

A TRIP TO GRAND RAPIDS

It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon.

It was chilly on Tuesday and Wednesday, as a cold front moved through, and the tomato growers stayed up late debating whether to cover plants for frost or not. "Naw," they decided about ten o'clock, and hit the hay and lay thinking about it: the humiliation of getting froze out, the shame of eating store-bought tomatoes, or, worse, going on tomato relief. "Here, Clarence, have a couple bushels of these—we got plenty. No, really. Bud covered ours that night in June, of course, when it froze—you remember—it was that night, you could tell by the birch leaves it was going to get below freezing . . . you didn't know that?"

It rained Wednesday night. Roger Hedlund lay worrying about his unplanted corn and thinking about his daughter Martha's new black kitten. Roger had laid down the law that a cat stays outdoors, even when it's cold: That's what it has fur for, put it outside, it'll take care of itself. She looked up at him, pleading. He said, "Now. Just do it." She put the kitten out. On her way upstairs she whispered, "Murderer." He heard her. When he went

up to bed, he heard the kitten crying on the back step. Well, he thought, it'll go away. It cried pitifully and then it did go away, and after a while he went out to look for it. "Kittykittykittykitty." He walked naked except for his long T-shirt, barefoot across the cold wet grass, his big dog, Oscar, with him. He pulled the T-shirt down to make himself decent, and thought he heard the kitten under the house. Bent over to look, and Oscar sniffed him. Roger jumped straight into the side of his house, hitting the faucet with his thigh. He groaned and sat down in the grass. "Obbbbbb." And saw the flashlight. "Dad?" she said. "Dad? Is that you?"

"Go back to bed," he said, "everything is all right." But his voice sounded funny, like a man who'd run into a faucet. "What's wrong, Dad? Are you all right?"

No, he wasn't. Much later he was not so bad, after the pain subsided and he had a shot of bourbon, but he wasn't all right. He lay awake listening for the kitten. He fell asleep, and in his dreams something chased him to hell and back—it might have been a cat. In the morning the kitten came back. Martha said, "Don't you think it'd be less trouble if we kept him in the house? Then you wouldn't have to get up in the middle of the night and go find him, Dad. You see, if you keep something—" "All right," he said. "—if you keep something indoors, then you know where it is." "All right," he said, "we'll try it and see how it works."

Thursday night he was glad the kitten was in. It rained buckets, one of those summer thunderstorms when the sky turns black and clouds boil up and the wind blows the grass flat. Trees bend in half and sheets of rain fall like in the Old Testament, and then it's over.

The wind took hold of the Quaker State oil sign at Krebsbach Chev, the one that hung on the Pure Oil sign, and ripped it from the bracket and whipped it down Main Street like a guillotine. It sliced into the ground in front

of the Unknown Norwegian and buried itself halfway in. When it came whistling down the street, Mr. Lundberg had just emerged from the Sidetrack Tap to make sure his windows were rolled up. The wind almost bowled him over, and then he heard a hum like a UFO and ran inside. It was the sign whizzing past so fast he only saw a blur, it could've cut someone in two. Such as him, for example. He is a hefty man and half of him would be almost as much as all of just about anyone else you could think of, but that sign would've done the job. It had not been a good week for him anyway, and then to get sliced in two on top of it—not a week you'd care to live through again.

Tuesday night a chunk of plaster fell from the bedroom ceiling, crashing on the bureau dresser and waking him and Betty out of a sound sleep. It was a chunk they have noticed for two years—first its outline, shaped like the state of Illinois, then the shadows where it pulled away from the lath. The force of gravity being what it is, it was clear what would come next, and they both looked up and said, “Looks to me like that plaster’s coming off.” So when it finally fell on the bureau, there were recriminations on her part, after they got over the scare. They lay in the dark, little bits of plaster falling, and she said, “If you'da just done it when you said you were going to.” He knew better than to reply. She said, “I kept telling you to.”