

SURRENDER

A MEMOIR OF NATURE, NURTURE, AND LOVE

MARYLEE MACDONALD



PRAISE FOR MARYLEE MACDONALD

Savor this book. Enjoy being in the hands of a generous and visionary writer.

— EILEEN FAVORITE

...each character is backed up “right against the precipice,” where the will of one person is determined to prevail over another.

— ADRIA BERNARDI

...brimming with emotional wisdom and eloquence.

— MELISSA PRITCHARD

...a vivid and visceral story that explores the great distance between human hearts.

— TARA ISON

Surrender

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MARYLEE MACDONALD



TEMPE, ARIZONA

For John and Michelle

“Whole societies have an astonishing ability to deny the past—not really forgotten, but maintaining a public culture that seems to have forgotten. . . . These forms of knowing shade into the archetypal open secret: known by all but knowingly not known.”

— STANLEY COHEN, author of *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*

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PART I

NATURE VS. NURTURE



This studio photograph was taken in 1969. Pictured left to right are Bobby MacDonald, John and Marylee MacDonald, Teddy MacDonald, and Jackie MacDonald.



John Michael, the couple's youngest, was born seven months after his father's death.

THE HOUSE OF SHROUDED MIRRORS

When I was sixteen and not yet wise enough to know what it meant to have a child and lose him, I surrendered my firstborn son. He was adopted. For the years of his youth, he was my ghost child. On good days I imagined him biking to the library or knocking helmets in a Pop Warner game. On bad days I pictured him dying and in need of a bone marrow transplant. I had never held him, not even as a newborn, and I had only briefly seen his face. Two years after his birth, I married his father, and we had four more children, full siblings to my absent child. When he turned twenty-one, I searched for him.

Back in 1962, when a mother surrendered a child, she signed a waiver that stripped her of her legal right to know anything more about her baby. She could not know his name or even whether he had been adopted. And yet, as an adoptee myself, I knew firsthand the difficulties of assembling an identity without the crucial, and missing, pieces that came from DNA.

From an early age, I knew I did not fit with the family that had adopted me. There was something inside me, trying to come out. I didn't know what it was, but growing up, I sensed my parents watching and waiting for the real me to emerge.

Why did I suspect that inside lurked a more authentic self? The little jokes they told. The innuendos that I did not then understand. All of these had to do with my genetic heritage. Rather than confirm my feeling of belonging to them, my adoptive family's speculative asides hinted at the opposite—that I was not *of them*.

After a difficult seven-year search, I reunited with my own birth family. For the first time in my life, I met people who looked, sounded, and acted like me. Now, I am a seventy-four-year-old former carpenter, sister, grandmother, and wife. My husband lives in Arizona, where he is a professor, and I live in Sonoma County, California, where redwood trees grow in my backyard. I often drag a blow-up mattress out to my back deck and enjoy the miracle of sleeping under the stars.

Each decade—each birth or move or life event—has caused me to revisit my own origin story and to try to make sense of two cataclysmic events that shaped my life. In the first instance, I was a baby, not much bigger than a shoebox, handed from one family to another. That transfer disconnected me from my genetic roots. In the second instance, I was the one doing the handing off. I did not literally hand my baby to his adoptive mother. I was not even allowed to touch him. However, the wheels of the transfer were set in motion the instant I signed my name to the surrender papers, thus surrendering a part of myself.

I do not blame myself for surrendering my son, nor do I seek forgiveness. Given my age at the time (sixteen), feelings of obligation to my adoptive mother, and societal norms, my signing those papers was not so much a decision as an inevitability.

As Albert Camus wrote in his novel *The Fall*, “Alas, after a certain age, every man is responsible for his own face.” Throughout each person's life, during all our acts of self-discovery and self-creation, we become the face we will one day see in the mirror—our own, authentic self.



The author was six weeks old at the time of her adoption. Pictured left to right are Rex and Lorene Benham (father and mother), Orville and Celia Pitney (maternal grandparents), and Marshall and Louise Pitney (mother's brother and his wife). The photo was taken on Thanksgiving (1945) at the adoptive parents' avocado ranch in Camarillo, California.

THE CRYING BABY

*R*evisiting the past is never easy. It was 2008, I was living in Evanston, and I did not want to move to Phoenix, where I had once lived in a home for unwed mothers. Already in my parka, awaiting my husband's arrival, I stood looking down at a black-and-white border collie running back and forth in a neighbor's yard. Light streamed through the dining room's windows. I was nearing the age, just at the edge of it, when the world suddenly took on a sharp beauty, each pane of the steel windows framing a seasonal tableau: maples bursting into a lime-green spring; the lush, variegated greens of summer; and now, late September, with its red, yellow, and orange leaves fluttering to the ground. Soon, it would be winter. Ice would coat the bare branches. This decade would bring one final burst of health and vitality, and I did not intend to be dislodged for the sake of my husband's job.

Coming in from his office two blocks away, Bruce unlocked the front door, came up behind me, and wrapped me in his arms. His muscled chest was the wall I had leaned on during the ups and downs of my children's teenage years and the reunion with my oldest son, the one I had surrendered for adoption. Now, unless I could figure out some way to convince my husband otherwise, he

was all set to move from Northwestern University to Arizona State. The therapist was squeezing us in.

Ten minutes later, Jim, a minister's husband with gray hair and the long-legged, rangy body of a distance runner, showed us into his basement office, both he and Bruce dodging the heating duct. Bruce, unwinding his muffler, took his usual seat in a leather chair near the door. Fit and muscular and with the quiet, gathered intensity of a man who never missed a day at the gym, he was at the top of his game, a leader in the world of science and a person who maintained strict control over his emotions. Jim, steepling his fingers, took the Eames chair across from us and asked what had brought us in—the therapist's standard opening gambit.

"Bruce received a formal offer from Arizona State," I said.

"They're giving me everything I could hope for," Bruce said. "A huge amount of lab space. A million dollars for remodeling. An endowed professorship. Permission to hire faculty. Oh, and moving expenses."

"Sounds great." Jim smiled benignly. "So, what's the hang-up?"

"My wife doesn't want to move."

"I want to," I said. The back of my neck prickled. My face lit up. "I just can't."

"Why don't you turn to Bruce and tell him what concerns you?" Jim said.

Take a deep breath, I told myself. Raising your voice won't do any good.

I swiveled my chair around and leaned forward. The corner of Bruce's mouth crimped. If he heard the drumbeats of anger, he would flee. Oh, sure, his body might stay seated in that chair, but he would shut down like a liquor store on Sunday, its metal grille pulled across the plate glass. How to convey my white-hot rage without scaring him? What words would open his heart?

"I need you to listen to my feelings and not be scared," I said.

"All right," he said. "What is it?"

"The research institute you're going to is an anthill of activity. All those multimillion-dollar grants. All those big egos. I'm scared that if you take this job, you'll work even more than you do now."

“That’s not my intention.” Grimacing as if I had stepped on his toe, Bruce looked at Jim. “For years, Marylee has been saying I work too much. With this job, I’ll have a lab manager and an administrative assistant. I’m actually doing this for us.”

Bullshit, I thought.

“Will you work Saturdays?” I asked.

One by one, he pulled his fingers until his knuckles cracked. Finally, he said, “I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep.”

I hated his integrity almost as much as I hated myself for trying to extort a promise. It was like trying to shame a puppy. Chewing on shoes was in its nature. However, I was not one to give up easily. In my nights of stewing about this, I had come up with some “appeals to reason.”

I reminded Bruce that he was in the middle of a visiting lectureship that would take him to one or two universities every week during the fall. Even with the best job in the world, surely he could see that the logistics of the move would fall on me. I’d have to get bids from moving companies, oversee the packing, and get our apartment ready to put on the market.

“I know that’s not fair,” Bruce said, “but Marylee has always been the one to handle the practical details of life. That’s why we make a good team,” he told Jim.

“Yes,” Jim said, “we are often drawn to our opposites.”

Very true. Both my husbands were engineers.

“Also,” Bruce said, “when I went down there last January to give a talk, I couldn’t believe how nice the weather was. I won’t be walking to work in snow.”

“We live only two blocks away from Northwestern,” I said. “It’s not like you ever freeze.”

“She’s not out there on the sidewalk at six thirty,” Bruce said, appealing to Jim. “It’s slippery as hell.”

“And you’ve never been to Phoenix in the summer,” I said. “It’s *hotter* than hell.”

“They tell me it’s a dry heat.”

“You could fry an egg on your head,” I said.

Jim held up his hands. “Whoa, whoa, let’s lower the temperature.”

I gripped the arms of my chair. My eyes welled with angry tears. A box of Kleenex sat on the table between us. A bottled-up scream made my throat shrink to the size of a straw. I needed to lower my voice and use “I” messages.

“Phoenix is where I surrendered my son,” I whispered.

“I know,” Bruce said.

“You wouldn’t ask a Vietnam vet to relocate to Vietnam.”

“I’m not asking you to move to Vietnam.” Bruce turned to Jim. “She thinks she has some kind of PTSD issue with Phoenix.”

“Oh?” Jim said. “Do you?”

“I’m no psychologist, but yes, I probably do. A hand clutches my throat and cuts off the air. I wake up at night and obsess. What it comes down to is, I wish Bruce would honor my feelings.”

“You didn’t want to move to Urbana either,” Bruce said, “but that turned out okay.”

“Okay? For you, maybe, but for three years, I was fighting off major depression.”

“You weren’t depressed. You were just angry.” Bruce turned to Jim. “When I came home from work, I could never tell what kind of mood she’d be in.”

“It wasn’t like that when we moved to Evanston,” I said.

“No, of course not. You wanted to move.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Bruce. I can’t buy into this move. My whole life is here. I have friends of the heart.”

“One thing I’m good at is recognizing an opportunity,” Bruce said, “and something like this won’t come my way again.”

Twenty-five years earlier, we’d convened a high school youth group. With long hair and bangs that he cut himself with a Swiss Army knife, he had not looked like potential husband material. His hair had thinned, but inside, he was still the same sweet, introverted nerd he’d always been, with rare exceptions—like today.

“I know this is the job of a lifetime for you. Arizona State values what you can bring to the campus. Your vision. Your leadership.”

“Yes?” He sat back and smiled.

“More than anything, I want you to take this job, but my life is here. I don’t know a single soul in Phoenix.”

“I’m starting from scratch, too.”

“Yes, but you have an institutional affiliation. Departmental colleagues.”

“I don’t know them.”

“I have a profession, too. Where am I supposed to find other writers?”

“Put up a sign in Whole Foods?”

“If you didn’t have that offer, would you think that putting up a sign in a grocery store would help you find work colleagues?”

“No, but then, if it weren’t for my job, you wouldn’t have the luxury of calling yourself a writer.”

Ouch, but fair enough.

I took a printed email from my purse and handed it to Jim. The email had come at 7:30 a.m., just after I finished my muffin and settled down to write. After reading it, I had walked down Noyes Street toward the lake, past Bruce’s office on the second floor of McCormick Technological Institute. I saw that he’d turned on his office light, but rather than go up there and throw a fit, I continued down the alley and onto the running path that skirted the athletic fields, the duck pond, the student union, and the theater department, where we had season tickets. A sailing club overlooked the swimming beach where I liked to swim in summer and where Bruce, when we’d first moved to Evanston, often met me for a walk to dinner at the Fish Market or the opera café that had been our favorite, Verdi & Puccini.

I sat down at a picnic bench and, taking the email from my pocket, read it again. The writer, one of the few literary writers I’d been able to find, had moved to Tempe because of her husband’s fabulous job at Arizona State. The Valley of the Sun was so spread out, she had not met any other writers. Her husband worked all the time. Her daughter needed to finish high school. Trapped, she had fallen into a clinical depression.

If I could have felt one ounce of reassurance, of gladness, one single ray of hope that I could create a life for myself in Arizona, it

would have eased my mind. Instead, I was unable to put on my “good sport” beanie. Ashamed of myself, bitterly angry that I could not find it in my heart to be the wife I wanted to be, I sat there, numb with misery, staring at the flat, calm lake. I had just turned sixty, and yet I felt as lonely and as lost as I had at sixteen, standing on the walkway of the Phoenix Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers, the sun beating down on my head. A part of me was still the high school student with her new learner’s permit and rag rug rolled beneath her arm, dreading experiences she could not yet imagine and did not want to have.

That was my Phoenix.

Bruce’s Phoenix was all promise and glory.

Jim handed the email to Bruce, and he read it. Then he handed it back to me.

“This is only one person’s opinion,” Bruce said.

“One person’s experience,” I said. “An experience is different from an opinion. This is her reality. It’s what she’s living through, day by day.”

“But you always make friends.”

“I cannot and will not uproot myself again,” I said. “Especially not to Phoenix.”

Call me a romantic, but I have always believed that love conquers all. Bruce just needed time to think through the implications. Then he would come around.

I reached for his hand. It felt warm and firm. “If I said to you, ‘Choose between me and your career,’ what would you say?”

His eyes darted about. He looked up, as if the keys of an invisible typewriter were striking his forehead. He pulled his hand free and cracked his knuckles.

Finally, he said, “If you force me to give this up, I’m afraid I would hate you for the rest of my life.”

I gasped. Wind whooshed through my ears. The pressure in the room shifted. The torrential rain of arguments gave way to a dead calm. An upright humidifier stood in the corner. Its whirr filled the silence. Then I heard a sniffing sound, air sucked through a nose. Then a snort, similar to a sneeze, followed by a deep, short grunt.

The sound of a cat in heat or a baby in distress. Mortified that I could not hold back the tears, I rocked forward, my face hot, palms covered in snot. A loud *Waa, waa* welled up from my throat and went on and on. It wasn't a cry of pain. Those were sudden and shrill. It wasn't hunger. It wasn't a whiny or fussy cry, either, but it would not stop. My face flashed hot and cold. I tried to rein myself in, and the crying grew in volume, until hiccups made me choke. Why couldn't I bring myself under control? I wanted to be rocked, I wanted to be held, but when I peeked out from between my fingers, I saw the therapist sitting wide-eyed and my husband standing with the doorknob in his hand. The clock above the door told me I had cried for a full half hour.

Jim looked at Bruce. "I think we're at the end of the session."

Bruce pulled a check from his pocket. "Here you go." And to me: "Pull yourself together. I've got an important conference call, and I need to get back."

Chin trembling, eyes aching, I blew my nose. Numbness washed over me. It was as if I were standing in a cold shower, my face, my chin, my shoulders, my hands, all going dead.

This was why Bruce and I were a good match. I was emotional. He was nonreactive. And now I had another important piece of information about his priorities. My fear of displacement didn't count; at least, it didn't count more than his job. Goddamn talk therapy. It never helped. I was going to have to figure out how to cope on my own, and I didn't have a clue.

COLLAGE

Solving environmental problems was Bruce's calling, not his job. The move wasn't about status or salary, but about his trying to save the world. He and I had the same values. That's what had attracted me to him in the first place. Plus, he did his own laundry, was intensely loyal, and paid the bills. If Bruce went out on the dating market, he'd be snapped up instantly. I was just being unreasonable and selfish. Army wives moved all the time. Why did I think I was so special? I wished I hadn't thrown such a hissy fit.

I unbuckled my seat belt and waited in the alley for Bruce to park the car. His first academic job had been at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, and that was where we'd raised the kids. Our two-bedroom apartment in the Rookwood Gardens—a 1927 castle with a crenelated parapet—was where we had downsized. The kids were off at college, and Northwestern had made him chair of environmental engineering.

Bruce closed the garage door and then reached out and drew me to him. I rested my cheek on his chest, feeling the metal snap on his jacket against my face.

"I was thinking on the way home," he said, "that we don't have to sell the apartment."

“Can we afford two homes?” I asked, pushing back so that I could see if he was serious.

His eyes, looking down through his glasses, searched my face. “With what they’re paying me? Yes,” he said. “That way, you could come back for your writing workshops. You can stay as long as you like, and if you don’t want to be in Tempe during the summer, you could come up here.”

“Thank you,” I said, my throat still raw.

As I watched him head down the alley, his step springy, his navy jacket shimmering in the sun, I realized how many times in this marriage I’d underestimated him. Occasionally, not just with Bruce, but with my first husband, too, marriage felt like a jail cell, a place I had to spring myself from. I wished I were the kind of person—a normal, “good wife” kind of person—who could just go with the flow. Instead, I was like a shopper in a shoe store, wanting the salesperson to bring me box after box, until finally, tired of myself, I settled for a pair that was an “almost good” fit, simply because I had to have something to wear. In most ways, Bruce and I were a good fit. However, his passion for his career pinched my toes. Similarly, my flying back and forth would be an almost good fit. I didn’t relish the idea of living apart.

As I climbed the steel stairs to the second floor and turned the lock in the kitchen door, I heard the phone ring. Inside, I grabbed the receiver from the wall.

“It’s Jim here,” the voice said.

“Jim the therapist,” I said, “or Jim from the condo board?”

“The therapist. I apologize for cutting off our session,” he said. “What was going on today?”

I put my hand on my stomach. Like torn strips of paper, my abdominal muscles felt shredded. “Oh, nothing,” I said. “I’m better now.”

“I doubt that.”

Jim told me to take a deep breath. Reach down inside and see if I could find that voice inside that had cried so desperately and for so long.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to. I was probably the only person in the

world who cared whether I was depressed or not. It was better to ignore my feelings, pretend they weren't there. But all right. If he thought it would help.

Elbows on the cool granite counter, I pressed my fingers to my eyes. It was weird trying to talk to a therapist while standing in the kitchen with a Princess phone in hand. I told him that, like it or not, I was going to have to move. I wasn't the first woman, or the only one, who was financially dependent on her husband, and I supposed that was part of the reason for the tears. It hurt my pride to acknowledge the truth: that in exchange for the freedom to write, I'd stopped paying my share of the bills.

"I don't think that's what brought on the tears," Jim said.

"Then what did?" I said.

"The tears sounded like those of a very angry baby," he said.

"I should have stuffed a sock in its mouth," I said.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said.

"It was like being possessed by a demon," I said. "I just totally let it take me over."

"You felt threatened."

"Threatened? How?"

"Like a child torn from its mother's arms."

"I'm adopted," I said.

"Yes, I know," he said. "That's what I'm talking about."

He suggested I find a small notebook, something I could carry in my purse. He wanted me to make a collage. "Find images that represent other parts of you, parts you can draw on to protect that baby."

A collage. All right. I'd always been sort of artsy-fartsy. Maybe this would, in some weird way, soothe the crying baby.

After the call, I found a stack of *National Geographic* magazines and a Moleskine notebook. In it I pasted a picture of a feisty little girl riding her first bicycle; also, a mountain gorilla, a redwood grove, and fog rolling in over the Golden Gate Bridge. California was where I had grown up and where I felt most at home. If I'd had my druthers, I would have moved back years ago. As I dabbed Elmer's glue on each image and smoothed it onto the page, I went

from feeling desolate to feeling the knot in my stomach loosen. If I held tight to this notebook, I might be able to make this move with more good grace than I had imagined.



Some psychologists believe that babies who are not reunited with their birth mothers soon after delivery experience a form of infant PTSD.



THE NOTEBOOK WAS MY TALISMAN. It soon filled with names and phone numbers of moving companies, human resources managers, real estate agents and title companies, and doctors and dentists.

Even though I was going through the motions, doing the tasks expected of me and trying to do them with a spirit of generosity, the crying in Jim's office still troubled me. Had I embarked on that crying jag because of my incipient feelings of displacement, or was the problem Phoenix itself, the place I had surrendered my son?

At the very bottom of the long-buried layers of emotion I was experiencing, akin to the geologic layers in the Grand Canyon, lay the rage that had spilled out in my therapist's office and that author Nancy Newton Verrier, herself an adoptive mother, wrote about so eloquently in *The Primal Wound*, a book that examines the displacement felt by an infant transferred from its mother's arms to the arms of its adoptive parents.¹

The [adopted] child actually experiences being left alone by the biological mother and being handed over to strangers. That he may have been only a few days or a few minutes old makes no difference. He had a 40-week experience with a person with whom he probably bonded in *utero*, a person to whom he is biologically, genetically, historically, and perhaps even more importantly, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually connected. . . . It is a real experience about which [adoptees] have had and are having recurring and conflicting feelings, all of which are legitimate. These feelings are their response to the most devastating experience they are ever likely to have: the loss of their mother. The fact that the experience was preverbal does not diminish the impact. It only makes it more difficult to treat. It is almost impossible to talk about, and for some even difficult to think about.

Reading Verrier's book and occasionally bringing up adoption as a potential issue with the various therapists I have seen over the years should have expunged adoption as a force that could still cause me to behave irrationally. After all, I was a smart person. I understood that this rage was a raw and primitive form of anger, a response to abandonment that is typical of many adoptees.

But I was wrong. The crying told me that my feelings, much as I might want to deny them, still blew at hurricane force.

Therapist Jack Hinman, who has worked with adopted teenage girls who are "acting out," explains it this way:²

An infant's world changes radically when her biochemical connection to Mom is suddenly absent. The baby is programmed, at the neurological, biochemical, and limbic levels, to attach to its biological mother. Separation can constitute an actual trauma and drive significant developmental changes. Some experts are even entertaining a diagnostic label of "developmental PTSD" for infants or children who experience attachment issues as a result of separation from the birth family.

Despite the evidence that carrying around my little notebook with its collages—my security blanket—actually helped, some part of me did not want to believe that my own adoption "trauma" was a trauma at all, or that it continued to ripple through my life. I was a grandma many times over. I wished my whole adoption history would just go away. I didn't want to feel *it* anymore (the emptiness and desolation) or have *it* jump out of nowhere and bite me in the ass.

In the book *Birthbond*,³ the authors, Judith S. Gediman and Linda P. Brown, say that some adoptees can "thrust their adoption into the background of their sense of self. For others, it is absolutely primary, an awareness that begins the moment they learn they are adopted and is never outgrown." The book quotes one adoptee, a woman in her forties:

Being aware that I was adopted was a cloak that I wore around me at all times. I was always aware of my adoption; it had become a part of me. Wherever I looked, whatever I did, I took the feeling of adoption with me.

Adoption creates a deep scratch on the LP of the soul. Every time the record revolves, the needle drops into that scratch. A normal person might be tempted to throw the record away. As hyperaware as many adoptees are about the various ways adoption has left us with scratches that cannot be repaired, we would also give anything for those feelings to be erased. If only the feelings would go away, we could feel "normal." Thus, we try and try again to push

this adoption angst into the background, to keep it below the level of consciousness.

Here's a quote that sums up the fallacy of this thinking: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results."⁴

Every time I play the record of my life, every time I contemplate its various episodes, I think, *Ouch, there's that damned scratch again*. The scratch continues to astonish me. In other words, I want so desperately for the scratch not to exist that I would do almost anything to remain in denial. And the thing I was most in denial about was that there was a connection between my own adoption and my having surrendered a child.

THE SEARCH

*A*lthough I had surrendered my oldest child, I had managed to put my life back together. In my early twenties, I found myself in a period of relative stability. I had finished college and was busy raising my other children and baking apple pies. However, all the years of my oldest son's growing up, I lived in a state of dread that something might happen to him before we could reconnect. He had been born in Phoenix and adopted through Catholic Social Service. Call it a premonition, but around the time he turned ten, I began to feel that something just wasn't right, that he was in danger.

In 1971, I was living in Germany. My husband, his father, John MacDonald, had a postdoctoral research fellowship near Munich, and one day when John was at work, I summoned the courage to write to the agency that had handled my son's adoption. I wanted to know if my son had indeed been adopted, and whether he was alive or dead. I did not expect any information beyond a yes or no. Yes, he was adopted. No, he was not dead.

I knew that in surrendering him, I had signed away my legal rights. Even so, I was a mother—his mother—and whatever document I had put my name to at age sixteen did not erase the feeling of longing in my heart.

My letter to the agency explained that the boy's father and I had married two years after his birth and that we had both graduated from Stanford, I with honors in English and my husband with a PhD. I wanted to present my bona fides so the director, Ramona Sherron, didn't think I was some kind of flake.

As it happened, she knew my son's adoptive grandmother and took the unusual step of calling to find out how he was doing. My son was active in Scouts and Little League, his grandmother said. He was doing well in school. The family had adopted other kids, so he was not their only child. Agency policy and Arizona adoption law did not allow Mrs. Sherron to disclose anything more.

I showed the letter to his father, my high school sweetheart, thinking he would be thrilled. After all, this was his oldest son. He read the letter and handed it back. "Why don't you let it alone?" he said. His reasoning was that I had relinquished all rights and that the adoption agency had told me to "put it out of my mind and go on with my life." We had other children, and I should concentrate on them.

All right, I thought, even if he didn't want to know about his son, I did. (Only years later did I understand that John may have been trying to protect me, and possibly himself, from the inevitable heartbreak of endlessly wondering what had happened to our child.) I wrote back, thanking Mrs. Sherron. She responded with another letter, asking me to make a tape. Catholic Social Service held classes for prospective adoptive parents. She thought a "birth mother's story" would be valuable. Without any expectation that this would get me access to my son—sealed adoption records made such contact illegal—I made the tape and talked about how my situation was typical of the birth mothers I had known. I was Catholic and had a long-term boyfriend. We'd gotten "caught." I talked about my marriage and about how John and I had worked our way through Stanford. Mrs. Sherron wrote back, thanking me.

During my son's teenage years, I made no further inquiries. Then, when he turned twenty-one, I wrote again. By that time, the director had retired, but the letter was forwarded to her. She remembered me. I told her my husband had been killed in a car

accident in Germany. At the time, 1971, I had been six weeks pregnant with our fifth child. Our son had four full siblings and a mother who had never forgotten him.

The director still had contact with my son's adoptive family. She learned where his adoptive mother lived and drove two hundred miles across the desert to speak to her in person. Mrs. Sherron proposed an exchange of addresses and phone numbers.

His mother said no. No to contact. No to giving me information.

"But is he okay?" I asked Mrs. Sherron.

"I think so," she said, then added, "but she hasn't spoken to him in several years."

"He's only twenty-one," I said.

"I believe they had some sort of falling-out."

"What kind?"

"She wouldn't say."

Mrs. Sherron did get an update on his life and whereabouts. My son had grown up in the Northwest, which I took to mean Seattle. He had majored in accounting and had been an honor student. It was legal to give this sort of non-identifying information. However, without his mother's permission, the director couldn't tell me more.

I thanked Mrs. Sherron for her trouble. She said it was nothing and that many birth mothers were searching. If I was serious, I should get in touch with an organization in Phoenix called Search Triad. They were familiar with the Arizona laws regarding adoption. Maybe they could help.

I hoped they could, because now I had no idea how to proceed, and proceed I must, quickly. If my son and his mother weren't on speaking terms, something in the adoption had gone terribly wrong. If my son had emotional problems, maybe information about his biological family could help. I owed his mother a debt. She had taken in my baby, loved him, and watched him grow. As a mother, I felt greatly distressed that the two of them were estranged, and I wanted to fix this as soon as possible—if it was within my power.

By the time I began searching for my son in earnest, I was forty-eight and had moved to Urbana, Illinois. In the years between my first husband's death and my second marriage, I had worked as a

carpenter to support my children. I was co-owner of Working Women Construction, a company that did room additions, roofing, and kitchen and bath remodeling. I took a few days off work and flew down to Phoenix for a Search Triad meeting. The group's leader put me in touch with other birth mothers, many of whom had been reunited with their children. The place to start, they advised me, was with a petition to the court to get my records unsealed. They gave me the name and address of the court, and I went back to Urbana, where Bruce had recently gotten promoted to associate professor. I wrote up the story about my son's father (John) and I marrying and having more kids, and about my being a generally upstanding citizen.

These days, Arizona allows contact between birth relatives, but only through a court-appointed intermediary. At the time I was searching, no such law existed. The records were sealed, and I had no good medical reason to justify my request that they be unsealed. The court denied my petition, and I began to feel the first pinpricks of doubt that I would ever find my child. But the next moment nudged that doubt aside. I must find him and let him know he had always been loved.

The Search Triad advisor—a lovely, warm woman named Karen—suggested I look at high school yearbooks. Since the boy's father and I had married and had three more boys, she felt certain I'd recognize my son if I saw his picture.

That summer, Bruce had a week-long conference at the University of Washington. I asked if I could tag along. First, I needed to tell my other children about their older brother and that I wanted to look for him. Jackie, a freshman at Bryn Mawr and the oldest of the children I'd raised, already knew. Unbeknownst to me, she had told her brothers. Shrugging offhandedly, the way teenage boys often do, her little brothers said, Sure, we knew about this. Go find him.

While Bruce attended his professional meetings, I visited public libraries. Their collection of yearbooks was incomplete. A librarian suggested I go directly to the high schools. I did but found that telling the office staff I was a birth mother looking for her son made me immediately a person of suspicion. Besides, there were more

than a hundred high schools in the Seattle area. I couldn't visit all of them in a week.

I decided to concentrate on the other piece of non-identifying information Mrs. Sherron had given me. My son had graduated with honors from an accounting program. I sat down with a phone book and, with Bruce's help, came up with a list of campuses. Cold-calling accounting departments, I soon learned to bypass the administrative assistants and speak directly to accounting professors. I explained the nature of my call—that I was searching for my oldest child, given up for adoption, and that I knew he had graduated as an honor student in accounting.

Two professors gave me lists of names—their top twenty students. Systematically, I worked through campus switchboards or called the phone company, asking for numbers.

By the end of the week, all I had to show for my efforts was a list of names, phone numbers, and arrows going to notes about possible contact points for the people I had not yet contacted. Bruce had been tolerant at first, but by the end of the week, seeing me face down on the bed, a pillow over my head, he said, "What's plan B?"

I didn't have a plan B. All I had was a trip back to Urbana and a backlog of work. I went up to the attic, where I had my office, opened my bid books and spreadsheets, and dug in.



WHEN BRUCE, whom I had met when we were leaders of a Presbyterian church's youth group, invited me to move from Palo Alto to Urbana, I'd told him I would if we bought an 1869 Italianate villa that was in such bad shape the city had slapped it with a No OCCUPANCY sign. The house was big and boxy: two stories, twelve-foot ceilings, a winding staircase to the attic, and five bedrooms. For years, each of my kids had been clamoring for his or her own bedroom. Restoring the historic structure would give me credibility as a woman in a nontraditional profession, and I could weave in the restoration with writing freelance articles for construction maga-

zines, which, up until the time I'd met Bruce, had provided a secondary source of income.

Bruce's job as an assistant professor paid zilch. The house, which had been occupied by a dozen students, had a coin-op washer and dryer in the basement, and we kept them, shoving in quarters for laundry for the next five years. Between his income and mine, we were finally solvent, but Bruce and I had a prenuptial agreement. We would go halves on expenses, but I was responsible for the kids' education. My daughter had just started college, and every month I wrote out a big check for her tuition.

Seeing no way forward with my search, I was tempted just to burrow down into my various income-making activities. The week in Seattle had wiped me out. Between work and normal family life, I had plenty to occupy my time and suck up my emotional energy. Finally, though, I recovered enough to give it one more try.

I called the Search Triad leader, Karen.

"There is one more option," she said, "but it will cost you."

"How much?" I said.

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Really?" I said, my voice a squeak.

"We use a secret searcher. We don't know who he is or where he lives, but I can tell you how to contact him."

"How long will it take?"

"If he's able to help you, two or three weeks. And he'll want the money up front."

"What am I paying for?"

"You don't want to know," she said. "And don't ask him. We're afraid he'll spook."

What he was doing was illegal. I didn't care. I had just about that much money in my bank account. I borrowed the rest from Bruce and went down to the bank for a cashier's check.

The anonymous searcher found my son's name and phone number. I learned that my son had also been named John, like his father, and that his phone had a Seattle area code. But I did not call immediately. I had to prepare myself.

Sitting in the attic, phone in hand, I called Karen. I had the name. What should I do?

She told me to write out a script. A caller can never know who's in the room with the person they're calling. A mother or father could be sitting right there. Or maybe there'd be something going on in the child's life. People sometimes hung up. Then you'd feel awkward calling again. You didn't want to come off as a stalker.

Karen warned me not to expect much. Boys, particularly, seemed to have a tough time with reunions. My son might not want or need anything more from me than his biological information. I told myself I could live with that. If I had to.

"Would it be better to write a letter?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It's important for your son to hear your voice. It's hard to deny the call of blood to blood."



I WROTE out my script and took it up to our house's belvedere, a streetcar-size space above the attic. The little room looked out at the treetops. It was where Bruce practiced his trumpet and where I curled up with a book. Now, it was where I rehearsed the lines that could either lead to a future relationship or cut off the one I hoped to have.

My son's twenty-first birthday had been in January. In March, Bruce and I had gone to Seattle and tried to find him. In August, the searcher had given me John's name, and I'd called Karen to find out how to proceed. But I feared being rejected. By calling him, I would be putting myself out there, opening this trough of feeling that had been running like an underground stream through the years between his surrender and the moment I'd learned his name.

By the time I let my feelings settle enough to make the call, more time had passed. It was October, leaf-raking season in Illinois. Bruce had the three boys—ages ten, twelve, and fourteen—out in the front yard. Through the belvedere's windows, I could see that he was raking, and they were jumping in leaf piles. I sat down on a built-in bench and dialed the phone.

“Hello, is this John?” I said.

“Yes, who’s this?” His voice had a deep, slightly nasal ring.

“I’d like you to write down my number in case we get disconnected,” I said.

“All right. Let me get a pen.” He covered the receiver and spoke to someone in the room. “Okay, got it.”

“Were you born in Phoenix on January 13, 1962?”

“Yes,” he said. “How did you know that?”

“I was there,” I said. “I’m your mother.”

He shouted to the other person in the room. “My mother’s calling! My mother’s calling!”

We spoke for half an hour. Yes, John had been in Little League, but basketball was his sport. He’d played for Sammamish High School and through college. He lived in Seattle, where he had grown up, the third of eight. The oldest four were adopted. He’d skipped fourth grade and graduated high school at sixteen.

John’s parents had divorced. He described his relationship with his mother as “estranged.” When he was fifteen, a friend’s family had taken him in, and from then on, he had supported himself by working in a grocery store. John hadn’t spoken to his mother in five years.

“What about college?” I asked.

His teachers had encouraged him to apply for a scholarship. He’d paid for room and board by working as a resident assistant in a dorm, and he’d graduated as class valedictorian from the University of Portland.

As I listened to all this—how early he’d been on his own, his parents’ lack of support for his education—thoughts of *no, no, no, no*, *no* raced through my head. *Just stop*, I told myself. They were his parents. They were the lot he’d been dealt, and he’d made the best of it.

But when I hung up, my body was shaking. My teeth chattered like joke teeth. He’d promised to write, and I’d said I would, too.

By Thanksgiving, he’d sent me a lengthy letter and a stack of photos. Like his brother Ted, John had once had blond hair, but it had turned darker during adolescence, when braces had pulled in

his buck teeth and when he'd shot up to a basketball player's height. How freeing it was to hold these pictures in my hand. To fan them out and see him in a Little League uniform and making a slam dunk. Freeing, and sad. I had not been there to cheer him on.

Then John received family pictures from me, seeing, for the first time, people who looked like him. After more phone calls and letters, he decided to come out for Christmas. Jackie had invited her college boyfriend home for the holidays. The kids' grandfather Bob MacDonald decided to fly out, too. It would be a full house for the reunion.

In preparation for the holidays, I delegated the housecleaning tasks. "Make sure you put clean sheets on Jackie's bed," I told her brother Bob, sixteen. He'd promised to deal with the second-floor bedrooms. If we were lucky, Ted, fourteen, would wash the mountain of clothes on his floor and clean the downstairs bathroom. My youngest, also named John, volunteered to move in with Bob. We assumed our "guest" would appreciate having his own bedroom. To fuel our vintage ivory-and-green kitchen stove, as well as our two other wood-burning stoves, Bruce split logs and kindling.

I ordered a turkey and hoped that the house, with its period wallpaper, cornice moldings, chandeliers, and cozy nooks would show who I was as a carpenter, mother, and head of household. Houses often surfaced in my dreams, a metaphor for my identity, and I counted on this house to speak for me.

REUNION

*I*n December 1982, the airport in Champaign-Urbana looked like a Greyhound station. Small planes flew down to central Illinois from Chicago or up from St. Louis. John, striding across the frozen tarmac, fought his way through the windblown snow. He was six foot five, with a loping walk and most of his height in his legs. Between his sock hat and his muffler, I saw a narrow, triangular jaw and a patchy beard. He was his father reincarnated.

Shaking, I thrust out a hand. "I'm Marylee."

He looked at my hand and smiled. "What's with that!" he said, pulling me into a hug.

Grandpa Bob MacDonald, John's grandfather, stood in his long khaki coat, a carry-on in his hand.

"It's colder than a witch's tit," he said.

Trust Grandpa Bob to tell it like it is. "John, this is your grandfather."

"I introduced myself on the plane," John said.

"How did you know it was me?" Grandpa Bob said.

"Marylee said to look for 'the businessman with laugh wrinkles.'"

Bob MacDonald hadn't always been laughing, especially right

after he'd found out his son had gotten me pregnant. It wasn't until after John's death that he found me admirable.

"Let's get you home," I said to John. "Everyone's eager to meet you."

"Can we stop by a liquor store?" Bob asked.

"We have wine," Bruce said.

"With this cold, I was thinking Johnnie Walker," Bob said. "And then maybe you can just drop me at the hotel. It was a long flight. I need a nap."

What was going on with Bob? His eyes were bloodshot. They kept going from me to John and back again. Was he just now realizing that this was the baby I'd given up, largely at his behest? That the baby was now a man who looked very much like his father, Grandpa Bob's oldest son?

Bruce put the luggage in the back of my Suburban. It was the vehicle I used for construction. Chunks of joint compound had hardened on the rubber mats, and as John climbed in back, I saw an amused smile. Bruce drove, with Grandpa Bob in the front seat, turning around to look at John. I had thought Bob, an entrepreneur and self-made man, would add to the favorable impression I was trying to make. I wanted John to feel connected to the web that was the extended MacDonald clan, the web that had supported me during the seven years of my widowhood, but I was beginning to realize that although John (the son) had been real to me all these years, to his grandparents he was a disquieting stranger.

The wipers were barely keeping up with the snow. Bruce eased out onto Neil Street, the country highway that led to town.

John looked out the car window at the fields and occasional barn. "What happened to the mountains?"

Grandpa Bob turned. "If you stand on a stepladder, you can see to the curvature of the earth."

John laughed.

"I didn't move here for the view," I said.

"Why did you, then?" John said.

"Bruce's job."

We reached the outskirts of town, with its mounds of dirty snow.

Bruce pulled up next to a liquor store. Bob went inside. The car finally warmed up. I leaned forward and tapped Bruce on the shoulder. “Tell John what you do.”

It annoyed me to have to prompt him, but if I didn’t, he’d sit there in silence, like the shy, slightly younger grad student I’d first asked out on a date.

Bruce shifted into park and threw his arm over the seat. “I’m a professor of environmental engineering.”

“What’s that?” John said.

“I study microbial communities,” Bruce said. “I harness them to provide services to society.”

“Oh,” John said, frowning.

“He does research on drinking water and sewage,” I said.

“Ah,” John said.

“On our honeymoon,” I said, “we visited a sewage treatment plant.”

“A good one, too,” Bruce said. “It was just transitioning from an old Imhoff tank. Marylee got some great pictures of condoms.”

“Condoms?” John said.

“They’re in the waste stream,” Bruce said.

“I see,” John said, his brow furrowing again.

“Condoms get flushed down the toilet,” Bruce said. “You know? And then in the treatment plant, methane makes them inflate.”

“Like party balloons,” I said, feeling reckless and swiping at the window’s fogged glass with my mitten. I hadn’t expected the subject of condoms to enter the conversation, but now that it had, either John was going to get on board, or he was going to think we were all a little cuckoo.

Grandpa Bob came out of the liquor store with a brown bag. John hopped out of the car and opened the door. *Good manners*, I thought. We dropped Grandpa Bob off at Jumer’s Castle, a German-themed hotel next to Urbana’s shopping mall. It was just a few blocks from our house. With two bathrooms, we didn’t really have room to accommodate everyone, and besides, family chaos had always made Grandpa Bob eager to get away.

As Bruce pulled into our driveway, John said, “Oh, wow. Is this where you live?”

“It is,” I said.

“When we moved in,” Bruce said, “the building was condemned.”

“I put back the belvedere—that little room on top—and the porches.”

“Don’t forget the shutters,” Bruce said.

The shutters with the arched tops. Those had been a real pain, but now the house, with its hip roof and eyebrow windows, looked stunning.

The kids, bundled up in jackets, came running out. Jackie was the first to greet John. “I always wanted a big brother,” she said, “and now here you are. The biggest of the brothers.”

John Michael, eleven and soon to be dubbed Little John, jumped up and tried to touch John’s head.

Inside, the kids pulled off their socks and compared the length of their toes. They played Scrabble. They napped on the living room floor, climbing on, or curled up next to, their new sibling. His booming laugh echoed through the house.

On Christmas Eve, I retrieved Grandpa Bob from his hotel and Bruce put on his “Chef Cat” apron and a starched white toque. John hung out in the kitchen, watching me light a fire in the green-and-ivory wood-stove. Bruce cooked a whole pumpkin and filled it with French onion soup. Ted set the table with my grandmother’s Haviland china. I lit candles. While we ate the first course, Bruce stayed in the kitchen, making chicken-and-mushroom crepes, and Grandpa Bob, playing the paterfamilias, regaled us with stories of R. F. MacDonald Co.’s boiler business, where John, my husband, had worked to pay off his debt for my time at the home for unwed mothers.

On Christmas, I gave John a red photo album with a picture I treasured: his father’s West Point portrait. There were other photos, too. Pictures of John’s high school friends. Pictures of proms and our wedding. A photocopy of my medical records at the time of John’s birth. Also, the “birth announcement” I’d recently sent out as

my Christmas letter, telling my friends how happy and proud I was to have found my oldest son.

While the other kids tore into their sweaters and board games, John, sitting apart in an armchair, slowly turned the album's pages. I watched him nod and tear up. Finally, he raised his eyes.

"I wish I'd met him," he said.

John Michael—Little John—sitting on the floor, looked up. "I never met him either."

My son Bob said, "The only memory I have is him standing in the doorway, saying, 'Night night. Don't let the bedbugs bite.'"

"How about you, Ted?" John said.

"Nothing at all."

"I remember him," Jackie said. "He used to put us all on a sled and pull us along a path by a river."

"The Isar," I said. "There was a path right by the institute he was working at when he was killed."

"In Germany, right?" John said.

"Yes, it was," I said. "In Garching, just north of Munich."

"Have you been back?" he asked.

"I couldn't bear it."

My eyes flicked over to Bruce, long-haired and with a full beard. His bangs had the bowl-cut look—early Ringo Starr. He was smiling. Since we had no children of our own—he thought I'd done my bit for the survival of the species—he viewed his contribution as picking up where John had left off.¹



OVER CHRISTMAS DINNER, which all the kids pitched in to cook, we discovered John didn't like Brussels sprouts but ate most anything else. He learned that Jackie went to college on a partial scholarship and that his brother Bob, with 800s on his SATs, was applying to Princeton and Brown.

"In my family, I was always a superstar," he said, "but here, I'm just average."

That was true. For the first time in his life, he was meeting blood relatives, all of whom were driven to excel.

The day after Christmas, snow continued to pile high. The kids made a snowman in our front yard. It was so cold that neither my Suburban nor Bruce's VW Beetle would start. Grandpa Bob came and went by taxi. John bundled up and, with the other kids, pulled sleds to the nearby grocery store.

He fit into our family as if he'd never been gone. But then, I had always known about him, known he was out there somewhere, whereas he had never even imagined he would see people who looked like him and brothers whose voices had the same deep timbre. When you haven't known someone for twenty-one years and suddenly that person is part of your family, it's easy to spot the genetic similarities. But I'd begun to notice John going quiet when his siblings talked about camping trips and other Christmases. These were experiences he had missed and telling him what had happened only reinforced that this was a family he could have grown up in but hadn't.

Later, when Bruce and I were going to bed, he asked, "Which one of the boys is the most like their father?"

"John Lauer," I said. "He looks like him, talks like him, and blows his nose like him. They even have the same handwriting."

I would have been happy if he'd spent every Christmas with us. I wanted to see as much of him as time allowed. However, I had to face the reality that his first loyalty was to his adoptive family and that he was in the "career-making" stage of life. The best I could do was to try to create a common history and keep the lines of communication open.

THE REQUEST

On March 19, 2013, John sent me a text: “Are you in Phoenix anytime this Thursday night to Saturday afternoon? I’m coming down for business.” Come on down, I said, as if he were a contestant on the old game show *The Price Is Right*.

It was not unreasonable for John to question my whereabouts. After our move from Evanston, I often found excuses to leave Arizona. And it was not unusual for our attempts at connection to not quite work out. Despite a good reunion, he’d pull away for months or years, and I assumed that what was going on for him was similar to what I had felt after my own reunion—that the discontinuities between my own lived history (the “nurture” part of my story) and the relief and wonder I felt at finally knowing my birth mother and siblings (the “nature” part of the equation) simply overwhelmed me.¹

After my reunion, I had listened with a noncommittal smile as my birth family talked about family vacations and camping trips and overnights with their grandmother. Hearing about their memories opened a well of longing and grief. I would pull away, not intentionally but because I couldn’t bear knowing how much I had missed.

Some months or years later, I would muster the courage to “go there again.” What do I mean by “there”? To the house of pain.

I had not heard from John since Christmas, when my kids, now grown and starting their own families, made a point of renting a big house so that the whole family could spend time under one roof. John sometimes came, but more often did not. Even though I had behaved in much the same way with my birth mother, I never knew how to handle either the silences or the moments when he’d resurface. As I stood in line at a Starbucks now, I fully expected him to bail.

I took my coffee to an outdoor table. Cars zoomed past. Across Scottsdale Road, I saw that a strip club—Les Girls—had opened its doors. Smoking a cigarette, a blonde in shorts and a tank top sat on the front stoop. Hunched over, elbows on her knees, she watched the passing traffic. She might have been thinking, though not with words, *how could my life have been different? Is this where I imagined I’d wind up?* But, of course, I was projecting. Maybe she wasn’t thinking that at all. Maybe pole dancing required her to erase all feeling. As I well knew, going numb made it easier to survive. For twenty-one years, I had locked away the love I felt for my absent child, just as I’d slammed the lid on the “crying baby”—anything to make her shut up.

A red car swung into the parking lot. Minutes later, my son, holding a latte, pushed open the patio door. His long legs closed the space between us. Fifty-three, he had put on weight since Christmas. The heavier version of John Lauer gathered me in his arms. One hug, and then another, followed by his fingers giving me a chuck on the chin, a gesture tinged with affection or condescension. I was his mother, but I had not raised him, and, even after our time together, I did not know him well enough to accurately decode the nonverbal clues.

At the tables next to us, golfers and baseball fans down for spring training soaked up the sun. John handed me his coffee and moved a green umbrella to shade the table. Then he sat. With his crisp white shirt and broad shoulders, he looked the way his father

might have looked in middle age: eyes so blue you could practically see the sky through his head.

His appearance told me that though he had briefly inhabited my body, everything else about him came from the MacDonald gene pool. His oval face had his father's patchy beard. He also had his father's hands—short fingers with nails the size of quarters—a biological feature his father had bemoaned because his small hands made him less effective playing defense.

I gulped down the rest of my coffee and licked the foam from my lips. It was eleven in the morning. Some feeling in my stomach was trying to announce itself. Hunger. Rage. Oatmeal cookie.

My son checked his Rolex and leveled me with his eyes. "Here we are, together again in Phoenix after fifty-one years."

"Yes," I said. "Here we are."

He pointed to my forehead. "I have those."

"Oh, the oil bumps." My fingers went to the bumpy skin at my temple. "Last time I went to the dermatologist, I asked if he could remove the places on my forehead. He told me no, he had other patients, and if he started, he'd be at it all day."

A laugh came from the boom box of John's chest. Four men wearing Cubs hats turned toward the joke they had missed.

"Do you live near here?" John said.

I thumbed over my shoulder. "On the other side of the ASU campus. Bruce draws a little circle around his office, and I've got to find a house within walking distance."

He nodded. "Your house in Urbana was close to his office. I remember that from my first visit."

His first visit. The best and most joyful Christmas of my life. He'd visited us in Evanston only once.

"We actually have a guest bedroom," I said.

"Okay," he said.

"Short notice works," I said. "I don't care."

"Yeah," he said. "Well."

"The price is the same as good advice. Free."

He laughed. "When I came down here before, the rooms were

sixty bucks. The price shot up. My room's running me three hundred a night."

"Spring training."

He frowned. "I never thought of that."

Why hadn't he called me a week ago? Maybe he wanted to work all the time and didn't want to disturb us. More likely, seeing me triggered the same kind of pain it did for me. I could never reclaim the relationship I might have had if he had grown up calling me Mom. Despite that, he was my son, and I loved him.

"Are you getting adjusted to Phoenix?" he said.

I sniff-laughed. "I doubt I ever will."

"It's not a place that ever called to me, either."

The sun peeked around the umbrella, and I put up a hand to shield my face.

John checked his watch again. His smile faded. A fist of uncertainty clenched my gut, the very place—behind that wall of stretch-marked skin—he had turned his baby back flips. I waited for him to push back his chair. Interview over.

"I wanted to get together so you and I could have some time alone," he said.

"That would be nice," I said.

"I thought maybe we could talk about what happened when you were down here."

"What is it you would like to know?" I crossed my arms and then uncrossed them and tried not to look defensive. Surely, after all his years in corporate America, he could read body language.

He leaned forward and pushed his cup aside. "The story of my birth."

"That's the most compelling story for all of us," I said. "How we came into the world. Who our ancestors were. How the combination of nature and nurture made us who we are."

"Yes," he said. "When you sent me pictures of my dad, it blew me away."

"Do you still have the album I gave you our first Christmas together?" I asked.

"I still have it," he said.

“It’s quite the coincidence that you want to talk about this now,” I said. “I’ve actually been doing some work with a woman who’s an adoption intermediary. She’s sort of a private eye for reunion searches. Here in Arizona, I’m not entitled to my records without going to court. On her first pass, she was able to locate some files from the home for unwed mothers.”

“And that was?”

“The Florence Crittenton Home,” I said. “And last week I sicced her on Catholic Social Service. Maybe she’ll turn up something.”

“What do you want to know?” he said.

“I’ve never understood why they placed you with the family they did.”

“It wasn’t a bad family.”

“It wasn’t a good one, either.”

“My mom always used to say that they got to pick out their kids,” he said, “but my grandma always said, ‘If you got to pick him out, why’d you pick one with such a big nose?’”

I bit my lip and shook my head. John had his father’s nose, of course. All the children had inherited that. For a nose of such size, it was remarkably inefficient.

We talked about his father’s deviated septum and the genetics of John’s height and baldness, inherited from the O’Briens, his grandmother Henrietta’s side of the family. Specific genes in our DNA are responsible for our facial characteristics. A team of researchers, publishing in the prestigious journal *Nature*, identified facial features that linked to fifteen locations in our DNA.² The DNA markers were evident even during the development of a baby in the womb. A team at Stanford University found that, of these fifteen genetic markers, seven were specific to the nose.

But the face isn’t the only repository of inherited traits. A predisposition to alcoholism, diabetes, or anxiety may also stem from a child’s heritage. I knew from my own reunion that body type and stress-induced eating were part and parcel of my genetic makeup, as was a tendency toward respiratory illnesses. Similarly, certain kinds of intelligence—mathematical ability or musicality—may be partially derived from DNA.

Then the conversation shifted to the odd nature of John's adoptive family: four adopted children and four birth children. The youngest four, biologically related, formed their own tribe. Of the oldest four—the adoptees—John was the only one who'd reconnected with his birth family.

"I'm sorry I'm not better at staying in touch," he said.

"Two years ago, you showed up for Christmas," I said. "That's something."

He nodded. "I know it must seem like I'm in the witness protection program."

"It does."

He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know if I ever told you, but I once told a therapist I didn't need anyone. I said if you put me down in the middle of the Sahara with a book and some drinking water, I'd make my way across the sand to Timbuktu. And you know what my therapist said?"

He'd told me this story before. "No," I said.

"He said, 'That's all fine, John, but you don't live in the Sahara.'"

John laughed.

I did, too. Four years earlier, when he was agonizing about whether to get divorced, we'd had a couple of long phone calls. In any long-term relationship, friendship, not passion, counted for a lot. Thinking of my relationship with Bruce, I'd told John that a determination to wait out the bad patches could reap its own rewards.

"What does your therapist's comment mean to you?" I said.

He frowned and thought. "I discovered I do need people. It gets lonely on weekends."

"What exactly do you want to know?" I said.

"What it was like for you," he said.

"Surrendering you, do you mean? Or living through the years when I didn't know if you were alive or dead?"

"Both," he said.

"That prolonged uncertainty was worse by far than your father's death. You were out there adrift, my own flesh and blood."

“Tell me everything. Tell me from the beginning.”



FOR THIRTY-TWO YEARS, I had told him pretty much anything he'd asked. From the beginning. Again? Yes, again, but with a different twist this time. Not just how I got pregnant and by whom, but how it had been for me.

I had told the story of my life, over and over, to various therapists and even to John, and on all these occasions, I had freely shared the facts of his birth and tried not to burden him with more than he wanted to know. But I had not shown him “me,” the girl I was then. The chosen child. The adoptee. The crying baby. The part of me I wanted to pretend had played no part in why I had wound up pregnant.

When I was a young mommy raising my other four, I tried to respond to them as individuals, not as part of a litter. Once a year, on their birthdays, each child came up with a plan for how we would spend the day. My youngest, John Michael, wanted to spend a night at the Cinderella Motel on El Camino Real and watch *The Incredible Hulk* on TV. My son Bob wanted to rent bikes in Golden Gate Park and ride across the Golden Gate Bridge.

If my oldest son wanted to know what it was like for me, I would try to share the story of my own adoption and the peculiar admixture of nature and nurture that led to his surrender. But could I really explain such a complicated story?

I was no longer a carpenter. For fifteen years, I had been steadily working away at becoming a writer, trying to find words to express what is often glimpsed only in one's peripheral vision.

As author Anne Rice wrote:³

Writers write about what obsesses them. You draw those cards. I lost my mother when I was fourteen. My daughter died at the age of six. I lost my faith as a Catholic. When I'm writing, the darkness is always there. I go where the pain is.

Like anyone raking up a past trauma, I was not certain that taking a walk down Memory Lane would do any good. The thought of opening the door to the crying baby's nursery gave me no pleasure. However, in any childhood, there are moments of beauty, wonder, and joy.

Childhood is the territory of play. Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way* leads readers back into those rooms of memory and back into our early longing for lives rich with creativity. By going back into my own childhood, I would have a chance to introduce my oldest son to my roots as a carpenter and writer. In addition, I could introduce him to more relatives, all of whom—if I did my job right—would live vividly on the page. Most important, I could show him his father—walking, talking, and living his life in the full expectation that it would not be cut short.

As I prepared to plunge into this memory pool of sensations and experiences, I was struck by what a daunting task lay ahead. An adult seeking to make sense of the past needs to construct a coherent story. A “self” needs to emerge on the page, just as the self of the real-life person eventually emerges from all the conflicting bits of advice, admonitions, punishments, rewards, and sermons that come down from parents, teachers, and the precepts of one's faith.

NOTES

CHAPTER 3

1. Nancy Newton Verrier, *The Primal Wound* (London: The British Academy for Adoption and Fostering, 2009).
2. Jack Hinman, "Adoption, Trauma and Attachment Disorder in Teens," a blog post by a therapist working with teens who struggle with behavioral problems associated with adoption trauma.
3. Judith S. Gediman and Linda P. Brown, *Birthbond* (Liberty Corner NJ: New Horizon Press, 1991), 4.
4. Although this quote has been variously attributed to author Rita Mae Brown, Einstein, and even Mark Twain, a more recent investigation by blogger Garson O'Toole from the website Quote Investigator found earlier instances of its use.

CHAPTER 5

1. Bruce had never officially adopted the kids. The youngest was seven by the time Bruce joined the family, and it was simpler to leave well enough alone.

CHAPTER 6

1. It had taken me seven years to find my birth parents. I maintained contact with my birth mother, but not with my birth father, with whom I'd been in touch by phone. My mother maintained that I was the product of a sexual assault.
2. Peter Claes et al., "Genome-wide mapping of global-to-local genetic effects on human facial shape," *Nature Genetics* 50, vol. 3 (2018): 414–23.
3. Joyce Wadler and Johnny Greene, "Anne Rice's Imagination May Roam Among Vampires and Erotica, but Her Heart Is Right at 'Home,'" *People*, December 5, 1988.

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Authors depend on reader feedback. We need to know our books are worth the time we spend at our desks. If you enjoyed this book, please take a moment to leave a comment. Even a line or two makes all the difference. And, please stop by my website and say hello.

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Marylee MacDonald is the author of *Bonds of Love and Blood*, *Body Language*, *Montpelier Tomorrow*, *The Rug Bazaar*, and *The Big Book of Small Presses and Independent Publishers*. Her fiction has won the Barry Hannah Prize, the Jeanne M. Leiby Chapbook Award, the Ron Rash Award, and the *American Literary Review* Fiction Prize, among others.



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