



ISLAND BLUFFS

by Alan A. Winter

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In this emotional thriller, a couple strikes a Faustian bargain in order to have a child.

Gabe and Carly Berk have been married for six years, and that whole time they've been trying to conceive a baby, without success.

Desperately trying every strategy, they're now willing to grasp at any straw. For them, "euphoria could not be spelled any sweeter than

b-a-b-y." The Berks are surrounded by a well-drawn cast of supporting characters who are either indifferent to their quest for a baby (such as Megan, a child from Gabe's first marriage, now grown into a somewhat surly teenager) or puzzled by its urgency (such as Gabe's father, the "quite lovable, rock-solid Yehuda Berkowitz"). But the couple's fortunes take a sharp turn when they encounter "the renowned specialist of last resort" Dr. Isadore Teplitsky, who guarantees to solve the Berks' fertility problems, but who asks quite a bit in exchange. First, they must pack up and move to Island Bluffs, a small, sleepy town on the Jersey Shore, near Teplitsky's clinic. This strikes the Berks as odd, yet it's nothing compared with the follow-up: Teplitsky will not only guarantee the couple a baby, he'll guarantee them twins—one of whom must be surrendered at birth to Teplitsky, without hesitation or question. Gabe, who prides himself on making sound decisions, at first balks at this horrific bargain: "I didn't sign up for us to have someone else's baby." Oddly, it's Carly who overrides such concerns: "If this is the price we have to pay to have our baby, then we are doing it." Gabe and Carly—and Megan and Yehuda—all move to Island Bluffs, and Winter's sure-footed novel follows the twists and turns of their discovery of the secrets hidden behind its quaint facade. There's a thick atmosphere of dread: the Stepford-esque conformity of most of the town's inhabitants, the tyrannical sheriff, the well-developed tension when Megan and Yehuda find a pile of human bones in a locked basement room of the couple's dream house. "What did we get ourselves into?" Gabe wonders at one point. "What did *I* get everyone into?" The dread only increases as the Berks steadily uncover more dark secrets, including an echo of the Nazi Germany that Yehuda only barely escaped. Winter (*Savior's Day*, 2013) keeps what could have been a fairly predictable plot moving briskly, and the climactic series of revelations is handled with smooth control and a good deal of dark humor.

An atmospheric and engrossing modern-day Gothic tale about the lengths to which a desperate couple will go.