# WE ARE STILL MARRIED

## STORIES & LETTERS

## GARRISON KEILLOR

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VIKING

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To the memory
of my classmate
Corinne Guntzel
(1942–1986)

My parents think I'm crazy,
My kids think I'm bourgeois—
My true love thinks I'm wonderful,
The handsomest she ever saw,
And who am I to disagree
With one so sensible as she?

# INTRODUCTION

There's a lot to be said for lack of communication and so many problems we can't talk about simply go away after a while, such as the problem of mortality, for example, but a writer's duty is to keep trying, to wake up every afternoon and saddle up the mare and bear the sacred *plume de litérature* over the next ridge, and here, to show I've been on the job and not sunning myself in Denmark, is a book, collecting in one neat pile some stories, poems, and letters written at the time of Ronald Reagan, the President who never told bad news to the American people.

I've written for *The New Yorker* since I was in high school, though they weren't aware of it at the time, and many of these stories first appeared there; most of the letters in Section 3 appeared there, unsigned, in "The Talk of the Town." When I first met up with the magazine, I was thirteen, sitting in the periodicals room at the Minneapolis Public Library, surrounded by ruined old men collapsed in the big oak chairs, who I took to be retired teachers. I read Talk as the voice of inexhaustible youth, charged with curiosity and skepticism, dashing around the big city at a slow crawl, and tried to imitate its casual worldly tone, which, for a boy growing up in the potato fields of Brooklyn Park township, was a hard row to hoe, but I tried. The magazine was studded with distinguished men of initials, including E.B., A.J., S.J., E.J., and J.D., so I signed myself G. E. Keillor for a while, hoping lightning would strike. The summer after college I hitched a ride to New York and got a room in a boardinghouse on West 20th next door to a convent and walked up to *The New Yorker*

to apply for a job as a Talk reporter. I was twenty-three, had a beard and long hair, and was dazed with ambition. There were plenty of exclusive clubs on 43rd and 44th, including the Harvard, Princeton, New York Yacht, and Century, but only one worth trying for, in my eyes, and I took the elevator up and tried. A woman named Patricia Mosher talked with me for an hour. She was friendly and encouraging, and sent me home to write more, which I've been doing ever since. Three years later, I got a letter from Roger Angell at *The New Yorker* buying a story of mine and sat down on the front steps of my house and enjoyed his three or four lovely paragraphs two or three dozen times. I felt grateful that my life would not be completely wasted. Over the years, Roger turned out to be a tireless editor, writing encouraging letters, and, like a great coach, telling me how much the magazine *needed* me, hoping I'd become one of his starters, a cleanup humorist, and only gradually did he come to accept me for who I am, a tall serious man with a knack for the long pause, whose association with the magazine has been modest but undistinguished. In 1971 I became the first writer in its history to have his name misspelled on a byline (Kiellor), and a few years later I wrote the story "Don: The True Story of a Younger Person," which contains a quintuple interior quote, a quote of a quote of a quote of a quote of a quote, the deepest interior quote ever published there. You could look it up. In 1974, having written a piece about the Grand Ole Opry, I became one of the few writers in *New Yorker* annals to write a factual piece about an achievement that he then set out to emulate, when I started "A Prairie Home Companion." Mark Singer did not open a bank after writing *Funny Money*, nor did Calvin Trillin buy a rib joint with the proceeds of *Alice, Let's Eat*. Yes, I am aware of Roger Angell's pinch-hit appearance (7/12/49) at the Polo Grounds, a long poke off the bat handle that scooted into the left-field corner under the Macy's clock and caromed off the groundskeeper's roller for a skinny triple, driving in one run, and that's why I said I was one of the "few"—Pauline Kael, who directed Joanne Woodward and John Wayne in *Canaan*, is another, but you look at that picture, you can't help but feel the sparks flying between the stars and you see

how precise and single-minded *knowing* the camera is, and you wonder, "Why couldn't she just let those two loose?" And Roger's hit, in any other ballpark, would've been a double, except in Fenway, where it would've been foul. (Fenway is a narrower park, of course.)

It was a long reach for a writer, to do a radio show all those years, like a dairy farmer sailing the Atlantic, but that sort of thing happens all the time. The open sea casts a powerful lure and dairy farmers are particularly susceptible. The monotony of twice-daily lactation and the steady throbbing of the milking machines make them feel like the engine-room crew of a ferryboat that's going nowhere, and they dream of taking the helm with salt spray in their faces. Wiping the immense udders, they imagine a billowing spinnaker—a manure-crusted tail switches across their face and they see the mainsheet taut as the *Francesca* rounds Bermuda—and next thing they're at the Clay County library to check out *How to Build a Boat from a Sixty-Foot Pole Barn*. One year and eighteen months later their pole barn is gone, the *Francesca* is finished and loaded on a flatbed truck and all the comedians of Chatterton, South Dakota, who have done hours of stand-up material watching Ray build the boat, stand around and hoot and howl as he chugs out of the driveway. He's glad to pull out of the dusty little town and past the soybean fields and see the water tower disappear in the rearview mirror, but six months later, after weeks of thirty- and forty-foot swells and close calls with icebergs and flying sharks and the morning when the tanker loomed out of the fog and the misery of wet socks and damp underwear and rope burns on his hands that never heal and the sullenness among his crew since the whiskey ran out, Ray thinks back on Chatterton as a jewel of civility and he is glad to return and see his cows and get back on the tractor and hold *seeds* in his hand, and so was I glad to rejoin *The New Yorker*—its faded yellow walls and scraps of furniture, its burrows stuffed with books and manuscripts, the glass bookcases and the long table piled with newspapers, the archives full of black scrapbooks and the little library crammed with reference books where Eve and Dusty and Hal and all the checkers slave away—and to be back among *paper*.

My cash crop is humor, a bastard genre of literature that includes Mark Twain and the gentlemen of the old firm of Benchley, Thurber, Perelman & White and also includes *How to Talk Suth'n*, *Buddy's Big Book of Booger Jokes* and *Funny Fotos of Cats in Hats*, a mixed field.

Humor is a knife and what it cuts off doesn't grow back right away, just look at Washingtonians. They are gentle and thoughtful people given to good work in a dark world, but they have been withered by thousands of Washington jokes, portraying residents of our nation's capital as peabrains. Humor has dropped a rock on them, just as it has withered Iowans, Clevelanders, Jerseyites, Dan Quayle, proctologists, people named Elmer, and yet no victims dare complain lest they be accused of having no sense of humor, the worst charge that can be leveled against an American citizen. Even someone who was convicted of selling the nation's last three nuclear secrets to the Russians—if, before sentencing, the judge were to lean across the bench and say, "You know, you have a very poor sense of humor," the defense would leap to its feet and object. Humor, a good sense of it, is to Americans what manhood is to Spaniards and we will go to great lengths to prove it. Experiments with laboratory rats have shown that, if one psychologist in the room laughs at something a rat does, all of the other psychologists in the room will laugh equally. Nobody wants to be left holding the joke. The funniest line in English is "Get it?" When you say that, *everyone* chortles.

For a long time, most Americans have considered humor to be much funnier than it really is. I wish I could quit writing humor and write irritation for a while. I grow old and irritable. I once was a tall dark heartbreaker who, when I slouched into a room, women jumped up and asked if they could get me something, and now they only smile and say, "My mother is a big fan of yours. You sure are a day-brightener for her. You sure make her chuckle." I grow old. Boys and girls in their thirties who compose essays on the majestic sorrows of aging—*give me a break.* I'm forty-six. Wait until you're forty-six and then tell me about it. I'll be sixty then. I grew up in a gentler, slower time. When Ike was President, Christmases were years apart,

and now it's about five months from one to the next, and in a decade it'll be the end of the century, the year 2000, a fiction. I grow old and irritable and forgetful and often forget what irritated me in the first place, though the misery is still there. It's enough to make a person psychopathic if you had the energy for it but irritation is all I can manage. It irritates me when news people explain things that everyone knows, such as who Rocky Marciano was or Edward R. Murrow or John Foster Dulles, names that don't pop up often, but when they do, the teenage anchorman says, "Dulles, the bass player of the Crickets, gave up his seat on the plane to Richie Valens," as if you didn't know this. Of course you do. Last November, on the anniversary of the assassination, the tube was jammed with bozos explaining about the Kennedy years, implying that it was long ago, but twenty-five years isn't that long. You learn this as you grow up.

Like everybody, I mark time by who's in the White House, starting with Truman, who presided over my childhood, a man in a bow tie who resembled my uncle Bill Anderson who hiked around Minnesota as a young man and swam across rivers stripped naked, his clothes wrapped in a bundle and fastened on his head with his belt looped under his chin. He shot pool, a daring thing in a Christian family, and knew all the counties of Minnesota by heart. About Truman, however, dark things were intimated in our house. He used the Lord's name in vain and was weak on Communism. In the playground at Benson School, we played war during recess and killed North Koreans by the zillions. Our teacher Floyd Lewis brought a television set to sixth grade so we could watch Eisenhower's inauguration. He looked like Uncle Merrill who traveled the Midwest aboard the North Coast Limited and Hiawatha and other crack trains, extending the domain of Northrup, King seed corn. Ike's benign rule saw me through high school and I started at the University of Minnesota the fall Kennedy was elected. Being eighteen, free, and reasonably intelligent, I decided I was a Democrat, of course, and admired him feverishly and was—except for an afternoon during the Cuban blockade when I was afraid the world was about to end—as patriotic as a person could possibly be, right up to November 22, 1963, that

deep cold cave, the day of our national murder, when Lyndon Johnson was ushered in. He was the first President I voted for and the first who threatened my life. My son was born at the beginning of Nixon, 1969, who resigned in 1974, missing my thirty-second birthday by a day, ending the epic Watergate story, since when newspaper reading hasn't been one fourth as much fun. Ford didn't register on me. Carter only showed that I didn't know beans about politics: I thought he was a decent hardworking God-fearing President and never understood how Republicans could get elected simply by saying his name out loud. Everybody understood this joke except me, so I took an eight-year vacation under Reagan and didn't have a political thought, except to admire the old masseur as he applied his craft. Then came Gentleman George Bush, and there we are now.

Of all those men, Reagan was the best storyteller. He saw America as a fabulous land, a small town of sixty million Christian families who work hard, play ball, and handle their own problems. He truly believed in his story and was disinterested in other, gloomier visions. He was a midwesterner who had long since left home to escape the Law of the Provinces (*Don't think you're somebody. If you were, you wouldn't be here, you'd be on the Coast*) but who remained true to the Midwest's distrust of intellect, its virtuousness and sweet sense of isolation, its nostalgia, and he retained a cozy philosophy common to successful men his age in small towns all along the Mississippi. He himself was a huge success, the most outrageously successful authentic high-flying Irish politician of his day, with a honey voice and a twinkle and a wave and a duck of the head, the most boyish seventy-five-year-old man in America, hard to lay a glove on, as light as a kite. Nothing he said ever came back to haunt him. His mastery of the air baffled and dazed his enemies, who couldn't take seriously a man who refused to face up to the facts of the American decline. They were serious men, who trusted scholarship and experience and competence, but he revealed their crucial flaw: they had no story, and a man who has no story is a man with no truth to offer. They thought him shallow, which was irrelevant, like accusing Will Rogers of not writing a novel: so what? His talent was to be a hearty, graceful

public man, a royal President. A genial uncle, the first one you'd want at your wedding to make a toast and charm the in-laws, the last one you would choose to trouble with the information that you are pregnant and feel lousy. He himself went out of his way to avoid upsetting people. He told no bad news. He never uttered a sentence that didn't have at least a fifty-three-percent approval.

When Reagan retired from the field, he left his opponents covered with dust, discouraged. Few had the heart to argue that he was a dishonest and disastrous President because the ones he was most dishonest to (Christian fundamentalists) and most disastrous for (people under thirty) supported him in droves, and when the people speak so clearly, the minority ought to shut up and listen. In 1984 when I went in the booth and voted for Mondale-Ferraro, the lever felt cold and dry, as if untouched by human hands. I went home and before supper was over Mondale had lost forty-nine states, carrying only Minnesota. If you could win only one state out of the Union, I suppose Minnesota would be your first choice, but it made for a short evening. Tom Arndt and I zipped over to Democratic headquarters at a hockey rink in St. Paul to cheer for our man and found a small crowd thinly milling around, people looking for people who weren't there, like a fortieth annual reunion of something. Wan liberal faces from civil-rights and antiwar days, snooty feminists, old union guys, hairy leftists: My Old Gang. We had been so right for so long about so many things that the American people refused to vote for us out of pure resentment. The sheer mass of Reagan's victory loomed above us like Mount McKinley.

In Lake Wobegon, we grew up with bad news. Since I was a little kid I heard it wafting up through the heat duct from the kitchen below. Our relatives came to visit on Saturday evenings and after we kids were packed off to bed, the grownups sat up late until ten-thirty or eleven and talked about sickness, unhappiness, divorce, violence, and all the sorrows they felt obliged to shelter children from, and I lay on the bedroom floor and listened in, soaking up information. Two high-school boys and a girl, killed when the car slammed into a tree at ninety miles an hour, at 2:00 A.M. the night before grad-

uation, only the driver survived, the one who was drunk. A cousin was sick, whose husband had run away and whose son had drowned at age eighteen, doctors didn't give her long. The son's girlfriend had never recovered from the shock. That sweet black-haired girl had tried to kill herself twice. The drunk driver was the husband's nephew. The voices were soft and low. "I donno. He's like a different person entirely. He doesn't look good at all but he won't hear about seeing a doctor. I think it's his heart. His mother died of heart trouble and she was heavy like him. I think he drinks too." A chair creaked *shnkknk* and someone shuffled over *stiplstoplstiplstople* and poured a cup of coffee, *blibliblibliblibliblib*. An edgy silence. Throat clearing. "She tried to kill herself by dropping an electric fan in the bathtub. Then she tried to row out on the lake but the waves were too high. I don't know. She never got over him, that's for sure. You want more banana bread? It's fresh, I just baked it. Here."

They are still down there in the kitchen, my beloved aunts and dear uncles, drinking coffee, murmuring, discussing the sorrows of the world, protecting me from bad news, and I'm still in the bedroom, listening at the grate.

Farewell, Mr. President.

Long live American humor.

We are getting old, a terrible mistake, and that's no joke.

What's really funny is that we are still married.

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