

Utopia, **Iowa**

BRIAN YANSKY



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For my lovely sister, Jane Sharpe

Utopia, Iowa

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Utopia, Iowa, is one of the oldest settlements in Iowa. Located in the northeast corner of the state, the town is bordered by the Mississippi to the east, flat plains to the west, and rocky bluffs to the north and south. The population of Utopia is 5,001^[1].

The town's largest employer is Nirvana College, which has an annual enrollment of between 2,000 and 2,300 students. Nicknamed the “Hogwarts of the Midwest” by a *New York Times* article^[2], the college has a curriculum that includes classes in mind reading, fortune-telling, techniques for speaking to the dead, and Teleportation for Beginners.

The president of Nirvana College, Ted Houston, called His Holiness by his followers and the Cowboy Guru by the press, claims that the town of Utopia is located in a sacred place. He says a great city existed there once, long before recorded history. When pressed, he claims^[3] that spirits — gods, even — built the city. These gods had the ability to take many forms, one of which was human. In addition, these deities could fly, move objects with their minds, view distant places without traveling there, and were possessed of other fantastical talents. However, there is absolutely no archaeological evidence, or any evidence whatsoever, to support Mr. Houston's claims of an ancient city.

However, the town is noted to have a milder climate than the rest of the Midwest for reasons that aren't entirely clear to meteorologists^[4]. Also, people in this small community, as a rule, live remarkably long and healthy lives^[5]. These two facts are sometimes cited as proof of Mr. Houston's assertion that Utopia, Iowa, is a sacred place.

Recently the town has become home to several successful Internet businesses, including Divination Plus and Charms for Travelers of Both the Physical and Spiritual Realms.

1. United States Census Bureau. “Demographic Trends of the Midwest.” census.gov. 7 Feb. 2013. Retrieved 26 Dec. 2014.

2. Richardson, F. (14 July 2012). “The Hogwarts of the Midwest.” *New York Times*, p. 8.

3. Richardson, F. (14 July 2012). “The Hogwarts of the Midwest.” *New York Times*, p. 9.

4. Climate of Iowa. noaa.gov. Retrieved 11 Oct. 2013.

5. United States Census Bureau. “Demographic Trends of the Midwest.” census.gov. 7 Feb. 2013. Retrieved 26 Dec. 2014.

I arrived late the first day of school, so I couldn't find my friends in the crowd that was herded into the cavernous auditorium for a pep rally first period of our first day back. When I was already in my seat, I saw Ash and Blake up near the front. Too late. I would have texted them, but school rules forbid any use of cell phones. You couldn't even look at your phone. Some of the teachers seemed to have a gift—or curse, depending on your point of view—for seeing cell phones in students' hands. In my opinion that was a very lame gift (or curse), but I kept my phone in my pocket.

Principal Thompson is a storky-looking guy with thick gray sideburns and abnormally large teeth (See *Scrooge*, 1951; writers: Charles Dickens, Noel Langley; stars: Alastair Sim, Jack Warner, Kathleen Harrison); he

gave notoriously bad pep talks. His problem was that he had a monotone voice and bad posture, and the two together had an anti-pep effect.

I slipped lower and lower into my creaky auditorium seat, my yawns stretching themselves like lazy cats. Principal Thompson droned on and on, outlining the school rules and regulations, which seem to get stricter and stricter each year. Then he mentioned how the cafeteria would no longer serve creamed corn because it dries and sticks to surfaces and was hard to clean. I wasn't the world's biggest fan of creamed corn or anything, but for some reason, the banning of creamed corn was too much. Granted, I could have bumped past a row of knees to the aisle and quietly marched out of the auditorium; instead I took the less traveled road (thank you, junior English and Robert Frost) and boldly stood. I raised one closed fist into the air and shouted, "Give me creamed corn or give me death!" (Thank you, freshman history and Patrick Henry.)

Total silence. There is no silence like a room full of silent people.

My face reddened and I felt sweat break out around the collar of my new back-to-school shirt. I looked for escape, but the exits were impossibly distant from my position of humiliation.

Then a low murmur began. Then a chorus. "Creamed corn or death. Creamed corn or death." I realized I'd been holding my breath and once again joined others in the

effortless inhale/exhale of air. Soon I was smiling. The whole school seemed to be chanting. Finally there was some pep in this pep rally. However, Principal Thompson was not looking pleased.

He raised his hands palms out, a regal gesture meant to order silence, but instead inspired louder chanting. Then he folded his arms. Too late I realized his devious strategy. He was waiting for us to become bored with chanting. Naturally, being teenagers, we did. I tasted the bitterness of failed revolution. I learned a hard lesson that day: real revolution needs more than creamed corn.

“Mr. Bell,” he said, which just happens to be my last name. My first name is Jack, after Jack Kerouac, who is one of my father’s three heroes. In case you’re wondering, the other two are Mahatma Gandhi and Bruce Lee. “My office after the announcements are over.”

It was not an unfamiliar place to me.

After the rally, as we made our way out, I received some slaps on the back and some “Awesome, dudes” and some cold stares from the cheerleaders whose idea of pep was not in line with mine (that day). I walked down the hall to the principal’s depressingly small office, where he was already waiting for me.

We had a “nice” talk in which he did all the talking. He spoke first of school rules and starting the year off right. Then he reminded me of the Eleven Commandments. He paused to give significance to his ridiculous addition of one to the standard ten. Somehow even his pause had a

dull edge to it. Then he said that the eleventh commandment was the one that Moses had not gotten around to writing down: “Be a good student so that you may later become a good teacher.”

“What does that mean?” he asked me.

Rhetorical question, it turned out, because he didn’t wait for me to answer. Over the next thirty minutes, he meandered through an explanation that left me more confused than when he’d begun—and had me nodding off. I shook myself awake as he sentenced me to ten hours of detention. I thought that excessive and told him so. He disagreed. I suggested a compromise of five hours. He became short with me and said this wasn’t a negotiation.

“This last half hour should at least be counted as time served,” I said, though really it should have been counted as at least five hours served, since it felt like that much.

“Good-bye, Mr. Bell,” he said, sighing dramatically.

So the first day of my senior year, I earned my first detention of the new school year all because Principal Thompson was a bad public speaker with poor posture. After I sat my way through math, English, history, and biology, I sat my way through an hour of detention in a room with no windows. I read *Fahrenheit 451*, which seemed appropriate given my own recent run-in with totalitarian ruling forces. Today they were banning creamed corn; tomorrow it would be books.

I pointed this out to Mrs. Archer, the librarian who presided over detention and was a familiar after-school

companion. She shook her head sadly. “Let me just remind you why you’re here. Creamed corn. Does that make you think maybe your priorities are a little skewed, Jack?”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

But I wondered if skewed priorities were a bad thing—which was probably just further proof that I had them.

When I got home to our large two-story house (which my dad says has character, another way of saying it's old) across the street from the greatest river in America, the mighty Mississippi, I had a close encounter of the third kind with my sister. By which I mean the seven-year-old, scrawny-limbed, towheaded girl tackled me, her technique NFL perfect though she weighed a paltry fifty-eight pounds. I landed hard on my side, but I lifted her off me a second later. She may have had a big personality, but she was still only fifty-eight pounds.

About a week earlier, I had made the mistake of ordering some old Pink Panther movies (1963–present; writers: Maurice Richlin, Blake Edwards; star: Peter Sellers) on Netflix and watching them with my sister. In the later ones, Inspector Clouseau, a detective of questionable

skills, has an assistant named Cato, who has been ordered to attack Clouseau at unexpected times to keep him alert. I had given no such order to my baby sister, but she pretended I had. Nearly every time I came home, she waited somewhere in the house, hoping to catch me unaware and vulnerable to attack.

“I told you not to do that, Big Amanda,” I said.

“I got you,” she said.

I sighed. “Yes, you got me. Yes, you move like a cat.”

That made her smile. It was one of our dad’s phrases.

“I got you,” she said again. “Now you have to watch TV with me.”

“Is that a new rule?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t get the memo,” I said. “I have to decline.”

“Ple-e-e-e-e-e-ease. Please. Please.”

I said I had homework. Amanda’s former compulsive love of musicals, particularly *The Sound of Music* (1965; writers: Howard Lindsay, Russell Crouse; stars: Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer, Eleanor Parker), had been replaced by a new love: old, old TV shows, mostly old sitcoms my mom and dad had watched as kids. *Bewitched* was her current favorite.

“Ple-e-e-e-e-e-ease. Please. Please. We’ll watch *Bewitched*.”

“Homework,” I repeated.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” she said.

Girls, even little girls, seem to know how to look like

they know more than they do. Most likely her secret would be some uninteresting gossip about another second-grader. I should have just ignored her. I should have. But.

“OK, but I’ll do my homework while we watch *Bewitched*,” I said.

“Deal.” She stuck out her hand and we shook on it, her hand so tiny mine covered it like a catcher’s mitt covers a ball.

“Tell me,” I said.

“I saw a dead girl in your room,” she said. “I’ll turn on the TV. You make the popcorn.”

Amanda skipped off to the living room, and a second later I heard the *Bewitched* music, which was not at all bewitching.

I considered this new information. On the one hand, it had been a long time since any girl at all had been in my room, so maybe I should have been grateful. On the other hand, a dead girl in my room meant complications. I was already dealing with detention, the start of senior year, and all kinds of questions about my future. I didn’t need a dead girl, too.

But I had one. When it came to the dead, Amanda never lied.

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I microwaved the popcorn and looked out the window over the sink into the backyard. Needed mowing. This was a fact I would not be pointing out to Dad, because as soon as I did, he'd assign the job to me.

Mom came into the kitchen carrying a load of laundry. "Can you get the door, hon?" she asked.

I opened the door to the basement, where the washer and dryer were. Mom stood in the doorway, the laundry basket propped against her knee. She stared at me.

"Detention again?" she said. My mom is long all over: long face, neck, arms, and legs—in a Shelley Duvall in *The Shining* kind of way (1980; writers: Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick; stars: Jack Nicholson, Shelley Duvall, Danny Lloyd). She has almond-shaped eyes. She knows things she shouldn't.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said.

She didn’t give me a chance to explain about the principal’s monotone voice or his stance on creamed corn.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m resigned to the fact that you’ll be a career criminal. Just no guns. Promise me that.”

“Mom.”

“Promise.”

“Right. No guns.”

“That’s a good boy,” she said, and the stairs creaked as she disappeared into the cellar.

I carried the bag of popcorn into the living room, where Amanda was glued to the TV.

“I’m starving,” she said. “I had a very tough day at school.”

“Me, too,” I said.

“Did you get pushed down during recess by Sam Yancey and told that you should watch where you’re going?” she asked.

I had to admit that I had not. “You want me to beat him up?” I asked.

She considered this. In the past she’d always given a decisive “No” because she adhered to the code of non-violence preached by the great leader Mahatma Gandhi. His “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind” was one of our father’s favorite quotes, and Amanda took our father’s attitudes very seriously.

“I guess not,” she answered finally.

I made a mental note to make my offers of violence more carefully in the future. I sensed her loyalty to the code of nonviolence was being challenged by the behavior of boys.

“Popcorn,” she ordered.

“Not so fast,” I said, fighting the urge to do what she said because deep down I wanted to please her—almost always. “You get the popcorn when I get information.”

“I’m watching,” she said, staring intently at the TV screen, where Samantha was wrinkling her nose in order to perform some act of magic. The fact that I knew this depressed me.

I considered my next move carefully. My sister was ruthless when it came to secrets. Once she had the popcorn, she would hold on to her secret as long as possible and use it to get other favors from me.

I held the popcorn above my head and invited her to get it for herself.

“You’re mean.”

“Didn’t I just offer to beat up a boy for you?”

She shrugged and pretended to turn her attention back to *Bewitched*.

“Smells so good,” I said, taking a deep breath.

She snuck a look. Then she squinted at me in a Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* sort of way (1966; writers: Luciano Vincenzoni, Sergio Leone; stars: Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef, Eli Wallach). Then she broke. Big dramatic sigh that went all the way up her

back into her shoulders. “The ghost was on your bed in your room.”

“What was she doing?”

“Just sitting on your bed.”

“Old? Young? I need details.”

“A teenager,” she said, as if I was purposely being dense. “She was pretty, really pretty. She had long blond hair. She was different, though.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. She just looked different from most dead girls.” Amanda’s hands reached out longingly. “Popcorn. Need popcorn. Becoming zombie.”

She pretended to keel over onto the sofa—which seemed more like the lying dead than the walking dead, but I kept this observation to myself. I gave her the popcorn, and she sat up and stuffed her mouth with a handful of kernels.

“Were you asleep when you saw her?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said, flecks of partially chewed popcorn exploding out of her mouth like sparks from fireworks. She grinned, and then looked back at the TV screen and put her finger to her lips and whispered, “Shush, shush.”

About an hour later, I heard our father pound down the stairs from his nap. He owned a bar, which was closed in the afternoons, and he always took what he called a siesta from about four to six. His bar is named *Field of Dreams*, after the movie *Field of Dreams* (1989); writers:

W. P. Kinsella, Phil Alden Robinson; stars: Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan, James Earl Jones), which is about an Iowa farmer who builds a baseball field for dead baseball players. The guy keeps hearing this whisper, "If you build it, they will come," and they do come, the dead baseball players, I mean, and they play games out there, too. Our dad's Field of Dreams was a coffee bar in the morning and a drinking bar at night. He closed it in the afternoons because he wanted a siesta, which showed the kind of businessman he was. A bad one.

"Hello, kids!" he shouted, bounding into the room. Dad is a shouter and a bounder. He got between Amanda and the TV and she complained and he told her he was more interesting than Samantha Stephens, which was true but not saying much. Then we had a conversation about tall people and short people because my father said short people liked TV too much.

"You can't like TV too much," Amanda said.

Our dad said she was a perfect example of a short person who was overly fond of what he called the idiot box.

"That's an idiotic thing to say," I said. "Sir."

"I'm not short," Amanda said. "For my age."

"And yet you like TV," our father said.

I was still trying to study, but I was sucked into the argument by my father's next statement, which was that short people have the advantage of their disadvantage. He made the case that short people needed to make up for being short and so try harder.

“Look at Napoleon,” he said. “He would never have conquered his own backyard if he’d been tall.”

He and I argued while Amanda scooted over and watched more *Bewitched*. The problem was our dad enjoyed an argument and sometimes said things just to irritate me into reactions. Oddly, I didn’t hate him for it. Stockholm syndrome, maybe?

I imagined that Dad was getting a lot of argument practice at his bar, which he’d only opened a year earlier, when he went through what our mom called a “midlife crisis” and quit being a carpenter and furniture maker, saying he needed to fulfill his dream of being a bar owner now or he never would. The problem was the bar wasn’t profitable. He’d never made a fortune as a carpenter, but we’d gotten by. Now we weren’t getting by. Mom was worried. I was worried.

Mom interrupted Dad’s new topic—which was his observation that road trips didn’t have the romance for my generation that they did for his—by calling us in to dinner.

“Amanda saw a ghost in my room today,” I told our parents as I sat at the hourglass-shaped table my father had built, a beautiful work of art but, like all his furniture, a little difficult to use. Everyone had vegetarian food in front of them but me. Our mother accommodated my carnivorous preference by making me pot roasts and hamburgers and chicken to go with whatever arrangement of vegetables they were eating.

Amanda frowned. "I didn't say you could tell them."

"Were you asleep, sweetie, when you saw this ghost?" Mom asked.

Amanda's lower lip came out, as it did when she was upset. Mom would often warn her that her lip could get stuck there permanently if she wasn't careful. "And that would be a tragedy, sweetie," she'd add.

"I already told him," she said, poking me in the shoulder.

"Don't do that," I said to Amanda. Turning to Mom, I said, "She wasn't asleep."

"You know how I feel about dead people wandering around the house," Mom said.

"I didn't ask her in," I said.

"Are you sure? I don't see how she got in if she wasn't asked."

"Not by me," I said. Not that I would mind having a girl in my room; I just wanted her to be alive.

Mom looked at Amanda.

"No," she said. "I don't like dead people wandering around the house, either."

"I'll check the charms," Mom said. "They simply don't make charms the way they used to. God, listen to me. I sound like my mother."

"You'll figure it out," Dad said. "'Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.'"

"Mahatma Gandhi," I said.

“Bruce Lee,” Amanda said.

“I’m going to have to go with Amanda,” our mother said. “Bruce Lee.”

We’d played this game since I was a little older than Amanda.

“Congratulations, son,” Dad said.

“It really sounded like Bruce Lee,” Mom said, patting Amanda consolingly on the shoulder.

After dinner, Dad challenged us all to a game of Risk. I didn’t really feel like it, but his boasts about his success at world domination the last time his armies had taken the field of battle convinced me he needed to be put in his place.

“I’m the king of the world!” he said.

“That guy who directed *Titanic*,” Mom said (1997; writer: James Cameron; stars: Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet).

“James Cameron,” I said.

“That’s not a real quote,” Amanda said.

“Correct,” our father said. “It’s a fake quote. I will be king of the world, though.”

“You talk the talk,” Mom said. “Let’s see if you can walk the walk.”

In fact, he could. The rest of us might be able see dead people, like the kid in *The Sixth Sense* (1999; writer: M. Night Shyamalan; stars: Bruce Willis, Haley Joel Osment, Toni Collette)—among other things—but when it came to conquering countries and wiping out armies, Dad could walk the walk.

The city is magnificent. Magic sparkles off the surfaces of all things. The streets are wide when they need to be wide and narrow when they need to be narrow, and the buildings seem to touch the sky. There are markets where those who dwell outside the city bring their wares; these visitors are always careful to be on their best behavior, for all know that even the weakest city dweller could stop their heart with a single look. Those outside the city call the city dwellers gods, but they are not gods, though they are not human, either.

The city dwellers call all those who live outside the city short-livers because the city dwellers live thousands of years. And when their end nears, the strongest of the strong can live on if they're willing to take other bodies, if they're willing to end lives to extend their own.

The queen is not so old, but the king is one of those who must take and wear new bodies in order to live on. Usually

he takes one of the short-livers, but sometimes he will take the body of a city dweller because they last so much longer. He wears them like clothes, discarding them when they are worn out or the mood strikes him. His long life has made him very powerful. This and his need for bodies and his temper make him feared by all.

Even the queen fears him, which has made her careful except in one rather significant respect. She has fallen in love with a beautiful youth, a short-liver who is the son of one of the chiefs of a minor tribe. Already she has betrayed the king with him.

She wakes in fear and goes to sleep in fear. It is madness to see the boy. She tells herself it must end. But still she goes to him. Again and again.

4

My mother was angry with me the next morning because I wouldn't get up, but I told her to try sleeping in a bed where a ghost had been. All night long, I kept waking up shivering; it was freaking Alaska in my dreams. I ended up sleeping on the sofa in the living room.

"You should have just done that in the first place," Mom said as I sat at the kitchen table. She'd been dealing with ghosts since she was eight years old, so she wasn't sympathetic about incorporeal inconvenience.

"I'll go see your grandmother today," Mom added. "We'll get some stronger charms. There won't be any more ghosts in your bed."

Then she had to leave for her part-time job as assistant to the richest woman in town, Mrs. Piermont Morgan. For twenty hours a week, that mean old lady abused my mother. She didn't even pay her that well. When I

asked why she put up with Mrs. Piermont Morgan, Mom said that Mrs. Morgan needed her. That was not a good reason as far as I was concerned. I'm sure Attila the Hun "needed" someone, too.

I was ten minutes late getting to Mr. Van Horn's class, and he gave me that evil look he gives everyone who walks in late, as if he is doing his best to make them a victim of instantaneous combustion.

"That's one, Mr. Bell," he said.

He called us all by our last names like Sir does in *To Sir, with Love* (1967; writers: E. R. Braithwaite, James Clavell; stars: Sidney Poitier, Judy Geeson, Christian Roberts).

"Sorry," I said. I was sorry he had the unjust policy of taking off points every time a student was late. Not so sorry to miss a few minutes of English.

I sat at a desk near the back, my usual seating preference in a classroom. Mr. Van Horn had decided we would start the semester by reading *The Great Gatsby*, which earned him nods of approval from both the nonreaders (thin novel) and most of the readers (already read it). I fell into the second category.

Mr. Van Horn rambled on about the themes of *Gatsby*: romantic love and class in America and the American Dream. Mr. Van Horn did love books. He wore black pointy shoes, and when he got excited, his heels lifted off the floor. He got excited about books a lot. It was one of

the things I really liked about him. And to be honest, I liked English, too—just not his attendance rules.

I listened, but I also looked out the window and wondered about that ghost on my bed. No, not wondered. Worried. It had to hurt her to be in our house. There were charms and other things to keep ghosts out. She must have had a very good reason to force her way in. And that worried me.

“Mr. Bell,” Mr. Van Horn said. “What is so interesting out that window?”

I couldn’t say that I’d been thinking about a dead girl. I had enough trouble getting dates. So I looked harder to try to see something interesting out there.

“End of summer,” I said.

Everyone looked out the windows. Fall was blowing in. The leaves were shivering. It wouldn’t be long before they started changing colors.

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Van Horn said dismissively, because he knew better than anyone about the changing weather. He had, according to Gram, the gift—or curse, depending on your point of view—of smelling what the weather would be, particularly when it was changing or dangerous. Our town was too small to have local TV news, but we did have a radio station, and Mr. Van Horn would tell them when dangerous weather was coming. He was always right. Always.

“Back to *Gatsby*. What do you think, Mr. Bell? Is true love real?”

There were some snickers. True love? Seriously? But before I considered the potential fallout from an honest answer, I answered honestly. Stupid.

“Yes.”

The snickers became nervous laughs. There were a few “Awws” from the sarcastic, mostly boys, and a few moonish stares from the romantic, mostly girls. Dickerson, the kind of jock who helped create and maintain the jock stereotype, said, “True love lasts as long as a good—”

“That’s about twenty seconds for you,” Kayla said.

The laughter pretty much ended class, because the bell went off before Mr. Van Horn could regain control. As we shuffled out, he shouted that we were to read two *Gatsby* chapters by next class.

“Hey, lover boy,” Dickerson said, passing by with his redheaded sidekick, Bill Wayne, who added, “Lover boy,” in his usual echo of Dickerson.

It was an unoriginal nickname, but that wouldn’t matter if they were able to get others to start using it. That would be irritating. What had I been thinking? I knew, though, didn’t I? A fact I would deny under the most severe torture imaginable. Rip out my heart. No comment. Tear out my soul. No comment. Chop off my head. Really—no comment.

I knew any attempt at denial or counterattack would

only motivate Dickerson, so I tried a mysterious look, like I'd had erotic experiences they couldn't even imagine.

They laughed at me.

Still, as I walked down the hall, I felt a strange exhilaration thinking of my admission. It had felt good saying it out loud. Good and bad. How did I know true love was real? Easy. I'd felt it.