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Winesburg, Indiana: Occupy Winesburg

Abstract
I pitched my tent between the soccer field and the playground in Emile Durkheim Park, across the street from Emile Durkheim High School, my stinking alma mater, and I dove the dumpster at Dollar General for sheets of cardboard. My mother texted: you're making a fool of yourself, honey.

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Winesburg, Indiana: Occupy Winesburg

Shannon Cain

Day 1.

I pitched my tent between the soccer field and the playground in Emile Durkheim Park, across the street from Emile Durkheim High School, my stinking alma mater, and I dove the dumpster at Dollar General for sheets of cardboard. My mother texted: *you’re making a fool of yourself, honey.*

Did I care? Hannah Arendt made a fool of herself. Rosa Parks, too. Fucking Gandhi was the biggest fool of them all. I chuckled at public humiliation. I was the sole Occupier in Winesburg; alone in the park. The movement was me; I was the movement.

When I saw the principal of Durkheim High coming down the block in her minivan, I hustled into my tent for the sign I’d made just for her. *I Reject Your Authority as Illegitimate.* She shrugged at me benignly as she drove past my encampment, on her way to indoctrinate the current generation of Winesburg youth in capitalism and civic complacency. With one hand I held my sign high, and with the other hand I flipped her the bird.

Don’t kid yourself that Winesburg is a haven from corporate America. Don’t go thinking this town is special because a few mom & pops—the meat store, the funeral home—have so far survived the global economic meltdown. Don’t go thinking that the people here have some sort of community ethic about preserving small-town culture.
The parking lot of the Target on Highway Eight last holiday season? Mayhem. Emile Durkheim’s grand theories of cultural interdependence and organic solidarity trampled under the boots of Black Friday shoppers.

What they didn’t teach you at EDHS, by the way, was anything about Durkheim himself, the father of modern sociology. I needed big cardboard real estate to quote him in full. I raided the dumpster at Winesburg Appliance. They were under new local management, claimed the sign, but hardly anybody knew they’d actually gotten bought out by Whirlpool. I found a refrigerator box. If society lacks the unity based upon the commitment of men’s wills to a common objective, I lettered artfully in purple Sharpie, then it is no more than a pile of sand that the least jolt or the slightest puff will suffice to scatter. I poked holes in the corners of the Durkheim quote and strung my sign between the swing set and the maple tree under which Bobby McReynolds had once kissed me before he went away to college.
August 24, 2012

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Day 5.

My mother came by the encampment with tuna sandwiches and a Diet Coke. I was pretty hungry, so I tolerated her sighs and groans as she crawled into my tent. “Remember the summer we went to Yosemite?” she said. “Remember that bear?”

I dug into the tuna. I love my mother’s tuna. She makes it with sweet relish and mustard. She examined my sleeping bag, my plastic tub of clothes and books, organized and ready for a bug-out in case I was evicted in the middle of the night. There wasn’t a whole lot to do out here. I couldn’t even catch the wifi signal from the high school. Mostly I waited around for the cops to come tell me I couldn’t camp in the park. I was hungry for an arrest. Something.

“What’s the deal here, honey?” my mother said. “I mean, what’s the point?”

My mother had double mortgaged her home to cover my father’s hospital bills, for all the good that did us: he died anyhow, not a dime of life insurance. Now her home, the home where I grew up, was in foreclosure. Ditto two other houses on our block, and three on the next street. No college fund for yours truly, either. And here my mother sat, asking me what’s the point. Winesburg, Indiana: not really so special.

Day 12.
On Wall Street and in Oakland they were drumming and teaching-in and taking pepper spray in the face. I thumb-typed a Declaration of Principles on my cell phone. I started a Facebook page. I educated myself in horizontal structures and direct democracy. I was ready to facilitate a General Assembly, as soon as there were others to assemble. But I was tired of waiting around for Winesburgers to wake up to the reality of a ruined world. I zipped up my tent and went to the Target on Highway Eight. My sign said *Everything is Okay, Just Keep Shopping.*

My mom came out of the store, pushing one of those oversized red carts. “Well, hi there, honey,” she said. She rummaged around in the plastic bags and handed me a box of Little Debbie’s Devil Squares. My dad used to love those things. “I’ve been thinking,” she said, waving her fingers to indicate my sign, my worldview, my involvement in the coming revolution. “Whatever makes you happy is ok with me.”

Emile Durkheim wrote that through collective consciousness, people become aware of one another as social beings, and that we produce collective consciousness through our interactions with one another. This strikes me as obvious. But you get the sense that he was quite the radical thinker for his time. Or maybe it was obvious all along. Maybe Emile was just saying what people always knew in their hearts to be true.

I watched my mom push the cart back to her car, across the asphalt expanse. The Target security guard came out of the store and told me I couldn’t stand there. Then he said, “Hey. Your dad was my soccer coach.”

I didn’t remember him. His nametag said Elmer, but I was pretty sure that wasn’t his name. You don’t forget a name like Elmer. My dad loved those soccer boys. He coached that team for ten years, talked like every last one of his players was some sort of miracle, special in a profound way. Even the klutzes. I said, “What will you do if I don’t leave?”

Elmer lit a cigarette and seemed to think about it. He thought for a good long while, smoking and watching customers come and go. “He was a good coach,” Elmer said at last. “I’m sorry about what happened.” He stepped on his cigarette and then went back inside.

I opened the box of Little Debbies. They reminded me of course of my father, which made me really fucking sad, so there I was holding my sign and stuffing my face with Devil Squares and crying in front of the Target. Which isn’t exactly the ideal way to change the world.
I took the bus to the Bank of America branch on Maple Grove and attached myself by the neck to the front door with a U-shaped bicycle lock. It was super uncomfortable, let me tell you. The handle was at an awkward height, forcing me to sort of crouch there, unable to sit or stand. Plus the lock was pressing fairly hard against my windpipe.

The security guard came outside, and I thought, all right, here we go. But he was followed by the manager, Dave, a wiry guy with big feet who used to be on my dad’s bowling team. I’d forgotten Dave worked there. His daughter, Julie, and I used to sip cokes at the bowling alley’s shoe rental counter while we waited for our dads to finish their games. Which they cheerfully lost, pretty much every week.

Dave sipped at his cup of coffee, sized up the situation. “Hey there, Suzie,” he said. “What’s cooking?”

“You fuckers foreclosed on my mom’s house,” I croaked. I didn’t like calling him that, because it was always Dave who had quarters in his pocket for the coke machine. But honestly: there’s a global economic meltdown in progress, and actual human beings are in pain.

“Oh, that,” he said. “Right.” He gestured to the security guard and the guy went away. While I waited for whatever was going to happen next, I informed Dave about Emile...
Durkheim’s thoughts on the cultural aspect of the collective consciousness. “We’re emotionally bound to culture,” I told him. “The emotional part of the collective consciousness overrides our egoism. We act socially because we recognize it’s the responsible, moral way to act.”

“You don’t say,” Dave replied.

The security guard appeared, carrying an enormous pair of bolt cutters. He placed them tenderly between my neck and the door handle and with a little grunt he snapped the U-lock and I was freed.

Dave laid a hand on my shoulder. “You know what, sweetheart? I don’t mind saying this. Your dad would’ve been proud of your spunk.”

“Have a nice day,” the security guard told me.
Day 23.

I was at my mom’s house, packing up my old stuffed animals and Brainiac trophies when Larry from AAAA Locksmith came to the door. “Gotta do this,” he told my mom. “Sorry.”

“You’re early!” she wailed. She waved a letter from the bank. “I have two more days! The freezer is full of meat!”

Larry examined the letter. He pointed out a sentence containing the words “may” and “at the discretion of” and “up to 7 days before your foreclosure date.” I snatched the letter from his hand and climbed to my roof. The day before, I had decamped from the park and reinstalled myself on the roof of the house. The pitch of the roof made it pretty hard to sleep, but I’d weighted the tent down with foreclosed paving bricks I liberated from the foreclosed patio. I’d lettered Emile Durkheim Forever in Sharpie on a pillowcase flag and flew it from the chimney. I painted STOLEN AMERICAN DREAM across the shingles in big block letters of pink latex paint still sitting around from when my dad built my playhouse.

I waved the letter from Bank of America, and translated for the neighbors, who had begun to congregate on their lawns, the sentence that authorized Larry to change the locks on my mother’s house. “We are the bank and we are legally entitled to screw you,” I yelled, “for as long and as hard as we damn well please!” My voice was hoarse. I’d been yelling quite a lot from the roof in the past week, to tell you the truth. The
neighbors had been tolerant about it—my dad had been a popular guy, the kind of man who’d shovel your walk when you’re out of town to confuse the burglars—but I’m guessing they weren’t so disappointed to see Larry the Locksmith. They were tired of watching our misfortune, tired of thinking how close they were, too, of falling into this well of bad luck.

“Shame!” I yelled at Larry, who really was just some guy trying to make a living. I wasn’t being fair, but none of this was fair.

A cruiser from the Winesburg Police Department showed up. The cops conferred with Larry at the front door, blocking the entrance to our home. My mother stood in our driveway in her house slippers and sweatpants and wept. Our neighbor Irene held her by the shoulders, tried to steer her inside, then seemed to realize my mother no longer had an inside to be steered toward. By now, everyone was on their front porches, on the sidewalks. Kids on bikes circled around the street. “Shame!” I yelled at the sky. “Shame on everyone!”

Constance Wooten, the ancient crazy artist lady who lives at the end of the block, appeared at the edge of the crowd, leaning on the arm of a young man who turned out to be Bobby McReynolds, home from college. Bobby was carrying a bright green duffel bag and an aluminum folding chair. They made their slow way into our yard, Constance ignoring the cops and the neighbors and the general tumult. She pointed to a spot on the grass, unfolded the chair, and settled herself. Bobby gave me a little salute, unzipped the duffel bag and like a magic trick out popped an orange tent. A little backpacking tent, just big enough for two. The neighbors surged forward for a look. Constance reached into a tote bag covered with splotches of paint and pulled out a brush and a palette and painted OCCUPY WINESBURG right on the nylon.

Everyone stood around muttering energetically as they watched Constance and her slow paintbrush. When she finished and stood up, it was as though she’d startled a flock of birds. The neighbors dashed away. From my vantage point on my roof I watched them opening their garages and storage sheds, rooting around inside. Kids biked in tight circles around the locksmith’s truck, making war whoops.

Within twenty minutes, our neighbors’ tents overflowed the lawn, spilled onto the sidewalk, filled the street. Kids struggled with poles. Dads pounded stakes into our grass. Somebody brought coffee and cookies.

My mother clapped and clapped. She bounced on her toes. She pushed past the cops and went inside. She came back out with the American flag my father had flown on holidays, inserted it into the brace on the front porch.
We weren’t idiots. We knew that this was all too late, that the house was already lost, that these tents would be cleared out tomorrow, that my father was dead and gone. But when my mother raised the flag, it felt, for a moment, like we were still living in the America we once knew.

She stepped back, shaded her eyes and found me on the roof, where I was sitting with my legs dangling over the edge. Bobby McReynolds had climbed up and was grinning at my side. Our yard was a bright fluttering sea of blues and yellows and greens.

“Honey!” my mother called up to me. “Oh, honey!”