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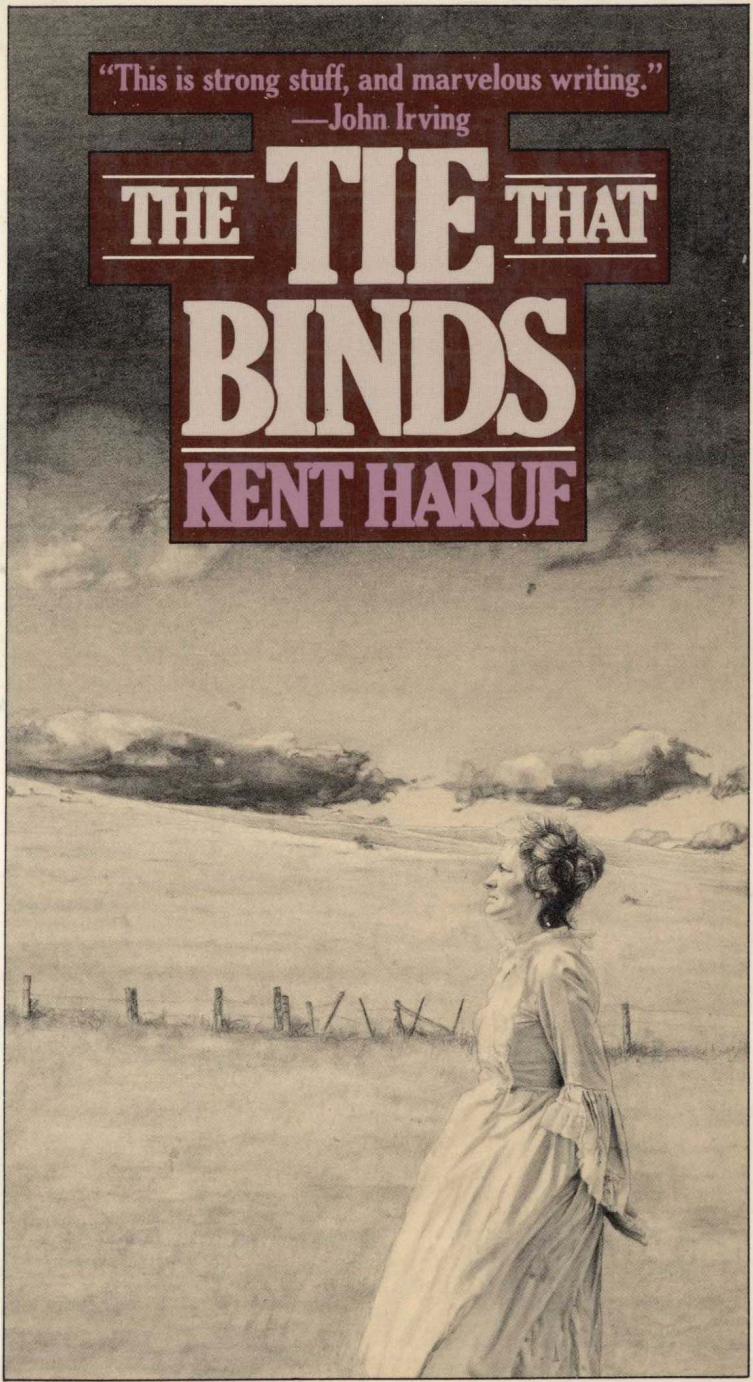
THE TIE THAT BINDS

KENT HARUF



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A NOVEL BY

KENT HARUF

PENGUIN BOOKS
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street,
New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published in the United States of America by
Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1984
Published in Penguin Books 1986
Reprinted by arrangement with Holt, Rinehart and Winston

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Haruf, Kent.
The tie that binds.
Reprint. Originally published: New York: Holt,
Rinehart, and Winston, c1984.
I. Title.
PS3558.A716T5 1986 813'.54 85-31024
ISBN 0 14 00.8966 5

Printed in the United States of America by
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Harrisonburg, Virginia
Set in Janson

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EDITH GOODNOUGH isn't in the country anymore. She's in town now, in the hospital, lying there in that white bed with a needle stuck in the back of one hand and a man standing guard in the hallway outside her room. She will be eighty years old this week: a clean beautiful white-haired woman who never in her life weighed as much as 115 pounds, and she has weighed a lot less than that since New Year's Eve. Still, the sheriff and the lawyers expect her to get well enough for them to sit her up in a wheelchair and then drive her across town to the courthouse to begin the trial. When that happens, if that happens, I don't know that they will go so far as to put handcuffs on her. Bud Sealy, the sheriff, has turned out to be a son of a bitch, all right, but I still can't see him putting handcuffs on a woman like Edith Goodnough.

On the other hand, I don't suppose Bud Sealy ever intended to become a son of a bitch at all. As late as nine days ago he was sitting on a barstool at the lunch counter in the Holt Café. It was Friday afternoon; it was about two-thirty, that slack time that comes every day for him when he's got all his paper work filled out, when there isn't a thing more for him to do except wait for the high school kids to get out of school so they can begin to race up and down Main Street or drive out onto U.S. 34 and cut cookies on the blacktop. So Bud had time. He was

relaxing. Already he had eaten his butterscotch pie and Betty had cleared his plate. Now, while he waited for his second cup of black coffee to cool, he was turned around on the barstool so as to front the men who sat opposite him in the booths. The men had come in earlier in their town pants and adjustable caps. Two or three of them had slapped him on the back like they do, and they had all taken their places on the other stools or in the nearby booths so they could hear the talk and keep current.

Most of the talk that afternoon was Bud's. He was telling them a story. I believe most of the men had heard this particular story at least twice before, though I doubt that any one of them would have thought to stop him from telling it again, since the one thing they all had too much of was just that—time. I mean two or three had already retired from the work they had never gotten around to beginning.

At any rate, the story Bud was telling that afternoon had to do with how there was this guy at the National Western Stock Show who was walking around in public with a piece of pink thread tied to himself, like what it was tied to was one of the agricultural exhibits in the pavilion hallways. He was sort of displaying himself to folks. That is, until the police collared him and took him to jail for indecent exposure and creating a nuisance. They booked him. A few weeks later when they stood him up in front of a judge—an old man with wire glasses and no hair to speak of—the judge says to him: "Son, I'm going to ask you just one question and I want an answer. Son, are you crazy?" And the guy with the pink thread says, "No sir, I don't believe so." And the judge says: "Well then, are you just half crazy?" And the guy says . . .

But Bud never got to say this time what the guy says, because just then someone walked into the Holt Café that neither Bud nor any of the other men knew. He asked

which one of them was the sheriff. One of the boys pointed to Bud.

It turned out this new man was a newspaper reporter from Denver. He had just driven into town. At the police station they had told him that he might discover the sheriff at the Holt Café, and he did. So I date it about then, a little after two-thirty on a Friday afternoon in April, that Bud Sealy started seriously to become a son of a bitch. Because in a few minutes Bud and this Denver man went out to the town's cop car; they drove off up Main Street, and I don't guess they had driven long or far before Bud gave him the fifty-pound bag of chicken feed that had been knifed open and laid in easy access for the six or seven chickens, laid just inside the chicken coop where it wouldn't get wet or snowed on.

That was not enough, however. That did not satisfy him. The man from Denver wanted more than just chicken feed. So Bud turned off onto one of the residential streets and drove a block or two under the budding elm trees risen along the curb, and then on Birch Street or Cedar he gave him the dog too, told him how the old milky-eyed dog, which had never been tied up before, had nevertheless been tied up that particular December afternoon three and a half months ago and again within easy reach of several days' food and water.

But that still was not enough. Chicken feed and an old dog must have only whet the Denver man's appetite. Besides, I suppose he was beginning to crowd Bud now, shove him hard for more. Then too, maybe by this time Bud was beginning to see something in it for himself. Perhaps Bud imagined that having his name appear on the front page of a Denver newspaper would somehow insure his twenty-year-old investment at the local county polls, as if it would permanently close an insurance policy with us that would make us want to go on marking that X beside

his name come the first Tuesday in November. Because with his name featured prominent in the big city papers and on the front page, no less, we'd be proud of him, take pride in one of our own's managing such a thing, and then he wouldn't ever have to do any more storytelling in the Holt Café in order to collect from us. All he would have to do would be to enter his name on the proper election papers at the appointed time and see to it that it was spelled right, and then—why hell—just go on paying his wife's doctor bills and sending those tuition payments to the state university in Boulder, where it looked like his kid was never going to amount to a goddamn or even to graduate.

But I can't say for sure that's how Bud was thinking. What I've suggested is based only on what I know about him after these fifty years of seeing and talking to him about once every week. No, all I know for sure is that his cop car was out in the country a little later that same afternoon and he and the Denver man were still in it, still talking, still licking up to one another like they were a couple of dogs discussing the fresh joys of a bitch in heat. Only they were not discussing copulation, nor love and the weather, nor even the price of fat hogs at the sale barn in Brush. It was more than that. I believe it was a lot more, because it was then and there, with corn stubble on one side and green wheat on the other, that Bud Sealy emptied himself. He gave him Edith Goodnough.

He told him how in December Edith had sat there quiet, rocking herself and waiting, while over there across the room from her, Lyman, her brother, had lain on his cot asleep, snoring against the wall. Bud didn't have to tell that. There was enough without any of that. It's just a good thing the son of a bitch didn't know about Lyman's travel papers and pumpkin pie, because if he had, he'd have thrown them in too. Sure as hell.

Myself, the next afternoon when he came to me, I didn't give him a thing.

THIS WAS EIGHT DAYS AGO. Saturday. First I hear the tires on the gravel grind, then the car door. It's too early in the afternoon for it to be Mavis and Rena Pickett returning from town, so I look up from the squeeze chute where I'm doctoring cows, and, at the time, when I see the Denver plates, I still think it must be one of these state farm agents come out to talk fertilizer. Even when I see he's wearing a tie and yellow pants I think it is, because nowadays some of your young farm agents are starting to dress like that, like they think at any minute they're going to be called on to play Ping-Pong. Anyway, here he comes, walking over towards me away from his car. He gains the corral, finds the gate, fiddles with the bar latch, but then it looks as if he can't figure out how to work it, because he starts climbing. It doesn't do the hinges a lot of good. He climbs up on it anyway, and at the top, with the gate shaking back and forth underneath him, he swings both his legs over, then he drops down into the corral beside me.

"I'm looking," he says, "for Sanders Roscoe."

I turn back to the cow. I shoot her and she bawls, then I release the head catch on the chute and she goes out, already running, crow-hopping with her head down and kicking up fresh cow manure. A piece of it the size of a half dollar splats onto his shirtfront next to his tie.

"You found him," I say.

He doesn't look to be much more than a kid, but I haven't seen a lot of his face yet. Right now he has his head ducked down, studying his shirtfront. Then, while I watch him, he takes an Eversharp pencil out of his shirt

pocket and begins to flick with the point of it at that little splat of manure. When he's got it all off pretty good, so that it appears as if maybe he's just spilled him some brown gravy there, he clips the pencil back inside his pocket and sticks his hand out. His hand's like that toilet paper they say on TV they don't want you to squeeze. Soft.

"Mr. Roscoe," he says. "I'm Dick Harrington. With the *Post*."

"That so?" I say. "I hope you're not selling anything."

"No," he says. "The *Denver Post*. It's a newspaper. Maybe you've heard of it."

"Sure. I've heard of it," I say. "But we keep it out on the back porch where we scrape our boots, so we don't have to track cow into the kitchen." Then I throw my head back and laugh. "It saves throw rugs," I tell him.

But he doesn't think that's real funny; he looks at me like How can I be so dumb and live? Guys like him think they drive the 150 miles out here due east from Denver and when they get here we don't know anything. They think they have to educate us poor dumb country bastards. They think we don't know what the *Denver Post* is. We know all right. We just don't give a damn.

But now he's busy with his hands again. It seems like his hands are always flat busy, like he can't let them rest. He reaches behind him into the back pocket of his pants and removes his billfold, opens it, and fingers out a little white card. I study it. It has his newspaper's design at the top and his name printed underneath that—only the card says Richard—with a phone number below his name to call him at his office if anybody wants to call him at his office. I hand it back to him.

"You can keep it," he says.

"No," I say. "It'd just get lost around here."

"Well," he says. "Well . . ."

But then it's like he doesn't know how to go on. He looks over across the corral to where the three or four cows I've already doctored are pushing one another butt up against the fence, facing him with their eyes rolled back to white and looking like for two bits they'd either bust down the fence behind them, or, if that didn't work, race him headlong across the corral to that gate he couldn't figure out how to open, and escape that way. So, for about two minutes, those cows and him are watching one another, staring at one another across that thirty feet of corral space and fresh cow manure that separates them, until all of a sudden that one cow I haven't doctored yet decides she has to bawl. And then it's like he's been jerked hard by the sleeve; he turns back in the other direction, quick, to face her. She's still caught inside that narrow alley that leads into the chute; you can see her between the alley rails. Her eyes have got plenty of white showing, too, and she's beginning to get a little antsy from being left by herself, but at least there's that much—there's that fence—separating him and her, and besides, crowded into the alley the way she is, she can't back up enough to collect herself for a good jump, even if she wants to jump over in his direction. Which she surely doesn't. Only I don't believe he knows that.

"Mr. Roscoe," he says. "Isn't there some place else we can talk?"

"Oh," I tell him, motioning at the cows, "you'll have to never mind them. They just haven't seen many yellow pants before. Give them a little more time—they might get used to it."

He looks doubtful over at the cows again. I have to admit they haven't changed much. They still look like they flat want to run or fly or get loose somehow. They're still facing him with their eyes rolled back and their butts

jammed up against the fence as tight to it as they can get.

"Well," he says, turning back to me, "if I can, I'd like to ask you some questions. Can I ask you a few questions?"

"Depends," I say.

"On what?" he says.

"On what you're asking."

So then he asks me, and what he asks shows he's not even a state farm agent, that he doesn't even amount to that much. It shows too that yellow pants or no, the joke's over. Because what he asks is:

"You're a neighborly sort of man, aren't you, Mr. Roscoe?"

"I can be," I say, because I know what he's driving at now; I know what's coming.

"I mean," he says, "you know all the neighbors around here."

"Maybe. Some of them."

"Edith and Lyman Goodnough, for instance?" he says. "People tell me you knew them better than anyone else did. That you did things for them. Is that true?"

So there it is. It hasn't taken him long. And I say, "Didn't all these people you say you talked to at least tell you how to say their name—while they were telling you the rest of it?"

"You mean it's not Good-now?"

"No."

"What is it then?"

"Good-no."

"Okay," he says. "Suit yourself."

Then he reaches behind him again to dig in his back pocket. He draws out a little spiral notebook and writes something into it with that Eversharp pencil he used a little while earlier to flick the cow manure off his shirt. When he's done scribbling he says, "They used to live down the road from you, didn't they?"

"It's still theirs," I say. "Nobody else has bought it from them yet."

"Yes," he says, "and I already know it's located down the road from you."

So he's starting to talk that way now, like he's sure of himself, because with that spiral notebook and that pencil in his hands he's forgotten he's standing on top of cow manure inside a work corral where, thirty feet away from him, some fresh-doctored cows are still on his side of the fence, and they would just as soon run through him as have to look at him any longer.

But he goes on. He says, "I've been told that you were the first one there that night, last December. That when the others arrived they found you already waiting for them, and then you didn't want to let them go inside. You tried to prevent them. Why is that?" he says.

"You tell me. You know all about it."

"Look," he says, "Mr. Roscoe. I'm just trying to get what my editor sent me out here to get. And I don't think I like it any better than you do. But I think I know how you must have felt about—"

"You don't know a damn thing," I tell him.

"All right," he says. "All right then, forget that. But listen, let me just ask you this. Let me ask you: you agree it was deliberate, don't you? You don't think it was just an accident."

I don't answer him. Here he is, standing in front of me in his yellow Ping-Pong pants; he's not more than an arm's length away from me, and for what he's trying to get me to commit myself to saying I ought to swing on him. But I don't. I just look at him.

So he says, "But we both know that, don't we? I just want to know what you think of it."

I've had enough of him now. More than enough. I say, "You want to know what I think?"

"Yes."

"I think it's none of your goddamn business. I think you better go on back to Denver."

"Mr. Roscoe," he says, saying my name this time like he was saying shit. "I've already talked to the sheriff, Bud Sealy. And he told me—"

"No," I say. "No, you better go now." And I take a step towards him. He looks surprised, like he's just opened the wrong door and come up on something he never expected. He backs up a couple paces.

"It'll all come out anyway," he says. "I'll find out from somebody."

"Not from me you won't."

I step towards him again and look at him close up, a foot away from his face. His moustache is thin under his nose and he's got pockmarks along the side of his jaw. He could use a haircut. But—I'll give him this much—he doesn't back up anymore, even if he is just a kid, so I'm through playing with him now. I walk around him over to the corral gate and open it by throwing back the bar latch and holding it for him.

He walks over towards me, and when he's just about to pass me to go through the gate I take his little notebook out of his hand and rip the top page out of it, the one he wrote something on while he was talking to me. Then I give the notebook back to him. His face looks like somebody just slapped him.

"What are you doing?" he says. "You can't do that."

"Son," I say, "get your ass off my place. And don't you ever come back here. Understand? I don't ever want to see you again."

He starts to say something more; his mouth opens beneath the moustache, then it closes. He turns and walks away from me over to his car. He gets in and for a minute watches me through the window. Then he turns the key;

the car moves, spraying gravel out behind him as he leaves. I watch him out the lane onto the road back to town. When I can't see him anymore I look at the scribble on the piece of paper I took from his notebook. It reads: *Sanders Roscoe—fiftyish—heavyset—obstinate—Goodnough's neighbor—Good-no.* Then I tear it up and drop it underfoot. My boot heel grinds it into the cow shit until it's disappeared, gone, turned into just brown nothing. The damn squirt.

But it didn't do any good. He found out anyway. It got into the papers anyway. He must have talked to Bud Sealy again and some of those others in town. They put it on the front page. That's why they're talking of trial now. His damn newspaper account sparked this trial talk.

SOME OF IT was even right. Some of what they threw on the front page between those two pictures of Edith and Lyman was even the truth, because I guess even a Denver newspaper reporter can walk into the Holt County Courthouse and copy down the date from a homestead record, and then, after he gets that straight, drive on out to the cemetery and read what it says on the three headstones that are standing there side by side in brown grass, away off at the edge of the cemetery, where there's just space enough left over between that last stone and Otis Murray's cornfield for one more grave. Because yes, he managed to get that much straight. And after he got it, his paper managed to arrange it clever on the front page.

They had Edith's picture over here on the left and Lyman's picture opposite it, over here on the right, with both of them staring into the middle so that they seemed to not only be looking at one another but to also be studying what was between them. And what was there, between them, like it was some kind of funeral notice or maybe

just the writing on the inside cover of a family Bible, was this:

ROY GOODNOUGH BORN, CEDAR COUNTY, IOWA, 1870
ADA TWAMLEY BORN, JOHNSON COUNTY, IOWA, 1872
R. GOODNOUGH & A. TWAMLEY, MARRIED 1895
GOODNOUGHS, HOMESTEAD, HOLT COUNTY, COLORADO, 1896
EDITH GOODNOUGH BORN 1897
LYMAN GOODNOUGH BORN 1899
ADA TWAMLEY GOODNOUGH DIES 1914
ROY GOODNOUGH DIES 1952

And then, finally, below that there was just one more date, that last one, the one that was the reason for there even being a story on the front page at all:

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1976

So that much of it—that much of what that Denver reporter found out and that much of what his paper printed—was right. But that wasn't all of it. That wasn't even all of that much. It didn't touch on the how; it never mentioned the why. And even when it went on to repeat what Bud Sealy must have told him about those half-dozen chickens and that old dog and Lyman asleep on his cot while Edith rocked, even then it wasn't complete. For one thing, it left out Roy's stubs. For another, it didn't say a word about Lyman's wait, nor his Pontiacs and postcards and twenty-dollar bills. For still another, it didn't tell how Edith herself waited, first for one to die and then for the other to come back, and what she did with him when he did come back, and how, finally, she ever managed to live through those years of travelogue. It never mentioned my dad.

But then, to tell truth, I don't guess that Denver reporter could have written about those things, even if he'd have wanted to, because nobody told him about them in the first place so that he could go on and write them up after he was told. I wouldn't tell him. I would have been the one to tell him too—Bud Sealy was right about that. But I wouldn't. By God, I would not.

But listen now, if a person didn't want to print it up in some damn newspaper or throw it all over the front page between two pictures that were arranged so the people in the pictures had to stare at what was printed between them like it was a thing to be ashamed of—no, if a person just wanted to sit down quiet in that chair across the table from me and, since it's Sunday afternoon, just drink his coffee while I talked, and then if he just didn't want to rush me too much—well, then, I could tell it. I would tell it so it would be all, and I would tell it so it would be right.

Because listen:

—2—

MOST OF WHAT I'm going to tell you, I know. The rest of it, I believe.

I know, for example, that they started in Iowa, like the papers said.

I believe, on the other hand, that he must have seen flyers talking about it. Maybe he saw notices in the Iowa papers and government brochures too, all talking about it, saying there were still some acres of it left out here and if he proved on some of it, stayed on it, it was his to homestead.

He was twenty-five. He had married late. Ada had married later—for a woman, I'm talking about, since this was eighty-two years ago and she was already twenty-three. But things like age and time would have bothered him in a different way than they did her, because the pictures I have seen of her show that she was a small thin woman with eyes that seemed too big for her head—one of those women with blue veins showing at both temples. A woman like that—tight strung, nervous, too fine altogether for what was wanted of her—never should have married somebody like him, and she paid for it. He was a hard stick. He was all stringy arms and legs, with an Adam's apple like a hickory nut that jugged up and down when he chewed or said something, and I don't suppose he was much more than just getting used to having a woman in