Settlers of Unassigned Lands

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How to Start Your Own Midwestern Ghost Town

First, locate a town in the upper portion of the Central Time Zone. Population circa 1990 should hover around five hundred. Median income should be not enough. Next, make sure industry leaves: the meat plant, the Wheat Growers, the regional K-Mart equivalent—all of these must go. Try to space the closings out over a decade or more; the effect you are after is chronic fatigue, as opposed to acute calamity. Make the pace of the obliteration glacial. Think, slow burn. The Midwest is filled with distance and if you are going to start your own ghost town, it's important to realize it won't happen overnight. Let the chain stores crunch their numbers. Watch them downsize, have sales, take losses, give up. See local business follow suit: The Hamburger Shack, the Tractor and Auto, the church thrift shop with its copper, polished bell above the door. It will be mandatory, too, to have your town’s high school incorporated into another’s; youth are often on the receiving end of mixed messages, but busing them twenty or forty or sixty miles five days a week will make certain they understand it foolish to settle where they were raised, that their town is dying, that even education has left.

Subsidize all the farms. Subsidize everyone. If they own pets, subsidize those. Keep the machines out of the fields. Promote sloth. Give people time to dwell, to ponder, to watch six hours of Court TV each evening, the satellite dish turned skyward like the face of Job. Make sure the governor cuts hospital funds so it takes over an hour for an ambulance to reach you, ensuring if a serious accident does occur you will expire while waiting for help. At seven o’clock on a Thursday, come home from work and have your wife hand you divorce papers. She’s gone three towns over for these, the courthouse in your small burg long dissolved, its rooms of law gutted, the flagpoles and desk lamps and stenography machine donated to the failing church thrift shop. Watch your wife leave in her brother’s pickup. Open a beer. Open more.

The next day drive to the gas station hungover. Here is where you
bought your first candy bar, first cigarettes, first three-pack of lubricated
condoms. Stare at the man dismantling the pumps. Stare at the gas station
across the street, closed now for over a year, the windows boarded, tum-
bleweeds—real tumbleweeds—wedged behind the empty pop machine. Get
out of your truck. Throw up.

Arrive to your clerking job at the courthouse three towns over, where
your wife obtained her divorce papers yesterday. Sit on your chair behind
bulletproof glass, listening to people who can’t pay their court fees tell you
why they can’t pay their court fees. Let them ramble. Suggest a payment
plan. Never smile; it will be taken as a symbol of aggression. Elderly women
may claw at the window if you do this. High school football stars, now
middle-aged drunks, may head butt the glass you sit behind then try the
electronically locked door to your left (their right). Stay calm. Listen to the
door rattle. Call security. Go to lunch.

Watch your friends come in, your neighbors. Talk about caulking the
bathtub or grouting kitchen tile, talk about anything more pleasant than
the task at hand. See them slide their papers over the recessed iron recepta-
cle. Pretend to not notice their fingers shaking. Look elsewhere while they
count out bags of change. Block out phrases like “tax liens” and “loan pay-
ments” and “farm repossession.” When they ask you if you can hold off
on running the check until the end of the week, tell them that you’ll see
what you can do. What you can do is exactly nothing. Depress your PAY-
MENT RECEIVED stamp against its red felt blotter. Consider that human-
ity is drowning in its own bureaucracy, that it creates more problems than it
solves. Use your stamp on all three copies. Forget the last place to get gaso-
line in your town has closed forever. Make it home on fumes.

Saturday afternoon attend the Veterans’ Parade. See the men who served
ride grim-faced in the back seats of near mint, old model convertibles, their
hands raised gamely to the crowd. Wonder who can afford to keep these
cars, and for how much longer. Scald your tongue on coffee from your
thermos. Ogle the teenage baton twirler at the motorcade’s head. Think
about the boy she’ll meet at college, her future home in a suburb of Chicago
or Milwaukee. Realize this is what she has been thinking about every night
for the past two years, her ACT now taken, her applications in the mail,
the processing fees exhausting the tip money from her summer work at the
Tastee-Freez, the same one your wife punched in at so long ago. Realize
that come spring this girl will check the mailbox daily, praying, really praying, that God might grant her leave from a township now surviving on teen pregnancy and checks from the Feds. See her toss and catch, toss and catch. Enjoy the high cut of her sequined leotard. Remember the state census is due out in a week’s time. **Watch** the brightly colored parade balloons float up, and away.

At home, decide to go birding. This will involve emptying half of your thermos of the coffee you took to the parade and replacing it with Kentucky grain alcohol. It is important also to bring binoculars, not so much for viewing the birds as to justify, should someone happen upon you, why you might be seated in the patch of woods by the sewage treatment plant, shit-cannd and mumbling to yourself. **Regard** the plumage of a blue jay as you zip through your toddy. Stagger upright and urinate on an elm. For as long as you can linger in the small glen, because now there is nothing waiting at home for you but leftovers and nighttime television and then Sunday morning, when it feels simply cruel to find yourself alone.

Around midnight, call your wife at her brother’s house. Plead epiphany. Beg for another chance. Admit you made a big mistake but that it was not done with conscious irresponsibility, that it was a situation that was unforeseeable, that by the time you knew what was happening, the outcome could not be changed. Past your wife’s angry breathing hear the Union Pacific blow its whistle as it passes through on the tracks. Remember the Cabela’s gift card you got for your brother-in-law last Christmas. Consider the make of the rifle he’d chosen. Hang up. Lock the doors. Pass out.

The morning of the Lord’s Day burn eggs in a pan on the stovetop then rummage around in your basement while drinking more beer. Find old yearbooks and ancient Christmas cards, moth-eaten wrestling tights and your dead father’s collection of suits. Find shoeboxes labeled SPARK PLUGS and FLY LURES and BAKELITE. Find trophies that seem barely your own. Go upstairs and call the county courthouse, leaving a message on your supervisor’s voicemail saying that you won’t be in tomorrow. Make a day of your self-pity and remorse. Use the start of the workweek to recover. Feel good about your decision. Feel like this is something you’ve earned. Go back downstairs and thumb through a wooden crate of license plates, souvenirs taken from cars left to rust in the county impound lot, the owners unable or not wanting to get them out. Put on trucker’s hats and work shirts
and long aprons bearing the name and logo of defunct companies running from the Rust Belt to the Great Plains: Bethlehem Steel, Hemingray Glass, the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company; Midway Airlines, Hafner Manufacturing, Wyoming Heating and Oil. If you’re feeling brave, peruse old photo albums of you and your wife on your wedding day, on your honeymoon, standing in front of your financed two-bedroom house. Ignore the single piece of furniture that resides here, a white sheet drawn over its top.

Before the sun fades and night falls, write down the names of all the people you’ve known who have departed your town in the past decades: childhood friends and generations of families, mayors and teachers and priests. Wear your pencil’s sharp tip to a nub. Realize that if the numbers really are accurate, your town has lost around two hundred people, forty percent of its total population, since the five-hundred mark of 1990. Wonder if the larger world is even aware of this. Wonder if anyone cares at all.

On your personal holiday drive to the county library two towns south, stopping for gas at the first place that has it. Buy a six-pack for later. Buy five key chains you’ll never use. Do this out of shame for still having a job when so many are jobless, for getting paychecks from the state drawn on the backs of the unlucky, the speeders, the driving drunks. Realize the cashier behind the counter is one of these people, that she orally hurled saliva at you just last week, while you explained in the flat tone of an automated voice prompt why the court-processing fee was more than her gas bill. Recall the woman’s daughter dressed in pastel rags, her blonde curls a dirty mat, her toes poking through the tops of her black canvas shoes. Picture the spit- tle hitting the bulletproof glass. When the cashier asks, while glaring at you, what you want with so many key chains, say you’re doing some early Christmas shopping. Don’t tell her this is your way of trying to stimulate the economy. Don’t tell her this is your way of trying to help.

At the library’s circulation desk put your name down on the waiting list to use the only computer. A good measure of whether or not your future ghost town will garner success is the amount of income the people in your area can spend on home technology. Look at the number thirty-seven next to your signature on the list.

While you are waiting wander over to the shelves that house the history section. Finger the spines of titles concerning the Mayans and Spaniards, the Inca and smallpox, the Goths’ and Gauls’ and Teutons’ descent upon Rome.
Gaze at the surplus of writing on ancient civilizations and the details of how they failed. Think *The Grapes of Wrath* has been shelved incorrectly. Realize that it has not. Turn the row’s corner and find yourself in the parenting section, surrounded by books on fertilization and birthing technique, breathing method and back labor, diet while pregnant and aerobics while pregnant and final trimester care. *Baby names and their etymological meanings. God’s intent for your newborn. Foundations for raising a capable child.* Grow anxious. Feel your hands go clammy. Find a side exit and get to your truck. Put down two bottles from the six-pack you bought earlier. Watch a turkey vulture ride the noon vapors above.

After forty-five more minutes of waiting, sit down on the still-warm plastic seat facing the computer screen. Enter the address of the major Internet auction site. From your jeans pocket remove the piece of paper with the details of the item (Wooden Baby’s Crib, Barely Used) you’re looking to sell. Post your listing while the man in line behind you looks over your shoulder. Lend him a stare that lets him know if he doesn’t locate some patience, you can meet him in the parking lot and provide him with some of your own. Enter all information needed by the auction site on your third try. Go out to your vehicle and drive home.

In your kitchen, dump the contents of your peppershaker out on the counter. Ignore the garbage can, its plume of refuse. Ignore the pots rotting through in the sink. Bend down to the counter’s top and put a few lines of pepper up either nostril. Call the courthouse to say your illness is worse than you initially figured, that it looks like the full week will have to be spent at home. Cough up phlegm dotted with black flecks while talking. Understand you’ve stooped to a new low.

At sunset go back to the woods by the sewage treatment plant, a fresh thermos of coffee and bourbon tucked under your arm in the manner a small child holds a favorite toy. Forget to bring your set of binoculars. Sit amongst the leaves and nettles in the crisp November air. Watch the light slant golden through limbs of thinning foliage, the beams seemingly still but having actually traveled faster than you can calculate, from the cold void of space to your makeshift forest of gloom. Find your favorite elm and relieve yourself just as a couple who live down the street from you come over the
wood’s small hill. Wave with your free hand, slurring your words as you try to explain yourself. Prepare for another long night at home.

Tuesday morning wake early for work, forcing yourself to revitalize, vowing inner strength and investment in the future, vowing never to have a string of days like you just had again. Clean some dishes. Make some coffee. Remove the bulbous heap of refuse to the can around the side of the house. On your way back in, stop to pick up your state capital’s daily newspaper from your doorstep. The census numbers will have made the front page. Don’t begin to weep internally. Don’t throw up in your mouth. It is important to think of this enormous, damning, confirming article as free publicity for your future ghost town, and not the death of everything you know and love. Find your county in the third line of the cover story, listed as the prime example of rural decay. Read quotes from your governor positing why people are treating your region as though it were plague–ridden. Stare at the picture of him in a suit. Stare at the three-color bar graphs and pie charts, replete with statistics on education and income, home values and unemployment rates, marital status and births versus deaths. Hear your phone ring from inside the house.

Lose your job. In the manner standard to Midwestern nicety, engage in a fifteen-minute conversation with your supervisor about bass season and Big Ten football, maintaining an upbeat tone while you wait for him to can you. Flip through the paper’s classifieds section while your now ex-boss lists off the necessary euphemisms, words that hurtle through your county like the steel-tracked freight trains do, unstoppable, not slowing: cutbacks, deficits, closures, defeat. Wonder what your new life in the big city will be like. Wonder how much you can get for your house. Wonder if you aren’t smarter than the criminals on Court TV who burn their houses for the insurance money. Think you might be able to not leave behind clues. Write down your severance pay with the same pencil you used to make your RECENTLY DEPARTED list. Hang up the phone. Convert the severance figure to a living wage. Go outside and get the birds off the trees with your screams. Look down the length of your short quaint street where small good things were supposed to happen for you, a place where you could manage through the seasons with a weathered, stoic sort of dignity,
assured that you will not conquer the world but also that the world will not conquer you. See not one other human soul.

Drive to the grocery store for more beer. Over the store’s front window regard the poorly draped banner, its red block letters reading FINAL WEEK. Wonder if the masses of medieval Europe felt like this during the waves of Black Death, the disaster in real time, fully spelled out. Watch people buy everything they can in a panic, a last gasp, the carts of the elderly filled to capacity, mothers too young to purchase a six pack of Grain Belt buying Pampers en masse. Think the crowd should be much larger than it is. Realize it actually should not, that the size is just right, that according to the census your town has lost 54% of its population in fifteen years—unthinkable, impossible, correct.

Near the row of gumball machines next to the sliding doors get cornered by an out-of-town reporter. Answer her questions about your region’s exodus in a manic fashion reserved most often for the mentally ill. When she asks if you have children tell her you used to. When she asks you if you’re married tell her not anymore. Pull a cart from its column as she says thank you. Walk the worn linoleum aisles. Remember coming here with your father after Sunday school and filling white bags of waxed paper with candy, the clear plastic scoops on their ropes. Remember stealing a six pack after a wrestling match on a Saturday night, your pickup, much newer then, idling in the parking lot, your future wife in the front seat, having told you just minutes ago that if you put a ring on her finger she won’t bother with college applications, that all she needs to be happy for the rest of her life is you. Remember coming here three years ago, minutes before midnight, just beating the doors being locked for the evening, and informing the teenage clerk that your wife is pregnant and at home, and if you don’t come back with two pints of mint chip ice cream and a half dozen peppered jerky sticks it may be better if you don’t come back at all. Turn a corner and see a sign taped to the glass door of the freezer that holds bags of ice, reading: NOTHING LEFT HERE. Take the sign down. Add it to your cart.

After checkout, on your way past the gumball machines, catch part of a conversation between two of the men who rode in the Veterans’ Parade. Look at their wooden canes and weathered denims and pressed gingham shirts. Notice they are joking, laughing, that this is somehow not the apocalypse to them but part of the continuum of life. Just as you are leaving, just
as the door is shutting, just as you are mentally committing to your new existence in your state’s capital, hear it come from one of the men’s mouths, the words that will make all the difference, the single sentence that you have been unknowingly waiting for these weeks and months and years. Hear the grizzled veteran say: “This place is a god damned ghost town—you’d think someone could at least capitalize on that.”

For the first time in so long see with absolute clarity. Realize your path. Know its way. Tell the man that he is exactly god damned right while you wheel your cart out the door, stuffing all four twelve packs into the donation bin for the county food drive. You do not need them anymore. You are lucid. You are able. You are wise beyond your years.

There is a ghost town to start, and it is time to set to work.

Begin by cataloguing all items in your basement: the fly lures, the bakelite, the spark plugs, the license plates; the long aprons and work shirts and state wrestling trophies and suits. Anything a collector might consider antique. Anything someone will pay good money for to not use. When you are finished with your list run to the home of an elderly neighbor, demanding that she let you borrow the digital camera her grandkids in Denver gave her last Christmas, your aggressive manner of asking assuring she can’t say no. Return to your basement and begin snapping pictures. Remove the white sheet from the crib you’ve kept stored here for over a year now, taking pictures of it for good measure, though under the rules of your new ghost town you will no longer sell this item. Under the rules of your new ghost town it will now function as a centerpiece or cornerstone, a symbol for what has been and is yet to come.

Drive to the library, passing by the elderly neighbor’s house while she stares at you from behind her screen door. Do a sort of thing with your hand that is meant to imply: you can trust me! I’ll be right back! Among the columns and rows of books find the librarian and force her to show you how to plug the camera into the single computer. When she tells you that the cords that came with the camera are needed to do that, tell her she better find some, and fast. See her respond to your threat, locating the accessories you need from a locked filing cabinet next to the water fountain. Take the clipboard housing the wait list for the computer off the counter of the circulation desk and begin calling out names. When someone responds, wave your check-
book in their face, saying, *I will pay you twenty dollars to move ahead of you in line. This is not a joke. I am going to save my hometown starting right now. The check is good. Yes or no?* Do this twenty-three times. Write twenty-three checks. Sit down on your earned throne and click the icon that gets you online.

Remove the list of basement findings from your jeans pocket. Delete your old posting and add one hundred and fifty-two new ones. Receive help in wording the descriptions of your items from your high school English teacher, a plump woman with a weakness for romance novels who has been on unemployment since your alma mater was shut down. Have her pat you on the head, tell you what a good thing you’re doing. Realize this is the first human contact you’ve had since your wife left you for good. Log off and return the cords to the librarian, her anger replaced by fascination. Listen to her ask if there’s anything else she can do. Tell her you need the names of enormous Midwestern philanthropic foundations, the kind that treat money the way people at weddings treat rice. Discover someone has put together a book of these groups. Flip through the hundred-plus listings, scrawling down information on squares of library scratch paper with your borrowed, miniature pencil. On a separate sheet, compose your letter. Write something similar to this:

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Dear Sons and Daughters of Benevolent Millionaires,

Perhaps you’re aware of the recent census numbers for my city, county, and state. They are not good. Everyone has left or is leaving; there are no jobs, and we are running out of places to buy food. What I am proposing is to not combat these truths but rather absorb them and prosper thusly, to accept the fate the rest of the country has consigned to us and try to keep all remaining inhabitants here alive. In short, I want to save the place I live from turning into a ghost town by turning it into one. I would appreciate greatly your support. I am planning whole blocks of gift shops and ghost town attractions, a food court and animal rides for the kids. What I need most badly is capital to get started. This is where you come in. Without your help everyone here is completely doomed. Winter is coming. I await your response.

Sincerely,

The Name You Have Had Since Birth
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Using the librarian’s personal laptop computer, download and print out and
fill out application form after application form with the determination of the
teenage baton twirler from the Veterans’ Parade. Understand her urgency
now, her drive. Think your wife must have had this same drive in her while
handing out chocolate malts and chili fries and bacon burgers at the Taste-
Freez all those years ago, college only months away until she started dating
you. When you are finished with your forms, make seventeen photocopies
of your letter. Go to the post office and buy seventeen stamps. Kiss each
envelope before dropping it into the mailbox, these pieces of paper your
livelihood now, the very rest of your life.

Drive home. Draw the blinds. Find your pencil. Begin work on coupons
and maps and brochures for tourists arriving to your very impending ghost
town. Sketch hay rides, a corn maze, The Virtual Tornado Chaser. Sketch
figures panning for fool’s gold in your manmade stream. Lure and capture
the all-white tabby you often glimpse wandering by the defunct train
depot, the building so haunted-seeming high schoolers won’t go there to
use drugs. Add your own likeness to your drawing, walking the tabby on a
Day-Glo leash. Create The Abandoned Farm Restaurant, The Lost Thread
Quilt Shop, Thee Olde Tyme Dust Bowl Saloon. Keep at it. Don’t give up.
Remember other towns in the area are vying to become ghost towns also,
and someone out there may be working just as hard as you. Design parking
lots and information kiosks. Design a combination petting barn and Ger-
man buffet. Design The Safety Gourd, a small building for children who
have become separated from their parents, a designated “safe place” painted
bright orange and in the shape of an acorn squash. Never consider this a
mockery of the heartland, a joke you’ve played on yourself and those around
you. Justify your plan as progressive thinking, that what the Midwest can
offer is changing and that you are bringing the tourist industry, a growth
industry, to its door.

Midweek take to your truck, scouting your town and those towns around
you for notices of upcoming yard sales and farm auctions. Cruise the streets
at five miles an hour, scanning the rows of houses the way vengeful gang
members do in films. When attending one of these events purchase any-
thing that functions as a remnant of times passed, that recalls the ethic and
industry and independence on which your part of the country once prided
itself. Fill the bed of your pickup with crates and boxes. Haggle, barter,
hoodwink, persist. Catch the last of the autumn flea markets, the days grow-
ing noticeably shorter, the sort of cold in the air that makes your lungs start upon initial breath of it, the mallard and geese and teal gone south. Behind card tables see your brethren seated in folding chairs, bundled in blankets, wondering if they too should migrate somewhere else. Buy what they sell for tough but fair prices. In your mind promise all of them brand new ghost town jobs, even your ex-wife and her brother, even the gas station store clerk who spat at you. Return to the library. Open your inbox. Look at the dozens of bids for items you’ve auctioned. Answer questions about shipping to Japan and Australia. Respond by saying you will send your waking nightmare to anywhere in the world.

Tonight, in your empty bed, come up with ideas for highway signs for your ghost town, huge advertisements that will sit just off the blacktop and indicate you are alive, are here. For a theme, use something extinct or fossilized: cavemen, dinosaurs, petrified wood. Petrified dinosaurs. Something gone but mighty. Something dead but built to last. When the time comes, you will let the banner drop. You will send up the balloons. People will push strollers down the sidewalks again. Hotels, once built, will fill. Let your mind’s eye sweep over all you’ve created. Fall asleep dreaming of what you can do.

Have Thanksgiving pass unnoticed. On the first day of December receive snow. For the last time this year return to the woods by the sewage treatment plant, because your one-year old son seemed to love this place most in winter, the whiteness or quiet of it, the ice-hided boughs. Remember the warmth and weight of his body, snug in its harness, as you carried him on your back. Remember his breath and fingers and murmurs. Remember his last evening on earth, his body seizing in the bathtub, undiagnosed epilepsy, and you away from him for thirty seconds or surely no more than a minute because the phone rang, because the National Census Bureau chose that moment of all moments in your life to phone and remind you to fill out your household’s information form, and that by the time you hung up and returned to the bathroom, your child was blue. Remember the sirens, so far in the distance. Remember your sad attempts at CPR. Remember awaiting your wife’s return from her night class at the regional community college. Try to forget the quizzical look on her face upon noticing the paramedics lingering on the porch. Find no irony in driving to the largest city in your area, a place teeming with life, to buy a child’s coffin on an installment plan.
Irony isn’t for a person like you. Irony is for accredited professionals from urban centers. Irony is for patrons of your future ghost town.

In the glen’s silence listen to your shoes crunch over the new snow. From its perch on a low branch stare at a bird, some small species, a finch or swallow or type you don’t know. Walk closer to the tree. Stand below it. See the bird hold its place. Take a single step closer. Have the bird not move. Hold out your hand. Extend a finger. Watch the bird leave its branch and fly towards you. This will be the most amazing moment of your life.