



VINTAGE

COLD WATER

GWENDOLINE RILEY

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About the Book

Carmel McKisco is a twenty-year-old girl working nights in a Manchester dive bar. Cut off from her family, and from Tony, her carefree ex, she forges strange alliances with her customers, and daydreams, half-heartedly, about escaping to Cornwall. *Cold Water* is a poignant picaresque of barmaids and barflies; eccentric individuals all somehow tethered to their past – not least Carmel herself, who is nurturing mordant fixations on both her lost love, Tony, and her washed-up adolescent hero: a singer from Macclesfield. As she spins out the days and nights of an unrelentingly rainy winter she finds herself compelled to confront her romantic preoccupations, for better or worse.

About the Author

Gwendoline Riley was born in 1979. After graduating early from Manchester University she studied on Michael Schmidt's writing course and at the age of twenty was appointed literary editor of *City Life* magazine. Her first novel, *Cold Water*, won a Betty Trask Award and she was chosen by the *Guardian* as one of six Best First Novelists in 2002. Her second novel, *Sick Notes*, was published in 2004 and a third novel, *Joshua Spassky*, was published in May 2007.

for my mum
and for Kelly Griffiths and Emma Unsworth

Cold Water

Gwendoline Riley



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

1

This is a dive bar in the American style. There's worn out red velveteen on the stools, the tables are battered dark wood and dusty artificial ferns froth in long brass planters between the booths. The limited light glows from yellowed glass lamps shaped like clam shells, studded around the grey-green walls. I like working here, mostly: sleeping in the daytime and living the days in the nights; meeting people and listening to stories, while the blue spotlights swim over the banks of bottles behind me. It's never busy until late on, so after I've filled the fridges I do the cryptic crossword in the paper or read, underlining passages that strike me and Biroing rigid swirls and spoked stars in the margins of my book. I was reading *Death in Venice*, held open by a glass ashtray still hot from the sink, when I first saw Tony, this summer. He grinned at me, pulling on a skinny roll-up, his face burnished by the flare from his lighter and his dipped eyelashes casting a dark shadow, and I had cause to remember a line: '*You mustn't smile like that! One mustn't, do you hear, mustn't smile like that at anyone.*'

He shouldn't have.

The reason I'm here is Margi, who was always working when I started coming down here regularly two years ago. The way she used to stand pulling at her rat's tail black hair, the way she widened her grey eyes at the customers' mildest anecdotes, seemed to me to signal a wild disingenuousness which I could only admire. I studied her from my side of the bar and was in thrall. I asked for a job. She's twenty, same age as me, but a lot, lot wiser I think. I think. She's been wearing the same clothes, more or less,

since we met, with maybe a half inch of pale, inner-city midriff visible below a small black T-shirt, above grey, men's trousers which hang off the gentle jut of her hipbones and trail raggedy at the hem, a black tidemark an inch or so up where they've dragged through Manchester's sad, silty puddles.

Customers come and go. The only one who's been here all this time is Kevin Kinsella. I've never really worked Kevin out. I know I don't like the way he sniggers. Don't like how he holds out his beaker and says, 'Can you put another little guy from the top shelf in there please, Carmel.' It winds me up. His bald head is marked with pewtery dents, and his leftover hair is dark blond and fried-looking. He always wears a Hawaiian shirt and a trench coat. He wears two watches, one on each wrist. Neither of them has any hands. I'm not sure what that signifies. On one scrawny forearm is an ancient tattoo of a sea horse, blue-green, the outline indistinct. I can imagine him waiting backstage with a damp bouquet for a pretty redheaded chorus girl. A doll. Staring at his shoes, blushing. Sometimes I think this bar is full of delusionals. Infants. I find it a little sinister. A friend of a friend went round to Kevin's house once and claimed Kevin showed him this video of two Japanese women in a bath, being sick into each other's mouths. I argued about this with Margi a few weeks ago. She said, 'Kev's just like you or me, he's just got his own bubble, his own things that he's into - Bukowski, Damon Runyon, John Fante, all that hard-boiled stuff, and mermaids and whisky . . .'

'And Japanese women being sick in each other's mouths,' I said. 'Where does that fit?'

At this point I picked up one of the coffee cups from the top of the espresso machine and it slipped and smashed at my feet. Shards of thick white china exploded across the dirty floor. I knelt down and started picking them up. Margi flicked me a look and I flushed.

'Accident,' I said.

Lose your temper and lose the fight. That's a life rule, but it's hard to keep to. I'm pretty temperamental, despite myself. Like the time I was pissed off with Tony for going home early without me when I was working. I took a break and sat outside on the ledge in front of the bar with a drink. I got mad when I thought about it and threw my glass into the gutter. It's not good behaviour. It's not very dignified. I thought Tony was long gone, but he'd heard the smash and ran back around the corner in case there was trouble. I don't like to think about the way he looked at me. I went down in his estimation right then. I saw it happen in front of my eyes.

I walked all the way back to my flat after work that night, down past the museum and the park. Summer rain fell fast and the leaves dripped. The warm air tasted of mulch and rot. On the edge of town there's a building site where they're putting up a new leisure complex. The diggers were still, poised. To one side huge concrete slabs, dark grey with absorbed rain, were stacked ready to be slotted into place. For a long time I stared down at the churned, live earth, planted with rusted iron bars. In the squat office block behind, a window was broken and the wind was shuffling the grubby vertical blinds, whipping them off the rail.

2

My dad died when I was fourteen. I found him, sitting stiffly on the settee when I came in late one night, his eyes open behind his glasses, and a full ashtray balanced on the arm of the chair. I clicked off the hissing TV and sat down next to him. I wasn't upset. I felt relieved. For us and for him.

My brother Frank and my mum and I moved soon afterwards, from our small semi in Prestwich to a small semi in Whitefield. It was a miserable place, always a mess. There were newspapers and clothes all over the living room floor; picking a path to the settee you would crack Bircocks underfoot. Tea-stained mugs and dirty plates crowded on the coffee table and the windowsill. My mum pushed the furniture around to cover a carpet filthy with kicked over drinks and thrown food. She was always saying she could never have people round because of the state of the place.

'Like who?' I'd ask.

'Friends.'

'What friends?'

And then there'd be tears. More specifically, there'd be sniffing. I couldn't stand it. All of her crying sounded like singing to me. I thought cruel thoughts like maybe my dad had smacked her in the head once too often. She acted frightened all the time. And there was a petulance in there too, a martyrdom, that's what I couldn't take.

Well, a friend did come round, once, just after we'd moved. An old friend. She turned up unannounced on a Sunday afternoon. Frank was out as usual and Mum and I were sitting watching TV. Mum answered the door in her washed-out blue dressing gown.