

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

From 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



The 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.

GARRISON KEILLOR

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