

WINTER LIGHT

“reminds us of the
fragility of teenagers,
and the incredible
power of kindness”

Paulette Boudreaux,
author of *Mulberry*

MARTHA ENGBER

Praise

“*Winter Light* tugs at your heart, reminding you of what it’s like to be a young person growing up, unsure of what to wear, how to behave, who and what to care about. Unsure of anything. The story is a ride through Class V rapids that will keep you hanging on white-knuckled till the end. A great read.”

JANA MCBURNEY-LIN, AUTHOR OF *MY HALF OF THE SKY*

“*Winter Light* is the extraordinary and intricate story of Mary Donahue, a teenager from the darker side of life whose struggles, resilience, and courage will be forever seared in your brain and your heart.”

JOYLENE NOWELL BUTLER, AUTHOR OF *BROKEN BUT NOT DEAD*,
MATOWAK: WOMAN WHO CRIES, AND
DEAD WITNESS

“Martha Engber has crafted a well-paced, thoughtfully structured, insightful novel that draws the readers’ compassion for Mary and the motley collection of ‘burnout’ teens that are Mary’s friends. We witness Mary’s heartrending struggles to break free of economic and social class boundaries, the effects of careless parenting, and the low expectations of others, subjects the author handles with great skill and subtlety.”

PAULETTE BOUDREAUX, AUTHOR OF *MULBERRY*

About the Author

Martha Engber is the author of *The Wind Thief*, a novel, and *Growing Great Characters from the Ground Up*. A journalist by profession, she's written hundreds of articles for *The Chicago Tribune* and other publications. She had a play produced in Hollywood and fiction and poetry published in the *Aurorean*, *Watchword*, and other journals. A workshop facilitator and speaker, she lives in Northern California with her husband, bike, and surfboard.

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Winter Light

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To my mom, who was my Mrs. McCarthy

Chapter 1

Tues., Dec. 12, 1978

Mary lay with her cheek against the school desk, staring into the winter dusk. Bare tree limbs looked black against the ash sky tinged with the orange of a sinking sun. Everyone said this winter would be bad. The worst in recent history. Real scary boogeyman shit. The cold colder than the coldest. The snow deeper than the deepest. The coldest and deepest in years, maybe since the Ice Age. Whistling winds, blizzards, ice-sheet highways, one prediction bleaker than the last. Whatever came would have to be a real whopper of catastrophe, though, because you don't grow up in this old Chicago suburb on the Burlington-Northern Line without knowing the meaning of frigid. And you don't survive fifteen years with three older brothers and a worthless, his-glasses-glaring-all-the-time, alcoholic father without knowing how to dig yourself out from under.

But then she narrowed her eyes because Mother Nature could be a mean bitch, even on days when nothing much happened. Like today. No blizzard, no limb-tearing wind. Yet look at the muted glow of that dying sun, the sky bleeding out slowly, quietly, alone. Like the work of a serial killer.

She didn't bother looking at the clock above the classroom

door. The time always 11:59—forever on the verge—because nobody bothered to fix the thing. Mr. O'Brien had ducked out twenty minutes ago, saying he needed something from the office, when everybody knew he went to have a smoke in the teachers' lounge. The time must be close to three when the bell would ring.

She turned her head and rested her other cheek on the desk. She studied the girl in the next seat over. The same girl who always sat in that same seat, probably even on the days Mary ditched. Though the girl had to be fifteen, too, she looked twelve, what with the skinny body and flat chest. She read with one hand on her forehead and an elbow lodged on a stack of books. She wore a white button-down shirt beneath a dark blue wool sweater with a ring of small whales circling the collar. And how everything matched, too. Jesus. The sweater with the corduroys, the corduroys with the socks, the socks with the ribbon that kept a perfect curl of brown bangs off of her face. But the shoes gave her away. No real prep would be caught dead wearing cheap Oxford knockoffs with a dweeby wedged heel. That made the girl a wannabe, and the only thing worse than a prep was a fucking prep wannabe.

Mary lifted her head and with two fingers, flipped a strand of long, strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder. "You got the time?"

The girl looked up.

Mary counted three Os: two made by the girl's surprised brown eyes, and the third by her prissy lip-glossed mouth.

"The time," Mary said.

The prep looked at her watch. "Five to three."

"Thanks."

The girl returned to reading. Mary looked out the window again. The sinking sun meant the temperature would drop soon, too, probably to near zero. Yet she had no ride waiting for her, so she'd do what she always did and walk home.

She'd cross the street and cut through the hole, a wooded lot good parents forbid their kids to cut through, especially after that girl got murdered there last summer. She'd been a loser with dirty hair and a bad complexion, but even so. Nobody deserved to be strangled.

Mary would continue along 47th Street as the streetlights blinked on and the headlights of oncoming cars flashed across her chest. She'd walk by the same houses she passed every day, middle-class jobs of stucco and brick. While most looked nice, every block had at least one dump like the one where she lived. A place where though you switch on the overhead light in your room, the cold and dark remain inside of you. So you smoke and listen to your favorite album, Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, a gift from your best older brother, Danny. And somehow you try to stop thinking about death. When you're only fifteen and have your whole life ahead of you, you're not supposed to dwell on strangled dead girls or guys like Terry Kath, the guitarist for Chicago who'd just croaked of an accidental self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Bang!

She jerked, the pulse in her neck throbbing with the sudden race of her heart. The sound she'd heard had been somebody coughing. Just a cough, not a gunshot, and Christ, what was wrong with her? A drop of sweat snaked down her back beneath her black Ted Nugent T-shirt. She thought of taking off her midi-length wool coat with the trampled fake fur collar, but the bell would ring soon. So she'd sit and do nothing and pretend she didn't care. As always. Maybe forever.

But then the wannabe prep cleared her throat, the sound quiet and polite. Mary considered the girl again, though longer this time and without blinking.

"What you reading?" Mary said.

Again the girl looked startled. "Well..." She rotated her wrist to show the cover. Instead, Mary kept her eyes on the

girl. Apparently confused, the prep looked down, cleared her throat and said, "*Jane Eyre*."

"What's it about?"

"Um—"

"What's *um*?" Mary said, deadpan.

The girl pressed her lips together.

"Just teasing," But Mary didn't smile.

The girl's right eyebrow dipped. A *yeah, right* look. Yet she answered anyway. "It's just this girl. She's an orphan and has this really hard life."

"Gee, how sad."

"Well, you asked," the girl said with enough edge in her tone to almost make Mary smile. She liked people who could take care of themselves, especially those who didn't look like they could.

Mary propped her head on her hand. "I'm not trying to be a bitch or anything."

Which was true. Nobody wants to be a bitch. That's just how you get tagged sometimes, mostly because other people don't understand. They think you're trying to be a smartass, when really you want to learn what you don't know, but you're not good at asking. Either that or they look you up and down, and after studying your not-so-fancy clothes and not-so-cheery face, decide you're a bitch because you look like one.

So she sugared her tone a tad. And though she couldn't dish up a fake smile, she tried not to look so serious, or whatever had put off this girl who couldn't take a joke.

"I'm just saying," she said, "must be nice not to know about that shit firsthand. You read about it and when it gets too depressing, just close the book."

But apparently she hadn't sweetened her tone enough. The girl dropped her eyes to her book. Jaw tight, shoulders tense, face averted; everything about her slammed shut, barring entry to the Big Bad Bitch, and Jesus, what an impressive reaction.

The bell rang, and the prep stood so fast she knocked her desk sideways. She scooped up her books, and rather than leave the desk askew, as Mary would have, the girl tugged the desk into place and walked toward the door with quick, hipless steps. To choir practice, maybe, or a giggle with the girlfriends.

Mary extended her arm. She cocked her thumb and index finger and pointed at the girl's retreating head. She itched to pull the trigger. Then again, you never know who might save you someday. A good Samaritan. A guardian angel. A stranger just waiting to jump out of nowhere to do saintly deeds.

Too bad she didn't believe such bullshit. Yet she lowered the barrel anyway.