

Is This Kansas

The girls were wearing nothing but white towels and high heels. There were about thirty of them, and they passed in an animated swarm like one of those flocks of white pelicans that can occasionally be seen migrating through the Midwest with sun silvering off their wings. I was returning from a walk by the river and I stopped there on the sidewalk to stare after the clatter and gaggle of the girls. The rituals of that town, a town in which the population doubles while the university is in session, became only more foreign to me the longer I stayed. The chanting on sorority lawns, the parades, the groups in matching T-shirts that read "Pharmacy Bar Crawl '06" or "Ted's Birthday!" The shivering girls hugging themselves and clicking down the streets bare-shouldered and drunk in February, the endless game played with beanbags on front lawns, the boys roving at night after the bars closed, hollering. The car crashes, the falls from balconies, the alcohol poisonings. The football game days, on which cars crept toward the stadium in long, slow lines and everyone wore black and gold. The empty plastic

cups under bushes, the idle boys on decaying porches, the midnight Ping-Pong tournaments, the windows illuminated by neon beer signs.

I would often wonder, during my time in that town, why, of all the subcultures in the United States that are feared and hated, of all the subcultures that are singled out as morally reprehensible or un-American or criminal, student culture is so pardoned. Illinois home owners propose ordinances against shared housing among immigrants, while their sons are at college sharing one-bedroom apartments with five other boys. Courts send black teenagers to jail for possession of marijuana, while white college kids are sentenced with community service for driving while intoxicated, a considerably more deadly offense. And Evangelicals editorialize about the sexual abominations of consenting adults, while very little is said about the plague of date rapes in college towns.

One reason for all this might involve the sign on Liberty Bank in downtown Iowa City that reads "Welcome Students!" Or perhaps it has more to do with the fact that those of us who own homes, and those of us who write laws, who demand ordinances from the city council, who lead congregations, see students not as Trojan soldiers hiding in the wooden horse of education, but as the quickly dying sparks of our former selves. And so we allow them their romp, believing that beer pong will lose its luster after four years and that these students will graduate, most likely, into a life of harmless drudgery, in which they will cease drinking loudly and begin drinking more quietly, quickly becoming the kind of thick, docile citizens the Midwest expects them to become.

One August in Iowa City, on the day when student leases traditionally expire and lamps and mattresses are piled into borrowed horse trailers or minivans or pickup trucks while crippled dressers without drawers and legless chairs are left by the curb, an alarming pile of couches appeared on the corner of Iowa and Summit. There were ten or fifteen couches in the pile, and it was nearly twenty feet tall. It came to a kind of jagged peak, as if intended for a flag. The couches in that pile were still redolent of the homes from which they had been torn, from the suburbs of Chicago or the farms of Iowa, and the old hopes and ambitions of those places. They were tastefully floral or conservatively brown, and one, I remember, near the top, had a tiny pineapple pattern just like my own Midwestern grandparents' couch. But these couches were scarred with cigarette burns and smelled, after the rain that came the next day, of vomit. The pile of couches stood for a week or so like a monument to the city, a monument to the sad waste of it. It was a reminder that this place was not wholesome, as the Midwest likes to imagine itself, but rather perverse.

In the spring before the pile of couches arrived, I became accustomed to visiting, at one or two in the morning, the weekday parties on my block and informing the hosts that I lived three houses down, or five houses down, that I was their neighbor, and that I could not sleep because of their music. I considered this a kind of public service, because there were just as many families and working people on my block as there were students. After one such visit to a party where I arrived to find a grown man suspended upside down by several boys who seemed to be occupied with siphoning beer into the man

through a tube, I returned the next day to thank the boys for how quickly they had shut down the party. They invited me inside, and their screen door clanged behind me in their dim living room, where they stood on their miserable, sticky floor with their baseball caps pulled over their eyes, looking at their feet and calling me ma'am. The boy I had spoken to the night before took pains to tell me that he had wanted to end the party earlier but that some of his friends had brought their parents, and that it had been especially hard to persuade the parents to go home.

There are nearly as many churches in Iowa City as there are bars, and one of the many Christian concepts that my students introduced me to during my time as a graduate instructor at the University of Iowa was the idea that one must love the sinner but hate the sin. Having absorbed something of my father's great reverence for knowledge, and being aware that less than a third of the people in my country could ever expect a bachelor's degree, I was tempted to believe that to waste a college education was a sin. But I knew that my students were not being offered the kind of education I had enjoyed as an undergraduate. That was a much more expensive education, and, while it might not have been better, it was more indulgent. I also knew that my students were not all wasting their education and that some were waiting tables or installing air conditioners to pay for it. I knew that I owed them a complicated debt. Their tuition was being used to pay me to learn how to teach college students. They were preparing me for a career,

and I could not with any confidence say that I was doing the same for them.

The philosophy of education that dominated the University of Iowa, an ideology not unlike the thinking that dominates many other universities, seemed not only to encourage but to depend on the quiet resignation of the students. That is not to say that there were not excellent professors at the university or that the students were without opportunities. But they were at the bottom of an immense hierarchy that was preoccupied with many concerns other than their education. One didn't need to spend very long at that institution before realizing that the interests of everyone else—the funders, the administrators, the professors, the graduate students—came before the interests of the undergraduate students. And as in any feudal system, the people on whom the entire system depended were robbed, as completely as possible, of their power. The students were, for the most part, unable to hold inept teachers accountable, to protest the wasting of their own time, to influence the grounds on which they would be evaluated, to demand anything, really, of substance from the institution. There were procedures for such things, of course, but they consisted mostly of misleading paperwork. The students were subjects of this education, which was acted out upon them. They either absorbed it or did not.

As a graduate student, I enjoyed much greater autonomy than the undergraduate students whom I was paid to teach, but I found the philosophy of education in which I was immersed so distasteful that I absorbed very little of that education myself. I was impatient and argumentative in the classroom. I was

the very kind of student whom I now dread, who I fear will reveal to me how dependent I have become on the hollow authority of my place in the institution. Often sleepless, I was in the habit of writing angry letters at midnight, and I became a burr in the already messy hair of the English Department. On one occasion, my complaints made the head of the English Department, a former military man, very red in the face, and he stabbed his finger at me, calling me a "presumptuous young lady." I was stunned not so much by the finger in my face as by what it meant. I was no longer an adult there, but a child again. And so, reduced to the frustrated tantrums of a powerless child, I raged my way through my education at Iowa, while my students, whose Midwestern dispositions did not so readily allow for sober displays of rage, drank their way through it.

On the first day of the very first class I taught at the university, I told my students that I had lived in New York City for a few years, where I had taught creative writing to elementary school and high school students. I told them this as evidence that I had some teaching experience, to compensate for what I understood to be my grave underqualifications for my job as their instructor. But they weren't as interested in my inadequacies as they were in New York City. They wanted to know where I had lived there, and where I had worked, and if I had been scared. They wanted to know if men had harassed me. I told them that, yes, men had harassed me on the street, but no more than the frat boys in Iowa City harassed me as I walked past their houses. In fact, I told them, I found Lucas Street on a Thursday night, with all the hooting from dim porches and the boys smashing

beer cans, to be significantly scarier than anywhere I had ever been in New York. They didn't quite believe me, but I was telling the truth. And this was before a drunk frat boy broke into my apartment two weekends in a row, the first time wearing Mardi Gras beads and passing out just inside the front door, the second time becoming belligerent and refusing to leave until the police arrived. This was also before a group of students on my street dragged a couch out of their house in the middle of the night and used it to barricade my neighbor's door so that she could not get out, and then sat on it, ignoring her screams until the police arrived. This neighbor, who didn't eat meat because she couldn't bear the thought of harming animals, would then buy a pellet gun for self-defense. Iowa City remains, to this day, the only place I have ever lived where I have had reason to speak with the police with any regularity.

Racism, I would discover during my first semester teaching at Iowa, does not exist. At least not in Iowa. Not in the minds of the twenty-three tall, healthy, blond students to whom I was supposed to teach rhetoric. And not, at least not publicly, in the opinion of the one student who did not look white but who promptly informed the class that she was adopted and considered herself white.

Sexism does not exist either, at least not anymore. My students considered my interest in these subjects very antiquated. These things, they informed me with exasperation, had already been resolved a long time ago, during the sixties. In the course of one of our discussions about the rhetoric of the gay-marriage controversy, several students agreed that it would be a good

idea to send all of the gay people in America to one state, one largely unpopulated state, like North Dakota, where they could live together and send their children to schools that would be “separate but equal.” I asked them if they knew that the Supreme Court had found the concept of separate but equal inherently flawed. No, they reported innocently, they did not know.

Their ignorance, I would come to believe, was not entirely their fault. These were students just out of high school, where they had been taught that the world was benign and that hard work and obedience would inevitably be rewarded with prosperity. Their complacency in maintaining that myth was willful, but it was also somewhat necessary to the lives they were expected to lead.

Hurricane Katrina touched down in Louisiana the week after classes started in my last year of teaching at the University of Iowa. I was on my way to a funeral when Michael Chertoff told Robert Siegel on the radio, “I have not heard a report of thousands of people in the convention center who don’t have food and water.” I watched the floodwaters lapping rooftops on the television in a house where an only child was mourning the loss of her mother. As I was already wearing black, and as I was waiting to leave for the funeral home while I watched the news, I was well prepared to regard the situation in New Orleans as I would a death in the family. Perhaps that is why I was shocked when I returned to find so many people on campus preoccupied not with the flooding of New Orleans but with the looting of New Orleans. My students, in particular, kept saying of the looting, “Well, that’s where I draw the line.” What line that was,

I did not ask. But I supposed it was the line between victim and villain. Because white Americans have tended, for hundreds of years now, to think of black Americans as either victims or villains—children or savages.

A week after the levees broke, *Boston Globe* columnist Jeff Jacoby was describing the people of New Orleans as “predators,” “primitives,” and “savages.” “Those who called early on for shooting looters on sight should have been listened to,” Jacoby wrote, “not because property is more valuable than human life, but because when property isn’t safe from marauders, human life isn’t, either.” This impossible equation equaled out, of course, only if one was willing to assume that some human lives are more valuable than others. This, in the name of “morality.”

When looting broke out in New Orleans, America suddenly became a moral nation. A nation concerned with what was, philosophically speaking, “right.” Now, while people were waiting in the Superdome for the government to fulfill its most basic duty toward its citizens, everyone from the Associated Press to Fox News was interested in examining the ethics of stealing during a crisis. Those of us who balked at this false piety were accused of moral equivalence, like the Syracuse University professor who told Alan Colmes, “You need to talk about the issues. The fact is that you’re choosing one segment of society to kick around. You’ve got looters with Enron. You’ve got looters in Iraq. Focus on that. Talk about that.”

America also quite suddenly became a nation capable of distinguishing between necessities and luxuries. My students, many of whom regularly spent the money their parents sent them for food on alcohol, became adamant on this point, the

damning point in the debate over the looting in New Orleans—the fact that some people were not taking just food and water from stores, but also alcohol and televisions.

At the time, I simply widened my eyes and said nothing. The discussion, it was clear, was not so much a discussion as it was an extended metaphor. We were not talking about looting, we were talking about everything white Americans feared would be taken from us by black Americans. The metaphor did not end with looting, of course, because fear moves like floodwaters. The reports of looting in New Orleans came mingled with reports of fantastic acts of violence—children with their throats slit and babies raped. These stories would later be exposed as false. Within a few weeks of the first reports of violence, the *Times-Picayune* and then the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* would all run articles correcting the record, revealing that most, if not all, of the incidents of violence they had reported in the aftermath of Katrina had been myths.

In one popular correction, the superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department, who had been quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, “The tourists are walking around there, and as soon as these individuals see them, they’re being preyed upon. They are beating, they are raping them in the streets,” would clarify that this statement was based on rumors and that “we have no official reports to document any murder. Not one official report of rape or sexual assault.” The relief helicopter that had famously been shot at from the ground, it was revealed, was not actually shot at. Young girls had not been found with their throats slit. And the babies who were in reality suffering from a lack of food and water were not, in reality, being raped.

But, as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek would observe, false reports of violence had already corrupted rescue efforts by the time they were corrected. “They generated fears that caused some police officers to quit and led the authorities to change troop deployments, delay medical evacuations and ground helicopters,” Žižek wrote. “Acadian Ambulance Company, for example, locked down its cars after word came that armed robbers had looted all of the water from a firehouse in Covington—a report that proved totally untrue.”

Our willingness to imagine our own people as villains, as savages, is not a private problem of unclean thinking. It is an issue of public safety. And it should not take a rash of factual errors in our newspapers to make this clear. Even if all the reports of violence following Katrina had been true, the story that was made of them would still be problematic. Because in this case the story preceded the facts, instead of emerging from them. And the story—that blacks are violent barbarians—was already far too old to qualify as news.

Unlike the reports of violence, many of the reports of looting in New Orleans were, in fact, substantiated. There were witnesses and photographs. But, again, the story—that blacks are thieves—was already in circulation before the events took place. The facts of the reports may have been true, but the motives driving the reporting, and the motives behind the public fascination with the story, were based on old lies about who steals from whom in this country. And it was evident from the strange enthusiasm, the eagerness, with which those reports of looting were met that readers were not interested so much in the looting as they were in how well it supported their sickest

suspicions of black people. Our willingness to believe the news is, in many cases, not entirely innocent.

About six months after the levees broke in New Orleans, Iowa City was visited by a storm of its own. On a Thursday evening in April, a tornado roared directly through downtown Iowa City, collapsing St. Patrick's Church, ripping a wall off the Liquor House, and leaving by way of Iowa Avenue, where it lifted the roof off a sorority house and spun cars into a ravine and ravaged several blocks of houses.

A girl who had been hiding under a table in the sorority house would later describe the tornado as sounding like a "freight train," a description that means something in Iowa City, where freight trains pass through town regularly, rattling the windows of classrooms and pausing conversations and haunting the night with their whistles. In all, a thousand houses were damaged. Trees and traffic signals and power lines were torn down. And in the dark silence after the storm the streets filled with students carrying plastic cups of beer and digital cameras, wandering past the live wires and the gas leaks, and lighting cigarettes. Some students dragged a couch into the street and sat on it, while some others gathered around cases of beer in a parking lot.

"After the funnel went through town, but while sirens were still sounding," the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* reported the next day, "college students in the rental neighborhoods around downtown made their way onto the sidewalks and streets by the hundreds. Those who were already in the bars downtown came outside." It was a version of the usual Thursday-night car-

nival, but set against the backdrop, this time, of disaster. And that backdrop revealed the carnival for what it was. "Posing by the downed power lines and overturned cars, cheeing for their cameras and cell phones," the opinion editor for the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* wrote, "the onlookers seemed to view the damaged downtown as an amusement park—walking through the storm's path of destruction like it was a new adventure ride."

The sound of chain saws began the morning after the storm and did not stop for months. Windows were boarded over, and spray-painted messages appeared on the streets. On a piece of plywood on Iowa Avenue: "Don't Gawk, Help." And on the boarded-over window of a barbershop, in orange spray paint: "Toto, is this Kansas?"

The local newspapers reported the looting very cautiously. The *Press-Citizen* described it only as "small-scale looting." The *Gazette* mentioned only that "some scattered reports, most unconfirmed, of looting were made." The student newspaper, the *Daily Iowan*, was more specific: "Curious passersby took advantage of the chance to swipe a few free beers from smashed and damaged stores and convenience stations—incidents that many gas-station operators throughout Iowa City's nucleus reported. 'The Liquor House opened up like a can of tuna, and all my neighbors ran up and started taking liquor,' said UI senior Sam Ehlinger as he meandered through the Pedestrian Mall around 10 p.m. Thursday." But when asked to confirm this story by the *Daily Iowan* reporter, the employees at the Liquor House declined to comment. "Now's not the time," said one.

The looting would cease to be a story very quickly, giving

way to the story the town preferred to tell itself. As the *Gazette* put it, "It never fails that a wicked Midwestern storm brings out the wonderful Midwestern compassion for our neighbors. Amid a few reports of looting, the most prevalent scene after tornadoes and thunderstorms caused a big mess last week was that of neighbor helping neighbor."

Meanwhile, my students told me about drinking thirty-packs of beer in parking lots after the storm had passed, and they told me about watching their friends throw bricks through windows, about sitting on mattresses on front lawns, watching the National Guard come in, and about the kegger in the Pentacrest Apartments. When I asked them what they had learned from the storm, one student said, after a moment of grave and woeful reflection, "I guess you never know how you're going to act in a situation until you're in it."

Iowa City is a small city, and the storm that hit it was a small storm. The incident barely made national news, meriting only one brief mention in the *New York Times*. And so it was sobering for me to watch, as the months passed and the houses on Iowa Avenue still stood vacant, how difficult it was for the town to recover. And how different spring looked with half as many trees. When I left Iowa City three months after the storm, small scraps of metal and bits of insulation were still hanging in some branches. Blue tarps covered roofs on Iowa Avenue. A bulldozer stood idle on the lawn of the sorority that had lost its roof and a wall. But the students, the victims and the villains of that place, were still sitting on their porches, still tossing beanbags on Jefferson Street, and still drinking.