



VINTAGE

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**JOSHUA SPASSKY**  
**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. Her second, *Sick Notes*, was published in 2004.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Cold Water*

*Sick Notes*

For Jimmy Jimmereeno

# Joshua Spassky

Gwendoline Riley



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

‘Karamazov!’ Kolya cried, ‘Is it really true what religion says, that we shall all rise up from the dead and come to life and see one another again, and everyone, even Ilyushechka?’

‘Without question we shall rise, without question we shall see one another, and joyfully tell one another everything that has happened,’ half laughing, half in ecstasy, Alyosha replied.

*The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky*



# 1

Jeane came to see me before I left.

‘Come in,’ I said. ‘Come on in. It’s like the set of Beckett’s something or other in here.’

She followed me down the hallway. In the dark kitchen, she opened the empty fridge – I saw her placid face lit up – and shut it again. In the empty living room she paced slowly around, her hands in her raincoat pockets. I sat back down on the floor.

After she’d joined me, I flicked a dust ball towards her. A tiny cloud of bent hair knots and grey fluff. It floated along.

‘So, anyway,’ I said, ‘I have this image in my mind, of a pig with its throat cut, and with all of its legs still twitching. I’m crossing the ocean. Is that just a spasm?’

Jeane frowned. After a moment she took in a breath and huffed it out.

‘I’m not sure,’ she said.

And then: ‘You know, Mick still phones me every now and then. To say he still loves me and to check I still love him. He says, “I know circumstances are tough, they’re tough for me too, I’m just phoning to *check*.” It’s funny. It’s fine. Whether we’re together or not is a piece of trivia. I don’t think love is a matter of logistics, Natalie. Love is there,’ she said, and she looked at me as she patted her hand on the floor.

‘It’s right there.’ She patted the same place, rubbed the orange laminate. ‘All the time. Like a – saucer.’

‘So why press the point?’ I said. ‘Good question. Maybe I’m going in order to mock God.’

‘Oh, really.’

I stood up and brushed off my itchy hands, walked over to the cold window.

‘If you think I’m throwing my life up for the sake of rhetorical excitement then you’re only half-right. But then again, what else is there? Maybe there isn’t much else.’

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘Speaking of which, all I ate yesterday was half a cabbage, shredded. I thought that might be funny, but it’s just been upsetting.’

I could see her grinning to herself behind me, pushing her hair back out of her face.

‘You’re turning into the Dalai Lama,’ I said, peering down, now, at the cobbled alley behind my building.

My old settee was still there. Filthy and slouched. I’d dragged it outside late one night last week, and now it was making me feel guilty. I kept waiting for it to be taken – by whatever mysterious agencies take waterlogged settees from city streets.

‘Just so long as I don’t have to be fucking reincarnated,’ Jeane said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Are you coming back?’ she said.

## 2

I'd thrown nearly everything away. Now there was this: an old letter from Bomp Bramwell to my Grandma:

*16, Oakwood Drive, Driffield  
9th January '58*

*My Dear Hilda,*

*Don't upset yourself too much by what I am going to tell you but the Home Help found Auntie had passed away during the night of yesterday the 8th. It was best it happened that way. The Home Help said she looked very peaceful and had passed in her sleep.*

*She was ever so cheerful on Tuesday and told Mr. and Mrs. Rime she was going to the Whist Drive with them that night. When she was ready they hadn't arrived to take her so she was on her way on her own when they caught up with her. She won a prize (1/3d) and Uncle Herbert has it in a white purse that she had. (I have been up to Nora's to see him this morning.)*

*Mr. and Mrs. Rime went in with Auntie to help her to get to bed and Auntie took a hot water bottle up. The Home Help said she found the bed wet through, though - she hadn't put the stopper in correctly.*

*The funeral is at 11 o'clock at Kemberworth Church on Saturday. I'll get a spray for you so don't worry. The Co-op are attending to things. Of course Uncle Herbert didn't let me know how much insurance there is. He and Nora have done all the arranging. Well, all my love and look after yourselves, Pa*

*P.S. If Jane still hasn't sent that thank you note well she won't need to bother now.*

No, she won't, I thought - I was sitting on the bedroom floor with the latest bin bag next to me - and I tore the thin, dry pages in two. I put them, and a small stack of others like them, into the bag.

Jane was my Mum, Bomp Bramwell my Great-Grandad. I met him a couple of times - if met is the right word. The last time was on a visit to his rest home with Mum and