

PAULLINA SIMONS

ROAD TO
PARADISE



HarperCollins*Publishers*

PROLOGUE

“MOTEL”

Do what you like, Shelby Sloane, the bartered bride had said to me, smiling like an enigma, just remember: all roads lead to where you stand.

Back then I said, what does *that* mean?

This morning I knew. It was the morning of the third day I had been trapped in a room, two miles from the main drag of the Reno strip in a place called “Motel.”

I stood alone, broke, and in Reno.

There is one road that leads to Reno from the east—Interstate 80, and in Salt Lake City, Utah, 569 miles away, there is a bellman at a four-star hotel who, when asked if there is perhaps a more scenic route than the mind-numbing Interstate, blinks at me his contempt in the sunshine before slowly saying, “In *Nevada*?”

But there *is* another road in Nevada that takes you almost there: U.S. 50, the loneliest road in America.

Reno is in the high desert valley, 4500 feet above sea level, but the highway climbs into the mountains before twisting down the black unlit slopes to the washbasin where the lights are. The town itself is one street, Virginia, running in a straight line between the mountain passes.

On Virginia stands the Eldorado and the Circus Circus; The Romantic Sensations Club; Horseshoe, the 24-hr pawn shop

("nothing refused!"); the Wild Orchid Club ("Hustler's All-new Girls!"); Heidi's Family Restaurant; Adult Bookstore ("Under New Management: More Variety!"); Limericks Pub&Grill (*Once a young lass from Mamaroneck/Decided to go on a trek . . .*); Arch Discount Liquors; Adults Only Cabaret (Filipino waitresses in Island outfits); Saint Francis Hotel; Ho-Hum Motel; Pioneer and Premier Jewellery&Loan; "Thunderbolt: Buy Here! Pay Here! We buy Clean Cars and Trucks!"; Adventure Inn: Exotic Theme rooms and Wedding Chapel; a billboard asking, "Is Purity and Truth of Devotion to Jesus Central to your Life?" and "Motel."

That's where I am.

"Motel" is a beige, drab two-story structure with rusted landings built around a cement square courtyard that serves both as a parking lot and a deck for the swimming pool. The cars are parked in stalls around the pool right behind the lounge chairs. Not my car, because that's vanished, but other people's cars, sure.

I was waiting for the girl in the mini-skirt to come back. She wasn't supposed to have left in the first place, so waiting for her was rather like waiting for the unscheduled train to run over the car stalled on the tracks. I came back for her, and she had disappeared. Along with my car. The note she left me could have been written in hieroglyphs. "Shel, where are you? I thought you were coming back. Guess not. I've gone to look for you. Here's hoping I find you." Two kisses followed by two hugs, as if we were sophomores in junior high passing notes back and forth. She had taken her things.

I was half-hoping the "Motel" manager would throw me out, seeing that I had no money and couldn't pay for the room, but he said with a smile and a wink, "Room's bought and paid for till the twentieth, dahrlin'." As I walked away I was tempted to ask the twentieth of what, but didn't.

The first day I didn't get that upset. I felt it was penance. I hadn't done what I was supposed to; it was only right she didn't do what she was supposed to.

The second day I spent foaming in righteous, purifying fury. I

was eighteen, stopping for a day in Reno, on my way even farther west, to help out a fellow pilgrim I met along the way, and look what I got for my troubles. I whiled away the hours compulsively shredding into tinier and tinier strips fashion magazines, an old newspaper, informational brochures on Reno, and gambling tips, then strewing them all over the room. "TOURIST ATTRACTIONS!" "PLACES TO EAT!" "THINGS TO DO!" all sawdust on the floor.

Paradise, California, Butte County, Sierra Nevada Mountains, Tall Pines, Blue Skies, Paradise Pines, Lovelock and Golden Nugget days. Paradise Ridge was inhabited by the Maidu Indians who lived there ten thousand years before white man came. In Magalia, near Paradise, gold was found in 1859. The Magalia Nugget is world renowned, weighing fifty-four pounds, of which forty-nine ounces is pure gold. And my stagecoach of life had stopped in Paradise, near Magalia, on its way out west. It was summer of 1981.

Days in an empty room while outside was full of rain.

Rain, in Reno, in August!

The first day I ate the musty, half-eaten candy bars the girl had kindly left behind and an open bag of potato chips. The second day I finished a bag of peanuts and tortilla chips so stale they tasted like shoe laces, but I ate them anyway and was grateful. I drank water from the tap.

Inside me was detritus from weeks on the open road. The stop sign near Valparaiso, Indiana. The Sand Hills of Nebraska. The Great Divide in Wyoming that, I thought then, split my life into the before and after. Silly me. Yesterday Paradise. Today Reno. Like still frames. Here is Shelby driving her Shelby—the car dreams are made of. I have a picture; it must have happened. Here is the flat road before me. Here are the Pomeranians. Here is the sunset in St. Louis. Here's the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Black Hills, the Yellow Dunes, the casinos and the slot machines, and Interior, South Dakota, with Floyd, that sad, tattooed boy.

Do what you like.

Indeed.

When we spotted her a second time, we couldn't believe it was

the same gal. I slowed down, we looked. Can it be? we said. It is. Should we stop? No, no. No hitchhikers. But she waved to us; recognized us. Look, it's fate, I said. What are the chances of running into the same girl in different states, hundreds of miles apart. I don't believe in fate, said my friend Gina. Come on, I said. You gotta believe in something. What *do* you believe in?

Not fate, said Gina, pointing. And not her.

I cajoled. We'll give her a lift down the road. When it stops being convenient, we'll let her off. I saw her in the rear-view mirror running toward us. Running and waving. That frame is on every page in my helpless head. Seeing her get closer and closer. This is what I keep coming back to: I should have kept going.

If only I hadn't gotten that damn, cursed, awful, hateful, hated car. How I loved that car. Where was it?

At night I paced like a caged tiger, growling under my breath, choking on my frustration. I couldn't sleep, couldn't lie down, couldn't watch TV, couldn't sit still, couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Night was senseless; day was worse.

During the day, I prayed for night to come. But at night I barricaded the front door with two chairs and a dresser; I chained and locked it, and locked the window looking out onto the open landing. I didn't turn on the TV because I wanted to hear every footstep coming close, but every footstep coming close made my heart rip out of my chest. Now that the others were gone, I thought at any moment "they'd" be coming for me; a few days ago there were three of us and today only I was left. Otherwise how to explain my car's vanishing, my friends' vanishing?

On the third day of rain, I thought I was losing my mind. I couldn't recall the farms of Iowa anymore, or when we crossed the Mississippi. I couldn't remember if I'd graduated, the last name of my good friend Marc, my home phone number. I didn't know what to do. The girls were gone, my car was gone, my money was gone, phone numbers had left my head, and a man at the reception desk was smiling at me with his filthy grin saying, "Stay as long as you like, dahrlin'."

On the third morning I slept. I had nothing to eat and nowhere to go. I didn't know where relief was going to come from, and I couldn't allow a single thought without doubling over in fear and despair. Perhaps my hitchhiker was wrong and the Eastern spiritualists right. You *should* train yourself to let go of all passions. Train yourself to let go of all earthly things, detach yourself from life.

Think only not to think.

Will only not to will.

Feel only not to feel.

God have pity on me, I was crying in my self-pity, on my knees in front of one bed, then the other, my forehead sunk into musty blankets.

Help me. Help me. Please. Why hadn't I insisted she tell me what the fourteenth station of the cross was? She told me that no prayer asked in faith could remain unanswered at the fourteenth station; and when I asked what it was, she became coy. "You'll have to learn one to thirteen first," she said. Where was I supposed to learn this? On U.S. 83 in South Dakota? In the Badlands? From junkyard Floyd? Besides, back then I was curious but fundamentally, indifferent. And why not? I was young, the sun was shining, my car was fast like a jet, and on the radio, one way or another, it was paradise by the dashboard light every night for the local girls. I should've insisted she tell me, because now, when the only thing that remained true was that I was still eighteen, I didn't know where to turn.

Maybe that Gideon's Bible in the musty drawer would shed some light on the fourteen stations, but no. I was by the side of the bed, kneeling in the paper shrapnel, my fingers sightlessly tracing the words I didn't and couldn't understand, closing the Book, opening it to a random page, sticking my finger into a paragraph, struggling to focus. This is what I got:

Lift up thy hands, which hang down, and thy feeble knees.

I got up and climbed into bed. It was still raining hard. How could I stand one more day in here, waiting, listening through the curtains for the steps of the one who was coming to kill me? I didn't know what time it was. It felt early, though I couldn't be

sure because the night before in my helpless terrors, I'd smashed the alarm clock with the heel of one of my newly-bought summer sandals. This morning was so dark and gray, it could've been after dusk, or before sunrise. It just was, without dimension.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Not the tentative knock of an illegal immigrant asking to clean my room, but the insistent, demanding knock of a man's fisted knuckles. I jumped out of bed and hid in the closet.

"Police. Open up."

I threw on some clothes and peeked through the hole in the curtain. I moved furniture out of the way and opened up. Two cops in different uniforms stood outside on the second floor landing.

"Shelby Sloane?"

"Who wants to know?"

One flashed his badge. "Detective Yeomans. Paradise Police Department."

The other flashed his badge. "Detective Johnson, Reno Police Department."

"Do you have anything to eat?" I asked.

"What? No. Are you Shelby?"

I felt like falling down. Nodding, I held on to the door handle. I said nothing; they said nothing.

"We found out what happened to your car."

"Did you." It was not a question. It was as if I already knew. I wanted to say, well, took you long enough to find a car of which only a single one—mine—was made in the year 1966. One car, and it's taken the police departments in two cities three days to find it. Good job.

"I'm real hungry. Is the phone working?"

"How would we know if your phone's working?" said Yeomans from Paradise. "Where did you call from when you reported the car missing?"

"I don't know."

The two cops exchanged an awkward look, then cleared their throats.

“Look, we came to see you on a matter of some urgency.”
“About my car?”
“Uh, not quite,” said Yeomans. “We need you to come with us. We’d like you to come with us.”
“Am I under arrest?”
“Did you do anything to cause yourself to be under arrest?”
“No.”
“Then no.”
“Do I have the right to remain silent?”
“You always have that right.”
I chose not to exercise it. “Is something wrong?”
They nodded.
I fought for words. “Is the car in Paradise?”
“No.”

That surprised me. I thought it might be.
“It’s here in Reno. Well,” Johnson amended. “Moran’s junk shop is here in Reno. Moran is now under federal indictment.”
“Has there been”—I couldn’t get the words out—“Has there been an . . . accident?”
“Not with the car. But . . . Look, put your shoes on and come with us.” Yeomans from Paradise looked me over. “Wear something warm. It’s cold out.”

I didn’t want to put on my shoes. I became not hungry, not thirsty. I barely moved, dragging my feet, bending low, pretending to look for them under the unmade bed, except there was no under the bed, and I knew it; the shoes were in the closet, but I didn’t want to go get them. I couldn’t find anything except the inappropriate clock-smashing heels. Three-inch stilettos with jeans and a sweatshirt. I moved like a sleeping bear through molasses.

I felt Yeomans staring at my back.
How I got the sandals on, I don’t know. Perhaps Johnson helped me. How I got into the patrol car, I don’t know. It wasn’t a Reno black-and-white. It was a Paradise black-and-white. So they’d come all the way from there. I felt like I was still on the floor, looking

under the boarded-up bed, not for my sandals this time but for my lost life.

“Are we going to stop at Moran’s? Get my car?” I asked in my faux calm voice. We were driving down Virginia.

“Unfortunately he doesn’t have your car anymore,” said Johnson. “I’m sorry about that. And no, we’re not going there.”

I was waiting for the rain to let up. We drove slowly, pushing through the wave of oncoming morning rush-hour gambling traffic. She must have taken my car and sold it to Moran’s, the title and registration being conveniently in the glove compartment, and he, who was not allowed to buy cars without checking the identity of the seller, wanted it so bad—and who wouldn’t?—he took it from her anyway, and then, belatedly realizing he was in a deepload of trouble, dismembered my car for parts, while she pocketed the money and split.

Moran’s Auto Salvage, in the middle of an ocean of grass, nested on a sloping bank, just a rusted trailer listing limply, its side wheels missing. It was surrounded by junk cars. We didn’t even slow down as we passed.

“How much did he pay for the car?”

“He said a thousand.”

A thousand! Oh, the gall. The insult. Of him, of her. The pit inside my stomach was a gorge deep.

It was raining, raining. The window in the back was open and the rain was coming in sideways, onto my lap, my seat, the floor of the police vehicle. I didn’t care, they didn’t care. Eventually, they got cold and I rolled up the window.

“How in heaven’s name did you get yourself into this sordid mess?” said Johnson from Reno.

I pressed my face against the damp glass. It was an eternity through the mountain passes and the strawberry fields back to Paradise.