

THE NIGHT WHISPERS

THE NIGHT WHISPERS

CAROLINE MITCHELL



First published in Great Britain in 2022 by



Bonnier Books UK Limited
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London, WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

Copyright © Caroline Mitchell, 2022

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Caroline Mitchell to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

eBook ISBN: 978-1-47141-163-2

Audio ISBN: 978-1-47141-264-6

This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher

Embla Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

To the readers, writers and dreamers.

*You hear them in the shadows
You won't know what they say
But when they turn their eyes upon you
It's too late to get away.*

*Beware the black-eyed children
Whose whispers never cease
They move with graveyard stillness
As only the good find peace.*

*Beware the knock on your door
As you lie in your bed
For if you draw back your bolt
You are already dead.*

1

Monday, 2nd March 2020

My name is Mercy. I am twelve years of age. I haven't seen my family in twenty-five years. I don't have a grave. When I do, my headstone will be overlooked by a stone angel. Daffodils will grow there in the spring and snowdrops will rise through the winter snow when it crusts over the borders of my grave. My brother will be buried beside me. His name is Mikey. He is six.

Mother is calling our names. The faint sound of her voice used to be a comfort but now it makes me sad. She is both near and so very far away. I'm scared she'll stop looking for us. I'm scared I'll never see her again. You think about a lot when you're away for so long from the people you love. You think about things like graves, and being laid in the cold, damp earth. You think about the people who put you there. Mikey doesn't speak, but I know he feels the same. Perhaps I shouldn't say it but I'm glad I'm not alone. Will you help us, Elliott? Will you help us to find our way home?

Elliott's eyes snapped open and he blinked in rapid succession, gripping his duvet which was tumbling onto the floor. The digital clock on his bedstand glowed 22:22. His skin was cold and clammy and he rubbed his right ear to rid himself of the breath delivering whispers only he could hear. It was not the first time his sleep was invaded by the voices of the dead. But this time it was different. These were children, just like him. His long black lashes fluttered as he conjured up the girl's image while trying to keep her at bay. Mercy had been older, nearly a teenager, but the boy must have been six or seven, like him. The chalk-faced silent child, watching and waiting for Elliott to reply. Elliott's body trembled with an involuntary shiver,

the thin cotton of his pyjamas doing little to protect him from the biting cold. Shadows lurked in every corner. His heart was beating too fast. Drawing his knees to his chest, he inhaled a few deep breaths. He'd been asleep, but not dreaming. The whispers in his ear were real. He fought the urge to call his mother, who had gone to bed early after working all evening at the Lakeside Hotel. Burying his head in his knees, Elliott whispered the alphabet backwards. 'Z . . . Y . . . X . . . W . . .' It was a trick Sarah had taught him to push the bad feelings away. Slowly, his bedroom warmed. The children were leaving. He was safe.

For the last few weeks, he had slept soundly. He'd almost believed it was safe to go to bed. He relaxed back into his pillow, staring at the stars floating on his ceiling cast by his new nightlight. His father's medal for bravery glinted on his bedside table. He didn't bring it to bed anymore. His daddy was too poorly to be a hero now. Besides, *real* heroes were brave on the inside; that's what Sarah said. She was a police detective. She should know.

He sniffled in the moonlight as his heartbeat slowed to its normal rate. The tip of his nose was freezing, and the tops of his fingertips too. He reached for his teddy and plunged his face into the soft fur. He didn't want to think about Mercy, but the image of the girl and her brother resurfaced just the same. Their mottled blue skin. The breath that smelled like the grave. But the real horror came when he looked into the hollows of her eyes. There was nothing there. Nothing but black tunnels echoing with screams. He snuggled beneath the covers. They were gone, for now. But a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach told him that they would return.

2

Rosemary's knees burned in protest as she rose from the sofa. It was as if moving from sitting to standing was the most unnatural thing in the world. Sighing, she brushed the scone crumbs off her dress. At her age, everything was a battle. Her sight had been the first to decline, rapidly followed by her hearing, and now her joints felt like they had given up the ghost. Her walking stick tapping against the wooden floor, she shuffled down the long, narrow hallway, pausing to turn the heating up a notch. She was meant to be watching the pennies but Geoffrey hadn't been sleeping. Best to keep the house toasty warm until the weather improved. Her son didn't have it easy. She had to put him first after everything he'd been through. Lingered outside the bathroom, she listened for signs of life.

She was rewarded with the sounds of a faint splash of water. Her hand hovered in mid-air as she readied herself to knock on the bathroom door. She bit her bottom lip. *Leave him. He'll only get annoyed.* Her inner voice was right, of course. Geoffrey did not appreciate her meddling, however well meaning. What normal man wanted to be living with his mother at his age?

Rosemary plodded back towards the living room. All the dreams she'd had about grandchildren . . . it was unlikely she'd have any now. Still. Monday night was fish and chips night and it had been nice, eating takeaway food while watching their favourite soaps. Funny, how when it was Geoffrey's turn to cook, they always ordered out. Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt as a soft knock rose from the door. It was gone half ten. Who could that be at this hour of the night? Why weren't they using the bell?

A rumble of thunder bellowed from outside. She froze in uncertainty as a feeling of ill tidings passed over her. It was as if someone had taken an ice cube and run it down the curve of her

back. The last time she had felt like this, her beloved husband of forty years dropped down dead. She forced herself to breathe in . . . out . . . nice and calm. It was coming up to the anniversary of his passing and she couldn't get him off her mind. Sometimes it felt as if he was in the room with her. Last night she had thought she heard whispering, but when she turned around there was nobody there.

Another soft knock. *Get a hold of yourself, Rosemary*, she muttered to herself as she walked to the door. A crack of lightning sharpened her senses as she pulled it open. There were two small figures standing on her doorstep. Squinting, she looked behind them, but there was nobody else there. A howl of wind threatened to take the door off its hinges as she waited for them to speak. They stood in silence. Blinking, she made out the figure of a pale-faced boy and an older girl with straight blonde hair. They seemed far too young to be out alone on a night like this.

'Are you lost?' Rosemary said, softening.

'Please, missus, can we come in?' the little girl replied. Her words were a whisper, her eyes were shadowed, her face long. Rosemary cursed her vanity. She should have put on her glasses before answering, but she hated how the thick lenses distorted her eyes. She bent as she tried to take in their features. She didn't recognise them, but without her glasses it was hard to tell. But they were children, who seemed neglected and alone. A thunderous storm was brewing. They looked chilled to the bone.

'Of course you can.' Ushering them inside, she closed the door and guided them to the living room. 'Where are your parents? Has something happened?' But no answers came. The room filled with melancholy and a sense that something was very wrong. Perhaps they had run away from home? They could have been abused – or worse. She knew what her husband would say – call the police and let them deal with it. Right now, she felt his presence stronger than ever before.

'Why don't you sit down?' She gestured towards the sofa. 'You must be frozen. I'll make you some nice hot chocolate. How about that?' Obediently, they sat. The unnatural silence made Rosemary nervous. Her glasses were in the kitchen. She really should keep them on a neck chain.

Quietly, she took the cordless phone from its holder and brought it into the kitchen with her. Geoffrey would be out of the bath soon.



THE NIGHT WHISPERS

It took time for him to dry himself and get back in his wheelchair. There was no need to bother him, she could handle this on her own. Pressing on the kettle to boil, she slipped on her glasses and dialled her friend's number. Jemma was an ex-social worker. She would know what to do. But her relief as it rang faded when the answering machine kicked in. She dutifully left a message, explaining that two lost little children had turned up from nowhere at her door. 'I think they're in shock,' she continued. 'They asked to come in and haven't spoken since.' Rosemary sighed, her hand resting lightly on her chest. She should have waited for her son. 'They don't know I'm calling,' she added, feeling uneasy. 'I don't want to frighten them off.'

She heard the bathroom door close. 'Never mind, Geoffrey's coming. He'll know what to do,' she said before ending the call. Her thoughts wandered as she stirred drinking chocolate into two cups of warm milk. Perhaps they were hungry. She could make them a sandwich. She hoped the children hadn't been treated too badly. Carrying the hot chocolate on a tray into the living room, she tried her best to hold it steady as she manoeuvred without her walking stick.

They were still there. Staring. Seeing. Judging. Because she could see their faces now. She could see everything. 'No,' she gasped, the strength leaving her limbs. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. She didn't feel the shift in weight as the mugs slipped off the tray and splashed up the sides of her new beige sofa that she had bought just last week. The scream that followed was enough to curdle her blood. Then she realised it was coming from her. She couldn't make it stop.

'What's going on?' Her son's voice was coarse with worry as he wheeled himself in. 'Jesus!' The word fell from his lips as he stared, slack-jawed. His damp hair was stuck to his forehead, his tracksuit hanging loosely from his thin frame. Rosemary exchanged a look of disbelief with her son. Geoffrey had overcome the horrors of the accident which had left him wheelchair-bound. He had come to terms with living with his mother. But nothing could have prepared them for this. His face was ghostly, his mouth gaping as he took in the scene. Another roll of thunder. In her peripheral vision Rosemary saw movement. Her stomach liquefied as death stared them in the face.

3

Gerard couldn't remember walking out on his wife, Ruth, but it was done with such a sense of urgency that his sons thought he had lost his mind. Being a solid, understanding woman, Ruth told him to take the time he needed. He had simply been working too hard. But this wasn't a mid-life crisis. Darker forces were pulling his strings.

The proposed demolition of Blackhall Manor had not been publicised in the media, which is why his family were surprised when he insisted on travelling from London to Lincolnshire to save it. Given it was a listed building, he had an excellent case. But he couldn't tell his family why he'd come here because he didn't know. Lately, he didn't know a lot of things. His lapses in memory were growing worryingly frequent. It started with doodles; strange little stick figures next to a dense foggy woodland where birdsong was rarely heard. Then drawings of flint-eyed ravens were followed by moths with wings which seemed to dance on the page. Gerard drew until his eyes grew weary and his fingers were sore. Sometimes he would awaken from a dream-like daze with pages of illustrations scattered across his desk. Slowly, the outline of a building formed, its name a mass of jumbled letters. Blackhell. Darkhall. Blackmanor. The words tortured him as he grasped for their meaning. He was unable to concentrate in meetings, nodding to his colleagues as he pretended he was taking notes. Then he'd turn the page of his Moleskine notebook and continue drawing a mess of stick figures and words. He bought himself a pencil, as it flowed better on the page. Slowly the manor took shape. More words followed. Night Manor. Darkwoods. On and on the words came until it finally formed. Blackhall Manor.

Once the image and title of the manor were mastered, he began to draw maps. Then road names. Landmarks. A nearby town. In the night, when he could stand it no longer, he looked the place up.

THE NIGHT WHISPERS

His mouth had gone dry at the sight of it because it was a carbon copy of what he had drawn. Since then, his dreams were filled with whispers, the cries of children waking him in the dead of night. His heart thundering, he'd awake from lucid nightmares, the air thick with the smell of sweat and fear. It was accompanied by a sense of urgency that he could not ignore. It was as if his life depended on it. No. Not *his* life. The lifeblood of Blackhall Manor. To his shame, he allowed himself to be pulled in. He used his knowledge of legal procedures to stop the demolition and now the woman who owned the manor had been forced to put it up for sale. As an established property lawyer, he could have done it over the phone but after his first visit to Slayton he returned home, arranged a sabbatical from work and sorted things out with his wife. A psychotherapist, she was committed to her London practice, but not so busy that she wouldn't miss him after he'd gone. He'd promised his stay in the rented woodland cottage would only be for a month. But if he was done with Blackhall Manor then why was he here?

The gothic ruin stood on the highest point of Slayton, surrounded by a mass of thick trees. A network of barbed wire and brambles formed a barrier against intruders when the rusted gates were closed. Not for the first time, he wondered what had taken root in his brain. Sometimes he would lose whole blocks of time. He wasn't in control of his own mind and that was a frightening thought. 'Maybe you'll feel better when you get it out of your system,' Ruth had said. She'd seen the drawings of Slayton, expressed concerns at his lack of sleep. Then he had kissed her like he hadn't kissed her in years, because something deep down told him this could be the last time. But now he was naked, standing in his rented cottage on the cold, unforgiving tiles.

As he swayed on weak legs, he felt like he was on a tightrope – one wrong move and he would plunge to his death. His limbs ached with tiredness. He felt like he'd run a marathon. Goosebumps rose on his bare skin and his face creased in confusion. What had happened to his clothes? He touched the tight, dry skin of his face. Perhaps he had been about to get in the shower when . . . a noise from down the hall made his thoughts fall away. Someone

was in the cottage. His stomach clenched. There was no point in trying to remember how he'd got here. That memory was gone, along with countless others which had evaporated into the ether, never to be retrieved. At least he was safe in the sanctuary of the cottage on the outskirts of Blackhall Woods. It was a small but adequate abode with the stench of stagnant water – or was that sewage? – hanging in the air. Tonight it was particularly strong, but that was the least of his concerns. He crept silently down the hall towards the knocking noise rising from the kitchen at the back of the property.

'Who's there?' he said, dread rising with each step. But there was no response, just a steady rhythmic knocking, then a slosh . . . He strained to listen, fear falling away as he realised what it was.

He opened the kitchen door, exhaling in relief as the sight confirmed his suspicions. The washing machine. That's all it was. An old, battered model knocking and sloshing in the corner of the room. Although why he'd needed to put a wash on, he didn't know. As for being naked . . . he peered at the glass door of the washing machine as his clothes went round. 'What the—?' The whisper left his lips as he bent closer for a better view. The water was crimson. His brow furrowed in a frown. It must be paint. Or a red sock maybe, something stupid like that. But he didn't have any red socks, or dirty clothes for that matter. He hadn't been there long enough. He stood, feeling as if his body knew exactly what had happened and was waiting for his dumb brain to catch up. The newly washed kitchen flagstones were damp, and he made out the sweet smell of lemon cleaning fluid beneath his feet. Had he just washed the floor? On auto-pilot, he returned to the bathroom, where he'd been heading when he came to.

It's alright, nothing to worry about, he told himself as he tried to calm his palpitating heart. *Shower and sleep, that's all I'd planned. I'd just cleaned the kitchen and was getting ready for bed.*

It was the not remembering that was freaking him out. The deep-buried feeling that something bad had occurred. He pushed the door open. Caught the unwelcome smell of sewage as he forced himself towards the only mirror in the house. Reaching out in the



THE NIGHT WHISPERS

darkness, he pulled the long dirty string which dangled from the ceiling and activated the light above. He closed his eyes as it clicked the fluorescent light into life. He was shaking now, his eyes closed as he prepared to greet his reflection. He didn't want to open them but equally he had to know. To verify what was already screaming at him from the back of his mind.

Blood. The water in the washing machine had been tainted with blood. He opened his eyes and froze. It was smeared across his face, with flecks on his eyelids and his curly black hair that refused to turn grey, despite his age. 'Oh God, oh God, oh God,' he said finally, his trembling hands touching his face. The blood staining his cheeks had dried into his pores making his skin feel like stretched leather. It stopped abruptly at his neck, but flecks rested on his hair, his ears . . . he licked his lips and tasted it on his tongue. He checked his body for injuries, already knowing the blood wasn't his. But whose was it? A whimper escaped his lips as he dragged himself towards the shower. He had to get it off. It was all over him like a thousand red ants crawling on his skin.

Spikes of icy water made him gasp for breath as he stood beneath the rusty shower head. His head bowed, he tugged at each strand of hair as he tried to rinse it clean. He grabbed a bottle of shampoo from the shelf, squeezing it hard and lathering himself. Tearing at the sticky red coating, his eyes stung as the shampoo worked its way in. With frenzied movements, he covered every inch of himself. He watched as the water turned from brown to red, felt it turn from cold to hot, steam cloaking him as he discarded the shampoo bottle and grabbed a bar of soap. He could still feel it. In his pores, up his nose, in his ears. He scrubbed until his skin was bright pink. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath before working up a lather on his face. His clothes must have been caked in it. But where had it come from? He glared at his feet, watching the water swirling around the plug hole turn clear. Any minute now, he expected the door to be kicked in as blue lights strobed from outside the window. But there was nothing. Nothing but the dull drip, drip of the shower head as he turned the water off. Wrapping himself up in towels, he glanced at his reflection once more.

CAROLINE MITCHELL

*

His hands squeaked against the steamed-up mirror and he took a breath as it cleared. It was gone, all of it. Like it never happened at all. There wasn't a mark on him, apart from where he had scrubbed his skin. No defence wounds. No scratches. Perhaps it was an animal. Maybe he hit something with his car. He forced one foot before the other as he walked to his bedroom. Eleven minutes past eleven. He blinked. All he wanted was to put this behind him, and yet he found himself unable to leave. Just what was he doing here, and why? Why had he been drawn to Slayton? But a bigger question grew in his mind and it was sharply edged with fear.

What the hell had he done?