

One Friday Night in Baltimore

Marylee MacDonald

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One Friday Night in Baltimore

Fog drifted along the harbor district's bumpy streets. Fixing to kill some time and find some women, Terrell Duncan followed his buddies down the block of brick warehouses. Sean had found the club on YELP, and Nathan agreed that Baltimore sounded good. In Georgetown you couldn't even hold a meaningful conversation. A bouncer blocked the door with his arm and checked IDs. He stood aside to let Sean and Nathan pass, but Terrell hung at the door, looking for women of color. None on the dance floor. Strobes popped above crowded tables, and in the white-hot flashes, dancers froze, shadowboxing. He had a prickly feeling on the back of his neck. Maybe he should wait in the car.

"You're blocking traffic," the bouncer said.

Terrell pulled out his ID and looked at the mess of twenties in his wallet. He should have brought some ones.

The bouncer handed back the license.

Terrell went in.

On a platform near the entrance he saw a wooden barrel with a galvanized washtub. Iced beer. A blonde in a leopard-skin bikini popped the caps off Millers and Heinekens. From sticking her hands in the washtub, her fingers had shriveled. He couldn't pull his eyes away from her breasts. No blue veins. Probably implants. Don't even go there, he thought, looking around for a table.

"Hey, what about your drink?" the blonde said.

"I'm not all that thirsty."

"There's a one drink minimum." She wore a black, velvet baseball hat with rhinestones that spelled out her name in cursive. Misty. Dropping her chin, Misty batted her long eyelashes and fake-smiled.

"It's not necessary to flirt," Terrell said. "You're just demeaning yourself."

"Don't be fresh."

"I'm not being fresh," he said.

"Yes, you are."

He could hardly hear her above the din. "Let me have a Heineken."

"That'll be ten bucks," she said.

"Ten buck beer?"

"You got it."

"What a rip!" There wasn't even live music, just some rockabilly crap.

She leaned back and stretched, pooching out her belly. Her navel looked like a wad of old gum. He took out a twenty. She reached in her canvas apron and gave him two fives back, then held out her palm.

"I don't have change," he said.

Later, in jail, he remembered the hard look she gave him; but right then, he didn't care. Money was money, to him as much as anyone else. Too bad for her.

Terrell brushed fries from a table near the door. A disc jockey behind a soundboard spun tunes. Misty, in her sparkling baseball cap and skimpy swimsuit, grabbed folks as they came through the door. What a job. Every day, dressing up in a leopard-skin bikini. One step up from prostitution, not that he didn't feel prostituted in his current job. The low pay sucked. Fax and file. That's all he ever did. A think tank, supposedly, although nothing he did for the Urban Institute required a modicum of intelligence. He had a BA, *summa cum laude*, and his brain was turning to mush.

He felt a hand on his shoulder: His buddy Sean grinned down at him. Terrell motioned to empty chairs at the next table. Sean pulled one over and sat backwards on it. His best friend was always doing things backwards. The backwards baseball-cap thing. Putting his socks on inside out. Even sweaters, so the label showed. Sean had duded himself up in khakis, a long-sleeved shirt, and tie. And for what? This place was a dive. Terrell looked down at his XXL pink, Vassar sweatshirt. He had wanted something comfortable, not one of the suits he wore to work, and now, he was wishing they'd gone to one of the bars out in College Park. Would have, if Sean hadn't been desperate to get away from campus. Nathan, loosening his tie, came toward them. "The women are Barbies," he shouted.

"I hate their stupid hair." Sean made a barking motion with his hand. "They should wear dog collars."

Terrell looked at the women. Teased hair. Like Italian girls from the Jersey Shore. He laughed and shook his head. It took all kinds. Nathan waggled his eyebrows in the direction of the barmaid.

Sean looked at Terrell. "Can you front me some cash?"

"Forget to stop by the ATM?" Terrell said.

"Yeah."

Terrell pulled out another twenty.

His eyes ached and he rubbed them. Too much time standing at the copier, a flash of light blinding him every few seconds. Maybe he should go back to school. It wouldn't be out of the question to start a master's. Maybe sociology or psych.

Sean put down two Millers. Nathan took one. Sean, the other.

"Guess I don't get change," Terrell said.

Nathan pulled out a ten.

"I'll pay you back." Sean sat.

"Sure you will."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Come on." Terrell planted his elbow and reached for Sean's hand. Sean squared off. Terrell felt the pressure of Sean's fingers against his. He gave a little ground. His part-time job, personal trainer, was a lot more fun than his day job; but his mom, an actuary for Met Life, kept saying he should go for a PhD and not waste his math ability. Maybe so. He ratcheted Sean's hand back to vertical. The length of his forearm gave him the advantage. He slammed Sean's hand onto the table.

Sean flexed his fingers. "This is a stupid way to spend Friday night."

"There's no one for me here," Terrell said.

"How about Georgetown?" Sean said.

"A blues club would suit me better."

"The review made this place sound a lot cooler than it is," Sean said.

Standing, Terrell saw Misty, the barmaid in the leopard-skin bikini, jerking a thumb for him to come over. Terrell pointed at his chest. She nodded. Yes, him. He made his way to the platform where she stood, hands on hips, the way his mom did, ready to come down on him about an unmade bed. Misty looked foolish there on her platform, lip-syncing words he couldn't hear; he was about to turn away. From the wads of bills crumpled in her canvas apron, she dug one out and held it up. Somehow, he knew she was trying to say, "You gave me this!"

He put his hand to his ear. "I can't hear you."

Her lips moved again.

"You gave me a twenty," she said.

"Yeah, so?" he shouted. That's all he'd had in his wallet. He walked around to the side of her platform and placed one foot on it. She reached over her head and pulled a dangling rope. A spinning blue light came on and a disembodied voice said, "Blue light at station six." Dancers stopped moving.

Terrell took his foot down. "What's the problem?"

"It's money out of my paycheck," Misty said.

Two beefy guys with bulging knit shirts grabbed Terrell's arms. A man in a green blazer appeared. A walkie-talkie was pinned to his shirt. He pressed a button and opened a corner of his mouth. "Call me a wagon."

"What is going on?" Terrell said.

Hands vise-gripped his arms, right above the elbows. Bouncers led him past the restrooms into the kitchen, where he exchanged a glance with a Mexican busboy heaving a plastic tub of dishes onto the counter. Behind him, he heard Sean. "Hey, where are you taking him?" The music started up. A door opened to the alley. Outside, dumpsters overflowed. Terrell smelled garbage. A white panel truck had parked in the glow of amber lights. The paddy wagon looked like a bread van—no city insignia, no flashing light. Maybe this was some kind of kidnap situation. But then he 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.

"You can't arrest him for no reason," Nathan said.

The light-skinned cop grabbed Nathan's elbow and escorted him across the street.

Nathan was a computer geek. No surprise he didn't know how to handle himself. "Relax," Terrell called. "I'll get this straightened out."

Sean pushed through the bouncers. "What's going on?"

The bouncers released Terrell and dragged Sean across the street. "Why don't you go find some real criminals?" Sean shouted, his feet windmilling.

"Stay cool, Man," Terrell said. He felt a tic at the corner of his eye, and when he started to press it, the white cop grabbed his arm.

Put down on the sidewalk opposite, Sean cupped his hands. "Remember Rodney King. Don't worry, Buddy. You didn't do anything."

"I know," Terrell said.

The white cop shouted, "Shut the fuck up, or we'll throw you in the wagon."

Across the street, Nathan paced up and down, tearing his hair. Terrell had thought that was just an expression, but he saw now that people really did it. Fists clenched, Sean looked like a bull about to charge. It was pretty funny watching the two of them freak out, because just as soon as he explained, this would all be over. Then Terrell felt the white cop's hand against the middle of his chest and his back against the wagon.

“Let’s see some ID.”

Terrell pulled out his driver’s license and slid his college ID toward the man.

“Put it away,” the cop said.

“But I just graduated from Vassar. Jane Fonda went there. Jackie Kennedy. Meryl Streep.”

The cop looked at him for the first time. “Are you some kind of queer?”

“Are you some kind of homophobe?” Terrell said. “No, it’s an Ivy League institution. One of the Seven Sisters. In Poughkeepsie.”

The man looked at him for a minute. No smile associated with that stare. Then, he wrote down Terrell’s drivers-license number and pushed his shoulder, spinning him around. Metal slid around Terrell’s wrists and the latch clicked, pinching his skin.

“Watch him,” the policeman said.

Terrell laughed. “Where am I going?”

“Other guys have tried to run away,” the light-skinned brother said.

Terrell gave the brother a look. Surely, the guy could tell what kind of person he was—a college graduate, not some criminal scum. When he started to explain, his mouth went dry. They stood in silence by the van.

When the other policeman came back, Terrell expected to see the bar girl with him, bar “woman” he would have said at school, where it was politically incorrect to call a female over the age of sixteen a “girl.” The cop was alone. He opened the wagon’s double doors and made Terrell take a big step up. The door slammed. The air inside smelled of urine, smoke, and vomit. The wagon bumped over potholes.

At the station, the white cop told him to make himself at home. Terrell found himself inside a small booking area, the yellow walls smudged from the shoulders and hips of criminals. He wasn’t one. They’d see that. Behind the counter, a weary policeman stood doing paperwork. “Sit down,” he said, nodding toward the room’s single chair. Okay, the policeman was busy. Terrell just had to be patient. In a couple minutes, he could explain. An old schoolroom clock had a red second-hand. Terrell watched it. His pulse beat twice for each tick. His heart thought he was running; yet, here he sat—stock-still. It was 12:20 AM and he felt irritated because he would only have a few hours of sleep. Tomorrow, Saturday, his first client, Bill Thomas, a wimpy little accountant at the general accounting office, would arrive at five of 10. He always wanted his money’s worth. At Gold’s Gym, when you were their “Man,” you had to be on time or they would hire another trainer. Sean better be raising hell with the bar’s management and getting this nonsense dismissed.

The cop who’d brought him in returned. “Come with me.”

Terrell followed him to a small room where coffee cups had left ghost rings on the table. The cop left. Carrying a sheaf of paper, a policewoman paused by the door. “First time here?”

“Yeah.” Like, welcome to the hotel.

“You’re not one of the regulars,” the policewoman said.

“Obviously not.”

She nodded and walked away. Just making conversation.

A moment later, the cop who had put him in the van returned. Big gut and capillaries on his cheeks. If he had to chase down a real criminal, he'd be in trouble.

“You should reduce the alcohol consumption,” Terrell said.

The cop frowned, his mouth fixed. He swallowed a bee-bee of saliva.

“Could you loosen my cuffs?” Terrell said.

The cop looked over Terrell's shoulder. “Your cuffs are plenty loose.” He put a clipboard with the funny money in front of Terrell's face. Someone had photocopied the corners of a twenty and taped them over the ones of a dollar bill.

“So, where'd you get it?” the cop said.

“It's not mine.”

The policeman snapped his ballpoint. “Would you care to make a statement?”

“I bought a beer at 10:30,” Terrell said. “There were three hundred people in the bar. That bill didn't come from me.”

The policeman pulled a dirty phone from a nook in the wall. “I'm calling Secret Service.”

Terrell laughed. “Let them come.”

The policeman cupped his hand over the receiver and mumbled. Pretending to talk. The guy was so obvious.

The receiver slammed down. “They'll be here by morning,” the policeman said.

“The sooner the better, Barney Fife.”

“Okay, smartass,” the cop said. “From here on out, you may refer to me as the ‘arresting officer.’”

“Am I being arrested?” Terrell said.

“What do you think?” the cop said. “Stand up.” Back in the booking room, he unlocked the cuffs. “Take off all your personal items—coins, shoelaces, belt, watch, and rings. Put them here.” He patted the counter. “Cell phone, too.”

Terrell worked his Vassar ring over his knuckle. The officer pointed to the silver cross with the clasped hands of Jesus. A priest had persuaded his mother, a high-church Episcopalian, to enroll him in Stepanic High School where Jon Voight and Alan Alda had gone; and when Terrell had converted to Catholicism, Father Durocher had blessed the cross and said, from then on, Jesus would be his protector. Since the age of thirteen Terrell had never removed it, not even to shower. He fiddled with the clasp.

“Hurry up,” the cop said.

“What am I going to do, hang myself?” Terrell said.

“Give it here.” The officer held out his hand, then pawed the things into a plastic bag and tossed the bag on a table. On the other side of the booking counter, a door hissed open. The Arresting Officer motioned Terrell towards an old black man in a green uniform. As Terrell approached, the man spun around and headed down a hall that felt as hot and damp as the YMCA in White Plains where Terrell had learned to swim. The door behind him slammed. His ears plugged, and he fought the urge to claw toward fresh air. All he had to do was stay calm till Sean showed up.

The janitor stopped in a small room and opened a stamp pad on the counter. “Give me your hand.”

Terrell let the old janitor take his hand, and in one deft motion, roll each finger. On a white card marked "Fingerprints," his thumbs spilled beyond the borders of the squares. The janitor pointed to packets of HandiWipes. "Wash," he said.

Thinking of Lady Macbeth, Terrell tore open a wipe. It got dirty and he took out a second. Sweat trickled down his neck. He might be washing more than he needed to.

"Let's go." The janitor showed him the garbage can.

Terrell dropped in the wipes and followed the janitor down the hall. The man, all bent over, walked like Terrell's grandfather, bones creaking with every step. Must have had one hell of a case of acne when he was young because he had a badly pockmarked neck. Terrell looked into a cell occupied by a tall, skinny black man sitting on a metal bunk, his hands between his knees. His forehead gleamed in the fluorescent light.

"Hey," Terrell said.

"Hey," the man said back.

Terrell wanted him to ask, "What you in here for?" but the man just leaned forward and looked at his hands.

"You here." The janitor pressed a red button on the wall. A cell door slid open. Terrell heard a whoosh and stepped in.

On his right, heavy brackets bolted a stainless steel bed to the wall. On his left stood a toilet and sink, all one piece. If he sat on the toilet, his back would be against the sink. There was no toilet paper. He turned, but the janitor had vanished. In the space between the toilet and bed, a bright light shone from a wire-covered niche near the ceiling. Fastened to the wall was a small, dirty mirror. Terrell walked over. Not a mirror, a stainless steel panel. He leaned in. His eyes looked yellow, his face wavy. Two steps took him to the door. His fingers curled around the bars. Where the gold paint had worn off, the steel felt ragged. The red button across the hall opened the door. If he could just touch it...he slid his hand between the bars. His forearm caught. Two steps and he bumped the back wall, another two, and his chest slammed the bars. He peeled off his sweatshirt. His shirt was soaked.

"Turnkey!" called the man in the next cell.

So that was what the janitor was called: Turnkey. Turncoat! In the distance, Terrell heard the squeak of a desk chair. The crepe soles of the turnkey's shoes sounded like Velcro.

"Gimme some toilet paper," the prisoner in the next cell said.

Footsteps slowly receded, then returned.

"Zat all?" the other prisoner said.

"Regulation," a voice said.

Terrell tried to force the bars apart—they didn't budge. "Turnkey!" he called.

A moment later, the turnkey stood in front of his cell.

"What about making a phone call?" Terrell said.

"Have to ask," the old man said.

"Are my friends in the waiting room?"

"Ain't no waiting room." He ambled off.

Terrell heard a chair scrape.

This was absurd. People couldn't be locked up for no reason. His legs began to shake. He tested the bed with his hand. He weighed a lot more than most guys, certainly more than the skinny-ass dude in the next cell. If he was lucky, the bed wouldn't fall off and kill him. Forcing himself to stay in one place on the steel and not scrabble around

like a desperate little dog on a vet's examining table, he curled up. The steel smelled like disinfectant. Same smell as deodorant cakes in urinals. Heat drained out of him. He arranged his sweatshirt to cover his shoulders. Once, his mom had been down in Jamaica visiting his grandmother; he had been staying at his aunt's place in the Bronx and his tonsillitis flared up. He'd felt the same kind of cold—teeth chattering, face burning. Shit, he would give anything for a blanket. If he'd let Sean go off on the cops, they'd be lying end to end, the furnace of Sean's body-heat warming him. Sean would do everything in his power to make bail. He knew, better than anyone, how Terrell had a thing about prison.

Terrell woke up, frozen through. Metal clanged; men laughed and joked. For a moment, he thought he was in a locker room. No. Jail! He leapt to his feet. Pressing his cheek to the bars, he looked down the hall. The turnkey was leading in two new arrivals: a red-haired college student and his drunk friend, who staggered and scraped the wall. The red-haired dude, who wore a Maryland football jacket, begged to call his uncle. Said he was some kind of hotshot lawyer in the Justice Department. He promised the jailer a tip. Instead of walking toward the cells, the turnkey reversed direction. The two disappeared back toward the booking room, and a few minutes later, returned to enter their cell. An hour later the turnkey led them out.

As they passed his cell, Terrell grabbed the football jacket. "I need you to call my friend Sean."

The big guy looked down at Terrell's hand. "Don't mess with the threads."

"Sean O'Brien." Terrell let go. "He lives in College Park."

"What's his number?"

Number one on speed dial. Terrell hadn't memorized an actual number in years.

"He just got a landline," Terrell said. "Call new listings."

"Yeah, sure," the football player said.

"Sean O'Brien," Terrell shouted. "Like Sean Penn."

"Okay, okay."

"Move on out, boys," the turnkey said.

"Or like Conan O'Brien," said the football player's friend.

"Not Conan!" Terrell shouted. By then, they were gone.

"Hey, Turnkey," the inmate next to Terrell screamed, "why you letting that college kid kiss your ass?"

College kid. Sure! That was the angle.

Terrell waited a few minutes. "Mr. Turnkey," he called, "I wonder if you might bring me some toilet paper."

The man appeared with three folded sheets. Terrell took the paper and stared down in the turnkey's doleful eyes. "I have not had an opportunity to make a phone call yet, and I believe I have the right to legal representation." He was a college kid, too, the old man ought to realize. Plus, the man was a brother.

The turnkey smiled. "I know what you're saying."

"The policeman didn't read me my Miranda rights."

"This ain't like on TV." The turnkey sauntered off.

No kidding, Terrell thought.

Second semester of senior year, Terrell had gone over to Green Haven Correctional, the state pen that had once housed Old Sparky, the electric chair. For one unit of Community Service, the easiest A of his four years at Vassar, he'd tutored a guy named Larry, who was in for dealing hash out of his girlfriend's apartment in Queens.

A three-time offender, Larry had a high Afro. The first time they'd met, sitting in the meeting room at a round table with lesson book open, Larry had had a cold. They wouldn't give him anything to dry up his sinuses. Terrell wished he'd brought some cold tabs. Larry said it wouldn't have done any good because the guards would have confiscated them. Terrell nodded. He guessed there had to be rules.

By the end of the term, Larry had made progress. He could read a paragraph clear through. He knew how to use the dictionary's index words. Terrell explained how he'd be graduating, and he told Larry about his job down in Washington DC. "What kinda job you gonna have?" Larry said. Terrell thought maybe he could inspire Larry to finish his GED. "I'll be working at the Urban Institute," he said. Larry asked what that was, and Terrell said it was a think tank where people came up with ways to solve society's ills. Larry nodded. Terrell was pleased with himself. It was always easier to bring news into prison than expect Larry to come up with something to say. Day in and day out, life in Green Haven was pretty much the same. But Larry had surprised him with some parting words. He cocked his head to one side, let his nostrils flare, and made a steeple with his fingers.

"Watch out for The Man," Larry said, jerking his head back toward the guard. "You be a college boy and all that, but to them, you're just another slave."

"You've been in jail too long," Terrell said, half laughing. His whole life he'd tried to see himself as an individual, not as a member of an oppressed class.

Larry raised his eyebrows in a knowing way. "It's another world out there, college boy, and you don't know *nothing* about it."

Without his watch, each minute felt like an hour. A cart wheeled down the hall. The smell of breakfast made Terrell's stomach rumble. Saturday morning and still no phone call, but now that it was day, his buddies would spring him. A jailer opened a port in the door and handed him a Styrofoam cup and a carton. In the carton he saw a fried egg sandwich and white bread that sopped up grease like a paper towel. Terrell took the lid off the cup. Coffee looked like tea. The alternative was tap water: warm and rusty. He sat on his bunk and ate, and with food in his stomach, tried to sort out what had gotten him here.

He must have given the woman a twenty when he bought the beer. The woman was right, remembering the twenty, but wrong in every other respect. Maybe this was a scam she pulled every night, claiming to find a phony bill and then getting a tourist to pony up a real twenty. Then he remembered her saying something about money out of her paycheck.

Coffee burned his tongue. No, damn it. He'd been at Vassar too long. The bitch had picked on him because he was black, and when he came up in front of the judge, he'd sound just like those cons up at Green Haven Correctional, like Larry: smart, but barely literate, proclaiming, "Honest, Judge, I'm innocent."

After breakfast, Terrell called for the turnkey. A young guy came.

“Has Secret Service arrived?” Terrell said.

“No, they haven’t,” the turnkey said.

“Can I make my phone call?”

The guy looked at him. “I’ll let you know when.” He walked away.

Pacing, Terrell heard the turnkey’s television. College football season. The first game of the day ended—Michigan, where Sean came from. Then the second game began. Lunch arrived. A hamburger on white bread. Sprite to drink. Dinner arrived a couple hours after lunch, greasy chicken and a biscuit that nearly choked him. None of the food required utensils.

Prisoners demanded to see the Commissioner. Terrell called the turnkey.

The old man appeared.

“I’ve been here twenty-four hours,” Terrell said, “and I still haven’t gotten to make my phone call.”

The old man looked at his watch. “What time was you brought to the station?”

Terrell told him.

“It’s not twenty-four hours from the time you brought in,” the old man said. “You looking at eight hours for paperwork.”

The turnkey walked back down the hall.

Terrell lay on his bed and his fingers went to his throat. He felt around. They had taken his cross.

Someone was shaking his shoulder. A green uniform. Finally! Swinging his feet to the floor, Terrell sat up.

“I need your left hand,” the turnkey said.

“You have my fingerprints.”

“Just do what you told.”

Terrell stood. Out in the corridor cuffed to the bars stood a white guy, plaid shirt hanging, jeans frayed; looked like his highest career aspiration might be working at a video rental. Terrell let his arm be jerked sideways. A handcuff clicked shut. The turnkey collected the man next door, as tall as Terrell but much thinner. His pants were falling down because the cops had taken his belt. The three moved like convicts on a chain gang, through a series of doors, and entered an office where three chairs faced the desk of a large woman in a flowery dress. She sat plugging away at a computer. So this was the Commissioner. An educated African-American like himself. Finally, he was face-to-face with an authority figure who could rectify this miscarriage of justice. The Commissioner swiveled around to face them and take the first prisoner’s information.

The white guy lived with his parents. The cops had charged him with possession of one marijuana cigarette. Bail came to twenty-five hundred, but he could get out on bond for two-fifty. The man began to hiccup. He blew his nose in his fingers.

“Didn’t your mother teach you not to do that?” Terrell said.

The man wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Swearing under her breath because the computer had locked, the Commissioner tapped her nails. When the screen came to life, she took the second defendant’s information. He had broken into his neighbor’s house; done it before. The court had forbidden him to come within a hundred feet of the premises.

“But I wasn’t harming no one,” he said.

The printer spit out bail. Exactly the same. Incredible.

Terrell gave the Commissioner his social security number and address. She typed the information. He waited for her to finish. These guys had violated the law, but he’d done nothing wrong. He was out of here.

She spun her chair around, talking to her computer but never looking right at him.

“The charges are forgery, counterfeiting a public document, and theft of a bottle of beer.”

“Let me tell ...” Terrell began.

“Tell it to the judge.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” he said.

“Bail is twenty-five hundred and bond two-fifty.”

“I’m innocent.”

She gripped the top inch of paper rolling from a printer. “This is your paperwork. Hang onto it.”

Bitch. He wanted some acknowledgment of his humanity. A smile. A compassionate glance. He looked at a clock above the door. Six AM—Jesus!

A different turnkey came to walk them back to their cells. Bulge of fat over his shirt collar. Triple chin. Poisoning himself on prison grub. “Let’s go,” he said.

The other prisoners stood. Terrell felt the handcuff tugging his arm, but his legs had seized up, the way they did when he did too many squats. He needed to work out and wondered what Bill Thomas, the accountant from the GAO, had managed to get done. Nothing probably.

“C’mon, move it,” the turnkey said.

Terrell stood.

They passed an empty cell, and the man arrested for breaking-and-entering threw his paperwork through the bars. The papers fluttered to the floor. The man laughed. The white guy mumbled that his parents would post bail. If Terrell could only remember Sean’s phone number, he could get out on bond. But that uneducated black man? No one was going to save his sorry ass.

The turnkey stopped at Terrell’s cell.

“Can I finally make my phone call?” Terrell said.

“How long have you been here?”

“Thirty-two hours,” Terrell said.

“I have to put your buddy here back in his cell.”

“I need to call my mom,” the white boy said.

“Okay,” the turnkey said. “I’ll take you first.”

The cell door slammed. Terrell stood holding the bars.

A few minutes later, the turnkey pressed the red button and led Terrell to an alcove with a pay phone.

“They took my calling card,” Terrell said.

“Call collect.”

Terrell stared at the instructions.

“I haven’t got all day,” the turnkey said. “Dial zero first.”

On Thursday, he had called Nathan to arrange a ride. The last part of the number was 4488. He turned over his wrist. Luckily, the number was still there, faint, but written in pen.

The phone at Nathan's house rang and rang. If no one answered, he'd have to call his mom, but she was up in White Plains, a train ride away from DC. Plus, they might not even let him make a second call. He'd be locked up forever.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice said.

"Collect call for Nathan Finkelstein," the operator said. "Will you accept?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I finally got to make my call," Terrell said.

"Sean figured they'd just let you out," Nathan said.

"Where were you guys?"

"We went to the station, but they said you weren't there."

"You must've gone to the wrong station," Terrell said.

"Sean asked the guy at the bar where they were taking you."

"Didn't he tell them this was ridiculous?"

"Sure, but they didn't listen."

"I need a two-hundred-fifty-dollar bond."

"When? Now? It's Sunday."

"Where's Sean?" Terrell said.

"Home," said Nathan.

"Call. Sean." Terrell spoke slowly. "Do whatever you have to do, but get me out of this shit-hole."

"Don't worry. You won't go to jail."

"I'm in jail already."

"No, I mean permanently. I talked to my sister who's a lawyer, and she'll get you off."

"I don't care if I get off. Get. Me. Out!"

The turnkey tapped Terrell's shoulder and took the receiver.

Back in his cell Terrell sat on the bunk, rocking back and forth. It was Nathan who'd been working the phone. Nathan who'd got on it and called his sister. Terrell pictured Sean stretched out on the couch, chilling and watching football. All through college, he'd put up with Sean's gym clothes stinking up their room. The fitted sheet on Sean's bed had a gray spot in the middle, like a rodent's nest. Like the smell here: rust, piss, grease, and the inmates' mingled, nervous sweat.

Terrell ate breakfast. Keys jangled. The turnkey unlocked the door and cuffed him to the white guy.

"My mom's going to kill me," the white guy said.

"Most probably," Terrell said. His would, too, if he ever told her.

The turnkey led Terrell back down the yellow corridor to the booking room. There were his so-called buddies.

"Hey, man." Sean raised a fist.

Nathan gave a timid wave.

Terrell looked away.

A man in an olive sport coat gave Terrell a thumbs-up: the bail bondsman. He high-fived a cop seated at a table. "Hey, Randy. How you doing?"

"All right," the cop said. "How about yourself?"

“Keeping busy.”

Yeah, right, Terrell thought.

The cop nodded to Terrell. “Sit down, boys. Let’s get you checked out.”

“I’ve been here longer than he has,” Terrell said. “I demand to go first.”

The white boy turned and looked at his mother, a fat woman in a flowered housedress. She was dabbing her eyes. “That’s fine with me,” the white boy said.

The officer leafed through some forms. Finally, he tucked them in a cubbyhole and unlocked the handcuffs. Terrell rubbed his wrists.

“Here’s your personal effects,” the policeman said.

Two plastic bags were in a milk crate; the officer dropped the bag on the table. Terrell’s bag burst open.

He separated the silver chain of his cross from the coins. He couldn’t undo the clasp. Finally, he got it and pressed the cross to his lips. The usual warm rush didn’t come. Jesus wasn’t looking out for him. He put the cross in his pocket.

On the other side of the counter, the bondsman slapped Terrell on the back. “Your buddy Sean, here, racked up two-fifty on his VISA to get you out.”

Sean, with his fly-boy jacket and backwards baseball cap, smiled urgently. “Don’t look so scared. You’re free.”

“At least until the hearing,” Nathan said.

Sean held the door.

Terrell slid past. Outside, the sky had turned overcast. Rain spit on him.

Nathan used the remote to unlock his mom’s car. Terrell was about to slide in back. The bondsman went around to the other side. The man meant to sit next to him. No way, Terrell thought. Shoving Sean aside, Terrell opened the front door.

“What’s that about?” Sean said.

“I’m not riding in back,” Terrell said.

“Chill out, man,” Sean said. “It’s not a friggin’ bus.”

“That’s good,” Terrell said. “Because then I might have to kill you.”

“I hope you’re not going to be one of those blacks with a chip on your shoulder,” Sean said.

“One of *those* blacks?” Terrell waited a moment to see if Sean understood what he’d just said. He looked in the car. The bondsman took a cigarette from behind his ear.

“I ain’t riding with no white boys,” Terrell said.

Sean got in the back seat. “If you’re not getting in, close the door. It’s raining.”

“Close it your own self.” He pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt, jammed his fists in his pockets, and headed down the sidewalk. The sky opened up. It was a deluge. Behind him, he heard a car door slam. The engine started and Nathan pulled up beside him. Sean rolled down the back window. “It’s a long walk back to DC.”

“I’d rather walk,” Terrell said.

“Suit yourself.” Sean closed the window.

Terrell felt his socks squish. He wanted to stand in a shower and wash off the jail stink. His teeth felt cottony. The rain made him cold.

The car stopped at the end of the block. Through the downpour Terrell saw taillights.

“Hey, Dude!” Terrell shouted. He began to run. “Wait up!”

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Acknowledgements

This story was first printed as “What Am I Doing Here” in 2011 in *Blue Moon Literary & Art Review*, Davis, CA. The title was “What Am I Doing Here?” It is also included in Marylee MacDonald’s short story collection, *Bonds of Love and Blood*.

If you enjoyed this story, I hope you’ll be interested in learning about my other books. I often post excerpts from my works-in-progress on my website.

To learn more, hop on over and take a look right now:

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Marylee MacDonald is the author of the novel *Montpelier Tomorrow*, *Bonds of Love & Blood*, *Body Language*, *The Rug Bazaar*, and *The Big Book of Small Presses and Independent Publishers*. Her fiction has won many prizes, including the Barry Hannah Prize, the Ron Rash Award, and the Jeanne M. Leiby Memorial Chapbook Award.

When she's not writing, she's working in her garden, out with her camera, or helping other writers (photo by Eric Williams).

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ISBN 978-0-9962503-1-3

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