Chapter One

Ad Hominem Memoriam

THE MORNING of November 1, 1991, broke clear and pleasantly cool over Los Angeles. Liz Wahlstedt rose early in the guest bedroom of her friend's suburban home, still tired after a night of jet-lagged sleep. She was in a hurry to get to the cemetery, though the service wouldn't begin for another six hours.

Liz hadn't known the deceased, nor was she a friend or relative of the family. She'd flown from Minneapolis not out of obligation but out of reverence. Gene Roddenberry's death, one week before, had devastated her. Having grown up during the cold war, with the relentless dread of nuclear holocaust, she believed that *Star Trek*'s vision of the future—at the time virtually unique in its optimism—had contributed to the world's survival. In homage to Chekov, the Russian ensign aboard Roddenberry's starship *Enterprise*, she'd chosen Russian for her language instruction during her hitch with the air force.

With Roddenberry now gone, Liz wondered what would become of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the phenomenally successful sequel to the original series, airing in first-run syndication. "The future of *Star Trek* reflects what might be for the future of humanity," she says. "*Star Trek* can affect how we see our own future. It's not that I think we're going to be beamed up tomorrow; it's just a TV show. But at the same time, it still has social importance."

The day after Roddenberry's death, Liz had read his obituary in the *Star Tribune*, noting that the memorial would be held the following Friday, one of her two days off. His widow, actress Majel Barrett, had invited the public.

By ten o'clock, four hours before the scheduled service, Liz had negotiated the Los Angeles freeways in her rented Ford Escort and found her way to Forest Lawn in the Hollywood Hills. Once inside the gate, she began looking for other fans. She wended slowly from the entrance, passing lush green lawns that were shaded by tall pines and decorated with statuary. She bore right at the "Old North Church" and kept going. Almost a mile from the entrance stood a huge rectangular building, one side covered completely by a mural depicting scenes from the American Revolution. "God gave us liberty. People who forsake God lose their liberty," read the inscription above the mural.

Taking in the cemetery's Hollywood-style opulence, Liz looked around for other fans; seeing no one, she wondered whether she'd come to the wrong place. Finally she spotted a well-dressed young man walking out of the building. She stopped him and asked if he knew where the Gene Roddenberry memorial service was to be. Right here, he said, in the Hall of Liberty.

At about the same time, forty miles to the southwest, a Toyota pickup pulled away from Don Maglio's Long Beach home. Its four passengers had rendezvoused sometime earlier that morning from points all over southern California. Don, who'd taken the day off from work, wore an original Captain Kirk uniform, as did Jill Bryant, a college student. Lorri Goldman, another student, wore an original *Star Trek* science officer's uniform. Nita Myer, Don's girlfriend, had donned her ordinary civilian clothes. Their driver was Don's mother, whose interest in the matter was to provide safe transportation for the four mourners, who'd all met at *Star Trek* conventions.

By the time they arrived at Forest Lawn, the first of what would be three hundred or so fans had already gathered around the area beside the Hall of Liberty to talk about the man and the shows—both "classic Trek," as they called it, and The Next Generation. That Don, Jill, and Lorri had dressed in their uniforms— they would be the only mourners so attired, except for one young woman who later showed up wearing Spock ears—sent twitters through the growing crowd. Most, like Liz Wahlstedt, believed that this was not the kind of event to which one wore a costume.

"I thought that wearing my uniform was a way of showing that the dream lives on, despite the death of the man who created it—that there's still hope for an optimistic future," says Don.

The fans watched as the limos bearing celebrities began pulling up. The atmosphere seemed more festive than solemn. It was a bright autumn day of almost religious beauty, if you were inclined to see God's handiwork in the clarity of such blue skies and brisk air.

Roddenberry, for one, had not been so inclined. A devotee of humanistic philosophy, he had disdained organized religion, having long before slammed the door on the Baptist teachings of his early childhood in the belief that religious faith was a vestige of a prerational age. In Roddenberry's universe, Man made the rules and Man could break the rules. And so the actors, writers, fans, family, and friends of Gene Roddenberry would soon witness a secular ceremony, not one presided over by clergy. Since the deceased had been cremated days before, there would be no graveside ceremony.

The invited guests were seated on the floor level of the Hall of Liberty. Fans filled the balcony. A photograph of a smiling Roddenberry adorned an easel at stage right. The familiar themes to the two *Star Trek*s played over the loudspeakers. When the lights dimmed, the curtains opened on the stage, revealing a large screen on which was projected a montage of this-is-your-life photographs.

Nichelle Nichols, who portrayed communications officer Uhura during the first three seasons of *Star Trek* on television and in six feature films, sang two songs to a pianist's accompaniment: Paul McCartney's "Yesterday," followed by one she'd written herself, "Gene." She dedicated it to the "Great Bird of the Galaxy," the epithethical nickname conferred upon Roddenberry by producer and longtime friend Robert Justman.

Ray Bradbury spoke first, reminiscing about the friend whom, he said, he missed already:

... I was over in Scottsdale last year, and three young men ran up, in their early thirties, and they said, "Oh, Mr. Roddenberry, you are so wonderful. We love you

and we love your show and we hope it goes on forever." And I said, "Thank you, I'm glad you like my work." I learned to not disappoint these fans. To tell them the truth would be so terrible that their faiths would be destroyed. So I let them go away happy and it made me happy, too. You know, when I told some of my friends this, that I was going to be here today, two of them said, "What an honor, what an honor." And I hadn't thought of it until that moment. I was sad, first of all. It was going to be a burden. A sweet burden, but a burden. And when they said that twice, I said, "Yes, it is an honor. A great honor to be here to speak of an honorable man."

Oscar-winning actress Whoopi Goldberg spoke next. Five years before, she had asked Roddenberry whether she might have an irregularly recurring role on The Next Generation. "It amused him," she said, "and he asked, 'Why?' And when I explained to him that his was the only vision that had black people in the future [Nichelle Nichols as Lieutenant Uhura], he thought that was very bizarre. I guess he didn't realize how many of us saw us there."

Roddenberry, she said, in fact changed the entire face of the world. Everywhere you go, no matter what country, they all love Star Trek. They all know that, somehow, the world can actually be better because of this one man's vision.

What an honor to have been able to meet someone who changed the world without screaming and yelling and cursing out crazies, like some of us do. He just said, "No. This is my vision." And for once, people in charge listened. And twenty-five years later, a kid from the projects, and kids from all over the world and all over the country are standing here to celebrate Gene Roddenberry.

The accomplished screen and television writer Christopher Knopf, one of Roddenberry's closest friends, recalled a long ago afternoon at Dodger Stadium, when Roddenberry had told him the premise of a new television series idea he had, about a dirigible that takes to the air in the late nineteenth century with a crew of men and women who intend to explore the earth's unexplored regions.

Knopf then related an anecdote that seemed quintessentially Roddenberry: The two friends and their wives had just returned to the Roddenberry home after

dining out. When the women disappeared into the house, Roddenberry dragged Knopf up the driveway to show off his recent acquisition, a motorcycle that was soaking wet from the rain. "Ever been on one?" Roddenberry asked.

"No," Knopf replied, "and it doesn't start now."

In our blue suits, shirts, and ties, rain beating us to death, down the driveway we went on the Harley, onto Beverly Glen, leaning into a turn up Lindbrook; lots of leaning; traction suddenly history; the bike on its side, spinning about the asphalt.

When we picked ourselves off the pavement, our suits torn to shreds, blood pouring out of our knees, the bike, what was left of it, plowed through a hedge, and we sat on the curb, trying to decide whether the wiser course was emergency hospital or a hot shower, Gene turned to me, with that sudden marvelous laugh of his.

"Do you realize," he said, "you'll probably never do anything like this again. You've got to love it."

Near the end of his eulogy, when talking about *Star Trek*, Knopf injected a wistful note:

Most of us would have made a mess of the eternal debate between good and evil, standing for justice and equality. Except that his choices, his words, the poetry and rhythm with which he used them, his philosophy and ideas were so many levels above what most of us as writers knew how to achieve. Never mesmerized by the sound of his own voice, he was a spectacular learner, providing insight, charm, compassion, humor, infusing his work with qualities of selfsearching, putting us on paper, himself on paper, and the result you know: a seemingly ordinary man with extraordinary vision.

Another close friend, the writer-producer E. Jack Neuman, stepped to the podium. After noting that Roddenberry was the first writer to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Neuman recounted the time in 1956 when he met Roddenberry, who was then a few months removed from the Los Angeles Police Department. An aspiring television writer, Roddenberry had covertly arranged to

sit next to the established professional, Neuman, on a flight from New York to Los Angeles. They talked for a long time, and had five rounds of drinks. Adequately fortified, Roddenberry admitted that he was scared. "What's to be scared about?" Neuman asked.

"I used to fly one of these things," Roddenberry replied.

Roddenberry was a golfer, Neuman said, by way of a metaphorical segue into a personal assessment of the man: "Aside from the fairways, Gene's expertise was in a little-known, very obscure, track-and-field event called self-effacement. In Hollywood it's practically extinct. Gene was the hands-down champion of self-effacement— unequaled, unrivaled, unchallenged; Gene owned the gold, the silver, and the bronze without even competing. He invented the event."

The final eulogist was Patrick Stewart, the actor who portrays Capt. Jean-Luc Picard on *The Next Generation*. Commanding the stage as only a trained Shakespearean can, he alluded to the deceased's cosmology by reciting dialogue Roddenberry had composed for an episode in the show's second season. Roddenberry had Picard answer the question of what happens to a body after death. Did the captain believe in the traditional concept of an afterlife, or in black nothingness? "Considering the marvelous complexity of our universe, its clockwork perfection balancing this against that, matter, energy, gravitation, time, dimension, happening, I believe that our existence must mean more than either of those choices. I prefer to believe that what we are goes beyond Euclidian and other practical measuring systems in ways we cannot yet fathom. Our existence is part of a reality beyond what we understand now as reality."

Stewart later recounted an incident that had occurred the previous spring. Former president Ronald Reagan had stopped by the set briefly to watch the filming. At the time, Roddenberry's deteriorating health had required that he use a wheelchair, but for standing and minor locomotion he used a cane. "[Reagan] and Gene stood side by side," Stewart said, "and somehow Gene's stick fell to the ground and at once the president bent on one knee to pick it up. And when this was referred to later, Mr. Reagan said, 'You know, in that moment, I felt I was being knighted.'

"Well, in one way or another, Gene graced all of us while he was alive, and he will go on doing so."

At the conclusion of Stewart's remarks, two men dressed in kilts played a particularly mournful version of "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes. Roddenberry's prerecorded voice could then be heard, reiterating his well-known sanguine forecast that reason and logic will, by the twenty-fourth century, lead that wondrous creature, the human being, into virtual utopia.

The mourners were directed outside. Fans and celebrities mingled together, waiting for the announced overhead fly-by—the so-called missing man formation. After thirty minutes, under a sky that had grown intensely blue in the late afternoon, four planes approached in a modified wedge formation. The lead plane broke formation while the other three flew on.

"I thought I would cry, but I didn't," Lorri Goldman says. "Even though it was sad, it was inspiring, too. It was a celebration, not like, 'Oh, gee, we lost him.' Well, it was that, too, but his life was so wonderful.

"And yet, I don't lionize the man. I've talked with some other people since and found out that, indeed, he wasn't Saint Gene."

Roddenberry had died, eight days before, of a heart attack in his doctor's Santa Monica office, his heart failure attributable to diabetes, hydrocephalus, alcoholism, and a series of strokes. The man extolled by five eulogizers and honored by several hundred guests had been a World War II bomber pilot, a commercial airline pilot for Pan American Airways, a police officer, and an episodic television writer of relatively minor distinction—until *Star Trek*.

In the last twenty-two years of his life, he never escaped the gravitational pull of that future universe. Nor had he wanted to. It was the wellspring from which sprang his pleasures and successes. Gene Roddenberry became a willing one-trick pony. But when it came time, in 1986, to re-create that universe anew for *The Next Generation*, he found that his pony had gone lame. He had to rely on others to get there—and felt entitled to the free ride. In his mind, he was the creator emeritus who'd made their work possible.

But *Star Trek* had never existed as Gene Roddenberry's proprietary domain—not in the twenty-third century, nor in the twenty-fourth. And despite his insistence, he had not entrusted it begrudgingly, because of lack of time, to other writers. No matter how persuasively he had convinced himself otherwise, the *Star Trek* realm had been, almost from the beginning, a dynamic cosmos with many gods, some less equal than others, but all of them contributors to the vision.

When the applause began, Roddenberry had walked out alone onto center stage, where he maintained that humans just three hundred years into the future—barely one tick of the evolutionary clock—will have overcome their frailties and foibles, and particularly their vanities. Irony explains why so few of those former fellow gods joined those who, on November 1, 1991, had come to pay their final respects: They had no respect left to pay.