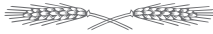


## Chapter 1



# DON'T THINK YOU'RE SPECIAL



*There was a young man from the City  
Who formed a Campaign Committee  
But gave up the race  
When he saw that his face  
Looked just like his butt—what a pity.*

I AM A Democrat, which was nothing I decided for myself but simply the way I was brought up, starting with the idea of *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*, which is the basis of the simple social compact by which we live and also *You are not so different from other people so don't give yourself airs*, which was drummed into us children back in the old days when everyone went to public schools. Don't be conceited. So you can write: goody-goody for you, but don't think

you're a genius because, believe me, you're not. The democracy of the gospel. *All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All we like sheep have gone astray.* These articles of faith, plus our common tongue and a fondness for jokes and the American landscape, bind us together in a union of souls, each one free, each one devoted to the union.

These things were not so clear to me when I was young and immortal, but now I am part of the democracy of old age, impressed on me in 2001 when my mitral valve came loose and I was wheeled into a bright blue industrial room at Mayo and masked and eight hours later my little boat bumped up on a foggy shore and a young woman named Erinn said I would be okay and the next day my catheter was removed and that night a nurse in a blue uniform with a pager clipped to her lapel bent down to take my blood pressure and the weight of the pager opened the fabulous landscape of her breasts and my libido awakened, but I digress. I grew up among Bible-believing people in Minnesota, a cold weather state when the jet stream slips and the wind blows steadily from Manitoba; it gets so cold your skin hurts, your innards clench up, and a man's testes shrink to the size of

garden peas, but—*Everyone else is just as cold as you are so don't complain about it, this is not a personal experience*, that's what we say, and you comfort yourself with fried eggs and bacon and you bulk up a good deal by spring, but then everyone else is fat too, so it's not a problem.

Here we have the democracy of flatness: there simply aren't so many hills for rich people to live on top of. We suffer less from the self-esteem issues that make people call on their cell phones and announce their whereabouts. There was no radio in *The Spirit of St. Louis* and nobody knew where Lindbergh was as he flew the Atlantic until some fishermen spotted him off the Irish coast, but a man on a train from New York to Boston must furnish frequent updates on his progress. In Minnesota, we get home when we get home, no big deal. And if we're caught in traffic and miss the sales meeting, it won't matter that much in the end. The marketing of widgets will go on, our impact on the world is slight, so take life as a comedy and play it for laughs. You die, there is a sort of decent grief and a few people really do suffer from your absence, but the impact on the greater world is negligible. You do not leave a big hole. They dig a hole and put you in it.

The state was settled by no-nonsense socialists from Germany and Sweden and Norway who unpacked their trunks and planted corn and set about organizing schools; churches; libraries; lodges; societies and benevolent associations; brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and raised their children to Mind Your Manners, Be Useful, Pay Attention, Make Something of Yourself, Turn Down the Thermostat (If You're Cold, Go Put on a Sweater), Share and Share Alike, Be Satisfied with What You Have—a green Jell-O salad with mandarin oranges, miniature marshmallows, walnuts, and Miracle Whip is by God good enough for anybody. I grew up in the pure democracy of a public grade school where everybody brought a valentine for everybody on Valentine's Day so we should feel equally loved though of course some valentines are more equal than others, some have lace and little flaps under which special endearments are written, and others are generic, printed six to a page with bumpy edges where they were torn on the dotted line. But you should be happy with what you get and Don't Think You're Special Because You're Not. (Those people on daytime TV talking about how their parents never gave them the positive feedback they needed and that's why they shot

them—those are not Minnesotans. Nor are the people who go to court to win their children the right to not say the Pledge of Allegiance or not be in the room when other children are saying it.) We take pains to not be Special. If there is one meatball left on the platter, you do not take it, you take half of it, and someone else takes half of that and so it is endlessly divided down to the last crumb. Not a state of showboats or motormouths. We tend not to be uncomfortable about silence and can sit in the company of others and eat and not a word is said and it's okay by us. *Silence, the purest democracy.* The sweetest part of Sunday morning: when the organ stops and nobody speaks and we look at the light streaming in the windows.

I live in Minnesota for the plain and simple reason that *I am not so different from these people* and also because the social compact is still intact here, despite Republicans trying to pound it out of us.

Here in St. Paul, I live a few blocks from where my mother lived back in the Dirty Thirties when she was a slim, shy, lovely teenager attending St. Paul Central and hoping to become a registered nurse and earning her keep by going door-to-door in the neighborhood selling

freshly baked peanut-butter cookies in little brown paper bags. It's also the neighborhood of F. Scott Fitzgerald's boyhood, who wrote plays and got his chums to perform them, with himself in the starring role. For all that's changed since then, a good deal has not—people still say Please and Excuse me and Good morning and hold the door open for you and indulge the free spirits among us though it's irksome when their dandelions go to seed and blow onto our land. If you're in the mood, you can make small talk with us and we will make small talk back. The art of small talk is beautiful and intricate and hard for foreigners to learn. It does not preclude large talk. You could be waiting for the Grand Avenue bus with a man you've seen around the neighborhood over the years, at the dry cleaner's and Kowalski's and Tom the Tailor's and La Cucaracha and ask him how he's doing and he'll tell you about the death of his father in the hospital the night before and you will listen to his spontaneous monologue and ease his loneliness a little. An utterly common occurrence in a society that isn't hung up on social status—people turning to each other and dishing up a story of astonishing frankness and intimacy.

In the new privatized low-tax minimal-services soci-

ety the Republicans are striving to lay on us, public transportation will offer no pleasure whatsoever. The bus will be for losers and dopes. The driver will sit in a bullet-proof box and there will be no conversation with him. The bus will be full of angry and sullen people who have lost hope that their kids can rise in the world and have a better life, which is the hope that makes it possible for me to turn to you and say something about the weather. Civility leads to civilities. In Republican America, you will not enjoy public life *period*. The public library, that great democratic temple, will become a waiting room for desperate and broken people, the alxies, the wacked-out, the unemployables, and the public schools will become holding tanks for children whose parents were too un-resourceful to find good schools for them, and politics will be so ugly and rancid that decent people will avoid expressing an opinion for fear of being screeched at and hectored and spat on.

That isn't the country I grew up in, dear hearts.

I grew up in a sweet country that was one country and so there were certain points where all roads led and everybody came together, nabob and yahoo, poet and redneck, Baptist and Catholic, and the public school was

one of those places. In Anoka, Minnesota, some children wound up attending Dartmouth and Stanford and Carleton and Princeton but they spent their formative years in the public school system with the children of farmers and carpenters and cops and firemen. They all rode together on the big yellow schoolbus and cheered for the Tornados and ate macaroni and cheese in the lunchroom. This experience is valuable. It gives you a tribal feeling. Everybody else knows the same songs you do, including *Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, guess I'll go eat worms* and *Did you ever think as the hearse rolls by that you may be the next to die?* And the one about the doctor and the nurse and the lady with the alligator purse. And *Minnesota, hats off to thee, to your colors true we shall ever be* and maybe *All Glory Laud and Honor to Thee O Saviour King, to Whom the Lips of Children Made Sweet Hosannas Ring*—or maybe not, there's room for diversity here—but we all grew up on the same playground and skipped rope to *Mable, Mable, set the table, she put on the red hot pepper* and played *Rover Red Rover* and *Prisoner's Base* and *Run Sheep Run* and *Fox and Geese* and we all knew what liverwurst was and *Cheez Whiz* and *Spam* and we all knew the story

of Daniel in the lion's den and Noah's Ark and the Prodigal Son and a couple hundred other basic tales—I'd hate to think that little Hmong and Mexican children might go through the St. Paul public schools and not learn *O say can you see any bedbugs on me* and *On top of Old Smokey all covered with sand I shot my poor teacher with a big rubber band* and *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school*. And of course *Step on a crack and break your mother's back*. Thanks to this wise saying, millions of youngsters have learned something about mercy and also avoided tripping on cracks and skinning their knees.

My wife and I lived in New York City for a while, a-gorgeous place if you enjoy humanity, but then we begat a little girl, and we brought her home to Minnesota so she could enjoy her aunts and grow up among slow-spoken enigmatic people. (Are they—a. resolute, b.-bored, c. thoughtful, d. drugged?) These are My People. I attended the University of Minnesota and remember how the marching band came blazing down University Avenue, flags snapping in the wind, the *shap-shap-shap* of their shoes, drums pounding out the cadence, and wheeled into Memorial Stadium packed with 61,000 people and when

they stood and sang “firm and strong, united are we,” you could feel that union in your shoes as thousands of gold balloons rose in the October air and you felt blessed to be one of this hardy northern tribe, honest and true, camped along the Mississippi River and the world’s largest freshwater lake, the state that produced Fitzgerald and the Mayo Clinic and Lindbergh, and Sinclair Lewis and Hubert Humphrey. I want my daughter to be from here too. As the song says, *Like the stream that bends to sea, like the pine that seeks the blue, Minnesota still for thee, thy sons and daughters true.* When I stand at a urinal, it’s the thought of Minnehaha Falls that loosens up my plumbing, and when I need to sleep at night, it’s the 87-counties of Minnesota that I slowly recite and I drop off around Pennington, Pipestone, Polk, Pope, Ramsey. Which is where St. Paul is, a civil place in which to bring up a child. A city of yellow-dog Democrats—*not even one (1) precinct in St. Paul voted for our current Republican U.S. senator even though in his days as a Democrat he was mayor of St. Paul, that’s how Democratic we are*—so there is a high value placed on public services. If you call 911 in St. Paul, the cops or the EMTs will arrive within four minutes. In the Republican suburbs, where

No New Taxes is the beginning and end of politics and emergency services depend on volunteers, the response time can be anywhere between ten or fifteen and thirty minutes.

This is the difference between Democrats and Republicans in 2004, when it comes right down to it. Republicans are all about Old Glory and school prayer and the sanctity of marriage and the Fatherhood of God but when it comes to actually needing help from them, you shouldn't get your hopes up. They might send an ambulance or they might just send a Get Well card. In yellow-dog St. Paul, you will be rescued by the St. Paul fire department and there is no better emergency service anywhere in the civilized world. You may be flat on the floor feeling as if an elephant stepped on your chest, or your child may have swallowed a fistful of God knows what medication, or your grandma may have slipped on the ice and banged her noggin and she insists she's okay but in Swedish—whatever your dilemma, the St. Paul rescue squad will deal with it in swift and professional fashion. Because we Democrats feel that the people of St. Paul are entitled to the best when it comes to what's crucial. You can be a Christian, atheist, Buddhist, nudist,

and the rescue squad will be there for you within four minutes.

Republicans have perfectly nice manners, normal hair, pleasant smiles, good deodorants, but when it comes down to cases, you do not want them to be monitoring your oxygen flow: they will set it to the minimum required to sustain basic brain function, and then they will recite a little prayer for you. They are a party that is all about perceptions, the Christian party that conceals enormous glittering malice and is led by brilliant bandits who are dividing and conquering the sweet land I grew up in. I don't accept this.

We Democrats are deciduous. We fade, lose heart, become torpid, languish, then the sap rises again, and we are passionate. This is a year for passion.

## Chapter 2



# WE HAVE BECOME THE TEDIOUS CONSERVATIVES



*There once was a good Democrat  
Who was able to talk through his hat.  
Such smart things he said  
Off the top of his head  
Or else out the place where he sat.*

**S**OMETHING has gone seriously haywire with the Republican Party. Once, it was the party of pragmatic Main Street businessmen in steel-rimmed spectacles who decried profligacy and waste, were devoted to their communities, and supported the sort of prosperity that raises all ships. They were good-hearted people who had vanquished the gnarlier elements of their party, the paranoid Roosevelt-haters, the Flat Earthers and Prohibitionists, the antipapist antiforeigner element. The genial

Eisenhower was their man, a genuine American hero of D-Day, who made it okay for reasonable people to vote Republican (even in the South), and he brought the Korean War to a stalemate, produced the Interstate Highway System, declined to rescue the French colonial army in Vietnam, and gave us a period of peace and prosperity, in which (oddly) American arts and letters flourished mightily and higher education burgeoned and there was a degree of plain *decency* in the country. Much too much was made of Alger Hiss and the Hollywood Ten by lefties with a bad case of the yips. Fifties Republicans were giants compared to today's. Richard-Nixon was the last Republican leader to feel a Christian obligation toward the-poor.

In the years between Nixon and Newt Gingrich, the party migrated southward down the Twisting Trail of Rhetoric and sneered at the idea of public service and became the Scourge of Liberalism, the Great Crusade Against the Sixties, the Death Star of Government, a gang of pirates famed for bold symbolic forays that diverted and fascinated the media by their sheer chutzpah, such as the misty-eyed flag-waving of Ronald Reagan who, while George McGovern flew bombers in World

War II, took a pass and made training films in Long Beach. The Willie Horton ads of 1988. The flogging of the undeserving poor, the barely concealed racism, the drumbeat of diatribes against The Gummint. The Nixon moderate vanished like the passenger pigeon, purged by a legion of angry white men who had risen to power on pure punk politics, nasty, violent, borderline psychopath. "Bipartisanship is another term for date rape," says Grover Norquist, the Sid Vicious of the GOP. "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub." The boy has Oedipal problems and government is his daddy.

The party of Lincoln and Liberty was transmogrified into the party of hairy-backed swamp developers and corporate shills, faith-based economists, see-through fundamentalist bullies with Bibles, Christians of convenience, freelance racists, hobby cops, misanthropic frat boys, lizardskin cigar monkeys,-jerktown romeos, ninja dittoheads, the shrieking midgets of-AM radio, tax cheats, cheese merchants, cat stranglers,-taxi dancers, grab-ass executives, gun fetishists, genteel pornographers, pill pushers, chronic nappers, nihilists in golf

pants, backed-up Baptists, Crips and Bloods of the boardroom, panjandrums of Ponzi marketing and the grand pooh-bahs of Percodan, censors, spin dentists, Swiss bankers, hit men, body snatchers, mouth breathers and tongue thrusters, testosterone junkies, oversexed hedgehogs, brownshirts in pinstripes, sweatshop tycoons, line jumpers, randy preachers, marsupial moms and chirpy news anchors, UFO scholars, johns, shroomheads, hacks, fakirs, aggressive dorks, wizened aliens, aluminum-siding salesmen, Lamborghini libertarians, people who believe Neil Armstrong's moonwalk was filmed in Roswell, New Mexico, little honkers out to diminish the rest of us, braying, smirking, scratching on the national blackboard, Newt's evil spawn and their Etch-a-Sketch president with a voice like a dial tone, who for almost four years has looked as if he were just about to say something smart, not much introspection going on here, no inquiring minds eager to learn about the world, not much chance of anyone picking up a book that isn't on the official reading list and hearing a still small voice, a dull and rigid man suspicious of the free flow of information and of secular institutions in general, whose philosophy is a jumble of badly sutured body-parts trying

to walk, supported by millions of good folks who do not share the anarchist dream but sleep well with this West Texas sphinx for a nightlight. Republicans: the No. 1 reason why the rest of the world thinks we're deaf, dumb, and dangerous.

What gorgeous characters they have given us, a cast worthy of Dickens—the oily and toxic DeLay, the lubricious Lott, the bland and arrogant Dr. Frist, the shabby and devious Rove, the meathead Hastert, the squinty Rumsfeld, the stone-brained Cheney, and the tragic Powell, the Company Man Who Could Have Been Great, who was offered the mantle by all the polls but deferred to the Boss's Callow Son and vouched for him, the battlefield veteran defending the goldbricker, the bootstrap hero kneeling to the Young Pretender. Rich ironies abound! Lies pop up like toadstools in the forest! Wild swine crowd round the public trough! Outrageous gerrymandering! Districts shaped like orthopedic devices! Pocket lining on a massive scale! Paid lobbyists sit in the committee rooms and write legislation to alleviate the suffering of billionaires! Young Republicans ride the government gravy train! The train is full! More cars are added! Hypocrisies shine like cat turds in the moonlight!

O Mark Twain, where art thou at this hour? Arise, and behold the Gilded Age reincarnated gaudier than ever, upholding great wealth as the sure sign of Divine Grace, railing against the expense of public schools and calling for more prisons. Henry Mencken, you poisoned these boobs and they've come back hardier than ever. A whole new strain, more virulent than any previous.

Every satirist who drew breath has flung pots of ink at this parade of tooting lummoxes and here it is come round again, marching down Main Street, rallying to the cause of William McKinley, hail, hail, the gang's all here, ta-ra-ra-BOOM-de-ay.

★

It's the natural cycle of life, I suppose, that conservatives become anarchists and liberals conservatives. Once we Democrats were young and rebellious and lobbed eggs at the bewigged and berobed Establishment and now we're the parents with the thankless job of home maintenance, defending principles that go back to the founding of the Republic, namely, the notion of the common good, the principle of equality, the very idea of representative government. We've become the tiresome, repetitive old dad who tells his boys that Progress Depends on Teamwork

and All of Us Learning to Pull Together, while the Republicans have turned into the Screw You Party. They tore into the progressive income tax, raked the IRS over the coals for chasing down deadbeats, and succeeded in convincing the American people that they are overtaxed (compared to whom? Albania?), succeeded to the extent that 17% of Americans now believe it is justifiable to cheat on your income tax.

Here in 2004, George W. Bush is running for reelection on a platform of tragedy—the single greatest failure of national defense in our history, the attacks of 9/11/2001 in which nineteen men with box cutters put this nation into a tailspin, a failure the details of which the White House has fought to keep secret, even as it has run the country into hock up to the hubcaps, thanks to generous tax cuts for the well-fixed, hoping to lead us into a box canyon of debt that will render government impotent, even as we engage in a war against a small country that was undertaken for the President's personal satisfaction but sold to the American public on the basis of brazen misinformation, a war whose purpose is to distract us from an enormous transfer of wealth taking place in this country, flowing upward, and the deception is working

beautifully so far. The top 1% holds nearly half of the financial wealth, the greatest concentration of wealth of any industrialized nation, more concentrated than at any time since the Depression. In 1980, on average, CEOs earned 42 times the salary of the average worker, and these days they earn about 476 times that salary. Since 1980, the rich have been getting richer fast and furiously and hard-working people in the middle are sliding down the greasy slope who never imagined this could happen to them. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is the death knell of democracy. No republic in the history of humankind has survived this. The election of 2004 will say something about what happens to ours. The omens are not good.

I am a liberal and liberalism is the politics of kindness. Liberals stand for tolerance, magnanimity, community spirit, the defense of the weak against the powerful, love of learning, freedom of belief, art and poetry, city life, the very things that make America worth dying for. The people who call themselves conservatives stand for tax cuts, and further tax cuts, annual tax cuts, the only policy they know. Cut taxes. Use the refund to buy a gun and an attack dog to take with you when you drive your

all-terrain vehicle through the barricades of Republicanville to make a foray into enemy territory to purchase supplies. They are leading this great land toward a Lost New World where Social Security and Medicare will be dim memories and America will be a series of malls connected by interstates, and people will live in walled compounds with moats, like in the Middle Ages.

Other liberals, bless their hearts, are deeply into diversity and thanks to them the public school doesn't use the word *Christmas* without mentioning *Kwanzaa*, *Hanukkah*, and *Ramadan* in the same sentence, but I am far more interested in middleness and centrality and ordinary decency, which we are losing in George W. Bush's America. He is leading our beloved country down the old plank road toward Plantation Days in Dixie, where you are either landed aristocracy, or a supervisor, or a barefoot field hand in overalls. This is not the America I grew up in.

What liberals must conserve is the middle class: the stable family who can afford to enjoy music and theater and take the kids to Europe someday and put money in the collection plate and save for college and keep up the home and be secure against catastrophe. This fam-

ily has taken big hits in payroll taxes and loss of buying power and a certain suppressed panic about job security. Its optimism and good humor are not boundless and if Democrats don't defend it, it could be washed away along with the old-fashioned notion of the common good that was strong back in my youth in the Fifties when we thought of this as one nation. We learned it in public school from the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. America is predicated on an idea, which is equality, and the equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We are not a herd of woolly mammoths united only for self-preservation, nor a gang of mercenaries, nor the United Federation of Caucasians or the Church of the Sacred Banner, we are a noble political experiment and when Lincoln rose on that November afternoon in 1863, after a man with three names had blown hard for two hours, he summed up in two minutes the great cause: what could be the Lord's purpose in allowing the green fields of Pennsylvania to be soaked with blood and gore if not to consecrate these United States to the ideal of government of and by and for the people?

Nothing in literature moved me so much in my youth

as the Civil War, the popular Bruce Catton histories, the letters of soldiers, the Brady photographs, Whitman's *Specimen Days*, the biographies of Lincoln, the story of our own First Minnesota that charged forward to plug a hole at Gettysburg and save the Union line from folding—the whole epic sweep of the War and the cavalier arrogance of the South that pushed the nation to conflict and that almost put to rout the muddling patriots of the North, the stubbornness of Grant, the cult of Lee, the woozy romantic twaddle of the Lost Cause, and the mystical sense of Union that rose from the slaughter. Union: a house divided cannot stand. Slavery was a gross insult to the national ideal; we could not tolerate it and still be the United States.

If the powerful have free rein to stomp on the weak, then the Union itself is weakened: to tolerate injustice will corrupt politics and leach away public happiness and darken public places; walking in the darkened streets we will regard each other with suspicion and feel the need for locked gates, private security guards, moats, towers, motion detectors, prisons in which to keep the vengeful, and circuses and spectacles to distract us from what is happening.

The Union does not rest on strength of arms or financial wealth but on the common faith of American people that their children have a fair chance to thrive, that the iron gates have not slammed shut on them, that there is justice, that the Bill of Rights has not been privatized. This is the bottom line in America: we have to feel that our kids stand a chance—otherwise, there’s a civil war brewing.

We are one country, and I remain a proud Unionist, happy to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” and pledge allegiance, sing about the amber waves of grain, wish I was in the land of cotton, pick my teeth with a carpet tack, be in the kitchen with Dinah, hate to see the evening sun go down, take myself out to the ball game, walk that lonesome valley, and lean on the everlasting arms. I love this country. This is one of those simple dumb discoveries a man makes, like the night I came out of the New York hospital where I, a bystander at my wife’s travail, had held my naked newborn six-pound shining-eyed daughter in my two hands, and I walked around town at midnight stunned by the fact that what I had seen was utterly ordinary, *everybody comes into the world pretty much like that*. In the same spirit, I walk around St. Paul

and think, *This is a great country* and it wasn't made so by angry people. We have a sacred duty to bequeath it to-our grandchildren in better shape than however we found it. We have a long way to go and we're not getting any younger.

The Union is what needs defending this year. Government of Enron and by Halliburton and for the southern Baptists is not the same as what Lincoln spoke of. Not even close. This gang of Pithecanthropus Republicanii has humbugged us to death on terrorism and tax cuts for the comfy and school prayer and flag burning and claimed the right to know what books we read and to dump their sewage upstream from town and clear-cut the forest and gut the IRS and promote the corporate takeover of the public airwaves and to hell with anybody who opposes them. Their crusade against government has given patriotism a bad name. And their victory has been accompanied by such hubris as would choke a goat. One Republican columnist wrote that Democrats should give up opposing tax breaks for the rich because working people don't vote their self-interest, they vote their aspirations and are happy to give big gifts to rich people because they hope to become rich too. A little TV Republican named Tucker

Carlson wrote a column saying that if Democrats want to win, they need to (1) talk tough, (2) start their own think tanks, and (3) get a sense of humor.—(3) Got one, Tucker, (2) got plenty of think tanks, except we call them colleges, and (1) shut your piehole, peabrain, or I'll set fire to your loafers.

Democrats have changed America in simple basic ways in the past fifty years that have benefited everyone. Race has become less and less an issue in people's lives and racism has ceased to be socially acceptable anywhere. Women have moved into every realm of society and this is everywhere accepted without much comment. Equal opportunity in education, employment, housing. There is general agreement on the right to a dignified old age, guaranteed by the state. Democrats led the way in bringing these things about. It's one thing to get into power and do favors for your friends; it's quite another to touch the conscience of a nation. The last Republican to do that was Teddy Roosevelt.

## Chapter 3



### WHERE I'M COMING FROM



I WAS BORN in 1942, in time to catch glimpses of fugitive scenes from the 19th Century and get coal smoke in my nostrils and hear the *oomph* of steam engines in the night and the scream of their whistles. Somber women in plain print dresses walked through my childhood quoting proverbs (Haste makes waste. If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride and the world be drowned in a sea of pride) and men whose faces looked carved from wood and who kept a heavy-lidded watch on-things. I rode the hayrack drawn by Belgian horses, harness jingling, tossing their heads, and once I rode one-bareback, clinging to his mane, utter gooseflesh grandeur at the age of four. I stood next to Uncle Jim, his forehead against the flank of a cow, and smelled the warm

milk squirting into the steel bucket and poured it into a milk can to be lowered into a cistern in the milk house and kept cool until the milk truck came to pick it up. I chased chickens through the lilac bushes and grabbed their ankles with a coat hanger and brought them to the chopping block to be dispatched. On Sunday mornings, I sat on hard wooden chairs next to stern old white-bearded Plymouth Brethren in black gabardine suits and white starched shirts buttoned to the top, no ties, no vain adornments, who walked the narrow path of truth and righteousness, intent on finding the Lord's Will for their lives; they put Him first and material things second, as a result of which they were poor and lived on the fringe of society, which was more or less what Jesus had promised His followers, so they were not disappointed. They were not much for small talk and they didn't trust strangers or confide in them. On their best days they were funny and generous and sociable, and on their worst days, they didn't discuss it. They were stubborn stoics who got up at dawn and washed their faces in cold water from steel basins and read a chapter of Scripture and prayed at length and then worked until dusk and had supper and fell into bed early. They bought no insurance and had no faith in

doctors. They accepted disease as their lot in life and pain to be cheerfully endured and walked down the narrow road that life assigned them, walked to the end knowing it was not the end but only a corner around which Christ awaited them in shining glory, His loving arms open to receive them. They were people of profound kindness.

I am descended from an act of kindness. My grandfather James Keillor journeyed from New Brunswick to Minnesota in 1880 to help out his brother-in-law who had homesteaded north of Anoka and was dying of tuberculosis. (James's grandfather Thomas Keillor came over to Canada from Yorkshire in 1773 and tried to make a living harvesting hay in the saltwater meadows that French settlers had been driven from, and here the Keillors met up with the Crandalls, who had fled north from the Connecticut colonies in 1778, having taken a stand for law and order at the wrong moment in history and lost their homes, everything they couldn't haul away in a wagon. Premature conservatives.) James was 20, a strapping young shipwright, and he arrived in Anoka to find the brother-in-law on his deathbed, the sister with three small children and a modest farm on sandy soil along Trott Brook in Ramsey Township. James stayed to raise

those children, and then, at the age of 46, fell in love with a 20-year-old teacher, Dora Powell, whose schoolhouse was across the road from the farm. One day, he crossed the road and told her he wanted to kiss her, and he did, or she did, or something happened between them, and they were married by a justice, and he brought her home. In his hurry to get upstairs he forgot his team of horses, and they stood there all night in harness. From this passionate union sprang several hundred Keillors including-me.

I was born in Anoka, Minnesota, early enough to see horse-drawn plowing and experience the darkness of a nonelectrified farm and late enough to be only thirteen when Elvis blew into town and was fervently condemned by all serious right-thinking people and Jerry Lee Lewis shook our nerves and rattled our brains. I got to hear a roomful of Brethren sing a cappella the mournful old hymns and baptize young people in Trott Brook and I saw the last living veteran of the Union Army, Albert Woolson, ride in the Anoka Halloween parade, an ancient cadaverous man sunk deep in the backseat of a convertible and waving a flag in his tiny translucent hand, and I got to hear Jack Benny on the radio, but I was

still young enough to be 18 when John F. Kennedy ran for President and to be bowled over by him.

Grandma lived on the farm with Uncle Jim and they didn't read the paper or listen to the radio much. Uncle Jim had a crystal set in his room but I don't recall them ever discussing politics. Presidents came and went, and the great and famous, on a stage very far away from their thoughts. (In 1961, the year before Grandma died, I made her sit down and watch John Glenn's rocket blast into orbit, but nothing could make her believe it was true. Pictures held no truth for her, and Walter Cronkite was nobody she believed whatsoever; after all, she'd never met him.)

My dad had left the farm when he was 23 and eloped with my mother and went to work in the post office. After the war, he bought an acre of cornfield north of Minneapolis and started building us a house with money borrowed under the GI Bill of Rights. We were living in Minneapolis where big yellow streetcars with cane seats rumbled down Bloomington Avenue past our house and we rode the trolley to Como Zoo and the great glass-domed Conservatory and the old green wooden ballpark to see the Millers and to Grandpa Denham's little stucco

bungalow on Oakland Avenue under the elms overarching the green yards, the peonies and marigolds, the cast-iron lawn chairs, the bird bath, the gazing globe, the trim grass, a world of perfect order, the streets numbered and the avenues alphabetical from Aldrich, Bryant, Colfax, Dupont through Washburn, Xerxes, York, and-Zenith. In my memory, my movie-star-handsome dad stands in his wool overcoat, a gray fedora on his head, smiling at the Revere movie camera in Mother's hand as a street-car passes in the summer of 1947. He smiles, like Gary Cooper. We children stand perfectly still in Grandpa's yard and then we perk up and smile—someone off-camera has told us to—and like good children we do and my sister waves.

Dad dug the basement for the new house in the clay and loam, poured concrete, lay concrete block walls, put a roof over it, and we left Minneapolis and lived in the basement for five years while he framed up the house and finished it, a three-bedroom Cape Cod, white, blue shutters, from a blueprint he'd seen in *Popular Home*. The whine of the power saw, the smell of sawdust, the rhythm of the hammer. He worked for the Railway Mail Service, sorting mail in the mail car between St. Paul and

*Where I'm Coming From*

Jamestown, N.D., going off to work in the afternoon, in overalls, with a government-issue .38 revolver in a holster, and put in a 12-hour shift, slept at the Cran Hotel in Jamestown, then boarded the eastbound for another shift.

To our Keillor cousins, we were city people and looked upon with some suspicion so we tried to win their approval and pitch in with chores, shovel cow manure, do our part, not flinch. My mother, a city girl, learned to dip a dead chicken in boiling water, rip off its feathers, take a butcher knife and gut it, without comment.

The big hurdle for me was the outhouse, sitting there and dropping your dirt into a hole and hearing it plop on other people's and at night, if your bladder was full, feeling your way to the end of the bed and locating the chamber pot and squatting on it and doing your business. Our house that Dad built had indoor plumbing of course and this permitted great delicacy in regard to personal matters. You locked the door, ran water in the sink to camouflage other sounds, and nobody was any the wiser. It was a shock to go to the farm and sit in the old two-holer and be joined by your cousin. At first you tried to pretend nothing was happening, that you'd only

come here to peruse the Sears catalog and its fine selection of sporting goods, but then events took their course, your bowels opened, a great stink was launched downward, and you were initiated into the great democracy of the latrine: *WE ALL DO IT*.

Living in the basement, climbing the stairs to the muddy cornfield, piles of sand and gravel, I got my first inkling that *we were poor*. Startling to a boy of six. Other people live in houses with carpets and antimacassars and dresser scarves and figurines and we live in a bunker in the ground. *Bunker, bunkbed*. How poor are we? *I don't know*. We had a half-acre vegetable garden and in late summer Mother canned. In the laundry room stood a wall of shelves with rows of Ball fruit jars, filled with corn, beans, and stewed tomatoes. In early spring, Dad and I drove north to Lake Superior for smelting late at night: a bonfire on the shore near the mouth of the Lester River, a crowd of men in hip waders, and when there was a run of smelt rushing for the river to spawn, the crowd waded in with landing nets and hauled up pound after pound of the little fish and we took ours home in big milk cans and filleted and froze them, to be eaten

over the summer, breaded and fried. This seemed to me to be poor people food because it was free.

One day, helping Dad bring groceries into the basement from the car, I carried two big three-gallon glass jugs of milk, one in each hand, as I'd seen Uncle Jim carry milk cans from the barn. Toted them down the back stairs and then lost my balance, pitched forward, dropped the jugs, which broke. Six gallons of milk splashed on the concrete floor. I picked up the shards of glass, deeply ashamed, and slunk into the room I shared with my brother and lay on my bunk and sobbed into the pillow. I had wasted food. We were poor. What would happen to us now? The pillowcase was wet with my tears. Our old black cocker spaniel, Capadocia, lay at my feet. *We are poor*. On the other hand, I had books, a tablet and pencils, a radio, a pair of binoculars. Clean clothes.

When the garage got built, I liked to put a little piece of plywood on the floor and stand, bat in hand, and wait on the 3-and-2 pitch and swing, driving Whitey Ford's fast-ball over the centerfield fence in Yankee Stadium to win the seventh game of the World Series for the New York Giants. I earned \$100,000 a year and had bought a fine home for my family, a real-showplace with chandeliers,

and all my aunts and uncles were proud as punch, and I had a wife, a beautiful one but vague, faraway in the stands, cheering, waving a hanky.

I sometimes tried to help Dad with building the house, but he wasn't a great teacher. He got disgusted if you made the same mistake twice. So I holed up in my room and read books, Richard Halliburton's sailing expeditions to the Far East, *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, *Black Beauty*, *Heidi*. And then jumped to *Main Street* and *Babbitt* and Fitzgerald and *Studs Lonigan*. Writing was respected in our family. Not necessarily fiction, but literary endeavor was honored by my mother and father, who revered the King James Bible of course and enjoyed a clever turn of phrase in the newspaper. Mother followed Cedric Adams's tales of his boyhood in Madelia in the *Star*. Writing was something of a black art, and there were bad characters in that line of work, drunkards, infidels, adulterers, but the power of language was respected. I was honored when my father asked me when I was 19 to write a letter for him, setting out his qualifications to be a rural mail carrier, and I did a good workmanlike job on it, though he didn't get the position. Qualifications didn't

matter so much; it was a patronage appointment, and Dad didn't know the right people.

My father sat at one end of the table, my mother at the other, six children, three on a side, and we passed the stewed tomatoes, the green beans, the liver and onions, and I kept wondering, *Are we poor?* We went up to the farm in Anoka to kill chickens, which seemed like a poor-person thing to do. The chickens ran like halfbacks through the lilac bushes and into the cornfield, but I ran most of them down and hooked them by the ankles with a wire hanger and brought them flapping and croaking back to Dad, who dispatched them with an ax on a bloody stump. I held the carcass until it stopped dripping and gave it to Mother for defeathering and evisceration. Dad said that store-bought chicken didn't taste as good to him and Grandma said you could never be sure whether store-bought meat was properly handled. *No, it's because we're poor.* On long car trips, my mother made sandwiches on a cutting board across her lap sitting in the front seat, cheese and baloney or peanut butter and jelly. She said the prices you pay for food in restaurants are outlandish. *Poor people.* Up on the farm, I washed my face with Lava soap in cold water in the morning

and wiped it on a towel on a roller. I collected eggs and brought them in for breakfast, fried in a black crusted skillet on a woodstove, with a thick slice of Grandma's bread. Once I swung on a rope through the dusty air of the haymow and leaped onto a stack of bales and skidded down the side of them through the open hatch and into the bull's pen and cracked my head on his feed trough and was carried into the house and laid on the couch and Grandma put brown paper on my head. I thought I should go to the hospital but she moistened this brown paper and placed it on the contusions and said it'd make me feel better. *We are poor people, I thought. We cannot afford to go to a doctor. Other people would take their children to be x-rayed after a bump on the head but in our family we put paper on them and say a prayer, Help Us Again Amen, and that's the end of it.*

I think of my mother at the sink peeling potatoes and looking out at the snowy garden and the wash frozen stiff on the clotheslines, and she is angry at my dad who has criticized what she spent for Christmas presents. She defers to him, though she works as hard as he, maybe harder. She does the laundry in a washing machine with a wringer and hangs it on the line and scrubs the floors

and cooks and vacuums and in late summer she takes all the bounty of the garden and cooks it in a pressure cooker to be canned in jars. You make a mistake in the canning process and you run the risk of *Clostridium botulinum*, which is so deadly that an ounce could kill 100 million people. One jar of asparagus, the equivalent of a medium-range nuclear warhead. (You tap the lid with a knife and if it rings, then the seal is good and the angel of death will pass over, and if it thuds, you throw that jar away.) She puts up a hundred jars of tomatoes and a hundred quarts of corn and makes pickles and jam, all for frugality's sake, and she doesn't remind him of the money he spends to buy a new car every few years. She can't mention this for fear he will turn silent, which is his weapon. Hers is weeping, and lamentation, his is walking away and getting busy with something. She was one of those women who never read fashion magazines, never updated their look, never used hairspray, just put on a scarf. One of those women who got up every morning and got the kids off to school and did the wash and every spring went at the house in a fury of soap and Lysol and scrubbed and scraped and rendered everything shining and new and yet had not much say in things in

general, having been brought up to be of service and accept a rough road without complaining, women of great kindness.

My grandma had no luxuries and no expectation of any, but her children felt the gravitational pull of prosperity. They left the farm and got jobs in town and wore town clothes and street shoes and didn't necessarily read Scripture after breakfast or kneel and pray, just a quick rote prayer over the food, because they had to be to work on time. They lived cheek-to-jowl with strangers and learned to make small talk and bought chicken at Super Valu and got a TV set and started believing Walter Cronkite. But still they thought about God all the time. A plaque hung on our dining room wall (CHRIST THE UNSEEN GUEST AT EVERY MEAL, THE SILENT LISTENER TO EVERY CONVERSATION) to remind us that we were on His Mind and after dinner we circulated the little plastic bread loaf with the Scripture verse cards and each person at the table drew a card and read a verse. *We know that all things work together for good to those who love God.* Chuck Berry was cruising along in his Coupe de Ville and Elvis bumping and grinding and the Beach Boys sang anthems to California, but the basic question

in my mind, then and now, is *What does God want me to do?* I think about this every day. Or I try not to think about it and thus think even harder about it. *Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy might. And love thy neighbor as thyself.* I sit and ponder this with the trash culture bumping and grinding outside the window and the powerful undertow of narcissism tugging, and I believe I serve God and my neighbor by paying diligent, prayerful, and playful attention to my peculiar gifts, such as they are, and doing good work that supports the weak and lightens up the heavy. I belong to the Church of Work and Prayer. I was young in the time of hippiedom and flittery-skittery tie-dye people in flowing locks with their dreamy take on things and long yawps about illusion/reality and druggy sitar-ridden music and they were not from my church. I knew an English major drop-out who felt a holy calling to raise sheep and live like a medieval serf in a makeshift yurt while making helpless animals miserable whom he had no idea how to herd or care for. Not my church. Coke and speed and marijuana didn't interest me for some reason and we Christians have no need of barbiturates, we are sleepy enough as it is.

My politics doesn't come from the Sixties, it comes from my parents' generation who stepped out of high school into the Depression, hoed corn, drove truck, pumped gas, made do, bopped around on not much dough, went off in 1942 and fought the good war and came home and enjoyed the democratic prosperity of the Fifties. Satirists portrayed them as anti-intellectuals and raging conformists in love with plastic and the color beige, but I think they were just happy they had come through so much trouble and danger and had a roof over their heads and food on the table. They were public-spirited, joiners of committees, school board stalwarts, volunteer firemen, softball coaches, Scoutmasters, Sunday School teachers, and the women—this was back before it took two people working 60-hour weeks to support a middle-class family—were ferocious do-gooders in the community, the angels of the library, the muscle behind the school bond issue, the church ladies, the surrogate mothers, organizers of festivals, tireless fund-raisers. Sometimes satirists are dead wrong. What seemed like conformity was really a low level of narcissism and no taste for flamboyant behavior: my parents and their contemporaries believed in a sort of public happiness that found full expression

at Anoka High School graduation—the wave of warm buttery emotion at the-playing-of “Pomp and Circumstance” and the singing of the-national anthem, the flashbulbs popping as the children processed in, the good feelings for teachers and school and community, even if the speaker was a dud-and-a windbag. The loyalty to the community was palpable.

My politics is somehow descended from the kindness of my aunts, apolitical though they were, from tireless Aunt Elsie who kept a lovely home, so clean and fragrant, her perfect Sunday dinners, her exquisite hospitality, and Aunt Ina with her collection of seven hundred sets of salt and pepper shakers, and Aunt Ruth, short and round with sweet little chins and fat creases at her wrists, like a baby's, her plump feet in high heel pumps, the first photographer in the family, and Aunt Josephine with her well-kept garden, the handsomest woman in the family, and Aunt Bessie, the family historian and wit, and Aunt Eleanor who marshaled the big Keillor family Thanksgivings for years, an outdoorswoman who skied and kept horses and cut trees and drove around to check on her elderly neighbors almost up to the day she died, in her kitchen, fixing Thanksgiving dinner. I do not remember

these Christian women as judgmental or sarcastic or authoritarian: they were the soul of kindness and their spirit points to the politics that sees to children, the sick, the poor, the wayward, the downcast, and lets the slick and the strong do for themselves.

Yes, my ancestors made a bigger impression on me than any of my contemporaries did, especially the addled ones. I'm conservative. I went to the contemporary service at church where the young minister played guitar and the kids sang, "Wherever I am, you're near me, nobody cares for me as you do, you give me all that I need. Thank you, Lord, for helping me as you do." And I really do prefer *Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee*. It's better writing, no matter what anybody says. My ancestors told me, in plain Protestant fashion, to Work, Achieve, Be Somebody, Question Authority, Don't Be a Chip on the Tide, Be Your Own Man. The glib Sixties talk about the system being broken struck me as juvenile and silly: if water flows from the tap and the buses run and the mailman brings the mail and the newspaper lands on your porch in the morning with a fiery editorial against ignorance and corruption, the system is work-

ing okay—the rest is up to you. I could appreciate the Christian aspects of hippiedom, the communalism, the embrace of poverty, the love of the land, the tolerance, the cheery potluck suppers and the singing and barefoot dancing, the open-heartedness, but the writing—oh my God. A thin soup of mystical noodles and no salt, pages and pages of transcendent dishwater and nobody home.

My generation went from the pretentious Bob Dylan to arguing about wine and cheese and the virginity of their olive oil and the merits of vintage balsamic vinegars, coffee beans and designer jeans and shiatsu vs. reflexologic massage. They lived most intensely through media, were happy jargonizers, and sadly self-absorbed—they could talk for hours about a romance gone sour and pick at an ancient grudge against their father and ponder their fate until you were desperate for an excuse to leave. No, my politics comes from my parents, who believed in-keeping your yard nice and paying your taxes and looking out for people in trouble. The descendants of the-narcissist New Agers are the narcissist Republicans. People with too much money and too little character, all sensibility and no sense, all nostalgia and no his-

## HOMEGROWN DEMOCRAT

tory. It's-the Republican Party that followed its nose and swung to the right and I am standing where my people stood back when this was one country, before the deluge of delusion.

## Chapter 4



# ANOKA HIGH SCHOOL



I AM A CHILD of public education. My parents had six children and there was no choice but to put their trust in the Anoka public schools. They packed me off to Benson School on the day after Labor Day, 1948, with lunch money in a small brown envelope and a tablet and pencils in a pencil box and told me to keep my nose clean and do what the teacher said. Mrs. Shaver was my first grade teacher, St. Estelle, who noticed I was slow to read and kept me after school to read aloud to her as she corrected papers and made me feel I was doing this to keep her entertained, not because I was dumb. Though I was. At movies, when the text rolled down at the beginning,

“Many years ago in Europe during the era known as the Dark Ages, bands of knights roamed the countryside . . .” I was lost and other kids were not.

Parents did not supervise their children’s schooling then, just as they didn’t manage our social lives—“parenting” wasn’t a verb and children didn’t have “play dates,” we just went out the door and fell into some company or other, a band of robbers, or the Confederate cavalry, or an Ojibway war party, and as for school, Mother looked at the class projects I brought home and commented on the penmanship, and she looked at the report card when Mrs. Shaver sent it home, but teachers were deferred to back then. And so, amazingly, we learned “Frankie and Johnny” in the fourth grade, a traditional ballad about a pimp and a prostitute—unthinkable now—including the lines:

*The first time she shot him he staggered.*

*The second time she shot him he fell.*

*The third time there was a southwest wind*

*From the northeast corner of hell.*

There we are in the class photograph, Benson School, 1952: the girls in corduroy jumpers and the boys in

plaid shirts, our hair slicked down and combed, our clean hands folded on the desks, the map of the United States of America in the back of the room. We aren't handsome or stylish children, as children today are, and we didn't bathe every day, just on Saturday night, and in between we washed our faces, no deodorant for us, we smelled like kids, but we were extremely anxious to please and most of us, thanks to Mrs. Shaver and Mrs. Moehlenbrock, loved school. I'm in the second row from the left, fifth desk from the front, the boy in steel-rim glasses, the good speller, competing with Billy Pedersen for Champion Reader honors. My mother made sure I had clean clothes, some from the Sears, Roebuck catalog and some handed down from older cousins and one pair of jeans from my sister that zipped up the side. Mother reminded me to say, "Please" and "Excuse me" and "May I—" (not "Can I—") and to pay attention in school and not daydream. A report card with poor marks in deportment was not taken lightly. Grandma Keillor had been a schoolteacher and her grandchildren were not going to be scofflaws and scapegraces and illiterate ne'er-do-wells. A mark of Satisfactory in arithmetic demanded a promise to reform and earn an Excellent. It wasn't enough to

say you weren't interested in arithmetic. Maybe you weren't but you should pay attention and learn something and not waste the teacher's time.

For 7th grade, I got on the yellow schoolbus and rode it ten miles north to Anoka where I spent six years in Anoka High School, where my dad had graduated and all my Keillor aunts and uncles. Anoka was a river town, on the Rum and Mississippi, with a bustling Main Street and a handsome old red-brick county courthouse with a steeple sitting high and proud in the courthouse square. A quiet town where the front-page news in the *Anoka Herald* tended toward community events and nothing bad was said about anybody.

In Anoka High School you found yourself among farm kids smelling of hay, the haberdasher's kid in his yellow cardigan sweater, and greasers in black slacks and pink shirts and hair like Elvis's, their customized cars blasting into the parking lot in the morning, and the debate team crowd who were earnest and ambitious, and the brainy kids (innocent, socially inept) and the fraternity of jocks who had to be careful not to appear brainy. Then there were the oddballs like me, outsiders, starved for approval, doinking around writing poems or drawing

cartoons or doing Bob & Ray comedy routines or thinking about space travel. We were celibates, unknissed by anybody, our dignity was too brittle to risk rejection. I read self-help books, such as we had in 1958, and they said, "Just be yourself," which, in my case, did not seem to me a good idea.

I wasn't very bright but I disguised my ordinariness by being extremely quiet so some teachers imagined I was an introspective genius. Others wondered if I were deaf.-A person almost always burnishes his reputation by shutting up: I learned that as a boy. I practiced the art of invisibility, the gift of the middle child in a large family, a sort of vacancy or blankness, and teachers looked right through me and asked the person behind me to come to the blackboard and work out the math problem, and girls looked through me as if I were foliage. I didn't mind.

I was six-foot-three, 136 pounds with my shoes on, I looked like a folded ironing board with hair, I didn't go around mirrors. I was so near-sighted that without my glasses I lived in an impressionist world. I was in the Young Democrats Club and the girls I knew were Democrats and sympathetic to needy cases. The club took a

ski-trip to Theodore Wirth Park, my first time on skis. These were the wooden kind with the single leather strap across your shoes. I got in the back of the line at the top of the hill. I didn't use poles because I had no idea what to do with them. I pushed off from the top of the hill when nobody was looking and suddenly I was a physics experiment, trying to stay vertical, hands over my head, trees racing by, the law of gravity all over me, and a small spruce zoomed toward me, three feet high, and I leaned to one side and the ground came up and whacked me and I slid on my face for a hundred feet or so and collected a few pounds of snow under my shirt and pants, and hiked down the hill and never tried skiing again. I still remember every moment of that run. People ski for years trying to attain an intensity of experience that I got the first time. I went to the ski lodge and there was my crowd, the doinks, the gimps, the losers, hanging around the lobby fireplace and pretending to have a very very good time waiting to go home. I took a cup of spiced tea and sat down on the couch and glimpsed myself in an old cracked mirror across the room, a small dark cloud with a lizard face, inept, impoverished, faintly ludicrous, a person I wouldn't have wanted to know.

*Anoka High School*

There were some lovely moments with girls, lounging in swimsuits in a dark green gazebo on a long sloping lawn by the river, and talking and smoking, trying to get the hang of cigarette inhalation and be intellectual, arguing with terrible certainty that the world had taken a fatal turn and was about to end in nuclear conflagration—a dark imagination was a sure way to be taken seriously. I longed to have a girlfriend to whisper affection to in the dark, and neck with, the little ballet of tenderness, the electricity, the delicacy of touch and countertouch—I wondered if something terrible was wrong with me that I hadn't kissed a girl yet—16, 17, 18—when did normal people start doing this? I sent away for a nudist magazine with black and white photos of naked people playing volleyball, which I read secretly in the basement and one day, hearing footsteps on the stairs, stuffed it into a bookshelf full of old *Sugar Creek Gang* and *Nancy Drew* books and fled, and never found it again. Somebody took it and threw it away, but nothing was said to me about it. We were good at silence in our family.

Altogether the Class of 1960, Anoka High School, formed a picture of democracy that I will carry for the rest of my life. We went through it all together—the

embarrassment, walking to the front of speech class and turning and facing them, or standing in gym shorts and fermented socks in a line of boys waiting to do a flying somersault and thinking to myself, "Someday I won't have to do this," the dull misery of indifferent teachers (coaches were the worst), a lingering sense of dread about the future, the gathering sense of inevitable failure and disgrace. All of us odd ducks lined up in our graduation gowns and paraded onto the football field that June evening with *no idea* what life would deal out to us. Not a clue.

But it was there at Anoka High School, that big, bland beige-tiled building, that Mr. Hochstetter encouraged my literary pretensions. He was a brilliant man who paced his classroom declaiming about Twain and Mencken and George Ade and how Luther's Reformation had paved the way for social criticism like Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* while the boys in the back of the room dozed or read comics. He liked me, and said I had talent to write, and a kind word or two is all a boy needs. The heart almost bursts with pleasure. He directed me to the Minneapolis Public Library where I climbed the stairs past the Egyptian mummy in its stone coffin and entered into the

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stacks and there was pure heaven. I hadn't thought about college, not considering myself slick or bright enough to make a go of it, being from Podunkville, but I was at home in a library, utterly in my element, and the University of Minnesota had an enormous library, so I would give that a try.