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## Winesburg, Indiana: Cleaning Lady to the Stars

### **Abstract**

Call me Isobelle -- at least, that's what my card says. I'd like it better if you call me the cleaning lady to the stars, a.k.a. the professors at St. Meinhof's. They move in here trailing a van full of kitchen gear they don't know how to use, wearing their attitudes like tiaras. One of them got the card made up for me cos she thought it was cute. I thought it was embarrassing, but she was right about one thing: you got to have a business card if you want to scrub professors' toilets. They check references, too.

### **Keywords**

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### **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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## Winesburg, Indiana: Cleaning Lady to the Stars

*by the editors*

by Valerie Sayers

Call me Isobelle—at least, that’s what my card says. I’d like it better if you call me the cleaning lady to the stars, a.k.a. the professors at St. Meinhof’s. They move in here trailing a van full of kitchen gear they don’t know how to use, wearing their attitudes like tiaras. One of them got the card made up for me cos she thought it was cute. I thought it was embarrassing, but she was right about one thing: you got to have a business card if you want to scrub professors’ toilets. They check references, too.

“How you like the Midwest?” I ask the new customers, first time I show up with a mop.

“You mean the *Midwaste*?” They ask me where you go to *eat* around here. You go to your well-stocked kitchen, is what I’m thinking, but I point them to Albert’s Seafood Lounge, and it’s not entirely my fault if they swallow a little botulism with their sushi. We didn’t have sushi till Albert thought to bring it in and (in case you hadn’t noticed how far we are from the ocean) we survived without it.

*The land that time forgot*, the professors call Winesburg. They say they’ll probably only be here a couple of years, cos they’re really East Coast people or West Coast people, or if they’re truly obnoxious, Texas people. Twenty years later, here is where they’re still parked, with their tenure and their season football tickets, and the same forty pounds the rest of us put on since high school. Meanwhile their paychecks have

been getting fatter, too, not that they ever do any work *I* can see, and they've moved on out to the subdivisions with the Fruity-Tooty gazebos and the house-moats just in case a marauding army's passing by. I haven't noticed no raise in *my* hourly.

All right, I say to myself. All right, let me play me some Taylor Swift nice and loud as a consolation: nothing like a little young blood to perk up your spirits while you're brushing the high-paid shit off her highness's throne. But if somebody's doing her "research" at home, I'm not allowed even that consolation. "Oh, Izzy, just a *smidge* lower. Well, maybe a little lower than *that*."

You find all *kinds* of things slipped behind their beds and it's another consolation that we're all the same under the skin, only you know they're paying way too much for a vibrating riding crop to arrive in a plain unmarked package when Doug could get one at Boys Will Be Boys out by the bypass for half the price. But this new customer downtown in the miserable Victorian with the sagging floors is more Girls Will Be Boys, anyway. Her name's Betty, old-fashioned and plain like you'd never expect with her purple-tipped spikes. She's as buff as the boys' wrestling coach and she spends *a whole lot of time* on Craig's List, if you catch my drift.

She's in English where they put all the troublemakers, I've learned over the years—so good, she's feisty, let's ask her to Trivia Night. My pardner Lucille and me been begging professors to go to Trivia Night at St. Casimir's for as long as we've been cleaning, cos that's the scam around here: you get you some Ph.D.s and you've got you a winning Trivia team. Not that they could do it without us. Lucille and me got to cover t.v. shows, sports teams, astrology, politics, radiology, and quantum mechanics. But you can count on pretty much any professor, no matter what they claim to teach, for geography, cooking (naturally), gardening, the Kinks, and foreign languages. When they're doing accents it's embarrassing to even be sitting at the same table with them.

Betty says sure, she'll give the St. Caz Trivia Night a whirl. I suggest the Polish supper first, but as soon as Lucille and me are salivating over the brats, Betty laughs: she only does *raw* food anymore. So *that* explains those torture machines taking up all the counter space in her kitchen. Something sweet about her tattoos—she's got one pumping heart on her right bicep that says *Dewey Dell 4-Evuh*—makes me do what I've never done before and tell her just come on over to the house and we'll eat there first.

"Why thank you, ma'am," she says, and am I imagining or is that a Sarah Palin-size wink she gives me? I'll kill her if she's making fun. Lucille digs me in the ribs on the way out to the truck. "What *you* gonna make that's *raw*?"

"Albert's sushi!" We both get the giggles till we pee our pants. I'm thinking, anybody can make cole slaw and put out a bowl of walnuts, which is exactly what I do come Saturday night. Betty says, "Perfect, my favorite meal"—I sure to hell hope she's not making fun of me—and then she holds up the bottle of wine she's brought.

Probably she sees the looks on our faces cos now she hoists a corkscrew, like she thought I wouldn't *have* one. "It's not that," I say, meaning I prefer a no-fuss-no-muss American beer to a mediocre Pinot Noir like the one she brought, but Lucille beats me to the sarcasm punch: "We'd rather smoke a little crank before Trivia."

Betty's eyes get as fiery as that pumping heart on her big arm and she says: "You mean crystal *meth*?" Poor baby. Once they're in Winesburg hobnobbing with the help, these professors think they're in white-trash hell. I get her a Miller and I'm sorry to disappoint her. But she's already sniffing around the living room like an over-stimulated terrier and hits a few keys on the electric piano, where Doug has his little statuette of Liszt. Look, I *know* he's sentimental. It's not my statuette.

"You play?" Betty asks me and I say, "Only honky tonk," God's own truth. So she moves on to read the walls, plastered with clippings from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. My great-aunt Tommie played third base for the Fort Wayne Daisies.

"Wow," Betty says, "you're a real *scholar* of this baseball stuff, aren't you?"

"Hell, you should see her Billy Sunday room," Lucille says, and I give her the evil eye. I don't want any professors in my Billy Sunday room, but you can guess what happens next, now that all the walnuts are gone. Nothing to do but show her and make her take her shoes off first. That is *white* shag and I mean to keep it that way. Betty's a good sport—takes off her socks too—and digs her toes in. She doesn't even fuss when I take her beer away, cos Billy, bless his heart, was a Prohibitionist. Betty studies the pictures like she's a scholar, too—I've got them divided into baseball on one wall and hellfire on the next. On the paneling, there's a row of Billy preaching and playing together. She says:

"How'd a Catholic get interested in an evangelist?"

She thinks I'm a Catholic cos of trivia night at St. Caz but I'd rather not discuss my lack of religious affiliation with an employee of St. Meinhof's, which pretty much *owns* Winesburg, so I just laugh. Lucille thinks she's helping when she says: "Isobelle has long talks with Billy."

"Lucille."

Too late. Betty gets it out of me that I've been known to hold a séance or two and Billy Sunday has been known to make an appearance. I never would have let it get this far if she hadn't dug her toes into my carpet so pretty or given me that wink.

Now she gets all tooled up. How's my séance work? Do I turn the lights off? (Lucille's just turned them off for me.) Do I call his name? (Duh.) Do I have a Ouija board or somesuch? When I say, no, I call him on my iPhone, she lets out a

roar of laughter and that does it: Billy's got to get in the game and stand up for me.

"Are you mocking this good lady, Professor?" he says: not in his hellfire voice, in his gentle-Jesus voice, like he's sorely disappointed. He's wearing his old White Stocking uniform, which is falling off him, he lost so much muscle before he passed. I suppose he might not even know he comes back as a little old man.

"No, sir," says Betty, her voice atrembling, beads of sweat dancing on her upper lip, where she has the lightest little mustache. It's kind of fetching.

Bill revs up to hit her with *Have you been saved, Professor*, which could be downright embarrassing to all of us, so I get him chatting instead about the Winesburg Wildcats. His Christianity doesn't stop him from being nasty on *that* subject. Lucille has meanwhile helped Betty sit in the couch, but looks like she's about to topple off that and hit the floor, she's so scared.

"Don't you worry," I say. "It's just Billy Sunday. He's got a lake house not that far from here."

Her lips are turning blue and I don't know how to tell Billy it's time for him to make himself scarce. He's so sensitive in his old age. Betty commences to mutter and we all lean forward to hear her:

"All this *religion*."

Billy gets his stern look on but Betty's trash-talking religion must have hurt him bad cause he's fading too. "Wait," I call, maybe to both of them, thinking I can bring them together after all, but before we know it Lucille and me are sitting in the dark with a passed-out Betty and Billy Sunday departed back to Winona Lake. My iPhone buzzes to beat the band: probably Douglas is texting me. *Go away* I hiss to the phone, but Betty hears in her sleep and sits halfway up like she's seen a ghost.

"I'll go," she says, into the darkness, and Lucille and me say, "No! No, we need you on our trivia team. The pot's up to almost seven hundred bucks." Betty says she knew she shouldn't have come here, but I know she doesn't mean my house, she means Winesburg.

"Aw, don't be all stuffy," I tell her. "We might surprise you."

And we help her to her feet and get her out the room till she's looking more like her feisty self. Safe back in the kitchen, I do mention that a living wage and a little time off would be appreciated, and I admit I do it in a kind of spooky-séancy-Midwestern way, but she perks right up at that and says:

"Isobelle, I used to be the graduate student *union rep*," and then she gives me another

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of those winks—talk about spooky, she’s Sarah Palin *exactly*—and I know we’re going to win that Trivia pot together. We all three go marching out of my house with our arms linked, singing “Solidarity Forever,” and Betty allows that she really wasn’t expecting any Field of Dreams crap in my little house.

I’m hurt the way Bill was hurt, but I’m used to it. Professors. No social skills whatsoever, which is why they ended up doing what they do.

Valerie Sayers cannot tell a lie: she is a professor at the University of Notre Dame. Her novels will soon be reissued by Northwestern University Press and her stories and essays appear widely.

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