

Stephen Gibbin

The Quiet One

Cow-parsley lined the edge of the cinder path, rags of old man's beard¹ and hawthorn, wild garlic and celandine. Liam was weird like that. Knew the names of all kinds of shit. Liam was smart. Got it off his grandad. Grandad didn't say much, but there wasn't nothing he didn't know. A bird would sing and he'd tell you what it was just by listening. Liam took it all in. Books were his thing. Always a nose in a book. Best place to read was in Grandad's shed. Better than school. School was shit. Kids either bullied them or ignored them. It didn't help that his dad cut their hair, proper bowl cuts², or that Kyle, his brother, had once worn a girl's blouse to school because it was all they had in the Spastic shop³ and Dad said that no one would notice but then everyone had noticed and in PE they'd nicked it and tossed it around the changing room, shouting "Stacey Braithwaite", the name of the girl that was stitched into the collar. After that everyone called Kyle "Stacey Lacy" and said that he wore girl's knickers and was a fag, which he didn't and wasn't. He'd already been with a girl. When he was 10. It was on a visit to their cousins. She'd shagged him at the park. At least, he thinks she did. She was thirteen and had let him put it into her knickers for a quarter of chewy nuts⁴ and a can of Iron Bru⁵ but Kyle wasn't sure if that counted and Liam wasn't too sure either. Still, he definitely wasn't a fag. Teachers did nothing. Nothing that helped anyway. Just lots of talk. Kyle was smart but he didn't have nothing to aim it at, so he just got angry until the older kids kicked the shit out of him and then the teachers told him off for starting fights.

School was shit.

The shed was best.

The shed was Liam's favourite place in the whole world. Inside it smelt of creosote, dried dirt and cigarette smoke. Even had an oak desk that his grandad had salvaged from the tip. Grandad said that it was crackers what rich folks threw out. He didn't throw nothing out. Chisels, hammers, spanners, saws. Wouldn't leave the tools on the allotment, though. Too much thieving. Sometimes they played dominos there. And rummy and blackjack. Grandad wore glasses that he kept pressing up the ridge of his nose with his long, crooked finger, skin cracked and yellowing, veins like rope.

Mostly they grafted. Liam had his own patch and was growing carrots and King Edwards⁶, runner beans and strawberries, tomatoes under glass.

It was at the shed that Courtney Hadley found him.

"What ya doing?" she asked.

"What's it look like?"

Liam was on his knees, picking strawberries into a plastic tub. Courtney was one of them gobby⁷ girls who made out like she was 15 when she was, like 11, or 12, which was well annoying. But Courtney wasn't a slapper. Courtney was fit⁸. Well fit. He wondered if she'd done it yet. Kyle had done it, at least he thought he had. When he was 10.

Liam was 13.

"You're that Kyle's brother," she said. "He's well weird. And you're that quiet one." She picked open a block of cherry Hubba-Bubba⁹ and dropped it into her mouth. "So why you not in school? You been kicked out?"

¹ *old man's beard*: a plant

² *bowl cut*: a simple hair cut

³ *Spastic shop*: charity shop

⁴ *chewy nut*: toffee with chocolate coating

⁵ *Iron Bru*: a Scottish soft drink

⁶ *King Edwards*: a type of potato

⁷ somebody who speaks loudly and offensively

⁸ attractive

⁹ a brand of chewing gum

Liam ferreted round for more strawberries, hoping that she would go away.

"You deaf or something?" she said.

40 He glanced up. A sheet of gum was stretched tight over her tongue that she blew into a neat, little bubble that blistered and burst. "My brother got kicked out," she told him. "Got an apprenticeship now. YTS¹⁰. You heard of him? Chud. Got an earring. Gonna get a tattoo and a car."

45 The whole estate knew who Chud was. Kids at school reckoned that he'd gone into the social club and swung a mace at his dad. Right there, in front of everyone. During the darts. Then his mum had gone at him with an ashtray. Proper mad, that woman. Worst of the lot. But Liam wasn't scared. Courtney was a girl. And boys don't get scared by girls, even girls with brothers.

"Thems look nice," she said, nodding at the tub.

He looked back down, tugged at the last of the strawberries and then pegged the green mesh, shuffling the straw. The soil beneath was warm and sandy, needed water.

50 "Can I have one?" she said, the gum tumbling around her mouth.

"Shouldn't you be in school or something?"

"Says you."

55 The latch clicked open. Courtney stepped into the allotment. Liam frowned, the tub of strawberries held tight to his side, almost behind his back. Courtney squinted against the sun and blew a massive bubble that popped over her nose and chin. She pushed her bottom lip up, munched it back into her mouth, her jaw roving like a donkey's, and then peeled the rest from her cheeks. "You gonna give us one, then?" she said.

60 Liam gnawed at his thumb nail. He'd picked the strawberries to take to his grandad, not hand out to Courtney Hadley, who wouldn't even know the difference between a strawberry and a radish. Fit, but thick as shit. Still, it might get rid of her. Just the one, and then she'd be off. He rummaged through the tub and passed her the smallest one he could find. Courtney took the gum from her mouth, folded it into the wrapper and slipped it into her skirt pocket.

"Well?" said Liam.

65 She eyed the strawberry suspiciously, dangled it over the pit of her gob, sniffed and plonked it in. All of it. Down in one.

Liam smirked. "You don't eat the green bit."

"I do," she said and gulped. "I like the green bit." She folded her arms across her middle, flicked her hair. "So, you skiving?"

"I got a note."

"That why you in your uniform?" She nodded at him.

70 Liam glanced at his shirt. "Been sick."

Courtney shrugged. "Me too. You smoke?"

"Nope!"

"Blow¹¹?"

He brushed a hand against the back of his trousers. "A bit."

75 She smiled and slotted her fist onto her hip, a knee pointing sideways as though her legs were about to set off in different directions. "My brother," she said, her foot tapping at the ground, "he can get anything. Whizz¹². Acid. You want some?"

"Na," he said. "I'm skint."

"Sure?"

80 "Sure."

Courtney looked him over, traced a finger round her lips and said, "You're pretty cute, you know."

Liam's heart spluttered in his chest. He dug his heel into the dirt, mumbled about needing to "get on," and quickly disappeared into the shed with the strawberries. It was cool, felt safe. When he came out

¹⁰ Youth Training Scheme, an on-the-job training course for school leavers aged 16 and 17

¹¹ slang for drugs

¹² amphetamine

85 Courtney was leaning against the gate chomping on the gum. Sunlight caught in her hair, a faint spray of freckles across her nose. She smiled at him, just like a film star. He smiled back, a quick spasm across his lips, and marched off with the watering can, a rash of heat crawling up his neck. The hose was fastened onto the tap with a clamp. He twisted it on and let the water drum roll into the can and glanced towards the shed. Courtney waved at him. He snapped back round, embarrassed, but giddy too. In his legs, his stomach. What if she really did like him? Courtney wasn't a slapper. Courtney was fit. Well fit. He adjusted
90 his pants. If Kyle was with him now, he'd know what to say. Splint armed, bow-kneed, Kyle was smart, at least his mouth was, but there was barely enough of him to throw a shadow. He thought about it some more. Probably best if Kyle wasn't there. If she really did like him, he wouldn't want him scaring her off.

If...

95 Water gurgled over the top of the can. He turned the tap off, tightened it with both hands and lugged it back to the shed, weaving through beds of raspberry canes, roots and runner beans, upended plastic bottles, CDs hung from wires. On the way, he raked his mind about what to say to her. Maybe he could tell her about the other stuff he was growing, she seemed pretty keen on his strawberries, well, just wait 'til she copped a load of his carrots and spuds! She might even want to help him. There was plenty to be getting on with.

100 He rounded the corner of the shed. Courtney was sat on a plastic garden chair, feet swinging just short of the ground, white knickers winking at him each time her legs kicked up. The heads of the strawberries she'd eaten lay scattered at her feet like little green stars, the half empty tub on her lap.

"Hey!" he shouted. Water splashed over the dirt, his brow damp with sweat, breathing heavy. He dropped the can and ran clumsily towards her, the tops of the wellies clapping against his shins.

105 "Only had a few," she said, grabbing the tub. "And you got loads in here."

"Give them back!"

"Snog us and I will."

Liam swallowed hard. Courtney was fit. Well fit. But he'd only kissed a girl once and didn't much like it. Tracy. When he was 7. From the way Tracy spat and gagged, he didn't think she'd liked it much either.

110 Liam was 13.

Courtney was 11. Maybe 12.

"Give 'em back, will ya," he said, pulling at his collar. His teeth hadn't seen a brush in days and he was hot. Midges fizzed around his head. He swiped at them. Butterflies in his tummy.

115 "Kiss me first," she said and hid the strawberries behind her back, leaned forwards and puckered her lips, eyes pressed tight.

Liam looked round. All quiet. "You won't tell no one?" he whispered.

"Nope!"

120 The train tracks that ran along the bottom of the allotment began to hiss. A horn sounded. Rooks and crows put into the air. The gate rattled in the latch. The top of the train shone over the embankment. Diesel-slick and super-fast. London to Leeds and nothing in-between. The back draft shunted the shed. Liam closed his eyes, took a deep breath, blood surging, and kissed Courtney Hadley.

125 In the mucky films that his dad watched, women groaned and looked in pain when they got snogged. But Courtney didn't do none of that. Courtney slapped a handful of strawberries on top of Liam's head, rubbed them in and squealed. A thick tar of red slipped over his face. He shoved her back, a hand to his head, checking his fingers. Courtney took the rip, laughing and pointing, and pelted another strawberry at him. "Urgh! You kissed me!" she yelled and then lobbed a great handful of strawberries at him. "Wait 'til I tell my brother!"

130 That whole family were nutters. Kids at school reckoned that her brother had gone at the dad with a mace. Right there, in front of everyone. Down the social club. During the darts – but none of that mattered now. Liam seized Courtney by the arms, screamed and dug the crest of his nails into her skin. She gasped, her mouth tipped open in a little O. Liam pulled his arm back and filled her in with his fist. She hit the deck, wailing, arms everywhere, the strawberries rolling across the dirt, covered in grit.

"I'm gonna kill you!" Liam raged, his fists locked tight, bloodless and white.

135 Courtney scrambled to her feet, a flip flop in the dirt, balling her eyes out. Blood poured from her split lip. She legged it to the path, tripped over herself, and glared back at him. "You're dead," she spat. "Fuck off!" Liam yelled. "Fuck off! Fuck off!" and then, long and very loud, "F U C K...O F F!" And Liam was the quiet one.

(2020)