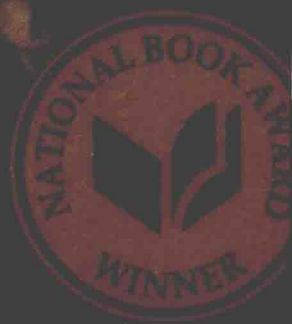


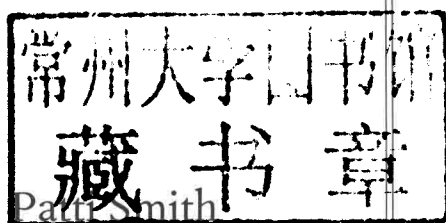
# 1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



# JUST KIDS

PATTI SMITH

Just Kids



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## Just Kids



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

## Foreword



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

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

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

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

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



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Monday's  
Children





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

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

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

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



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

My sister Linda followed during yet another blizzard in 1948. By necessity I was obliged to measure up quickly. My mother took in ironing as I sat on the stoop of our rooming house waiting for the iceman and the last of the horse-drawn wagons. He gave me slivers of ice wrapped in brown paper. I would slip one in my pocket for my baby sister, but when I later reached for it, I discovered it was gone.

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

My mother taught me to pray; she taught me the prayer her mother taught her. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the winter, we built snow forts and I led our campaign, serving

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Robert was very taken with this story, and sometimes on a cold, languorous Sunday he would beg me to recount it. "Tell me the Stephanie story," he would say. I would spare no details on our long mornings beneath the covers, reciting tales of my childhood, its sorrow and magic,