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Winesburg, Indiana: Deanne Stovers

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Abstract
Wayne is a good man. I’m lucky to get him. People keep telling me those things, as if I need reminding. He took care of his troubled sister from the time he was nineteen years old, tracking her more than once to the houses where she was shooting up and taking her back home. Wayne’s youth was sacrificed on the altar of that girl. I should be grateful that a man like that wants to marry me now, when the skin under my eyes is showing lines and the legs that used to look slim and good in shorts now just look like stalks. I am grateful. But shouldn’t a man have wanted a little more out of his life? Shouldn’t a man have taken some time off from his mess of a sister once in a while, going out to the quarry with a few guns and friends who’ve been drinking? He took care of her to the day she died, and after. He was the one to wash her body for the funeral. People talked.

Keywords
people, biography, fiction, white dress, wedding, bridal

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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This is exactly why I need to wear a white dress, even if white makes me look little and washed out. Mama said I could pass for a used cotton ball. She thinks I should have a pink wedding gown. She thinks I look good in pink, which is true, but she forgets that white means something. I’m not talking about how I’ve had other boyfriends. Everybody in town knows that. White means respect for the tradition, and I’m trying to get this right.

I have thoughts that are not helpful. What does it mean that a man who spent ten years chasing down his sister in shooting galleries thinks that marrying me is the natural next move? Mama tells me not to say such things. I don’t see why I shouldn’t. Everybody
who saw me pulling in to park at Monica’s Bridal did.

I tried on a dress that Wayne would like—strapless, with lots of flounces on the skirt. The salesgirl had to pin it to hold it up, chattering, “Aren’t you tiny! Not many of the girls who come in are so little.” I looked in the mirror and saw a broomstick rising from a mound of whipped cream. “Maybe something with sleeves,” I said to her, while Mama said, “You can always dye it pink.” She was trying to make this a happy day. One look at her face told me she was remembering my first day of school, my first bike—the days before every room started to seem too small. Once she sent me to school in a turtleneck, and by the time I got home I’d cut out the neck with craft scissors.

I’m too old now to wear a dress designed for a 20-year-old and Wayne must know that. He’s not a fool and he doesn’t close his eyes when he looks at me. He says, “I like a girl who’s been around the block.” Well, he shouldn’t. He should stand up straighter and get mad enough to snarl at the girl he’s going to marry when she comes home later than she said she would, and drunk besides. When she lets the guys she works with tease her that the fella she’s marrying is fussy as an old lady. Wayne shrugs and says, “People say things,” and then he asks me what I want for dinner. Sometimes the words are right there in my mouth: “Oh, grow a pair.” He fusses at me, tucking in my scarf and putting Chapstik on my lips so I don’t have to dig through my purse for gloss. His eyes are calm when he does these things. He loves to tuck in my scarf.

I was barely fourteen when I went joyriding with Neil Osterman. He was nineteen, and I knew where we were going and what we were going to do there, and I yelled, “Faster!” whenever he slowed down. By the time we got to the quarry he was leaving rubber at every corner, including the one where we’d spun out and got a grill full of green corn. Drunk, of course, both of us, and loud, hollering as we swung on the rope over the glassy water. People think that Neil’s drunk hands slipped on the rope and he fell onto the boy swimming below us, but it wasn’t so simple. Neil was bombing for him and I was hanging onto Neil, screaming either “Go! Go!” or “No! No!” The versions vary. I’d been drinking too. Was that my sin, or was it the two of us, slick and wet teenage bodies, landing on that little boy, or was it me holding my head up after the funeral that every soul in Winesburg seemed to turn out for? My other sin was continuing to ride with Neil until he got locked up.

Wayne knows all of this. I made sure. I don’t want him coming home from the NAPA shop one day with his mouth folded back against the words he doesn’t want to say to me. He wants to protect me, even now.
“Do you still love Neil? Is that it?” Mama had demanded after she heard that I turned down Wayne a second time. Of course I don’t love Neil. It was Neil’s house that Wayne hauled his sister out of. Without even trying I can conjure Neil’s lazy sneer. He liked to blow cigarette smoke in my mouth when we kissed. No woman in her right mind loves Neil.

The salesgirl brought me another dress, with lacy sleeves that ate at my arms like a tracing of fire ants. The lace rode up in a high collar. “You won’t be able to fasten this yourself, but your mama can help you,” the salesgirl said. Mama looked unhappy. What did she think we were buying, a party dress? The lace pinched, so stiff I could barely bend my elbows.

“Look at you! A bride!” the salesgirl said.

In the mirror stood a girl, skinny as a needle, her skin gray underneath the stupid white lace.

“You’ll be wrapped up too tight to dance at your own wedding,” Mama said.

The salesgirl started to talk about alterations and Mama was saying pink, both of them chattering until I said, “Hush,” as if I had a right.

“Are you crying?” Mama said.
“That’s tears of joy,” the salesgirl said. “I see them a lot.”

“You keep thinking that,” I said. My arms were too stiff at my sides to wipe my eyes, so a drop landed on the dress, spotting it and making it mine now.