VINTAGE

SICK NOTES

GWENDOLINE RILEY

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About the Author

Gwendoline Riley was born in 1979. Her first novel, *Cold Water*, won a Betty Trask Award and was voted one of the top five first novels of 2002 by the *Guardian*.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Cold Water

She was born like it, I swear. I can see her howling herself rigid in her cradle. They are never happy, these sports which ordinary, humble people throw off: they belong nowhere and are insatiable.

Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel*

‘Declare to whom? I want to know to whom?’

‘To nobody, to everybody, to the first one who reads it. Why specify? To the whole world!’

‘To the whole world? Bravo! And so there’s no need for repentance; and not to any authorities!’

‘No, no need, devil take the authorities! But write, if you’re serious! . . .’ Pyotr Stepanovich yelled hysterically.

‘Wait! I want a face at the top with its tongue sticking out.’

‘Ehh, nonsense!’ Pyotr Stepanovich got furious. ‘All that can be expressed without any drawing, just by the tone.’

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*

If you find one false excuse for yourself you will soon find a hundred, and be just what you were before.

When you really want love you will find it waiting for you.

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

Sick Notes

Gwendoline Riley

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

1

The bus moves slowly through the whirling sleet. The windscreen wipers switch slowly, dragging slushed snowflakes so cold water streams down constantly. I was one of just a handful of passengers boarding this late trip, but I walked right to the back to sit down and I folded my coat and scarf on the seat next to me to ensure I was left alone. And so I was.

I spent the journey – seven long hours up the motorway – trying to look through my reflection to catch the shrinking numbers on the blue signs, to see inside the cars with the flashing lights on the hard shoulder. And as the songs on my Walkman slowed I closed my eyes and must have rolled my head against the headrest trying to go to sleep, because loops of my hair have worked themselves loose of my ponytail. I can see in the window now how they have been snagged into peculiar orbits.

Rounding the corner on to Chorlton Street, where Manchester's taller hotels and office buildings give way to the low canopies of the terminus, our misted windows catch the weak rising sun, and by degrees they flare, light up, become entirely opaque. I take a hold of the arms of my seat and breathe slowly. Because each one is shining: perfect and blank.

I drag my suitcase across a pitted concourse stuck with blackened chewing gum; it bangs against bollards and down steps after me and I can feel fear – something – rising in my chest with the same dull thud. I see Donna – my friend, my flatmate – waiting by the glowing vending machines. Her dark hair is tucked away in a yellow and black striped hat

(my old hat, actually) and she's letting her half-moon glasses hang from her ears like a chinstrap, closing one eye at a time to stare into a beige plastic cup of something which she's evidently bought more to warm her hands on than to drink. I stand in front of her for a long minute before she notices me looming there, slides her glasses up into place and looks back.

The thing about me is – I'm double-jointed in my left elbow, and so when I stand, as I often do, as I'm doing now, with my hands jammed in my hip pockets – one arm looks like it's bending the wrong way. In summer, in short sleeves, the effect is more dramatic: the sheeny skin inside the joint stretches and shows up a lattice of red thread veins deep below. But even in a thick winter coat it's an unsettling trick, I know; jabbing a limb out at such an odd angle.

'Stop doing that with your arm,' Donna says now, and takes a hold of my elbow and clicks it around and back into place. 'You look disappointingly familiar,' she says.

'Don't be deceived,' I say. I pick up my case properly but make no move to leave. 'I have Tweetie-Pie and a Coca-Cola bottle tattooed on my ass.'

Donna leans back against the wall and twitches her eyebrows, her pale lips twitching too: a suppressed smile. 'On your what?' she says. 'Come on, car's this way.'

In the car I listen to the changing tones of the tyres on the wet roads, watching with one open eye the monochrome early morning suburbs scrolling by.

Donna says, 'So. The New World.'

And I say, 'White socks.'

She nods. The car is cold and it smells of her peppery perfume. Being only five feet tall she has to sit on a cushion to see over the steering wheel.

By the time we get to Salford a chilly sunlight is hitting the clean snow crusts on the car bonnets and the bin lids. I can feel the brightness forcing itself in behind my eyes. Dew spangles the black twigs on the tree in front of our squat

block. The path to our porch is frozen over. I lean on the front wall, thinking how to cross it, while Donna locks the car.

I've never smoked in my life; still, somehow, since I was a kid, I've had this habit of holding a phantom cigarette. While I'm thinking now I press two fingers to one side of my mouth and then swing them to one side, sighing out a stream of cold air and pinching my eyebrows together. There's no way around it. Even the strip of barren soil by the fence is glazed. I pick up my suitcase from by the gate and slide it across the bumpy tundra to the door. It spins slowly towards the step, making a thin, scratching sound. I set off after it, taking baby steps and holding my arms out: my red hands balled in tight fists; my eyes wide because all I can think is that at any moment I'll be slamming into the ground, with my knees, with my tail-bone. What I really feel like doing is getting down and crawling; that would surely be safest. Donna walks alongside carefully; the rubber soles of her tide-marked baseball shoes have more grip than these knee-high boots I've been wearing, with my jeans rolled halfway up my calves, with my twinset: my snowbound-Kansas 1957 look.

I sense I'm going to slip so I reach out and clutch Donna's scarf. I right myself okay but she sways.

'If you're going to fall *on your ass*, I think we should do this independently,' she says, looking round at me.

'Yes,' I say, and take hold of her coat sleeve; creak the stiff damp wool between my fingers. 'Independently while grabbing on to each other.'

I snap open my cardboard suitcase on my bedroom floor and find a tape amongst the tangle of jeans, dresses, cardigans. I click it into the player on the dresser and lie down on the bed with my hands behind my head and my coat and boots still on. Soon there's a timid tapping on the

door; my green door which is gripped by the brass knuckles of a series of locks.

‘Come in,’ I say.

Donna pushes the door open but she doesn’t come in. With her arms up and her feet apart she spiderwebs the doorway, looking in around this small room which she hasn’t seen for three months. She’s taken her coat off and I see she has some jack leads tied around the top of her jeans in place of a belt. She jerks her hipless middle side to side a couple of times so the plugs swing neatly.

‘Sound tech. chic,’ she says.

I raise my eyebrows but don’t reply, just suck on a ratty snatch of my hair and resume staring into a corner of the ceiling. She climbs in now over towers of taped up cardboard boxes, from the time when I thought I might leave for good. Boxes I’m already narrowing my eyes at – because I don’t intend to unpack them again. I flip over and lie on my front, and look at Donna with one eye while rubbing the other one. I feel very tired all of a sudden now I’m lying down. But Donna is staring at all the dusty empties over on the other side of the room; a couple of dozen, half-sized bottles, gin mainly, crowding at the end of the bed.

‘They look like hungry baby birds,’ she says, standing in a small patch of clear carpet and twitching her jack leads into pendulum motion again, in time with the slow music on my tape. ‘Or those statues, those . . . I can’t remember . . . *National Geographic* . . . little clay people . . .’

‘Yeah,’ I say, sitting up. I turn the yeah into a yawn. I stretch my arms up and then pat my mouth. ‘Yeah.’

‘They’ve taken over. They’re encroaching . . .’

Another nice yawn from me.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It’s very meta—’ I lift the limp curtain to look out of the window at the bus stop.

‘—phorical. Yes it is, Esther, yes it is,’ she says.

‘I bought you a present,’ I say. ‘It’s on top of the case.’

She kneels down and retrieves a cheap snow globe from its tatty nest of tissue paper: a yellow cab and a cop car stupidly big next to warping plastic skyscrapers. She stays crouched there and nods as she turns it upside down a couple of times. But the cloudy liquid inside isn't viscous enough, so no matter how hard she shakes it the snow stuff falls too fast and is almost instantly back on the bottom; the sealed up scene as static and lifeless as before. She nods again and her black hair falls from behind her ears.

'Is that Ancoats?' she says. Then, 'You should clear them out.' She points at the bottles. 'Make room for the new ones at least.'

I blow on my cold hands.

'The heating's broken again,' she says. 'Do you need any shifts, by the way?'

I shake my head. Donna starts climbing out of the room.

'Cup of tea before I get off?'

I nod. 'Don't put any milk in,' I say.

I stop my music, get up and go down the hall to her room. On her door are two Polaroid photos I took of her years ago. In one she has her arms folded and looks bored beyond measure; in the other she's in close up, she's got red eye behind her glasses and she's growling fetchingly.

Donna has the same narrow bed and chipped nursery furniture as me but she's made more of an effort with her space. There's a duvet cover, framed postcards on the wall, ornaments even: dried up sea urchins, a crouching child figurine, a tiny pair of painted wooden clogs, a ship in a bottle and a Russian doll flanked by the two rubber ducks I got her for her last birthday. Also a plain brass photo frame holding a picture of a small girl standing by a piano. The kid's on tiptoe, reaching up to jab at the keys. The curtains behind her and the jumper underneath her dungarees are in sour seventies colours. Her facial expression is kind of sour too. That's Donna at her grandma's. A sardonic toddler,

wouldn’t you know it. I move her guitar, sit down on her unmade bed and look through the books on her pillow.

She comes and finds me and stands in the doorway with our tea. ‘What are you on these days. Still your Westerns?’ she says.

‘No,’ I say, ‘I had to stop. I got tired of drinking tequila and living off beans and hotsauce.’

She nods.

‘It wasn’t such a healthy diet for me. Plus,’ I lean forward to whisper, ‘I got saddle sores.’

Donna rubs her non-existent behind and winces, then spins around slowly to bump down next to me.

‘I’m reading a book called *Hunger*,’ I say.

‘What’s that?’

‘Well . . . how to explain . . . this man . . . he’s hungry . . . then he eats and he’s full . . . then he gets hungry again and he *doesn’t eat* and he gets hungrier . . . then he sells his vest, and he eats. And he’s full. That’s the story so far.’

‘Existential,’ she says and grins to herself.

I flick up the collar on my coat then pull out the Biro I keep stuck in my ponytail. I make it a cigarette for one puff and then crunch it and wink. Donna turns up the collar of her shirt so we match. Donna’s got a great smile on account of her teeth: the front two on the top cross over one another. You can hear it when she talks, too; there are some consonants it sounds like she’s kissing.

‘I tried fasting a few weeks ago in pursuit of a transcendent experience,’ I say, tapping my Biro over her mug.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘And? Did you see God?’

I shake my head slowly. ‘No. Just black spots floating.’

I pick up the nearest book. A bath-read Jean Genet. I flick through looking for her annotations. There’s just one I can find: a thin red line under the word ‘trousers’, a few pages in.

‘More depravity,’ I say.

She looks over my shoulder, at my stubby-nailed thumb tutting on the page.

‘And you know when I was six,’ she says, squinting, ‘I got woodworm in my chuff from rubbing myself against library Ladybird books.’

She sighs and pulls her hair back out of her face.

‘Don’t look so aghast.’

‘Aghast, well you know me, Donna, every time someone starts having sex with me I feel like phoning a psychiatrist.’

Sadly true. I start using the string attaching the tag to my teabag to floss under my nails. Donna shakes her head and leans right forward with her elbows on her knees. She huffs out a sigh.

‘Esther, listen, I know you. You’ve just forgotten what it’s like; what it’s like to be with someone.’ She jabs me with her elbow, but keeps looking straight ahead. I see I’ve started tapping all my fingers on the side of my mug. She keeps going, and bless her. ‘You look at their eyebrow or their mouth or some hair in their ear, or their socks on the floor – if you’re lucky – and you feel the way they feel and move, it’s amazing. Don’t you . . .’

I can’t say I do. I reach across her to pick up another book, one of mine, I’m sure: Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*. I hold it up with a selling soap powder smile.

She clicks her fingers and nods and says, ‘Now that’s a sad book. This little boy starts shooting birds and stamping on ants. And all because his pony dies. And all he wanted to do was brush it and stroke it and love it. It’s really a heartbreaking tale.’

‘His pony,’ I say.

But she doesn’t flinch. She segues seamlessly into a long and – let’s not be churlish – entertaining story about twelve hours of true love on a damp mattress, rolling around on spiky toast crumbs, in a room with a non-functioning gas fire and a nasty old maroon sheet drawing pinned over a bay window.