WINESBURG DAYS

Michael Downs

"Adventure"

We arrived in Clyde, Ohio, on a midafternoon in late December, one of those inert, gray days wedged between Christmas and New Year's. The cold air bit, the sky looked hard as a sidewalk. We were a husband and wife on an adventure and confused about it. Behind us, to the west, was the home in Montana that she loved and never wanted to leave, mountains and clear water. Ahead lay Baltimore, a spirited eastern city that was also the ruin of a city, and yet another career for me: a fresh start as a forty-three-year-old writer who had some months earlier published his first book. We drove a white four-door sedan, bought used, the best car we'd ever owned. In the back seat stood a big dog we held dear. Ozark, a Great Pyrenees mix, balanced on her three good legs. A cancer had dissolved the bones of the right fore, so it dangled useless as a stocking filled with broken sticks.

Though Clyde looked to have buttoned itself tight against the cold from the great lake ten miles north, we lowered the car's back windows; Ozark wanted the rush of air against her face. We'd come to this town of some six thousand souls because the writer Sherwood Anderson grew up there, and out of that life he'd written a book of tales called *Winesburg, Ohio*. No, that is not quite right. We'd come to Clyde because that previous summer I'd read the book for the first time, and it had made something in me want to be closer to something in Sherwood Anderson. I wanted to know Clyde so I might better know the writer and how their alchemy made *Winesburg*.

Winesburg is an old book and a famous one. Writers, especially, admire its example. Anderson's characters imprint themselves on one's imagination. If you have read the book, you know what I mean. Few can forget twitchy Wing Biddlebaum with his amusing name and terrible past. Or the Reverend Curtis Hartman, who peeps through broken stained glass at an undressed woman. That same woman, Kate Swift, scandalously smoking cigarettes while reading books. And especially memorable: the young newspaperman George Willard, to whom people reveal their deepest selves as best they can. Yet no matter how many secret truths they confess, no matter the strength of their yearning for rapport and shared sympathy, the people of Winesburg remain apart from each other and terribly alone.

It's uncertain when Anderson left Clyde, but the biographers say 1897 seems likely, two years after his mother's death. He would have been twenty. The time of which I now write was the year 2007, its last days. That morning we, wife and husband, had left the comfortable house of her niece and the niece's family in Indiana. We'd since driven the turnpikes and become numbed by their uniformity, the Burger King at this plaza, the McDonald's at that one, the Michigan drivers all too fast. I'd looked ahead and noticed that Clyde lay only a few miles off our main route. A detour toward a different adventure. A distraction from my wife's sadness about our move. "We'll have fun," I said to Sheri. "Clyde will have a Sherwood Anderson museum, and we can spend the afternoon there, enjoy a nice dinner and stay over at some mom-and-pop motel." She agreed. We were and still are people who chart our lives by the twin stars of chance and discovery.

Trusting, as we did, in the old technologies, we found our way to Clyde using a printed road atlas. Behind the wheel, I glanced about. An urgency propelled me, as someone intent to rectify a mistake. Having read *Winesburg* so late in life, I lacked longevity with the book and wanted immersion to take its place. On Route 20, on Clyde's outskirts, we passed a training center for Whirlpool employees and a Whirlpool distribution center, which all could be reached by an avenue called Whirlpool Way. Even this put me in mind of Winesburg, the fictional town, where people struggle to make lives in an economy turning from handcrafts and farming to factories. Anderson's own father had suffered in Clyde when his work, harness making, became industrialized and he redundant. Here now in Clyde was a maker of refrigerators and washing machines. Victory for the conveyor belt.

We drove on. Were I a character in *Winesburg*, Anderson might have called me bespectacled, then noted the salt and pepper in my scanty beard, the eager darting of my eyes as I sought signs of the famous writer. I wore a ball cap, because to protect my balding head against skin cancer I always wore a ball cap. Beside me, Sheri wore sunglasses in her thick blonde hair, ready should the clouds break, prepared as she ever is for a better turn from the events of a moment.

And here came a good turn. A Winesburg Pizza. And a Winesburg Motel. A sign with an arrow directing us toward

"America's Famous Small Town." The citizens of Clyde, it seemed, knew we were coming. How much more would we discover once we reached the town's heart! We turned onto Main Street. My copy of *Winesburg, Ohio* comes with a map, which is very much a map of Clyde. In worlds real and fictional, Main and Buckeye Streets cross near the center of the old part of town, so I had a good sense of where to look for a coffee shop, or a bookstore, or a Sherwood Anderson museum.

Yes, here now were broad sidewalks and storefronts for insurance agencies and law offices, a hair cuttery and a bank, street lamps and small, leafless boulevard trees. Here is where we came upon a wind-battered banner, strung from one side of Main to the other, announcing a celebration called Winesburg Days. The banner hung tenuously, folding over itself in the wind, but we could make out the words in red letters and two piney wreaths depicted, one on each end. Alas, we'd missed the party. The festive weekend had occurred some half month before, part of the secular advent that leads to Christmas. The news of Winesburg Days gladdened and confused me. True, Clyde acknowledged its literary heritage. But I did not remember *Winesburg, Ohio* as a book concerned with the Nativity. In fact, the book's memorable line involving Jesus invokes not Christmas but the cross, when a character named Dr. Parcival declares to George Willard that "everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified."

We continued along the length of Main Street, scanning storefronts and signs for other evidence of Sherwood Anderson. But we cleared the three blocks or so of Clyde's downtown having seen nothing more. Finally, a half mile south of Buckeye Street, we stopped at an elementary school, closed for the holiday. Ozark needed to sniff and squat.

I'd like to report that the school was called Sherwood Anderson Elementary. It wasn't—though "Clyde Elementary" comes out of a sensible logic. Ozark limped over the beaten-down grass of the schoolyard, and I felt disappointed and silly that we'd driven so far for Winesburg Pizza and, perhaps, nothing more. No Sherwood Anderson Museum. No Kate Swift Bookstore. No Willard Inn, named for the hotel George Willard's mother owns in *Winesburg*.

"Nobody Knows"

To return to the turnpike, our most direct route would send us back along Main Street. "We should look one more time," Sheri said, her sentiment unsurprising. Like George Willard, she and I had both worked as newspaper reporters. If Winesburg existed in Clyde, we would find it. We'd knock on doors. We'd ask questions. Now we drove slower through town, peering down side streets and up alleys, unconcerned whether our puttering inconvenienced drivers behind us. There were few of them anyway, and fewer pedestrians, owing to the so many storefronts closed between Christmas and New Year's. A city government building, though, looked open, so I parked by what appeared to be a town green. "Look over there," Sheri said, pointing out an Ohio Historical Marker that extolled Sherwood Anderson and his contributions to literature. I left the car to snap a picture. Placed in 2003, the plaque did not have much to say that I didn't already know, though in proclaiming that Sherwood Anderson "gave up a successful business career . . . to concentrate on writing" it glossed over the dramatic circumstances, which Anderson himself once described as "went nutty—had nervous breakdown—slight suspicion have been nutty ever since. Started writing for the sake of the salvation of my soul." The plaque did note that Anderson had influenced the likes of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck. Faulkner, it is true, called Sherwood Anderson "the father of all my generation."

Across the street stood the Clyde Municipal Building, a handsome brick structure with a clock tower and a look that fancied a railroad station. Sheri said she'd stay with Ozark while I visited. Inside, I met the police dispatcher/city hall receptionist, who sat on the other side of what I took to be a bulletproof window. She said she'd never heard of Sherwood Anderson. My heart surprised me, so quick its heaviness at her answer.

"Respectability"

But a second woman who passed within earshot interrupted to tell me she knew who I was talking about. There was a brochure upstairs. She could show me.

"You know," she said, as we climbed to the second floor, "he wrote a book. I didn't care for it. It's kind of crazy. Depressing. A guy looking at women through windows and things."

It is true that when *Winesburg* was published some critics called it "filth" and a "sex book." Though the book's references to masturbation and carnality are coy, they are clear; also less threatening now than they were in buttoned-up 1919.

I told the woman that I'd also read the book. It's why I'd come to

Clyde. She then showed me a display of brochures, including a flashy colorful one touting Clyde "for a visit or a lifetime." A photograph of a chubby-faced, pink-cheeked boy clutching a small American flag graced the cover. "Residents enjoy an award-winning water system," the brochure told me, "low utility rates, well-maintained streets, an excellent public library, and one of the state's top school districts… Clyde's parks and public facilities offer swimming, tennis, ball diamonds, fishing and boating."

The brochure also nodded to history buffs, extolling the life of General James Birdseye McPherson, a Clyde native who served at Vicksburg and was killed by Confederate troops outside Atlanta, making him one of the highest-ranking officers martyred for the Union cause. Interested parties could tour his home and its veranda or admire the monument raised to honor him. Sherwood Anderson received less billing, a bare mention that he'd written several books and that "each year Clyde hosts the Winesburg Christmas Weekend including the Friday evening Santa parade."

I learned that the weekend also included trolley rides. The accompanying imagery suggested penny candies and scented candles for sale, which have nothing to do with *Winesburg, Ohio* or with life in Clyde at the time Anderson lived there. In fact, Anderson's Winesburg is home to lonely oddballs, drunks, gamblers, itinerant salesmen, domineering husbands, libidinous teenagers, violent farmers, and a night watchman who hopes for a new career raising ferrets. Filth and sex—what Anderson knew to be the reality of Clyde. I did not judge. After all, why would the Clyde Business and Professional Association, sponsors of the Christmas weekend, want to claim Anderson's depiction of his hometown? Understanding, however, did not erase my disappointment. Winesburg Days! It recalled the author's own description of Winesburg's harvest fair: "An American town worked terribly at the task of amusing itself."

But I digress. The woman at the Clyde Municipal Building handed me brochures, and I took them, along with an understanding that she and other townsfolk wanted the world to know that Clyde was not Winesburg and Winesburg was not Clyde. We're not like that small town in the book was the message. We're a place of steady, happy neighbors, quiet and safe. A community in which to raise kids. With a past that can be grand or quaint—however we want, a present that is comfortable and workaday, a future so shiny bright.

"An Awakening"

Among the brochures was one printed in black and white, made by photocopy on a sheet of plain paper, double-sided, then folded. It had been published by the Clyde Historical Society some twenty years earlier, and it was called "The Anderson Guide." In it was a hand-drawn bird's-eye view of Clyde and its outskirts. Numbered spots indicated sites of interest that pertained to either Sherwood Anderson or *Winesburg, Ohio*. This was it. I held the treasure map.

In the car, Sheri navigated while I piloted. Our first stop, the town historical society, was closed, and though I peered through windows and observed references to General McPherson, I saw nothing of Sherwood Anderson. Outside a church said to be the one out of which Reverend Curtis Hartman spies on naked Kate Swift, I took photographs with our camera. Kids on bicycles in the parking lot stared at me, curious. We saw two homes in which Sherwood Anderson had lived as a boy. The first now had a two-car garage that had been converted into Bill's Upholstery, though an *L* was missing so it read "Bill's Upho stery." The second house was small and tidy. Neither home announced its literary legacy: not a historic marker or yard sign. I wondered whether the people who lived there even knew. And if they knew, how did they react to the history? Did the homeowners embrace the ghost? Own copies of all Sherwood Anderson's books? Invite tourists in for tea and literary conversation? Or were they annoyed by the occasional stranger who came to the door? I'll never know, because I didn't knock at either place. Even with my experience as a journalist, having knocked on many doors and often under worse circumstances, I now felt uneasy at the prospect. Why trouble poor Clyde over the famous son they seemed content to acknowledge but not to celebrate? Why strike again at my already dashed illusions?

By this time, we needed a bathroom. So we made our last stop the public library, an elegant building constructed with Carnegie dollars in 1905—a decade or so after Sherwood Anderson fled town. Outside along the highest parts of the walls, names of famous authors stood in relief: Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes. Not Anderson, of course, who was not yet famous when the town raised the building. Inside, high, clean windows made the dreary day seem brighter. The library bustled with patrons, especially children and teens on winter break. A few read books but most availed themselves of the library's large DVD collection. Sherwood Anderson, I knew, had a complicated relationship with this library. In his later years, he read a story about himself and the library in a student's thesis, and that story

dumbfounded him. He sent a note to an old friend in Clyde.

"She also says in her thesis," Anderson wrote, "that later the Clyde library wrote and asked me for copies of all of my books to put on their library shelves and that I answered by writing a rather impertinent letter telling them that if they wanted my books they should buy them. I wonder, Herman, if this story is also true as I have entirely forgotten the incident… I would have liked particularly to know because if the library there in my hometown really wants my books I would be glad to arrange to have them presented to the Clyde library."

Sheri and I explored. We learned that the public library in Clyde did, indeed, keep a Sherwood Anderson collection for researchers, including letters, notebooks, and other ephemera—and perhaps copies of books he'd presented himself. But access to that history required an appointment. Lacking one, Sheri and I satisfied ourselves by studying framed pen-and-ink sketches in an anteroom, which depicted Clyde at the time Anderson lived there. In the stacks, I looked for his books and took a photograph of what I found. Though he published more than two dozen in his lifetime, here, only, was *Winesburg, Ohio*: four paperback copies.

"The Untold Lie"

It is valuable, sometimes, to learn that your passions are not shared by some others. At first this feels crazy, depressing. But it is also called perspective. What mattered more in my life that day than how Clyde treats Sherwood Anderson was that Sheri and I were in the midst of our own life adventure. Everything was about to change, through chance and discovery. We would long for one former home and come to love a new one. This was our habit. The move to Baltimore was one of several by which we had taken turns following each other's passions. I followed her to Montana, her dream; she came with me to graduate school in another part of the country; we returned to Montana for her; then to Baltimore for me. As I write these words, it is her time again, and who knows where that may lead us?

Ozark the dog died a year and a half after we visited Clyde. Sheri believes we kept her alive too long, and maybe we did. It is impossible to know when to let a dog go, I say, and she says yes, but we waited too long.

You can see that in the great ongoing of our lives, our day in Clyde has little consequence. Yet I've not stopped thinking about that odd afternoon. The hours there gave me a problem I couldn't solve.

Clyde's response to *Winesburg, Ohio* and to Sherwood Anderson still seems wrong, even unjust. I want to say, "What's wrong with you, Clyde?" And then I wonder, what is wrong with me that I care so much? Sherwood Anderson doesn't need me to defend him to good people who busy themselves with lives in a place he gave up on more than one hundred years ago.

But because I could not let Clyde go, because I remained curious, years later I did return in a manner of speaking—through the internet. I learned that since we'd visited, Clyde had come under scrutiny from the United States and Ohio environmental protection agencies. In town and in the area, an unusual number of children had been stricken with cancer. News stories called it the Clyde cancer cluster. Suspicions were that Whirlpool left polychlorinated biphenyls—or PCBs, which the EPA calls "probable human carcinogens"—in soil in various spots around Clyde. Most attention had gone to a children's park that Whirlpool built for the community in 1950, with a basketball court surrounded by dirt filled with PCBs and a swimming pool that might have been deadly. The pool drew its water from a pond at the bottom of a slope. The slope was also found to have PCBs in its soil.

Sherwood Anderson first intended to title his collection of tales *The Book of the Grotesque*, and a remnant of that intention remains as *Winesburg*'s introduction. There, Anderson writes about truths, and about how there are many in the world, but sometimes a person takes a particular truth and believes in it, and that truth becomes fixed in the person's life. There's comfort in thinking you've got things figured out, that every village must celebrate its famous literary son. Or that our town is a good place to raise kids.

At best, such a fixed belief closes the paths to chance and discovery. At worst, the belief stays too long fixed. Then, it's likely—over time—to be proved a lie. If accepted, the falsity of that belief creates misunderstanding and grief. Worse, though, is this: held to despite all, the lie turns a soul grotesque.

"Departure"

As we left the library that long-ago afternoon, we'd already decided, without saying much about it, that we wouldn't stay the night in Clyde. Neither the Winesburg Motel nor the pizza parlor offered enough to keep us. We'd given maybe an hour in all searching for Sherwood Anderson, and with what the day still offered we could cover many miles. So we drove away, listening to the radio and

learning that the leader of Pakistan had been assassinated. That news took our attention until, tired and hungry, we arrived at a motel outside Pittsburgh, one that allowed dogs. ■