

# YOU ↙ CAN → TAKE ↗ THE ↖ GIRL ← OUT ↑ OF ↓ IOWA

My naïve attempt to take the Iowa  
out of the girl

by Ann Friedman

Illustration Nishant Choksi

**When I was** a kid I would fantasize that I was adopted. I was the child of two cash-strapped grad students who had given me up so they could finish their dissertations. This couple—he was an English professor by now, probably, she an artist—lived in a big brick house covered in ivy. It was *packed* full of books. One January, while drinking wine by the fire, they would finally have that tough conversation, the one where they would discuss their long-lost daughter and wonder where she'd ended up. She'd be about, what, 10 now? 11? The professor would set down his wine and take his wife's hand.

"Honey, we should find her. We *need* to find her."

Cue the montage of them demanding to see hospital records, shuffling through court files, approaching the front door of our squat ranch house on Rosewood Drive. When my real-life mom lets them in, my fantasy parents glance around the living room. Crucifix. No bookshelves. Their eyes settle on a First Communion portrait of an exceedingly gangly girl with thick bangs and bad teeth.

They can just *tell*.

I never thought about the actual "reunion." At this point the fantasy would leap directly to their ivy-covered brick home in the city. It's probably Chicago, because this is the first city I ever knew, first experienced

through the windows of the family minivan, contorting my neck to see to the tops of buildings as we hurtled along I-90 on a family vacation.

In front of the roaring fire, I would tell my fantasy parents about my life without them.

"First, we live in Dubuque," I say. No description necessary. They've been to eastern Iowa. They know how bad it is.

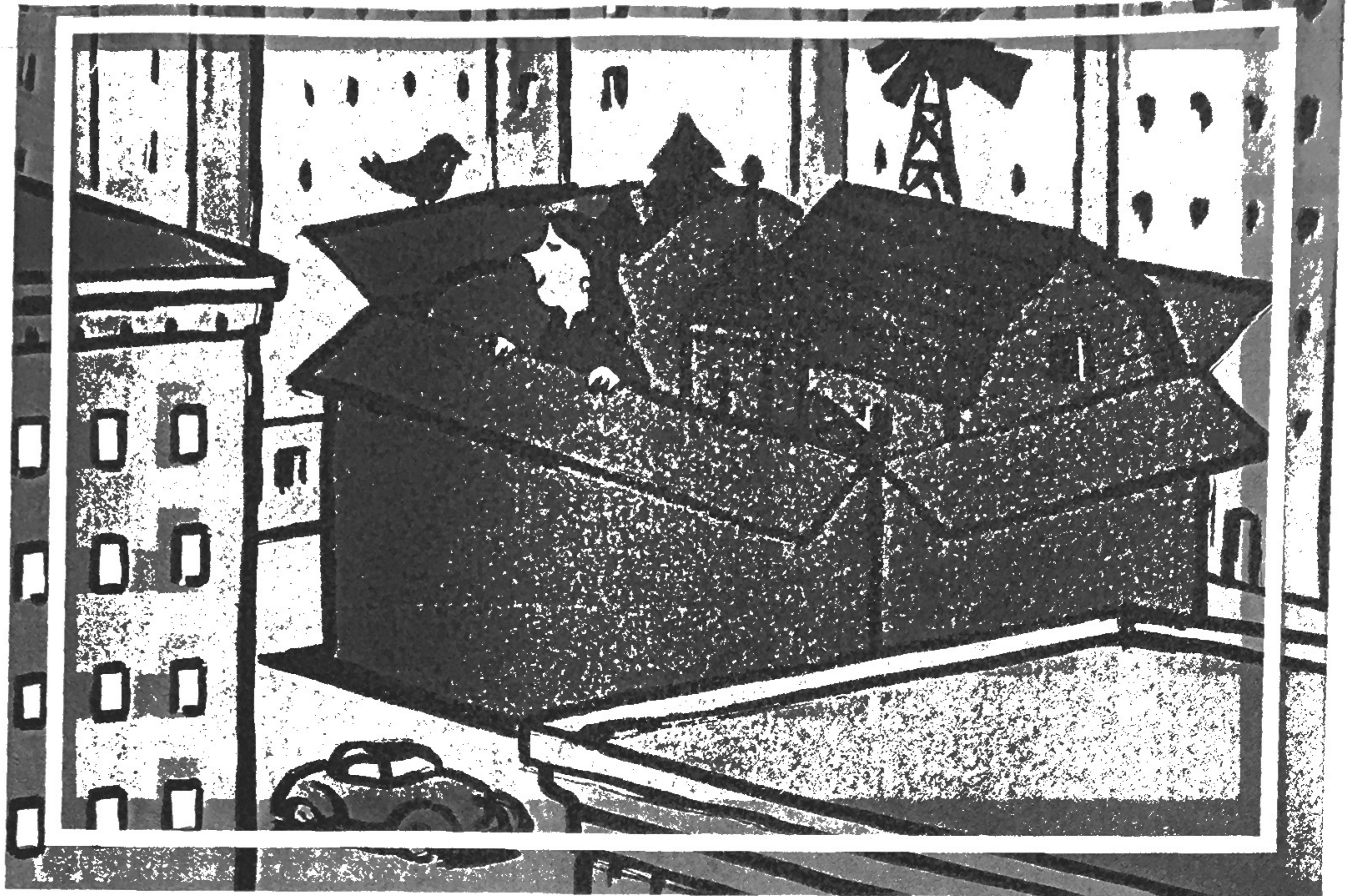
"My whole family likes sports," I continue. "It's all they talk about at dinner. And they make me go to baseball games! Every summer! I bring a book, but some of the outdoor stadiums have really poor lighting." They nod sympathetically.

"When we go on vacation, I have to beg to be taken to the art museum," I say. "And then my dad makes fun of the modern art to the security guard. It is mortifying." My fantasy mom, who totally wears funky jewelry, puts her hand on my knee and swallows, hard. But I'm not done yet.

"I go to *Catholic* school," I wail. "I have to go to church EVERY SUNDAY! And Holy Days!" By this point, they are both quietly weeping. What have they done?

(Not to fact-check my own childhood fantasy, but it now occurs to me that this liberal couple probably would have just had an abortion. Or that it wouldn't have ▶

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► been a couple at all, but a single woman. Clearly Catholic school succeeded at installing a few blinders.)

At this point I should probably say that I love my real family, and they love me. We just never seemed to ... fit.

My parents are a product of their environment, and they are happy there. My dad grew up in the town where I was raised, a place that's 94 percent white and 83 percent Catholic. My mom grew up in a slightly smaller town three hours down the Mississippi. They like Iowa. They never yearned for anywhere else. Certainly not for the city. So expensive. The crime, the concrete, the traffic. No, thank you. Not for them.

I pined for the city before I even knew what that meant. I loved to read because I wanted to be somewhere else. This is why misfits are so smart, right? They read to escape. I read books about kids who run away and explore the city alone, I wrote stories about girls who are sent away to live with eccentric aunts for the summer.

By the time I hit junior high, I'd developed a sense of superiority about my dorkiness. It wasn't that I didn't mesh with the world, it was that I didn't mesh with *this* world, with small-town Iowa. It was everyone else's fault for not getting it. In cities, I was sure, everyone was just like me. Wearing Converse sneakers and shirts carefully rescued from thrift stores, listening to Björk. I pictured myself a city kid, delivering my late-'90s anti-establishmentarian missives about how prom sucks and Leo DiCaprio isn't that cute, everyone laughing jovially around me.

When I was a sophomore in high school, my father diagnosed me with early senioritis. "Ann's got her col-

lege search narrowed down," he joked with his golfing buddies, "East Coast or West Coast."

So we were all in agreement, then. The middle of the country was not the place for me.

**Among those** of us who grew up where the tallest building tops out at three stories, there are the people who left and the people who stayed. For the moment, let's not concern ourselves with the ones who stayed, though they are a fascinating lot. Let's talk about those of us who decamp to the sparkle of the coasts, of the cities. Those of us who decide to seek our fortunes among other people who vote for Democrats and eat sushi and don't want to get married until we're *juuuust* about ready to start having kids.

Despite my individualistic streak, I realize, of course, that I am not a unique snowflake. Cities tend to draw exactly my kind: People who never quite fit in with their small-town peers and decided it was because everyone else had bad taste. This is why certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn can be so insufferable.

My dad's prophecy proved false. I went to college in the middle of the country, venturing only as far as Missouri. But I decamped for New York mere weeks after graduation. Brooklyn, to be precise. (Wipe that smirk off your face.) The night before my coast-bound flight was to depart, I stuffed a selection of my wardrobe—including all the dresses that I'd sewn myself after finding Midwest mall options insufficiently fashionable—into a cardboard box that was balanced on a

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bathroom scale until the number read "48.8," just under the 50-pound weight limit. The following day at the Cedar Rapids airport, the box officially clocked in at 52.3, but the friendly employee at the check-in counter let me get by without paying the extra fee.

When I landed at LaGuardia, my first decision as a city dweller was to succumb to an airport livery cab scheme. I paid nearly triple the yellow-cab rate because the driver was so friendly. Also, in the city everything costs triple what it should, right? So expensive.

I learned the hard way that here, everyone's nice for a reason. Maybe my parents were right about cities.

On the first day of my internship, I gave my name to the guard at the security desk in the lobby. "Friedman," I said, "F-R-I-E—"

"—I know how to spell it," he interrupted, annoyed. It would take me another five or six security check-ins to realize that most people with my surname are not German Catholics from Iowa. It would take me another five or six weeks to realize that for the first time, I was the one at a cultural deficit. When my coworkers reminisced about a series of delightful French children's books they'd grown up reading, I was silent. I seemed to mispronounce everything—a word nerd's worst nightmare. At rush hour, I'd watch packed subway car after packed subway car arrive and depart, unable to muster the confidence to squeeze myself in.

I decided I hated New York. In fact, what I hated was that I didn't immediately love it. The things I assumed I would have in common with people in the city—books and music and food and politics, and all the other stuff that online profiles are made of—didn't matter much. All those people with great taste I had dreamed of living among? Turns out when you get them all together, they can be kind of snobby. Or, worse, boring.

I had expected to come to the city and have all the pieces of my life snap together like a Lego set. Even though I'd intuited as a child that I was missing out because I didn't have parents with a certain cultural sensibility, I thought my own taste could make up the difference. None of the fools in my high school had ever heard the Velvet Underground, one of my favorite bands. No one in my extended family had ever eaten hummus, one of my favorite dips. Now here I was in what was

supposedly the greatest city in the world, a city where Lou Reed eats hummus! And it was as disdainful of me as I was of everyone back home.

Culture, I realized, isn't just the taste you cultivate for yourself. It's the world you marinate in, all of the subtle influences that shape you. The city made one thing abundantly clear: I was Midwestern. Here, that was the thing that set me apart. In the cultural sense, I'd pulled myself up by my bootstraps. I embraced a new narrative: Some people are raised to be cool. Others work for it.

I also embraced my roots. When Shake Shack opened in Madison Square Park and New Yorkers queued up to try the frozen custard, I remarked to a fellow Midwest expat, "They've never eaten Wisconsin-style custard before? The poor dears!" When bartenders asked for ID, I felt a twinge of pride as I handed over my Iowa driver's license. When I was invited to a potluck, I called up my grandma for the family cheese ball recipe. When people at parties turned up their noses upon hearing I'd grown up in flyover country and attended a state school, I turned on my heel and walked away. I didn't long for the Midwest, but I did begin to own my Midwesternness.

My long-distance pride was fully awakened a few years later, when I was living in Washington, D.C., and went to see Iowa's preeminent musical genius perform. No, not Slipknot, but Leslie Hall, a former art student and Ames resident who raps about party dip and crafting over synthy beats she makes on her MacBook. She's found a modicum of internet fame for her YouTube music videos about bedazzled sweaters and partying in minivans. That night, sheathed from head to toe in gold lamé Spandex, she performed a song I hadn't heard before.

"Not from the East, not from the West, it's girls in the middle that rock the best," she sang. "Girl must be a diva, Midwest diva."

Not just a song. An anthem. Our anthem. Even though I've long since left the middle, I claim it as my own. ■