



The Winter Girl: A Novel

By Matt Marinovich

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A scathing and exhilarating thriller that begins with a husband's obsession with the seemingly vacant house next door.

It's wintertime in the Hamptons, where Scott and his wife, Elise, have come to be with her terminally ill father, Victor, to await the inevitable. As weeks turn to months, their daily routine—Elise at the hospital with her father, Scott pretending to work and drinking Victor's booze—only highlights their growing resentment and dissatisfaction with the usual litany of unhappy marriages: work, love, passion, each other. But then Scott notices something simple, even innocuous. Every night at precisely eleven, the lights in the neighbor's bedroom turn off. It's clearly a timer . . . but in the dead of winter with no one else around, there's something about that light he can't let go of. So one day while Elise is at the hospital, he breaks in. And he feels a jolt of excitement he hasn't felt in a long time. Soon, it's not hard to enlist his wife as a partner in crime and see if they can't restart the passion.

Their one simple transgression quickly sends husband and wife down a deliriously wicked spiral of bad decisions, infidelities, escalating violence, and absolutely shocking revelations.

Matt Marinovich makes a strong statement with this novel. *The Winter Girl* is the psychological thriller done to absolute perfection.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A marital thriller more scary than *Gone Girl*...Even though *The Winter Girl* is dark and dismal — Marinovich may have given birth to Hamptons noir — the novel is, essentially, the anatomy of a marriage and what happens when deadly secrets, like poisonous snakes, threaten those who seek to get close to them. Marinovich writes with startling authenticity about how it feels to be in a miserable relationship....If you had a love/hate relationship with Nick and Amy Dunne, the crazy couple at the center of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, you'll feel equally at home with Scott and Elise — just be forewarned that this devilishly good story is scads more scary. To quote Scott, "The worst decisions never let you go. They come circling back, even on the best days, to find you."

--*The Washington Post*

"It seems like a knife ought to play some part in Matt Marinovich's *The Winter Girl*, because that's what his story feels like: sharp and delightfully treacherous. It cuts, and then it cuts some more. Marinovich is merciless toward his characters—toward his readers, too. This is one of the leanest, meanest books I've read in a long, long time. I suspect Jim Thompson would've loved it. James M. Cain, too. And Patricia Highsmith. That's how great this book is."

--Scott Smith, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Ruins* and *A Simple Plan*

"The novel summons elements of Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 masterpiece "Rear Window" (from a short story by Cornell Woolrich) and "Gone Girl," the ongoing best-seller by Gillian Flynn, though it is darker than both....[*The Winter Girl*] moves into dangerous territory as one shocking surprise leads to the next, culminating in mayhem and revelations of twisted family secrets."

--The Sacramento Bee

"So creepy you want to take a shower after reading it."

--*Newsday*

"Without giving the twisty-turny plot away, tragedy inevitably follows Scott and Elise, neither of who turn out to be quite as nice as they might initially seem. Their story, and that of the mysterious title character, is unsettling but oh so fulfilling for those who love a good tale about bad people."

--*Sag Harbor Express*

"Marinovch's novel, set in wintertime in the Hamptons, is a sexy update of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Scott and Elise are staying in the Hamptons to care for her aging father. Scott's irrepressible curiosity about the vacant house next door leads to a dangerous and thrilling discovery."

--Travel + Leisure (online)

"The bleak landscape of the Hamptons in winter provides the backdrop for this absorbing thriller from Marinovich...an engrossing, disquieting read for a chilly night."

--*Publishers Weekly*

"[*The Winter Girl*] is a dark and ever darkening psychological thriller."

--*Kirkus*

"Family secrets and marital transgressions weave a suspenseful Hitchcockian story of intrigue, mystery, and

deceit."

--Library Journal

"The twists are clever and the pacing relentless."

--Booklist

"Author Matt Marinovich has crafted a riveting, gruesome and dark story as chilling as the winter landscape. The isolation he has created is striking."

--Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star

"*The Winter Girl* is a page-turner. Once the surprises start coming out, it's hard to put down.... Marinovich has delivered an intriguing and fast-paced read if you're looking for something to keep you up on a cold winter's night."

--New York Daily News' Page Views

"[*The Winter Girl*] like an impending winter storm, is filled with menace and the threat of destruction.When the ominous winter storm finally breaks, the story builds to a crescendo of murder and betrayal and brutal sadism."

--The East Hampton Star

"The Hamptons is famous for beautiful beaches, rolling green golf courses, Rodeo Drive-like shopping and generally being a, to quote the well-worn media trope, "playground for the rich and famous." But there's another Hamptons—the stark, grey, cold and often desolate place locals know well from October to March. This is the Hamptons in Marinovich's sizzling thriller, *The Winter Girl* (Doubleday, January 2016), and his book is so much better for it...What follows is a page-turning, sexy and brutal ride that will linger and haunt readers well past reading the final poignant, vicious words."

--Dan's Papers "Top Hamptons Beach Reads of 2016"

"This book is twisted, eventful, and completely different than what you think it's going to be. I was surprised until the end. If you like a psychological thriller that will surprise you, you'll absolutely love *The Winter Girl* by Matt Marinovich."

--Country & Bookish blog

"Marinovich's book is both compelling and disturbing...fans of the Noir at its "noirest" should be pleased with this book."

--Pop Culture Association

"The slow, relaxed pace is perfect for building this almost ghostly, frightening tale...As if stringed instruments are playing in the background, readers will feel dizzy with alarm and the feeling of foreboding that builds the thrills and chills perfectly. For those who believe the Hamptons in winter is a posh place to visit, this story will definitely have you all running for the biggest, busiest, brightest city imaginable."

--Suspense Magazine

About the Author

MATT MARINOVICH is the author of *Strange Skies* and lives in Brooklyn. He has worked as an editor at *Interview*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *People*, and *Real Simple*. His writing has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Esquire.com*, *Salon*, *Quarterly West*, *Open City*, *Barcelona Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Poets & Writers*, and other publications.

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The two lights in the upstairs bedroom of the house next door were on a timer. I was certain of this.

They turned off at 11:00 p.m. every night, as if some ritualistic loner decided to go to bed at the exact same minute every evening. I remember I looked out our kitchen window one night and I said something to Elise about no one really living there.

It was early December and we were staying at her father's place in Shinnecock Hills, about halfway between Hampton Bays and Southampton. His house, like the others on Ocean View Road, faced the bay. In the distance, you could see that thin strip of sand where the most expensive houses were. Green and red lights blinked way out there at night, where the helicopters landed. That winter, I never saw one.

In the winter, hardly anybody was around. It was nice to see a distant light through the dark scrub pine.

We'd been staying there for three weeks, so that Elise could visit her father in the hospital during the day. His colon cancer had metastasized and she was forced to take a leave of absence at the office where she worked as a speech therapist. It would have been nice if we'd had some of her other family members to help us, but Elise's mother had passed away when she was a kid, and she heard from her younger brother only when he called to wish her a Merry Christmas from the Hamilton County jail in Ohio where he was serving a five-year sentence for distributing a controlled substance and burglary. Needless to say, it really pumped up the mood on Christmas Day when her phone rang and I could hear the recording: "You have a call from an inmate at the Hamilton County jail. If you choose to accept the call .??.?"

Of course, she always accepted the call, closing the bedroom door so she could talk to him for a few minutes in private. Being the curious type, I always turned down the volume on the television until I could just make out what she was saying. Since I'd never met her brother, or even spoken to him, all I had to go on was Elise's half of the conversation. The only problem was that they spoke in a maddening sibling code. V?Rex I assumed was the nickname for her father. The Hub must have meant me. Screech was what she had nicknamed her profession for him. She always signed off with him in a loving, ironic voice that was one of my favorite things about her, mixing a perfect amount of affection and cruelty. Love you, Greasebag, she actually said once. He must have said something equally pithy, because she laughed out loud before he hung up. Then she composed herself behind the closed door as I slowly turned the volume up again, unable to ask her anything.

At night, Elise and I mostly watched television and avoided talking about how long it was taking her father to die. By early December, it was getting dark pretty early. By then, we had a routine down. I'd have dinner ready by the time I heard the wheels of our car on the short gravel driveway. Sometimes I'd watch Elise gather herself together in the Volvo, as if she were trying to put away what she'd seen in the hospital so that she could deal with me. The overhead light would flip on and I could see her reaching for things on the passenger seat. Once she gripped the steering wheel and pulled at it, as if she were going to tear it off. Then I saw her wiping the tears away with her sleeves, her mouth still gaping with grief. If you're wondering why I didn't run out there and comfort her, I don't have an exact answer. One of the reasons is that it had been going on for almost a year. He'd just gotten worse.

That's the terrible thing about watching a parent die. One day they look like they're ready to check out, and the next doctors might be talking about a five-year plan. They had assured us that it was a matter of months. Something in me was telling me that I had to pace myself.

The day she fell apart in the car was the first day I'd crept through the woods to take a look at the house next door. It was early in the afternoon, but the temperature had dropped below thirty and gray waves were sloshing in the bay. Hiding behind the crusty bark of a pine tree, I stood looking at the house's gray shingles, its bay windows, the fence around an empty pool that was shaped like a giant kidney bean. I stood there smiling, trying to look harmless, in case someone really did live there and was hiding behind a curtain, looking right back at me.

"It's empty," I said later. "I was right about the lights being on a timer."

I was standing over the sink, my glasses fogged by the rising steam from the pasta I'd dumped into the colander.

Elise was sitting at the table in the living room a bunch of her father's bills in front of her, like a game of solitaire. A moment passed without her answering, but I was used to that. Our conversations had become satellite transmissions, like those far-flung reporters you see on TV, waiting for the delayed voice of an anchor.

"It's the off-season," she said, picking up one of Victor's bills. "Of course it's empty."

I felt a surge of blood warm the back of my neck. It had been my great accomplishment of the day, finding out the truth about that house. She was wearing her father's old Irish sweater. I walked up behind her and squeezed her shoulders, and noticed that she quickly put one of the bills behind another. I caught a glimpse of it just long enough to see that it was from PSEG, the electric company.

"Another late payment?" I said.

"Please don't start with that."

Every few weeks, she went through a pile of them and paid them with our money. She had assured me that her father would pay her back when he got out of the hospital, but the subject added only another layer of stress to our situation. I decided to let it go, for the good of the night.

"You want a massage?" I said.

She tore open another envelope. I started to knead her shoulder, and for a moment she leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Imagine if this house was ours," she said. "If we had a little space?"

"We can pretend," I said.

"It's not the same," she said, tapping my right hand to let me know the massage was over. She wanted to get back to looking over Victor's bills.

That's pretty much where we left it that night. We ate the pasta. We drank a bottle of wine. I can't remember what we watched on television. I know we didn't have sex. It was more or less like every other day that had preceded it for three weeks. In the back of my mind, I was wondering what kind of shape her father would be in when Elise showed up at the hospital in the morning.

I'm a photographer. I used to teach at the New School before they cut half the adjunct staff. In the fall, I ended up photographing Asian newlyweds in Prospect Park. It was a gig I got through an Asian student of mine. For three hundred bucks, I'd take fifty to sixty shots of the bride and groom, smiling at each other under some dying tree. It was always the same tree. An elm with a beautiful black bark that made the yellow leaves above seem even more unreal. I don't know why the work stopped. But by late October, I didn't get any more calls from Asian newlyweds, or even my Asian student. When I stopped by the New School to ask my old boss if he had any work, he asked me to walk with him as we talked. I thought that was odd since he had been sitting down when I walked into his office. We walked, he nodded his head, and he promised me he'd get in touch. Of course, he never did.

Elise is a pediatric speech therapist. She shares an office with another speech therapist in Park Slope, Brooklyn. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, Elise makes seventy-five bucks an hour teaching little kids to say "car" instead of "tar." She has a real degree for this stuff, but one day, back when we were really in love, I pretended I was another speech therapist filling in for her. The parent brought her little girl in and I faked my way through a whole hour. Invented my own kind of speech therapy and probably set the kid back two years.

"You've got to open your mouth like this," I kept saying. "Like you're blowing a bubble."

I thought that sounded good. The little girl's mother sat watching us on the couch, and I could sort of see up her skirt. With Elise furtively listening outside the door, the whole situation became oddly arousing. Like I was skating on the surface of some real crime.

The funny thing about the day I pretended to be a speech therapist is that it also turned into the first real argument between me and Elise. I basically told her that she'd wasted seventy-five thousand dollars on a master's in speech and she told me I'd wasted ten years of my life pretending to be a photographer. We made up later that night, but looking back, I realize we never forgave each other. Part of each of us was always keeping an eye on the other from then on, even after we got married.

The day she heard her father was getting really sick, I drove the car to her office. I double-parked on President Street and ran into her office suite. It was the first time she'd let me back in since I'd pretended to be a speech therapist. It was a narrow office. I'm sure it still looks pretty much the same. A small desk. Sheetrock walls through which every loud telephone conversation of the lawyers next door can be heard. A thin beige wall-to-wall carpet. A thick wood door with frosted glass panels on either side.

It was late September when she got the news that her father's colon cancer had spread. I held her in my arms in the office. I said all the stuff any normal guy would say and I meant it. So sad. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I would have added He's a great guy, but I couldn't force myself to spit that one out.

Elise's mother had left her father a long time ago. Her mother is Puerto Rican and her father's Caucasian. The truth is, he married his housekeeper. He was vaguely rich by then, making all his money in direct marketing. He had made a pile on the Hensu Knife, then sold his agency at the right time, just before the company diversified and went down the drain.

Needless to say, after years of abuse, his late wife or incarcerated son didn't make it to Southampton Hospital that day, weren't there to inhale the vague scent of urine in the private room. I was the one who kept on ferrying snacks back from the vending machine, buying newspapers he'd end up never reading, changing

channels on the television above his bed as Elise held his chalky, dry hand.

I clipped his fucking nails.

Elise had fallen asleep halfway through doing them. Her father was asleep too. I watched the nail clipper slowly slip off the bedsheet and fall to the floor, and I sat watching it for a good long time as it got darker in the room, and Arthur, of all things, played on the television above his bed. After about ten minutes I leaned over and picked up the nail clipper and I resumed the job. It's odd clipping the nails of a sleeping man you vaguely detest. There were eight fingers that Elise hadn't finished, and by the time I got to his pinkie, he was awake, his dark blue eyes murkily looking at me.

"You're a manicurist now?" is what he said.

There was no point in trying to explain what I was doing, or how much his daughter loved him, or why I thought he was a hypocrite and a liar. Instead, I tossed the clipper on the table beside the bed and told Elise I was going to do some shopping in town. I stepped through the automatic doors of the emergency room and kept walking. I sat in our black Volvo S40 and turned on the radio and listened to 1010 WINS, the news anchor gently laying out the day's murders and a late report of a missing woman who was last seen leaving a bar with a registered sex offender.

I drove down Gin Lane into Southampton. There seemed to be a red bow or hanging strands of Christmas lights in the window of every store. Even the hardware store had gotten into the spirit, with a mechanical Santa waving his arm in the window. I was stopped at a light, trying to figure out why it seemed like something was missing, and then I realized what it was: people. There were only two people out on the street--an older couple who waved at me, mostly because they were concerned I might run them over when the light turned green. I waved back and continued driving down the empty street. Past a Saks Fifth Avenue, a clapboard church, the white picket fence of a small graveyard.

2

It was about two weeks before Christmas, and Elise was visiting her father in the hospital again, and I was standing on the frozen front lawn of his house, looking out at the bay. Peering through a set of old-fashioned binoculars. I scanned the inlet, where a duck blind bobbed on the opaque, wind-whipped waves. In the distance, on that spit of land where the most expensive houses are, a pool of golden sunlight was growing, carving itself into the sea until it blinded me just to look at it. I turned right and looked through the binoculars at the house next door. Its shingled, gabled roof. The sky reflected in its bay windows. The lounge chairs stacked up on one side of the pool. It was twice the size of Elise's father's house. Three chimneys. At least four balconies on which no one stood, admiring the view. There was a deer path that led from her father's property to the house next door, and I traded the binoculars for my digital camera and stole up to it again, looking through the lens as I walked toward the pool, as if being a photographer were the perfect excuse.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christine Kaufman:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important behave, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a e-book. Beside you can solve your long lasting problem; you can add your knowledge by the publication entitled The Winter Girl: A Novel. Try to make book The Winter Girl: A Novel as your buddy. It means that it can to get your friend when you experience alone and beside regarding course make you smarter than previously. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you. The book makes you considerably more confidence because you can know every thing by the book. So , we need to make new experience and knowledge with this book.

Pamelia Thompson:

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