The Price We Paid

by Marylee MacDonald

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I was not the sort of girl who should have gotten pregnant in high school. I was the kid in the front row waving her hand, the grade-grubber begging for extra credit. At the end of sophomore year, my best friend scribbled a warning in my yearbook: "Passionate humanitarian, don't let the passion get the best of you." Like Gandhi or Martin Luther King she meant.

I stared at the word "passionate," thinking she might have guessed my secret. This was 1961, before I understood how much passion cost.

Fifteen and half, an eager girl, I was throwing myself at life. My friends and I looked down our noses at cheerleaders, hoods, and jocks. We were intellectuals. I had listened to the Kennedy-Nixon debates and read Jack's book, *Profiles in Courage*. I was going to change the world. Before my pregnancy shamed my family, I canvassed door to door, campaigning for fair housing. I shook hands with James Farmer, head of C.O.R.E. An officer in Junior Statesmen, I went to Sacramento and won debates. The best musicians in orchestra were my boyfriends. Confident, an Annette Funicello lookalike, I had been groomed for the social success my homely mother coveted. She and I did not look alike because I was adopted, but adoption played no role in my early life. I was the "chosen child." Other parents didn't get to pick their kids, my mom always bragged. Mine did.

What my mother didn't know was that my social life had recently crumbled. My boyfriend had asked for his school ring back, saying I was "taking him for granted," a phrase that meant nothing to me then, or now. He and I, sophomores, had been eating our lunches on a shadowy concrete bench behind the L-wing classrooms, and we talked about our favorite books; but when I unclipped his

dog-tag chain, I began to wonder whether I was popular or unpopular, desirable or undesirable. Didn't I have a good personality? Didn't I wear the right clothes? Why did boys abandon me? Abandonment was a big, big issue. A pit had opened beneath my feet, a hollow feeling in my stomach.

Until then, I had heaped scorn on the girls who read *Seventeen*, but now I studied it carefully. To rid my nose of blackheads I applied oatmeal paste. I dabbed peroxide on the fuzz above my upper lip. Following my mother's advice, I joined a Catholic youth group. That was where the trouble began.

The boys in this youth group went to Catholic high schools. Two of them were six feet tall and wore Oxford shirts and tan pants. At the group's weekly dance, the wild gyrating music of Chuck Berry and Little Richard flung boys and girls against opposite walls. I boldly walked across the no man's land and asked the dark-haired guy with a triangular face and enigmatic smile if he and the other tall boy were twins. No, he said, just tall. This immediately made me the butt of all his jokes, the gullible public school girl whom he could put anything over on. All five of my children inherited this boy's prominent nose and steel blue eyes. John MacDonald had just turned sixteen.

The oldest of eight, John already did his share of family driving. He had a white '58 Ford sedan for his own use, and his father, involved in an affair with his secretary and living away from home, glanced in the rear view mirror and said, "Would your mother listen to reason if I talked to her about the driving?" I tried to picture how this would go over with my mom, a bug-eyed woman with trifocals and receding chin. I didn't want to have my mouth washed out with soap again for not saying "Ma'am" or for sassing her. I didn't want to be grounded for life. "It's okay the way it is," I said. Not married until she was forty-five, and hardly dating before that, she was wary of older boys—John was a year and a half older—and boys who could drive. The house rule was that parents had to drive me on dates, and John's father, busy with his double lives, resented the rule.

John opened the door of a small stucco house. A lava-lamp bubbled on a coffee table. Couples wrestled on couches. When I backed out, John gave me a shove forward and closed the door. The party was in honor of Nicky T.'s birthday,

and after a moment, he got up off the couch and put on some music. John pulled me close and whispered that he'd tried to ask out a redhead named Elaine who was "after" him, but she had an unlisted number. This did not give me a great deal of confidence until I looked up and saw him grinning.

Nicky T.'s girlfriend Brenda, a tiny blonde with a flip that reminded me of "The Flying Nun's" habit, had made him a shirt. He went in the bedroom to try it on, and she went too. The door closed. They came out an hour later, showered. Strange to shower in the middle of a party, I thought.

Love Me Tender came on and John's tongue flicked into my mouth. I asked him if that was "Frenching," thus firmly establishing my reputation as "out to lunch." I thought guys who went to Catholic schools would take right and wrong as seriously as I did, but I guess the nuns who taught our weekly Saturday catechism classes did a good job of implanting a truly Catholic sense of guilt. The way we were kissing, I was pretty sure, merged into mortal sin lane. When John's dad picked us up, he gave me a quick up-and-down. No lipstick. Tangled hair. Wrinkled blouse. I felt soiled. He knew exactly what we'd been doing. I felt ashamed and vowed never to let John untuck my blouse again.

For our next date, John invited me to a high school dance. He had rented a pale blue tux, and he looked down at me, flames sparking in his eyes. But no. Tonight, I wore a formal, and I was going to hold the line. I didn't want to develop a bad reputation. That meant everything to me, and once surrendered, could never be regained. He handed me a florist's box. A white orchid was inside. I pinned it on with shaking fingers, glad that, after my begging and throwing a fit, my mother had relented and allowed us to double date. The high school cafeteria had been decorated like a Christmas wonderland. The girls had printed bids where we wrote our partners' names. We only danced with one partner. By the end of the evening, I was convinced I had fallen for Prince Charming. The fairy tales of my youth—"Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Snow White"--led me to expect a knight in shining armor. I felt lucky that he found me so easily without having to hack his way through briars.

My grandmother, the rock in the family during my parents' stormy divorce, woke up one night in agony, tapping on the common wall between our rooms. Rushed by ambulance to San Francisco, she had half her intestines removed. More beaten down than usual, my mother spent a sleepless night in the hospital's corridor. Exhausted, I suggested taking a bus down the Peninsula to Redwood City. John picked me up at the station and brought me home to his sunny, yellow kitchen. His mom poured me Cheerios and milk. I lay down on the couch and slept. After that, I came back for Sunday dinners. I met John's aging relatives and his siblings. My mother joked that when I married John, I married the whole clan. She liked that because, until her death in 1969, the year before John's, she became part of the clan too.

John and I spent more and more time together. He showed me literature from the John Birch Society and told me Robert Welch was his hero. If the Soviets won the Cold War, Communists would suppress the Catholic religion, so I'd better watch out and not become indoctrinated by that Commie group, the American Friends Service Committee. Also, the Spanish I excelled in was the course dummies took at his school. I was in awe of his four years of Latin and two of Greek, but thought it proper that my prince be slightly smarter, as well as slightly older. That way I could look up to him.

The middle of sophomore year, I played Friar John in the Honor Society's production of "Romeo and Juliet." I nearly got the character lead of the Nurse. That role, ironically, might have kept me out of trouble. With more scenes and lines, I would have stayed later at rehearsals. Instead, John's football season ended, the days grew short, and John picked me up after rehearsal. At my house, my mother made us sit in the living room while she graded papers and kept up a constant stream of conversation about her fourth graders. At John's place his seven little brothers and sisters wanted stories read or help drawing dinosaurs. We began parking.

My mother had warned me time and again about parking, but I had no idea why. It seemed natural for two people who loved each other to want time alone. Because my friends were not sexually active, I didn't have a store of inaccurate,

anecdotal information to draw on. Sure, we had the typical one hour class in sixth grade to tell us about our periods. Back then my mother sat me down for a scientifically exacting description of male and female anatomy and how they fit together. She admitted to doing it with my father once, but she made it sound like licking dirt off the kitchen floor. What did any of that have to do with the explosion of feelings inside? With my mood swings and total preoccupation with the relationship? I seesawed between guilt and satisfaction. Oh yes. Satisfaction.

Lying on the front seat of his white Ford, around mid-March, we went further than we had intended to go. From loosening my bra and pressing against my body, John began exploring where this surging passion was coming from. In spite of the gymnastics of trying to get clothes partially off, duck the steering wheel, find a place where the police wouldn't pull up and shine a flashlight in, one winter afternoon we found ourselves sufficiently alone, undressed, and so hot that when I said "no stop," it probably sounded like I was as ready as he was. This little sentence standing between us was as readily penetrable as my virgin body. On this day, he thrust inside me, and then, we were neither one of us innocent.

This first encounter hurt. I thought blood meant I was having my period, but John said, no, he'd heard that happened the first time. So I didn't worry. After that, we parked and had intercourse as often as we could find time and privacy. Once started, I just couldn't stop.

Using birth control—that was another story. There was no pill back then; no condom dispensers; no contraceptive jelly on the shelf. John, who looked older, would have had to screw up his courage to ask the pharmacist, and he was afraid of someone telling his mother. Besides, Father Cavanaugh, my parish priest, gave sermons once a month about the evils of family planning. Even for married couples, birth control was a mortal sin, worse than fornication. Every Saturday I'd stand in line outside the confessional, listening to mumbled absolutions. In the dark curtained space, my knees rocking on the wooden kneeler, I'd try to come up with an accurate count of how many times I had "done it." I felt like a liar if I

didn't give him the right number and overconfessed, just so the slate would be clean.

Because I was definitely going to stop. At mass, John and I hung our heads and sat a foot apart, like little kids at Holy Communioners. He blamed himself, saying he needed to learn self-control. He'd been reading Thomas Aquinas on free will, and he claimed the saint stiffened his resolve. By Monday or Tuesday, the back of his hand would brush mine as he shifted through the gears, my good intentions would melt, and I'd fall into his arms again and go at it.

We were the modern day Romeo and Juliet. John was the academic captain of his football team, a standout student in math and science. I was the humanist and social justice freak. Our friends in the church group thought we made a cute couple. At school, my friends said John was good looking, but weren't sure he was my type: not artsy; not politically liberal. However, there were no other boyfriend-candidates. John and I agreed politics was one area our minds would never meld. Not that it mattered. There was too much white heat elsewhere.

I must have gotten pregnant in late April. Six weeks later, I began to get sick to my stomach. My mother kept throwing pimento loaf in my sandwiches. I broke off bits of bread crust, letting the wafers compact and dissolve like Holy Communion. The nausea came from nerves, I thought. Maybe I had ulcers from a term paper that was due and a novel I had to write for Spanish IV. I worried about making myself not worry and got very little sleep. I didn't connect my unsettled stomach with pregnancy. I didn't know anyone who'd ever had a baby.

One afternoon, I was throwing up in the bathroom. I flushed the toilet, brushed my teeth, and opened the door. My mother. Eyes bulging behind her thick glasses, white hair frizzed, she blocked the door. Lowering the cupped hand she held over her mouth, she said, "Is it possible you could be pregnant?"

Yikes! Holy Mary, Mother of God.

"I could be," I said.

"I always knew it. You're just like your mother!" She backed into the living room and sank down on the couch. Her face dropped in her head in her hands.

I followed her.

"You always told me you didn't know anything about my mother," I said.

"What?" She looked up and then over my shoulder at the front door as if she expected my parents to rise from the dead and knock. They had both been killed in a car accident. That's why I was adopted. Or, at least, that's what she'd told me.

"My mother…" I said. "Do you know about her?"

"She was the same age as you."

"Fifteen and a half?"

"Yes."

"How am I just like her?"

"You're not married. The boy, your father, was nineteen."

"Are they alive?"

"How should I know?"

This was astonishing. They could be alive. I held my breath hoping she would go on. My fingers stiffened, and I felt my hand raise, just like in class.

"She was a good student. Like you."

"And him?"

"A carpenter. Both of them had blond hair and blue eyes."

My mother looked at my eyes and saw the eyes of strangers looking back. Oversexed teenagers. "How could you do this to me?" she said.

It's not about you, I wanted to say.

Taking off her thick glasses, she rubbed her eyes. Looking at me, she didn't bother focusing. I was a blur, the chalk left behind after the blackboard's erasure. She wasn't my mother. Not really. Nor was I a prodigy. My other mother had provided genes that had finally surfaced. My mother had somehow known they would, all along.

During the turmoil of my parents' divorce, I had hovered above the chaos—my father breaking the plate glass window, bodies crashing into walls behind their bedroom door, rope burns on my mother's wrists. I had looked down on both of them with contempt--her for weakness, him for cruelty--and pondered why the adoption agency had placed me in this screwed up family. My parents,

forty-five years older than me, might have chosen me, but I had not chosen them. That had been my salvation. Now I saw the logic of my placement. The social workers thought I would turn out a blonde or something. Instead, I was a brunette.

The only comfort on that first "Is it possible?" day came from thinking of my birth mother. She had been my age when she became pregnant—fifteen. My mother had blond hair and blue eyes. A picture formed in my mind of a woman who might understand what I was going through, and when I turned thirty-five, I finally summoned the courage to find her. She had gone through a similar experience herself. And just a girl, too.

But on that day in high school, I didn't know anything about how finding my birth mother could fill the void that was then my identity. I didn't know that it would take me seven years and hours of reading microfilm. Like a castaway, I felt adrift.

Admitting the possibility of pregnancy didn't mean I was pregnant. I hoped for ulcers or a prolonged case of stomach flu. Confirmation required a trip to the clinic, a waiting room of pregnant women browsing issues of *Good Housekeeping*. They kept their eyes discretely down when the nurse called my name.

My first pelvic exam. I put my feet in the stirrups. A nurse draped a sheet over my knees. The doctor inserted a finger full of gooey jelly and poked. Then a quick thrust with ice-cold pliers, forcing me apart, and shining in a hot light. He told me I was seven weeks pregnant. Then he asked my mother to step into his office and repeated the news.

Crying, she asked, "What will the neighbors think?"

The doctor shrugged, picked up a pencil, and doodled on his prescription pad. I did not feel guilty in front of him. He approached it as a medical problem, not a problem to bring church and state to the brink of collapse. As a by the way, he asked what I planned to do with the baby.

"Get married," I said, looking at my mother.

"No you won't," she said. "She'll put it up for adoption."

The burden of my pregnancy fell heavily on my mother's shoulders. During the next two weeks (the visit to the doctor's, the stony negotiations where John's parents and my mother mapped out my future) she developed a painful half-body twitch called *hemi-correa*. She couldn't control the jerking of her eye, half her mouth, her arm or her leg. Half-spastic, she would take a medical leave. She couldn't teach anyway. I had wounded her, perhaps permanently. I had to face what I had struggled to deny. Pregnant. Oh God. And my mother perhaps never able to teach again. Teach? She could barely walk.

I wanted someone to realize I hadn't meant to hurt anyone: I had only wanted comfort for myself. Was it too much to ask for compassion? A week later, I confessed my sin—the sin of getting caught. The priest's comforting words ended with this bit of theology: Mary Magdalene was a whore, and Jesus found it in his heart to forgive her. Go and sin no more.

From now on, my sexuality defined me. Adults now knew about it, knew I had let John explore its dark, sweaty depths. But now they, the adults, took charge, dealing with me as if this part of my body were my smile, my eyes, and my mind. This marked the beginning of the numbing, of the absolute stoicism with which I marched toward the inevitable conclusion.

We moved to Phoenix, to hide from neighbors and gossip and shame. I sat in an apartment for three tortured months, eating TV dinners, never talking to my mother, and reading. At night, I swam in the warm, turquoise pool with fat beetles floating upside down on their backs. Underwater, I touched the pool's round, hot light, exhaled, and surfaced to see my mother scowling.

What relief when the nausea ended and how amazed I was to feel the first quick twitches of life. The joy tasted like chocolate, deep and bittersweet. As my

belly button became an out-button, I plunged into the musty, unread books of the Phoenix library. This was my long-novel period—*Three Musketeers*, *Brothers Karamazov*, and *War and Peace*. My eyes ached while my breasts ballooned and the skin on my belly snapped into concentric red circles. I entered the Florence Crittenden home too late to learn tricks the girls there used to keep from getting stretch marks—diet and cocoa oil.

As my child grew and I completed correspondence courses from a bogus high school that would send transcripts to mine, I lay on my side in the four-girl dorm room and felt my baby pushing and kicking, getting its feet up under my ribs and spreading them apart. The bones in my pelvis ached as the constant pressure forced them open. Such a strong baby! That space grew too cramped. The baby wanted out.

John wrote nearly every day, mostly about how horny he felt. In one letter he said he thought about taking my one-time rival Elaine to the Christmas dance, but decided not to. I dropped quarters in the pay phone and splurged on a long distance call. How could he even think about it? I was having his baby! Believing we loved each other was the one thing keeping me sane. Barely.

Before New Year's, John came to visit me in Phoenix. I got a day pass, borrowed my mother's '52 Chevy, and drove to the city's edge; I had scouted out a cactus arboretum. We got in the back seat and gradually undressed. John touched my stomach and moved his ear, listening for a heart beat, laughing when he felt a fist. We made slow love, and afterward cried and held each other in desperation, saying we would marry; we wouldn't let this or anything drive us apart. How grown up we felt that day, talking about young people in other cultures wedded in their teens, how a biological imperative glued us inseparably.

But John never wrote the word marriage after he left. Instead, he sent me a clipping from the front page of the local paper. The grainy image showed him holding a letter of appointment to West Point. Surrounding him were his mother and seven brothers and sisters. I had seen *West Point Story* on television. I knew

what the rules said: “No wife; no horse; no mustache.” Getting into the Academy had been his lifelong dream. Mine had been meeting him.

In a hospital gown and robe, I waited in a row of chairs with other girls whose due dates drew near. We each had our knitting or crocheting to keep our hands busy. I looked toward the sunlit doorway at the end of the dark corridor, waiting for my turn to enter the examining room and have the doctor thrust his finger inside. I didn’t flinch anymore. This was normal life.

The second week of January, the doctor said the baby would come anytime. Second semester of junior year was two weeks away, and my mother called to remind me she had to start school soon. I felt frantic. I had to deliver. If I came back late to school, people would wonder. Then what would be the point of all this secrecy? I thought of Juliet and the price she paid to “live an unstained wife” to Romeo. To live honorably in the eyes of others, to protect our families from shame—that was the whole point here, wasn’t it? I began walking and walking inside the high walls that surrounded the home. A path had been worn in the parched grass. Girls from Phoenix never left for fear they would be recognized. This was our only exercise, an eighth-of-a-mile hamster circle within the unscalable walls of our prison.

A week went by.

On Saturday night, I waddled down to the infirmary. Other girls told me that the weekend nurse could start labor by giving an enema. I had no idea what an enema was. Of course I also had no idea what labor was supposed to feel like. We had no childbirth or Lamaze classes and were as ignorant about the birth process as we once had been about sex itself. Labor started at two in the morning. I went back to the infirmary and climbed up on the metal table. The nurse shaved my pubic hair into a kidney-shaped bowl. Then she called the ambulance to take me to the hospital.

I was alone in a narrow bed. Occasionally a nurse checked me. I held the cold guard rails and cried. As my pains grew worse I screamed for John. They

gave me a shot of Demerol. The room began to swirl like a carnival ride. Seizing my abdomen, invisible giant hands squeezed and squeezed, driving the baby out. I screamed. Several nurses surrounded the bed. One took a quick look.

"The baby's crowning."

They pushed me into the glare of an operating room. The pains ran one into the other in a continuous, swollen torrent as I slid onto the table; the nurse cinched my legs and arms in straps. Dizzy, I felt like a child myself, held by an arm and leg and flung around and around in circles. I could feel the baby coming.

"She's so young," one nurse said. Her fingers curled around mine as I let out a scream and pushed.

"Don't push!" the doctor yelled. "You'll tear."

What was he talking about? My baby had to come out. Too late. I felt the head sliding from me. Then the shoulders. The doctor held a bloody, waxy mess. For a long second the baby didn't breathe. Watching, I held my breath. The doctor put his finger inside the baby's mouth and slapped its back. The baby squalled in rage.

"It's a boy," he said, not smiling.

"Do you want to see him?" A nurse held a flannel blanket in her arms, quickly wrapping my son.

"Yes," I said.

She held the blanket open. I saw his kicking legs, the little fists I had felt inside, a dark fringe of hair. Eyes squeezed shut, face red, he wailed. The nurse folded the blanket around him and took him away.

"This is going to hurt just a little," the doctor said.

He thrust his arm deep inside, scraping the inside of my abdomen as if he were cleaning a pumpkin.

"He has to get the rest of the placenta," the nurse explained. "Go ahead and cry. I know it hurts."

I tried to, but I didn't have any more tears. I don't know where they went.

Early in the morning an ambulance took me back to the infirmary and the Home's large-bosomed nurse tied a wide Ace bandage—a breast binder—around

my chest to stop my milk from coming in. She pushed on my abdomen as though it were a deflated pillow. Beneath the puffiness, she found the edges of my uterus and seized it, kneading it like a tennis ball. I continued bleeding. The contractions of labor continued another day.

Two days later, I walked down to the waiting room in my robe. My mother held out a grocery sack with my regular clothes. She didn't hug me or ask how I was or how it had been. But I saw she looked better. More relaxed. Her ordeal was almost over. She made small talk, told how we would drive home at the end of the week.

I desperately wanted to lie back down. I felt dizzy and cold; but I couldn't leave yet. I had papers to sign. A social worker arrived: not the one from the home or the one from the agency. No. A total stranger with a briefcase. The woman, dark-haired, dressed in a business suit and with cat's eye glasses, placed the briefcase in the middle of the table as if it held state secrets. Almost reverently, she snapped open the lock. She passed papers to me and handed me a pen, explaining that by signing, I would relinquish my child forever. This was a selfless act, she said. I was giving a childless couple the greatest gift possible. I should know my son would be raised in a good and loving Catholic home.

Her face was wooden and expressionless. Only her jaw moved up and down, like a marionette's. She had said these lines so often they held no real meaning.

"Now you can go on with your own life," she said. "Put this experience behind you. Forget."

I felt entirely numb. I had turned to stone, to a block of wood, to ice. Her words had frozen me, but her lips kept moving. My son would have two parents. They would give him all the advantages. She reached over and nudged the papers.

Advantages. Yes. I thought of these two people, these parents who were old enough and adult enough to care for my sweet child. Who was I to think I could have done just as well if John and I had married? I was just a girl, a gutted husk of a girl who had gotten herself into a big mess.

Empty and drained, I now knew wild passion's sober results. You deserve this, I thought. No one did this but you. Without reading the document, I put the pen tip to the signature line. I wrote my name and cut the cord. Forever.

Two years after the birth of their first child, the author married John and had four more children. Both transferred to Stanford at the time of their marriage. She graduated from Stanford with Honors in English in 1968. John, a Phi Beta Kappa and Tau Beta Pi engineer, was awarded a Ph.D. from Stanford the year before he was killed in an auto accident, 1971. The author was six weeks pregnant with their fifth child at the time of his death. After a long search, the author found her son. Reunited on the Christmas of his 21st birthday, she saw a man walk toward her across the airport tarmac, 6'4", blue eyes, the image of his father. College valedictorian, he was also, coincidentally, named John.