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Jane Doe

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Susan Taylor Chehak

Jane Doe

Nobody wants to read a story about Iowa, or so I've been told. Nothing happens there, or if something does happen there, it probably isn't anything very interesting, not even to the people to whom it happens, because, on the whole, they're not very interesting either. Even if the story isn't about Iowa per se but is about something that just happened to finally have happened there, nobody would want to read it. Everybody knows that this is true, and no one will blame you if you happen to be somebody who is one of those nobodies yourself.

Most people don't even know where Iowa is, exactly. They have a vague idea, maybe, but they've never been there themselves, and they get it confused with other places all the time, places like Idaho and Illinois and even Ohio, places with *o*'s and *i*'s and maybe an *a*, and what else is there to say? There is nothing special about Iowa. You couldn't write a story about it that would tell anybody anything they don't already know.

Iowa is nowhere and it's nothing. It has no mountains, no sea, no unusual rivers, no great lakes. No big cities, either. It's not even all that flat, not like Nebraska. Or Kansas. It has a lot of fields. And farms, too. But so what? Who doesn't have fields and farms? There are fields and farms everywhere, even in Africa. Even in France. Corn and hogs. Soybeans. Silos and barns and, okay, maybe sometimes the ones in Iowa are pretty, but mostly they're not; mostly they're just what they are, they are what they're for, and they're nothing more or less than that.

Sometimes they stink, but not always. For example, in winter nothing smells like anything at all. It's just cold, and in Iowa it's cold for no good reason that anybody can tell. There's no purpose to the cold or the snow, and it isn't even pretty, mostly. It just is what it is, cold and snow. Lots of cold and lots of snow, but still not as much as plenty of other places get. There is rain, and that's good news for the farmers if there's enough of it, which usually there isn't, or if there isn't too much of it, which usually there is. There are storms, even tornadoes sometimes, but plenty of other places have those, too. The ones they get in Iowa aren't famous or special. For example, the storms that hit Iowa don't have names.

There are woods, too, but not many of them, and they aren't forests—they're neither thick nor deep. They're just woods made up of ordinary trees—oaks and maples and elms, sometimes beeches, a willow here and there; that's all. They cling to the rivers and the streams in the creases of the land.

The animals in Iowa aren't anything you can't find someplace else either. Pigs, mostly, and cows and horses, donkeys, chickens, goats, sheep. All the usual farm animals, which are maybe interesting at first, when you're a kid, but not for long even then. All the usual wildlife too: squirrels and skunks, raccoons, turkeys, deer, hawks, owls. You don't see tigers in Iowa. Not even wolves. Or bears.

Except for the hump in its side that is the Mississippi River passing by on its way to and from someplace else, Iowa is just a rectangle in the center of the country, in the center that is not the center at all, but just the middle of the middle, a bit of nothing where nothing interesting happens, where there's nothing interesting to see and not much that's especially interesting to do.

It never happens that something happens in Iowa that hasn't already happened someplace else. It also never happens that something happens in Iowa while nothing else happens in the

world, but it does often happen that nothing happens in Iowa when something else happens in the world.

This turns out to be exactly why some people choose to live in Iowa in the first place. Those people like it that nothing happens here, because they don't want anything to happen, at least not to them. They know that sometimes, when something happens, it's good and it's interesting—or at least they think that maybe this was once true, at least for them or for other people that they knew; but that was before everything that happens started happening to be something bad more often than it was anything good. Now they know that, most of the time, when something happens, it's bad; and although it may still be interesting, it's interesting in a bad way, and most people don't want bad things to happen, especially not to them. They've seen bad, they've seen how bad bad can be, and they don't want those bad things they've seen to happen to them or to anybody else either—unless somebody deserves it, or unless they've asked for it, which some people do—and so they'd rather be someplace where nothing happens at all, just to be on the safe side.

By this reasoning, you might think that Iowa is a good place to raise children, because nothing can happen to a child here, and that's what good parents want, isn't it? For nothing to happen to their children? They pray for this, some of them. *Dear God, they say, please don't let anything happen to _____*. Go ahead and fill in that blank with the name of your own child, and you'll see what I mean. Or you can insert your own name there, and then maybe you'll know something about what it's like to be a child in Iowa, growing up where nothing happens. And then you'll also know why some children have to decide to make something happen, when it looks like nothing is ever going to happen on its own, in case they don't.

This is called acting out when it gets the child in trouble, but the parents of the child want to be told that it's really nothing, that whatever it was that got the child in trouble, still it's nothing, and so nothing has really happened; everything is still the same and it's all okay. They'll agree that the child was only acting out, and it's over, whatever it was, so now everybody can just go back to doing nothing and being nothing again.

It's like a kernel of popcorn—which is a crop that's grown in Iowa, along with feed corn and seed corn and sweet corn. Like this: A kernel of popcorn just sits there in the oil until it gets hot enough, and then it starts to swell until it's bigger than its own skin, so it pops, and then it's over, it's nothing. Just air. Even that big event is like nothing happened: there's just the sound of it, that's all, an empty sound, the eponymous pop; and so what if along the way the kernel itself is deformed, that doesn't do anything to anybody except to make them want to eat it. Before it acted out, that kernel was all one thing, perfect and complete, smooth and round and hard; you'd break a tooth if you tried to bite into it. Then *Pop!* just like that, it's soft and deformed and lumpy; and that's what happens to you if you are a girl, and you find yourself in hot oil, and you get popped. At that point you can't help it anymore. You just have to act out. That's a must, and you have no choice. And once that happens—and definitely it will—then that's it, you're done. Finito. One pop, that's all it takes, and after that everything will be changed; and yet nothing will have changed, because you're still there, where nothing happens, and nothing has happened, and nothing is going to happen, because that's how it is, that's how they like it. They want it that way. That is how the place was made.

You already know what they're like, the people who live in Iowa. I don't have to tell you; it's nothing new. They're mostly fat and white and loud and cheerful, and sometimes they're sunburned, or they wear big shorts, or their otherwise straight hair is permed in a tight curly way

that is distinctly Iowan. You recognize them because you see them this way when they come to visit you, wherever it is you yourself live. To them, you are an attraction. They are eager and agog, like they've never seen anything like you before; they've never seen the things you see every day and take for granted, except maybe on television or in the movies, where it's either smaller than life or larger than life, but it isn't life, at least not life as they know it, which is just fine with them. And they're friendly, too, and polite. They're all smiles, partly because they want you to like them—because they think that if you like them then probably nothing will happen—but also because they're used to nothing happening and you aren't, and so they feel sorry for you, the way that people who go to the zoo feel sorry for the animals in the cages, because the animals in the cages are stuck there, and they can't go home because they're already home, and it's a terrible home, where all kinds of terrible things can happen and do happen, but these folks from Iowa are free to leave, and they'll go home eventually, home to where nothing happens, while you'll just have to stay right there, wherever you are, and be the ones to whom things happen, both good and bad, but mostly bad.

The people from Iowa pity you for that. They'd like to feed you through the bars. They'd like to baby talk you into feeling happy, if they could, which you know and they know they can't. So, all the time, what they're really hoping for is that you'll jump up and down or beat your chest or do something else that shows them how miserable and trapped you've been feeling, how much you wish that you could be like them, because it makes them happy to know that they have something you don't have, which is nothing. They've read about you in the news, and they've watched you on TV, and they're glad that they're not you, but at the same time they're feeling sorry for you because you are you, and you are not them, and they would never want to be you; but what they don't know is that you would never want to be them either, because even if you are an animal in a zoo, still at least you're a tiger or a bear or something interesting and dangerous, which is exactly what they are not, and they think they're lucky for that.

Even on those rare occasions when something does happen in Iowa, it's not something that hasn't already happened someplace else, so no matter what happens, somebody somewhere will know what to do to make it seem as if it never happened. That is, whatever happens, it's nothing new in the sense that it's nothing unexpected, which is exactly why some people, certain people, want to go to Iowa to live, with their children, and then that turns out to be why they want to stay there even after their children have grown up and moved away. In fact, these are the people who will want to stay there for the whole rest of their lives. Which they expect to be long, because they think there is nothing that will happen to them there that might make them short. And it's also why certain other people will do anything to get away, as soon as possible. And then, once those people are away, they don't come back; or if they do come back, that's only because something happened while they were away, and it scared them, maybe, or it hurt them, or maybe it was just something that happened that reminded them of what it was like for them when nothing did happen, and they decided they liked that better. This is how it is for people when the something that happens when they weren't in Iowa is something bad.

And then, even when something does finally happen in Iowa, nothing happens.

Like this: In Iowa, when somebody dies, it turns out nothing happened. Even if somebody you thought you loved got hurt. Or if somebody you thought you loved died. Or if somebody you thought you loved almost died, and it was almost all your fault.

For example, let's say there's a girl passed out in the back seat of your car. She's a couple of years older than you, and so you've been led to believe she knows what she's doing. Oh yes,

and she's beautiful, by the way. She came into your life like a surprise. You never expected a girl like her to pay any attention to a girl like you, to pick you out of the crowd and smile. Her bright eyes. Her clear face. The way she looked at you, and you could feel the shiver of her radiance on your skin.

Let's say she's passed out in the back seat of your car, like a sleeping princess. You watch the way the leafy trees cast shadows on her body and her face. This is Iowa in summer, so the heat and the humidity are mixing it up into misery. You turn on the car so the air conditioning will blow, but your father has been complaining about how gas prices have lately been going through the roof, so you turn it off again.

This girl told you when you picked her up that her life has not been easy. That she's been on her own for a while now, and maybe she's been living on the street. Her father is a drunk, her mother isn't well, her brothers are cruel, and her grandmother died. You want to be a good person. You want her to be happy. So you helped her get what she said she needed for that. You know that eventually the sun is going to set, and the air is going to cool, and the drugs are going to wear off, and she's going to come to, and she's going to be okay. Maybe she'll reach for you then. Maybe she'll be grateful to you for taking care of her as you have.

You're sitting in the yard of a house that isn't yours, with some friends who aren't really your friends, but who live there together now that school is out. You still live at home. You ask, "What should we do?" Everyone agrees that it's best to just let her be, let her sleep it off. This sounds reasonable to you.

But then it's getting to be the end of the day, and she's still out there. You check on her again. The fine sweat on her pale skin makes it look like it's not real. Like she might be made of glass. Or porcelain. Like the fine china in your grandmother's dining room that only comes out for holidays when the whole family is there. You watch a bead of sweat gather and then drip, sliding down her jaw, into the shadows of her throat. The tattoo on her shoulder. The bruises on her arms. The blue vein at her wrist. Her slack lips, a wink of tooth. Her eyelashes, caked and smeared in black. She seems so peaceful in her dreams, there inside her own secret self, a million miles away, in a life of unreality where people are walking around, and maybe you'd like to believe you're in there somewhere too.

A car rounds the corner, and you turn to stare at the woman in the front seat, how she's got her hair all done up, and she's passing by here in this world, while in the world behind the girl's eyes, something else is happening. Maybe it's that same woman in the car doing something else altogether, or maybe it's some other woman in some other car, driving slowly past, staring back at you. And you blink, and then the woman and the car are both gone.

That's when you decide you'll have a beer. Just one. You don't really even think about it. It's automatic. There's nobody to keep you from doing anything you want to here. You're not planning on getting wasted, although that's exactly what you'll do. You're just being in the moment, right now, right here, and so you go up onto the porch, where these two guys you don't really know are sitting at the table, playing cards. They offer you a hit, and you take it, and then you get a beer from the cooler and snap it open and light a cigarette and climb into the hammock in the yard. You're listening to the music that comes from a radio somewhere, or maybe it's just in your head. You finish that one beer, and then you get up and get another one. Take two, to save yourself another trip to the cooler. It's been a long time, and you haven't eaten anything for as long as you can remember, so when you roll out of the hammock again, you know you're drunk and *Fuck! That wasn't it. Not to get drunk!* The wobbliness, the blurriness, the fogginess,

everything is slowed and sludgy now, and you only wanted to be sharp and clear again. You wanted it to be morning again; the night and its darkness has always seemed too secretive and dangerous to you. And *Fuck!* Now you remember the girl. Those two on the porch have stopped playing cards and are on the chaise making out, and they have no awareness of you or anyone other than themselves.

You go to your car, and there's this sound. At first you think it's the radio, turned down, someone talking in a low voice, saying the same thing over and over again, or repeating a series of numbers. Then it sounds more like a motor, starting and stopping. You open the door, and it gets louder. You put out a hand for balance, and this feels like a dream now because, *What is that sound?* A bellows—whoo-ha, whoo-ha, whoo-ha. And then, in the back seat, there she is. Her eyes are open, and the sound is coming from her, or behind her, or under her. Her chest rises and falls, her eyes roll, so she's not seeing you or anything else at all.

Now you're shaking her, trying to wake her up. "Girl!" you cry. "Girl!" Then it's all loud and happening fast. Those other two are there, because you were screaming, and they see what's happening, so now there's a lot of shouting, some of it your own: "Get her to the hospital! Call 911!"

But those two are pushing you away. They're yelling back at you: "Fuck, no. No ambulance here, man. No cops. Just take her there yourself."

So that's how it ends up belonging to you. All of it. All yours.

By the time you get to the hospital, she's quiet at least. You pull up to the emergency entrance and go inside, and you don't know how you look or what you're saying, but everyone is gaping at you anyway. Like the nurse, or whatever she is, who thinks you're there for yourself; but you're doing your best to explain: "No! She's in the car, a girl, she's...She needs...Help her...Please..." Until finally you get the nurse to follow you outside. And then there's a stretcher, and you say you're just going to park the car, you'll be right back; but instead you drive away, and it's not until you get back home that you realize you never did tell them her name. Maybe you never even knew it yourself.

This is another reason why nothing ever happens in Iowa—because even when it happens, it didn't happen.

You don't have to be a genius, or even someone special, to know that what I'm saying here is true. You could be anybody, or you could be somebody, or you could be nobody. Or maybe your name's Jane Doe.