

Kisses Don't Lie

by Tony Hozeny

It was one of those muggy August days when you're so bored you wish school would start again. Of course, you'd never say that. My friend Carl and I lay on the grass near the Chicago and Northwestern railroad tracks, chewing on wild chives and throwing stones into Wingra Creek. Carl was a year older, tougher and stronger than I was. We wore old tee shirts and beat-up jeans.

"You want to check out Franklin Field? Maybe some guys are playing baseball."

"Nah," Carl said. "Too hot. I'm so Goddamn bored. You got any money? I'm thirsty."

I shook my head and fired a stone into the creek. "Look, man, I hit a lily pad."

"Hey," Carl said. "Let's walk down to the Badger Road Bridge and then climb up that rock wall to the top. And then we'll visit Ted Sanderson. He'll give us something to drink. His parents own that restaurant, Sanderson's Steak House."

"I don't like him," I said. "He's a prick."

Carl gave me a look. "Ted's pretty cool. He's wild."

"You're not going to stick me with Mona, are you?" Ted's sister was a year older than the rest of us in our sixth grade class because she'd missed a year of school traveling around the country. She was a nice girl. But still.

Carl shrugged. "You can go home if you want to."

The sun burst through the clouds. We were sweating now. I walked the rail for a few steps, but it was so hot it was burning through my sneakers. The railroad men had laid fresh creosote on the ties. It smelled sweet and looked like black candy, like you could eat it. We walked along, throwing rocks ahead of us. I felt the cross ties vibrate and looked behind me.

"Train," I shouted. "Really coming up fast."

We scrambled down the embankment and waited for the green-and-yellow diesels and passenger cars to flash by.

"Wow, man," I said, when we reached the bridge. "That's really tall." The bridge was held by two limestone columns flush with the hills on either side.

"Yeah, it's pretty tall," Carl said, in that matter-of-fact way he had of minimizing problems, "It's probably a couple stories high."

I folded my arms. "Our apartment is two stories. This is way taller."

Carl ran his hand over the rock wall. It was a little slick. "See, look, just like Ted told me. He says he climbs it all the time. It's limestone, so there are little creases in the rock where you can grab on and pull yourself up and brace your feet. Do you want to try it?"

I knew he really wanted to make this climb, but he needed me to go along, maybe to keep up his nerve. "All right," I said.

"Let's try to go up side by side."

He found two handholds and pulled himself up right away. It took me a few tries to get started, but then I moved from hold to hold as quickly as he did. This is easy, I thought. When I was about twenty feet up, I looked down to check my progress and felt the whole world turn on its side, my stomach churning, my throat tight, and my head spinning.

"Oh, God," I said. "I'm scared."

"Don't ever look down," Carl said. "Goddamn it, that's my fault. I should've told you that before we started. Come on."

"I can't." My legs and arms were turning to water.

"You've got to. You can't jump, it's too high, and you'll never make it down backwards."

"You mean I'm stuck here?" The rock seemed to crumble under my fingers. Any minute now, I'd crash to the ground and break every bone in my body.

"Maybe I'd better keep climbing and get help," he muttered. I watched him go, hand over hand. I had to follow him. Hand over hand, step by step, I clambered slowly up the limestone column, slipping once, but only once.

Near the bottom support of the bridge, the limestone jutted out frighteningly,

hanging me out over what I'd already climbed. Don't look down, I told myself. I pulled up onto the sidewalk. My legs and arms were so shaky that I fell down on my knees. My palms and fingers were raw. I lay on my stomach, my head spinning. Carl came running over.

"You made it," he shouted. "Good going."

"I ain't doing that again," I said. The ground was whirling around my head. I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them, and everything cleared. There across Badger Road was the restaurant.

"Hey, look at that, man! A brand new '58 Continental convertible!"

We had to check that out. The car was a block long, pink with a white top. I looked down into the interior.

"Cool! The gear selector is a prism. You have to look at it just right or you can't read the gears."

A big guy came out of the restaurant. He yelled, "Hey, you kids, get the hell away from my car!"

We ran around to the back, where the Sandersons had their living quarters. Two pine trees shaded the porch. I could hear the radio, some twangy music. Ted was smoking a cigarette and sitting at a card table. He had greasy black hair and rings of dirt in his fat neck. There was a deck of cards on the table. When Carl sat down, Ted leaned toward him and whispered something. Carl and Ted laughed loudly, both slapping their thighs, a gesture I had never seen Carl use.

"Mona," Ted shouted, "get your ass out here with something to drink."

Mona came out with lemonade and poured four glasses. She sat down next to me. Her red-brown hair was tied in a ponytail with a black ribbon. She wore a sleeveless pink blouse with the tails out over her black shorts. Her lips were light red, like from lipstick, and I could see the outline of a bra under her shirt. Our eyes met, and I looked away. I felt funny and awkward.

She'd grown up, and I hadn't. She'd sat in front of me all through sixth grade, and yet today I couldn't think of a single thing to say to her. Ted took a final drag on his cigarette and tossed it away.

"Hey, let's play strip poker," he said. "If Mona loses, she'll have to take her shirt off. Then we'll see if she's really got anything to put in that new little training bra she got yesterday."

"Shut up, Ted." Her brown eyes flashed, her thin face turned hard, and her mouth was a tight line. "You're the one who's going to lose. Then we can all look at your fat butt."

"Fuck you," he said coldly. "Come on, Carl, I got something to show you in my room." I started to get up. "Not you. You're too little. You stay here with my little sister."

Carl and I exchanged glances. "Oh, come on, Ted, let him come along."

"No," Ted said. Mona and I watched them go.

"Good lemonade," I said.

Mona crossed her legs and fiddled with the strap of her bra. "You ain't missing much," she said. "Ted's got some girlie magazines, that's all."

I made a face. "You mean, like Good Housekeeping? Why's he looking at a magazine for girls?"

Mona did a double take. "Don't you know what I mean? A magazine with naked girls in it, like Playboy."

"Oh," I said.

She smiled and touched my wrist. I felt a sudden tremor run from my neck all the way down. "You've never looked at one, have you?"

"No. But one day Don Maly brought in these playing cards he stole from his old man that have naked people doing things to each other." I leaned forward. "He showed them to everybody in the boys' john. Even Dennis Beyler. Dennis said, 'Why are they doing that?' We all just laughed at him." I shrugged, trying to seem cool and mature, but I hadn't known what they were doing, either. I just had enough sense not to ask. "They were lousy photographs. You couldn't really see much. One picture had a horse in it."

Mona giggled. "We have a couple of them decks under the bar. You can just about tell that they're screwing. You want to see one?"

I said, "No, that's okay." But I felt young and stupid because none of this fazed Mona at all. Maly had said that girls didn't know anything about screwing and stuff like that. How you do it is, you get them drunk or something and then screw them before

they even figure out what's going on, he'd said.

"What the hell was the horse doing?" She had this grin like she was about to tell a secret.

"Just standing there. Some girl was underneath him, sucking on his, his . . ." I felt my face turn hot red. Then I burst out laughing. Mona did, too. We stopped.

"Jesus. A horse," she said. That set us off again.

When I stopped laughing, I said, "So what's the big deal with the magazines?"

"All the girls have really big boobs."

"Oh." I sipped my lemonade. She sipped hers. I tried to think of something to say. Mona looked away, singing softly along with the radio:

This can't go on, you'll have to choose the way
You'll have to go or stay
Stop running wild

"Hey, is that a new Everly Brothers song?"

Mona shook her head. "No, that's the Louvin Brothers. This song was out last fall. It plays on our jukebox all the time."

"It's a pretty song."

"Yeah, I like it. And you're right, it kind of sounds like the Everly Brothers." Mona rummaged in her purse and pulled out a crumpled pack of Salems and matches.

"You smoke?"

"Sure," she said, her eyes cool, watching me. "Don't you?" She lit one and exhaled a stream of smoke.

"I stole a couple from my old man once." I felt myself turn red—two drags and I'd thrown up over the back fence.

"You want to try one?"

What if I said no, and she told everyone I was chicken?

"Yeah," I said, watching her. Wow. A girl who smoked. She blew out a stream of smoke, then leaned so close I could smell her flowery perfume. I felt a hard thump in my stomach, like going down in a fast elevator. She slipped the filter tip between my lips. I

took a small drag and let the smoke slowly leak out. Even so, I coughed and coughed. The smoke drifted up under my glasses, and my eyes turned hot and itchy. I had to take my glasses off and rub my eyes.

"You almost got it," Mona said, "Just don't inhale. That's the secret."

"What does that mean?"

"People who really smoke take these big drags and open their lungs so they get the taste. I can't do that yet. But when they exhale, it comes out in a thin stream. You want to make it look like that. Just take a little smoke in your mouth, and then blow it out hard. See?" She blew the smoke out again. She looked cool, like a movie star.

I tried again. It was pretty easy. I could taste the sweet menthol on my tongue and lips. We sat and smoked. She gave me that grin again. I felt grown up, no longer a scrawny little kid everyone picked on. I couldn't wait to tell Carl. But the smoke made me a little woozy.

"Can we take a walk?"

She nodded. We walked out behind the restaurant and into the trailer park beyond it. My head cleared. We passed a cigarette back and forth. I wasn't bothered now when I dragged on it. When I wasn't dragging on it, I cupped it in my hand, as I'd seen teenagers do at the bus stop, but Mona said, "You don't have to worry about getting caught. I don't even know most of these people, and the ones we know wouldn't bother telling my parents." She flicked ashes off the end of the cigarette. "Me and Ted are alone a lot."

Her soft, scratchy voice sounded sad. She crushed out the Salem under her sandal, and we walked toward the Badger Road Bridge, the backs of our hands brushing a few times. I really liked that tremor. We sat on the sidewalk, looking down on the tracks.

"I climbed up here when we came to see you," I told her.

She slugged my arm. "Liar, liar, pants on fire."

My palms were still red. "See? From the limestone."

"Wow." She looked right into my eyes and gave me that grin again. "Even Ted can't do that. Now I suppose you think you're really hot shit."

I shook my head. "It was dumb, Mona. I could've killed myself."

Mona touched my hand. I almost touched hers back. "I'll show you another way down."

"It must be cool to have a restaurant," I said.

Her jaw dropped. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, you must get all the pop and ice cream you want."

She snorted. "You get to clean up after a lot of damn drunks, too. You should see some of these people from Saint Raphael's, they act so holy on Sunday morning, you should see what they're like on Saturday night. Telling dirty jokes and feeling each other up. Bunch of jerks. One of them old guys tried to put his hands on me. I slugged him right in the nuts. All the priests come out here, too. They're mostly okay. They just drink and watch the ballgame. But Monsignor Kelso's really bad, and he starts ordering everybody around and acting like a big shot."

"He's an asshole, first, last and all the time."

"Aren't you afraid you'll go to hell, calling a priest an asshole?" She punched my arm lightly, and I punched her back the same way. I felt that tremor again. "Aren't you afraid you'll go to *hell*?"

"Not for that," I said.

"Are you *sure* you're not afraid?" she teased, grinning at me.

I grinned back, wanting to touch her hand, her shoulder, something. "Hell, no," I said, firing a rock down at the railroad tracks. "He *is* an asshole. Even God knows that."

She kicked off her sandals and pushed the soft dirt around with her toes. "I never knew you were such a bad boy," she said huskily. "But nice, too." I grinned goofily, staring into her warm brown eyes, unable to say anything. We heard a diesel horn, and we watched a long freight go by. Her face looked drawn, her mouth tight.

"Are you sad about something, Mona?"

She adjusted her bra strap. "Just I've got to work the bar tonight."

"Do you get paid?"

She snorted. "That'll be the day." She stared down at the tracks. "I'm glad you came out to visit."

"Me, too."

I saw Carl come walking quickly out the front of the restaurant.

"We've got to go right now," he said.

"Mona knows another way down," I said. We followed her to the trailer park and then down an overgrown path. A garter snake slithered across the path in front of Mona. Carl and I both jumped, but she didn't even blink. At the tracks, she turned in profile, stuck her hands in the pockets of her shorts, and said, "See you some time," and headed back up the path.

"What were you and Ted doing?"

Carl made a face. "He *is* a prick."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Well, Mona told me he's never climbed up to the bridge."

"Lying sack of shit."

Carl wouldn't want to come out here again. And I could just imagine trying it alone. Ted would dog us the whole time. I felt drawn to Mona in a way I couldn't understand. For the first time ever, I wanted to go to church, hoping she'd be there, but no luck. So right after Sunday lunch, I looked up her phone number and picked up the phone to call her. Dad asked whom I was calling.

"A girl in my class."

He shook his head no, glaring at me. "Hang up. You're too damned young to be calling girls. You're supposed to be washing the dishes, so get on the stick."

By the time I was done with the dishes, I'd worked out a plan. I pocketed my Boy Scout knife and the thirty cents I'd earned cutting the neighbor's grass. I said I was going for a bike ride. My little sister Cathy wanted to come along. I'd taught her to ride a month ago, and now she wanted to come along all the time. I told her we could ride later.

There was a payphone about three blocks away in front of Bongey's drug store. I went into the store and bought two small bottles of Coke. Then I called. Mona answered right away.

"Sanderson's Steak House."

I froze.

"Who *is* this?"

I took a deep breath, choked, choked out “This is me.”

“Oh. *Big* help. Come on, I ain’t got all day.”

I blurted out my name and that I wanted to see her today. We decided to meet in a half hour on the tracks at the Wingra Creek trestle. She’d bring cupcakes and cigarettes. I hid the Cokes in the backyard, hustled inside and grabbed my baseball glove.

“Now where are you going?” Mom said. “Honest to Pete.” But she was smiling.

“To play ball with my friend Gene.” I knew she’d ask, so I said, “He lives down the tracks just past the creek. On Fisher Street.”

Dad set the paper aside. “Be back by three. I want that grass cut today.”

It seemed like I’d been waiting a long time. I wondered if she’d forgotten or changed her mind. Then I saw her, way off in the distance, walking fast.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. Today, she wore a pink ribbon in her ponytail, a sleeveless blue shirt tied at her waist, and jeans. Same flowery perfume. “At the last minute, my mom made me fill the little paper cups with Cole Slaw and then wrap the tops and put them in the refrigerator,” she said. As she talked, her eyes flashed, and she kept opening and closing her hands. “I hate that damned job. Takes forever. Plus, one of the waitresses called in sick today, so guess who has to work? And that one, oh, sure, she’s *sick*, all right. Probably just hungover. Damnit, I forgot the cupcakes. Plus, Ted doesn’t have to do nothing but take out the garbage. He’s off someplace playing ball or whatever he does. Oh, well, no sense complaining. Don’t do no good anyway.” She stared at me, raising her eyebrows. “What’s wrong with you? Cat got your tongue?”

“You talk a *lot*, Mona.”

She did a double take. “I guess I do.” We started laughing.

“Hey, what’s this?” She picked up the glove. “You brought me out here to play baseball? I don’t want to play baseball.”

“Not even girls’ baseball? You know, first base kissing, second base—”

She slugged my arm. “You *are* a bad boy.”

We sat down on the rail. I explained the glove was my ticket out of the house. She grinned her secret grin. I reached in the bag, used my knife bottle opener to pop the tops of the Cokes, and handed her one.

“So how about a cigarette?” she said.

I guided her hand to light my cigarette. Her hand was warm and soft. That tremor was strong now, more like a spasm, and it didn’t go away. We inched closer, our shoulders and hips touching.

“Jeez, school’s only two weeks away,” Mona said, adjusting her bra strap. “So have you heard which nun we’re going to get?”

“Yeah, big Josie. You weren’t here then, but I had her in fifth grade. She’s going to work us to death. But she’s fair. No teacher’s pets. She’s *tough*. Me and Maly were fighting on the playground, and when we didn’t stop right away, she smacked us both upside of the head with a ruler. That hurt! But don’t worry. She doesn’t hit girls.”

“This is really nice,” she said. “There’s a little breeze, so it’s not too hot. You can see the water rippling down there.” She threw a rock down into the ripples. “Nobody here to bug us or tell us what to do.” She exhaled, and I watched her smoke.

“You still got that down better than I do. I guess it just takes practice.”

We smoked quietly for a few minutes. I picked up a handful of rocks and threw them in the creek.

“It’ll be good to see the other kids again.” Mona snickered. “See who else is growing boobs.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. She looked down, seeming to draw into herself. I tried flipping my cigarette away with my thumb and middle finger, like the teenagers at the bus stop. It looked cool. Mona stubbed out her cigarette. I got an idea.

“I can still taste that menthol on my lips. Can you taste yours?”

Our eyes met. She shook her head no.

“Want to taste mine?”

She giggled. “How we going to do that?”

I moved toward her, and we kissed, our teeth knocking together. We kissed, and kissed again, then more times than I could count. Just like in the movies, I pulled her close, and she rested her head on my chest. Suddenly, nothing on earth mattered but this girl. I’d never felt so safe and happy and peaceful. And *strong*. I believed I could probably pick up a house.

She moved a little apart. “This is nice,” she whispered. “But I got to go.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“You don’t have to do that. Besides, I’m going to have to run all the way.”

“Then I’ll have to run with you.”

“You just want to kiss me again.”

“How did you figure that out?”

When we’d almost reached the path, we walked, holding hands. Then I pulled her close and kissed her. It was a long kiss. We ended up gasping because we forgot to breathe.

“Call me again some time.”

“I will.”

I watched while she picked her way up the steep, sandy path. She blew me a kiss, and then she was gone. I had so much energy I didn’t know what to do with it all. I ran and yelled and jumped and threw rocks all the way back down the tracks.



Tony Hozeny is the author of the novels *Driving Wheel* and *My House Is Dark*, both published by Wisconsin House Ltd., and numerous short stories. He has an MA from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. Now retired, he was for many years Director of Communications for the Wisconsin Department of Commerce. He plays mandolin for the Northern Comfort Bluegrass Band. He is married with three children and one grandchild.