

THE COVENANT FIELD

It was nearly noon Iowa time when we finally crossed the Mississippi River and into the rolling, corn-stubbed hills of America's breadbasket. Michigan's congested midriff was far in the rear view mirror, now only the land Lewis and Clark dubbed, "the great green sea" tread beneath my wheels. Once teeming with elk, buffalo, and prairie chickens, Iowa is now a testament to the destructive qualities of a hundred and fifty years of agricultural advancements. But they haven't destroyed all that was left of prairies. In the fencerows and terraces, amidst the corn and beans, rivers and creeks, lay pockets of thick grass the color of butternut squash. It was in those weed-covered hills I made a horrible discovery one blustery November afternoon a year shy of the next presidential election.

Iowa has a wholesome innocence about it. The land lies before you like an open book, a new page. The farmhouses are sparsely landscaped, and the barns are brimming with purpose. There's very little clutter, and everyone- from implement dealers to the wait staff behind the counters at the coffee shops - seem to have a hand in the business of farming. The land, the people, the pace of life is so different than what I was used to. It's like going back in time to when the inhabitants, the community, the entire nation had a connection to Mother Earth, to the cycle of life and the rebirth of the passing seasons.

When I finally exited the highway and pointed the old suburban south towards the little town of What Cheer, I had polished off the last of the meatloaf sandwiches. What Cheer is the same as most other towns in Iowa. They're all about function. No flash or pizzazz. Necessity, necessity, necessity. The shops downtown are all about farming, eating, or growing things. They don't have any flower shops, or dog-grooming boutiques, and lord forbid, fitness centers. The people in Iowa get their exercise the old fashioned way- by growing crops, tending the livestock, and eating food that was grown on the farm. Maybe that's why most folks who live there seem to be thin and healthy.

Anyway, the hardware store across the train tracks hadn't changed since the last time I was there almost exactly one year ago. I recognized the weathered hardwood floors, the string of Swiss cow bells dangling from the back of the heavy, wide door, and the massive deer antlers fastened to a wooden border beneath the stained, false ceiling. The countertop was still a smooth sheet of ancient linoleum, with its center worn thin from decades of coins, currency, and paper sacks pushed across its surface.

The middle-aged man behind the counter was just like I remembered. He still had on a pair of denim painter's pants and an archaic, faded work shirt that could have had a name patch over the pocket. I asked for a non-resident hunting license and a box of shot shells from behind the counter.

“Quail or pheasant,” he asked, scratching a narrow shrub of hair, slightly above a line of creases on his forehead.

“Both,” I responded, confidently.

He smirked. “*What kind of shot shells* do you want, quail or pheasant?”

“Sorry,” I shrugged. “I thought you were—”

“Asking what kind of license,” he interrupted. “And a small game license allows you to hunt both quail and pheasant.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“Maybe you’d like to pick out your own box of shells.”

I conceded. “Right.”

The man behind the counter moved to his right, and slid the backing on the counter to the left. Fingers poised on a small, desktop computer, he asked for my name.

“C. Derrick Twitchell...the second.”

“First name?”

“Claude,” I said, embarrassed.

“Oh yes,” he nodded, smiling, as if I had conjured up pleasant childhood memories. “I remember you.” Suddenly, I had made his day. “You’re that reporter fella from Michigan, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“I recognized your name. We don’t get too many ‘Claude’s’ around these parts.”

“I know. It’s unusual.”

He raised his eyebrows and continued “especially those guys whose truck catches on fire in the middle of downtown What Cheer.” He chuckled, and said ‘What Cheer’ as if it were one word.

“Don’t remind me,” I laughed half-heartedly along with him. “I almost lost my dog in that fire.”

“Never mind your dog, that fire almost burned down the store, and damned near burned down the seed elevator next door.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” He looked at me.

“Yeah, I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be sorry,” he continued, “that was the biggest news in What Cheer for quite some time. I bet there was fifteen fire trucks here, from six different towns. Your story was printed in the papers, and on television.”

“No kidding?”

He was getting riled up, recanting the story. “That was something. I saw it on the news out of Des Moines. If it wasn’t for your truck getting burned up in the process it would really be funny.” I shook my head and peered beneath the counter

at the boxes of shot shells festooned with ears of corn and fake leaves of red, yellow and orange. "What started that fire, anyway?"

I looked up from the shot shell display. "Catalytic converter, they think, but I really can't say for sure."

"Must have been the unleaded fuel in a leaded truck," he said, smugly. "What year was it anyway?"

"Eighty seven."

"Oh sure," he said, raising an index finger to his lips. "Those catalytic converters turn cherry red if you run unleaded fuel through them. It's no big deal if you're just driving around town, but on long trips that baby will glow like a Christmas light."

"Guess I was lucky."

"What did you do anyway?" His fingers moved from his lips to the cash register. "That will be ninety dollars for the license."

"Last year?" I asked, handing him a pair of well-earned fifties.

"Yeah."

"I walked to a motel, picked up a newspaper and the classified ads, and bought another truck the next morning. After that I went hunting. What else could I do?"

He laughed, affirmatively. "Here's your license, Mr. Twitchell, and your change. Have you decided on a box of shells?"

“Yes I have.”

We finished our business. All of it. I was legal to hunt pheasants and quail in Iowa, now all I needed to do was get to the Emmert St. Peter farm in the waning hours of the day.

Iowa’s shooting hours are from eight in the morning to four-thirty in the afternoon, local time. The idea behind the rationale is that it protects the pheasants when they’re still on the roost. It also keeps hunters hunting during the most daylight, where it is easier to tell the hens from the roosters. Only roosters are legal to kill.

At almost two, I pulled off the blacktop and onto one of the gravel roads that crisscrosses the countryside. My old suburban was chugging along merrily, and I was proud of it. I loved the bench-style front seat, and the obnoxiously ugly seat cover I tied to it. It felt like a hunting truck, drove like a hunting truck, and even smelled like a hunting truck. I didn’t pay much for it a year ago in Iowa, but I didn’t get scalped, either. Even though I was desperate for a set of wheels, the folks who had it for sale didn’t scalp me. That’s what I’ve come to expect from the folks in Iowa: honest, fair, and willing to lend a hand or a leg up.

My English springer spaniel, Synch recognized the uneven roads; the familiar chatter bumps, and awoke from a long nap in the backseat of the suburban. She yawned, shook the cobwebs from her head and took a giant whiff of air from the passenger side window. Her tail wagged, sending the little curl of hair at the end

into a dither. She smelled the intrigue, the adventure. She tasted the hint of corn, the mention of beans in the dusty, swine-filled breeze.

“What do you think?” I asked her. She yawned again, nervously. She was anxious. We both were.

At nearly two we pulled into the long, gravel drive of the St Peter farm. It hadn't changed a bit since last year, or since the first time I met them several years ago. The farmhouse and barnyard still sat on a round knob about halfway up a sloping, corn-studded hillside. Emmert hadn't planted any shrubs or done any landscaping, which wasn't surprising because hardly any farms were dressed in frivolity. The cellar still doubled as a pantry for mom's canned vegetables, and a place to hide when the storms of summer steamrolled the countryside. There were no cotton towels, linens or denim jeans dancing on the clothesline, but that's not to say that it wouldn't happen during the next warm spell; a basket of clothespins swayed at the ready. I pulled right in, like I owned the place because that's what Emmert always said I should do. He's such a nice guy. He and his wife both are. I always bring them a quart of Michigan's finest maple syrup and they seem to appreciate it. It's one of those things that I probably don't have to do, but it makes me feel better about the whole arrangement of hunting their farm without having to pay for the privilege. When I made it to the back door there was a note taped to the sill. It read: *Derrick, go ahead and hunt. We've gone over to the Amana Colonies for an auction and dinner. Mother made you some cookies, and there's soft drinks in*

the garage. We won't be home till late. Good luck and thanks for the syrup.

Emmert.

I laughed. Maybe it was a good idea that I brought along the maple syrup, after all. Until now, I never thought that anyone who let me hunt their farm really appreciated it. For years, syrup had been one of those good will gestures I gave to the farmers, but I really had no idea that they actually poured it over their morning pancakes or their homemade cornbread. I figured that some of them gave it away to their relatives, their neighbors, or the even the postman, for that matter.

After leaving a quart of syrup on the doorstep, I drove the old Suburban out of the farmyard, down the lane and behind one of Emmert's old barns. Synch couldn't wait to get out of the truck. She bounced from the back seat to the front, shoving me out of the way. "Okay, okay," I scolded her. "Let's go hunting."

In no time I had donned my hunting chaps, a fleece pullover, and a comfortable pair of hunting boots. Synch had finished sniffing out the barnyard, sending a half dozen semi feral cats scrambling for the safety of a broken out window or a rusty farm implement. They looked at my aging Springer with either mild amusement, or curious disdain. It seemed that they hadn't remembered our visit to the farm almost exactly a year ago.

Synch hates cats.

I couldn't wait to get after a big walk after such a long drive. It feels good to stretch the legs, to handle a shotgun instead of the steering wheel. I couldn't wait to

see how much the hill behind the barn had grown in the past year. With each visit, that hill somehow becomes taller and taller.

I keep getting older and older.

In either case, we had an excellent day for a pheasant hunt. The air was damp, and moist, an excellent vehicle for carrying the scent of game. The skies were business-suit gray, flecked with the pleated shadows of potential snow. I put on my yellow shooting glasses and we were bathed in the regal glow of everything good. Corn stalks became the color they were a month previous, when they stood tall and proud, laden with ripe cobs. Brown nut grass bunched in small pyramids in the gaps of sheep-wire fencing. They were neat and orderly, like the bundles of straw in an Amish wheat field.

Synch raced down the lane, as I locked the suburban and hid the keys in my vest next to my digital camera and a small handful of freshly purchased shot shells. I let her go, to burn off energy. After a couple days of hunting she'd forget about those frivolous escapades and stick to business. And when we'd stop for a break, she'd be the one to curl up and take a mini-nap, if only for a moment or two.

The St. Peter farm is not all that unlike most of the farms in Iowa. Emmert and his wife, Carolyn own a total of three hundred and thirty acres in three different sections of Keokuk County. They raised a family on the farm, two daughters and a son, Robert, who was named after Carolyn's father. The two daughters moved out of state after they were married. One of them married a railroad engineer, and now

lives in Superior-Duluth. The other fell in love with a seed salesman who used to call on the elevator where she worked the summer months while attending school at Ames. The seed salesman eventually quit selling seeds, and now works for the pork industry as a lobbyist in Kansas City, Missouri. Robert moved away too, to Iowa City where he's in charge of strategic planning at the university. Much like most the other farms in Iowa, the St. Peter farm is being farmed by folks who are in their seventies, with no children who want to take it over. As the farmers die off, and the farms go up for auction, much of the property gets scooped up by farming conglomerates, which put employees in the farmhouses, who in turn have little concern for upkeep of the grounds.

Little by little, Iowa is being overrun by big business.

The St. Peter farmhouse rests at the east end of the property, where a hundred and sixty acres stretches a half-mile wide, by a half mile long. When property values crashed during the farm crisis of the nineteen eighties, Emmert bought another forty at the northwest tip of his property. Carolyn despised the idea of spending more money for more property while their kitchen needed remodeling. Emmert listened to her wishes, but bought the property anyway, knowing full well that the additional twenty five acres of tillable ground would eventually pay for itself, and a couple of new kitchens thereafter.

The forty wasn't really the best for farming, but then again Emmert probably didn't pay top dollar for it, either. It was in the middle of a broad valley, where the

soil was black and rich, and in the intersection of a small river and two large creeks. It was one of those forties that had three workable fields, just big enough that a fair-sized tractor could get in there and take care of business.

My goal was to make it to the back forty before the end of shooting hours, not necessarily shoot a limit of pheasants.

Some guys want to shoot three roosters just as fast as they can. They measure their experience in the field by the heft of their game bag, instead of the magic that is pheasant hunting. The only thing I wanted to do was take my dog hunting, to watch her go, and have the time of her life. If Synch happened to flush a rooster or two in range, and my shot was true, that would be all right, too.

When the farm lane snaked its way to the right, Synch and I marched left-up the side of the hill. At first I thought that I hadn't worn enough clothes; November's talons cut right through me. But half way up the hill, I was breathing hard and sweating like a riled thoroughbred. When we finally reached the summit, I was huffing and puffing, cursing the clothes I had worn, and regretting the weight I hadn't lost.

But what a view from the top of that hill. I could see for miles. Iowa lay before me like a handcrafted quilt. With Synch sitting at my side, I decided on a plan. We'd take the second, thickest terrace around the backside of the hill to the fence line. From there, we'd hike down the rest of the hill, through a patch of yellow

grass, and a stand of cottonwood with its carpet of bittersweet. We'd still have time to hit the forty, I hoped.

Synch was settling down now, and as long as we hunted into the wind, she stayed fairly close. When we hunted with the wind at our back, she would run far ahead and try to work her way back towards me. Usually, though, the pheasants wouldn't stand for that, and flushed far out of range. It drove me mad, but I resisted the urge to yell at her, because that made the pheasants even more skittish. I learned a long time ago that it's better to realize that the dog will cost you a few birds, but they find more than they flush out of range.

Halfway through the second terrace, Synch jumped a couple of hens. They dashed away on those thick, lovely wings. Synch knew the sound, and followed the hens for a few fleeting seconds. She had struck gold. The smell of game.

Quickly now, we were covering the little strip of weeds that curled along the back side of the hill. I could see the end of the weed strip a hundred yards ahead. The dog smelled more game and was marching along, tail a blur. I forgot all about my gun, my boots, my steps. Everything in the world was focused at the terrace end. The pheasants were ahead of me, no doubt, getting nervous, poised to flee. Synch was growing hotter too, her small, powerful legs gobbling up real estate.

When we closed the gap to fifty yards they began their exodus. One hen. Two hens. Three hens, more. Synch heard the commotion and sprinted. I tried to

keep up, watching the first rooster of the trip smash into the barbed wire fence at the end of the terrace, regroup, then fly away, unscathed.

Too far, I thought.

A dozen more steps and a second rooster made a low, right to left getaway. I was momentarily taken with its color, its size, its nimble way it covered so much territory with such little effort. It was the easiest of shots and one that I've made a hundred times. I threw the gun to my shoulder and found the bead at the end of the barrel. The rooster was making hay, getting away. I fired, but he kept smoking, miraculously. The rooster cackled, making the scene more urgent. I switched triggers and fired again, full well thinking that the rooster would be flailing dead in the yellow maize. He didn't miss a beat.

Nice. Drive all the way to Iowa, and miss.

I stood there for a second or two and watched him soar down the hill, to the west. Another hen distracted my attention, but I came back to the rooster, now a pepper speck on the horizon. He made it across the cornfield and at last settled into the heavy wood of the forty.

Synch didn't appear to be as disappointed as I was. She paraded down the cornfield, to where my shot whacked the corn. She's learned over the years that the smell of burnt gunpowder often leads to a dead bird. Or, a dead bird isn't far from the smell of burnt gunpowder. Whatever the case, there wasn't anything to find. And at least for her, it was no big deal.

The first miss of the day got inside my head. Even though I'm not a superstitious kind of guy, I always like to nail the first bird, because it's a good omen for the rest of the trip. Synch did her part; the rooster flushed in range. I should have nailed him, lickety-split.

On to the next.

We took the fence line down the rest of the hill, towards the valley and the strip of yellow grass. Synch was on the downwind side, trotting merrily again. She looked back at me every once and a while, which was good. I don't like a dog that hunts for itself. I want a dog that hunts *with* me. I want a dog to be part of a team. Synch was all that.

We walked quite a little ways without moving any more roosters. Although the yellow grass was thick and tall, the only things we found were a few more hens. The edge of the creek is often a great place to find pheasants because the birds hide beneath the undercut banks. Despite Synch's valiant efforts- beneath the canopy on the water's edge- we came up empty.

At almost four that afternoon we made it to the forty, where Emmert had planted two odd-shaped fields with beans. The beans were gone, but he had left enough along the edges that a handful of pheasants could probably make it through the winter on what he had left behind. There were pheasant tracks new and old in the black earth, and in the skiffs of snow that were piled in the shadows of the cottonwoods.

We were into them again. Synch smelled them, I just knew it. The little dog tags dangling from her collar were jingling to the beat of her footsteps. She drew me further and further down the edge of the creek. *Here we go again*, I thought. Steadily we made our way, closer and closer towards the fence line, the property edge. Synch and I were herding them, driving them under the fence and off the property. There was nothing we could do. The ditch wriggled under the fence, and so did the pheasants. My little ditch bitch wasn't far behind.

When we made it to the fence, I stopped. Synch kept motoring, a fireplug on wheels. I felt like whistling her back. Like calling off the deal. Twenty yards she scurried ahead of me. Then thirty. I rolled my eyes and knew the outcome. She would follow the creek to an acre of grass near an old barn a hundred yards ahead.

I tugged at my sleeve. Four fifteen. There was no time to reconvene. I stood at the fence and looked around. Iowa was all mine. Not a soul in sight, not a sign of life. Synch was now fifty out, and judging by her demeanor, was only a moment or two from scattering the masses.

This is not good.

I really wanted to follow. I wanted to tag along, but at the same time, knew the rules about trespassing.

It was just about that time that I heard the cackle. The rooster that I had missed along the fence line near the top of the hill was now thumbing his nose at me, daring me to cross. It was all I could take.

You're dead.

I leapfrogged the fence and started after the dog, quickly. Just like I knew she would, the dog left the ditch and plowed right into the acre of grass. Hustling still, I was with her in the abandoned farmyard when the mayhem began. All at once the little acre of weeds erupted. There were pheasants everywhere. My head snapped left, then right and left again. They all seemed to be hens. Finally though, I saw a rooster, and heard another. One right and one left.

Bang! The first tumbled in a heap, but I didn't have time to watch him fall. There was work to do. I spun to the left and found the second making his getaway near an old windmill. He was the mad cackler, the one with the Teflon feathers. I never really had time to savor the moment, to relish the flavor of revenge. He died as if he was hit with an iron skillet.

From a bird hunter's perspective, it was awesome.

A double, in the waning hours of the day.

"Good girl," I cried. "Dead bird."

She gathered the first bird in her mouth and was trotting back to me. "Good girl," I told her again. I don't know who was happier~ the dog or myself. After she delivered the first pheasant, she set her sights on the second. I followed along, but I really didn't need to. She found the second, and I paused for a moment to take a few photos of my old dog, and our beautiful birds amidst the quaint yellow and orange bulbs of bittersweet.

Years from now, when Synch was surely gone, I'd look at these photos and think that it was bittersweet, indeed.

"Let's go, girl," I told her, as I tucked my camera and my birds in my vest- tail feathers protruding from either side. "Let's get out of here."

She snorted, and I patted her on the head.

Instead of following along, Synch spun around and headed for the barn. "Come on, Synch-ie! This way!" She ignored me.

I whistled.

Twice.

I listened for her dog tags.

She was gone.

A gentle breeze captured the windmill behind me. It bellowed the metallic wail of neglect. The haunting, eerie noise carried the valley, the hills, the lonesome cottonwoods along the edge of the creek. It sent a chill down my spine, as if it were nails on a chalkboard. "Synchie, here," I yelled again, my heart beginning to race.

Nothing.

I walked towards the back of the barn- a hip-roofed, decrepit beast, built when Eisenhower was president. She must have found a few cats, I figured. Or raccoons. I tried to whistle, but couldn't. All of a sudden my lips had turned to rubber.

I peered through the cracks in the wooden door and saw the front end of a tractor-trailer. No sign of the dog.

Several more steps along the back of the barn, and I smelled gas. Lots of it. A handful of pigeons must have been watching my approach, because they chose that instant to stretch their evening wings. I just about jumped out of my skin.

Quickly, I turned the corner of the barn, still smelling gas. Another gap in the wood siding and I saw that the tractor-trailer was connected to a tanker, the kind that I often see delivering fuel to gas stations.

“Synchie.... come on,” I pleaded.

Another corner and I was in the front of the barn, where the two giant door handles meet. Slowly, I pulled them apart. The smell of gas was stronger now, obnoxiously so. It was everywhere. The gas stood in piles at my feet. It laid around in drums and five gallon buckets. In plastic barrels, and gallon milk jugs.

Something is wrong, here.

I broke open the action on my little 16-gauge, reached in my vest and pulled out my camera.

Click.

I got the license plate.

Then the gas in all its piles.

After three or four shots, I inched my way to the front- to the tractor itself. Printed on the driver's side door were the words "Parker Oil Company. Peoria, Illinois."

Click.

I closed the action on the gun, and set it against the front tire.

My foot found the little stirrup beneath the cab, my hand the handle at the bottom of the door. It opened slowly, and my eyes couldn't believe what I saw. Strewn on the floorboard were the frozen, lifeless fingers of the driver, whose throat was slit from ear to ear. His blood was everywhere, caked and dried. I backed away in horror, regrouped frantically, and took three more shots of his pale white face, his fingers, his fingerless hands duct-taped to the steering wheel.

That was enough.

I slammed the door shut.

I raced through the cans and barrels as if they were alive.

Run, man, run.

I was out of there as fast as my middle-aged legs could carry me.

Hell with the dog.

To hell with pheasant hunting.

In the blink of an eye, I was over the fence and back onto Emmert's property. I whistled for the dog, but couldn't. My mouth was a desert. I ran through the beans,

the yellow grass, the cut corn. By the time I made it to the big hill, Synch caught up to me. At last.

We jumped in the old Suburban and raced for town, exhausted, relieved, and holding the evidence to something I knew was huge.

Really huge.

By the time we made it back to What Cheer, I was anything but cheerful. I was starving. The meatloaf sandwiches I had for lunch were long gone, and I knew that if I stopped at the police station the cops would keep me there to all hours of the night. If the cops in Iowa were the same as the ones back in Michigan they'd use food as a bargaining chip when it came to prying more evidence from someone in for questioning. I knew enough guys on the force to realize that they all have ways to coerce a confession.

The cops could wait.

I decided to check in to a motel, grab a bite to eat, take care of my dog, and clean the birds.

Besides, knowing my luck, I probably left the cap to the camera on the lens, and all those photos would be lost. Knowing my luck, I probably had dead batteries in the Kodak, anyway. I'm one of those guys that have the best intentions, but lack

the follow through, or the attention to detail. I'm forgetful, not irresponsible as my ex-wife used to remind me. In either case, there were lots of reasons to wait. There were only a few that prompted immediate action.

An hour later Synch was curled up on the motel bed in a sleepy ball, twitching and whimpering that wonderful pheasant hunting scene on the St. Peter farm. She didn't even raise an eye when I came in from the cold with a pair of skinned birds. She didn't even flinch when I rinsed them off in the bathtub. Years ago she'd roll up her sleeves and be right in there with me, gobbling down the pheasant hearts, and watching my every move until they were safely tucked away. Now she's lights out after a bowl of canned dog food and a long drink of cold water.

After ordering a pizza and taking a quick shower, I pulled out the digital camera and my laptop computer. The photos were all there. The ghastly, horrible mess. They were even worse when I moved them from the camera to the computer. The image of his blood stained, bristly haired fingers burned a hole in my eyes, my mind, my soul. I got a close up of his ring~ a smallish gold piece with an engraved emblem on the side. I've seen, and on one occasion, taken photos of murder scenes, suicides, and autopsies throughout my career, but I was never *that* close to the action. The image of the dead man behind the wheel was insane, "worth a thousand words" as we say in the newspaper business.

I turned on the television when the pizza arrived. There was nothing on but the news, but that was all I wanted. It wasn't the lead story, but it wasn't far from the top, either:

"The search for a missing Bettendorf man continues this weekend. Charles A. Cigan was driving a gasoline tanker truck, loaded with almost 13,000 gallons of unleaded fuel. He has been missing for ten days now after not showing up to deliver gasoline at an Iowa City distribution center. Excluding taxes, the gasoline had a value of over \$26,000 and authorities report today that the internal global positioning system on board was deactivated, then reactivated, but attached to a different vehicle that eventually showed up in California."

The picture on the screen was that of the California Highway Patrol and a disgruntled looking trucker in a white t-shirt!

"If you have any information at all on this case or any other crimes in Iowa, the Iowa State Police want you to call the Hawkeye Crime Line..." I looked away for a moment, just long enough to hear him say, "or if you see news happening dial pound 710 on your touchtone phone. We pay top dollar for news stories."

All of a sudden the gravity of the situation hit me. The police had no clues. Lord only knows, the FBI did either. Everyone wanted to know where that poor truck driver was, and his twenty five thousand dollars worth of unleaded fuel. If the

news station were smart, they would tell us more about the driver. Who was he? What's his story? They needed to tell us who this person was and why should we care about him. I thought that maybe I could help bring his story to light.

The news station had all the resources, all the money, and here a modest freelance reporter from three states away and had all the answers. I felt like picking up the phone and calling the news station. And the cops. Cigan was right under their noses.

Then again, if I called the news station, I *would become* the story, instead of *covering* the story, and that's no way to make any money.

I came to Iowa to make some money as a freelance reporter, to hunt pheasants, and have a good time. It wouldn't be that much fun sitting in a police station. The same could be said for the five minutes of fame I'd have on the television, either. I know that newspapers and news stations often pay big bucks for "exclusive" rights to news stories, and what I had was exclusive alright, very exclusive. It was worth a ton of money~ probably more in my mind than in theirs, but somewhere in the middle would have been just fine.

And so, I dove into my pizza, hooked up my laptop to the Internet, and set up a bogus email account. Sure, I could have used my regular email account, but it didn't sound as salacious as the one I created. Besides, if they found out what my real name was, where I worked, and more importantly, didn't work, it may have compromised my bargaining position.

I wanted to make a great impression. A big splash. And so I wrote an email to the biggest paper in Iowa, the *Des Moines Register*:

I know where Cigan is. Hire me to cover the story. I have tons of experience, and I'll give you the exclusive. See the photo attached. Hire me. Hire me. Hire me.

My new name was Erik Jungblut.

I felt rather proud of myself sitting there in that Iowa motel room, having all the goodies to break the Cigan story. I pictured the editors in Des Moines- getting a strange email and wondering what the hell they should do with it. They'd scramble for direction from the publisher. Print the photo with a racy headline? Quash it and turn it into the cops?

The Cigan story was a whopper, and I was already thinking about my own deadline. Even though the story would be easy to write, I had some time to make it perfect.

By then it was almost eight, Iowa time, and I was exhausted. I had been up since four-thirty in the morning, Michigan time. The long drive, and the long walk took a lot out of me. Even though I was riled up just a few hours previous, I was beginning to unwind. I decided to lock up the suburban put on my pajamas, and spend a little time with the laptop, and my wonderful bird dog at my side.

When I made it outside to lock up the truck, I noticed man smoking a cigarette on the grass easement across the street. He had on an orange hunting cap, and was keeping a sharp eye on a pair of pointers who were gingerly walking

through the motel's unofficial doggie dumping grounds. I nodded in his direction, then opened the back door of the suburban.

I grabbed Synch's water jug, and reached for the handle on my gun case. When I did, I couldn't believe what an incredibly dumb move I had made.

How utterly stupid.

How dumb.

I had forgotten my gun at the crime scene in the middle of an Iowa cornfield.