

2nd Place Adult Category

The Search

By

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It all happened so quickly. Beth was gone. Winston twisted his body to look up and down the busy street, but Beth was nowhere in sight. He was breathing hard and trying not to panic, but the frantic pace of the cars whizzing past him wasn't helping to calm his nerves.

Beth was Winston's whole world. When Beth was happy, Winston was happy. But lately, Beth was anything but. Winston had a feeling it had something to do with Brian, who had stopped coming around about two months ago. It used to be the three of them, hanging out watching movies, going out for ice cream, or relaxing in the backyard. But one day, Beth and Brian had a terrible argument. It was so bad, Winston hid in the bedroom, afraid to get in the middle of their row. After that day, Winston never saw Brian again and Beth took to staring vacantly out the front window. Other days she would suddenly burst into tears. Winston tried to comfort her as much as possible on those terrible days. What would Beth do if he couldn't find her? What if she needed him and he wasn't there? If only he could retrace his steps and figure out how he'd gotten so turned around, maybe he could find her.

The day had started off like so many others. It was one of those days toward the end of May when the grass was lush, the trees were full, and the peonies that lined the wide front porch gave off a sweet aroma in the cool breeze. Beth and Winston walked the neighborhood weekly, a tradition since moving to the outskirts of Baltimore a year ago. Beth had taken a new job so they had packed everything up and moved from their apartment in Detroit to a quaint bungalow off of Harford Road just inside the Baltimore City limits. Winston's only requests for the new house were a large yard and a panoramic front window, especially since Winston spent most of his time at home and he enjoyed looking outside on nice days like this one. Winston looked forward to the best day of the week, when they could both blow off steam on their weekly walk and visit some of the neighborhood shops that they had come to love over the past year. At least, it was the best day of the week until he somehow became separated from the person he cared most about.

The last thing he remembered was following faithfully behind her on the narrow sidewalk until they came to a small bookstore. Once inside, Beth made straight for the register in the back of the store to request a specific book for a friend's upcoming birthday. That was the last time Winston had seen Beth. He should never have wandered into the children's book section. He remembered a little girl with long blond pigtails was looking through one of several books that she had pulled off of a nearby shelf. She spotted Winston and instantly became interested in him.

She declared, "I'm going to read you a story. You're gonna love it."

Winston only tilted his head in response and the girl took that as acquiescence and began slowly reading the book to him. After a few minutes, the girl had to leave with her mother, but he heard the mother mention lunch and Winston's belly rumbled in hunger even though it was still a little early in the day. So, he squeezed out of the front door just as it was about to close after the girl with the pigtails. The girl and her mother were already walking quickly across the street and Winston had to run to try to keep up.

When he was almost to the other side of the street, a large pickup truck startled Winston as it thundered down the road, directly toward him. Winston froze in the middle of the street as the pickup came to a screeching halt about two feet from him. The man in the pickup seemed angry and waved his arms and yelled a lot. A horn sounded, jerking Winston back to reality and he flew to the safety of the sidewalk. People were gawking and pointing. Winston just wanted to get further away from the man with the flailing arms and foul mouth. He ran further down the sidewalk, scooting into an alleyway, and took a few more turns until he ended up at another busy street. He hoped to see a glimpse of the girl with the pigtails so he could join her for lunch, but she was gone. Winston decided he needed to head back and find Beth before she became worried about him. That's how he found himself in his current predicament. He had gotten himself so turned around; he wasn't sure which way to go.

Winston paced back and forth with worry and then decided to head toward some people milling about on the sidewalk. After a few minutes of walking, he came upon the News Mart, where metal newspaper boxes stood outside, and racks of magazines and snacks and coolers full of drinks lined the interior walls. The bright sun outside made the inside of the store seem like a dark cave. Winston needed a place to rest, a place where he could calm his thoughts and think clearly, so he ducked inside and sat in the back corner of the store in the shade.

A man stepped around the front counter, and peered around a display, looking curiously at Winston. He started moving very slowly and deliberately, inching his way between Winston and the exit, which made Winston wary. Winston did not like being cornered. He waited until the man glanced behind him to see where he stood in relation to the front door and Winston took his chance. He ran full force toward the front door, grazing the man as he flew past him. The man turned and ran down the street after him, yelling for Winston to stop, but Winston didn't trust strangers. The man was fast, but Winston was faster. The man's yelling became faint and died off as Winston ran. Winston's heart raced and he sprinted recklessly despite his earlier close call on the street, darting out into the busy road as cars slammed their brakes to avoid him. With each step, he felt like he was further and further away from Beth and he began to despair that he'd never see her again.

Winston's legs felt like they were going to give out at any second from running quite a distance on the hot pavement. Up ahead was a church with a yard of several large trees and bushes. It was quaint and quiet and the bushes created a barrier between Winston and the busy street. It reminded him of his backyard at home, which made him homesick for Beth all over again. He wandered into the churchyard and collapsed at the trunk of one of the large oak trees.

Winston couldn't be sure how long he stayed there under that tree. He dozed off for a bit. A faint whistling sound woke him and when he came to, he realized the sunlight was fading behind the houses nearby. The whistling grew louder until the source of the sound came into view. A man, carrying a set of keys and a bag of fast food, entered the churchyard. His whistle died off the moment he spotted Winston, and his steps faltered slightly, but he quickly picked back up the tune and his pace, ignoring Winston as he walked past him to settle under one of the other trees in the churchyard. Winston was prepared to run again, but with the man looking the other way, Winston figured he could stay where he was for a little bit while he figured out his next course of action.

The whistling soon stopped and was replaced by a rustling of the paper bag. The man pulled out a few french fries and munched silently. He turned slightly to look at Winston. "Want one?" he asked gently, holding a few fries out for Winston.

Until that moment, Winston hadn't realized how hungry and thirsty he was. He debated whether he should take the food, and sat there for several minutes trying to ignore the man and his offering. Reluctantly, hunger won out and Winston cautiously approached the man and the french fries. He gingerly took them, ready to spring away should the guy try any funny business. The french fries tasted so good. As soon as Winston ate the few that were offered, the man held out more, which Winston gladly accepted. Maybe this guy wasn't so bad after all, Winston thought.

As they ate, the man told Winston his name was Sam and asked if Winston was hurt and briefly checked him for injuries. When Sam stood up and walked a short distance to a car in the parking lot, Winston followed suit. By now, it was dark. The streetlights illuminated sections of the busy street, and Winston was looking forward to a soft place to sleep and gather his thoughts. He would find a way back to Beth tomorrow. He climbed in the backseat of the car when Sam opened the door for him. Sam got into the driver's seat and typed something in on his phone. The car revved to life and they drove away from the church.

It wasn't much longer before Winston thought he recognized some of the places along the way. He perked up and gazed eagerly out the side window as the scenery flew by. A few minutes later, the car rolled to a stop in front of a familiar house with peonies lining the front porch. Winston yearned to get out of the car. He was finally home and home meant seeing Beth. Sam hopped out of the car and opened the door for Winston, who quickly darted up the front steps to the red-painted door of the house. Just as Sam raised his hand to knock, the door flew open and there stood Beth with red-rimmed eyes.

"Winston!" she cried and bent down to give him a bear hug. Winston's anxiety immediately vanished and he melted into her.

"I take it this is your dog?" Sam smiled as Beth stood up to greet him.

"Yes, thank you so much! Wherever did you find him? I've been scouring the neighborhood and calling local shelters all afternoon."

"I work part-time doing maintenance at the Church of the Messiah. When I left work, I spotted him in the churchyard sleeping in the shade. I saw he had a tag with his name and address, so here we are." Sam shrugged like it was no big deal.

"I can't thank you enough." Beth said and reached out to hold Sam's hand in thanks. Winston, meanwhile, was doing a happy dance, wiggling around the two on the front porch. As they said their goodbyes, Beth ushered Winston in the house and just as Beth was about to close the door, Sam turned around and spoke quickly, "You know, if you aren't busy, maybe we could meet up some time. Maybe take a stroll down Harford Road with Winston and grab a bite to eat. There is a great new restaurant." He looked a little awkward when he said this, thought Winston, who peered around Beth's legs. But when he looked up at Beth, he saw the brightest smile on her face. She agreed to Sam's suggestion, and she and Sam laughed and exchanged numbers. When Beth and Winston went back inside, he settled next to Beth on the couch and had new visions of barbecues in the backyard, ice cream at the local shop, and nights snuggling on the couch. He watched Beth smile and he knew everything would be ok because his most-special person was happy again.