

POSTCARDS HOME

EXCERPTS AND IMAGES

MARYLEE MACDONALD



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PREFACE

A few years back, my grandson Peter told his mom he didn't like to read because he wasn't sure he was picturing the story correctly. I put together this "postcard collection" for all the Peters of the world.

In *Postcards Home* you'll find brief excerpts from the stories in *Bonds of Love and Blood*. The images that accompany these excerpts can help you form a picture of what the story is all about. Some readers have told me they've even used *Postcards Home* to help them decide which story to read next!

The good thing about a story collection is that the stories can be read in a single sitting. *Bonds of Love and Blood* is the perfect book for armchair travelers and busy people.

Click the book cover for buy links, and happy reading!

Marylee MacDonald

MacDonald applies insight, power, and delicacy to create characters
between whom the psychic space virtually sizzles.—FOREWORD REVIEWS

Short Stories

BONDS

of

LOVE

and

BLOOD

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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.



“Do it like this,” Tanaka said in a gravelly voice. Instructing his future son-in-law, he pulled 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.

FINDING PETER



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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.



In the back of a 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.



Fifteen minutes later, 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. Above ground, steppingstones led through dry, knee-high grass. Like the trees that lined the roads in France, a lone, blotchy-barked, plane tree with a thick trunk and low, horizontal branches stood sentinel. As she walked beneath it, Anna noticed how much the leaves resembled the maples on her wooded lot back home.

ALMOST PARADISE

“What’s that?” I called.

Nico stopped. “Koh Chang.”

“You should translate the name. If you know it, that is.”

Nico rolled his eyes. “It means ‘Elephant Island.’”

“You ought to say it’s shaped like one.”

“That’s obvious,” he said.

Clouds swept over the island, blowing toward us. Back in Chicago, thick gray clouds like that would mean a tornado.





“Here comes Lady-Man,” Nico said.

“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 meet 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.



Behind me, the bamboo posts sawed and swayed. Water sheeted off the roof, and through it I could see the tide

had come in, a black shadow sucking the waves back toward the ocean. The island felt like a sailboat, buffeted and capable of overturning if the wind hit it right. The storm was awesome—a combination rock concert and car wash. The lawn became a lake.



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.

“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.

“I never alone. Exciting life.”

OREGANO



Casting about for something to photograph, 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.



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.

"What are you doing out there?" he said.

"Nothing."

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."

BONDS OF LOVE AND BLOOD

If I ever came back to Turkey, I vowed never to set foot in the store again, even if it meant walking a mile around the walls of Hagia Sofia to reach my pension. Hamdi had an urgent sincerity that he pressed on you, whether you were up for it or not. I mean, people have their own problems, right? You don't need to be every stranger's friend.



The two carpet dealers, light-haired Turks with polyester pants and gold tie clips, spoke almost no English. Their job was to lift the carpets and float them down on the floor, giving the corner a smart snap or brushing the pile so I could see how it looked, light or dark.



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



Below sparkled the lights of the Bosphorus, the strait that divided Europe and Asia. The commerce of the world passed at our feet: oil and contraband and arms and grain, massive tankers that, from this distance, looked no bigger than bathtub toys.

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.



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."



I sniffed the pack, tore off the cellophane, and pulled apart the seam so that I could lay the wrapper flat. The sweet smell of raw tobacco reminded me of gingerbread, and I loved the picture of the exhausted, cranky dromedary. Its knees looked like they were about to buckle in the desert's relentless heat. The big pyramid right by the dromedary's tail reminded me of the one Cheops built. But that was Egypt, and all the pyramids in Giza had smooth sides. The Mexican pyramids had

steps that led up to an altar where priests performed their sacrifices, tearing the hearts out of young girls.

KEY WEST

Lana, Todd's mom, pulled out a map of the attractions. Some looked pretty cheap. "Todd, what say we walk over to the aquarium?"

"See?" Allison—his former girlfriend—said.

"See what?" Lana said.

"First, the tea. Then the salad. Now, the plan for the afternoon."

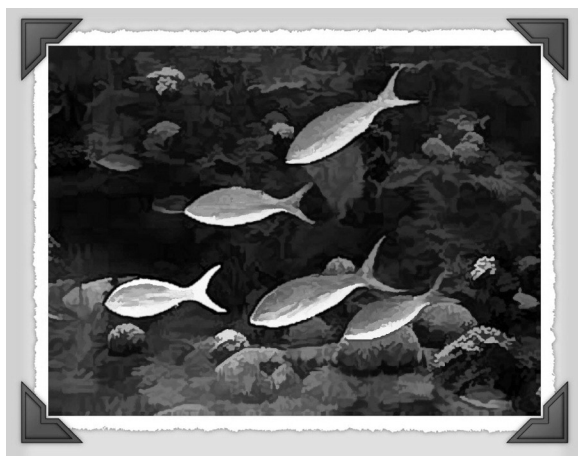
"What's wrong with a plan?" Lana said.

"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."



Tanks of fish confronted her, a wall of bright, blue windows that reminded Lana 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.



The Banyan that shaded the patio was like something out of *Swiss Family Robinson*, but its vertical branches, rising up fifty feet to the canopy, made her feel like an animal in a zoo. Todd had been out all night. Would he come back in time to kayak through the mangroves?

PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN

The moon shone 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.



High school was where 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 Lake, stripping off their sweaty tee shirts and diving from the bank into cold, green water. He missed the splash fights and the way his body felt—tired, but not exhausted. Plus, he had buddies who knew what he was all about. He wanted to talk to the union dude who'd come over to say hello, but he was afraid.

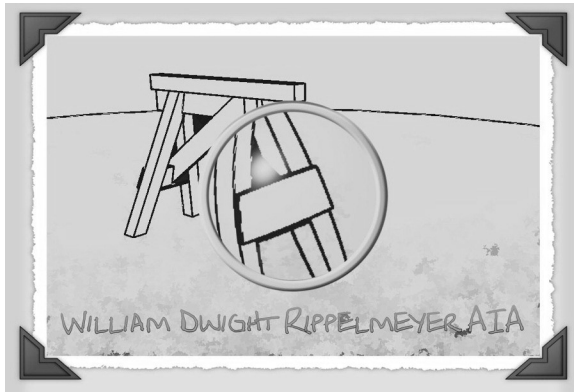
"Shouldn't you be getting back?" Billy said.

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

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

"Maybe you should."

"I'm not going to be doing this forever. I'm going to be an architect."



WEEKEND IN BALTIMORE



Before Baltimore, life looked like it might be heading someplace good. Terrell 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.



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.

TWO TRAINS IN MANMAD

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

Leslie took it from him.

The man in the picture was young and wore a hat that reminded Leslie of a Shriners’ fez. 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.



Lying there in his yoga mat, Ashok, curled in the fetal position, reminded Leslie of that time in Manmad, her so-called honeymoon. God, Manmad again.

The narrow-gauge train had pulled in, discharged its passengers, and chugged away. The wide-gauge train had been delayed. How long would it be? “No telling,” the stationmaster said, wagging his head. There was a saying: *A man could go mad waiting for a train in Manmad.* A

woman, too. Thirty hours the wait had been, thirty hours with a baby.

The sky had turned from gray to pink. Looking down the spittle-stained platform, she saw hundreds of shapeless rags, stirring. It was like the start of a ballet, dancers writhing onstage. It was a scene from Dante's *Inferno*.

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.





“Look there.” Wilson, her partner and farm worker, pulled her sleeve with his mitten. “Blade’s off the windmill.”

Gusts carried the shriek of ball bearings. The windmill limped.

“Can you fix it?” she asked.

Wilson’s eyes widened. “Are you out of your mind?”

His eyes touched her face and then moved to the sugar bush. From atop the distant hill, the maples’ fingered branches waved like spectators looking down on the white house, the weathered barn, and the greenhouse, its fabric luffing like sails.

TEŞEKKÜR

“Next, we go Saklikent Gorge,” Mehmet said.

“Not more walking!” I said.

“We stop for tea.” 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.

“Famous butterfly and Hidden City,” he said. “Must see.”

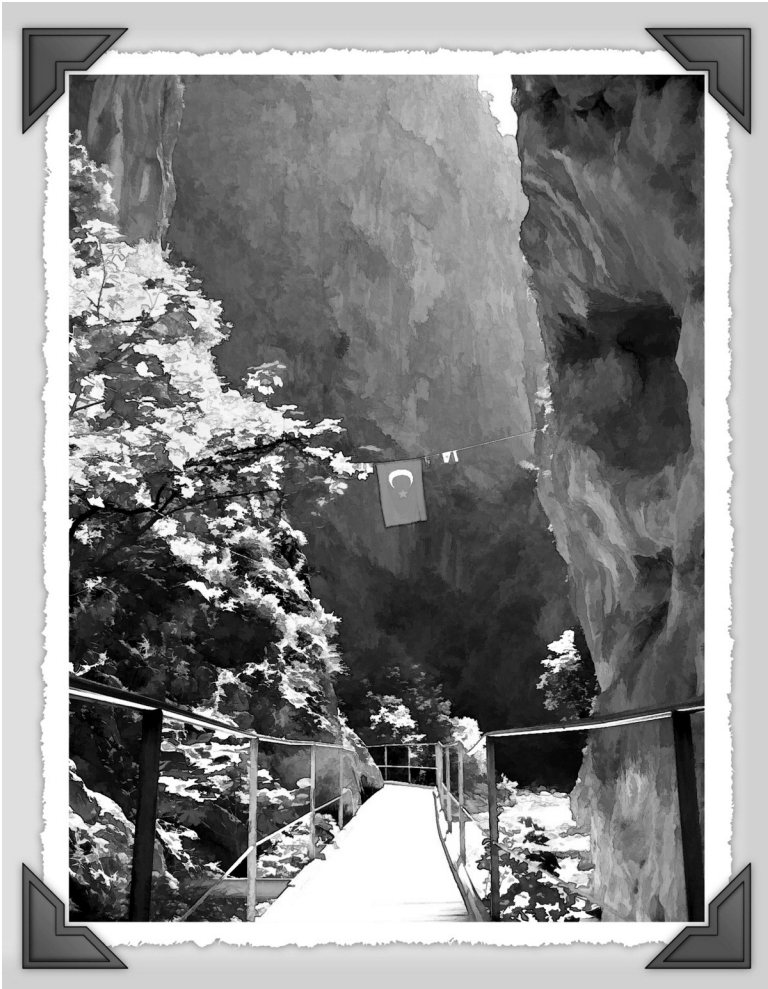
“Is Hidden City another crumbling ruin?” I said.

“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. “Maybe we could...”

“We go see ruins here, and then we drive to next

place and you rest. If water high, Hidden City stay hidden. Okay?" Drawing his eyebrows together in a scowl, he looked at my niece Jennifer and then at me.



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."



The water surging through the channel before me spilled from crevices in the cliff to my left. They were like jets in a fun park, but where the springs joined at the bottom, a milky plume fanned out.

Two men, their shirts open and shorts turned up, headed back in my direction. I waited to see how they crossed. Before plunging into the current, they slid down the gravel embankment on Jennifer's side and walked along the opposite canyon wall, putting one hand against the rock for balance. Ten giant steps, like the kind we used to take in "Mother May I," and then they were over and climbing the bank to surrender their shoes. Ten steps. I could do it.



The waiter arrived with tea. Steam rose from the glasses. At the distant opening of the canyon, a fireball of light hovered above the water, and I thought of the River Styx, the underground stream into which all life disappeared.

AFTERWORD

Bonds of Love and Blood is the perfect book to take you out of your day-to-day life and transport you to another reality.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love short stories because they allow me to write about turning points in people's lives. A novel can capture a whole life, but in a short story, the reader experiences the moment when a character stands at a fork in the road. As you'll see when you read *Bonds of Love and Blood*, I'm interested in people who feel misplaced or displaced, and it's not uncommon for the characters in my stories to feel a little lost.

Maybe that's because my life is a bit fragmented! I split my time between Tempe, Arizona and Santa Rosa, California. When I'm not writing, you can probably find me walking on a trail in the redwoods or hiking in the red rocks of Sedona.

If you'd like to see what else I have going on, drop in at my website and say hello.

www.maryleemacdonald.com

