



The Life and Times of the

THUNDERBOLT KID

A MEMOIR

BILL BRYSON

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GIVE OR TAKE the occasional ticklish murder, Iowa has always been a peaceful and refreshingly unassertive place. In the 160 years or so that it has been a state, only one shot has been officially fired in anger on Iowa soil, and even that wasn't very angry. During the Civil War, a group of Union soldiers, for reasons that I believe are now pretty well forgotten, discharged a cannonball across the state line into Missouri. It landed in a field on the other side and dribbled harmlessly to a halt. I shouldn't be surprised if the Missourians put it on a wagon and brought it back. In any case, nobody was hurt. This was not simply the high point in Iowa's military history, it was the only point in it.

Iowa has always been proudly middling in all its affairs. It stands in the middle of the continent, between the two mighty central rivers, the Missouri and Mississippi, and throughout my childhood always ranked bang in the middle of everything—size, population, voting preferences, order of entry into the Union. We were slightly wealthier, a whole lot more law-abiding, and more literate and better educated than the national average, and ate more Jell-O (a lot more—in fact, to be completely honest, we ate all of it), but otherwise have never been too showy at all. While other states of the Midwest churned out a more or less continuous stream of world-class worthies—Mark Twain, Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Charles Lindbergh—Iowa gave the world Donna



Reed, Wyatt Earp, Herbert Hoover, and the guy who played Fred Mertz on *I Love Lucy*.

Iowa's main preoccupations have always been farming and being friendly, both of which we do better than almost anyone else, if I say so myself. It is the quintessential farm state. Everything about it is perfect for growing things. It occupies just 1.6 percent of the country's land area, but contains 25 percent of its Grade A topsoil. That topsoil is three feet deep in most places, which is apparently pretty deep. Stride across an Iowa farm field and you feel as if you could sink in up to your waist. You will certainly sink in up to your ankles. It is like walking around on a very large pan of brownies. The climate is ideal, too, if you don't mind shoveling tons of snow in the winter and dodging tornadoes all summer. By the standards of the rest of the world, droughts are essentially unknown and rainfall is distributed with an almost uncanny beneficence—heavy enough to give a healthful soaking when needed but not so much as to pummel seedlings or wash away nutrients. Summers are long and agreeably sunny, but seldom scorching. Plants love to grow in Iowa.

It is in consequence one of the most maximally farmed landscapes on earth. Someone once calculated that if Iowa contained nothing but farms, each of 160 acres (presumably the optimal size for a farm), there would be room for 225,000 of them. In 1930, the peak year for farm numbers, there were 215,361 farms in the state—not far off the absolute maximum. The number is very much smaller these days because of the relentless push of amalgamation, but 95 percent of Iowa's landscape is still farmed. The remaining small fraction is taken up by highways, woods, a scattering of lakes and rivers, loads of little towns and a few smallish cities, and about twelve million Wal-Mart parking lots.

I remember reading once at the state fair that Iowa's farms produced more in value each year than all the diamond mines in the world put together—a fact that fills me with pride still. It remains number one in the nation for the production of corn, eggs, hogs, and soybeans, and is second in the nation in total agricultural wealth, ex-

ceeded only by California, which is three times the size. Iowa produces one-tenth of all America's food and one-tenth of all the world's corn. Hooray.

And when I was growing up all this was as good as it has ever been. The 1950s has often been called the last golden age of the family farm in America, and no place was more golden than Iowa, and no spot had a lovelier glint than Winfield, the trim and cheerful little town in the southeast corner of the state, not far from the Mississippi River, where my father had grown up and my grandparents lived.

I loved everything about Winfield—its handsome Main Street, its imperturbable tranquility, its lapping cornfields, the healthful smell of farming all around. Even the name was solid and right. Lots of towns in Iowa have names that sound slightly remote and lonesome and perhaps just a little in-bred—Mingo, Pisgah, Tingley, Diagonal, Elwood, Coon Rapids, Ricketts—but in this green and golden corner of the state the town names were dependably worthy and good: Winfield, Mount Union, Columbus Junction, Olds, Mount Pleasant, the unbeatably radiant Morning Sun.

My grandfather was a rural route mailman by trade, but he owned a small farm on the edge of town. He rented out the land to other farmers, except for three or four acres that he kept for orchards and vegetables. The property included a big red barn and what seemed to me like huge lawns on all sides. The back of the house was dominated by an immense oak tree with a white bench encircling it. It seemed always to have a private breeze running through its upper branches. It was the coolest spot in a hundred miles. This was where you sat to shuck peas or trim green beans or turn a handle to make ice cream at the tranquil, supertime end of the day.

My grandparents' house was very neat and small—it had just two bedrooms, one upstairs and one down—but was exceedingly comfortable and always seemed spacious to me. Years later I went back to Winfield and was astounded at how tiny it actually was.

From a safe distance, the barn looked like the most fun place in the world to play. It hadn't been used for years except to store old furni-

ture and odds and ends that would never be used again. It was full of doors you could swing on and secret storerooms and ladders leading up to dark haymows. But it was actually awful because it was filthy and dark and lethal and every inch of it smelled. You couldn't spend five minutes in my grandfather's barn without banging your shins on some piece of unyielding machinery, cutting your arm on an old blade, coming into contact with at least three different types of ancient animal shit (all years old but still soft in the middle), banging your head on a nail-studded beam and recoiling into a mass of sticky cobwebs, getting snagged from the nape of your neck to the top of your buttocks on a strand of barbed wire, quilling yourself all over with splinters the size of toothpicks. The barn was like a whole-body workout for your immune system.

The worst fear of all was that one of the heavy doors would swing shut behind you and you would be trapped forever in a foul smelly darkness, too far from the house for your plaintive cries to be heard. I used to imagine my family sitting around the dinner table saying, "Well, I wonder whatever became of old Billy. How long has it been now? Five weeks? Six? He'd sure love this pie, wouldn't he? I'll certainly have another piece if I may."

Even scarier were the fields of corn that pressed in on all sides. Corn doesn't grow as tall as it used to because it's been hybridized into a more compact perfection, but it shot up like bamboo when I was young, reaching heights of eight feet or more and filling 56,290 square miles of Iowa countryside with a spooky, threatening rustle by the dryish late end of summer. There is no more anonymous, mazelike, unsettling environment, especially to a dim, smallish human, than a field of infinitely identical rows of tall corn, each—including the diagonals—presenting a prospect of endless vegetative hostility. Just standing on the edge and peering in, you knew that if you ventured more than a few feet into a cornfield you would never come out. If a ball you were playing with dropped into a cornfield, you just left it, wrote it off, and went inside to watch TV.

So I didn't play alone much at Winfield. Instead I spent a lot of time following my grandfather around. He seemed to like the company. We got along very well. My grandfather was a quiet man, but always happy to explain what he was doing and glad to have someone who could pass him an oil can or a screwdriver. His name was Pitt Foss Bryson, which I thought was the best name ever. He was the nicest man in the world after Ernie Banks.

He was always rebuilding something—a lawn mower or washing machine; something with fan belts and blades and lots of swiftly whirring parts—and always cutting himself fairly spectacularly. At some point, he would fire the thing up, reach in to make an adjustment, and almost immediately go, "Dang!" and pull out a bloody, slightly shredded hand. He would hold it up before him for some time, wiggling the fingers, as if he didn't quite recognize it.

"I can't see without my glasses," he would say to me at length.

"How many fingers have I got here?"

"Five, Grandpa."

"Well, *that's* good," he'd say. "Thought I might have lost one." Then he'd go off to find a bandage or piece of rag.

At some point in the afternoon, my grandmother would put her head out the back door and say, "Dad, I need you to go uptown and get me some rutabaga." She always called him Dad, even though he had a wonderful name and he wasn't her father. I could never understand that. She always needed him to get rutabaga. I never understood that either since I don't remember any of us ever being served it. Maybe it was a code word for prophylactics or something.

Going uptown was a treat. It was only a quarter of a mile or so, but we always drove, sitting on the high bench seat of my grandfather's Chevy, which made you feel slightly regal. Uptown in Winfield meant Main Street, a two-block stretch of retail tranquility sporting a post office, two banks, a couple of filling stations, a tavern, a newspaper office, two small grocers, a pool hall, and a variety store.

The last stop on every shopping trip was a corner grocer's called

Benteco's, where they had a screen door that *kerboinged* and *bammed* in a deeply satisfying manner, and made every entrance a kind of occasion. At Benteco's I was always allowed to select two bottles of Nehi brand pop—one for dinner, one for afterward when we were playing cards or watching *Bilko** or Jack Benny on TV. Nehi was the pop of small towns—I don't know why—and it had the intensest flavor and most vivid colors of any products yet cleared by the Food and Drug Administration for human consumption. It came in six select flavors—grape, strawberry, orange, cherry, lime-lemon (never "lemon-lime"), and root beer—but each was so potently flavorful that it made your eyes water like an unintended sprinkler, and so sharply carbonated that it was like swallowing a thousand tiny razor blades. It was wonderful.

The Nehi at Benteco's was kept in a large, blue, very chilly cooler, like a chest freezer, in which the bottles hung by their necks in rows. To get to a particular bottle usually required a great deal of complicated maneuvering, transferring bottles out of one row and into another in order to get the last bottle of grape, say. (Grape was the one flavor that could actually make you hallucinate; I once saw to the edge of the universe while drinking grape Nehi.) The process was great fun if it was you that was doing the selecting (especially on a hot day when you could bask in the cooler's moist chilled air) and a torment if you had to wait on some other kid.

The other thing I did a lot in Winfield was watch TV. My grandparents had the best chair for watching television—a beige leatherette recliner that was part fairground ride, part captain's seat from a space ship, and all comfort. It was a thing of supreme beauty and utility. When you pulled the lever you were thrust—flung—into a deep recline mode. It was nearly impossible to get up again, but it didn't

*I know it was never actually called *Bilko*. It was *You'll Never Get Rich* and then changed to *The Phil Silvers Show*. But we called it *Bilko*. Everybody did. It was only on for four years.

matter because you were so sublimely comfortable that you didn't want to move. You just lay there and watched the TV through splayed feet.

My grandparents could get seven stations on their set—we could only get three in Des Moines—but only by turning the roof aerial, which was manipulated by means of a crank on the outside back wall of the house. So if you wanted to watch, say, KTVO from Ottumwa, my grandfather had to go out and turn the crank slightly one way, and if you wanted WOC from the Quad Cities he turned it another, and KWWI in Waterloo another way still, in each case responding to instructions shouted through a window. If it was windy or there was a lot of solar activity, he sometimes had to go out eight or nine times during a program. If it was one of my grandmother's treasured shows, like *As the World Turns* or *Queen for a Day*, he generally just stayed out there in case an airplane flew over and made everything lapse into distressing waviness at a critical moment. He was the most patient man who ever lived.

I watched a lot of television in those days. We all did. By 1955, the average American child had watched five thousand hours of television, up from zero hours five years earlier. My favorite programs were, in no particular order, *Zorro*, *Bilko*, *Jack Benny*, *Dobie Gillis*, *Love That Bob*, *Sea Hunt*, *I Led Three Lives*, *Circus Boy*, *Sugarfoot*, *M Squad*, *Dragnet*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Millionaire*, *Guns Smoke*, *Robin Hood*, *The Untouchables*, *What's My Line?*, *I've Got a Secret*, *Route 66*, *Topper*, and *77 Sunset Strip*, but really I would watch anything.

My favorite of all was *The Burns and Allen Show* starring George Burns and Gracie Allen. I was completely enchanted with it because I loved the characters and their names—Blanche Morton, Harry Von Zell—and because George Burns and Gracie Allen were, in my view, the funniest double act ever. George had a deadpan manner and Gracie always got the wrong end of every stick. George had a television in his den on which he could watch what his neighbors were up to with-

"You want chocolate gravy with that or biscuit gravy or peanut butter 'n' niblets gravy?"

"Hey, how about a little of all three?"

"You got it!"

The main dishes were complemented by a table of brightly colored Jell-Os, the state fruit, each containing further imaginative components—marshmallows, pretzels, fruit chunks, Rice Krispies, Fritos corn chips, whatever would maintain its integrity in suspension—and you had to take some of each of these, too, though of course you wanted to because it all looked so tasty. Then came at least two big tables carrying tubs and platters of buttery mashed potatoes, baked beans and bacon, creamed vegetables, deviled eggs, corn breads, muffins, heavy-duty biscuits, and a dozen types of coleslaw. By the time all these were loaded onto your paper plate, it weighed twelve pounds and looked, as my father once described it, distinctly post-operative. But there was no resisting the insistent blandishments of the many Mabels.

Everyone for miles came to the suppers. It didn't matter what the denomination of the church was. Everybody came. Everyone in town was practically Methodist anyway, even the Catholics. (My grandparents, for the record, were Lutherans.) It wasn't about religion; it was about sociable eating in bulk.

"Now don't forget to leave room for dessert," one of the Mabels would say as you staggered off with your plate, but you didn't have to be reminded of that for the desserts were fabulous and celebrated, the best part of all. They were essentially the same dishes, but with the meat removed.

On the few nights when we weren't at a church social, we had enormous meals at my grandparents' house, often on a table carried out to the lawn. (It seemed important to people in those days to share dinner with as many insects as possible.) Uncle Dee would be there, of course, burping away, and Uncle Jack from Wapello, who was notable for never managing to finish a sentence.

"I tell you what they ought to do," Uncle Jack would say in the

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out their knowing it, which I thought was just a brilliant notion and one that fed many a private fantasy, and he often stepped out of the production to talk directly to the audience about what was going on. The whole thing was years ahead of its time. I've never met another human being who even remembers it, much less doted on it.

NEARLY EVERY SUMMER EVENING just before six o'clock we would walk uptown (all movement toward the center was known as going uptown) to some shady church lawn and take part in a vast potluck supper, presided over by armies of immense, chuckling women who had arms and necks that sagged in an impossible manner, like really wet clothes. They were all named Mabel and they all suffered greatly from the heat, though they never complained and never stopped chuckling and being happy. They spent their lives shooing flies from food with spatulas (setting their old arms a-wobbling in a hypnotizing manner), blowing wisps of stray hair out of their faces, and making sure that no human being within fifty yards failed to have a heaped paper plate of hearty but deeply odd food—and dinners in the 1950s, let me say, were odd indeed. The main courses at these potluck events nearly always consisted of a range of meat loafs, each about the size of a V-8 engine, all of them glazed and studded with a breathtaking array of improbable ingredients from which they drew their names—Peanut Brittle 'n' Cheez Whiz Upside-Down Spam Loaf and that sort of thing. Nearly all of them had at least one "n" and an "upside down" in their names somewhere. There would be perhaps twenty of these. The driving notion seemed to be that no dish could be too sweet or too strange and that all foods automatically became superior when up-ended.

"Hey, Dwayne, come over here and try some of this Spiced Liver 'n' Candy Corn Upside-Down Casserole," one of the Mabels would say. "Mabel made it. It's delicious."

"Upside down?" Dwayne would remark with a dry look that indicated a quip was coming. "What happened—she drop it?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe she did," Mabel would reply, chuckling.

midst of a lively discussion, and someone else more assertive would interject a comment and nobody would ever hear what Jack thought. "Well, if you ask me," he'd say, but nobody ever did. Mostly they sat around talking about surgical removals and medical conditions—goiters and gallstones, lumbago, sciatica, water on the knee—that don't seem to exist much anymore. They always seemed so old to me, and slow, so glad to sit down.

But they sure were good-natured. If we had a guest from beyond the usual family circle somebody would always bring out the dribble glass and offer the guest a drink. The dribble glass was the funniest thing I had ever seen. It was a fancy-looking, many-faceted drinking glass—exactly the sort of glass that you would give to an honored guest—that appeared to be perfectly normal, and indeed *was* perfectly normal, so long as you didn't tilt it. But cut into the facets were tiny, undetectable slits, ingeniously angled so that each time the glass was inclined to the mouth a good portion of the contents dribbled out in a steady run onto the victim's chest.

There was something indescribably joyous about watching an innocent, unaware person repeatedly staining him- or herself with cranberry juice or cherry Kool-Aid (it was always something vividly colored) while twelve people looked on with soberly composed expressions. Eventually, feeling the seepage, the victim would look down and cry, "Oh, my golly!" and everyone would burst out laughing.

I never knew a single victim to get angry or dismayed when they discovered the prank. Their best white shirt would be ruined, they would look as if they had been knifed in the chest, and they would laugh till their eyes streamed. God, but Iowans were happy souls.

WINFIELD ALWAYS HAD more interesting weather than elsewhere. It was hotter, colder, windier, noisier, sultrier, more punishing and emphatic than weather elsewhere. Even when the weather wasn't actually doing anything, when it was just muggy and limp and still on an August afternoon, it was more muggy and limp than anywhere else

you have ever been, and so still that you could hear a clock ticking in a house across the street.

Because Iowa is flat and my grandparents lived on the very edge of town, you could see everything meteorological long before it got there. Storms of towering majesty often lit the western skies for two or three hours before the first drops of rain fell in Winfield. They talk about big skies in the western United States, and they may indeed have them, but you have never seen such lofty clouds, such towering anvils, as in Iowa in July.

The greatest fury in Iowa—in the Midwest—is tornadoes. Tornadoes are not often seen because they tend to be fleeting and localized and often they come at night, so you lie in bed listening to a wild frenzy outside knowing that a tornado's tail could dip down at any moment and blow you and your cozy tranquility to pieces. Once my grandparents were in bed when they heard a great roaring, like a billion hornets as my grandfather described it, going right past their house. My grandfather got up and peered out the bedroom window but couldn't see a thing and went back to bed. Almost at once the noise receded.

In the morning, he stepped outside to fetch in the newspaper and was surprised to find his car standing in the open air. He was sure he had put it away as usual the night before. Then he realized he *had* put the car away, but the garage was gone. The car was standing on its concrete floor. It didn't have a scratch on it. Nothing of the garage was ever seen again. Looking closer, he discovered a track of destruction running along one side of the house. A bed of shrubs that had stood against the house, in front of the bedroom window, had been obliterated utterly, and he realized that the blackness he had peered into the night before was a wall of tornado passing on the other side of the glass an inch or two beyond his nose.

Just once I saw a tornado when I was growing up. It was moving across the distant horizon from right to left, like a killer apostrophe. It was about ten miles off and therefore comparatively safe. Even so

"Did they ever find that leg?"

"Nope. Never found Mabel either. You know, I think it's moving again."

He indicated the tornado and we all watched closely. After a few moments it became apparent that it had indeed resumed its stately march to the east. It wasn't coming toward us after all. Very soon after that, it lifted from the ground and returned into the black clouds above it, as if being withdrawn. Almost at once the wind dropped. My father and grandfather went back in the house looking slightly disappointed.

The next day we drove over and had a look at where it had gone and there was devastation everywhere—trees and power lines down, barns blown to splinters, houses half vanished. Six people died in the neighboring county. I expect none of them were worried about the tornado either.

WHAT I PARTICULARLY REMEMBER of Winfield is the coldness of the winters. My grandparents were very frugal with the heat in their house and tended to turn it all but off at night, so that the house never warmed up except in the kitchen when a big meal was being cooked, like at Thanksgiving or Christmas, when it took on a wonderful steamy warmth. But otherwise it was like living in an Arctic hut. The upstairs of their house was a single long room, which could be divided into two by a pull-across curtain. It had no heating at all and the coldest linoleum floor in history. But there was one place even colder: the sleeping porch. The sleeping porch was a slightly rickety, loosely enclosed porch on the back of the house that was only notionally separate from the outside world. It contained an ancient sagging bed that my grandfather slept in in the summer when the house was uncomfortably warm. But sometimes in the winter when the house was full of guests it was pressed into service, too.

The only heat the sleeping porch contained was that of any human being who happened to be out there. It couldn't have been more than one or two degrees warmer than the world outside—and outside was

it was unimaginably powerful. The sky everywhere was wildly, unnaturally dark and heavy and low, and every wisp of cloud in it, from every point in the compass, was being sucked into the central vortex as if being pulled into a black hole. It was like being present at the end of the world. The wind, steady and intense, felt oddly as if it was not pushing from behind, but pulling from the front, like the insistent draw of a magnet. You had to fight not to be pulled forward. All that energy was being focused on a single finger of whirling destruction. We didn't know it at the time, but it was killing people as it went.

For a minute or two the tornado paused in its progress and seemed to stand on one spot.

"That could mean it's coming toward us," my father remarked to my grandfather.

I took this to mean that we would all now get in our cars and drive like hell in a contrary direction. That was the option I planned to vote for if anyone asked for a show of hands.

But my grandfather merely said, "Yup. Could be," and looked completely undisturbed.

"Ever seen a tornado up close, Billy?" my father said to me, smiling weirdly.

I stared at him in amazement. Of course not and I didn't want to. This business of not ever being frightened of anything was easily the most frightening thing about adults in the fifties.

"What do we do if it's coming this way?" I asked in a pained manner, knowing I was not going to enjoy the answer.

"Well, that's a good question, Billy, because it's very easy to flee from one tornado and drive straight into another. Do you know, more people die trying to get out of the way of tornadoes than from any other cause?" He turned to my grandfather. "Do you remember Bud and Mabel Weidmeyer?"

My grandfather nodded with a touch of vigor, as if to say, *Who could forget it?* "They should have known better than to try to outrun a tornado on foot," my grandfather said. "Especially with Bud's wooden leg."

perishing. So to sleep on the sleeping porch required preparation. First, you put on long underwear, pajamas, jeans, a sweatshirt, your grandfather's old cardigan and bathrobe, two pairs of woolen socks on your feet and another on your hands, and a hat with earflaps tied beneath the chin. Then you climbed into bed and were immediately covered with a dozen bed blankets, three horse blankets, all the household overcoats, a canvas tarpaulin, and a piece of old carpet. I'm not sure that they didn't lay an old wardrobe on top of that, just to hold everything down. It was like sleeping under a dead horse. For the first minute or so it was unimaginably cold, shockingly cold, but gradually your body heat seeped in and you became warm and happy in a way you would not have believed possible only a minute or two before. It was bliss.

Or at least it was until you moved a muscle. The warmth, you discovered, extended only to the edge of your skin and not a micron farther. There wasn't any possibility of shifting positions. If you so much as flexed a finger or bent a knee, it was like plunging them into liquid nitrogen. You had no choice but to stay totally immobilized. It was a strange and oddly wonderful experience—to be poised so delicately between rapture and torment.

It was the sereneest, most peaceful place on earth. The view from the sleeping porch through the big broad window at the foot of the bed was across empty dark fields to a town called Swedesburg, named for the nationality of its founders, and known more informally as Snooseville from the pinches of tobacco that the locals used to pack into their mouths as they went about their business. Snoose was a homemade mixture of tobacco and salt which was kept embedded between cheek and gum where the nicotine could be slowly and steadily absorbed. It was topped up hourly and kept in permanently. Some people, my father told me, even put in a fresh wad at bedtime.

I had never been to Swedesburg. There was no reason to go—it was just a small collection of houses—but at night in winter with its distant lights it was like a ship far out at sea. I found it peaceful and

somehow comforting to see their lights, to think that all the citizens of Snooseville were snug in their homes and perhaps looking over at us in Winfield and deriving comfort in turn. My father told me that when he was a boy the people of Snooseville still spoke Swedish at home. Some of them could barely speak English at all. I loved that, too—the all sitting around eating herring and black bread and saying, "Oh, ja!" and just being happily Swedish in the middle of the American continent. When my dad was young if you drove across Iowa you would regularly come upon towns or villages where all the inhabitants spoke German or Dutch or Czech or Danish or almost any other tongue from northern and central Europe.

But those days had long since passed. In 1916, as the shadow of the Great War made English-speaking people suspicious of loyalties, a governor of Iowa named William L. Harding decreed that henceforth it would be a crime to speak any foreign language in schools, at church, or even over the telephone in the great state of Iowa. There were howls that people would have to give up church services in their own languages, but Harding was not to be moved. "There is no use in anyone wasting his time praying in other languages than English," he responded. "God is listening only to the English tongue."

One by one the little linguistic outposts faded away. By the 1950s they were pretty much gone altogether. No one would have guessed it at the time, but the small towns and family farms were soon to become likewise imperiled.

In 1950, America had nearly six million farms. In half a century almost two-thirds of them vanished. More than half the American landscape was farmed when I was a boy; today, thanks to the spread of concrete, only 40 percent is—a severe decline in a single lifetime.

I was born into a state that had two hundred thousand farms. Today the number is much less than half that and falling. Of the 750,000 people who lived on farms in the state in my boyhood, half a million—two in every three—have gone. The process has been relent-

less. Iowa's farm population fell by 25 percent in the 1970s and by 35 percent more in the 1980s. Another hundred thousand people were skimmed away in the 1990s. And the people left behind are old. In 1988, Iowa had more people who were seventy-five or older than five or younger. Thirty-seven counties out of ninety-nine—getting on for half—recorded more deaths than births.

It's an inevitable consequence of greater efficiency and continuous amalgamation. Increasingly the old farms clump together into super-farms of three thousand acres or more. By the middle of the present century, it is thought, the number of farms in Iowa could drop to as low as ten thousand.

Without a critical mass of farmers, most small towns in Iowa have pretty well died. Drive anywhere in the state these days and what you see are empty towns, empty roads, collapsing barns, boarded farm-houses. Everywhere you go it looks as if you have just missed a terrible contagion, which in a sense I suppose you have. It's the same story in Illinois, Kansas, and Missouri, and even worse in Nebraska and the Dakotas. Wherever there were once small towns, there are now empty main streets.

Winfield is barely alive. All the businesses on Main Street—the dime store, the pool hall, the newspaper office, the banks, the grocery stores—long ago disappeared. There is nowhere to buy Nehi pop. You can't purchase a single item of food within the town limits. My grandparents' house is still there—at least it was the last time I passed—but its barn is gone as is its porch swing and the shade tree out back and the orchard and everything else that made it what it was.

The best I can say is that I saw the last of something really special. It's something I seem to say a lot these days.

Chapter 11

WHAT, ME WORRY?

LIES IN MORGUE 17 HOURS—ALIVE

ATLANTA, GA. (UP)—An elderly woman taken to a funeral home for embalming opened her eyes 17 hours after arriving and announced: "I'm not dead."

W. L. Murdaugh of Murdaugh Brothers funeral home here said two of his employees were made almost speechless.

The woman, listed as Julia Stallings, 70, seemed dazed after her long coma ended Sunday night, but otherwise appeared in good condition, Murdaugh said.

—*Des Moines Tribune*, May 11, 1953

Collier's

15c

August 5, 1950



HIROSHIMA, U.S.A.

Can Anything Be Done About It?

THE ONLY TIME I have ever broken a bone was also the first time I noticed that adults are not entirely to be counted on. I was four years old and playing on Arthur Bergen's jungle gym when I fell off and broke my leg.

Arthur lived up the street, but was at the dentist or something when I called, so I decided to have a twirl on his new jungle gym before heading back home.

I don't remember anything at all about the fall, but I do remember very clearly lying on damp earth, the jungle gym now above and around me and seeming awfully large and menacing all of a sudden, and not being able to move my right leg. I remember also lifting my head and looking down my body to my leg which was bent at an unusual—indeed, an entirely novel—angle. I began to call steadily for help, in a variety of tones, but no one heard. Eventually I gave up and dozed a little.

At some point I opened my eyes and a man with a uniform and a peaked cap was looking down at me. The sun was directly behind him so I couldn't see his face; it was just a hatted darkness inside a halo of intense light.

"You all right, kid?" he said.

"I've hurt my leg."

He considered this for a minute. "You wanna get your mom to put

some ice on it. Do you know some people named . . .”—he consulted a clipboard—“. . . Maholovich?”

“No.”

He glanced at the clipboard again. “A. J. Maholovich, 3725 Elmwood Drive.”

“No.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell at all?”

“No.”

“This is Elmwood Drive?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, kid, thanks.”

“It really hurts,” I said. But he was gone.

I slept a little more. After a while Mrs. Bergen pulled into their driveway and came up the back steps with bags of groceries.

“You’ll catch a chill down there,” she said brightly as she skipped past.

“I’ve hurt my leg.”

She stopped and considered for a moment. “Better get up and walk around on it. That’s the best thing. Oh, there’s the phone.” She hurried into the house.

I waited for her to come back but she didn’t. “Hello,” I croaked weakly now. “Help.”

Bergen’s little sister, who was small and therefore stupid and unreliable, came and had a critical look at me.

“Go and get your mom,” I said. “I’m hurt.”

She looked at my leg with comprehension if not compassion. “Owie,” she said.

“Yes, owie. It really hurts.”

She wandered off, saying, “Owie, owie,” but evidently took my case no further.

Mrs. Bergen came out after some time with a load of washing to hang.

“You must really like it down there,” she chuckled.

“Mrs. Bergen, I think I’ve really hurt my leg.”

“On that little jungle gym?” she said, with good-natured skepticism, but came closer to look at me. “I don’t think so, honey.” And then abruptly: “Christamighty! Your leg! It’s backward!”

“It hurts.”

“I bet it does, I bet it does. You wait right there.”

She went off.

Eventually, after quite some time, Mr. Bergen and my parents pulled up in their respective cars at more or less the same moment. Mr. Bergen was a lawyer. I could hear him talking to my parents about liability as they came up the steps. Mr. Bergen was the first to reach me.

“Now you do understand, Billy, that technically you were trespassing . . .”

They took me to a young Cuban doctor on Woodland Avenue and he was in a panic. He started making exactly the kind of noises Desi Arnaz made in *I Love Lucy* when Lucy did something really bone-headed—only he was doing this over my leg. “I don’t thin’ I can do this,” he said, and looked at them beseechingly. “It’s a really bad break. I mean look at it. Wow.”

I expect he was afraid he would be sent back to Cuba. Eventually he was prevailed upon to set the break. For the next six weeks my leg remained more or less backward. The moment they cut off the cast, the leg spun back into position and everyone was pleasantly surprised. The doctor beamed. “Tha’s a bit of luck!” he said happily.

Then I stood up and fell over.

“Oh,” the doctor said and looked troubled again. “Tha’s not good, is it?”

He thought for a minute and told my parents to take me home and to keep me off the leg for the rest of the day and overnight and see how it was in the morning.

“Do you think it will be all right then?” asked my father.

“I’ve no idea,” said the doctor.

The next morning I got up and stepped gingerly onto my wounded leg. It felt okay. It felt good. I walked around. It was fine. I walked a little more. Yes, it was definitely fine.

I went downstairs to report this good news and found my mother in the laundry room bent over sorting through clothes.

"Hey, Mom, my leg's fine," I announced. "I can walk."

"Oh, that's good, honey," she said, head in the dryer. "Now where's that other sock?"

IT WASN'T THAT MY MOTHER AND FATHER were indifferent to their children's physical well-being by any means. It was just that they seemed to believe that everything would be fine in the end and they were always right. No one ever got lastingly hurt in our family. No one died. Nothing ever went seriously wrong—and not much went wrong in our town or state either, come to that. Danger was something that happened far away in places like Matsu and Quemoy and the Belgian Congo, places so distant that nobody was really quite sure where they were.

It's hard for people now to remember just how enormous the world was back then for everybody, and how far away even fairly nearby places were. When we called my grandparents long distance on the telephone in Winfield, something we hardly ever did, it sounded as if they were speaking to us from a distant star. We had to shout to be heard and plug a finger in an ear to catch their faint, tinny voices on return. They were only about a hundred miles away, but that was pretty considerable distance even well into the 1950s. Anything farther—beyond Chicago or Kansas City, say—quickly became almost foreign. It wasn't just that Iowa was far from everywhere. Everywhere was far from everywhere.

America was especially blessed in this regard. We had big buffering oceans to left and right and no neighbors to worry us above or below, so there wasn't any need to be fearful about anything even. Even world wars barely affected our home lives. During World War II, when the film mogul Jack Warner realized that from the air his Hollywood studio was indistinguishable from a nearby aircraft factory, he had a giant arrow painted on the roof above the legend "Looney Tunes" to steer Japanese bombers safely away from some-

of the valuable stars who didn't go to war (and that included, just for the record, Gary Cooper, Bob Hope, Fred MacMurray, Frank Sinatra, John Garfield, Gene Kelly, Alan Ladd, Danny Kaye, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, Van Johnson, Dana Andrews, Ronald Reagan, and John Wayne, among many other valiant heroes who helped America to act its way to victory) and toward the correct target.

No one ever knew whether Warner was in earnest with his sign or not, but it didn't really matter because no one seriously expected (at least not after the first jittery days of the war) that the Japanese would attack the U.S. mainland. At the same time, on the other side of the country, when a congressman grew concerned for the welfare of rooftop sentries at the Capitol Building who didn't ever seem to stir from their positions or enjoy a moment's relief, he was quietly informed that they were in fact dummies and that their anti-aircraft guns were wooden models. There was no point in wasting men and munitions on a target that was never going to be hit, even if it was the headquarters of the United States government.

FOR THE RECORD there was one manned attack on the American mainland. In 1942, a pilot named Nobuo Fujita took to the air from coastal waters off Oregon in a specially modified seaplane that was brought aboard a submarine. Fujita's devious goal was to drop incendiary bombs on Oregon's forests, starting large-scale fires that would, if left to plan, rage out of control and engulf much of the West Coast, killing hundreds and leaving Americans weeping and demoralized at the thought of all that damage caused by one little squint-eyed man in a plane. In the event, the bombs either pattered out or missed only localized fires of no consequence.

The Japanese also, over a period of months, launched into the prevailing winds across the Pacific some nine thousand large paper balloons, each bearing a thirty-pound bomb timed to go off forty hours after launch—the length of time calculated that it would take to cross the Pacific to America. These managed to blow up a small number of curious souls whose last earthly utterance was something along the

lines of "Now what the heck do you suppose this is?" but otherwise did almost no damage, though one made it as far as Maryland.

IN THE COLD WAR YEARS all this comfortable security abruptly vanished as the Soviet Union developed long-range ballistic missiles to match our own. Suddenly we were in a world where something horribly destructive could drop on us at any moment without warning wherever we were. This was a startling and unsettling notion, and we responded in a quintessentially 1950s way. We got excited about it.

For a number of years you could hardly open a magazine without learning of some new destructive marvel that could wipe us all out in a twinkling. An artist named Chesley Bonestell specialized in producing sumptuously lifelike illustrations of man-made carnage, showing warhead-laden rockets streaking gorgeously (excitingly!) across American skies or taking off from giant space stations on a beautifully lit, wondrously imagined Moon en route to an explosive attack on planet Earth.

The thing about Bonestell's paintings was that they seemed so real, so informed, so photographically exact. It was like looking at something as it happened, rather than imagining it as it one day might be. I can remember studying with boundless fascination, and more than a touch of misplaced longing, a Bonestell illustration in *Life* magazine showing New York City at the moment of nuclear detonation, a giant mushroom cloud rising from the familiar landscape of central Manhattan, a second cloud spreading itself across the outlying sprawl of Queens. These illustrations were meant to frighten, but really they excited.*

*Bonestell was an interesting person. For most of his working life he was an architect, and ran a practice of national distinction in California until 1938 when, at the age of fifty, he abruptly quit his job and began working as a Hollywood film-set artist, creating background mattes for many popular movies. As a sideline he also began to illustrate magazine articles on space travel, creating imaginative views of moons and planets as they would appear to someone visiting from Earth. So when magazines in the fifties needed lifelike illustrations of space stations and lunar launchpads, he was a natural and inspired choice. He died in 1986, aged ninety-eight.

I'm not suggesting that we actually wanted New York to be blown up—at least not exactly. I'm just saying that if it *did* ever happen, you could see a plus side to it. We would all die, sure, but our last utterance would be a sincere and appreciative "Wow."

Then in the late 1950s the Soviets briefly developed a clear lead in the space race and the excitement took on a real edge. The fear became that they would install giant space platforms in geostationary orbit directly above us, far beyond the reach of our gnatlike planes and weakly puffing guns, and that from this comfortable perch they would drop bombs on us whenever we peevied them.

In fact, that was never going to happen. Because of Earth's spin, you can't just drop bombs from space like water balloons. For one thing, they wouldn't drop; they would go into orbit. So you would have to fire them in some fashion, which required a level of delivery control the 1950s simply didn't command. And anyway because the Earth is spinning at a thousand kilometers an hour (give or take), you would have to master extremely precise trajectories to hit a given target. Any bomb fired from space was in fact far more likely to fall in a Kansas wheat field, or almost anywhere else on Earth, than through the roof of the White House. If bombarding each other from space had ever been a realistic option, we would have space stations up there in the hundreds now, believe me.

However, the only people who knew this in the 1950s were space scientists, and they weren't going to tell anybody because then we wouldn't give them money to develop their ambitious programs. So magazines and Sunday supplements ran these breathless accounts of peril from above, because their reporters didn't know any better, or didn't wish to know any better, and because they had all these fantastic drawings by Chesley Bonestell that were such a pleasure to look at and just had to be seen.

So earthly devastation became both a constant threat and a happy preoccupation of that curiously bifurcated decade. Public service films showed us how private fallout shelters could not only be protective

total, or nearly three times Iowa's normal allotment—and 163 deaths. A famous picture of the time from *The Des Moines Register* shows assorted families, including one man on a tall ladder, standing outside Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines shouting greetings and encouragement to their quarantined children through the windows. Even after half a century it is a haunting picture, particularly for those who can remember just how unnerving polio was.

Several things made it so. First, nobody knew where it came from or how it spread. Epidemics mostly happened in the summer, so people associated polio with summer activities like picnics and swimming. That was why you weren't supposed to sit around in wet clothes or swallow pool water. (Polio was in fact spread through contaminated food and water, but swimming-pool water, being chlorinated, was actually one of the safer environments.) Second, it disproportionately affected young people, with symptoms that were vague and variable and always a worry to interpret. The best doctor in the world couldn't tell in the initial stages whether a child had polio or just the flu or a summer cold. For those who did get polio, the outcome was frighteningly unpredictable. Two-thirds of victims recovered fully after three or four days with no permanent ill effects at all. But others were partly or wholly paralyzed. Some couldn't even breathe unaided. In the United States roughly 3 percent of victims died; in outbreaks elsewhere it was as high as 30 percent. Most of those poor parents calling through the windows at Blank hospital didn't know which group their children would end up in. There wasn't a thing about it that wasn't a source of deepest anxiety.

Not surprisingly, a kind of panic came over communities when polio was reported. According to *Growing Up with Dick and Jane*, a history of the fifties, at the first sign of a new outbreak, "Children were kept away from crowded swimming pools, pulled out of movie theaters and whisked home from summer camps in the middle of the night. In newspapers and newsreels, images of children doomed to death, paralysis or years in an iron lung haunted the fearful nation.

Children were terrified at the sight of flies and mosquitoes thought to carry the virus. Parents dreaded fevers and complaints of sore throats or stiff necks."

Well, that's all news to me. I was completely unaware of any anxiety about polio. I knew that it existed—we had to line up from time to time after the mid-fifties to get vaccinated against it—but I didn't know that we were supposed to be frightened. I didn't know about any dangers of any type anywhere. It was quite a wonderful position to be in really. I grew up in possibly the scariest period in American history and had no idea of it.

WHEN I WAS SEVEN and my sister was twelve, my dad bought a blue Rambler station wagon, a car so cruddy and styleless that even Edsel owners would slow down to laugh at you, and decided to break it in with a drive to New York. The car had no air-conditioning, but my sister and I got the idea that if we lay the tailgate flat, stood on it, and held on to the roof rack, we could essentially get out of the car and catch a nice cooling breeze. In fact, it was like standing in the face of a typhoon. It couldn't have been more dangerous. If we relaxed our grip for an instant—to sneeze or satisfy an itch—we risked being whipped off our little platform and lofted into the face of a following Mack truck.

Conversely, if my father braked suddenly for any reason—and at least three or four times a day he provided us with sudden hold-on-to-your-hat swerves and a kind of bronco-effect braking when he dropped a lighted cigarette onto the seat between his legs and he and my mother jointly engaged in a frantic and generally entertaining search to find it—there was a very good chance that we would be tossed sideways into a neighboring field or launched—fired really—in a forward direction into the path of another mighty Mack.

It was, in short, insanely risky—a thought that evidently occurred to a highway patrolman near Ashtabula, Ohio, who set his red light spinning and pulled my dad over and chewed him out ferociously for

twenty minutes for being so monumentally boneheaded with respect to his children's safety. My father took all this meekly. When the patrolman at last departed, my father told us in a quiet voice that we would have to stop riding like that until we crossed the state line into Pennsylvania in another half hour or so.

It wasn't a terribly good trip for my dad. He had booked a hotel in New York from a classified ad in the *Saturday Review* because it was such a good deal, and then discovered that it was in Harlem. On the first night there, while my parents lay on the bed, exhausted from the ordeal of finding their way from Iowa to 1,252nd Street in upper Manhattan—a route not highlighted in any American Automobile Association guide—my sister and I decided to get something to eat. We strolled around the district for a while and found a corner diner about two blocks away. While we were sitting enjoying our hamburgers and chocolate sodas, and chatting amiably with several black people, a police car slid by, paused, backed up, and pulled over. Two officers came in, looked around suspiciously, then came over to us. One of them asked us where we had come from.

"Des Moines, Iowa," my sister replied.

"*Des Moines, Iowa?*" said the policeman, astounded. "How did you get here from Des Moines, Iowa?"

"My parents drove us."

"Your parents *drove* you here from Des Moines?"

My sister nodded.

"*Why?*"

"My dad thought it would be educational."

"To come to Harlem?" The policemen looked at each other. "Where are your parents now, honey?"

My sister told them that they were in the Hotel W. E. B. DuBois or Chateau Cotton Club or whatever it was.

"Your parents are staying *there*?"

My sister nodded.

"You really *are* from Iowa, aren'tcha, honey?"

The policemen took us back to the hotel and escorted us to our room. They banged on the door and my father answered. The policemen didn't know whether to be firm with my dad or gentle, to arrest him or give him some money or what. In the end they just strongly urged him to check out of the hotel first thing in the morning and to find a more appropriate hotel in a safer neighborhood much lower down in Manhattan.

My father wasn't in a strong position to argue. For one thing, he was naked from the waist down. He was standing half behind the door so the police were unaware of his awkward position, but for those of us sitting on the bed the view was a memorably surreal one of my father, bare-buttocked, talking respectfully and in a grave tone of voice to two large New York policemen. It was a sight that I won't forget in a hurry.

My father was quite pale when the policemen left, and talked to my mother at length about what we were going to do. They decided to sleep on it. In the end, we stayed. Well, it was such a good rate, you see.

THE SECOND TIME I noticed that adults are not entirely to be trusted was also the first time I was genuinely made fearful by events in the wider world. It was in the autumn of 1962, just before my eleventh birthday, when I was home alone watching television and the program was interrupted for a special announcement from the White House. President Kennedy came on looking grave and tired and indicated that things were not going terribly well with regard to the Cuban missile crisis—something about which at that point I knew practically nothing.

The background, if you need it, is that America had discovered that the Russians were preparing (or so we thought) to install nuclear weapons in Cuba, just ninety miles from American soil. Never mind that we had plenty of missiles aimed at Russia from similar distances in Europe. We were not used to being threatened in our own hemi-

sphere and weren't going to stand for it now. Kennedy ordered Khrushchev to cease building launchpads in Cuba or else.

The presidential address I saw was telling us that we were now at the "or else" part of the scenario. I remember this as clearly as anything, largely because Kennedy looked worried and gray, not a look you wish to see in a president when you are ten years old. We had instilled a naval blockade around Cuba to express our displeasure and Kennedy announced now that a Soviet ship was on its way to challenge it. He said that he had given the order that if the Soviet ship tried to pass through the blockade, American destroyers were to fire in front of its bow as a warning. If it still proceeded, they were to sink it. Such an act would, of course, be the start of World War III. Even I could see that. This was the first time that my blood ever ran cold.

It was evident from Kennedy's tone that all this was pretty imminent. So I went and ate the last piece of a Toddle House chocolate pie that had been promised to my sister, then hung around on the back porch, wishing to be the first to tell my parents the news that we were all about to die. When they arrived home they told me not to worry, that everything would be all right, and they were right of course as always. We didn't die—though I came closer than anybody when my sister discovered that I had eaten her piece of pie.

In fact, we all came closer to dying than we realized. According to the memoirs of Robert McNamara, the then secretary of defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff at that time suggested—indeed, eagerly urged—that we drop a couple of nuclear bombs on Cuba to show our earnestness and to let the Soviets know that they had better not even think about putting nuclear weapons in our backyard. President Kennedy, according to McNamara, came very close to authorizing such a strike.

Twenty-nine years later, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, we learned that the CIA's evidence about Cuba was completely wrong (now there's a surprise) and that the Soviets in fact already had about 170 nuclear missiles positioned on Cuban soil, all trained on us of course, and all of which would have been launched in immediate retal-

iation for an American attack. Imagine an America with 170 of its largest cities—which, just for the record, would include Des Moines—wiped out. And of course it wouldn't have stopped there. That's how close we all came to dying.

I haven't trusted grown-ups for a single moment since.