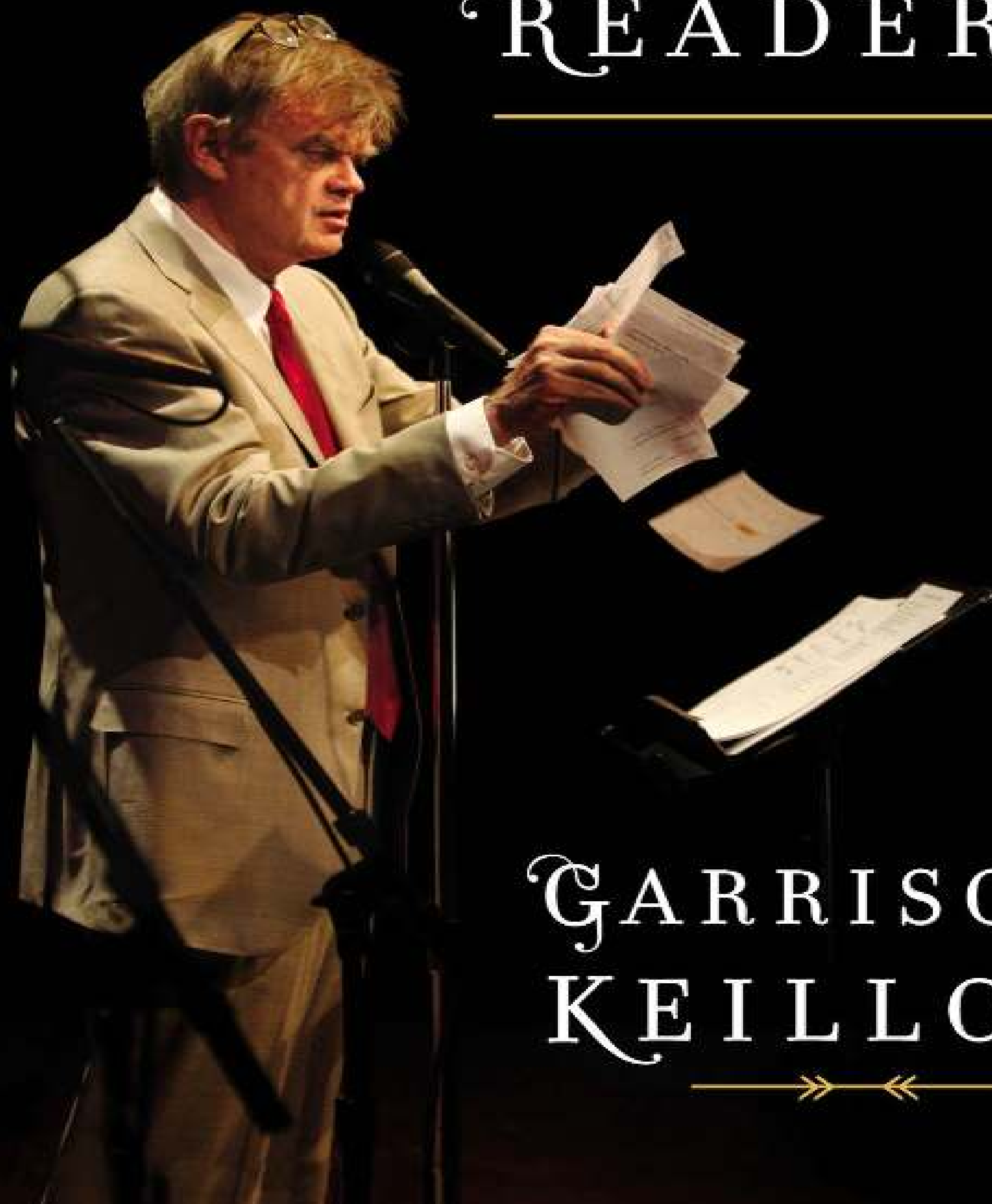
The KEILLOR READER



GARRISON KEILLOR

ALSO BY GARRISON KEILLOR

Guy Noir and the Straight Skinny

A Christmas Blizzard

Pilgrims: A Lake Wobegon Romance

77 Love Sonnets

Liberty

Pontoon

Love Me

Daddy’s Girl

Homegrown Democrat

Lake Wobegon Summer 1956

Me: The Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente Story

The Old Man Who Loved Cheese

Wobegon Boy

Cat, You Better Come Home

The Book of Guys

WLT: A Radio Romance

We Are Still Married

Leaving Home

Lake Wobegon Days

Happy to Be Here

GARRISON KEILLOR

The KEILLOR READER

VIKING

VIKING
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com
A Penguin Random House Company

First published by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2014

Copyright © 2014 by Garrison Keillor
Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continu to publish books for every reader.

This page constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Keillor, Garrison.
[Works. Selections]
The Keillor reader / Garrison Keillor.
pages cm
Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-1-101-51777-2
I. Title.
PS3561.E3755A6 2014
813'.54—dc23 2013047835

Version_1

To my editors, Roger Angell, Kathryn Court, Charles McGrath, William Whitworth, Corby Kummer Molly Stern, Beena Kamlani, and all the copy editors and fact-checkers

CONTENTS

Also by Garrison Keillor
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Introduction

I
The News from Lake Wobegon

1. Bus Children
2. Growing up with the Flambeaus
3. My Cousin Kate
4. June
5. Gospel Birds
6. Pontoon Boat
7. What Have We Learned So Far?
8. Chickens
9. The Death of Byron
10. Truckstop
11. Faith

II
Iconic Pajamas

1. Henry
2. Little House on the Desert
3. Billy the Kid
4. Lonesome Shorty

5. The Babe
6. 1951
7. Little Becky
8. Casey at the Bat
9. Marooned
10. Mother's Day

III

Guys I Have Known

1. Earl Grey
2. Don Giovanni
3. Taking a Meeting with Mr. Roast Beef
4. Your Book Saved My Life, Mister
5. Zeus the Lutheran
6. Al Denny
7. Jimmy Seeks His Fortune in Fairbanks
8. At *The New Yorker*: My Own Memoir
9. Snowman

IV

Life's Little Day

1. Rules of Orchestra
2. Five Columns
3. A Speech to the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner
4. Chet
5. Mark
6. What a Luxury
7. My Life in Prison
8. Drowning 1954
9. College Days
10. My Stroke (I'm Over It)
11. Home
12. Anglicans
13. The Owl and the Pussycat
14. Cheerfulness

THE
NEW YORKER
No. 25 WEST 43RD STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10036

EDITORIAL OFFICES
OXFORD 5-1414

May 26, 1970

Mr. Garrison Keillor
222 30th Avenue North
St. Cloud, Minnesota 56301

Dear Mr. Keillor:

There is so much life and imagination and energy and humor in the various sections of your "Child's Life of Richard Nixon" that I am somewhat embarrassed to tell you that we are only purchasing the shortest of these tales, that "Local Family Keeps Son Happy." It's quite an "only" at that -- a really funny and surprising piece, just about perfect in every way. It is also short, which is almost a miracle these days.

If it's all right with you, we wish to make some very minor editorial changes in the story. These are mostly matters of paragraphing and style, and nothing for you to worry about. You will see a full set of proofs before the story appears, and you will be encouraged to complain if you think we have damaged the story in any way. I can't tell you just when the thing will appear, because we are under an enormous and customary backlog of unpublished stuff, but short and funny pieces seem to float to the top of the pile. I can't tell you exactly what our payment will be, either, but I'll try to get that check to you within a couple of weeks. Meantime, our congratulations and thanks for this contribution.

There was much to admire in all the other pieces here, but the Nixon satire becomes a little too broad and easy at times. I don't know, though: maybe it isn't possible to get at Nixon except broadly. There is also the problem of surpassing Nixon's own perpetual self-parody. Anyway, we seriously considered taking several

THE NEW YORKER

of these, but various groupings of the stories seemed to make a confused whole. I especially admired THE CONCERNED INDIVIDUAL and THREE YEARS IN THE WOODS.

I hope this is only the beginning of a long list of contributions from you that we will want to publish. Please let me know whether we have your permission to go ahead with those small editorial changes that I mentioned.

Yours sincerely,

Roger Angell

Roger Angell

RA:kb

This is a letter that changed my life and rescued me from despair, and beyond that, it’s a classic Roger Angell letter to an author—th faint ~~embarrassment that they rejected a story and maybe they were wrong (“I don’t know”), the booming praise of the story~~ they accepted (“just about perfect in every way”), the modest suggestion (“If it’s all right with you”) of a few minor changes, and the ho that this is only the beginning. I sat down on the front step of our rented house at 222 30th Avenue North and thought, “Now my li is not entirely wasted.” Roger was a generous letter writer, and I think of him sitting at a typewriter and banging out long, elegant, encouraging letters to far-flung authors. It gave you a big charge to get one.

A Sunday afternoon in July 1933, my mother, eighteen, perched on the bench in her father's backyard on Longfellow Avenue in Minneapolis, looks at the camera held by her younger sister Elsie as my father, twenty, writes his name on an entry form for a conte (Name A Lake Home) that he did not win. But they got each other, and also six children, including me.

INTRODUCTION

I come from the prairie, I've been to New York,
A tall lonesome fellow and slightly historic,
But I am a rider, I ride every day
On a big Underwood cross the wide open page.
I ride in the sun and the snow and the rain,
I've ridden with Thurber, Benchley, Mark Twain.
They mostly wrote better than I and I mean it
But I am still living and that is convenient.

When I was twenty and something of a romantic, I thought about dying young and becoming immortal like Buddy Holly or James Dean or Janis Joplin and people leaving bouquets on my grave and grieving for my enormous complicated talent lost to the world. But I didn't have a complicated talent, nor was it enormous. Some people thought I did because I wrote poems and was shy, didn't make eye contact, kept to myself. (Nowadays they'd say "high-functioning end of the autism spectrum," but back then oddity was interpreted in a kindlier fashion.) Anyway, death didn't occur. I never needed to charter a plane in a snowstorm as Buddy did, and a car like James Dean's Porsche 550 Spyder was way beyond my means, and heroin was not readily available in Anoka, Minnesota, so onward I went. An angelic being assigned to read through the mounds of unsolicited stories in a backroom at *The New Yorker* plucked out one of mine, and the magazine printed a string o them, and that led to a fact piece about Nashville, which inspired a radio show called *A Prairie Home Companion*, and then I was forty, which is too old to die young, so I headed down the long dirt road o longevity, and thus arrived at seventy, when I took time to sit down and put this collection together.

• • •

I was the third of six children of John and Grace, a young Sanctified Brethren couple in Anoka, Minnesota, on the Mississippi, a farm boy and a city girl who fell in love and married secretly in an air of scandal. There was a Model T involved, a moonlit pasture, a startling realization, a justice of th peace. I was born in Anoka in 1942, in a house on Ferry Street, and grew up along the river in

Brooklyn Park township, north of Minneapolis, where we moved in 1947 into a house Dad built on an acre lot with room for a big garden. All around us were vegetable farms, fields of potatoes, peas, swe corn. My friends and I rode our bikes with cardboard strips clipped to the rear fender brace to whap against the spokes to make a motor sound, racing on dirt roads to an abandoned grass airstrip with rusting carcasses of Piper Cubs to sit in and reenact the war, fighting off the deadly Messerschmidts and Jap Zeroes. My brother and sister and I attended Benson School, a handsome three-room country school, where I had Estelle Shaver and Fern Moehlenbrock for teachers. In first grade, I was slow to read, and Miss Shaver kept me after school to read aloud to her, which she made me believe was not for my sake, but for hers, to keep her company as she graded papers. She made disability feel like talent. She said to Bill the janitor, “Listen to him, doesn’t he have a lovely voice.” In time, I turned into a bookworm and a good speller. And around the time I was eleven, I began to be a writer. That was the summer Grandpa Denham died and I was allowed to attend the funeral and look at his body. My only previous encounter with death was the Egyptian mummy in the Minneapolis Public Library. Grandpa’s body, the preacher talking about death and how it may be imminent and so those who are unsaved should come to the Lord and do it *now, don’t wait until later*—my aunts weeping, the solem faces of the men, the motorcade to Lakewood Cemetery, the lunch afterward at the Gospel Hall—it was all very grand. And then in August Mother made my dad take me with him to New York City. A family friend was an Army captain stationed in Germany and wanted his brand-new Pontiac shipped over. Dad had agreed to drive it to Brooklyn to be loaded aboard a freighter. He had been stationed in the city during the war, sorting mail for the Army in the Main Post Office with its famous inscription about snow and rain and heat and gloom of night, and he had wartime friends he wanted to see. I thin Mother made him take me along because she felt that the father of six children should not go waltzin off to Manhattan scot-free. The friends he wanted to see were two sisters, Nancy and Betty, both of them married now, but still.

It was the trip of all trips—the two-lane highways through Indiana and Ohio, the country inn in Pennsylvania with the high poster bed, Valley Forge, the whine of traffic in the Lincoln Tunnel, the towers of Manhattan silvery in the afternoon sun, streets jammed with pushcart peddlers shouting in strange languages. We stayed with Don and Betty in their Brooklyn apartment, one bedroom, a kitche alcove, a small living room with a round clawfoot dining table where we sat down for supper. They reminisced about the war years and I almost fell asleep—it was a hot night in Brooklyn—and hours later, when they went to bed, it was too hot to sleep, so Dad and I took a walk to a candy store and bought cream sodas and perched on the curb and drank them. Across the street was a park where hundreds of people lay sleeping on blankets spread out on the grass, families, little kids nestled against their mothers, and on the benches around the perimeter men sat smoking and talking in the dark. We walked back to Dad’s friends’ apartment and he spread a mattress on the fire escape and we slept there, five stories in the air, headlights passing below us, the elevated train rumbling by, a block away. I lay on the mattress and thought, *A person could fall asleep and fall to his death. Some crimin could come creeping up the fire escape and knife Dad and throttle me. The Russians could drop the A bomb*. Nonetheless, I went to sleep.

I came back to Benson School as the only boy in the sixth grade ever to have laid eyes on New York City. Enormous status. A kind of nobility. A girl asked me if it was true that trains ran underground and went fast and I said yes, it was true and I had ridden them. It was the first time I had amazing firsthand experience to offer an audience. I wrote a report and read it aloud to the class and they soaked it all up: Coney Island, the Empire State Building, Ebbets Field, subways, Jones Beach, the Staten Island Ferry, Times Square, all the wonders of the world. There is nothing like good

material. You only had to say *New York* and there was an awestruck silence. You went, you saw, and now you tell the others. And that was my start as a writer, age eleven, some yellow No. 2 pencils and Big Red Indian Chief tablets. Later I was presented with Uncle Louie's Underwood manual typewrite with a faint *f* and a misshapen *O*. You had to poke the keys hard to make an impression. I set it on a maple desk in my bedroom, which looked out onto a cornfield across the road, and I wrote stories about lonesome loners who kept their distance from the mindless crowd and observed them with contempt tinged with envy. My parents did not encourage this. The Brethren did not favor fiction or poetry, nor did they care much for history aside from what was in Scripture.

That fall I flunked the eye test and got wire-rim glasses, and one fine day, playing softball, I was out in right field, the sissy position where there was plenty of leisure time, and I dropped an easy pop fly—took a few steps back and settled under it and it came in chest-high and caromed off the heels o my hands and the other team hooted and whooped and my teammates wouldn't look at me. I was humiliated. I got permission to spend recess periods in the school library. I got absorbed in history books. I sought out my uncles and asked about the War and the Depression. Instead of scrapping for the respect of peers, I basked in the company of old people. Why had Grandpa Denham come over from Glasgow in 1911? Why did Grandpa Keillor come down from New Brunswick in 1880? The old uncles were grateful for a boy's interest. They lavished stories about Anoka back when the North Coast Limited stopped there, when quarter horses raced at the fairgrounds and the Wild Man from Borneo was exhibited in a tent and bit the head off a live chicken. And the terrible tornado of 1938 that blew Florence Hunt and her baby girl into a tree. It was so much easier to sit and listen to them than to hold my own on the playground. My peers thought I was strange. I didn't mind. I was a writer and writers only compete against themselves.

• • •

I tried to go out for football in eighth grade but failed the physical due to a clicky mitral valve and w disappointed but only briefly. A couple days later I walked into the office of the Anoka *Herald*, a down-at-the-heels weekly around the corner from the junior high, and asked the editor, Warren Feist, if I could write sports for him, an act of reckless bravery by a fearful young man, and Mr. Feist smile and said, "Sure." So I got to sit in the press box at football games, high above Goodrich Field, and look reporterly as I took extensive notes, listening to the play-by-play of the KANO announcers next to me. Back at the office—thirteen years old, I had an *office*—Whitey and Russ sat at the keyboards o their monster Linotype machines, wheels turning, arms pumping, a little flame in back keeping the melted lead hot. Line by line, they clattered away, pulling the lever that poured the hot lead into the mold to make a slug, the slug slapped into the galley, which was set into the chase, which lay on the turtle. Russ and Whitey were pasty-faced with purple noses and they reeked of drink, but they were kind to me and I was honored to be there. Mr. Feist edited my stories gently, removing paragraphs of crowd description, drawing out the action on the field. The *Herald* was printed on Wednesday afternoon and I made a point to be there to watch. Whitey stood on a platform over the flatbed press and, though drunk, he could riffle a giant sheet of paper loose from the stack and flip it up and onto the flatbed, where the roller rolled over it with a *whump* and a *shwoosh* and the folder cut and trimme and folded it, and a copy of the *Herald* slid down the chute with the sports page and my byline with my story about the Anoka Tornadoes ready to be read by dozens, if not hundreds, of subscribers, men and women in kitchens all over Anoka eager for my account of the game. A person never gets over this, the pleasure of seeing his own words in print. Unless there's a tipo. Never.

My parents were dismayed at my newspapering. My mother said that writers were a bunch of drunks, meaning F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose old neighborhood in St. Paul she had once lived near and she had heard the story of him walking into church drunk on Christmas Eve. She shook her head at that. Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Dylan Thomas, all boozers. People went to Thomas's readings to see if he could remain upright and not drop a cigarette down his pants and set himself on fire. She had read about that somewhere.

The only writing that mattered was Holy Scripture; everything else was vanity and horsefeathers—fiction, poetry, even history was suspect. When they cut loose from the Church of England in the early nineteenth century, men were being hanged for stealing spoons, aboriginal people were enslave the poor were starved into submission, and the Established Church sanctified it all. The Brethren stepped away from history, politics, power, the very idea of hierarchy. Rich, famous, accomplished, brilliant—those words meant very little to them—we are all naked and impoverished before the Lord—so I grew up sitting through Bible study with postal clerks and farmers, an auto mechanic, a seed salesman, engineers, railroadmen, carpenters, my tribe, feeding on the Word, leaning on the promise The Bible is not bad as literature, but as revelation, taken literally, it is a wild ride. I was a devout young man but when I turned twenty, I abandoned the Brethren. I thought that probably they were right, that it was sinful to want to be a writer, but I would do it anyway. It was all I really wanted. I took a last stab at self-sacrifice and wrote a letter to a Trappist monastery near Dubuque, asking for admission, and they wrote back politely suggesting that I give the matter further thought. A good Christian was supposed to sacrifice his desires to the Lord. But if I couldn't be a Trappist and lead a life of prayer and poverty in a black robe in Iowa, then nuts to that, I'd just go ahead and be a writer.

I went off to be an English major at the University of Minnesota, where John Berryman, James Wright, and Allen Tate taught. My parents were not pleased, but I paid my own way so they had no leverage. I owned the Underwood, a *Webster's Third Unabridged*, a funeral suit, blue jeans, white shirts, one tan corduroy jacket, Red Wing work boots, and a broad-brimmed hat. I had acquired a nicotine habit and was learning to tolerate coffee because *that's what writers do.* Back then, a cup of coffee was two bits, a pack of smokes thirty-five cents, and a drink was a dollar. I supported myself b washing dishes and parking cars, both educational experiences. You work the morning shift in the he and steam of the scullery and you feel clean and contented the rest of the day, even in August. You stand on a gravel parking lot on the high bluff of the Mississippi, the wintry blast sweeping down the valley, and you direct a stream of cars to their correct spots in straight lines, tolerating no dissent or diversion, stomping out individual preference wherever it occurs, and you discover the authoritarian within. Good to know one's own capacity.

Mr. Tate was sixty-eight when I took his poetry seminar. A slim, elegant man with a Southern patrician accent—a pal of Robert Penn Warren and Hart Crane—he chain-smoked in class, so we did too. The whole English Department reeked of tobacco smoke and was proudly alcoholic—anyone wh wasn't was considered an interloper, possibly a Mormon. James Wright chain-smoked through his lectures on Dickens and Whitman, which he delivered through a haze of hangover. He always looked pale and haggard. His line "Suddenly I realize that if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom" was written by a man with smoke coming out of his mouth.

My hero, Saul Bellow (*The Adventures of Augie March*), had recently taught at the U and I heard about him from his pal, my advisor, Joe Kwiat, a big, hearty guy with a great bark of a voice. Snowy-haired Robert Frost came and filled Northrup Auditorium, 4,700 seats, and recited his greatest hits by heart to the awestruck crowd. Afterward I stood by the back door and watched him emerge and shuffl down the walk and climb into his limousine. Nobody asked for his autograph, it was enough to obser

him up close. (He looked extremely old.) Our great alcoholic genius was John Berryman, a man of such towering intellect that I was afraid to be in the same room with him—one caustic glance and I would've gone up in flames. He wore a big beard that made him look like he was eating a sweater. H gave a reading of his *Dream Songs*, slumped against the lectern, speech slurred, a man on the verge o collapse. His greatness and his affliction seemed intertwined, an artist engaging with powerful dark forces in public, pain had driven him to alcohol and to poetry, and he could no more give up one than he could stifle the other. I thought, *If this is what it takes to be a great American writer, then I am on the wrong street. I am not screwed up enough*. Berryman's dad blew his brains out with a shotgun when the poet was twelve. My dad only worked hard and expected me to.

So I accepted that I could not be a true artist and that my future lay in the field of amusement. Fo the campus literary magazine, *The Ivory Tower,* I wrote stuff that owed a lot to Benchley and Thurbe A. J. Liebling and E. B. White. My journalism teacher, Bob Lindsay, encouraged this. He was a Marine Corps captain, a veteran of two wars—his bald head showed a remarkable dent as if a mortar shell had bounced off it—and he was a no-nonsense teacher. In his class, one spelling mistake on a writing assignment, no matter how elegant, earned you an F. We were horrified to hear this. But we learned to copyread, a skill that sticks with you for life. Mr. Lindsay's office was on the first floor of Murphy Hall, and when I walked down that hall, I slowed down, and if his door was open and he didn have a visitor, I stuck my head in. He was brusque, not given to flattery, and when he said I should tr to catch on at *The New Yorker,* I believed him. And then, unbeknownst to me, he sent the magazine some of my writing and a letter attesting to my good character.

I had not informed him that I had written to my draft board that winter of 1965 and told them I considered the war in Vietnam unnecessary and therefore immoral and so I would not be reporting fo induction into the U.S. Army, as I'd been ordered to do, having passed the Army physical in the fall. was waiting for the FBI to knock on my door and wondering if, hauled into a government office and confronted by G-men with lantern jaws and ball-bearing eyes, I would cave or if I'd stay strong and g off to Sandstone Prison. I pondered this great question on late-night walks along Riverside Avenue to the river and back: prison was a dreadful prospect, but so was Vietnam, and for that matter, life itself What to do? I had acquired a girlfriend, Mary Guntzel, the cousin of my friend Corinne, and neither o them knew about the letter. Only my friend Arnie Goldman did and he told me I should head for New York and simply disappear. And he offered me a ride.

He drove me to the city in July 1966. I was living in a ramshackle house near campus, above the river, and Arnie drove me and a suitcase to New York and dropped me at a boardinghouse on West 19th Street across the street from an Episcopal seminary. It was a poor Hispanic neighborhood then and the boardinghouse was cheap: breakfast and dinner along with a room, bathroom down the hall, for $45 a week. A woman named Elizabeth Lyon ran it, assisted by an old lady, Marion Tanner, who was the eccentric aunt of the man who wrote *Auntie Mame* and who worked in the kitchen. The clientele was about half made up of recent patients from mental hospitals, doped up on Thorazine, a sedate bunch, who sat in the garden under ailanthus trees listening to the nuns in the convent next doo chanting in Spanish. Mary and I were supposed to marry in September, a big church wedding with a country-club reception—it was all planned—and I wanted to escape. I felt like a jerk, abandoning her and her family, who had been so good to me, but there was an enormous vacancy between her and me a silence we could not break through. New York seemed like a good move, what with marriage and th FBI on my trail. Arnie introduced me to an artist friend of his named Irwin Klein who drove a cab by night and shot photographs by day, and I hung out with him. He was screwed up, as an artist should b he dropped acid, smoked dope, and lived in a one-bedroom fourth-floor walk-up on the Lower East

Side with his wife and two baby girls in such poverty as I knew I hadn't the strength of character to endure. Small dim rooms, summer heat, city clangor, sink full of dirty dishes, weeping infants, a weary wife. New York was indeed a place where a man could find anonymity, but how did that jibe with my wanting to get my name in *The New Yorker*? I had spoken to a woman there, Patricia Moshe who encouraged me to write a try-out piece for them, so I tried writing one about Marion Tanner and her un-*Mame* life peeling potatoes and tending to a brood of abandoned children she kept under her wing. If the magazine bought the story, I thought, I would stay in the city, not file a tax return, mayb change my name. I weighed what to write to my mother (*I am okay. I don't have an address or phone number now but I will call you from time to time*), but the magazine turned down the Marion Tanner piece—"There is much to admire here but it's just not quite right for us," someone wrote in pencil at the bottom—meanwhile I took a bus to Boston to interview at the *Atlantic*. An overnight bus, to save on hotel. Got to the *Atlantic* office on Arlington Street an hour early and went to the men's toilet, stood at the sink, took off my shirt, and sort of bathed and dried myself with paper towels, and a man in a suit came in, stood at the urinal, and made a point of not looking at me. He, as it turned out, was the man who would be interviewing me. It was a brief interview and I was not told to keep in touch. I was almost out of money. I rode the Greyhound back to Minnesota with great trepidation and marrie the girl and moved to a tiny apartment in Minneapolis overlooking the Mississippi and the handsome Franklin Avenue bridge. The next year, Irwin jumped out a fourth-story window. I felt jumpy about the FBI for a long time but they never knocked on my door. Maybe someone at the draft board office stuck my file in a dark place and thereby put herself in danger—it is a felony to conceal or otherwise impair the availability of a governmental record—and I wish I knew who she is because I owe her an enormous debt.

In 1969, I sent some stories to *The New Yorker* and one, rescued from the slush pile by an angel, was bought by the fiction editor Roger Angell, who became my editor, and I moved my family to a rented farmhouse south of Freeport, Minnesota, in German Catholic country. The magazine paid around $1,000 a story, and our rent was $80 a month, not including heat and light. I sent off two or three stories a month and if they bought one, we were on Easy Street. It was a luxurious life for a writer, not so good for the writer's wife and infant child, isolated among clannish country people suspicious of strangers. Sweden might have been better, or Bulgaria. I wrote in an upstairs bedroom o my Underwood typewriter on a slab of $^{3}/_{4}$-inch plywood set on two filing cabinets, my back to a window looking out on the farmyard, the barn, the cattle milling in the feedlot, the silo, the granary, the pig barn, the woods beyond. I found that I could sit and look at a piece of writing for hours at a time and not get twitchy, a skill I had picked up in Brethren Bible study, and I was a good rewriter. Day after peaceful day, visitors on weekends, the occasional big check and encouraging letter from West 43rd Street. A sculptor named Joe O'Connell befriended me, and a St. Cloud couple, Fred and Romy Petters, and that was all the social life I needed, but Mary slipped into depression; she spent whole days hardly speaking. Her mother, Marjorie, urged me to move back to the city for Mary's sak and I took a job at Minnesota Public Radio, the 6–9 a.m. shift, played records and created a cheery or air persona, the Old Scout, who rallied listeners to rise and shine and face the day with a smile. It wa a good and useful persona. I even started to believe in it myself. I was in an awkward marriage, I was absurdly self-conscious and timid and eager to please and arrogant, all at the same time, but I was lucky. On that early morning shift, I invented a town where the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are all above average. Businesses in that town advertised on my show—Jack's Auto Repair, Bob's Bank, Bunsen Motors, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, the Chatterbox Café, the Sidetrack Tap, Skoglund's Five & Dime, the Mercantile—and I talked about the women, men, and

children, and that town, Lake Wobegon, became my magnum opus, unintentionally. I just sort of slid into it, like you'd go for a walk in the woods and fall into a crevasse and wind up in a cave full of rubies and emeralds. I labored in obscurity for the first few years, and then Will Jones, the entertainment columnist of *The Minneapolis Tribune*, wrote a big warm embrace of a story and that was the beginning of many good things. Will was from Ohio and admired James Thurber, and though Lake Wobegon was Thurberesque, and his kind words in print were intoxicating.

In 1974, after writing a fact piece for the magazine about the Grand Ole Opry, I started up *A Prairie Home Companion* on Saturday evenings, a live variety show with room for a long monologue by me ("It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon. . . ."), and found steady colleagues who did the hard work, starting with my boss, Bill Kling, and the producer, Margaret Moos, Lynne Cruise, Tom Keith, Bill Hinkley, and Judy Larson, and down to the present day, Sam Hudson, Kate Gustafson, Debra Beck, Kay Gornick, Richard Dworsky, Tim Russell, Sue Scott, and Fred Newman, not to mention tech guys, good stagehands, researchers, and our truckdriver Russ Ringsak, and so we sail th ocean blue in pursuit of truth and beauty, sober men and true, attentive to our duty.

Life is good when you finally grow up. You find work you enjoy, buy a car that starts on cold mornings, look for love, sing along with the radio, beget children who nestle on your lap and put thei little arms around your neck and kiss you. You put away sarcasm. You mow your lawn, read history, learn to cook a few things well, seek out good shoes, converse with strangers on the bus. You find a hairstyle that suits you. Your taste changes: time goes by and contemporary art strikes you as ditzy and shallow whereas you are moved by Hopper and Rockwell and Nordic painters of snowscapes. Young Sarah Singer-Songwriter only makes you wonder if she is getting enough fresh air and exercise, whereas a Chopin étude carries visions of women in lamplight, the forbidden kiss, the whisper of silk, the nobility of kind gestures. You cross the line into your forties, the mortgage years and the fifties, when you stand weeping at graduations and weddings, and then in the blink of an eye you land in your sixties and now you're on Easy Street. You become eminent and learn to harrumph. And then seventy. A golden age. You are wise beyond knowing, you have embraced moderation and humility, your work is triumphant, you pee like a Palomino pony, and your imagination is more vivic than ever before. One can't wait to turn eighty and ninety.

Having once anticipated dying young, I now look back on those times when I might have and did not. The time I dashed out onto a busy freeway to retrieve a heavy mattress I'd foolishly tied with twine to the roof of the car and at 65 m.p.h. physics kicked in and it blew off. While I was dragging i off the road a truck bore down on me as if I were a raccoon and blew its air horn. I heard the Doppler effect up close and the whoosh of the draft made my pant legs go *whupwhupwhupwhup* and blew my hair back.

One summer my brother Philip and I canoed into a deep cavern in Devil's Island on Lake Superior, attracted by the dancing reflections on the low cavern ceiling. We steered into a narrow passage, ducking under rocks, and he took pictures of the formations, and after a while we paddled out, a few minutes before the wake of an ore boat a mile away came crashing into the cavern, three-foot waves that would have smashed us into the rocky ceiling like eggs in a blender. Our mangled remains would've floated out and been found by fishermen days or weeks later—TWO TWIN CITIES MEN PERISH IN BOATING MISHAP—but instead we sat in the canoe and watched the waves whopping into the cavern and said nothing, there being nothing to say. He raised his Leica and snapped a picture of the crashing waves and dropped it into the lake and it got smaller and smaller as it plummeted to the bottom.

Philip died a few years ago in Madison, Wisconsin, skating on a pond near his house. He who hac

survived the close call in the cave on Lake Superior fell and struck the back of his head on the ice and suffered serious brain injury and died. He was an engineer, a methodical man, a problem-solver, and I imagine that even as he fell, he was analyzing his mistake—he should've sat down on the ice and landed on his butt rather than his head. He tried too hard to remain upright; he should've collapsed. His family tried to keep his funeral as light as possible. There were three funny speeches and a rollicking gospel finish, and then we stood around the hole singing hymns as the gravedigger bent down, exposing a big slice of butt crack, and lowered Philip's body into the ground, and then went to supper.

After we buried my brother, he became a steady, flickering presence in my life, even more so than when he was alive. He was a teacher, a patient man who strove to accept people and see the goodness in them and not scorch them with ridicule, and now I try to be more like him and less like myself.

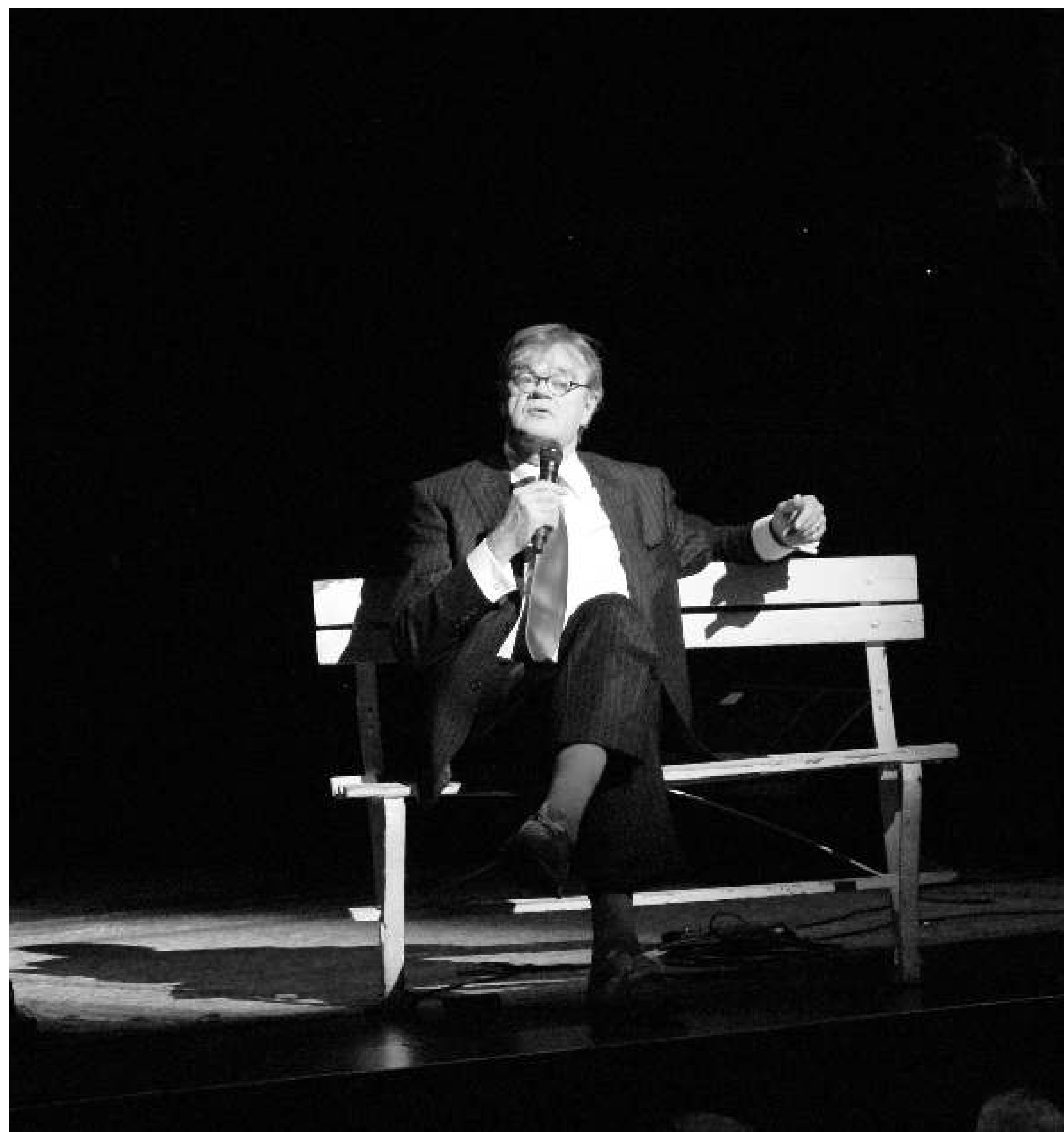
When you're in your seventies, people die all around you, at a steady rate. A high school classmate collapsed at our fiftieth reunion while I was at the microphone nattering about olden times; he died two days later. A man died in the audience at *A Prairie Home Companion* in Seattle; he was old and ill but wanted to come to the show, and during intermission he simply leaned against his wife and expired. Tom Keith, who was on the radio with me for four decades, came to a post-show party at my house, felt fine, and two days later fell down dead from an aneurysm—the man who played Mr. Big, the jowly incomprehensible man, and did the sounds of a golf swing, a man falling off a bridge into piranha-infested waters, a 350 h.p. snowmobile driven by an orangutang over a cliff and onto the ice of Lake Superior. He was a prince.

The living wander away, we don't hear from them for months, years—but the dead move in with us to stay. They exhort us to greater faithfulness, forgive us our inertia, comfort us in our agitation. My first mother-in-law, Marjorie O'Bleness, is smiling from the doorway, holding a Winston and a Rob Roy, tuned in to the conversation. My grandmother Dora is kneading bread on the counter, whistling a tuneless tune under her breath. Aunt Eleanor speaks in a soft twang a sentence that begins "Well, you know—" and it's something I never knew, it never occurred to me to know it. My father sits waiting for us to get in the car and head for Idaho to visit some people there. My father-in-law, Ray, is about to launch into a long and very detailed story about the cars that he has owned and how well they ran.

I think often of John Updike, who lovingly re-created the backyards and clotheslines of the 1940s small town and described a snowstorm as "an immense whispering" and wrote beautifully of his fath bidding him goodbye on a train platform and astonishing him by planting a kiss on his cheek. I last saw John on the New York subway, riding from 155th Street down to 72nd, a white-haired gent of seventy-five grinning like a schoolkid. At 110th a gang of seminarians boarded and crowded around him, chattering, not recognizing him, and he sat soaking it up, delighted, surrounded by material.

The film director Robert Altman is a hero of mine—shooting a movie in St. Paul though he was eighty-one and in the throes of cancer and barely mobile. He loved his work and so put his mortality on a shelf. If you have flown a B-24 bomber, that screaming unheated boxcar of a plane, on fifty missions in the South Pacific at the age of twenty as Bob had, there is not much left to be afraid of. I remember him sitting in a canvas chair at 4 a.m. on the corner of Seventh and St. Peter in St. Paul, on a Sunday in July, directing a scene in which Kevin Kline gets up from a stool in Mickey's Diner and walks out the door and scratches a match on the doorframe and lights a smoke and walks across a rain soaked street. Bob was pushing to beat the sunrise but he loved studying that walk and lighting it, angling it, instructing the man with the hose, the man in the cherry picker with the spotlight, all the while offering running commentary to his audience of grips and extras. He was a happy man.

I am grateful for the work—more now than ever, the pleasure of scratching away on paper. I sit i my ~~office and look up at a photograph over the fireplace of the old schoolhouse where Grandma~~ taug a hundred and some years ago and I'm sure she hoped I'd go into a more distinguished line of work than this, but I must say in defense of comedy that it does give good value. There are plenty of discouraging facts around—e.g., half of all people are below average—and jokes relieve some of the misery. A man walked into his house with a handful of dog turds and said, "Honey, look what I almos stepped in!" (That's a joke, but I know people like that.) Solomon said, "Whoever increases knowledge increases sorrow." That's a joke, too. And "The rivers run into the sea and yet the sea is n full." That's a joke. And also "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." And how about this one? "The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong nor riches to men of understanding, but time and chance happeneth to them all." That's the essence of comedy in less than 25 words. You're fast, you trip and fall down; you're strong and you poke your sword in your left foot; you're smart and you go broke. Solomon said, "The thing that has been is the thing that shall be; and the thing that is done is that which shall be done: there is nothing new under the sun." That is true and I know it, but I look forwar to tomorrow morning and rising up, making coffee, watching the sun rise as it keeps doing day in anc day out, and resuming the race, boats against the current and so forth. It's all been done before and it needs doing again.



I tried doing the News from Lake Wobegon sitting on a bench but my natural inclination is to pace. And sitting felt stagy. And peop
asked me if I was not feeling well. Pacing stimulates the mental processes. You walk in the darkness, spotlight in your eyes, along t
lip of the stage, glancing down into the first row to avoid stepping off the edge and into their laps, and if your mind goes blank, you
think of something better.

I

THE NEWS FROM LAKE WOBEGON

In 1970, I moved to Stearns County with my wife and little boy to live in a rented farmhouse south of Freeport, an area of nose-to-the-grindstone German Catholics, so we could live cheaply—I was supporting us by writing fiction for The New Yorker*—and we found a big brick house on the Hoppe farm in Oak township that rented for $80 a month. With the house came a half acre we could plant in vegetables. It was a fine snug house, four rooms down, four rooms up, a mansion by our standards. A room for Mary's piano and a room for my Underwood typewriter and a small back room for the baby and two guest rooms for our writer friends from the city who liked to come and soak up the quiet and drink beer at night and lie on the lawn and look up at the stars. To the north of the house was a dense grove of spruce and oak where we got our firewood, and beyond this windbreak was a couple hundred acres of corn. Cows stood in a nearby meadow and studied us. The Sauk River was nearby, to canoe on, and Lake Watab to swim in. It was a land of well-tended hog and dairy farms on rolling land punctuated by tidy little towns, each one with a ballpark, two or three taverns, and an imposing Catholic church, and a cemetery behind it where people named Schrupps, Wendelschafer, Frauendienst, Schoppenhorst, and Stuedemann lay shoulder to shoulder. There were no Johnsons or Smiths to speak of.*

For three years, I sat in my room and wrote short fiction and shipped it to New York. After a shipment, after a week or so, I'd watch for the mailman every day with more and more interest. He came around 1:30. I'd walk out the driveway to the mailbox and look for an envelope from The New Yorker*—a large gray envelope meant rejection, a small creamy one meant acceptance. Acceptance meant another three months' grace. Eventually I ran out of grace and we moved to the Cities and I went back to my radio job and a couple years later started* A Prairie Home Companion *and the Lake Wobegon saga. When I invented Lake Wobegon, I stuck it in central Minnesota for the simple reason that I knew a little bit about it and also because my public radio listeners tended to be genteel folk who knew the scenic parts of Minnesota—the North Shore, the Boundary Waters, the Mississippi Valley—and knew nothing at all about Stearns County. This gave me a free hand to make things up. I put Lake Wobegon (pop. 942) on the western shore of the lake, for the beautiful sunrises. I said it too[k] its name from an Ojibway word that means "the place where we waited all day for you in the rain," and its slogan was* "Sumus quod sumus" *(We are who we are), and to the German Catholics I added, for dramatic interest, an equal number of Norwegian Lutherans. These don't exist in Stearns County but I bused them in. The Norwegians, ever status-conscious, vote Republican and the Germans vote*

Democratic to set themselves apart from the Norwegians. The Catholics worship at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility and the Lutherans at Lake Wobegon Lutheran church, home of the 1978 National Lutheran Ushering Champions, the Herdsmen. On Sunday morning, everyone is in church, contemplating their sinful unworthiness, the Catholics contemplating the unworthiness of the Lutherans, the Lutherans the unworthiness of the Catholics, and then everyone goes home to a heavy dinner.

If anyone asked why the town appeared on no maps, I explained that, when the state map was drawn after the Civil War, teams of surveyors worked their way in from the four outer corners and, arriving at the center, found they had surveyed more of Minnesota than there was room for between Wisconsin and the Dakotas, and so the corners had to be overlapped in the middle, and Lake Wobego wound up on the bottom flap. (In fact, the geographic center of the state is north of there, in Crow Wing County, but never mind.)

Anyway, "Gateway to Central Minnesota" is the town slogan. And through the gateway over the years came a procession of characters. The three boys who drive to Iowa one February morning when they hear of Buddy Holly's plane crash and their discovery of his blue guitar in the snowy field. The stolid Father Emil, who said, in regard to abortion, "If you didn't want to go to Chicago, why did you get on the train?" and the town handyman Carl Krebsbach who repairs the repairs of the amateurs, and Bruno the fishing dog, and the irascible Art of Art's Baits and Night O'Rest motel, its premises studded with warning signs ("Don't clean fish here. Use your brains. This means you!!!"), and Dorothy of the Chatterbox Café and her softball-size caramel rolls ("Coffee 25¢, All Morning 85¢, A Day $1.25, Ask About Our Weekly Rates"), and Wally of the Sidetrack Tap, where old men sit and gradually come to love their fellow men by self-medication. It was Wally's pontoon boat, the Agnes D on which the twenty-two Lutheran pastors crowded for a twilight cruise and weenie roast. When the grill capsized and the Agnes D pitched to starboard, they were plunged into five feet of water and stood quietly, heads uplifted, and waited for help to arrive. It's a town where the Lutherans all drive Fords bought from Clarence at Bunsen Motors and the Catholics all drive Chevys from Florian at Krebsbach Chevrolet. Florian is the guy who once forgot his wife at a truckstop. Her name is Myrtle.

The stories always start with the line "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon" and then a glimpse of the weather. It's a fall day, geese flying south across a high blue sky, the air sweet and smoky, the woods in gorgeous colors not seen in Crayola boxes, or it's winter, snowflakes falling like little jewels from heaven, and you awake to a world of radiant grandeur, trees glittering, the beauty o grays, the bare limbs of trees penciled in against the sky, or it's spring, the tomatoes are sprouting in little trays of dirt on the kitchen counter, the tulips and crocuses, the yellow goldfinches arriving from Mexico, or it's summer, the gardens are booming along, the corn knee-high, and a mountain range of black thunderclouds is piling up in the western sky. And then you go on to talk about Norwegian bachelor farmers sitting on the bench in front of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery or the Chatterbox, where large phlegmatic people sit at the counter talking in their sing-song accent. So how you been then? Oh, you know, not so bad, how's yourself, you keeping busy then? Oh yeah, no rest for the wicked. You been fishing at all? I was meaning to but I got too busy. How about yourself? Nope. The wife's got me busy around the house, you know. Yeah, I know how that goes.—And so forth. And you slip into your story, and take it around the turns and bring it to a point of rest, and say, "And that's the news from Lake Wobegon," and that's all there is to it.

sample content of The Keillor Reader: Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories: Where Did They All Come From?

- download The Rape Of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II
- *Neurobiology of Mental Illness (4th Edition) online*
- download Michael Tolliver Lives (Tales of the City, Book 7)
- National Geographic (August 2015) book

- http://thewun.org/?library/Expressive-Oil-Painting--An-Open-Air-Approach-to-Creative-Landscapes.pdf
- http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/Soccer-on-Sunday--Magic-Tree-House--Merlin-Mission--Book-52-.pdf
- http://serazard.com/lib/Celtic-Fairy-Tales.pdf
- http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/Go-Kill-Crazy-.pdf