

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



JUST KIDS

PATTI SMITH

BLOOMSBURY

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Much has been said about Robert, and more will be added. Young men will adopt his gait. Young girls will wear white dresses and mourn his curls. He will be condemned and adored. His excesses damned or romanticized. In the end, truth will be found in his work, the corporeal body of the artist. It will not fall away. Man cannot judge it. For art sings of God, and ultimately belongs to him.

Foreword

I WAS ASLEEP WHEN HE DIED. I HAD CALLED THE HOSPITAL to say one more good night, but he had gone under, beneath layers of morphine. I held the receiver and listened to his labored breathing through the phone, knowing I would never hear him again.

Later I quietly straightened my things, my notebook and fountain pen. The cobalt inkwell that had been his. My Persian cup, my purple heart, a tray of baby teeth. I slowly ascended the stairs, counting them, fourteen of them, one after another. I drew the blanket over the baby in her crib, kissed my son as he slept, then lay down beside my husband and said my prayers. He is still alive, I remember whispering. Then I slept.

I awoke early, and as I descended the stairs I knew that he was dead. All was still save the sound of the television that had been left on in the night. An arts channel was on. An opera was playing. I was drawn to the screen as Tosca declared, with power and sorrow, her passion for the painter Cavaradossi. It was a cold March morning and I put on my sweater.

I raised the blinds and brightness entered the study. I smoothed the heavy linen draping my chair and chose a book of paintings by Odilon Redon, opening it to the image of the head of a woman floating in a small sea. *Les yeux clos*. A universe not yet scored contained beneath the pale lids. The phone rang and I rose to answer.

It was Robert's youngest brother, Edward. He told me that he had given Robert one last kiss for me, as he had promised. I stood motionless, frozen; then slowly, as in a dream, returned to my chair. At that moment, Tosca began the great aria "Vissi d'arte." *I have lived for love, I have lived for Art*. I closed my eyes and folded my hands. Providence determined how I would say goodbye.

Monday's Children

WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, MY MOTHER TOOK ME FOR walks in Humboldt Park, along the edge of the Prairie River. I have vague memories, like impressions on glass plates, of an old boathouse, a circular band shell, an arched stone bridge. The narrows of the river emptied into a wide lagoon and I saw upon its surface a singular miracle. A long curving neck rose from a dress of white plumage.

Swan, my mother said, sensing my excitement. It pattered the bright water, flapping its great wings, and lifted into the sky.

The word alone hardly attested to its magnificence nor conveyed the emotion it produced. The sight of it generated an urge I had no words for, a desire to speak of the swan, to say something of its whiteness, the explosive nature of its movement, and the slow beating of its wings.

The swan became one with the sky. I struggled to find words to describe my own sense of it. *Swan*, I repeated, not entirely satisfied, and I felt a twinge, a curious yearning, imperceptible to passersby, my mother, the trees, or the clouds.

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I was born on a Monday, in the North Side of Chicago during the Great Blizzard of 1946. I came along a day too soon, as babies born on New Year's Eve left the hospital with a new refrigerator. Despite my mother's effort to hold me in, she went into heavy labor as the taxi crawled along Lake Michigan through a vortex of snow and wind. By my father's account, I arrived a long skinny thing with bronchial pneumonia, and he kept me alive by holding me over a steaming washtub.

My sister Linda followed during yet another blizzard in 1948. By necessity I was obliged to measure up quickly. My mother took in ironing as I sat on the stoop of our rooming house waiting for the iceman and the last of the horse-drawn wagons. He gave me slivers of ice wrapped in

brown paper. I would slip one in my pocket for my baby sister, but when I later reached for it, I discovered it was gone.

When my mother became pregnant with my brother, Todd, we left our cramped quarters in Logan Square and migrated to Germantown, Pennsylvania. For the next few years we lived in temporary housing set up for servicemen and their children—whitewashed barracks overlooking an abandoned field alive with wildflowers. We called the field The Patch, and in summertime the grown-ups would sit and talk, smoke cigarettes, and pass around jars of dandelion wine while we children played. My mother taught us the games of her childhood: Statues, Red Rover, and Simon Says. We made daisy chains to adorn our necks and crown our heads. In the evenings we collected fireflies in mason jars, extracting their lights and making rings for our fingers.

My mother taught me to pray; she taught me the prayer her mother taught her. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.* At nightfall, I knelt before my little bed as she stood, with her ever-present cigarette, listening as I recited after her. I wished nothing more than to say my prayers, yet these words troubled me and I plagued her with questions. What is the soul? What color is it? I suspected my soul, being mischievous, might slip away while I was dreaming and fail to return. I did my best not to fall asleep, to keep it inside of me where it belonged.

Perhaps to satisfy my curiosity, my mother enrolled me in Sunday school. We were taught by rote, Bible verses and the words of Jesus. Afterward we stood in line and were rewarded with a spoonful of comb honey. There was only one spoon in the jar to serve many coughing children. I instinctively shied from the spoon but I swiftly accepted the notion of God. It pleased me to imagine a presence above us, in continual motion, like liquid stars.

Not contented with my child's prayer, I soon petitioned my mother to let me make my own. I was relieved when I no longer had to repeat the words *If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take* and could say instead what was in my heart. Thus freed, I would lie in my bed by the coal stove vigorously mouthing long letters to God. I was not much of a sleeper and I must have vexed him with my endless vows, visions, and schemes. But as time passed I came to experience a different kind of prayer, a silent one, requiring more listening than speaking.

My small torrent of words dissipated into an elaborate sense of expanding and receding. It was my entrance into the radiance of imagination. This process was especially magnified within the fevers of influenza, measles, chicken pox, and mumps. I had them all and with each I was privileged with a new level of awareness. Lying deep within myself, the symmetry of a snowflake spinning above me, intensifying through my lids, I seized a most worthy souvenir, a shard of heaven's kaleidoscope.

My love of prayer was gradually rivaled by my love for the book. I would sit at my mother's feet watching her drink coffee and smoke cigarettes with a book on her lap. Her absorption intrigued me. Though not yet in nursery school, I liked to look at her books, feel their paper, and lift the tissues from the frontispieces. I wanted to know what was in them, what captured her attention so deeply. When my mother discovered that I had hidden her crimson copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* beneath my pillow, with hopes of absorbing its meaning, she sat me down and began the laborious process of teaching me to read. With great effort we moved through Mother Goose to Dr. Seuss. When I advanced past the need for instruction, I was permitted to join her on our overstuffed sofa, she reading *The Shoes of the Fisherman* and I *The Red Shoes*.

I was completely smitten by the book. I longed to read them all, and the things I read of produced new yearnings. Perhaps I might go off to Africa and offer my services to Albert Schweitzer or, decked in my coonskin cap and powder horn, I might defend the people like Davy Crockett. I could scale the Himalayas and live in a cave spinning a prayer wheel, keeping the earth turning. But the urge to express myself was my strongest desire, and my siblings were my first eager coconspirators in the harvesting of my imagination. They listened attentively to my stories, willingly performed in my plays, and fought valiantly in my wars. With them in my corner, anything seemed possible.

In the months of spring, I was often ill and so condemned to my bed, obliged to hear my comrades at play through the open window. In the months of summer, the younger ones reported bedside how much of our wild field had been secured in the face of the enemy. We lost many a battle in my absence and my weary troops would gather around my bed and I would offer a benediction from the child soldier's bible, *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

In the winter, we built snow forts and I led our campaign, serving as general, making maps and drawing out strategies as we attacked and retreated. We fought the wars of our Irish grandfathers, the orange and the green. We wore the orange yet knew nothing of its meaning. They were simply our colors. When attention flagged, I would draw a truce and visit my friend Stephanie. She was convalescing from an illness I didn't really understand, a form of leukemia. She was older than I, perhaps twelve to my eight. I didn't have much to say to her and was perhaps little comfort, yet she seemed to delight in my presence. I believe that what really drew me to her was not my good heart, but a fascination with her belongings. Her older sister would hang up my wet garments and bring us cocoa and graham crackers on a tray. Stephanie would lie back on a mound of pillows and I would tell tall tales and read her comics.

I marveled at her comic-book collection, stacks of them earned from a childhood spent in bed, every issue of *Superman*, *Little Lulu*, *Classic Comics*, and *House of Mystery*. In her old cigar box were all the talismanic charms of 1953: a roulette wheel, a typewriter, an ice skater, the red Mobil winged horse, the Eiffel Tower, a ballet slipper, and charms in the shape of all forty-eight states. I could play with them endlessly and sometimes, if she had doubles, she would give one to me.

I had a secret compartment near my bed, beneath the floorboards. There I kept my stash—winnings from marbles, trading cards, religious artifacts I rescued from Catholic trash bins: old holy cards, worn scapulars, plaster saints with chipped hands and feet. I put my loot from Stephanie there. Something told me I shouldn't take presents from a sick girl, but I did and hid them away, somewhat ashamed.

I had promised to visit her on Valentine's Day, but I didn't. My duties as general to my troop of siblings and neighboring boys were very taxing and there was heavy snow to negotiate. It was a harsh winter that year. The following afternoon, I abandoned my post to sit with her and have cocoa. She was very quiet and begged me to stay even as she drifted off to sleep.

I rummaged through her jewel box. It was pink and when you opened it a ballerina turned like a sugarplum fairy. I was so taken with a particular skating pin that I slipped it in my mitten. I sat frozen next to her for a long time, leaving silently as she slept. I buried the pin amongst my stash. I slept fitfully through the night, feeling great remorse for what I had done. In the

morning I was too ill to go to school and stayed in bed, ridden with guilt. I vowed to return the pin and ask her to forgive me.

The following day was my sister Linda's birthday, but there was to be no party for her. Stephanie had taken a turn for the worse and my father and mother went to a hospital to give blood. When they returned my father was crying and my mother knelt down beside me to tell me Stephanie had died. Her grief was quickly replaced with concern as she felt my forehead. I was burning with fever.

Our apartment was quarantined. I had scarlet fever. In the fifties it was much feared since it often developed into a fatal form of rheumatic fever. The door to our apartment was painted yellow. Confined to bed, I could not attend Stephanie's funeral. Her mother brought me her stacks of comic books and her cigar box of charms. Now I had everything, all her treasures, but I was far too ill to even look at them. It was then that I experienced the weight of sin, even a sin as small as a stolen skater pin. I reflected on the fact that no matter how good I aspired to be, I was never going to achieve perfection. I also would never receive Stephanie's forgiveness. But as I lay there night after night, it occurred to me that it might be possible to speak with her by praying to her, or at least ask God to intercede on my behalf.

Robert was very taken with this story, and sometimes on a cold, languorous Sunday he would beg me to recount it. "Tell me the Stephanie story," he would say. I would spare no details on our long mornings beneath the covers, reciting tales of my childhood, its sorrow and magic, as we tried to pretend we weren't hungry. And always, when I got to the part where I opened the jewelry box, he would cry, "Patti, no..."

We used to laugh at our small selves, saying that I was a bad girl trying to be good and that he was a good boy trying to be bad. Through the years these roles would reverse, then reverse again, until we came to accept our dual natures. We contained opposing principles, light and dark.

I was a dreamy somnambulant child. I vexed my teachers with my precocious reading ability paired with an inability to apply it to anything they deemed practical. One by one they noted in my reports that I daydreamed far too much, was always somewhere else. Where that somewhere was I cannot say, but it often landed me in the corner sitting on a high stool in full view of all in a conical paper hat.

I would later make large detailed drawings of these humorously humiliating moments for Robert. He delighted in them, seeming to appreciate all the qualities that repelled or alienated me from others. Through this visual dialogue my youthful memories became his.

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I was unhappy when we were evicted from The Patch and had to pack up to begin a new life in southern New Jersey. My mother gave birth to a fourth child whom we all pitched in to raise, a sickly though sunny little girl named Kimberly. I felt isolated and disconnected in the surrounding swamps, peach orchards, and pig farms. I immersed myself in books and in the design of an encyclopedia that only got as far as the entry for Simón Bolívar. My father introduced me to science fiction and for a time I joined him in investigating UFO activity in the skies over the local square-dance hall, as he continually questioned the source of our existence.

When I was barely eleven, nothing pleased me more than to take long walks in the outlying woods with my dog. All about were jack-in-the-pulpits, punks, and skunk cabbage, rising from the red clay earth. I would find a good place for some solitude, to stop and rest my head against a fallen log by a stream rushing with tadpoles.

With my brother, Todd, serving as loyal lieutenant, we'd crawl on our bellies over the dusty summer fields near the quarries. My dutiful sister would be stationed to bandage our wounds and provide much-needed water from my father's army canteen.

On one such day, limping back to the home front beneath the anvil of the sun, I was accosted by my mother.

"Patricia," my mother scolded, "put a shirt on!"

"It's too hot," I moaned. "No one else has one on."

"Hot or not, it's time you started wearing a shirt. You're about to become a young lady." I protested vehemently and announced that I was never going to become anything but myself, that I was of the clan of Peter Pan and we did not grow up.

My mother won the argument and I put on a shirt, but I cannot exaggerate the betrayal I felt at that moment. I ruefully watched my mother performing her female tasks, noting her well-endowed female body. It all

seemed against my nature. The heavy scent of perfume and the red slashes of lipstick, so strong in the fifties, revolted me. For a time I resented her. She was the messenger and also the message. Stunned and defiant, with my dog at my feet, I dreamed of travel. Of running away and joining the Foreign Legion, climbing the ranks and trekking the desert with my men.

I drew comfort from my books. Oddly enough, it was Louisa May Alcott who provided me with a positive view of my female destiny. Jo, the tomboy of the four March sisters in *Little Women*, writes to help support her family, struggling to make ends meet during the Civil War. She fills page after page with her rebellious scrawl, later published in the literary pages of the local newspaper. She gave me the courage of a new goal, and soon I was crafting little stories and spinning long yarns for my brother and sister. From that time on, I cherished the idea that one day I would write a book.

In the following year my father took us on a rare excursion to the Museum of Art in Philadelphia. My parents worked very hard, and taking four children on a bus to Philadelphia was exhausting and expensive. It was the only such outing we made as a family, marking the first time I came face-to-face with art. I felt a sense of physical identification with the long, languorous Modiglianis; was moved by the elegantly still subjects of Sargent and Thomas Eakins; dazzled by the light that emanated from the Impressionists. But it was the work in a hall devoted to Picasso, from his harlequins to Cubism, that pierced me the most. His brutal confidence took my breath away.

My father admired the draftsmanship and symbolism in the work of Salvador Dalí, yet he found no merit in Picasso, which led to our first serious disagreement. My mother busied herself rounding up my siblings, who were sliding the slick surfaces of the marble floors. I'm certain, as we filed down the great staircase, that I appeared the same as ever, a moping twelve-year-old, all arms and legs. But secretly I knew I had been transformed, moved by the revelation that human beings create art, that to be an artist was to see what others could not.

I had no proof that I had the stuff to be an artist, though I hungered to be one. I imagined that I felt the calling and prayed that it be so. But one night, while watching *The Song of Bernadette* with Jennifer Jones, I was struck that the young saint did not ask to be called. It was the mother superior who desired sanctity, even as Bernadette, a humble peasant girl, became the

chosen one. This worried me. I wondered if I had really been called as an artist. I didn't mind the misery of a vocation but I dreaded not being called.

I shot up several inches. I was nearly five eight and barely a hundred pounds. At fourteen, I was no longer the commander of a small yet loyal army but a skinny loser, the subject of much ridicule as I perched on the lowest rung of high school's social ladder. I immersed myself in books and rock and roll, the adolescent salvation of 1961. My parents worked at night. After doing our chores and homework, Toddy, Linda, and I would dance to the likes of James Brown, the Shirelles, and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. With all modesty I can say we were as good on the dance floor as we were in battle.

I drew, I danced, and I wrote poems. I was not gifted but I was imaginative and my teachers encouraged me. When I won a competition sponsored by the local Sherwin-Williams paint store, my work was displayed in the shopwindow and I had enough money to buy a wooden art box and a set of oils. I raided libraries and church bazaars for art books. It was possible then to find beautiful volumes for next to nothing and I happily dwelt in the world of Modigliani, Dubuffet, Picasso, Fra Angelico, and Albert Ryder.

My mother gave me *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* for my sixteenth birthday. I was transported by the scope of his murals, descriptions of his travels and tribulations, his loves and labor. That summer I got a job in a nonunion factory, inspecting handlebars for tricycles. It was a wretched place to work. I escaped into daydreams as I did my piecework. I longed to enter the fraternity of the artist: the hunger, their manner of dress, their process and prayers. I'd brag that I was going to be an artist's mistress one day. Nothing seemed more romantic to my young mind. I imagined myself as Frida to Diego, both muse and maker. I dreamed of meeting an artist to love and support and work with side by side.

Robert Michael Mapplethorpe was born on Monday, November 4, 1946. Raised in Floral Park, Long Island, the third of six children, he was a mischievous little boy whose carefree youth was delicately tinged with a fascination with beauty. His young eyes stored away each play of light, the sparkle of a jewel, the rich dressing of an altar, the burnish of a gold-toned

saxophone or a field of blue stars. He was gracious and shy with a precise nature. He contained, even at an early age, a stirring and the desire to stir.

The light fell upon the pages of his coloring book, across his child's hands. Coloring excited him, not the act of filling in space, but choosing colors that no one else would select. In the green of the hills he saw red. Purple snow, green skin, silver sun. He liked the effect it had on others, that it disturbed his siblings. He discovered he had a talent for sketching. He was a natural draftsman and secretly he twisted and abstracted his images, feeling his growing powers. He was an artist, and he knew it. It was not a childish notion. He merely acknowledged what was his.

The light fell upon the components of Robert's beloved jewelry kit, upon the bottles of enamel and tiny brushes. His fingers were nimble. He delighted in his ability to piece together and decorate brooches for his mother. He wasn't concerned that this was a girl's pursuit, that a jewelry-making kit was a traditional Christmas gift for a girl. His older brother, a whiz at sports, would snicker at him as he worked. His mother, Joan, chain-smoked, and admired the sight of her son sitting at the table, dutifully stringing yet another necklace of tiny Indian beads for her. They were precursors of the necklaces he would later adorn himself with, having broken from his father, leaving his Catholic, commercial, and military options behind in the wake of LSD and a commitment to live for art alone.

It was not easy for Robert to make this break. Something within him could not be denied, yet he also wanted to please his parents. Robert rarely spoke of his youth or his family. He always said he had a good upbringing, that he was safe and well provided for in practical terms. But he always suppressed his real feelings, mimicking the stoic nature of his father.

His mother dreamed of him entering the priesthood. He liked being an altar boy, but enjoyed it more for his entrance into secret places, the sacristy, forbidden chambers, the robes and the rituals. He didn't have a religious or pious relationship with the church; it was aesthetic. The thrill of the battle between good and evil attracted him, perhaps because it mirrored his interior conflict, and revealed a line that he might yet need to cross. Still, at his first holy communion, he stood proud to have accomplished this sacred task, reveling in being the center of attention. He wore a huge Baudelairean bow and an armband identical to the one worn by a very defiant Arthur Rimbaud.

There was no sense of culture or bohemian disorder in his parents' house. It was neat and clean and a model of postwar middleclass sensibilities, the magazines in the magazine rack, jewelry in the jewelry box. His father, Harry, could be stern and judgmental and Robert inherited these qualities from him, as well as his strong, sensitive fingers. His mother gave him her sense of order and her crooked smile that always made it seem as if he had a secret.

A few of Robert's drawings were hung on the wall in the hallway. While he lived at home he did his best to be a dutiful son, even choosing the curriculum his father demanded—commercial art. If he discovered anything on his own, he kept it to himself.

Robert loved to hear of my childhood adventures, but when I asked about his, he would have little to say. He said that his family never talked much, read, or shared intimate feelings. They had no communal mythology; no tales of treason, treasure, and snow forts. It was a safe existence but not a fairy-tale one.

“You're my family,” he would say.

When I was a young girl, I fell into trouble.

In 1966, at summer's end, I slept with a boy even more callow than I and we conceived instantaneously. I consulted a doctor who doubted my concern, waving me off with a somewhat bemused lecture on the female cycle. But as the weeks passed, I knew that I was carrying a child.

I was raised at a time when sex and marriage were absolutely synonymous. There was no available birth control and at nineteen I was still naïve about sex. Our union was so fleeting; so tender that I was not altogether certain we consummated our affection. But nature with all her force would have the final word. The irony that I, who never wanted to be a girl nor grow up, would be faced with this trial did not escape me. I was humbled by nature.

The boy, who was only seventeen, was so inexperienced that he could hardly be held accountable. I would have to take care of things on my own. On Thanksgiving morning I sat on the cot in the laundry room of my parents' house. This was where I slept when I worked summers in a factory, and the rest of the year while I attended Glassboro State Teachers College. I

could hear my mother and father making coffee and the laughter of my siblings as they sat around the table. I was the eldest and the pride of the family, working my way through college. My father was concerned that I was not attractive enough to find a husband and thought that the teaching profession would afford me security. It would be a great blow to him if I did not complete my studies.

I sat for a long time looking at my hands resting on my stomach. I had relieved the boy of responsibility. He was like a moth struggling within a cocoon and I couldn't bring myself to disturb his unwieldy emergence into the world. I knew there was nothing he could do. I also knew I was incapable of tending to an infant. I had sought the assistance of a benevolent professor who had found an educated couple longing for a child.

I surveyed my quarters: a washer and dryer, a large wicker basket overflowing with unwashed linens, my father's shirts folded on the ironing board. There was a small table where I had arranged my drawing pencils, sketchbook, and copy of *Illuminations*. I sat readying myself to face my parents, praying beneath my breath. For a brief moment I felt as if I might die; and just as quickly I knew everything would be all right.

It is impossible to exaggerate the sudden calm I felt. An overwhelming sense of mission eclipsed my fears. I attributed this to the baby, imagining it empathized with my situation. I felt in full possession of myself. I would do my duty and stay strong and healthy. I would never look back. I would not return to the factory or to teachers college. I would be an artist. I would prove my worth, and with my new resolve I rose and approached the kitchen.

I was dismissed from college, but I no longer cared. I knew I was not destined to be a schoolteacher, though I believed it to be an admirable occupation. I continued to live in my laundry room.

My compatriot from college, Janet Hamill, bolstered my morale. She had lost her mother and came to stay with my family. I shared my little quarters with her. Both of us harbored lofty dreams but also a common love of rock and roll, spending long evenings discoursing on the Beatles versus the Rolling Stones. We had stood in line for hours at Sam Goody's to purchase *Blonde on Blonde*, combing Philadelphia in search of a scarf like the one Bob Dylan wore on the cover. We lit candles for him when he had his

motorcycle accident. We lay in the high grass listening to “Light My Fire” wafting from the radio of Janet’s battered car parked by the side of the road with the doors open. We cut our long skirts to the mini-lengths of Vanessa Redgrave’s in *Blow-Up* and searched for greatcoats in thrift stores like those worn by Oscar Wilde and Baudelaire.

Janet remained my trusted friend through my term, but as my pregnancy progressed, I had to find refuge elsewhere. Judgmental neighbors made it impossible for my family, treating them as if they were harboring a criminal. I found a surrogate family, also called Smith, farther south by the sea. A painter and his wife, a potter, kindly took me in. They had a little boy and theirs was a disciplined but loving environment of macrobiotic food, classical music, and art. I was lonely but Janet visited me when she could. I had a small amount of pocket money. Every Sunday I would take a long walk to a deserted beach café to have a coffee and a jelly doughnut, two things forbidden in a home regimented by healthy food. I savored these small indulgences, slipping a quarter in the jukebox and listening to “Strawberry Fields” three times in a row. It was my private ritual and the words and voice of John Lennon provided me with strength when I faltered.

After the Easter holidays my parents came for me. My labor coincided with the full moon. They drove me to the hospital in Camden. Due to my unwed status, the nurses were very cruel and uncaring, and left me on a table for several hours before informing the doctor that I had gone into labor. They ridiculed me for my beatnik appearance and immoral behavior, calling me “Dracula’s daughter” and threatening to cut my long black hair. When my doctor arrived, he was very angry. I could hear him yelling at the nurses that I was having a breech birth and I should not have been left alone. Through an open window, while I lay in labor, I could hear boys singing a cappella songs through the night. Four-part harmony on the street corners of Camden, New Jersey. As the anesthesia took effect, the last thing I remember was the doctor’s concerned face and the whispers of attendants.

My child was born on the anniversary of the bombing of Guernica. I remember thinking of the painting, a weeping mother holding her dead child. Although my arms would be empty and I wept, my child would live, was healthy, and would be well cared for. I trusted and believed that with all my heart.

On Memorial Day I took a bus to Philadelphia to visit the Joan of Arc statue near the Museum of Art. It had not been there when I first went with my family as a young girl. How beautiful she looked astride her horse, raising her banner toward the sun, a teenage girl who delivered her imperiled prince to his throne in Reims and struggled to free her country, only to be betrayed and burned at the stake on this day. Young Joan whom I had known through books and the child whom I would never know. I vowed to both of them that I would make something of myself, then headed back home, stopping in Camden at the Goodwill store to buy a long gray raincoat.

On that same day, in Brooklyn, Robert dropped acid. He cleared his work area, arranging his drawing pad and pencils on a low table with a pillow to sit on. He placed a fresh sheet of clay coat on the table. He knew he might not be able to draw once the acid peaked, but he wanted his tools by him in case he needed them. He had tried working on acid before, but it drew him toward the negative spaces, areas he would normally have the self-control to avoid. Often the beauty he beheld was a deception, the results aggressive and unpleasing. He didn't contemplate the meaning of this. It was just so.

At first the LSD seemed benign and he was disappointed, as he had ingested more than usual. He had passed through the phase of anticipation and nervous agitation. He loved that feeling. He traced the thrill and fear blossoming in his stomach. He used to experience it as an altar boy as he stood behind the velvet curtains in his small robe holding the processional cross, readying to march.

It occurred to him that nothing was going to happen.

He adjusted a gilded frame above the mantel. He noticed the blood coursing through the veins crossing his wrist and the bright edges of his cuff. He noticed the room in planes, sirens and dogs, the walls in their pulse. He became aware that he was clenching his teeth. He noticed his own breath like the breath of a collapsing god. A terrible lucidity came over him; a stop-motion force dropping him to his knees. A string of remembrances stretched like taffy—accusing faces of fellow cadets, holy water flooding the latrine, classmates passing like indifferent dogs, his father's disapproval, expulsion from ROTC, and his mother's tears, bleeding with his own loneliness the apocalypse of his world.

He tried to rise. His legs were completely asleep. He managed to stand and rubbed his legs. The veins of his hands were unusually prominent. He took off his shirt soaked in light and damp, sloughing away the prison of skins.

He looked down at the piece of paper on his table. He could see the work there, though it was not yet drawn. He crouched down again and worked confidently in the last rays of afternoon light. He completed two drawings, spidery and amorphous. He wrote the words he had seen and felt the gravity of what he had written: *Destruction of the universe. May 30 '67.*

It's good, he thought, somewhat ruefully. For no one would see what he had seen, no one would understand. He was accustomed to this feeling. He'd had it all his life, but in the past he tried to make up for it, as if it were his fault. He compensated for this with a sweet nature, seeking approval from his father, from his teachers, from his peers.

He wasn't certain whether he was a good or bad person. Whether he was altruistic. Whether he was demonic. But he was certain of one thing. He was an artist. And for that he would never apologize. He leaned against a wall and smoked a cigarette. He felt swathed in clarity, a little shaken, but he knew it was merely physical. There was another sensation brewing he had no name for. He felt in control. He would no longer be a slave.

As night fell, he noticed he was thirsty. He craved chocolate milk. One place would be open. He felt for his change, turned the corner, and headed toward Myrtle Avenue, grinning in the dark.

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In the spring of 1967 I assessed my life. I had brought the child healthy into the world and placed her under the protection of a loving and educated family. I had dropped out of teachers' college, having not the discipline, the focus, nor the money I needed to continue. I was holding a temporary minimum-wage job in a textbook factory in Philadelphia.

My immediate concern was where to go next, and what to do when I got there. I held to the hope that I was an artist, though I knew I would never be able to afford art school and had to make a living. There was nothing to keep me home, no prospects and no sense of community. My parents had raised us in an atmosphere of religious dialogue, of compassion, of civil

rights, but the general feel of rural South Jersey was hardly pro-artist. My few comrades had moved to New York to write poetry and study art and I felt very much alone.

I had found solace in Arthur Rimbaud, whom I had come upon in a bookstall across from the bus depot in Philadelphia when I was sixteen. His haughty gaze reached mine from the cover of *Illuminations*. He possessed an irreverent intelligence that ignited me, and I embraced him as compatriot, kin, and even secret love. Not having the ninety-nine cents to buy the book, I pocketed it.

Rimbaud held the keys to a mystical language that I devoured even as I could not fully decipher it. My unrequited love for him was as real to me as anything I had experienced. At the factory where I had labored with a hard-edged, illiterate group of women, I was harassed in his name. Suspecting me of being a Communist for reading a book in a foreign language, they threatened me in the john, prodding me to denounce him. It was within this atmosphere that I seethed. It was for him that I wrote and dreamed. He became my archangel, delivering me from the mundane horrors of factory life. His hands had chiseled a manual of heaven and I held them fast. The knowledge of him added swagger to my step and this could not be stripped away. I tossed my copy of *Illuminations* in a plaid suitcase. We would escape together.

I had my plan. I would seek out friends who were studying at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. I figured if I placed myself in their environment I could learn from them. When I was laid off in late June from my job in the textbook factory, I took this as a sign to head out. Employment in South Jersey was hard to come by. I was on a waiting list at the Columbia Records pressing plant in Pitman and the Campbell Soup Company in Camden, but the thought of either job made me nauseous. I had enough money for a one-way ticket. I planned to hit all the bookstores in the city. This seemed ideal work to me. My mother, who was a waitress, gave me white wedgies and a fresh uniform in a plain wrapper.

“You’ll never make it as a waitress,” she said, “but I’ll stake you anyway.” It was her way of showing her support.

It was a Monday morning on July 3. I maneuvered the tearful goodbyes and walked the mile to Woodbury and caught the Broadway bus to Philadelphia,

passing through my beloved Camden and nodding respectfully to the sad exterior of the once-prosperous Walt Whitman Hotel. I felt a pang abandoning this struggling city, but there was no work for me there. They were closing the great shipyard and soon everyone would be looking for jobs.

I got off at Market Street and stopped in Nedick's. I slipped a quarter in the jukebox, played two sides by Nina Simone, and had a farewell doughnut and coffee. I crossed over to Filbert Street to the bus terminal across from the bookstall that I had haunted for the last few years. I paused before the spot where I had pocketed my Rimbaud. In its place was a battered copy of *Love on the Left Bank* with grainy black-and-white shots of Paris nightlife in the late fifties. The photographs of the beautiful Vali Myers, with her wild hair and kohl-rimmed eyes, dancing on the streets of the Latin Quarter deeply impressed me. I did not swipe the book, but kept her image in mind.

It was a big blow that the fare to New York had nearly doubled since last I'd traveled. I was unable to buy my ticket. I went into a phone booth to think. It was a real Clark Kent moment. I thought of calling my sister although I was too ashamed to return home. But there, on the shelf beneath the telephone, lying on thick yellow pages, was a white patent purse. It contained a locket and thirty-two dollars, almost a week's paycheck at my last job.

Against my better judgment, I took the money but I left the purse on the ticket counter in the hopes that the owner would at least retrieve the locket. There was nothing in it that revealed her identity. I can only thank, as I have within myself many times through the years, this unknown benefactor. She was the one who gave me the last piece of encouragement, a thief's good-luck sign. I accepted the grant of the small white purse as the hand of fate pushing me on.

At twenty years old, I boarded the bus. I wore my dungarees, black turtleneck, and the old gray raincoat I had bought in Camden. My small suitcase, yellow-and-red plaid, held some drawing pencils, a notebook, *Illuminations*, a few pieces of clothing, and pictures of my siblings. I was superstitious. Today was a Monday; I was born on Monday. It was a good day to arrive in New York City. No one expected me. Everything awaited me.

I immediately took the subway from Port Authority to Jay Street and Borough Hall, then to Hoyt-Schermerhorn and DeKalb Avenue. It was a sunny afternoon. I was hoping my friends might put me up until I could find a place of my own. I went to the brownstone at the address I had, but they had moved. The new tenant was polite. He motioned toward a room at the rear of the flat and suggested that his roommate might know the new address.

I walked into the room. On a simple iron bed, a boy was sleeping. He was pale and slim with masses of dark curls, lying bare-chested with strands of beads around his neck. I stood there. He opened his eyes and smiled.

When I told him of my plight, he rose in one motion, put on his huaraches and a white T-shirt, and beckoned me to follow him.

I watched him as he walked ahead, leading the way with a light-footed gait, slightly bowlegged. I noticed his hands as he tapped his fingers against his thigh. I had never seen anyone like him. He delivered me to another brownstone on Clinton Avenue, gave a little farewell salute, smiled, and was on his way.

The day wore on. I waited for my friends. As fortune would have it, they did not return. That night, having nowhere to go, I fell asleep on their red stoop. When I awoke, it was Independence Day, my first away from home with the familiar parade, veterans' picnic, and fireworks display. I felt a restless agitation in the air. Packs of children threw firecrackers that exploded at my feet. I would spend that day much as I spent the next few weeks, looking for kindred souls, shelter, and, most urgently, a job. Summer seemed the wrong time to find a sympathetic student. Everyone was less than eager to provide me with a helping hand. Everyone was struggling, and I, the country mouse, was just an awkward presence. Eventually I went back to the city and slept in Central Park, not far from the statue of the Mad Hatter.

Along Fifth Avenue, I left applications at shops and bookstores. I would often stop before a grand hotel, an alien observer to the Proustian lifestyle of the privileged class, exiting sleek black cars with exquisite brown-and-gold-patterned trunks. It was another side of life. Horse-drawn carriages were stationed between the Paris Theatre and the Plaza Hotel. In discarded newspapers I would search out the evening's entertainment. Across from the Metropolitan Opera I watched the people enter, sensing their anticipation.

The city was a real city, shiftY and sexual. I was lightly jostled by small herds of flushed young sailors looking for action on Forty-second Street, with its rows of X-rated movie houses, brassy women, glittering souvenir shops, and hot-dog vendors. I wandered through Kino parlors and peered through the windows of the magnificent sprawling Grant's Raw Bar filled with men in black coats scooping up piles of fresh oysters.

The skyscrapers were beautiful. They did not seem like mere corporate shells. They were monuments to the arrogant yet philanthropic spirit of America. The character of each quadrant was invigorating and one felt the flux of its history. The old world and the emerging one served up in the brick and mortar of the artisan and the architects.

I walked for hours from park to park. In Washington Square, one could still feel the characters of Henry James and the presence of the author himself. Entering the perimeters of the white arch, one was greeted by the sounds of bongos and acoustic guitars, protest singers, political arguments, activists leafleting, older chess players challenged by the young. This open atmosphere was something I had not experienced, simple freedom that did not seem to be oppressive to anyone.

I was beat and hungry, roaming with a few belongings wrapped in a cloth, hobo style, a sack without a stick—my suitcase stashed in Brooklyn. It was a Sunday and I took a day off from searching for work. Through the night I had gone back and forth to the end of the line at Coney Island, snatching bits of sleep when I could. I got off the F train at the Washington Square station and walked down Sixth Avenue. I stopped to watch the boys shooting hoops near Houston Street. It was there I met Saint, my guide, a black Cherokee with one foot in the street and the other in the Milky Way. He suddenly appeared, as vagabonds will sometimes find one another.

I swiftly clocked him, inside and out, and perceived he was okay. It seemed natural talking with him, though I didn't normally talk to strangers.

"Hey, sister. What's your situation?"

"On earth or in the universe?"

He laughed and said, "All right!"

I sized him up while he was looking at the sky. He had a Jimi Hendrix look, tall, slim, and soft-spoken, though a bit ragged. He posed no threat, uttered no sexual innuendos, no mention of the physical plane, except the most basic.

“You hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Come on.”

The street of cafés was just waking up. He stopped at a few places on MacDougal Street. He greeted the fellows setting up for the new day. “Hey, Saint,” they would say, and he’d shoot the shit while I stood a few feet away. “Got anything for me?” he asked.

The cooks knew him well and gave him offerings in brown paper bags. He returned the favor with anecdotes of his travels from the heartland to Venus. We walked to the park, sat on a bench, and divided his take: loaves of day-old bread and a head of lettuce. He had me remove the top layers of the lettuce as he broke the bread in half. Some of the lettuce was still crisp inside.

“There’s water in the lettuce leaves,” he said. “The bread will satisfy your hunger.”

We piled the best leaves on the bread and happily ate.

“A real prison breakfast,” I said.

“Yeah, but we are free.”

And that summed it up. He slept for a while in the grass and I just sat quietly with no fear. When he awoke, we searched around until he found a patch of earth without grass. He got a stick and drew a celestial map. He gave me some lessons on man’s place in the universe, then the inner universe.

“You follow this?”

“It’s normal stuff,” I said.

He laughed for a long time.

Our unspoken routine filled my next few days. At night we’d go our separate ways. I would watch him stroll away. He would often be barefoot, his sandals slung over his shoulder. I marveled how anyone, even in summer, would have the courage and stealth to roam barefoot in the city.

We would go find our own sleep outposts. We never spoke about where we slept. In the morning I would find him in the park and we’d make the rounds, “getting vitals,” as he said. We’d eat pita bread and celery stalks. On the third day I found two quarters embedded in the grass in the park. We

had coffee, toast and jam, and split an egg at the Waverly Diner. Fifty cents was real money in 1967.

That afternoon, he gave me a long recap of man and the universe. He seemed content with me as a pupil, though he was more distracted than usual. Venus, he had told me, was more than a star. "I'm waiting to go home," he said.

It was a beautiful day and we sat in the grass. I guess I dozed off. He wasn't there when I awoke. There was a piece of red chalk he used for drawing on the sidewalk. I pocketed it and went my way. The next day I half waited for him to return. But he didn't. He had given me what I needed to keep going.

I wasn't sad, because every time I thought of him I'd smile. I imagined him jumping on a boxcar on a celestial course to the planet he embraced, appropriately named for the goddess of love. I wondered why he devoted so much time to me. I reasoned it was because we were both wearing long coats in July, the brotherhood of *La Bohème*.

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I grew more desperate to find a job and started a second-level search in boutiques and department stores. I was quick to comprehend I wasn't dressed right for this line of work. Even Capezio's, a store for classic dance attire, wouldn't take me, though I had cultivated a good beatnik ballet look. I canvassed Sixtieth and Lexington and as a last resort left an application at Alexander's, knowing I would never really work there. Then I began to walk downtown, absorbed in my own condition.

It was Friday, July 21, and unexpectedly I collided with the sorrow of an age. John Coltrane, the man who gave us *A Love Supreme*, had died. Scores of people were gathering across from St. Peter's Church to say goodbye. Hours passed. People were sobbing as the love cry of Albert Ayler spirited the atmosphere. It was if a saint had died, one who had offered up healing music yet was not permitted to heal himself. Along with many strangers, I experienced a deep sense of loss for a man I had not known save through his music.

Later I walked down Second Avenue, Frank O'Hara territory. Pink light washed over rows of boarded buildings. New York light, the light of the

abstract expressionists. I thought Frank would have loved the color of the fading day. Had he lived, he might have written an elegy for John Coltrane like he did for Billie Holiday.

I spent the evening checking out the action on St. Mark's Place. Long-haired boys scating around in striped bell-bottoms and used military jackets flanked with girls wrapped in tie-dye. There were flyers papering the streets announcing the coming of Paul Butterfield and Country Joe and the Fish. "White Rabbit" was blaring from the open doors of the Electric Circus. The air was heavy with unstable chemicals, mold, and the earthy stench of hashish. The fat of candles burned, great tears of wax spilling onto the sidewalk.

I can't say I fit in, but I felt safe. No one noticed me. I could move freely. There was a roving community of young people, sleeping in the parks, in makeshift tents, the new immigrants invading the East Village. I wasn't kin to these people, but because of the free-floating atmosphere, I could roam within it. I had faith. I sensed no danger in the city, and I never encountered any. I had nothing to offer a thief and didn't fear men on the prowl. I wasn't of interest to anyone, and that worked in my favor for the first few weeks of July when I bummed around, free to explore by day, sleeping where I could at night. I sought door wells, subway cars, even a graveyard. Startled to awake beneath the city sky or being shaken by a strange hand. Time to move along. Time to move along.

When it got really rough, I would go back to Pratt, occasionally bumping into someone I knew who would let me shower and sleep a night. Or else I would sleep in the hall near a familiar door. That wasn't much fun, but I had my mantra, "I'm free, I'm free." Although after several days, my other mantra, "I'm hungry, I'm hungry," seemed to be in the forefront. I wasn't worried, though. I just needed a break and I wasn't going to give up. I dragged my plaid suitcase from stoop to stoop, trying not to wear out my unwelcome.

It was the summer Coltrane died. The summer of "Crystal Ship." Flower children raised their empty arms and China exploded the H-bomb. Jimi Hendrix set his guitar in flames in Monterey. AM radio played "Ode to Billie Joe." There were riots in Newark, Milwaukee, and Detroit. It was the summer of *Elvira Madigan*, the summer of love. And in this shifting, inhospitable atmosphere, a chance encounter changed the course of my life.

It was the summer I met Robert Mapplethorpe.