

THE WHISPERING GENTLEMEN

by Sherry Cassells

Rivers and the inhabitants of the watery elements
are made for wise men to contemplate
and for fools to pass by without consideration.

– Izaak Walton



Chapter 1

“Do promises wear out?” Claire asks.

My daughter, who is eleven, is in bed and I am folding her shirt which I picked up from the floor. I notice there is dirt on her face – not simply that she is dirty – but that there are streaks of actual dirt on her cheeks which make her look like a warrior. When my wife kisses that beautiful face goodnight, which she will do, something might start. You never know.

I, too, have been wondering whether promises expire, and as the moonlight falls through the window onto my busy white hands, I share my thoughtful conclusion: “I don’t know.”

I back out of the room – exude love – and do not say anything more.

But the light is not from the moon after all. Headlights slide over me and I feel heat or something similar: Kate is home. I snap on the TV, wish that I had made popcorn because its smell reassures my wife, pose on the couch, sing hello.

“What’s that?” she asks, indicating my lap.

Claire’s shirt, twisted. Wrung. Fuck.

I wake with a sentence in the air, exhale, and another sentence comes.

Maybe Kate is right.

“Go back,” she said. “Write it all down. It might save you.”

She did not say anything else but I know there were more words because of the

way her mouth moved to stop them, and the way her eyes hit the floor.

My wife and daughter give me things which I carefully place in the trunk of the small car. Pistachios, a jar of green olives, shoelaces of all things, the first bright clementines of the season, three bags of coffee. I notice a small fold of camo fabric poking out of my suitcase so I rearrange the trunk before Kate sees the tiny sleeve. Not that she'd say anything. I just don't need her to know I'm bringing the puppet I've had since I was a kid.

Kate hands me my pills, a folded prescription which she watches me put into my wallet.

Our daughter is concerned. Part of her believes this is the way her parents have chosen to break up and both Kate and I know what she's thinking, so we offer one another slightly too much affection and our insincerity frightens Claire further. She wanders off when her mother and I say goodbye and I hope she is watching from a window because that's when Kate and I get real. But she's been in the shed, runs out from between the houses like a pole vaulter with the tube that contains my fishing rod, waits for me to let go of her mother, hands me my rod and tackle box.

That's my girl.

I drive through the lower reaches of Algonquin. Leaves are falling. Rain comes very hard and I get used to the slamming sound, am startled by the momentary silences when I fly under bridges. I love the dark gray sky, the way clouds bloom along the horizon, the occasional leaf smacking flat on my windshield, this slightly giddy feeling. My possessions rumble in the trunk. My laptop on the passenger's seat keeps me tethered – as do Claire's texts: I love the dark gray sky, she blooms.

I feel as if I could drive forever, but when it's dark I pull into a motel, roll

beneath willow branches so heavy with rain it's like a car wash. I text Claire when I get to my room and tell her my lips are red as Lady Gaga's from eating the pistachios all day hahahaha.

I wake in the night with more sentences, an image of the strange house to which I am returning, the three big rocks we put in the river when we were kids.

Next night I sleep in a bed parallel to the Saint Lawrence Seaway, my feet toward the ocean. The storm is fierce with thunder, waves, my roaring heart, a slew of sentences – this time they feel urgent – and the image of my sister Jane when she was 11, same eyes as Claire. I understand in a flash that I love my daughter so generously because she gets my love for Jane, too,

Third day I walk from my motel room and say to the storm, *come on let's go*.

I slide into New Brunswick, swoop to the coast where the rain is replaced, bit by bit, with gobs of darkness. I pull over and walk through the forest to the beach, stacks of waves glowing in the moonlight, clouds flying right through me.

This is where I grew up and everything means something.

no more texts, darlings

Claire sends me a heart that lifts from the screen, enters my chest through my throat. Kate sends me a tiny smiling face, hopeful in spite of clenched teeth.

I get in the car beneath the Van Gogh sky and follow the river home.

We put the three big rocks in the river when we were kids. I remember how strange they looked at first, the way they intruded into the familiar curves, introduced new waterbraids and whirlpools.

“They look like tombstones,” my mother said, but they became ‘The Whispering Gentlemen’ because that’s what my sister Jane said the year before Krikey Macilroy killed her.

Now the three rocks belong as much as any other. The banks have adapted to them and the river has accepted them, widened around them, and their bare heads rest easy on my eye.

I have come back to the house by the river to write this book and make good on a promise I made to five young men more than forty years ago: This is their story.

The Whispering Gentlemen lean together in the cold, fast river as the night gathers round them and for all the times I watched them before, I watch them again, interpret their congregation as a fine acquiescence, and with their blessing, I begin.