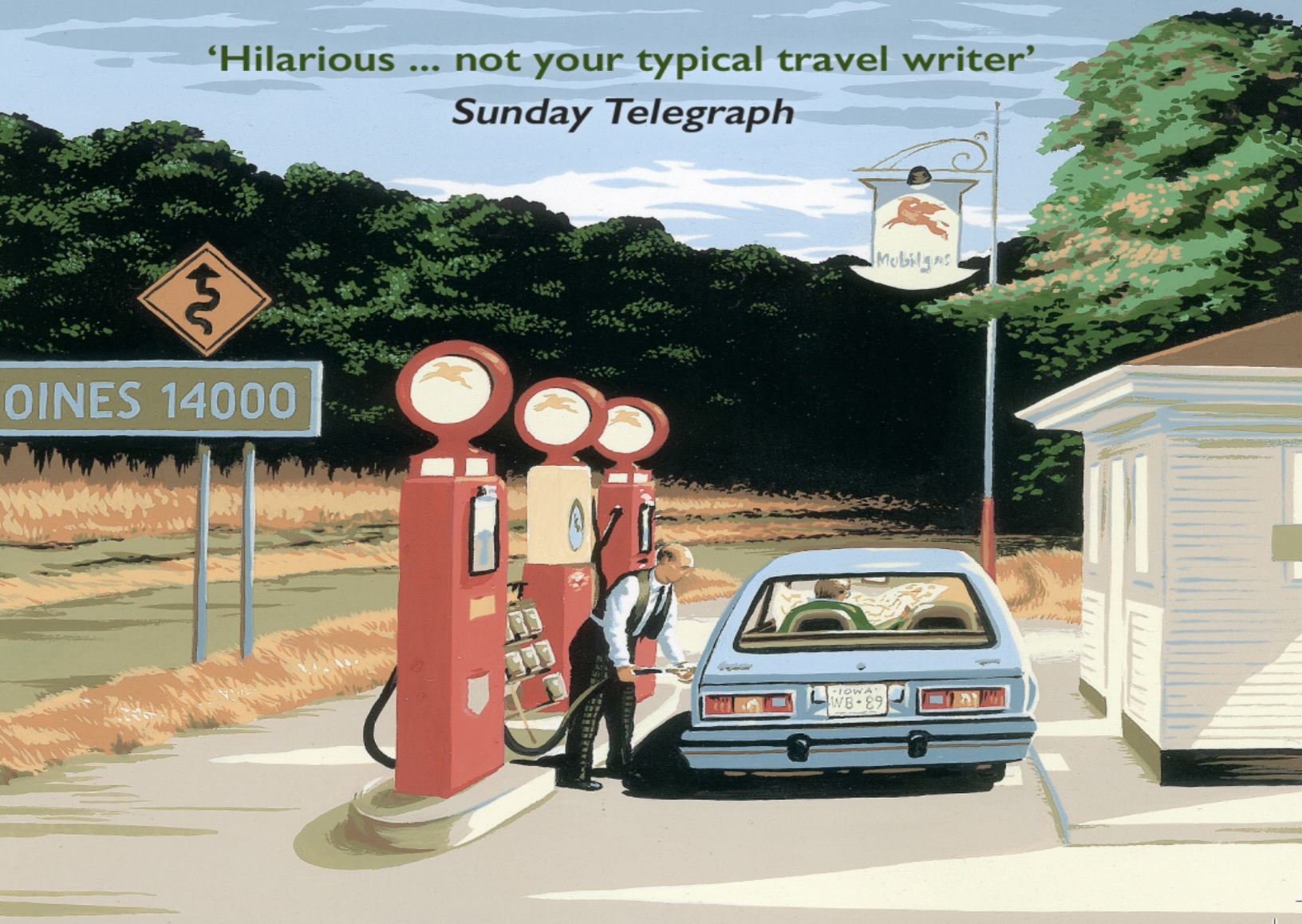
BILL BRYSON

The LOST CONTINENT

TRAVELS IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

'Hilarious ... not your typical travel writer'
Sunday Telegraph



About the Book

‘I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to.’

And, as soon as Bill Bryson was old enough, he left. Des Moines couldn’t hold him, but it did lure him back. After ten years in England he returned to the land of his youth, and drove almost 14,000 miles in search of a mythical town called Amalgam, the kind of smiling village where the films of his youth were set. Instead he drove through a series of horrific burgs which he renamed Smellville, Fartville, Coleslaw, Dead Squaw, Coma, Doldrum. At best his search led him to Anywhere, USA; a lookalike strip of gas stations, motels and hamburger outlets populated by obese and slow-witted hicks with a partiality for synthetic fibres. He found a continent that was doubly lost; lost to itself because blighted by greed, pollution, mobile homes and television; lost to him because he had become a foreigner in his own country.

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THE LOST CONTINENT

Travels in small-town America

Bill Bryson

To my father

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PART ONE
East

Chapter one

I COME FROM Des Moines. Somebody had to.

When you come from Des Moines you either accept the fact without question and settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there for ever and ever, or you spend your adolescence moaning at length about what a dump it is and how you can't wait to get out, and then you settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there for ever and ever.

Hardly anyone ever leaves. This is because Des Moines is the most powerful hypnotic known to man. Outside town there is a big sign that says WELCOME TO DES MOINES. THIS IS WHAT DEATH IS LIKE. There isn't really. I just made that up. But the place does get a grip on you. People who have nothing to do with Des Moines drive in off the interstate, looking for gas or hamburgers, and stay for ever. There's a New Jersey couple up the street from my parents' house whom you see wandering around from time to time looking faintly puzzled but strangely serene. Everybody in Des Moines is strangely serene.

The only person I ever knew in Des Moines who wasn't serene was Mr Piper. Mr Piper was my parents' neighbour, a leering cherry-faced idiot who was forever getting drunk and crashing his car into telephone poles. Everywhere you went you encountered telephone poles and road signs leaning dangerously in testimony to Mr Piper's driving habits. He distributed them all over the west side of town, rather in the way dogs mark trees. Mr Piper was the nearest possible human equivalent to Fred Flintstone, but less charming. He was a Shriner and a Republican – a

Nixon Republican – and he appeared to feel he had a mission in life to spread offence. His favourite pastime, apart from getting drunk and crashing his car, was to get drunk and insult the neighbours, particularly us because we were Democrats, though he was prepared to insult Republicans when we weren't available.

Eventually, I grew up and moved to England. This irritated Mr Piper almost beyond measure. It was worse than being a Democrat. Whenever I was in town, Mr Piper would come over and chide me. 'I don't know what you're doing over there with all those Limeys,' he would say provocatively. 'They're not clean people.'

'Mr Piper, you don't know what you're talking about,' I would reply in my affected English accent. 'You are a cretin.' You could talk like that to Mr Piper because (1) he *was* a cretin and (2) he never listened to anything that was said to him.

'Bobbi and I went over to London two years ago and our hotel room didn't even have a *bathroom* in it,' Mr Piper would go on. 'If you wanted to take a leak in the middle of the night you had to walk about a mile down the hallway. That isn't a clean way to live.'

'Mr Piper, the English are paragons of cleanliness. It is a well-known fact that they use more soap per capita than anyone else in Europe.'

Mr Piper would snort derisively at this. 'That doesn't mean diddly-squat, boy, just because they're cleaner than a bunch of Krauts and Eyeties. My God, a *dog's* cleaner than a bunch of Krauts and Eyeties. And I'll tell you something else: if his Daddy hadn't bought Illinois for him, John F. Kennedy would never have been elected President.'

I had lived around Mr Piper long enough not to be thrown by this abrupt change of tack. The theft of the 1960 presidential election was a long-standing plaint of his, one that he brought into the conversation every ten or twelve minutes regardless of the prevailing drift of the discussion.

In 1963, during Kennedy's funeral, someone in the Waveland Tap punched Mr Piper in the nose for making that remark. Mr Piper was so furious that he went straight out and crashed his car into a telephone pole. Mr Piper is dead now, which is of course one thing that Des Moines prepares you for.

When I was growing up I used to think that the best thing about coming from Des Moines was that it meant you didn't come from anywhere else in Iowa. By Iowa standards, Des Moines is a Mecca of cosmopolitanism, a dynamic hub of wealth and education, where people wear three-piece suits and dark socks, often simultaneously. During the annual state high school basketball tournament, when the hayseeds from out in the state would flood into the city for a week, we used to accost them downtown and snidely offer to show them how to ride an escalator or negotiate a revolving door. This wasn't always so far from reality. My friend Stan, when he was about sixteen, had to go and stay with his cousin in some remote, dusty hamlet called Dog Water or Dunceville or some such improbable spot – the kind of place where if a dog gets run over by a truck everybody goes out to have a look at it. By the second week, delirious with boredom, Stan insisted that he and his cousin drive the fifty miles into the county town, Hooterville, and find something to do. They went bowling at an alley with warped lanes and chipped balls and afterwards had a chocolate soda and looked at a *Playboy* in a drugstore, and on the way home the cousin sighed with immense satisfaction and said, 'Gee thanks, Stan. That was the best time I ever had in my whole life!' It's true.

I had to drive to Minneapolis once, and I went on a back road just to see the country. But there was nothing to see. It's just flat and hot, and full of corn and soya beans and hogs. Every once in a while you come across a farm or some dead little town where the liveliest thing is the flies. I remember one long, shimmering stretch where I could see

a couple of miles down the highway and there was a brown dot beside the road. As I got closer I saw it was a man sitting on a box by his front yard, in some six-house town with a name like Spigot or Urinal, watching my approach with inordinate interest. He watched me zip past and in the rear-view mirror I could see him still watching me going on down the road until at last I disappeared into a heat haze. The whole thing must have taken about five minutes. I wouldn't be surprised if even now he thinks of me from time to time.

He was wearing a baseball cap. You can always spot an Iowa man because he is wearing a baseball cap advertising John Deere or a feed company, and because the back of his neck has been lasered into deep crevasses by years of driving a John Deere tractor back and forth in a blazing sun. (This does not do his mind a whole lot of good either.) His other distinguishing feature is that he looks ridiculous when he takes off his shirt because his neck and arms are chocolate brown and his torso is as white as a sow's belly. In Iowa it is called a farmer's tan and it is, I believe, a badge of distinction.

Iowa women are almost always sensationally overweight – you see them at Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines on Saturdays, clammy and meaty in their shorts and halter tops, looking a little like elephants dressed in children's clothes, yelling at their kids, calling out names like Dwayne and Shauna. Jack Kerouac, of all people, thought that Iowa women were the prettiest in the country, but I don't think he ever went to Merle Hay Mall on a Saturday. I will say this, however – and it's a strange, strange thing – the teenaged daughters of these fat women are always utterly delectable, as soft and gloriously rounded and naturally fresh-smelling as a basket of fruit. I don't know what it is that happens to them, but it must be awful to marry one of those nubile cuties knowing that there is a time bomb ticking away in her that will at some unknown date make

her bloat out into something huge and grotesque, presumably all of a sudden and without much notice, like a self-inflating raft from which the stopper has been yanked.

Even without this inducement, I don't think I would have stayed in Iowa. I never felt altogether at home there, even when I was small. In about 1957, my grandparents gave me a Viewmaster for my birthday and a packet of discs with the title 'Iowa – Our Glorious State'. I can remember thinking even then that the selection of glories was a trifle on the thin side. With no natural features of note, no national parks, no battlefields or famous birthplaces, the Viewmaster people had to stretch their creative 3-D talents to the full. Putting the Viewmaster to your eyes and clicking the white handle gave you, as I recall, a shot of Herbert Hoover's birthplace, impressively three-dimensional, followed by Iowa's other great treasure, the Little Brown Church in the Vale (which inspired the song whose tune nobody ever quite knows), the highway bridge over the Mississippi River at Davenport (all the cars seemed to be hurrying towards Illinois), a field of waving corn, the bridge over the Missouri River at Council Bluffs and the Little Brown Church in the Vale again, taken from another angle. I can remember thinking even then that there must be more to life than that.

Then one grey Sunday afternoon when I was about ten I was watching TV and there was a documentary on about movie-making in Europe. One clip showed Anthony Perkins walking along some sloping city street at dusk. I don't remember now if it was Rome or Paris, but the street was cobbled and shiny with rain and Perkins was hunched deep in a trench coat and I thought, 'Hey, *c'est moi*!' I began to read – no, I began to *consume* – *National Geographics*, with their pictures of glowing Lapps and mist-shrouded castles and ancient cities of infinite charm. From that moment, I wanted to be a European boy. I wanted to live in an apartment across from a park in the heart of a city, and

from my bedroom window look out on a crowded vista of hills and roof-tops. I wanted to ride trams and understand strange languages. I wanted friends named Werner and Marco who wore short pants and played soccer in the street and owned toys made of wood. I cannot for the life of me think why. I wanted my mother to send me out to buy long loaves of bread from a shop with a wooden pretzel hanging above the entrance, I wanted to step outside my front door and *be* somewhere.

As soon as I was old enough I left. I left Des Moines and Iowa and the United States and the war in Vietnam and Watergate, and settled across the world. And now when I came home it was to a foreign country, full of serial murderers and sports teams in the wrong towns (the Indianapolis Colts? the Toronto Blue Jays?) and a personable old fart who was President. My mother knew that personable old fart when he was a sportscaster called Dutch Reagan at WHO Radio in Des Moines. 'He was just a nice, friendly, kind of dopey guy,' my mother says.

Which, come to that, is a pretty fair description of most Iowans. Don't get me wrong. I am not for a moment suggesting that Iowans are mentally deficient. They are a decidedly intelligent and sensible people who, despite their natural conservatism, have always been prepared to elect a conscientious, clear-thinking liberal in preference to some cretinous conservative. (This used to drive Mr Piper practically insane.) And Iowans, I am proud to tell you, have the highest literacy rate in the nation: 99.5 per cent of grown-ups there can read. When I say they are kind of dopey I mean they are trusting and amiable and open. They are a tad slow, certainly – when you tell an Iowan a joke, you can see a kind of race going on between his brain and his expression – but it's not because they're incapable of high-speed mental activity, it's only that there's not much call for it. Their wits are dulled by simple, wholesome faith in God and the soil and their fellow man.

Above all, Iowans are friendly. You go into a strange diner in the South and everything goes quiet, and you realize all the other customers are looking at you as if they are sizing up the risk involved in murdering you for your wallet and leaving your body in a shallow grave somewhere out in the swamps. In Iowa you are the centre of attention, the most interesting thing to hit town since a tornado carried off old Frank Sprinkel and his tractor last May. Everybody you meet acts like he would gladly give you his last beer and let you sleep with his sister. Everyone is happy and friendly and strangely serene.

The last time I was home, I went to Kresge's downtown and bought a bunch of postcards to send back to England. I bought the most ridiculous ones I could find – a sunset over a feed lot, a picture of farmers bravely grasping a moving staircase beside the caption 'We rode the escalator at Merle Hay Mall!', that sort of thing. They were so uniformly absurd that when I took them up to the check-out, I felt embarrassed by them, as if I were buying dirty magazines, and hoped somehow to convey the impression that they weren't really for me. But the check-out lady regarded each of them with interest and deliberation – just as they always do with dirty magazines, come to that.

When she looked up at me she was almost misty-eyed. She wore butterfly glasses and a beehive hairdo. 'Those are real nice,' she said. 'You know, honey, I've bin in a lot of states and seen a lot of places, but I can tell you that this is just about the purtiest one I ever saw.' She really said purtiest. She really meant it. The poor woman was in a state of terminal hypnosis. I glanced at the cards and to my surprise I suddenly saw what she meant. I couldn't help but agree with her. They *were* purty. Together, we made a little pool of silent admiration. For one giddy, careless moment, I was almost serene myself. It was a strange sensation, and it soon passed.

* * *

My father liked Iowa. He lived his whole life in the state, and is even now working his way through eternity there, in Glendale Cemetery in Des Moines. But every year he became seized with a quietly maniacal urge to get out of the state and go on vacation. Every summer, without a whole lot of notice, he would load the car to groaning, hurry us into it, take off for some distant point, return to get his wallet after having driven almost to the next state, and take off again for some distant point. Every year it was the same. Every year it was awful.

The big killer was the tedium. Iowa is in the middle of the biggest plain this side of Jupiter. Climb onto a roof-top almost anywhere in the state and you are confronted with a featureless sweep of corn for as far as the eye can see. It is 1,000 miles from the sea in any direction, 400 miles from the nearest mountain, 300 miles from skyscrapers and muggers and things of interest, 200 miles from people who do not habitually stick a finger in their ear and swivel it around as a preliminary to answering any question addressed to them by a stranger. To reach anywhere of even passing interest from Des Moines by car requires a journey that in other countries would be considered epic. It means days and days of unrelenting tedium, in a baking steel capsule on a ribbon of highway.

In my memory, our vacations were always taken in a big blue Rambler station-wagon. It was a cruddy car – my dad always bought cruddy cars, until he got to the male menopause and started buying zippy red convertibles – but it had the great virtue of space. My brother, sister and I in the back were miles away from my parents up front, in effect in another room. We quickly discovered during illicit forays into the picnic hamper that if you stuck a bunch of Ohio Blue Tip matches into an apple or hard-boiled egg, so that it resembled a porcupine, and casually dropped it out

the tailgate window, it was like a bomb. It would explode with a small bang and a surprisingly big flash of blue flame, causing cars following behind to veer in an amusing fashion.

My dad, miles away up front, never knew what was going on and could not understand why all day long cars would zoom up alongside him with the driver gesticulating furiously, before tearing off into the distance. ‘What was that all about?’ he would say to my mother in a wounded tone.

‘I don’t know, dear,’ my mother would answer mildly. My mother only ever said two things. She said, ‘I don’t know, dear.’ And she said, ‘Can I get you a sandwich, honey?’ Occasionally on our trips she would volunteer other pieces of intelligence like, ‘Should that dashboard light be glowing like that, dear?’ or, ‘I think you hit that dog/man/blind person back there, honey,’ but mostly she wisely kept quiet. This was because on vacations my father was a man obsessed. His principal obsession was with trying to economize. He always took us to the crummiest hotels and motor lodges, and to the kind of roadside eating-houses where they only washed the dishes weekly. You always knew, with a sense of doom, that at some point before finishing you were going to discover someone else’s congealed egg-yolk lurking somewhere on your plate or plugged between the tines of your fork. This, of course, meant cooties and a long, painful death.

But even that was a relative treat. Usually we were forced to picnic by the side of the road. My father had an instinct for picking bad picnic sites – on the apron of a busy truck stop or in a little park that turned out to be in the heart of some seriously deprived ghetto, so that groups of children would come and stand silently by our table and watch us eating Hostess Cupcakes and crinkle-cut potato chips – and it always became incredibly windy the moment

we stopped, so that my mother spent the whole of lunch-time chasing paper plates over an area of about an acre.

In 1957 my father invested $19.98 in a portable gas stove that took an hour to assemble before each use and was so wildly temperamental that we children were always ordered to stand well back when it was being lit. This always proved unnecessary, however, because the stove would flicker to life only for a few seconds before puttering out, and my father would spend many hours turning it this way and that to keep it out of the wind, simultaneously addressing it in a low, agitated tone normally associated with the chronically insane. All the while my brother, sister and I would implore him to take us some place with airconditioning, linen table-cloths and ice-cubes clinking in glasses of clear water. 'Dad,' we would beg, 'you're a successful man. You make a good living. Take us to a Howard Johnson's.' But he wouldn't have it. He was a child of the Depression and where capital outlays were involved he always wore the haunted look of a fugitive who had just heard bloodhounds in the distance.

Eventually, with the sun low in the sky, he would hand us hamburgers that were cold and raw and smelled of butane. We would take one bite and refuse to eat any more. So my father would lose his temper and throw everything into the car and drive us at high speed to some roadside diner where a sweaty man with a floppy hat would sling hash while grease-fires danced on his grill. And afterwards, in a silent car filled with bitterness and unquenched basic needs, we would mistakenly turn off the main highway and get lost and end up in some no-hope hamlet with a name like Draino, Indiana, or Tapwater, Missouri, and get a room in the only hotel in town, the sort of rundown place where if you wanted to watch TV it meant you had to sit in the lobby and share a cracked leatherette sofa with an old man with big sweat circles under his arms. The old man would almost certainly have only one leg and probably one other

truly arresting deficiency, like no nose or a caved-in forehead, which meant that although you were sincerely intent on watching *Laramie* or *Our Miss Brooks*, you found your gaze being drawn, ineluctably and sneakily, to the amazing eaten-away body sitting beside you. You couldn't help yourself. Occasionally the man would turn out to have no tongue, in which case he would try to engage you in lively conversation. It was all most unsatisfying.

After a week or so of this kind of searing torment, we would fetch up at some blue and glinting sweep of lake or sea in a bowl of pine-clad mountains, a place full of swings and amusements and the gay shrieks of children splashing in water, and it would all almost be worth it. Dad would become funny and warm and even once or twice might take us out to the sort of restaurant where you didn't have to watch your food being cooked and where the glass of water they served you wasn't autographed with lipstick. This was living. This was heady opulence.

It was against this disturbed and erratic background that I became gripped with a curious urge to go back to the land of my youth and make what the blurb writers like to call a journey of discovery. On another continent, 4,000 miles away, I became quietly seized with that nostalgia that overcomes you when you have reached the middle of your life and your father has recently died and it dawns on you that when he went he took some of you with him. I wanted to go back to the magic places of my youth – to Mackinac Island, the Rocky Mountains, Gettysburg – and see if they were as good as I remembered them. I wanted to hear the long, low sound of a Rock Island locomotive calling across a still night and the clack of it receding into the distance. I wanted to see lightning bugs, and hear cicadas shrill, and be inescapably immersed in that hot, crazy-making August weather that makes your underwear scoot up every crack and fissure and cling to you like latex, and drives mild-

mannered men to pull out hand-guns in bars and light up the night with gunfire. I wanted to look for Ne-Hi Pop and Burma Shave signs and go to a ball game and sit at a marble-topped soda-fountain and drive through the kind of small towns that Deanna Durbin and Mickey Rooney used to inhabit in the movies. I wanted to travel around. I wanted to see America. I wanted to come home.

So I flew to Des Moines and acquired a sheaf of road-maps, which I studied and puzzled over on the living-room floor, drawing an immense circular itinerary that would take me all over this strange and giant semi-foreign land. My mother, meantime, made me sandwiches and said, ‘Oh, I don’t know, dear,’ when I asked her questions about the vacations of my childhood. And one September dawn in my thirty-sixth year I crept out of my childhood home, slid behind the wheel of an ageing Chevrolet Chevette lent by my sainted and trusting mother and guided it out through the flat, sleeping streets of the city. I cruised down an empty freeway, the only person with a mission in a city of 250,000 sleeping souls. The sun was already high in the sky and promised a blisteringly hot day. Ahead of me lay about a million square miles of quietly rustling corn. At the edge of town I joined Iowa Highway 163 and with a light heart headed towards Missouri. And it isn’t often you hear anyone say that.

Chapter two

IN BRITAIN IT had been a year without summer. Wet spring had merged imperceptibly into bleak autumn. For months the sky had remained a depthless grey. Sometimes it rained, but mostly it was just dull, a land without shadows. It was like living inside Tupperware. And here suddenly the sun was dazzling in its intensity. Iowa was hysterical with colour and light. Roadside barns were a glossy red, the sky a deep, hypnotic blue; fields of mustard and green stretched out before me. Flecks of mica glittered in the rolling road. And here and there in the distance mighty grain elevators, the cathedrals of the Middle West, the ships of the prairie seas, drew the sun's light and bounced it back as pure white. Squinting in the unaccustomed brilliance, I followed the highway to Otley.

My intention was to retrace the route my father always took to my grandparents' house in Winfield – through Prairie City, Pella, Oskaloosa, Hedrick, Brighton, Coppock, Wayland and Olds. The sequence was tattooed on my memory. Always having been a passenger before, I had never paid much attention to the road, so I was surprised to find I kept coming up against odd turns and abrupt T-junctions, requiring me to go left here for a couple of miles, then right for a few miles, then left again, and so on. It would have been much more straightforward to take Highway 92 to Ainsworth and then head south to Mount Pleasant. I couldn't imagine by what method of reasoning my father had ever settled on this route, and now of course I never would know. This seemed a pity, particularly as there was almost nothing he would have liked better than to cover the dining-room table with maps and consider at

length possible routings. In this he was like most Midwesterners. Directions are very important to them. They have an innate need to be oriented, even in their anecdotes. Any story related by a Midwesterner will wander off at some point into a thicket of interior monologue along the lines of 'We were staying at a hotel that was eight blocks north-east of the state capitol building. Come to think of it, it was north-west. And I think it was probably more like nine blocks. And this woman without any clothes on, naked as the day she was born except for a coonskin cap, came running at us from the south-west . . . or was it the south-east?' If there are two Midwesterners present and they both witnessed the incident, you can just about write off the anecdote because they will spend the rest of the afternoon arguing points of the compass and will never get back to the original story. You can always tell a Midwestern couple in Europe because they will be standing on a traffic island in the middle of a busy intersection looking at a windblown map and arguing over which way is west. European cities, with their wandering streets and undisciplined alleys, drive Mid-westerners practically insane.

This geographical obsession probably has something to do with the absence of landmarks throughout middle America. I had forgotten just how flat and empty it is. Stand on two phone books almost anywhere in Iowa and you get a view. From where I was now I could look out on a sweep of landscape about the size of Belgium, but there was nothing on it except for a few widely-separated farms, some scattered stands of trees and two water-towers, brilliant silver glints signifying distant, unseen towns. Far off in the middle distance a cloud of dust chased a car up a gravel road. The only things that stood out from the landscape were the grain elevators, but even they looked all the same, and there was nothing much to distinguish one view from another.

And it's so quiet. Apart from the ceaseless fidgeting of the corn, there is not a sound. Somebody could sneeze in a house three miles away and you would hear it ('Bless you!' 'Thank you!'). It must nearly drive you crazy to live a life so devoid of stimulus, where no passing aeroplane ever draws your gaze and no car horns honk, where time shuffles forward so slowly that you half expect to find the people still watching *Ozzie and Harriet* on TV and voting for Eisenhower. ('I don't know how far you folks in Des Moines have got, but we're only up to 1958 here in Fudd County.')

Small towns are equally unhelpful in offering distinguishing features. About all that separates them are their names. They always have a gas station, a grocery store, a grain elevator, a place selling farm equipment and fertilizers, and something improbable like a microwave oven dealer or a dry cleaner's, so you can say to yourself as you glide through town, 'Now what would they be doing with a dry cleaner's in Fungus City?' Every fourth or fifth community will be a county town, built around a square. A handsome brick courthouse with a Civil War cannon and a monument to the dead of at least two wars will stand on one side of the square and on the other sides will be businesses: a five and dime, a luncheonette, two banks, a hardware store, a Christian bookstore, a barber's, a couple of hairdressers, a place selling the sort of men's clothing that only someone from a very small town would wear. At least two of the businesses will be called Vern's. The central area of the square will be a park, with fat trees and a bandstand and a pole with an American flag and scattered benches full of old men in John Deere caps sitting around talking about the days when they had something else to do other than sit around and talk about the days when they had something else to do. Time in these places creaks along.

The best county town in Iowa is Pella, forty miles south-east of Des Moines. Pella was founded by Dutch immigrants

and every May it still holds a big tulip festival for which they get somebody important like the mayor of The Hague to fly in and praise their bulbs. I used to like Pella when I was little because many of the residents put little windmills in their front yards, which made it kind of interesting. I wouldn't say it made it *outstandingly* interesting, but you learned from an early age to take what pleasures you could find on any trip across Iowa. Besides, Pella had a Dairy Queen on the edge of town where my father would sometimes stop and buy us ice-cream cones dipped in chocolate, and for this alone I have always felt a special fondness for the place. So I was pleased to note, as I rolled into the town on this fine September morn, that there were still windmills whirling in many a front yard. I stopped at the square and got out to stretch my legs. Being a Sunday, the old men from the square had the day off – they would be on sleeping-in-front-of-the-TV duty all day – but in every other respect Pella was as perfect as I remembered it. The square was thick with trees and flower-beds of blazing salvias and glowing marigolds. It had its own windmill, a handsome green one with white blades, nearly full-sized, standing on one corner. The stores around the square were of the cereal box architecture favoured by small-town stores throughout the Midwest, but with gingerbread cornices and other cheery embellishments. Every business had a solid, trustworthy Dutch name: Pardekooper's Drug Store, Jaarsma Bakery, Van Gorp Insurers, Gosselink's Christian Book Store, Vander Ploeg Bakery. All were shut, of course. Sundays are still closely observed in places like Pella. Indeed, the whole town was eerily quiet. It was steeped in that kind of dead silence that makes you begin to wonder, if you are of a suitably hysterical nature, if perhaps everybody has been poisoned in the night by a leak of odourless gas – which even now could be taking insidious control of your own central nervous system – turning Pella into a kind of Pompeii of the plains. I briefly

imagined people from all over coming to look at the victims and being especially enthralled at the worried-looking young man in spectacles on the town square, forever clutching his throat and trying to get his car door open. But then I saw a man walking a dog at the far end of the square and realized that any danger was safely past.

I hadn't intended to linger, but it was such a splendid morning that I wandered off down a nearby street, past neat wooden-framed houses with cupolas and gables and front porches with two-seater swings that creaked in the breeze. There was no other sound, apart from the scuffling of my feet through dried leaves. At the bottom of the street, I came across the campus of Central College, a small institution run by the Dutch Reformed Church, with a campus of redbrick buildings overlooking a serpentine with an arching wooden footbridge. The whole place was as tranquil as a double dose of Valium. It looked like the sort of tidy, friendly, clean-thinking college that Clark Kent would have attended. I crossed the bridge and at the far side of the campus found further evidence that I was not the only living person in Pella. From an open window high up in a dormitory building came the sound of a stereo turned up far too loud. It blared for a moment – something by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, I believe – and then from someplace indiscernible there came a booming voice that said, 'IF YOU DON'T TURN THAT THING THE FUCK OFF RIGHT NOW I'M GONNA COME OVER THERE AND POUND YOUR HEAD IN!' It was the voice of a large person – someone, I fancied, with the nickname Moose. Immediately the music stopped and Pella slept again.

I continued on east, through Oskaloosa, Fremont, Hedrick, Martinsburg. The names were familiar, but the towns themselves awoke few memories. By this stage on most trips I was on the floor in a boredom-induced stupor, calling out at fifteen-second intervals, 'How much longer? When are we going to be there? I'm bored. I feel sick. How

much longer? When are we going to be there?' I vaguely recognized a bend in the road near Coppock, where we once spent four hours caught in a blizzard waiting for a snow-plough to come through, and several spots where we had paused to let my sister throw up, including a gas station at Martinsburg where she tumbled out of the car and was lavishly sick in the direction of a pump attendant's ankles (boy did that guy dance!), and another at Wayland where my father nearly left me at the side of the road after discovering that I had passed the time by working loose all the rivets on one of the back door panels, exposing an interesting view of the interior mechanism, but unfortunately rendering both the window and door forever inoperable. However, it wasn't until I reached the turning off for Winfield, just past Olds, a place where my father would announce with a sort of delirious joy that we were practically there, that I felt a pang of recognition. I had not been down this road for at least a dozen years, but its gentle slopes and isolated farms were as familiar to me as my own left leg. My heart soared. This was like going back in time. I was about to be a boy again.

Arriving in Winfield was always thrilling. Dad would turn off Highway 78 and bounce us down a rough gravel road at far too high a speed, throwing up clouds of white dust, and then to my mother's unfailing alarm would drive with evident insanity towards some railroad tracks on a blind bend in the road, remarking gravely, 'I hope there's not a train coming.' My mother didn't discover until years later that there were only two trains a day along those tracks, both in the dead of night. Beyond the tracks, standing alone in a neglected field, was a Victorian mansion like the one in the Charles Addams cartoons in the *New Yorker*. No-one had lived in it for decades, but it was still full of furniture, under dank sheets. My sister and brother and I used to climb in through a broken window and look through trunks of musty clothes and old *Collier's* magazines and

photographs of strangely worried-looking people. Upstairs was a bedroom in which, according to my brother, lay the shrivelled body of the last occupant, a woman who had died of heartbreak after being abandoned at the altar. We never went in there, though once, when I was about four, my brother peered through the keyhole, let out a howl, cried ‘She’s coming!’ and ran headlong down the stairs. Whimpering, I followed, squirting urine at every step. Beyond the mansion was a wide field, full of black and white cows, and beyond that was my grandparents’ house, pretty and white beneath a canopy of trees, with a big red barn and acres of lawn. My grandparents were always waiting at the gate. I don’t know whether they could see us coming and raced to their positions or whether they just waited there hour after hour. Quite possibly the latter because, let’s face it, they didn’t have a whole lot else to do. And then it would be four or five days of fun. My grandfather had a Model T Ford, which he let us kids drive around the yard, to the distress of his chickens and the older women. In the winter he would attach a sleigh to the back and take us for long cold rides down snowy roads. In the evenings we would all play cards around the kitchen table and stay up late. It was always Christmas at my grandparents’ house, or Thanksgiving, or the Fourth of July, or somebody’s birthday. There was always happiness there.

When we arrived, my grandmother would scuttle off to pull something fresh-baked out of the oven. This was always something unusual. My grandmother was the only person I ever knew – possibly the only person who ever lived – who actually made things from the recipes on the backs of food packets. These dishes always had names like ‘Rice Krispies ’n’ Banana Chunks Upside-Down Cake’ or ‘Del Monte Lima Bean ’n’ Pretzels Party Snacks’. Generally they consisted of suspiciously large amounts of the manufacturer’s own products, usually in combinations you wouldn’t think of except perhaps in an especially severe

famine. The one thing to be said for these dishes was that they were novel. When my grandmother offered you a steaming slab of cake or wedge of pie it might contain almost anything – Niblets sweet corn, chocolate chips, Spam, diced carrots, peanut butter. Generally it would have some Rice Krispies in it somewhere. My grandmother was particularly partial to Rice Krispies and would add a couple of shovelfuls to whatever she made, even if the recipe didn't call for it. She was about as bad a cook as you can be without actually being hazardous.

It all seems so long ago now. And it was. It was so long ago, in fact, that my grandparents had a crank telephone, the kind that hung on the wall and had a handle you turned and said, 'Mabel, get me Gladys Scribbage. I want to ask her how she makes her Frosted Flakes 'n' Cheez Whiz Party Nuggets.' And it would turn out that Gladys Scribbage was already listening in, or somebody else listening in would know how to make Frosted Flakes 'n' Cheez Whiz Party Nuggets. Everybody listened in. My grandmother often listened in when things were slow around the house, covering the mouthpiece with a hand and relaying to the rest of the room vivid accounts of colonic irrigations, prolapsed wombs, husbands who ran off to Burlington with the barmaid from Vern's Uptown Tavern and Supper Club, and other crises of small-town life. We always had to maintain the strictest silence during these sessions. I could never entirely understand why, because if things got really juicy my grandmother would often butt in. 'Well, I think Merle's a real skunk,' she would say. 'Yes, that's right, it's Maude Bryson here, and I just want to say that I think he's an absolute stinker to do that to poor Pearl. And I'll tell you something else, Mabel, you know you could get those support bras a dollar cheaper in Columbus Junction.' In about 1962 the telephone company came and put a normal phone without a party line in my grandmother's house, possibly at the request of the rest of

the town. It drove a hole right through her life from which she never entirely recovered.

I didn't really expect my grandparents to be waiting for me at the gate, on account of them both having been dead for many years. But I suppose I had vaguely hoped that another nice old couple might be living there now and would invite me in to look around and share my reminiscences. Perhaps they would let me be their grandson. At the very least, I had assumed that my grandparents' house would be just as I had last seen it.

It was not to be. The road leading to the house was still gravelled with gleaming gypsum pebbles and still threw up satisfying clouds of dust, but the railroad tracks were gone. There was no sign that they had ever been there. The Victorian mansion was gone too, replaced by a ranch-house-style home with cars and propane gas cylinders scattered around the yard like a toddler's playthings. Worse still, the field of cows was now an estate of box houses. My grandparents' home had stood well outside the town, a cool island of trees in an ocean of fields. Now cheap little houses crowded in on it from all sides. With shock, I realized that the barn was gone. Some jerk had torn down my barn! And the house itself – well, it was a shack. Paint had abandoned it in chunks. Bushes had been pointlessly uprooted, trees chopped down. The grass was high and littered with overspill from the house. I stopped the car on the road out front and just gaped. I cannot describe the sense of loss. Half my memories were inside that house. After a moment a hugely overweight woman in pink shorts, talking on a phone with an apparently endless cord, came and stood in the open doorway and stared at me, wondering what I was doing staring at her.

I drove on into the town. When I was growing up, Main Street in Winfield had two grocery stores, a variety store, a tavern, a pool hall, a newspaper, a bank, a barbershop, a post office, two gas stations – all the things you would

expect of any thriving little town. Everyone shopped locally; everyone knew everyone else. Now all that was left was a tavern and a place selling farm equipment. There were half a dozen vacant lots, full of patchy grass, where buildings had been torn down and never replaced. Most of the remaining buildings were dark and boarded up. It was like an abandoned film set which had long since been left to decay.

I couldn’t understand what had happened. People now must have to drive thirty miles to buy a loaf of bread. Outside the tavern a group of young thuggy-looking motorcyclists were hanging out. I was going to stop to ask them what had happened to their town, but one of them, seeing me slow down, gave me the finger. For no reason. He was about fourteen. Abruptly, I drove on, back out towards Highway 78, past the scattered farms and gentle slopes that I knew like my own left leg. It was the first time in my life that I had turned my back on a place knowing that I would never see it again. It was all very sad, but I should have known better. As I always used to tell Thomas Wolfe, there are three things you just can’t do in life. You can’t beat the phone company, you can’t make a waiter see you until he’s ready to see you, and you can’t go home again.