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EXCERPT OF





## **Chapter One**

**1979**

**Her mother had two speeds: drunk or driven. Here she is on an August afternoon at the helm of their VW van, laughing and waving her hands, alternating one and then the other on the steering wheel. Momentarily, no hands on the wheel. Then Charlotte's left hand flies out the window, slices the air carelessly, her fingers stretched wide as if she'd flung a fist of pearls at passing cars.**

**Charlotte drives without a seat belt—doesn't make Viva use one, either. This was before safety awareness, before worry was a sport, before you could be cited for mowing your grass the wrong way. Beers in hand, mothers and fathers sloshed around town in big-boat cars and cruise-ship vans, vans that held flip-flops, firewood, stray arrows. This was when children walked by themselves—uptown, downtown—alone while singing, together in packs, silent, not silent, shrieking at the sky like birds.**

**They are in Cape Cod, on Route 6, trying to nudge the flat nose of their**



van into the middle lane—the passing lane for cars heading in both directions—the "reversible" lane, the "suicide lane," the "every man for himself" lane. Charlotte said the highway people got the idea from ants, because ants are polite, don't panic, and basically everyone should take a cue from ants. Everyone calls it the "crash lane." Everyone drives it anyway.

Earlier they'd stopped for a drink. Charlotte drank most of her first glass of white wine, and Viva drank the last few sips when she ordered another. When Viva learned the planets in science class, Mrs. Kenmore said that when the Earth is closest to the sun that point is called a perihelion, and that was how she thought of herself and her mother. She was the closest anyone could get to Charlotte, maybe until the end of time.

"People used to drink wine for breakfast. Did you know that?" said Charlotte. She was worldly and once toured with a band called Yesterday's Horoscope.

"What people?" asked Viva. She looked at her mother's face, which had



softened since her first glass. Charlotte had that look in her eye as if many things she'd tried to recall, very good things, had all flown back to her.

"Renaissance people." She tapped her index finger on their table.

"Oh." That past year in the Fifth Grade Melody Makers, Viva had learned a madrigal—a fussy, overwrought song that circled round and round. A Renaissance person wrote it, and it did make perfect sense to her that they might have been drunk when they did.

Charlotte ordered another glass of wine from their waiter, Kenny, who had a bar towel crammed into his back pocket. When he walked it bounced like a tail. Charlotte whispered to Viva, "Men become delicious after fifty." They both laughed without making any noise. They were alike that way—a society of two.

Back on the road, Charlotte jabbed at the accelerator with her bare foot as they sped up to pass a Mustang. They were going fast, but the Mustang went faster. The air became thick and warm, the oncoming traffic looked tight and



crinkled. On certain gray days, their van was hard to see. It had been custom painted "cloud color" at Charlotte's behest. The paint was a strange bluish gray, the color of white socks that go through the dark wash by accident.

Then there was a third car in the crash lane coming toward them. It might as well have sprung from the pavement because Viva was watching carefully, and it had not been there just a moment before. Red station wagon. Primer on the hood. The man driving looked as though he was deeply considering something, the way a person stops in the grocery store mid-aisle, stops with their entire body, and tries to decide whether they want chops or spaghetti. The van began to shake.

Charlotte said, "Why didn't anyone tell me?" as if something had just occurred to her, and she found it both hilarious and tragic.

Viva had no idea what she was talking about—it wasn't about the passing lane—but Charlotte had that faraway look she'd come to recognize.

Her mother bent over the steering



wheel, squeezing it as if that would make their van go faster. The smell of burgers, grease, and cotton candy poured into their open windows, which meant they were only yards from the La Pierre campground where they'd stayed for the past month. They would have to turn. Which meant they would have to crash. Which meant they would have to be dead. And then they would have to start all over again in another life, because Charlotte said souls travel in packs, and Viva did believe in reincarnation, but she knew it was possible they might not come back again as mother and daughter but perhaps as farmer and pig.

She was worrying about these things as she always worried about everything, and she had ample time, more than ample because all at once time was very slow. It was like they'd driven through an invisible door where time was so slow it would take a week for a man to put on his shoes. The top of her head buzzed, and it was not unlike hearing an entire city's worth of flies and bees on a summer's day, and it



was not unlike a shock treatment or what she thought one might be like. The camp was near a state mental hospital, and sometimes Viva thought she could hear the treatments happening at night—sharp, electric buzzes like stars spinning from the sky. Under no circumstances did she ever want one. And now this would be a moot point, this fretting about elective electrocution, what with potential deadness in the offing. The bad shaking got worse, and in her mind things started to come loose, random things—scraps of conversations, the names of water formations in caves. They'd been on a science test earlier in the year. Stalagmite, stalactite, and you can remember which one grows up and which hangs down, because you just think of tights and how they roll down, see like stalacTITES! And then there was Mrs. Kenmore, who popped into her mind saying: Viva, I could tell your mother the school burned down, and she'd show up with a box of Frosted Flakes.

Charlotte shouted, "Fucking hell!" She was honking, and the man in the red



station wagon was honking, and neither of them would take their car back into the proper lane.

Then Viva's head went quiet, and she could feel the bones of her skull, as if someone had their hands around her brain, holding it still while a kind of information poured into it. It wasn't fancy, only different, like breathing from your elbow instead of your nose. It was a knowing that they would not crash, but she didn't know it from her brain. Her brain was the tollbooth they'd passed through a mile back. It was only necessary to get to a larger territory that didn't involve thinking and remembering. They were alive. They were alone. They were alone but together.

**End of Chapter One**