

Unravelled

Life as a Mother



MARIA HOUSDEN

from the author of the bestselling
Hannah's Gift

Maria Housden

Unravelled: Life as a Mother

«HarperCollins»

Housden M.

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Maria Housden tells of her own transformation, as a mother, a wife and a woman, as she struggled to cope with the death of her daughter Hannah and make the hardest decision of her life. From the author of the bestselling *Hannah's Gift*. • At the age of 36, instead of enjoying the perfect family life she had imagined as a child, Maria felt judged and found wanting by others. She realised that, no matter how much she still loved her husband and how powerful her bond of love was with her children, she had to change her life radically – and make it her own again. So began an emotional and enlightening search for herself. • Written in the same moving, lyrical style as *Hannah's Gift*, the story unfolds in a series of painful, joyful and humorous moments, at times heart-wrenchingly sad, but ultimately uplifting.

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In memory of my beloved father, Ronald Guy Schlack

*I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though, some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray...*

*'Live in the layers,
not on the litter.'*

*Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.*

*I am not done with my changes.
Stanley Kunitz, 'The Layers'*

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Prologue

Summer 1975

“AT THE AGE OF 12, I WROTE THE STORY OF MY LIFE. THE words flowed effortlessly onto the page; I knew everything then.

My sister Diana and I were leaning against the trunk of the maple tree that marked the dividing line between our backyard and the neighbour’s next door. It was early August, a week before my 13th birthday; Diana was two years younger than me. We were bored and sweating in the heat, streaks of dirt creased into the backs of our knees and under our chins. I was wearing the same shorts and t-shirt I had worn the past few days and my canvas tennis shoes, which had been bright white at the beginning of the summer, were now scuffed and grey. Diana drew circles with a stick in the dirt and I waved half-heartedly at our younger sister and brother who were riding their bikes up and down the alley with a pack of neighbourhood kids, whooping and hollering each time they passed.

The two of us sat in the middle of a circle of limp white string that was tied to the wooden stakes our father had erected in an attempt to keep us off the grass he was trying to grow in the only shady part of the yard. Our father was nothing if not disciplined and persistent. Working long hours as a janitorial supply salesman during the week and as a member of the Air Force Reserves on weekends, his scant bit of free time was spent seeding and reseeding patches of dirt. Even so, our yard was mostly dusty sand, a constant parade of bicycles and endless games of ‘kick the can’ crushing any hope of lawn taking root.

Our house was one of the smallest on the block. It was painted grey on one side, white on the other. Years ago, someone had started painting it and never finished. My parents rented it from Mr Nyland, a stocky, good-humoured man who lived in a bigger house across the street with his wife and teenaged kids. Our neighbourhood was a mid-western mix of hard-working middle-class families and those who were significantly less hard working. The most scandalous thing to happen so far that year, besides the juvenile detention of the boy next door for ‘borrowing’ his aunt’s car, was the impending divorce of my friend Anne’s parents. Her father, a doctor, had been having an affair with one of his nurses. All the mothers in the neighbourhood spoke in hushed whispers about it. Nothing was said to us kids.

‘I’m bored,’ Diana said, flinging her stick across the yard.

I tipped my head back and squinted into the sun.

‘Boring is what summer is,’ I said. ‘At least until we’re grown-ups,’ I added, thinking about our mother who was inside the house, stretched out on the couch in front of the fan, a cool washcloth folded neatly over her forehead. ‘When we’re grown-ups, we’ll be able to do anything we want.’

‘Yeah, as long as we don’t die of boredom first. My butt’s even falling asleep,’ Diana said.

‘Wait here,’ I said, standing up and brushing off the back of my shorts. ‘I have an idea.’

I was careful to be quiet as I let myself in the house. Mom didn’t like us kids traipsing in and out, banging the bent screen door. I tiptoed upstairs to my dad’s office, which was set up in the corner of my parent’s bedroom, just down the hall from my brother’s room and the one we three girls shared. I opened the bottom drawer of my dad’s desk and lifted a stack of blank, white typing paper out of the folder in the back. I found two pencil stubs in the pencil holder my brother had made the previous Christmas out of an empty soup can and pieces of felt.

Diana was still sitting in the shady ‘no man’s land’ when I returned.

‘Here’s what we’re going to do,’ I said, handing half the paper and a pencil to her. ‘We’re going to write letters to each other as if we’re already grown up. You tell me about your life, and I’ll tell you about mine.’

‘How old should we be?’ Diana asked, getting into the game.

‘Oh, old enough to have everything we want, but not too old to enjoy it. You be 34 and I’ll be 36,’ I said.

I leaned back against the trunk of the tree and closed my eyes. The image of what I saw is as clear to me now as it was then.

Dear Diana,

My life is perfect. My husband James and I are happily married. We met when I was an architect just out of college, the year I published my first book. James is a wonderful man, a banker, tall and handsome with black curly hair, twinkling blue eyes and large, strong hands. We live on a horse ranch in the mountains outside Denver, Colorado, just the two of us with our 12 kids.

Our children are growing so fast. Justin, the oldest, is already 12. The twins, Elizabeth and Anastasia are 10, John is 9, Rebecca and Christian are 8, Emily is 7, Ben is 6, Julia and Molly are 4, Thomas is 3 and Sarah is 1. As you can imagine, they keep me very busy. I have time for myself too, though. I love to go horseback riding in the mountains, paint, write or play tennis during the day. At night, James and I often go to fancy restaurants with our friends.

Our family lives in a lovely old Victorian mansion that's painted blue with white gingerbread trim. It has a large porch that goes all the way around the house and bedrooms for each of our kids. A swing hangs from the branches of a tree in the front yard and in the back there's a playhouse with lace curtains in the windows, barns with chickens and goats, and a rolling, green horse pasture.

Despite the demands of our busy household, I am able to manage everything quite effortlessly. I love my life, and feel lucky to be the woman I am, the mother of 12 beautiful children, and James's wife.

I hope your life is wonderful too, and that you will be coming to visit us here soon.

love Maria

As I reread my letter before handing it over to my sister, I felt warm and quiet inside. I loved this woman I imagined I would become, this capable, vibrant, sexy, beautiful wife and mother. I knew that her toes were manicured, her purse well organized and her children well dressed and polite. I loved her life, the wholeness and fullness, joy and satisfaction in it.

I felt as if great things were possible for me, things that felt real and familiar even though there was no evidence of them in the life I was now living. I was a secret being kept hidden until the time was right, ripening and waiting for the external world to change before I could be revealed. Sitting beneath the maple tree in our backyard, I felt a deep quiet in the centre of myself as I imagined this woman I would become, as if it were already done, already true for me.

Each of us, in the most silent part of ourselves, has always known who we are. The eyes that look into ours from the image in the mirror recognize something that does not change with time or age. It would take me 24 more years to spiral into this centre of myself, to discover and begin living fully the sense of happiness and possibility that I dreamed for myself when I was 12. And, in the process, I would have to learn to be fiercely honest with myself and with others, and to unravel, with integrity and discernment, all my ideas about the way life is 'supposed to be'.

Ten Days, Ten Years

Summer 1998

Sunday

THE ONLY LIGHT IN THE ROOM CAME FROM A SINGLE KEROSENE lamp. I ran my hand along the wall beside the wide plank door, found a switch and flicked it on. A copper lamp with a fringed shade made a circle of light on the small wooden table next to the bed. I stood in the centre of the room and felt a sense of excitement growing in me. Although I had dreamed of this moment for years, envisioned this place many times before, I hadn't ever truly believed it would happen. Looking around now, I felt as if something new was coming alive in me, a sense without form, poised to take shape.

The idea of a retreat had been planted in my heart in the first months after Hannah's death. Holding her lifeless body in my arms, part of me had released itself; something in me had irreparably changed. I had known then that I would have to get away, to immerse myself in a silence that was only mine, if I were to ever understand fully what had happened, and to know what I was supposed to do next.

The Hermitage, the centre where I was now staying, had been established years ago by an elderly Mennonite couple who had converted a huge barn into several floors of small bedrooms, libraries and a kitchen/dining room. For a modest fee, guests were given their own room and bath, and encouraged to spend their days quietly on their own, reading, painting, writing or walking in the fields and surrounding woods. All meals, except for breakfast, were prepared by Mary and served to guests around the farm table in silence. It seemed the perfect space for my retreat.

Now, gazing around the room, I felt as if I had been transported into another, timeless place, far from any life I had ever known. The walls were panelled with knotted pine boards that climbed horizontally to the beamed ceiling. Two screened windows on wide hinges were open to the warm summer evening, their white lace curtains catching the breeze. A well-worn plank floor was partially covered by a brown braid rug, and along one wall, facing the largest window, was a double bed with a carved wooden headboard and muted patchwork quilt. A small teddy bear with button eyes and suede paws leaned against the pillow.

I laid my suitcase on the bed and began to unpack. I stacked my folded clothes in the drawers of the simple bureau, placed my new journal alongside a silver pen on the desk that sat beneath the window across from the bed; I slid several photographs of Claude, and our four children, Will, aged 10, Hannah, who would have been 7, Margaret, aged 3, and Madelaine, aged 2, under the edges of the window frame. In the drawers of the desk, I put pages of drawing paper, a few pencils and a deck of cards.

Beneath the second window, next to the dresser, was a small kneeling bench with a wooden shelf nailed to the wall above it. Here, I placed a votive candle and the gold cross I wore around my neck during the last year of Hannah's life. When I had finished, I slid my suitcase under the bed, and sat down in the large, upholstered reading chair in the corner. From my vantage point, I could see fireflies blinking in the dark outside the windows. I sat quietly, not moving, feeling myself breathe, drinking it all in.

Mary had told me when I checked in that, apart from one other guest who was scheduled to arrive in a day or two, I would be on my own. Having shared a room with two younger sisters until I was 18, and never having lived on my own, the idea of such solitude and silence seemed too good to be true. As a wife and mother, I had become so accustomed to constant interruptions that I couldn't help thinking, in the quiet of the room, that this peace couldn't possibly last.

Sitting in the light of the flickering lamp, I heard a rustling noise just outside the window. I felt a shiver up my spine, feeling suddenly frightened of being alone, as if I might be smothered by

the room's unfamiliar silence. Quickly, I stood up and with a running start leaped across the floor onto the bed, just as I had as a little girl, afraid of monsters that lurked in dark corners. Undressing beneath the covers, I dropped my clothes on the floor and burrowed beneath the soft sheets and thick quilt. Closing my eyes against the dark and silence, I fell almost immediately into a deep sleep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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