

more

Once upon a time saints



KATHY H.

ethel Pochocki
with illustrations by kathy holbrook

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a time
saints



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Also by Ethel Pochocki

Once Upon a Time Saints
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FOR PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS,
GODPARENTS, SISTERS, BROTHERS, UNCLES, OR AUNTS
WHO FOR SOME REASON
FIND THIS BOOK IN YOUR HANDS

WHAT WAS SAID in preface to *Once Upon a Time Saints* may be repeated here: these stories were written to disarm rather than alarm. They are meant to show that the saints were not marshmallows—pale, sticky-sweet glops of goo that could be interesting only when toasted. They are meant to show human and lovable (most of the time) people whose passion for God led them into preposterous escapades.

Their lives are as unbelievable, as fantastic, as fairy tales of princesses with golden hair, princes on white stallions, blacker-than-hell witches, elves, pookahs, black ravens, white rabbits and smoke-belching dragons.

Fairy tales clear the way for sanctity. They are the child's first morality play, clear-cut, no-nonsense black and white, good and evil, life and death—with a bit of fun thrown in to alleviate the pain. The lives of the saints, so filled with derring-do, gaiety, charm and courage, are all the more fantastic because the persons were real, even though they might seem right out of the pages of Hans Christian Andersen.

You will not find dates and statistics here, except where they seem necessary to explain how or why a saint got to his particular spot. And I have used the embroidery of legend because I feel that under its eye-catching trivia, there is the good homespun of fact. Sometimes it has been hard to discover which facts are the *real* facts. In reading six books about one saint, you may have as many versions of his or her death—he may have died on the battlefield, in the arms of a wife or son, pinned to a tree with seven arrows . . . or a combination of all three.

I have chosen lesser-known saints because these are the ones to whom I am drawn, coaxing these hideaway saints out of the dusty pages of old reference books for one brief, if fanciful, moment in the sun.

FOREWORD, *ONCE AGAIN!*

WHEN YOU SEE a statue of a saint in church or a painting in a museum looking very long-faced and sour, please don't think saints were that way when they lived on earth. Most of them were very much like us. They laughed and cried and enjoyed picnics and ice cream and hopscotch, told jokes and had quick tempers. They probably pinched their baby brothers and were spanked for it when they were little. They might even have stolen apples from the store and lied about it. Certainly they hid their liver under their plates at suppertime.

But then something happened. God spoke to them, and they stopped what they were doing and listened, and every thing was different from then on. They took their ordinary lives and made them into *extraordinary* adventures.

No matter who they were (farmers or soldiers or queens or jugglers), they knew where they were going. They made butter, washed lepers, sailed to Nova Scotia, taught children the alphabet, or whatever God gave them to do, as perfectly as possible. They knew that God was always with them so nothing could frighten them—not even thunder-storms, spiders or death.

They loved this world as well as Heaven. The birds and beasts and everything God had made were their friends. They tried to see Christ in all people, even those who were a pain, a bore, or just plain nasty. It wasn't easy, but they knew God loved them, so they tried.

The saints teach us one important thing—that we don't have to follow anyone else's way to holiness. All we have to do is want to be saints, in our own way and using our special gifts, and God will send that gift of grace with each sunrise. That grace will help you master the bumps in the day ahead.

If you want to be a saint badly (or goodly) enough, then you will, and someone a few hundred years from now may be writing a story about *you!*

1. Hyacinth

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a son born to noble parents in Poland and they named him Hyacinth. He had everything one could imagine—his own gold cup, his own horse, his own teacher—everything. Hyacinth was so grateful for the abundant life he had been born into, he decided to become a priest so he could thank God and give him his heart completely.

His parents were delighted and his uncle, the bishop of Cracow, took him to Rome to study there. Among many holy men, he met Dominic, who had just founded the Order of Preachers and who asked Hyacinth if he would like to join them. Hyacinth could think of no other way he would like to spend his life as much as this, so Dominic clothed him in the black and white friar's habit and sent him home to Poland to preach.

Hyacinth travelled not only to Poland but also to almost every corner of the world. He visited Austria and China and Norway and Scotland, preaching and teaching the way of the Christian. He especially loved to talk of Mary, our Lord's mother. Every good deed, he said, came out of his love for her.

Once when Hyacinth was in a Russian town called Kiev, a rowdy band of men called Tartars, who were as fierce as they looked, thundered out of the hills on their horses and tried to destroy the town by smashing and burning whatever was in their sight.

Hyacinth heard the screaming and saw the flames reflected in the windows, but since he was in the middle of offering Mass, he did not think it polite to stop and think about other things. The windows crashed about him, the people fled, the candles swayed and flickered while Hyacinth blessed the empty church and said, "Go in peace, the Mass is over." Then he covered the cup of hosts with his cloak and walked quickly away from the altar. A voice bade him stop, the voice of a gentle lady which said, "Hyacinth, my son, will you leave me behind to my enemies? Please take me with you."

He looked up to the heavy statue of white alabaster and wondered how Mary expected him, not a very strong man, to lift it. But if Mary asked him, well, then he would. He tucked the hosts care-

fully into a leather pouch, took a deep breath and reached for the statue. He wrapped his arms around it and prayed neither he nor it would break.

When he lifted the statue, he found it light as a bit of milkweed down. He ran with it as fast as he could, the Tartars' horses pounding behind him. He came to the river Dnieper and said, "Lord, what do I do now?"

God said, "Keep walking." So he did, right straight across the river, which parted to make a path for him. The Tartars stopped short at the water, which roared angrily at the men. They watched with amazement and some fear at this man carrying the huge statue across the stormy river. They decided they had better return to the hills and leave the town of Kiev alone. Strange people were living there!

Hyacinth spent the rest of his life travelling until our Lord decided he needed a heavenly rest. On the feast of Mary's Assumption, Hyacinth left this world just in time to celebrate it with her.



2. Joan Delanoue

ONCE UPON A TIME, in the town of Anjou in France, there lived a girl named Joan Delanoue who was a terrible grouch. If there would ever be a Saint for Skinflints and Penny Pinchers, she was it. The only way she would part with anything was to sell it for as high a price as she could wring out of the poor person who needed it.

And once she had the money, Joan couldn't bear to part with it. If she absolutely had to (to buy firewood or put a penny in the Church collection), she would sob and squeeze her eyes and big tears would roll down and drop off her nose.

Not only did it pain her to let go of money but also food, clothing and time. She said she had no time to waste smiling or telling jokes. "Time is money," she would snap briskly to people who wanted to talk with her about their problems, or who asked her to visit the old woman who told stories of when she was a girl over and over and over. "I should sit and listen to an old woman's babbling when I could be piling my money in neat little piles? Never!"

No one could understand why Joan was this way. She had been raised by kind and loving parents who welcomed each of their twelve children as if he (or she) were a special gift of God, which he (or she) was. Joan, who was the twelfth child, acted more like the bottom of the "grab bag surprises" than a special gift. She yelled and grabbed and demanded things, as if she were the only child living in the comfortable home.

Perhaps because the toys and clothes which had been passed down to Joan were so worn and faded, she decided when she grew up she would never share anything with anyone again. But then again, she just might have been a born miser.

Her father owned a general store on the corner in the center of town, and like a true general store, it sold everything. Warm flannel shirts and corn plasters and bean pots and Anjou pears and goat's milk cheese and mugs with violets painted on them and blueberry rakes and red-checked tablecloths and rubber bands for braids and oatmeal and oysters. And because there was a shrine to Mary in a nearby town, Joan's father sold rosaries and silver

medals and little bottles of holy water and statues of all the saints they knew up to that time.

Joan worked in the store from the time she was old enough to count pennies, and how she loved it! She would make sure no child would pop a root-beer sucker into his mouth without paying for it. The mothers laughed and shook their heads. "She's a sharp one, doesn't miss a trick. But I'd rather her father waited on me!"

When Joan was twenty-five, her father died, and her mother soon after. The house and the store were left to Joan. Even in her sadness at her parents' deaths, Joan was busy rearranging shelves and buying new scarves and prayer books. She settled down to make a good living and became known as the town's sharpest merchant.

Joan gave no credit to customers. Even if the village priest wanted to buy a handful of peppermints for the altar boys and emptied his pockets to show he had no cash with him, she firmly shook her head no. "Sorry, Father, if I did it for you, then I'd have to do it for everyone. And then where would I be, I ask you? That's no way to run a business!"

She decided to open the store seven days a week, which made the other shopkeepers angry. It was unfair to them since they were closed on Sunday. At least they were Christians, they grumbled, and kept holy the Sabbath. She also began to rent rooms to pilgrims on their way to the shrine, charging them for a room, breakfast, towels and soap.

In the evening, after a supper of food too far gone for even her to sell, she sat beneath a little oil lamp painting scenes on scallop shells or embroidering pillows that read, "Souvenir of Anjou." Then she counted her money. On moonlit nights, she sat by the window to count her money so she wouldn't have to burn her oil lamp.

And this is how she might have gone on until the end of her days, getting stingier and grouchier and caring less and less about opening her heart to the needs of others. But something happened. Something we cannot know until we meet her in heaven and ask her face-to-face, "Joan, whatever did happen to make you give away that first dress?"

We know that God sometimes sends other people as a magic key to unlock a hardened heart to the warmth of his grace. Perhaps

he sent the Widow Souchet—a strange old woman who appeared at Joan’s store one Epiphany Eve—to announce that she heard directly from the Lord that she was to come to Joan. For some unknown reason, Joan took pity on her and let her stay the night—without charge.

Joan began to feel quite uncomfortable, as though she had caught something from the old woman. She checked her tongue and the whites of her eyes and her fingernails, and was relieved to find that she was not turning blue and her hair was not falling out.

Then Joan knew that what she felt was something inside her—a great sadness, a yearning for something she did not know. She felt the door to her soul cracking and opening about an inch. She had a strange urge to give one of her dresses to the widow.

Now, it wasn’t a very great dress. It wasn’t even one you’d want to use for dress-up unless you were three years old and wore it backwards anyway.

It had a rip under the right arm and a chocolate stain smack out front and a moth hole the size of a quarter (it fed a moth family of six for two weeks). Ordinarily Joan would have sold it for a cleaning rag. But she gave it away. She gave the dress to the Widow Souchet, who exclaimed over it and over Joan’s goodness in giving it.

Joan’s heart rose as light as a balloon. She decided to do it again, and then again and again. When she used up the dresses in the store, she began giving away all her own clothes. Then she opened her kitchen to the poor who came to her door, to those hearing of her new kindness to beggars. She let people who didn’t have money charge their cheese and sausages.

The Widow Souchet encouraged Joan and told her each day what the Lord said Joan should do. Joan began to understand why God had sent the old woman to her and his message went to her heart like an arrow:

*I was hungry, and you did not give me food;
Thirsty, and you did not give me drink;
Naked, and you did not clothe me;
Sick, and you did not care for me. . . .*



She knew now that it was her special job in this life not to take but to give, and to give wholeheartedly and not to concern herself with tomorrow. “I have given you today,” God said to Joan. “Trust me to give you tomorrow!” One day the widow told Joan that she was to go to the nearby town of St. Florent, and there she would find six poor children in a stable who needed her. So off Joan went, and sure enough, she found six miserable little cold, hungry, frightened children, and their parents as well. She went home quickly, made a hot onion soup and a long loaf of crusty bread, gathered up warm blankets and clothes and piled them into a cart, and returned to St. Florent to take care of the family.

She stayed with them for the next few months, helping them get back their strength and courage. When she returned home, she knew that she must close the shop, which really wasn’t a shop any longer since she gave everything away. Besides the pilgrims who