A Story Told by Garrison Keilor

On NPR’s

Prairie Home Companion

Jim Nordberg, a member of the fictional town of Lake Woebegone, tells the story about how close he came to committing adultery. Nordberg describes himself as waiting in front of his home for a woman he works with. She likes Nordberg, and Nordberg likes her. They flirt at work, text each other after work, and talk on the phone about going on a weekend trip to Chicago. There is only one problem, Jim Nordberg has been married for ten years to a faithful and loving spouse.

As he waits for the woman from his office to pick him up, he begins to feel guilty about the lies he told to hide what he is doing. Sitting under a spruce tree in his yard, he looks up and down his street at all his neighbors’ houses. He thinks about all his neighbors and the fun his family has shared with them. Nordberg whispers, “We’re connected.”

The he is struck by how much the quality of life in each home depends on the neighbors next door and up and down the street. Sitting there gazing and the homes, he whispers again. “My wife and my children, my neighbors and this street have been good to me.”

For a moment, his head is clear, and he is honest enough to realize that what he is doing will cost him his marriage and his place in the world. Then he stops and says out loud. “Will my new wife get tired of me in ten years and leave?” And it occurred to him that cheating in marriage is much different than cheating on a quiz or a test.

Nordberg summarizes what happened next. “As I sat on the lawn looking down the street, I saw that we all depend on each other. We are all connected. I thought my cheating could be secret, but it could be no more secret than an earthquake. My family and all these other families will be rocked by my unfaithfulness.”

Then Nordberg uses what is called hyperbole or exaggeration to describe what would be the effects of his adultery. “If I cheat on my wife, it will pollute the drinking water of our neighborhood. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school. The little girl next door will have an awful accident on her bike. If I go to Chicago with this woman who is not my wife, the school cross walk patrol will forget to guard the intersection and someone’s child will be injured. A sixth-grade teacher will think, “What the hell,” and not help a student in need. And the butcher in the grocery store will say, “To hell with the Health Department. This sausage was good yesterday — it certainly can’t be any worse today.”

And Jim Nordberg decided not to go to Chicago with the woman from work.