SURRENDER

A MEMOIR OF NATURE, NURTURE, AND LOVE

MARYLEE MACDONALD

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Publisher's Note: This memoir reflects the author's life faithfully rendered to the best of her ability. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of others.

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PRAISE FOR MARYLEE MACDONALD

Surrender offers a powerful saga of family and blood bonds, and is highly recommended reading that should be in any family issues collection and on the reading list of anyone interested in the lasting impact of an adoption choice and process on everyone involved.

— DIANE DONOVAN FOR *MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW*

Although this is a work of nonfiction, I was thrilled that Marylee approached this book like she was writing a novel. This helped to make her story more intriguing and engaging for me. I often had to be reminded by the images in the book that I wasn't reading a novel.

— JACHIKE SAMUELSON FOR *ONLINE BOOK CLUB*

…an extraordinary story.

— JAMIE MICHELE FOR *READERS' FAVORITES*

…from the very first page, one feels the heartbeat of the narrator.

— RUFFINA OSERIO FOR *READERS' FAVORITES*

Surrender is a gripping and defiant memoir about personal identity and motherhood.

— SAMANTHA ANN EHLE FOR *CLARION REVIEWS*

A touching personal account of a journey to understanding and acceptance; informative and unsettling.

— *KIRKUS REVIEWS*

Surrender

A MEMOIR OF NATURE, NURTURE, AND LOVE

MARYLEE MACDONALD

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TEMPE, ARIZONA

ALSO BY MARYLEE MACDONALD

Bonds of Love and Blood

Body Language

The Rug Bazaar

Montpelier Tomorrow

The Big Book of Small Presses & Independent Publishers

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.

CHAPTER 1

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 Celicia 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.

CHAPTER 2

THE CRYING BABY

Revisiting 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.

CHAPTER 3

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.

CHAPTER 4

THE SEARCH

Although 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. He lived in Seattle, where he had grown up, the third of eight. The oldest four were adopted. He'd skipped second grade and graduated high school a year early.

John's parents had divorced. He described his relationship with his mother as "estranged." When he was eighteen, a friend's family had taken him in, and from then on, he had supported himself by doing landscaping and by working in a grocery store. John hadn't spoken to his mother in two years.

"What about college?" I asked.

His teachers had encouraged him to apply for a scholarship, which he had done, but he'd also needed to work summers and vacations. He'd paid for room and board by working as a resident assistant in a dorm, and eventually 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.

CHAPTER 5

REUNION

In 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.

Our house in Urbana, Illinois was an 1869 Italianate villa.

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.

CHAPTER 6

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.

PART II

AN ADOPTEE'S CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER 7

THE CHRISTMAS CHICK

When I was young, I believed that God could see inside my very soul, a belief that took root because my adoptive father, despite his own shortcomings, had determined to raise me Catholic. The men who climbed the steps and passed between the pillars of Our Lady of Mount Carmel church wore suits and ties, but my father, a longshoreman, was proud of being a "working stiff." Defying convention, he wore his usual long johns, brown wool pants, and flannel shirt. Pausing at the door, he dipped his fingers in the holy water, crossed himself, and continued down the aisle, his splay-footed swagger clearing a path to the third pew.

While Old Father Cavanaugh, in a subdued and quavering voice, intoned the Latin, my father flipped down the kneeler. It hit with a slap. People turned. Ignoring them, my father genuflected, crossed himself, and slid into the pew. I did the same, careful not to sit on his brown fedora.

He leaned on the pew in front. With his slicked-back, silver hair and wind-chapped face, my father looked every bit his age. Only Mass stilled his restless energy.

After the priest had raised the host and turned it to the body and blood of Christ, my father slid past me and joined the others,

waiting in line. When he returned, I sat back. I knelt beside him and did not even mind the scent of smoke clinging to his clothes. Soon, I could walk up the aisle with my father. We could take Communion together. I would finally know what it felt like to hold the body of Christ on my tongue and feel the wafer, thin and stiff. The teacher in my Saturday class said not to chew it. We were supposed to let it dissolve while we prayed for Christ's blessing.

I had already memorized the prayers for First Communion. I knew that God was not just one person, but part of the Trinity of the Holy Spirit. I knew that Christ had been born and died for our sins, but that on Judgment Day, God the Father would send us to Heaven or Hell, or possibly Purgatory, where we would spend a long time atoning for the bad things we had done. Oh, except if we were unbaptized babies. Babies went to a place called Limbo, which was neither so glorious as Heaven nor so cruel as Hell. I pictured Limbo as a kind of orphanage in the sky, the kind of place I came from before my parents took me out of there and gave me a home.

My Saturday teacher also told us what to say in confession: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," followed by however many days it had been since our last confession. I even knew the kinds of sin: mortal and venial. Also, sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of omission were the things you should have done, the things your parents expected of you, such as chores and not lying, but that you had somehow weaseled out of, probably by pretending, as my grandma would have said, to have wax in your ears.

Our home was not far from Our Lady of Mount Carmel. A small, flat-roofed stucco house, it had two parts: a living room, dining room, and two bedrooms in front, and an in-law room in back. All the rooms were small, mine barely large enough for a single bed, the bookcase my grandfather had made, and a child's table and straw-bottomed chair my father had bought down in Tijuana. On Sundays, my mother and her parents, non-church-going Methodists, ate breakfast while my father took me to Mass.

Because my father preferred cold oatmeal to warm, my grandmother put our bowls in the refrigerator.

Back from Mass, my father picked up the *Chronicle* from the driveway. No one dared touch the paper before he'd retrieved it. Opening the gate, we passed the chickens pecking about in the backyard coop, a mesh enclosure my grandfather had made to keep out the raccoons. In the breezeway, I hung my coat. Daddy separated the paper. Turning to the right, he went back to my grandparents' room—just large enough for a double bed and the wing chair where my grandfather sat, looking out at the yard. "Here you go, Doc," my father would say, and hand Grandpa the funny papers.

After I'd eaten breakfast, Grandpa read me "Prince Valiant" and "Beetle Bailey." After that, my father took the whole family out for a drive. And after that, the chicken and dumplings would be ready, and we could eat. It was the same every Sunday, the only variance being whether the chicken was stewed, fried, or fricasseed and whether we had dumplings or mashed potatoes.

My father said hello to my mother and grandmother, who stood back to back at the U-shaped counter, and then carried his breakfast and mine to the dining room. He liked his oatmeal with raisins, and I liked mine that way, too. I carried the bottle of half-and-half. My father and I were the only ones who used half-and-half. Before pouring it, he would pull off the paper top and sniff. If it had spoiled, he marched to the kitchen and half-and-half glugged down the drain. My parents and grandparents were trying to make sure I didn't turn out spoiled. Children who had no brothers and sisters were often spoiled, my mother said.

After breakfast, my father took a beer from the refrigerator and went into the living room to smoke and read the paper. Grandma, on the side of kitchen sink used for dish drying, held tweezers. She was plucking pinfeathers from a hen. My mother asked if I'd like to help make Christmas cookies. She was baking them for her class.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Let's start by rolling out the dough." She pulled a chair to the counter and double-tied an apron around my waist. Standing on the chair, I saw that she had taken out the muslin bag that held the

cookie cutters and arranged them on the counter. She'd also made up batches of green and pink frosting, and she'd even bought some colored sprinkles.

The dough was thin, the rolling pin floury and hard to hold. The handles felt wet and sticky. I pushed and pushed and spilled flour on the floor. Grandma wouldn't like that. Extra work. My mother finally stood behind me and put her hands over mine. Ragged as an untrimmed piecrust, the dough covered the breadboard. I picked up a loose piece and opened my mouth.

"Put that down." Grandma plunged the chicken into a pot on the stove. "If you eat the raw cookie dough, it'll give you a tummy ache."

Mother pointed to the cookie cutters—a star, a Christmas tree, and a gingerbread man, all made of yellow plastic. "Which one do you want to try?"

I pointed to a cutter made of thin, sharp metal. It was a chick, like the ones that had eventually become our backyard chickens. The cookie cutter had a tiny beak and two tiny feet.

"Can I make the chick?" I asked.

"*May* I make the chick," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "May I make the chick?"

"Very well. Now that you've asked nicely." Mother dipped the cutter in flour and handed it to me.

I took the cutter's handle, not wanting to hurt the chick, even though I knew it wasn't really alive. I pressed, but each time I lifted the cutter away, either the feet or the beak always stuck, leaving a beak-less, footless chicken. It looked deformed. It had to be perfect. I tried again.

"If you roll out that dough over and over," Grandma said, "it's going to be inedible. Have her use the tree."

"Wait!" I said, pulling up the cutter. "I can do it!" And there it was. Finally, a perfect chick. Every tiny toe. A perfect beak.

"Show your father," my mother said. "He'll be proud."

She lifted me down from the chair, wiped my hands, and, with a spatula, slid the chick onto my palm.

Thin and translucent, the chick looked the way I imagined a Communion wafer might.

In the living room, Daddy put down his paper and stubbed out his cigarette. His brown bottle of beer balanced on an upright ashtray.

"Daddy, look!" I said.

"Say, that's nice." He leaned over, plucked the chick from my hand, and gulped it down.

The raw dough would give him a tummy ache. He would be sick. And if he was sick, it would be my fault. Then he saw my face.

"Hey, don't cry." He pulled me onto his lap. His whiskers scratched my cheek. The wool of his pants rubbed my thighs. He picked up his beer bottle and put it to my lips. "Have a sip."

The beer smelled and tasted sour. It dribbled down my chin. I held my breath and pulled and twisted to get away. He had me in his tickle-torture grip, his hand around my wrist. He jerked my arm behind my back. If he got his other hand on my wrist, he'd give me an Indian burn.

I spat beer in his face.

"Hey!" He released me.

Before he could clamp his knees together, I slid down and crawled under the table and cowered, a hard lump in my stomach.

"Come out from under there," he called, bending down. "I didn't hurt you."

"Rex, what are you up to?" Mother stood at the kitchen door, one floury hand on her hip.

He settled back with his beer. "She's got a hair up her ass. That's all."

"Come out from under the table," Mother said.

I pushed the chairs aside and crawled out.

"Turn around and let me retie your apron," she said.

I pulled it off. "I don't want to make cookies."

"You could frost them," she said.

"No," I said.

"No, ma'am," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Then go to your room."

"Can't Grandpa read me the funnies?"

Grandma, her hair kinked by white curls, looked out from the kitchen. "She's acting spoiled."

My mother's mouth crimped. She looked up at the ceiling. "I can't see the harm. All right. Go ahead."

I hurried through the kitchen to my grandparents' room. I never saw my grandfather—Orville Pitney—in anything but a starched white shirt, and there he sat, the legs of his pin-striped pants crossed, the paper spread open before him. His eyes, enlarged by the half-moons of his bifocals, smiled. From his shirt pocket he took a pack of Wrigley's spearmint gum. "Want some?"

"Do you have any Juicy Fruit?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." The gum would take away the taste of the beer.

In his dresser he found a pack of Juicy Fruit and gave me a stick. "Where shall we start?" he asked, gathering me into his lap.

"How about 'Prince Valiant'?"

What I liked was the way Prince Valiant treated his son, Arn. Every father should be like that, firm but gentle.

The author at fifteen months is shown with her mother and grandmother.

CHAPTER 8

WRONGFUL DEATH

At the time of my adoption, my grandfather had moved from Colorado to California. He'd let his medical license lapse, and anyway, he was an old-fashioned country doctor, often as not paid in chickens or rhubarb pies. He had no retirement, not even social security, but he was well educated and particularly fond of Dickens and Mark Twain.

Until I went to kindergarten, my grandfather had plenty to do keeping me out of Grandma's hair. An amateur woodworker with a few basic hand tools, he made me a stove out of peach crates and coffee-can lids. He carved a menagerie of wooden animals. We played endless games of dominoes and Chinese checkers. When the weather was sunny, we sat side by side on the kitchen steps while I carved a bar of Ivory soap and he whittled a Santa or a cow or a dog. When his and my grandmother's favorite programs—*One Man's Family* and *Fibber McGee and Molly*—came on his vacuum tube radio, I went to my grandparents' room and listened.

However, my going to school changed all that. When I started kindergarten, my father persuaded "Doc" Pitney that he could earn far more as a shipping clerk, working on the waterfront in San Francisco, than he had ever made as a doctor. All Doc Pitney had to do,

my father claimed, was walk around with a clipboard and match bills of lading with the container numbers on the ship's manifest. The two of them could commute to San Francisco on the train, and the job wouldn't be physically taxing. If my grandfather needed to walk down to the end of one of the piers, he could hop on a jitney. Hell, he'd soon be driving a forklift! my father claimed.

My grandfather went along with my father's scheme. Maybe Grandpa was tired of my father's lording it over him, bragging about how much he made. Or maybe my grandfather thought that he could put aside enough money so that he and my grandmother could get their own little place.

Then, one morning, my father came rushing in. Out of breath, chest heaving, he put a hand on the counter. "Doc fell under the train!"

> REDWOOD CITY, Oct. 27—A 78-year-old retired physician suffered a loss of both his legs this morning when he slipped beneath the wheels of a moving commuter train in front of the Southern Pacific station here.
>
> Dr. Orville Pitney, resident of 504 Roosevelt Avenue, was in a critical condition at Sequoia Hospital after his legs were severed below the knees before the horrified eyes of approximately 20 commuters waiting on the station platform about 6:30 a.m.

According to my father, Grandpa ran for the northbound train, which was starting to move out of the station. He grabbed a handrail on one of the cars but then lost his balance and fell between two cars. A sheriff's ambulance arrived, and the ambulance drivers applied tourniquets.

My grandfather died early in the morning three weeks later, on November 2, 1953. He was seventy-eight. Blood clots had spread from his amputated legs and stopped his heart.

On March 15, 1956, the Superior Court of San Mateo County awarded $36,600 to the "family of a retired Colorado physician who died under the wheels of a commuter train in Redwood City in 1953." My mother, uncle, and grandmother had gone to court

asking for $100,000, compensation for the train's negligence. A jury deliberated three hours and twenty minutes before deciding whether there would be any award at all, and if so, how much it would be.

After the verdict came in, my father was irate and blamed the lawyer for not having been more aggressive. Even my grandmother, mother, and uncle looked like they'd had the wind knocked out of them. However, the money, though not as much as they had hoped for, made a difference. It meant they could look for a house where my grandmother could have her own bathroom and kitchen and my parents could have more privacy.

Moving? No! In this house on Roosevelt, I had worn my red straw hat and played cowgirl. I had pushed my pet hen, Maude, in my baby buggy and built forts with my father's army blankets. The house was where Grandpa had read me bedtime stories. And it was where I had learned the story of my adoption.

CHAPTER 9

THE CHOSEN CHILD

From 1945 to 1973, four million women in the United States had children placed for adoption, two million during the 1960s alone. The origin story for all of us, whether we were told early or found out by the slip of a relative's tongue, began the moment we learned we had been adopted.

I was crawling under my grandparents' bed, using my grandfather's fleece-lined slippers to push out clumps of lint. The floor made my tummy cold. In the band of yellow light beneath the bed, I saw my mother's ankles. The bed creaked. She had come into her parents' room.

After I had crawled out, she took the slippers from my hands and passed them to her father, my grandpa. Grandpa had begun reading me a fairy tale my mother had brought home from the library: "The Ugly Duckling."[1]

Thus far in the story, a mother duck had found a strange, large egg in her nest and decided to sit on it until it hatched, but when it did, she was surprised by the peeping baby's size and ugliness. Grandpa opened to the page where the mother duck urged her ducklings to jump in the water and forced her strange hatchling to sink or swim.

> The mother 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 out, however, when we go to the water. It must go in if I have to push it myself."

Grandpa paused and looked at his daughter. "Are you going to tell her, or shall I?"

"No, I'll do it," my mother said. "Marylee, you should know you are adopted."

"What's 'adopted'?" I asked.

"It means we chose you," my mother said, smiling and leaning back, her hands flat on the chenille spread. "Other parents don't get to choose their children, but we chose you."

"Oh." I huddled back against Grandpa. Our next-door neighbors, the McHales, had two foster children, Charles and Mikey. Charles, the younger one, sometimes came over to play.

"Is 'adopted' like 'foster'?" I said.

"No," my mother said. "Your real parents are dead."

"Oh," I said.

"After Grandpa finishes your story, it's bath time," Mommy said.

And that was the end of it. The beginning of the story of "me" was not the moment I came out of my mother's womb. It was five weeks later, the moment they picked me out and brought me home.

"The Ugly Duckling" always had great meaning for me, not just because my grandfather had read it to me on the day I learned of my adoption, but because the story itself seemed to be telling me an essential truth. It promised that one day, I would discover where I fit in.

Genetically, an adopted child may be brilliant but feel like a misfit because he's being raised by "good" people who share none of the adoptee's drives or desires. Hans Christian Andersen was raised by "good people" whose highest aspiration was for him to become a shoemaker. For a more contemporary example, think of Steve Jobs.[2] Son of two brilliant graduate students. Raised by a mechanic and his wife. Conflicted. Driven. Repeating the pattern of his own abandonment by abandoning his daughter Lisa.

People who are adopted live in the middle of a psychodrama. They do not know the script, only that they find themselves on a stage, mouthing lines they did not know they knew.

Prior to my adoption, my parents had been living on an avocado ranch in Camarillo, California, my father working on the docks at Port Hueneme, my mother raising rabbits and, with the help of sailors, harvesting avocados. They were late to be embarking on this journey into parenthood.

My mother, who had grown up in Colorado, had worked her way through college by teaching in one-room schools. A sorority sister from Colorado State Teachers College (now Northern Colorado State University), in Greeley, had moved to California. When my mother came out to get a master's degree at UCLA, the women reconnected. Dorothy Lipton worked for the California Children's Home Society (CCHS). That's how my mother, who was forty at the time, newly married after a lifetime of never having had a date, and who had no experience with babies, managed to get me. But even though my mother and the social worker were sorority sisters, the adoption almost didn't happen.

Thinking he'd like to go into business for himself, my father had recently bought an icehouse in Camarillo. The CCHS was undertaking a home study to verify my father's income; however, during that process, the icehouse began losing money. Refrigerators had just come in. Ultimately, my father went bankrupt.

To make up for lost income, my mother needed to go back to teaching. The CCHS wouldn't approve the adoption unless she came up with a suitable plan for childcare. She wrote a desperate letter to her parents, begging them to move out from Colorado and take charge of me. And so, instead of my parents, it was my grandparents who prepared my formula of evaporated milk and Karo syrup, who established my every-four-hours feeding schedule, and who washed my cloth diapers.

When I was six months old, my parents sold the ranch and

moved to Redwood City, a bedroom community on the peninsula with an easy train commute to the docks in San Francisco. My mother resumed her career.

At McKinley School, where she taught fifth grade, she often had yard duty, breaking up arguments about tetherball or keeping boys from heaving kickballs at their enemies.

When we were at school together, she walked around the playground with her customary scowl.

"Is Mrs. Benham your grandmother?" one of the boys in my class asked.

"No, she's my mother," I said.

"She looks mean," he said.

"She's not mean," I said. "Just strict."

"Anyway, you don't look like her."

"I'm adopted," I said.

"Oh, sorry."

In those days, admitting you were adopted was like admitting your parents were divorced. I didn't know anyone whose parents had divorced, nor did I know anyone adopted, at least anyone who'd admit it. Even so, I didn't understand why he'd said "sorry." Adoption wasn't anything to feel bad about. My parents had chosen me. They could have picked another kid. If anything, I should have felt sorry for him.

Soon, however, I began to understand more about what the word "adoption" meant. My mother signed me up for a Brownie troop. The moms of my friends in the troop wore pastel cotton shirtwaists. My mom had a pear-shaped body and wore a girdle with whalebone stays. The other moms had pageboys. My mother had gray hair, short and permed. The other girls' moms stayed home. My mom worked.

On June 2, 1953, we Brownies sat at a kitchen table, watching Queen Elizabeth's coronation. Our craft project that day was making paperweights. The troop's leader had purchased three-inch-

diameter glass ashtrays, and we were going to make Father's Day presents. While we watched the coronation, we pressed our school pictures in the ashtrays' bottoms and filled the void with plaster of Paris. After the plaster had hardened, we glued on red felt circles. When we turned the ashtrays right side up, there were our smiling faces!

This school photo is identical to the one placed in the ashtray and covered with plaster of Paris.

Mothers began coming in before we had finished. They bent over and hugged their daughters. They brought along older siblings or babies in strollers. As I looked from the faces of my friends to the faces of their mothers, I saw the same hair and eye color, the same dimples and curls. I looked from the mothers and daughters to the brothers and sisters and babies in strollers. These other families had more kids than mine did, and the people in each family all looked alike. At the time, I didn't understand that there was any other way to have babies than to go pick one out, sort of like a song that was

popular back then, Teresa Brewer's "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?"

And maybe I should have. At home, if I had been paying attention, I might have seen that my mother looked like her father. They both had the same oval face and narrow chin. Both wore bifocals. Both had protruding eyes, a condition, I later learned, that came from having an overactive thyroid.

My uncle Marshall, whom we saw once or twice a year, looked like his mother. He had auburn hair and a distant stare, like the heads we had seen the previous summer on our vacation to Mount Rushmore.

If I had just lived with the knowledge of adoption within the bubble of my family, I would not have questioned this notion that I had been "chosen," the fairy tale I had been told from the time I could still slither under Grandpa's bed.

"Chosen" was a simpler word to say than "adopted."

"Chosen" was also a simpler concept.

However, how much choice do adoptive parents really have? Can they choose their children? Sociology professor Christa Hoffman-Riem, the author of *The Adopted Child*, says that the notion of parents "choosing" a child is an inaccurate portrayal of what transpires. Adoption is a two-step, bureaucratic procedure.[3] The adoption agency interviews the candidates and makes a prior selection. According to the author, "The freedom of choice for applicants is reduced to the freedom to reject the offer, a decision that, depending on the 'market situation,' could jeopardize the entire adoption plan." She quotes one adoptive mother as saying the following:

> And then we also said [to the adoption counselor], "If we don't take to this child, you never know, you take to some babies too and not to others, do we get . . . are we then put on the waiting list?" Of course, that's really depressing, and "no," she [the adoption counselor] said.

The stress of accepting or rejecting the child the agency wishes a prospective adoptive couple to take is the flip side of the adoption coin. However, a child—an infant—doesn't know that the parents may have worried about hair and eye color, or whether the child will be a good fit.

> Adoptive mother: "What kind of child are you going to get? If it's, er, if it's your own child, you might also expect certain dispositions. If, say, you're dark-haired, maybe the child will also be dark-haired. In our case, it's what kind of child are we going to get? A red-haired one . . . or a dark-haired one? Are we going to get an absolutely fair-haired child?"

During the adoption process, Hoffman-Riem writes, the prospective parents' anxiety often "revolves around the aspect of hereditary traits."[4]

Very true. I had thick, dark brown hair, which my grandmother trained into finger curls by tying rags around it at night. I had eyelashes so long that Santa, making an appearance at Davies Chevrolet, a car dealership in Redwood City, asked, "Where'd you get those long eyelashes?" My eyebrows looked as if they'd been applied with the kind of stick my mother used to pencil in her pale white ones. People said I looked like Shirley Temple and, later, Annette Funicello of *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

The adoption agency had told my parents that I had Irish heritage, and that my dark eyes would turn blue as I grew older. If I had been a blond-haired, blue-eyed baby, my appearance might have invited fewer comments.

Every summer we drove down to El Paso, where my father grew up. It was on one of those trips that I began to sense that there was more to the story than parents just "choosing" me.

Tumbleweeds rolled across Route 66. Imaginary lakes shimmered on the horizon. My halter top chafed my neck, and the

elastic around my midriff rode up as I leaned forward. I wanted to dip my hand in one of those coolers at a gas station and feel around in the ice cubes and water and pull out a Nehi orange soda.

"When can we stop?" I said. "Is our motel going to have a pool?"

"Swimming, always swimming," my father said, driving one handed, a Camel hanging from the corner of his lip. "Deserters from the Spanish Armada must've jumped ship and swum to the coast of Ireland."

"Hush, Rex," my mother said. "Little pitchers have big ears."

"What's the Spanish Armada?" I asked.

Years later, I deduced that this had been an oblique reference to my appearance, my father's little "ha ha" moment about sailors having sex with an Irish lass. But even then, I knew that it meant *something*.

Adoptees, hyper alert and listening for signals about their behavior or appearance, will pick up on these innuendos, even if they don't understand their full meaning. When my son said his grandmother had commented, "If they got to choose you, why'd they pick one with such a big nose?" I recognized this as the same kind of offhand remark directed at me. We adoptees listen in perplexed silence as our adoptive relatives speculate about our families of origin. This attempt, on the part of the adoptee, to understand the nature of his or her own intrinsic "self" and to somehow bring that self into closer alignment with the norms and expectations of the adoptive family begins the moment a child learns he or she is adopted.

No matter how parents attempt to figure out the right language or come up with an age-appropriate story, adoption arises from the decision of adults to transfer legal custody of a child from its family of origin to a family that does not necessarily have any blood relationship, otherwise known as "consanguinity." Simply put, adoption, in a legal sense, has to do with the transfer of property.

The first modern adoption law, passed in Massachusetts in 1851, sought to protect the interests of the child, not benefit the adults. Prior to the passage of that law, however, children were often

adopted to do farm labor, a form of indentured servitude. Between 1854 and 1929, the orphan train[5] movement relocated two hundred thousand orphaned and abandoned children to the farmlands of the Midwest. Often, these children were used as cheap farm labor. Like adoption, this wholesale transfer of young children was done with the best of intentions, the thought that such transfers would give the children a better life.

When I began the search for my birth mother, I learned that in 1945 the legal notices for adoptions were posted in newspapers under "Chattel Sales." The transfer of a baby was, as far as the law was concerned, quite similar to the old practice of transferring the ownership of livestock or of window glass, back in the days when glass was an important indicator of a person's wealth and social status.

Indeed, the search for my own genetic heritage began when I found the legal notice of my adoption in the classified ads of a Culver City newspaper. The news slammed into my gut like a fist punch. I hadn't realized how much of me had gone missing. Now I knew. There had been a "me" even before my parents adopted me. Although it would take many more years to track down my birth mother, this one-inch-by-two-inch notice provided proof that an actual baby had existed. A crying baby, separated from her birth mother and taken to a foster home for five weeks, and then separated from that placement and taken to live with Rex and Lorene Benham on their avocado ranch in Camarillo.

I cannot imagine a way to explain the legal matter of adoption to a young child. Telling a child he or she has been "chosen" makes a lot of sense.

However, adoption is not just a legal matter. It is also a matter of biology, and that, too, is hard for children to comprehend, especially if they have not yet learned the "facts of life."

CHAPTER 10

PEACHES

The moments seared into our memories are often associated with particular places. We all remember where we were on 9/11. Or where we watched the moon landing. Or where we had our first kiss. I learned about sex in the kitchen of our new house, a house we had moved into the summer after Southern Pacific sent a settlement check for my grandfather's wrongful death. The house sat on a stretch of unincorporated county land between Redwood City and the tony suburb of Atherton.

It was Saturday, and my mother had roused me early. Annoyed at having been awoken from a sound sleep, I dressed in play clothes: shorts and a blouse.

By the time I came into our kitchen, my mother had gotten out a blue-speckled, enamel canning vat. Mason jars jiggled in boiling water, steaming the windows, and a mixing bowl of parboiled peaches sat on the table.

"There are some things you're old enough to learn," my mother said.

I took a bowl of oatmeal from the refrigerator. The oatmeal had developed fissures, like land undergoing desertification. I poured half-and-half and sat down.

"Use your napkin," my mother said, as if I needed to be reminded.

I tucked the napkin into my blouse.

My mother pushed a box of red-bordered labels toward me. "While you eat, write, 'Peaches, 1956.'"

Spooning up oatmeal with my left hand, I set to work on the labels. My chair gave me a view through the laundry room and screen door, and I saw Grandma, already outside. Wearing a flowered housedress that buttoned down the front, five-foot-two and shrinking, she lowered the clothesline so she could hang the laundry.

"Okay, I'm done," I said, tucking the labels back in their box and wiping my chin. "Can I go?"

"Wash your bowl," my mother said. "Then you're going to help me with the canning."

"For how long?" I said.

"Until lunch."

I took the bowl to the sink.

My normal Saturday morning job was to sweep the oak leaves off the patio. While I disliked any chore that seemed pointless, such as crawling under the dining table to dust the table legs, I didn't mind sweeping the patio. Acorns and oak balls locked up my skates. When I grew up, I planned to skate for the Bay Area Bombers, a roller derby team my dad and I watched on television. My dad had recently taken us to the Cow Palace to see the Ice Capades. Maybe I could be Sonja Henie, skating backward with my arms held out and my leg uplifted in an arabesque. I had never skated on ice, but I was pretty sure I could do it, because I was really good on roller skates.

I washed and dried the bowl.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked.

"I sent him down to Sunnyvale for apricots," my mother said. "There are some things we have to discuss before he gets home."

Every spring, my mother and grandmother carried in the empty Mason jars from the shelves in the garage. Once filled with canned produce, the jars would provide all our meals until the next canning season: stewed tomatoes, corn, spinach, and army-green peas. My mother called this "putting up."

And, then she explained how "it"—this putting up—was done. The fruit must first be washed, bad spots cut out with a paring knife, and the jars disinfected in boiling water. She explained the dangers of botulism, and that one must always label the jars and use the oldest first. When I got married and was in charge of my own house, I should check before removing the lid to make sure the "in" button on the lid's center hadn't turned to an "out" button. Fruit wasn't usually a problem, she said. Fruit would keep a year or two. I must be very suspicious of green beans, and even canned tomatoes could kill you.

As she explained the science behind canning, and how necessary it was for girls my age to learn these skills, I perked up. Fifth grade was the first year we'd had science. The idea that there was a science to running a house surprised me. This was a side of my mother I had never seen, this assured and confident woman. My mother taught slow learners, and I had assumed she did that because she was slow herself: tentative, plodding, careful.

My fingers shriveled, and the peach skins slid off. The beautiful, golden flesh of the fruit felt firm and slippery in my palm. I stuffed the peaches down into the Mason jars. My mother brought more peaches. The table filled up with jars. After fitting the jars in a wire rack, she carried them to the canner, lowered the metal basket that held them into boiling water, and returned to the table, tipping her chair back against the refrigerator.

"You may have heard certain things from kids at school," she said, blowing a wisp of hair from her brow. "About what happens to girls."

"No," I said.

"You're eleven," she said. "Girls your age begin to menstruate."

I had never heard that word before. I didn't ask her to repeat it, but she did anyway.

"You will start to bleed once a month, and there isn't anything you can do to stop it, so you shouldn't be embarrassed when it happens."

She was staring at me, her eyes bugged open, waiting for me to say something. I was breathless. My heart thrummed in my ears.

She spoke the cringe-inducing words "penis" and "vagina" and explained that those were the correct words for parts of a man's and woman's body.

I had never seen a grown-up's naked body. When she dressed for work, my mother rolled nylons up to the garters that dangled from her corset. Now, curling her fingers, she showed me how a man put his penis in a woman's vagina.

My mother wiped her hands on her apron. The jars of peaches were ready to have the lids screwed on and the labels affixed. Soon my father would be home with the apricots.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, as if I were one of her slow learners.

My parents slept in twin beds. I was adopted. It seemed unlikely that she'd ever subjected herself to an act that sounded so yucky and gross. "Did you and Daddy ever do it?"

"We did it once," she said.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what that might have involved.

Licking dirt off the kitchen floor would have been easier to understand. *Yes, I licked dirt off the kitchen floor. It was not good, but I did it because there was a black spot and that was the only way to clean it up.*

The "sex talk" is one every parent dreads. Much as we try to convey positive messages, our body language often transmits the subtext of our own anxiety. My mother must have wanted to sound objective and thought she was carrying off the conversation about sex with the same tone she'd used to explain canning and botulism —scientifically factual and devoid of emotion. In both cases, however, her facial expression—scrunched-up eyes, mouth twisted—told me she was "putting up." Never once did her tone imply that if the stuff in the jar didn't kill you—if you followed carefully prescribed rules of timing and cleanliness—the result would be fruit that tasted sweet and good.

Very shortly, a different version of the sex talk, illustrated by a black-and-white movie showing eggs floating down the fallopian tubes, made me realize that the information my mother had given me was correct, though horrifying. The teacher at Selby Lane

School separated the boys and girls for separate talks about the changes in our bodies, and there was a great buzz about it. Afterward, boys giggled and taunted us when we gathered in a kickball circle.

I didn't know what to make of the movie, not just the tadpole of sperm swimming up to mate with the ovum, but the warning that once a month, we girls would turn short-tempered. We had to fight against that and work extra hard to be cheerful. I couldn't imagine any of this would ever apply to me, but puberty would soon hit me hard.

In eighth grade, I became—as my mother would have said, though she had no idea this was happening—completely "boy crazy." I complained that the popular girls in school were all skinny and that I needed to lose ten pounds and make myself some new skirts. My mother bought me *The Teenage Diet Book*, and I put myself on an egg-and-grapefruit diet. For an after-school snack, I made diet root beer floats with a single scoop of ice milk. After a week of hunger headaches, I'd lost five pounds and plunged headlong into the mysteries of adolescent attraction, a roller coaster of lust and longing and fear of rejection that is driven by hormonal change.

That year we middle-school students read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Thinking the ups and downs of my life might one day have some importance, or perhaps just wanting to talk to someone at a time when it was impossible to talk to my parents, I borrowed a small brown notebook. For the first time, I began recording my unsupervised thoughts. This was a mere two years before I became pregnant.

> December 13, 1959, Sunday
>
> Dear Diary,
>
> I say that because I can't think of anything more appropriate. I went to Jonny's house today. He's a lot cuter and nicer than he used to be. I'm glad I have him for my best friend. Dave just called

me once today. Dave is my one and only thought lately, excluding schoolwork. He is so nice to me. When he kisses me, I flip, but even when he's just with me, I feel a companionship I have never felt before. I imagine it is something like I will feel when I get married.

My favorite song is "The Village of St. Bernadette" by Marty Robbins. It is just beautiful. My thoughts are so unorganized lately because all I can do is dream of David.

December 14, 1959

Dear Diary,

I'm so happy I got a 95 on my Geometry test. I want to get an A in Geom. So bad. I won't mention the final I got back in Geography, though. (I got a C.)

In school I do think about my work. As soon as the bell rings, however, my mind races to him dearest to my heart. It sounds kind of sickening when written down, but it really doesn't seem that way when I'm thinking about him. Older people criticize teenagers for getting crushes. I think that if the two kids who were in love matured together, that they would still be suited to each other for marriage.

Like Anne Frank, I had begun to think about "love." However, another change had entered my life, one that would profoundly alter how I saw myself. As boy crazy as I continued to be, I was also an ambitious grade-grubber.

The Redwood City School District had revamped its curriculum and decided to put its smartest students on a separate track. In eighth grade, students would begin a course of math study that did not even have a textbook, as the district had agreed to cooperate with Stanford on the so-called "new math," SMSG math.[1] Gone were times tables, long division, and rote learning.

The administration must have wanted to make sure that only the smartest kids were thrown into the "new math," so the school administered an IQ test. The cutoff line on the test was 135. I didn't make it. Suddenly, I was separated from the kids who had been in

the highest reading group, who raised their hands when the teachers asked questions, and who sought out extra credit. In eighth grade, I found myself in a classroom with slackers and hoods. For my entire life, I had been praised for bringing in straight A's. Being smart went along with feeling special, with being the "chosen child." For an adoptee, being "chosen" also meant being worthy of a mother's love. My mother was a teacher. I wanted to live up to her expectations.

Knowing of my distress, my mother found out my test score.

"Your IQ is 126," she told me. "We've always known you were a hard worker."

A hard worker? I didn't want to be a hard worker. That was a demotion. I wanted to climb back to the top tier, rejoin my friends and fellow smart kids in challenging classes. I couldn't accept it, I wouldn't accept it, but there was nothing I could do.

But then something happened that took my mind off school. My father, in what was undoubtedly the high point of his life, won a new car in the St. Pius church raffle, the parish we had started attending after our move. The car was a red-and-white Pontiac station wagon with Naugahyde seats. Winning the car meant he could take his family on a road trip, and where better than Mexico, where he could vacation in style?

CHAPTER 11

VERA CRUZ

I still get excited at the thought of a holiday. Every year when my family rents a Christmas house, we bring along one-thousand-piece puzzles. After meals and present opening and during football games, we kneel around a coffee table, the youngest to the oldest joining in. Piecing together the puzzle's edges is where we start. Once we have the size and shape—rectangle, square, circle—we work our way toward the middle. In sorting out the pieces that define the "nature versus nurture" puzzle, I began with the edge pieces, trying to find the personality-shaping events of my childhood.

In my growing-up years, a defining moment was our 1958 trip to Mexico. My father was proud of being a member of Local 34 of the ILWU, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union,[1] led by Australian socialist Harry Bridges, whom J. Edgar Hoover was trying to have deported. To improve conditions for longshoremen, Bridges wanted to organize a strike that would shut down West Coast ports, but the FBI was tapping Bridges' phone. Because my father spoke Spanish, he volunteered to go down to Mexico and speak with the union's leaders in person. With his newly won car and family in tow, he would be above suspicion.

My mother's Christmas letter, run off on her school's mimeo machine, recounted a heavily redacted version of the trip: "It is in Acapulco that the longshoremen have a beautiful building and are paying for it by renting out office space. They also maintain a hospital, not only for their workers but also one for children and women. Mr. Lluch, one of the national officers of that union, is a very likable man, and we had several nice visits with him and his cousin, who lived in San Francisco for forty years."

After Acapulco, we drove down to San Cristóbal de las Casas, forty miles from the Guatemalan border. While changing money in a bank, my father met a man who had won the Mexican lottery and invested in fifty-two coffee plantations. He invited us to stay on one, saying he'd notify his servants that we were coming. Here's what I wrote in the travel journal my father required me to keep.

> Long yellow ribbons of sun had just cut through the morning fog of the *finca*, but the Indians had been up for two hours. Coffee pickers must work in the early morning while the air is still bearable. We tourists, too, were up early because we were to look at an Indian's hut before it got too hot.
>
> An Indian mother waited outside with her children, two still naked. One girl was much shorter and skinnier than I was, but about my age. Like other Indians, she wore a clean, patched, white dress, but it was much too small. Her hair was a straight and shiny black, her skin a rich maple color, and her eyes were mahogany and smiled for her whole face. Strutting proudly outside the hut were her two chickens and her pig, which I tried to catch. The pig must have thought it was a new form of tag because he dodged and turned and ran between our legs. Finally, I put my hands on his sides and was picking him up when he gave a big lurch forward, slipped out of my hands, and ran for cover. Despite the language barrier, we laughed at that clever pig. When we walked back to the horses, we were to ride around the *finca*, the Indians were still laughing at the *Norte Americana*.

We stayed three days, a totally unscripted and culturally enriching life experience, and one I owe to my father. He was fearless in approaching strangers. He could talk to anyone and find common ground, and I like to think that the one aspect of my personality that comes from having lived with him is this desire to connect.

I remember nothing of the longshoremen's building or the hospital; what is interesting to an adult is not necessarily interesting to a kid. However, I vividly recall Mr. Lluch, a kind man with kind daughters. The girls were fifteen and sixteen. They wore flats with stockings and did not shave their legs. These girls had long, dark leg hairs matted under their nylons. With their lace blouses, lipstick, and gold jewelry, they looked like grown-ups.

Just as we were saying goodbye, the girls took off their gold earrings and put them in my hands as remembrance gifts.

"Take off your headband and give it to them," my father said.

"But there are two of them," I said.

"Go get your other one."

I had two headbands, one red velvet and the other braided-gold plastic. I wore headbands to keep my hair from falling in my face. Those headbands were irreplaceable. I had tried on a hundred in the dime store and chosen those two because they didn't cut into the soft tissue above my ears.

The twenty-four-carat gold earrings meant nothing to me.

"Go on," my father said. "Give them your headbands."

"I don't wear earrings," I said.

"You can have your ears pierced when you get home," my mother said.

Plunging a needle through my earlobe struck me as barbaric. I felt betrayed, not just by my father, but by my mother, who had always told me she'd never let me have pierced ears.

In the end, seeing the stricken look on the girls' faces, I took the velvet headband off my head and went to my train case for the other. Talking back, speaking up for myself, would have done no good. Even my mother didn't dare challenge my father. His unpredictability could turn violent, particularly if he began drinking.

From Mexico City, my father wanted to head east to Vera Cruz to do some deep-sea fishing. Problems started when we arrived at what he called a "Mexican tourist hotel." Because of my repeated questions about whether the place had a pool, he'd gone out of his way to find one that did. But the pool in Vera Cruz was saltwater.

I stood by the pool's ladder, too shocked to move. Acacia blossoms floated on the black water. The ladder into the deep end was all rusty, and there wasn't any shallow end. I had never seen a swimming pool that wasn't blue, and I was scared because the water looked thick and smelled like decaying leaves. It reminded me of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. In the eerie pink sunset, bubbles rose to the water's surface. The oily sheen looked like a spirograph.

With a pool net, my father pushed away the leaves and blossoms. "There," he said. "Jump in."

"The water looks yucky," I said.

"They take the water straight from the ocean," my father said. "It's cleaner than it looks."

"Rex," my mother said, "that water hasn't been changed in a year."

"No, Lorrie!" he said. "She wanted a place with a pool. She asked twice, which is against the rules. So, against my better judgment, I got her a pool." He turned, his jaw thrusting out. "Get in."

My mother looked at the sky. "Go on," she said. "It won't kill you."

I turned around and backed down the ladder. Inky water swallowed my legs.

My father put his big hand on my head and pushed. "All the way in."

Gulping tears, I felt my feet slip on the ladder's steps. Salt stung my eyes, and when I surfaced, my hair was full of yellow blossoms. I dog-paddled to the ladder and looked up. My father had disappeared.

After dinner, he headed to the *cantina*. There was a card game. When he returned for more money, he was slurring his words. My

mother begged him to come to bed, but he would not. In the room next door, I heard them arguing, a body thumping against the wall. It was not the first time this had happened. At home he rarely drank this much, but on this trip, my father had steadily been working his way up from ordering a *cerveza* or five to ordering tequila and mescal. My mother had rope burns on her arm from where he'd "taught her a lesson."

After the argument, my father returned to the *cantina* and my mother came into my room and sat down on the edge of the bed. She beckoned me to the bed and pulled down the elastic front of her dress. From the top of her corset, where two giant cones pushed her flesh together, she withdrew a tiny cotton sack, cinched with pink embroidery thread and held in place by a small gold safety pin. She took out a roll of bills and told me to pack. We were going to the airport.

I had never flown on an airplane. Back in 1958, people drove or took the train. Her plan was to take a plane from Vera Cruz to Mexico City and fly back from there to San Francisco.

Next to the motel, on a broad *avenida*, traffic and taxis whizzed past. My mother stepped forward and waved her white handkerchief. A taxi stopped, and we got in. She had looked up the word for "airport" in her phrase book, and eventually, far beyond the city's lights, the taxi pulled into the airport's parking lot. In the darkness my eyes could barely make out the single-engine crop dusters along the edges of a narrow runway. The planes looked like toys.

My mother thought we should leave our luggage in the taxi until she'd bought our tickets. The driver said he had better wait, and he followed us inside.

The "airport" was a Quonset hut that smelled of diesel fuel, and in the back of it, four dimly lit work bays held disassembled engines. Propellers leaned against the walls. Toward the front was the snack bar's long counter and men sitting on wooden stools. When I looked their way, they shifted their hips and spread their knees. I moved closer to my mother. The taxi driver asked the bartender when the next flight left.

The man smiled, exposing a silver tooth, and turned to a calendar. He pointed at the day. *"Mañana."*

"Aren't there any flights tonight?" my mother said.

"Runway no have lights," the driver said. "If you want, buy ticket now, go tomorrow."

My mother looked up in her head for a moment, and then her eyes made a circle of the room. Like bookends, a Coke machine and a cigarette machine stood at either end of a grease-stained leather couch. "What time is the first flight?"

The driver asked the bartender, and the man said noon. If the plane didn't break down, the driver translated.

"All right." She started to take money from her purse. She looked at the couch. "We can sit over there."

"You wait?" the taxi driver asked incredulously. He looked at me.

Mother looked at me, too. "I guess you're right. It would be better to go back."

"Maybe we should stay here," I said, a rabbit of fear racing for a burrow. "It might be better too."

"Lady!" The taxi driver folded his arms. "I no can wait all night."

I grabbed my mother's arm. "Mom! We'll be fine here."

Mother shook her head. "Don't worry. We can come back in the morning if he's still bad."

I couldn't form a picture of tomorrow in my mind. The plan, speeding in one direction, toward safety, was now rewinding toward Father. I began to pray for one thing: that he hadn't discovered we'd ever left.

The driver loaded our suitcases in the trunk. "I sorry," he said. "I not know."

I slumped down on my seat. Fifteen minutes later, the driver pulled into the hotel's circle drive and a pink slash of neon cut across the backseat. It was the light of the *cantina*. Afraid my father would see me, I ducked down onto the floor and buried my head, the nuclear attack drill.

"Get up from there," Mother said. "Act like a big girl."

We carried our suitcases down the open corridor to my room, and my mother came into my room and began to unpack.

Someone knocked. Fearing it was my father, I pulled the curtain aside.

Hands behind his back, the manager stood in the yellow bug light. I unlocked the door. The man wanted to close the *cantina*, but my father was arguing that he wanted it to stay open.

"It'll be okay," I said. "Sometimes I can calm him down." The room threw a triangle of light onto the veranda. Coming toward us was Father, his white hair flying back, shirttail out, belt unbuckled.

"Hey, honey," Father called from the darkness, "give your old man a hand with his key."

By his tone, I knew he meant me. His words didn't slur, so I couldn't tell how far gone he was. I prayed this was a beer drunk. Mescal made him mean. Any delay, and he would start acting up. Pushing past the manager, I took the key, and with my father propped on one stiff arm against the wall, his hot, sour breath in my face, I used my nail to find the tiny crescent where the key went in. Then I stepped into the room and let my father pass.

He tossed coins on his bed and went into the bathroom. The faucets squeaked. His belt buckle dropped on the floor. "Turn the light on," he called. "I don't want to bark my shins."

I turned on the light.

"Try to get him to bed," Mother whispered from the doorway. She placed our room key in my hand. "Don't stay long. I don't think he'll harm you but be cautious."

I put the key in my pocket. I closed the door so Father wouldn't go back to the *cantina*. Then, while he was in the bathroom, taking a shower, I turned on the bedside lamp and scooped up the coins. He could go straight to bed.

When the water turned off, I heard a towel sandpaper bare skin. He came out with a towel tucked around his waist, a cigarette dragging down the corner of his mouth. His legs straddled the corner of the bed, and where the towel spread, I could see that thing in the middle like a pink, rolled-up sock. "Pe-nis." The word made me cringe as I thought of the day my mother had told me the facts of

life. The word "penis" sounded foreign and ugly, but the way he was sitting, I could not help looking at his.

"You're not scared to be in here with your old man, are you?"

"I'm not scared."

My father had taught me how to approach a mean dog. Stay calm inside, give the dog time to growl or challenge, but never take a step back.

He stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray. "You remember last year when I took you to the FBI headquarters?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Can you name the top ten violent crimes?"

He liked to play games that showed his superior knowledge. The most-wanted posters in the FBI lobby came to mind.

"Murder. Arson. Armed robbery. Assault and battery. Felony theft. Kidnapping. Blackmail. Um, killing a police officer. No. That's murder. Uh, interstate flight. Narcotics."

"You've got nine," he said, holding up nine fingers. "What's the tenth?"

"I don't remember."

"Here's a clue." He stuck up his middle finger, the wave he made to women drivers when they braked on curves.

I got up from my chair. "Are we going deep-sea fishing tomorrow?"

"Give up?" he said.

I was tired of this game.

"Need another clue?" he said.

"No." I put my hands in my pockets. My fingers curled around the key.

"Come over and give your old dad a night-night kiss."

Breathing fast, I looked at the door. He half-stood, grabbed my shoulders, and pulled my lips toward his. His towel fell on the floor.

I socked his stomach. "Daddy! No!"

He grunted and fell back on the bed. I leapt for the door.

Father pulled up the sheet, and his sunburned arm reached for the bedside lamp. "Fair enough. Next time, don't ask for a place with a pool."

Back in my room, the lights were out. The moon, coming through the window, cut checkerboard squares on the floor. My mother had left a nightgown on my pillow. I went into the bathroom and scrubbed my face.

Then I went to bed. The cool sheets made me shiver.

Mother rolled over. "Did he go to sleep?"

"Yes," I said.

"What did you say to him?"

"He was talking about last year's vacation."

"He always gets the last word, doesn't he?" She reached across the divide between our beds.

I turned my back and curled up. My shoulders shook and my knees jerked. To control myself, I hugged my pillow.

"Do you have a fever?" my mother asked.

"No," I said.

"He didn't touch you, did he?"

"He didn't lay a hand on me."

And I would make sure he never did.

The next morning, my mother insisted we go home. Ten days in a car with a man who frightened me, but who I had to pretend did not. I sensed that I had stepped into a battle my parents were fighting, a battle of silences and frowns and raised voices. Nobody had bothered to tell me the rules.

CHAPTER 12

LIFE AMONG ALIENS

We drove across the bridge between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, where my father had grown up, and headed west across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California's Central Valley, and finally chugged up rocky Pacheco Pass and then dropped down into the Bay Area. Lying in the back seat, I felt my body alternately trembling and going numb. It was as if I were levitating above myself, a disembodied spirit hovering the way souls are said to hover above the bodies of the recently departed. I wrote in my diary that I felt as if I had "landed among aliens," and my best friend from those years remembers me wondering aloud why the adoption agency had placed me "with these people." One might naturally suppose that disengaging from my adoptive parents might have been an adaptive response. One might even call it a survival response. However, this was not the first time I had felt misplaced or displaced.

The feeling of "mis-placement" or "dis-placement" is widely experienced by adoptees. Nancy Verrier, author of *The Primal Wound*, an adoptive mother who spent a decade trying to help her adopted daughter weather the storm of adolescence, has written, "Many [adoptees] do not feel as if they were born, but as if they

came from outer space or a file drawer."[1] And if I felt detached from myself, I also felt detached from my mother. I hovered above her, watched her, waiting to see how she would react—if she would react—to what had happened in Mexico.

My mother was much closer to the events than I am today, and yet in her Christmas letter, written in December 1958, she was hiding her fear:

> We were in Veracruz and were there for one night. The swim in the Gulf of Mexico was lovely. The sun played a trick and did not set over the water but slipped down behind the hills. The sun set on the wrong side of the world for us that night.

How true that was, and how poetically expressed.

But what was a woman who found herself in an abusive relationship to do? Marriage and advice books suggested ways for women to change their behavior in order to induce their husbands to stop cheating, drinking, or being abusive. One of the 1950s marriage-counseling gurus, a shyster named Clifford R. Adams, offered this advice:[2]

We can assure wives whose husbands are prone to violence that following a program of avoiding arguments, indulging their husbands' whims, helping them relax, and sharing their burdens would "foster harmony" in the home and make them even "happy wives."

On Labor Day, school began. My mother took on a combined fourth-fifth classroom of "slow learners" at Hawes Park Elementary, and I started my freshman year at Woodside High School. When my father was not working up on the docks, he sat in the living room, watching *The Three Stooges* and *Popeye the Sailor* and downing beer after beer.

One of the boys in the school band—I played clarinet—caught sight of my legs. When the band director went down the roster of

names, asking if I was "Mary-lee" or "Merrily," this boy said, "She's neither. She's *Hairy* Lee."

Mortified, I asked my best friend what to do. "Shave your legs," she said.

"But my mother won't let me," I said.

"How's she going to stop you?"

It had never occurred to me to disobey my parents, but I couldn't bear the teasing. In the bathroom, with its pink-and-maroon tile and matching maroon towels, I opened the medicine cabinet and found my father's shaving things: a razor and a box of double-headed Gillette blades. Sitting on the toilet, quaking with fear, I scraped my legs until my shins bled.

The next day, the boy in band didn't tease me. Neither my mother nor my grandmother noticed what I'd done. Pleased with this step toward independence, I decided that as long as I was going to be a rebel, I would stop wearing white anklets with my flats. On the way home from school, I detoured into a drugstore at Woodside Plaza and bought myself some "peds," the skin-colored liners for dress shoes. I unwrapped them and wore them the rest of the way home.

The ironing board was set up next to the front door. When I opened it, Grandma came out from her back room. She went to the refrigerator and brought out a pillowcase of damp clothes. She turned on the iron and reminded me that it was my job to iron the napkins and tablecloths. Then she licked her finger and touched it to the iron. I heard a hiss.

The television blared. My father was sitting on the living room sectional. He was smoking and, as usual, had a beer in his hand. He saw me and did a double take.

"Where are your socks?" he asked.

"I didn't wear them," I said, dropping my book bag on the dining room table.

"You look like a Mexican whore," he said.

I didn't know that word. Maybe it had something to do with the Mexican blouse and three-tiered *fiesta* skirt I'd worn that day. I felt okay with how I looked. Pretty, in fact.

My grandmother picked up the iron and yanked the plug from the wall. She walked toward him. "Apologize," she said, holding the iron out in front and continuing to advance.

"Watch out, old lady," my father said.

My heart thrummed in my throat. "Grandma, what are you doing?"

"Apologize," Grandma said, continuing to advance.

My father stood up. I expected him to knock the iron out of her hand and then grab her arm and twist it up behind her back, the way he did with my mom and me. Instead, grumbling that he was out of beer, he brushed past her, nearly knocking her off her feet.

"Whore," he called to me. "Slut." He slammed the door behind him.

Grandma hurried to the picture window. She pulled back the drape and watched him back out the driveway. If he kept drinking, no telling what he would do. Trembling, I took the iron from her hand.

A black dial phone sat on an end table. Grandma found the phone book, and her finger sped down the page. A moment later, she had a locksmith on the line. By the time my mother returned from school, five locks had been changed and the garage had a new padlock.

We had returned from Mexico the third week of August. On September 22, 1958, four days before my thirteenth birthday, the same lawyer who had dealt with my grandfather's wrongful death case filed the paperwork for a legal separation. My guess is that my mother decided to take this step after that night in Vera Cruz. She must have told my grandmother what had happened. Maybe they, in consultation with the lawyer, decided that changing the locks would be the only way to keep my father out of the house.

To imagine what a bold step this was back in 1958, consider that California did not have a provision for no-fault divorce. Mental cruelty, abandonment, and infidelity were the only grounds by which a spouse could sever the bonds of marriage. In 1958, divorce was rare and shameful: The divorce rate per one thousand married females fifteen years of age and over was 8.9 percent.[3] The

language of that era referred to "broken homes," and government policies encouraged "family preservation" at all costs. If a woman moved out, she could be accused of abandonment and lose custody of her children. However, in order for the period of legal separation to begin, one or the other spouse had to leave.

After my father's departure and the changing of the locks, the process server tracked him down. The period of official separation began. But what neither my mother nor my grandmother could have imagined was the way he would seek revenge.

CHAPTER 13

BLOOD MONEY

When my father came home late that night and tried to let himself in, his key didn't work. He bellowed and lunged against the door. My mother called the sheriff. After that, she boxed up his clothes and put them at the end of the driveway. When the boxes disappeared, we knew he had found someplace else to live.

Although my mother might well have considered divorce long before our trip to Mexico, she would have hesitated because my father was the main breadwinner. Financially, divorce would have looked like a disaster. Women worked as nurses, salesclerks, waitresses, telephone operators, and teachers. My mother would have been earning about $33,450 in 1959 dollars.[1] My father earned twice that.[2]

My mother must have done the numbers and seen that, on her own, she could not cover the monthly mortgage payments, let alone our living expenses. To raise her income, she began tutoring after school. She signed up to teach summer school. She and my grandmother pooled their resources and managed to keep the house, but I remember that first Christmas as a lean one. My grandmother gave me a book I wanted badly: *Gods, Graves, and*

Scholars, by C. W. Cerum. My mom gave me two sweaters from a discount store.

My mother's separation decree asked for $1 of alimony for her and $150 per month for me. My father refused to pay. My mother's lawyer filed a motion for nonpayment, and my father called a reporter and had himself photographed with his fingers around the bars of a cell in county jail. The photo wound up on the front page of the *Redwood City Tribune*. My father claimed the $1 alimony was "blood money."

My mother was so shamed by the publicity that she took a day off work and kept me home from school. She was afraid kids would tease me. Instead, when I went back, even the boy in band said how sorry he was that this was happening in my family. Teachers at my mother's school rallied round, especially her principal, William Morrisey, a gruff, red-haired man with a soft heart.

My mother's attorney advised her to hold firm. There could come a day when she'd need my father's financial support. Without that dollar as a placeholder, the lawyer couldn't go back to the court for more.

To get out of jail, my father eventually wrote a check for the alimony and one month's child support. That was the last check my mother ever received. When she took him to court again, the process server couldn't find him. For weeks, he hadn't shown up on the docks. Fortunately, he kept paying his union dues. Otherwise, our health care and dental insurance would have lapsed.

Periodically, my father came around and banged on the picture window. I was afraid he'd break it and leap through the broken glass. If the phone rang once, it was one of my friends. If it rang for an hour straight, it was him. And if it rang in the middle of the night, which it frequently did, we knew he was drunk and trying to harass us.

Today, there are support groups for women in situations of domestic abuse. The National Domestic Violence Hotline lists several indicators that can help a woman assess her risk of abuse.[3] And what we also know is that even when a woman extricates herself from an abusive relationship, the perpetrator's pleas to be let

back into her life—to be forgiven for his offenses—can cause a woman to drop her guard. That is even more likely when the husband is the primary breadwinner. Thankfully, my mother held firm, but the stress of doing so took a great toll on her physical and mental health.

CHAPTER 14

FOG

My mother flicked on the bedroom light. "Hurry and change into your clothes."

I checked the clock. "It's two a.m." I was fifteen years old, a sophomore in high school. "I didn't go to bed until eleven."

"Grandma's sick. I called an ambulance. You need to go to the front door and let them in."

And then she was gone. I hopped out of bed and slipped into a pleated skirt and sweater. Heart pounding, I passed the sewing room. Next to the sewing cabinet, where I had left a half-finished cotton skirt, stood my mother's dress form, and beyond that, the door to Grandma's room. Open. Lights on. Moans. I went to the front door.

The ambulance pulled up, sirens blaring. Two men carrying a stretcher hurried across the living room. They returned with Grandma, swaddled in a flannel blanket. Face gaunt, her normally stoic expression collapsed by pain, she pulled off her hair net and put it in my hand. "Don't worry. I'll be fine," she said.

I hoped that was true.

"Grab a coat," my mother said.

Moments later, we were driving up Bayshore, the new freeway

that had replaced El Camino Real as the fastest route to the city. Kaiser had only a clinic in Redwood City. Grandma's illness was serious, and she needed to go a hospital. Streetlights turned the fog amber, but mere fog did not make my mother take her foot off the gas. In silhouette, this fifty-six-year-old schoolteacher, with her thick glasses and protruding eyes, drove as if pushing a pedal car with her reserves of strength. The corner of her mouth began to twitch, the first sign of what would soon become a much bigger problem.

I remember her saying, "It's a good thing Dr. Konstansz happened to be on call."

"Why's that?" I said.

"He'll drive up to the city and meet the ambulance."

Dr. Konstansz was my grandmother's doctor. My mother's, too. I still went to a pediatrician.

By the time we had found a parking spot on hilly Geary Street and walked downhill to the emergency room, my grandmother lay on a gurney. Her lips, drawn together by purse strings of determination, quivered. My mother took Grandma's glasses, folded them, and put them in her purse. She kissed her mother's forehead. Then she and I sat in the dimly lit, nearly deserted waiting room.

Dawn came, and we went to the cafeteria for breakfast. My mother buttered her toast methodically. She was not one to share her thoughts and certainly not her feelings, but her posture—the downward-sloping shoulders, the quivering lower lip, the working of the butter knife back and forth across the toast, her refusal to meet my eyes—told me that this was but one more trial in a lifetime of them. After breakfast, we resumed our vigil.

My mother, I thought, should have more faith that my grandmother would pull through. Every day, if I hadn't gone to a friend's house, my grandmother and I had been working on sewing projects, she at an old Singer treadle and I at my mother's Viking. Recently, she had started a hooked rug made from cut-up strips of my grandfather's suits. Born in 1880, she had lived through two world wars and the Great Depression and had survived my grandfather's untimely death. This—whatever had caused her to summon an ambulance—would not kill her. Nothing could.

Dr. Konstansz, an internist with a pencil mustache and kind brown eyes, came toward us. Dressed in green scrubs, he had assisted the surgeon. Standing over us, he said, "I knew right away it was serious."

"Why did you think that?" my mother said.

"Your father was a doctor," he said. "A doctor's wife would never call in the middle of the night unless she was in extreme danger."

My grandmother had a blockage in her intestines. Gangrene had set in. They had removed half of her lower bowel, a six-hour operation.

My mother took a packet of Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose. They had taken my grandmother to the recovery room. My mother said she wanted to wait until Grandma woke up.

It was New Year's Eve. I had chores to do. Grandma would be fine.

"Maybe I could take a Greyhound to Redwood City," I said.

"How would you get home?"

"I could call that guy from youth group."

"All right," she said, "but don't let him in the house." She dug out change.

I found a pay phone and called information for his number. The guy—John—said sure, he'd pick me up. My mother put me in a cab to the bus station and gave me money for a ticket.

On the bus ride down the peninsula, I thought I'd made a giant mistake. I had been too forward. Boys didn't like it when girls chased them, and I wasn't even sure I'd recognize him.

I stepped down from the bus, and there he stood—John MacDonald—in the shade of the station's awning. Arms crossed, he balanced on one leg, the other bent with his foot against the wall. He pushed off and came toward me with a loping, athletic walk, a guy comfortable in his own skin. The uncertainty and strain of the night washed through me. Here was someone who wanted nothing from me, whom I didn't have to prop up. On his chin he had a scrap of toilet paper glued by dried blood. A shaving cut.

"You made it," he said.

I let him take my arm. "I did."

As he jingled his keys and walked toward a white Ford Fairlane, I had the unbalanced feeling of a domino about to tip.

In the MacDonalds' sunny kitchen, his mother poured me Cheerios and milk. A barbecue table, covered with Formica and with padded benches for seats, filled a long breakfast alcove in the kitchen. John sat across from me. Henrietta, a former football queen at San Jose State, smiled and asked questions about my grandmother. After that, I lay down on the living room couch and tried to take a nap. John's three little brothers ran down the hall and peeked in at the girl their brother had brought home. John, I'd learned, was the oldest of eight. This was all new to me: a house with other children; a house with a stay-at-home mom; and, most of all, a house with children's laughter.

Late in the day, John drove me over to my house and parked in front of the picket fence. At his house, his mother had been in the kitchen. Her questions had made it easier to think it was okay to impose on this guy I barely knew. Now, the old awkwardness came back, along with the feeling that I should run a comb through my hair.

"Are you going to be all right?" he said.

"I'll be fine." And, of course, I would be fine. I had always been fine. Everyone else in my family might be crazy or violent or depressed, but I would always have to be fine. Fine, fine, and more fine.

I got out of the car and gave him a little wave. "Please tell your mom thank you."

When I pushed open the gate, Grandma's face did not peek out from behind the drapes. What if my father came around? Hurriedly, I looked down the street. John's car had disappeared.

I walked down the driveway to the garage, unlocked the padlock, and raised the door. Except for my bicycle, the lawn mower, and the loft at the far end, the garage was empty. I found the kitty litter and poured it on the oil pan in the carport. My mom's

car was eight years old, a '52 Chevy that leaked oil. Now, her car sat parked with its wheels cramped against the curb on Geary Street, just outside the hospital, and I had an odd feeling in my stomach, the way Huck Finn might have felt when his raft began moving down the Mississippi—unmoored, swept along by a rapidly moving current, the destination unclear.

My mother had been nagging me to finish nailing the staves back on the picket fence. Every October she knocked off the staves, loaded them in a wheelbarrow, and took them around back to the patio. It was my job to whitewash them. The staves needed to be put back before the roses started their spring bloom. I found a hammer in the toolbox.

I was just finishing the job when a cloud bank crept down the street. The fog was as thick as the fog at Pescadero Beach, as thick as the fog that blanketed Skyline Boulevard, the two-lane, north–south route that ran along the ridge line of the coast mountains. I went out to the street and stood looking up at the bower of trees. I couldn't see where the branches met. A line from a Carl Sandburg poem ran through my head: *The fog comes in on little cats' feet*. Engulfed by this slowly moving cloud, unable to see the sky but feeling the damp tingle of moisture, I held my breath. For a minute or two, light from the setting sun infused the fog and turned it the color of cotton candy. My cheeks felt damp. I was swimming, buoyant, but able to breathe. I spread my arms. Then the light dimmed, and the fog turned gray, like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy returns to Kansas.

The day of the pink fog: This was one of the strangest moments of my life, an event as rare as snow in the desert, and it left me both joyous and shaken. Even if I told my mother what had happened, she wouldn't have believed me. Had what I'd seen—stood right in the middle of, spinning round like a dervish—been real or imagined? Maybe, as she had the three little girls at Lourdes, the Virgin Mary was sending me a message. Grandma was up in the hospital. This miracle was a sign that she would come home.

I returned the hammer to the garage, took the key from the dog-tag chain around my neck, and unlocked the front door. To keep

from getting zapped, I kicked off my loafers. My mother wanted to rip out the wool carpet with its garish, giant roses, but she had to wait and see if my dad would finally pay child support.

The carpet extended into the hall. To the left stood the master bedroom, with its twin beds. Opposite the master sat the sewing room, the bureau drawer that my mother must have been looking in still open. The bureau held birth, marriage, and death certificates, as well as ration books and air-raid-marshal badges left over from the war. The lower drawers of the cabinet held photo albums from my grandfather's life in Colorado. Before his death, Grandpa had been a great album maker. My "job," when I was three and four, had been to sit on his lap and lick the black corners that held his snapshots.

In Grandma's apartment, a rocking chair sat near the radio. My grandfather had made the rocker so that her feet could touch the floor. I sat down. Small as a kindergarten chair.

In her raffia basket I found the wooden rug hook. I picked up the two-foot-diameter circle she had started. The rug felt stiff and heavy in my lap. I turned on the radio. Back when I was a child and measles and mumps meant a week of boredom, she had snapped down my bedroom's window shades and gone back to her room, the squat black heels of her lace-up, old-lady shoes clomping as she lugged the radio to my bedside table.

My grandmother had gone to the hospital on December 30. Two days later, on January 1, 1961, she passed away. After the funeral, I went back to her apartment and collected the rag balls. They were the size of volleyballs. I pushed them under my bed. Then I rolled up the rug and put it in my closet. Summer would give me time to finish it.

I could not have guessed that by summer, I would be on my way to Phoenix and to a home for unwed mothers, or that this rug would be my one anchor to my so-called "normal" life.

PART III

ROMEO AND JULIET

CHAPTER 15

PUBLIC-SCHOOL GIRL

John was the only boy I knew who had a car. Even though he had picked me up and taken me back to his house, I wasn't sure he liked me. Yes, he'd danced with me a time or two at youth group, but mostly we'd talked, and anyway, with guys you could never tell.

A charismatic priest had come to St. Pius. Father Peter Gomez Armstrong, balding, round-faced, and irrepressibly cheerful, had started a youth group. Every Saturday night, the Teen Club held a chaperoned dance in the parish hall. Girls from Notre Dame, Mercy, and Sacred Heart grouped together, and boys from Serra, St. Francis, and Bellarmine—the Jesuit school down in San Jose—stood opposite, a no-man's-land between. Like so many schools of fish, forming and reforming along opposite sides of the dance floor, each school had its own clique, the girls all giggling behind their hands, the boys in a huddle, talking sports or whatever boys talked about when girls weren't present.

Shortly before my grandmother went to the hospital, I happened to be standing on the boys' side and found myself on the periphery of a group of five. The two tallest dressed alike: beige jeans and oxford-cloth shirts. Narrow-waisted and broad-shoul-

dered, they stood with the tentative confidence of boys who had only recently heard their voices ricochet between upper and lower registers. One of the tall ones had a blond crew cut and eyebrows as white as my mother's. The other boy had dark hair and blue-gray eyes.

"Are you twins?" I asked.

"Twins!" The dark-haired guy doubled over laughing. "Why would you think we're related?"

"Because you're tall."

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

"What high school do you go to?" the dark-haired one asked.

"Woodside," I said.

"Are all public-school girls that dumb?"

Heat climbed my cheeks. "Are all parochial-school boys that rude?"

"Hey, no harm, no foul," he said, holding up his hands.

Stupid boys. I had looked briefly at their muscled arms and long legs, but then I got distracted by their penny loafers. At Woodside, only girls wore penny loafers. Maybe this was a parochial-school dress code: penny loafers as opposed to saddle shoes, which was what the guys at Woodside wore to dances.

"Want to dance?" the dark-haired one asked.

"What's your name?"

"John MacDonald."

I hadn't seen him out on the dance floor.

I took a step back. "I'm just a dumb public-school girl. Why would you even be interested?"

"Who says I am?"

He put his hand on my waist and pushed me away from his buddies. I put my right hand in his. Stiff as a mannequin, he shuffled forward. Could he not tell that a simple fox trot, moving his feet in a square, would have kept him from stepping on my toes?

"Didn't you ever have dance lessons in PE?" I asked.

"No," he said. "My sisters tried to teach me, but they gave up."

"It's simple," I said. "Just keep to the beat."

"I can keep to the beat."

"In your dreams."

I loved to dance, and every day when I came back from school, I turned on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* and learned the new moves. The Mashed Potato. The Frug. The Swim. The Twist. The Watusi.

Halfway through the song, I settled for pushing John's feet sideways with my feet. It was like trying to push bricks out of the way. And as we danced, sort of, I grew more and more annoyed at his robotic moves and at his stupid comment about public-school girls. My mother taught in public school. My father believed that the foundation of our democracy lay in the education of its citizens. I loved my school.

"So, how many public-school girls do you know?" I asked.

John thought a minute. "None, I guess."

"Where do your sisters go?"

"Two go to Sacred Heart. The other's still at Mount Carmel."

"Then I can only conclude you're prejudiced."

"I was only teasing," he said.

"What even made you say that?"

He pulled in his chin and looked down at me. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

"You didn't hurt my feelings. You made me mad."

"Hey, hey! Come on." He stopped dancing.

A mirrored, spinning ball flashed colored lights around the room, and the parent-DJ changed the record to Elvis Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes."

Rather than retreat to his gang of four, John took my elbow and steered me toward the double doors. "Let's go outside and talk."

"Don't you want to dance?"

"I don't know how to fast-dance."

"Or slow-dance."

"Now who's being mean?"

"I'm sorry. This is pointless. You're not going to like me anyway."

"You don't know that."

I felt like saying, *I do know that. I can read the handwriting on the*

wall. Why would John like me? My early "love interests," as my mother called them, had wasted no time in asking me to go steady. Then, in baffling reversals of affection, these same guys had asked for their rings back and sent me sobbing to the school bathroom.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Sixteen."

"What year are you?"

"I'm a junior."

At Woodside, guys went out only with girls in their same grade. "I'm only a sophomore."

"That doesn't matter," he said.

On either side of the doors, chaperones sat on folding chairs. John found two spares and set them up in a corner.

While the music blasted, we shouted. John, determined to justify his stupid comment about public-school girls, said that the public-school curve was a joke. At Bellarmine, an A was 93 and above; a B, 85 and up, whereas at the public high schools, like Sequoia and Woodside, a grade of 90 and up earned an A. To drive home the point, he said that at Bellarmine a grade of 80 would have been a straight C, not a B-minus. To top it off, public schools didn't even offer Greek.

A champion debater, I launched into my defense of public education. Woodside had teachers with stellar credentials: a Jamaican, Oxford-educated PhD who taught Latin and French; my Physiology teacher, Mr. Parsons, who had dropped out of Stanford's med school in his third year; and my Spanish teacher, Moises Macias, a Moroccan Jew with a pure Castilian accent.

"You prove my point," John said. "Spanish is easy. It doesn't even have any declensions."

"Yeah? Well, Greek and Latin are dead languages. Nobody speaks them."

"I guess Spanish is good if you want to talk to fruit pickers. You could study all you want, but you'll never be as proficient as a native speaker."

"My Spanish must not be too bad, because I tied for twelfth in

the statewide Spanish proficiency exam. Anyhow, I didn't come here to have a debate."

Back on the dance floor, arms pumped up and down.

Hoping for a reprieve, I said, "Do you know the Watusi?"

He rolled his eyes. "No."

Boys were supposed to take the initiative; at least, that's what *Seventeen* and *American Girl* advised. I was stuck. Mock-plugging my ears, I said, "It's hard to carry on a conversation."

"We could go outside," he said.

"Then we can't get back in," I said.

"We could sit in my car and talk."

"My mom wouldn't like that. She has a thing about boys and cars."

"All right, then," he said. "I guess we can try to block out the noise."

He stood and turned his chair. We sat knee to knee, our foreheads almost touching. I smelled the cinnamon of Dentyne on his breath.

John asked what clubs I was in, if I was in student government, and if I went out for any sports. Although I was good at field hockey and archery, it had never occurred to me to go out for a sport. Girls generally didn't, but, even so, I felt put on the spot, as if this were another instance of my school's failing to meet an artificial standard I hadn't known existed.

This made me more determined to convince him that a public education was every bit as rigorous as his. The music grew louder—the DJ was playing "At the Hop"—and meanwhile he and I were having this quasi-adult conversation, with me shouting about Junior Statesmen and *Robert's Rules of Order* and the Model United Nations.

"The Model UN's a communist-front organization," he said. "You ought to watch out."

"For what?"

"For communists. There's this guy, Archie Brown. He's head of the Communist Party in California."

"So?"

"They infiltrate all these liberal groups."

This guy was either naive or annoying. I could fold my chair and walk away, but if I left, I'd have to go stand on the girls' side all by myself.

What I believed was that every citizen bore responsibility for making the world a better place. I was fifteen, a seedling still buried in the soil, but with a little water and the right amount of sunlight, I'd pop through the surface of my childhood and stretch toward the sun of an autonomous life, one where I could participate in the political process. Vote. Write letters to the editor. Maybe even run for office. John didn't know a thing about me—not a thing—yet he felt entitled to put me down. I was a serious person, not a humorless person like my mother, but serious in the way that it was good to be serious because it meant you were applying yourself and trying to figure out who you wanted to be when you grew up. I pasted on a fake smile. I knew what I knew, even if he didn't, and if I had to prove myself, I would.

John sat back and folded his arms. He looked over my shoulder. Was he wanting to go back to his friends? I turned. A tall redheaded girl was staring at him. Or at us. When I stared right back, she frowned and then gathered her friends in a scrum. I couldn't stand cliquish girls.

"Do you know that redheaded girl?" I said.

Two chaperones held opposite ends of a bamboo pole. The DJ put on a record for the Limbo. The group surrounding the redhead broke apart.

"The girl at the end of the Limbo line," I said.

"Oh, her," he said. "Yeah, I know her sort of."

"Who is she?"

"Ginger Dawkins," he said. "She goes to Mercy."

"Why does she keep looking over here?"

John shrugged. "I heard she has a crush on me. But listen. About the Model UN. It's dangerous. They try to brainwash you."

"Who tries to brainwash me?"

"Not you specifically. Communists prey on idealistic youth."

I should have just excused myself and joined the line of people snaking around the edge of the room. Doing the Limbo didn't

require a partner. Instead, here I sat, watching John scowl and twist his athletic ring. His knuckles were large—my mother would have said from cracking them—and patches of dark, wiry hair covered the backs of his hands. The hair reminded me of the Lluch girls with their hairy legs and of my father's friend in Mexico, Señor Lluch.

"Where did you come up with this bizarre theory about communists?" I asked.

"They would do anything to impose a godless society on us," John said. "They're trying to destroy the American way of life."

"You sound like a John Bircher."

"I am," he said.

I was tempted to shake him up and tell him about the time in sixth grade when the FBI visited my house, trying to dig up dirt on my father's union. At one time in the not-so-distant past, Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee had found communists under every bed. Of course, it was a free country and John was entitled to his opinion, but he was ignorant and misguided, and I had just wasted an hour sitting in a corner, talking to a guy who obviously had no interest in asking me out.

However, a week later, when Grandma woke us up and the ambulance came to take her to San Francisco, I remembered John's having mentioned that he had a car.

CHAPTER 16

TILLIE'S PARTY

Why did I "fall in love" with John when our core values clashed? When he was convinced Goldwater would save us from perdition and I went door-to-door, passing out Kennedy flyers? Pheromones, I suppose—the neurotransmitters of attraction. When I was with John, sitting knee to knee, arguing, even, I felt a frisson of pleasure, a smile rippling down my spine to my fingertips, which came alive when he held my hand. At Mass, as he sat next to me, kneeling when I knelt, standing when I stood, reciting the Latin responses during the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I felt spiritually comforted.

With Catholicism in common, we tabled the debates and went on constituting our own little world. Teen Club dances on Saturday night. The occasional picnic at Blackberry Farm. Sunday Mass. Sunday brunch after Mass, the large MacDonald clan crowding in at the kitchen table where his mother had first offered me a bowl of Cheerios.

Even at that first youth-group dance, I had seen that he was smart, maybe slightly smarter than I was, especially in math and science. Although quiet, he was a natural leader, captain of the foot-

ball team, and acing all his classes. In ancient Greek, he was reading and translating Aeschylus's play *Agamemnon* from the Oresteian Trilogy, and over the phone, he'd give me updates about what was happening.

"So, Agamemnon comes home from the Trojan War, expecting to be given a hero's welcome, and instead, his wife, Clytemnestra, is pissed off."

"Why is she pissed off?" I said.

"He sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia."

"For what reason?"

"So that the gods would give him wind."

"And why did he need wind?"

"He had a fleet. Wind was the only way he could return to Troy."

In sophomore English, the teacher wanted us to give a ten-minute talk about a poet. The one he assigned me was E. E. Cummings. I read John the first few lines over the phone:

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman
whistles far and wee

"What's this even supposed to mean?" I asked.

"Honestly?" he said. "I can't make heads or tails of it."

"Well, I have to give a talk about it, and I have no idea where to even begin."

"Go to your school library and see if they have anything."

"I did, but I can't really copy from *Compton's Encyclopedia*."

"I'll see if we have anything at Bellarmine."

"I wish he'd assigned me Walt Whitman. At least *Leaves of Grass* sort of makes sense."

I wasn't sure why John kept calling, but with Grandma gone and my mom going to bed right after dinner, it felt good to hear his

interested, sympathetic voice. Sometimes we'd get tired of talking about classes and quizzes but still not be ready to break off the conversation. For diversion, he'd strike a match and tell me he was lighting a fart. Boys could be so stupid.

"You'd better not do that in my presence," I said.

"Then entertain me," he said.

If my mom hadn't gone to sleep, I'd pick up my ukulele and practice chord progressions or toot out an excerpt from Von Weber's Clarinet Concerto #1, the one piece of clarinet music that sounded good without accompaniment. If John called me on the days that he had band practice, he'd honk out a tune on his baritone sax.

When we talked, I pictured him upstairs, a dormer bedroom he shared with his brother. On his desk, he had a portable stereo and a stack of albums. He'd just bought Bob Newhart's latest, *The Button-Down Mind Strikes Back*, and held the phone next to the stereo so I could listen. When I was a little girl, my grandfather had made me a toy telephone with two tin cans connected by a string. The two foster boys who lived next door had one end, and I had the other, and when we pulled the string tight, we could talk to each other after our parents thought we'd gone to bed.

The phone cord didn't reach all the way into my bedroom, and my mother started to object that I was tying up the line. I didn't see why it mattered. I had my homework done. It didn't cost us to receive a call. I sat on the overstuffed sectional in the living room, my hand cupped over the receiver, wishing John and I were together. I liked listening to his voice—it had a deep, rich timbre—and I liked to make him laugh. He laughed easily and well, and ever since his "public-school girl" comment, I had not heard him make a joke at another person's expense.

He called me three or four times a week, and I still wasn't sure why. Sure, we danced together at Teen Club, but he'd never even asked me to a movie. I felt like one of John's model airplanes, taken down from a shelf but just as easily put back when the novelty wore off. While my life felt complete with a single good friend, John's life

was crowded with people, particularly the kids he'd gone to school with at Mount Carmel.

On weekends, he would sometimes include one of his friends in our phone call, and so I'd find myself talking to Dave Morton, his best friend. Then his other good friend, John Tillinghast, a.k.a. Tillie, would show up and John would break off to shoot hoops in the driveway.

One day, John said, "Tillie's having a party. Want to go?"

My mom had a rule: no boys in cars until I turned sixteen. "Who'll drive?" I asked.

"I guess my father could," he said.

"My mom could drive," I said.

"No, he'll do it if I ask."

I had never met John's father, but he pulled up beyond my picket fence and John came in to get me. The whole way over, John's father didn't say one word beyond "hello." No interview. No attempt to see if I was suitable date material for his son. Instead, his eyes, looking back at us in the rearview mirror, flicked from John's face to mine.

In those days, older people often said I looked like Elizabeth Taylor, and people my age compared me to Annette Funicello, one of the leads on Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club*, but I didn't think I was anything special. I was a brunette in an era when blondes were the glamour queens. Sure, I occasionally modeled for my uncle, a serious amateur photographer, but not because I had anything great to wear. I made my own clothes and wore no cosmetics other than lipstick, so why was this old guy with the thinning hair staring at me continuously?

Tillie lived with his mom in a small bungalow in Redwood City. As John and I walked up to the front door, I heard music playing, but I wasn't ready to go in.

"I don't think your dad likes me."

"He doesn't even know you," John said. "How could he not like you?"

"He kind of glared at us in the mirror."

"He's just mad at me."

"Why?"

John opened the screen door. "Because he had to drive down from Burlingame."

"What's in Burlingame?"

"His office," John said, standing aside for me to enter. "Don't let him bum you out. Let's just have a good time."

The lights were low. John's buddies, boys he'd known since elementary school, scuffed across the carpet with their dates. Soon, John's cheek rested on my head. Cocooned against his chest, I inhaled his scent: nutmeg, cinnamon, and cloves. I had never pressed so tightly against a boy that my breasts flattened, and when I leaned my head back, his moist lips met mine. I closed my eyes and let the kiss settle into the stream bed of my soul. Water might ripple overhead, but gravity had drawn me down into the sand, where I wanted to stay forever.

Then his tongue darted between my teeth.

"Ew!" I drew back and wiped a hand across my mouth. "What are you doing?"

"That's French kissing," he said. "I read about it in a book."

I pulled away. "What kind of book?"

"A book Tillie lent me. But we don't have to do it if you don't want."

"I don't!" I said. "If you ever put your tongue in my mouth again, I'll bite it off."

"Okay, okay," he said, pulling me close again. "Don't get all upset."

I wasn't upset. I liked that he was dancing more or less in time to the music. It was just that I didn't quite know what to expect or how to handle his advances: his intrusive tongue or the hard thing in his pants. But I did like the grip of his fingers laced through mine, and the way he curled my hand against his chest as if we were two mice in a nest. For the first time in a long time, I felt secure.

Although the party was nowhere close to breaking up, at nine forty-five, fifteen minutes before my curfew, John's father pulled up outside and honked the horn. I tucked in my blouse and ran a brush through my hair. John climbed in the backseat and put his arm

around my shoulders. On the ride home, I felt the pressure of his fingertips, silently communicating that he cared. And it was a good thing we were coming home early. On Monday I was auditioning for a school play, and I was nervous about it because I hadn't been onstage in a very long time.

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.

CHAPTER 9

1. Historian Jens Jorgensen found historical records that suggest Andersen was indeed an "ugly duckling"—the illegitimate son of Denmark's crown prince, Christian Frederick, and a Danish aristocrat, Elise Ahlefeldt Laurvig. 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."
2. The first chapter of Walter Isaacson's book *Steve Jobs: A Biography* begins with the story of Jobs's birth and subsequent adoption. By placing this information in the

first chapter, the biographer invites the reader to contemplate the ripple effect that adoption played throughout Jobs's life.
3. Christa Hoffman-Riem, *The Adopted Child: Family Life with Double Parenthood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2016), 113.
4. Ibid.
5. For a poignant reminder that even well-intended social-work interventions can have devastating personal consequences, see Victoria Golden and William Walters's memoir, *A Last Survivor of the Orphan Trains* (Orphan Books, 2017).

CHAPTER 10

1. According to Wikipedia, "The School Mathematics Study Group (SMSG) was an American academic think tank focused on the subject of reform in mathematics education. Directed by Edward G. Begle and financed by the National Science Foundation, the group was created in the wake of the Sputnik crisis in 1958 and tasked with creating and implementing mathematics curricula for primary and secondary education, which it did until its termination in 1977.

   "The efforts of the SMSG yielded a reform in mathematics education known as New Math, which was promulgated in a series of reports, culminating in a series published by Random House called the New Mathematical Library (Vol. 1 is Ivan Niven's *Numbers: Rational and Irrational*). In the early years, SMSG also produced a set of draft textbooks in typewritten paperback format for elementary, middle, and high school students."

CHAPTER 11

1. The union is now called the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

CHAPTER 12

1. An excerpt from *The Primal Wound* can be downloaded from the Gap Academy's website. The download link is listed in Works Cited.
2. Clifford R. Adams was the author of widely read advice books: *How to Pick a Mate*; *Sexual Behavior and Personality Characteristics*; and *Preparing for Marriage*. For more about Adams and the mindset about women's roles, see Martin Halliwell's *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture, 1945-1970* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 141.
3. Divorce Statistics Analysis: United States—1962.

CHAPTER 13

1. Table 75: "Estimated average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools: selected years 1959-60 through 2005-06" (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).
2. "Women's Wages—1950s" (Columbia, MO: Government Documents Dept., University of Missouri, 2020).

3. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, risk factors include isolation, denying and blaming, being physically abusive, and using threats and coercion.

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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 in your favorite online bookstore. Even a line or two makes all the difference. And, please stop by my website and say hello.

www.maryleemacdonald.com

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BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Here are questions to help book groups discuss the issues raised in the memoir.

1. What did you already know about adoption before you read this book?

2. Why do you think the author chose to tell this story?

3. What else have you read on this topic, and would you recommend these books to others?

4. Have you seen any movies or TV shows that deal with the subject of identity, genetic heritage, or adoption?

5. How honest do you think the author was being?

6. Think about the other people in the book besides the author. Was the author "fair" in her portrayal?

7. What aspects of the author's story could you most relate to?

8. What new things did you learn?

9. Do you think nature or nurture played a bigger role in the author's young life?

10. What aspects of the author's personality seemed most related to her biological heritage?

11. If you had a chance to ask the author one question, what would it be?