



## Mermaids

*By Patty Dann*

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A coming-of-age novel that spawned the cult classic movie of the same name, starring Cher and Winona Ryder.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This is a really funny book about people trying to find something to hang onto in a world that keeps shifting under their feet. Patty Dann guides us through the guerilla war between mother and daughter, through the minefields that lie between being a child and being an adult in a voice not like any we've heard before."

- John Sayles

"Pure gold...energetic...frisky...a pleasure!"

- *Kirkus Reviews*

"Antic and poignant slice-of-coming-of-age-novel...a quirky charm will delight readers!"

- *ALA Booklist*

"Charming, fresh...sharply etched."

- *Publishers Weekly*

#### About the Author

**Patty Dann** is the author of **THE GOLDFISH WENT ON VACATION: A MEMOIR OF LOSS** and **THE BABY BOAT: A MEMOIR OF ADOPTION**. She has also published two novels, **SWEET & CRAZY** and **MERMAIDS**. Her work has been translated into French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, Korean and Japanese. **MERMAIDS** was made into a movie, starring Cher, Winona Ryder and Christina Ricci.

Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *O Magazine*, *The Oregon Quarterly*, *Redbook*, *More*, *Forbes Woman*, *The Writer's Handbook*, *Poets & Writers Magazine*, and "Dirt: An Anthology About Keeping House," and "This I Believe: On Motherhood."

She has served as a judge for the Scholastic Young Writers Awards. She has an MFA in Writing from Columbia University and a B.A. from the University of Oregon. Dann has taught at Sarah Lawrence College and the West Side YMCA. She was cited by New York Magazine as one of the "Great Teachers of NYC."

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#### CHAPTER 1

Mrs. Flax was happiest when she was leaving a place, but I wanted to stay put long enough to fall down crazy and hear the Word of God. I always called my mother Mrs. Flax. She had driven my little sister Kate and me in the blue Buick station wagon for three days this time, racing from Oklahoma to New England. Skinny Burt LeForest, who had a bulging Adam's apple and was in my high school, tore behind us in a truck full of our furniture, driving wildly to keep up. I had seen Mrs. Flax kiss Burt by the stove a week before, when he came by to change a light bulb we couldn't reach.

We arrived in Grove on a round moon night, with lilacs blowing sweet against our new house in the breeze. We rented the place; we always rented. I lay in the back seat, holding Kate, with her curly red hair, on top of me as I stared up at the windshield, which was still covered with Oklahoma dust. Mrs. Flax turned off the motor. I shut my eyes and prayed this would be the town where I heard a voice. Joan of Arc heard voices at thirteen; I had just turned fourteen, but I hadn't given up hope.

"But Charlotte," Mrs. Flax said when she found me at age six, kneeling in the middle of the kitchen on a hot Arizona afternoon, "Charlotte, you're Jewish." Mrs. Flax didn't believe in ritual or tradition. "Religion weighs me down," she said. I, however, decided I wanted to repent the first time I saw a girl with ashes on her forehead cross herself and chant Hail Marys before a spelling bee. That was when we lived in Wisconsin; the next day I stole an old piece of charcoal from a neighbor man's barbecue and walked around with a smudge between my eyebrows for a week and a half.

I was eight years old when Mrs. Flax was pregnant with Kate. While she drove with her belly pressed up against the steering wheel, I knelt way in the back of the station wagon. I solemnly clipped two curls of my hair and placed them in the Cracker jacks box where I saved my baby teeth. I prayed these relics would be kissed by miles of crusaders, who would wait piously in line someday.

I always had trouble trying to be holy, though. First of all, I liked to lie a lot; second of all, I kept falling in love.

Mrs. Flax climbed the porch steps in her high heels and polka dot dress. "Girls," she called out into the night, "come give this nice young man a hand."

People said Mrs. Flax and I looked alike green eyes, dark curly hair, medium height; not that we ever were the kind to stand giggling back to back. I listened to Burt drag boxes and furniture inside. New England was only a donkey head shape on the map to me. I hadn't come across a Massachusetts saint so far; I didn't know what the odds would be not that I knew anything about odds, but I prayed this would be the place where I'd find divine inspiration.

"Wake up, Kate," I said finally. "Welcome to home sweet home number eighteen."

Kate woke up yawning, with her hands over her ears. I adored Kate; everybody did. When she was born, I wanted to name her Gobnet, after the virgin beekeeper saint. "I worry, Charlotte, I really do," said Mrs. Flax.

Kate hopped up the steps on one foot and I followed her onto the porch. Burt was trying to lift the couch up onto his shoulders and through the front door. I held my breath, trying not to breathe in Mrs. Flax's perfume, as I clutched a leg of the couch; I didn't believe in perfume or make up or anything artificial. I washed with icy water whenever I could stand it; I was going to lead a pure life, free of sin. After Burt yanked the couch up through the doorway, Mrs. Flax followed him inside.

I held Kate's hand and stared sleepily out at the dark yard, breathing in the pine air. It seemed as if we'd been on the road forever. I had calculated that I'd wasted far too much of my life in a car. No saints, either male or female, had ever heard the Word at seventy miles an hour on the interstate. I needed to stand very still and as quiet as possible, and then inspiration would pour through my soul. I was losing patience, though. I had tried to be charitable, taking care of Kate all the time and trying not to kill my mother, but lately I was worried I'd succumb to a life of sin. Lots of saints had led secular lives before they turned to the monastic path; I just wasn't sure. I'd read everything to find the answer the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, and every book I could find on martyrdom. In sixth grade, while a circle of girls sat around reading horse books, I sat

alone at my desk, reading about Simone Weil, the Jewish girl who starved her head off trying to become a saint.

Suddenly Mrs. Flax gave one of her loud laughs, and a few moments later Burt was back outside. He slapped me on the shoulder, then jumped off the porch and into his truck and drove off down the road. As soon as he left, I took Kate inside. The place smelled of tomato sauce and toy trains. Burt had stuck the couch in the middle of the living room, and there was a jumble of boxes piled in front of the fireplace. Our room was down the hall, with bunk beds set up against the wall. Kate climbed onto the top bunk right away; she liked the top because she said it was like floating on water. I always preferred to be close to the ground.

I wandered through the house, avoiding Mrs. Flax, who was sitting on the counter next to the sink, humming "The Star Spangled Banner." I stared at the double bed in her room, trying to figure out if she'd done it with old Burt; she seemed to do it with everyone else. I considered stealing the car right then and running away forever. Within the last year, Mrs. Flax had taught me how to drive. I was underage, but she said being able to drive was the most important skill a woman could have; she taught me one morning in Oklahoma at five A.M., behind the supermarket, as the orange sun came up. I was a slow driver, a very slow driver, driving as if there was something wrong with my mind, according to Mrs. Flax; I put on my signal lights miles before I turned. If there was a church in Grove, I knew I'd be able to drive there if I wanted, but I'd decided long ago that church was not the place for divine inspiration. Saints were called while they were out herding sheep or staggering around the desert or down at the river, getting water in a bucket. Saints were not called while listening to a hot faced man yell at them. I walked down the hall, past a room with RED SOX carved into the door. The floor was covered with boxes of Mrs. Flax's personal possessions, which she had decided bored her to tears.

When I got back to our room, Kate was curled up like a snail, sound asleep, with her dress, on; but I could never sleep the first night in a place. I never could sleep until I made the room look like it did in every previous house. I opened one of the boxes Burt had dumped in the corner and carefully took out Kate's rock collection. I dusted the rocks twice, then laid them out on a low shelf against the wall. Kate was crazy about those rocks. She picked them up wherever we lived. Now there were a good number stuck to cardboard. Her method was to wrap adhesive tape around each rock, then label it with a made up name. The large rocks were too heavy to glue to cardboard, though. Those she just labeled and lined up in a shoebox, like fat sailors with their white belts.

I took out Kate's swimming trophies, which I'd wrapped individually in towels at our last house. I dusted them off and lined them in a row on the window ledge. Then I took out my old Cracker Jacks box, which I'd dragged all over America. I hadn't opened it in six years; I held my breath, then ripped the top and emptied the relics into my hand. As the years passed and we'd moved from state to state, the baby teeth had turned yellow and the curls now lay like dry apostrophes, and still God had not spoken to me. I put them back in the Cracker Jacks box and leaned the box next to Kate's Children's Encyclopedia of Fish of the World on the shelf.

Then I took out the tom picture of a pair of grown up brown tie shoes on yellow grass that I was certain belonged to my father. Kate had a different father, but I never told her that, it was one of those lies I just kept telling and telling. I didn't know if it was to protect Kate or because I liked to have secrets, but I always lied. Mrs. Flax never corrected me, either. When I was a kid I liked to refer to my father as Our Father Who Art in Heaven, and when Kate learned to talk baby talk she called him by the same name. I wondered every minute if my father was ever coming back. Saint Barbara became a Christian while her father was away; she became a hermit and lived in a bathhouse. When her father came back he almost killed her for becoming a Christian, but then he was struck by lightning and died with a sizzled smile on his face. My father called Mrs. Flax a

few times a year, but he never introduced himself to me. Men called Mrs. Flax every day of her life, and I drove myself nuts trying to figure out which one was Dad. Every few months Mrs. Flax said he'd be visiting soon, but the guy hadn't made an appearance yet.

I found a thumbtack on the floor and stuck the picture of his shoes to the closet door. I kissed the picture, then kissed Kate's curls, which smelled faintly of chlorine. Then I lay down on the lower bunk and tried to sleep, but I kept remembering, a pair of hands, which might have been my father's. When I was younger than Kate, in a town in Idaho, a man slid a pair of cardboard glasses on my face, lightly touching my ears, so I could watch an eclipse of the sun without going blind. I stood backward at the window, holding Mrs. Flax's powdery compact mirror, trying to see the sun, but all I could see was my own mouth. And then those hands lightly took the glasses away.

I liked the new house and I prayed we wouldn't be leaving right away. I prayed I would stop lying all the time. I prayed my father would return. I prayed I wouldn't fall crazy in love so much, and then I prayed that I would.

The phone rang early the next morning, and I was the one who stumbled out of bed to the kitchen to answer it after twelve rings. Mrs. Flax always insisted on having the phone connected before she moved into a place so she wouldn't miss a single gentleman caller. A man with a faraway voice that sounded like potatoes asked if my mother was home. I thought it could have been the guy who planted his seed, but I couldn't tell. Mrs. Flax finally got to the phone and sat on the kitchen table, puffing her bathrobe around her, then letting it fall open as she crossed her leg, swinging it back and forth. She wouldn't give a clue who it was, though. All I knew was I'd never seen her so friendly at that hour of the morning. The only people she consistently liked, aside from Kate, were Avon ladies; it was true wherever we lived.

Before we moved to Grove I had almost begun to think I was going to graduate in Oklahoma; not that I loved the place, not that I liked squinting until I'd go blind, and not that I liked the taste of dust when I licked my lips, but we'd lived there longer than anywhere else. Then Mrs. Flax began dating her boss, and although the pattern wasn't predictable, it often meant we'd be moving soon. A few days later she came home from work early one afternoon, ran a bath, and sat splashing around, hitting her fists on the water. She reached under the sink for the atlas, opened it up, and placed a dripping finger down on Grove. The next day she dialed information and found the name of Pine & Timber Realtor and spoke to Linda Jenkins, who had never dealt with a long distance tenant before.

Mrs. Flax hung up the phone after talking to the man with the potato voice and stood gripping the sink, with her back to me.

"Would you kindly see if Kate has fallen out of bed again?" she said as she opened the empty refrigerator.

"Who was that? Was that him?"

Kate appeared in the doorway, rubbing her eyes, wearing the wrinkled dress she had slept in. "Do they give us food in this place?"

"Not yet, baby, we'll go to the store later," said Mrs. Flax. "But I have some candy bars in my purse."

This is probably the best time to say a word about Mrs. Flax and food. The word is hors d'oeuvres. That's all the woman cooked. Fun Finger Foods was her main source book, except for when Kate was a baby and we lived on Hors d'Oeuvres for Your Infant, which she found at a tag sale in El Paso.

Anyway, that first morning in Grove we ate Mars Bars, sitting on the kitchen table because old, Burt had forgotten to pack the chairs.

"The Pilgrims live here," said Kate, swinging her legs. "My teacher said they sleep on a rock near here."

There was a knock on the door and Mrs. Flax slid off the table. "I hate Pilgrims," she said as she went to see who was there.

I ran to the window; there was a man, a tall man with black hair and the smoothest skin I'd ever seen, standing on the porch. I remember I thought he looked like a pirate. Although it was warm out, he was wearing a thick sweater and heavy corduroy pants, and he had Indian moccasins on his feet.

"Ma'am," he said, Pressing his forehead to the screen door.

" 'Ma'am'?" said Mrs. Flax through the screen. "'What can I do for you, sir?'

"I work up the hill. My name is Joe Peretti and I just wondered if you got moved in all right."

"And what is up the hill, Mr. Joe Peretti?"

"The convent, Protectors of the Blessed Souls."

I crossed myself and leaned against the refrigerator. "This is a sign," I whispered. "This is a real sign."

Mrs. Flax opened the door wide. "If I need you, I'll call, thank you. How old did you say you were?"

"Twenty nine," said Joe.

"Well, there is one thing, the porch swing. Would you mind putting it up? I can't reach."

Joe cleared his throat, and Mrs. Flax stood inside at the living room window, strumming her fingernails along the Venetian blinds, while Joe fumbled with the chains of the squeaking swing.

That night we were sitting on the kitchen table, eating little gems called Cheese Ball PickMe Ups and Wagon ho Miniature Franks, with toothpicks, when Mrs. Flax said, "That Mr. Joe Peretti is a most attractive man."

Kate giggled something about him looking like Joe Poseidon, King of the Sea, who was her favorite god, but I threw my toothpick on the floor.

"Don't you think so, Charlotte?" said Mrs. Flax. "You're old enough to have a boyfriend now, don't you think?"

"If I'm old enough, maybe you're too old," I said and walked out of the kitchen.

I had never actually had a boyfriend, although I'd fallen in love ninety one times so far. Once at a pep rally in the crowded gymnasium in Oklahoma, when everyone was jumping up and down, a small group of boys bumped into me on purpose and touched my breasts. I had always been embarrassed about not being flat-chested; I wanted to be flat and strong like Joan of Arc going into battle, but I was getting as many curves as Mrs. Flax. I'd fallen in love with every single one of the male teachers I'd ever had, especially the history

teachers. I loved to hear them talk about Hannibal as if they knew what they were talking about, as if they knew what it was like to cross the Alps on elephants who had snow in their ears. I lay down on my bed and put the pillow over my face. I wanted to be a virtuous person. I wanted to have a holy soul, but I was beginning to doubt I had a prayer.

"What do you think, Charlotte?" called Mrs. Flax. "D'you think it's Divine Providence that our nearest next door neighbors are nuns?"

Mrs. Flax's parents had been bakers in Poland, and when they moved to America they opened the first kosher bakery in Minerva, Ohio. As a child, Mrs. Flax had stood in the kitchen by the oven, twisting pieces of dough into messy, uncookable knots. She thought cooking bread was pointless, let alone cooking kosher. Her oldest sister was the one who stayed home and later took over the bakery, but Mrs. Flax left town on the last day of high school. The night before, she had stood in her parents' kosher kitchen, eating a ham sandwich and a glass of milk and making her mother cry.

The next morning I got up at sunrise when I heard a bell ringing from up the hill, and I put on a navy blue dress. I always wore dresses, never pants. If I ever went on a crusade I'd wear pants, but I thought a truly holy person should try to be proper at all times. I also wore a pair of beige vinyl boots. The boots were the only thing my father ever sent me; they arrived in a ripped box one day from California. They were ugly, I knew that, they had no grace, but they were a gift from him, and I wore them as often as I could stand it. I was always too hot, and the boots made my heels sore, but I thought it was best to always be slightly in pain, as an act of penance for my sins.

I walked across the yard full of daffodils and started up the steep hill to the convent. I tried to walk on tiptoe the whole way so I wouldn't disturb the nuns. At the top of the hill was a wrought iron gate with a sign that said NO TRESPASSERS ALLOWED. The gate was open, though, and I could see three nuns walking by the bell tower, their heads bent in prayer. I'd seen a convent once before, when we lived in Oregon when I was very young. My class had gone on a field trip, and a forest ranger made me count out loud the rings of a giant sequoia tree. On the way home we stopped for a picnic in a field outside the convent.

That first time I saw nuns, they were playing horseshoes. A bunch of them were standing in a crooked black line on the lawn, laughing as each one threw into the sky and missed. Rusty horseshoes landed all over the grass. When the game was over, the nuns zigzagged across the lawn, scooped up the horseshoes, and dropped them, clanging, into a wood box. Then the nuns picked up their prayer books from a neat stack in the shade of a tree and walked away in rows of black skirts, chanting Latin. "My mommy and daddy are in fifth grade. My mommy and daddy are in fifth grade," I thought they said.

I walked through the gate of the Protectors of the Blessed Souls, whispering "Trespass not against those who trespass against you," and felt suddenly calm as I entered the grounds. It was a bursting spring day, all the blossoms were out, the dogwood and apple, and the lawns were freshly cut. I snuck across the grass, past the bell tower, to the stone chapel with stained red and yellow windows. I put my ear to the oak door but I didn't hear a sound. As a child, I once spent an hour with my ear pressed to the door of some nuns' car in a shopping center, but all I heard was a loudspeaker blaring "Swiss steaks, two for the price of one."

I walked deeper into the convent, back on a curving path through the woods. I hid behind a tree when I heard the sound of digging in the ground. I was scared and discovered secret catacombs, but when I squinted my eyes I could see a man kneeling in a vegetable garden, surrounded by small tomato plants. He had his back to me, but I could see it was Joe Peretti, Joe Poseidon Peretti himself. I shut my eyes. "Dear God," I prayed, "don't let me fall in love and want to do disgusting things." I watched him dig up weeds, then throw them off

into the woods. "Dear God," I prayed, "I love the way he throws." When Joe stood up I held my breath, but he didn't walk toward me; he walked the other way. The second he was gone I missed him, I swear. I wrapped my arms around the tree and pressed my ear to the rough wood. A few minutes later I heard something being dragged along the ground, and I ducked behind the tree to watch. Joe was returning with a sledge hammer and long wooden stakes in one hand and a large roll of chicken wire in the other. This is it, I thought. I'm going to be tortured by rods and rack and fire, just like Saint Agatha. I watched Joe all morning, digging deep holes for the stakes, then pounding them into the ground. He covered his precious tomato plants with chicken wire, pricking his fingers until they were beaded with blood. Then he suddenly began ripping the wire away from the stakes. He looked like he was having a fit; I wanted to run over to him and lick his fingers and ask if he was having supernatural revelations. He threw everything to the ground, then stormed off the other way. I leaned against the tree and crossed myself; I decided I'd wait forever for him to return.

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