

an epilogue to
**The Bridges
of Madison County**



**A
THOUSAND
COUNTRY
ROADS**

A N O V E L B Y

Robert James Waller

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The Bridges
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by

ROBERT JAMES WALLER



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*Once more,
for the peregrines,
the strangers,
last cowboys.*

*And for all the readers
who asked about
the rest of the story.*

In all, a book of endings.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are songs that come free from the blue-eyed grass, from the dust of a thousand country roads. This is one of them.

With those words I began a book called *The Bridges of Madison County*. But, in truth, there were two stories. Stories sometimes must wait their turn lest they clutter other things having first call. Over the years, letters arrived from the readers of *Bridges*, from men and women, teenagers of both genders, from truck drivers and housewives and lawyers and pilots and oil-rig workers. Hundreds of letters, probably thousands, from all over the world, with kind thoughts and good wishes.

A fair percentage of those who wrote wanted to know more about Robert Kincaid and Francesca Johnson, about their lives, about what happened to them after their four days together in Madison County, Iowa. Living a quiet, contented existence on a remote, high-desert ranch, having returned to my studies of economics and mathematics and jazz guitar, I felt no need to dig out the research notes, no push to write more. Yet, somewhere, at some time, for reasons not clear, after reading one more letter requesting information, I decided to tell the rest of the story.

And I wonder always about improbabilities, the nature of chance. *The Bridges of Madison County*, a small story set in a small time, a book originally

written as a gift for family and friends, a book I never had any hope of getting published nor intentions of doing so when I wrote it, in thirty-five or more languages now. A book that rolled from an inexpensive printer when I was using five-dollar software on a chugging Zenith 286 computer.

So, for those of you who asked and for anyone else with such curiosity, here is the rest of the story. If you have not read *Bridges*, the book may not stand by itself for you. For those who have read *Bridges*, I think you will find, among other things, surprise at the unexpected joy Robert Kincaid discovered late in his life.

ROBERT JAMES WALLER

In the Texas high-desert

Del Norte Mountains

New Year's Eve, 2001

Robert Kincaid

So:

*Come twirl the big rope again,
maybe not so high and wild
as you once did,
but still
with the hiss
and feel
of the circle
above you
and sun falling through the loop,
shadows on the ground
where the big rope twirls
while it's all getting down
to last things,
down to one-more-times...*

...down to inevitabilities and the long winding run from where you rocked in your mother's darkness to this: fog over Puget Sound and sitting in Shorty's bar on Tuesday nights, listening to Nighthawk's tenor saxophone contemplate "Autumn Leaves."

So this as it stands, the end of your season on the line and still alone, with the refrigerator's hum laid over the sound of your memories. Last cowboys

and all that. Those who hammered out the trace for you going or gone, Iris packing up her rainbow and the scholars of the twilight dead. Now, only the sound of your memories and the refrigerator's hum and Nighthawk's tenor on Tuesday nights.

It might have been different in a different life. Might have worked out for you and the woman. She was your one chance, and yet looking back on what happened, there was no chance at all. You have always known that, probably knew it then.

The act of going, of leaving what she had, that in itself would have made her a person apart from the one with whom you spent those days and nights. Both the decision and the act would have done that. Still, you would have risked it and tried to work things out on the run if she had turned your way.

Now, early morning in November 1981, chilly fog over the water. And piles of mail on the kitchen table you picked up for five dollars at a yard sale. Lugged it here on a ferry years ago after they bulldozed the apartment house in Bellingham to build a shopping center. Envelopes with a veneer of officialdom—government stuff—the VA and Social Security people still trying to find you. They can't figure out you might not want to hear from them, that you don't want whatever they're offering. Those envelopes marked: Return to Sender.

Still, it's mail of some kind when there's little else in the box except advertisements from people trying to get you to buy things you don't care about owning, home theater systems and such. Thinking, what the hell is a home theater system, anyway?

And if you had the money to buy it, which you don't, what would you do with it?

At the age of sixty-eight, Robert Kincaid tugged on a frayed orange suspender and ran his other hand along the neck of a golden retriever called Highway. He lit a Camel and walked to the window. Somewhere in the fog or behind the fog, low distant ronnk of a tug working the Seattle harbor.

Kincaid opened the top drawer of a four-high filing cabinet near the window. The rows of photographic slides hanging in their plastic pages, his life in those pages, five to a row and twenty to a page. The life of a man who had spent his years looking for good light. He chose a page at random and held it up to a reading lamp. The first slide was of a dock worker in Mombasa, muscles popping and big grin under a knit cap. That would have been 1954, twenty-seven years earlier.

The second was of a harp seal pup looking straight up the lens at him: 1971 and the ice floes off Newfoundland. Then along the Strait of Malacca and men putting out to sea in a six-oar boat, fishing with baited hooks and dwindling hope waters fished too long and hard. After that, a summer shot in the Basque countryside. And a cold June along the Beaufort Sea where Amundsen had once sailed. And a tiger coming out of long grass on the shores of Lake Periyar in south India. Another pocket showed a heron looping across morning water near Port Townsend, the photo looking much like the sound of Nighthawk's saxophone on the fourth measure of "Sophisticated Lady."

More. The *campesino* girl in Mexico, standing in a field and looking back over her shoulder at him, floppy straw hat and feed-sack dress, her name and village neatly lettered along one edge of the slide: *María de la Luz Santos, Celaya, Mexico, 1979*. That had been his last major assignment for a magazine, a low-budget shoot where he eventually used some of his own money to get the job done right. He wondered whatever happened to María de la Luz Santos, if she still lived in the same village and worked the fields of summer.

Next pocket, the sun slowly falling through a North Dakota autumn and a hard, sunglassed face looking down from the window of a big orange machine: *Jack Carmine, Wheat Combiner, farmer's field south of Grand Forks, 1975*.

Thousands of photographs in the file. Robert Kincaid had kept only the best ones, and his standards were exquisitely high. The rejects tossed and burned as part of the sorting. For each of those he kept, he could remember almost the exact time and place and light conditions when he hit the shutter. Even the smells that had surrounded him. Periyar brought him curry, the Basque shot returned spiced goat meat. The Beaufort shoot had been a less interesting culinary experience, the tedium of camp food mainly, fish sometimes, all of it forked in under mosquito netting.

The last slide in the page was a blurred image of rock and water. He was working the cliffs of Acadia in 1972 and had slipped and fallen thirty feet to sand just as he pressed the shutter. He kept the shot as a token to daring and stupidity and the thin

edge separating them. The broken ankle had never healed properly, chiefly because he ignored his physician's advice and started working hard before the bone had a proper chance to mend. He returned the page to its place and rested easy on the open drawer, hands folded on the files, fingers laced.

At the front of the drawer was a large manila envelope containing letters written to Francesca Johnson over the years, but never mailed. Behind the envelope was an archival box with photographic prints in it. Robert Kincaid took out the box and cleared a space on the kitchen table, pushing aside dirty dishes and advertisements and return-to-sendered VA letters. Lowering himself onto a chair and carefully opening the box, he put on his wire-rimmed bifocals and lifted a sheet of protective paper. He stared at the woman in the top photograph.

From sixteen years back, Francesca Johnson leaned on a fence post in Iowa and smiled at him in her old jeans and T-shirt. Black and white had been right for her, picked up the lines of her body and the lines in her face, just the way she looked back then. When he first printed the shot, she came up on the paper like the ghost of his past she was. First the blank paper, then the soft outlines of meadow and fence and a human form, then Francesca in high contrast at dawn on a Wednesday, in August, in 1965. Francesca, coming toward him out of the tray.

Robert Kincaid studied the photograph, as he had hundreds of times over the years since being

there with her. There were twenty-six other shots of her in the box, but this was his favorite. Nothing fancy, just Francesca and the morning, her breasts pressing against thin cotton and clearly outlined against it.

He laid his hands on the table beside the box, spread his long, slim fingers, and felt the touch of her skin from back through all the years. Felt the shape of her body, some tactile memory from his mind to his hands or the other way around. Without moving his hands, only his mind, he could run them easy and soft over her, the length and round of her, over Francesca Johnson.

Francesca and his one chance at wrenching aside all the lonely times, his one damn chance at something other than these long years of silence and solitude, the road and the roar of jet engines on his way to wherever the light was good. He would have given up everything for her, the road and the picture-making, anything. But there were choices in the way of them, hard choices for her. And she had made her decision, the right one as she saw things, and stayed with it. Stayed with her family in Iowa instead of leaving with him.

Jesus, how he could bring it back, convert images into feelings, make it torturously real and right there for him. His belly against hers, the arch of her body as she came to him, the lightning of a thick summer night though the bedroom curtains. Her soft smile and how she couldn't stop touching him, there in the bed, the morning after, always with her hands on him.

"If I don't touch you, I'm afraid this all might go

away," she told him, smiling and pressing against him as she said it.

But it went away just the same. Went away on a Friday morning when he drove down the lane of her farm in southern Iowa, when the sun was hot and the trees were still and the world had a silent heart. When he stood on the running board of a truck named Harry and looked back up the lane at her, looked a long time before taking Harry slowly onto the main road. And tears coming then as he glanced back one time at Francesca sitting where the lane began, sitting cross-legged with her head in her hands, in the heat and dust of an Iowa summer.

Who the hell says the fires burn down? Maybe flicker a little, but never snuffed completely. The old myths, a matter of convenience for those who no longer want the press of a woman against them and all the responsibilities that entails. Looking at the photo of Francesca Johnson, his hands moving over her across the miles and years, he wanted it all again, wanted her naked and moving beneath him and saying words he could not always understand, but understood just the same. He felt himself starting to get hard, and smiled. Just the thought of her could still do that to him.

Robert Kincaid removed his billfold from the left hip pocket of his jeans and extracted a small piece of folded paper. The paper was smudged and raggedy from a thousand unfoldings and ten thousand readings of Francesca Johnson's words with a phrase from W.B. Yeats embedded in them.

If you'd like supper again when 'white moths are on the wing,' come by tonight after you're finished. Anytime is fine.

Her handwriting from a long-ago summer when August had been hot and stayed that way and he sipped iced tea in her plain farmhouse kitchen. Later that night, she tacked the invitation to the side of a covered bridge, Roseman Bridge, in Madison County, Iowa.

Just to talk with her, to say again how he felt, how his entire life had been made whole for a few days. To thank her, if nothing else, look at her, see her face again. One moment of being able to say he was still out there and still loved her. Not possible and never was possible, her with a family and all. He leaned back, ran his hands through his gray hair, which was disheveled as usual, hanging two inches beyond his shirt collar. Final things, one-more-times, and the road still out there. Last cowboys ought to twirl the big rope again. Ought to do that. Ride the tired horse until it falls and let the blunted stem of your evolutionary path end with your passing.

Crouched there with fog on the water, fog at the door, and the footprints of all the years upon him. Crouched at the edge of...what? Nothing.

He poured a cup of coffee, walked to the cupboard, and opened it. On the shelves lay his equipment: the five lenses capped and resting in soft leather bags, the two Nikon F's and the Rangefinder, wrapped in thick cloth. The tools of a professional, old tools, old and battered, scratched and scarred

from metal buttons and zippers, from sirocco-driven sand and rocks of the Irish Barrens, from the jostling and rubbing of miles in Harry and in transcontinental jets bound for Africa or Asia or somewhere.

In the freezer compartment of the refrigerator was his last roll of Kodachrome II 25-speed film. When they stopped making it, he bought five hundred rolls and kept them frozen, rationing and nursing them, holding them for his own use while the magazines shifted over to Kodachrome 64.

So it all came down to this, just as he always knew it would. Fog on the water, fog at the door, and his last roll of film. The basics: blood and bone and flesh on the bones and thoughts in the mind, all gone to ashes come the end of things. Nothing more and impossible to change, the great push of what was written firm early on and stored by the Keepers of the way things turn out. What a strange, lonely, silent life. From the beginning it was of that feather and stayed the same. Except for those days, those four lambent days in 1965.

Down to this, after the years of walking Acadia's cliffs and the shores of Africa's horn, after twilights in a mountain village where the universe slides together, the laughing swims in jungle pools with a silk-merchant's daughter, her laughter pushing the silence away only for a moment. And always, always, being aware of the howl of time, of the fading and passing of this curious thing known as life, of understanding it was all so transitory. Work, eat, walk straight and stagger later on. Watching it all come down to a four-high file of emulsions as

fleeting as you are. Only the images remain, hushed testimony to your earlier celebrations.

*India,
or the Horn of Africa,
or the Strait of Malacca,
always the same:
men on the sand,
or handling boats
in the shore waves.
Some go
while others watch.
Tomorrow
they will do it
...again.*



Once the idea came to him, it wouldn't leave. He walked to the window and looked at the fog. Even the morning seemed tired, though it had only begun.

Robert Kincaid opened a kitchen drawer. Three uncashed checks from wearisome shoots at schools and art fairs, totaling \$742. Not the glory days anymore, not the long wandering shoots for *National Geographic* that had taken him to wherever the light was good.

Another eighty-seven dollars in bills. His coffee can full of change had maybe fifty more in it. The new engine in Harry was carrying only sixty-eight