

TLC Showcase

BERNICE LANDRY

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Introduction to *White Night*

My experience with TLC has been wonderful and I would recommend their services to any writer without hesitation. They have been prompt, professional, knowledgeable, kind and incredibly helpful. My reader, Jude Cook, sent me detailed, intelligent notes that I considered very carefully before making changes to my novel *White Night*. Afterwards I got the good news from Rebecca Swift that my book had advanced to the TLC "quality manuscripts" pile – which sure beats the hell out of "slush pile"! And so, the process continues, and my book is now being considered by agents with the all-important push and stamp of approval from TLC.

White Night, a work of literary fiction, follows Anna as she embarks on a suspense-filled, Kafkaesque voyage of self-discovery into the multiple, multi-colored worlds of the psyche, the self, memory, fantasy and dreams.

Extract from *White Night*, by Bernice Landry

“Every heart, every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.”

—Leonard Cohen

Part One

A woman, man and a child sit next to each other in a bright, white space. They are side by side and almost motionless.

None of them move from their simple wooden chairs. Instead they glance from left to right, back and forth. They seem surprised to see one another.

Finally the woman speaks.

Do I know you? she asks the man.

I don't know, he replies. You look familiar, but I can't seem to place you.

That's exactly how I feel, says the woman, puzzled.

And what about you? the woman asks the little girl, who must be about six or seven. Do you know us?

Sure, she says, smiling. I know you.

What's my name? asks the woman.

I don't know, says the girl.

I don't know, either, admits the woman.

Same goes for me, says the man.

The man rises from his chair and takes a few tentative steps. He bends down to touch the ground. It's hard and lukewarm, and the same color as everything else he sees around them—pure, bright white.

Then he turns in a complete circle, trying to locate a horizon. There isn't one. Everything blends together into the same whiteness, as far as the eye can see.

Do you have any idea where we are? asks the man.

No, I don't, says the woman, who is also looking around. I don't think I've ever been here before, wherever here is.

Me neither, he says.

Then he sits down again, and, for a while, no one says anything. The only sound comes from the little girl as she swings her legs.

Finally the man breaks the silence.

What do you think we should do? he asks.

I don't know, she says. I was trying to think of something, but nothing comes to mind.

Maybe we should try walking around, the man suggests.

How was the floor when you stepped on it? the woman asks.

It seemed safe and firm enough, he responds.

She pauses for a moment.

Well, why not? she answers finally. It sounds like a good idea.

What do you think? she asks the little girl.

Okay, the little girl says.

They all rise from their chairs and stand for a moment. Then they begin to walk.

They walk in more or less a straight line for what seems like a long time, without saying anything. The setting doesn't change. It's white and bright and seemingly limitless. The only difference is they can no longer see the simple chairs they once sat on.

I've been going around and around in my mind, the woman says as she continues walking. And it's so strange. I can't seem to remember a thing about who I am, or how I got here.

The same goes for me, says the man.

And another thing, she adds. The only thing that's not pure and white and homogenous is us. Even the chairs we were sitting on were white.

They were, weren't they? he says.

Maybe we should think about that, she says. You know, about us.

Not exactly, he says. What do you mean?

Well, she says, for example, look at you. You're not just some generic person. You're about 40 years old, I would guess. You have brown hair that's thinning a bit on the top. No offense.

None taken, he says warmly.

You're about six feet tall, maybe a bit taller. You don't look like an athlete, but you're in good shape. You're wearing black pants and a belt that looks a little worse for wear. Your shoes are on the dressy side, but they also look broken in. You're also wearing a T-shirt and, over that, a gray pinstriped blazer. In other words your clothes are sharp, even a bit stylish, but also casual, like it's something you're used to wearing.

I guess that's true, he says, inspecting his clothes as she's speaking.

But how much can you really tell about someone by his clothing? he asks.

Well, I don't know, she says. If I saw you walking down the street, I would guess you were a white-collar worker, but not a corporate guy.

Why can't I be a corporate guy? he asks.

Your dress is far too casual for that, she observes.

But maybe I'm not at work, he says. Maybe I'm at home.

Could be, she says. But who wears a blazer watching TV?

Good point, he says.

So, she continues, maybe you're an architect, or an entrepreneur. Or maybe you're in the arts. Look at your T-shirt.

He looks down at his T-shirt. It's black with a red, stylized drawing of a phoenix.

Hey, I like that, he says, pulling the shirt out from his body to get a better look. That's pretty cool.

See what I mean? she says. It's not random. It's something you chose.

Incidentally, she asks. What is it that you like about it?

The T-shirt? he says. Well, I like that it's mostly black, and the red drawing isn't flashy—it's simple, just a few lines. And I like the story of the phoenix. In fact, I think I like mythology in general.

Right, she says. So you like the design, but also the story behind the design. You definitely have an artistic side, even if you're not an artist.

I can see that, he says. But it doesn't seem to be prompting my memory.

What's a phoenix? asks the little girl.

A phoenix is a bird like this, the man says, pointing to his shirt. But it's not a regular bird, like a chicken or a blue jay. A phoenix has a beautiful golden body and magnificent golden wings. What also makes it special is that it's eternal. When a phoenix is very, very old, so old that it's about to die, it lights on fire and burns in a brilliant red and golden flame. And then, when all that's left of it is a pile of ashes, it's reborn. It becomes a fresh, new, baby phoenix. And then the cycle repeats itself, over and over again.

That's a fine story, isn't it? says the woman to the little girl. It's a hopeful kind of story.

Yes, the little girl says, smiling. I like that story.

And what about you? says the man, looking at the woman. What about what you're wearing? It's pretty straightforward, in a way. But, then again, maybe there's more to it than meets the eye. You have on a simple white dress—

Yes, she says, interrupting. It's a sleeveless A-line. I would say it's a kind of sundress.

You're not wearing any jewelry, other than a wedding ring, he adds. He pauses. Then he starts to blush.

And you also have a wedding band, she says. I noticed, too.

I'm sorry, he says. I feel like I've done something wrong, like I've forgotten an anniversary. But it's actually much worse than that, since I can't remember if we're married.

Well, neither can I, she says, smiling. So I won't be pointing any fingers.

Your dress is very pretty, he says. I think it suits you very well.

I notice you're not guessing my age, says the woman defensively. But you'll have to say something about how I look, since I can't see my own face.

You're beautiful! he says. Then he looks at the ground.

Thank you, she says softly. You didn't have to say that.

But it's true, he says. You have brown hair and freckles, and almond-shaped green eyes, and you're probably a little younger than me, I would guess. Even though you look even younger than that—it's more of a feeling than anything else. I feel like we're contemporaries.

I see the diplomacy continues, she says, smiling. No wonder I may have married you.

What I find interesting, he says, is that your clothing is all white, like everything we see around us. Even your shoes are white.

I thought they were more off-white, she says, looking down at her white ballet slippers.

They look pretty white to me, he says.

Maybe, she says. This place is so white—everything seems pigmented against it. But why do you find that interesting?

Well, it might offer some kind of clue, he says. Is white a color you think you would normally wear?

I'm not sure, she says. Maybe not.

So perhaps there's a reason you're the only one who matches our surroundings, he says.

She shrugs.

I don't know, she says. I guess I'll have to think about it.

And what about her? says the man, pointing to the little girl who had wandered a little distance away and had begun to play imaginary hopscotch.

I love her dress, the woman says. It's canary yellow with white lace trim, and it's very flattering against her long, auburn hair and green eyes. She's a beautiful girl.

She sure is, he agrees. Do you think it's the kind of dress you might choose for her?

Definitely, she says. I love it.

The man pauses, and purses his lips.

What is it? the woman says, looking at him.

Nothing, he says.

Are you sure? she says. It looks like something.

It's just, he continues in a low voice. The way you speak about her yellow dress and her hair, and everything about her. Are you sure you don't know her?

I'm telling you, I can't remember, says the woman angrily. You say you can't remember anything, either. Don't you think I would remember if I could?

I'm sorry, he says. That's why I didn't want to say anything.

No, she says after pausing. I'm sorry. It's just that this is all rather frustrating, isn't it?

It should be, he says. But I don't feel frustrated.

You don't? she says.

No, I feel perfectly fine, he says. I don't feel tired or hungry or thirsty, or in any way uncomfortable. I feel like I just woke up, and I'm ready to face the day.

I wish I felt like that, she says.

You don't? he asks. Then how do you feel?

I feel the same as you do, physically, she says. Not hungry or thirsty or tired. But I don't like it here at all.

The woman looks around and shudders.

Well, I can understand that, he says. It's not a place you wind up every day.

Maybe we should look on the bright side, he says, trying to be upbeat. At least we're here together.

And I'm glad about that, she says. I don't want to seem like I'm not. It's just that I would just feel better if—

What? he asks.

If I knew who you were! she says. Or if I knew who the little girl was. I don't even know my own name, for heaven's sake.

Well, he says, maybe we should do something about that.

How? she asks.

Maybe we should go ahead and name ourselves, he says. You know, at least until we remember.

Well, that's kind of a strange idea, she says. But I suppose it's better than walking around with no name.

Exactly, he says.

Do you have a name in mind for yourself? she asks.

Let me think, he says. The first name that springs to mind is John. What do you think of that one?

Let's see, she says. John is simple, but it has character. I associate that name with strength and tenacity.

Does it go with my outfit? he says, trying to make a joke.

No, she says quite seriously, not exactly. But it seems to go with you. The name and the outfit together seem to capture more of you.

Thank you, he says, surprised. I'm flattered.

You're welcome, she says.

And what about you? he says. What would you like to be called?

I like the name Anna, she says. I also like Anne, but I think I like Anna more.

Anna is a beautiful name, he says. It's elegant, but not overbearing. It's a name you could never tire of saying.

She smiles.

That's very sweet, she says. Thank you.

What about you? Anna asks the little girl who had been playing within earshot. Would you like to choose a name?

Yes, she says. I would like to have a name, too.

What would you like your name to be? she asks.

The little girl thinks about it for a moment.

Sarah? she says.

That's a wonderful name, says the woman.

It's lovely, agrees the man. Does it feel like your name?

Yes, said the girl. I think so.

Come here, Sarah, says Anna. Sarah runs into her arms without the slightest hesitation.

Thank you, says Anna as she embraces her. That feels so good.

Then Sarah pulls away and runs off, leaving Anna smiling.

It feels funny to name yourself, says John. But, it's actually settling in better than I thought.

Really? says Anna.

Well, it's only been a few seconds, he says. But already I feel more and more like John.

That's good, she says.

What about you? he asks.

Yes, you're right. Anna makes perfect sense to me. I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier.

Do you think it could be your real name? he asks.

Well, I wouldn't go that far, she says. But it certainly works for now.

Anna and John both turn towards the little girl, who has run into the distance.

Sarah! calls Anna. Hello! Sarah!

Sarah immediately turns towards them. Anna and John wave to her. She smiles and waves back.

Well, I guess that settles that, says John, still waving at Sarah.

Yes, says Anna, smiling. So it seems.

About the Writer

Like so many writers, I am also a journalist. After finishing a journalism degree in 1993 in Nova Scotia, Canada, I left to work as a freelancer and stringer based in Budapest, Hungary. There I wrote most notably for the British-based Economist Group, but I also did a fair amount of local reporting on the changing face of post-communist Hungary. Then, in the late 1990s, I moved to New York and worked as an editor on Wall Street. I didn't like that nearly as much as journalism – but I did get an insider's look at the wacky and distorted workings of the international financial industry. I left New York in 2000, thankfully before 9/11, and moved back to Canada, where I was once again a freelance broadcaster and writer (for such outlets as the CBC and the Toronto Star). There I did stories mostly on social, societal issues like addiction and autism. My CBC story on autism, a two-hour series called *The Dark End of the Spectrum*, is an international award-winning documentary. A few years ago my life took a dramatic turn when my husband and I moved back to Nova Scotia to lend a hand to my cancer-survivor mom after my dad died. So, besides writing, that's what I do now. I always knew I would write novels, but I had to search to find my own style. I have a certain realistic and practical directness that seemed to be at odds with a strong attraction to magic realism and flights of fancy. Eventually I figured it out—and the result is my first novel, *White Night*.

