



I. THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

Last year's Lake Wobegon Fourth of July (Delivery Day) was glory itself, sunny and not too hot, flags flying, drummers drumming, scores of high-stepping horses, smart marching units in perfect cadence, and Ben Franklin, Sacajawea, Ulysses S. Grant, Babe Ruth, Amelia Earhart, and Elvis marching arm in arm along with Miss Liberty majestic in seven-pointed crown and wielding her torch like a big fat baton, plus the Leaping Lutherans parachute team, the Betsy Ross Blanket Toss, a battery of cannons belching flame boomboomboom from the crest of Adams Hill and Paul Revere galloping into town to cry out the news that these States are now Independent, God Bless Us All, and Much Much More, all in all a beautiful occasion in honor of America, and the only sour note was that so few in Lake Wobegon appreciated how truly glorious it all was, since Wobegonians as a rule consider it bad luck to be joyful, no matter what Scripture might say on the subject, and so in the swirl of color and music and costumes and grandeur you could hear people complain about the high cost of gasoline and shortage of rainfall and what in God's Name were they going to do with the

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leftover food. It was all eaten, that's what was done. More than seventeen thousand people attended and downed 800 pounds of frankfurters, 1800 of ground beef, a half-ton of deep-fried cheese curds, 500 gallons of potato salad, a tanker-truckload of Wendy's beer, but the next day the talk in the Chatterbox Cafe was not about exultation and the wonders of the great day, no, it was about the bright lipstick someone smeared on the stone face of the statue of the Unknown Norwegian and the word *RATS!* painted on walls and sidewalks and the innerspring mattress dumped on the lawn of Mr. and Mrs. Bakke, the work of persons unknown. People grumped about vandals and what made them do the bad things they do (lack of parental discipline, short attention spans) and maybe it's time to rethink the Fourth of July and pull in our sails a little and not give bad apples an arena for their shenanigans.

The Chairman, Clint Bunsen, was unfazed by this, having grown up with these people, and he weathered the petty complaints and dispatched his men to pick up the mattress and clean up the graffiti, and by the time March rolled around and the snow melted he was all set to go again and giving The Speech which the Old Regulars knew almost by heart and which went something like this: "July Fourth is the birthday of our country and deserves to be done right because, by God, it is a great country and it changed the world and if we can't even find a way to say that, then who are we? A bunch of skunks, that's who. When you neglect the details, you lose the big picture. For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, and so forth. Like my father said, personal slovenliness is the doorway to cowardice and cruelty. Nobody cares about holidays anymore. Which is

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why—and I'm only giving my opinion here—the country is so beset by government lies and corruption and everybody out for himself and to hell with the future—because those people grew up thinking the Fourth was just a day to lie around on the beach and toast your weenie.”

Chairman Bunsen loved the Fourth, he relished it, the booming, the chatter, the smell of cooking fires, the gaudiness, the good humor, the fiery delectations bursting in the sky, and he was happy to expand on this if you questioned the lavishness of it—Why two drum-and-bugle corps? Couldn't we cut back on the fireworks? Does it really take sixteen Percherons to pull one circus wagon? And why four wagons? Wouldn't two be sufficient? Why \$1,200 for the Leaping Lutherans Parachute Team—wouldn't they appear gratis? Had he asked? Did we need to bring the Grand Forks Pitchfork Drill Team in? Couldn't we have found something just as good in Minnesota?—and he got very quiet and then started in on the subject of Getting The Details Right. “There was the guy who neglected to check his oil and the car overheated on the way to his girlfriend's and he was an hour late and she refused to date him again and if he had seen to business she probably would have married him instead of me. And I wouldn't be here. I'd be living it up in California. All because of lubrication.” He cackled at his own story, nobody else did.

Clint Bunsen along with his brother Clarence ran Bunsen Motors on Main Street, the Ford garage in town, he was the ginger-haired, snub-nosed man in dungarees, and when he got wound up about the Fourth the O.R.s looked deeply into their coffee cups and listened.

The O.R.s were Carl, Lyle, Ernie, Berge, LeRoy, and Billy P.,



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somber men with big rumps and great bellies that cried out for a pin-striped vest and a silver watchchain to accent the amplitude, and they sat in the corner booth at the Chatterbox and shot the breeze and bitched about their aching backs and their wandering children, but when spring came the Chairman climbed up on his high horse about the Fourth.

In other towns the Fourth was a parade of tractors and pickups led by a geezer VFW honor guard with four old ladies in a convertible, some dogs riding in a pickup, and a kid carrying a boom box playing "The Stars And Stripes Forever," but the Chairman insisted on upholding high standards despite all the guff he got. "It is not easy trying to sell grandeur and pizzazz to a bunch of sour old pragmatists," he said.