

CHRISTIAN NELSON

The Sculptor

“Writing a letter is like crafting a sculpture.” Winston paused to take a sip from the thermos he kept on the thin wood lectern that had to be as old as the high school itself. He hoped the water would clear the harsh rasp from his voice, but, of course, it never did.

“You carve out the words piece by piece, creating an intended whole—all you hope to convey,” he continued, casting his practiced teacher glare at two girls whispering and giggling in the back row. One girl saw and nudged the other silently.

“So this weekend, when writing your--” The overhead bell rang, cutting Winston off. A symphony of shuffling feet and backpack zippers filled the room.

“Don’t forget, your letter to your future self is due next Wednesday. I don’t want some half-hearted slop. Write like you mean it!” Winston’s chest lifted at the final passionate flourish, then immediately deflated. A third of the students had already left the room, and the rest seemed much more focused on leaving than on him. Winston knew right well that they weren’t going to ‘write like they meant it.’ Their enthusiasm seemed about on par with the audiences, if you could call them that, at his recent string of dive bars shows.

As the final students ambled out, heading for lunch, Winston heard a faint clapping. He turned to see Laura leaning on the door frame of his classroom. “That was one heck of a speech, Mr. Whitlock.” She smiled that warm honey smile that made him wonder if things could have gone differently between them.

“You know how it is with these kids,” Winston knew what it was like too. He had been the type of student who was disinterested in what anyone in a position of authority had to say. “You say one thing, they do the other.” He sat there for a moment just staring at Laura entranced by her figure, a slim body with a slight hourglass figure being cinched by a belt at her waist, before blurting out. “Wanna grab coffee or dinner sometime?” She stood there for a moment fidgeting with the rings that covered her fingers as Winston sat there leaning back in his chair waiting for an answer.

“Like a date?” She shifted off the door frame moving closer to Winston’s desk. “I don’t know.”

Winston grunted out an um-huh as if to not trust himself to speak.. Turning around in his swivel chair he grabbed a stack of essays from the previous class and started fervorously flipping through them, keeping his hands busy, and his back towards Laura. Winston has faced his fair share of no’s, but a no from Laura meant a whole different thing.

“Do you have any shows this weekend?” Winston almost jumped out of his seat forgetting she was still there. Most times when he turned his back on people they found their way back to the door. To be honest, that method usually worked on most people but Laura never budged.

“Got a gig tonight at a dive bar a few cities over. I’ve been there a couple times. Granted half the crowd is drunk by the time I’m a quarter way through, but hey, a crowd’s a crowd.”

“You should really play that song you showed me. I’m sure the crowds would love it.” Laura was one of the very few people that Winston has shared his original music with. Winston gave her a shuttered look forgetting he shared that part of himself with her, then went to grab another sip from his thermos to busy his hands a bit more.

“Come on— You tell these kids to chase their dreams, but you’re being a hypocrite.” She inched a few steps closer, now standing across from his desk, and as she closer a piece of her hair fell in front of her face. Winston had grown kin to Laura’s sandy hair which was always corralled in a messy bun on the top of her head.

“I don’t know. They always want to hear covers, never original music.” He said as he reached forward and brushed the strand out of her face.

“Look, I know it’s easier said than done but all I’m saying is, try it.” Though Winston wouldn’t admit it, Laura knew how to make him restless. “Anyways, I’ll leave you to it. I know you’ve got work to do, and I’ve got a class to run. See you on Monday. Oh.. And good luck later tonight!” She was halfway into the classroom before she turned and flashed that warm honey smile again, knocking Winston’s consciousness into ruins. He took a deep breath allowing himself to stop for the first time since his first period class around 8AM.

As he grounded himself, students from the next class started to shuffle in. The rustles of backpacks and bantering back and forth of students threw him back into the class. He wished the rest of the day would speed up, but he knew for a fact that this would be the slowest stretch of the day.

That evening Winston found himself crammed in the corner of a dive bar, a sign hanging on the brick wall behind him noting it as the ‘Last American Dive Bar’ yet it was far from that. A neon sign hung on the wall across from him saying ‘unhappy hour’ while Christmas lights hung overhead although it was April. Stagnant air reeked of booze and BO. This was the exact experience he was looking for, a place filled with flaws. A place of joy and sadness.

This was one of Winston's favorite dives to play at. Maybe it was the fact that it felt like his childhood home. The smell of the old leather couch in the grimy old green room, brought him back to better times. Sometimes he would catch a whiff of someone's aftershave and he was reminded of his father, to hell with that old man.

The cramped space felt inviting, always having some form of hum to keep his mind from wandering. Winston played in and out of songs, playing as if no one and everyone were watching all at once.

It was half past one when he made his way out of the bar. He stepped out onto the wet asphalt as it had been raining earlier in the evening, though it was unseasonable. There was something about the stillness after it rained that bothered Winston. After all the humdrum throughout the day his thoughts finally caught up with him. He began to light a cigarette and take a long drag, as he found he thought better when he smoked.

Laura had told him once before. Who was he kidding? It was more than once that she had told him to quit smoking. It was probably the only other thing she actually got upset with him about. Well, that and why he wouldn't share his music. But her father and multiple people in her life had died from lung cancer so he couldn't blame her for her reaction to him smoking.

"Winston, you've gotta stop. Those things are gonna kill you." she said as she would snag cigarettes out of his mouth. "Think about what it'll do to you." And of course he knew she was talking about his singing, though she would be careful to not say anything about his voice at all.

It wasn't the proding about the smoking that got to him. It was the fact of how you tell someone that sharing your music is like giving away a part of your soul? How do you tell some one "Yeah I had a fucked childhood, here's a song about it"? He doubted if anyone wanted to hear about how his father would ash cigarettes on him when he was younger. Or how his mother left him and his father when she found a better life with a completely different man. Something about it irked him. But what if he was being a hypocrite?

Winston rushed back into the building as he had made a decision. His heart was thrumming as he rushed back into the building. Bursting into the dive Winston began to notice all the uncertainties of what he was about to do, but he didn't care anymore. He just wanted to share his original songs with people who wanted to hear them. He began to open up his case and pulled out his guitar. The guitar spoke for itself, it was a rich brown koa wood that made up the body with walnut covering the face. The guitar has seen better days, some scuffs and scratches showing it had been loved. Once Winston was ready he ran over to the tech guy who was always there.

"Hey man, do you mind recording this for me?"

"Yeah, no problem."

As Winston sat down on a creaking barstool he took in his surroundings, taking a deep breath, enjoying the self-indulgences of his actions.

"This is an original song of mine called 'Where the Wild Things Are', hope y'all enjoy"

Brass strings rang out new life into the room while Winston sat somber dropping every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears into his performance. His harsh rasp broke the silence of the room and blended with the chime of his old guitar. As he finished he noticed in the back of the room a figure he knew. As he caught the figure she waved back. It was Laura.

"There's no going back now" she called out from the back of the dive.

The End