



M Train

By Patti Smith

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National Best Seller

From the National Book Award–winning author of *Just Kids*: an unforgettable odyssey of a legendary artist, told through the prism of the cafés and haunts she has worked in around the world. It is a book Patti Smith has described as “a roadmap to my life.”

M Train begins in the tiny Greenwich Village café where Smith goes every morning for black coffee, ruminates on the world as it is and the world as it was, and writes in her notebook. Through prose that shifts fluidly between dreams and reality, past and present, and across a landscape of creative aspirations and inspirations, we travel to Frida Kahlo’s Casa Azul in Mexico; to a meeting of an Arctic explorer’s society in Berlin; to a ramshackle seaside bungalow in New York’s Far Rockaway that Smith acquires just before Hurricane Sandy hits; and to the graves of Genet, Plath, Rimbaud, and Mishima.

Woven throughout are reflections on the writer’s craft and on artistic creation. Here, too, are singular memories of Smith’s life in Michigan and the irremediable loss of her husband, Fred Sonic Smith.

Braiding despair with hope and consolation, illustrated with her signature Polaroids, *M Train* is a meditation on travel, detective shows, literature, and coffee. It is a powerful, deeply moving book by one of the most remarkable multiplatform artists at work today.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Incantatory . . . Unlike her first memoir, the now classic, *Just Kids*, which was all about the thrill of ‘becoming,’ *M Train* is mostly about the challenge of enduring erosion and discovering new passions (like detective fiction and a tumbledown cottage in Rockaway Beach, Queens). Smith, of course, is a ‘kid’ no longer. She’s suffered a lot of losses, including the deaths of artist Robert Mapplethorpe, who was her partner in crime in the *Just Kids* years, and her husband, musician Fred ‘Sonic’ Smith, who died suddenly in his 40s. ‘They are all stories now,’ says Smith, thinking of these and other deaths . . . Both of Smith’s memoirs tell a haunting story about being sheltered and fed, in all senses, by New York City.” —Maureen Corrigan, *NPR* (Best Books of 2015)

“Patti Smith’s new book remains one of the best reading experiences I had this year . . . elliptical and fragmentary, weird and beautiful, and, at its core, a reckoning with loss. Much has been made of the book’s seeming spontaneity, its diaristic drift. But as the echoes among its discrete episodes pile up, it starts to resonate like a poem. At one point, Smith writes about W.G. Sebald, and there are affinities with *The Emigrants* in the way *M Train* circles around a tragedy, or constellation of tragedies, pointing rather than naming. It is formally a riskier book than the comparatively straight-ahead *Just Kids*, but a worthy companion piece. And that Smith is still taking on these big artistic dares in 2015 should inspire anyone who longs to make art. In this way, and because it is partly a book about reading other books—how a life is made of volumes—it seems like a fitting way to turn the page on one year in reading, and to welcome in another.” —Garth Risk Hallberg, *The Millions*

“Rich, inventive . . . Where *Just Kids* charted Smith’s path from childhood to celebrity, *M Train* does not move in a simple arc from one destination to another. It meanders between her interior life and her life in the world, connecting dreams, reflections and memories. Smith’s language lures the reader down this nonformulaic path. She doesn’t slap a convenient label on emotions; she dissects them. With each sip [of coffee], her ruminations deepen . . . *M Train* is less about achieving success than surviving it. Smith has outlived many of the companions who sustained her in her youth. She grieves for her husband and her brother; she mourns the artists with whom she had felt a connection when they were alive, including Burroughs and Bowles. And in a scene that strikes a universal chord, she mourns her mother . . . At the center of *M Train* is the passage of time—the way places and events can mean different things at different stages in a person’s life . . . Tender, heartbreaking.” —M. G. Lord, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Incandescent . . . moving, lovely. Patti Smith is a poet with a mindful of memories enough to fill *M Train* to the brim. Let’s be clear: every observation is beautiful. *M Train* is chiefly concerned with salvaging the pieces that, together, form a life entire . . . In its barest sense, the book is a series of cups of coffee around the world, drunk between waking and sleep. But once the memoir has sunk in its claws, these rituals become a framework for more meaningful observations. What is a life, if not a pattern interrupted by occasional revelations or surprises? Where *Just Kids* traced the linear progression of her friendship with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and her coming of age in 1970s New York City, *M Train* finds its footing in shared experiences. It’s the universal—not rock ‘n’ roll in particular—that haunts the reader most . . . Aging and loss transcend fame and geography. Smith whittles her prose down to the essentials . . . *M Train*’s greatest reward, for a reader, is her unwillingness to bend to the dream-cowboy’s recurring doubts [about] ‘writing about nothing.’ Even nothing has meaning—the found objects, the things remembered, the cups of coffee that mark our days better than clocks. Would that every tribute to a life lived sang so beautifully.” —Linnie Greene, *The Rumpus*

“It’s easy to see why so many readers say that *M Train* changed [their] lives. It’s every bit the book *Just Kids* is, full of the same lovely writing, resolute faith in the consolations of art, odd flashes of humor, rawness to memory and experience. It’s obvious why readers find a deep, deep correspondence to their own inner lives in her work . . . The deeper memories in *M Train* tacitly trace the origins of a new phase of [Smith’s] life, including the loss of her parents and, most crucially, of her husband. She conveys with tender restraint what it has meant to lose him, how linked their spirits were. Moments [of] remarkable power blend directness, melancholy, and memory. Smith’s searching voice speaks for a generation that has realized later than most that it, too, would age. ‘I want to hear my mother’s voice,’ she writes. ‘I want to see my children as children.’ But only the artist is innocent enough, or brave enough, to try and live a second time.” —Charles Finch, *Chicago Tribune*

“Intimate and elegantly crafted . . . As a child, a woman and an acclaimed artist, Smith has long reflected on the power of invention and how it shapes a life. Her writing moves effortlessly between past and present, both Smith’s and that of the scholars and makers who have inspired her and with whom she feels a kinship—the Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa, the poet Rimbaud, or Alfred Wegener, the first scientist to present the idea of continental drift. As Smith slips in and out of reverie, the effect is one of a motionless travel; throughout her journeys, real and imagined, she considers what it means to endure the hardships fed to us by time . . . For Smith, this means following her wild and associative mind, a sort of thinking that seams the unremarkable with the sublime. At the heart of *M Train* is the careful braid the author makes between everyday matters and her lyrical take on how art offers a form of sustenance . . . To Smith, the constellation of human experience is as valued in *Jane Eyre* as it is in *Law & Order*—at times, we are dreaming about the high plains even as we clean up after the cats, and try to figure out where we left our wallet. Her photographs appear throughout the book like ghosts, dim and unadorned, a way of seeing how Smith’s imagination elevates the humble objects she cherishes. A silver thread also works its way through her stories—her memories of her late husband, the guitarist Fred Sonic Smith, whose wisdom she grieves for and celebrates. The book’s final essays are a testimony to his words because they dwell deeply on how the mind’s fires can light a way toward hope.” —Emma Trelles, *Miami Herald*

“What makes riding the M Train so rewarding is the way solemn, eloquent meditations on Genet and Kahlo, William Burroughs and Sylvia Plath are offset by Patti Smith moments—like an imaginary dialogue with Nikola Tesla, ‘the patron saint of alternating currents.’” —Stuart Mitchner, *Princeton Town Topics*

“*M Train* comes near to accomplishing Marcel Proust’s goal to follow the workings of the human mind and the human heart. By the end of the book you know that nothing is everything, and that life is a labor of love.” —Joan Juliet Buck, *Harper’s Bazaar*

“Intimate, delicately revealing . . . *M Train* concentrates on a recent spell in Smith’s life, one where she spent days at a local café drinking coffee, writing, and reflecting. Most of *M Train* revolves around the pleasure of a local café—a public place to be private—and that sentiment is at the heart of this book . . . Occasionally, Smith dips back into her relationship with Fred ‘Sonic’ Smith, remembering the moments when the pair took advantage of everything Michigan had to offer, from dive bars in Detroit to beaches on the upper edge of the lower peninsula . . . Perhaps the biggest surprise of *M Train* is Smith’s deep, personal connection with detective shows.” —Stephen Thomas Erlewine, *Vulture.com*

“Evocative . . . *M Train*, works [like] ‘an interior hopscotch in the mind, recording time backwards and forwards’ as Smith skips from moment to moment across the past forty years of her life. Reading the book feels rather like navigating a lucid dream . . . Smith’s words are rhythmic, arranged according to ‘the music of [her] imagination’ . . . The playful tone is endearing, and buoys what is, above all, a meditation on loss—of people, yes, but also of the objects to which she has become attached . . . Time shifts in *M Train*:

One moment Smith is in a café, the next she is staring at [her husband] Fred as he crouches over a cornucopia of her most loved lost things . . . Patti Smith loves nothing lightly, and if she makes writing about [nothing] look easy, consider that it's *not* actually nothing she's writing about—it's everything." —Claire Lampen, *Hyperallergic.com*

"Satisfying . . . Cup after cup of coffee in cafes from Greenwich Village to Tangiers is downed by the Godmother of Punk as this book unfolds . . . There are many pleasures to be found here. This is a book of quiet meditation wherein a *CSI: Miami* marathon can inspire the same deep self-reflection as the work of the late Chilean author Roberto Bolano. Smith stares into her black coffee and whole worlds are opened up to her. *M Train* is her report back from those journeys." —Kristofer Collins, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

"What does it mean to be a woman alone? This question lies at the heart of *M Train*. That, and the eternal query, Where's the best place to get a good coffee? A caffeine-fueled travelogue of first-person vignettes, *M Train* conjures ghosts. The book's touchstones are either cultural heroes (Jean Genet, Alfred Wegener, Akira Kurosawa) whose graves she tracks down in search of talismans, or they're lost loved ones, specifically [her husband] Fred and her brother Todd, both of whom died in 1994. Smith's muses are memories, or figures in dreams, or names in books . . . *M Train* begins and ends in a dream state. The line between waking and sleeping, remembering and doing, living and dying, is porous for Smith . . . Discursive, fanciful, geeky, transgressive, just plain and delightfully weird, it's a book that loses you and you get lost in, finding your own kernels of truth and resonance." —Evelyn McDonnell, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

**** "Powerful . . . Smith shares a rush of memories, reveries, and revelations that reach a height with all the expressive power of her most rapturous '70s rock. *M Train* is a great meditation on solitude, independence, age, a ride-along with the last Romantic standing . . . It proceeds through cups of coffee at tables for one, on planes and in hotels across Latin America, Europe and Asia, animated by a mellowing grief for Smith's husband, who died in 1994. Yet Smith doesn't mourn so much as celebrate their love . . . Smith inventories her inspirations, and makes her house out of the life lived, out of the love spent. *M Train* will make this year's best-of lists." —Matt Damsker, *USA Today* (four stars)

"Essential . . . A collection of lyrical, sometimes mystical musings, with photographs. An account of a quixotic mission to French Guiana appears among stories of a trip to photograph Frida Kahlo's bed, of buying a cottage on Rockaway Beach, of singing Buddy Holly songs with chess master Bobby Fischer. Always, Smith returns to her essentials: black coffee, a crime show on TV, a pen." —Marion Winik, *Newsday*

"Engaging . . . poetic and unconventional." —*Details*

"After winning the National Book Award, Smith returns with *M Train*, [which] pulls through 19 stations along her latest stretch of track . . . Smith lets us into her head in an extraordinarily intimate way. It's a rare gift indeed . . . *M Train* can be measured out in cups of black coffee, slices of brown toast, and dreams. These are not the typical elements of a page-turner, and yet, nearing the book's conclusion, I felt my fingers flipping faster and faster. Perhaps Smith's triumph here comes down to her ability to gradually reveal how the mundane actually matters a great deal. It's a read that ultimately rewards and touches . . . Her sense of loss is so palpable that it leaps from the page . . . The personal photographs of her and Fred and her home after the hurricane were devastating . . . Even after completing *M Train*, many readers may still wonder what exactly they've just experienced, but I'd urge them to consider Smith's questions again. Are we familiar with her now, and are we glad for it? Both questions deserve a resounding affirmation." —Matt Melis and Megan Ritt, *Consequence of Sound*

“A locomotive that runs on plenty of good, strong coffee and abundant poetic reflection. The coffee—a real character in the book, repeatedly and lovingly portrayed as a soothing companion—is the map, not the road, however. *M Train* is in fact a loving paean to the author’s late husband and, as these sparse but gorgeously written pages attest, the love of her life . . . The narratives [of *M Train*] are loosely connected, but attain coherence and continuity through the grace of Smith’s prose, a language that can raise the profane toward the sacred with only a few economic sentences. The dialogue here is an interior one, as Smith speaks to few corporeal beings, save the baristas who pour her java. . . Smith has a sense of humor, and even her most ruminative thoughts indulge levity, thereby avoiding heavy-handedness. But *M Train* is a prayer, to be sure. This is Romanticism of the highest order, but Smith avoids anything resembling maudlin. For her, life is no less beautiful for the suffering endemic to its living. The irony and snark-fueled aloof stance that form the defensive crust for many in the modern age are not for her. Both would only diminish the wonder of it all.” —Jeff Miers, *Buffalo News*

“A beautiful book. Smith’s prose has a crystalline precision . . . *M Train* is, to borrow a phrase from T.S. Eliot, a memoir measured in coffee spoons. The effect of reading it is something like sitting across a coffee shop table from Patti Smith as she stares dreamily out at the street, pausing occasionally to tell you something she’s just remembered about [her late husband] Fred, to muse over the Haruki Murakami novel she’s reading, and to push one of her Polaroids across to you. *M Train* is a book of tributes to [her] masters; a meditation; a series of associative leaps that interrupt the ordinariness of Smith’s days . . . There are moments of breathless emotional force.” —Kelsey Ronan, *St. Louis Dispatch*

“Wholly enchanting . . . bewitching. A most unusual and breathtaking book: part memoir, part dreamscape, part elegy for the departed and for time itself. Transcendent transience is what beloved musician, artist, and poet Smith explores in *M Train* . . . The point that each loss evokes all losses [is] delivered with extraordinary elegance of prose and sincerity of spirit. What emerges is a strange and wonderful consolation for our inconsolable longing for permanency amid a universe driven by perpetual change . . . The book is, above all, a reminder that love and loss always hang in such a balance . . . This, indeed, is the book’s greatest gift: The sublime assurance that although everything we love—people, places, possessions—can and likely will eventually be taken from us, the radiant vestiges those loves leave in the soul are permanently ours.” —Maria Popova, *Brain Pickings*

“Wonderful . . . *M Train* is about being lost and found. It weaves poetry, dreams, art, literature, and conversational fragments into a phantasmagoric, atmospheric, and transportive whole . . . Smith’s journeys take her across decades, continents, and the vistas of her own mind. She is a generous, charming, and brilliant guide. In her loneliness, her cherished possessions take on talismanic significance. . . She has no self-consciousness about the art she loves, and the truths they afford her are honest and hard won. By the end of the book, she has purchased a bungalow, drunk innumerable cups of black coffee, and come to some resolutions about her life, none of them easy or pat.” —Eugenia Williamson, *The Boston Globe*

“In the span of *M Train*, Smith distills ineffable, tragic human existence into a collection of experiences, meditating on the intangible permanence of loss over a lifetime. Through freely associated vignettes and artful snapshots of her life, the artist creates an elegy for objects, people and muses she’s left behind. Smith’s *M Train* demonstrates, once again, her ability to turn a phrase or an image on its head. Whether she writes of a dream or a lost coat, she connects threads of memory, pain and the absurdity of human experience. Smith is as captivating narrating a meal as she is illustrating the nature of masterpiece . . . *M Train* floats languorously from past to present, from dream to waking moment. Smith’s work embodies a constant yearning, and the effect of her amalgamated experiences is a picture of life that becomes about accepting loss. There’s a conceit carried through the book about writing when there’s nothing to say; in Smith’s moments of nothing, though, she says everything.” —Heather Scott Partington, *Las Vegas Weekly*

“Charming and non-pretentious—full of genuine delight. Smith slips beguilingly between present and past. Once a muse, now she muses. Once an icon of alternative culture, she now loves to sit in anonymity at her favorite Greenwich Village coffeehouse. Thanks to *M Train*, we can see Smith clearly: a woman who doesn’t speak in our era’s languages of snark, irony, and one-upmanship. While she’s a veteran of punk rock, she doesn’t appear to have a reservoir of anger or bitterness. She’s hardly forgotten the losses in her life. But she moves forward, ever delighted to see what’s now and what’s next: ‘We seek to stay present, even as the ghosts draw us away.’” —Randy Dotinga, *Christian Science Monitor*

“Smith’s lyrical prose is potent . . . insightful. She clearly knows herself. She is a survivor in every sense of the word. Her grappling with loss pours out of the book. The title begs the question: Where does the *M Train* go? Nowhere. And, everywhere. Perhaps I naively believed that Patti Smith had all the answers. She doesn’t. Like all of us, she harbors confusions, gets grumpy without coffee, and holds fascinations with certain people and things. She probes the peculiar depths of human listlessness. It’s worth settling down with this book and a cup of joe.” —Paula Mejia, *Newsweek*

“Packed with thoughtful prose and keen observations . . . The prose of *M Train* floats. Patti Smith paints solitude as beguiling and essential. *M Train* doesn’t glorify sadness or loneliness, nor does it suggest that Smith walks this present-day Earth through a tunnel of malaise. Rather, she travels around the world, finding solace in specific cafes in every city. She keeps her own company, and her sense of humor remains intact. Smith has always been a poet first and foremost—before she was ever a performer. Here, she has created a book that so many of us wish to write, one that parses what it all means. Smith doesn’t sound like she has it all figured out, but she does have stories that serve as markers in her journey as an artist.” —Kathy Iandoli, *Pitchfork*

“This gorgeously written book—sprinkled with richly detailed memoirs of Fred Smith and often dreamlike in structure—is likely to prove revelatory even to longtime fans.” —Brian McCollum, *Detroit Free Press*

“Thrilling . . . Like Patti Smith’s life, *M Train* feels guided simultaneously by determination and serendipity . . . Each chapter is set in motion by a Proustian moment that provokes an unpredictable chain of memory and observation, one thing talking to another. To the degree that we’re led to imagine the life of the book’s author, that life feels familiar, even ordinary, the life of a woman who was once a dreamy girl in New Jersey. But simultaneously, the life feels exotic, extraordinary, the life of a woman who has visited places and seen things that, without her having written about them, we would never imagine . . . Smith the writer is well-known as both a musician and a visual artist, but writing has always lain at the center of her achievement. But it’s one thing to write a great rock-and-roll lyric and another thing to write a book like *M Train* . . . The punk chanteuse has become the irresistible siren of middle age, and she has done so not by surviving but by refusing to settle for the glamour of past accomplishment. Except for what she will do next, *M Train* is the most beautiful thing she’s ever made.” —James Longenbach, *The Nation*

“A remarkably intimate look at Smith’s life in New York City. Throughout she bounces between home and her favorite Greenwich Village café, where she writes in her notebook and ponders the past. Memories of her childhood, her extensive travels and her marriage to Fred ‘Sonic’ Smith provide points of departure for the narrative. At once poetic and direct, *M Train* reflects Smith’s inquisitive, exploratory spirit . . . Like her trademark attire—boots, cap, coat—her narratives have a plainspoken beauty that transcends the times. An American original and a magical writer, Smith makes the reader believe in the redemptive power of art.” —Julie Hale, *BookPage*

“Sublime—sparse and poetic . . . Patti Smith can make sitting alone on her stoop on New Year’s Eve,

watching the drunken revelers, seem like the coolest thing in the world.” —Suzi Feay, *Financial Times*

“Smith began her career writing poetry books and for rock magazines (including this one). So it’s no surprise that the successor to *Just Kids* is no boilerplate rock-star flash back. *M Train* is an impressionistic weave of dreams, disasters, and epiphanies, a meditation on life and art by a woman who sees them as one . . . Smith’s caffeinated flow has charm, and the beauty of her writing breaks through . . . She is a generation’s great medium, freestyling séances over diner coffee, across years of magical thinking.” —Will Hermes, *Rolling Stone*

“Smith’s prose moves seamlessly from the literary to the cinematic, from the musical (Mendelssohn, Puccini) to, perhaps most surprisingly, the televisual. One of the many joys of reading *M Train* is learning about Smith’s obsession with detective serials . . . That fascination ripples through *M Train*, whose inclusion of Polaroids of everyday objects at times feels like a series of endless clues that would no doubt help us unlock Smith’s own train of thought—were it not so much more entertaining following it aimlessly instead. Every page feels like an invitation to another world, another portal being opened, another rabbit hole to be dug, to be followed, to be lost in . . . Her sentences bring to life those authors and loved ones she’s lost but carries within her.” —Manuel Betancourt, *Slant Magazine*

“The legendary singer-songwriter takes readers on a journey through love, loss and a vanishing New York. *M Train* is as filled with words [and] images: pictures she’s taken of talismans she’s traveled the world to capture, or gathered from her life in New York. Frida Kahlo’s crutches. Sylvia Plath’s headstone. Her husband’s passport photo. It is a collection of *memento mori*, of dreamlike remembrances of journeys to cemeteries and penal colonies and the hurricane-devastated boardwalk of Rockaway Beach, the end of a favorite crime show, a Haruki Murakami novel accidentally abandoned.” —Rob Smith, *Amtrak Arrive*

“For those who read *Just Kids* and adored Smith’s voracious appetite for art and praise of writers and poets, *M Train* will not disappoint . . . Smith found her way to music through poetry, and her prose reflects her history. Still, what is most affecting in her writing is not just her use of words; she describes being a human with such depth that you close the book feeling as if you know her . . . She loved, mothered, and learned so deeply that she transcended her famous self, and touched in with something at the core of humanity. It is in her descriptions of the everyday that the artist in her shows clearest . . . In writing, she finds a family long after her husband and friends are gone, and to our great fortune, she chose to share them with readers.” —Emily Neuberger, *Everyday eBook*

“Writer, artist, and musician (to some, the High Priestess of Punk), Patti Smith gifts the literary world and a whole new generation of fans with another look into her singular mind, piquant curiosities, and otherworldly experiences.” —Emily Barasch, *vogue.com*

“A book of memory. Smith gives spirituality to coffee—this book is an ode to it—a ‘post-Beat meditation’ on Smith’s ‘substance of choice.’ The objects of *M Train* are full of life. As Smith ages, so does the totemic power that surrounds her.” —Anna Heyward, *T, The New York Times Style Magazine*

“Complex and enchanting . . . Smith’s writing is easy and direct; her indomitable curiosity is obvious on every page. Certain words flicker like mica. Sundry fleeting images of places she has visited; montages of observations, with the deep references of a collector or scholar; by turns warm, wary, cagey, detached, and involved, each sentence leaves details to be considered further. It’s energetic writing and compelling storytelling that actually sound like the author enjoys relating. Patti makes being wise and smart such appealing qualities . . . These views into her life often seem so fantastical one could feel they are reading fiction, if we didn’t know better, and if her moody photographs throughout weren’t there for proof as well.

Purely fascinating and glorious to read.” —Peter Holsapple, *The Daily Beast*

“Amazing. Marvelous—funny and tender and sad, simple, soulful and rigorous . . . One of the things I love most about Patti Smith is the way she makes you interested in other things. In *M Train*, she takes you on a journey that includes Frida Kahlo, Bobby Fischer, TV series *The Killing* and Sylvia Plath . . . She even manages to make grief beautiful. The real thrill, though, is how funny she is. Really hilarious, in a way that you just wouldn’t expect . . . One of the other things that struck me is how pure Patti Smith’s life is. She lives it at her own pace, with no entourage or staff or hangers-on . . . Smith inspires hope and courage and confidence—surely the things that matter most in life.” —Porter

“Potent . . . The *M Train* is a Magical Mystery line that Smith rides, her snaking Mental trains of thought carrying her into Memoryland, as well as into reveries on subjects as wide-ranging as her passionate appetite for detective stories, and her surprising membership in a scientific society devoted to the subject of continental drift. Smith travels far afield geographically, too, making pilgrimages to the homes and graves of beloved writers and artists. Ultimately, it’s the local stops on *M Train* that make the most profound impressions . . . Smith’s suffered a lot of losses, [and] *M Train* is about enduring [that] erosion. She has weathered storms, but as she eloquently demonstrates in *M Train* there’s a spooky beauty in those ramshackle things, and people that defy conventional wisdom—and keep on standing.” —Maureen Corrigan, *NPR’s Fresh Air*

“Spare and elliptical—part dream diary, part travelogue, and shot through with sobering reflections on age and impermanence. Smith’s passion is undiminished: for good books, strong coffee, a poem or painting or a beautiful piece of music she can get lost in. She’ll travel thousands of miles just to take a Polaroid. But she’s not a culture snob; TV detectives enthrall her nearly as much as French philosophers and Russian novelists. Fans of *Just Kids* will find [here] a different kind of beauty: bittersweet and battered by time and circumstance, but still somehow full of grace.” —Leah Greenblatt, *Entertainment Weekly*

“A memoir that blends a lifetime of memories with everyday experience, *M Train* moves in several arcs at once, fading in and out of dreams, jumping between subjects and years like a stone skipped across a lake. It contains elements of manifesto, passionate tributes to the writers she reveres, accounts of some of Smith’s stranger travels and vivid passages of her continual search for artistic inspiration. Memory and love weigh heavily on Smith’s mind as she writes . . . *M Train* is filled with wonder—[it is] a tribute to people and to sacred things, to Smith’s own artistic calling, part of her effort to give permanence to what’s departed. And so she brings those dreams, those lost loves, those sacred objects into being. *M Train* is Smith’s treatise on life’s purpose and meaning, and why a worn and tattered black jacket can be cherished beyond all reason, can be treasured with the same fervor as the world’s most celebrated art.” —Eric Swedlund, *Paste*

“A beautifully composed account of travels and pilgrimages, told through words and photographs—a touching and extraordinarily well-crafted book that for all its formal architecture flows as naturally as if Smith were singing one of her songs. Though the book has been described as a travel memoir, that is a frame on which to hang a multilayered meditation on loss, making art, mortality and the sacred. A multimedia work, featuring her austere photographs, it is also a musical book, with its own rhythm, color and dynamics. Smith grounds the reader with a recurrent image of herself at home base—drinking black coffee at her favorite Greenwich Village café—then launches into quietly vivid descriptions of various pilgrimages. Invariably, the real-time trips melt into dreams, ruminations on art, childhood recollections and reminiscences. Some of the book is taken up with plain great yarns, like the time she wound up singing Buddy Holly songs with Bobby Fischer. Indeed, Smith appears to take a disarming pleasure in exposing her own vulnerability . . . She weaves these threads—loss, coffee, death, a beach cafe, dreams, pilgrimages, memory, childhood, [a] cowpoke—like the musical themes of a softly unfolding fugue, eventually coming to

rest in a dream, one prefigured in an early passage of the book. Nicely done.” —Paul de Barros, *The Seattle Times*

“Patti Smith writes exquisitely. She is a survivor whose dreams prod her to ‘redeem the lost’ by writing about them. *M Train* evokes people who died far too young, including—most devastatingly—her husband, and her brother, who died exactly one month later . . . Unlike the relatively straightforward, chronological narrative of *Just Kids*, *M Train* drifts fluidly between a fugue state of memories, dreams, and a largely solitary present. But it is also energized by her keen interests and obsessions. These include her passion for coffee and her beloved neighborhood cafés, where she writes on scraps of napkins; a rundown property she buys near the beach in Far Rockaway, just weeks before Hurricane Sandy; television detective mysteries, which she binge-watches; and Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* . . . Elegiac, melancholic, and meditative, filled with wistful flashbacks and haunting Polaroid snapshots.” —Heller McAlpin, *NPR*

“Deeply personal, lovely, vivid . . . In 1994, Smith lost her husband to heart failure, and her brother to stroke. Those losses, and newer, fresher sorrows, pierce her elegiac *M Train*, which in its own elliptical way is as much a love story about her late husband as *Just Kids*, her stunning memoir of youth and bohemia, was about Robert Mapplethorpe . . . [Her] peripatetic life is chronicled in *M Train*, a series of journeys through cities, hotels, dreams and memories. The M stands for mind, and Smith is her train’s conductor. As such, she has written a book that is memoirish, but not strictly a memoir—a Proustian tour of love, loss and survival, leavened with comedic digressions. Smith is clearly game for anything, and chasing her obsessions, she winds up in curious places . . . As a writer she must go it alone. And as a writer still making peace with devastating loss, it is a given that whatever she’s writing is haunted by ghosts. Books are her deepest love, and writing them is clearly her keenest ambition.” —Penelope Green, *The New York Times*

“A work whose charm has much to do with its lithe resistance to contradictions of genre . . . *M Train* comes in the form of fragments of waking fantasy, literary commentaries, reminiscences, evocations of lost objects, travel notations. By turns it is daybook, dreambook, commonplace book. Under all lies grief. *M Train* represents a sort of negotiation (through rites of pilgrimage, writing, art, and divination by tarot card) with the implacable forces of the world. Its unapologetic informality [is] a bit like the title of the old Bill Evans album, *Conversations with Myself*—the quality of laying out the contents of one’s mind to see what they look like. Writing about nothing is after all one of the most ancient and gratifying of literary practices, often so much more rewarding than more formal chronicles and autobiographies, and for that reason something that always feels a bit illicit.” —Geoffrey O’Brien, *The New York Review of Books*

“Patti Smith loves coffee. It courses through *M Train* like a dark, steaming river, connecting her various adventures . . . She writes—and, judging by her memoirs, acts—as if the world were brimful with the divine. There are no fixed boundaries: her dreams seep through her waking hours, she journeys on a whim. She is a person for whom the material world veils—flimsily—a set of more lasting, luminous truths. These are the truths of art, genius, fate. She is an unreconstructed Romantic, which makes reading her rather like time travel. *M Train* might start somewhere like the present day, but soon Smith is transported across years and continents, and off we go with her, like neophytes accompanying a seasoned pilgrim. When it comes to popular music, our collective memory tends to be short, but Smith resists that kind of temporality: her mind is with the immortals. Toward the end [of the book] she expresses something close to a creed: ‘Life is at the bottom of things and belief at the top, while the creative impulse, dwelling in the center, informs all.’ Her theology [is] served with uncommon resolve. If you happen to spot her in the West Village, buy her a coffee—or instead, pour a cup out for her, in the manner of a true libation.” —Anwen Crawford, *newyorker.com*, “Cultural Comment”

“Patti Smith is a great artist, but she might be a greater fan of art, in all its many forms. While her bestselling *Just Kids* was a largely straightforward memoir of her youth in New York, *M Train* is a

simulation of what it is like to live inside her brain . . . What ties together the things she loves is their romance, their intensity, their dignity. There is a hint of poetry in each of them. By naming such a vast network of influences, she is giving dreamy, young readers a roadmap to her haute bohemian life, with coffee and travel and dreams . . . I want to vacation in Patti Smith's mind. Because *M Train* isn't just a roadmap; it's an archive, too. It's Smith, often alone and haunted by so many intimate ghosts, preparing herself for precisely the thing we make art to confront—and defy: mortality . . . *M Train* is a monument to the timeless creations of humans doomed to die. It's hard to imagine how anyone in our long history can have loved them as much as she does.” —Judy Berman, *Flavorwire*

“Sublime. Smith, poet and shaman, [is] an American icon, a vagabond child of rock 'n' roll who fused it with her own, fiercely honest poetry . . . When *Just Kids*, her rapturous labor of love, was received with acclaim (and a National Book Award), some were surprised. The Mother Courage of Punk can write! Her new memoir, *M Train*, will leave no one in doubt that she has long since been a member of what she calls that secret society of writerly bums and obsessed alchemists panning for a drop of gold. *M Train*—the title signifies a ‘mind train’ that goes to any station it wants—is a collection of true stories concerning irredeemable loss, memory, travel, crime, coffee, books, and wild imaginings that take us to the very heart of who Patti Smith is.” —John Heilpern, *Vanity Fair*

“Captivating . . . rich, varied. How to mourn for what's lost without allowing loss to take over? While leaving space for what's lost to return in an old or new form? These are the questions at the heart of *M Train*, [which] takes us on a journey through the ‘stuff’ of Smith's bookshelves and suitcases, as well as of her mind and memory . . . *M Train* embraces the fragment—moments of reverie [that] arise from the mundane. Integrated into the text are Polaroid photographs [that are] in productive tension with the text, as in the novels of W.G. Sebald, whose work Smith greatly admires. While it is perhaps a cliché to call such a book ‘dream-like,’ *M Train* truly moves with the logic of dreams, and Smith gives equal consideration to her dreams as she does to her waking experience. But what makes *M Train* feel most like a dream is its slippery, mystical relationship to time. Smith imbues it with such a haze that she appears to board a plane to Berlin as seamlessly as she walks to the corner deli. This loose relationship to time allows [her] to appreciate aspects of the contemporary world through an anachronistic lens; it's as if Smith is enamored with the present moment inasmuch as it allows her access to the past . . . Smith is all too aware that much of what gets lost is irreplaceable: ‘Please stay forever, I say to the things I know. Don't go. Don't grow.’ The journey of *M Train* through Smith's ‘stuff,’ we come to understand, is itself an incantation of this plea.” —Sara Jaffe, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Achingly beautiful . . . a kaleidoscopic ballad about the losses dealt out by time and chance and circumstance . . . Smith is remarkably attuned to the sound and sorcery of words, and her prose here is both lyrical and radiantly pictorial. Like her famous Polaroid photos (some of which are scattered throughout the book), the chapters of *M Train* are magic lantern slides, jumping, free-associatively, between the present and the past. Whereas *Just Kids* centered on her early years in New York in the late 1960s and '70s, this volume chronicles her peregrinations around the world and into the recesses of her imagination; its unities are not of time and place, but the landscape of Smith's own mind. The ghosts of artists haunt these pages, as do the spirits of her beloved husband and brother. And a dark melody of loss threads its way through this volume. Her favorite coat—lost. Her favorite Murakami book—left in an airport bathroom. Her favorite camera—left on a beach. Her favorite café—closed. Smith buys a tiny house near Rockaway Beach, and while it somehow survives Hurricane Sandy, she witnesses the myriad losses of her neighbors—the boardwalk turned to splinters, hundreds of homes burned to the ground . . . If *Just Kids* was about starting out as an artist and setting forth in the world, *M Train* feels more like a look at the past through a rearview mirror . . . An eloquent—and a deeply moving—elegy for what she has ‘lost and cannot find’ but can remember in words.” —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“Marvelous . . . *M Train* is a book of days, a year in the life, a series of reflections; it concerns itself with reckoning. Its episodes find Smith at home in Greenwich Village, on the road in Japan or London or Mexico City, looking back and forth across the days. *M Train* is a book about the process of its own creation, a slice of life with skeleton exposed. Like memory, it flows in and out of the present, as Smith goes on about the business of existence—writing, performing, traveling, pondering. [She] has always represented aspiration as much as achievement, the idea that art ennobles us by bringing us in contact with some thread of thought or feeling larger than ourselves. The message is that living is a kind of invocation, or better yet, a form of prayer.” —David L. Ulin, *Los Angeles Times*

“Profoundly strong . . . After reading *M Train*, it will be clear to any reader that Smith’s formidable twin powers of rhetoric and compassion cast the kind of spell that one must return to over and over again . . . Each chapter treats an important loss in her life, from her heartbreaking historical moments as the death of her husband, to such private griefs as the sudden misplacement of her favorite coat. She moves between reflections on actual events through the use of dreamscapes; she crafts fluid transitions between her event memory, her creative instincts to romantically transform the real event, and her meditations on how to cope with what she’s learned. The train is her metaphor for dreaminess, [and] we glide into each station—some of them faraway sojourns—with her. Smith sees soul in the smallest pebbles. She respects that life is full of loose and lost ends . . . Smith’s [photographs] serve both as a wonderfully tight anchor to the stories in the text as well as a sort of unusual history museum unto themselves . . . The real delight is how simply and daily she strives to embrace those mundane realities with which we all struggle. In the constant grip of what has been lost and mourned and pulled toward the abyss, she just wants readers to be human with her, to be familiar to the kind of compassion that ultimately bolsters an optimism needed for making life livable.” —Megan Volpert, *PopMatters*

“Exquisite . . . a magical, mystical tour de force that begins in a tiny Greenwich Village café and ends as a dream requiem, encompassing an entire lost world . . . As perceptive and beautifully written as its predecessor, *Just Kids*, Smith’s new memoir is a record of a lifelong pilgrim, filled with mementos mori and personal accounts of her travels, her artistic obsessions and inspirations. Smith writes poignantly. Like her first memoir, this one probes a deep emotional core. Don’t read *M Train* expecting revelations of a rock star excess. It is a Proustian reverie [and a] bibliophile’s trove, with striking insights into the books that ignited Smith’s imagination. Mostly, Smith comes across as a lover: of literature, of art and music, of her children and late husband; of her parents and siblings, friends and mentors, many of whom have died. There’s an elegiac tone to much of *M Train*, yet there is extraordinary joy here, too. Her own journey continues, illuminated by her openness to the world and her compassionate, questing spirit . . . Readers who share in Smith’s transcendent pilgrimage may find themselves reborn.” —Elizabeth Hand, *The Washington Post*

“When the high priestess of punk-rock poetry won the National Book Award for *Just Kids*, she set a new literary standard for celeb autobiography. In [*M Train*], she explores a variety of loves (coffee, TV crime dramas, travel, her husband) and losses (her favorite café, her favorite coat, her favorite boardwalk, her husband). Intellectually rigorous and generously layered with cultural references, *M Train* is the closest thing Patti Smith fans have to walking the world in her shoes.” —Emily Rems, *Bust*

“Smith’s National Book Award-winning *Just Kids* created a juggernaut of interest in her life as a musician, performer and photographer. Her new memoir takes a different tone and agenda—that of a wise earth mother, literary shaman, and television crime-show junkie, imparting the rituals, routines, loves, and losses that have guided her long, productive artistic career. At the same table in tiny Café ’Ino, she scribbles notes on napkins as she pores over the books of beloved Beat poets, surrealists and select others [who] have long inspired and sustained her . . . *M Train*’s nonlinear narrative is beautifully in thrall to Smith’s restless imagination and dream life . . . Pure Patti.” —Lisa Shea, *ELLE*

“Luminous . . . It’s pleasurable to accompany rock icon Smith—mother, widow, artist—in her new memoir as she applies her fine mind and humane wit to various pilgrimages and projects, including coming to terms with aging and loss. Smith describes a game she invented to fight insomnia and invite visions; it involves uttering a stream of words beginning with the same letter. Let’s play: The book is mesmerizing, mischievous, moral, meaningful, mourning, merry, marvelous.” —Judith Stone, *More*

“Extraordinary . . . If *Just Kids* was Smith’s requiem to New York City gone by, then *M Train* is her requiem for the moment. Through vivid recollections of dreams and snapshots from her global voyages, Smith weaves a complex narrative about surrendering to Time. Her trips to various author’s graves (Sylvia Plath’s among them), Hurricane Sandy’s destruction of her Rockaway Beach home, and the untimely closing of her Greenwich Village haunt, highlight the unbearable lightness of being that Smith so passionately seeks through bottomless mugs of coffee . . . Written in between the lines is the reminder that everyone can live a life worthy of a memoir. All it takes is some romanticism, a little more awareness, nostalgia, and heaps of caffeine.” —Hayden Manders, *Nylon*

“Exciting . . . Unvarnished and intimate, tender and frank—as a musician, artist, and writer—Smith presents a singular self in *M Train* [and] invites us to ride along with her over the course of a year. As she ventures to the places the mind goes when one is alone—dashing back to the past and then to the kitchen to feed the cat—and travels the world to commune with artists long gone, we’re reminded how lucky we are that she’s still here, and still working.” —Marnie Hanel, *W Magazine*

“Unexpected and extraordinary . . . Enchanting and enchanted . . . The book feels like a poetic letter directly from the brain of your smartest, oddest, bravest friend, the one who has ventured so much further than most of us dare to. Whether chronicling her obsessions or her journey through grief, a survivor’s grace permeates this heartbreaking memoir/meditation/artist’s notebook. *M Train* loops and swirls through dreams, memories, images, journeys, and acts of mourning. Like a modern Antigone, Smith attempts to honor her many dead—her husband, Fred; Jean Genet; her brother; Frida Kahlo; the writer Osamu Dazai; her parents. Her life in the present is also riddled with losses. In her travels she loses photos, books, a beloved coat, a camera . . . One wouldn’t necessarily know from reading *M Train* that it was written by a rock icon; we see little of Smith’s public life. Instead, she opens her extraordinary heart and soul to us, holding nothing back and never permitting vanity to intrude. It’s a gift, this record of beloved absences, to which one can only respond: thank you.” —Stacey D’Erasmio, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

“A collage of a singularly creative life. In *M Train*, Smith writes about New York, her love of cafes, her favorite books and television shows, her cats, [and] her memories, joyful and melancholy, of her husband. But it is her travels—idiosyncratic, ritualistic, vividly recalled—that provide a unifying theme. She travels with purpose, with passion. Going backward and forward in time, she describes trips to Mexico, France, Morocco, Japan and other places, often looking for signs that will reveal her next trip. As for the inconvenient aspects of travel—canceled flights, lost luggage, jet lag—they are, in their own ways, opportunities. After all, a late plane might be a sign to catch a flight to another destination. And the ‘thick torpor’ of jet lag is often ‘coupled with a surprisingly internal luminosity.’” —Suzanne MacNeille, *The New York Times*, “Armchair Traveler”

“The bestselling author[’s] second memoir dives into her literary and everyday obsessions, and chronicles her travels, adding in Polaroids she snapped of graves and artifacts connected to artists who have inspired her.” —*The Wall Street Journal*, “What to Read This Fall”

“Smith explores her life through visits to the places she loves: 18 ‘stations,’ including Greenwich Village

cafés, train stations, Frida Kahlo's abode, and her own bungalow on Far Rockaway. Smith, who won the National Book Award for *Just Kids*, writes here about the loss of her husband and her struggles as a writer."
—Laurie Hertzler, Minneapolis *Star Tribune*

* "Following Smith's critically acclaimed *Just Kids*, *M Train* creates a map of the singer-songwriter's peripatetic journeys to cafés, cemeteries, hotels, and train stations around the world. She is the perfect guide, revealing the mysteries in the shadows, the little bits of life people often take for granted—such as a good cup of coffee, a familiar coat, or the 'transformation of the heart.' Her haunting and joyful recollections of life with her late husband, Fred Sonic Smith, anchor her intensely physical descent into memory and its ability to haunt her waking and dreaming life. The narrative carries readers through the despair, loss, hope, consolation, and mysteries that Smith faces as she lives through Fred's death, struggles with the writer's craft, and comes to realize, through one of her dreams, that the 'writer is a conductor'—and she is indeed a phenomenal conductor along these elegant tours of the haunting places in her life, where anyone might stumble upon momentary but life-altering wisdom." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Iconic poet, writer, and artist Smith articulates the pensive rhythm of her life through the stations of her travels. In a Greenwich Village cafe sipping coffee, jotting quixotic notes in journals, and 'plotting my next move,' the author reflects on the places she's visited, and the impact each played on her past and present selves. She describes a chance meeting with guitarist Fred Sonic Smith, who swiftly stole and sealed her heart with marriage and children. A graceful, ruminative tour guide, Smith writes of travelling with Fred, armed with a vintage 1967 Polaroid, to French Guiana, then of solitary journeys to Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul, and to the graves of Sylvia Plath, Jean Genet, and a swath of legendary Japanese filmmakers. After being seduced by Rockaway Beach and purchasing a ramshackle bungalow there, the property was destroyed by Hurricane Sandy—though she vowed to rebuild. The author synchronizes past memories and contemporary musings on books, art, and life with Fred . . . No matter the distance life may take her, Smith always recovers some semblance of normalcy with the simple pleasures of a deli coffee on her stoop, her mind constantly buoyed by humanity, art, and memory . . . An atmospheric, moody, and bittersweet memoir, to be savored and pondered." —*Kirkus*

About the Author

PATTI SMITH is a writer, performer, and visual artist. She gained recognition in the 1970s for her revolutionary merging of poetry and rock. She has released twelve albums, including *Horses*, which has been hailed as one of the top one hundred albums of all time by *Rolling Stone*.

Smith had her first exhibit of drawings at the Gotham Book Mart in 1973 and has been represented by the Robert Miller Gallery since 1978. Her books include *Just Kids*, winner of the National Book Award in 2010, *W?tt*, *Babel*, *Woolgathering*, *The Coral Sea*, and *Auguries of Innocence*.

In 2005, the French Ministry of Culture awarded Smith the title of Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres, the highest honor given to an artist by the French Republic. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007.

Smith married the musician Fred Sonic Smith in Detroit in 1980. They had a son, Jackson, and a daughter, Jesse. Smith resides in New York City.

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In 1965 I had come to New York City from South Jersey just to roam around, and nothing seemed more romantic than to write poetry in a Greenwich Village café. I finally got the courage to enter Caffè Dante on MacDougal Street. The walls were covered with printed murals of the city of Florence and scenes from *The Divine Comedy*.

A few years later I would sit by a low window that looked out into a small alley, reading Mrabet's *The Beach Café*. A young fish-seller named Driss meets a reclusive, uncongenial codger who has a café with only one table and one chair on a rocky stretch of shore near Tangier. The slow-moving atmosphere surrounding the café captivated me. Like Driss, I dreamed of opening a place of my own: the Café Nerval, a small haven where poets and travelers might find the simplicity of asylum.

I imagined threadbare Persian rugs on wide-planked floors, two long wood tables with benches, a few smaller tables, and an oven for baking bread. No music no menus. Just silence black coffee olive oil fresh mint brown bread. Photographs adorning the walls: a melancholic portrait of the café's namesake, and a smaller image of the forlorn poet Paul Verlaine in his overcoat, slumped before a glass of absinthe.

In 1978 I came into a little money and was able to pay a security deposit toward the lease of a one-story building on East Tenth Street. It had once been a beauty parlor but stood empty save for three white ceiling fans and a few folding chairs. My brother, Todd, and I whitewashed the walls and waxed the wood floors. Two wide skylights flooded the space with light. I spent several days sitting beneath them at a card table, drinking deli coffee and plotting my next move.

In the end I was obliged to abandon my café. Two years before, I had met the musician Fred Sonic Smith in Detroit. It was an unexpected encounter that slowly altered the course of my life. My yearning for him permeated everything—my poems, my songs, my heart. We endured a parallel existence, shuttling back and forth between New York and Detroit, brief rendezvous that always ended in wrenching separations. Just as I was mapping out where to install a sink and a coffee machine, Fred implored me to come and live with him in Detroit. I said goodbye to New York City and the aspirations it contained. I packed what was most precious and left all else behind. I didn't mind. The solitary hours I'd spent drinking coffee at the card table, awash in the radiance of my café dream, were enough for me.

Some months before our first wedding anniversary Fred told me that if I promised to give him a child he would first take me anywhere in the world. I chose Saint-Laurent du Maroni, a border town in northwest French Guiana. I had long wished to see the remains of the French penal colony where hard-core criminals were once shipped before being transferred to Devil's Island. In *The Thief's Journal* Jean Genet had written of Saint-Laurent as hallowed ground and of its inmates with devotional empathy. He had ascended the ladder toward them: reform school, petty thief, and three-time loser; but as he was sentenced, the prison he'd held in such reverence was closed, the last living inmates returned to France. Genet served his time in Fresnes Prison. Devastated, he wrote: *I am shorn of my infamy*.

At 70, Genet was reportedly in poor health and most likely would never go to Saint-Laurent himself. I envisioned bringing him its earth and stone. Though often amused by my quixotic notions, Fred did not make light of this self-imposed task. He agreed without argument. I wrote a letter to William Burroughs, whom I had known since my early 20s. William, close to Genet and possessing his own romantic sensibility, promised to assist me in delivering the stones.

Preparing for our trip, Fred and I spent our days in the Detroit Public Library studying the history of Suriname and French Guiana. Fred bought maps, khaki clothing, traveler's checks, and a compass; cut his long, lank hair; and bought a French dictionary. When he embraced an idea he looked at things from every angle. He did not read Genet, however. He left that up to me.

We flew on a Sunday to Miami and stayed for two nights in a roadside motel. We ate red beans and yellow rice in Little Havana and visited Crocodile World. The short stay readied us for the extreme heat we were

about to face. In Grenada and Haiti, all passengers had to deplane while the hold was searched for smuggled goods. We finally landed in Suriname at dawn; a handful of young soldiers armed with automatic weapons waited as we were herded into a bus that transported us to a vetted hotel. The first anniversary of the 1980 military coup that overthrew the democratic government was looming: an anniversary just days before our own.

After a few days basking in the heat of the capital city of Paramaribo, a guide drove us 150 kilometers to the town of Albina on the west bank of the Maroni River bordering French Guiana. The pink sky was veined in lightning. Our guide found a young boy who agreed to take us across by pirogue, a long dugout canoe. We pushed off in a light rain that swiftly escalated into a torrential downpour. The boy handed me an umbrella and warned us not to trail our fingers in the water. I suddenly noticed the river teeming with tiny black fish. Piranha! He laughed as I quickly withdrew my hand.

In an hour or so the boy dropped us off at the foot of a muddy embankment. He dragged his pirogue onto land and joined some workers beneath a length of black oilcloth stretched over four wooden posts. They seemed amused by our momentary confusion and pointed us in the direction of the main road. As we struggled up a slippery knoll, the calypso beat of Mighty Swallow's "Soca Dance" wafted from a boom box. We tramped through the empty town, finally taking cover in a bar. Two men were drinking Calvados. Fred engaged in a broken French-English conversation with a leathery-skinned fellow who presided over the nearby turtle reserves. As the rains subsided, the owner of the local hotel appeared, offering his services. Then a younger, sulkier version emerged to take our bags, and we followed them along a muddied trail down a hill to our lodgings. We had not even booked a hotel and yet a room awaited us.

The Hôtel Galibi was spartan yet comfortable. A small bottle of watered-down cognac and two plastic cups were set on the dresser. Spent, we slept, even as the returning rain beat relentlessly upon the corrugated tin roof. The morning sun was strong. I left our clothes to dry on the patio and spread the contents of our pockets on a small table: damp receipts, dismembered fruits, Fred's ever-present guitar picks.

Around noon a cement worker drove us outside the ruins of the Saint-Laurent prison. There were a few stray chickens scratching in the dirt and an overturned bicycle, but no one seemed to be around. Our driver entered with us through a low stone archway and then just slipped away. The compound had the air of a tragically defunct boomtown. Fred and I moved about in alchemical silence, mindful not to disturb the reigning spirits.

In search of the right stones, I entered the solitary cells, examining the faded graffiti tattooing the walls. Hairy balls, cocks with wings, the prime organ of Genet's angels. Not here, I thought. I looked around for Fred. He had found a small graveyard. I saw him paused before a headstone that read, "Son your mother is praying for you." He stood there for a long time looking up at the sky. I left him alone and inspected the outbuildings, finally choosing the earthen floor of the mass cell to gather the stones. It was a dank place the size of a small airplane hangar. Heavy, rusted chains were anchored into the walls illuminated by slim shafts of light. Yet there was still some scent of life: manure, earth, and an array of scuttling beetles.

I dug a few inches seeking stones that might have been pressed by the hard-calloused feet of the inmates or the soles of heavy boots worn by the guards. I carefully chose three and put them in an oversize Gitanes matchbox, leaving the bits of earth clinging to them. Fred offered his handkerchief to wipe the dirt from my hands and then made a little sack for the matchbox. He placed it in my hands, the first step toward placing them in the hands of Genet.

We didn't stay long in Saint-Laurent. We went seaside but the turtle reserves were off-limits, as they were

spawning. Fred spent a lot of time in the bar, talking to the fellows. The men seemed to respect him, regarding him without irony. He had that effect on other men. I was content just sitting on a crate outside the bar staring down an empty street I had never seen and might never see again.

For the most part I kept to myself. Occasionally I caught glimpses of the maid, a barefoot girl with long, dark hair. She smiled and gestured but spoke no English. She tidied our room and washed our clothes. In gratitude I gave her one of my bracelets, a gold chain with a four-leaf clover, which I saw dangling from her wrist as we departed.

There was no rail service in French Guiana. The fellow from the bar had found us a driver, who carried himself like an extra in *The Harder They Come* with a cocked cap, aviator sunglasses, and a leopard-print shirt. We arranged a price and he agreed to drive us the 268 kilometers to Cayenne. He insisted our bags stay with him in the front seat of his beat-up tan Peugeot as chickens were normally transported in the trunk. We drove along Route Nationale, listening to reggae on a station riddled with static.

Every once in a while I untied the handkerchief to look at the Gitanes matchbox with its silhouette of a Gypsy posturing with her tambourine in a swirl of indigo-tinged smoke. But I did not open it. I pictured a small yet triumphal moment passing the stones to Genet. Fred held my hand as we wound through dense forests and passed short, sturdy Amerindians balancing iguanas squarely on their heads. We traveled through a tiny commune that had just a few houses and one six-foot crucifix. We asked the driver to stop. He got out and examined his tires. Fred took a photograph of the sign that read "Tonate. Population 9," and I said a little prayer.

The primary mission accomplished, we had no ultimate destination; we were free. But as we approached Kourou we sensed a shift. We were entering a military zone and hit a checkpoint. The driver's identity card was inspected and after an interminable stretch of silence we were ordered to get out of the car. Two officers searched the front and back seats, finding a switchblade with a broken spring in the glove box. That can't be so bad, I thought, but as they knocked on the trunk our driver became markedly agitated. Dead chickens? Maybe drugs. They circled around the car, and then asked him for the keys. He threw them in a shallow ravine and bolted but was swiftly wrestled to the ground. I glanced sidelong at Fred. He betrayed no emotion and I followed his lead.

They opened the trunk. Inside was a man who looked to be in his early 30s curled up like a slug in a rusting conch shell. He seemed terrified as they poked him with a rifle and ordered him to get out. We were all herded to the police headquarters, put in separate rooms, and interrogated in French. The commander arrived, and we were brought before him. He was barrel-chested with dark, sad eyes and a thick mustache that dominated his careworn face. Fred quickly took stock of things. I slipped into the role of compliant female, for in this obscure annex of the Foreign Legion it was definitely a man's world. I watched silently as the human contraband, stripped and shackled, was led away. Fred was ordered into the commander's office. He turned and looked at me. stay calm was the message telegraphed from his pale blue eyes.

An officer brought in our bags, and another wearing white gloves went through everything. I sat holding the handkerchief, relieved I was not asked to surrender it. An interrogator brought me a black coffee on an oval tray with an inlay of a blue butterfly and entered the commander's office. I could see Fred's profile. After a time they all came out. They seemed in amiable spirits. The commander gave Fred a manly embrace and we were placed in a private car. Neither of us said a word as we pulled into the capital city of Cayenne. Fred had the address of a hotel given to him by the commander. We were dropped off at the foot of a hill. It's somewhere up there, the driver motioned, and we carried our bags up the stone steps.

—What did you two talk about? I asked.

—I really can't say for sure, he only spoke French.

—How did you communicate?

—Cognac.

Fred seemed deep in thought.

—I know that you are concerned about the fate of the driver, he said, but it's out of our hands. He placed us in real jeopardy and in the end my concern was for you.

—Oh, I wasn't afraid.

—Yes, he said, that's why I was concerned.

The hotel was to our liking. We drank French brandy from a paper sack and slept wrapped in layers of mosquito netting. In the morning we explored Cayenne. It was Carnival time, and the city was all but deserted. Overcrowded ferries departed for Devil's Island. Calypso music poured from a mammoth disco in the shape of an armadillo. There were a few small souvenir stands with identical fare: thin, red blankets made in China and metallic blue raincoats. But mostly there were lighters, all kinds of lighters, with images of parrots, spaceships, and men of the Foreign Legion. There was nothing much to keep one there, yet we stayed in Cayenne until our anniversary as if bewitched.

On our last Sunday, women in bright dresses and men in top hats were celebrating the end of Carnival. Following their makeshift parade on foot, we ended up at Rémire-Montjoly, a commune southeast of the city. The revelers dispersed. Fred and I stood mesmerized by the emptiness of the long, sweeping beaches. It was a perfect day for our anniversary and I couldn't help thinking it was the perfect spot for a beach café. Fred went on before me, whistling to a black dog somewhat up ahead. There was no sign of his master. Fred threw a stick into the water and the dog fetched it. I knelt down in the sand and sketched out plans for an imaginary café with my finger.

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