete*

**VIVIAN CONAN:** And she was just on the other side of Central Park from me, so I wheeled my shopping cart through the park and into her elevator...

*Ambient chatter of the park and smooth jazz music; then, the ding of an elevator*

**VIVIAN CONAN:** And went up, you know, to her office. Her office was on like something like the 37th floor. It was very high up.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** They watched it together. And Vivian learned that Sybil had something called dissociation. Her personalities helped her deal with a traumatic experience. The therapist had never treated something like that. But Vivian knew she needed to find someone who did. That's how Vivian met Jeffery.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** I'm Jeffrey Smith, and I'm in, in private practice, but I'm also Associate Professor

of Psychiatry at New York Medical College, and been doing psychotherapy for 40-some years. And in particular, dissociative identity disorder since about 1977. And I've been working with Vivian since the early 90s.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** He's bald on top and he has gray hair on the sides. He's kind of comforting looking. His office is, it's decorated in tones of browns and grays. It's conservative, but it's comfortable. And then some kind of couch that is, the top opens. And you can keep stuff inside. And I used to keep, like, crayons in there and a blanket and a coloring book. And I used to keep different stuff that the different parts of me used to like to use during sessions. And I kind of felt special that stuff of mine was in his office, even when I wasn't there.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Jeffery had this idea about Vivian's condition. He believed the atmosphere was some kind of remnant from her childhood.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** And that was a little bit like being bathed in the womb...

*Mysterious droning sound and bubbling*

**JEFFERY SMITH:** You know, where everything is warm, and everything is muffled and softened. And then birth is like finding out suddenly that that the world is different from that, and it's not always connected with you.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Jefferey's theory was that parts of Vivian got stuck in this child-like state. The atmosphere was like this wall that protected her from the outside world.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** And so in that sense, attachment is really more the core problem that she had, that she struggled with.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** "Attachment" as in the connection between parents or caregivers and

their kids. Studies show that those connections can affect a child for the rest of their lives.

*Upbeat keyboard-based music*

**LANE STRATHEARN:** If a child's parents have addiction problems...

**NICK GALLAGHER:** That's Dr. Lane Strathearn.

**LANE STRATHEARN:** Or are suffering from depression, or anxiety...

**NICK GALLAGHER:** He's a neuroscientist, and he runs a lab at the University of Iowa.

**LANE STRATHEARN:** Or there are socio-economic factors that make it a struggle just to survive every day, that child may be way down the level of priority for that parent.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** His team does brain scans to see how parents and kids interact with each other. Their research shows that the way our caregivers respond to us actually changes our brain chemistry.

**LANE STRATHEARN:** When you're in a nurturing or predictable environment, where your basic needs are being met, you develop a model of how the world is. You can know that if something goes wrong, there's going to be someone there to help you through that.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** So what if that doesn't happen? How does a kid respond if her needs aren't met?

**LANE STRATHEARN:** For some children, that may mean that they are more irritable, more distress, more crying, more overtly demonstrating that they need to be paid attention to. Okay? And if that strategy doesn't work, then sometimes they give up.



**NICK GALLAGHER:** Giving up could mean turning inward. Shutting out the world. And creating a new one in its place. It's what Dr. Strathearn would refer to as an "attachment strategy."

**LANE STRATHEARN:** Attachment strategy.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** It's something everyone does.

**LANE STRATHEARN:** We develop these attachment strategies in response to the experiences that we have, and that in many cases, they are adaptive, they are protective, that help us to survive in very, very difficult circumstances.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Vivian could really relate to these ideas.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** No one would walk into my apartment without knocking on the door because my father would erupt.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** She grew up in Brooklyn with a huge extended family. That part was great. Vivian could play with her cousins whenever she wanted. Her grandparents cooked for her. But the one place Vivian didn't fit in was her own apartment, where she lived with her Mom, Dad and brother.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I felt like I had two mommies. I had one mommy who sometimes would sit and read a book with me if she had time. And another mommy who cursed me when she was impatient and I got in her way.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Her dad, too.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** He had a lot of rules, and if you obeyed his rules, he was very loving. But if you didn't, he could be, physically, he could hit a lot. And so I never knew when his temper would, would get set off. So I had two daddies also. So it was sort of like I had four parents. The good mother and the good father and the bad mother

and the bad father. And so I think I split off because of that.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** The atmosphere was a way to get Vivian through her childhood. But as Dr. Strathearn puts it...

**LANE STRATHEARN:** Attachment strategies are adaptive at certain points in life and can be maladaptive in other circumstances.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** So the atmosphere helped when Vivian was a kid. But it became a problem as she got older. Now, Vivian had an idea about what created the atmosphere. But it was still difficult to let go of.

*Acoustic guitar strumming*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** So Jefferey came up with a plan. He decided to recreate the atmosphere as best he could in real life. That meant being perfectly understanding and patient and kind. Just like how he would act in the atmosphere.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** Then it was clear to me that if she couldn't keep me in the atmosphere, if I didn't function, more or less, like she expected an atmosphere person to function, then the relationship would just break down, and she'd get that that deadpan kind of look on her.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Think of it this way. If Jeffery flat-out told Vivian that none of this atmosphere stuff was real – she'd probably get upset. Because the atmosphere was real to Vivian. So he did the opposite. He tried to behave exactly as Vivian saw him in her mind. It took some getting used to. A lot of trial and error.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** If he's in the atmosphere, his whole concern is me. He doesn't have any other patients, he doesn't have a family, he doesn't have anything. He doesn't even walk around in the world. You know, like, when I leave his office, and I

say goodbye, he's standing there with his hand in the air waving until the next time I come back. And then as I backed out, I had the image of him with his hand in the air that I would keep with me all week.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** And if something comes up, then we have to start over again and do it right. So I was very tuned in with her, except for here and there, when something would, would go awry. If a couple of books had moved on the bookshelf, something as small as that could trigger her worrying about whether everything might be completely different.

*Keyboard-based music*

**NICK GALLAGHER:** This was part of Jefferey's plan. He wanted Vivian to notice those tiny little inconsistencies.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** I kind of knew that, that the inevitable degree of failure would also supply the situations where she needed to learn.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Then there was the weekly toast ritual.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** The ritual would involve going into the kitchen and making the toast and buttering it. And then we'd sit on the floor in the office and have toast together, and...

**VIVIAN CONAN:** When we first started having toast together, I used to, I used to put the toast in the toaster and take them both out at the same time. And I liked the idea that we were both having the same sensation of when we each took a bite of our own toast.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** It was rather, rather pleasant. And by that time in the day, I was usually pretty hungry anyway, so.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** It wasn't until months later that I found out, I like my toast more crisp and he likes his softer. So I started taking his out sooner, and leaving mine in long. And that was kind of learning to separate from him. So like, we were still having toast together. But it was not the same toast and it was not the same sensation.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** That's how the atmosphere began to fall away.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** If he was perfect for like three weeks and all of a sudden, one week, he said he was gonna call and he forgot to call. And I would be all upset. The fact that we talked about it, and that I understood what happened. And he didn't forget me forever. He just had something happen. And the fact that I could tell him that I was upset, and he could say he was sorry. It was in the reparation, it was in the repair of these breaks, that I was able to make progress.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** Finding out that I'm, that I'm human and fallible, I can make mistakes and fail to come through and yet I'm still worth something.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** It was very, very, very slow. Like, it took several years.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** She's gotten better and better and better. And that's really important in kind of helping me stay engaged and motivated. And so, so as long as there's progress being made, then I feel like it's, it's worthwhile.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Over all of those years, Vivian had to pretend everything was fine. Even when it wasn't.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** It's not something that's easy to live with. Even though we look like (we, meaning people like me) look like we're living a regular life, going to school, paying the rent, going out with

friends, but there's a lot of internal turmoil and chaos, and a lot of pain. For people who do not have those issues, I would like them to understand that, that I'm not a freak, and that people who have these issues are not freaks.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Vivian may have had an extreme case of dissociation. But Jefferey says everyone can relate on some level.

**JEFFERY SMITH:** Dissociation is much more common than is recognized. Like when you see people after a disaster on television, walking around like zombies. That's because their emotions have been split away. And that's a dissociative phenomenon. And so there are many different forms of dissociation, all the way up to this more extreme form. So I think that the media and people in general don't realize that that's, that's a fairly common part of life.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Vivian used to want real people to be perfect. Just like how they were in the atmosphere. But now, she's come to appreciate human imperfections.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** You know, atmosphere, people are perfect, but they can't give you a hug. So yeah, it's more satisfying to have relationships with real people. They're gonna make mistakes. I make mistakes sometimes, too, you know. But they're, the connection and the relationship I have with them is much more satisfying than in a relationship I had with the atmosphere people. But it takes a lot more work. It was as if I came to another country, and I was an immigrant, needing to learn another culture. You know, that that's what everybody's been doing all the time. I'm just new to that.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** And in a weird way, the COVID lockdown made Vivian even more connected.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** Like, I never used to be on Facebook. I mean, I'm 78 years old, and Facebook is not my thing. And actually, for young people, it's no longer the thing either. But I sort of discovered Facebook, and I live by myself, but I go out every day during COVID I take a walk. And I take pictures, and I post them on Facebook. And I post them with commentary. Then sometimes we'll take it offline and we'll email and we'll meet in the park. And if I, if COVID had happened before I had all these people skills, I would have felt so isolated. And I would have, I don't know what I would have done. But these skills are kind of helping me get through COVID.

**NICK GALLAGHER:** Now, Vivian can use the atmosphere only when she wants to. It no longer controls her.

**VIVIAN CONAN:** I am like, 99.9%, you know, in the real world. And, you know, occasionally when I'm under stress, or something happens, I can, you know, resurrect the atmosphere for a very short time, which is not really bad. Like, some people will take a tranquilizer or drink, you know, I have, it's like, it helps me get through a hard time.

*Outro/Credits:*

*Illusory is co-produced by Max Balton and me, Nick Gallagher. Original scoring and sound design also by Max Balton. This episode was edited by Kalli Anderson.*

*Special thanks to Vivian for sharing her story. You can read more about her life in her memoir. It's called "Losing the Atmosphere." And you can find it on her website: [vivianconan.com](http://vivianconan.com).*

