Just Kids

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Just Kids

IT WAS HOT IN THE CITY, BUT I STILL WORE MY RAINCOAT. It gave me confidence as I hit the streets looking for work, my only résumé a stint in a factory, vestiges of an incomplete education, and an immaculately starched waitress uniform. I landed a job in a little Italian restaurant called Joe's on Times Square. Three hours into my first shift, after spilling a tray of veal Parmigiana on a customer's tweed suit, I was relieved of my duties. Knowing I would never make it as a waitress, I left my uniform—only slightly soiled—with the matching wedgies in a public bathroom. My mother had given them to me, a white uniform with white shoes, investing in them her own hopes for my well-being. Now they were like wilted lilies, left in a white sink.

Negotiating the thick psychedelic atmosphere of St. Mark's Place, I was not prepared for the revolution under way. There was an air of vague and unsettling paranoia, an undercurrent of rumors, snatched fragments of conversation anticipating future revolution. I just sat there trying to figure it all out, the air thick

with pot smoke, which may account for my dreamy recollections. I clawed through a thick web of the culture's consciousness that I hadn't known existed.

I had lived in the world of my books, most of them written in the nineteenth century. Though I was prepared to sleep on benches, in subways and graveyards, until I got work, I was not ready for the constant hunger that gnawed at me. I was a skinny thing with a high metabolism and a strong appetite. Romanticism could not quench my need for food. Even Baudelaire had to eat. His letters contained many a desperate cry for want of meat and porter.

I needed a job. I was relieved when I was hired as a cashier in the uptown branch of Brentano's bookstore. I would have preferred manning the poetry section over ringing up sales of ethnic jewelry and crafts, but I liked looking at trinkets from faraway countries: Berber bracelets, shell collars from Afghanistan, and a jewel-encrusted Buddha. My favorite object was a modest necklace from Persia. It was made of two enameled metal plaques bound together with heavy black and silver threads, like a very old and exotic scapular. It cost eighteen dollars, which seemed like a lot of money. When things were quiet I would take it out of the case and trace the calligraphy etched upon its violet surface, and dream up tales of its origins.

Shortly after I started working there, the boy I had briefly met in Brooklyn came into the store. He looked quite different in his white shirt and tie, like a Catholic schoolboy. He explained that he worked at Brentano's downtown branch and had a credit slip he wanted to use. He spent a long time looking at everything, the beads, the small figurines, the turquoise rings.

Finally he said, "I want this." It was the Persian necklace.

"Oh, it's my favorite too," I answered. "It reminds me of a scapular."

"Are you a Catholic?" he asked me.

"No, I just like Catholic things."

"I was an altar boy." He grinned at me. "I loved to swing the frankincense censer."

I was happy because he had selected the piece I singled out, yet sad to see it go. When I wrapped it and handed it to him, I said impulsively, "Don't give it to any girl but me."

I was immediately embarrassed, but he just smiled and said, "I won't."

After he left I looked at the empty place where it had lain on a piece of black velvet. By the next morning a more elaborate piece had taken its place, but it lacked the simple mystery of the Persian necklace.

By the end of my first week I was very hungry and still had nowhere to go. I took to sleeping in the store. I would hide in the bathroom while the others left, and after the night watchman locked up I would sleep on my coat. In the morning it would appear I had gotten to work early. I hadn't a dime and rummaged through employees' pockets for change to buy peanut butter crackers in the vending machine. Demoralized by hunger, I was shocked when there was no envelope for me on payday. I had not understood that the first week's pay was withheld, and I went back to the cloakroom in tears.

When I returned to my counter, I noticed a guy lurking around, watching me. He had a beard and was wearing a pinstripe shirt and one of those jackets with suede patches on the elbows. The supervisor introduced us. He was a science-fiction writer and he wanted to take me out to dinner. Even though I was twenty, my mother's warning not to go anywhere with a stranger reverberated in my consciousness. But the prospect of dinner weakened me, and I accepted. I hoped the guy, being a writer, would be okay, though he seemed more like an actor playing a writer.

We walked down to a restaurant at the base of the Empire State Building. I had never eaten at a nice place in New York City. I tried to order something that wasn't too expensive and chose swordfish, $5.95, the cheapest thing on the menu. I can still see the waiter setting the plate before me with a big wad of mashed potatoes and a slab of overdone swordfish. Even though I was starving, I could hardly enjoy it. I felt uncomfortable and had no idea how to handle the situation, or why he wanted to eat with me. It seemed like he was spending a lot of money on me and I got to worrying what he would expect in return.

After the meal we walked all the way downtown. We went east to Tompkins Square Park and sat on a bench. I was conjuring lines of escape when he suggested we go up to his apartment for a drink. This was it, I thought, the pivotal moment my mother had warned me about. I was looking around desperately, unable to answer him, when I saw a young man approaching. It was as if a small portal of future opened, and out stepped the boy from Brooklyn who had chosen the Persian necklace, like an answer to a teenage prayer. I immediately recognized his slightly bowlegged gait and his tousled curls. He was dressed in dungarees and a sheepskin vest. Around his neck hung strands of beaded necklaces, a hippie shepherd boy. I ran up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Hello, do you remember me?"

"Of course," he smiled.

"I need help." I blurted, "Will you pretend you're my boyfriend?"

"Sure," he said, as if he wasn't surprised by my sudden appearance.

I dragged him over to the science-fiction guy. "This is my boyfriend," I said breathlessly. "He's been looking for me. He's really mad. He wants me to come home now." The guy looked at us both quizzically.

"Run," I cried, and the boy grabbed my hand and we took off, through the park across to the other side.

Out of breath, we collapsed on someone's stoop. "Thank you, you saved my life," I said. He accepted this news with a bemused expression.

"I never told you my name, it's Patti."

"My name is Bob."

"Bob," I said, really looking at him for the first time. "Somehow you don't seem like a Bob to me. Is it okay if I call you Robert?"

The sun had set over Avenue B. He took my hand and we wandered the East Village. He bought me an egg cream at Gem Spa, on the corner of St. Mark's Place and Second Avenue. I did most of the talking. He just smiled and listened. I told him childhood stories, the first of many: of Stephanie, The Patch, and the square-dance hall across the road. I was surprised at how comfortable and open I felt with him. He told me later that he was tripping on acid.

I had only read about LSD in a small book called *Collages* by Anaïs Nin. I wasn't aware of the drug culture that was blooming in the summer of '67. I had a romantic view of drugs and considered them sacred, reserved for poets, jazz musicians, and Indian rituals. Robert didn't seem altered or strange in any way I might have imagined. He radiated a charm that was sweet and mischievous, shy and protective. We walked around until two in the morning and finally, almost simultaneously, revealed that neither one of us had a place to go. We laughed about that. But it was late and we were both tired.

"I think I know somewhere we can stay," he said. His last roommate was out of town. "I know where he hides his key; I don't think he would mind."

We got the subway out to Brooklyn. His friend lived in a little place on Waverly, near the Pratt campus. We went through an alleyway

where he found the key hidden beneath a loose brick, and let ourselves into the apartment.

We both fell shy when we entered, not so much because we were alone together as that it was someone else's place. Robert busied himself making me comfortable and then, in spite of the late hour, asked if I would like to see his work that was stored in a back room.

Robert spread it out over the floor for me to see. There were drawings, etchings, and he unrolled some paintings that reminded me of Richard Poussette-Dart and Henri Michaux. Multifarious energies radiated through interweaving words and calligraphic line. Energy fields built with layers of word. Paintings and drawings that seemed to emerge from the subconscious.

There were a set of discs intertwining the words EGO LOVE GOD, merging them with his own name; they seemed to recede and expand over his flat surfaces. As I stared at them, I was compelled to tell him of my nights as a child seeing circular patterns radiating on the ceiling.

He opened a book on Tantric art.

"Like this?" he asked.

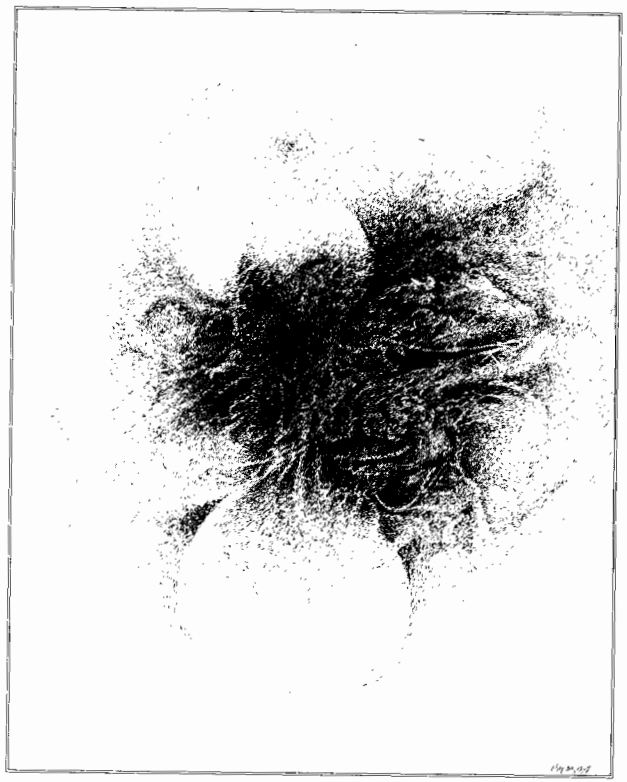
"Yes."

I recognized with amazement the celestial circles of my childhood. A mandala.

I was particularly moved by the drawing he had done on Memorial Day. I had never seen anything like it. What also struck me was the date: Joan of Arc's feast day. The same day I had promised to make something of myself before her statue.

I told him this, and he responded that the drawing was symbolic of his own commitment to art, made on the same day. He gave it to me without hesitation and I understood that in this small space of time we had mutually surrendered our loneliness and replaced it with trust.

We looked at books on Dada and Surrealism and ended the night



Memorial Day, 1967

immersed in the slaves of Michelangelo. Wordlessly we absorbed the thoughts of one another and just as dawn broke fell asleep in each other's arms. When we awoke he greeted me with his crooked smile, and I knew he was my knight.

As if it was the most natural thing in the world we stayed together, not leaving each other's side save to go to work. Nothing was spoken; it was just mutually understood.

For the following weeks we relied on the generosity of Robert's friends for shelter, notably Patrick and Margaret Kennedy, in whose apartment on Waverly Avenue we had spent our first night. Ours was an attic room with a mattress, Robert's drawings tacked on the wall and his paintings rolled in a corner and I with only my plaid suitcase. I'm certain it was no small burden for this couple to harbor us, for we had meager resources, and I was awkward socially. In the evenings we were lucky to share the Kennedys' table. We pooled our money, every cent going toward our own place. I worked long hours at Brentano's and skipped lunches. I befriended another employee, named Frances Finley. She was delightfully eccentric and discreet. Discerning my plight, she would leave me Tupperware containers of homemade soup on the table of the employee cloakroom. This small gesture fortified me and sealed a lasting friendship.

Perhaps it was the relief of having a safe haven at last, for I seemed to crash, exhausted and emotionally overwrought. Though I never questioned my decision to give my child up for adoption, I learned that to give life and walk away was not so easy. I became for a time moody and despondent. I cried so much that Robert affectionately called me Soakie.

Robert was infinitely patient with my seemingly inexplicable melancholy. I had a loving family and could have returned home. They would have understood, but I didn't want to go back with my head bowed. They had their own struggles and I now had a companion

I could rely on. I had told Robert everything about my experience, though there was no possible way of hiding it. I was so small-hipped that carrying a child had literally opened the skin of my belly. Our first intimacy revealed the fresh red scars crisscrossing my abdomen. Slowly, through his support, I was able to conquer my deep self-consciousness.

When we had finally saved enough money, Robert looked for a place for us to live. He found an apartment in a three-story brick building on a tree-lined street around the corner from the Myrtle el and within walking distance of Pratt. We had the entire second floor, with windows facing east and west, but its aggressively seedy condition was out of my range of experience. The walls were smeared with blood and psychotic scribbling, the oven crammed with discarded syringes, and the refrigerator overrun with mold. Robert cut a deal with the landlord, agreeing to clean and paint it himself provided we pay only one month's deposit, instead of the required two. The rent was eighty dollars a month. We paid one hundred and sixty dollars to move into 160 Hall Street. We regarded the symmetry as favorable.

Ours was a small street with low ivy-covered brick garages converted from former stables. It was just a short walk to the diner, the phone booth, and Jake's art supply store, where St. James Place began.

The staircase up to our floor was dark and narrow, with an arched niche carved into the wall, but our door opened onto a small, sunny kitchen. From the windows above the sink you could see a huge white mulberry tree. The bedroom faced the front with ornate medallions on the ceiling that boasted the original turn-of-the-century plasterwork.

Robert had assured me he would make it a good home and, true to his word, he labored to make it ours. The first thing he did was to wash and scrub the crusted stove with steel wool. He waxed the floors, cleaned the windows, and whitewashed the walls.

Our few possessions were heaped in the center of our future bedroom. We slept on our coats. On trash night we scavenged the streets and magically found all we needed. A discarded mattress in the lamplight, a small bookcase, repairable lamps, earthenware bowls, images of Jesus and the Madonna in ornate crumbling frames, and a threadbare Persian rug for my corner of our world.

I scrubbed the mattress with baking soda. Robert rewired the lamps, adding vellum shades tattooed with his own designs. He was good with his hands, still the boy who had made jewelry for his mother. He worked for some days restringing a beaded curtain, and hung it at the entrance of our bedroom. At first I was a little skeptical about the curtain. I had never seen such a thing but it eventually harmonized with my own gypsy elements.

I went back to South Jersey and retrieved my books and clothing. While I was gone Robert hung his drawings and draped the walls with Indian cloth. He dressed the mantel with religious artifacts, candles, and souvenirs from the Day of the Dead, arranging them as if sacred objects on an altar. Finally he prepared a study area for me with a little worktable and the frayed magic carpet.

We combined our belongings. My few records were filed in the orange crate with his. My winter coat hung next to his sheepskin vest.

My brother gave us a new needle for our record player, and my mother made us meatball sandwiches wrapped in tinfoil. We ate them and happily listened to Tim Hardin, his songs becoming our songs, the expression of our young love. My mother also sent along a parcel of sheets and pillowcases. They were soft and familiar, possessing the sheen of years of wear. They reminded me of her as she stood in the yard assessing with satisfaction the wash on the line as it fluttered in the sun.

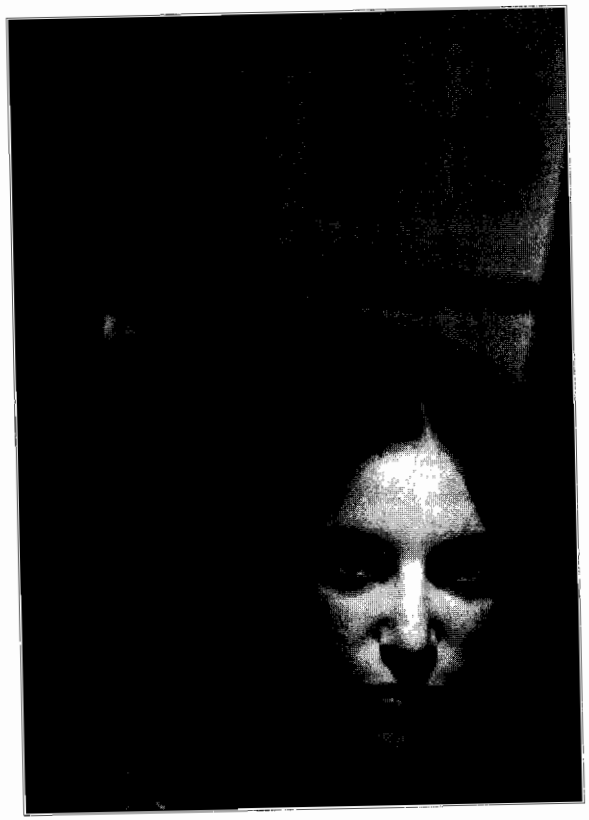
My treasured objects were mingled with the laundry. My work area was a jumble of manuscript pages, musty classics, broken toys,

and talismans. I tacked pictures of Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, Lotte Lenya, Piaf, Genet, and John Lennon over a makeshift desk where I arranged my quills, my inkwell, and my notebooks—my monastic mess.

When I came to New York I had brought a few colored pencils and a wood slate to draw on. I had drawn a girl at a table before a spread of cards, a girl divining her fate. It was the only drawing I had to show Robert, which he liked very much. He wanted me to experience working with fine paper and pencils, and shared his materials with me. We would work side by side for hours, in a state of mutual concentration.

We hadn't much money but we were happy. Robert worked part-time and took care of the apartment. I did the laundry and made our meals, which were very limited. There was an Italian bakery we frequented, off Waverly. We would choose a nice loaf of day-old bread or a quarter pound of their stale cookies offered at half-price. Robert had a sweet tooth, so the cookies often won out. Sometimes the woman behind the counter would give us extra and fill the small brown paper sack to the brim with yellow and brown pinwheels, shaking her head and murmuring friendly disapproval. Most likely she could tell it was our dinner. We would add take-out coffee and a carton of milk. Robert loved chocolate milk but it was more expensive and we would deliberate whether to spend the extra dime.

We had our work and one other. We didn't have the money to go to concerts or movies or to buy new records, but we played the ones we had over and over. We listened to my *Madame Butterfly* as sung by Eleanor Steber. *A Love Supreme*. *Between the Buttons*. Joan Baez and *Blonde on Blonde*. Robert introduced me to his favorites—Vanilla Fudge, Tim Buckley, Tim Hardin—and his *History of Motown* provided the backdrop for our nights of communal joy.



First portrait, Brooklyn

One Indian summer day we dressed in our favorite things, me in my beatnik sandals and ragged scarves, and Robert with his love beads and sheepskin vest. We took the subway to West Fourth Street and spent the afternoon in Washington Square. We shared coffee from a thermos, watching the stream of tourists, stoners, and folksingers. Agitated revolutionaries distributed antiwar leaflets. Chess players drew a crowd of their own. Everyone coexisted within the continuous drone of verbal diatribes, bongos, and barking dogs.

We were walking toward the fountain, the epicenter of activity, when an older couple stopped and openly observed us. Robert enjoyed being noticed, and he affectionately squeezed my hand.

"Oh, take their picture," said the woman to her bemused husband, "I think they're artists."

"Oh, go on," he shrugged. "They're just kids."

The leaves were turning burgundy and gold. There were carved pumpkins on the stoops of the brownstones on Clinton Avenue.

We took walks at night. Sometimes we could see Venus above us. It was the shepherd's star and the star of love. Robert called it our blue star. He practiced forming the *t* of Robert into a star, signing in blue so that I would remember.

I was getting to know him. He had absolute confidence in his work and in me, yet he worried incessantly about our future, how we would survive, about money. I felt we were too young to have such cares. I was happy just being free. The uncertainty of the practical side of our life haunted him, though I did my best to stay his worries.

He was searching, consciously or unconsciously, for himself. He was in a fresh state of transformation. He had shed the skin of

his ROTC uniform, and in its wake his scholarship, his commercial path, and his father's expectations of him. At seventeen he had been infatuated with the prestige of the Pershing Rifles, their brass buttons, highly polished boots, braids and ribbons. It was the uniform that attracted him, just as the robes of an altar boy had drawn him to the altar. But his service was to art, not to church or country. His beads, dungarees, and sheepskin vest represented not a costume but an expression of freedom.

After work, I would meet him downtown and we would walk through the yellow filtered light of the East Village, past the Fillmore East and the Electric Circus, the places we had passed on our first walk together.

It was exciting just to stand in front of the hallowed ground of Birdland that had been blessed by John Coltrane, or the Five Spot on St. Mark's Place where Billie Holiday used to sing, where Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman opened the field of jazz like human can openers.

We couldn't afford to go inside. On other days, we would visit art museums. There was only enough money for one ticket, so one of us would go in, look at the exhibits, and report back to the other.

On one such occasion, we went to the relatively new Whitney Museum on the Upper East Side. It was my turn to go in, and I reluctantly entered without him. I no longer remember the exhibit, but I do recall peering through one of the museum's unique trapezoidal windows, seeing Robert across the street, leaning against a parking meter, smoking a cigarette.

He waited for me, and as we headed toward the subway he said, "One day we'll go in together, and the work will be ours."

Some evenings later Robert surprised me and took me to our first movie. Someone at work had given him two tickets to a preview of *How I Won the War*, directed by Richard Lester. John Lennon had an important role as a soldier called Gripweed. I was excited

to see John Lennon but Robert slept with his head on my shoulder throughout the movie.

Robert was not especially drawn to film. His favorite movie was *Splendor in the Grass*. The only other movie we saw that year was *Bonnie and Clyde*. He liked the tagline on the poster: "They're young. They're in love. They rob banks." He didn't fall asleep during that movie. Instead, he wept. And when we went home he was unnaturally quiet and looked at me as if he wanted to convey all he was feeling without words. There was something of us that he saw in the movie but I wasn't certain what. I thought to myself that he contained a whole universe that I had yet to know.

On November fourth, Robert turned twenty-one. I gave him a heavy silver ID bracelet I found in a pawnshop on Forty-second Street. I had it engraved with the words *Robert Patti blue star*. The blue star of our destiny.

We spent a quiet night looking at our art books. My collection included de Kooning, Dubuffet, Diego Rivera, a Pollock monograph, and a small pile of *Art International* magazines. Robert had large coffee table books he had acquired from Brentano's on Tantric art, Michelangelo, Surrealism, and erotic art. We added used catalogs on John Graham, Gorky, Cornell, and Kitaj that we acquired for less than a dollar.

Our most prized books were on William Blake. I had a very pretty facsimile of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and I often read it to Robert before we went to sleep. I also had a vellum edition of Blake's collected writings, and he had the Trianon Press edition of Blake's *Milton*. We both admired the likeness of Blake's brother Robert, who died young, pictured with a star at his foot. We adopted Blake's palette as our own, shades of rose, cadmium, and moss, colors that seemed to generate light.

One evening in late November Robert came home a bit shaken. There were some etchings for sale at Brentano's. Among them was a print pulled from an original plate from *America: A Prophecy*, watermarked with Blake's monogram. He had taken it from its portfolio, sliding it down his pant leg. Robert was not one to steal; he hadn't the nervous system for theft. He did it on impulse because of our mutual love of Blake. But toward the end of the day he lost courage. He imagined they were on to him and ducked into the bathroom, slid it out of his trousers, shredded it, and flushed it down the toilet.

I noticed his hands were shaking as he told me. It had been raining and droplets trickled down from his thick curls. He had on a white shirt, damp and sodden against his skin. Like Jean Genet, Robert was a terrible thief. Genet was caught and imprisoned for stealing rare volumes of Proust and rolls of silk from a shirt maker. Aesthetic thieves. I imagined his sense of horror and triumph as bits of Blake swirled into the sewers of New York City.

We looked down at our hands, each holding on to the other. We took a deep breath, accepting our complicity, not in theft, but in the destruction of a work of art.

"At least they'll never get it," he said.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Anyone who isn't us," he answered.

Robert got laid off from Brentano's. He spent his unemployed days in the continual transformation of our living space. When he painted the kitchen, I was so happy that I prepared us a special meal. I made couscous with anchovies and raisins, and my specialty: lettuce soup. This delicacy consisted of chicken bouillon garnished with lettuce leaves.

But soon after Robert was laid off, I also got fired. I had failed to charge a Chinese customer any tax on a very expensive Buddha.

"Why should I pay the tax?" he said. "I am not an American."

I had no answer to this, so I didn't charge him. My judgment cost

me my job, but I was not sorry to leave. The best thing about the place had been the Persian necklace and meeting Robert, who, true to his word, had not given the necklace to another girl. On our first night together at Hall Street he gave me the cherished necklace, wrapped in violet tissue and tied with black satin ribbon.

★

The necklace was passed back and forth through the years. Ownership was based on who needed it the most. Our mutual sense of code manifested in many little games. The most unshakable was called One Day–Two Day. The premise was simply that one of us always had to be vigilant, the designated protector. If Robert took a drug, I needed to be present and conscious. If I was down, he needed to stay up. If one was sick, the other healthy. It was important that we were never self-indulgent on the same day.

In the beginning I faltered, and he was always there with an embrace or words of encouragement, coercing me to get out of myself and into my work. Yet he also knew that I would not fail if he needed me to be the strong one.

Robert got a full-time job as a window trimmer at FAO Schwarz. They were hiring for the holidays and I got a temporary position at the cash register. It was Christmastime but it was less than magical behind the scenes at the famous toy store. The pay was very low, the hours were long, and the atmosphere was dispiriting. The employees were not allowed to talk to one another, nor share coffee breaks. We found a few moments, secretly meeting by the Nativity scene spread on a platform of hay. It was there I rescued a tiny Nativity lamb from a waste bin. Robert promised to do something with it.

He liked the boxes of Joseph Cornell and often transformed insignificant bits of jetsam, colored string, paper lace, discarded rosaries, scrap, and

pearls into a visual poem. He would stay awake late into the night, sewing, cutting, gluing, and then adding touches of gouache. When I awoke there would be a finished box for me, like a valentine. Robert made a wooden manger for the little lamb. He painted it white with a bleeding heart and we added sacred numbers entwining like vines. Spiritually beautiful, it served as our Christmas tree. We placed our gifts for one another around it.

We worked quite late Christmas Eve, then got a bus at Port Authority to South Jersey. Robert was extremely nervous about meeting my family, because he was so estranged from his own. My father picked us up at the bus station. Robert gave my brother, Todd, one of his drawings, a bird rising from a flower. We had made handmade cards and brought books for my youngest sibling, Kimberly.

To stay his nerves, Robert decided to take acid. I would never have considered taking any drug in the presence of my parents, but it seemed more natural for Robert. My whole family took a liking to him and noticed nothing unusual except his continuous smile. In the course of the evening, Robert was examining my mother's expansive knickknack collection, dominated by cows of every description. He was particularly attracted to a marbleized candy dish with a purple cow lid. Perhaps it was the swirl of the glaze in his LSD-induced state, but he couldn't stop staring at it.

On Christmas evening we said goodbye, and my mother gave Robert a shopping bag filled with her traditional gift to me: art books and biographies. "There's something in there for you." She winked at Robert. When we got in the bus on the way back to Port Authority, Robert looked in the bag and found the purple cow candy dish wrapped in a gingham kitchen towel. He was delighted with it, so much so that years later, after he died, it was found displayed among his most valuable Italian vases.

For my twenty-first birthday, Robert made me a tambourine, tattooing the goatskin with astrological signs and tying multicolored

ribbons to its base. He put on Tim Buckley singing "Phantasmagoria in Two," then he knelt down and handed me a small book on the tarot that he had rebound in black silk. Inside it he inscribed a few lines of poetry, portraying us as the gypsy and the fool, one creating silence; one listening closely to the silence. In the clanging swirl of our lives, these roles would reverse many times.

The following night was New Year's Eve, our first together. We made new vows. Robert decided he would apply for a student loan and return to Pratt, not to study commercial art as his father wished, but to devote his energies to art alone. He wrote me a note to say we would create art together and we would make it, with or without the rest of the world.

For my part, I made a silent promise to help him achieve his goal by providing for his practical needs. I had quit the toy store after the holidays and was out of work for a short while. This set us back a little but I refused to be confined to a cashier's booth. I was determined to find a better-paying and more satisfying job and felt lucky to be hired at the Argosy Book Store on Fifty-ninth Street. They dealt in old and rare books, prints, and maps. There were no salesgirl openings, but the old man in charge, perhaps beguiled by my enthusiasm, took me on as an apprentice restorer. I sat at my dark heavy table, cluttered with eighteenth-century Bibles, linen strips, archival tape, rabbit glue, beeswax, and binder's needles, completely overwhelmed. Unfortunately I had no aptitude for such a task, and most reluctantly he had to let me go.

I returned home rather sad. It was going to be a hard winter. Robert was depressed working full-time at FAO Schwarz. Working as a window trimmer sparked his imagination and he made installation sketches. But he did less and less drawing. We lived on day-old bread and Dinty Moore beef stew. We hadn't the money to go anywhere, had no television, telephone, or radio. We had our record player,

Hall Street, Brooklyn, 1968

though, and drew back the arm so a chosen record would play over and over as we slept.

★

I needed to get another job. My friend Janet Hamill had been hired at Scribner's Bookstore, and once again, as she had done in college, she found a way of giving me a helping hand by sharing her good fortune. She spoke to her superiors, and they offered me a position. It seemed like a dream job, working in the retail store of the prestigious publisher, home to writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and their editor, the great Maxwell Perkins. Where the Rothschilds bought their books, where paintings by Maxfield Parrish hung in the stairwell.

Scribner's was housed in a beautiful landmark building at 597 Fifth Avenue. The glass-fronted Beaux Arts–style exterior had been designed by Ernest Flagg in 1913. There was a two-and-a-half-story space behind a lavish expanse of glass and iron, under a vaulted ceiling lined with clerestory windows. Each day I rose, dutifully dressed, and made the three subway changes to Rockefeller Center. My uniform for Scribner's was taken from Anna Karina in *Bande à part*: dark sweater, plaid skirt, black tights, and flats. I was positioned at the phone desk, which was manned by the kindhearted and supportive Faith Cross.

I felt lucky to be associated with such a historic bookstore. My salary was higher, and I had Janet as a confidante. I was rarely bored, and when I got restless, I wrote on the back of Scribner's stationery, like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, scribbling poems on the inside of cardboard boxes.

Robert was increasingly despondent. The hours were long and the pay was less than his part-time job at Brentano's had been. When he came home he was exhausted and dispirited and for a time stopped creating.

I implored him to quit. His job and scant paycheck were not worth the sacrifice. After nights of discussion, he reluctantly agreed. In return, he worked diligently, always anxious to show me what he had accomplished while I was at Scribner's. I had no regrets taking on the job as breadwinner. My temperament was sturdier. I could still create at night and I was proud to provide a situation allowing him to do his work without compromise.

At night, after trudging through the snow, I found him waiting for me in our apartment, ready to rub my hands to make them warm. He seemed always in motion, heating water on the stove, unlacing my boots, hanging up my coat, always with one eye on the drawing he was working on. He would stop for a moment if he noticed something. Most of the time, it seemed as if the piece was fully formed in his mind. He was not one for improvising. It was more a question of executing something he saw in a flash.

Existing in silence all day, he was eager to hear my stories of the bookstore's eccentric customers, of Edward Gorey with his big tennis shoes or Katharine Hepburn wearing Spencer Tracy's cap covered with a green silk head scarf or the Rothschilds with their long black coats. Afterward, we would sit on the floor and eat spaghetti while examining his new work. I was attracted to Robert's work because his visual vocabulary was akin to my poetic one, even if we seemed to be moving toward different destinations. Robert always would tell me, "Nothing is finished until you see it."

Our first winter together was a harsh one. Even with my better salary from Scribner's, we had very little money. Often we'd stand in the cold on the corner of St. James Place in eyeshot of the Greek diner and Jake's art supply store, debating how to spend our few dollars—a toss-up between grilled cheese sandwiches and art supplies. Sometimes, unable to distinguish the greater hunger, Robert would keep nervous watch in the diner while I, filled with the spirit of

Genet, pocketed the much-needed brass sharpener or colored pencils. I had a more romantic view of the artist's life and sacrifices. I had once read that Lee Krasner had lifted art supplies for Jackson Pollock. I don't know if it was true, but it served as inspiration. Robert fretted over not being able to provide for us. I told him not to worry, that committing to great art is its own reward.

At night we played the records we liked to draw to on our battered player. Sometimes we played a game called Record of the Night. The album cover of the chosen record would be prominently displayed on the mantel. We played the disc over and over, the music informing the trajectory of the evening.

It did not bother me to work in obscurity. I was hardly more than a student. Yet Robert, though shy, nonverbal, and seemingly out of step with those around him, was very ambitious. He held Duchamp and Warhol as models. High art and high society; he aspired to them both. We were a curious mix of *Funny Face* and Faust.

One cannot imagine the mutual happiness we felt when we sat and drew together. We would get lost for hours. His ability to concentrate for long periods infected me, and I learned by his example, working side by side. When we would take a break, I would boil water and make some Nescafé.

After a particularly good stretch of work, we would stroll along Myrtle Avenue, searching for Mallomars, splurging on Robert's favorite treat, a marshmallow cookie covered in dark chocolate.

Although we spent most of our time together, we weren't isolated. Our friends would come to visit. Harvey Parks and Louis Delsarte were painters; sometimes they worked on the floor next to us. Louis did portraits of us both, Robert with an Indian necklace and one of me with closed eyes. Ed Hansen shared his wisdom and collages and Janet Hamill read us her poems. I would show my drawings and tell stories about them, like Wendy entertaining the lost children

of Neverland. We were a crew of misfits, even within the liberal terrain of an art school. We often joked that we were a "losers' salon."

On special nights, Harvey, Louis, and Robert would share a joint and play hand drums. Robert had his own set of tablas. And they accompanied themselves by reciting from Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers*, one of the few books Robert actually read. Occasionally I would read their cards, deriving meanings from a mix of Papus and my own intuition. These were nights like none I had experienced in South Jersey, whimsical and filled with love.

A new friend entered my life. Robert introduced me to Judy Linn, a fellow graphics student, and we liked each other right away. Judy lived around the corner, on Myrtle Avenue, over the Laundromat where I washed our clothes. She was pretty and intelligent with an offbeat sense of humor, like a young Ida Lupino. She eventually pursued photography, spending years perfecting her darkroom techniques. In time I became her subject and she produced some of the earliest images of Robert and me.

On Valentine's Day, Robert gave me an amethyst geode. It was pale violet and nearly the size of a half grapefruit. He submerged it in water and we looked at the glowing crystals. When I was a kid I had dreamed of being a geologist. I recounted how I spent hours looking for rock specimens, wearing an old hammer tied around my waist. "No, Patti, no," he laughed.

My gift to him was an ivory heart with a cross carved in the center. Something in this object provoked a rare childhood tale from him, and he told me how he and the other altar boys would secretly rummage through the priests' private closet and drink the vestment wine. The wine didn't interest him; it was the funny feeling in his stomach that excited him, the thrill of doing something forbidden.

In the beginning of March, Robert got a temporary job as an usher for the newly opened Fillmore East. He reported for duty in an orange jumpsuit. He was looking forward to seeing Tim Buckley.

But when he came home he was more excited by someone else. "I saw someone who's going to be really big," he said. It was Janis Joplin.

We didn't have the money to go to concerts, but before Robert left the Fillmore he got me a pass to see the Doors. Janet and I had devoured their first album and I felt almost guilty seeing them without her. But I had a strange reaction watching Jim Morrison. Everyone around me seemed transfixed, but I observed his every move in a state of cold hyperawareness. I remember this feeling much more clearly than the concert. I felt, watching Jim Morrison, that I could do that. I can't say why I thought this. I had nothing in my experience to make me think that would ever be possible, yet I harbored that conceit. I felt both kinship and contempt for him. I could feel his self-consciousness as well as his supreme confidence. He exuded a mixture of beauty and self-loathing, and mystic pain, like a West Coast Saint Sebastian. When anyone asked how the Doors were, I just said they were great. I was somewhat ashamed of how I had responded to their concert.

In *Poems a Penny Each*, James Joyce wrote a line that dogged me—*the signs that mock me as I go*. It came in my mind some weeks after the Doors concert, and I mentioned it to Ed Hansen. I always liked Ed. He was small though sturdy, and with his brown overcoat, light brown hair, elfin eyes, and wide mouth, he reminded me of the painter Soutine. He was shot in the lung on DeKalb Avenue by a pack of wild children yet maintained a childlike quality himself.

He said nothing of the Joyce quote but one night brought me a record by the Byrds. "This song is going to be important to you," he said as he touched the needle to "So You Want to Be a Rock 'N' Roll Star." Something in the song excited and unnerved me but I couldn't divine his intention.

On a wintry night in 1968 someone came to our door and told us Ed was in trouble. Robert and I went out to find him. I grabbed my black lamb toy that Robert had given to me. It was his black sheep boy to black sheep girl present. Ed was something of a black sheep himself, so I took it along as a comforting talisman.

Ed was perched high up on a crane; he wouldn't come down. It was a cold, clear night, and as Robert talked to him, I climbed up the crane and gave him the lamb. He was shivering. We were the rebels without a cause and he was our sad Sal Mineo. Griffith Park in Brooklyn.

Ed followed me down, and Robert took him home.

"Don't worry about the lamb," he said when he returned. "I'll find you another."

We lost contact with Ed but a decade later he was with me in an unexpected way. As I approached the microphone with my electric guitar to sing the opening line "So you want to be a rock 'n' roll star," I remembered his words. Small prophecies.

There were days, rainy gray days, when the streets of Brooklyn were worthy of a photograph, every window the lens of a Leica, the view grainy and immobile. We gathered our colored pencils and sheets of paper and drew like wild, feral children into the night, until, exhausted, we fell into bed. We lay in each other's arms, still awkward but happy, exchanging breathless kisses into sleep.

The boy I had met was shy and inarticulate. He liked to be led, to be taken by the hand and enter wholeheartedly another world. He was masculine and protective, even as he was feminine and submissive. Meticulous in his dress and demeanor, he was also capable of a frightening disorder within his work. His

own worlds were solitary and dangerous, anticipating freedom, ecstasy, and release.

Sometimes I would awaken and find him working in the dim light of votive candles. Adding touches to a drawing, turning the work this way and that, he would examine it from every angle. Pensive, preoccupied, he'd look up and see me watching him and he'd smile. That smile broke through anything else he was feeling or experiencing—even later, when he was dying, in mortal pain.

In the war of magic and religion, is magic ultimately the victor? Perhaps priest and magician were once one, but the priest, learning humility in the face of God, discarded the spell for prayer.

Robert trusted in the law of empathy, by which he could, by his will, transfer himself into an object or a work of art, and thus influence the outer world. He did not feel redeemed by the work he did. He did not seek redemption. He sought to see what others did not, the projection of his imagination.

He thought his own process drudgery because he saw the finished outcome so quickly. He was drawn to sculpture but felt the medium to be obsolete. Still, he spent hours studying the *Slaves* of Michelangelo, wishing to access the feeling of working with the human form without the labor of the hammer and chisel.

He sketched out an idea for an animation depicting us in a Tantric Garden of Eden. He needed nude pictures of us to make cutouts for the geometric garden that bloomed in his mind. He asked a classmate, Lloyd Ziff, to take the nude photographs, but I wasn't happy about it. I didn't particularly relish posing as I was still somewhat self-conscious about the scars on my stomach.

The images were rigid and not as Robert had envisioned. I had an old 35mm camera and I suggested he take the photographs, but he didn't have the patience for developing and printing. He used so many photographic images from other sources I thought he could

get the results he sought shooting them himself. "I wish I could just project everything on the paper," he said. "By the time I'm halfway through I'm already on to something else." The Garden was abandoned.

Robert's early work was clearly drawn from his experiences with LSD. His drawings and small constructions had the dated charm of the Surrealists and the geometric purity of Tantric art. Slowly his work took a turn toward the Catholic: the lamb, the Virgin, and the Christ.

He took down the Indian cloths from the walls and dyed our old sheets black and violet. He stapled them to the wall and hung crucifixes and religious prints upon them. We had no difficulty finding framed portraits of saints in junk heaps or in Salvation Army stores. Robert would remove the lithographs and hand-color or work them into a large drawing, collage, or construction.

But Robert, wishing to shed his Catholic yoke, delved into another side of the spirit, reigned over by the Angel of Light. The image of Lucifer, the fallen angel, came to eclipse the saints he used in his collages and varnished onto boxes. On one small wooden box, he applied the face of Christ; inside, a Mother and Child with a tiny white rose; and in the inner lid, I was surprised to find the face of the Devil, with his extended tongue.

I would return home to find Robert in brown monk's cloth, a Jesuit robe he had found in a thrift store, poring over pamphlets on alchemy and magic. He asked me to bring him books slanted toward the occult. At first he didn't read these books so much as utilize their pentagrams and satanic images, deconstructing and refiguring them. He was not evil, though as darker elements infused his work, he became more silent.

He grew interested in creating visual spells, which might serve to call up Satan, like one would a genie. He imagined if he could make a pact that accessed Satan's purest self, the self of the light, he would

recognize a kindred soul, and that Satan would grant him fame and fortune. He did not have to ask for greatness, for the ability to be an artist, because he believed he already had that.

"You're looking for shortcuts," I said.

"Why should I take the long road?" he answered.

Sometimes, during lunch break at Scribner's, I would go to St. Patrick's to visit the young Saint Stanislaus. I would pray for the dead, whom I seemed to love as much as the living: Rimbaud, Seurat, Camille Claudel, and the mistress of Jules Laforgue. And I would pray for us.

Robert's prayers were like wishes. He was ambitious for secret knowledge. We were both praying for Robert's soul, he to sell it and I to save it.

Later he would say that the Church led him to God, and LSD led him to the universe. He also said that art led him to the devil, and sex kept him with the devil.

Some of the signs and portents were too painful to acknowledge. One night at Hall Street I stood at the entrance of our bedroom while Robert slept and had a vision of him stretched on a rack, his white shirt crumbling as he turned to dust before my eyes. He woke up and felt my horror. "What did you see?" he cried.

"Nothing," I answered, turning away, choosing not to accept what I had seen. Though I would someday hold his ashes in my hand.

★

Robert and I hardly fought, but we would bicker like children—usually over managing our small income. My salary was sixty-five dollars a week and Robert would find the occasional odd job. With rent at eighty dollars a month, plus utilities, every penny had to be accounted for. Subway tokens were twenty cents apiece and I needed ten a week. Robert smoked cigarettes and they were thirty-five cents a pack. My

weakness for using the phone booth in the diner was the most problematic. He couldn't comprehend my deep attachment to my siblings. A handful of coins on the telephone could mean one less meal. My mother sometimes slipped a dollar bill in her cards or letters. This seemingly small gesture represented many coins from her waitress tip jar and it was always appreciated.

We liked to go to the Bowery, examining tattered silk dresses, frayed cashmere overcoats, and used motorcycle jackets. On Orchard Street we would hunt out inexpensive but interesting materials for a new work: sheets of Mylar, wolf skins, obscure hardware. We spent hours at Pearl Paint on Canal Street and then took a subway to Coney Island to walk along the boardwalk and share a Nathan's hot dog.

My table manners appalled Robert. I could see it in the cast of his eyes, the turn of his head. When I ate with my hands, he thought it drew too much attention, even while he'd be sitting in the booth bare-chested, wearing several beaded necklaces and an embroidered sheepskin vest. Our nitpicking usually evolved into laughter, especially when I'd point out such discrepancies. We continued these diner arguments throughout our long friendship. My manners never got any better but his attire went through some extremely flamboyant changes.

In those days, Brooklyn was very much an outer borough, and seemed far removed from the action in "The City." Robert loved to go to Manhattan. He felt alive when he crossed the East River, and it was there he later went through rapid transformations, personally and artistically.

I lived in my own world, dreaming about the dead and their vanished centuries. As a young girl I had spent hours copying the elegant script forming the words of the Declaration of Independence. Handwriting had always fascinated me. Now I was able to integrate this obscure skill into my own drawings. I became fascinated with Islamic calligraphy, and sometimes I would take the Persian necklace out of its tissue wrapping and set it before me when I was drawing.

I was promoted at Scribner's from the phone desk to sales. That year, the big sellers were Adam Smith's *The Money Game* and Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, summing up the polarization of everything that was rampant in our country. I identified with neither. I felt disconnected from all that was outside the world that Robert and I had created between us.

In my low periods, I wondered what was the point of creating art. For whom? Are we animating God? Are we talking to ourselves? And what was the ultimate goal? To have one's work caged in art's great zoos—the Modern, the Met, the Louvre?

I craved honesty, yet found dishonesty in myself. Why commit to art? For self-realization, or for itself? It seemed indulgent to add to the glut unless one offered illumination.

Often I'd sit and try to write or draw, but all of the manic activity in the streets, coupled with the Vietnam War, made my efforts seem meaningless. I could not identify with political movements. In trying to join them I felt overwhelmed by yet another form of bureaucracy. I wondered if anything I did mattered.

Robert had little patience with these introspective bouts of mine. He never seemed to question his artistic drives, and by his example, I understood that what matters is the work: the string of words propelled by God becoming a poem, the weave of color and graphite scrawled upon the sheet that magnifies His motion. To achieve within the work a perfect balance of faith and execution. From this state of mind comes a light, life-charged.

Picasso didn't crawl in a shell when his beloved Basque country was bombed. He reacted by creating a masterpiece in *Guernica* to remind us of the injustices committed against his people. When I had extra money I'd go to the Museum of Modern Art and sit before *Guernica*, spending long hours considering the fallen horse and the eye of the bulb shining over the sad spoils of war. Then I'd get back to work.

That spring, only days before Palm Sunday, Martin Luther King was gunned down at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. There was a picture in the paper of Coretta Scott King comforting her young daughter, her face wet with tears behind her widow's veil. I felt sick at heart, just as I did as a teenage girl watching Jacqueline Kennedy in her flowing black veil, standing with her children as her husband's body passed in a horse-drawn caisson. I tried to speak of my feelings in a drawing or poem but I couldn't. It seemed whenever I wanted to express injustice I never had the right lines.

Robert had bought me a white dress for Easter, but he gave it to me on Palm Sunday to assuage my sadness. It was a tattered Victorian tea dress of handkerchief linen. I adored it and wore it in our apartment, a fragile armor against the ominous portents of 1968.

My Easter dress was not suited to wear to the Mapplethorpe family dinner, nor was anything else we had amongst our few pieces of clothing.

I was fairly independent of my parents. I loved them but was not concerned about how they may have felt about my and Robert's life together. But Robert was not so free. He was still their Catholic son, unable to tell them we were living together out of wedlock. He had been warmly welcomed in my parents' house but worried I would not be welcome in his.

At first Robert thought it would be best if he slowly introduced me in phone calls to his parents. Then he decided to tell them we had eloped to Aruba and had gotten married. A friend of his was traveling in the Caribbean and Robert wrote his mother a letter, his friend postmarking it from Aruba.

I felt this elaborate deception unnecessary. I thought he should just tell them the truth, really believing they would eventually accept us as we were. "No," he would say desperately. "They're strict Catholics."

It wasn't until we visited his parents that I understood his concern. His father greeted us with icy silence. I couldn't comprehend a man not embracing his son.

The entire family was grouped around the dining room table—his older sister and brother and their spouses and his four younger siblings. The table was set, everything in place for a perfect meal. His father barely looked at me, and said nothing to Robert except, "You should cut your hair. You look like a girl."

Robert's mother, Joan, did her best to offer some sense of warmth. After dinner, she slipped Robert some money from her apron pocket and took me into her room, where she opened her jewelry box. Looking at my hand, she took out a gold ring. "We didn't have enough money for a ring," I said.

"You should wear one on your left ring finger," she told me, pressing it into my hand.

Robert was very tender toward Joan when Harry wasn't around. Joan had spirit. She laughed easily, chain-smoked, and obsessively cleaned house. I realized Robert got his sense of order not entirely from the Catholic Church. Joan favored Robert and seemed to have a secret pride in Robert's chosen path. Robert's father had wanted him to be a commercial artist, but he refused. He was driven to prove his father wrong.

The family hugged and congratulated us as we left. Harry stood in the background. "I don't believe they're married at all," he was heard to say.

Robert was cutting out sideshow freaks from an oversized paperback on Tod Browning. Hermaphrodites, pinheads, and Siamese twins were scattered everywhere. It threw me, for I couldn't see a connection between these images and Robert's recent preoccupation with magic and religion.

As always, I found ways to keep in step with him through my own drawings and poems. I drew circus characters and told stories about them, of Hagen Waker the nocturnal tightrope walker, Balthazar the Donkey-Faced Boy, and Aratha Kelly with his moon-shaped head. Robert had no more explanation of why he was drawn to freaks than I had in creating them.

It was in that spirit that we would go to Coney Island to visit the sideshows. We had looked for Hubert's on Forty-second Street, which had featured Snake Princess Wago and a flea circus, but it had closed in 1965. We did find a small museum that had body parts and human embryos in specimen jars, and Robert got fixated on the idea to use something of that sort in an assemblage. He asked around where he might find something of that sort, and a friend told him about the ruins of the old City Hospital on Welfare (later Roosevelt) Island.

On a Sunday we traveled there with our friends from Pratt. There were two points on the island that we visited. The first was a sprawling nineteenth-century building that had the aura of a madhouse; it was the Smallpox Hospital, the first place in America to receive victims of contagion. Separated only by barbed wire and broken glass, we imagined dying of leprosy and the plague.

The other ruins were what were left of the old City Hospital, with its forbidding institutional architecture, finally to be demolished in 1994. When we entered it, we were struck by the silence and an odd medicinal smell. We went from room to room and saw shelves of medical specimens in their glass jars. Many were broken, vandalized by visiting rodents. Robert combed each room until he found what he was looking for, an embryo swimming in formaldehyde within a womb of glass.

We all had to agree that Robert would most likely make great use of it. He clutched the precious find on the journey home. Even in his silence, I could feel his excitement and anticipation, imagining how he could make it work as art. We left our friends on Myrtle Avenue.

Just as we turned the corner to Hall Street, the glass jar slipped inexplicably from his hands and shattered on the sidewalk, just steps from our door.

I saw his face. He was so deflated that neither of us could say anything. The purloined jar had sat on a shelf for decades, undisturbed. It was almost as if he had taken its life. "Go upstairs," he said. "I'll clean it up." We never mentioned it again. There was something about that jar. The shards of heavy glass seemed to foreshadow the deepening of our days; we didn't speak of it but each of us seemed inflicted with a vague internal restlessness.

In early June, Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol. Although Robert tended not to be romantic about artists, he was very upset about it. He loved Andy Warhol and considered him our most important living artist. It was as close to hero worship as he ever got. He respected artists like Cocteau and Pasolini, who merged life and art, but for Robert, the most interesting of them was Andy Warhol, documenting the human mise-en-scène in his silver-lined Factory.

I didn't feel for Warhol the way Robert did. His work reflected a culture I wanted to avoid. I hated the soup and felt little for the can. I preferred an artist who transformed his time, not mirrored it.

Soon after, one of my customers and I fell into a discussion about our political responsibilities. It was an election year and he represented Robert Kennedy. The California primary was pending and we agreed to meet again afterward. I was excited about the prospect of working for someone with the ideals I cherished and who promised to end the war in Vietnam. I saw Kennedy's candidacy as a way in which idealism could be converted into meaningful political action, that something might be achieved to truly help those in need.

Still shaken by the Warhol shooting, Robert stayed home to do

a tribute drawing for Andy. I went home to see my father. He was a wise and fair man and I wanted his opinion about Robert Kennedy. We sat together on the couch watching the primary returns, which were favorable. My father winked at me, taking pleasure in the promise of our young candidate and my own enthusiasm. In the intermittent hours we followed a late news feed from California to the East Coast. I was filled with pride as I slept but the following morning everything had changed. He had won the primary for the Democratic nomination for president and his jubilant smile seemed a light on earth. But he was shot down as he walked through the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel. My father and I once again sat on the couch, holding hands, waiting for hours for news of his condition.

Senator Robert F. Kennedy was dead.

"Daddy, Daddy," I sobbed, burying my face in his shoulder.

My father put his arm around me. He didn't say a thing. I guess he had already seen it all. But it seemed to me that the world outside was unraveling, and, increasingly, my own world as well.

I came home and there were cutouts of statues, the torsos and buttocks of the Greeks, the *Slaves* of Michelangelo, images of sailors, tattoos, and stars. To keep up with him, I read Robert passages from *Miracle of the Rose*, but he was always a step ahead. While I was reading Genet, it was as if he was becoming Genet.

He discarded his sheepskin vest and beads and found a sailor's uniform. He had no love of the sea. In his sailor dress and cap, he resonated a Cocteau drawing or the world of Genet's Robert Querelle. He had no interest in war, but the relics and rituals of war attracted him. He admired the stoic beauty of the Japanese kamikaze pilots who laid out their clothing—meticulously folded shirt, a white silk scarf—to be donned before battle.

I liked to participate in his fascinations. I found him a peacoat and a pilot's silk scarf, though for me, my perception of World War II was filtered through the Bomb and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I acknowledged

his world as he willingly entered mine. At times, however, I felt mystified and even upset by a sudden transformation. When he covered the walls and medallion ceiling of our bedroom with Mylar, I felt shut out because it seemed more for him than me. He had hopes it would be stimulating but in my eyes it had the distorted effect of a funhouse mirror. I mourned the dismantling of the romantic chapel in which we slept.

He was disappointed I didn't like it. "What were you thinking?" I asked him.

"I don't think," he insisted. "I feel."

Robert was good to me, yet I could tell he was somewhere else. I was accustomed to him being quiet, but not silently brooding. Something was bothering him, something that was not about money. He never ceased to be affectionate to me, but he just seemed troubled.

He slept through the day and worked through the night. I would awake to find him staring at the bodies chiseled by Michelangelo tacked in a row on the wall. I would have preferred an argument to silence but it wasn't his way. I could no longer decipher his moods.

I noticed that at night there was no music. He withdrew from me and paced about, unfocused, not fully realizing his work. Half-finished montages of freaks, saints, and sailors littered the floor. It was unlike him to leave his work in that state. It was something that he had always admonished me for. I felt powerless to penetrate the stoic darkness surrounding him.

His agitation mounted as he became increasingly unsatisfied with his work. "The old imagery doesn't work for me," he would say. One Sunday afternoon he took a soldering iron to the groin of a Madonna. After he was done, he just shrugged it off. "It was a moment of insanity," he said.

There came a time when Robert's aesthetic became so consuming that I felt it was no longer our world, but his. I believed in him, but he had transformed our home into a theater of his own design. The vel-

vet backdrop of our fable had been replaced with metallic shades and black satin. The white mulberry tree was draped in heavy net. I paced while he slept, ricocheting like a dove skidding the lonely confines of a Joseph Cornell box.

Our wordless nights made me restless. Something in the change of the weather marked a change in myself as well. I felt a longing, a curiosity, and a vibrancy that seemed to stifle as I walked in the evenings after work from the subway to Hall Street. I began to stop at Janet's on Clinton more often, but if I stayed too long, Robert would get uncharacteristically annoyed, and increasingly possessive. "I waited all day for you," he would say.

Slowly I began to spend more time with old friends in the Pratt area, especially the painter Howard Michels. He was the boy I was looking for on the day I met Robert. He had moved to Clinton with the artist Kenny Tisa, but at that time he was on his own. His huge paintings resonated the physical power of the Hans Hofmann School and his drawings, though unique, were reminiscent of those of Pollock and de Kooning.

In my hunger for communication I turned to him. I began to visit him frequently on the way home from work. Howie, as he was known, was articulate, passionate, well read, and politically active. It was a relief to converse with someone about everything from Nietzsche to Godard. I admired his work and looked forward to the kinship we shared in these visits. But as time passed I was less than candid with Robert about the nature of our growing intimacy.

In retrospect, the summer of 1968 marked a time of physical awakening for both Robert and me. I had not yet comprehended that Robert's conflicted behavior related to his sexuality. I knew he

deeply cared for me, but it occurred to me that he had tired of me physically. In some ways I felt betrayed, but in reality it was I who betrayed him.

I fled our little home on Hall Street. Robert was devastated, yet still could not offer any explanation for the silence that engulfed us.

I could not easily cast off the world Robert and I shared. I wasn't certain where to go next, so when Janet offered to share a sixth-floor walk-up on the Lower East Side, I accepted. This arrangement, though painful for Robert, was much preferred to my living alone or moving in with Howie.

As distraught as Robert was over my leave-taking, he helped me move my things into the new apartment. For the first time, I had my own room, to arrange as I pleased, and I began a new series of drawings. Leaving my circus animals behind, I became my own subject, producing self-portraits that emphasized a more feminine, earthy side of myself. I took to wearing dresses and waving my hair. I waited for my painter to come, but most often he didn't.

Robert and I, unable to break our bonds, continued to see one another. Even as my relationship with Howie waxed and waned, he implored me to return. He wanted us to get back together as if nothing had happened. He was ready to forgive me, yet I wasn't repentant. I wasn't willing to go backward, especially since Robert still seemed to be harboring an inner turmoil that he refused to voice.

In early September, Robert appeared out of the blue at Scribner's. Dressed in a long oxblood leather trench coat, belted at the waist, he looked both handsome and lost. He had returned to Pratt and applied for a student loan, buying the coat and a ticket to San Francisco with some of the money.

He said he wanted to talk to me. We went outside and stood on the corner of Forty-eighth and Fifth Avenue. "Please come back," he said, "or I'm leaving for San Francisco."

I couldn't imagine why he would go there. His explanation was disjointed, vague. Liberty Street, there was someone who knew the ropes, a place on Castro.

He grabbed my hand. "Come with me. There's freedom there. I have to find out who I am."

The only thing I knew about San Francisco was the great earthquake and Haight-Ashbury. "I'm already free," I said.

He stared at me with a desperate intensity. "If you don't come, I'll be with a guy. I'll turn homosexual," he threatened.

I just looked at him, not understanding at all. There was nothing in our relationship that had prepared me for such a revelation. All of the signs that he had obliquely imparted I had interpreted as the evolution of his art. Not of his self.

I was less than compassionate, a fact I came to regret. His eyes looked as if he had been working all night on speed. Wordlessly he handed me an envelope.

I watched him walk away and disappear into the crowd.

The first thing that struck me was that he had written his letter on Scribner's stationery. His handwriting, usually so deliberate, was fraught with contradiction; it went from neat and precise to a childlike scrawl. But even before I read the words, the thing that deeply moved me was the simple heading: "Patti—What I think—Robert." I had asked, even begged him so many times before I left to tell me what he was thinking about, what was on his mind. He had no words for me.

I realized, looking at these sheets of paper, that he had gone deep within himself on my account and had attempted to express the inexpressible. Imagining the anguish that drew him to write this letter brought me to tears.

"I open doors, I close doors," he wrote. He loved no one, he loved everyone. He loved sex, he hated sex. Life is a lie, truth is a

lie. His thoughts ended with a healing wound. "I stand naked when I draw. God holds my hand and we sing together." His manifesto as an artist.

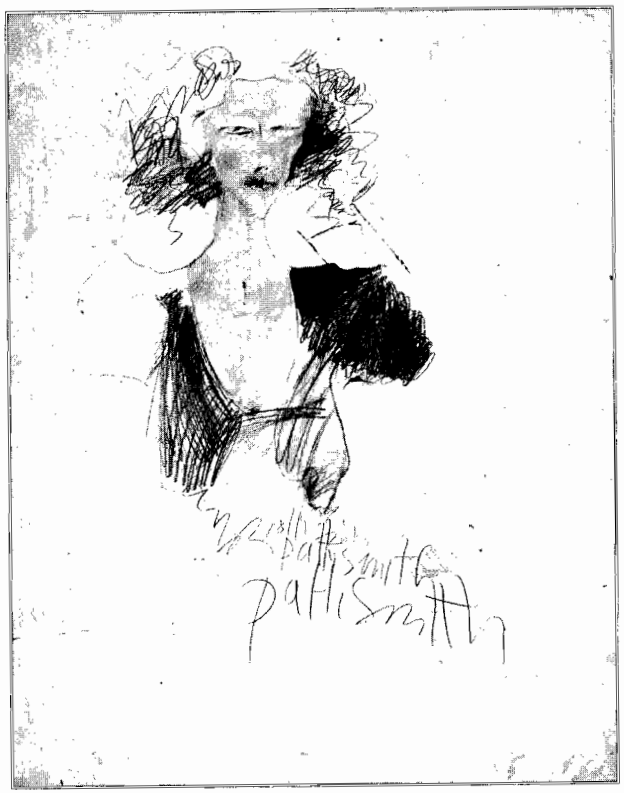
I let the confessional aspects fall away, and I accepted those words as a communion wafer. He had cast the line that would seduce me, ultimately bind us together. I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope, not knowing what would happen next.

★

The walls were covered with drawings. I emulated Frida Kahlo, creating a suite of self-portraits, each containing a shard of poetry that tracked my fragmented emotional state. I imagined her great suffering that made my own seem small. One evening I was mounting the stairs to the apartment and Janet met me halfway. "We've been robbed," she cried. I followed her up the stairs. I reasoned that we owned very little that would interest a thief. I went into my room. The thieves, frustrated by our lack of sellable goods, had torn down most of my drawings. The few still intact were covered with mud and boot prints.

Deeply shaken, Janet decided it was time to leave the apartment and move in with her boyfriend. East of Avenue A in the East Village was still a danger zone, and since I had promised Robert I wouldn't stay there alone, I went back to Brooklyn. I found a two-room flat on Clinton Avenue, a block from the stoop I had slept on the summer before. I tacked up the surviving drawings on the wall. Then, on impulse, I walked over to Jake's Art Supplies and bought some oils, brushes, and canvas. I decided I was going to paint.

I had watched Howie paint when I was with him. His process was physical and abstract in a way that Robert's was not, and I recalled



Self Portrait, *Brooklyn, 1968*

my own young ambitions, seized with the desire to pick up a brush myself. Taking my camera to MoMA, I searched for inspiration. I took a series of black-and-white portraits of de Kooning's *Woman I,* and had them developed. Taping them to the wall, I began her portrait. It amused me to do a portrait of a portrait.

Robert was still in San Francisco. He had written that he missed me, and that he had accomplished his mission, discovering new things about himself. Even as he spoke to me of his experiences with other men, he assured me he loved me.

My reaction to his admission was more emotional than I had anticipated. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for this. I felt I had failed him. I had thought a man turned homosexual when there was not the right woman to save him, a misconception I had developed from the tragic union of Rimbaud and the poet Paul Verlaine. Rimbaud regretted to the end of his life that he could not find a woman with whom he could share his full being, both physically and intellectually.

In my literary imagination, homosexuality was a poetic curse, notions I had gleaned from Mishima, Gide, and Genet. I knew nothing of the reality of homosexuality. I thought it irrevocably meshed with affectation and flamboyance. I had prided myself on being nonjudgmental, but my comprehension was narrow and provincial. Even in reading Genet, I saw his men as a mystical race of thieves and sailors. I didn't fully comprehend their world. I embraced Genet as a poet.

We were evolving with different needs. I needed to explore beyond myself and Robert needed to search within himself. He explored the vocabulary of his work, and as his components shifted and morphed, he was in effect creating a diary of his internal evolution, heralding the emergence of a suppressed sexual identity. He had never given me any indication in his behavior that I would have interpreted as homosexual.

I realized that he had tried to renounce his nature, to deny his desires, to make things right for us. For my part, I wondered if I should have been able to dispel these drives. He had been too shy and respectful and afraid to speak of these things, but there was no doubting he still loved me, and I him.

When Robert returned from San Francisco, he seemed both triumphant and troubled. It was my hope that he would come back transformed, and he did, but not in the way I imagined. He seemed to glow, more like his old self, and was more affectionate to me than ever. Even though he had experienced a sexual awakening, he still hoped that we could find some way of continuing our relationship. I wasn't sure I could come to terms with his new sense of self, nor he with mine. As I wavered, he met someone, a boy named Terry, and he embarked on his first male affair.

Whatever physical encounters he had experienced in San Francisco were random and experimental. Terry was a real boyfriend, kind and handsome, with wavy brown hair. A narcissistic air surrounded them, in their matching belted coats and knowing glances. They were a mirror image, though not so much in physical resemblance as in body language, in sync. I felt a mixture of understanding and envy for their intimacy and the secrets I imagined they shared.

Robert had met Terry through Judy Linn. Terry, soft-spoken and empathetic, accepted Robert's caring for me, and treated me with warmth and compassion. Through Terry and Robert, I observed that homosexuality was a natural way of being. But as the feelings between Terry and Robert deepened, and the intermittent relationship with my painter diffused, I found myself completely alone and conflicted.

Robert and Terry visited me often, and though there was nothing negative between the three of us, something snapped in me. Perhaps it was

the cold weather, my prodigal return to Brooklyn, or the unaccustomed loneliness, but I fell into long bouts of weeping. Robert did everything to make me feel better while Terry stood by helplessly. When Robert came alone, I begged him to stay. He assured me I was always in his thoughts.

As the holidays approached, we agreed to work on books of drawings as a mutual gift. In some way, Robert was giving me an assignment to help me pull myself together, something creative on which to focus. I filled a leather manuscript book with drawings and poems for him, and in turn he presented me a graph paper composition book with drawings very similar to the ones I had seen on our first night. He covered it in purple silk, hand-stitched with black thread.

What remains in my memory of the end of 1968 is Robert's worried expression, the heavy snow, stillborn canvases, and a bit of respite provided by the Rolling Stones. On my birthday Robert came to see me by himself. He brought me a new record. He put the needle on side one and winked. "Sympathy for the Devil" came on and we both started dancing. "It's my song," he said.

★

Where does it all lead? What will become of us? These were our young questions, and young answers were revealed.

It leads to each other. We become ourselves.

For a time Robert protected me, then was dependent on me, and then possessive of me. His transformation was the rose of Genet, and he was pierced deeply by his blooming. I too desired to feel more of the world. Yet sometimes that desire was nothing more than a wish to go backward where our mute light spread from hanging lanterns with mirrored panels. We had ventured out like Maeterlinck's children seeking the bluebird and were caught in the twisted briars of our new experiences.

Robert responded as my beloved twin. His dark curls merged with the tangle of my hair as I shuddered tears. He promised we could go back to the way things were, how we used to be, promising me anything if I would only stop crying.

A part of me wanted to do just that, yet I feared that we could never reach that place again, but would shuttle back and forth like the ferryman's children, across our river of tears. I longed to travel, to Paris, to Egypt, to Samarkand, far from him, far from us.

He too had a path to pursue and would have no choice but to leave me behind.

We learned we wanted too much. We could only give from the perspective of who we were and what we had. Apart, we were able to see with even greater clarity that we didn't want to be without each other.

I needed someone to talk to. I went home to New Jersey for my sister Linda's twenty-first birthday. We were both experiencing growing pains and we comforted each other. I brought her a book of Jacques-Henri Lartigue photographs, and as we leafed through the pages we had a longing to visit France. We sat up through the night plotting, and before we said good night, we had promised to go to Paris together, no small feat for two girls who had never been on an airplane.

The idea of this sustained me through the long winter. I worked overtime at Scribner's, saving money and plotting our route, charting ateliers and graveyards, designing an itinerary for my sister and me, just as I had planned tactical movements for our sibling army.

I don't think this was an artistically productive time for Robert and me. Robert was emotionally overwhelmed by the intensity of facing the nature he had suppressed with me and found through Terry. Yet if he was gratified in one sense, he seemed uninspired, if not bored, and perhaps couldn't help drawing comparisons between the atmosphere of their life to ours.

"Patti, nobody sees as we do," he told me.

Something in the spring air and the restorative power of Easter drew Robert and me back together. We sat in the diner near Pratt and ordered our favorite meal—grilled cheese on rye with tomatoes, and a chocolate malt. We now had enough money for two sandwiches.

Both of us had given ourselves to others. We vacillated and lost everyone, but we had found one another again. We wanted, it seemed, what we already had, a lover and a friend to create with, side by side. To be loyal, yet be free.

I decided the time was right to go away. My extra hours at the bookstore without vacation paid off, and they gave me a leave of absence. My sister and I packed our duffel bags. Reluctantly, I left my drawing materials behind so I could travel light. I brought a notebook and gave my camera to my sister.

Robert and I pledged to work hard while we were apart, I to write poems for him and he to make drawings for me. He promised to write and keep me abreast of his pursuits.

When we embraced to say goodbye, he drew back and looked at me intently. We didn't say anything.

With our small savings, Linda and I went to Paris via Iceland on a prop plane. It was an arduous journey, and though I was excited, I was conflicted about leaving Robert behind. Everything we owned was piled in two small rooms on Clinton Street in Brooklyn manned by an old super who was definitely eyeing our stuff.

Robert had moved out of Hall Street and was staying with friends near Myrtle Avenue. Unlike myself, Robert was not driven by travel. The prospect of being financially independent through his work was

his primary goal, but for the meantime he was dependent on odd jobs and his student loan money.

Linda and I were overjoyed to be in Paris, the city of our dreams. We stayed at a fleabag hotel in Montmartre and combed the city in search of where Piaf had sung, Gérard de Nerval had slept, and Baudelaire was buried. I found some graffiti on the rue des Innocents that inspired me to draw. Linda and I found an art supply shop and lingered for hours examining beautiful French drawing papers with exquisite watermarks of angels. I bought some pencils, a few sheets of Arches, and chose a large red portfolio with canvas ribbons, using it as a makeshift table on my bed. With one leg crossed, the other dangling over the side, I drew confidently.

I dragged my portfolio from gallery to gallery. We joined a troupe of street musicians and busked for change. I worked on my drawings and wrote and Linda took photographs. We ate bread and cheese, drank Algerian wine, contracted lice, wore boatneck shirts, and shuffled happily through the backstreets of Paris.

We saw Godard's *One Plus One*. The film made a huge impression on me politically and renewed my affection for the Rolling Stones. Only days later, the French papers were covered with the face of Brian Jones: *Est Mort, 27 Ans*. I mourned the fact that we could not attend the free concert the remaining Stones held in his memory for over 250,000 in Hyde Park, where Mick Jagger released 3,500 white butterflies into the London sky. I laid my drawing pencils aside and began a cycle of poems to Brian Jones, for the first time expressing my love for rock and roll within my own work.

One of the highlights of our days was our trek to the American Express office to send and receive mail. There was always something from Robert, funny little letters describing his work, his health, his trials, and always his love.

He had temporarily moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan, sharing a loft on Delancey Street with Terry, with whom he still had an amicable friendship, and a couple of Terry's friends who had a moving company. Work as a mover afforded Robert pocket money, and the loft had enough raw space for him to continue developing his art.

His first letters seemed a bit down but brightened when he described seeing *Midnight Cowboy* for the first time. It was unusual for Robert to go to a movie, but he took this film to heart. "It's about a cowboy stud on 42nd Street," he wrote me, and called it a "masterpiece." He felt a deep identification with the hero, infusing the idea of the hustler into his work, and then into his life. "Hustler-hustler-hustler. I guess that's what I'm about."

Sometimes he seemed lost. I would read his letters, wishing I could be home by his side. "Patti—wanted to cry so bad," he wrote, "but my tears are inside. A blindfold keeps them there. I can't see today. Patti—I don't know anything."

He would take the F train to Times Square, mingling with the cons, pimps, and prostitutes in what he called "the Garden of Perversion."

He took a picture for me in a photo booth, wearing the peacoat I gave him and peering from beneath an old French naval cap; it has always been my favorite photograph of him.

In response I made a collage drawing for him called *My Hustler*, where I used one of his letters as a component. Even as he reassured me that I had nothing to worry about, he seemed to be moving deeper into the sexual underworld that he was portraying in his art. He seemed to be attracted to S&M imagery—"I'm not sure what that all means—just know it's good"—and described to me works titled *Tight Fucking Pants*, and drawings in which he lacerated S&M characters with a matte knife. "I have a hook coming out of where his prick should be, where I'm gonna hang that chain with dice and skulls from it." He spoke of using bloody bandages and starred patches of gauze.

He wasn't merely jerking off. He was filtering this world through his own aesthetic, criticizing a movie called *Male Magazine* as "nothing more than an exploitation film using an all male cast." When he visited the Tool Box, an S&M bar, he felt it was "just a bunch of big chains and shit on the wall, nothing really exciting," and wished he could design a place like that.

As the weeks went on, I worried that he wasn't doing well. It wasn't like him to complain about his physical condition. "My mouth is sick," he wrote, "my gums are white and achy." He sometimes didn't have enough money to eat.

His P.S. was still filled with Robert bravado. "I've been accused of dressing like a hustler, having the mind of a hustler and the body of one.

"Still love you through it all," he ended, signing it "Robert" with the *t* forming a blue star, our sign.

★

My sister and I returned to New York on July 21. Everybody was talking about the moon. A man had walked upon it, but I hardly noticed.

Dragging my duffel bag and portfolio, I found the loft where Robert was staying on Delancey Street, beneath the Williamsburg Bridge. He was overjoyed to see me, but I found him in very bad shape. His letters hadn't completely prepared me for how poorly he was doing. He was suffering from trench mouth and a high-grade fever, and he had lost weight. He tried to hide how weak he was, but every time he stood up he got dizzy. Yet he had been productive.

We were alone; the other fellows he shared the loft with had gone to Fire Island for the weekend. I read him some of my new poems and he fell asleep. I roamed the loft. The polished floors were scattered with the work he had so vividly described in his letters. He was right to be confident about it. It was good. Male sex. There was also one of me, with my straw hat in a field of orange rectangles.

I straightened his things. His colored pencils, brass sharpeners, remnants of male magazines, gold stars, and gauze. Then I lay down beside him, considering my next move.

Before dawn we were awakened by a series of shots and screams. The police instructed us to lock our doors and not leave for a few hours. A young man had been murdered outside our door. Robert was horrified that we had been so close to danger on the night of my return.

In the morning when I opened the door, I was shaken to see the chalk outline of the victim's body. "We can't stay here," he said. He was concerned for our safety. We left most everything behind—my duffel bag with my Paris mementos, his art supplies and clothing—and took only our most precious possessions, our portfolios, traveling across town to the Hotel Allerton on Eighth Avenue, a place known for its very cheap rooms.

These days marked the lowest point in our life together. I don't remember how we found our way to the Allerton. It was a terrible place, dark and neglected, with dusty windows that overlooked the noisy street. Robert gave me twenty dollars that he had made moving pianos; most of it went for the room deposit. I bought a carton of milk, bread, and peanut butter, but he couldn't eat. I sat there watching him sweat and shiver on an iron bed. The springs of the ancient mattress poked through the stained sheet. The place reeked of piss and exterminator fluid, the wallpaper peeling like dead skin in summer. There was no running water in the corroded sink, only occasional rusted droplets plopping through the night.

Despite his illness, he wanted to make love, and perhaps our union was some comfort, for it drew out his sweat. In the morning he went out in the hall to go to the bathroom and came back visibly upset. He had exhibited signs of gonorrhea. His immediate sense of guilt and worry that I might have contracted it magnified his anxiety about our situation.

He thankfully slept through the afternoon as I wandered the halls. The place was filled with derelicts and junkies. I was no stranger to cheap hotels. My sister and I had stayed in Pigalle in a sixth-floor walk-up, but our room was clean, even cheery, with a romantic view of the rooftops of Paris. There was nothing romantic about this place, seeing half-naked guys trying to find a vein in limbs infested with sores. Everybody's door was open because it was so hot, and I had to avert my eyes as I shuttled to and from the bathroom to rinse out cloths for Robert's forehead. I felt like a kid in a movie theater trying to hide from the shower scene in *Psycho*. It was the one image that made Robert laugh.

His lumpy pillow was crawling with lice and they mingled with his damp matted curls. I had seen plenty of lice in Paris and could at least connect them with the world of Rimbaud. The stained lumpy pillow was sadder still.

I went to get Robert some water and a voice called to me from across the hall. It was hard to tell whether it was male or female. I looked and saw a somewhat battered beauty wrapped in ragged chiffon sitting on the edge of a bed. I felt safe with him as he told me his tale. He had once been a ballet dancer but now he was a morphine addict, a mix of Nureyev and Artaud. His legs were still muscled but most of his teeth were gone. How glorious he must have been with his golden hair, square shoulders, and high cheekbones. I sat outside his door, the sole audience to his dreamlike performance, drifting through the hall like Isadora Duncan with chiffon streaming as he sang an atonal version of "Wild Is the Wind."

He told me the stories of some of his neighbors, room by room, and what they had sacrificed for alcohol and drugs. Never had I seen so much collective misery and lost hopes, forlorn souls who had fouled their lives. He seemed to preside over them all, sweetly mourning his own failed career, dancing through the halls with his length of pale chiffon.

Sitting by Robert, examining our own fate, I nearly regretted the pursuit of art. The heavy portfolios propped against the stained wall, mine red with gray ribbons, his black with black ribbons, seemed such a material burden. There were times, even when I was in Paris, that I had just wanted to leave the lot of it in an alley and be free. But as I untied the ribbons and looked at our work, I felt we were on the right path. We just needed a little luck.

In the night, Robert, generally so stoic, cried out. His gums had abscessed, he was deeply flushed, and the sheet was soaked with his sweat. I sought the morphine angel. "Do you have anything for him?" I pleaded. "Anything to ease his pain?" I tried to permeate his opiate veil. He gave me a moment of lucidity, and came to our room. Robert was lying there, delirious with fever. I thought he might die.

"You have to take him to a doctor," the morphine angel said. "You have to leave here. This place isn't for you." I looked into his face. All that he had experienced was in those dead blue eyes. For a moment they ignited. Not for himself but for us.

We did not have enough money to pay our bill. At first light I woke Robert, helped him dress, and walked him down the fire escape. I left him there on the sidewalk so I could climb back up and get our portfolios. All we had in the world.

When I looked up I saw some of the woebegone residents waving handkerchiefs. They leaned out of windows calling "goodbye, goodbye" to the children who were escaping the purgatory of their existence.

I hailed a cab. Robert slid in, followed by the portfolios. Before ducking into the taxi, I took a last look at the sad splendor of this scene, the waving hands, the Allerton's foreboding neon sign, and the morphine angel singing from the fire escape.

Robert rested his head on my shoulder. I could feel some of the stress leave his body. "It's going to be all right," I said. "I'll get my job back and you'll get better."

"We're going to make it, Patti," he said.

We promised that we'd never leave one another again, until we both knew we were ready to stand on our own. And this vow, through everything we were yet to go through, we kept.

"Chelsea Hotel," I told the driver, fumbling through my pockets for change, not completely certain I could pay him.

Hotel Chelsea