

# PILGRIMS: A WOBEGON ROMANCE



## **The Pilgrims**

1. MARJORIE (MARGIE) KREBSBACH,  
English teacher
2. CARL KREBSBACH, carpenter
3. DARYL TOLLERUD, farmer
4. MARILYN TOLLERUD, conference facilitator
5. CLINT BUNSEN, co-owner, Bunsen Motors
6. IRENE BUNSEN, tomato grower
7. ELOISE KREBSBACH, mayor
8. WALLY KREUGER, barkeeper
9. EVELYN KREUGER, barkeeper's keeper
10. FATHER WILMER, priest
11. LYLE JANSKE, biology teacher (ret.)
12. GARY KEILLOR, radio show host

GARRISON KEILLOR

**F**rom our small town the group had come  
To view the glory that was Rome  
Wellspring of art and poetry  
And so much of our curriculum,  
Science and mathematics and more recently  
Pizza whose richness our pilgrims knew  
Quite well. Now of this company  
Of twelve citizens, good and true,  
Was one named Marjorie Krebsbach  
Who had assembled the crew  
(Though she was shy and slow to talk)  
To carry out a mission: to place  
A photograph upon a burial rock  
And give to grief a proper face  
Of a young man lost in the Great War  
And say a prayer for God's abundant grace.  
But something else she traveled for  
And that was to warm her husband's heart  
Which had turned cold. For more  
Than three months they'd slept apart  
And she intended, if the truth be told,  
To reignite his passion and to start  
A new romance out of the old,  
Which some say is impossible.  
But they have not read St. Matthew's gospel,  
The promise of the resurrection—  
Mortality may change direction.  
And that was why she flew to Rome,  
To win his heart and bring him home.

## DA VINCI



**T**he first of the pilgrims through the International Arrivals portal at Leonardo da Vinci was Margie Krebsbach, face scrubbed, fresh, grinning, towing her husband Carl who looked stunned as if struck by a ball-peen hammer, and then the others came slouching and shuffling along, jet-lagged, brain-dead, and right away she spotted the thin, spiky-haired man in the blue blazer holding up a sign—LAKE WOBEGON—in one hand, high, and she let out a whoop and let go of Carl. “This is so neat!” she said, meaning the sign—the words “Lake Wobegon”—here!—in Italy!—Great God! “We have to take a picture.” So she pulled out her little PikClik as the other pilgrims groaned. *Please. No photography, please. And no whooping. Please. No enthusiasm.* None of them had slept much on the flight from Minneapolis to Amsterdam thanks to a small child named Rose who wandered up and down the aisles pinching people with slimy fingers and then the flight to Rome had hit turbulence over the Alps, a death-envisioning experience (12 MINNESOTANS AMONG THOSE LOST IN PLANE CRASH; EN ROUTE TO ROME TO HONOR FALLEN WAR HERO, THEY PERISH IN FLAMES ON SNOW-CAPPED MATTERHORN) and

now they were hoping for a soft place to lie down for a day or two. Lyle looked as if he'd been held hostage aboard a fishing trawler, lying on a pile of deceased halibut. Wally and Evelyn appeared to be under the control of aliens. Clint and Irene looked as if they should not be allowed to operate motor vehicles. Daryl had a weird smile on his face, as if he'd come to Rome with a sackful of dough from the church-building fund. Father Wilmer looked very bleak, as if he had seen unspeakable things up close. Eloise looked as if she had just eaten a plateful of boiled thistles. Carl appeared heavily medicated, and in fact was. A double dose of Placidol. Mr. Keillor was lifting his feet, first one, then the other, left, right, left, right, and trying to remember the word (English) for what he had taken two of on the plane to help him sleep. They were all off-kilter except Margie, standing arm in arm with the man from Columbo Travel. She looked simply terrific. Never better. Big smile, hair in place, stylish in black warm-up pants and green satin jacket, a brown fedora on her head, classy new black horn-rimmed glasses. She'd bought the hat in the Amsterdam airport. An impulse. A hundred euros. What the hell. She was stoked. Pumped. "We're in Italy! Italy!" she cried. The spiky-haired man smiled wanly, having been born in Italy, descended from Italians. He wore gray slacks and a blue blazer with a gold crest on the pocket, COLUMBO TOURS. She wanted to hug him but he stepped away, so she hugged Carl instead. "We made it, sweetheart. Good job!" And to the porter pushing the cart of luggage behind: "*Avanti!*"

Carl had been afraid of flying since a trip to New York three years ago to see Carla after she had phoned home to ask if she

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was covered by their health insurance (no) and he sensed pregnancy and flew out to see her (she wasn't but she read to him from a book about girls who grow up with emotionally distant fathers who are unable to form lasting relationships, and she cried and cried) and he went to the airport feeling dark and gruesome and on the way home, the plane hit teeth-shaking turbulence over Lake Michigan. An overhead popped open and an enormous black bat flew out and Carl screamed and threw up his hands and broke its neck and it fell on him, dying, flapping its great leathery wings. He jumped out of his seat and the flight attendant yelled at him to sit down, dammit. And the woman whose bat it was, a noted Berkeley bat researcher seated next to him, took the corpse and screeched at him for fifteen minutes that bats are harmless and any ten-year-old child knows that and he had gone and killed a rare specimen from the upper Amazon and upset the balance of the ecosystem and pushed the Earth closer to extinction. "Killer," she hissed. "You. You're a killer." As a result, Carl hadn't flown until now, a ten-hour flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul to Amsterdam and a two-hour flight to Rome. He had been inert with terror the whole time, silent, stiff, eyes open, respirating, refusing food and drink. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart," she said. He did not seem to recognize her. "I'm your wife, Margie," she said. "The mother of your babies. Isn't this romantic? *Italy.*"

Mr. Columbo got to work organizing the bags and Margie beamed at her group. "A historic moment deserves a group picture!" cried Margie. "Come on, squeeze together like you know each other," she cried. She pointed to Mr. Keillor at the rear.

"Take a picture," she said. She thrust the camera at him. He didn't understand—he was accustomed to being the photographee. "Take it!" she said. "The camera. Take the camera."

"What do you want?" he said.

"We want you to take our picture with the tour guy."

"Couldn't we—" And then it dawned on him. He was not part of the "we"—he was *him*, a big cheese in the radio world maybe but an outrider among his landmen, an addendum, a curio, a cigar-store Indian. He took the camera from Margie, or almost did, and it clattered on the floor. She picked it up. "Are you okay?" she said. "I thought you had traveled overseas before."

He looked at the little silver camera. "Doesn't this have a timer so we can—"

"No," she said. "It doesn't. Just shoot."

And the eleven of them, five in front, six in back, squeezed in tight. "Tighter," she said. They squeezed some more. "Cheese," said Evelyn. "Ovaries," said Margie. Mr. Keillor pushed the button and nothing happened. "Lens cap!" cried Eloise.

"My Uncle Will was the first one to get a Kodak box camera with a timer," Evelyn said. "He was so pleased with himself for figuring out how to use it. He took hundreds of self-portraits. Pictures of himself, you know. Him with his old Packard. Him at the jigsaw. Him mowing the grass. Him lying in bed with Miriam. Oh, that upset her! She thought he'd lost his marbles. But there they are in that little double bed and his eyes are closed and hers are open."

The word he was looking for was Dramamine: he'd taken one when the plane lifted off from Minneapolis and it hadn't kicked

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in. He was wedged into seat 33J because Irene Bunsen had bullied him into giving up his first-class seat to Lyle Janske who she said was in bad shape having gotten the bad news that he had Alzheimer's. "This may be his last trip as the Lyle we know," she said. "Let's let him have the shrimp cocktail and lamb chops on jasmine rice and Merlot and *you* have the box lunch."

Well, how could you argue with that? So the radio man wound up sandwiched between a large embittered man and his angry wife with a fretful child on her lap, a couple from Rapid City, South Dakota, and no, they did not want to change seats with him so they could sit together. She was going to Rome to take up a fellowship at the American Academy and he was going along to provide child care. The child had colic. Mr. Keillor took another pill over Newfoundland. The child slept for an hour and resumed screaming on the descent into Amsterdam—meanwhile the woman had recognized Mr. Keillor and chose that moment to tell him that she used to listen to his radio show. She emphasized the "used to" as if it were some odd aberration like being addicted to butterscotch. "I have one word of advice for you," she said. "Don't sing. Someone should've told you this years ago. You're not a singer. Don't sing." The pill kicked in as the plane pulled up to the gate in Amsterdam and he was awakened by the cleaning crew, tiny Indonesian women with backpack vacuums. He thought he had landed on another planet. All of the passengers and crew were gone. He had to jog through the terminal to catch the plane to Rome and it was not lost on him that nobody in his group had come looking for him. Nobody. He hurtled down the Jetway as the lady gate agent was about to swing the plane door shut and she muttered something in Dutch that

sounded like *dummkopf*. He sat down next to Daryl who said, "We were all discussing whether you'd gained weight or not. It looks to me like you have. Have you?"

He had come on the trip because he thought he could get a book out of it. A little comic novel called *Veni Vidi Vickie* about a Minnesota divorcée who goes to Rome to find the meaning of life and falls in love with a tall, dark stranger who turns out to be from Minnesota. The stranger is in public radio and yet he is a comely man with terrific abdominals and (as she discovers one evening) a terrific dancer and fabulous lover, so together they climb the heights of ecstasy on a fine king-size mattress in a four-star hotel. The Chopin etude "Tristesse" is playing, children laugh and play in the courtyard below. They lie quietly in each other's arms and he says, "Life is insurmountable and yet we mount up again and again and ride, glorious and free, across the river and into the golden uplands, hoping against hope, longing for that for which there are no words." And she whispers, "Thanks for being so wonderful." Something like that. The next thing he knew, the plane had touched down in Rome. Daryl said, "What's it like, being famous? You enjoy strangers coming up to you and fawning over you? I wouldn't, but I suppose some people eat it right up." And then he was standing in the terminal with a camera in his hand. "Just take the lens cap off and point and shoot," said Eloise.

And so the first record of their pilgrimage to Italy was a picture, slightly out of focus, of the eleven of them, large white sleepy people from the northern prairie leaning against each other, exhausted, vertiginous, smirking at the lens-cap mishap and the word "ovaries," namely:

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The anxious and earnest Carl Krebsbach, president of Krebsbach Construction, husband of Margie, father of Carla, Carl Jr., and Cheryl, and now the owner by default of a half-finished three-bedroom chalet on a two-acre lot on Lake Wobegon, built for a wealthy Minneapolis investment banker named Ladderman who is now in the midst of a bitter divorce on account of a dalliance with a 26-year-old receptionist whom he promised to take on a 21-day cruise to New Zealand.

Ruddy, genial Daryl Tollerud, partner with his old man in a six-hundred-acre hog-and-corn operation. Father of four. Farmer of the Year in 1988 and 1997. In 1974 he missed two free throws and cost Lake Wobegon the District 47 basketball trophy. Score tied, one second left on the clock, all he had to do was make one free throw. He didn't. St. Agnes won in sudden-death overtime. *St. Agnes!*

The gracious and kindly Marilyn Tollerud, wife of Daryl and owner/operator of Mid-Country Meetings & Conferences Inc., which organizes public events such as the recent two-day Revitalizing Rural Minnesota Through Diversity, fourteen hours of earnest Lutheran discourse about (1) the need to celebrate who we are and (2) joyfully embrace those who are different.

The likable and capable Clint Bunsen, head mechanic at the Ford garage and former chair of the Fourth of July parade, now, after a flagrant love affair with the young Angelica (who marched as the Statue of Liberty), more or less reconciled with his wife. . . .

The plainspoken and observant Irene Bunsen, gardener, mother, Girl Scout leader and camper (against her will but

someone must do it), perpetual grand champion of the Mist County Fair Tomato Sweepstakes, committed to Clint, “in for the penny, in for the pound.”

The brave and beleaguered Eloise Krebsbach, four-term mayor of Lake Wobegon, mother of three, brokenhearted now, having been dumped by longtime lover and volunteer fireman Fred Peterson, after all she’d done for him, including getting him into AA, where he met someone younger and perkier.

The sagacious and steady Wally Kreuger, owner of the Sidetrack Tap, and long-ago batting champion (.324) for the Lake Wobegon Whippets, which you would not guess by looking at him. A pillar of the Legion and the Knights of the Plume Columnar, but also a bartender, sympathetic to man’s failings.

The watchful and matronly Evelyn Kreuger, née Schoppenhorst, wife of Wally, cousin of Margie, famous for her Nutty Nougat Coconut Caramel Bars, and longtime president of Catholic Mothers for Decency.

The patient and soft-spoken Father Wilmer, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, a voice for tolerance and mercy (which leads some to suspect he has dark secrets, perhaps a lover somewhere, a gambling addiction, a faith problem). In November he was seen entering a storefront in St. Cloud that houses a tanning salon, a women’s crisis center, and a psychotherapist’s office. Father has no tan whatsoever. Never did.

The laid-back and long-suffering Lyle Janske, newly retired biology teacher at Lake Wobegon High, married to Carl’s sister Ardis. He thinks it is a hormone deficiency, not Alzheimer’s, having researched it online, and is taking large gelatinous cap-

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sules purchased from a source in Costa Rica. Ardis couldn't come: she needed a break from Lyle.

"Okay!" cried Margie. "Your bags are in the van! Let's add 'em up and move 'em out! Let's go have fun!" And turned and marched out to the curb and they slouched along behind and onto the white van, a 12-seater, as Margie sang:

*Fight, fight, Lake Wobegon!*  
*Go, go, you Leopards.*  
*Fake to the left and right,*  
*And run past them—up the center!*

It's the leader's job to be positive and she was the leader now. *She had never been a leader before in her entire life.* Fifty-three years old and she'd always trotted along like a good girl, helping the nuns, clapping the erasers, a very quiet good girl who got good grades, joined clubs, wrote poems, married, raised kids, never a leader, and when Carl's sister Eloise moved back to Lake Wobegon from Minneapolis, her with her booming voice and confident clear-cut sentences, and was elected mayor, Margie deferred to her, but now Eloise was cast down by the loss of the treacherous Fred, and the torch had been passed. Thrilling. Absolutely thrilling. Having spent decades tolerating dopes and bores and obeying braggarts and petty tyrants, to at last emerge from her cocoon as a Benevolent Leader of Her People on an Expedition to a Distant Land.

In the Amsterdam airport, she'd spotted a book called *How to Deal with Impossible People* and snapped it up. The first

rule was “Always Be Confident.” “Start every endeavor with a surplus of Positive Energy.” “Be a Builder-Upper.” “Do not anticipate failure.” Which struck her as profound—the sort of wisdom you’d never learn in Lake Wobegon, a colony of doubters and backbiters. And then, moments later, she saw Eloise weeping afresh over Fred and sat down and patted her hand. And Eloise was holding a sheet of paper that a strange woman had handed her.

#### A WORD TO THE AMERICAN TRAVELLER

Rome remains a hotbed of terrorist activity in the Mediterranean, with daily car bombings, knee-cappings, abductions, assassinations, and random killings. Most events go unreported in the mainstream media, which derives a good deal of ad revenue from the tourism cartels.

If you must visit Rome, follow a few sensible guidelines.

1. Do not wear American clothing. Buy Italian clothing as soon as you arrive, to reduce the chance of your becoming the target of a political shooting or bomb explosion.
2. Do not speak English. Gesture with hand signals.
3. Do not flash large amounts of cash. If you must use an ATM machine, find one on an isolated street, or one that is in a recessed alcove.
4. If you feel you’re being followed, go to a police station and be prepared to pay a fee (in cash) for protection.
5. Do not ride in cabs or on buses. Walk. Stay close to buildings. Never cross a street except in a throng.

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6. Do not go out in the evening.
7. Avoid bathing, if possible. Strong body odor has been shown to be effective in warding off terrorist attacks.
8. Avoid tourist attractions, such as the Colosseum or St. Peter's or the Spanish Steps.
9. Avoid eye contact. Look at the ground. Smiling is not a good idea. Terrorists are offended by laughter and may lash out at people they perceive as lighthearted.
10. Do not drink coffee except in tiny cups. People with coffee mugs are presumed to be Americans. Drink tea, with milk.

Eloise thrust it at Margie. "Oh my God," she said, "we are in trouble now. See what you've gotten us into. A nun gave this to me. A nun."

"Listen," Margie said. "This is hogwash. Pure idiocy. We're perfectly safe." She tore the sheet into tiny pieces.

"You don't think we should talk this over?"

"Damn it to hell, Eloise. Just pull yourself together, willya? Get a grip."

Eloise was stunned. Margie never cursed—never ever. "You don't think we should—" Margie took hold of her shoulders and shook her. "Listen to me. Just grow up! I mean it! Get over it!"

Eloise nodded.

And right there was where Margie took command, pushing Eloise around, telling her to grow up. Anyway, the trip had been her idea from Day One. It was she who called them up in January and said, "Guess what? Carl and I are going to Rome. Want to go?" *Where? Italy. Kind of expensive, isn't it? Hey, a person*

only lives once. *I've heard that. How much does it cost?* Less than you'd think. So she bought the plane tickets from a web site called Cheapskate.com and booked the hotel and phoned the pilgrims with regular helpful reminders (Passport. Cash card. Adapters for electric shavers.) and shepherded them onto the plane in Minneapolis (*What if someone else has taken our seat?*) and through Schiphol in Amsterdam (*Why do we have to wait so long at Passport Control when the Europeans go scooting on through?*) and into Rome (*Was it okay that I packed some Nut Goodies in my suitcase? What if they search my bag? I see the sign about not bringing food products into Italy—is Nut Goodie a food product? Should I tell the police or should I sneak into a restroom and flush it down the toilet?*). And she had dealt with Evelyn who sat there in Amsterdam holding a small cardboard box someone had given her.

*Who was it?*

"I don't know. He just asked me to take it on the plane for him."

*Oh my God. Evelyn!*

"What's wrong?"

So she grabbed the box and threw it into a stairwell. And she herded them away to a coffee bar where Marilyn had a meltdown while looking at a chicken salad sandwich and burst into tears and said, "Why didn't I bring Mother along? She would've loved to come. I never even thought to ask her. Oh my God. She was probably just waiting for me to say something and I never did. She's still hale and hearty, she could've come and enjoyed this. It might be *her last chance*. And I didn't even think to mention it. *It didn't even cross my mind!*" And she wept. "I am a bad per-

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son," she said. "God is going to punish me, I know it. I just hope he spares my kids." Oh, it was the old Midwestern ritual of brutal self-accusation—out of pure vanity people lashing into themselves—*how worthless I am!*—and thereby dragging sympathy and praise out of you—No, you are *not* a bad person, you are a *good* person, and no we don't hate you, not at all, we all *love* you. Indeed, we do. So she had comforted Marilyn and rounded up the sheep and moved them to the next plane and on the flight to Rome she had reminded Lyle why they were going to Rome—to put a picture on Gussie Norlander's grave—and at the Customs counter she said *Buon giorno* to the policeman who checked her passport and *Grazie* when he handed it back—and at the baggage carousel she had spotted a porter and tapped him on the shoulder and said "*Per favore, signore,*" and so well, with rolled R's and all, that his face lit up and he poured out his heart to her in Italian and she simply raised her hand and said, "*Sono Americano—I'd rather speak English. Thank you. Grazie.*" And the man grinned and squeezed out some English. She handed him ten euros, he brought a cart for the bags. So cool. Eloise whispered, "Where did you learn that?" "In the movies," she said.

True. *Roman Holiday* starring Audrey Hepburn as a princess spinning around Rome on the back of a Vespa, her arms around Gregory Peck. Margie saw it in high school and Audrey became her patron saint whom she tried to emulate, her ballerina elegance, her bubbly demeanor, though bubbiness did not come naturally in Lake Wobegon. People tended to be dry. A woman who bubbled was considered ditzzy. You were supposed to be a little dark. Treat yourself to dark scenarios about your kids, the schools, the elms, the future of the bluebird species. Any effer-

vescence was a symptom of unreliability. If you bubbled, people didn't want their kids to ride in your car.

She took a deep breath and put on an Audrey smile and cried, "We are going to have *such fun* in Italy! Fun such as you cannot even imagine! Boy O boy O boy. This is one for the history books! C'mon, let's see some happy faces! Smile, darn ya! You people look like somebody peed on your sugar bread. Lighten up! We're on vacation! Seven glorious nights and six fun-filled days!" She poked Carl. "Right?" "Right," he said. She got in the shotgun seat in the big white van as Mr. Columbo loaded the bags in back. Enormous bags. The others had packed like refugees who might never see home again. For her: two carry-ons. Underwear, jeans and pullovers, one black dress, one pair of walking shoes. "If I need more, I can buy it there," she told Marilyn. "It's only a week." Marilyn admitted she had brought four sweaters *Four sweaters?* Four sweaters. Just in case.

Marilyn, Eloise, Evelyn sat in the second seat; Wally, Irene, Lyle, in the third; Carl, Daryl, Clint, Father, in the backseat. Mr. Keillor stood by the open door, waiting for someone to scootch over. "Jump in," said Margie. "Where?" he said. "Anywhere." The seat with the three ladies was full and so was the second, what with Irene parking her carry-on bag next to her. Father Wilmer said, "I'm afraid there's no leg room back here. It's tight for me and you have longer legs." Finally, Irene heaved a sigh and moved the carry-on bag onto her lap and Lyle swung his legs out to allow the radio host to squeeze in between him and Irene—"I have to sit on the outside on account of my

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knees," he said. So Mr. Keillor found himself wedged in tight, trapped, like a caged animal. He slipped his left arm around onto the seat back behind Irene—to make more room—and she said, "Don't." So he had to sit crooked, Lyle's elbow in his kidneys. When the van pulled away and bounced in a pothole, it sent shock waves up his spine. Just last Friday, a black limo had picked him up at LaGuardia and taken him to Town Hall for *A Prairie Home Companion*, where he shared a dressing room with Yo-Yo Ma who was gracious and treated him like Somebody, and now here he was back in the fourth grade among cruel bus mates. "We may need a bigger van," he muttered. "Some of us may need to lose weight," said Irene. She sighed a long articulate sigh. Which he remembered suddenly and very clearly from years ago.

They were juniors in high school. It was May. She and he, sitting on the iron rail by the side door to the gymnasium. Under an old wounded elm tree split by lightning and still alive. Sun pouring down, she in her white blouse and denim wrap skirt, a half circle of sweat under her arms. He, not daring to look at her:

"I was thinking about going to the Prom but I don't know. I might have other plans. It's hard to tell. Were you planning to go?"

"You mean, to the Prom?"

"Yes."

And then he realized that she did not want to go to the Prom with him nor anywhere else. She did not want to be sitting there beside him. There was magnetic repulsion going on. She was

about to throw up her arms and scream, "Get this person away from me!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I just realized, I can't go, I told some people I'd do something else. Sorry."

"That's okay," she said. She gave him a sidelong glance and in that glance he withered like a delicate shrub in a hard frost. Here he had almost asked her to the Prom, had opened the door to the possibility of his perhaps asking her, and then withdrawn this non-offer. Then she cried, "Hey! What took you so long!!" to some guys in a souped-up Model T pulling up and she ran and jumped in the backseat.

And now, years later, he was that kid all over again, seventeen years old and six three, 150 pounds, high-water pants, size thirteen shoes, horn-rimmed glasses slipped down on his nose, short hair shaved up high in back, pipsqueak arms, solemn voice that broke into adolescent duck quacks. Why had he come on this trip? Some dark lust for punishment had driven him to travel back to the Land of Pain.

And he was subsidizing the trip! Oh God. The ultimate irony! Fifty-seven thousand dollars he was paying!

You escape the cold steel bars of high school and go off to a happy life in radio broadcasting as the host of your own show and then, through weird circumstance, you donate money to pay for your old neighbors to visit Rome and you go along for the honor of the thing and they punish you for your good deed. What a dope! Dumbhead! *Stoopnagel!* You could've spent that money on a fourteen-day luxury cruise on the Baltic and instead you are jammed into a van with the Jealous & Resentful!

The van hurtled down a ramp to the freeway, hit another pothole, which drove a nail into Mr. Keillor's spine, and flew past construction sites, piles of concrete slabs and logs and gravel, and then a grove of palm trees and twelve-foot rosebushes. They drove through a little village, tangles of fencing and bungalows perched on hills, clinging to steep rocky slopes. It looked like California. Apartment buildings and every apartment with a balcony that overflowed with billows of flowering vines. Margie leaned forward and tried to commit it all to memory. She had expected Italy to be exotic, swarthy men sitting on wine barrels under arbors strumming mandolins, singing in plaintive tenor voices as big-hipped ladies swung their skirts and old nuns laughed and old men argued, hands in the air waving, but of course Italians go to offices too. They have dental appointments. They must go shop for toilet paper and put it on the roller. And then she saw a burst of bougainvillea growing out of an old decrepit apartment building, five stories high. One enormous plant. And then gigantic wisteria plants that looked like they were eating a three-story house. "Look," she said. And someone said, "What?" And then it was gone. A string of bicyclists crossed an overpass as they sped under and then Carl said, "How long until we get there?" Like a child on a car trip. "Fifteen minutes," said Mr. Columbo.

"What if our rooms aren't ready?" said Carl.

"Then we'll walk around and look at the sights," she said.

"Won't they be ready?" said Lyle in a pained voice. "Did we request for them to be ready?"

Mr. Columbo hit the brakes and took an exit off the freeway—

*lento, adagio*, thought Margie. “Scenic route, very historic,” he said—and now they were speeding through vineyards, the slender gnarled trunks and canopy of intertwined vines webbed above. “Best wine in Italy comes from here. Ghirlandaio. Only two hundred barrels a year and they leave it in the wooden casks for five years and it costs a hundred euros a bottle and it is said to have special powers”—he glanced around, decorously—“to restore the *lib-i-do*.” He pronounced it in a whisper.

“What about lipids?” said Daryl.

“Sign me up for a case,” said Margie.

They came along a street of houses in pastel shades, coral, pink, pale yellow. A golden house with green shutters. He pulled over in front of a mud-colored building with pockmarked walls. “Artillery shells,” he said. “Americans thought there were Germans inside and they blasted it with mortars and couldn’t knock it down and then a child came running out waving a white bedsheet and they held their fire and then fifty or sixty more kids came out. And then two clowns in whiteface with big floppy shoes and little *ooga-ooga* horns on their belts. Luigi and Carlo. They were from a circus whose wagons had been destroyed by bombs and their trained dogs had run away and also a llama and an old spotted horse. The two of them got caught in the Allied tank assault and ran for shelter in the castle and found the cellar full of terrified schoolchildren. So they painted themselves up and got into costume and put on a show, whacking each other with the slapsticks. When they heard an incoming shell, Luigi bent over as if to let a great fart and when the shell hit, Carlo fell down and waved his arms to disperse the smell. It was very funny. They did some of their act for the Americans who sus-

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pected the clowns might be booby-trapped. They made them drop their trousers right there in front of the schoolchildren, which the clowns did, clowning around, their hands clasped over their privates, eyes rolling, heads bowed. And then a shot rang out. A German sniper on the roof. An American raised his rifle and blasted away and the sniper fell four stories to the pavement and landed with a big crunch and that was the end of the comedy and the war resumed."

The van drove on.

Mr. Columbo slowed down coming through a piazza and pointed off to the left—"There's the balcony Mussolini came out on when he spoke to the crowds"—and they looked up at the little balcony. "After the war, they went around and shot people they called collaborators, but hell, almost everybody collaborated. If you wanted a nice life, you went along with the Nazis. There weren't many heroes."

"Well, we came here to celebrate a hero," said Margie. "An American by the name of Gussie Norlander. He was from our town. He died in the liberation of Rome."

Mr. Columbo shrugged. "All dead men are heroes, and the rest of us are cowards."

They drove on across the Tiber, a shallow snot-green river, with stone walls and broad footpaths on either side, the dome of St. Peter's looming up.

"Will we have the opportunity to see the Vatican?" said Father Wilmer, changing the subject.

"I am at your service," said Mr. Columbo. "I am here for you. Whatever you want, I am here to provide."

"Assuming that is acceptable to Mr. Keillor," added Father. "I

don't wish to dictate where we go. Probably he has seen it all many times." He turned to the author. "I heard you had been given a VIP tour of the Vatican once."

The author shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His legs were numb and his bladder was about to let go. He told Father Wilmer that at the Vatican, VIP stood for "Vastly Ignorant Protestants" and that his tour guide, Father Reginaldo, had an aversion to crowds and so the tour skipped the Sistine Chapel and the Michelangelo *Pietà* in favor of the Vatican kitchen and a warehouse where shards of statuary were glued back together.

"What's that I smell? Chicken?" said Daryl, and some of the pilgrims snickered.

In Minneapolis, Irene had read a story about chicken flu in Europe that caused nausea, loud whirring sounds in the eardrums, hallucinations, vomiting and diarrhea—as much as four gallons in one outburst—followed by shame and depression. She had passed the story around to the others, and while they pooh-poohed it—still, the thought of four gallons of poop suddenly blowing out of you was hard to get out of your mind. "What if it's true?" said Irene. "Better go easy on the chicken until we can test it out." And she and a few of the others agreed that Mr. Keillor could be the guinea pig. The man had a strong constitution. Let him chow down on some chicken and then keep an eye on him.

Irene had purchased what she believed to be a chicken sandwich at a food stand in the Rome airport and then noticed the label, *cervello*, brain. It was fried like an egg, between slices of bread. She unwrapped the tinfoil and looked at Mr. Keillor who was resting his eyes. "How about some breakfast?" she said. He looked at the sandwich. It was the first kind gesture anyone in

## PILGRIMS

the group had made toward him, it had been one insult after another—Clint Bunsen saying, “People keep telling me to read your books and somehow I never find the time.” Lyle suggesting he see a doctor about nasal blockage. In the Minneapolis airport, Marilyn Tollerud going on and on and on about Mr. Keillor’s radio rival Ira Glass, Ira Glass, Ira Glass, idol of urbane young women from coast-to-coast, and how much she enjoyed his writing, his mumbly style, and how she listened to podcasts of Ira over and over and over and over. Even Evelyn had let him have it: she said, “I heard you stopped drinking and I thought, Thank God.” (This, from a woman who had tended bar at the Sidetrack Tap and seen men plastered, loaded, bombed, stewed, fried to the gills, falling down shit-faced. He had gotten drunk in the classic WASP style, quietly, alone, at home, late at night, straight whiskey in a glass, listening to Bach organ chorales, weepy, no trouble to anyone. . . . How did he come to be the goat here?)

The chicken sandwich looked good. “Thank you,” he said to Irene. “That’s very sweet of you.” And he ate it, all of it, aware that everyone in the van was watching him. “Delicious,” he said. “My grandma raised chickens and I used to catch them when she needed to slaughter a few. I don’t know if I ever told you this story—I used a wire clothes hanger to catch them by the ankles—they could run really fast—it was a wire hanger that you unwind to make a long straight wire with a hook at the end—they’d run into the lilac bushes and I chased them—I was probably seven or eight at the time—my dad cut their heads off—anyway, this one time I remember . . .”

Margie listened to his convoluted tale as the van slowed in rush-hour traffic. How did this man ever come to be telling sto-

ries on the radio? Finally, thank goodness, the van pulled up in front of the Hotel Giorgina and she disembarked. Stood on the sidewalk. *Rome*. Sunny and warm. A brick-paved street, little Fiats and scooters parked. A broad yellowish concrete walk with marble curbs. Two women approached, arm in arm, in dark heavy coats, one of them walking a little brown dog in a red plaid sweater. Handsome well-put-together women who strode past, paying her no mind, inviting no comment from anybody.

*Rome*. And she thought back to January, when the idea of the trip to Rome sprang into her mind.