Just Kids

One of my favorite Leonard Cohen songs begins with the lines,"I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel/You were talking so brave and so free." Patti Smith's memoir of her coming-of-age with artist/photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is partially set in this hotel with its unique history and cast of characters.

How different was life in New York City in the late 60s! But first Patti had to get there. Patti, who loved the French symbolists poets--Verlaine, Baudelaire, MallarmÃ© and Rimbaud--knew her future had to be in New York. She had recently had a child out of wedlock and given the baby girl to a family who could afford to keep her. She worked for a few months and saved her money up. But when she reached Philly's Greyhound Station, she discovered the fare had just doubled. In frustration, she went into a phone booth, not knowing whether to weep or call her sister to come retrieve her. But there on the tiny ledge, lay a white patent leather purse with 30-odd bucks inside and a necklace. Patti helped herself to the money and returned the purse and jewelry to the counter. Destiny, she thought.

She had almost no money and one suitcase of her things. She first went to where friends from her town in New Jersey lived, but alas, they had moved on. The young man that answered the door did not know where they had gone but his roommate did. The stranger sent Patti into the room where Robert Mapplethorpe was sleeping; he reminded her of a sleeping angel with curls. He walked her to her friends' new place, but they did not return for a long time. So Patti took to the streets. An enlightened hippie (or so he seemed) taught her where to get free day old bread and wilted lettuce for sandwiches, showed her the best places to sleep. A few days later, she met a man who took her to dinner, but he was not her type. As they were debating what to do next, Mapplethorpe walked by without a shirt on wearing a lambskin vest. Patti ran to him, and begged him to pretend he was her boyfriend and rescue her. He did. And thus a long standing relationship began, both personal and artistic. They both wanted, in fact, knew they would become famous.

They supported each other, though in truth, Patti was often the only one with a regular job--in various book stores. She began as a visual artist and poet and eventually became a rock star, perhaps prefigured by one night's visit to the Chelsea's home restaurant, the El Quixote, where Patti noticed Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe and the Fish, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin--all in the same night--dining and drinking. Patti became Mapplethorpe's first model.

To each other they were muses, lovers, and friends, but after about a year, Mapplethorpe discovered or finally admitted to himself his homosexuality. In describing this part of their history, Patti remains uncharacteristically silent. She only mentions several times, how very sad she felt by the changes in their relationship.

In the early 80s, they moved apart--Patti to Detroit, and a marriage and family. Mapplethorpe remained in New York--he had patrons now, a big loft, his work was appearing in the best

museums.

This incredible story narrates being young during interesting times. It also describes a deep friendship, and how through it, a talented pair learned how to become the artists they dreamed of being in a changing world. If you like this memoir you might also want to read another rock autobiography Life [2] by Keith Richards. Also check out a bio of Mapplethorpe written by an ex-lover and first publisher, Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera [3]. If you love Patti Smith's music and want to explore her poetry try Auguries of Innocence [4]. [5]
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Posted by Dory L. on Feb 24, 2011

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