

Narratives

Lucy Smalley

1. Sleeping with the Rambutans

We arrived at the station at quarter to midnight to get the sleeper train. We didn't understand the announcements but we gathered that the train was late, the announcements were making people angry. At one in the morning the train arrived, people rushed to the tracks, jumped across them and heaved themselves up to the platform on the other side. Big boxes of fruit, unidentifiable vegetables, animals and small children are all helped onto the train. We reached the door to our cabin and the ticket man tells us "No." We show him our tickets and a dark shadow of embarrassed horror flashes across his face. We were not supposed to be on the train, let alone in this cabin.

For sixteen hours we attempted sleep on wooden benches with the broken fans and the sewage. In the morning an old lady and her grandson joined us in our journey, she gave us prickled fruit and taught us the proper way of eating it. She had clearly refined her skill over many years. He made origami planes and sang us an unchained melody of terrible pop songs. Then she threw all of the plastic containers out of the window.

2. The Good Luck Has Always Been There

Year after year we return to this place but it never really changes. Even though you and I are no longer a part of what goes on, we still go and race across the man-made sand trenches like we did when I was eight and you were nine. The other day we reminisced about naughtily forming jelly sand piles in our hands as we sat and listened to the songs. We were not supposed to, the sand was impossible to get rid of once you touched it and I regretted it every time.

3. The House with the Coloured Stained Glass

You invited me in because I had walked a long way to get there. You lived directly on the beach in a large white house, there was an elaborate old staircase to the left when you entered and I think there was some kind of water feature directly ahead. I met your father, he seemed like a nice man with a lot of money. We made plans and drank out of special wine glasses for a few hours. When I went outside there was a small walled garden that I could only just see into; you had a miniature train track running, and the passengers were somehow family friends from another time and another place; it didn't mean anything to me then.

4. Milking Stile Ln

It would take exactly ten minutes, you timed it. I think it must have been a dangerous walk because sometimes you would set off at the same time and meet me halfway at the beginning of the dark alley. Sometimes when that happened I would walk as fast as I could; I'd turn the corner and start walking down the alley by myself so you would meet me in the dark in the middle of it and see that I could go at least halfway on my own.

5. Burglar

We saw the shoes sticking out from underneath the table but we were not afraid.

6. The Impossible Sleepover

It was a dark satin-covered room with high ceilings and gothic chandeliers. The host, a tall man with a long black robe, glided across the room and sat on an elaborate red armchair. They were all lying down in a line on the other side of the room, wearing their pyjamas and wrapped up in sleeping bags. There was nowhere for me to go, it turned into fire and water.

7. The Worst Kind of Rain

You decided to walk off on your own despite what I told you. You didn't know where you were or where you were going, just that you had to find it on your own in the dark dramatic downpour. We shouted across the paths and I tried to throw lines over to you but you did not want to catch them. It was in some ways the culmination of all the negative thoughts we had saved up over the years; I hope that we won't speak to each other like that again.

8. Walking With Spiders

We were invited by a man who wore a white leather suit and did a performance dance on a dirty rain-stained mattress. He owned the entire valley, and built huge white phallic structures sticking up amongst the tropical rainforest. The slippery thick mud made us slide around in the dark in inappropriate footwear and we felt the scratch of potential creatures on our bare legs as we joined the jungle party. You drank too much and we carried you up the make-shift staircase, looking down on to the scene that we were once a part of. You sat down straight in the mud and held your head between your legs; we sat next to you and stroked your back so you knew we were there. I spoke to him for the first time and learnt that he had also built the structure we were looking at – it was a huge metal net dome with hanging sculptures and an elaborate lighting rig with smoke machines. He told me in a whisper that he really hoped it would survive the storm that night.

9. Hornet Cage

We had reached the top of the mountain. It was hot, and the water in the backpack no longer made any difference to our thirst, warm on warm. The cage was there and you thought it probably had been for a long time, but only as a precautionary measure. Apparently it hadn't been used for a few years, but when the hornet storm came it was necessary and there had been a few fatalities in the past. When you look back on the cage now you can visualise it being locked with a very heavy padlock, but you struggle to see how that makes any sense.

10. Epping Forest

We used to know this forest like the back of our hands but a lot has changed now. We felt the cold stone as we scrambled to the top, the dirt gently gave way beneath our clumsy feet. We climbed through and under the roots, we swung on the strength of the trees. It was important to keep your balance or else you would probably fall into the pond.

She created a task for herself to clear the forest of litter, she had a special litter-picker that she took with her every time. The litter-picker was much older than I was, and the rusty release mechanism kept getting stuck on the prongs - you had to bang it back into place after every other go. I remember standing by the lightning tree holding the litter-picker with the prongs resting gently on my wellies, I would push down until it hurt a bit.

11. That Time I Stepped on a Snake

We realised a little bit too late that we should have brought the torch. Luckily the snake did not fight back too much but it was understandably angry, it made a loud hissing noise. Half an hour later we were inside the tipi and my face was being painted with decorative white dots - I looked in the mirror and the artist had decided to bring the dots together in the shape of a snake.

12. Helping the Police

We all wore head torches and walked around slowly in the dark to avoid tripping on the guy-ropes. From midnight until morning we had to look out for suspicious behaviour and sound the alarm if we noticed anything. All I remember is the cold coffee; we had to miss Stevie Wonder's last few songs so we sang them together and flawlessly harmonised with strangers while sipping Nescafé Gold out of dirty plastic cups.

13. A Densely Packed Sea of Flies that Died Fifteen Years Ago

We waited until after midnight so we wouldn't get caught. The tower had been blocked off for a few years after the suicide happened and the building was deemed unsafe – they had started to demolish and rebuild parts of it but then ran out of money.

With the torches from our phones we climbed over the rubble and tried to make our way through the maze of abandoned offices and never-ending corridors. Every door we passed through we made sure to keep propped open – we didn't know if we would be able to get through it again if it closed. After about half an hour of being confronted by locked doors and insurmountable furniture piles we finally managed to find the staircase. We went as far as it would take us and then entered the room. I remember the football playing cards stuck to the kitchen pipes, you were looking out of the window on the far side of the room.

I walked over to the window and we stood together in silence, the windowsill below was covered entirely in flies, I had never seen so many flies before but for some reason nothing needed to be said.

14. The Magician That Never Picked You

It was your birthday, and you were probably wearing that pink and yellow chequered dress. We all sat on the floor looking up at the man who was paid to entertain us; he wore a trademark starry suit and his nose was too small for his face. We all eagerly put our hands up to be picked as his assistant for each trick but for some reason he consistently avoided you, why was he avoiding you? It was your birthday, you should be picked for at least one. You ran away and spoiled your own birthday party; you didn't know that there was a rabbit in a hat waiting just for you.

15. A Mushroom Library

It had the feeling of Disneyworld but without any of the rides. There were lots of other visitors and it was more of a skill and logic challenge – visitors unknowingly started a journey leading through different fantasy landscapes and they were all heading towards one main goal but through different paths; you had to in some way sabotage each other in order to win. At one point you were confronted by a deep hole that you couldn't see to the bottom of. It was lined with mushrooms and you knew that you had to slide down it –when you did you landed in a little man's cosy living room. He had a lot of books on the walls and he was crying. You had to find the book that would make him feel better, and he would let you pass to the next level if you read it to him nicely and stopped his tears.

16. The Covey Stones

We get in the car and back slowly down the driveway, we turn left. There is an old-fashioned red Mini parked and we usually have to stop behind it and wait for a car coming the other way. When we reach the end of the road we turn right at the Bell and Cross and drive towards the rock valley. It is always much darker in there and the sign warns of potential avalanche. When we were small we used to close our eyes and wait for the rocks to come, but of course they never did. Now we wonder why the sign is there at all. Since that time we have travelled on far more precarious roads.

17. Pangolin

Last night you were on a huge exotic jungle island floating in the sky. The island was stuck in a permanent black cloud and the only way to get from place to place was by these old rickety wooden trains that stopped at various locations around the edge of it. The trains were always very busy so when they stopped you had to be very careful not to fall through the gap; the mess of earthy undergrowth and thick tree roots meant that it was important to wear sensible shoes but you never fell over. They used pangolin scales for cooking, apparently they were becoming a pest and the islanders didn't like them. Mary was there too, and together you worked on a research project that investigated apple schizophrenia, the pathways of bees and how many balloons you can take on the jungle train before one of them pops.

18. Slope

You used to walk down this path when the number 3 dropped you off outside the doctors on Penny Street. After 6pm the bus wouldn't stop at the normal place, saving time by avoiding the ring road that somehow became an inescapable loop in the night. Not everyone on the bus knew it, but if you didn't get off at the doctors you would be forced to remain on it all the way to the bus terminal, and nobody wanted to go to the bus terminal.

So you would walk down towards this path alone in the dark and would look over your shoulder to check that nobody was following you. The pathway relied only on the distant lighting of other streets and started with a steep slope down; you gained momentum in the steady drop and by the time you reached the bottom you were almost running. There was a high brick wall on the right and to the left you could see the dodgy car park where the ice cream van always seemed to be. The men with the hoods would stand around there in small groups and sometimes shout things.

Coming up the other side of the slope you entered the car park for a moment or two, walked over the wet muddy grass patch and stopped when you felt the concrete step down onto the road, you balanced right on the edge. When the cars had gone you would quickly cross because you couldn't see what was coming around the left corner, and then you'd walk up the opposite road towards the station bridge. Sometimes you would walk straight over the bridge if you were in a rush, but sometimes you would stop for a second to listen to the automated train lady announcing the next train to Heysham.

19. On the Unremarkable Similarities Between Birds

In the summer garden we raced to the swings. The grass was always more moss than grass and it was springy and spongy under our feet as we ran across it. We were there, you and I, sitting on our personal plastic platforms, and we clung on tightly to the white plaited ropes that smelt distinctly of horse and softly burnt our hands. We leant back as far as we dared and closed our eyes.

We would bet on:

- Whether there would be any birds when we opened our eyes
- If there were birds when we opened our eyes and how many of them there would be
- How many birds were in the sky and how many were in the tree.

The kind of birds we saw really did not matter, and it would be wrong of me to tell you that it did. Just seeing any kind of bird was better than seeing no bird at all.

20. Annual Bear Day

There was a time when our bears had passports and we decided we would try to throw them into the tallest tree in the field. Alice threw hers up first and immediately regretted her decision as it sadly did not return to her, it became lost in the dense greenery. We walked around for a bit until we spotted a patch of brown fur. I ambitiously threw up mine to try and dislodge it but my bear inevitably reached the same sorry fate. We had to tell Mrs Denton who then told Mr Gregory who at that time had a very thick brown beard. Mr Gregory went into his infamous shed and retrieved the largest ladder I had ever seen, he looked at us with disappointed eyes; this was clearly not how he planned to spend his afternoon. A small crowd formed as Mr Gregory embarked on a journey of impressive vertical proportions, he rummaged around in the blooms for a while and one by one the poor stuffed victims were safely pulled out by their extraneous limbs. When he had reached the bottom of the ladder and had caught his breath I pretended to throw my bear back up again; sadly the joke was delivered a little bit too early for the reaction I was hoping for.

