Postcards Home

Marylee MacDonald

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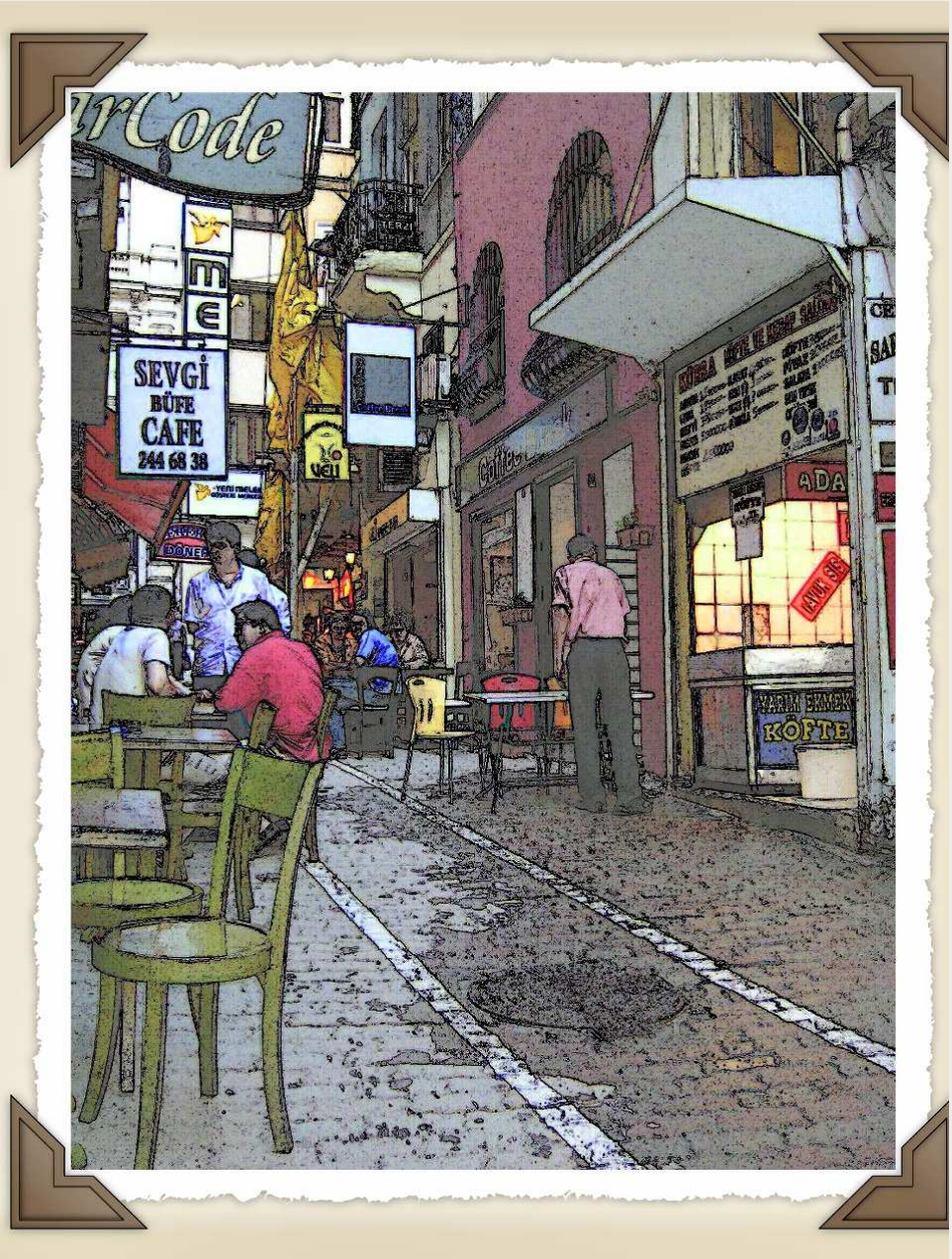

Excerpts and images from the short story collection *Bonds of Love & Blood* by Marylee MacDonald.

From the story “Bonds of Love & Blood”

It was getting on towards dusk, and I had stopped by the rug shop to tell Hamdi farewell. While the tense little Kurd with the shining eyes talked to his boss, Duran Duran, on the phone, I studied a framed photograph of a village somewhere in eastern Turkey. On a rolling, grassless steppe, a settlement of low, domed houses huddled. No water vessels or stacks of wood, no clotheslines or looms, nothing to announce that, here, people needed warmth, light, water, food, or wore clothes or made love or laughed.

In a corner of the frame, Hamdi had wedged a faded color photo of two boys with hollow, black eyes. The older boy was Hamdi. Even then his smile occupied half his face. Or maybe it was not a smile so much as a grimace of anxiety, hunger, and despair.

(photo credit: Stuart Phoenix)

“I’m so sick of all this ‘love you like a brother’ stuff. They love their brothers more than their wives.”

From the story “Pancho Villa’s Coin”

With their thin arms and caved-in stomachs, barefoot Indians advanced across the cane fields, hacking left and right with their machetes. My father drove the highway’s centerline and gestured with his cigarette. “That’s where your sugar comes from, Janet. The sweat and tears of those poor sons-of-bitches. The world’s a tug-of-war between the oppressed and the oppressors!”

I picked up my journal, a spiral notebook with a brown, water-stained cover.

On the way to Vera Cruz we saw exploited Indians.

This was Mexico, 1958.

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Father blew out a stream of smoke. He tossed me his empty Camel's wrapper. "Here's a camel for your scrapbook."

"Actually, I think it might be a dromedary," I said. "Then why does it say 'Camel' on the pack?" he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Then listen to your old man," he said. "It's a camel."

From the story “Almost Paradise”

What a strange looking person,” I said.
“Look who’s talking.” Nico opened his arms and embraced the person.
“Busy day,” the person said, puffing for breath. “I suppose to meeted you, but I late.”
He dipped his chin and finger-combed his bangs to swing across the scar that ran diagonally from eye to jaw. Through the curtain of his hair, I could see one bright eye and a droopy eyelid. As I looked from his breasts to his face, I wondered if he was a she, or she a he, and what pronoun I should use for him-her.

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Lady-Man shifted positions and sat cross-legged, arranging his sarong to cover his legs. “Nico tell you, I not always work here?”
“Where’d you work?” I said.
“Patpong.”
“I know Patpong,” I said. “We walked through the Night Market.” Nico had purchased a bong and some jade necklaces for our moms. “What did you sell?” I said.
“I work club,” Lady-Man said.
“What’d you do, cook?”
“Before pimp cutted me, I work prostitute.”
I swallowed. Nico and I had a couple drinks at the “Super Pussy.” Women sat in our laps. At least, I thought they were women.

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“I don’t think I’ve ever been happy,” I said.
“Really?” Lady-Man said.
“I don’t think so.”
Lady-Man hugged his knees. “Patpong make me happy.”

“Why?” I said.

Lana pulled out a map of the attractions. Some looked pretty cheap. “Todd, what say we walk over to the aquarium?”

“See?” Allison said.

“See what?” Lana said.

“First, the tea. Then the salad. Now, the plan for the afternoon.”

“What’s wrong with a plan?” Lana said.

“Nothing,” Allison said, “but maybe Todd wants to make his own plan.”

Todd’s chin bobbed as if pulled by a string. “That’s what I’ve been feeling.”

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Tanks of fish confronted her, a wall of bright, blue windows that reminded her of her fish tanks at home. She tapped the glass. Tetras flashed by. Quick as rioters disappearing into stores, they popped into jagged coral grottoes. Floating among the anemone was the little figure of a scuba diver. From his mask rose a thread of silver bubbles. The little guy's fists were up, and he had a knife strapped to his scuba belt.

From the story “Proud To Be An American”

The moon shining like a searchlight on the cornfields made Billy Rippelmeyer proud to be an American. Steering one-handed, air streaming through his fingers and bugs stinging his outstretched palm, he wished his boss, sacked out in the back, would climb forward into the shotgun seat. Mile markers flicked past, and the white line of the county road got sucked beneath the wheels of the panel truck.

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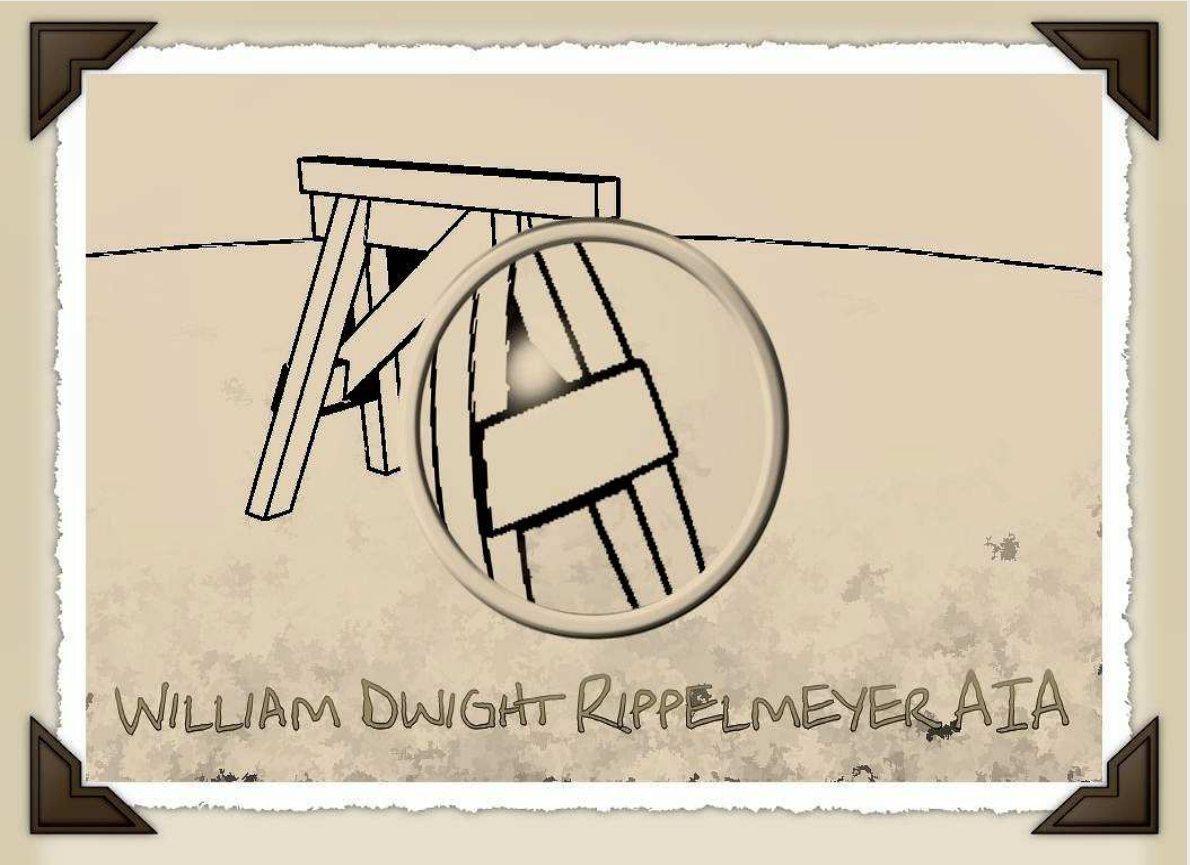
That was how Billy had learned to frame and trim, building a house under his shop teacher's supervision. Then, he'd had friends to hang out with. At three o'clock, they'd knock off for the day, spend half an hour sweeping up, and drive up Coal Road to Argyle

"Shouldn't you be getting back?" Billy said.

"I'm on break," the young carpenter said.

"I don't take breaks," said Billy.



From the story “One Friday Night in Baltimore”

Before Baltimore, life looked like it might be heading someplace good. He was done with school. Had a decent job. Friends. Then, Friday night came. Fog drifted down the harbor district’s bumpy streets. He and his buddies walked three abreast, just looking to fill the time, maybe find some women.

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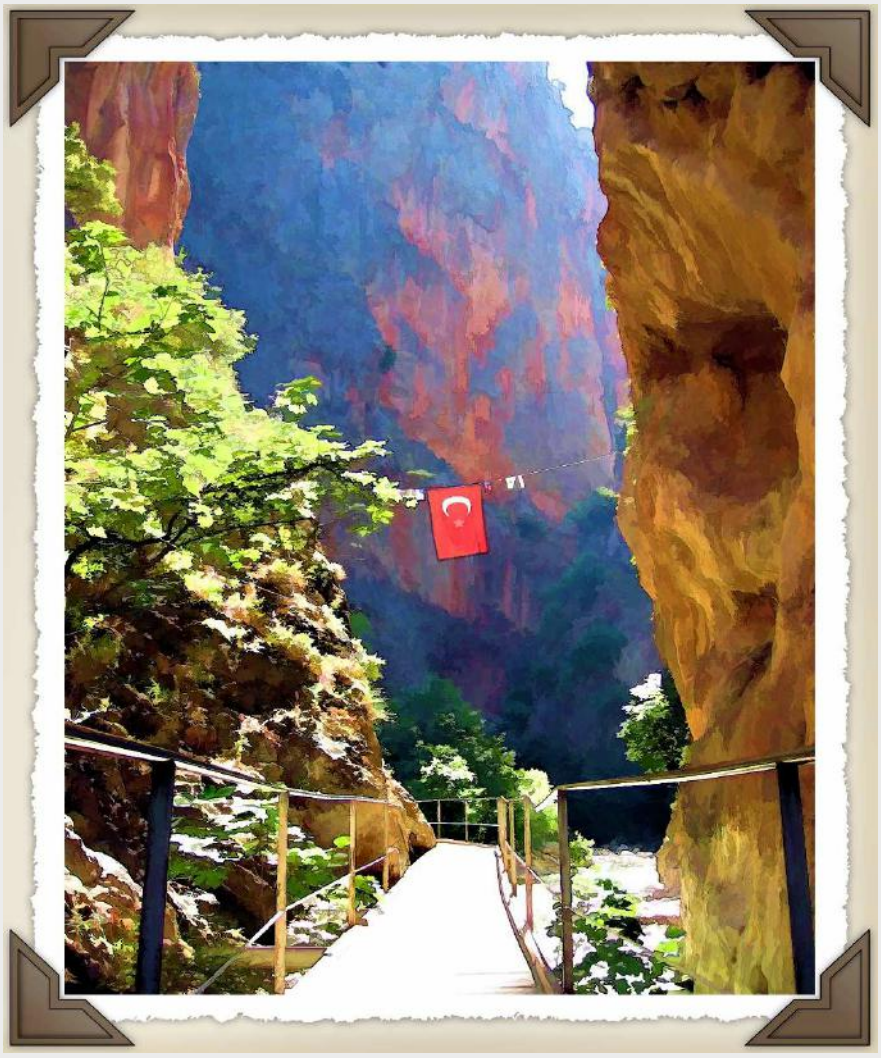
Outside, dumpsters overflowed. Terrell smelled garbage. Parked in the glow of amber lights, a white panel truck idled. The paddy wagon looked like a bread van—no city insignia, no flashing light. Maybe this was some kind of kidnap situation. But then Terrell saw the uniforms: two cops, one a veteran with a gruff voice, and the other a young, light-skinned brother.

"There's been a misunderstanding," Terrell said.

From the story “Teþekkür”

“Next, we go Saklikent Gorge,” Mehmet said.
“Not more walking!” I said.
“We stop for tea.”
“Famous butterfly and Hidden City,” he said. “Must see.”
Thin mustache twitching, Mehmet was not a man who liked to be challenged, but I was of an age where I truly didn’t care.
“What’s at this gorge place?” I said.



“Is Hidden City another crumbling ruin?” I said.
“I think,” he said. “Last time I there, water high. I no go in.”
Turkey’s Anatolian coast was just one rock-ruin after another.

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One person wide, the walkway cantilevered out from the canyon’s wall. Through the knotholes and cracks, I looked down at the roiling water. Strung from a clothesline above our heads, a red Turkish flag with its crescent moon and five-pointed star flapped in the breeze. Mehmet stopped. “Moon star,” he shouted. “*Ay Yildiz.*”
I nodded that I had heard him. “How much further?”
“Near,” he said. “And flat all way.”

From the story “Oregano”

Inspired and casting about for something to photograph besides the Gateway Arch, Felicia had come up with the idea of flowing water: the Mississippi River in all its floods, freezes, and thaws. She hadn’t been over to the locks and dams since grade school, but when she stepped from the warmth of the car into the predawn dark of the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary, she learned that the true focus of the weekend would be birds.

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“What are you doing out there?” her husband said.

“Nothing,” she said.

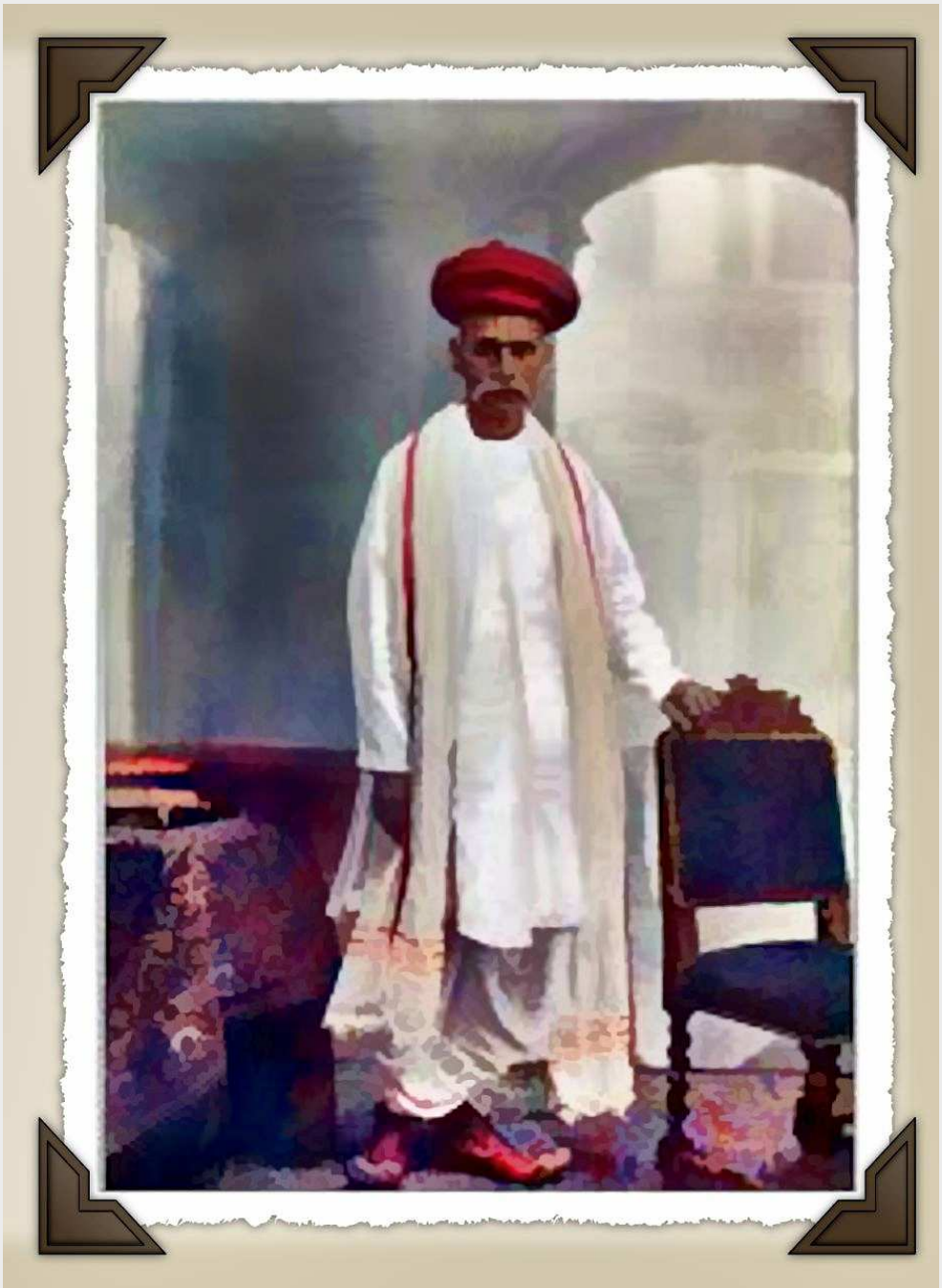
Maybe the oregano wasn’t dead after all. She pushed her chair back, turned on the kitchen light, and took the clay pot down from the sill. With her fingers, she stripped the brittle leaves one by one. He loves me. He loves me not. Or maybe, I love him, I love him not. She stared at the stubble.

She held the plant as if it would speak to her, tell her this is your stop. This is where you get off.

“Felicia, you’re on my case all the time,” he said.

From the story “Regret”

“It’s a tintype of grandfather,” Ashok said. “Hold it by the edges.”



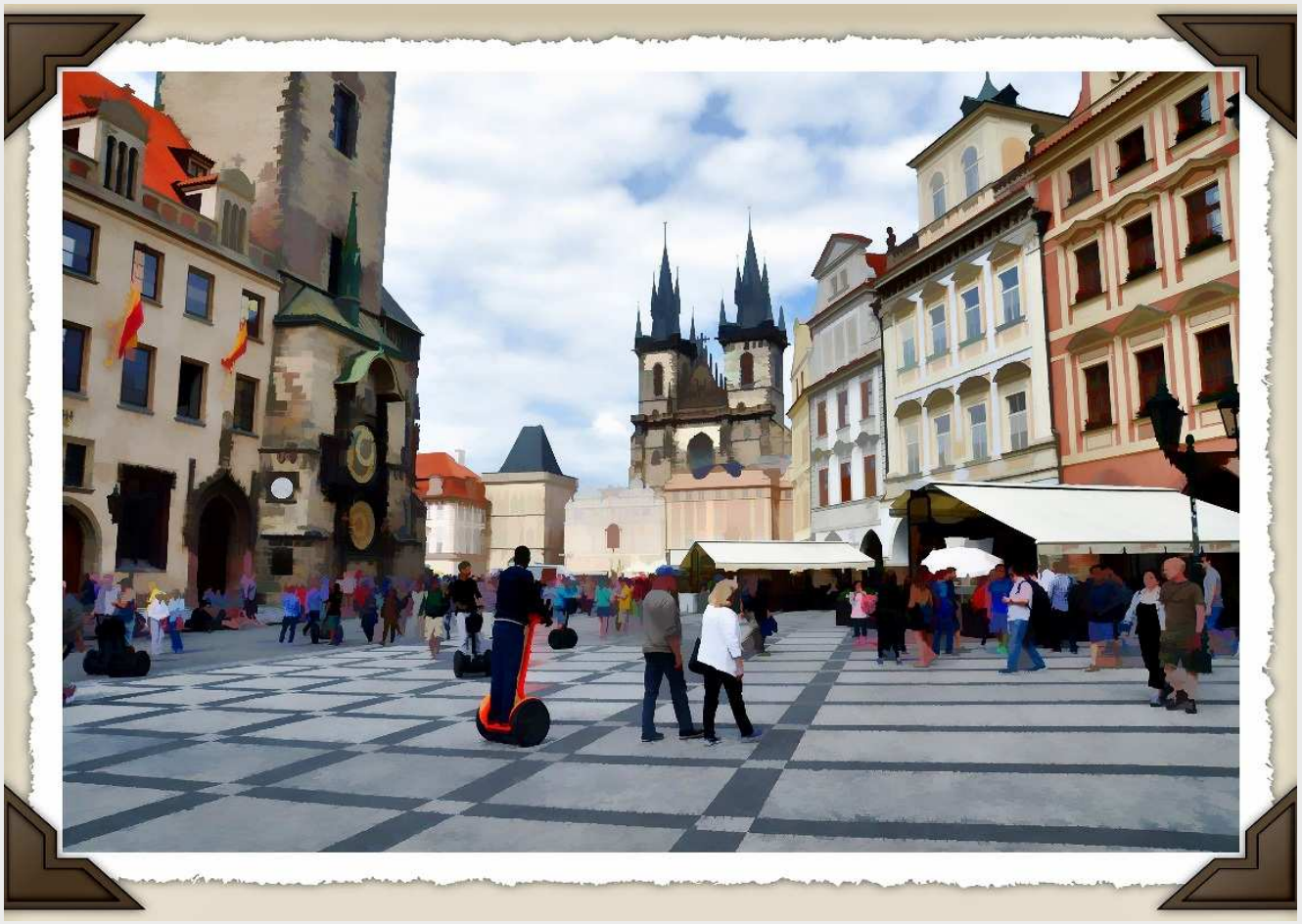
The tintype looked like a negative—dark skin, light eyes. The eyes were a marker for all the Brahmans of their caste. Supposedly, they had descended from Persian sailors.

It was amazing how everything associated with India seemed to come straight from myth. The weird, elephant-headed god Ganesh. The Taj Mahal. The Kama Sutra. When they were first together, Ashok had plumbed the Sanskrit manual for ideas, and, giggling at the book's illustrations, coaxed her through all sixty- four positions. That sure was a thing of the past.

When she first met him, the old man, dressed in a high-necked, muslin shirt, his lips and teeth red-stained, sat all day in the shade of the courtyard's mango tree, hailing street urchins who ran to the nearby paanwallah for packets of betel leaf. A sitar player, collector of foreign stamps, and headmaster of a Normal School, he occupied his rickety bench, staring vacantly into space, his bony fingers gripping the armrests as he swayed and chewed, spitting cardamom and lime paste.

From the story “Finding Peter”

Her blouse still damp, a bra chafing her skin, Anna Ringaard splashed through puddles on Prague’s Charles Bridge, where a dozen sooty saints scowled down from the balustrades. Cowering and feeling like a mom who’d let go of a toddler’s hand, she offered her missing-person’s flyer to Czech street artists in dreadlocks and olive drab.



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In the back of the tram the Dutch girl found an empty seat. “Sit.” The girl motioned for Anna to slide in. Their hips touched, and Anna caught the sickeningly sweet smell of patchouli. And, after a long ride well beyond the city limits, Neeltje led the way through a tunnel beneath the tracks. It reeked of urine. Graffiti covered the walls. Coming up the stairs, Anna took a deep breath.

From the story “The Ambassador of Foreign Affairs”

Like hulls of rice in a burlap sack, weariness shifted through Tanaka’s body. During his wife’s long illness, he had begun seeking truths in the poems he had memorized as a young man. Basho wrote that it was rare for anyone to reach the age of seventy. The period when mind and body truly flourished was not much more than twenty years.

In anticipation of his flight to California, Tanaka had reread the poet's great works, "Account of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton" and "The Narrow Road to Oku," preparing himself for this separation from the one person who meant most to him. His wife was gone. Mayumi was all he had left.

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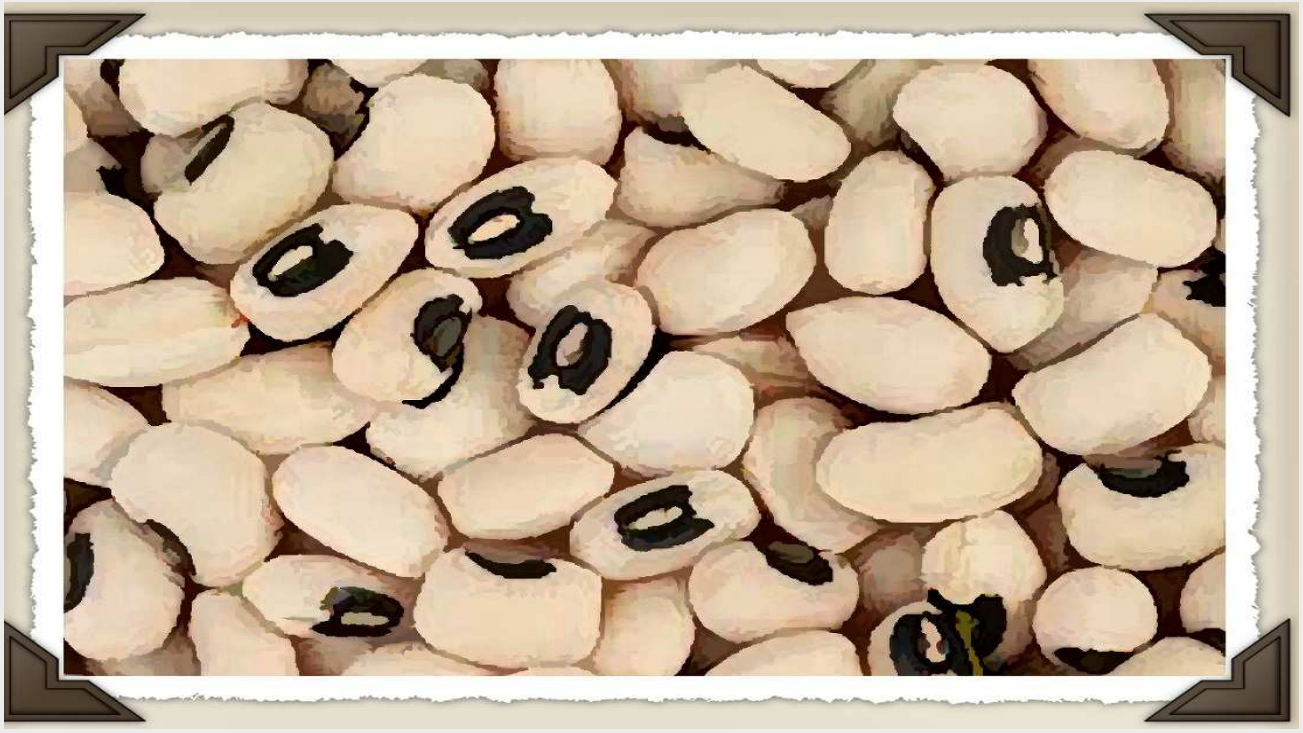
"Do it like this," Tanaka said in a gravelly voice, pulling the worm of a noodle through his lips.
"Tsu- rup, tsu-rup. That is the verb for eating noodles." Trying to recall a Basho poem, he sucked another long one and moved his feet so that the three sets of knees touched.

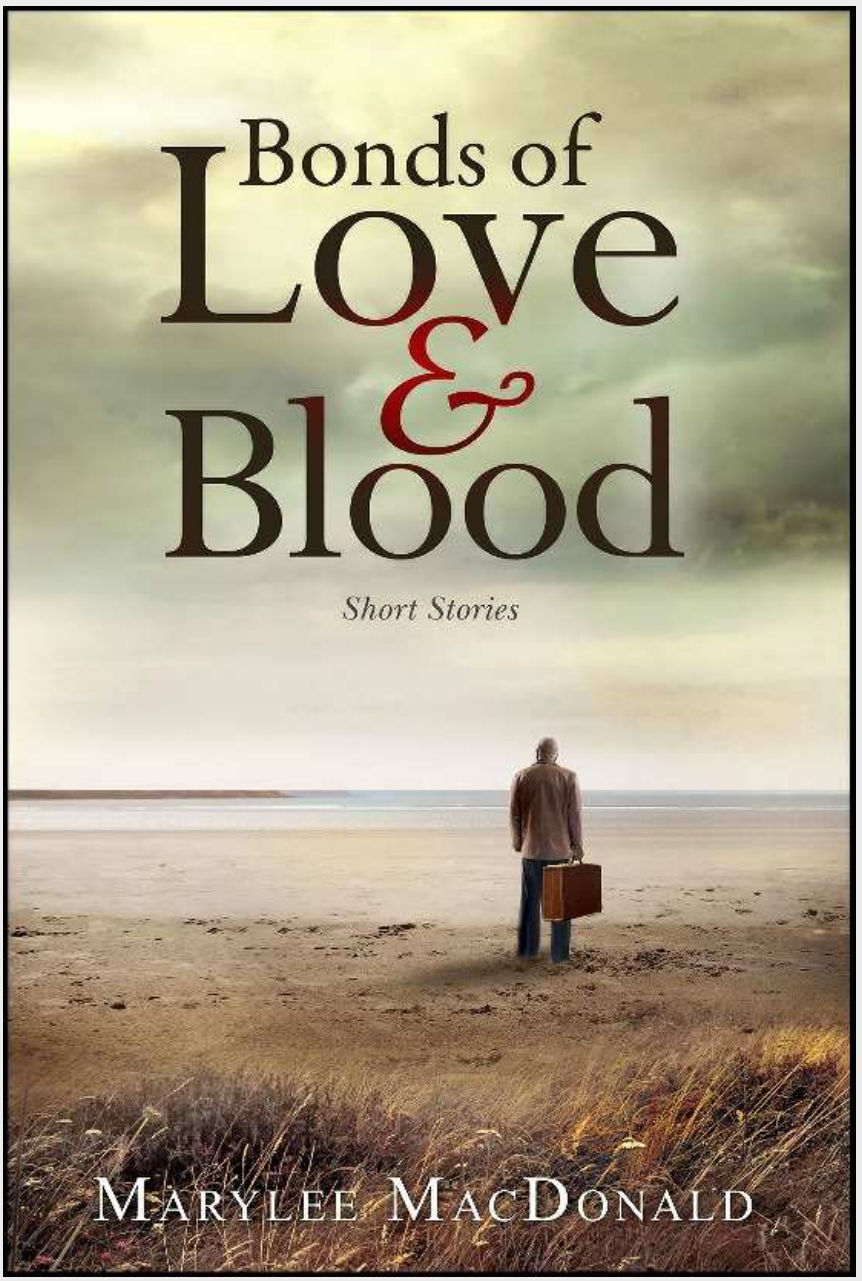
From the story “The Bean Grower”



Her precious Valentines! With the snipped fingers of her mittens, Fabienne Drummond felt the six-inch bean-pods. The Scarlet Runner, a bean from the 1800s and one of the earliest in her seed bank, had hooked a tendril up and around a hanging fluorescent. What she loved about beans was their active, urgent lust for light. She climbed a step-stool, pulled the tendril down, and made the plant more compact. In another week, the speckled pods of

Wrens Eggs would be ready to harvest. The best she could do for the Commodores and Old Homesteads

and Pencil Pods was to pack straw around their roots, and she'd been at that all day. If the power stayed on and the sun shone even a little, the straw would hold in enough heat to keep the pods from freezing. The beans might be smaller than average, but they would be good enough for the canvas bags of soup beans she sold at farmers' markets.



A few years back, my grandson Peter told his mom that he didn't like to read because he wasn't sure if he was picturing the words correctly. I created *Postcards Home* for all the Peters of the world.

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