



Time to Get Up

A Short Story

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I knew, even in my sleep-weary haze, when my phone rang at four in the morning on a Tuesday, who was calling me and why. I didn't make it to the phone in time, but when I picked it up and saw my missed calls, my prediction was confirmed. It was my mother. That meant one thing: my sister.

I called my mother back while trying to find my pants, searching around the dark bedroom on my hands and knees, the ringing phone one in one hand, the other tapping over the carpet. My mother picked up on the first ring.

I found my pants and slipped out of the bedroom. I didn't want to wake my girlfriend.

"Matthew," my mother said. "It's Brandi."

"I know," I told her. "Why?"

She told me my sister had been picked up for a DUI. My first thought, as I pocketed my phone and searched for my keys, was that my mother should just leave my sister in jail.

Fifteen minutes later I was slipping into the passenger seat of my mother's old Taurus. The car was on its last legs, or wheels, I guess, since cars don't have legs, and the only reason my mother couldn't afford a new one was my sister. All the legal fees, college tuition for failed classes, medical bills, and now this, bailing my sister out. You can see how it all adds up.

The worst part is: my mother blames herself for Brandi's behavior. She makes excuses for her, says she's "not wired right." Now, I'm not one for hitting women. I never have and I never will, even though I've had more than my fair share good reasons to. But what my sister really needs is a good smack across the mouth. That's what I think, anyway.

On the way downtown my mother called the officer at the jail. He told us we needed to see a bail bondsman and gave us directions. After that my mother's phone rang. It was my sister calling again. I guess that stuff about one phone call isn't really true.

"I know, I know. We're on our way to see the bondsman, honey. I know, but we have to talk to him first. I know. I know. We're on our way."

"Honey" she called her. I was pretty sure, sitting next to my mother in the car as she talked to my sister, that "honey" wasn't what I would be calling my daughter if I was her.

We went to the bondsman first. It was a little chilly in the early September morning, but I was crackling with anger. It kept me warm. I stayed outside to smoke while my mother went inside.

Out in the street I could see my mother talking to the bondsman through the glass window. He was a heavy guy and looked like he could handle himself in a fight. I guess he'd need to be, in his line of work.

Down the street, maybe a fourth of a block, I saw a huddled up guy in a Kansas City Chiefs jacket. He was crouched down next to a building, smoking a cigarette. I looked at him and he looked at me and it looked like he was going to get up, so I looked away. Normally I'd offer a couple of cigarettes or a couple of bucks to a guy like that, not because I think it really does anything, but because it makes me feel good afterwards. But I wasn't in the mood right now. All I could think of was my sister and how she was probably going to turn out just like that guy if she didn't stop fucking around. That made me angry at him for no reason, so I finished my smoke and went inside.

As soon as I came in the bondsman looked up.

"Are you the brother?" he asked me. Jesus. What a question that was. It took all I could not to say, "I used to be."

"Yes," I said.

He asked me my name, address, and phone number.

"In case she misses her court date," he said.

Again, I bit back my tongue. I knew that if she went missing she wasn't going to be with me. I wouldn't have her.

The bondsman asked about my brother and got his information, too. Then he slid a paper in front of my mom. He explained to her that if my sister screwed up again, or didn't make her court date, or practically anything else, my mother would be responsible for the amount listed on the sheet.

I glanced at it as my mother was reaching for a pen. It was twelve-hundred dollars.

"Mom," I touched her shoulder. "What are you doing? Why are you doing that? You know you're just going to end up paying that."

"Look," said the bondsman, folding his hands across his ample belly, "I can give you some time to talk it over." He started to get up.

"That won't be necessary," my mother said. She signed it.

She also paid a hundred and thirty dollars to get Brandi out. Next, my mother signed a release that took Brandi into her custody for the four hours after her discharge.

"If she goes out and gets in more trouble this morning, or gets behind a wheel and drunk drives, this says that you'll be responsible," he said.

After a little more paperwork the bondsman gave us directions to the jail, telling us to park on the side at "inmate discharge" and go in the front. He told us to give the bond paperwork to the officer at the desk and then go back to the car to wait for my sister.

"It should be about forty-five minutes," he said. "Bring her back here when she's out and I'll give her a court date."

We nodded and left, my mother barely containing her tears.

On the short drive to the jail I tried to tell my mom she shouldn't have bailed Brandi out.

"I hope you have that twelve-hundred bucks," I told her. "Because you're probably going to need it in a few days."

My mother sighed and I wanted to press the issue. The thing I hate most about my sister is how she bullies my mother. My mother grew up in a house without much yelling or confrontation, where people just ignored each other when they were angry. She doesn't know how to handle angry voices or temper tantrums: my sister's two favorite tools. The thing about my mother is: she doesn't react or fight back against it – she just takes it and takes it and takes it.

I didn't want to just bully my mother about the money because I knew she'd just take it from me, not say anything, but not change her mind. All I would be doing is making her feel worse. I let it drop.

We parked the car at the jail and went in the front. The only things inside were a bunch of closed doors and a glass booth with a talking grill like the thing you buy your tickets from at the movies. I'd never been inside a jail or a police station before, but it didn't look like anything I'd seen on TV. All the soft Hollywood edges were missing. It was government. It was real.

There wasn't anyone there, but after a minute a guy appeared behind the glass. My mother slid the papers to the guy through a metal drawer. He told us it would be about thirty minutes and to wait around the side.

In the car my mother cried and smoked two cigarettes.

"I just quit smoking," she told me between tears and puffs. We talked about Brandi.

"I would have just left her in there if I were you," I said.

She told me I didn't understand what it was like to be a mother.

She was right. I don't. I would have just left her in there.

"The worst part is, Brandi only had a week left on her probation," my mother said. My sister was on the end of a six month probation for possession. "She could have even been done with her probation already if she'd just paid the fine."

"How much was the fine?"

"A hundred dollars," my mother said. "I even thought about paying it for her, but I thought, she's got to be a grown up and take care of it herself."

My tongue was raw from all the things I was biting back. I wanted to ask my mother why she wasn't letting Brandi stay in jail until her court date if she was such a grown up, but I didn't.

I knew what was going to happen to Brandi:

1. She was probably going to screw up again and miss her court date, or both, leaving my mother with a twelve-hundred dollar bill she couldn't afford.
2. She was going to lose her driver's license, although she might be able to get a work permit after awhile.
3. She was going to lose her student loans since any fuckup of her probation meant that it added a mark to her record and you can't get federal student loans with a mark on your record.
4. I was probably going to yell at her.

There wasn't much I could do about the first three on that list, but I could do try to stop number four.

After about a half-hour of waiting in the car my sister appeared at the door of the jail, escorted by an officer. She came limping out into the yard, her purse under one arm. At the fence she waited until the officer buzzed it open, and then she started toward the car.

I got out, opened the back passenger door for her, and shoved an empty file box over to the other side. I didn't say anything. I knew that once I opened my mouth I was going to yell, so I kept it shut.

Not even half a block from the jail, Brandi started in.

"I don't know, Mom, I don't even fucking know," she said, as if she'd been asked a question. "Can you just bring me back to my place?"

"No," my mother said. I could hear her trying to keep her voice steady. "We have to go back to the bondsman so he can give you a court date."

"Fuck!" Brandi screamed. "I just want to go home! I have to work a double in a few hours."

I'd kept my cool until then. I hadn't said a word. But I knew this game. I knew that Brandi was going to slowly whittle down my mother's resolve until she had my mother believing some half-cocked version of what actually happened. I'm sure that's what the "limp" was all about, even though Brandi hadn't gotten into an accident, she'd just been pulled over while driving the wrong way down a one way street. On top of all that, now she was going to try and make my mother feel sorry for her. No fucking way. I exploded.

"Well maybe you should have thought about that before you got into a drunk driving accident!" I screamed at her. I was right. I felt justified. My pulse sprinted through my veins. My heart pounded.

"Fuck you!" she screamed back. "That's not even what happened! I don't have to sit here and listen to this!"

Brandi opened the back door and got out. I thought to myself, as I followed her out of the car, that she'd gotten out of the car only partially because I'd yelled at her. Unlike my mother, my sister can handle yelling. I knew she was also angry because I'd gotten the details of her DUI wrong: she hadn't gotten into an accident, but in my anger I flubbed up the details and that's what set her off. The stupid details.

My mother stayed in the car, at the wheel.

Brandi started down a set of railroad tracks. I followed her. She was screaming obscenities at me, I was threw them right back at her.

"How could you do that to mom?" I asked her. "Why are you doing this to her?"

"Brandi, stop," my mother was out of the car now, standing in the middle of the downtown street.

Brandi kept walking away. She'd pulled a stunt like this once before after my mother and my mother's boyfriend picked her up after a "cry for help" suicide attempt. That time she'd tried to get out of the car at thirty-five miles an hour. Luckily my mother's boyfriend had the car slowed down to five before her feet hit the pavement.

I knew I shouldn't have yelled at her and set her off. I knew, in the back of my mind as I was screaming at her, following her down the railroad tracks at 5:30 in the morning, that she was technically "under my mother's custody" for the first four hours after her release. All we needed right then was a cop to drive by, a block away from the jail, and stop to find out what all the yelling was about, or why the car was stopped in the middle of a downtown street.

I turned back to the car. I was done. No holds barred, signed, stamped, and out, done. I got back in the passenger seat. My chest was heaving. I couldn't stop shaking.

My mother started jogging after Brandi. After a minute I slipped over the center console and moved the car to the side of the street. A building blocked my view of the tracks, so I couldn't see anything, but I didn't want to just leave the car in the street. There was no place to easily park it. So I sat and smoked a cigarette.

I didn't care if Brandi came back. She could go fuck herself for all I cared. But I wanted my mother to come back to the car. I couldn't just leave her there. So I sat.

My thoughts whirled. I puffed angrily on the smoke, exhaling great plumes into the air. I tried to calm down. I steeled my resolve. When Brandi came back, I wasn't going to say anything. I was just going to drive and ignore her.

Cars passed me, driving slowly around my mother's car. I needed to move it. I couldn't just leave it there. I drove down the street and turned right, starting to circle around to look for Brandi and my mother. I noticed my mother's cell phone was on the center console. Just as I spotted them, my phone rang. It was Brandi.

"Bring back mom's fucking car," she commanded. My resolve about not speaking to her broke and I was winding up an old fashioned "Fuck you," but my phone was dark. She'd already hung up.

I circled back around and picked them up. I kept my ears shut and my eyes on the road. My mother handed Brandi her prescription, from a trip to the pharmacy that day. I was pretty sure the prescription was for Prozac or some other SSRI, after her "cry for help" last month. I think Brandi should be on lithium. She's got to have some sort of bipolar something or other thing.

Brandi threw the pill bottle back at my mother.

"Fuck that stuff," she said. I kept my mouth shut.

We parked outside the bondsman's place. I stayed outside and smoked while they arranged Brandi's court date.

They were in there for about ten minutes. As they walked back to the car, I watched Brandi remember her limp halfway back. She started dragging her foot. I was livid, but said nothing when they got in, aside from asking my mother for directions.

On the way to Brandi's place we got more of the story. She wasn't driving, she said. She was in the passenger seat. The cop pulled them over, her boyfriend and the cop got in some kind of vague "altercation." Brandi got hauled in for a DUI.

I didn't know how much of the story I believed, but I kept my mouth shut. I knew that under state law an intoxicated person sitting in a vehicle with the ignition turned on can be charged with a DUI. It seems thin to me, if Brandi wasn't driving, but if I was the cop and some guy tried to start something with me, I'd probably be pissed and do the same thing – arrest everyone on the spot and sort it out later.

I doubted we'd gotten the whole story from Brandi, probably just the parts that made it all seem like it "wasn't her fault." It's hard to know what really happened. Events seem to somehow get fuzzy when she's involved. I hate that. But that's how far trust goes with Brandi these days. My mother seemed to buy it all, which just made me even angrier at Brandi.

My mother urged Brandi one last time to call a lawyer in the morning, some guy Brandi was already familiar with after her possession charge six months ago, before Brandi got out of the car at her place.

My mother and I switched seats and she drove back to my apartment to drop me off. It was just a little before six thirty in the morning. My mother came up to use the bathroom. I sat on the couch and stared at the wall. When she came out, I stood up.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she said.

I held her while she sobbed on my shoulder. Finally, she pulled away from me, leaving a wet spot on the side of my neck.

"Do you want to stay for awhile?" I asked her. "I can make some coffee."

"No," she said. I opened the door for her.

"I love you," I told her. She hugged me again and turned to leave.

Just then, her phone rang in her purse. She pulled it out and opened it. It was her morning alarm.

She looked at me with tired eyes.

"Time to get up," she said.

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