

IT WAS APRIL 2012, AND I HAD been working as a contract writer in Reston, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., when an email floated in from an organization in Fairfield, Iowa. Oprah had recorded a show about the cool small town, trumpeting its many achievements as a hotbed of creativity, innovation, and consciousness. It was the state's Entrepreneurial Community of the Year. Check it out, it said.

After a decent career that included working as a writer in Hollywood, running marketing communications for tech companies, and helping nonprofits, I was feeling burned out. The dog-eat-dog intensity of the D.C. area didn't help any.

Sitting in Starbucks, looking at that email and feeling at loose ends, I wondered if Iowa might be a better place for me than Northern Virginia.

Reston, as a town, is disturbingly incongruous. On the surface it appears to be a gentle, leafy suburb, but once you're there awhile you realize it's actually an epicenter of gladiatorial combat, a life-and-death fight over government contracts (many military related), a fiercely aggressive place dominated by people who under ordinary circumstances might be nice and neighborly, but cast in this milieu have become adversaries in cut-throat competition for jobs/promotions/traffic lanes/parking/groceries/space/air/pie.

Traffic jams in the region are often measured in the *tens* of miles, and if you have decent vision, you can sometimes actually see the malevolent stare on the face of the driver tailgating you, whose thoughts generally run along these lines:

I must get to work! You are an impediment. Curse you—and your family, your kids, your grandkids (whenever you have them), and your parents, too. Disappear! Die!

Living amid this, I realized I'd become *clenched*. Fortunately, I had just completed my six-month contract at the Corporation, and I was a free man.

So when the word Fairfield floated up off the laptop screen from that email—well, it *seemed* to be hovering halfway between me and the computer—that

AWOL in Iowa

Exasperated Urbanite Finds the Sweet Life

BY WARREN GOLDIE



An East Coast wanderer finds his field of dreams in small-town Iowa.

appeared, somehow, significant. I understood what I had to do. I knew how to reclaim sanity and my soul, which bit by bit had become scattered around Northern Virginia's business parks, strip malls, and freeways. Sometimes I'd see it on my drives, and pull over, but it was so light and ethereal it flew off in the slightest breeze.

When I arrived, it wasn't much to look at—which, I discovered, is a ruse intended to deceive.

I closed down my affairs over a couple of weeks. And before you could say "Midwest OMG What Am I Doing,"

Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio were rolling under tire, disappearing into the rearview mirror.

Fairfield, population 9,476. Cool, mellow, eco-friendly. Mix of spiritually inclined folks from the Transcendental Meditation community (there since 1974) and native Iowans. Priuses parked beside pickups. Square dances with locals and local millionaires.

When I arrived, it wasn't much to look at—old houses, middling parks, limited shopping, not much in the way of landscapes or views, little to no nightlife—all of which, I discovered, is a ruse intended to deceive. Camouflage. Why flaunt the bounty? The richness, I came to find, was definitely there, though it's as much about what's *not* in this place as what is. Often it's in the hidden populations.

Driving around on my first night, a phone call came in, so I pulled into a deserted parking lot at Waterworks Park to

take it. Within a few minutes the moonlight shining off the hood was obliterated by the powerful spotlight of a police cruiser. The officer checked me out and told me the lot was closed after hours. I said no problem, I'm on my way. "No, that's okay," he said with a smile. "You go ahead and finish your call."

Huh? I stared at him, speechless. What kind of a cop tells you to *finish your call*?

In the Burger King, a 16-year-old boy took my order. He looked into my eyes and smiled, and I realized with shock and disbelief—for I had rarely seen this in any East or West coast teenage boy—what I was witnessing: the absence of hostility. No latent malevolence, no surliness. No murderous stare. No general pissed-offedness. Just peacefulness, serenity, being okay with life, call it what you will. And not put on. It was real.

I went about my business at the retail stores, keeping an eye out, finding it virtually always there.

At the DMV, the doctor's office, the market—more of the same. I saw it in Mount Pleasant, Burlington, the town of Washington. Friendly greetings. Eye contact. Even, if I can venture the sentiment, neighborly caring.

In time the vibrating anxieties of the D.C. area began to disperse, and I started to unclench, began to feel the spaciousness again. I commenced to collect up those wayward bits of soul, released the battle stance. My thinking became clear and unencumbered. I started to work again. I began enjoying the little things. A coffee conversation. A walk, even if it wasn't Rock Creek Park or Great Falls. A tree, even if it wasn't old growth and awesome. Even, dare I say it, a trip to Walmart or Hy-Vee.

Oh, blessed Iowa.

I've learned much during my time here. Even this: Don't be so fast to delete marketing emails.

A few weeks ago I drove down to St. Louis to visit a friend with whom I'd grown up in Baltimore, and told him where I was living. "Iowa?" he smirked. "Why? There's nothing there."

I had to smile. Good. Fine. You go right ahead and think that. □