

LIAM'S GIFT

A PARABLE OF THE ARTISTIC LIFE

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For my grandsons, Liam and Declan

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PREFACE

Every writer has stories that aren't long enough to make full novels, nor right for a story collection. This is one such story. I love the family in this story, particularly the little girl Maureen, but I even have a soft spot for the cantankerous Gran.

The story takes place when soldiers were being drafted and sent off to fight in the trenches of World War I, thus the reference to the Kaiser, the leader of Germany in 1918. This was also an era when three generations of a family lived in a single tenement, and women took in washing to support the family. Luckily, the first electric wringer washers made their appearance in 1911, and the mother in the story would have been a very lucky woman to have owned one. If she did take in

washing for others, such a labor-saving device would have made her day much easier.

Now, why did I write this story? When I was a girl and traveling back to Colorado and Missouri with my grandparents, I once met another little girl whose entire family was involved in musical theater. It wasn't vaudeville, exactly, but close enough. This family was traveling by train from Kansas City to Denver, and the little girl and I ran up and down the aisle until the conductor told us to take our seats.

From the 1880s to the late 1920s, vaudeville performers "did the circuit," as it was known, traveling from city to city on tours organized by professional booking companies such as the Carncross Minstrels. Chicago, where this story takes place, was one of the hubs.

One of the most famous vaudeville acts was that of Eddie Foy and his children—"Eddie Foy and the Seven Little Foyes." Like Eddie Foy (*nee* Fitzgerald) the grandfather in my story would have begun performing on street corners and in saloons. Anything to help his mother make a buck.

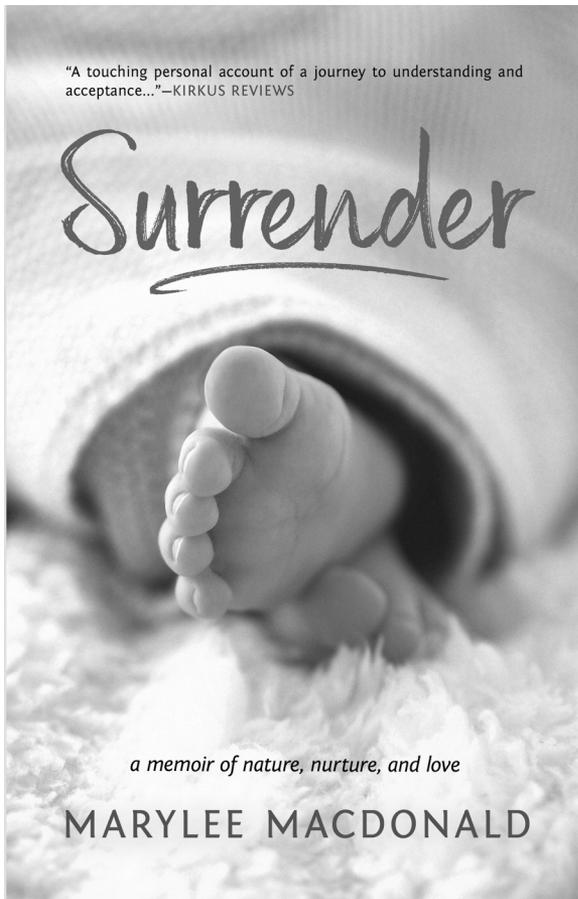
Enough background. Suffice to say that feisty little Maureen has lived vividly in my imagination for lo these many years. Now, I introduce her to you. And, if you're

looking for another book with a child's perspective, I invite you to check out my memoir *Surrender*.

getbook.at/SURRENDER

Happy reading!

Marylee MacDonald



LIAM'S GIFT

Maureen McGuire woke from a dream, and a song chirped inside her head. Humming, she ran barefoot into the kitchen. Gran was up. In slippers and a robe, her hair as gray and wet as the upside-down mop by the door, Gran slapped a hot iron across the hem of Maureen's yellow dress.

"Sleepyhead's awake!"

"I see that," Maureen's mother said.

Mama put a bowl of oatmeal on the table.

"I need Uncle Liam," Maureen said.

Gran picked up a second iron from the stove, wet her finger, and tested the iron with her fingertip. Ssss. Ssss. Ssss.

Maureen hummed louder.



“Come here and put up your arms,” Gran said, “and stop that caterwauling.”

Stiff and hot, the dress fell over Maureen’s head.

Gran pushed the ironing board back to its secret place in the wall. Standing by the green stove, she flung her hair over her face, tossing her head like a horse switching away flies. “What are you staring at?” Gran said.

“She never seen your hair down,” Mama said. “Gran has beautiful hair. That’s where you get your red hair from.”

Maureen tasted a shiny tail of her braid. Someday she would look like Gran, with a face shriveled as bathtub fingers.

“Don’t chew on your hair,” Gran said.



Gran had magical powers. Even with her back turned, she could tell what you were thinking. Maureen was afraid of Gran. Today, especially. Maureen tapped her spoon against the enamel table. Birds gave humans the gift of song. That's what Uncle Liam said. *Come back. Come back.* She tapped louder. The bird of song had flown away.

"You're making a racket," Gran said.

A boxy, brown radio sat on a shelf beneath the

window. Mama turned it on. “I wonder if we’re going to war.”

A man’s scratchy voice came over the radio.

“Papa says the Yanks will fix the Kaiser,” Maureen said.

“Did he, now?” Gran said.

“Men and their notions,” Mama said.

“Like as not, they’ll send him over to the trenches,” Gran said.

Mama covered her face, sighed, and walked down the hall. Maureen heard her talking to herself. “With the McGuire’s, it’s music, poetry, or war. But I knew that, didn’t I? Didn’t I?”

Before getting married, her father had traveled from city to city with Uncle Liam and Uncle Joe. They’d played in an orchestra. Uncle Liam could play anything. Her father only played cello, except for when he was her age and played violin. Mama returned with her arms full of sheets and pushed them down into the wringer washer’s suds. On Saturdays, the apartment smelled like soap.

“With eight boys, I don’t know how you dealt with the linens,” Mama said.

“The sleeping car porter changed them.” Gran glanced over, scowling. “This one, she don’t appreciate how good she’s got it.”

Maureen hung her head and put a hand to her cheek. It felt warm. Maybe she would get influenza and die. Then Gran would think about all the mean things she'd said.

Mama put on a mitten and took four loaves of bread from the oven, leaving the door ajar. Gran pulled over a chair and fanned her hair across her shoulders. Great knots pulled loose in Mama's ivory comb. Gran held them over the garbage pail, and they fell: long-legged spiders ballooning from the web.

"The eentsy, weentsy spider," Maureen sang, "climbed up the water..." Frowning, she scratched a spot of chipped enamel and picked raisins from her oatmeal. It was funny how one song could take the place of another. Except, it wasn't funny. It was sad.

"What's the matter?" Gran's voice screeched like a sticky drawer. "You have a stomachache?"

Mama looked over.

Maureen felt her cheek again. "No."

"No, Ma'am," Gran scowled. "Mind your manners."

Maureen slid off the chair. Hiding behind the door to the hall, her fingers pulled at the wallpaper's loose seam. That spider song had crowded out her song, which was much better.

"You should make her eat the raisins," Gran said.

"I don't think that's necessary," Mama said.

Through the door's crack, Maureen saw Gran sitting like a frowning statue in the park. After Grandpa took sick, he and Gran had moved in. Grandpa had gone to heaven.

Maureen slipped into her room. Outdoors, the ice cream truck ding-donged as it rumbled down in the alley. From the street below her window came the scrap dealer's cry. *Rags-iron-copper, rags-iron-brass, ooold pans, ooold pans*. She climbed on the bed and knelt, her elbows on the sill.

The scrap-dealer's cart turned the corner, and his voice trailed off. Her knees felt cool and damp. The mattress's blue-and-white ticking had a wet spot in the middle. Now she was *glad* the song had flown away. Her dreams were bad. She had to stop waking up with them. She climbed off the bed.

In a doll crib slept a shiny doll with braids and a forehead curl. When she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad, she was horrid. That's what Gran said.



Maureen tilted the doll up; the eyes clicked open. Down, the eyes closed. With her face pressed against the bars of the doll crib, Maureen closed her eyes. Pink stars blinked against the empty black. Still no song! She grabbed the doll's hand and flung it across the room. The doll's head hit with a crack. Sleepy eyes snapped open.

Her robe flying, Gran came in, but Maureen crawled sideways. The blow aimed for her cheek glanced off the back of her head.

Boots clomped. She heard them in the kitchen. Papa was home! Maureen jumped to her feet and ran through the door, throwing her arms around his legs. His wool pants smelled of cigars, and his stubby fingers gripped the broomstick handle of his toolbox. His glasses fogged.

“You’re home early,” Mama said.

“I fell off the scaffold.”

“Are you hurt?” Mama stopped washing dishes and turned around. He rolled up a sleeve and showed her a skinned elbow. She went to the bathroom and came back with iodine. As she applied it, he made a face, then rolled down his sleeve.

“The kitchen’s a steam bath,” he said, opening the back door. He removed his glasses and took out a handkerchief. “Do we have to keep the washer in here?”

“Kevin, for what this cost? Yes.” On tiny rollers, the wringer washer was sneaking away from the corner. “If you left your tools on the porch, they’d walk away.”

“No, but that’s...”

“Don’t argue.” Nodding toward Maureen, Mama said, “Since you’re home, take your daughter to the park. Your mom’s got her Irish up.”

Maureen took her father's hand.

"You want to go to the park?" he said.

"Not the park," she said. "I want to go see Uncle Liam."

"You two can bring Liam some supper," Mama said. "He's nothing but skin and bones."

Mama pulled a meatloaf from the ice box, sliced off a piece, then thumped the bread pan. The loaf fell out.

Papa stuck out his lip. "You feed him better than you feed me."

Mama whisked his hand away from the neckline of her blouse.

Papa frowned. "If you want me to take him a sandwich, we'll have to go all the way into the city."

"Obviously," Mama said.

Maureen looked down the hall. Gran was shuffling to the bathroom. She looked toward the kitchen and shook her finger. "I'll deal with you in a minute, Missy." The bathroom door closed.

Maureen heard the medicine cabinet open.

They'd better hurry. "Please! Please, Papa. Can we go?"

Mama, standing with her feet apart, put her hands on her belly. "Because I asked your mother if she'd help me with the laundry, she's been looking to take her anger out on Maureen."

“She’s never had a proper house to run.”

“She’s a mother isn’t she?” Mama said.

“A cat’s a mother, too. It’s a fact of biology.” Papa laughed. “She hates housework. Though she’d never confess it, she’s as wild as we’uns.”

Maureen felt the whip-hard brush and her mother’s fingers tugging her scalp. Tight new braids meant she might escape before Gran gave her a swat.

“Shoo, now. I need to take these linens to the Cogdans,” Mama said. “Your mother thinks she’s done enough. Half a basket of ironing! It’s barely even a start.”

“Liam thanks you, Love, for his supper,” Papa said. “Surely, he’ll be sick all the time now. You’ve given him the best care of his life.”

Maureen took a last bite of oatmeal. “Let’s go, Papa.” She tugged his coat. Gran might come out any minute.

“A man could do worse than live in a house full of women.”

“Kevin,” Mama laughed, removing his hands from beneath her apron. “Your mother.”

“Darling, she’s had eight children.”

Mama laughed again.

“After the ironing, we have to air the mattresses, but

if you're home by one, I might need a nap..." She looked down. "If Maureen takes a nap, too."

"I'll take her to Humboldt Park. She can run off some energy."

Maureen felt his rough hand tweak her chin. He had stopped at the barbershop, she saw. A dab of foam stuck inside one ear. That must be why Mama's nose pressed his cheek.

Aching to leave, Maureen took her sweater from a hook by the door. Liam had taught her the game, "*Doh, re, mi...*" Their secret game. Gran couldn't know of it. That's what Liam said. Maureen was already good at secrets and glad her mother said nothing about the wet bed. Women were the secret-keepers. In a family, they were the strong ones.



Maureen had gone with Mama to take care of Liam when he had the flu. Uncle Liam slept on a sagging bed in a rented room, but he was a great musician, Papa said. Mama said Liam needed a wife to iron his wrinkled shirts and make sure he wore the right socks. In his room, there were piles of sheet music and dirty pants dropped in vomit on the floor.

Mama said when it came right down to it, men were

big babies, but Maureen didn't think that was true of every man, certainly not her Papa nor Uncle Liam.

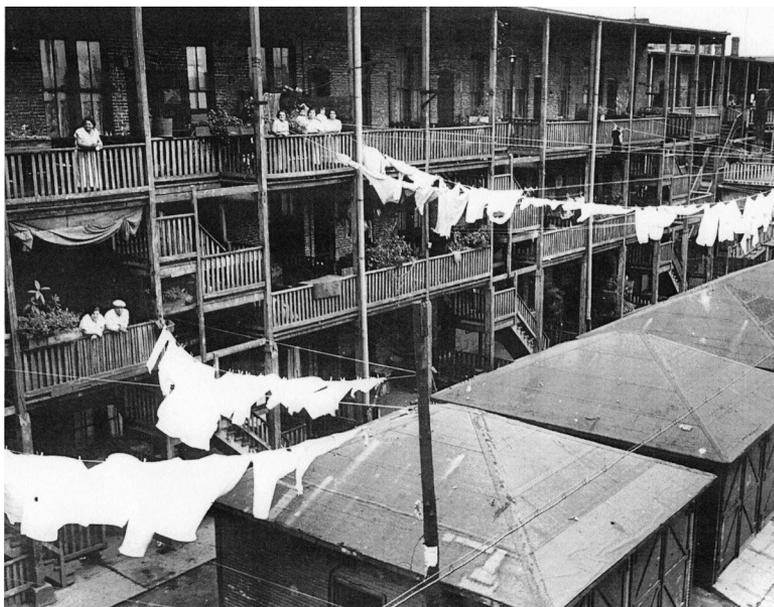
"You want to walk?" Papa said.

She reached up. "Carry me."

Papa plodded down tenement's back stairs.

Leaning over the railing on the fourth floor, Mama called down, "You two forgot Liam's supper, and that was the point of you going downtown, wasn't it?"

Papa smacked his forehead and knocked his hat on the ground. No, Maureen thought. That was not the point. She needed Liam to help her remember her song.



Maureen picked up Papa's hat and watched him

zigzag up the stairs. Looking up through flags of laundry, she saw the open window and her mother's face, as round as a gingerbread man with raisin eyes.

Out of breath when he returned, a black lunch pail clanking against his leg, Papa crushed her fingers.



In the alley, Maureen jumped over cracks in the buckled pavement. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back. Step on a line, break your mother's spine.* A mother was the most important person in the world. She wanted to be a Mama and a musician. Uncle Liam said she could do both, just maybe not at the same time.

She turned a corner and passed the green grocer and crates of kitten-soft peaches. She reached for one.

“Don’t touch, Maureen,” Papa said. “Little girls can’t have everything.”

“I know.” She looked down at the scuffed toes of her shoes. She only wanted to touch the peach because it looked pretty. She felt sad. Her song had dropped like a marble through a pocket’s undiscovered hole. She would never get it back.



At the park, she threw stale bread to the ducks and circled the shallow pool where boats sailed across the green water. Boys in knickers tossed a ball.

Her father took her to the swings. As she pumped,

the rusty poles creaked *Grand-pa, Grand-pa, Grand-pa*. She thought of him snoring in the sitting room or tapping his fingers while he looked through an album of yellowed newsprint. His eyes were white and cloudy, and his breath smelled like a moldy basement.

When he went to the hospital for the last time, he forgot how to speak, but he could still hum. On Sundays, they visited, and she heard his voice, high and clear—*so-so-so-doh, doh, doh*.

She closed her eyes and leaned back, stretching out her feet. Squeaking from the chains, the song filled her head.

So-ti-fa-doh

Re-mi-la-so

Mi-re-ti-la

Doh-ti-fa.

Now that she'd heard the melody a second time, she wouldn't forget. Uncle Liam would know what to do.

Papa took her to the slide and climbed the ladder behind her. He pushed, and down she went, her feet stirring dust at the bottom. The day was hot. The back of her legs burned. She bent her knees and pulled her skirt over them. Two boys throwing spiky, brown seed pods reminded her of soldiers. She picked up a seed pod

and felt the stickers. Papa might go to war. What would they do then? She turned to look for him.

He had taken a seat on a green bench and unfolded his paper. He turned a page. As he balanced the paper on one knee, his foot jiggled. He began to whistle.

She covered her ears, marched over, and punched the paper's crease. "I'm done playing."

He stopped whistling. "But we just got here. How about the teeter-totter?"

"No!" The song lodged securely in the back of her throat like a sweet. "I want to go see Uncle Liam!"

Papa's eyebrows joined over his nose. "Do you promise to take a nap when we go home?"

If the mattress was dry. "I promise," she said.

"Don't open our bedroom door."

"I won't."

"Don't bang your little piano."

It wasn't a real piano, only a toy. "I won't," she said.

"Don't bang the xylophone either."

"I never bang it."

"Why not?"

"Uncle Liam said to be gentle."



Uncle Liam had taught her how to find the notes on the piano and the xylophone, but she wasn't very good yet. The xylophone's tonk-tonk-tonk made Gran's head ache, and Gran often told her not to play.

Papa scratched his chin and looked at the other benches where mothers sat knitting. "I thought you'd like the park."

She had disappointed him, but didn't care. She had her song back. Now, getting downtown as quickly as possible was all that mattered.



Papa lifted her onto the streetcar. Sharp corners of packages dug into her arms, and sturdy black shoes like the ones Gran wore stepped on her feet. The tracks hissed, and she hummed louder. Papa, standing and holding onto a strap, stared out the window. Mama would have said his mind was elsewhere.



Downtown, the block-towers of buildings leaned in. At a corner by the theater, a pair of jugglers threw bowling pins in the air. A man on a unicycle rode backwards and forwards and tossed biscuits to a fluffy white dog walking

on its hind legs. The people on the sidewalk were show performers, and their job was to get people to buy tickets.

A man in a brown-and-white checked suit stood outside the theater. Hands behind his back, he switched his cigar to the other side of his mouth and tugged the brim of his hat. "Hi, little lady," he said. "You going to audition?"

Papa pulled her close. "Not today. She's too young."

"Say, Kevin! I might have something for you." The man took out a notebook. "I have a short gig in Ohio. Just a week."

"I have to ask the Missus," Papa said.

Mama would be upset. Maureen hopped from foot to foot. "I have to go potty."

Papa's mouth made a squiggle. "I probably shouldn't."

"You're a musician," the booking agent said.

"Work's not steady."

"If you don't take this, I'll give it to someone else."

"Best you do."

The man shrugged, lit another cigar, and leaned back against the box office, telling Papa to let him know when he changed his mind.

After Papa's knock, a white-haired man in a red jacket with gold buttons unlocked the theater's door.

"Hello, Andy." Papa lifted his hat.

"Mr. McGuire." Andy bowed. "Sorry to hear about your father."

Papa shrugged. "Ah, well, he's content, probably more than when he was alive."

"And didn't he have you all up on stage with those little instruments, and you in stripes and straw hats like the Seven Little Foys?"

"Those were the days."

"Saw you talking to Anderson," Andy said. "Thinking of going back to vaudeville?"

"It's an itch that's best not to scratch," Papa said. "I've taken up carpentry."

"Watch your fingers, Kevin." Andy put a hand over his heart. "No one plays 'Matushla' with more sincerity."

"That's my bailiwick, the old standards." Papa looked around the lobby, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "It's good to be home."

Andy took a pack of Necco wafers from his pocket and shook a few into Papa's hand.

"Thanks, Andy."

"Is Maureen allowed?"

"No, thank you," she said. "I brought a song for Uncle Liam."

“Tsk,” Papa said, “and for *that* we came all the way down here.”

Andy walked to the padded double doors and held one open.

“Can she use the ladies room?” Papa said.

“Certainly,” Andy said. “I’ll turn on a light.”

“I don’t have to now,” Maureen said, turning toward the theater.

The lights were out. Down the aisle, she saw the stage. The velvet curtains were parted, and a man in blue carpenter’s overalls pushed a make-believe house from one side of the stage to the other. The rumble of wheels sounded like thunder.

“I was never an improvising man,” Papa said to the doorman. “The real musicians eat, sleep, and dream the stuff, as I’ve seen close at hand. It’s a torment and a curse.”

“The drinking you could call a curse.” Andy bent down to pick up paper from the floor. “But not the music. Them two’s separate entirely.”

Papa’s placed a heavy hand landed on Maureen’s shoulder. She felt him lean—the way he did when he came home drunk.

She tugged his pants. “Let’s go!”

He took his weight off. “I guess you’re right,” Papa

said, sighing. "But Liam's not a carouser, and I've stayed away from the tavern for, I don't know, a year?"

"She's got you on the straight and narrow, eh?" Andy said.

"Very straight and very narrow," Papa said. "Barely any wiggle room."

A fib. He drank. Sometimes a lot.

Maureen took Papa's hand. "Let's go."

Papa sighed. "It feels so good to be back here. If only..."

"If only what?" the doorman said.

"If only I could make a living."

Lights flicked on, and the stage lit up: a house and a pretend tree. A man holding a rope looked up, raising and lowering a swing. Maureen tried to imagine Papa up on stage, the fourth "Musical McGuire" with his straw hat and striped vest. His picture was on a poster in her parents' bedroom.

She ran the last few steps to the orchestra pit. A dozen musicians were warming up. The pit smelled of ham, pickles, and corned beef.

"Hey, L'am." Papa leaned over the brass rail and handed down the lunch box.

Liam reached for it. "Well, look who's here," he said. "You didn't have to do this."

"Maureen insisted," Papa said.

Uncle Liam hadn't remembered to comb his thinning hair. It curled over his ears and down his neck. On his cheek, a birthmark looked like a tattoo. His tuxedo had food stains down the front. His shoes hadn't been shined. Above his droopy socks, Maureen could see slick, white skin. He did need a wife.



Liam opened the lunch box and unwrapped his sandwich, placing it beside the leather case of his clarinet. The instrument lay in pieces on a folding chair. The silver helmet of the mouthpiece rolled, clinking, onto the floor.

Maureen waited for him to rub on cork grease and twist the clarinet's neck. Killing the goose.

"Can we play our game?" she said.

"Let me have a bite first." Uncle Liam picked up his

sandwich and spoke with his cheek puffed out. "Kevin, whatever happened to the little violin?"

Papa frowned. "One of Joe's kids has it."

"Listen to me." Maureen stood on tiptoe, her chin on the rail.

"Be calm, Maureen," Papa said.

But she saw Uncle Liam looking at her, his head to one side. "Ask Joe for it back," he said. "It's a good instrument to start on."

"For who? This one?" She felt Papa's heavy hand on her head. "She's too young."

"You may need glasses, but you're not deaf, I trust." Uncle Liam made a ball of waxed paper and tossed it over the rail. He threw his half-eaten sandwich in the lunch box.

A bamboo reed was pressed, like the stick of a lollipop, between her uncle's lips. Maureen's mouth grew moist. Each music stand had a tiny light, bright as a star. Hands on the rail, she leaned back. Monkey bars. The lights blinked on and off. Violins tuned to the plunk of an old piano, an upright with a missing back.

"Uncle Liam, when can I sing you my dream?"

Liam motioned the other musicians quiet.

"See Kevin? That first time was no accident. This is the third or fourth, if I'm not mistaken. All right, my

lovely Maureen,” he said. “You have a new song for me?”

Liam’s voice was deep, like Papa’s cello, playing sad.

So-ti-fa-doh...

The dream poured out. His black eyes steady on hers, Liam played as she sang, releasing the song, note by note, to his care. And then he took up her dream and sang it through his clarinet.

As her dream spun round and round, she began dancing, spiraling around and around so fast she nearly toppled over.

Papa lifted her off the floor, and she sat perched in the crook of his elbow. His glasses twinkled in the light, and she pulled his ears, laughing, as he plowed his nose into her belly.

“Liam,” he said, looking down at his brother and shaking his head. “Lord help us, she’s got your gift.”

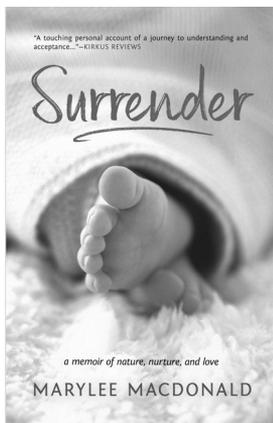
AFTERWORD

I should have confessed right up front that Maureen and I have something else in common.



I was a child performer in Dorothy Roberts' "Stars of Tomorrow," a song-and-dance troupe straight out of vaudeville. You can read all about my life as a "child star" in my memoir *Surrender*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

No matter what else we having going on in our lives, it's important to stop and smell the roses. My house in Sonoma County, California is close to the Luther Burbank Gardens, now a historic site. When I need a break from writing, I often head for the rose garden.



If you'd like to see what else I have going on, pop over to my website and leave me a message.

www.maryleemacdonald.com