

Chapter 1



DON'T THINK YOU'RE SPECIAL



*Here's to Vice-President Cheney
Who is neither charming nor brainy,
But he's doing his best,
He's avoided arrest,
And he's been careful with his gun, ain't he.*

I AM a Democrat, which was nothing I decided for myself but simply the way I was brought up, starting with the idea of *Don't take all the cookies, even though nobody is looking. Think about the others. Do unto them 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—God isn't going to make an exception in your case so don't ask*, which was drummed into

HOMEGROWN DEMOCRAT

us children back in the old days when everyone attended public school, except Catholics, Rockefellers, or boys with behavior problems. In seventh-grade phys ed class, you faced up to that harrowing moment when you shed your skivvies and stepped bare naked into a shower room with thirty other boys, some plump ones, some thin as a rail, very few Greek gods among them, moist pink flesh stepping gingerly to a showerhead, soaping up, rinsing, getting the hell out and into your clothes. A democratic moment. There was the outhouse experience, sitting and dropping your dirt into a hole and hearing it plop on other people's. Our house had indoor plumbing, which permitted greater delicacy in these matters, but up on the farm, you sat in the old two-holer and perhaps were joined by a cousin. At first you pretended that you had only come to peruse the Sears catalog and its fine selection of sporting goods, but then gravity took its 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.*

The democracy of public school was powerful. *Don't be conceited. Wait your turn. Keep your voice down.* The democracy of the gospel. *All have sinned and come*

Don't Think You're Special

short of the glory of God. All we like sheep have gone astray. The democracy of work. Do your part. Pull your weight. Don't jerk people around just because you can. And so when I attend the big Labor Day picnic on Harriet Island in St. Paul, I am among civilized people who grew up with those rules, and when I find myself at a big corporate gala, I feel suffocated, surrounded by loud, self-absorbed, and rather brutal people. You sit in first class on an airplane and the proportion of assholes is high. Power corrupts and it also makes for bad manners. But democratic faith, plus our common tongue and a fondness for jokes and the romance of American landscape and history, binds us together. America is a mystical union of souls tied each to the other by invisible bonds, by rhythm and twang, a love of corn, a belief in equality.

This union, sacred to Lincoln, was made holy by the blood sacrifice of the heroic dead at Gettysburg, Verdun, Normandy, Anzio, Inchon, Da Nang, Kuwait, Kabul, Baghdad, not by the brilliance of generals or the honesty of the public officials who sent the heroes to war, but by the love and loyalty of the dead, and so the union endures, despite greed and corruption, despite the

HOMEGROWN DEMOCRAT

grandiosity of cranks on the radio and the flummery of e-z idea salesmen and the enormous cheat that the Conservative Revolution has turned out to be.

This union was not so clear to me when I was young and immortal and full of intense vapors, but now I am part of the democracy of old age, forgetful about car keys and glasses, no longer bounding up stairs—if we live long enough, humility is imposed on us, and we face up to the ultimate democracy of death, where the rich man met Lazarus at last after years of riding past him in the limo. I learned a little about humility in July 2001, when my mitral valve came unhinged and I was wheeled into a bright room at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, and slid onto a glassy platform and Dr. Orczulak, the son of a steelworker in Pittsburgh, sliced open my thorax and eight hours later I felt my little boat bump up on a foggy shore and a young woman named Erinn assured me that I would be okay and removed the hose from my throat 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 fabu-

Don't Think You're Special

lous landscape of her breasts and my libido awakened and I realized that I would indeed survive.

I grew up among Bible-believing people in Minnesota, a cold-weather state when the wind blows down 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 little by spring, but everyone else puts on weight too, so it's not a problem unless you're obsessed with mirrors, which we aren't.

Here we have the democracy of flatness: there aren't many hills for rich people to build castles on top of. We suffer less from the self-esteem issues that drive people to purchase Hummers or have their faces surgically rearranged or own 300 pairs of shoes. We could do all that if we moved to Las Vegas or Phoenix or some place where nobody knows us, and maybe we will someday—win the lottery, buy a shiny new face with a cleft chin, drive around in a paramilitary vehicle with our Russian wolfhounds and give ourselves the nicknames Biff and



HOMEGROWN DEMOCRAT

Muffy, but for now, here we are, and our friends and families keep us in line. *Don't get hoity-toity with us.* Your impact on the world is slight, so take life as a comedy and play it for laughs. You die, there is some grief, a momentary bowing of heads, 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.