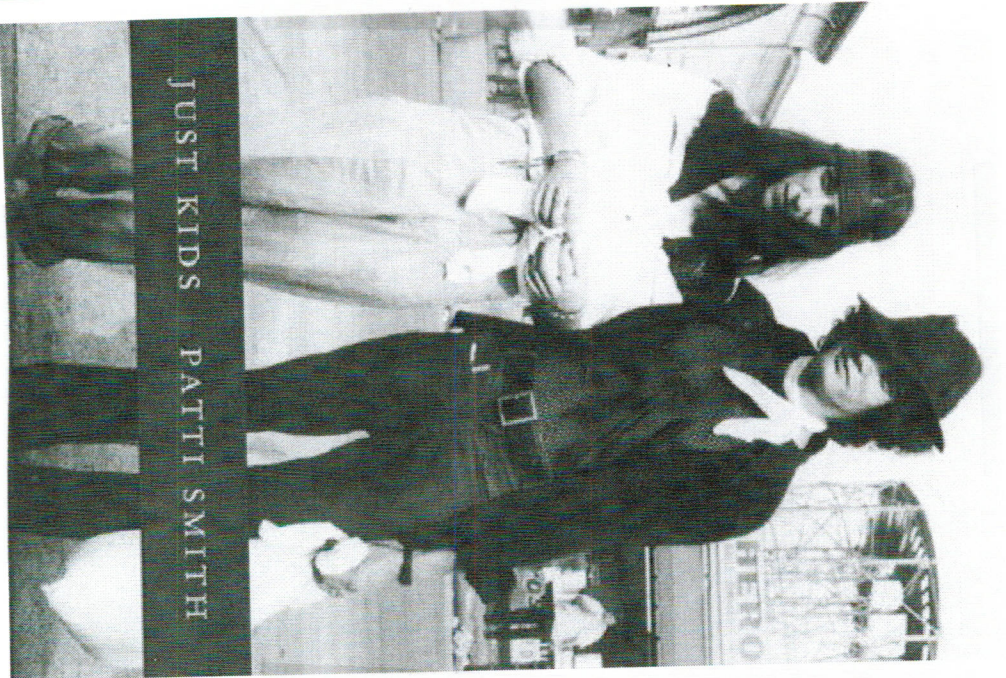


From the memoir Just Kids  
by Patti Smith (2010)



**W**HEN 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 sugarpum 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,

as we tried to pretend we weren't hungry. And always, when I got to the part where I opened the jewelry box, he would cry, "Patti, no..."

We used to laugh at our small selves, saying that I was a bad girl trying to be good and that he was a good boy trying to be bad. Through the years these roles would reverse, then reverse again, until we came to accept our dual natures. We contained opposing principles, light and dark.

I was a dreamy somnambulant child. I vexed my teachers with my precocious reading ability paired with an inability to apply it to anything they deemed practical. One by one they noted in my reports that I daydreamed far too much, was always somewhere else. Where that somewhere was I cannot say, but it often landed me in the corner sitting on a high stool in full view of all in a conical paper hat.

I would later make large detailed drawings of these humorously humiliating moments for Robert. He delighted in them, seeming to appreciate all the qualities that repelled or alienated me from others. Through this visual dialogue my youthful memories became his.



I was unhappy when we were evicted from The Patch and had to pack up to begin a new life in southern New Jersey. My mother gave birth to a fourth child whom we all pitched in to raise, a sickly though sunny little girl named Kimberly. I felt isolated and disconnected in the surrounding swamps, peach orchards, and pig farms. I immersed myself in books and in the design of an encyclopedia that only got as far as the entry for Simón Bolívar. My father introduced me to science fiction and for a time I joined him in investigating UFO activity in the skies over the local square-dance hall, as he continually questioned the source of our existence.

When I was barely eleven, nothing pleased me more than to take long walks in the outlying woods with my dog. All about were jack-in-the-pulpits, punks, and skunk cabbage, rising from the red clay earth. I would find a good place for some solitude, to stop and rest my head against a fallen log by a stream rushing with tadpoles.

With my brother, Todd, serving as loyal lieutenant, we'd crawl on our bellies over the dusty summer fields near the quarries. My dutiful sister would be stationed to bandage our wounds and provide much-needed water from my father's army canteen.

On one such day, limping back to the home front beneath the anvil of the sun, I was accosted by my mother.

"Patricia," my mother scolded, "put a shirt on!"

"It's too hot," I moaned. "No one else has one on."

"Hot or not, it's time you started wearing a shirt. You're about to become a young lady." I protested vehemently and announced that I was never going to become anything but myself, that I was of the clan of Peter Pan and we did not grow up.

My mother won the argument and I put on a shirt, but I cannot exaggerate the betrayal I felt at that moment. I ruefully watched my mother performing her female tasks, noting her well-endowed female body. It all seemed against my nature. The heavy scent of perfume and the red slashes of lipstick, so strong in the fifties, revolted me. For a time I resented her. She was the messenger and also the message. Stunned and defiant, with my dog at my feet, I dreamed of travel. Of running away and joining the Foreign Legion, climbing the ranks and trekking the desert with my men.

I drew comfort from my books. Oddly enough, it was Louisa May Alcott who provided me with a positive view of my female destiny. Jo, the tomboy of the four March sisters in *Little Women*, writes to help support her family, struggling to make ends meet during the Civil War. She fills page after page with her rebellious

scrawl, later published in the literary pages of the local newspaper. She gave me the courage of a new goal, and soon I was crafting little stories and spinning long yarns for my brother and sister. From that time on, I cherished the idea that one day I would write a book.

In the following year my father took us on a rare excursion to the Museum of Art in Philadelphia. My parents worked very hard, and taking four children on a bus to Philadelphia was exhausting and expensive. It was the only such outing we made as a family, marking the first time I came face-to-face with art. I felt a sense of physical identification with the long, languorous Modiglianis; was moved by the elegantly still subjects of Sargent and Thomas Eakins; dazzled by the light that emanated from the Impressionists. But it was the work in a hall devoted to Picasso, from his harlequins to Cubism, that pierced me the most. His brutal confidence took my breath away.

My father admired the draftsmanship and symbolism in the work of Salvador Dalí, yet he found no merit in Picasso, which led to our first serious disagreement. My mother busied herself rounding up my siblings, who were sliding the slick surfaces of the marble floors. I'm certain, as we filed down the great staircase, that I appeared the same as ever, a moping twelve-year-old, all arms and legs. But secretly I knew I had been transformed, moved by the revelation that human beings create art, that to be an artist was to see what others could not.

I had no proof that I had the stuff to be an artist, though I humpered to be one. I imagined that I felt the calling and prayed that it be so. But one night, while watching *The Song of Bernadette* with Jennifer Jones, I was struck that the young saint did not ask to be called. It was the mother superior who desired sanctity, even as Bernadette, a humble peasant girl, became the chosen one. This worried me. I wondered



if I had really been called as an artist. I didn't mind the misery of a vocation but I dreaded not being called.

I shot up several inches. I was nearly five eight and barely a hundred pounds. At fourteen, I was no longer the commander of a small yet loyal army but a skinny loser, the subject of much ridicule as I perched on the lowest rung of high school's social ladder. I immersed myself in books and rock and roll, the adolescent salvation of 1961. My parents worked at night. After doing our chores and homework, Toddy, Linda, and I would dance to the likes of James Brown, the Shirelles, and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. With all modesty I can say we were as good on the dance floor as we were in battle.

I drew, I danced, and I wrote poems. I was not gifted but I was imaginative and my teachers encouraged me. When I won a competition sponsored by the local Sherwin-Williams paint store, my work was displayed in the shopwindow and I had enough money to buy a wooden art box and a set of oils. I raided libraries and church bazaars for art books. It was possible then to find beautiful volumes for next to nothing and I happily dwelt in the world of Modigliani, Dubuffet, Picasso, Fra Angelico, and Albert Ryder.

My mother gave me *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* for my sixteenth birthday. I was transported by the scope of his murals, descriptions of his travels and tribulations, his loves and labor. That summer I got a job in a nonunion factory, inspecting handlebars for tricycles. It was a wretched place to work. I escaped into daydreams as I did my piecework. I longed to enter the fraternity of the artist: the hunger, their manner of dress, their process and prayers. I'd brag that I was going to be an artist's mistress one day. Nothing seemed more romantic to my young mind. I imagined myself as Frida to Diego, both muse and maker. I dreamed of meeting an artist to love and support and work with side by side.



**R**obert Michael Mapplethorpe was born on Monday, November 4, 1946. Raised in Floral Park, Long Island, the third of six children, he was a mischievous little boy whose carefree youth was delicately tinged with a fascination with beauty. His young eyes stored away each play of light, the sparkle of a jewel, the rich dressing of an altar, the burnish of a gold-toned saxophone or a field of blue stars. He was gracious and shy with a precise nature. He contained, even at an early age, a stirring and the desire to stir.

The light fell upon the pages of his coloring book, across his child's hands. Coloring excited him, not the act of filling in space, but choosing colors that no one else would select. In the green of the hills he saw red. Purple snow, green skin, silver sun. He liked the effect it had on others, that it disturbed his siblings. He discovered he had a talent for sketching. He was a natural draftsman and secretly he twisted and abstracted his images, feeling his growing powers. He was an artist, and he knew it. It was not a childish notion. He merely acknowledged what was his.

The light fell upon the components of Robert's beloved jewelry kit, upon the bottles of enamel and tiny brushes. His fingers were nimble. He delighted in his ability to piece together and decorate brooches for his mother. He wasn't concerned that this was a girl's pursuit, that a jewelry-making kit was a traditional Christmas gift for a girl. His older brother, a whiz at sports, would snicker at him as he worked. His mother, Joan, chain-smoked, and admired the sight of her son sitting at the table, dutifully stringing yet another necklace of tiny Indian beads for her. They were precursors of the necklaces he would later adorn himself with, having broken from his father, leaving his Catholic, commercial, and military options behind in the wake of LSD and a commitment to live for art alone.



*Bible school, Philadelphia*



*First Holy Communion, Floral Park, Long Island*