

TWO

The Stayers

When you come from Des Moines you either accept the fact without question and settle down with a girl called Bobbie and get a job in the Firestone factory and live there forever 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 Bobbie and get a job in the Firestone factory and live there forever and ever.

—Bill Bryson, *The Lost Continent*

THE SMALL-TOWN IOWA OF SIXTY YEARS AGO, the one Lee Ulrich knew growing up, hardly resembles the town where he was reelected mayor in November 2007. Everything from the mom-and-pop stores on the old Main Street to the family farms that defined the pattern of the countryside have disappeared, devoured by megamalls, megafarms, and factories where robotic systems perform the tasks once assigned to human beings. Iowa still produces more eggs, hogs, and corn than any state in the Union and more than a few countries in the world; it's just that these goods come from a shrinking labor force overseeing "hog hotels" or a ten-thousand-acre spread of genetically modified crops. Ulrich believes that if one of the town's factories were to close, it would be a kick in

the gut that would knock the town down so hard that it might never get back up. Over beers at Sally's, Ulrich confesses how he can't stop worrying. "You know," he says, talking into his beer bottle so that his constituents at the bar don't hear what he says, "we might not make it another five years. I think about that a lot."

Before Ulrich became Ellis's mayor, he taught history and social studies at the now-defunct Ellis Community Junior and Senior High School. As he lectured about current events and the Great Depression, if his students dared ask what grade he would be "giving" them for the term, Ulrich would correct them in his booming baritone: "I will never give you a grade. Like everything else in this life, it's just another thing you will have to earn." That lesson, Ulrich insists, was tailor-made for the kids who struggled most in his classes, the ones not headed to college who complained continually about how they would never need to do research papers with footnotes in "the real world." Teaching history was beside the point, Ulrich told us: "I didn't expect them to grow up and become historians." Ulrich would tell his charges that he was getting them ready to deal with "a life filled with struggle." In exchange for their coming to class on time and ready to learn, he would show his students how to be decent, hardworking citizens who contributed to society.

When Ulrich retired from the classroom, not long after he was sworn in as mayor for the first time more than a decade ago, he carried with him an up-close understanding of how a social engine pushed certain kids to leave and kept the rest close to home. He also could see, with absolute clarity, how the loss of so many young people, combined with the constraints trapping modestly educated young workers in the countryside, posed the greatest challenge to Ellis's viability for the next century. Back when he was a teacher, Ulrich struggled to get his colleagues to see how their overinvestment in the young people who leave was draining resources away from the ones who stayed—representing a crucial, missed opportu-

nity. "It was as if all they cared about were the ones who were the first chair in the orchestra or playing varsity basketball," he said. Though he recognized the danger in writing off the local kids who remain close—the Stayers—even Ulrich struggled against the intoxicating appeal of focusing his time and energy on the most attentive and highly diligent students. All teachers want to bask in the accomplishments of students who work far beyond their grade level. No one enjoys standing in front of a classroom of knuckleheads who show up for class without books and a pencil.

During his years as a teacher, Ulrich had no qualms about calling out the troublemakers. He would make them look him straight in the eye and warn them that if they were just going to take up space in his classroom, maybe they were wasting everyone's time and shouldn't bother showing up at all. Sometimes, those wild, angry teenagers who marched out of his office in a thick fog of rage would return, promising to work harder and do better. In the years to come, one of Ulrich's greatest joys would be running into his former students, the ones who had become upstanding citizens with jobs at the plant or in construction and had families of their own. Sometimes they would tell Ulrich how much they appreciated the fact that he "never took their shit." Others felt differently. Some accused Ulrich of being the worst sort of teacher, someone who bullied his students and cared most about the kids who took their seats at the head of the class, the students with the right last names.

Ulrich is a true believer in the power of the American meritocracy to reward hard work and diligence; he never thought it was his place to debate the fairness of pushing some kids to go and others to stay. To him, trying to dismantle the sifting and sorting system makes about as much sense as informing the government that you've decided not to pay your taxes. What Ulrich recognizes is that the town's future rests in the hands of the young people who, in previous generations, supported themselves on family farms,

working for the railroad or on a line. Ulrich remains convinced that to survive, Ellis needs the region's plants and some version of the farming economy, and so, as a teacher and, later, as a mayor, he has devoted himself to making sure the kids who remain have something to hold on to. Ulrich's greatest fear is that he may have betrayed those young men and women he taught for so many years, the ones he promised would be just fine if they worked hard, played by the rules, and never complained. Looking at the world the young people of his community will inherit, Ulrich now wonders if he taught them to believe in something that no longer exists.

If you travel around the Heartland, you'll encounter many isolated places where a lingering sadness hangs in the air: hundreds of miles away from the nearest city, the world surrounding Ellis orbits around this speck on the map at dizzying speed.¹ Here, kids still drag race on dusty country roads in a local practice known as gravel traveling. Boys holler at the girls, dressed in their cutest jeans, who spend an hour buying Cokes at Pronto's gas station and convenience store. The residents, especially the young ones, feel trapped in time.

For small-town kids, having access to a car is akin to breathing. But there are important differences in status. The Stayers tool around town in beat-up jalopies they buy and maintain themselves, whereas Achievers drive newer, nicer models. The "Snob Hill" kids and the town kids host parties in their parents' basement family rooms and watch movies, but the Stayers' socializing usually consists of drinking beers away from the view of the deputies. Their parties are at "the pits," an abandoned quarry right off Route 20, and when there isn't snow on the ground, they try to spin out perfect donuts on the empty highways. For many kids in the Heartland, NASCAR is more popular than the NBA, so when poor teenage

boys in Ellis dream of making it big, they fantasize about racing in the Daytona 500. One of the most famous chroniclers of coming-of-age among small-town kids, H. G. Bissinger, writes, "Across the country there are thousands of towns just like it . . . places that had gone through the growing pains of America without anyone paying attention, places that exist as islands unto themselves."²

Most Stayers with whom we spoke knew where they were headed by the time they reached junior year. They say that in school, it was easy to tell the future Stayers from the Leavers, simply by the way they dressed. Stayers came to school wearing hand-me-down clothes, work boots, T-shirts, and the kinds of blue jeans and sneakers sold at the discount stores in Waterloo. If they had to milk cows or feed hogs at the crack of dawn, the stench hung over them even if they took a shower afterward and scrubbed themselves raw and red with the strongest deodorant soap. Their class rank and position in the school's pecking order daily reminded them that they were not like the Achievers.

Forty percent of Ellis High's entering freshman class will never set foot on a college campus nor live anywhere but Liberty County. If they are fortunate, they will find work at Safeguard, an ambulance manufacturer owned by Amos and Ralph Leinhardt; John Deere in Waterloo; or Tantech, a Cedar Rapids-based microprocessor-assembling firm, where full-time employees might earn \$15 an hour after a year or two. Or they might make half as much at the meat-processing plants, egg factory, or cardboard-box factory, working alongside undocumented workers from El Salvador and Mexico.³

Steven Hennes, the manager of a dairy farm, is a taciturn twenty-eight-year-old with angular features who has never lived more than five miles from his parents' farm. Back in high school, no one would likely have seen much academic potential in him; when we wonder about his class rank, Steven responds, spitting out his

chewing tobacco for effect, "I was about as low as you could get." Casey Annis is a brawny, chain-smoking twenty-five-year-old who supports his wife and three kids as a welder at Deere in Waterloo. He says that during high school, "I never did band or sports or anything like that." Such pursuits were the domains of the kids from Snob Hill, the ones who would move away right after graduation. Casey explains, "I was a work type." Peter Garton, a stocky, baby-faced thirty-year-old who never finished high school and now works on the killing floor at Con-Agra, says he and his high school friends were "the low-life type of people in the school who didn't really care about a lot of things." Henry Randall, a thirty-year-old truck driver, recently moved back home with his parents because his ex-girlfriend, the mother of his newborn son, took out a restraining order against him. Henry never finished high school, and, like most dropouts from Ellis, he never ventured far from home, except when he was on the road driving a semi, sleeping in the back of his cab. As Henry explains, there was a pretty clear social hierarchy when he was a student at Ellis High School: "You had your smart kids, your medium kids, and then you had your low kids." Stayers like him "were way below the low kids."

CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE

In an irony not lost on the young people who would grow up to stay, the same teachers who inspired the town's best kids to dream of a life far beyond the countryside told the Stayers they would never amount to enough to get out of Ellis. The fact that young people rarely rebelled against the assumption that they would inherit their parents' place in the world demonstrates how powerful and all-encompassing the tendency toward social reproduction⁴ could be; indeed, like the old adage says, the exceptions prove the rule. Jacob Rippentorp, age thirty, remembers how he worked hard to become an exception.

Less than six feet tall but fit and more than a little imposing, Jacob looks like a police officer even when he's dressed in a sweatshirt and baseball cap. Back in high school, Jacob says he was an average student who didn't participate in after-school activities and whose family was not one of the local elite. Because of these characteristics, Jacob says, he found himself set onto—from his view, shoved down—the Stayer path. "We had to take these aptitude tests back in high school. . . . The counselor told me, to my face, I shouldn't go to college. I should probably get a job in the factory . . . because I wouldn't make it." And yet Jacob did not go to work at Deere or Safeguard. He put himself through college, earning a degree in criminal justice. He lives and works in a Chicago suburb as a police officer. But for every young person like Jacob who resisted, far more young people followed the course set by the adults who supposedly knew better. Though it failed in Jacob's case, this steering could be overt and crude, and in many cases, it dovetailed seamlessly with the decisions that young people appeared to make of their own volition.⁵

Understanding how the Stayers choose and, at the same time, get chosen to remain is like listening to an old, sad hymn. Many scholars puzzle over why schools fail to operate as the meritocracies most Americans believe them to be. The Stayers may have attended a rural school in one of the more remote corners of America during the 1990s, but their stories bear a striking resemblance to the working-class boys the sociologist Paul Willis encounters in a 1970s industrial city in the British Midlands or to the group of friends growing up in a Boston housing project that a Harvard student named Jay MacLeod wrote about in the mid-1980s who failed in school because education had failed them.⁶ The desire to go to college may be the defining aspiration for the Achievers, but for the Stayers, like so many working- and lower-class kids whose family incomes put them in the bottom quarter of the in-

come distribution, just surviving high school feels like a major accomplishment.

In some ways, rural dropouts are not very different from their suburban and inner-city peers: typically, they earned lower grades, scored poorly on standardized achievement tests, showed signs of low self-esteem, and lacked a sense of control over their own lives. More often than not, rural dropouts defend their decision to walk away from education with the assertion that “school was not for me.”⁷ Kids in the suburbs and cities make similar claims, and indeed, no matter where dropouts live, school sets the stage for future economic prospects. And yet, in one of the many self-deceptions implicit in how class patterns reproduce themselves generation after generation, the Stayers insist they choose their paths for themselves. At the same time, rural dropouts differ, crucially, in how they rank work. Research on rural youths shows that their parents are more likely to encourage their offspring to get full-time jobs, attend trade schools, or enter the military rather than attend college; indeed, these “leveled aspirations”⁸ extend to money. Rural youth have parents who reject the American ethos of earning lots of money and, instead, value making a good income, having a secure job rather than a high-powered one, and holding onto friendships as far more important priorities.⁹

Given how diligently the Stayers applied themselves to work, how poorly they fared in school, and the fact that their parents were not totally convinced of the need for college and careers, it is easy to see how they abandoned higher education. College would be nice, but trade school, a job at the plant, or a military tour were just as good—and probably better, since they didn’t cost so much.¹⁰ Peter Garton told a typical story: At age seventeen, he could take home \$200 a week working construction—earning as much as men a decade older. That made it easy to decide that he had outgrown education: “I just thought I had more important things to do than

school." So while the Achievers, focusing on their studies and extracurricular activities, assiduously avoided work, the Stayers ran as fast as they could to get it. This choice is pivotal for marking young people—like Marie Huss, a single mother who, at twenty-five, who still gets carded when she goes out dancing with her girlfriends at their favorite country music bar in Cedar Falls—as Stayers.

Marie has never lived anywhere but Ellis, and she started finding the means to pay her way in the world by the age of twelve. Marie's parents were farmers with five kids, and they expected her to spend the money she earned babysitting to buy all her own wardrobe for school. By sixteen, she was working thirty hours a week at the local nursing home to get money for her car and insurance. Her job left her no time for homework, much less sports or other extracurricular activities that could matter for getting into college. Those long hours at her job made it possible to afford "a really nice car with a really high payment" and "cool clothes." Working, she believes, provided her with purpose, maturity, and direction. Marie recalls with pride, "I took care of people who couldn't take care of themselves and made sure they were healthy and made sure they were eating and bathed and dressed them and did all that. And to me, I thought that was a pretty grown-up job, so I felt pretty grown up at the time, and I had a lot of freedom." As work started to overtake her commitment to school, neither Marie nor her parents seemed very concerned, even when she went from being an honor student to just getting by with her grades. Why did she have to go to college and wait four more years for a good job when, as a teenager, she had already done so much? So what if her teachers did not see her accomplishments? Truth be told, the teachers at school didn't pay her much attention anymore. Marie never got in trouble, and she was not flunking out, but increasingly school was just the place where she spent time between work and home.

The decisions that Stayers consciously and unconsciously make

in valuing work over education are easy to understand when one weighs the immediate gratification of having one's own money against the vaguer possibilities of what a degree and a career might mean for the future. What Marie didn't see back in high school was that eight years later, she would take home just a few dollars more an hour than she did as a teenager. Her paycheck—with the responsibilities of raising a child, as she has done since the age of nineteen—has meant that even with her full-time job, she finds herself eligible for welfare and food stamps.

It is not simply that the Stayers' parents didn't care about school. In a perfect world, the Stayers' parents indulgently daydream about their kids, who seem at first to have all sorts of untapped potential. But by the time they get to fifth, sixth, or seventh grade, and certainly when they enter high school, their grades and teacher reports are the cold, hard slap in the face to that earlier, intact optimism. Of course, the Stayers' parents would agree that attending college and becoming a doctor are better than having to break your back to survive, but for kids from the countryside, not earning a degree, or not having a profession, or starting a family at eighteen were hardly the end of the world. According to Steven Hennes, the dairy farmer, the only advice his parents offered was to "get some schooling and try to do what you can to get by with what you have." Steven watched his parents get through life without a diploma, and they taught their children how to work and take responsibility for the choices, for better or worse, that they would make.

The Stayers were raised by moms and dads who hadn't gone to college themselves and had survived.¹¹ Besides, they believed, college and education change you: college graduates start talking and acting differently or, in more than a few cases, begin looking down on where they came from. Such observations contributed to an uneasiness toward schooling and its transformative influences. Given that the Stayers' parents found it easier to believe in work

than in school, it shouldn't be surprising that they put up precious little resistance to the official assessments from teachers and guidance counselors predicting their kids' modest academic prospects. And so, when the Stayers, the children of truck drivers and factory workers, got pregnant in high school or failed to earn the grades, scores, or scholarships to get into college, it wasn't a crushing disappointment or even all that unexpected. Their parents reasoned that attending college and indulging in the freedom to delay entry into the "real world" were simply more luxuries that their kids would be denied.¹² As parents, raising kids does not require putting them into stasis until they embark on their real adult lives. Like most people in Ellis, the Stayers' parents are the descendants of the homesteaders who built America, and that grit and determination is still in them. Their faith in the American dream took root in the unexamined assumption that their kids would be okay, somehow.

Dave Klinger, twenty-nine, is a machinist. With movie-star good looks and a thoughtful nature, you wouldn't guess that at age sixteen he failed classes and left school after a fight with a teacher, or that at seventeen, the girl he had been dating got pregnant and he became a father. As soon as he got his driver's license, he started working at the nursing home thirty-five hours a week, making \$7 an hour, which back then wasn't far off from a grown man's paycheck. As Dave's mother and father watched their son pulling long hours, earning his own money, paying for his own car, their inclination was to assume he was a man. Dave recalls how by his junior year, "My mom never forced me to do my homework and didn't even know if I was going to school. At the time I thought it was great, but, you know, looking back on it, I think [it was easy to get to the] point where I'd failed too many classes."

The clear disconnect in how his family and his teachers viewed

Dave's behavior sent the sort of mixed messages that steer kids off course. Dave's parents may have thought he was fine; his teachers disagreed. What the school staff saw was a lousy report card and chronic truancy and tardiness. From their perspective, Dave was a disappointment at best, a failure at worst. Things finally came to a head in a social studies class taught by Lee Ulrich. "I didn't like [Ulrich's] class. . . . I had to be at work, like I had five minutes from the class to get over to . . . the nursing home [three miles away]." Dave says that he could have done it, but it was convenient for him to skip the class because he had two study halls right before it. And then one time he didn't have his work done for social studies, and Ulrich took him into the hall and told him that he just shouldn't be wasting his or anybody else's time; he should just drop out. The incident was a turning point. It still amazes and wounds Dave that no one chased him down the hall and told him to go back to his seat. His mother, he says, "didn't try to keep me in school, and my dad was kind of a little bit [concerned], but he didn't really say much. I mean, nobody really tried very hard to keep me in school, so that's kind of how it happened." And what about Lee Ulrich? Even now, Dave can't get his head around why Ulrich worked so hard to push him into a corner with an ultimatum that day. "Now when I look back at it, I just can't believe he told me to . . . I just don't understand why." We asked Ulrich about the incident, not mentioning Dave by name but describing the events from Dave's account. He was silent for a while, then said, "I'm not sure which student you mean. There are a couple; those sorts of things happened." He had no further comment. Rural kids are far more likely to leave school for economic pulls such as a job or personal reasons such as pregnancy, marriage, disability, illness, or, as we see in Dave's case, an inability to get along with teachers.¹³

Many of the Stayer kids grew up in working-class households where their parents sent the message, loud and clear, that if they

wanted the toys of adolescence—namely, a car or clothes—they would have to buy them for themselves. Within farming communities, the tradition of young people working is cherished precisely because it instructs them in the value of a dollar. But, truthfully, the more central concern was that in the households where the prices of milk, corn, hogs, groceries, and heating bills were a constant topic of conversation, the extra income that high schoolers brought home made it possible for families to get by from month to month. In contrast, the Achievers' parents, as we heard in the previous chapter, kept their kids from taking after-school jobs because they understood that grades and extracurricular activities mattered more. Either the Achievers' families made enough money to buy the accessories of adolescence for their offspring, or they made sacrifices, such as taking on side jobs, so their kids could devote themselves fully to academic pursuits.

As we've seen, Stayers do not drift off course in school without the complicity of adults. When they skipped class, no one came looking for them, and when they didn't turn in their homework, their parents shrugged their shoulders and told them to find a job. Teachers, staff, and parents may be indicted for dismissing the Stayers as rebellious, lazy, or just indifferent to school, thus dooming them to their limited prospects in the region's dying economy. Yet, it is also true that the Stayers damage their own futures when they preemptively reject school before it can reject them. Stayers were puzzled that their teachers viewed them as lazy, even though they worked twenty or thirty hours a week.

Stayers didn't just decide one day that school wasn't worth their time and effort. For the lesson to stick, they had to hear it repeatedly. Even though most Stayers did not cooperate in school, they managed to internalize the judgments from teachers who told them college wasn't for them. Stayers came to view their preference for work over school as just as legitimate and honorable as the pursuits

of academically driven Achievers. The tragedy is that Stayers are blind to the reality of blue-collar work in a postindustrial economy. Their downfall is hubris, forged in their unwavering belief in the work ethic. At seventeen, they just could not see how their physical strength and willingness to work hard could ever betray them.

In another time, the Midwest was populated with company towns and local aristocracies in the form of entrepreneurs who made factories rise out of the prairie. Muncie, Indiana had the Balls, five brothers who invented the home-canning jar, and Newton, Iowa, has the Maytags.¹⁴ Technically, Ellis is no company town; no single entity employs most people there. But in recent years, some of the best blue-collar jobs for young people who aren't headed for college or the military can be found at Safeguard.

When the Leinhardts arrived in Ellis about fifteen years ago, they didn't have a big, established company in the process of expanding production; rather, they were a start-up family business eager to spread its wings. Amos Leinhardt's father, Morris, had grown up in a rural North Dakota community very much like Ellis, so he understood what bringing one hundred factory jobs to this town would mean. For its part, the Ellis business community used all the incentives at its disposal to woo Safeguard: generous financing, a deal on the property, and more than a few drinks at Sally's. So when Amos Leinhardt purchased the late Doc Stillworth's house and moved his family to town to oversee daily operations, the Leinhardts hitched their fate to Ellis.

From the Leinhardts' perspective, the town and its inhabitants made them prosper. Fortunately for Ellis, they were not the type of businesspeople who would move their manufacturing overseas just to drive up profit margins. Four years ago, when Morris's declining

health pushed father and son to look to the future, the Leinhardts acted against their own best interests, choosing not to sell the company in a public offering. Instead, they arranged for Safeguard to be purchased by their own employees. By doing so, they lost 10 to 15 percent of the money they could have gotten if they'd sold to outside stockholders—a noble act that totally violates the dominant credo of today's "it's nothing personal, it's just business" corporate world. But for self-described "small-town people" like the Leinhardts, their success far exceeded their wildest expectations. Safeguard is called the Cadillac of ambulances. As legend has it, when Dale Earnhardt crashed at Daytona in 2001, it was an ambulance built in Ellis that transported the mortally injured racing star. The Leinhardts believed they owed Ellis for their success, and if they couldn't afford to fund a university or endow a park, at least they wouldn't be the ones to stab the town in the back.

Precisely because the company employs the men and women who are not in a position to leave Ellis, Ulrich believes, "Safeguard is the knight on a white horse that saved an entire generation of the town's workers." Amos Leinhardt disagrees with this rosy assessment; Safeguard's being open won't change the fact that stores such as Wal-Mart are nothing more than "Main Street killers," that people don't do their shopping at the town's hardware and grocery stores, or that even with all the old folks living in town and at the nursing home there isn't enough business for Ellis to sustain its pharmacy. There's no way a single plant with one hundred people building ambulances in a flyover corner of Iowa can be any more stable than the billion-dollar multinationals such as Maytag, Whirlpool, or Winnebago. The company could go belly-up anytime: though it is unlikely, the workers themselves might decide to cut and run, take their money, and watch the ambulances get built in Mexico. Even if the workers own Safeguard and the jobs

at Deere in Waterloo are safe, Leinhardt knows that Ellis is just treading water: "This town is just surviving, but what we really need is to grow."

Only occasionally does the Heartland make the evening news, and unfortunately the only time the people who truly have the power to stabilize America's Heartland pay attention to towns like Ellis seems to be during presidential campaigns. This is when politicians fight for the votes of salt-of-the-earth blue-collar types in contested purple states such as Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—where the manufacturing sector is the canary in the coal mine, warning the nation that economic downturns and unemployment are heading their way soon.¹⁵ The general trend toward deindustrialization has gathered speed as NAFTA and the recession of 2001 have severely depleted the manufacturing base of many Midwestern states. Tellingly, the top candidates for the Democratic nomination in 2008, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, were quick to criticize free-trade agreements and rewards for firms that outsource jobs.¹⁶ Yet many economists point out that the erosion of jobs may have more to do with global economic ebbs and flows than with regional trade agreements.¹⁷ The twenty-first-century high-growth sectors fueled by financial services and bio- and high-tech were not economies that would benefit those modestly educated workers whose fortunes had risen during the heyday of American manufacturing nearly fifty years ago. To the young people who stayed in the countryside, it felt as if the rural crisis had come in the middle of the night while they slept. Long before the bosses mailed out a thousand pink slips, the withered rural economy would suffer a slow, torturous death by a thousand cuts: cuts in pay, cuts in health insurance and pension plans, cuts in work hours, cuts in new hires, cuts in full-time workers, and, of course, the farcical negotiations in which the beaten, bloodied labor representatives declare a Pyrrhic victory just for staving off closure for another year.

"WORK WAS SOMETHING I WAS RAISED TO DO"

Life in a farming community teaches the value of hard work. From a very early age, kids who grow up working alongside the adults in their family come to understand that their efforts matter for a successful harvest and getting the farm through another year. In the pantheon of categories that exist at Ellis High, there were jocks, band and theater geeks, teachers' pets, nerds, and the kids who worked.

In the summer months, local kids, along with some of the town kids who were saving for college, worked on farms detassling corn, walking the beans, and picking rock. Each of these painstaking jobs is vital to a successful growing season. Picking rock is a crucial step for seasonal harvesting; all the rocks and pieces of debris must be cleared from the fields so the machinery can get through unhindered. Walking the beans is necessary because most Iowa farmers rotate their crops, alternating between corn one year and soybeans the next. Armed with a cutting blade, workers walk between rows of soybeans and cut out the volunteer corn and other weeds that may have been missed by the cultivator. Detassling corn means removing the seed tassels to prevent carefully engineered hybrid feed corns from cross-pollinating. When our respondents came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was common to see yellow school-bus loads of teenagers from all over the county working in the fields.¹⁸ A local high school wrestling coach even organized his own crew; he probably figured picking rock was a good way to condition his team and for them to make a little money on the side.

Because of the extreme summer conditions, a farmhand's tasks start at dawn and end in late afternoon. Despite the harsh physical demands, the lure for local teenagers was that as long as they could endure the heat, humidity, sun, and swarms of bugs, at the end of the summer they would be rewarded with enough cash for a

new car or a year's worth of money to live on during high school. Some of the town kids worked alongside the country kids on their summer break because the jobs paid so well. The difference is that while the Leavers and the Stayers might pick rock or detassel corn together from June to August, once September came and school started, the sons and daughters of the teachers and lawyers devoted their after-school energy to their studies and sports, whereas their classmates not headed for college remained on as field hands for the harvest.

Kids growing up in the countryside are not segregated in the labor force the way kids in more densely populated metropolitan areas are. Being an hour's drive from the nearest mall means that teens from Ellis can't earn extra money selling scoops of gourmet ice cream or folding clothes at the Gap. Some of the Stayers collected their first paychecks employed as farmhands by the massive corporate agribusinesses, and many of the girls, and even a few boys, found jobs with the town's most reliable employer, Valleycrest Nursing Home, where, after completing a six-week certification course, anyone older than age sixteen could be certified as a nurse's aide. Many male Stayers' fathers worked in construction or fixed cars, and so, just as young men coming of age in rural America have done for generations, they learned their fathers' trades.

Stayers' introduction to the labor force and their intense, year-round participation in it starting as young teenagers fed their misplaced conviction that they would be able to get the sorts of blue-collar jobs that make someone middle class in America.¹⁹ Before graduating from high school, the future Stayers would earn almost as much as the adults working alongside them. What they could not see was that under the rules of the new economy, these were the jobs that quickly maxed out in terms of earning potential or upward trajectory, so the jobs Stayers held at seventeen would hardly be different from the jobs they held at forty-seven. Earning

\$10 an hour and having no health insurance or pension can be a disaster when you reach thirty or forty, but at eighteen these circumstances feel very different. With money in your back pocket, your parents treat you as if you're a grown-up, allowing you to come and go as you please and make choices for yourself. Stayers say their parents never expected them to get rich, just to earn a decent income and pay the bills. Their parents could not grasp the grand sweeping transformations of postindustrial, post-Fordist capitalism and the long-term impact of stagnating wages that had trapped them. When they did start to make the connections and figured out what had happened, it was too late to warn their kids. If they couldn't save themselves, they didn't see how they could make their kids much better off.

After graduating from high school, Stephanie Cannell, a former cheerleader with long dark hair and sad eyes, wasn't motivated to follow her classmates to a community college. Her first job was an assembler on the midnight-to-8 a.m. shift at Tantech, the same place her mother worked. When the company lost one of its contracts, as a part-time worker she was let go; cutting her hours didn't cost the company unemployment insurance. For the next year, Stephanie bounced around from one minimum-wage job to another: first at Burger King for \$5.15 an hour, then at the local supermarket.²⁰ The money wasn't great, but it was enough to pay for her car, which she "couldn't really afford."

Stephanie got pregnant around this time, and her boyfriend, Todd, who worked construction, did not stay in the picture very long. When he left, he took his paycheck with him. Working a minimum-wage job, even when Todd was still around, made Stephanie eligible for welfare. After he left, things got even worse. Feeling desperate, Stephanie tried to find work at Tantech again. Her

mother, June, who had worked the assembly line for ten years, stopped by Human Resources constantly to see if something new had opened up. June also started lobbying the shift supervisors directly on her daughter's behalf. Stephanie, now twenty-three, jokes that her mom, normally an unassuming, quiet woman, waged a full-frontal assault to get her daughter a job. "She would tell them, 'She's already worked here for a year, you had no problems with her, why not hire her back?'" Eventually, her nudging paid off, and Stephanie returned to Tantech after a scary year and a half. "My mom really wanted me to have a good job."

It's striking how much Stephanie's 8 a.m.-to-4 p.m. "mommy's hours" shift job as an assembler, which pays less than \$9 an hour, transformed her life. Working at Tantech means that Stephanie and her son are protected from the indignities of public assistance and welfare workers, and she can count on a steady paycheck that will go a long way toward raising a family. But what if the plant had another round of layoffs, and she lost her job? This time, Stephanie wants to be prepared: she and her mom are going back to college through the company's tuition-benefits plan. Stephanie survived her first brush with the new economy, and she says she longs to get back to school so she doesn't get mired in the quicksand of minimum-wage work again. With any luck, we joke, the only time she will be in a Burger King is to get her son a Whopper Junior. Another contract lost and a turn in the economy, and Stephanie, a self-sufficient single mom with her own house and a decent job, could find herself back on welfare in a flash.²¹

Many of the Stayers don't fully comprehend the rules of the new economy until they get steamrolled by them. "Nowadays, everything is so much computers that either you are going to be a laborer or you're going to be on your butt behind a computer. You get to do one or the other. And if you're not good at reading or writing, like I am not, you'd better learn some alternatives," explains Casey

Annis, a welder who works alongside his parents at John Deere. After walking out of high school with a diploma and some money in their pockets, the Stayers believed that getting a job would deliver them from the petty exclusions of the world of high school. Why should they endure the indignities of not being the ones expected to accomplish anything when they believed they had more important things to do than school? But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and ten years later, the Stayers who sprinted to get out of school would find themselves looking back on their missteps. There is Stephanie Cannell, the single mother who survived welfare and is trying to figure out how to get a degree; Courtney Rillings, a convenience store clerk wistfully imagining what might have been if she had headed off to college; and David Klinger, who blames the adults who should have known better for not keeping him on track. A decade of working has shown them all that their parents and teachers were wrong; it wasn't a good idea to find work in the plant. Working hard and playing by the rules would not bring their own reward. Klinger has worked in full-time jobs since leaving high school at sixteen and hasn't gotten a raise in four years. His job could disappear, and there is almost no chance he could work anywhere else with better wages, better benefits, or more security. At twenty-five, Dave feels finished. "There's no ladder to climb."

"AROUND HERE, TWENTY-FOUR IS OLD
TO BE GETTING MARRIED"

Leaving school and starting work are not the only things Stayers do faster. In every facet of their lives, Stayers settle in for the long haul far sooner than their college-bound Achiever peers.

Though the median age for first marriage in Iowa is twenty-four, just a year younger than the nation as a whole, for the Stayers—mostly young women who left Ellis only to take an accounting or medical-assistant class at a community college or never left Liberty

County at all—marriage and children were things that happened, quite typically, around the age of twenty-one.²² Though unusual, one young Ellis woman had sought a judge's permission to wed her husband at seventeen; another married her high school sweetheart at nineteen, when she discovered she was pregnant. In the laughing words of Sara Alfred, twenty-eight, a teacher who resisted pressure from family and friends who couldn't understand why she was waiting so long to marry the boyfriend she had dated since junior prom, "Around here, twenty-four is old to be getting married."

With all the talk of hooking up and party rape on college campuses, it's tempting to long for the days of dating high school sweethearts.²³ Looking at the Stayers' mating rituals is like discovering a time capsule from the 1950s, an era when the majority of Americans wed by the age of twenty-four, shotgun weddings hadn't gone out of style, and marriage was seen as more of an obligation than a preference.²⁴ Attending a four-year college builds natural delays for marriage, although going to college is hardly the only reason for postponing a wedding. Higher education and high-status careers, goals that are linked with the twenty-first-century experience of emerging adulthood, erode young people's preferences for marriage.

Courtney Rillings, a twenty-three-year-old wife and mother with cornflower blue eyes and straight brown hair that falls below her shoulders, talks with us after she's cleared away the dinner dishes. Courtney, who works at a convenience store, married at age nineteen, and was pregnant on her wedding day, believes that if she had followed her Achiever friends to college, she wouldn't be a wife and mother now. "I would've met other people. I would've wanted to be free and just have fun and do the whole free-spirit college thing." To her way of thinking, marrying young, as she has done, "is a small-town thing." After getting out of high school, couples

decide to wed because “you figure, you guys have been together so long, and it’s not gonna make a difference.”

In a social milieu where testing out different partners and waiting to get married just doesn’t happen, there is no existential crisis about being ready to make the ultimate commitment. Relationships that endure “for a certain amount of time” lead to marriage, effortlessly and inevitably. Laura Carpenter, a thirty-year-old housewife who wed at age nineteen, explains the process. “You know, I didn’t think anything of it. I thought that’s just what I had to do. Not that I had to do it, I just—that’s what I wanted to do. I was at the point in my life where I was like, ‘Let’s get this going.’” Young people pursuing higher education find a variety of other priorities to occupy their time and energy, while in Ellis, marriage and childbearing seems to be at the top of a short list of things to do. Moreover, when faced with pregnancy, couples in the countryside are far more likely to respond with marriage than with cohabitation.²⁵

So what is the trouble with these young couples following the traditional patterns of mid-twentieth-century life by marrying far earlier than their more affluent, educated, urban peers? Though the marriage traditionalists might celebrate the countryside as a throwback to a better time, the truth is that marriages before the age of twenty-three face a far greater chance of resulting in divorce within ten years. And this risk of divorce contributes to a greater risk for poverty because single motherhood, whether it results from divorce or nonmarital childbearing, is the primary reason for economic insecurity among women and children.²⁶ If we take the state of marriage as a barometer of conditions in Iowa, the fact that marriage is becoming more breakable and that more women and children are following the path into poverty long associated with distressed urban centers seems to show that trends witnessed in inner cities are now evident in rural areas. What does it mean if Iowa, tradi-

tionally one of the most married states in the Union, is facing the sorts of hardship and suffering that were once associated only with troubled inner-city areas where weddings have become such rare events?

SMALL-TOWN TROUBLES

In towns like Ellis, no kids are strangers. Most people are related to one another, if one goes back far enough, through either marriage or birth. Small-town schools set the rhythm of life there, and any young person seen tooling around town when school is in session catches people's attention. One young man recalled the time he tried, but failed, to cut class. Apparently, his car had given him away; someone in a house near the school spotted him pulling out of the parking lot after the bell rang. The deputy caught up with him just a few minutes later. "Yah," he explained, "they know which kids drive what cars." In places where people stay put for generations, it's just harder to get away with things.

But the greatest myth of small-town life is that nothing bad ever happens there. Rural kids have distressingly high rates of suicide,²⁷ early childbearing,²⁸ and alcohol abuse,²⁹ as high as anywhere else, and school shootings occur more frequently in isolated rural places.³⁰ It's not simply that kids coming of age in the countryside get in trouble; there are also important differences in how this trouble is viewed. When the Achievers missed class, they received excused absences, whereas the Stayers got detentions. Stayers speeding down Main Street were cited for a moving violation; when the Achievers did the same thing, the same deputy wished them luck in the big game. While the Stayers' parties got busted by police, the Achievers' drinking was considered harmless fun, a precursor to their social life on a college campus in a year or two.

When our young Iowans were growing up, their preferred drug of choice was alcohol. During the late 1990s, a synthetic form of

speed, whose typical users are white and rural, would change all that. With the spread of methamphetamine, drug epidemics would unravel life in the countryside. Law-enforcement officials consider meth to be the fastest-growing drug threat in America. The Heartland's countryside, with its small police departments operating in isolation and its easy access to the ingredients, space, and tools required for the drug's manufacture, was the ideal location for the ascent of a new growth industry: meth capitalism. Across the nation, meth has more regular users than crack, and since 1994 meth use has nearly tripled.

By 1999, there were three hundred times more meth-lab seizures in Iowa than in New York and New Jersey combined, according to statistics from the Drug Enforcement Agency. Iowa has claimed some major victories: state and federal officials embarked on a successful campaign to restrict the sales of cold medicine with pseudoephedrine and called on agriculture retailers and farmers to place locks on fertilizer tanks with anhydrous ammonia, both key ingredients for meth production. Since every pound of meth produces six pounds of hazardous waste, curtailing the proliferation of the labs saved the state millions of dollars annually by reducing the need for costly lab cleanups. But making it difficult to cook meth in Iowa did nothing to reduce people's appetite for the drug. With the Beavis-and-Butthead-style meth-lab operations out of the way, the Mexican drug cartels moved in to take a bigger share of the market.

In 2007, more than one in one hundred Iowans older than age twelve reported using meth in the past year, ranking the state fifteenth in the nation for meth use. "Like crack, meth drives up all the other problems in these communities. Meth users tend to be erratic, violent, and, in some cases, borderline psychotic—especially when on a sleepless binge or 'tweaking' episode. Users abandon families, lose jobs, and batter spouses and loved ones."³¹ The ques-

tion of whether the spread of meth has something to do with the loss of good-paying jobs in small towns, observes the writer Timothy Egan, “is an echo of a question—the one posed about crack and heroin use in gutted inner cities.”³² Should we be more troubled by the fact that so few people seem to be connecting the dots between the rise of crack in the inner city and the spread of meth in the countryside?

The summer we lived in Ellis, the town’s chief of police, Daryl Meyer, had grown quite accustomed to orchestrating massive drug raids—with helicopters, hazmat teams, and heavily armed federal agents driving SUVs with tinted windows—that resembled scenes from an action blockbuster. Local dentist Dennis Daughtery noticed that more and more of his younger patients had blackened, rotting teeth, which he recognized as “meth mouth,” with the cracked teeth from teeth grinding that is symptomatic of tweaking.³³ Over at the Ellis pharmacy, before it closed, Rob Hubler, the druggist, and his wife, Jan, who worked the counter, took note of which customers purchased unusually large amounts of Sudafed. Driving by abandoned farmhouses, neighbors would check to see if there were several cars and trucks parked in the driveway or strange odors emanating from the property.

Mike Craun, a handsome, soft-spoken new father who meets us at our house in Ellis, somehow doesn’t fit his wild history. As a high school senior, Mike worked in construction, which made it possible for him to finance his partying lifestyle. His first employer—his father, Rich—counted on his son to keep the tiny family construction business afloat. How Mike and his friends spent their time off never prevented him from being industrious on the job during the day. Mike says his parents were worried about what he and his friends were doing but had little knowledge about how out of control things

had become. Mike thinks they stood back because they thought he'd have to make his own mistakes and figure things out on his own. His family became aware of all that Mike was doing around the time he celebrated his twenty-first birthday.

After a week of partying, using so many drugs that he can't remember exactly what he did, who was there, or how long he went without eating or sleeping, Mike tried to drive out in the middle of an unincorporated section of Liberty County known as Smokeville to those involved in the meth scene. The isolated location was ideal for keeping activities hidden from curious neighbors. He drove his car off the road. When he woke up, not sure if he'd been asleep or unconscious, he called a friend to come get him. Not realizing he was still tweaking, Mike remembers, "I didn't even know anything was wrong with me. I looked at my car, and you couldn't even recognize it." Somewhere between crashing his brand new car and calling his friend, Mike had set the car on fire. "I don't know why I did, but I took the plates off the car and threw them." His friend arrived and drove him to his parents' house. The Crauns had not seen their son for a week, and they were shocked to see cuts on his face. Mike could have lied or left out some details, but for some reason he didn't. He told them about the weeklong meth binge, crashing the car, waking up by the side of road. Terrified and confused, his parents, not knowing what else to do, called the Ellis police. When the police discovered the remains of the burned-out car, they thought there should be a corpse beside it. Mike was arrested for arson, but given his demeanor, the police and the judge decided to send him to a hospital. They feared Mike would try to kill himself.

"Why did you get into all this crazy stuff?" we ask. Mike answers, "I was just bored."³⁴

Two years have passed since the birthday celebration, and Mike is back working now. While in the hospital, he met a pretty nurse's aide named Amy, who was eighteen. Unlike the party girls Mike

had been with before, Amy was serious. Still in high school, she worked at the hospital because she wanted to go to community college and become a nurse. Mike and she started talking when he returned to the hospital for his outpatient follow-ups.

Since Amy came into his life, Mike tells us, "I haven't been doing any drugs or anything." Amy and Mike now live together, and she's finishing her nursing degree. They are engaged and have a one-year-old son named Dylan. No wedding date has been set, but they will marry after she gets her RN. Mike says he's "doing good." Finding Amy and becoming a father have been a calming influence. We wonder what would have happened to him if he hadn't crashed the car and set the whole chain of events in motion. Mike answers, "Not in prison, but [I'd] probably [be] in jail." There would be no Amy and baby Dylan, but, Mike adds, smiling, "I'd still have a really nice green race car."

His friends have not been so fortunate. Mike remembers how, after his own arrest, they just wouldn't listen to him. "I told them they were gonna get into trouble 'cause, I mean, you could [cook meth] in a big town, but in a small town like Ellis, everybody knows everything." Mike had heard warrants were coming; there was talk in town that law officers "were coming around talking to people, asking questions about why they were out driving around so late." Mike says, "I told them, you know, this is going to come down pretty soon. They just, I don't know, they were hooked on it or they didn't believe it or what." Mike had managed to keep a job while using meth in intense spurts, but his friends didn't work and were paying the bills, and feeding their habit, by cooking meth for themselves.

We met Mike in the summer of 2001, and it was in the previous January that people had started getting arrested. Mike would be called to testify about the use of drugs in town. One friend,

the ringleader from a well-to-do family who was friendly with the chief of police, ended up in a federal boot camp. Another received a phone call warning him that the authorities were on their way and that he should pack his bags and leave town for good; he took the good advice. Most people in Ellis know he's up in Minnesota, and many know where he is, but people figure he's someone else's problem now.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO LEAVE?

Although, as we've discussed, economic and social forces keep certain kids in Ellis, the strongest hold over many of them is that they simply like the town. They're comfortable there and cannot really imagine living anywhere else. The lyrics of John Mellencamp's song "Small Town" ring true for many of our Stayers, and when we asked them why they stuck around, their responses were shot through with a tinge of puzzled amusement; no one had ever asked before. As Mellencamp's verse so clearly states, this was the place they would be until they die.

The worst and best features of life in Ellis are that people know you, you never have to lock your doors, there is no traffic, and, although crimes occur, people sense that it's more difficult to get away with them here because no one is anonymous in a small town. For those who remain in Ellis, living in a place where people feel as if they know you as well as you know yourself and "there are no secrets" is a source of infinite comfort. For others, it could be a source of madness.

The Stayers don't long for change and adventure; they prefer, instead, to be surrounded by like-minded people. Such an inclination grates against the normative underpinnings of pluralism, in which diversity ought to be valued over homogeneity. The truth is, the majority of Americans inhabit highly segregated worlds, and

the elites who claim to put such a high premium on tolerance pretend this social isolation is an accident, rather than a clear, willful act. In Ellis, there are no such pretensions. It's just common sense that people prefer to be around those who share their orientation to the world. And yes, it is safe to infer that being around people who are like you means that the Other will be tolerated but not necessarily accepted. The central dilemma of life in the countryside is that its inhabitants want to lock themselves away from the outside world, yet to sustain life in their remote corner they must let that world in.

The Stayers' wings get clipped around the time they start working in high school. Their lightning-fast entry into the labor force gives them cash in their pockets, but what they fail to realize is that short-term financial independence will not be enough when they are adults and have a mortgage, children, and a retirement fund to feed. Many of the young people who stay in the countryside get tripped up when they try to play by twentieth-century rules in a twenty-first-century economy, and by the time they do understand, it's too late.

It is remarkable how much the Stayers talk about the comfort and security of small-town life, given the growing uncertainty they face. Even with the grim shadow of meth and the spread of poverty and joblessness, people in Ellis cherish the fact that the chaos, insecurity, and danger they associate with the wider world is not found to the same degree in the countryside. Several Stayers described Ellis as a haven where their kids could run free, be safe, and practically raise themselves. And though most Stayers have seen little of the world beyond Liberty County, they know that the unguarded way they raise their children would be impossible in urban America. When we lived there for a summer as parents of a two-year-old daughter, we, too, were struck by the lack of fear in

Ellis compared to back home in Philadelphia. In our regular visits to the Ellis community swimming pool, we noted scores of unsupervised young children who biked alone to the pool each day and spent their time cavorting in and out of the water under the casual watch of teenage lifeguards. Very often, when we went to the pool with our daughter, Camille, our presence there doubled the number of adults watching over the children.

This enviably relaxed approach to child supervision was at odds with our own urban, middle-class experience, one in which children are raised and protected in a cocoon-like existence. But only a few of the town's middle-class denizens shared our surprise at the relative lack of supervision; overall, it was a socially accepted practice. For Stayers, living in a place where their children could grow up and play freely, as their parents had during their childhoods, consistently ranked among the top reasons for remaining there.

The social and economic context might overshadow the sort of lives Stayers lead, but it is important to see that even though they don't overanalyze their decisions and appear fairly content with their circumstances, they face a major challenge in their diminishing capacity, in the new economy, to sustain protected lives. The problem with the Stayers' choice of work and money over education is that they effectively close off one of the most reliable escape routes from the countryside—and their best chance at economic security. It also means that a disproportionate number of the workers who will determine the future of the Iowa labor force will be particularly ill suited to adapt to the economy's increasing demands for educational credentials and technical skills for all but the most basic of jobs.

Stayers are the harbingers of troubled times in the small towns of the Heartland. They are the people most likely to be poor, and they are victims of the Midwest's meth epidemic. They must also

be a vital part of the solution to the hollowing-out problem. That they have been largely overlooked suggests that they are an as yet untapped resource, and this book's conclusion includes recommendations that can help small towns renew themselves and prepare for the challenges of an increasingly globalized and unpredictable future that is already transforming life in the rural Heartland.