

*The Bridges of  
Madison County*

# *Madison County*



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# *The Beginning*

There are songs that come free from the blue-eyed grass, from the dust of a thousand country roads. This is one of them. In late afternoon, in the autumn of 1989, I'm at my desk, looking at a blinking cursor on the computer screen before me, and the telephone rings.

On the other end of the wire is a former Iowan named Michael Johnson. He lives in Florida now. A friend from Iowa has sent him one of my books. Michael Johnson has read it; his sister, Carolyn, has read it; and they have a story in which they think I might be interested. He is circumspect, refusing to say anything about the story, except

that he and Carolyn are willing to travel to Iowa to talk with me about it.

That they are prepared to make such an effort intrigues me, in spite of my skepticism about such offers. So I agree to meet with them in Des Moines the following week. At a Holiday Inn near the airport, the introductions are made, awkwardness gradually declines, and the two of them sit across from me, evening coming down outside, light snow falling.

They extract a promise: If I decide not to write the story, I must agree never to disclose what transpired in Madison County, Iowa, in 1965 or other related events that followed over the next twenty-four years. All right, that's reasonable. After all, it's their story, not mine.

So I listen. I listen hard, and I ask hard questions. And they talk. On and on they talk. Carolyn cries openly at times, Michael struggles not to. They show me documents and magazine clippings and a set of journals written by their mother, Francesca.

Room service comes and goes. Extra coffee is ordered. As they talk, I begin to see the images. First you must have the images, then come the words. And I begin to hear the words, begin to see them on pages of writing. Sometime just after midnight, I agree to write the story—or at least attempt it.

Their decision to make this information public

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was a difficult one for them. The circumstances are delicate, involving their mother and, more tangentially, their father. Michael and Carolyn recognized that coming forth with the story might result in tawdry gossip and unkind debasement of whatever memories people have of Richard and Francesca Johnson.

Yet in a world where personal commitment in all of its forms seems to be shattering and love has become a matter of convenience, they both felt this remarkable tale was worth the telling. I believed then, and I believe even more strongly now, they were correct in their assessment.

In the course of my research and writing, I asked to meet with Michael and Carolyn three more times. On each occasion, and without complaint, they traveled to Iowa. Such was their eagerness to make sure the story was told accurately. Sometimes we merely talked; sometimes we slowly drove the roads of Madison County while they pointed out places having a significant role in the story.

In addition to the help provided by Michael and Carolyn, the story as I tell it here is based on information contained in the journals of Francesca Johnson; research conducted in the northwestern United States, particularly Seattle and Bellingham, Washington; research carried out quietly in Madison County, Iowa; information gleaned from the

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photographic essays of Robert Kincaid, assistance provided by magazine editors, detail supplied by manufacturers of photographic films and equipment, and long discussions with several wonderful elderly people in the county home at Barnesville, Ohio, who remembered Kincaid from his boyhood days.

In spite of the investigative effort, gaps remain. I have added a little of my own imagination in those instances, but only when I could make reasoned judgments flowing from the intimate familiarity with Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid I gained through my research. I am confident that I have come very close to what actually happened.

One major gap involves the exact details of a trip made across the northern United States by Kincaid. We knew he made this journey, based on a number of photographs that subsequently were published, a brief mention of it by Francesca Johnson in her journals, and handwritten notes he left with a magazine editor. Using these sources as my guide, I retraced what I believe was the path he took from Bellingham to Madison County in August of 1965. Driving toward Madison County at the end of my travels, I felt I had, in many ways, become Robert Kincaid.

Still, attempting to capture the essence of Kincaid was the most challenging part of my research and writing. He is an elusive figure. At times he

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seems rather ordinary. At other times ethereal, perhaps even spectral. In his work he was a consummate professional. Yet he saw himself as a peculiar kind of male animal becoming obsolete in a world given over to increasing amounts of organization. He once talked about the "merciless wail" of time in his head, and Francesca Johnson characterized him as living "in strange, haunted places, far back along the stems of Darwin's logic."

Two other intriguing questions are still unanswered. First, we have been unable to determine what became of Kincaid's photographic files. Given the nature of his work, there must have been thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of photographs. These never have been recovered. Our best guess—and this would be consistent with the way he saw himself and his place in the world—is that he destroyed them prior to his death.

The second question deals with his life from 1975 to 1982. Very little information is available. We know he earned a sparse living as a portrait photographer in Seattle for several years and continued to photograph the Puget Sound area. Other than that, we have nothing. One interesting note is that all letters mailed to him by the Social Security Administration and Veterans Administration were marked "Return to Sender" in his handwriting and sent back.

Preparing and writing this book has altered my



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world view, transformed the way I think, and, most of all, reduced my level of cynicism about what is possible in the arena of human relationships. Coming to know Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid as I have through my research, I find the boundaries of such relationships can be extended farther than I previously thought. Perhaps you will have the same experience in reading this story.

That will not be easy. In an increasingly callous world, we all exist with our own carapaces of scabbed-over sensibilities. Where great passion leaves off and mawkishness begins, I'm not sure. But our tendency to scoff at the possibility of the former and to label genuine and profound feelings as maudlin makes it difficult to enter the realm of gentleness required to understand the story of Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid. I know I had to overcome that tendency initially before I could begin writing.

If, however, you approach what follows with a willing suspension of disbelief, as Coleridge put it, I am confident you will experience what I have experienced. In the indifferent spaces of your heart, you may even find, as Francesca Johnson did, room to dance again.

*Summer 1991*

## *Robert Kincaid*

**O**n the morning of August 8, 1965, Robert Kincaid locked the door to his small two-room apartment on the third floor of a rambling house in Bellingham, Washington. He carried a knapsack full of photography equipment and a suitcase down wooden stairs and through a hallway to the back, where his old Chevrolet pickup truck was parked in a space reserved for residents of the building.

Another knapsack, a medium-size ice chest, two tripods, cartons of Camel cigarettes, a Thermos, and a bag of fruit were already inside. In the truck box was a guitar case. Kincaid arranged the knapsacks on the seat and put the cooler and tripods on the floor. He climbed into the truck box and wedged the guitar case and suitcase into a corner of the box, bracing them with a spare tire lying on its side and securing both cases to the tire with a length of clothesline rope. Under the worn spare he shoved a black tarpaulin.

He stepped in behind the wheel, lit a Camel, and went through his mental checklist: two hundred rolls of assorted film, mostly slow-speed Kodachrome; tripods; cooler; three cameras and five lenses; jeans and khaki slacks; shirts; wearing photo vest. Okay. Anything else he could buy on the road if he had forgotten it.

Kincaid wore faded Levi's, well-used Red Wing field boots, a khaki shirt, and orange suspenders. On his wide leather belt was fastened a Swiss Army knife in its own case.

He looked at his watch: eight-seventeen. The truck started on the second try, and he backed out, shifted gears, and moved slowly down the alley under hazy sun. Through the streets of Bellingham he went, heading south on Washington 11, running along the coast of Puget Sound for a

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few miles, then following the highway as it swung east a little before meeting U.S. Route 20.

Turning into the sun, he began the long, winding drive through the Cascades. He liked this country and felt unpressed, stopping now and then to make notes about interesting possibilities for future expeditions or to shoot what he called "memory snapshots." The purpose of these cursory photographs was to remind him of places he might want to visit again and approach more seriously. In late afternoon he turned north at Spokane, picking up U.S. Route 2, which would take him half-way across the northern United States to Duluth, Minnesota.

He wished for the thousandth time in his life that he had a dog, a golden retriever, maybe, for travels like this and to keep him company at home. But he was frequently away, overseas much of the time, and it would not be fair to the animal. Still, he thought about it anyway. In a few years he would be getting too old for the hard fieldwork. "I might get a dog then," he said to the coniferous green rolling by his truck window.

Drives like this always put him into a taking-stock mood. The dog was part of it. Robert Kincaid was as alone as it's possible to be—an only child, parents both dead, distant relatives who had lost track of him and he of them, no close friends.

He knew the names of the man who owned the corner market in Bellingham and the proprietor of the photographic store where he bought his supplies. He also had formal, professional relationships with several magazine editors. Other than that, he knew scarcely anyone well, nor they him. Gypsies make difficult friends for ordinary people, and he was something of a gypsy.

He thought about Marian. She had left him nine years ago after five years of marriage. He was fifty-two now; that would make her just under forty. Marian had dreams of becoming a musician, a folksinger. She knew all of the Weavers' songs and sang them pretty well in the coffeehouses of Seattle. When he was home in the old days, he drove her to gigs and sat in the audience while she sang.

His long absences—two or three months sometimes—were hard on the marriage. He knew that. She was aware of what he did when they decided to get married, and each of them had a vague sense that it could all be handled somehow. It couldn't. When he came home from photographing a story in Iceland, she was gone. The note read: "Robert, it didn't work out. I left you the Harmony guitar. Stay in touch."

He didn't stay in touch. Neither did she. He signed the divorce papers when they arrived a year

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later and caught a plane for Australia the next day. She had asked for nothing except her freedom.

At Kalispell, Montana, he stopped for the night, late. The Cozy Inn looked inexpensive, and was. He carried his gear into a room containing two table lamps, one of which had a burned-out bulb. Lying in bed, reading *The Green Hills of Africa* and drinking a beer, he could smell the paper mills of Kalispell. In the morning he jogged for forty minutes, did fifty push-ups, and used his cameras as small hand weights to complete the routine.

Across the top of Montana he drove, into North Dakota and the spare, flat country he found as fascinating as the mountains or the sea. There was a kind of austere beauty to this place, and he stopped several times, set up a tripod, and shot some black-and-whites of old farm buildings. This landscape appealed to his minimalist leanings. The Indian reservations were depressing, for all of the reasons everybody knows and ignores. Those kinds of settlements were no better in northwestern Washington, though, or anywhere else he had seen them.

On the morning of August 14, two hours out of Duluth, he sliced northeast and took a back road up to Hibbing and the iron mines. Red dust floated in the air, and there were big machines and trains specially designed to haul the ore to freight-

ers at Two Harbors on Lake Superior. He spent an afternoon looking around Hibbing and found it not to his liking, even if Bob Zimmerman-Dylan was from there originally.

The only song of Dylan's he had ever really cared for was "Girl from the North Country." He could play and sing that one, and he hummed the words to himself as he left behind the place with giant red holes in the earth. Marian had shown him some chords and how to handle basic arpeggios to accompany himself. "She left me with more than I left her," he said once to a boozy riverboat pilot in a place called McElroy's Bar, somewhere in the Amazon basin. And it was true.

The Superior National Forest was nice, real nice. Voyageur country. When he was young, he'd wished the old voyageur days were not over so he could become one. He drove by meadows, saw three moose, a red fox, and lots of deer. At a pond he stopped and shot some reflections on the water made by an odd-shaped tree branch. When he finished he sat on the running board of his truck, drinking coffee, smoking a Camel, and listening to the wind in the birch trees.

"It would be good to have someone, a woman," he thought, watching the smoke from his cigarette blow out over the pond. "Getting older puts you in that frame of mind." But with him gone so much,

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it would be tough on the one left at home. He'd already learned that.

When he was home in Bellingham, he occasionally dated the creative director for a Seattle advertising agency. He had met her while doing a corporate job. She was forty-two, bright, and a nice person, but he didn't love her, would never love her.

Sometimes they both got a little lonely, though, and would spend an evening together, going to a movie, having a few beers, and making pretty decent love later on. She'd been around—two marriages, worked as a waitress in several bars while attending college. Invariably, after they'd completed their lovemaking and were lying together, she'd tell him, "You're the best, Robert, no competition, nobody even close."

He supposed that was a good thing for a man to hear, but he was not all that experienced and had no way of knowing whether or not she was telling the truth anyway. But she did say something one time that haunted him: "Robert, there's a creature inside of you that I'm not good enough to bring out, not strong enough to reach. I sometimes have the feeling you've been here a long time, more than one lifetime, and that you've dwelt in private places none of the rest of us has even dreamed about. You frighten me, even though



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you're gentle with me. If I didn't fight to control myself with you, I feel like I might lose my center and never get back."

He knew in an obscure way what she was talking about. But he couldn't get his hands on it himself. He'd had these drifting kinds of thoughts, a wistful sense of the tragic combined with intense physical and intellectual power, even as a young boy growing up in a small Ohio town. When other kids were singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," he was learning the melody and English words to a French cabaret song.

He liked words and images. "Blue" was one of his favorite words. He liked the feeling it made on his lips and tongue when he said it. Words have physical feeling, not just meaning, he remembered thinking when he was young. He liked other words, such as "distant," "woodsmoke," "highway," "ancient," "passage," "voyageur," and "India" for how they sounded, how they tasted, and what they conjured up in his mind. He kept lists of words he liked posted in his room.

Then he joined the words into phrases and posted those as well:

*Too close to the fire.*

*I came from the East with a small band of  
travelers.*