

Mr. Winston's Words

by Alex Shealy

There weren't many creative people in the neighborhood at that time, other than Mr. Winston. He used to make lawn ornaments out of thick wires. The neighbor girl thought they were incredibly expressive, especially around the holidays when he would arrange them to depict certain scenes from classic literature like the Bible, Macbeth and Mein Kampf. A lot of people who drove by weren't sure what to think when they saw one of the figures stabbing another in the chest. However, they all agreed that Mr. Winston's nativity was "an interesting interpretation of the birth of Christ."

The neighbor girl (let's call her April) used to visit Mr. Winston every so often as her mother advised.

"Mr. and Ms. Winston don't have any children, and it would be nice if you went over there and said hello every now and then."

April reluctantly followed her mother's advice, but dreaded the weekly visits up until she turned fourteen and began to wonder how to see the world through another's eyes.

Before he'd retired, Mr. Winston had been a taxidermist, but refused to decorate his own house solely with dead animal carcasses. Occasionally, a head of some woodland animal would peer from around a corner; but such decorations were few and Ms. Winston was much obliged. On one of her many visits, Mr. Winston told April that his career wasn't worth all the money he'd made.

"I can't smell anymore because of it; it was horrible how those animals smelled. Don't ever go into the business."

April was glad that the house didn't smell like the taxidermy house Mr. Winston described. She'd always assumed old people's houses smelled like spices, nutmeg, pot pourri, even dryer sheets, but the Winstons house was different. It didn't smell like anything at all.

It reminded her of when her family took a trip to Wyoming. April remembered how her father had screamed at her mother as they frantically searched over the map to identify their location. Feeling the cold bite at her skin and seep in like a sickness, April had pressed her hands against the window. She'd stepped out onto the lonely road and felt the scent flood around her. The air was like mineral water, pure, clean, and nothing. She wished she could run away and hide for a while. Mr. Winston, after hearing April's story, wished he could have his sense of smell back.

Sometimes, he would ask her how things smelled.

"Its like peppermints," she might answer. "Or grocery store produce sections; like the smell of cold and ice, that's snow, that's what it smells like."

Ms. Winston answered the door for her whenever she came over. After inviting April inside, she would ask how school was and if she'd like some juice. Occasionally, April took a cup of coffee into the living room for Mr. Winston.

"Mr. Winston told me about that book you brought to him; he keeps telling me the story, she'd told April while making cookies one day. "He's just in the other room, dear."

The wooden floor was covered with a very deep green carpet that was placed in the center of the hallway and ran as far as the kitchen. Ms. Winston had contrasted the deep hues of the floor with beige-yellow wallpaper ordained with delicate, doily patterns.

“My mother’s design,” she told her. Various black and white photographs of young women in sundresses were thumb-tacked to wall like a bland collage.

“Oh! You’re here. I was wondering what time you’d show up today!” Mr. Winston turned towards April as she entered the room.

She smiled and said hello as she sat down on the couch next to him. April picked up a book that was on the coffee table in front of the couch and began to read aloud from it.

In this story, I am the girl, and my neighbor is Mr. Winston, and he is blind. He was a taxidermist until age fifty-two or fifty-three when he lost his sight. Mr. Winston told me that he never really grieved over the loss of his eyes. Instead, he said that he received an even greater sense as he lost his ability to see. He’d learned how to listen. Over the years that I visited him, Mr. Winston taught me many things about life; but the thing that he told me never to forget was how to listen without seeing.

By the time I was fifteen, the Winstons and I had spent nearly every evening for the past year together. Most of the time, I would read to Mr. Winston as he formed wire figurines for his yard. My parents never objected to these visits, so I assumed that they were happy I’d found such admirable friends. My mother would smile and ask me if I’d done my homework when I returned home each evening.

“It’s so nice to have you around,” Ms. Winston said, forking bits of ham onto her husband’s plate. “We love your company, sweetie. It’s like we have a child of our own.”

“Here you are, Mr. Winston.” I was handing him a fork with skewered bits of ham on the end of it.

I complimented the food when I was done. Most nights were the same. I stepped off the bus at the Winstons, instead of at my own house and remained there until nine or so when I went home to finish up school work and to sleep.

“One thing you need to remember about people is this; people are too afraid to speak what they mean; their emotions stay guarded, and they never can properly explain themselves unless they learn to listen to their emotions,” Mr. Winston told me one evening.

I looked up from my essay on the rhetorical strategies used in Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury. “But then, how do I trust what people tell me?” I asked.

Mr. Winston smiled and searched for my shoulder to pat. “You have to search for the words that those people can’t find within themselves, be a listener to the things they can’t describe.”

When I was young, I never completely understood what he told me. Mr. Winston knew this and never hesitated to reassure me that “I’d get it someday.”

I started out of the living room around nine. I waited for Mr. Winston to stop me with words like he always did.

“How is your family these days?” he asked, his tone almost wet with concern.

“They’re well, but busy. Good night, Mr. Winston.”

Outside, he’d placed new wire figures from Faust that he’d crafted earlier that day. The figures were his visions of the characters in the stories we read. He easily bent the wires into shapes with his knowledgeable hands that didn’t need eyes to form perfect curves and lines.

I remember one night in particular walking down the Winstons' concrete pathway down to the pathway up to my own house. It was mid-December, and the snow around my feet tingled against my thin shoes. The snow falling against the houses' rooftops seemed to reflect the calm serenity of the moon. I stood on the road between the Winstons' house and my own, observing these places and trying to decide which house I called home.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to completely show my gratitude for Mr. Winston's words. Through him I have learned how to live and love. Most of all, I have learned how to listen, especially to those I pushed far away.

Ms. Winston tapped my shoulder lightly and smiled. "You've dozed off, dear. Maybe you should go on home now; it's very late."

I looked around the room; I only saw her bright face amidst the blackness of the night, feeding its color into the room. "Where's Mr. Winston?" I questioned.

"He's been asleep for sometime now."

I rubbed my eyes, gathered my books, and apologized to her for staying over so late. "Will you tell Mr. Winston that I'm sorry for falling asleep on him?"

I think she nodded as I walked down the yellow hallway.

"Wait," I heard her voice quiver.

Turning to face her, I saw a look of concern under her eyes.

I asked her if everything was all right.

Ms. Winston's hesitant voice made her seem more human than I'd ever imagined. This family, small and self-sufficient, seemed godly to me. But this woman's

vulnerability was new to my ears and frightened me as if she was going far away to where I could never reach her again.

“Your mother has been calling us lately,” Ms. Winston looked down, ashamed. “She asked me how you were doing and if you were happy,” she paused.

I wondered if I should respond. Ms. Winston asked me if I was happy. I told her that I was.

“I think you should spend some time with your own family, dear. We love having you here, but I feel like your parents are lonely for you. Perhaps they don’t know who you are anymore and don’t know how to ask you to come back into their lives.”

I knew what she was saying, but I didn’t want to hear it.

When I returned home that night, I realized that my own room seemed unfamiliar and cold, like a hotel with a dripping faucet. I couldn’t sleep that night; I stayed awake, fearing I’d lost both places I could call home.

It was the first time I’d eaten dinner with my family since I was fifteen. I noticed that my father had obtained a bright orange sweater that I’d never seen him wear before. My mother sported a shorter haircut, and her bands had been removed. I wondered why I never took mental notes of these changes before.

“It’s nice having you here for dinner, April,” my mother said, her small eyes sparkling with a mysterious glimmer.

I nodded and tried to feign comfort around these people. I found it incredibly bizarre that my own family seemed so unfamiliar to me; after all, I had spent most of my life with them. The Winstons had only been my close friends for the past year-and-a-half.

My father looked towards me. “Well, how have you been lately? I haven’t talked with you in so long.”

“I’ve been very well, thanks,” I responded. My mother had made some sort of spicy chicken, and it was burning my mouth. I reached for my glass of water and spilled it all over the table in the rush.

My mother stood up and immediately ran to get paper towels. My eyes shifted towards my father who seemed to be staring at me in contemplation.

“What?” I asked, curious of his expression.

He shifted in his chair; I could tell he was uneasy in this situation. “You’ve really changed, April.”

I didn’t know how to respond to him. I didn’t quite understand why my parents were so uptight with me. It wasn’t as if I’d been completely removed from their lives.

My mother returned to the table and cleaned up the spot on the tablecloth that I’d made with my drink.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I helped her wipe up the stain.

“Don’t worry about it; I’ll take care of it; go on and eat your dinner,” she looked incredibly sad to me, as if the uneasiness of everyone at the table was hurting her in some way.

I wished that I could be away from my own house and back at the Winstons. I wanted things to be as they had been before my parents worried about me. I wanted them to understand that I did care about them, but I didn’t know how to tell them. We ate dinner in silence after that. It was the first dinner I could remember that I hadn’t brought up some kind of bright conversation. Afterwards, my parents asked me to help with

washing the dishes. I didn't mind really. I'd usually helped Ms. Winston with the dishes after dinner at her house.

"You know, April, we'd really like it if you told us how you were sometimes; it's like we don't even have a daughter anymore. You're always gone, but I think it's wonderful that you've made such close friends with the neighbors. It's just that...well..." my mother's words trailed off. I turned to her and looked into her eyes. I wanted her to finish, but I realized that she couldn't find the words to tell me what she needed to express the most. Mr. Winston's words from days before flooded into my mind.

"You have to search for the words that those people can't find within themselves; be a listener to the things they can't describe."

It was difficult for me to understand Mr. Winston's lesson when I didn't yet know how to listen to words coming from the heart. Because of my mother's concern, I learned how to understand my parents and learned how their concern for me was so deep that they couldn't find the words to express it. I listened to what they didn't say and began to hear their grievances and how they felt like I was no longer their daughter. Later, I told them how Mr. Winston had taught me how to understand unspoken words. My parents smiled and hugged me.

"You've grown up so much," they said with tears welling in their eyes.

The next day I visited the Winstons; I told them how grateful I was for their constant hospitality and love for me as if I were their own child. I then invited them to my home for dinner that night and the night after and however long they wished to join us.

Mr. Winston and I still talked every night; over the years; I learned many more lessons from him. Even as he teaches me more life lessons, I will always remember the most important lesson he showed me: how to truly listen to those most important in my life.