

It Could Be Worse

I am a cheerful man, even in the dark, and it's all thanks to a good Lutheran mother. When I was a boy, if I came around looking glum and mopey, she said, "What's the matter? Did the dog pee on your cinnamon toast?" and the thought of our old black mutt raising his hind leg in the *pas de dog* and peeing on toast made me giggle. I was a beanpole boy, and my hair was the color of wet straw. I loved to read adventure books and ride my bike and shoot baskets in the driveway and tell jokes. My dad, Byron, was a little edgy, expecting the worst, saving glass jars and paper clips, turning off lights and cranking down the thermostat to keep our family out of the poorhouse, but Mother was well composed, a true Lutheran, and taught me to Cheer up, Make yourself useful, Mind your manners, and, above all, Don't feel sorry for yourself. In Minnesota, you learn to avoid self-pity as if it were poison ivy in the woods. Winter is not a personal experience; everyone else is as cold as you are, so don't complain about it too much. Even if your cinnamon toast gets peed on. It could be worse.

Being Lutheran, Mother believed that self-pity is a deadly sin and so is nostalgia, and she had no time for either. She'd sat at the bedside of her beloved sister, Dotty, dying of scarlet fever in the summer of 1934; she held Dotty's hand as the sky turned dark from their father's fields blowing away in the drought; she cleaned Dotty, wiped her, told her stories, changed the sheets; and out of the nightmare summer she emerged stronger, confident that life would be wondrous, or at least bearable.

It was a good place to grow up in, Lake Wobegon. Kids migrated around town as free as birds and did their stuff, put on coronations and executions in the long, dim train shed and the deserted depot, fought the Indian wars, made ice forts and lobbed grenades at each other, dammed up the spring melt in the gutters, swam at the beach, raced bikes in the alley. You were free, but you knew how to behave. You didn't smart off to your elders, and if a lady you didn't know came by and told you to blow your nose, you blew it. Your parents sent you off to school with lunch money and told you to be polite and do what the teacher said, and if there was a problem at school, it was most likely your fault and not the school's. Your parents were large and slow afoot and they did not read books about parenting, and when they gathered with other adults, at Lutheran church suppers or family get-togethers, they didn't talk about schools or about prevailing theories of child development. They did not weave their lives around yours. They had their own lives, which were mysterious to you.

I remember the day I graduated from tricycle to shiny new two-wheeler, a big day. I wobbled down Green Street and made a U-turn and waved to Mother on the front porch, and she wasn't there. She had tired of watching me and gone in. I was shocked at her lack of interest. I went racing around the corner onto McKinley Street, riding *very* fast so I would have big tales to tell her, and I raced down the hill past the Catholic church and the old black mutt ran out to greet me and I swerved and skidded on loose gravel and tumbled off the bike onto the pavement and skinned myself and lay on the tar, weeping, hoping for someone to come pick me up, but nobody came. The dog barked at me to get up. I limped three blocks home with the skin scraped off my forearm and knee, my eyes brimming with tears, and when I came into the kitchen, she looked down at me and said, "It's only a scrape. Go wash it off. You're okay."

And when I had washed, she sat me down with a toasted cheese sandwich and told me the story of Wotan and Frigga. "Wotan, or Odin, was the father of the gods, and his wife, Frigga, was the earth goddess who brought summer, and the god of war, Thor, was the winter god, and the god of peace was Frey. So from Odin we get Wednesday; from Thor, Thursday; from Frey, Friday—Sunday and Monday,

of course, refer to the sun and moon—which leaves Saturday and Tuesday. Wotan and Frigga had a boy named Sidney, and Thor had a daughter named Toots. They fell in love, and one day Sidney went to find Toots and steal her away, but Thor sent a big wind and Sidney rode his bicycle too fast and fell and skinned his knee, and that's why Saturday is a day off, so we can think about it and remember not to ride our bikes so fast." She gave me a fresh, soft peanut butter cookie. She wiped the last remaining tears from my cheek. She said, "Go outside and play. You're all right."

In Lake Wobegon, you learned about being All Right. Life is complicated, so think small. You can't live life in raging torrents; you have to take it one day at a time. And if you need drama, read Dickens. My dad said, "You can't plant corn and date women at the same time. It doesn't work." One thing at a time. The lust for world domination does not make for the good life. It's the life of the raccoon, a swash-buckling animal who goes screaming into battle one spring night, races around, wins a mate, carries on a heroic raccoon career, only to be driven from the creek bed the next spring by a young stud who leaves teeth marks in your butt and takes away your girlfriend, and you lie wounded and weeping in the ditch. Later that night, you crawl out of the sumac and hurl yourself into the path of oncoming headlights. Your gruesome carcass lies on the hot asphalt to be picked at by crows. Nobody misses you much. Your babies grow up and do the same thing. Nothing is learned. This is a life for bank robbers. It is not a life for sensible people.

The urge to be top dog is a bad urge. Inevitable tragedy. A sensible person seeks to be at peace, to read books, know the neighbors, take walks, enjoy his portion, live to be eighty, and wind up fat and happy, although a little wistful when the first coronary walks up and slugs him in the chest. Nobody is meant to be a star. Charisma is pure fiction, and so is brilliance. It's the dummies who sit on the dais, and it's the smart people who sit in the dark near the exits. That is the Lake Wobegon view of life.