

Patti Smith Group
RADIO ETHIOPIA



Patti Smith
"Pissing in a River"
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Arista

Pissing

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Let's talk about the space before change and how it's starving—for a moment. Let's talk about desperation in the wake of change and in lieu of it, how I get sick of places after three months but cling to minor interactions with unfulfilling people—how I've learned to become more selective, how my anger is hilariously strong that, after six beers on a tepid night in Brooklyn, the only thing I felt was how full my bladder was. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the carnival tilt of nineteen, I watched the buildings grow. The New Hampshire trees that circled the moon and hid my friends and our bathtub gin hung back as I skimmed the coast to Savannah where the height limit was four stories and the humidity reminded me what it was like to feel suffocated by state lines. By the time I transferred to school in New York, the buildings shot straight up, but so had the cages. I had plans once I got there, and the dearest friend I would find.

I want to talk about a night before classes started, a night that I'm going to make feel much more quixotic than it was, I assure you.

My mother is groaning already.

We had met at an apartment, a bunch of us, who only knew parts of each other; except Kelly, she and I knew worlds of each other. We had met at an apartment before meeting at another apartment, one with more people and more causeless revelry. How thoughtless of Kelly and I to leave our bags in this First Apartment. Or not thoughtless, just thinking of other, simpler things. There was a boy for her to talk to. I was just running on anxious energy.

As the night progressed, the people around us were revealed to be, as most are, disappointing. We grew tired of sneaking past freshman in fur coats snorting coke off the counter and boys who couldn't sit still, songs we didn't give a shit about, just to get to the bathroom or the other side of the 2 x 2 fire pit. The parts of our friends we recognized had been long gone and Brooklyn was awake without us. We made a break for it when the only seats left were on laps, gulped what was left of our howevermany beers, and watched them bounce off of the temporary gate of the tiny backyard in Bedstuy.

I'm sure our voices carried as we howled our frustration (as anyone who steps foot in New York can understand): how dare we expect momentum and 'Never-Before-Seen', how dare we expect anything besides makeshift glamour and juvenile preoccupations like warm beer and art school and strangers to hear about who you were in high school. We got outta there.

On we walked, three blocks down and around, a dark game of Candyland, never needing to pay too much attention to anything besides the color. All we needed, before we could return to our 16-story dorm, was to get back to the First Apartment and collect our things—IDs from other states, shameful school IDs, cherry flavored chapstick, metrocards old and new, pens and sketchbooks and God, whatever else we had in there. Though, of course, our prayers to Patron Saint Plumpy and all-mighty King Kandy were thrown back at us. The First Apartment was locked threefold. We could see through the bars on the first floor window - all the lights off, glasses left on the coffee table and our

small bags on opposite ends of the Ikea couch. We tried calling the boys who had lived there, three of which, we knew, were back at that party, wearing somebody else's hat backwards and sidling up to someone we would have a Drawing II class with. No one was answering their phone that night.

As I tossed my head back in a bellowing laugh, fed only on irony, I finally told Kelly, "I have to pee like a racehorse." We stretched the minutes out, taking steps circling the few slabs of sidewalk outside of the First Apartment. No one was coming. We knew that before we left, but our disappointment hadn't yet materialized into something greater than passing disappointment. It now transcended into predicament territory and my bladder was the star of the show, making me walk a little faster and think of less and less important things. Global warming, the stark poverty line, Kelly's and my skyrocketing student debt—it all escaped me as I finally held onto the stoop railing and sat on my heel, squeezing just about everything my body was made of and laughing severely.

Kelly finally suggested what I was hoping she would. "Gab, just, here," she said, walking over to the alley, just past the First Apartment, where the only things nestled within were someone's Honda motorcycle and some broken glass somewhere in the corner. "I'll guard you, just pee here. Just squat. I got you."

Thank God she laughed a bit. It wasn't long or narrow, but it wasn't on the welcome mat of someone's apartment either. I had peed in stranger places, and that's what I was thinking of as I stretched my high-waisted jeans wide enough to birth the anger-baby of urine that had been conceived that night. I thought back to New Hampshire and the backwoods I had marked because the closest house was miles out. I could go deeper and deeper and always find my way back out, to where all the trees were dead at the top from the bonfires we had out there. How, usually, it was just me, as the boys need only turn around to relieve themselves. But when other girls came around, we would claim a tree for the night, and laugh at the hasty trickle against the dirt, compare the benefits of leaning your back on a tree or hugging it close to you, and, of course, the little bare-assed wiggle you had to do in lieu of toilet paper.

Kelly was kind enough to be my tree that night, but when it came time to wiggle dry and pull those tight jeans back up, we had company. The NYPD came around the corner and slowed in front of us—a whole van of 'em. Even if I had been quick enough to button up and regain my composure, there were a few ounces of evidence against me. The pained laughter can start any minute now, you know. My mother has already stopped listening—having heard this story too many times and remaining to be the only person who hasn't found it funny.

Only one officer got out of the van, the other two or three smugly hanging back and watching. We answered their questions, wide-eyed, honest, innocent or, at least, human. It wasn't until they handcuffed me that my stomach flipped and Kelly ran up to the van, to each of the bemused officers, and plead my innocence, reciting my name and birthday and "please please please!"

As I explained myself, I found myself stumbling over any excuse that wasn't "When you gotta go, you gotta go," and "What would you have rather me do, wet my pants?" To which the officer would reply, "Well, the law would have preferred it." Panic came out in wet sighs as I tried to prove my identity along with trying to assure the cops that I was not trying to deface property, I was simply trying to do what people do every single day, just usually on a toilet behind closed doors. They had made it illegal in New York not to have your ID on you at all times (some awful law put in place only to get more homeless people off of the street into jail cells), and mine was behind locked door after locked door

in the First Apartment “literally, right there.” This was explained a few ways before the officers mumbled and conspired together in their unnecessarily large van.

I was left to stare at the dark puddle that, as I was hanging back, handcuffed, on the sidewalk, was pooling into thinner and thinner streams heading into the street and hugging the curb. The arresting officer returned and Kelly had been on her third round of “We’re students. We’re sorry. Let us go home.” The officer hovered, not saying much, just looking over at the cops in the car listening to this beautiful, frantic girl while her friend was about to be charged with Public Urination in the state of New York. It was then that the scene was penetrated by a passerby, walking their bulldog or Boston terrier or whatever, at 4 in the morning. I watched, knowing my own marking would only draw this dog in. The cop behind me smiled a tight smile and nodded at the man in basketball shorts while I kept my eyes on the ground, hands pinned behind my back, in arrest and anticipation. That little dog stopped inches in front of me, tugging its walker along, so it could take a whiff of the strange, dehydrated urine that ran through the streets and, bless its feral soul, made eye contact with me, squatted, and pissed right over the curb. This pup and I had a connection and, as it sauntered off, its walker convinced himself he didn’t see anything.

I felt a smile on my face, despite myself. I didn’t really mean to, but I said, “I wish I was a dog,” meaning, I wish this wasn’t happening because I just did what dogs all over this city do, meaning, I wish this wasn’t taboo, meaning, I wish I was home. The officer was less than amused, saying, “Yeah, well, you’re a human.” And that felt worse than he could have meant it.

The same officer had proceeded to ask if we had been drinking and we were wishy-washy—as underage girls have to be—but we damn-near gave them the address of that shitty party around the block and they never even turned down that road. Instead, the officer asked if I had Facebook, LinkedIn, “anything that can tell us you are who you say you are.” I stretched the handcuff chain best I could so I could slip my phone out of my back pocket and pull up Facebook, for once, a saving grace.

“That’s me, right there,” I explained, as if the officer were an alien or an aging uncle, “and that—that’s my birthday, tagged pictures, you don’t want that—uh, see, I go to school over at Pratt and I—” Rambling self-affirmation was all I had. The officer laughed at my cover photo, showed it to his buddies, and returned with a ticket. Kelly’s pleas had supplemented only to the officer’s comedic interpretation of the night, as well as my confidence and relief to know her. They had quieted and I had been released. The van rode away.

We were left in a city that smelled like piss and felt, already, like it was weeding us out. Worst of all, we were in the exact same situation we were in before, well, almost. I didn’t have to pee anymore, but now I owed \$175. We were still locked out of that goddamn First Apartment. Our only option now was to head back to the backyard party and see if the boys were ready or drunk enough to be convinced to leave. They weren’t, but Kelly and I managed to convince one of them to head back with us after saying, “Something happened and we want the get the hell outta here,” guarding our strange, shared experience.

I guess I was embarrassed, at the time. But that didn’t last. I had to laugh at it somehow. This is me laughing about it, again and again, and missing my friend, again and again, and listening to a song. A song about being amidst change, change that you asked for, fought for, but aren’t ready for. Or, not a song, a hymn, really, especially at its start, for freedom.

Freedom! Some version of it, even if it's feral and desperate, to piss where you're not supposed to—because there are places you're not supposed to. There are places where you're not supposed to even go, but we want to and some of us dare to, ready or not, and that changes something in us. Some of us break laws to hurt while some of us break laws because they get in the way. Some of us give ourselves gifts that end up turning against us—a future, a school, a plan—and in youth, what else could they do? And this song, it brings it all up to me, at whatever precipice I have found myself on the edge of since this mess. The river is mine and the piss is mine and, amidst all these big questions, I'm still just a human, no matter how bad that feels, and I'm gonna keep singing this song.

If there is some kind of "natural order," I don't think we have many arms that can touch it anymore, but pissing in that alley felt closer to it than anything I had felt in my four years in that city. An emptying in a corner next to a Honda motorcycle and my best friend as my tree. It was one of those beginning moments I think about often. I hadn't dropped any classes yet nor had I any work published. Kelly and I hadn't eaten any hashbrowns in the sunlight yet and her face held so much more hope than it has lately. Less plants kept in the bathroom and fewer First Apartments and fewer disappointments that only New York can deliver. One of those beginning moments where we can then trace ourselves—where we were inspired, where we did things we didn't want to fucking do, and where we started dipping off of the path we told our mothers and fathers about as we begged for this exact city, this exact school. But we come out of it with a laughter that morphs over the years. From nerves and embarrassment, to irony, frustration, coping, and ultimately, uproarious joy and nostalgia—as that is the only laughter than can be uproarious.

Long live, Patti Smith, the true queen.