

The Care and Feeding of Exotic Pets

Diana Wagman

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It is a Tuesday morning in November, and Diana Wagman's fourth novel could take place only in Los Angeles. Winnie Parker, a thirty-eight-year-old single mom, has been waiting for a rental car outside a service station. Her mother is Daisy Juniper, winner of two Academy Awards for her acting. Her ex-husband, Jonathan, host of the popular dating show, *Tie the Knot*, is spending \$151.20 for two pairs of stockings. She has a "pain-in-the-ass" teenage daughter, Lacy. A shiny Toyota sedan pulls up to the curb and Winnie gets in.

Oren, the Toyota's driver, can be a sensitive young guy, but his rage is always just around the corner. A young account rep—not an installer, he insists—for Carpet Barn, he is also president of the local Iguana Keeper's Club. He is devoted to his seven-foot-long, 165-pound green iguana, Cookie, who, he believes, needs a mate. Oren has been chatting online with a girl, Lacy, who claims to be eighteen. Lacy has been telling Oren about the hell she has endured from her rich mother and their perverted chauffeur. Oren is sympathetic; his own history of abuse and neglect puts Lacy's history to shame, and his narrative, unlike Lacy's, is true. Today he has called in sick so that he can carry out his plan to help Cookie find a mate and at the same time send a message to Lacy's supposedly rich, supposedly abusive mother, the unsuspecting Winnie.

Wagman takes us through this suspenseful and terrifying, yet quirkily humorous, day of Winnie's ordeal. She manages the rising and falling tension partly through shifting points-of-view, as Winnie seeks opportunities to escape from Oren's house, which is kept desert-warm to suit Cookie. Winnie's kidnapping is at the story's forefront, but Wagman's strength is her ability to parcel out bits of truth and falsity, as her characters grow in her readers' minds. She manages especially well their moves from deception to insight, from ignorance to clarity.

Winnie is not the rich bitch her daughter makes her out to be. She has a job and a two-bedroom bungalow and a humdrum life. She has lately felt "deflated, like an old balloon on a fencepost." She fights with her kid, and she envies her ex-husband's success and his new wife's "fresh and unused" boobs. Winnie doesn't have the ambition of Jonathan or the pretensions of her mother; but it's dawning on her that she is okay.

Wagman's second novel, *Spontaneous*, won the 2001 PEN Center USA Award for Fiction. She is also a frequent contributor to the *Los Angeles Times*.

JOE TAYLOR (Winter 2013)

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