

MADELYNN GRAHAM

Sal Paradise

“The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved...the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.”

- Jack Kerouac "On the Road"

After one year's separation, we still met in the usual parking lot, equidistant from our respective childhood homes, and close enough to the sheltered side roads devoid of police officers. I had called upon her for consistently since last summer, every time I was in town, and this was the first time she had taken up my offer to mix salads and burn.

She spent her first post-high school summer living locally but independently in a shoddy apartment complex, migrated to the University of Miami for a semester, decided green and orange weren't her colors, and retreated back to the safety and comfort of Sarasota, FL. She shacked up for a couple months with one of those older-artistic androgynous females she so admired, and after some extreme emotional duress admitted defeat and moved back in with her parents. She rationalized her reversion to the home life she so detested during high school by claiming that her twenty-one-year-old brother's cohabitation proved she was less of a failure.

“How's living back at home?” I asked gently.

“It's not that bad. Oh, my parents are out of town this weekend so I'll be having a party for sure,” she said. Her family could be characterized by the lipstick message a weary mother once inscribed on the bathroom mirror: “I deserve better than three drunks.” But when I passed through during visiting hours the house smelled like cinnamon and anything to be said beyond polite was discussed in German. Even so, the pastel-papered walls screamed stories of nuclear family under nuclear war. I knew this living arrangement couldn't be permanent for her.

“I won't be in town this weekend, I have to go back to Tallahassee for summer school,” I reminded, subtly bragging about my decision to take classes year round at my respective university and fast track my graduation.

“I'm going to Europe!” she replied, “for a month and a half.”

“What happened to going to California?” I pried, bringing up the last destination I had heard she was going.

“Who told you about that?”

“Benji.”

She shook her head, “It's not happening anymore.”

Her name is Elle. I had heard of her since fifth grade but we didn't cross paths until late in high school. Gossip about her swarmed our small school's hallways regularly. It started with the traditional “bitch” and “slut” labels used liberally by queen bees at the lunchroom table and when she switched her sexual preference they added “dyke” to the mix, but by far the worst rumor of all was that she was a

heartbreaker. Such an unusual distinction, but such a prevalent label bestowed upon her by males and females.

Teenage tongues, wet with only the juicy details provided my only backstory on Elle. I fell under a spell when we first conversed in our AP Language class. She was petite but tough, she had the typical marks of a childhood spent pushing the boundaries; brown skin from prolonged sun exposure and battle scars from climbing out of windows. She maintained eye contact when we spoke and peppered our ill conversation, about an intolerable redhead, with elegant giggles. The utterance of her name was a pleasurable experience with those four loopy letters and even her shit-talking smelled sweet. I saw no harm in befriending her.

Her beautiful surface was just a preview to her intelligent mind. At sixteen, her writing had already evolved a specific voice; she was a product of our school's renowned Dr. Schleifer and his creative writing class. Upon swapping drafts, she encouraged me to sign up for a section of Dr. Schleifer's class in the fall. Honored by her recommendation, I felt confident enough to take the class, and within the plain walls of his classroom, accented by literary posters and aged hardcover novels, was where we permanently bonded.

"Why not?" I asked. I felt her fresh scar rip open. Of course, her going to California wasn't a typical desire for a vacation. She needed to roam, to get the hell out of town.

"Well, I was moving to California with these three friends that I met after I broke up with Devon. They were totally for it and I just worked non-stop and saved."

"Did you already find a place to live and stuff?"

"Yeah, I researched apartments and everything, we were all set and then they like didn't have the money to go. So I said fuck it and cashed in on a trip."

"Who are you going with?"

"Myself." She laughed lightly in that personable way that warmed every heart she encountered. "I need to get out of this town, like for sure."

Such a decision would be startling amongst most of our peers that were still balancing living between home and college, but she had already tasted life on the outside and paid the consequences. Though the failure of her plan to make the pilgrimage to California pained her I was secretly happy.

That had been our dream, within the red walls of her two-door Celica packed with smoke we proclaimed that we would make the trip ourselves. We didn't need anyone else. We chose pseudonyms based on our heroes. I picked the bold "Dani California", Anthony Kiedis's muse, and she chose "Sal Paradise," Jack Kerouac's alter ego.

We signed our pen names to each work of loose fiction we turned into Dr. Schleifer that year. They became personas we could put on. Most of my creative portfolio that year, documented the same events as Elle's yet Dr. Schleifer consistently applauded hers more than mine. Even though our stories covered many of the same instances, he likened mine to a soap opera and hers to a documentary. I vied so desperately to please the gray-haired, black-mustached, skinny vegan; but he always preferred Elle's work.

"Stop being so melodramatic," he lectured me, "read some of Elle's stuff."

She superceded me not just academically, but socially too. We spent the heyday of our friendship hopping rental properties around MLK Boulevard, where art school and community college students resided. She introduced me to an ensemble cast of artistic people living in drug-induced hazes. We felt a false sense of privilege, as if our cohorts and I were the next beat generation.

She was in her menthol phase at the time, a craving explained by her ex-girlfriend, fine arts major Brittney Hollister, as a correlation between her current sexual preference. "Menthols and Men" is the title of the short story that emerged from this experiment.

One such man was a twenty-three-year-old full time Starbucks employee named James Cartier whose biggest dream was to teach high school English. Conveniently his type was seventeen-year-old girls, and Elle being a seventeen-year-old future creative writing major made him swoon.

James's house became the center of our daily travels. We would sit on the floor of his room, littered with beer bottles and decorated with posters left by the previous renter, around a charred wooden coffee table with drawings all over it, and depart from reality with the help of whiskey, champagne, pain pills, and the old faithful green leaf.

"Arielle Elizabeth Piaf," she recited from her seat on the floor late one afternoon. "It's so regal sounding." She sipped her mimosa.

"James Clifford Cartier," he said his own name. They were superficially the perfect match. Their names sounded like royalty. But Elle committed treason, and we were all astounded when she severed ties with her king. A mental breakdown followed in which he tried to kill himself with a mixture of pills. I remember the text messages she sent me detailing the gruesome scene of James writhing in pain and begging for reconciliation. I remember the text message he sent me the next morning confirming that she kept him alive.

"I wouldn't be able to go to Europe all by myself," I said in admiration of her bravery.

"Yeah, I'm just done with people for awhile. This guy after Devon really broke my heart. I'm off menthols for good," she told me revealing a red not green pack of Marlboros. The new color stood out boldly, more striking than her new Miami ink. I recalled the metaphor, but felt that it meant more than gender issues now that her heart had been broken.

Once James got back on his wobbly feet, I took pity on his broken heart and my sympathy led to trespasses. Elle found out about my strike and struck back. She exhumed a skeleton from my closet, Trevor Benton, a conquest I never conquered and made him fall in love with her.

She did it to me too.

Through a drunken filter I watched her make her move the very day they met. A mixture of flashbacks and illusions clouded my mind as I tried to comprehend that the two bodies affectionately mingling in the room were Elle and Trevor.

I closed my faded eyes and saw her light-hearted laughs permeating the white smoke within the red walls of her car, her bony fingers wrapping around the object of Trevor's arms. My heart was broken and I too was added to the list. I confirmed rumors, and spread my own.

We spent our nights buying bottles of flavored rum from a liquor store that didn't card and snorting Roxys off of Tegan and Sarah CDs. Eventually one such night, a rush of intoxicated confidence came over me and I called her out in Brittney Hollister's front yard.

"You're so selfish, you don't care about anyone else's feelings," I accused, "Everyone was right."

"No I don't and you did the same thing to me with James."

"It's different though, you were already done, you broke up with him. You don't know what it's like to be rejected because everyone you've ever even been friends with loves you. You've got the Midas touch and you abuse it." My harsh words through off my balance and I fell and hit my head on some mulch. I

don't remember clearly. but, she assisted me into the front seat of her car, put on a folk music CD, and wrapped me in a sweatshirt while I insulted her. She held my hand until I fell asleep.

A year since all has been said and done, and we have finally reconvened.

Though underage smoking was no longer a concern to wise, weathered adults, I was still a governed citizen back home.

"Ugh, if I smell like smoke, my mom is going to bitch at me," I sigh flicking the filter out the window.

"There's vanilla body spray in the backseat, here." She wraps her arm around the driver's seat and rummages for the familiar brown canister. She spritzes me and the very scent of vanilla-flavored aerosol and cigarettes is as comforting to me as her very presence. My nose tingles with memories lost, both accidentally through drugs and on purpose through emotion.

"So when do you go to Europe?" I asked.

"Three weeks," she sighed.

"And then what?" I continued, hoping the answer would not be reprising her stint as the ice cream and nachos vendor at the beach.

"Didn't Benji tell you? I found this school in Canada that I really like. I'm going to go check it out when I get back and apply and hopefully be there by the fall."

"You really are getting the fuck out of here," I laughed.

"For sure, just three more weeks," she replied, "I'm going to change my phone number, too."

"Are you going to give me your new phone number?"

"Yeah," she surprised me, "for sure."

The wounds had finally healed, as they were superficial blows all along. Trust is not as tangible as we all like to believe, I saw through Elle that trust is falling back into the same routine with an old soul and knowing the conversation will start exactly where you left off. She dropped me off in the usual parking lot; we hugged twice because of our awkward state of nostalgia and levity.

She lit another Marlboro Medium in the driver's seat of her car and backed out before me. Seatbelt on and without backward glances, she signaled a right turn and took off. She'll always be on the road.

"A pain stabbed my heart, as it did every time I saw a girl I loved who was going the opposite direction in this too-big world."

- Jack Kerouac On the Road