

Viv is a student witnessing the punk & post-punk revolution of the late 70s from her college's radio station. The traditional life she was always taught to want might not be the one for her; she makes some tough decisions that will change everything.

Radio Waves: A Post-Punk Novel

By Shawna-Lee I. Perrin

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RADIO WAVES

A Post-Punk Novel

Shawna-Lee I. Perrin

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-251-8

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64719-252-5

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64719-253-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Perrin, Shawna-Lee I.

Radio Waves by Shawna-Lee I. Perrin

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020924471

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.

2021

Chapter 1

August 31, 1979 (Labor Day weekend)

The sea wall along Marblewell Beach had crumbled in a couple of places since the last time I'd been there in the spring. The tide was low, with a warm, late summer breeze, and we walked on the beach side of the wall. Adrian stopped walking, took my left hand in his, and held it up to examine.

"The ring looks perfect on you, Viv," he said. "The diamond brings out the sparkle in your eyes."

The sinking sun coated everything in a syrupy haze. I rolled my sparkly eyes and put my hand down at my side.

"Have you always been this corny?"

He tilted his head and grinned, the skin in the creases around his golden-brown eyes crinkling. "I know – you're too punk rock for all this mushy stuff. But give me a break, will you? Thinking about us getting married brings it out in me."

I tucked a piece of hair behind his ear. "Sorry, Ade. That's very sweet."

He put an arm around me, and we walked to the Lobster Pot Bar & Grill. The hostess checked Adrian's name off the reservation list. She led us through the indoor dining room, with its many tables draped in red and white gingham tablecloths. The ceiling seemed lower.

"Did you guys redo the dining room over the summer?" I asked.

"No. It's been pretty much the same since the owners opened it twenty years ago," the hostess said.

"It seems smaller. Or shorter, or something," I said.

The hostess shook her head. "We've tried to get them to do some updating, but they're not interested. Mr. Kendall

thinks everything moves too fast these days, says people like having one thing they can count on staying the same.”

She seated us outside at a picnic table by the long railing overlooking the bay. I rubbed the cheerful gingham tablecloth between my fingers; its airy cotton gave this place a feeling of permanence, unlike the disposable vinyl tablecloths that every other restaurant used. Still, I was glad I wasn't the one trying to get butter and shellfish stains out of these.

“It's nice being here before all the other students,” Adrian said, taking my hand across the table. “Hopefully not everyone else had the same idea to come early, and we can beat the move-in madness by a few hours tomorrow.”

Adrian lived in Connecticut. Earlier in the day, he had met me at my house in Stonewald, in the northwest corner of New Hampshire, and I followed him two and a half hours across and down the state to Marblewell. We each took our own cars because we had too much stuff between us to fit it all in just one; my milkcrates stuffed with records and books dominated my trunk and back seat, and Ade's ironed shirts on hangers were laid flat and carefully stacked in his. We were staying overnight in a nearby hotel.

“Or,” he continued, “maybe there's still time to get out of campus housing? Find a little apartment together downtown?”

“My parents are helping put me through college,” I said. “The least I can do is respect their wishes of not ‘living in sin like a hussy.’ You have your room, I have mine, and everyone is comfortable thinking we're not having sex because we don't live together.”

“Yeah, but we're getting married, and it's almost the 80s - everyone's living together first now.”

The truth was, I could have moved in with him, with no argument from my parents. Getting engaged to Adrian was my single greatest achievement in their eyes, and they'd allow just

about anything to make sure I didn't screw it up. But I'd seen girls I knew move in with their boyfriends, fiancés, or husbands, and they were automatically in charge of cooking, cleaning, and ironing in addition to whatever paying job they had. No matter how great the guy, living together changed the girls; they didn't laugh as much and sighed a lot more. I didn't think Adrian would expect me to be like Donna Reed, vacuuming in heels and pearls, but I wasn't ready to find out just yet. Anyway, trying to get through my last year of college and keep up at the radio station as both a DJ and Music Director would be all I could manage.

"They're afraid that if you're getting the milk for free, you won't buy the cow, and the cow will end up a bereft spinster sleeping in its childhood barn."

"Please don't compare yourself to a cow, Viv."

"I'm taking a 400-level metaphor class this semester. I'll have something better by December."

He laughed and shook his head. "I'm just so happy to see you."

"Me too, Ade," I said, but couldn't shake the nerves that had been making my neck ache since we'd gotten into town. He'd been staring at me more than usual, like he was trying to figure something out.

The waitress came and took drink orders. I initially ordered a beer but changed it when Adrian ordered red wine. Beer was what my friends and I drank. Wine was what people who were going to get married and own a fondue pot someday drank.

The wine came, and we ordered food. Adrian raised his glass and said, "To our last year in college, to our engagement, and to growing up and starting our life together."

He didn't even smirk when he said it. "*So* earnest," I said, and clinked his glass. I took more than a sip, slightly less than

a gulp. It tasted like warm, metallic blood. I wrinkled my nose and said, “Mmmmm.”

“It’s an acquired taste, just like you,” he said with a wink. “You’ll get there.”

I’m an acquired taste? I cleared my throat. “Yeah? They teach you that in Connecticut?”

He fidgeted with his napkin. “Maybe.”

The breeze wandered across the deck, lifting the edges of the tablecloths and filling my nose with the scent of salty air and water. Adrian was looking out at the bay and the boats as they chugged by. His hair had gotten slightly shaggy over the summer, and he looked rested and dreamy-eyed. He wore a Beach Boys t-shirt and his old Levi’s. Had he always been into the Beach Boys? I didn’t remember that he had.

Our waitress brought salads and cups of chowder. Adrian ripped open the tiny bag of oyster crackers and dumped them into the soup, poured the dressing over his salad, and listed off all the things he had to get done the next day: get a haircut, go to the bookstore to get his textbooks so he could get a jump on the reading, organize his desk, get to the grocery store to stock up on healthy snacks... He asked me what my plan was.

“I guess bring my stuff up to my room, unpack some, then go to the radio station, see who’s around,” I said.

“Oh,” he said.

I searched his face. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No. It’s nothing. I just...” He looked up. “Our first full day back here, and you’re already planning on spending it at the radio station?”

All my friends were at the radio station, and I hadn’t seen any of them over the summer. I missed them terribly.

“I wasn’t planning on being up there all day,” I said. “You have a lot of things you want to do, so I figured I’d have some time while you were busy.”

He poked at his salad in the small, clear bowl shaped like a lettuce leaf.

“Ade?”

“I was wondering if maybe you were going to skip that this year. Senior year is a ton of work.”

I shook my head. “Of course I’m not ‘skipping’ that this year. Why would I?”

“Viv, please don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad.” No, I was furious he’d even think such a thing.

“You’re scowling at me,” he said. “I’m not trying to be a jerk, I just – it takes up a lot of your time, and you were struggling to keep up with your classes last year. And also... Ah, forget it.”

“No. What?”

He set his fork down. Looked at the table, then back up at me. “A bunch of your exes are still around up there.”

“A ‘bunch’? How many people do you think I’ve been with, exactly?” I was trying to be funny and lighten the mood – however, he wasn’t laughing. Ade hated to think about my romantic life before him. “It’s all ancient history anyway.”

“Not *that* ancient.”

“Like a year and a half.”

“I just think it’s weird. I hate the thought of you hanging out with guys who have seen you naked.”

“I can’t do anything about what happened before we got together, Ade,” I said. “But there’s nothing to worry about. They’re all like family now. I mean, they’re *nicer* than most of my family, but – anyway, all that’s over. Besides, some of *your* exes are still around the paper, right?”

“Yeah, but –”

“And I wouldn’t ask you to not do that this year because I know it means a lot to you, like the station does to me. Plus,

I'm not worried because I trust you." I smiled at my impenetrable logic.

He held my gaze, and gradually, his expression lightened. "Yeah. OK," he said.

I wasn't asking permission. "Good," I said, and took a bite of a mealy tomato.

When I looked back up at him, he was grinning. I looked around to see if I was missing something funny.

"Hey honey? I have some really exciting news."

"*Honey?*" He'd never called me that before. "What's that?"

"I'm trying something new."

"Well, don't. I'm not some 50s sitcom housewife."

"Why are you so grouchy tonight?"

I unclenched my jaw. "I'm not."

He arched an eyebrow, then shook his head. "OK, no more 'honey.' Anyway... I was going to wait to tell you, but I'm just so excited, I can't. I got an early acceptance to Connecticut Teaching University. They have a program that's pretty much a fast track to school administration."

"You mean like a Principal? You want to be a *Principal?*"

"Yeah, some day."

I knew he was planning on teaching, which was one of the most admirable things a person could do. But Principal... Principals thought they had some right to make the rules, and the idea of being married to one... I'd definitely have to dress way different, like in sweater sets and pumps and shit like that. I committed to talking him out of it before he started grad school.

"In the meantime, though," he continued, "I'll get a TA job to pay bills while I go to school, and I'm sure there will be some secretary jobs in the department for you – with your English degree, you'll be a shoe-in."

My hands trembled. I put them in my lap and fidgeted with the cloth napkin. “Secretary?”

A few years ago, before I got my summer job at home in a nearby bookstore, I asked my dad if he could get me a job as a secretary at the construction company he worked for. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. “You don’t want that job. It’s long hours, hard work, and they get treated like shit by those stuck-up assholes who work in the office all week. I don’t know how they put up with it.”

“Just for a little while, until we have kids and everything,” Adrian said. “We should probably wait until I get my Master’s, and till we get married of course, so your parents don’t murder me.”

I blinked at him.

Connecticut. Secretary. *Kids*? I couldn’t picture going to punk shows in dimly lit clubs with kids clutching at me, demanding snacks and sticky drinks.

“Are you ok?” He reached for my hand, but it was still shaking, so I didn’t give it to him.

“Um,” I said. “This is – this is a lot.”

He shook his head. “What do you mean it’s ‘a lot’?”

I stood. “I have to go to the bathroom. It’s an emergency.” I could just barely hear him saying my name over the sound of my own rapid-fire breathing. I picked up my pace toward the ladies’ room.

Once in the stall, I sat down, dropped my head into my hands, and tried to calm my breathing. But it came in ragged gasps, and I realized I was sobbing.

Connecticut. Secretary. Kids. Like, next fucking year? I knew he had plans, and I figured I’d go along with them eventually, but I didn’t think it would happen so soon. When would I ever get to travel and see all the things I wanted to?

I stood, opened the door and went to the mirror. My eyes and cheeks were red and swollen. My side-braid had come loose, and my hair hung wild around my face. I looked worse than I thought.

I've never gotten lost wandering around London. I've never seen David Bowie live. I've never sent postcards to my brother from somewhere that has different stamps than us. Never... Oh my God, how do I get out of this?

A woman wearing the Lobster Pot waitress uniform opened the door and caught her breath at the sight of me staring myself down in the mirror. She paused for a moment, then composed herself.

“Are you Viv?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Your fiancé asked me to check on you. He was worried you were sick.”

I cleared my throat. Took a deep breath. Forced a smile. “I’m fine. Just didn’t feel good for a second there. Nauseous.”

“You must have had the chowder,” she whispered. “I’ll tell him you’ll be along.”

I nodded again. The waitress left, and I re-braided my hair, splashed cold water on my face, and constructed a veneer of sanity that would hopefully last until I could get some time to think. I returned to the table and sat down. Ade asked if I was all right. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been less all right.

“Viv, we have to talk about this.”

“I just feel really queasy,” I said. “I’m cold, then hot. I think I have to go back to the room and lie down.”

Our waitress brought our dinners out. Ade started to say that we would have to take them to go, but I stopped him, reminding him that he hadn’t had lunch, and should stay and eat. He admitted to being hungry, so reluctantly agreed.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s a short walk, and I’m not dizzy. I just feel like I’m gonna throw up, and the smell of food is making it worse.”

He leaned over his plate, and said in a low voice, “Do you think you’re pregnant?” He was smiling. He seemed excited.

“No. Nope. Uh uh. The pill is very effective, and I never miss a dose. It’s just nerves. Stress. All that stuff.”

“Oh,” he said, and sat back in his chair. His shoulders slumped and the corners of his mouth dipped to a frown. He looked down at his hands, which were fidgeting with his napkin.

I just need some time to think. “Take your time. I’ll see you back at the room.”

He looked up at me, his brows knit together. “You seem like you’re freaking out, and I don’t understand why.”

“Not freaking out,” I lied. “Just don’t feel good.”

He chewed on his lower lip while he studied my face, keeping eye contact for far longer than I was comfortable with. For a moment, it seemed, he could read my thoughts. I gave him my very sincerest smile, then turned and left, stepping slowly so as to not actually flee.

On my walk back along the beach, once past the sheltering bay, I didn’t realize that the tide was coming in. Fast. I looked down and saw that my sandals and the hem of my skirt were soaked. It was getting dark. I stopped walking, and turned to face the advancing waves, capped with luminous white, stretching to the grey-pink horizon. The town lights twinkled on. Gulls screamed overhead. The saltwater was frothy and cold. Seaweed caught on my ankles.

The longer I stood in the water, the less the cold took my breath away. I admired each wave getting a little higher each time as it crashed down and headed toward me. The cold of the sea worked its numbing magic from my toes up to the

water now swirling around my knees. The retreating water tugged at my legs a little more insistently each cycle. It was sweet and intimate.

I was lucky to have Ade. So lucky. No one else had ever wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, and Ade was better than I deserved.

We'd met our freshman year; the student paper was around a corner and down the hall from the radio station. We didn't give much thought to each other, though – just enough to say “hi.”

“The newspaper kids,” as we referred to them, tended to be more preppy and overachieving than most of us music nerds at the station, but there were a few people who did both, and so we all pretty much knew each other. Plus, we shared the chattering dot matrix printer that was somehow directly linked to the Associated Press's news service and spat out news stories and weather on thousands of feet of paper, so we had a somewhat reluctant alliance.

Near the end of my sophomore year, the guy I'd been seeing for almost four months told me via a letter slipped under my door that he was going to study in Italy in the fall, and that he thought it would be “easier on both of us” if we went back to being friends. Yet every time I ran into him up at the station, he wrapped up whatever he was doing and left quickly. I never got a chance to talk to him about anything. I didn't want it to be a big deal, but it was.

One Thursday during the week before finals, I was filling in for a friend's shift at the station because he was running late. I went to grab the news, and Adrian was already in the room, sifting through the piles of paper that had collected in pale grey ribbons on the floor.

“Hey Adrian,” I said. “Got the *Reader’s Digest* version there somewhere?”

He handed me the short summary of the day’s events to that point. I thanked him and turned to leave.

“Hey, Viv?” he said, and I turned back to him. “I noticed that you seem kind of sad this week. Want to have some dinner with me? Let me try to cheer you up?”

I couldn’t imagine he meant it like a date, and I wasn’t ready to go on any dates again, anyway. My whirring thoughts must have been apparent on my face, because he said, “I’m sorry if that was too forward. I’d just really like to get to know you better.”

“Why?” I blurted. *Jesus*. I was terrible at this.

He smiled. “I just – I think you’re cute. You seem really cool. And it’s just dinner.”

My already-tenuous confidence had taken such a beating that spring, and his words were so very welcome. Unlike my friends and crushes, who wore a lot of garish-toned Grandpa sweaters over band t-shirts, Adrian never wore anything ironically; he always dressed like he might meet someone important he’d need to impress.

“OK,” I said. “Sure. When are you thinking?”

He looked at his watch. “It’s almost five now. When are you done up here?”

I thought I should probably try to clean up a little bit before going out with someone like him, put on something nicer than my beaten-up old jeans and thinning black sweater. “Keaton should be here in another half hour, but I should probably go back to my room and change. Or brush my hair at least.”

He smiled again. “I think you look great. Don’t change a thing.”

I felt myself blushing, so I knew I had to make a hasty retreat. “My song’s ending soon, and I don’t have anything else queued up, so...”

“Oh, yeah, of course. I’ll come back around 5:30?”

“Sounds good,” I said. “See you then.”

When Keaton came racing into the studio, apologizing for being late, I told him it was fine, but I was glad he got there when he said he would because I was going to dinner with a newspaper kid.

“Well well,” he said. “I didn’t think you even knew anyone outside this hallway.”

“Don’t be goofy. It’s just dinner.”

He was barely holding back his laughter. He did a very fancy bow and said, “Yes, m’ lady.”

I rolled my eyes and when I went back out into the hallway, Adrian was there waiting. We went to a small Italian restaurant downtown that I’d never been to. He even insisted on paying. I smiled more that night than I had in weeks. We went out a couple more times before the end of the school year and wrote to each other a few times over the summer break.

When fall came around, we were almost inseparable in our spare time between my radio station duties, and his classes, academic clubs, and the newspaper. Adrian was straightforward, reliable, and often mentioned things we could do together in the future. He made me feel more like a grownup, or at least like I could be one someday. Before Adrian, the guys I usually fell for often “joked” that I was too similar to them, and because they hated themselves, we couldn’t last long. I’d stopped laughing at that joke a while ago. Adrian was exotic to me because of his normality.

While my parents hadn’t met any of my previous boyfriends, they had met a few of my radio station friends one weekend when they’d come to visit me at school; my family’s

resulting descriptions included words such as “dirtbag,” “bum,” and “freakshow.” I’m sure Mom thought I was planning a future specifically designed to blot out all the good in her world. So, when I eventually showed up at home with Adrian one weekend and my mother’s usual pursed lips and disapproving head shakes transformed into a toothy smile and girlish giggle, I felt like I had finally done something right.

The school year went by fast, and before I realized it, we’d been a couple for longer than I had with anyone. I felt accomplished. I hadn’t cried in quite a while.

On my 21st birthday in May after school was done, Adrian came to visit me at home in Stonewald. He proposed, with a diamond ring and everything. I said yes because there was no reason not to. And I was pretty sure I loved him.

Still, I was scared; it was so adult, so final. I wondered what I’d be like in five years. Later that night in my old bedroom on the second floor, I lay awake. The wide-open windows allowed an occasional breeze, but the air was mostly stifling. It was in those blessed, breezy moments that I heard the familiar whistle of a train passing through the night. The tracks followed the river on the Vermont side; I’d been hearing that whistle since I was little. Ever since my dad had told me about freight hoppers jumping trains undetected, seeing the country on schedules dependent only on the trains rolling through, I thought about them whenever I heard that whistle, wondering where they were headed, where they used to call home, and what they were riding to or away from.

The moon had been full a couple nights back, but its glow still spilled brightly into my room. I held up my left hand, the diamond glittering like a busted disco ball.

I wondered if the freight hoppers would let me go with them and teach me how to disappear when I wanted. Maybe

someone could teach me how to play guitar or harmonica. Maybe I'd end up out West with the golden light, working as a typist for money when I needed it, hopping trains again when I was sick of it. Or maybe I could get a job at one of those weird little radio stations that Hollywood Joe had told me about before he graduated last year.

It was the end of wondering what and where I might be when I grew up, because now I knew: it was mapped out on my left ring finger and Adrian's lists. There was little room for any hard times or struggle in this version of the future, which should have been a relief. But as much as I tried, I couldn't shake this feeling of creeping terror. I told myself I would get over it. That I just needed a little time to get used to it. It wasn't like I had any better plans, anyway.

Looking into the waves, I wondered what happened when people got swept out to sea; if hypothermia or drowning killed them first. Hypothermia and its enveloping forever sleep sounded like the better of the two. I'm not sure how long I stood there, wondering what that would feel like.

Over the din of the ebb and flow, I heard shouting. I was dragged backwards. Then I sat on dry sand, and a tall, weathered-looking man in rain pants kneeled in front of me, examining my face and holding me by my shoulders.

"Young lady, the sea will steal you away if you're not more careful. You walked pretty far out there. Are you all right?"

I looked down and saw that my whole skirt was soaked. I'd lost my sandals.

"Yes sir, I'm all right," I said. "Sorry to have caused any trouble."

“No trouble, I’m just glad you’re ok. Do you need help getting home?”

“No sir, I’m close by. But thank you.”

He nodded, stood, and walked back to his boat. He brought over a small, plaid wool blanket and wrapped it around my shoulders.

“It’s getting cold,” he said. “This isn’t much, but ought to help you get home without freezing to death.”

I thanked him for his kindness and conjured up what I hoped was a reassuring smile. Barefoot and fighting back tears, I trudged back to the hotel, hid my wet clothes in a trash bag and tucked it in a pocket of my luggage, showered to warm up, and got into bed, where I lay staring at the bumpy, cigarette smoke-stained ceiling for only a few minutes before Adrian unlocked the door and came in.

“Viv? Are you feeling better? Do you need anything?”

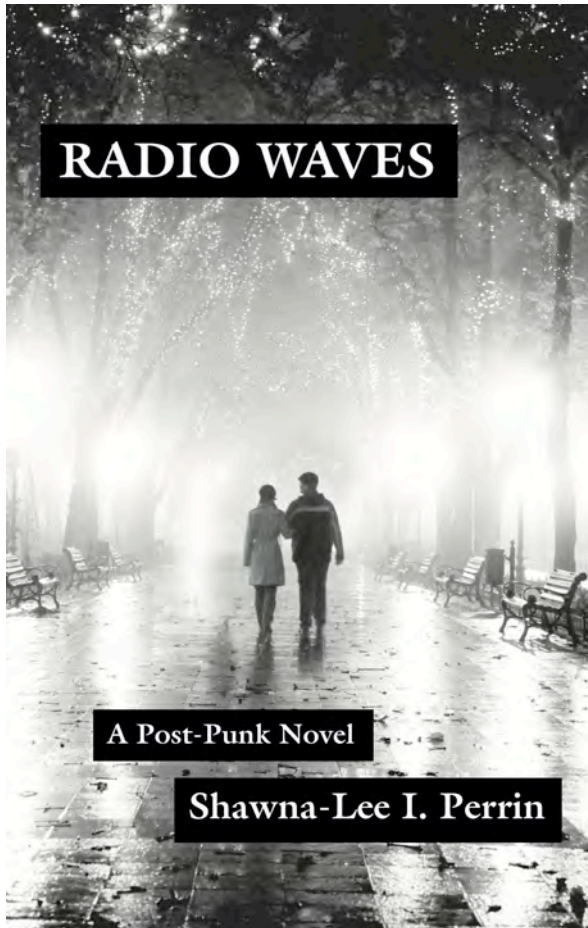
Yes. I do. So much.

“So much better,” I said.

“Oh, thank God,” he said. “Because I think I’m really sick.”

He ran to the bathroom, and soon I heard retching. I pressed my palms into my eyelids until I saw white explosions. I got up and went to help him.

“Oh my god,” he gasped. “I think it was the chowder. I knew it tasted weird.”



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