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Winesburg, Indiana: Miss Gladys

Abstract

Mornings, this autumn, I see the girls skipping past on their way to school, and my heart lifts at the sound of their bright voices. I live at the end of Locust Street in a onestory frame house with a porch that wraps around the side. If visitors know me, they knock on the side door when they come, aware that I spend most of my time in the dining room where I have my television set and the oak drop-leaf table I inherited from my mother, and the rocking chair, reupholstered now, that belonged to my father. I sit at the table working a crossword. The television is on for the noise, usually some sort of news show on CNN because I like to keep up to date. I may be on the far side of eighty, but I'm not dead yet. The world can still amaze me.

Keywords

generation, age, beauty, life plans

Cover Page Footnote

Note: "This story is exclusively available in the anthology, *Winesburg, Indiana*, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry."



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Mornings, this autumn, I see the girls skipping past on their way to school, and my heart lifts at the sound of their bright voices. I live at the end of Locust Street in a one-story frame house with a porch that wraps around the side. If visitors know me, they knock on the side door when they come, aware that I spend most of my time in the dining room where I have my television set and the oak drop-leaf table I inherited from my mother, and the rocking chair, reupholstered now, that belonged to my father. I sit at the table working a crossword. The television is on for the noise, usually some sort of news show on CNN because I like to keep up to date. I may be on the far side of eighty, but I'm not dead yet. The world can still amaze me.

This morning, I hear a voice outside my window—a light, thin voice singing that old kids' song, "Itsy Bitsy Spider." I glance up from my puzzle, and I see the girl, no more than nine or ten, coming up the steps toward my front door. It's one of those cloudless September days when the air is so clear, the slightest sound carries. Crows caw from the oak trees where the leaves are just now tinged with red. A car door slams somewhere up the street. The last bell rings at Winesburg Elementary, where once upon a time I taught, and I hear it plain as day.

"You're late for school," I say to the girl when I open the front door.

"I'm on my way," she says, not flustered a bit, and for a moment I remember the girl I was, head in the stars, chin leading forward, ready to make my life.

“You want to buy this?” She holds on her palm a figurine made from spun glass, a pale blue hummingbird, wings open, its beak probing a petunia bloom. The beak is short and too flat. The bird’s eyes are too far apart, and, well, truth be told, the whole thing is a mess. The head is too big, the body too arched in an attempt to make it seem that the bird is hovering over the petunia. The bird actually seems to be smiling, and I can’t decide whether it looks more like a dolphin or a maybe a cross between a dolphin and a platypus. “My daddy made it,” the girl says.

“Does your daddy need glasses?” I can’t help myself. It’s said before I can stop it. “You ought to get to school.”

The girl tips back her head a tad, squints at me, then says in a very measured voice, “You ought not to be such a mean old bitch.”

Maybe I fall in love with her a little, as much charmed as I am shocked by how she comes back at me like that. What can I do but buy the figurine—five dollars, she wants for it.

“What are you going to do with that money?” I ask her.

She folds the bill and sticks it into her jacket pocket. It’s a thin denim jacket, short in the waist, and faded from too many washings. Frayed threads, nearly white, unravel from the collar and the cuffs. She stuffs her fists into her pockets and shrugs her shoulders—such a slight, delicate girl with a long neck and fine blonde hair, blue veins showing through the white skin of her eyelids.

“Guess I’ll know that when I’ve got enough,” she says.

She smells like old cooking oil and black bananas and wet dirt. I can’t place her from any of the houses nearby; could be she lives in one of the trailers the next street over. A smudge of something dark shadows the left corner of her mouth. When she catches me looking at that stain with a disapproving frown, she tucks her head down and rubs her jaw across her shoulder.

“How will you know when you have enough?”

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She shrugs again. “Just will. You want me to come back tomorrow?” She smiles at me so sweetly. “I’ll bring you another pretty.”

“And want another five dollars, I suppose?”

She doesn’t flinch. “Pretty is as pretty costs.”

“You think five dollars makes that hummingbird look any less like a platypus?”

I don’t let her know that she’s shaken me. My breath is catching in my throat. I feel like my legs might give way. I’ve only heard someone change up that old saw about pretty is as pretty does one other time in my life, but now this girl has said it—pretty is as pretty *costs*—and just like that I’m back over sixty years ago in the cafe by the Winesburg train station—The White Spot—and I’ve just ordered a piece of coconut cream pie.

It was August, the dog days, and I was having lunch before going back to my summer job at the Rexall drug store. I worked the cash register and stocked shelves when business was slow. Sometimes I delivered medicines to customers who were housebound, folks as old as I am now. The pharmacist, Mr. Lister, called me his girl. “I’ll send my girl right over with your heart pills,” he’d tell someone on the phone. “What’s that? Oh, yes, she’s a good girl. Very dependable. She’ll be there in a jiff.”

That day at The White Spot, I was bored, and only a week away from the end of that summer job. I was eager to be back at Oakland City College, where I was studying to be an elementary school teacher. All summer, as customers had come and gone, I'd felt Winesburg close around me. My job gave me too much intimacy with people and their infirmities and habits. I knew who suffered from gout, lumbago, insomnia, heart palpitations, dyspepsia, toe-nail fungus, athlete's foot, ringworm, vertigo. I knew the women who colored their hair, the teenagers who smoked Chesterfields and Pall Malls, the men who wore trusses and sometimes took penicillin for matters better left undisclosed. I knew all this, and it was too much to know. It left me longing for someone who could be a mystery to me, someone I could know a little bit at a time and never feel like I knew everything.

Then I ordered that piece of coconut cream pie, and the waitress, Meryl Lane, who came into the Rexall each month to buy the new *True Confessions* magazine—she'd been reading the August issue when I'd sat down at the lunch counter; I'd seen it open to an article entitled, "I Couldn't Forgive My Brother-in-Law"—told me that the man at the other end of the lunch counter had just ordered the last piece of pie. A man in a light blue seersucker suit and a red and navy bowtie. A stranger with a yellow-cream leather suitcase on the floor by his stool. A pretty man with black hair, oiled and combed. He looked at me and smiled, and I felt my heart go.

"Why don't we split it?" he said. "Go halvesies. You game?"

I was indeed. I picked up my hatbox pocketbook, let it swing in my hand by its Lucite handle, and I strolled down the line of counter stools. My dress was new, a lavender summer dress with white polka dots, and a circle skirt with a ruffled hem. I liked the way the ruched bust flattered me, and I hoped this man would like it, too. I took my time as if I knew exactly where I was going and didn't need to hurry.

Turned out, I didn't know a thing.

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A piece of coconut cream pie. A man with time to kill while he waited on his train, a girl with her head in the clouds and eager for her real life to begin.

I stand here now toward the end of that life, and I can remember the way the air felt when the man and I stepped outside The White Spot—heavy with humidity, the sky overcast, and everything so still the way it is when a storm is coming. Locusts chirred. The couplings of boxcars clanked together in the rail yards behind the station. A smell of old flowers and dried cornstalks and river water told me autumn was coming soon.

What did we do? That man and I? I took his hand. I led him down the alley and up the stairs to the room above the Recall that Mr. Lister used for storage. I shut the door behind us, and I didn't turn on the light.

The man set down his yellow-cream suitcase.

“Do you like my dress?” I said. “Do you think it's pretty?”

He moved in close to me. He put his hands on my waist. “Pretty is as pretty costs,” he said.

He moved his hand up under my skirt, and I let him. I didn't know everything that would follow. I didn't know that my life had already started to change. I didn't know that come spring, I'd be at the Nebraska Children's Home in Omaha, saying goodbye to

my newborn daughter. I didn't know I'd never marry, didn't know I'd spend my life taking care of other women's children. To me, it was just a late-summer afternoon in Winesburg. I was just an antsy girl, too daring for her own good, too brazen. I had my whole life ahead of me.

Now, the girl in my house looks up at me, her chin quivering and turning to gooseflesh. "It's a hummingbird," she says. "A goddamn hummingbird. Are you blind? Anyone can see that."

I tell her to come back tomorrow, and to bring me another pretty. "I'll pay." She turns and runs out of my house, down my steps, up the sidewalk to school. All I can do is step out onto my porch and call after her. "You just tell me how much." I watch until I can't see her anymore. "I'll pay whatever it costs."

But she's gone, so I go back into my dining room, where I set the hummingbird figurine on top of my television.

CNN tells me that the United Nations will try to resolve the Syrian government's bloody offensive against its citizens; unease continues in Egypt; the rapper, 50 Cent, is visiting impoverished sites in Kenya and Somalia; the Human Rights Watch calls for Iraqi officials to stop executing prisoners; the Mexican army has seized more than fifteen tons of methamphetamine from a clandestine laboratory in a remote area of the state of Jalisco.

Meanwhile, I'm living through another day in Winesburg, already thinking about bedtime when I'll lie down to sleep. I like to let the world get by on its own for a few hours, but sometimes I think about the man with the yellow-cream suitcase and the daughter he never knew existed. I hope she has a happy life. I hope the thought of me doesn't bear upon her. I say a little prayer for her, and one for the girl with the hummingbird figurine. Then I let it all go—the things I can't change—and all morning I watch the way the sunlight splinters through the spun glass of that figurine, sending spots of color wheeling across my floor, my wall. I almost believe I can reach out and hold them in my hand.

Lee Martin is the author of the novels, *The Bright Forever*, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction; *Break the Skin*, *River of Heaven*; and *Quakertown*. He has also published three memoirs, *From Our House*, *Turning Bones*, and *Such a Life*; and a short story collection, *The Least You Need To Know*. He teaches in the MFA program at The Ohio State University.

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