

The Last Word

A Short Story by Mya Bell



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This story was written today (Wednesday, June 2, 2004), in response to a Fiction Forum challenge I read last night on www.writermag.com. The topic, posted by AnnieOakLeaf, was as follows:

If you were arrested for being a writer, what evidence would there be to convict you in a court of law?

This is my first submission to a fiction challenge—as a fulltime writer, I generally restrict myself to markets that help me pay my bills, so I haven't given much attention to online challenges, but Annie's topic intrigued me and I thought it would be fun to participate.

A fiction challenge is essentially a writing exercise. Writing is like playing the guitar—no matter how long you've been playing, you still need to practice and there's always something new to learn. Both beginning and established writers benefit from stretching their creative muscles and stepping out of their usual roles now and again.

Since I have other responsibilities, the most important of which is finishing my novel-in-progress, I imposed a time limit of eight hours for writing, editing, and polishing this story. No matter where I was in the writing process, when eight hours elapsed, I vowed that I would stop. I managed to squeeze in four edits and the PDF layout (barely) in the allotted time.

Working with a topic posed by someone else was definitely a challenge (I'm used to choosing my own ideas) but I enjoyed the process (thanks Annie). I hope you, as a reader, will enjoy the result.



The Last Word

I

“Mya, he won’t take the case.”

Georgia ran a paint-spattered wrist across her cheek, leaving a smear of Yellow Ochre #3, as she inspected my jail cell through the bars.

“What do you mean he won’t take the case? He’s been my lawyer for two decades—he negotiated my first big publishing contract,” I said, gripping the bars.

The guard scratched his buttocks and wandered off to check the other cells.

“Conflict of interest,” said Georgia, pretending she understood what it meant. She wiped her hand on the smock she wore when working on big canvases. “Hey, you know, this cell has a nice Dali-esque quality to it.”

“What?!” I shouted. “How can you talk about Dali when I’m locked up in here with. . .” At a loss for words, I pointed to the derelict snoring against the latrine. His open fly was a mouth of metal teeth, barely obscuring a flaccid pink tongue. With a shiver of revulsion, I turned back to Georgia.

“What about bail? If I’m going to convince them I’m not

a writer, I have to do something about the stuff at home.”

“Oh yeah I almost forgot. Here,” she said, handing me a small piece of paper folded into the shape of a hat. “They won’t take your personal check.”

“Why not?” I said unfolding the check.

“It’s gotta be cash or money order.”

“What are you saying, that I’m not getting out today? I can’t spend another night listening to rats tap dancing on the walls . . .”

“Don’t worry, I got enough cash from Gary to cover bail. But they won’t take that either—they say I need ID.”

“You need ID to pay with cash?”

“Yeah, so I gotta run to my studio to get the ID.”

My hand shot out involuntarily and wrapped itself around Georgia’s slender neck. I could feel heat rising in my cheeks. “You’ll do no such thing,” I said. “Even if you find it, it’s probably stuck to one of your paintings!”

“Oh yeah,” said Georgia, her face lighting up, even though I was throttling her. “Maybe it is. If not, I should try it.”

My grasp on her neck tightened as I lost my grip on reality. “Georgia. Get Gary to post bail. If I don’t get out by tomorrow, I’ll go berserk. Oh, and you’ll have to feed my cat. Please.”

“I can do that. I’ll just sleep at your place.”

“That’s fine,” I said. Then, noticing the twinkle in her eye, I added, “Just you, Georgia. Not Gary. I don’t want you two playing hide-and-seek in my sheets.”

Georgia ventured a pout, then pointed at the derelict and said, “I thought they kept men and women in separate cells.”

“The place is pretty crowded. I guess they figured he was too far gone to tell the difference.”

“If they convict you, you’ll be like that Bosco Wild guy.”

“Oscar Wilde, Georgia! And I don’t want to be like that ‘Bosco Wild’ guy. He shouldn’t have gone to prison in the

first place—and it ended up *killing* him.”

The guard was nearing the end of the cell block and would soon turn. I released my grip on Georgia and gasped at the five red spots glowing on her throat. “Great,” I sighed. “Now they’ll get me for attempted murder, too.”

“Don’t worry,” she said as she fingered the marks. “I’ll just tell ‘em I made out with the prison guard.”

As Georgia disappeared, I eyed the acrid-smelling latrine for a possible escape route, then made up my mind I wasn’t going to spend 29 years tunneling out like Andy Dufresne.

II

“So you’re the writer,” said the court-appointed attorney as she plomped herself in the chair opposite mine.

“Couldn’t we have met somewhere else?” I said. “This place looks like a Nazi interrogation room.”

“Public servants use public facilities,” she said as she tugged a large canvas bag onto her lap. “If you want to pay higher taxes . . .”

“Never mind,” I said. “You can get me out of this, right?”

The lawyer rummaged through the bag with a frown.

“You can, can’t you?”

“Oh here they are,” she said with a grin, as she waved two books. “See, I’m one of your biggest fans. Before we start, may I have your autograph?”

III

“It’s not often I get to ride in a taxi. It’s so delightfully bourgeois,” said Georgia the next afternoon as we sped away from the local jail.

“I’m so glad to be out of there,” I said as I sniffed the stale dank institutional odor that had invaded my clothes

and hair. "At midnight, they put a drag queen in my cell because the other prisoners were harassing him. He told me he was in the 'hormone phase' preceding his sex change operation and wanted to compare notes on female orgasm."

"Did you?"

"Georgia! I wanted to sleep!"

"Just asking."

"Well make yourself useful and ask me some questions they might ask in court."

"You mean about being a writer?"

"Of course about being a writer. I'm not dressed in scuba gear am I?"

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole . . ."

"Georgia!"

"I'm just trying to make it realistic. Okay. How many books have you written?"

That's the thing about Georgia. She goes straight to the heart of a matter, while I seem to get there in slow descending spirals. How was I going to take a solemn vow and then deny the truth?

"Never mind. This is never going to work. I *am* a writer. Everyone knows I'm a writer. I have three pen names. Amazon stocks my books. Powell's and all the universities carry them too. I have a Web site. My attic is full of writing magazines from the early eighties. I have four typewriters, a dozen computers, twenty signed first editions, a framed picture of Tolstoy, and a cat.

"You're right, the cat's a dead giveaway."

"Georgia, even my attorney wanted my autograph. Damn. I'm toast."

IV

I dug in my wallet as the cabbie started up the hill toward

my house. Georgia poked me in the shoulder and said, “Isn’t it cool the way police cars look like chocolate sundaes?”

When Georgia utters non sequiturs, most people ignore her. They assume she’s on drugs, even when she isn’t. But this time Georgia wasn’t staring into space, she was ogling three police cruisers parked in front of my house. To my horror, the police posse was loading books, papers, and computers into the trunks. A tow truck was hooking up to my car and yellow and black tape was staked around the perimeter of the property == Police Lines Do Not Cross == .

“Cabbie, stop! STOP! Oh no. It’s already too late!”

Georgia gave me a nervous glance.

“They can’t do this,” I cried. “They need a warrant. I don’t have a chance if they get all that evidence. And why are they confiscating my car, my house?!” The driver tapped the meter and held out his hand for the fare.

“Wait here!” I said as I jumped out of the cab. Georgia started to follow, so I said, “No. Georgia, you stay. Don’t let him leave—I’ll pay double. Tell him to turn the car around.”

“You mean like a getaway?”

“No. Yes. Georgia. Get back in the cab.”

In my haste, I blundered through my neighbor’s petunias while trying to avoid the black lab that sometimes prowled the yard.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” I called softly as I sneaked around back. I was hoping my cat Nabakov had high-tailed it outside when the police officers went in through the front.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” I called as I scrunched under the back stairs. A pair of round green eyes glowed at me, but Nabakov could tell something was up and didn’t want to leave the security of the dark corner.

“Come on, sweetie. Come to Mom.”

Nabakov stretch forward to sniff my hand, close enough

for me to grab him by the scruff. Cats are like teenagers; they prefer to do things their own way, but I heard a noise near the back door and there was no time for courtesies. I ran, with Nabakov's claws dug into my forearm, and stopped short when the black lab came around the corner, drooling and smiling a playful greeting.

"Not now, Cassius," I said as calmly as I could. Cassius looked dubious. "Good boy. Good dog."

Nabakov twisted in my arms until he was facing the dog. The dog tensed when he spotted the cat.

Nabakov is a big cat, a very big cat—23 pounds of muscle, with fangs like a lynx. But he's no match for a 70-pound dog. Suddenly my cat made a sound in his throat like a lawn mower as Cassius took a step toward us. I knew the cat was either going to launch himself out of my arms and vanish, or sink his claws so deep in my flesh that I would squirt blood like a sprinkler.

I had to think fast.

In my adrenalized state, my primitive instincts bubbled to the surface and I did the only thing that seemed to make sense—I growled. I took three menacing steps toward Cassius, bared my teeth, and snarled as ferociously as the reptilian part of my brain knew how. Cassius took a step back and sank his neck into his shoulders as I snarled again. Then, the neighbor came out on the porch.

"What the hell are you doing!" she said, staring at me in amazement.

"Sorry," I said and ran.

V

The cabbie shot a disapproving look at Nabakov as I jumped in the car. "Where to?" he asked dryly.

"The library."

“The library?” said Georgia as she peeled Nabakov’s claws one-at-a-time from my arm. Red rivulets trickled onto my lap.

“Yeah, I need to do some legal research.”

“That sounds like a drag.”

“I still can’t figure out how they got in my house without a warrant. Wait, Georgia. Now that I think of it, this might be the best thing that could have happened! Yeah, this is great!”

Georgia gave me a dubious look. “You feeling giddy?” she said. “Lost too much blood?”

“No, Georgia. I’m fine. Don’t you see? It’s illegal search and seizure. I can probably get the case thrown out. Nothing to worry about. No warrant—no law suit.”

“Oops,” said Georgia so softly I almost didn’t hear her.

“Oops? What do you mean oops? I’m home-free. Everything’s fine. Let’s go celebrate at Stenello’s. I can call my lawyer from there.”

“Um, Mya.”

“Yes?” I said, ruffling the cat’s fur.

“I think maybe they had a warrant.”

“No, Georgia. I wasn’t even home. I was still at the jail-house. Hey, maybe I can get them on breaking and entering too. How else could they have gotten into the house?”

“But I was there, Mya.”

“You were there? You mean they showed up before you left?”

Georgia nodded.

“But you didn’t let them in.”

“They were police officers.”

“You let them in? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Georgia looked away and started petting the cat.

“Well, okay, you opened the door, but they still can’t search without a warrant.”

Georgia started picking paint from under her fingernails.

“Georgia? Georgia, look at me. They didn’t serve you with a warrant, did they?”

“Um, no, Mya. They didn’t serve me, they served you.”

“But I was at the. . .”

Without raising her head, Georgia said, “I told them I was you.”

It took me a few minutes to digest this information. When it had rumbled around in my brain long enough to boil, cool, and settle, I yelled “What?!” so loud the cat leaped out of my lap and crawled into Georgia’s.”

“Well what was I supposed to do? They might have thought I was a cat burglar. Or they could have arrested me for being an artist.”

“Oh, Georgia. That’s ridiculous. Why would they arrest you for. . .”

“They arrested *you* for being a writer.”

We stared at each other for a long moment as the cabbie pulled up to the library.

“You’re right,” I said. “Now what?”

VI

The sign on the library door said NO PETS.

“Maybe we can find an outdoor café,” I said as I repositioned my raccoon-sized cat in my already-aching arms. “I’ll have to stop at the ATM—I’m almost out of cash.”

At the cash machine, I transferred Nabakov to Georgia. The machine sucked in my card like a strand of spaghetti and the screen flashed a bulletin that I would have to go inside the bank for an important message.

“What’s going on here? Damn. Georgia could you keep him outside? Nabakov might freak if he hears me yelling at the tellers about their stupid machine.”

VII

“What’s wrong?” said Georgia when I came out of the bank. My face must have given away my stunned disbelief. I reached for the cat.

“They’ve frozen my assets.”

“Frozen your what?”

“My assets—my money, my savings, everything. The court froze them—I don’t know how, but I’m broke.”

“Oh, well, that’s not so bad. It’s kind of romantic, actually. . .”

“Georgia! Shut up. I don’t have a sugar daddy like Gary to support me.”

“Sorry, Mya. I didn’t think of it that way. I guess I don’t have to worry about food and rent. I know you worked hard to get started in the writing business . . .”

“Damn right, I did—slinging hamburgers, typing serial numbers, washing fish, selling Magic Rainbow Drawing Boards. You don’t make money overnight as a writer.”

“What about that Harriet Potty person?”

“That’s Harry Potter. He’s a fictional character. The author is Joanne Rowling. She was a single mom on the dole before she made good money.”

Georgia looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “You can stay at my place.”

It was then I remembered how soft-hearted she was. “No thanks. I don’t want to take advantage and I’m not sure I could live in a small studio apartment with you and your bean-eating, chain-smoking, beer-belching boyfriend.”

Georgia didn’t take offense. She knew her taste in men wasn’t especially refined.

“Thanks, Georgia, but I think I’ll have to solve this on my own. I guess technically I’m a fugitive if I don’t show up for my court date. Could you take care of Nabakov for a

while? I want to make sure he's okay."

"Sure, Mya."

"Thanks. I think I'd like to walk now. I need some time to think. Call Gary to pick you up. There's a phone booth outside the library." I handed her Nabakov and said, "Well, I guess I'll see you around. Please go."

"Okay, Mya. Be careful."

I attempted a weak smile as she turned and walked away with Nabakov, my most treasured feline friend. Then I felt a pang of doubt and confusion so deep, I had to reach out a hand to steady myself against the bank. Nearby, a homeless man with an unruly beard squatted on a battered blue duffel bag next to a cardboard sign. I emptied the last of the money from my wallet into his hand.

"Bless you, sister," he said.

Sister, I thought. He addressed me like a street person—I'm one of them.

VIII

I missed my first appointment with the defending lawyer, and then the second, and the third. I had discovered the food bank was a 14-mile walk across town and it was only open two days a week. If I didn't get there early to stand in line, I would go hungry for the next three days. By the time my court date came up, my shoes were air conditioned, my clothes torn, and I smelled like an industrial waste pipe.

"Excuse me," I said to the woman in the courthouse information booth. "It is the 17th, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, peering at me with obvious distaste.

"And there's a hearing for Bell?"

"Hearings are posted on the courtroom doors," she said without interest, as she paged through a phone book.

"Thank you," I said. "It's so kind of you to be so helpful."

Wendell Willkie pointed out that the test of good manners is putting up pleasantly with bad ones.”

She watched me suspiciously as I stepped into the elevator that would take me to the third floor courtroom annex.

As I stood in the courtroom doorway, I reflected on my relative ignorance of legal matters. I wasn't even sure of the distinction between a hearing and a trial.

The room was empty except for a man in a well-pressed white shirt with a gold braid across one shoulder. He stood by the witness box like a royal guard presiding over a gate. At exactly five minutes to the hour, he began putting things on the judge's bench and peeked into the judge's chambers.

How did I get here? I thought. “I've done nothing wrong.”

“Don't need to do anything wrong,” said a voice behind me.

I turned, startled, not realizing I had spoken aloud, and found myself facing a man about my age, casually dressed in clean clothes, with his hands in his pockets.

“What do you mean?” I said, regretting that I hadn't showered.

“I got arrested for forgetting my wallet.”

Normally I would have considered this preposterous, but the events of the last few days had taught me that the improbable was sometimes possible.

“Shouldn't leave your drug money lying around,” I joked.

“Nope. Wasn't money, just a piece of ID I made up for a Halloween costume.”

He could see I was skeptical, so he continued, “It's true. I have this friend who everyone mistakes for my brother, except he's an accountant and I'm a forestry worker. So we made up this Halloween costume where he and I swapped identities. He dressed in forest service clothes and I borrowed his glasses and suit and dressed as him. We even got

photos and made fake driver's licenses and laminated them at Kinko's. It was a big hit."

"You can't get arrested for that."

"You don't think so? Months later, I left my wallet at the post office when I bought stamps. Before I knew it was gone, they turned it over to the police. They called me into the station to ask questions, but didn't say what it was about."

"When I got there, they asked if I had made a fake ID. I wasn't sure how they could have heard about it, but I said, "Yes," because it was just a joke ID to go with a costume and I didn't see any reason to hide the fact. Then they asked "Did you make any other IDs?" I said, "Yeah, I made one for my friend, too." "Okay, book him," they said. "For what?" I said. "For forgery, fake identity, I'm sure we can come up with more." Then they held up my wallet and told me they would have to keep it as evidence. Well the whole thing was crazy. It wasn't until they led me away that I put two and two together and realized I had left the wallet at the post office and that's how the police got it and found out about the fake driver's license."

"I can't believe it," I said. "No wait. I can believe it. I'm here because I'm a writer."

"Oh," he said, looking at my clothes. "I assumed they nabbed you for vagrancy. A writer, huh. Are you, uh, covering a case? Investigative reporter traveling incognito?"

"No, I mean, they arrested me for *being* a writer."

"Oh, I see," he said, reevaluating my disreputable state of dress. "You've been covering a story in a war zone or something?"

"No!" I said, getting frustrated. "No, I haven't been anywhere. At least not lately. I write reference books, educational texts, tech manuals, ad copy, short stories and novels. I'm here *only* because I'm a writer, not because of what I've written."

“Oh,” he said. “That’s too bad. When’s your trial?”

“My hearing is supposed to start soon, in this room.”

“My trial’s down the hall in a couple of minutes. I guess I have to go.”

“Good luck,” I said and spontaneously reached out a hand.

“My name’s Mya.”

“Good luck too. I’m Don,” he said, looking at my dirty palm for a moment before shaking it.

IX

After the hearing, I stumbled out of the courtroom with a fluttery sensation in my chest. I had to balance against the door until I could catch my breath.

The judge had mentioned a guilty plea, the attorney muttered “preponderance of evidence” or maybe it was the other way around—the whole thing was so jumbled in my mind, I could only remember saying I *wouldn’t* plead guilty and I wanted a jury trial.

As I wandered down the hall, with nowhere to go, I saw Don coming out of the far courtroom, shaking his head.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Guilty verdict,” he said.

“That fast?”

“The judge said it was an open-and-shut case on all counts.”

“Does that mean jail?”

“No, he gave me a suspended sentence, community service, and a big fine since there were no prior charges. But it doesn’t make sense. I never used the ID for anything illegal.”

“So how could they find you guilty?”

“The problem is, it’s been sitting in my wallet for months because I forgot about it, and the prosecutor argued—very

convincingly—that I wouldn't have kept it that long if I wasn't using it for other purposes.”

“Should have worn a tie,” I said, nodding at his unbuttoned collar.

“You're one to talk,” he said looking at my ragged clothes. “So what happened with your hearing?”

“It's going to trial.”

“Well, your luck may be better than mine.”

“I'm not so sure. *I am* a writer. I've been writing for years. They confiscated a truckload of evidence and impounded my house three weeks ago.”

“You don't sound very optimistic.”

“I'm not.”

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

X

After wolfing down a club sandwich, I started feeling better.

“You look like you haven't eaten all day,” said Don as he paid the tab.

“All week,” I replied as I wet the tip of my finger to pick up the remaining crumbs. “Can I have that,” I said as I eyed his leftovers. “Sure,” he said.

“What do you think they'll do?” he asked as I inhaled his sandwich rinds.

“They'll convict me. I'll spend the next 20 years in jail.”

“Twenty years!?”

“That's what the judge said--apparently it's a serious charge. Some old law that was forgotten, that never got taken off the books.”

“But there are lots of writers.”

“Lots of aspiring writers. It's easier for them to hide the evidence, to argue they haven't been published yet.”

“What about all the published writers?”

“I don’t know. When they booked me, they asked if I knew any others, if I could give them names, addresses.”

“Witch hunt?”

“That’s what it felt like. I told them I was a hermit. That I didn’t socialize much.” After some thought, I said, “Don, maybe I’m just the first. If they charge me and make it stick, maybe they’ll go after the others. I don’t even have a proper attorney. They’ve frozen my assets—I can’t put down a retainer. The court-appointed lawyer has copies of all my books.”

“Sounds like you don’t have a chance. Have you thought of skipping?”

“The country, you mean? Leave my cat, my home?” I said as I searched his pale gray eyes. “My newfound friend?”

He glanced down for a second, then looked up and said, “Well, if you decide to take an extended vacation in South America, I know someone who’s good at forging IDs.”

I laughed and then studied his face, not sure if he was joking.

XI

I barely remember the days leading up to the trial. I nearly lost track of time. Don had offered to put me up at his place before we parted company at the restaurant but I said no.

I have to admit, I was tempted, but something—I don’t know—stubbornness, independence, foolishness, pride—prevented me from accepting the offer.

As I walked slowly toward the courtroom building I thought I sensed movement in the bushes to my right. Suddenly my arm was almost ripped out of its socket and I was yanked into the bushes. A hand clamped down over my mouth.

I knew it was useless to scream. Whoever had a hold of me was larger and stronger than I. *I have to wait until he loosens his grip on my mouth*, I thought.

“Shhhhh,” said a voice in my ear. “It’s me, Don. Don’t scream. I’m going to take my hand off your mouth and let you go.”

As soon as he let go, I let him have it in the jaw.

“OW! What was that for? I’m trying to help you.”

“By mugging me and scaring me to death?” I cried as I watched a red welt form on his cheek. I remembered the fingerprints on Georgia’s neck and thought, *Maybe I am dangerous. Maybe they should lock me up.*

“Look,” he said as he pulled me towards two shopping bags that were tucked under a bush. “I got you some clean clothes—I hope they fit—and a comb, although I don’t know how you’ll ever get those dreadknots out in time. Oh wait, there’s a wig too, don’t worry about the hair.”

“Make fun of my hair and I’ll hit you again,” I said, but I was grateful for the clean clothes and the fact that he had gone to all this trouble.

“Here’s a purse with everything you need, cosmetics too. I hope the color of the wig is okay.”

“I’m not exactly in a position to complain about color.”

“Hurry up and change. I’ll turn around.”

I was starting to like this guy. Maybe I should have accepted the offer to stay at his place. He turned around, with his hands in his pockets and I wiggled out of my filthy clothes and left them in a heap on the ground for some street person to claim. Then I pulled on the clean clothes and said, “Don, could you help me with my buttons?” His hands felt dry and warm as they brushed the tiny hairs at the nape of my neck.

“Okay, that’s got it,” he said while I glanced at my face in a compact I had dug out of the purse.

“You look fine,” he said. “It’s amazing. You look completely different.”

“I’m not thrilled about wearing a wig,” I said. “And I would never have thought of getting a black one, but I guess I can’t be too choosy right now. Oh, look at my face. I’m dirtier than a miner in a mud slide.”

“It’s not that bad,” he said. “I brought a towel.” I breathed a quiet sigh as he licked a corner of the towel and dabbed it across my face. Then he stood back and said, “Your eyes are green.”

“Sometimes,” I said. His appraisal made me self-conscious. “Depends on the light and my mood.” Wanting to change the subject, I said, “I don’t know how I can thank you.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “My car’s over here.”

“But it’s less than a block. We can walk. I mean, I can walk.”

“Mya,” he said. “C’mon, let’s get in the car. There’s something I need to tell you.” His face was so earnest, I decided to humor him. If this guy wanted to drive me 30 yards, that wasn’t so bad. After all, I owed him.

Don helped me into the car, looked around, got in himself and proceeded to drive past the courthouse.

“You missed the main door,” I said.

“We’re not going to the courthouse,” he said. “That’s what I needed to tell you. I talked to some lawyers. They said you don’t have a hope in hell. You’ll be locked up for 20 years.” After a pause he said, “And then I’ll never see you again.”

“Don,” I said. “I can’t miss my trial! If I do, I’ll be a fugitive for the rest of my life!”

“I’ve made arrangements,” said Don, looking nervously at a police car coming toward us on the other side. “Maybe you should duck down until we get farther from the courthouse.”

“I’m not going to duck. Don, I appreciate your help, but I want you to turn the car around and take me back.”

“But I already bought the plane fare and paid for the documents.”

“Documents? What documents?”

“I got you a new identity, a passport, an international driver’s license, some cash, two months rent at this place in the south of France.”

“What! You got me forged documents?”

“What choice have you got?” he said. “What choice did fugitives from McCarthy have? The women of Salem? The Jews in the second world war? I hate to say this, Mya, but the ones who fled are the ones who survived.”

I sat for a moment digesting this hard truth. Don wasn’t just some crank. He had really thought about this.

“I can’t do it, Don. I can’t live my life running.”

“But what if they . . .”

“Pull over Don. Please.”

“Maybe you could get a new pen name and write about being on the run. Call it *The Fugitive*.”

“It’s already been done, Don.”

“Oh yeah.”

Don reluctantly pulled into a loading zone, but he didn’t turn off the engine.

“What are you going to tell them?” he said. “You know they don’t let you talk much in court. All you can do is answer direct questions.”

“Well, then I’ll refuse the court-appointed attorney and defend myself and tell them my whole story. They can’t stop me from doing that can they?”

“*Pro se*? Are you crazy? You know what they say about people who try to defend themselves in court?”

“Yeah, I know. You’ve lost before you even begin.”

“Well, that’s putting it politely,” he said with a stricken

look on his face.

“I don’t know, Don. I haven’t even had time to prepare a case. I guess I’ll just tell them that I can’t deny being a writer, that I’m proud to be a writer. That we need writers to chronicle the course of human history, to point out when we’re headed in the wrong direction, to let us see the world from other people’s point of view. To lift us out of our doldrums on a cold winter night.”

“You sure about this?” he said quietly. “There’s still time if we hurry—they probably won’t start hunting for you until you’re 15 minutes late.”

“I’m sure, Don. Please take me to the courthouse.”

Reluctantly, Don backed the car into a lane and turned.

“Isn’t there anything I can say to change your mind?” he said. I shook my head.

We pulled up by the courthouse. I took a deep breath, then opened the door. “Don, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. But I’m proud of what I am and there are bigger issues at stake. If I run away now, how will other writers find the courage to defend themselves?”

“Mya, just think about it for one more . . .”

“Don, we need writers. I know there are lots of irresponsible journalists and people who pump out trash, but they’re not all like that.”

I stepped out of the car and leaned down to look at Don’s face one last time. “Don, we need writers to go into war zones and come back and tell us what’s really happening and where this is all leading in the rawest, most honest, most prescient way possible. We need writers to write books that will help people through the trials of caring for a challenged child or an ailing relative. We need writers who can describe a new planet firsthand so the people who never travel in a spaceship can experience it from light years away.”

Straightening up, I said, "If they put me in jail, at least I will have tried, and my feelings about being a writer and the importance of writers will be in the court transcript as a permanent record."

"I wish you luck," he said. "You're very brave."

"No I'm not. I'm scared to death," I replied, as I closed the door on one life and opened the window to another.



Mya Bell is a published writer living in the Pacific Northwest near the U.S./Canada border. She is currently working on a novel which she expects to finish by summer 2004.

If you are interested in birding or bell collecting, you might enjoy excerpts from Mya's birding and bell journals which are uploaded each month at <http://www.myabell.com/>.

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