

## The Silent

The distance between my house in Blackbraes and Marie Connolly's house in Glen Doll was a mile and a half: a long walk for short legs. But I had to stop off at Alison Lea and pick up my friend Stephen first. Glen Doll, Alison Lea: erotic names. As though a street could be a huge recumbent girl; Alice on her back after finishing off the cake labelled EAT ME.

Stephen kept me waiting downstairs while his mum moved from room to room. I was worried that she would frustrate our plans, send Stephen for a message or ask me at length about my own mum.

'I'm dead excited, Rooney Roots,' I said as we made it outside.

'I'm dead excited too, Cammy,' Stephen said.

We could have taken the path that skirted the wilderness known as the Silent. Instead we cut through Hunter, where Protestant boys threw stones at passing Catholic boys like us. So we were told. On this July evening the school grounds were happily empty of other children. Only the huge metal bins stood guard.

We were out of Calderwood, into the newer conurbation of St. Leonards. Clumps of trees here were Scandinavian in their neatness, the earth under them dusty and flat. Tall wooden fences backed onto white houses, but the gardens were visible through the slats, not walled in like the gardens at home.

'Do you remember the first time we came down here?' Stephen asked.

'No.'

'You must remember. You brought a bright orange ball that had a thorn still stuck in it.'

'I remember the ball. Were we meeting the girls?'

'Not that time. Just Caffy and Cakes. We played a five-elevener with them. I can't believe you don't remember.'

'Who won?'

'Them, I think.'

We came to a large open square where people our age and younger congregated. It was here, a stone's throw from Glen Doll, that we were to meet the two girls. My mouth was dry already.

'Have we time to go to the shop?'

'What for?'

'A bottle of Irn-Bru.'

'I don't think so.'

We stood with thumbs hooked into our pockets, watching the downhill wheelies of daredevils on Chopper bikes. We must have stood like that for a full ten minutes. At one point I caught Stephen's eye just after we'd been staring in the same direction – over towards Glyn McGlynn's house. We knew he'd be home. Glyn was always home. Or if his mum let him outside, it was only ever to the patch of ground immediately in front of the house.

Stephen was shouting in my ear. 'Caffy! Cakes!'

Here they were again, Paul McCafferty and Kevin Cairns, with a football even, traipsing over from the direction of the swing park. I felt my spirit sag. Tonight was meant to be an amorous rendezvous, not a kick about. What would Marie say?

Well, I would find out. Through the trees we saw the two girls approach, so close to each other that they might have been sewn together. Marie was dressed in jeans and a white, wide-sleeved top that didn't drain any of the bloneness from her hair, Cheryl in a short brown dress with a dark slender belt around the waist.

'Hello David,' Marie said. 'Stephen, Kevin, Paul.'

The ball immediately got kicked between us boys, till it landed at Cheryl's sandalled feet. She kicked it straight in front of her with force.

'Snap,' Marie whispered, looking me up and down. 'Our clothes,' she said. I hadn't registered that we were both in blue and white.

'He's blushing,' Cheryl said, directing all eyes at me. 'He's blushing, he's blushing, he's blushing.'

Stephen, back with the ball, said: 'That's nothing. Have you seen the state of my neck? Burnt to a frazzle. Don't touch it but.'

Kevin made slapstick efforts to get at Stephen's neck. Nobody laughed, so he took the ball instead and bounced it hard. I watched him after that – it helped my cheeks cool to watch him. I saw that, as the talk flashed round, he would bounce the ball rather than speak. I could see in his face when a thought formed, and then he would bounce the ball again, until the thought disappeared again.

'Every hour, every minute, seemed to last eternally,' the girls sang. They were standing side-on to each other, Cheryl's arm on Marie's shoulder. 'I was so afraid, Fernando....'

'Who's this?' Stephen asked, taking a step back before grinning and pulling up his shoulders.

'Ted Heath. Too easy, do another one.'

'OK, who's this?'

'Captain Mainwaring.'

'Nope.'

'Sergeant Bilko.'

'Nope.'

'Ted Heath again.'

'No!'

'Hello guys. Who's the comedian?'

I wanted to say 'impressionist' as the man stepped into the circle we'd formed. The look of alarm on Kevin's face spread round us all.

'Relax, everyone,' the man said. 'I only want to chew the fat with you. Are you all from around here?'

'Us four are, not those two,' Marie said.

'Where you from, boys?'

'Calderwood,' Stephen said.

'You look like Calderwood boys. They grow them short up there. I'm a West Mains man.'

'What are you doing here?' Marie asked.

'Visiting a pal, but he's not in. Now I'm just chewing the fat with you guys. Anybody want a Polo?'

He very carefully took a packet of Polo Mints from his jeans.

'Shrink-to-fit, these. I stayed in the bath a bit too long but. Here, have a Polo. It's a great wee mint, isn't it? Stroke of genius having a hole in the middle. Think how much mint they're saving, then they charge full whack for something that's basically hollow.'

'I've heard that said before,' Marie said.

'You heard it before because it's true. Have one, why don't you.'

'No thanks. I don't accept sweeties from strangers.'

We all laughed.

'It gave this town its nickname, did you know *that*? Polo Mint City, on account of the fact it's got so many roundabouts. Did you not know that? You Calderwood boys'll be familiar with the Whirlies. That roundabout's murder. Women drivers shouldn't be let on it, they've no lane discipline. No offence, darlings.'

'Can you drive?' Marie asked, serenely.

'Got my Provisional. Once I get me a nice wee motor, it'll be bye-bye Polo Mint City. Just you watch me.'

We were all watching him, intently. There was an awkward moment while he looked back at us, sizing up the situation.

'Right, I'm going to show you something very special now. Just got to roll up my sleeves first.'

He unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and folded them neatly back on themselves, again and again, as far up as the denim would fold.

'Now look at these beauties.'

He flexed his upper-arm muscles and said: 'Touch them. Go on. They're rock hard. And that's only the biceps. Wait till you see my pectorals.'

He unbuttoned his shirt fully.

'I don't believe this is happening,' Marie said, as Cheryl screamed girlishly.

'The thing about the human body is, all the muscles and sinews are interconnected. If I tense these muscles here, watch what happens to my stomach. You can punch my stomach now, as hard as you want. Go on, punch it hard.'

We lined up to punch the talkative stranger, first Paul, then Stephen, then Kevin, then me. I kept my fist clenched till it was my turn.

'Wouldn't you know it? Little sailor boy packs the strongest punch,' he said.

'Always the quiet ones you've got to watch.'

'Let me have a go,' Marie said.

'Don't!' Cheryl said.

'Can't do it,' the man said, to my relief. 'It wouldn't be right. Now, boys, I'm going to let you into a secret you'll remember the rest of your lives. What did I do to deserve muscles as rock-hard as these? Two-minute exercises: that's all. You put your fingers like this....'

He locked his hands together so that they resembled one of those S-clasp buckles we'd grown out of; then pulled, counting to ten; reversed hands and repeated.

'Never do it for more than two minutes at a time,' he said.

We watched in awe before trying it out for ourselves. He cut an impressive figure there, standing on the hillock stripped to the waist with his blow-dried hair down to his shoulders and hands clasped in front of his chest. And it was true: the exercise produced Samson-like powers in us for seconds afterwards.

'Do you know this one?' Paul asked, his face shining up at the man. Next Paul arranged Kevin cross-legged and had the three of us attempt to lift him then press our palms down hard on his head and attempt to lift him again using only our index and middle fingers.

'What you've done there is tighten your biceps to make it easier for you to lift your friend.'

'I knew that,' Paul said, crestfallen. 'I just wanted to show you.'

One of the Chopper boys screeched to a halt beside us. 'Veronica's going mental again,' he shouted across the square.

First the boys on their bikes, then a crowd from the swing park, streamed past. Marie had a pained look on her face, but Cheryl tugged at her sleeve, and the momentum of the moment caused us all to drift towards the source of excitement. I glanced back at the man: he seemed, if anything, to be smiling.

I tried to keep close to Marie in case she would reach for my hand, as she occasionally, miraculously did in the dark of the school's TV room.

The commotion was happening outside a glass-fronted block of flats. Here the crowd swelled and then stopped, exposing a distraught girl on the lawn.

'I fucking hate you, fucking cunt,' she shouted up at a window – it wasn't clear which one. 'You fucking spastic, I wish you were fucking dead.'

'Veronica! Veronica! Over here, Veronica!'

'Shut the fuck up, spasm,' she snapped back at a bystander, a boy.

'She's epileptic,' Stephen said beside me. I looked at him. Cheryl was standing there too, Kevin further back, next to Paul. I couldn't see Marie.

'Did she burn your tea, Veronica?'

*She?* I looked up at the windows again. Sure enough, the figure of a woman, barely visible through the shimmering, green reflection of the trees, moved across a pane.

'Fucking bitch. Fucking *bitch*.'

A man in a bunnet passed by, carrying two slender bags of shopping, and saying: 'Did you ever hear the like?'

I was exhilarated. Here was a girl heroically screaming words we longed to scream at our own mothers too sometimes. Because I understood: the woman who appeared only to disappear again was the girl's mother. Why didn't she come downstairs and lead her daughter inside? I didn't want her to. Not yet. I had heard all the swear words before, but not at once or delivered so vehemently. We moved back as

Veronica lunged towards us, and crept forward as she aimed her rage at the window. I liked it best when she raged, when her features matched the violence of her words. But then a haunted, panicked look would take over: a look of extreme, fleeting remorse. It was like nothing I had witnessed before. The sheer repetition, the alternation between long rage and short remorse, began to make her seem comfortingly mechanical, like a doll, a clockwork doll. Still, I cowed whenever her eyes swept over mine. What if our eyes locked and she perceived something in me? What was that something? What if she shouted it to the crowd?

‘Get down here, bitch. Fucking bitch.’

When I turned round again, not even Stephen was there. I couldn’t tell how many minutes had passed. Surely a grown-up would come and put a stop to it. Somebody must have called the police by now. The police were sure to arrive.