

Play

LUKE PALMER



Everyone's setting their socks on fire.

We're up on the school playing fields, the moon a hard gash in a darkening sky, and everywhere little orange flares are glowing around people's feet. From where I'm lying they look like stars, or fireworks. Puffs of light coloured by laughter.

Sometimes the laughter tightens into a scream, or opens to a shout, or floats off into the night.

The grass under my palms has been warm all summer. I can hear it growing between my fingers.

Orange pulses register on the inside of my eyelids. There's a smell of deodorant and burning. And green, of course. You can always smell the green on nights like this, thick and sweet. And the laughter has a smell too – a kind of welcoming, warm smell, like dinner on the table when you get home. But maybe not so wet.

I smile. The lights inside my eyelids are dancing.

I can hear Mark's voice, or I remember hearing Mark's voice. He's probably gone by now, called away to some more important something, his phone pulling on him and taking his wares elsewhere. I laugh at that one. Wares elsewhere.

I like words like that. Words that play together. My favourite one is the difference between 'nowhere' and 'now here'. That little gap. Amazing what changes when

you add some space. Some air. Such a small difference, but it makes all the difference.

I worry about Mark, though. Wonder if a little gap will open inside him, let in the air and light. Before it's too late.

I worry for Luc, too. But I worry differently. I can hear him as well, his voice mapping his body, coming out of the night like a growl. It's funny how people's bodies can be a perfect map of themselves. Every ounce of Luc's body and how he carries it is seeping through that voice. It'll be the death of him, one day, all that tone and muscle.

And Matt, sitting behind me. It's his hand on my back, rubbing gently. It always is, poor Matt. But he's storing these things away for later. That's what he does.

The fires are flowering inside my eyes, and I feel somehow like all the moments that have ever happened in the whole world have led to this one. And how there's a balance in that, because all the moments that could ever happen now will come from here, with me lying on the school field, my friends around me, setting their socks on fire.

But then the moment passes. Into a new one.

Could you ever work out the different ways each moment could go? Draw a map that would tell you the paths to follow, the ones that might go somewhere?

Or which would lead to a cliff edge?

MARK

1

This was the game.

You build a den, or a camp, or whatever you want to call it. As high as you can build it. It's best if it has more than one level.

To make good dens, you need to really think about it before you start. It's hard finding old pallets in skips or taking them from building sites. And dragging them up to the heath on your own takes ages, so you want to make the best of what you've already got. Sometimes, doing a drawing helps.

And then, when you've planned it, you make it as well as you can, tie all the knots properly, pull the ropes and wait for the smell, like burning or skidding on carpet. It's the smell that tells you they're as tight as they can go. You get all the joins right so it will last for ages, or until you want to change it. And you put shelves in there with jars or pots full of all the stuff you've found and collected – the complete football sticker collection that will definitely be worth money one day, the little toy gun you nicked from a shop last year because Mum had said 'no, not this time' again and again, and the

biscuit tin containing the complete wing of a seagull, still with bits of blood on it.

And that was it.

When you got bored of one den, you'd just take it down, piece by precious piece, and make another one. And it was fine to spend all summer after Year 7 finished, and the one before, playing that game because Mum was always at work, and Brendon was always Brendon so didn't care what you did, even though he was left in charge.

The best den I ever made was the 'L' den. It took two days to build, and I used all of the wooden pallets I'd collected and dragged deep into the copse, which is a little group of trees maybe the size of a centre circle on a football pitch. It's surrounded by heather, and then there's the rest of the heath with its sandy paths and gorse bushes all around. I chose the copse because the birch trees and the cedars were tight against each other, and to make the 'L' den I found a place between two trees that was the exact same width as one of the pallets. I tied one of the pallets into the gap, up on one end, then I put another pallet on top of the first, with sticks through the middle of them like my uncle said you do when building real walls in massive buildings.

It was called the 'L' den because, when I was finished, it looked like a capital 'L', like you'd draw on square paper in a Maths book. It had a tunnel you had to crawl through to get in, then the main space at the end that

you could stand up in, like a tower. It was three pallets high on each side, and I made little seats all the way up the tower, all facing different ways so you could always see who was coming, from any direction.

But the main reason it was the best den was that I put the top roof on a slope, which meant there was a little window on one side. From that height you could see out of the copse and across the heath, all the way to where the trees had grown bent over in the wind. Some days, if it was early, a misty morning, or if it was summer and the heat was coming off the ground in waves, making everything wobbly, the tree's branches looked a bit like arms. Matt once said all the trees were like that because they bowed down to worship the devil at midnight on Halloween, and he'd seen it. He couldn't persuade anyone – not even Luc – to go out and see if that was true, though. Matt had drawn a picture of it in the last year of primary school that was actually pretty good. He didn't win the drawing prize though because his pictures were a bit weird.

I was sitting in the den, the summer before year eight started, the sun throwing thick bars of dusty light between the trees, the inside of the den warm and earthy, when I saw an armchair floating across the heath towards me.

It was upside down, its ripped lining flapping. Every now and then, the armchair would lurch into a little gorse bush, and have to back up, then it would go on again, floating slowly towards me like a clumsy ghost.

There was a steep slope on that side of the copse, so the chair had to go around. I watched through a gap in the pallet, expecting this strange floating chair to go on past me and trundle off to wherever it was going.

But it didn't trundle off.

It stopped.

The armchair flipped over then, revealing the boy who was under it. He squinted into the thicket of trees. The weirdest thing was that he stood with his hands on his hips. No one I knew stood like that. It was an old man way to stand. If you wanted to stand still, you put your hands in your pockets, or folded them on your chest. Putting your hands on your hips was almost as bad as putting them behind your back. But the boy stood there with his hands on his hips, peering at the trees. He bobbed his head around as he looked, and crouched down a bit sometimes, like a weird chicken.

He was trying to spot a way in.

I dropped right down to the bottom of the den and eased backwards into the darkest corner, pleased that I'd pulled the tarpaulin door shut behind me when I'd arrived that morning.

The boy had got the armchair past the trees and was moving it over the uneven ground, rocking it from side to side on its back legs like it was walking. The chair was pretty manky and you could see the bare material where most of the soft stuff had worn away. There were a couple of bits of tassley ribbon attached to the ends of

the arms. The boy got the chair almost right in front of the den, then he stopped. Now I was certain that he was going to try to steal the den from me, and I grabbed my Swiss army knife from its special shelf, deciding that the saw blade looked scariest, and gently prised it open. He must be after my football cards, or some of my other valuable stuff, and he wasn't going to get them without a fight.

The boy rearranged the cushion on the armchair, dusted off a few pine needles, hit it a few times to get rid of some dust.

'Hello,' he said.

I didn't answer.

'My mum said we could use this chair if we wanted. So I brought it.'

We? Who was we?

'It's a bit shit, but it's still pretty comfy.' A pause. 'I've got some other stuff, too.' The boy pulled off his backpack, emptied it onto the chair. Out came a couple of candles, a box of matches, a screwed up old tarpaulin, a few scraggy ends of rope, and what looked like a collection of small, square saucepans that clattered on to the floor. 'I took Giles' old tranny stove. Mum doesn't know but she won't mind. And Giles doesn't need it any more. So...' He trailed off. 'Giles is my stepdad, not my real dad,' he added, quieter.

I sat as still as I could. He didn't know I was here. He'd leave in a minute.

The boy flopped down on the ground, next to the chair.

'It's OK if you don't let me in for a bit,' he said. 'I can sit out here.'

A pinecone dropped from the trees above and landed by the entrance of the den.

The boy looked up. 'You ever catch a squirrel?' he asked. 'I got one once. Hit it with a stone.'

'Squirrels are too fast to get like that. You need to set a snare,' I replied. Then, for some reason, I added, 'I had one but then I sold it.'

'My uncle had an air rifle he used to shoot them with. They kept coming into his garden and taking the bird seed.' The boy drew his bare arm across his nose, sniffed.

'My uncle's got an air rifle, too,' I said, even though I hadn't seen either of my uncles since I was tiny. 'It cost him loads because it's got a night scope on it. He says I can have it when he gets a new one at Christmas.' I eased the saw blade closed against my thigh.

The boy nodded, impressed. He tapped the arms of the chair, tugged at one of the tassly bits.

I leant over to the other side of the den and picked up the biscuit tin with the seagull's wing in. It was the best thing I'd found, and if someone else was going to come into my den I didn't want them seeing it straight away.

'Are you coming in then? Careful of the nails on the door. They're holding the tarp in place.'

The boy stood up, scuffed around on the floor in

front of him for a bit, then walked – almost sideways – towards the door.

I climbed up to the second level.

‘Wow,’ he said, coming through the door on hands and knees. ‘Pretty good job.’

He ran his hands along the pallets, plucking at the ropes that tied them together, craning his neck around to look at the ceiling. He clocked the hazel spears I’d slotted into it – I’d been sharpening the ends of them that morning, so they looked really clean. He touched one, smelt his fingers.

‘Can I come through to that bit?’ the boy asked.

I moved right to the top, and the boy crawled further in and stood up in the tower. He was about the same size as me. He was wearing a red t-shirt, which wasn’t ideal as you could see that from miles away. I preferred greens and blacks.

‘Nice boots,’ he said, pulling at the laces on one of them. ‘Army surplus?’

‘Yeah.’ It wasn’t a complete lie. They had been army surplus once, but they’d been my brother’s before I’d been given them at the start of the summer. ‘They do the best stuff.’

‘I know.’ The boy pulled himself up onto the second level seat, and we sat like that for about a minute. He kept looking around, touching the shelves, occasionally giving things a probing wobble, checking to see how I’d lashed the pallets to the trees.

'So how do you bring it down?' he asked.

'What?'

'How do you bring it down? That's the best bit, bringing them down.'

'I don't know. I haven't planned that bit yet.' I didn't know what else to say. I'd spent the last week getting this den perfect, adding the shelves and the footrests. I wasn't ready to turn it into another one yet. Everything was where it needed to be.

'Want me to do it for you?' the boy asked. He was eager, excited.

'Yeah, whatever.' I kicked my feet around a bit, trying to put them too close to his face, show him that he shouldn't do whatever it was he was talking about.

But he was already wiggling back down the tower and out of the den. 'Can I use this?' he called back, waving my penknife under my feet. I must have left it on the bottom shelf when I climbed up.

'Yeah, but don't break it. It's the really expensive model and I just had the saw sharpened. I've got a sharpener for it in the shed at home.'

But he was gone.

I stayed where I was, using my ears to keep track of him. The boy circled the den a few times, doing things to the ropes, sawing at things, and he kept running back to his bag.

After a few minutes, he crawled back in. Bunched in his hand were the ends of different bits of rope, their

other ends trailing behind him, tautening. Some of them were mine, some of them were new – must have been the ones he'd brought. I thought for a second of a set of demolition expert's fuses. He passed the bundle to me.

'You do it. It's your den.' He spoke in an odd, grand way. Like we were going to launch a ship or something. 'Just give them a pull.'

I gave a half-hearted tug. Nothing happened except a kind of popping sound.

'Wait a minute. Let me get up there with you.' The boy hauled himself up to where I was sitting and crouched down, the toes of his boot just on the edge of my seat, his hands braced against the walls. 'Go!' he shouted.

I tugged again, harder this time, and with a dull kind of ping and a horrible lurch that shot through my stomach, the tower swayed. I put my arm out instinctively, tried to grab the pallet next to me, but it was tipping, tipping out and away. Next to me, the boy was laughing like a mad animal, using his feet to push at the pallet my seat was attached to. Everything was slipping backwards and I was swinging my legs out to balance myself when I felt a sharp crack on top of my head – the roof pallet, robbed of its walls, had fallen in. With a snap, the little periscope window disappeared. The boy gave a half-moan-half-guffaw noise and I saw him put a hand to his own head as the pallet slid over his scalp. It fell forward, onto my knee, and then I got an eyeful of sky for a

second as the pallet I was sitting on finally toppled, me flailing helplessly on top of it.

The fall seemed to last for ages. Inside the collapsing tower, I heard the boy cry out.

Then, with a thud that rattled my whole body, my back met something solid – the pallet over the entrance. For the briefest of moments it held me, then a creak and squeal and a skewed tumble, wood screeching against wood, and I rolled over my own back and found myself lying face down in pine needles, my feet on the seat of the boy's chair, as the last of the 'L' den came down with a series of tinny clacks and loud thunks.

I could taste something like blood in my mouth, and my armpits were cold and itchy. My forehead tingled where the pallet had hit it, and for a few seconds I wasn't sure which way was up or down. I slowly got up onto all fours.

The two pallets I'd tied in the perfect gap between the trees were the only things left upright. All around were pallets and bits of rope, splintered wood, smashed sticks. Up against the still-standing section, another pallet was leaning at a funny angle. There was a leg sticking out from under it, and a strange noise like some kind of animal.

It was the boy.

I scrambled over and pulled the wood off him, my heart beating in my ears. I still felt a bit woozy and staggered back as I picked up the last pallet. There he was, eyes closed, his arms clasped across his stomach,

and shaking uncontrollably. I picked up his limp arms, searching for whatever splinter of wood or stick had clearly stabbed him.

But I couldn't see anything.

Then I got it. The boy was laughing. Helplessly, unstopably laughing. Laughing so much he was unable to open his eyes.

I stepped backwards, caught the heel of my boot in the tangle of pallets and went over, sending another shotgun blast of sound around the thicket.

Then I started laughing, too. What with the giddiness, the slowly subsiding wave of nausea, the tingling feeling not just on my forehead, but down my back, along one of my arms where, looking between blinked-away tears, I must have scraped it along a rough edge or the head of a nail because it was bleeding gently in three or four places, my whole body felt like it was vibrating. My heart was pounding in my chest, right down to the bottom of my feet.

And the whole thing was hilarious.

'I'm Johnny, by the way,' the boy said when he'd stopped laughing enough to speak.

'I'm Mark,' I managed to splutter.

Then we both started laughing again and spent the rest of the morning comparing newly forming lumps and the places we were bleeding from.

I'd never felt so alive.

And that was the new game.

2

The new den is huge. There's a tower in one corner where we've nailed planks to a tree to make a 'Y' shape, with one of the pallets on top like a crow's nest. Johnny brought his stepdad's saw; said he wouldn't miss it. He brought a bunch of nails and a proper hammer too. I was making do with a bit of old pipe I'd found. It's quicker with a hammer.

It's quicker with two of us.

It's lucky because Johnny's only just moved here, into one of the big houses on the new estate. I think Johnny might be rich, but we don't talk about that kind of thing. And he doesn't act rich if you know what I mean. And anyway, he's going to the same school as I go to so I can show him around and he can join my friends tomorrow.

Matt and Luc have both been on holiday for the last three weeks. They keep sending pictures of the beaches they've been on. It's been ages since I was on a beach.

Luc sent a video two days ago of him tucking into a huge burger he ordered on their last night, and he said a girl on the other side of the restaurant was really into him for it but he couldn't do anything because she didn't speak English and he wasn't bothered anyway

because he'd already hooked up with three girls on the campsite. I didn't believe him, but I couldn't say anything about it.

Matt sent a picture of a museum he went to that actually looked alright because there were loads of things you could do, including an exhibit where you got to build your own thing for lifting water up a hill, called an Archimedes Screw. Luc said Matt could do with a screw, then sent some aubergine emojis. Matt did a crying-laughing face.

They've both been allowed to take their Xboxes with them, and they had wi-fi (obviously), so they've been gaming with each other, although Luc's wi-fi kept dropping out. I've told them my wi-fi's been broken all summer and I was having to use 4G, but actually my brother's decided to move out and taken the Xbox with him, so I can't play it anymore. Mum's not said anything, but seems fine with me looking after myself while she works.

Johnny's got an Xbox, but he doesn't play it often. He says he's tried it a few times and he can't get into it.

'It's like I stop playing a game, and I feel like I've gone to sleep or something – everything in the real world moves too slowly and isn't exciting enough. And I get this feeling, right here,' he points to the middle of his chest, 'like a tight feeling, whenever I play them. I don't like it, so I stopped. Well, started playing them less, anyway.'

Johnny's taking the kettle off the tranny stove, which he said he googled and it's actually called a Trangia. We're down to our last hot chocolate, but we decided to have a blow out as we're collapsing the last den today. We both like hot chocolate really strong and thick. I managed to get some money out of Mum this morning and bought as many biscuits as I could on the way here, so we've been munching on those. Johnny's mum wants him home by lunchtime so he can get ready for school tomorrow. I'm not sure my mum knows we're going back yet. She's not said anything.

We both climb up to the crow's nest and look out across the heath, sipping on our hot chocolates, wincing against the scald on our lips. There's a heat shimmer rising off the heather, but it's cool in the thicket. White butterflies are skittering over the long grass and a pair come chasing each other up the side of our tree, fly around our heads for a bit then go back out into the sunshine. There's a beautiful, sweet sap smell from the bulbs of orange goo where we've driven the big nails into the tree trunk. We've taken a couple of branches off, so we've got space to sit, and the fleshy ends of the stumps are gumming up with sap, too. When it dries, it turns white and dusty. Johnny's t-shirt's covered in hardened circles of it. It's the same shirt he's worn all this week, the red one I first saw him in. Bits of dirt and pine needle have stuck to the sappy patches, so he looks like a ladybird, covered in black spots.

'What's school like then?' Johnny asks.

'You know. Like any school, I guess,' I answer. 'It's alright, I suppose. Last year was OK, and we won't be year sevens this time.' A pause while we sip our drinks again. 'What was your last school like?'

'Fine. I didn't spend much time there, to be honest.'

'Do your family move around a lot then?'

'Not really. It's...'

Johnny trails off. I've noticed him doing this sometimes. It looks like he's going to carry on talking, but he doesn't.

A magpie shoots across in front of us, making its clacking, chirping, warning noise.

'I was taken out of lessons a lot,' Johnny continues. 'I find it quite hard to sit still, you know?'

'You're sitting still now though,' I say. Johnny's back is against the trunk, his leg dangling idly from our platform.

'It's different out here. Normally, I've got too much energy or something. Like I always feel I need to move around or pick things up. School is...' he fades out again.

'I'm the same sometimes.' I speak into the open space in front of us. 'They thought there was something wrong with me at primary. Had my mum in for talks and everything. She said I was just a certain kind of boy, and they should be better at dealing with it.'

'What kind of stuff did you do?'

'I don't know really.' The memories are a little fuzzy. 'I just did stuff and then someone told me I shouldn't have, you know?'

'Yeah, I know what you mean.' Johnny slings the last dregs of his hot chocolate into the view. 'I do the same. Like, if I see a plug in a wall – an electrical plug, I mean – I really want to unplug it. I don't want to turn off whatever's plugged in. I just get this odd feeling that I want to unplug it and plug it back in again, just for something to do.'

'Did you get detentions and stuff?'

'Yeah. A lot. And we had this place where you'd get sent if you were really naughty or got kicked out of lessons or something – the Hub, it was called. On the first day of my second term, my tutor told me I needed to go straight to the Hub at the start of school. That I didn't need to go to tutor time anymore. I tried to stay in tutor, some of my friends were in there, but every morning the head of year and the strict woman who was in charge of the Hub would come and get me.'

'We haven't got anything like that. Just detentions. Or you get sent to the head of year, Mrs Clarke. And there's Miss Amber, who's like her deputy. They're alright really. I've had a few detentions and stuff, for not doing homework. And they're a bit tight on uniform.'

'Sounds alright.' Johnny's picking at one of the sappy clumps on his t-shirt.

'Hey, tell you what,' I say. 'Why don't we go and look at it now?'

'Look at what?'

'The school – the field backs onto the heath. It's that way.' I point somewhere vaguely behind us.

‘Maybe. I went around at the end of last year, did a tour and stuff, with my mum.’

‘Yeah, they don’t show you the important bits, though. Come on,’ I say, swinging myself off the edge of the platform and dropping the six feet or so to the floor. ‘Just a look. I’ll point to where the year eight block is.’

‘Alright. Then we’ll come back and bring this down, yeah?’

Much as I enjoy bringing down the dens and the way we design each den with a weak spot so they collapse better, Johnny still gets more out of it than I do. ‘Definitely. We’ve got loads of time, I lie. I’m putting off thinking about how I’ll fill the day after Johnny goes home.’

We push through the branches on the other side of the copse and make our way to one of the sandy paths that criss-cross the heath, follow it downhill through a stand of birch trees on the edge of my housing estate, then back over another hill before it levels off. A few more bends and forks in the path, and we’re walking alongside a thick clump of brambles speckled with unripe berries. We stop at a place where their stretching, curling thorns are a bit lower.

‘There it is,’ I say, trying to sound impressive for some reason.

The bulky grey block of the school hall squats across the field. Clumped around it are smaller, lower blocks, with off-white panels on the sides and bright red doors. There’s a green fence around the whole perimeter.

'Looks OK,' Johnny says. He sounds non-plussed. 'So which is your classroom?'

'Last year I was around the other side, in the year seven block. But this year all the year eight tutors are in that block there.' I point to the low set of buildings closest to us, squat bushes clumped around the outside. There are blinds across the windows, but you can just about make out the faded colours of some posters on the inside of the glass. 'I hope you're in mine.'

'Yeah,' Johnny says. His foot is starting to tap.

'Like I said, it's alright really. It's just ... y'know. School.'

'Yeah.'

We stand and look at it for a few minutes. I check the clock on my phone's cracked screen. This time tomorrow will be the start of break. Almost on cue, a group of teachers come out from one set of buildings, some of them still wearing their summer shorts and t-shirts. They're carrying bags over their shoulders and talking to each other in twos and threes. We can't make out what they're saying, but a few notes of laughter drift to us over the fields.

'Must be a training day or something. Look, there's Mrs Clarke.' I point to the blonde-haired lady, walking on her own, a few steps behind the main group. 'She's alright really. There was a rumour that some kids in her last year group got radicalised and made a bomb or something and were going to blow up the school. And

this biology teacher was helping them. But he got fired. It was on the news, apparently. Anyway, that all happened the year before we started.'

The teachers file across the corner of the playground before they turn out of sight down the side of the technology block.

Johnny shuffles his feet. 'Yeah, it looks alright. Thanks.'

As we turn back, Johnny plucks a handful of blackberries from the bushes – bright red, but he eats them anyway. His mouth puckers up and he squints his eyes tight.

'Lovely.' He hands me a few.

It's like chewing a battery or something. Like when Brendon used to make me put the two points of those big 'D' batteries on my tongue. I make the same face as Johnny, and then we're both spitting sour, reddish-purple juice onto the sandy path, trying to scrape any traces of the berries from our tongue. Johnny picks a dandelion leaf, and eats that to try and get rid of the taste, then wretches all over again.

Then, five minutes later, we're passing another blackberry bush with its curtain of red globules, and we do it again, laughing all the way back to the copse.

We've already sawn halfway through the den's central pole, and when we've packed up all our stuff, buried the tin with the seagull's wing in it (which Johnny agreed was the best find), and prised half of the supporting planks off the big pine tree, we take the demolition rope up to

the platform. We've decided to do this one standing – it's the highest we've fallen from – and we're going to pull the rope together.

I can feel the platform complaining underneath me as I gingerly climb up onto it. Johnny hands me the rope and wobbles up beside me, walking his hands up the trunk of the tree before standing. There must only be two nails holding the whole thing up.

Standing either side of the tree, I catch Johnny's eyes. They're gleaming playfully behind his shock of hair, which is probably just as full of sap as his t-shirt. For me, these are the best bits. The knowing you're about to do something completely stupid. That you might hurt yourself, or worse.

But also knowing that you're about to feel completely, utterly, powerlessly free.

We do the countdown together.