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Hollowing Out the Middle

Chapter 1: The Achievers

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The Achievers

Richard Grunsky is an ordered man. This is reflected in his sturdy wardrobe—which looks as though it might have been purchased in the Sears Men’s Department in Cedar Rapids—and in the tidy appearance of his corner office, which also doubles as the school’s guidance center. Seated at his swivel desk chair by a window overlooking the school’s gravel parking lot, Grunsky has heard it all. Here students recount for him their triumphs—college scholarships, news of a job, high ACT scores—and also their traumas: drug problems, legal troubles, thoughts of suicide, unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, accounts of physical or sexual abuse or of a family’s financial or emotional collapse. Since Ellis is an hour’s drive from the nearest approximation of a city, and the Ellis high school lacks a clinical psychologist or social worker on the full-time staff, Grunsky, the school’s only guidance counselor, is very much alone on the front lines.

With graduation just a few months away, Grunsky is ticking off the days until he turns in the keys to his office of more than twenty years. When you’ve worked long enough to see the kids who once sat in your office grow into the parents of the students currently walking the hallways, it’s time to go. On the brink of his retirement, Grunsky has the air of a man who’s satisfied that he has done his job well, but who is content to be moving on.

Though Grunsky is part of a generation of teachers who weren’t innately obsessed with evaluation and assessment, he has changed with the times. The current principal of

the school, George Herdemann, is a stickler for numbers, trends, and percentage points of increases and declines, and he counts himself among the generation of No Child Left Behind-era administrators. Once Herdemann became principal, Grunsky's job responsibilities expanded to include that of school statistician. As such, the annual survey of the senior class is not the most scientific of undertakings. During the final week of school, Grunsky gathers the seniors together one last time, and he goes around the room asking each of them about their postgraduation plans. Because this is a small country school, and because Grunsky has been their sole counselor, there are few surprises. The best students—who are, more often than not, the sons and daughters of the town's professional class—are headed for the state's crown-jewel public universities: Iowa State and the University of Iowa. A smaller number will go to the small, private Lutheran schools that some of their parents attended. The less overachieving college-bound kids might find their way to the second- and third-tier "suitcase" schools of Northern Iowa and Upper Iowa University, but those kids caught right in the fat part of the bell curve mostly enroll in community colleges. One in ten male seniors enlists in the armed services, while the rest of the non-college-bound young men will go straight into the region's blue-collar workforce. A few respond with uncertainty about their plans; some will likely start working, and others may find themselves skirting the law in the region's underground world of meth dealing and using. Year after year, Grunsky collects the data on postgraduation plans in the form of legal-pad pages filled with handwritten notes kept in a manila folder, which is eventually filed away in a tall metal cabinet in the **guidance center**, which also doubles as his office. Grunsky doesn't need pie charts and bar graphs to reveal the patterns; his surveys can be read like a blueprint for the social machinery of

levers, gears, and pedals driving a select minority of kids away and keeping the rest close to home.¹ Who leaves Ellis? “The best kids go,” he explains, “while the ones with the biggest problems stay, and then, we have to deal with *their* kids in the schools in the next generation.”

The “best kids” are the high-achieving, most-likely-to-succeed students headed for highly regarded colleges, a group we have termed the Achievers. Their families, teachers, neighbors, and coaches have raised them with a sense of manifest destiny about how their lives will unfold. What makes the college-bound Achievers distinct from other Iowans who leave is that they generally do not come home except for Thanksgiving or to celebrate the occasional wedding. The longer they’re gone, the harder it is to readjust because they become accustomed to another life, often one with tempting options such as diverse cuisine and more varied shopping. They start locking doors and forgetting to greet people on the street with a warm hello, and their ability to follow the rules of a small town evaporates, becoming just another habit from childhood they put aside. After significant time away, they can’t recall how they ever lived out in the middle of nowhere. Worst of all, they may start to see Ellis the way outsiders do: just a little bit hick and parochial.

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The young people destined to leave Ellis—the ones who are widely blamed for the rural brain-drain—are quite special, and it seems that Dick Grunsky has a valid point. The Achievers’ ranks include the class valedictorians and stars of the swing choir, the

track stars and student-government leaders. Their talents and accomplishments have earned them regular coverage in the town newspaper, and folks in town glow with pride when the Achievers' names get mentioned over early-bird specials at the Ellis Cafe. The people of Ellis glean tremendous satisfaction from the fact that they are good at raising kids. Unfortunately, the homegrown best and brightest move away to be successes someplace else: **of the forty or fifty freshmen, fewer than twenty will still live in and around Liberty County within a decade after graduating from high school.**

Under the rules of the school's hierarchy, the Achievers were the winners of a slightly rigged competition. Not only did they bask in adult praise, they received special treatment, and different rules applied to them. While other kids got the message from teachers that they were good-for-nothings who lacked that spark to make it in New York or Chicago, the Achievers—singled out for futures that would lead them far from the countryside—could do no wrong. Each of these high-achieving ex-Iowans spent his or her adolescence being cultivated² by well-intentioned adults who never gave them a chance to settle for the easy or predictable route. At times, this cultivation manifested itself as a subtle steering toward activities and pursuits that would enrich and prepare the Achievers for life beyond Ellis. At other times, the directives were more overt: For example, parents often prohibited these young people from working too much so that they could focus on the extracurricular activities that would get them into college. The teachers, coaches, and parents of Achievers advised them to do something to fatten their resumes instead of spending summer vacations hanging around with their friends. As part of the process that leads young people down one path or another, the young people who

are “chosen” get the message that it is their fate, indeed their duty, to leave small-town life behind. It was as if the whole town “had your back” and “wanted you to go on,” recalls a star basketball player for the Ellis Hawks’ championship squad who became the first person in her family to set foot on a college campus.

The most striking feature of the Achievers’ lives is how all of them get so much of their teachers’—and everyone else’s—positive attention. The young people who grow up to be Achievers spend their teenaged years having their successes, quite literally, put up in lights. In Ellis, this means an old-fashioned movie-marquee-style sign located outside of Dunbar’s hardware store on Main Street. The Achievers discover that earning good grades, displaying good behavior, and being praised in front of their classmates can grant special privileges and access to adults who can help them break free of small-town life. As the hometown’s best and brightest, they absorb everyone’s expectations into their sense of self. With these hopes comes the belief that the local kids’ accomplishments reflect back on all the people who touched their life before they made it.³

Ellis’s pastoral setting belies a world where class matters just as much, if not more, than it does in other milieus. From inner-city ghettos to upscale gated communities, the majority of Americans inhabit social worlds marked by little economic heterogeneity. Here in rural America, the lower, working, middle, and upper classes cannot escape one another when they shop for groceries, attend church, or cheer on the hometown stars at homecoming. Paradoxically, although sharing such cramped quarters creates more opportunities for social contact, it also increases the need for individuals to mark out the

clearest sorts of social boundaries between people from the right and wrong side of Railroad or Division Street. And there is probably no other place in American society where the rules of class and status play out with a more brutal efficiency than in the world of a country high school. The sociologist Murray Milner, a scholar noted for his studies of Indian society, draws an intriguing parallel to adolescent culture's pecking order and the Indian caste system. Despite all the pain the school causes its "untouchables," Milner observes, for its Brahmin caste—that is, those at the top—the school is a scene of triumphs.⁴ In Ellis, this is *uniquely* true. We doubt it will surprise anyone that most of the best kids Dick Grunsky says will leave Ellis also live in the section of town known, to those who do not live there, as "Snob Hill" and come from the town's most privileged families. Take Megan Frank, the daughter of a local businessman earning her MBA so she can pursue a career in hospital administration in her adopted hometown of Indianapolis. Back in high school, Megan was one of the pretty and popular girls, who, on occasion, wielded "mean girl" influence. As a member of the Homecoming Court and the editor of the yearbook, Megan sat at the top of Ellis's unofficial social register. As she recalls, the hierarchy revolved around last names: "You've always known from growing up whose parents had money, and I guess, in a way, depending on what your last name was, depended on whether you were popular or not, or if your teachers would like you in school. It seemed like that to me. If you got into swing choir or if you got into the National Honor Society, I mean, you kind of knew. You just knew. That's just the way it was."

The myth of egalitarianism that permeates American consciousness insists that educational institutions offer objective measures of a student’s potential, and once talent gets measured and recognized, those employed by the schools reward diligence and achievement by providing opportunities for pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstrap-style success. In reality, “the system” tends to place children of the elite in a position of privilege from the start, and the offspring of parents with more modest circumstances aren’t afforded the same initial advantages.⁵ When the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes the power of social class and status in everyday life, he tells us that individuals acquire and deploy their cultural “assets” to manage their position in the social order. One of the most important marketplaces for spending and earning this special sort of wealth is in the setting of a school.⁶ It is here that individuals rely on their access to this most precious insider knowledge to determine who gets ahead or is left behind. Dick Grunsky and the rest of the teachers at the high school oversee the critical stage in the sifting and sorting system that leads *some* young people away and ensures that others stay closer to home. Whether they’re fair or not, these preliminary judgments seem to hang over young people’s heads, and in the words of one college graduate now living in the Twin Cities, they fuel the sense that, in Ellis, one’s fate was set “before you walked into kindergarten on the first day of school.”⁷

Although the kids from prominent families, like Megan Frank, readily admit they have a head start in the race to succeed, some Achievers come from far more humble origins, and, occasionally, the storied meritocracy actually becomes a reality. Kids without privilege and connections but with talent and potential—and the “right” kind of

underprivileged family—get the chance to follow a different path. For these young people, being talented was not sufficient reason to set them on the leaving path. Teachers, parents, and other influential adults vetted them to assess their worthiness. A talented kid of humble origins could be groomed as an Achiever as long as neighbors judged the young person's circumstances to be a result of misfortune rather than moral failure or fecklessness, and as long as his or her family was not judged to be undeserving of local philanthropy. Their immediate relatives couldn't include *too many* ne'er do wells, wife beaters, or drunks. If such individuals were close family members, such conduct had to be viewed as an aberration, rather than an observable pattern within multiple generations. Ideally, the student's family was counted among the respectable, church-going sort, even if the church they attended was among the lower Protestant churches, rather than the mainstream Lutheran and Catholic ones. Respectability could be earned through any number of simple acts: not wasting food stamps or unemployment checks at the supermarket, or wearing clean and mended clothes, even if they were old and purchased at the discount store.

Under this precise set of conditions, these students become the real-life Charlotte Simmonses—the eponymous heroine of Tom Wolfe's novel who escapes the limited prospects of life in a fading Blue Ridge mountain town after she earns a scholarship to a fictional version of Duke. Like Wolfe's character, Ellis's Achievers of more modest means are set on a special track by teachers who believe their gifts have marked them as destined for something beyond Liberty County. Judgments about young people's potential are made even before they enter elementary school, when they first start to offer

clues about their personality and promise. Parents, relatives, friends, and neighbors act like oracles, looking into crystal balls and reading palms, trying to tell the fortune of Ellis's young people: which among them will "stay on the farm" and "marry their high school sweetheart" and which ones "have the drive" and inclination to leave. Of course, it is impossible to know which of these assessments are prescient, which are self-fulfilling prophecies, or which are just plain wide of the mark. At times, the process of privileging the talented has the potential to divide families, because while one child is singled out, others might be judged not worthy of extra attention.

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Unlike his classmates who roll out of bed and don sweats and jeans for their classes, third-year University of Iowa Law School student Jack Pederson prefers a more buttoned-down look. With Dockers and collared shirts, Jack dresses as if he's heading off to the office, not a lecture. Jack believes that first impressions matter; besides, he isn't like the majority of his classmates, whose affluence and privilege never gave them any reason to doubt that they would earn a prestigious high-powered degree. For Jack, upward mobility has come through long-term strategic planning, not as a birthright.

Of the three kids in his family, Jack will be the only one to experience life on the quads of a Big 10 University. From the very start, Jack's parents—June, a dental hygienist, and Warren, a hog farmer—wanted the best for all their children. But the Pedersons, who had no experience with higher education (beyond June's community-college courses to be a dental hygienist), took a decidedly hands-off approach. Jack says that back in high school, "[Mom and Dad] never said a thing about going to college and

having a career. This doesn't mean they didn't care, but they knew I would do whatever I wanted to do." According to Jack, no coach or teacher pushed him to get out of Ellis. Yet, by the time he was in high school, his high scores on standardized tests alerted teachers to his above-average intelligence, while his sister and brother did not show the same ability. "Basically, it's kind of one of those stories where I nailed every test, and, growing up, my brother and sister struggled." Part self-fulfilling prophecy and the deployment of resources, these assessments inched the three kids in different directions. Starting in high school, Jack's brother and sister took part-time jobs throughout the school year; Jack only worked on his father's farm in the summer months. From September through June, "it was understood" that homework, baseball, Student Senate, and the National Honor Society would be Jack's main pursuits. "It was kind of always predetermined that—no, it wasn't predetermined, it was just wherever we wanted to go, and [my family] kind of understood that my interest would take me away, while I think they understood my brother and sister would stay there."

Looking back, Jack says the main driver that got him to college and law school was this unwavering conviction that he would be one of those kids to leave. And, though he underplays the role of his high-school teachers, the fact is, they were the ones who *decided Jack was talented in the first place*, and told his parents to expect great things from *this* kid.

Jonathan Garman meets us at a coffee shop not far from his apartment in the trendy section of Washington DC known as Adams Morgan, a neighborhood that stands out

because of its bohemian edge in a city that leans to the formal and stuffy. Jonathan takes a seat. As the young aide to a Republican senator, we recognize him immediately; he is clean-cut and well-scrubbed, wearing a tie, all business.

In their autobiographies, Achievers like Jonathan and Jack tell an eminently pleasing and self-satisfying story of how, through their own Horatio Alger efforts, they excelled. Like Jack, neither of Jonathan's parents had attended college: getting a degree was something, Jonathan recalls, that his mother and father "just left in our hands." There was never any sort of disappointment or recrimination directed at either of their sons' varying outcomes. Jonathan's oldest brother "went from high school to community college" and "wanted to get married," while Jonathan headed off to Grinnell College. The sifting and sorting system pushing him away and keeping his sibling close seemed to unfold through a collection of *choices he and his brother appeared to make for themselves*. Yet, just like Jack, Jonathan describes how efforts *behind the scenes* pushed him toward college and supplemented his parents' well-meaning, if laissez-faire, higher-education aspirations. So even though Jonathan insists that his grades and scores earned him this place in college, and they surely did, he also acknowledges that several people outside his immediate family kept him on track during his crucial high-school years. First, there was Mrs. Pulsin, the high school's English teacher, who taught reading, English, and a couple other courses. Jonathan recounts, "She is actually the one who introduced me to the scholarship opportunity to go to Germany," which would change his life and inspire him to study politics and international relations in college. After the school cut the German language program in a round of budget cuts, Mrs. Pulsen used her free period to tutor Jonathan privately in German for an entire school year.

Then, there was the school nurse, Sandi Weiland, the mom of one of Jonathan's classmates. For a huge group of kids, Jonathan included, Mrs. W. served as the "unofficial" guidance counselor. As long as no one was sick or needed her attention, the kids gathered in her office and plopped themselves in the comfortable waiting-room chairs as she worked quietly at her desk. Jonathan says he and his friends gathered there to gossip, discuss their favorite TV shows, or get ready for class. Mrs. Weiland's office epitomized one of the best parts of attending a small, country school; as Jonathan explains, "The teachers just knew everybody and where people were coming from." For the kids fortunate enough to receive it, this one-on-one time outside of class could be the greatest gift. The trouble is that for the young people not bound for college or who didn't earn the high test scores, memories like these don't exist.

Though the school plays a central role in cultivating the talents of Achievers, the wider community is also intricately involved in preparing the best and the brightest. There is an abiding sense in places like Ellis that you want to see "somebody from a small town make it big," and if you can play some part in that sort of success, "then that would be just wonderful." Along with the special treatment that Achievers received came the added weight of their hometown's hopes. Even as the people around them assured the Achievers that they had earned that special treatment, it was hard not to feel guilty about being set apart or to feel burdened by all the great expectations. Yet, with time, the Achievers say they subsumed these dreams into their identities. The support of the people back home made them believe they could accomplish anything.

Ella Hansel, a graduate student earning her doctorate in theology in St. Louis, grew up on a dairy farm just outside of town. The second of six children, she is twenty-five years old, but her youngest sister is eight and just started second grade. Ella's mom, whom we met during our time in Ellis, gave her daughter the pale blue eyes are hidden behind her glasses. She studied to be a teacher before she became a farmer's wife.

Just like so many other Achievers, the process of being singled out left an indelible impression on Ella, and long before she became her class's valedictorian, she remembers her teachers and parents noticing her academic gifts. Growing up in Ellis, she felt "embraced by the community and kind of set forth to go do something with what I had been given." While some of her classmates settled down quickly into lives that looked no different than their parents or grandparents, she felt it was her responsibility "to experience a lot more than high school." More than anything else, Ella's family and teachers would tell her they wanted her "to continue to develop and grow" into the person that they believed Ella's gifts "called [her] to be," because Ellis "was only the beginning." Ella also understood "that that's not necessarily how it is or how it is supposed to be for other people. That there are people who can be happy" remaining close to home. But Ella absorbed the sense that she was not raised to be one of them.

Rose Rolland was one of the poor farm kids who came to school clean, but wearing the sorts of clothes "everyone knew" her mom had gotten from the thrift store. During the depths of the farm crisis, when the Rollands had no money for anything but bread, sugar, and coffee, all the food the family consumed came from the farm. When things got tougher, and there was no money for clothes, even used ones, Rose's winter boots

consisted of plastic bread sacks wrapped around last year's shoes. Sporting Wonderbread logos instead of the trendy Nike swoosh forced Rose to acquire a toughness about the realities of her life. The ebbs and flows of her family's economic fortunes were well known to folks in town, and the Rollands' situation was widely considered the result of bad luck and unfortunate timing, rather than character flaws. It helped that Rose, like her mother and oldest brother, had always done well in school; by the time Rose enrolled in high school, she was among her class's most popular girls and an honors student with a particular aptitude for math and science.

Rose would soon become one teacher's pet—the first step in the process of being set apart as an Achiever. As one of the popular kids at school, Rose discovered that different rules applied to her and the town's privileged sons and daughters. “I mean, I could always do anything. I didn't, but I got away with stuff that I know I shouldn't have, that the other kids couldn't have.” When Rose earned top scores on her ACTs, a letter from Cornell University promptly arrived in the mail. Cornell's engineering program was eager to recruit women and minorities, and Rose's scores were high enough to earn her a special invitation to apply. She did, and in April, she found herself deciding between the Ivy League and the University of Iowa. For most kids from an average city suburb, there would have been little need for deliberation.

But for kids coming of age in Ellis, where *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of the nation's colleges exist outside the consciousness of most folks, there were other considerations. Historically, Ellis's best and brightest have attended the University of Iowa or Iowa State. Not only were the Achievers and their teachers somewhat naïve about the college admissions game, but the major concern for Rose, like many other kids

from Iowa, was money. On paper, farmers and landowners—even the ones who have no discernible income and who are overwhelmed with debt—appear to be quite solvent because of landholdings and assets. Since farmers are land-rich but cash-poor, their children can expect to receive precious little aid for college. Compounding the problem is the fact that farmers carry such a high burden of debt, which is required for farming. By the early 1990s, no bank manager, or farmer for that matter, was eager to take on more loans, even to send their children to college—even an ivy-covered one. Public universities are not simply the best option; given the calculus of financial-aid eligibility, they become the only one.

Like the other Achievers coming from farm families, Rose understood that going to school would require her to work full-time. At the University of Iowa, she held jobs in fast-food restaurants all over Iowa City: McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Dairy Queen, where she became the night manager. She wondered if there would ever be a time in her life when her clothes and hair would not smell of grease. Her college education, made possible by the state of Iowa and “the good people at Dairy Queen,” ended when she graduated with a teacher's degree and married one of her classmates, a former basketball player who had grown up in Maryland and who was on track for a career as a stockbroker.

Rose's desire to become a teacher stems from her deep and profound belief in the power of education to transform young people's lives, and, she says, it is a tribute to her teachers. When we interviewed her, a decade after leaving Ellis, it was the first time since she was eighteen that Rose was *not* bringing home a paycheck. She'd just had her first baby and was able to take a few months off from teaching to stay home. All the struggles

and hardships of her childhood and adolescence seemed a far cry from her new life of upscale suburban comfort and privilege in the DC suburbs. Recently, she and her financial-consultant husband purchased a starter home for half a million dollars; they could have purchased the identical house back in Ellis for less than \$100,000. Rose still has not digested the realities of this new life more than a thousand miles from her parents' three hundred acres in Iowa. Buying designer labels and baby toys still feels decadent to her, even now that she can afford Nikes for her son. Playing with the baby on the polished hardwood floors of her ranch-style house, which is decorated throughout with brand-new Shaker-style furniture, Rose muses that her "husband laughs at [her] all the time" because part of her still cannot quite come to terms with the security and affluence of this new life.

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One might assume that kids coming of age in places like Ellis might be counting off the days until they can leave, but the reality is that leaving is a gradual process that most young people must be persuaded to undertake: years of planning and preparation go into leaving. And for the Achievers, leaving behind the familiar world where they've been so successful is a difficult transition, evoking feelings of heartache and loss alongside excitement and anticipation. What the Leavers will remember most are the parents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and teachers who believed in them. When people are loved, supported, and at ease, leaving is not their natural priority, but these concerned adults implied that the Achievers owed it to themselves, and the people they left behind, to experience the world.

Before Marcy Trillin was a graduate student at Stanford completing her doctorate in statistics, she was the only daughter of Ellis's Lutheran pastor. Cautious with her words and highly intelligent, Marcy grew up understanding that a minister's kid would be held to a higher standard, with two choices: either work harder and live up to public expectations, or rebel completely and be the biggest troublemaker in town. Marcy chose the former.

Marcy describes Ellis as her hometown, but her parents settled there when she was just a baby. They have been residents of Ellis for more than twenty years, but some locals still might consider them interlopers. Perhaps because her parents' roots were not so deep in town or because they had college degrees themselves, Marcy says, her parents never believed she would stay in the countryside. "Definitely, my mother always wanted me to move away. She'd always say, 'Don't stay in Ellis.' She would tell me that...she always felt confined and a little bored by her life. I think she knew I was missing opportunities and there was more to offer in other places."

And so, parents like Marcy's mother find themselves caught in a troubling conundrum because they, more than anyone else, invest so much in the young people destined to be Achievers. Parents love and care for their children and raise them to be strong enough to leave and forge a life independent from their family. As any parent understands, this is parenting's fundamental dilemma. But, in places like Ellis, helping children succeed does not simply mean they leave their families; they also leave behind a community that has invested in them and that, quite possibly, will not be able to survive without them.

Another key strategy these families use to get their young people ahead is to delay their entry into the labor force. For high-achieving college-bound kids, high-school years

are a time to beef up GPAs and accumulate extracurricular accomplishments. Being at school before and after classes enables the future Achievers to strengthen all-important connections to teachers and coaches, whose support will be crucial as the students apply and transition to college. But for working- and lower-class young people, whose need to work can be greater, a parent or teacher must convince them of the long-term benefits of investing in school rather than devoting their energy to earning money for the props of adolescent life: car, clothes, sneakers, and entertainment.

Regardless of their backgrounds, young people who spend time in extracurricular activities often need their parents to cover the expenses of adolescence. “My parents never expected us to work,” explains Angela Zimmer, a recent Iowa graduate. “It was just assumed” that none of the family’s three daughters would be distracted by after-school jobs. Their mom, Cindi, worked full-time when the girls got to grammar school. The job kept her away from home, but it also meant that her daughters never lacked money for the things that help teenagers fit in with their friends, especially the ones with money who are headed off to college. In the Zimmer household, teenagers were to spend their time getting ready for college, not working for minimum wage. After Angela’s oldest sister, Becca, earned a coveted spot at the University of Iowa on a scholarship, it was as if Angela’s parents, who did not attend college themselves, had cracked a secret code for getting their kids to end up like the sons and daughters of the local Ellis aristocrats. It helped that all the Zimmer girls were pretty, average athletes, and strong students, and that their parents are respected members of their church and active in the school community. Everything about the way the family operated “steered us more toward college.” This was different from many of Angela’s friends, whom people “just

knew” would be “getting married” and “staying in Ellis” after high school, who would “just get a job and never leave.”

Going Off to College

After finishing high school, attending college is the next, and most noteworthy, step in the gradual process of leaving. The costs of higher education elsewhere and the existence of Iowa’s fine university and college system mean that many Achievers do not leave Iowa until after they collect a college diploma. There is no question that moving into a college dorm is a quintessential young-adult rite of passage for an ever-increasing number of eighteen-year-olds.⁸ All college freshmen are caught between the wider adult world and their teenage social world, where their identities were defined by their families, high school, and town. But for small-town kids, particularly from the rural countryside, going off to college is a momentous, intense, and, for some, alienating experience.

Growing up in a sheltered small town means that the temptations of a wild college party scene can prove distracting, and some people we spoke to admitted that their college social lives overtook their academic pursuits. Moreover, they often faced a serious adjustment as they settled in with new peer groups. For many small-town kids, dorm life brings them into contact with a level of privilege unlike any they have seen before. Some young people feel uncomfortable trading in flannel shirts and blue jeans for designer labels and Coach bags, although others embrace the change. For Achievers like Rose, these hallmarks of privilege stand in even starker contrast to their own upbringing.

Others are unwilling to break ties to friends and family, especially boyfriends or girlfriends back home. A few people we interviewed said they simply were not willing to reinvent themselves or give up the familiarity and comforts of small-town life—such as never having to lock a front door, always greeting people on the street, and being the big fish in a little pond. College is the Achiever’s point of entry into a world controlled by the nation’s most elite and privileged; like so many other tests in life, some people are more prepared to tackle them than others.⁹ The Leavers who adjust more easily to college life use higher education as a stepping stone or dress rehearsal for their new lives; after more time away from home, they begin to see their hometowns through outsiders’ eyes, and, with time, the rules of life in the countryside starts to chafe.

Even those Achievers who fit in more seamlessly than their peers experienced growing pains. Often, the newfound freedom of a world without the type of close supervision they were accustomed to means they must police their own behavior and trust their own judgment. They learn quickly that they must balance the studied restraint of their upbringing with the freedoms afforded by a campus lifestyle. In their first brushes with the world beyond Ellis, many young people find it difficult to be surrounded by concrete buildings, far from nature. Of course, there are also the first awkward encounters with the givens of college life: conspicuous consumption, Animal House–style debauchery, and a social world ruled by privileged kids whose parents foot their credit-card bills. Under any conditions, when young people from such varied backgrounds live together in a dorm, there will be misunderstandings and differing expectations. Ignorance about the rules of college life transforms Ellis’s former popular students and teachers’ pets—overnight—into the redneck kids from the sticks.¹⁰

For Angela Zimmer, the first-generation college student whose parents kept her from working after school so she could get into the University of Iowa, her first encounters with rich kids at college tested her self-confidence. Arriving on campus was a culture shock, not simply because of the apparent ubiquity of illicit drugs and Victoria's Secret-themed parties where the female guests wear lingerie, but because of how her peers treated her. At the University of Iowa, Angela says, you could easily pick out the country kids. They were drawn to each other because "we just stood out" in terms of how they carried themselves and looked. In the dorms, when Angela shared stories about going hunting with her father or listened to country music while doing her homework, the girls on her floor "would kind of look at you like, you know, it's weird." In their eyes, Angela, the softball star and honor student from the town no one had heard of, was little more than a "hick" and, confesses Angela in a hushed tone, "just a little white trash."

Pretty and intelligent, Sonya Eden now dyes her hair black, sports a punkish page-boy haircut, and wears vintage clothes for her job at a museum. But the senior portrait from her high-school yearbook reveals that this daughter of a high-school biology teacher and an accountant had a bad perm and brown hair. Sonya herself jokes how "I was totally clueless." For Sonya, the toughest part of life at the University of Iowa was not the rigorous academic curriculum but the social interactions replete with hidden norms and mores. "There were two girls down the hall that smoked a lot of pot. And I walk in and I'm like, 'What is that?' You know, I didn't know, and my roommate just starts laughing and she's like, 'You don't know what that is?' I was like, 'No, what is that?' She's like, 'Sonya, it's marijuana.'" What Sonya said next made the awkward situation even worse. She yelled out: "Oh my God, they're smoking marijuana in *my* dorm room!" By

revealing her shock and fear, Sonya was branded as the floor's country bumpkin—a reputation from which she struggled to free herself for the next few years.

To the Achievers on track to cross state lines after graduation, college thus offers a test in adaptability to the social world beyond Ellis. Although it isn't an accurate microcosm of the real world, college does offer a chance for Ellis kids to decide if they want to shed their small-town skin and forge a new existence, far away from the gravel roads and cornfields of their youth. Along with the awkward and occasionally traumatic transitions, Leavers also experienced a thrilling sort of liberation in reinventing themselves while encountering a world that they had only read about in Mr. Ulrich's social studies class. They found freedom that would be impossible in Ellis. While some young people returned home, judging this brave new world to be alienating, frightening, and mean-spirited, the kids who left and stayed away were different because they hungered for more.

Being at college was “a little crack to open the door on a world,” says Shannon Magnusson, a graduate student in physical therapy who was a three-sport athlete back in high school and whose father grew corn before he sold his farm. “I think I needed to get out of the box. I led a very sheltered life, and when I went to college I was like, ‘whoa’...I needed college to see the world in a different light, and I needed to be a participant in the world in a different light. You know, different everything, different culture, and starting out on my own. I really needed that freedom to experiment and try things without having people to identify me as what I used to be.”

For Rose Rolland, her experiences in Iowa City, just one hundred miles from Ellis, would be a way station on a road that led out of the state for good. “Even though it

was the middle of Iowa, it showed me that there was more to the world. This was the first time I had had minorities as friends...I had never had a conversation or been friends with anyone who wasn't exactly like me." For the kids who make it beyond Ellis, their excitement at the prospect of difference and encounters with the exotic "other" is a strong indicator they will not be coming home. For the first time, people they have not known since they were born, people who do not look, sound, or act like them—are not white, Christian, or American—are living and breathing parts of their lives. Jerry Langtry, a University of Iowa student earning a teaching degree, reflected that he's "had black roommates and [racially] mixed roommates, and it opens your eyes to how naïve you really are" about larger issues of privilege as well as smaller questions "like about how [African Americans] do their hair...Just little things like that...The way people [have] different holidays, different religions. You know," he added with a laugh, maybe the biggest change for him was coming to understand that not everybody "is Lutheran."

Carl Garraway, an engineer who studied at the University of Iowa and who now lives and works in Chicago, also rates encountering diversity as one of his most significant life-altering changes after leaving Ellis: "... getting more exposure to different things, different types of people, different classes of people...racial and ethnic groups...I think that's been a great education in and of itself." Carl contrasts his experience at school with the often parochial views of his friends and family back home. "If my mom heard [me say I would never move back] she'd be like, 'Why?' With no disrespect, there is a level of ignorance among the people [back in Ellis]. It's possibly because they haven't been exposed to different situations in life that are presented to individuals in larger areas...it's not very diverse. I'm sure it's 99 percent white, and that's

uncomfortable for me...you know, my job deals with multicultural people...no disrespect to the people [in Ellis] or my family...it's too small, bottom line.”

Jack Pederson, the law student we met at the start of the chapter, understands the price that must be paid for a big-city transformation. He is the first to admit that attending college has changed everything from his taste in clothes and food to the way he speaks and what he wants out of the world. Growing up in Ellis, he assumed he would be married by age twenty-one like the guys he saw at the local bar. Now, he observes, there is so much more he wants to do in life; getting married and starting a family have slipped to the bottom of the priority list. These days, when Jack returns home, he needs time to reacclimate to small-town life. He and his friends from Ellis who now attend universities have all noticed that they have a dual identity that manifests itself in their wardrobes. When they go home, they wear what Jack calls their “Ellis clothes”: blue jeans, rock T-shirts, hooded sweatshirts—just the plain ones, not the kinds with the university logos on them—and non-brand-name sneakers or boots. As Jack explains, you can't go home and hang out at the bar and play pool wearing the clothes you'd wear to a bar on the Gold Coast. Such displays make it seem as if you've forgotten where you've come from and imply that you're looking down on the people who have stayed close to home. “I don't want to come back seeming different than what I was when I left, [but] I think I have changed.”

The experience of going off to college isolates the Achievers in myriad ways, but paradoxically, it also eases their transition to a new life far beyond the town where they grew up. Perhaps most important, the Achievers come to see leaving—and the metamorphosis that accompanies it—as disrespecting where you come from. The Style

Network's reality show *How Do I Look?* captured this dilemma in an episode featuring a young Iowa woman with a degree from Duke who'd recently settled in Los Angeles. In the segment, billed as "*Little House on the Prairie* becomes *Sex and the City*," we watched as the "recovering Iowan's" mousy hairstyle, flannel shirts, and blue jeans change into honey highlights, high heels, and couture fashion. At the end of the show, she practices walking with high heels, and the host, Finola Hughes, declares that the last remnants of being a country bumpkin have been exorcised from the young woman's closet. We are told that the Iowa transplant, armed with her new look, is ready for her new life, her new career, and her search for "the right kind of man."

The show offered a staged and surreal version of the extreme makeovers that many Achievers undertake. Rushing the process of creating a new "look"—and, by extension, a new life—can result in an out-of-body, vulnerable-making experience, akin to kids playing dress-up rather than confident young people forging new trails. Whether the transformation manifests itself through clothes, music, consumption patterns, new friends, or a love for travel, there is something intense about the changes that come with leaving. Some find that the trick to coping with these changes is striking a delicate balance between the person they're meant to be and where they come from.

The young people who leave Ellis to do great things *someplace else* must embrace how they are set apart. Ella Frankel, the young theology student we met earlier, spoke evocatively of her journey since high school and how this transformative experience imbued her with a sense of purpose and meaning about why she had to leave home: "It's clear to me that...[if I had not left and gone off to college], I would be such a different person than I am. I needed to experience a lot more than high school to become who I

could be and to continue to develop and grow into the person that I believe I'm called to be." But Ella also struggles with the guilt of leaving people behind who did not benefit from the town's special investment. She reconciles this conflict by suggesting that some people are "equipped" to leave, while others are not. "Even though I know that [earning a high-school diploma or community-college degree, getting married, and staying in Ellis is not] a stopping point for me, [college] was only the beginning in a lot of ways." Ella believes "that that's not necessarily how it is or how it is supposed to be for other people. There are people who can be happy with whatever life standards, even with just a high-school education." What marks the Achievers is that they won't be happy "making do" with a life in Ellis; they are restless, ambitious, and willing to trade in what they know for a chance at something more.

The Costs of Leaving

We found that, generally, Achievers don't second-guess their decisions to leave. The typical Leaver story does include a period of adjustment and homesickness, but, with time, this leads to young people abandoning their small-town traits and mastering a new set of orientations and expectations. New friendships and responsibilities push away old lives and connections. Once the hardest part about building a new life is over, the next move, from college campus to a bigger city, no longer feels so scary or momentous.

Elaine Weschler still remembers the pang of regret she felt when she left home for the first time. She started out at one of the smaller regional public schools, the University of Northern Iowa, but when things didn't go well for her there she moved on to the

University of Nebraska, where her boyfriend was living. The couple wed two years later. During her first few months at a massive university, her life felt like a disaster: she was miserable; at night, she wept over not seeing her family. She confided to her mother how disappointed she was, and her mother responded, “Well, you can’t come back.” For Elaine’s mother, it was important that her daughter’s life be bigger and more variegated than what Ellis could offer. Elaine did harbor thoughts of returning to Ellis to raise children, but she knew this would signal failure to her family. In hindsight, Elaine declares that her mother was right. Settled and comfortable in Omaha—working at a bank, finishing her degree, and doing well financially—the likelihood of moving back to Ellis seems remote. Deep down, Elaine understands how much she has changed.

When Achievers who have made a life away from Ellis confront the fact that they probably will never go back, they’re almost wistful. Jonathan, the Senator’s aide living in DC, sighs before saying that if he were to move back to the Midwest, “I doubt that I would go back to Ellis.” He could see himself in Minneapolis, which is only about four hours away from Ellis—that “wouldn’t be out of the question”—but it would be tremendously difficult to entice him back now that he has a taste for life in the big city. More important, the changes he recognizes in himself make him doubt he could readapt to small-town life.

The Paradox of Preparation

Here is the conundrum that lies at the heart of the rural brain-drain: small towns rally to prepare Achievers to leave, pushing them to live up to their potential, all the while

lamenting the loss of their combined talents. Small towns can be especially good at quickly recognizing and nurturing talented individuals and sending them on their way. A few years back, we made a presentation to the Ellis school board and the high-school principal, George Herdemann, about our findings and our conversations with scores of young people from Ellis. As we talked about the Achievers, many of whom were profoundly grateful for the help they received from people back home but who were also candid about not returning, several people in the audience merely nodded and smiled ruefully. Only Herdemann spoke: “Well, this is the job we set out to do.” The people of Ellis aren’t ignorant of the paradox that traps them into expending resources to ensure that their most privileged, and in some ways most promising, young people leave. The challenge is getting these adults to imagine a different way of doing things.

Though the cultivation by family, teachers, and the wider community is crucial for many Achievers, if it ceased to happen tomorrow, talented young people would still strive to succeed in the wider world. Achievers are not merely propelled by the wishes of well-intentioned adults; in most cases they are determined to succeed for themselves, and they feel that to do so, they must go where there are more opportunities. In a certain way, then, there is an inevitability about how the Achievers’ lives unfold. “It’s just something drawing me out of the state, and I don’t know what it is. It’s not Ellis’s fault, it’s not Iowa’s fault. It’s just not for me, so I’m on my way out. That’s all I can say” is how Jack Pederson, the young attorney, explained it.¹¹

Any attempt to plug up the rural brain-drain and rebuild small towns must first acknowledge the basic truths of the process. Small towns invest far too heavily in the young people who are most likely to leave and who, once they build a new life elsewhere,

are unlikely to return to Ellis for anything but an occasional visit. Abandoning the sifting and sorting system might seem to deny a fundamental mission of schools and communities to provide young people with the best possible start in life. But the undeniable reality is that the current system relies on an unequal and profoundly illogical allocation of resources that produces self-defeating outcomes for young people and the community as a whole. The time has come for towns like Ellis to reimagine, radically, what is best for their young people and their community. If they don't, the hard truth is that these towns will, with time, simply disappear.

¹ In Hollingshead's classic 1949 study, *Elmtown's Youth*, he argues that social class is the primary force determining young people's success in school. The idea that education might operate as a meritocratic corrective has defined the work of scholars and assorted activists for social change (Labaree 1997; Meyer 1986). However, Jencks and Riesman (1986) remain far more skeptical and view education as a "social sieve" controlling access to privileged social positions. More recently, however, research finds that for young people in rural settings, educational goals are shaped by explicit and conscious commitments to rural life and place (in Howley 2006: 63; Davidson 1996; Elder and Conger 2000; Elder, King, and Conger 1996; Flora and Flora 2004; Howley, Harmon, and Leopold 1996; Jamieson 2000). In this sense, young people in rural settings are hindered, or helped, because of their ties to family and rural life.

² It certainly is worth mentioning that class factors into how young people get cultivated. Indeed, most recently, Annette Lareau, in her influential book *Unequal Childhood*, coined the term "concerted cultivation" to describe how middle- and upper-middle-class parents manage their offspring's leisure activities in order to maximize their potential and achievement. What we are describing here is a variation of Lareau's ideas, which other scholars have noted, and extending it to the community as a whole who, in the case of our work in Ellis, invests in young people. Indeed, what is striking about the Achievers from less affluent families is how they could deploy resources for one child and not another. Because Lareau focused on one child in a family, she could not compare the varying investments across siblings. Other scholars, notably and most recently Dalton Conley, in his book *The Pecking Order*, provide a review of this research. In this case, it is clear how parents invest in their children, but we observed a community-level deployment of resources that moves beyond Lareau's analysis.

³ In her memoir, *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression* (2007), Mildred Kalish Armstrong also speaks of the power of the small-town school. "Being a conscientious student who got good grades and would do anything to gain my teachers' favor, I was often granted special privileges and praised in front of my classmates. This was quite a contrast to my home environment where the adults were constantly critical of me. At home I couldn't do anything right; at school, I seemed to do everything right. So, school is where I wanted to be." (210)

⁴ Milner, Murray. 2005. *Freaks and Geeks*. New York: Routledge. We are indebted to Milner for this evocative parallel.

⁵ In the scholarship on education, the question of how students choose various curricula that lead to their distinctive outcomes is critical. In Jencks's analysis, he finds "84 percent of all seniors [in the Coleman survey] said they were in the curriculum they wanted to be in" (Jencks et al. 1972: 34). Jencks suggests that young people have many reasons for choosing their tracks. "Some will choose curriculums that lead nowhere, because such curriculums involve less work in the short run. Some will eschew college, because they dislike the idea of spending 4 more years reading books. Some will avoid the high-status jobs because they are afraid of responsibility and even success. The fact that this happens does not prove that the student's educational opportunities were unequal; it proves that equal opportunity is not enough to ensure equal results" (ibid., 37). James Rosenbaum's (1976) case-study analysis of young people in Grayton finds that guidance counselors mold the choices of their students "by the information they provide and withhold." This means that parents' and students' choices are not likely "to be free and informed." Working-class parents and students generally "lack information about tracking and college." So while Jencks implies "that students' choices are derived from personality attributes like self-esteem" (ibid.), Rosenbaum suggests, "Choice is the result of a complex interaction between the student and the school, and it must be measured in terms of real options the students are offered, the information they are given about the options, and the degree to which they are permitted to choose options the counselors consider ill-advised" (ibid., 125). We find, in our own study, that both elements are at work. Through the absence of very direct adult advice, young people drift off-course from the college-bound high-achievement trajectory. At the same time, young people claim agency over their fortunes, even though they do not fully appreciate how much these choices are structured by forces beyond their control and comprehension.

⁶ See especially Distinction-GIVE FULL REF

⁷ As in the previous chapter, it is important to note that we are not saying that there is a perfect class reproduction in Ellis. The sifting and sorting mechanism we depict here operates in very subtle ways that do favor those from privileged backgrounds—especially in the initial stages of the process. However, on occasion, a truly talented youth receives the nurturance and guidance of the wider community regardless of his or her background.

⁸ The rates of college participation have skyrocketed in the past thirty years, especially for young women. GET FIGURES AND INSERT.

⁹ “We know that higher education plays an important role in class and social mobility (Lamont 1992, Hout 1988, and Bourdieu 1984), but we do not know precisely how college experience achieves its class-consequential effects,” observe Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2005). For our young Iowans, exposure to the privileged world of college introduces them to new patterns of consumption and leisure but also to goals and expectations that mark them as authentic members of the elite. It is almost as if they become anthropologists, studying a new society. The Achievers will embrace what they see and go native; others will remain on the periphery and return home.

¹⁰ For years, journalistic accounts of hooking up and college drinking scenes have dominated the public’s understanding of such worlds. In recent years, many scholars have provided insightful examinations of the lives of emerging adults on college campuses. See Elizabeth Armstrong’s research on women college students at a large public university in her forthcoming book for Harvard University Press, Kathleen Bogle’s interviews with college students about the demise of dating and the rise of the hooking-up culture in *Hooking Up*, The Harvard School of Public Health’s ongoing studies of binge drinking, Paula England’s research on the sexual behavior of college students, and David Grazian’s account of the leisure and consumption patterns of University of Pennsylvania students in his book *On the Make*. For an interesting discussion of how a group of lower-, working-, and upper-class young people manage their first year out of high school, also see Tim Clydesdale’s *The First Year Out*.

¹¹ Sociologists recognize how higher education plays a critical role in class and social mobility (Lamont 1992, Hout 1988, and Bourdieu 1984), but we do not know precisely how college experience achieves its class-consequential effects. (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2005). In their retrospective accounts, the Achievers from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds describe college as an immersion experience where they reshape their cultural capital to complement their aspirations for social mobility and to mark themselves as authentic members of the status group to which they aspire to be a part. That said, there are moments when they can change course and abandon these goals. We will discuss the failed transformations in the Returner chapter, and, we hope, this will offers some insight into how higher education affects class identity and status.