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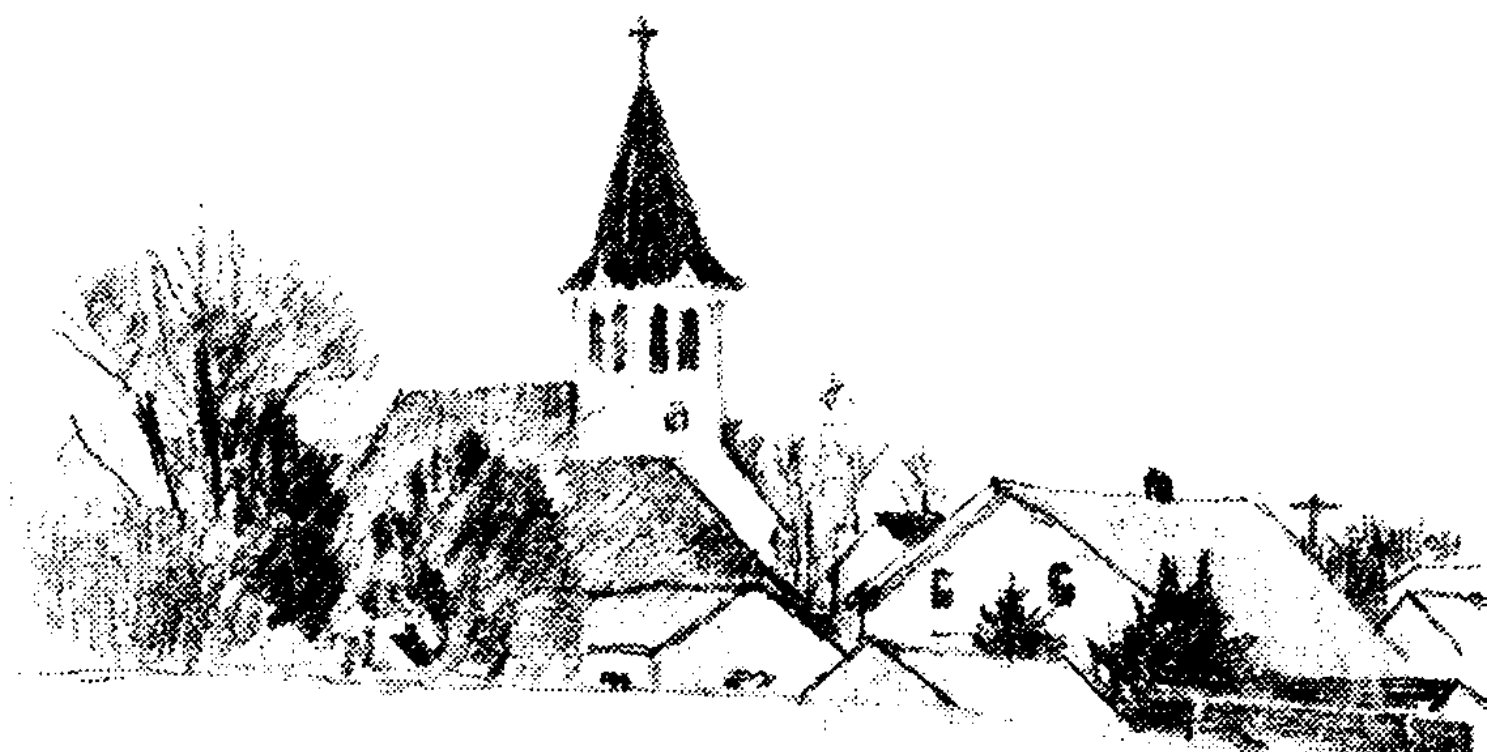
LAKE WOBEGON DAYS



GARRISON KEILLOR



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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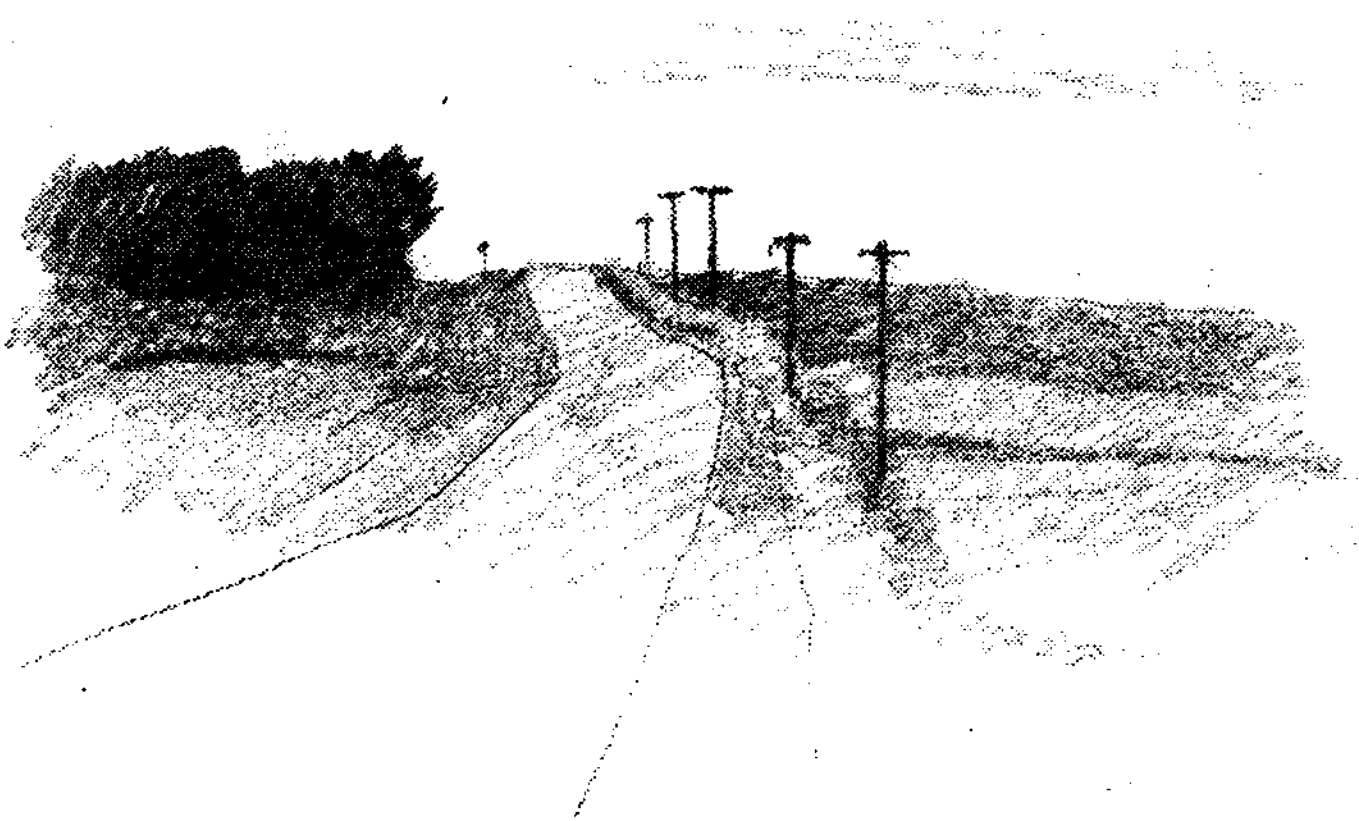
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PREFACE



In the spring of 1974, I got \$6000 from the *New Yorker* for writing a piece about the Grand Ole Opry, the most money I had ever seen, and so my wife and small son and I left home in St. Paul and got on the Empire Builder and headed for San Francisco to visit our friends, not knowing that this windfall would be most of my earnings for the year. I had never been west beyond Idaho, where I went to Bible conferences in my youth. We got a Pullman compartment and left Minneapolis late at night, awoke west of Fargo, watched the prairie roll by as we ate a good breakfast and lunch, and as the train headed into the northern Rockies, I sat in the bar car and took out a couple of stories from my briefcase and worked on them, a successful

American author who provided good things for his family. In Sand Point, Idaho, late the second night, close to where the Bible conferences took place, we derailed coming through a freight yard. The train had slowed to a crawl so none of us were hurt—our Pullman car simply screeched and swayed and bumped along the ties a little way—and we packed our suitcase and climbed out. We stood around a long time in the dark and got on an old bus that smelled of engine fumes, and headed for Portland, where we would catch the southbound Coast Starlight for San Francisco. My wife dozed next to me, the little boy lay across our laps and slept, and I sat and thought about the extravagance of this trip, the foolishness—one stroke of good luck, the Opry story, and I was blowing a big wad of the proceeds on what? *False luxury*, which was now derailed. The motive was good, to try to put a little life and color into a disappearing marriage, but I thought about the expense as we chugged across Washington, and the magnificence of the Columbia valley was lost on me, and reaching Portland at last, I made up my mind to finish up the new stories right away and sell both of them to the *New Yorker* and cut my losses. An hour later, I lost them both in the Portland train station.

I took my son to the men's room and set the briefcase down while we peed and washed our hands, and then we went to the cafeteria for breakfast. A few bites into the scrambled eggs I remembered the briefcase, went to get it and it was gone. We had an hour before the southbound arrived. We spent it looking in every trash basket in the station, outside the station, and for several blocks around. I was sure that the thief, finding nothing but manuscripts in the briefcase, would chuck it, and I kept telling him to, but he didn't chuck it where I could see it, and then our time was up and we climbed on the train. I felt so bad I didn't want to look out the window. I looked straight at

the wall of our compartment, and as we rode south the two lost stories seemed funnier and funnier to me, the best work I had ever done in my life; I wept for them, and my misery somehow erased them from mind so that when I got out a pad of paper a couple hundred miles later, I couldn't re-create even a faint outline.

To make me feel better, we trooped up to the dining car and ordered steaks all around and Manhattans for the grownups, which only made me worry about extravagance again, which now I was even less in a position to afford. By the time we got to San Francisco, the two stories loomed as two landmarks of American comic prose, a loss to the entire nation, and I was ready to go home.

Our California friends were sympathetic and encouraging, and so were my friends in Minnesota when we got home two weeks later. People always are encouraging about a terrible loss, so that sometimes the loser would like to strangle them. People tell you about other writers who lost stories, Hemingway, Carlyle, great men who triumphed over misfortune—"You'll go on and write something even better," they say, not knowing how good those stories were. I still have the two three-by-five cards on which, bumping along on the train, I wrote everything I could remember about the stories: one is entitled "Lucky Man" and the notes describe a man who feels fortunate despite terrible things that happen to him. Even now, looking at it, I faintly recall what a fine work it was. The other is entitled "Lake Wobegon Memoir," and the notes are sparse: "Clarence and Arlene Bunsen," "the runaway car," "Wednesday night prayer meeting," and "Legion club dance" are the extent of it. The lost story shone so brilliantly in dim memory that every new attempt at it looked pale and impoverished before I got to the first sentence.

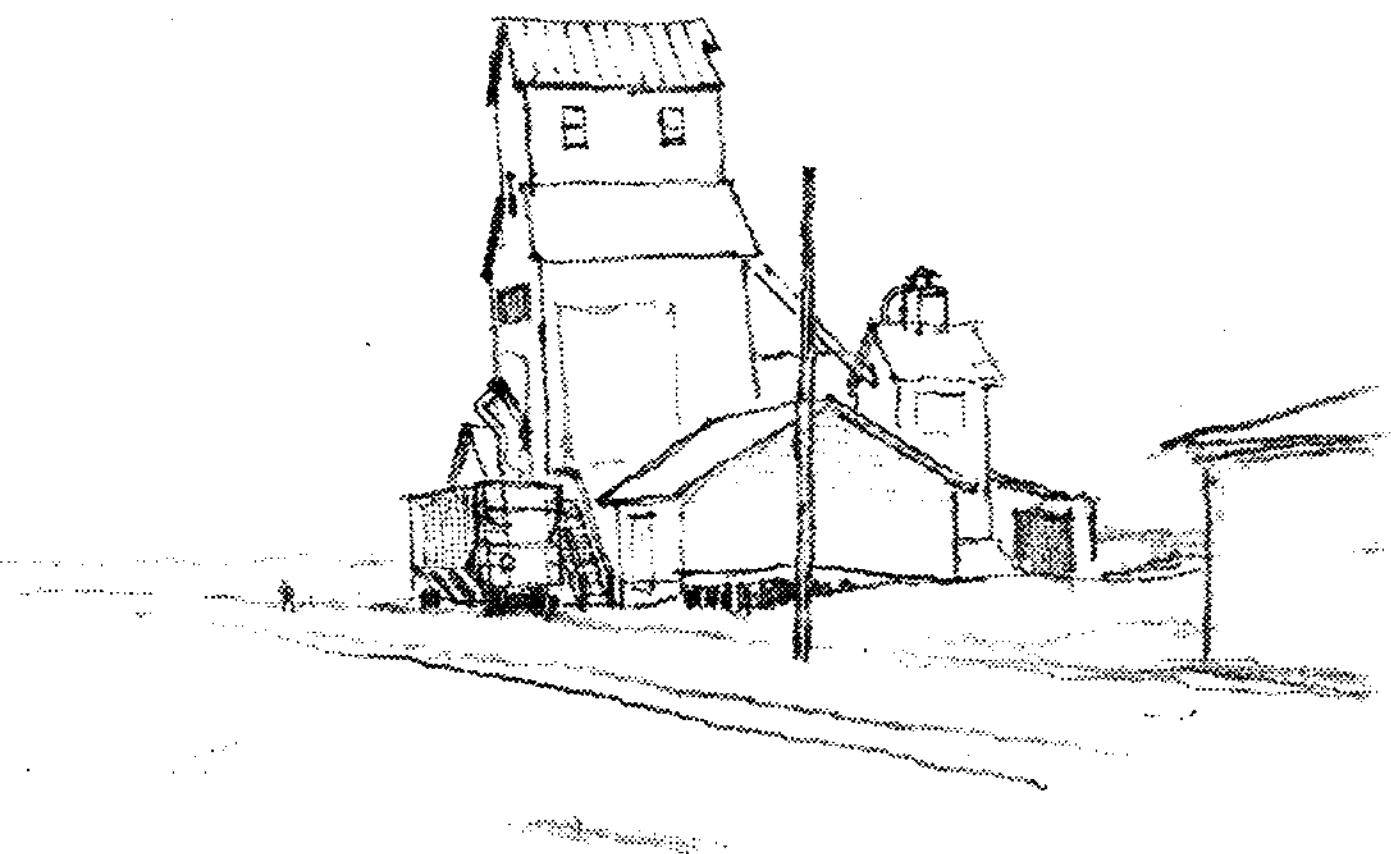
I started a radio show in July, "A Prairie Home Companion," a live musical-variety show like the Opry. I strug-

gled on as a writer, started a novel that stumbled along for a thousand pages and then tipped over dead. My wife and I split up in 1976. Somehow the radio show kept going, perhaps because I had no illusion that I was good at it, and I brought in Lake Wobegon as the home of a weekly monologue, hoping that one Saturday night, standing on stage, I would look into the lights and my lost story would come down the beam and land in my head. Eleven years later, I am still waiting for it.

It has been a good run and I'm a very lucky man, I think. One pretty good idea for gainful employment eleven years ago is still my livelihood, thanks to my longtime colleagues, Margaret Moos, William H. Kling, Lynne Cruise, and Richard ("Butch") Thompson, all patrons of the lost cause of live radio, and other friends in and out of the business who gave me so much good advice. I am indebted to Kathryn Court, the editor of this book, and to my agent, Ellen Levine, and to a parade of others going back to my teachers George Hage, John Rogers, Deloyd Hochstetter, Fern Moehlenbrock, and Estelle Shaver. I'm grateful to them. All the same, I wish I hadn't lost that story in the Portland lavatory, and I am still waiting for it to come back. I believe it was a story given to me as in a dream, that if found and people heard it they might discover something they too were looking for all these years, and I foolishly forgot it while washing my hands and don't know what to do to get it back. Sometimes, standing in the wings, I feel that story brush against my face and think I'll remember it—maybe if I closed my eyes it would land on my shoulder like one of the Performing Gospel Birds. This book, while not nearly so fine, will have to suffice until it returns.

Dogs don't lie, and why should I?
Strangers come, they growl and bark.
They know their loved ones in the dark.
Now let me, by night or day,
Be just as full of truth as they.

HOME



The town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota,* lies on the shore against Adams Hill, looking east across the blue-green water to the dark woods. From the south, the highway aims for the lake, bends hard left by the magnificent concrete Grecian grain silos, and eases over a leg of the hill past the SLOW CHILDREN sign, bringing the traveler in on Main Street toward the town's one traffic light, which is almost always green. A few surviving elms shade the street.

*"Right on this road 0.7 *m.* to OLD WHITE BARN, then right 1.2 *m.* to LAKE WOBEGON (1418 alt., 942 pop.), named for the body of water that it borders. Bleakly typical of the prairie, Lake Wobegon has its origins in the utopian vision of nineteenth-

Along the ragged dirt path between the asphalt and the grass, a child slowly walks to Ralph's Grocery, kicking an asphalt chunk ahead of him. It is a chunk that after four blocks he is now mesmerized by, to which he is completely dedicated. At Bunsen Motors, the sidewalk begins. A breeze off the lake brings a sweet air of mud and rotting wood, a slight fishy smell, and picks up the sweetness of old grease, a sharp whiff of gasoline, fresh tires, spring dust, and, from across the street, the faint essence of tuna hot-dish at the Chatterbox Cafe. A stout figure in green coveralls disappears inside. The boy kicks the chunk at the curb, once, twice, then lofts it over the curb and sidewalk across the concrete to the island of Pure Oil pumps. He jumps three times on the Bunsen bell hose, making three dings back in the dark garage. The mayor of Lake Wobegon, Clint Bunsen, peers out from the grease pit, under a black Ford pickup. His brother Clarence, wiping the showroom glass (BUNSEN MOTORS—FORD—NEW & USED—SALES & SERVICE) with an old blue shirt, knocks on the window. The showroom is empty. The boy follows the chunk a few doors north to Ralph's window, which displays a mournful cardboard pig, his body marked with the names of cuts. An old man sits on Ralph's bench, white hair as fine as spun glass poking out under his green feed

century New England Transcendentalists but now is populated mainly by Norwegians and Germans who attend LAKE WOBEGON LUTHERAN CHURCH (left at BANK .1 m.) and OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL RESPONSIBILITY CHURCH (right at CHURCH .08 m.), neither of which are remarkable. The lake itself, blue-green and brightly sparkling in the brassy summer sun and neighbored by the warm-colored marsh grasses of a wildlife-teeming slough, is the town's main attraction, though the view is spoiled somewhat by a large GRAIN ELEVATOR by the railroad track.

"North of town .3 m. is the junction with an oiled road."

—*Minnesota*, Federal Writers' Project (2nd edition, 1939)

cap, his grizzled chin on his skinny chest, snoozing, the afternoon sun now reaching under the faded brown canvas awning up to his belt. He is not Ralph. Ralph is the thin man in the white apron who has stepped out the back door of the store, away from the meat counter, to get a breath of fresh, meatless air. He stands on a rickety porch that looks across the lake, a stone's throw away. The beach there is stony; the sandy beach is two blocks to the north. A girl, perhaps one of his, stands on the diving dock, plugs her nose, and executes a perfect cannonball, and he hears the dull *thunsh*. A quarter-mile away, a silver boat sits off the weeds in Sunfish Bay, a man in a bright blue jacket waves his pole; the line is hooked on weeds.* The sun makes a trail of shimmering lights across the water. It would make quite a picture if you had the right lens, which nobody in this town has got.

The lake is 678.2 acres, a little more than a section, fed by cold springs and drained from the southeast by a creek, the Lake Wobegon River, which flows to the Sauk, which joins the Mississippi. In 1836, an Italian count waded up the creek, towing his canoe, and camped on the lake shore, where he imagined for a moment that he was the hero who had found the true headwaters of the Mississippi. Then something about the place made him decide he was wrong. He was right, we're not the headwaters, but what made him jump to that conclusion? What has made so many others look at us and think, *It doesn't start here!*?

The woods are red oak, maple, some spruce and pine, birch, alder, and thick brush, except where cows have been

*It is Dr. Nute, retired after forty-odd years of dentistry, now free to ply the waters in the *Molar II* and drop a line where the fighting sunfish lie in wait. "Open wide," he says. "This may sting a little bit. Okay. Now bite down."

put, which is like a park. The municipal boundaries take in quite a bit of pasture and cropland, including wheat, corn, oats, and alfalfa, and also the homes of some nine hundred souls, most of them small white frame houses sitting forward on their lots and boasting large tidy vegetable gardens and modest lawns, many featuring cast-iron deer, small windmills, clothespoles and clotheslines, various plaster animals such as squirrels and lambs and small elephants, white painted rocks at the end of the driveway, a nice bed of petunias planted within a white tire, and some with a shrine in the rock garden, the Blessed Virgin standing, demure, her eyes averted, arms slightly extended, above the peonies and marigolds. In the garden behind the nunnery next door to Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, she stands on a brick pedestal, and her eyes meet yours with an expression of deep sympathy for the sufferings of the world, including this little town.

It is a quiet town, where much of the day you could stand in the middle of Main Street and not be in anyone's way—not forever, but for as long as a person would want to stand in the middle of a street. It's a wide street; the early Yankee promoters thought they would need it wide to handle the crush of traffic. The double white stripe is for show, as are the two parking meters. Two was all they could afford. They meant to buy more meters with the revenue, but nobody puts nickels in them because parking nearby is free. Parking is diagonal.

Merchants call it "downtown"; other people say "up town," two words, as in "I'm going up town to get me some socks."

On Main between Elm and McKinley stand four two-story brick buildings on the north side, six on the south, and the Central Building, three stories, which has sandstone blocks with carved scallops above the third-floor

windows.* Buildings include the "Ingqvist Block," "Union Block," "Security Block," "Farmers Block," and "Oleson Block," their names carved in sandstone or granite tablets set in the fancy brickwork at the top. Latticed brickwork, brickwork meant to suggest battlements, and brick towers meant to look palatial. In 1889, they hung a man from a tower for stealing. He took it rather well. They were tired of him sneaking around lifting hardware off buggies, so they tied a rope to his belt and hoisted him up where they could keep an eye on him.

Most men wear their belts low here, there being so many outstanding bellies, some big enough to have names of their own and be formally introduced. Those men don't suck them in or hide them in loose shirts; they let them hang free, they pat them, they stroke them as they stand around and talk. How could a man be so vain as to ignore this old friend who's been with him at the great moments of his life?

The buildings are quite proud in their false fronts, trying to be everything that two stories can be and a little bit more. The first stories have newer fronts of aluminum and

*The stone plaque on the facade fell off one hot July afternoon, the plaque that reads CENTRAL BLDG. 1913, and crashed on the sidewalk, almost hitting Bud Mueller, who had just stopped and turned to walk the other way. If he hadn't, he would have been killed. He didn't know why he had turned. "It was like something spoke to me right then," he said. Others realized then that *they* had been on the verge of walking by the Central Building moments before and something had spoken to them. "You know, I was thinking, 'Maybe I will go to Skoglund's and purchase a pencil,' but then something said, 'No, you wait on that,' so I didn't go. If I had gone, it would've killed me," Mr. Berge said. He was one of many whose lives had been spared by a narrow margin. The plaque broke into five pieces, which Carl Krebsbach glued together, and it was remounted on the facade with a protective mesh to keep it in place.

fake marble and stucco and fiberglass stonework, meant to make them modern. A child might have cut them off a cornflakes box and fastened them with two tabs, A and B, and added the ladies leaving the Chatterbox Cafe from their tuna sandwich lunch: three old ladies with wispy white hair, in sensible black shoes and long print dresses with the waist up under the bosom, and the fourth in a deep purple pants suit and purple pumps, wearing a jet-black wig. She too is seventy but looks like a thirty-four-year-old who led a very hard life. She is Carl Krebsbach's mother, Myrtle, who, they say, enjoys two pink Daiquiris every Friday night and between the first and second hums "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" and does a turn that won her First Prize in a Knights of Columbus talent show in 1936 at the Alhambra Ballroom. It burned to the ground in 1955. "Myrtle has a natural talent, you know," people have always told her, she says. "She had a chance to go on to Minneapolis." Perhaps she is still considering the offer.

Her husband Florian pulls his '66 Chevy into a space between two pickups in front of the Clinic. To look at his car, you'd think it was 1966 now, not 1985; it's so new, especially the back seat, which looks as if nobody ever sat there unless they were gift-wrapped. He is coming to see Dr. DeHaven about stomach pains that he thinks could be cancer, which he believes he has a tendency toward. Still, though he may be dying, he takes a minute to get a clean rag out of the trunk, soak it with gasoline, lift the hood, and wipe off the engine. He says she runs cooler when she's clean, and it's better if you don't let the dirt get baked on. Nineteen years old, she has only 42,000 miles on her, as he will tell you if you admire how new she looks. "Got her in '66. Just 42,000 miles on her." It may be odd that a man should be so proud of having not gone far, but not so odd in this town. Under his Trojan

Seed Corn cap pulled down tight on his head is the face of a boy, and when he talks his voice breaks, as if he hasn't talked enough to get over adolescence completely. He has lived here all his life, time hardly exists for him, and when he looks at this street and when he sees his wife, he sees them brand-new, like this car. Later, driving the four blocks home at about trolling speed, having forgotten the misery of a rectal examination, he will notice a slight arrhythmic imperfection when the car idles, which he will spend an hour happily correcting.

In school we sang

Hail to thee, Lake Wobegon, the cradle of
our youth.

We shall uphold the blue and gold in honor
and in truth.

Holding high our lamps, we will be thy
champs, and will vanquish far and near
For W.H.S., the beacon of the west, the
school we love so dear.

And also

We're going to fight, fight, fight for Wobegon
And be strong and resolute,
And our mighty foes will fall down in rows
When we poke 'em in the snoot! (Rah! Rah!)

But those were only for show. In our hearts, our loyalties to home have always been more modest, along the lines of the motto on the town crest—"*Sumus quod sumus*" (We are what we are)—and the annual Christmas toast of the Sons of Knute, "There's no place like home when you're not feeling well," first uttered by a long-ago Knute who missed the annual dinner dance due to a case of the trots,

and even Mr. Diener's observation, "When you're around it all the time, you don't notice it so much." He said this after he tore out the wall between his living room and dining room, which he had not done before for fear that it was there for a reason. In the wall, he found the remains of a cat who had been missing for more than a year. The Dieners had not been getting full use of the dining room and had been silently blaming each other. "It's good to know that it wasn't us," he said.

In school and in church, we were called to high ideals such as truth and honor by someone perched on truth and hollering for us to come on up, but the truth was that we always fell short.* Every spring, the Thanatopsis Society sponsored a lecture in keeping with the will of the late Mrs. Bjornson, who founded the society as a *literary* society, and though they had long since evolved into a conversational society, the Thanatopsians were bound by the terms of her bequest to hire a lecturer once a year and

*I grew up among slow talkers, men in particular, who dropped words a few at a time like beans in a hill, and when I got to Minneapolis, where people took a Lake Wobegon comma to mean the end of the story, I couldn't speak a whole sentence in company and was considered not too bright, so I enrolled in a speech course taught by Orville Sand, the founder of reflexive relaxology, a self-hypnotic technique that enabled a person to speak up to three hundred words per minute. He believed that slow speech deprives us of a great deal of thought by slowing down the mental processes to one's word rate. He believed that the mind has unlimited powers if only a person could learn to release them and eliminate the backup caused by slow discharge. I *believe* that's what he said—it was hard to understand him. He'd be rattling on about relaxology one moment and then he was into photography, his father, the Baltimore Orioles, wheat germ, birth and death, central heating, the orgasm—which was satisfying for him, but which left me in the dust, so I quit, having only gotten up to about eighty-five. And after a few weeks, I was back to about ten or eleven.

listen. One year it was World Federalism (including a demonstration of conversational Esperanto), and then it was the benefits of a unicameral legislature, and in 1955, a man from the University came and gave us "The World of 1980" with slides of bubble-top houses, picture-phones, autogyro copter-cars, and floating factories harvesting tasty plankton from the sea. We sat and listened and clapped, but when the chairlady called for questions from the audience, what most of us wanted to know we didn't dare ask: "How much are you getting paid for this?"

Left to our own devices, we Wobegonians go straight for the small potatoes. Majestic doesn't appeal to us; we like the Grand Canyon better with Clarence and Arlene parked in front of it, smiling. We feel uneasy at momentous events.

Lake Wobegon babies are born in a hospital thirty-some miles away and held at the glass by a nurse named Betty who has worked there for three hundred years—then it's a long drive home for the new father in the small morning hours, and when he arrives, he is full of thought. His life has taken a permanent turn toward rectitude and sobriety and a decent regard for the sanctity of life; having seen his flesh in a layette, he wants to talk about some deep truths he has discovered in the past few hours to his own parents, who have sat up in their pajamas, waiting for word about the baby's name and weight. Then they want to go to bed.

Lake Wobegon people die in those hospitals, unless they are quick about it, and their relations drive to sit with them. When Grandma died, she had been unconscious for three days. She was baking bread at Aunt Flo's and felt tired, then lay down for a nap and didn't wake up. An ambulance took her to the hospital. She lay asleep, so pale, so thin. It was August. We held cool washcloths to her forehead and moistened her lips with ice cubes. A nun leaned over and said in her ear, "Do you love Jesus?" We