KISSING MY COUSIN

A blue line of light drew itself out slowly above the far black hills. It turned to a dull, throbbing red, then gold. And suddenly the sun rose noisily and flung its light over the crest of the Gros Ventre range. The light raced across the valley and splashed like a wave up onto the late-summer snows of the Grand Teton. Framed in the bunkhouse window opposite my bed, it was so juicy, colors so aniline, that it looked like an oil dealer's calendar.

It happened every morning that summer…but I never saw it once.

This light riot took place in the sky at about 5:30, when I was one of several still-sleeping humps. I needed all of that sleep I could get. I labored every day and all day long like a convict.

Suddenly the radio over in Gene's room came to friendly life. "Six o'clock, and it's *Farm and Ranch Time!*" A cheery voice from somewhere over in Idaho, crop prices and weather and pedal steel tinning away through the thin board wall that separated Gene from the waking me. Jesus, Gene, how could you listen to this crap? How could you be up, moving like one alive?

I could understand being up. I could understand stumbling around, numb-minded, thick-tongued, just able to wash and dress by rote. I *couldn't* understand being alert, thinking things. I couldn't understand being lively at six in the morning. I was 19. There was quite a list of things I didn't understand.

I was a college-kid cowboy, a hand brought in to help lay up the hay for the winter. This ranch was a stop on a cross-country trip that had as its real purpose a gulping down of any experience I could find. I was suffering from a lack of having lived and a vague desire to write, and I needed some experiences to write about. My pampered Eastern suburban existence had, I feared, set me apart from Humanity. I needed to go find where Humanity was, find some life and *live* it.

Living was more important than actually writing, and a lot easier--*and* a lot more fun. Too, there was the question of book jacket copy. "Mr. Kernan has worked as a ranch hand, fish gutter, railroad brakeman, deckhand on a tramp freighter, and has played piano

in a brothel in New Orleans. This is his third novel."

Well, 6:10, and now I've got to get up. Look at Gene. *He's* up! He's even smiling a pink, lean-faced smile as he leans through the door while holding the frame and says, "C'mon, boys! Time to get up!"

The boys are me and Shultz, tall, blond, brushcut ex-Army, with a fanatic passion for the arcane sport of Biathlon. There's also Johnny Brown, a Navajo who won't say a word during the course of this story. And there's Slim, an old cowboy who bunks with Gene and who has little time for us boys. The width of one whole universe seems to separate us from Slim.

Breakfast is ten minutes off, so dressing means dragging on yesterday's jeans and shirt and splashing water on my face. We are going to do a hard and dirty 10 hours in the fields. It would be a waste to begin this work with a good cleanup.

At 6:20 we walk over to the ranch house, a mock-rustic affair owned by one Bill Fleischmann, known in town as "Whiskey Bill" in honor of his connection with the whiskey family of Saint Louis. "Margarine Bill" would have been as appropriate, since the family made that too, but wouldn't that have sounded dumb?

Bill was waiting for us in the kitchen. He was a friendly man with a wiry, stiff, bowlegged body and a puzzled face tanned and creased by years in the intense sun. He'd been ranching for thirty years, and the key to his business plan was never to spend a cent on a new piece of equipment. Everything on the place--trucks, tractors, wagons, hay elevators--looked like it had been abandoned by Okies on their way to California**.** Bill had lots and lots of money, and he used it to pay for this little eccentricity. As each piece cracked under the weight of age and use, his workers rotated from job to job, the sequence determined by whatever else was in repair and running at the time when something broke. It wasn't good management, but Bill was a happy man, and he spent the day driving the place in his big red (new!) Chrysler Imperial. His dust plume was always visible somewhere in the distance.

So while us hands ate a huge breakfast of eggs, biscuits, potatoes, bacon and elk steaks, Bill and Gene talked about what needed to be done and what *could* be done given the equipment situation.

Today it was hay. Yesterday it had been hay too. And if the truck didn't break down

it would be hay for some days to come or the stuff would rot in the fields.

So after breakfast we swaggered out of the ranch house and started up the old truck that seemed made of polished rust. The truck roared and swayed slowly down the ranch roads through the liquid light of morning, its fenders flapping like the ears of an elephant, exhaust leaking from every crack in the exposed engine. The dew that fell during the cold mountain night glowed magically on the grass, on the low branches and the spider webs that swaged from bush to bush.

The truck trundled into a field and slowed, and one of the riders on the flatbed swung to the ground. His hay chaps were strapped to his legs, the hay hook dangled easily from his fingertips, and he sauntered over to the first bale. (There's a certain style to bucking bales, and we'd all learned it.) The work of the day was on.

Now, I'm anxious to get to the part about kissing my cousin, but before I do I want to say a little about the labor we did. In that work and in the mix of unconsciousness and self-consciousness with which we did it was so much of who we were. So here is the story of bucking bales.

Since each bale weighs from 85 (alfalfa) to 110 (timothy) pounds, you can't just toss it around. It's a matter of hooking the bale by one end and lifting that end onto the thigh. Then one sinks the hook into the other end and leans back, using the weight of the body as a counterbalance to lift the bale to the height of the flatbed truck and dropping it there.

Once the bale is on the truck, another hand hooks it and stacks it as neatly and tightly as he can. He is not an esthete. It's just that a loosely packed truck can dump a good bit of its load if it lurches through a ditch at an angle. A bale of hay is no lighter the second time you load it.

As the ranks of bales near the back of the truck bed, the standing room narrows and it becomes a challenge to catch the bale, hook it, tip it up and get it neatly in the stack at about head height in one smooth move while standing on a strip about a foot wide. I loved the work more when it got to this point, and I wished someone were there to see my skill. Some girl, perhaps.

When the ranks of bales were to the back of the flatbed it was time to head for the stack. The hand that has been working the field runs after the truck, leaps up, turn in the air, and lands sitting on the small strip left uncovered. It is done with a casual faith and

grace. It is done right.

That is the art of bucking bales.

Filling the truck took about an hour the first thing in the morning. By the time it was full we were beginning to feel the weight of the hay dragging on the muscles of our limbs and backs. But we were all strong, and there's a time in a young American life when hard work barely taps the energy stored in the body. It feels more than anything else like a warm-up for more work. This is who we were then.

As the truck roared back down toward the ranch buildings we had our first chance to rest and enjoy the rush of blood pumping energy into our limbs, to enjoy being alive and out West. I sat on the back of the bed and looked at the dirt of the road streaming out from under my feet and away into the distance where it slowed and merged into the landscape of the green mounds of the Gros Ventre. I was not stupid, but I was thoughtless.

The truck nosed down the road that fell over the edge of the valley floor into the wide alluvial ravine that held the ranch and the river. The sound of the engine rose as it braked the weight and momentum of the truck on the short, steep hill. (The truck always roared. Did I say why? The only working gears were first and compound low.)

As we started down I leaned out to the side and looked around the bales and down at the ranch glowing with content and serenity in the midmorning light. The buildings lay at the fringe of park land that ran to the river. There were the ranch house, the bunkhouse, the barn and a few smaller buildings partly hidden in the trees. A thin stream of smoke rose straight up from the bunkhouse chimney into the windless morning. I'd lit a fire that would burn slowly all day and heat the water for my shower at evening. The shower was part of my plan.

We rolled the lumbering truck, draped with its load of hay, around behind the barn to the haystack that we were building load by load, day by day. The truck jounced up to the hay elevator, coughed, and died. The roar was reborn in the old 2-cycle engine of the hay elevator that would take the bales up a conveyor and dump them at the top of the stack where two of us would place them.

The bales had to be laid up carefully, tightly, so that the vapor from the hay could outgas but the water of the rains couldn't find its way in to the center of the stack. The

young man's game in this part of the work was for the person unloading the truck to get the bales off and moving up the ramp as densely as he could manage. Thus he would try to overwhelm the two hands on top, who would hook each bale as it tumbled off the conveyor and wrestle it to a place on the stack. This could mean lugging and wrestling this prickly, heavy load fifteen or twenty feet across the rocking rack of bales without busting it apart. It often meant having one's leg drop into a crack between the bales and having to fight out again to resume hauling the arriving bales to the workface of the stack. The two hands on the top stood no real chance against the unloader, and it meant that when the elevator engine stopped, they had a jumble of 12 or 15 bales to set while the unloader below took some rest.

Now came the first silence of the run. It was sweet in the ear. We lay out in the damp living grass. I smoked. Schultz was in training for the Biathlon so he couldn't. He just talked with a kind of weird intensity of his recent Army days in Alaska and of how much he just loved to go around skiing and shooting, skiing and shooting. It would have been more unsettling if he hadn't seemed so much like a very big, very serious fifth grader.

Johnny Brown sat with us but somehow apart and sang a toneless song in his Dineh tongue under his breath. He was small, with a round face that looked up and opened in a lovely smile when Schultz said, "Lets go." We swung up onto the truck for the drive to the next field where the bales lay strewn under the midday sun like casualties.

***

The elevator engine died. I was working down on the truck bed, and had put on a furious burst of effort to try to get a vast and messy pileup of bales for the others on top to have to deal with, just for the fun, for the pure 19-year-old hell of it.

It was 5:30, and except for a 45 minute break at lunch we had been lifting bales since seven in the morning--nearly 10 hours of intense, difficult physical work.

We left the truck back in it's tin-roofed shed and walked up the short road that led to the bunkhouse. The ranch lay close to the mountains to the west, and the sun had gone behind them, but there was quite a bit of sunlight left in the sky above, and the green Gros Ventre mountains to the East were lit with an orange light. After the heat and the work of the day the cool of the mountain's shadow had a winey tang and cut the fatigue like a narcotic.

I walked faster as we got to the bunkhouse. I'd heated the water and it was mine. Gene was there as I walked in, but Gene neither showered nor smelled that I ever noticed. He must have taken care of these things in some cowboy way we didn't learn in college.

In the shower the water was no longer hot, but it had a warm, softening quality as it cut through the sweat and the dust and the hay blades and the grit that had filled my shirt and my boots and made a kind of paste against my skin. The shower had a richness, a luxury that was intensified by how much I needed it.

Afterward I dried off quickly, feeling the chill in the shadowy air and the coming night. I put on what seemed to be the last of my clean clothes. I'd have to go to town soon and do laundry. But no laundry tonight.

My boots were my only boots, and I had been working in them all day, and for weeks. I had some moccasins that I could wear. But not tonight. I had to wear my boots tonight.

I loped across the shadowy yard and through the gate into the ranch house kitchen and slid into my place at the table. The other boys were at the table and well begun on their supper. Elk steaks again.

After supper I hooked a ride with Gene in his pickup. We drove out the long ranch road to the main road, out of the mountain's shadow into the very last of the sunlight. I held forth a bit as we drove, saying that I didn't think that I could really live with the effects of an early mountain sunset. I said that there was a strange feeling that came from being in such a huge and enveloping shadow when the sun shone so brightly only a few miles away. It had an odd unsettling effect, I said. As I set off these little rockets of self-appreciation Gene looked over at me a few times with a smile that lay between affable and quizzical, but he said nothing.

Gene parked his old pickup nose to curb in town. I don't remember why he had come to town. Perhaps he never told me. I'm sure I didn't ask. It was some old cowboy thing, and the writer in me should have cared what it was, but at that moment I didn't. I had plans of my own.

Here's what they were...

Well, actually they were pretty vague. I was going to meet my cousin, Sally Thomsen from Philadelphia, and some friends of hers. That was as far as the concrete part of the plan went. After that things got rather unspecific and branched into several possibilities,

each a kind of romantic tributary.

Perhaps, for example, there'd be several of these friends who'd be female, and of those perhaps one or two might be attractive. Perhaps one of them might be more than just attractive. There might be one who would look at me and respond to some inward call. It wouldn't be a decision, she'd just *know* something. She'd feel that I was the answer to an incompleteness she'd only vaguely sensed until now. It would be the sight of me that would make that sense of incompleteness clear for the very first time. Before that it would have been only an elusive sadness that overtook her at just those times when she should have been happy.

Maybe there'd even be a *couple* of girls like that. That way, if one of them was cool to me or was with someone else there'd be the other. The trouble with this plan was that, for all of the bravado I felt in fantasy, I was very shy, and when in a group of people I'd either slip off to inventory the bookshelves or else drink enough to propel me into a kind of imitation of an extrovert that functioned as a wall.

But tonight, I told myself, could very possibly be different. For one thing, the place my cousin worked at was a dude ranch up the valley. It wasn't pure dude, with nothing but trail rides and campfires. It was like a working ranch, but it was theater. The young kids helped out, but the real work of the place was to keep the kids engaged and active and send them home a bit tougher than they'd been when they came out from the East. To this end they shuffled some cattle around and did things like that. But they didn't castrate the calves. I mean, imagine the letters home!

Sally and her friends were something like counselors, having risen through the system at this ranch camp. And that was the fascinating difference between them and me. *I* was working on a real ranch. *I* was doing a real job, a man's job. I bucked bales, mended fences, skinned my knuckles, ripped my jeans. I worked 10 hour days. I was a real hand, not some Episcopalian from the Main Line.

Don't you think that makes me sound interesting?

And if that weren't enough, I could always allude obliquely to writing, to Kerouac and the Beats.

The town of Jackson, where I'd come to meet Sally, had a kind of mock Western facade along most of the main street. Everyone who was in the town had come there to

play at cowboys, except for the real cowboys who had come to play with the people who were playing at cowboys. There were bars, cafes, souvenir shops that purveyed the illusion. It was a kind of cowtown Disneyland.

I was ready to play the game as I walked into the Silver Dollar. There was a long bar, paved with silver dollars, that began just inside the door. It surrounded an island of sinks, bottles, glasses and other drinking paraphernalia In the center of the island was a small bandstand, on which there was a western swing band--fiddle, guitar, bass, drums, and pedal steel. They were playing *San Antonio Rose*, a song out of date even then. "Lips so sweet and tender, like petals falling apart..." Even now when I hear it I'm transported back to that time that seems so carefree. Proust had his Madeleine; I bite into a bar or two of San Antonio Rose and feel my mouth fill with bourbon and my heart with longing.

But enough of Literature, where was Sally? And who had she brought with her? I walked down the bar and into a back room. It was away from the music and people were sitting around tables and talking. There, at a table in the back, sat my cousin Sally.

And with her was...was...Junie Goodwin? This was Sally's red-haired, plain-faced friend from Philadelphia. And there was someone else, a guy about my age whose name I never got. And that was all! There was no one to dream about. There was no unknown, unknowable girl to look at while she talked to someone else. There was no college girl heading back to some New England campus where the Indian summer heat would mix with leaf smoke in a few weeks. No one to write to, to have down for the weekend. No one to show my fascinating difference to. Just Sally and Junie. And some guy.

Thinking back, I was more dismissive of Sally than I should have been. She was rather plain by my fantasy standards, but she liked to laugh, and in retrospect I realize that someone who can laugh readily is a valuable fellow traveler on many roads.

It meant that you could show off in front of her, follow thoughts to absurd extremes. It meant that you could make fun of things you didn't understand and not be judged for it.

Really, I liked Sally. I sat down next to her. There were introductions to the other guy. He might have been made of glass.

The waitress came over and asked "Whatcha want, cowboy?" in a sassy way. "Gimme a ditch." That was the way they said Bourbon and water out there.

"So, Sally..."

***

Hours later, now, about 12:30. We were driving north up the main road of the valley, The Kid With No Name at the wheel, Junie next to him. Sally and I sat in the back.

Had the moon risen full when I was in the dark bars? I don't know, but my memory of that night has the land all painted in the silvery green/gray tones that the eye sees in moonlight. The shining Tetons to the left, the scrub and pasture fading into the buffalo-humps of the Gros Ventre range to the right, the headlights pointing up the dead straight, gray road that so perfectly divided everything under the glowing sky.

The air was cold, but it felt merely cool to me because of the effects of 5 or 6 ditches. We'd gone to several bars in town, and talked and laugh loudly over the music, danced a bit, drank some more. I was high and alive. I'd set aside my fantasy-ridden future and come into the present. I had become just who I was.

Sally murmured, "Cold," and leaned against me. I put my arm around her and she snuggled against my side. It felt good. It didn't matter who she was or was not. It just felt good to have someone touch me, not with their arms but with one whole side of their body. Things could flow between us where we met. Warmth. Something else, something like comfort. Something that suggested sex, but that wasn't all that erotic. There were hormones in the air, but there was also a sweetness.

I now know that something very big was happening then. I was at the end of the years spent proving that I was not my parent's child. I'd spent years noticing the difference between me and them, between me and the person they thought was their son, years being embarrassed by them, by their interest in me. I worked to make the distance between us clear.

While their friend's children worked on their tennis during the summer, I'd taken jobs in gas stations and factories. I'd spent my half-hour lunches there reading Dos Pasos, Upton Sinclair, Hemmingway, Kerouac, Corso. My parents had accepted all this relentlessly. My mother even found me a factory job through the wife of a company president who was on some committee with her.

Well, if my parents wouldn't fight or thrust me away, I needed to withdraw. I knew by then that I would never really go home to them. Or if I did it would be to behave like an uncouth visitor, to sleep late and stay up at night listening to music. Only now do I know

that they lay awake elsewhere in the house and listened to the same music, wondering about their stranger son. They heard everything.

Now I was two thousand miles away from home, sitting in the back of a sedan in the Wyoming night loving the sense of cool wind on one side of me and warm cousin Sally on the other. Now there was some real distance between the parents and me.

My head lay on Sally's. I lifted it and turned to look down at her. She felt my head lift and knew what it meant. She turned her face up to mine. Our bourbon breaths mixed and my mouth closed gently on hers.

I waited that way to see what would happen. I could feel her mouth slowly soften. This was it! I opened my mouth a bit and let my tongue lick softly at her lips. It could have been insistent, it could have been nothing. She made a soft noise and opened her mouth.

Oh boy! I let my tongue slip between her lips and into her mouth. She met it with her tongue.

And there we stayed for the next eight miles or so, completely still, tongues gently rolling together. It was everything we wanted.

***

We came to the turnoff to the Fleischmann ranch. I asked them to let me off, told them I'd walk in, didn't want the headlights to wake everyone up.

The truth was that I just wanted to have a moment to explode alone. I wanted to talk to myself and say a few things (I didn't know what). I wanted to run a few hundred feet, to burn off a little of the excitement I felt, and I needed to do it alone.

I started walking down the dirt road toward the white ghosts of the Tetons, great breasts with snowy tips rising into the silvery sky. I was full of light. I had touched Sally, held her, and kissed her. I'd wanted no more in that untroubled moment.