



# *Surrender*



Marylee MacDonald

# CHAPTER ONE

When I was sixteen and not yet wise enough to know what it meant to have a child and lose him, I surrendered my first-born son to adoption. For the years of his youth, he was my ghost child. On good days I imagined him playing Little League or knocking helmets in a Pop Warner game. On bad days I pictured him dying and in need of a bone marrow transplant. When he was twenty-one, I searched and found him and began tiptoeing over the eggshells of reunion.

On March 19, 2013, he sent me a text. "Are you in Phoenix anytime this Thursday night to Sat afternoon? I'm coming down for business." C'mon down, I'd said, as if he were a contestant on *The Price Is Right*.

It was not unreasonable for John to question my whereabouts. I lived in Tempe but often found excuses to leave. And, it was not unusual for our attempts at connection to not quite work out. I had not heard from John since Christmas, and I never knew how to handle either the silences or the moments when he'd surface. As I stood in line at a Starbucks, 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.

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. Bald, fifty-two, 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 I did not know him well enough to pick up 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.

It was windy. Dust blew in from the desert. My nose clogged up, and I took out a red bandanna. "Don't worry," I said. "I don't have a cold."

"What are you allergic to?" he said.

"Desert ragweed and acacias."

"Mine haven't been acting up since I got here."

Allergies could be genetic, not just the tendency toward having them, but the specific ones. 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, nails the size of quarters, steel wool on the backs of his hands. His father, John MacDonald, had been killed in a car accident in 1971, ten years after his son's birth. During those years, we'd had four more children.





*John MacDonald and Marylee MacDonald in a photo taken ten years after the surrender of their eldest son.*

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.

He checked his Rolex and leveled me with his eyes. "Here we are, together 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's, 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." Bruce was my second husband.

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

Visit. Visitor. Twenty-one, he had flown back to Urbana, Illinois to celebrate Christmas, the best and most joyful Christmas of my life.

"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 cheap. Sixty bucks. All of a sudden the price shot up. My room's running me over 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 inchoate pain it did for me. I could never reclaim the relationship I might have had if he had grown up calling me mom, but 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."

I put up a hand to shield my face from the glare. The sun's fierce eye had me under observance.

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."

That first Christmas of 1982, I had put together a red leather album prior to his arrival. The album contained his hospital records, the picture of his father in a West Point uniform, and the picture of the two of us at a West Point Christmas dance: me, the aspiring Vassar coed with flip curls and a strapless dress, and John (the father) with his double-breasted, dress grays. So young, so ignorant of the toll that surrendering a child had already taken on our relationship.

"Do you still have that album," I said, "or did you lose it in all your various moves?"

"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 these searches. Down here in Arizona I'm not entitled to my records without going to court. On her first pass, this detective-person was able to locate some files--the ones from the Florence Crittenton Home--but Flo Crit didn't have much. Last week I sicced her on Catholic Social Services. 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 fathers' deviated septum and the genetics of John's height and baldness, inherited from the O'Briens, his father's kin. We talked about the odd nature of his 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. Even though we'd had a good reunion, he'd pull away for months or years.

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

"You showed up at 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 when I was going through my divorce, I told my 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.'" He laughed.

I did, too. Four years earlier, when he was agonizing about a major life change, we'd had a couple of long phone calls.

"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."

That was quite a recognition, to go from not needing people to needing them. What did it mean to not need people, or to think you didn't? It meant you could think you were slightly superior. You were different. Unlike other ordinary mortals, you had no need to be touched or loved.

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

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

"It was the most painful experience of my life," I said, "worse than your father's death by far."

"Tell me everything," he said. "Tell me from the beginning."

From the beginning. Again? Yes, again. It looked like I would have to tell him this story over and over until we both came to terms with why I had given him away.

## CHAPTER TWO

Like Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling," the story I am going to tell begins with an egg, my egg, of course, but in the case of Anderson's story, a swan's egg about to be hatched by a mother duck. I'm beginning here because you wanted a story, and this one was my favorite as I was growing up. I was adopted, too, and Andersen's story dramatized feelings I didn't know I had. These feelings had to do with a profound sense of "dis-placement."

In a sunny spot stood a pleasant old farm-house close by a deep river, and from the house down to the water side grew great burdock leaves, so high, that under the tallest of them a little child could stand upright. The spot was as wild as the center of a thick wood. In this snug retreat sat a duck on her nest, watching for her young brood to hatch; she was beginning to get tired of her task, for the little ones were a long time coming out of their shells, and she seldom had any visitors. The other ducks liked much better to swim about in the river than to climb the slippery banks, and sit under a burdock leaf, to have a gossip with her.

At length one shell cracked, and then another, and from each egg came a living creature that lifted its head and cried, "Peep, peep."

"Quack, quack," said the mother, and then they all quacked as well as they could, and looked about them on every side at the large green leaves. Their mother allowed them to look as much as they liked, because green is good for the eyes.

"How large the world is," said the young ducks, when they found how much more room they now had than while they were inside the egg-shell. "Do you imagine this is the whole world?" asked the mother. "Wait till you have seen the garden; it stretches far beyond that to the parson's field, but I have never ventured to such a distance. Are you all out?" she continued, rising. "No, I declare, the largest egg lies there still. I wonder how long this is to last, I am quite tired of it," and she seated herself again on the nest.

"Well, how are you getting on?" asked an old duck, who paid her a visit.

"One egg is not hatched yet," said the duck, "it will not break. But just look at all the others, are they not the prettiest little ducklings you ever saw? They are the image of their father, who is so unkind, he never comes to see."

"Let me see the egg that will not break," said the duck. "I have no doubt it is a turkey's egg. I was persuaded to hatch some once, and after all my care and trouble with the young ones, they were afraid of the water. I quacked and clucked, but all to no purpose. I could not get them to venture in. Let me look at the egg. Yes, that is a turkey's egg; take my advice, leave it where it is and teach the other children to swim."

"I think I will sit on it a little while longer," said the duck, "for I have sat so long already, a few days will be nothing."

"Please yourself," said the old duck, and she went away.

At last the large egg broke, and a young one crept forth crying, "Peep, peep." It was very large and ugly. The duck stared at it and exclaimed, "It is very large and not at all like the others. I wonder if it really is a turkey. We shall soon find it out, however, when we go to the water. It must go in, if I have to push it myself."

On the next day the weather was delightful, and the sun shone brightly on the green burdock leaves, so the mother duck took her young brood down to the water, and jumped in with a splash.

"Quack, quack," cried she, and one after another the little ducklings jumped in. The water closed over their heads, but they came up again in an instant, and swam about quite prettily with their legs paddling under them as easily as possible, and the ugly duckling was also in the water swimming with them.

Awkward and self-conscious about his big nose, Hans Christian Andersen grew up in dire poverty, and the events of his real life mirror the events in "The Ugly Duckling." Raised by a 22-year-old cobbler and a 40-year-old washerwoman, the Danish author attended a school for poor children, until his father-by-adoption apprenticed him to a weaver and then a tailor.

At fourteen Andersen set out for Copenhagen. He wanted to become a singer, actor, or storyteller. He sang until his voice changed. He attempted ballet. He nearly froze and almost starved until the Director of the Royal Danish Theater took pity on him and arranged for further schooling. Sadly, his schoolmaster abused him.



Throughout his life, Andersen received clandestine support from the future King Christian VIII<sup>[1]</sup><sup>1</sup>, including money for his school tuition, private tutoring, and a three year appointment at the Royal Theater. But it was not enough to keep starvation at bay.

To support himself, the young man, a misfit in shabby clothing, provided evening entertainments--recitations from plays or from his own stories--in the homes of the wealthy. Though mingling with them and observing their manners and modes of speech, he was seen as a curiosity, not as "one of them."

Historian Jens Jorgensen found historical records that suggested Andersen was, indeed, an "ugly duckling"--the illegitimate son of Denmark's Crown Prince, Christian Frederick, and a Danish aristocrat, Elise Ahlefeldt Laurvig<sup>[2]</sup><sup>2</sup>. Their child was born on April 2, 1805 in the castle of Broholm, and according to oral tradition, "given away to good people."

It's possible Andersen learned the truth of his birth shortly before he began work on "The Ugly Duckling," a story that took him a year to write and that he called his "autobiography." It's also possible that this tall, dreamy, bisexual, gawky boy knew--at the level of blood and bone--that he did not belong to a washerwoman and shoemaker.

Unlike other fairy tales, such as those collected by the Grimm brothers, Andersen's stories don't involve tests where the main character "learns" the skills he needs to succeed in life. In Andersen's stories the protagonist only gradually goes through experiences that cause him to see "This is how life is."

Andersen's stories involve inner journeys. Assembling an identity and creating a tentative self was the great task of his teenage years, as it is for all adoptees. But, how could he do that when he was missing an important piece of the puzzle? He did not yet know he was the son of the Crown Prince. All he had to work with was a deep, internal yearning to tell stories. Driven by that yearning, he invented the person he would become.

Surely, everyone does that, don't they? During adolescence we discover our capabilities? We test different paths?

Yes, we do, but the difference is that an adoptee does that blindfolded. He sees no face like his own. It's unlikely he fits into the family professions. Genetically, he may be brilliant, but he feels like a misfit because he's being raised by "good" people who share none of his drives or desires.

Think of Steve Jobs, another adoptee. Son of two brilliant graduate students. Raised by a mechanic and his wife. Conflicted. Driven. Repeating the pattern of abandonment with his daughter Lisa. People who are adopted live in the middle of a psychodrama. We do not know the script, only that we find ourselves on a stage, mouthing lines we did not know we knew.

My script had to do with high academic achievement. Without straight A's on my report card, I had no self. I would disappear. Cease to exist. I was swimming in the sea of teenage hormones, and I grabbed the nearest available plank in hopes of staying afloat.

1. <sup>1</sup> Philip, Neil (2005-01-08). "The Little Prince". *The Times*. ↑

2. Max, Arthur (Associated Press, August 09, 1987), reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*. [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-08-09/news/mn-254\\_1\\_hans-christian-andersen](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-08-09/news/mn-254_1_hans-christian-andersen) ↑

# Thanks for giving this a look!

*Surrender* is a memoir based on Marylee MacDonald's time in a Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers and her subsequent reunion with her adult son. To learn more about the author, please visit her website. You can also watch a series of four videos about the creation of this book. Start here: [https://youtu.be/Xg0wYGx\\_91I](https://youtu.be/Xg0wYGx_91I)

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