

# *White Oleander*

by Janet Fitch

## A READING GROUP GUIDE

*o•le•an•der* *n.* *A poisonous Eurasian evergreen shrub (Nerium oleander) having fragrant, white, rose, or purple flowers and whorled leaves [Med. Lat., prob. alteration of L. lat. lorandrum, alteration of Lat. rhododendron].*

— *American Heritage College Dictionary*

This astonishing novel, universally praised for its lyrical beauty and narrative power, tells an unforgettable story of mothers and daughters, their ambiguous alliances, and the search for love and identity.

## On Writing *White Oleander*

Janet Fitch talks with  
Laura Miller, Editorial Director of Salon.com

Recently, Janet Fitch's life has had an enchanted quality. At 43 — after 22 years of laboring away at her fiction, publishing the occasional story in small literary magazines — she has seen her first novel, *White Oleander*, become a national bestseller. But *White Oleander* itself is no fairy tale. It's the story of Astrid Magnussen, daughter of the beautiful, merciless poet Ingrid. In Venice Beach, mother and daughter live a peripatetic bohemian lifestyle ruled by Ingrid's rigorous idea of beauty (three white flowers in a plain glass vase is the epitome of her aesthetic) and her contempt for emotional weakness. When Ingrid condescends to an affair with a less than exquisite man, falls in love and then is summarily dumped, she poisons her former lover and eventually winds up in prison. Astrid then begins a journey through a series of foster homes, in each one learning about sex, money, love, independence, courage, rage and the manifold ways of becoming a woman.

*Tell me about the genesis of White Oleander.*

I had the character of Ingrid first. She was actually the protagonist of a short story. It was black comedy. There's a writer, Sei Shonagon. She was a lady-in-waiting to the Heian empress in Japan in the 11th century.

*She wrote The Pillow Book.*

Yes. It was about a society based on aesthetics. Soldiers were promoted by how well they wrote poetry. Of course the Heian empire didn't last very long. They were pretty easy to wipe out. It was a time of tremendous refinement, where the aristocrats would have a party in which they would go and look at moon-

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light on a pond. But they had no conventional morality. Sei Shonagon could see somebody beheaded right in front of her and it's like, pfft, there's no connection between her and that person. But if somebody wore the wrong color combinations in their robes, then for days she just couldn't get over it, how disgusting it was. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to take someone like that, an aesthete, which is an aristocratic position, and put them at the end of the 20th century in America, with a crummy job and a crummy apartment, having to make a living, and see what happened. And so Ingrid emerged.

People read that story and they hated my character, Ingrid. They didn't want to walk a mile in her moccasins. They didn't want to be her; they said, "She's a monster, you cannot have her as your protagonist. Give her a co-worker, give her a friend, someone to see her through." And so I gave her a daughter. And suddenly it wasn't funny anymore. When you're the kid of someone who is an extreme person, it's not funny at all. And then the tone changed, and the perspective changed, and I got something very different, which was much better.

*Then you had a short story and . . .*

I had a short story and I sent it around. I send all my short fiction to *Ontario Review* because Joyce Carol Oates is associate editor there, and I think she's fantastic. They rejected it, but I got a little Post-it note saying "Too long for us. Liked it but seemed more like the first chapter of a novel." I thought, oh, Joyce Carol Oates thinks it might be the first chapter of a novel. So I started writing the novel, trying to continue the short story and trying to figure out what did happen to Ingrid and Astrid.

*Did you always have the idea of Ingrid being undone by an affair?*

Absolutely. That's a common experience. Many women get involved with a man that you pretty much know isn't suitable and

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you're kind of breaking your rules, but he's attractive in some unknown way. And then he doesn't even realize what a sacrifice you're making by being with him and he dumps you! [Laughs.] And you're just so angry at yourself for breaking your rules and angry at him for not realizing what he's given up. I think it's one step from that to, if you're an extreme unbalanced person, just going off the deep end.

*Did the idea of Astrid going through a series of foster homes follow from the idea that Ingrid was going to wind up in jail?*

If a murder happens, the first question is, is she arrested or not. If she wasn't, what's the point? It negates the act. I've always been concerned with what happens to children in our society when there's nobody left to take care of them. I've always been aware of that, and of course she would end up in foster care — and start moving from house to house and really seeing the various components of our society. We don't have a unitary society anymore, you know; it's very fragmented. I look up and down my block in Silver Lake [Los Angeles] and there is a different universe in every house. Fifty completely different worlds, and who would see that better than somebody in foster care?

*This is the first novel you've written?*

This is the first novel that's seen the light of day.

*Tell me a little bit about your writing life up until this point.*

Oh, the long sad story. No — it's a story of courage and struggle. I started writing when I was 21. I was going to become a historian. And then I realized there was more to the world than just the past. I didn't want to spend my life in the library. I wanted to be Anaïs Nin, I wanted to have adventures and look glamorous. What a mistaken idea of what a writer's life is like!

*Then what?*

I wrote short stories. I went to film school for a while. I wrote screenplays, which were terrible. And I realized that if I was never going to make any money at writing, never going to sell anything as long as I lived, I might as well do what I wanted to do. Because then, no matter what, I would have spent my life doing what I wanted to do. So, I went back to writing fiction and just kept writing and learning. I had to learn to write. The desire preceded the ability. Let's see, I started writing fiction in '78 or '79, and I went to film school for a semester — not even a semester. It was a debacle.

*Why was it a debacle?*

Because I'm really a writer. To make films you have to have boundless energy, you have to work and play with others really, really well, and I'm really a more contemplative kind of person. I like to sit at home and think, a lot. And have time to read and think and walk the dog. To live in my car and eat at Burger King three times a day and be constantly trying to persuade people to do things . . . I just couldn't do it. In film, you reenact things in physical reality. And physical reality is recalcitrant. I can write a line like, "She picks him up and drags him onto the bed," but if she can't pick him up and you're struggling, then it's two hours later, and people are starting to walk, and say, "Hey, I got to go." It was just wrong, but at least I found out. It was terrible. I was crying every morning when I woke up and had to do it again. My husband said, just forget it, forget it.

So, I went back to writing fiction. I became a newspaper editor in Colorado. I was the editor/reporter/photographer, I set the type, I laid out the pages. I did that for two years, which is a very demanding job. And then when I quit in '87, I wrote 18 short stories that first year and I've been writing ever since. It's been 20

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years since I started writing. It was 12 years after I first started writing before I published my first short story. My “overnight success” is the result of 20 years of learning to write. A lot of it is determination and trying to find the teacher who has what you lack.

*You describe Kate Braverman as your mentor rather than as your teacher. Tell me a little bit about the relationship.*

I’ve had teachers who haven’t made much of an impact, but when somebody completely transforms your world, that’s a mentor. Somebody who’s always challenging me and somebody who raises the standards, that’s what I needed. And she would attack a flaw as if it were a personal affront. She’s very epigrammatic. She would put things in a way that seared on your brain. I remember I brought in an early work. I was a former journalist, so I had a very straightforward, pedestrian style. I was trying to really punch it up and I brought in a story and she said, “You know, you could make a really good living as a romance writer. It’s a good living, you could do that.” And I remember going outside and sitting in my car and crying. Would I ever get it? If you wrote a line that thudded, she’d say, “What did you do, fax that in?” She demanded excellence, sentence by sentence, and she would make it very clear to you, in not a very tender way, if even a sentence wasn’t cutting it.

*Did she also offer you advice or support about how to get by when there wasn’t that much validation coming from the outside world?*

Her point of view was that it would always be hard, that you had to accept rejection and the difficulty of being an artist if you were going to make it at all. Because people who had mistaken ideas that it would be easy and glamorous were the ones whose disappointment would never allow them to hang in there.

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*How did White Oleander come to be published?*

I'd gone to Squaw Valley Writer's Conference. One day we got a leader who was so smart and so right, and I agreed with everything he said about people's manuscripts, this editor Michael Pietsch. And I thought, gee, I'm going to remember this guy. And when I have a novel, I'm going to send it to him. So I sent it to him. It took him a while, a few months. The manuscript went to a couple of other publishers who turned it down, but in the end Michael took it.

*Then the Oprah thing happens. What was that like?*

I was at work. I worked one day a week at a government relations company. I did their writing, you know, brochures and letters and rewrote reports in English. I did everything, answered the phones, paid the bills. And I got this phone call at work and it was this very familiar voice.

*Does she call you herself?*

Yes. She talked and I sort of sat there with my mouth open. I was simply stunned out of my mind. Evidently I paid all the bills that day and I put every check in the wrong envelope. It took them weeks to unscramble that.

*Some people in the book industry have an ambivalent relationship to Oprah. There's a knee-jerk literary-world assumption that television can never be a good thing.*

I think that Oprah's on a mission to improve the lives of the average American in various ways. And one of them is to bring literature to people who would normally not be quite as demanding in their reading tastes, to show them writing that can be more than just entertainment. That it can change people, it can open us

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up, it can make us more human. I have a little shrine to Oprah, a little picture. I change the flowers every day and put a little incense. I feel she's the patron saint of contemporary literature.

*One of the things I love about this book is that you're completely willing to let Ingrid be evil. It gives the story so much vitality. There's not enough of that in literary fiction sometimes.*

She's very single-minded. And it's very difficult to be the child of a single-minded person because everything goes one way. They're not good listeners. They don't look at that child and think, "Oh, she seems sad. I wonder what's wrong." Ingrid didn't want to open that can of worms because it would limit her freedom. And she was pursuing her own vision of herself. We all have some of that, and the more determined we are to do something, the more we have it. A child will take up 100 percent of you if you let them. It's only natural for them to want that, to try for that. So motherhood's a dance between individual needs and the needs of your child. And Ingrid's failing is that she had a child but refused to dance with her. She refused to look at her at any point and say, "What does my child need here?" But she loved her. She loved her in her way.

*Did you worry in writing that character that you were going too far?*

No. I think everyone has an aspect of themselves that doesn't want to care about other people, that just wants the absolute freedom. But we are more compassionate than that, we realize that in the long run, relationships have so much to offer, but you have to give in to that relationship to get anything back. And Ingrid is willing to sacrifice everything for her individual freedom.

*What was your biggest challenge in writing about that character?*

Oh, I enjoyed writing her character because her language was so beautiful. And strength of will in a character is the most impor-



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tant thing. If the character has strength of will, you're on the train and they are the locomotive. If your character doesn't know what they want, and they're sort of drifting around, then you're pulling the train yourself, which is a lot more work. I like Ingrid. I understand her. She's a monster. She has tremendous flaws, but tremendous intelligence and wit and she expresses a certain unspoken desire of many people. We're nicer than that, we care more about other people than that, but I think it's understandable on some level.

*White Oleander is a California novel. California plays a peculiar role in the national imagination, and that makes it hard for people from other places to put the idea of literature and California together in their minds.*

That started in the '20s. California was perceived as the locus of hedonism, and how can literature come out of pure hedonism? How can a deeper evaluation of the human condition come out of a place where there is no human condition, and nobody has any problems or worries? Which is, obviously, a complete and utter fantasy. Even in paradise you have daughters and mothers and disappointment, struggle and all the rest.



The complete text of this interview first appeared in Salon.com, at <http://www.Salon.com>. An online version remains in the Salon archives. Reprinted with permission.

## Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Describe the relationship between Astrid and Ingrid early in the book. Why was Astrid fearful that her mother would “fly away” if she mentioned her desires — such as having a father, or going to summer camp or a YWCA program?
2. Astrid chooses to express herself through painting and drawing, rather than through writing. Why do you think Astrid preferred these forms of creative expression? Which do you prefer?
3. Compare the characteristics of the white oleander to those of Ingrid. Do the same with Astrid.
4. Ingrid says, “Isn’t it funny. I’m enjoying my hatred so much more than I ever enjoyed love” (p. 38). How does this statement come back to haunt her?
5. Before the social service agency takes Astrid away, she packs up a few of her mother’s possessions to take with her. What is the significance of the folding knife? Of the kimono?
6. Astrid tells Paul, “I don’t let anyone touch me” (p. 301). Discuss how Claire touched Astrid. When and how else was Astrid touched by others? Discuss the powerful ways in which Astrid touched other people.
7. Why did Astrid choose Rena as her new foster mother over Bill and Ann Greenway? Was Astrid trying to punish herself in some way? Why did she feel she deserved Rena?

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8. Discuss Ingrid's letters to Astrid. At what point did Astrid begin to pull away from her mother emotionally? At what point did this change?
9. Referring to her relationship with Ray, Astrid says, "I was the snake in the garden" (p. 105). How does this phrase relate to Marvel, Claire, and Rena?
10. Why did Astrid wait several hours before alerting Ron to Claire's death? In what ways did Astrid also die?
11. Discuss Astrid's view of men. How did Ray compare to Ron? Did Astrid blame men for the bad things that happen to women?
12. Why do you think Astrid so often found herself in the position of caregiver — to Starr's children, to Marvel's children, and to Claire — when she was so deeply in need of care herself?
13. What was the ultimate life lesson Astrid learned in this coming-of-age journey? How did she triumph? Why would Astrid consider, and desire, a new life with her mother, yet not return to her in the end?



A Reading Group Guide to *White Oleander* is also available on [www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com](http://www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com)

## About the Author

Janet Fitch is a third-generation resident of Los Angeles, where her novels *Paint It Black* and *White Oleander* are set. *White Oleander* was a selection of Oprah's Book Club and a #1 national bestseller, from which a feature film starring Michelle Pfeiffer was adapted. It has been translated into twenty-four languages. Fitch teaches fiction writing at USC's School of Professional Writing.



. . . and her most recent novel

In September 2006, Little, Brown and Company will publish *Paint It Black*.

Following is a preview from the novel's opening pages.



## OPEN

COLD NUMBED the tip of Josie Tyrell's nose and her ass, just outside the reach of the studio space heater. Her leg had fallen asleep. She twisted her slight torso, enough to release tension, but not enough to disturb the painter working across the room in his paint-spotted Mao suit, his hair in a waist-length braid. Henry Ko wasn't painting well today. He stopped every few minutes to wipe his eyes on the back of his hand, while *Double Fantasy* circled around on the studio stereo. Everyone was playing it now. John Lennon had just been shot in New York, and wherever Josie went, people played the same fucking Beatles songs until you wanted to throw up. At least *Double Fantasy* had Yoko Ono.

On the cover that leaned against the dirty couch, John and Yoko pressed together for a kiss they would never finish. People were always trashing Yoko Ono, blaming her for breaking up the Beatles, but Josie knew they were just jealous that John preferred Yoko to some bloated megaband. Nobody ever really loved a lover. Because love was a private party, and nobody got on the guest list. She liked the pictures of Yoko and John in their white bed, their frizzy hippie hair. They'd retreated to the country with two passports only. From the outside it looked like death. People could pound the walls all they wanted, but they'd never find the door. Nobody could guess at the gardens inside.

Out the long windows of Henry Ko's studio, the hills and shacks of Echo Park tumbled toward Sunset Boulevard like a child's bedspread scattered with toys. Bare winter jacarandas broke the view with their angular arms, round pods hanging from their branch wrists like castanets. Henry kept crying about John Lennon. Josie felt worse about Darby Crash. Darby had just killed himself in an act of desperate theater the day before, a gesture swamped by the Beatle's death like a raft in the backwash of a battleship. But at least she knew him. With his shyness, his broken-toothed smile. She'd hung with him at the Masque, at the Fuckhouse, and on Carondelet. He hadn't been a natural performer, he had to get wasted, cramming anything he could swallow into his mouth, then played shows so intense that they hurt you to watch, made you feel like a creepy voyeur. Darby needed people to notice him, someone to care. All their friends had gone to the funeral, everybody but her. His death was so horribly unnecessary, such a stupid stunt, acted out by someone so sad and fucked up he would kill himself out of a need to be noticed. Josie thought it was repulsive to treat it like a party. And then the Beatle took it all away anyway.

"But he wanted it that way," Pen said. She'd covered it for *Puke* magazine, saying who'd been there, like it was an afterparty.

At least they'd known him. Whereas look at Henry. Getting all teary-eyed over John Lennon, whom he'd never even met. Huge crowds had converged last weekend in Griffith Park to mourn their lost icon. They didn't go, she and Pen and their friends, you could just tell it was going to be some overaged love-in, hippie beads and "Give Peace a Chance," when anybody could tell, nobody was ever going to give fucking peace a chance. Nobody was going back to Woodstock anytime soon.

But she was sure old Henry'd showed up with the other granaheads, lit incense, and rang finger cymbals and blew some pot, no doubt, in John's memory. *Om rama rama*. Did John Lennon

really want all that? Was that what he was about? From what she'd heard, the guy'd had some wit and brains — did he really want to be the dead guy of the hour, like a melting centerpiece?

Finally, the artist stepped away from his easel, sighing. “What say, Jo-say. Pack it in?”

She unfurled her legs, felt the blood rush back, that tingle and burn, stretching fragile shoulders, their delicate bones clearly visible, small breasts with their dark nipples, the black triangle that contrasted with her unlikely bleached hair, roots coming in dark. She put her clothes back on — a vintage dress she'd traded for a domino bracelet, torn leggings — and worked her feet into spike-heeled pumps from Goodwill. While Henry cleaned his brushes, she touched up her bloodred lipstick then joined him on the couch, orange velvet edged in brown dirt. He rolled a joint, special dope he called “The Spider” — brown turds of buds his friends in Hawaii sent him. Old hippies got so into their pot. She didn't mind sharing, but you didn't have to make a cult out of it.

As they smoked, Henry went on about John Lennon, how he couldn't believe he was dead, like the guy was some fucking saint. “He'd finally found himself,” he kept saying. “That cat had just finally worked it out.”

She toked along with him, knee to knee, and thought about the guy who shot Lennon. Shot by *a desperate fan*. On the news, fans were always desperate. Got his signature and then shot him down. The saddest thing about it was that she wasn't more shocked. To Josie, it just seemed part of the way things were heading, Ronald Reagan, greedheads running everything. Killing John Lennon seemed like just mopping up. Thirty thousand people were missing in El Salvador, those nuns, and everybody in America was worried about who shot JR.

She and Henry leaned back against the couch. The Spider, she had to admit, was major deluxe. Henry turned his head slowly, keeping it supported on the couch back, looking at her with his

small pot-reddened eyes that always smiled, even if he was angry or sad. He smelled of some weird liniment he brewed himself for nursing his tai chi injuries, roots and licorice and some kind of bugs. He put his hand on her knee. “Jo-say, you still with that guy, that Harvard cat?”

His hand on her knee. Henry Ko was like thirty-five, what was she supposed to do with an old guy like that? “Michael. Yeah, we’re still together.” At least she hoped they were. Maybe he was back. In fact, he might be home right now, waiting for her. Suddenly, she had to go. She put her child-sized hand on top of the artist’s turpentine-dry one. “But I’ll let you know if we break up, Henry, I swear.”

SHE DROVE back to Lemoyne in her rattly Ford Falcon, a powder blue relic with band stickers on the trunk — *X*, *Germes*, *Cramps*. It was normally a three-minute drive, but she hit a line of cars with their lights on. Why were they going so slow? Maybe another John Lennon thing. She honked, wove, and passed until she got to the front and saw it was a hearse. Mortified, she turned off onto a side street and stopped, red-faced. How was she supposed to know — a line of cars crawling along with their lights on? Some days it felt like her sister Luanne had just dropped her off at MacArthur Park day before yesterday.

She drove the rest of the way under the speed limit, parked in front of her house, took the mail from her mailbox, and pulled the noose on the gate. Careful in her high heels, she descended the rickety steps to the little cabin behind. Nothing more than a shack, but they loved it back here, the giant birds-of-paradise netted with morning glories, so private they didn’t need curtains. She opened the door, threw her key in the red bowl, and called out, “Hey, Michael?”



Silence. The empty chairs, the paintings, the wooden-bead curtain between the main room and the kitchen. The only sound issued from traffic out the windows overlooking the 2 and the 5. It had been five days since he'd stood there, in the kitchen doorway, beads pushed aside, grinding coffee with his brass Turkish grinder shaped like a tube. Telling her he was going away. She'd been getting dressed for a booking in Northridge. "I'm going up to Meredith's for a few days," he'd said. His mother was gone, off on tour in Uruguay or Paraguay, and good fucking riddance.

She'd stopped in the hall, finishing her lipstick, accurate even without a mirror. "What for?"

"It's a project I've been thinking about," he said, grinding. "I need time to concentrate." Casual, like it was nothing.

And she'd stared, trying to understand what he was really saying. They'd never been separated, not even when they fought. "Since when do I bother you when you're working?"

"I thought you'd be glad that I am," he said.

She was glad, but why would he think he had to leave?

He kept cranking the brass arm of the mill, standing in the kitchen doorway in his baggy jeans and bare feet with their long Greek toes. "I need the space, Josie. Try to understand."

"But you always painted fine here." It was true, the shack was small. It was hard for him to paint anything even the size of the blind Merediths. And his mother's house was standing there, empty, up on the hill. "What if I come with you?"

He set the grinder down then and put his arms around her, tight. Kissed her. "I'll be working. You know how I get. Trust me, it's better this way." She held on to him, her eyes closed, drinking in his smell, pine and moss and some peculiar chemistry of his own, that she craved the way an addict craved freebase. She could lick him like candy. He kissed her and held her for the longest time, crushing her to him, his scratchy beard.

She missed him like fire. She threw the mail in the bowl on the orange footlocker where the phone sat silent. She'd called him twice already, but he hadn't answered — he'd never answered a phone as long as she'd known him. But if he didn't come home soon, she was going up there, she didn't care how much he needed his space. Screw that. Three days was one thing, but a week was a separation. She'd barely managed to stay away this long, doing her best to keep busy, book extra sittings, going with Pen to see the Weirdos at the Hong Kong Café, a party on Carondelet. Maybe it looked like she was living it up, but all she was doing was waiting for him. What was he painting that he couldn't paint here? Or was he just dumping her? "Hey, fuck him and his brother too," Pen had said when she'd worried aloud at the Weirdos show. "This is great, just like the old days. Carpe fucking diem."

It felt strange to be alone in the little house, in the tranquillity of the afternoon. This was the first time she'd ever lived alone. She straightened the pillows on the couch, looked through the mail, put on the Clash, *Sandinista!*, sat down and got up, she couldn't settle anywhere. The house seemed so empty, her presence didn't even change its emptiness. At home in Bakersfield she'd shared a room with Luanne and Corrine, and on Carondelet she'd lived with Pen and Shirley and Paul. Later, in the Fuckhouse, it was half of punk Hollywood. Now she was alone, her only company the paintings and drawings he'd done, furniture they'd salvaged, collections they'd accumulated, toys and hats and flatirons. Without him, it took on the quality of a stage set where the actors hadn't yet come on. She sat on the blue couch and leafed through an art magazine. A man making paintings using smashed plates. They'd seen his show at the county art museum. She'd liked the big, heavy-textured works better than Michael had, their confidence, their bold beauty. "Shtick," he'd said. "Ya gotta have a gimmick." Always so critical, he hated everything artists were doing now. He only liked Francis Bacon and Lucien

Freud, who painted like bloodhounds on the scent of human imperfection. And his beloved Schiele.

Why couldn't he sleep here and paint there? Other artists had studios. If it was too small for him, he could at least come home at night. She was afraid to think it was just an excuse. That he'd decided, finally, he didn't want to be with her anymore. She yearned to call him but hated the sound of the phone ringing, ringing, knowing that he might be standing right there, not picking up, knowing it was her.

She sat in his chair by the window, overlooking the hills, Echo Park, Silverlake, and beyond: the Hollywood sign, Griffith Park. The observatory's green copper domes stood out perfectly clear against the pale blue winter sky. She loved to sit in this chair with him, her arms around his neck, drinking his smell. She pressed her face to the waffled coarseness of the chair back, trying to smell it, her eyelashes fluttering against the skin of her cheek. Catching then losing it.

Still stoned from the Spider, she shuffled back into the kitchen, drank a glass of milk standing up at the sink, peeled a finger-sized banana. She tried not to look at the wooden breakfast nook with its cutout hearts, where they ate their meals, and the painting that hung there, her at the old stove, the light from the kitchen window pouring over her. When he was the one who did all the cooking. She couldn't do more than heat soup from a can.

She went into the bedroom and lay on the bed, the fragrant linens that still smelled of their last lovemaking, their painting of Montmartre on all the four walls. She kicked off her shoes and crawled under the covers, white on white in the colorless light. It was almost Christmas. She needed to finish making his shirt, with the stripes cut horizontally, to make it unusual. Green to match his eyes. Maybe she would find him some sheet music at one of those little places on Hollywood Boulevard, dirty Twenties blues, all *new jelly roll* and *cakewalking babies from home*. She could decorate the

house in paper snowflakes, hang them from the ceiling, thick as leaves. How surprised he'd be when he came through the door and saw them. Of course he'd be back. Just another day or two.

She was thinking about the snowflakes when the phone rang out in the living room. Flinging herself out of bed so fast her head reeled, she got to the phone and grabbed it before the third ring. "Michael, thank God, I —"

"Excuse me, this is Inspector Brooks . . ."

Some government fuckhead.

"I'm from the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office. To whom am I speaking, please?"

Fuck. Oh, Jesus. The crank. The last time she'd seen her sister, Luanne had been down to ninety pounds. Though it could be Jimmy, or Tommy. Any of them. "This is Josephine Tyrell. What happened?"

"Your phone number was found on a motel registration. We're in the process of running fingerprints, but tell me, has there been someone missing?"

"I don't think so," she said.

She heard the shuffling of papers. "White male. Registered as Oscar Wilde."

All she heard was the roar of blood in her ears.

"Miss Tyrell?"

She could barely hold the phone. All the strength had gone out of her arms.

"Do you have any idea who this person might be?" said the voice on the other end, as if nothing had changed.

"Yes," she said. "No." She sat down on the furry couch before she fell. "I don't . . ."

"The person you're thinking of, how old is he?"

She searched for her voice. "Twenty-two."

"Height?"

"About six feet," she whispered.

“Weight?”

She didn’t know his weight. They’d never had a scale.  
“Skinny.”

“Eye color?”

“Green.” Please let him say brown.

“Scars or tattoos?”

She thought of his body. She ran her mind over it like fingers. “A scar, on his right hand. Between the thumb and first finger.” She rubbed her face, trying not to drop the phone, trying to listen through the roaring static in her head. “A mole, on the right side of his ribcage.” An artist’s model, she possessed body memory that never failed. It worked independently of her mind, which had shut off. It couldn’t be. This was a Tyrell call, speed contest, stabbing, shoot-out. Or an OD at the Fuckhouse.

There was a pause. “Is there someone who can come with you? We’ll need to see you downtown.”

JOSIE STOOD on the sidewalk holding herself together with both arms, as if her body would spill out onto the concrete if she let go, watching for Pen’s red Impala. Her friend slammed to a stop in front of the house, her purple hair a flag in that old convertible, threw open the passenger door. “I got here as fast as I could. Oh, Josie, don’t think anything yet. It could be anyone.”

She was still closing the door as Pen peeled out. It was deep rush hour, they skipped the freeway and took Riverside Drive, the back way along the river and past the Brewery where she’d just modeled for Tim Delauney the week before last. *Don’t think anything. It could be anyone.* She hoped it fucking was. Anyone else.

Macy to Mission, the foot of the concrete mountain that was LA County General. The coroner’s office wasn’t up at the hospital, it was down at the bottom, with the trucks and light industrial, a boxy two-story government building, the lettering painted

right on the side of the building, LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CORONER, MEDICAL EXAMINER, FORENSIC LABORATORIES, PUBLIC SERVICES.

Pen left the Impala parked sideways across two spaces and they dashed into the lobby, all brown marble and beige linoleum and patched acoustic ceiling, like the lobby in a building full of cheap dentists. At the counter, a heavy black woman looked them up and down, Pen's purple hair and black lipstick, Josie's punked-out bleach job, her yellow fake fur. Like they were a sideshow act.

"I got a call," Josie said.

The woman just stared.

"From some Inspectorman —," Pen said.

"Brooks —," Josie said.

"Across the breezeway." The woman pointed to the twin building out the smudged glass doors. "I'll tell him you're here."

They waited on cloth chairs in a smaller lobby, Josie's hands crammed deep into the pockets of her coat, her whole being reduced to a pinpoint of fear, like the nucleus of an atom about to be split and blow up the world. She had no mind at all, just the tremor in her right foot, that would not stop shaking.

"You're okay," Pen said, stroking her hair, her neck. "You're breathing, you're okay. What's taking this fucking creep so long anyway?" She got up, shook the locked knob, kicked the metal door with her Doc Marten, sat back down next to Josie.

"Light me a ciggie," Josie said, her hands in tight balls in her pockets. She could feel every hair follicle in her scalp.

Pen dug around in Josie's schoolbag purse, found her cigarettes, Gauloises Bleues, lit her one, put it between her lips. Josie forced smoke into her lungs, the cigarette helping her remember how to breathe, she removed a hand from her pocket to take it on exhaling. Her mind was a fist, no thought would enter, except *no, no no*. It was the longest five minutes in history.

"You're going to be okay, you're going to get through," Pen

said, lighting one of her own Camel straights, and their smoke filled the small waiting room. Outside the winter sky turned to rose. *If I finish this cigarette before the guy comes, it won't be Michael.*

"I hate places like this," Pen said. "I'd like to blow this place up."

They watched the heavy door into the hall, a little caged window. Before she was even halfway done with her cigarette, a black man in a blue blazer opened the door and stepped into the lobby. "Miss Tyrell?"

Josie stood up.

"Can you come with me? Both of you."

They walked down the hall, the fluorescent light bathing them in its weird green glow. Inspector Brooks's office was windowless, small, vomiting books, papers, folders, the walls covered with charts and a list on a blackboard, initials and magnets. They sat in two metal chairs, and he took a seat at his desk. "Are you all right, Miss Tyrell?" he asked.

"No, she's not the fuck all right," Pen said. "Can't you see she's practically puking? Can we get through this already?"

Josie lifted a shaking hand to her lips, toked on her cigarette. If he didn't like her smoking, he didn't say anything.

"When was the last time you saw your boyfriend, Miss Tyrell?"

She saw the standing ashtray, flicked ash into it, her upper lip stiff and bowed and frozen in its downturned U. "Five days ago. Wednesday."

"And when did you realize he was missing?"

Josie just stared at the lit tip of her cigarette. *How long was he missing?* She hadn't known he was missing at all. She had just let him go. "I didn't. I still don't."

The man pursed his full lips together and pulled out some white cardboard. "I'm going to have you look at some photographs," Inspector Brooks said. "I want to warn you, they're pretty disturbing. But it's important to know, for everyone."

White squares in his hands, the backs of two photographs, as he went on talking, talking, explaining about what she would see, the bullet entered the mouth and exited the back of the head, *effect of the gunshot wound* . . . She nodded, not listening. She wanted to rip those pictures out of his hands. Finally he laid them in front of her on the metal desk.

A face. Black eyes, like they'd been in a terrible fight. Swollen closed, though they weren't completely closed, God, they should have closed the eyes. Whoever's eyes they were. *Not his*. It couldn't be. She could only see a little of the hair, there was a sheet all around the head, and those black eyes, a slight rim of blood around the nostrils, the mouth, no, she didn't recognize him, it wasn't Michael, and yet, how could she be sure? *How could she know? He was alive the last time she saw him*. "I can't tell. I just don't know," she whispered.

The inspector gathered his Polaroids and put them aside with a folder, *John Doe*. "Does he have living parents?" Inspector Brooks asked.

"His father's Calvin Faraday, the writer. He lives in New York." Inspector Brooks wrote it on a legal pad, with the case number at the top, Michael's name, and notes from their phone call. "His mother is Meredith Loewy." She spelled it for him. "She's in South America. On tour."

"Well, first let's see if it's him." He dialed his pea green phone. "Yes, we're ready," he said into the receiver, and stood up. Josie crushed her cigarette in the ashtray and they stood and walked back across the breezeway. She clung to Pen, using her like a Seeing Eye dog, all she could see was the image from the Polaroid, the black eyes, she hadn't even thought to look for the little scar on his upper lip. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. Michael was alive. He was up at his mother's house, painting in the room off his childhood bedroom. She pictured him painting there in all the detail she could muster. The oaks outside the win-



dows. The brightness of the winter sun. How they would laugh about this later. *Imagine, for a split second I thought you were dead.* If only she could see it clearly enough, it would be true.

Pen never let go of her hand, let her crush the hell out of it. She could smell the leather of Pen's jacket.

"Whatever this is, we'll get you the fuck through it," Pen said. "You hear me?"

Inspector Brooks came across from the other building and let himself through a doorway in the brown marble, held it for them. They walked down a dirty hall, pinkish beige, the doors all had black kickmarks at the bottom. They came to an elevator, Inspector Brooks held it for them, got in and turned a key in the operating panel, the door shut and the elevator descended. Josie stared down at the streaky linoleum. *Please God. Let this not be happening.*

The doors opened, and right there, against the gray wall, against a busted water fountain, on a gurney, lay a human form under a white sheet. She held Pen's arm, or was Pen holding hers, the smell was different from anything she had ever smelled before, dirty, like old meat, and Inspector Brooks was saying, "He's not going to look like they do in the funeral home, they've cleaned him up some but he's going to look like the photos, all right? I'm going to lower the sheet now."

He folded back the top of the sheet. The body lay wrapped in another one, a knot like a rose at the chest, the arms folded in, the head covered, there was blood on the sheet, *don't look at that, don't look, only the face.* The bruised eyes, bruised mouth, lips dark as if he'd been drinking ink, the dark stubble, the handsome eyebrows, the eyelashes, *his eyes were not closed.* She slipped hard to her knees. The Inspector and Pen caught her but not in time. "His eyes . . ." The most diabolical thing she had ever seen. She threw up, on her coat, on her knees, on the floor. *A project I've been thinking about. Some time to concentrate.*

They picked her up and helped her into a chair. She sat with her head between her knees. Pen crouched next to her, holding her, vomit all over. *His body*. She was shaking, she couldn't stop. *His body, goddamn him! HIS BODY!* Inspector Brooks was covering him again, she got up and yanked down the sheet and laid her face against his sweet horrible one, then recoiled. It was hard, cold. A thing. He'd turned himself into a thing. A goddamn thing. "MICHAEL, YOU FUCK, YOU STUPID GODDAMN FUCK!" she was screaming into his face, but it didn't change. He didn't wake up. He just lay there with his black eyes and the whites showing, and Inspector Brooks covered him up, his hand dark and alive against the sheet.

"Let's go." Pen threw her arm around Josie's shoulder. Brooks held open the elevator, and a brawny man with a beard brought a mop, and then they were going up again. Through the pink hall.

He indicated the bench in the brown lobby. "Please." And then they were on it, she just sat next to Pen, shaking, her teeth chattering, trying to breathe. "Is there anything you'd like to know, Miss Tyrell?"

How could she make this not be happening? How could she turn this movie off?

"What happens now?" Pen said.

"We'll be notifying the parents, they'll make the arrangements, I'm sure they'll let Miss Tyrell know what they've decided."

Pen snorted. "Oh yeah, sure, they'll be right on the phone. Don't be a dick."

"I'll call then, when I know anything, all right?" he said, crouching, putting his living hand on Josie's. She wanted to kick him. She wanted to punch his fucking face in. She hated him for being warm when Michael was hard as wood, wrapped in a sheet. "Anything I find out, I'll call you, Miss Tyrell, I promise. I'm sure it won't be long."

*What won't be long? What was he talking about?*

“Where’d you find him?” Pen asked.

“In a motel. Out in Twentynine Palms. Believe me when I say how sorry I am you have to go through this, Miss Tyrell.”

Michael, in a motel in Twentynine Palms, a gun in his hands. Not at Meredith’s, painting in an explosion of new creation. Not over on Sunset, digging through the record bins, or at Launderland, separating the darks and lights. Not at the Chinese market, looking at the fish with their still-bright eyes. Not at the Vista, watching an old movie. Not sketching down at Echo Park. He was in a motel room in Twentynine Palms, putting a bullet in his brain.

“Let’s go home,” Pen said.

*He didn’t even drive, how could he have gotten out to Twentynine Palms?* None of it made any sense. It didn’t make sense. *Where did he get a gun?* She didn’t want to go home. Where could home be now, with Michael here in the basement, tied into a white sheet that was seeping blood? There was no home, only that body, the lips like black leather, dark smudge of beard shading his jaw, dark circles around his eyes against the drained yellow wax of his skin. Though somewhere in Twentynine Palms was a motel room splattered in the most precious scarlet. Suddenly, she wanted to go there, to be the one to clean it. Unthinkable that a stranger, some poor woman with a bucket, would look at his blood and think, *Christ, that’s never coming out.* Having no idea this had been Michael Faraday, no idea just what had died in that stinking hotel room, bleeding to death onto the moldy shag.

She drew her knees up inside her coat and lay on the bench, shaking, she couldn’t stop. Her head on her red schoolbag purse, she fought the urge to vomit again. She hid her face in the furry collar of her coat. *Registered as Oscar Wilde.* She wanted to wake up like Dorothy and see Michael’s face peering over the side of the bed, laughing. *Why, you just hit your head.* But it was no dream and there was no Kansas and he was never coming back.