

GROW

Luke Palmer



There won't be any explosions in this book.

Sorry if that's going to be a problem. And, while we're at it, there won't be any chasing around at night, or encounters with the undead, or werewolves, or vampires, or anything of that kind either.

Sorry.

A few years ago, I loved those kinds of books. I'd imagine myself in a world where all the adults were dead, or gone, or both. I think I'd have been OK. Maybe not the leader of one of the rebel gangs that stalked through the abandoned streets, shouting orders that various underlings followed with glee. It wouldn't have been me that was surrounded by hard-faced kids in ragged clothes. But I'd definitely be surviving, a sharpened stick in one hand, straddling a bike kitted out like a tank, ready to dash back to my stash of pilfered tins in the belly of an old barge down on the canal. I used to love imagining myself in those situations.

But I grew out of them.

I don't know why I liked them, really. It's pretty grim stuff, imagining your parents are dead. And enjoying it. This book won't be like those books.

It will be real.

It won't be about the future, or the past, or a world where the superpowers have gone crazy and bombed

everyone back to the stone age.

You don't need all that to create terror.

ONE

Mum burns the toast, again. The blare of the fire alarm cuts through my dream and has me on my feet in seconds, waving a pillow at the flashing plastic disc on the landing outside my room. It takes a few more painful moments to clear the sensor.

‘Sorry love. Would you like some?’ Mum’s head appears around the banister. There are big red circles under her eyes. The fire alarm’s light carries on flashing for a while after the sound stops and it feels like there’s a place in my ears where it’s still echoing.

‘Please,’ I croak, suddenly aware of myself standing in a pair of grotty boxer shorts. I’ve passed the age when it’s OK for your mum to see you in your pants.

I have a quick shower and put my uniform on, lug my backpack downstairs and sit at the table. Mum smiles and pushes a plate towards me, and a mug of tea. Despite having burned the last round – hers – the toast is cold. The tea’s not much warmer. I wonder how long she’s been up, waiting for me.

She leans back against the counter, her dressing gown coming apart a bit at her neck. I stare at my plate, pick up crumbs that have spilled over the edge with the end of my finger. Neither of us speak. A few times she

looks like she might be about to say something, ask me about what I'll be doing today, how my friends are getting on, whether I've done all my homework. But she doesn't.

It didn't used to be like this. Mornings used to be full of noise and energy and lost keys and the cats needing feeding and making sure I had my lunch and have I got my bus card and where did I leave that folder and when'll you be home this evening.

But not anymore.

After a few minutes Mum turns away, starts opening and closing cupboards and making scribbled notes on a pad we keep stuck to the front of the fridge. It's Thursday, the day of the big shop, which means she'll be late home.

I finish eating and go back upstairs to clean my teeth. The fire alarm still blinks at me on the landing. I keep the tap running, rinsing my mouth a few times to get the gritty, burnt crumbs out. They get stuck and turn into doughy sludge.

On my way out of the house, Mum stops me in the hallway and puts her hand on my cheek – just holds it there and looks at me. She's been doing this a lot recently. I think it's because my eyes are the same level as hers now. I smile. She does too. And then I walk through the door.

It is one of those frosty, late-autumn mornings where it hurts a bit to breathe. I push my hands deep

into the pockets of my coat and pull the collar right up over my chin, the zip between my teeth. The zip has a sharp, metallic taste. Like blood. You can tell it will be a sunny day later; the cloud, or mist, or whatever it is, seems to stop not far overhead, and there are definitely some blue bits on the other side of it.

It was on a day like this, a Monday morning in October just over two years ago, that I heard Mum shout my name as I walked down the street. I had run back to her as fast as I could, shrugging my bag off my shoulders as I went. There was something in her voice that sounded like I had to, as if Mum were hidden inside her own body and was shouting at me to get her out. When I got to her, she looked at me as if she wasn't looking at me. She had the phone clenched to her chest.

After a while, she was able to tell me.

There had been an explosion. In London.

Dad was dead.

TWO

So I lied about the explosions.

Sorry.

The Sunday evening before that phone call – before our lives were taken away from us, skinned alive, cut in half, tossed into the corner and stamped on – we’d all been sitting at the kitchen table. Dad was about to leave to catch the train into London. He worked in our town, on a leafy, high-tech business park doing something I never asked about. I regret that now – among other things. But he went into the capital regularly to meet clients or try to pick up new ones for whatever it was he did. This particular Sunday had been bright and unseasonably warm, and Dad kept finding reasons not to leave. He’d spent most of the day in the garden.

‘Sunny again tomorrow, Josh. What do you say we both ditch work? We’ve got gutters that need clearing, leaves to sweep, and the last of those plants could do with a—’

Mum interrupted our fantasy while still tapping away on her laptop, reminding me that I had a science test the next day, reminded Dad he’d been preparing for this meeting all last week.

‘But you don’t mind skipping that, Josh?’

‘Not at all, Dad. The house is a much more urgent priority, wouldn’t you say?’

‘That’s exactly what I say, Josh. But your mother...’ Mum gave us both one of her looks.

‘Ergh. London!’ Dad’s head clunked as it hit the table. One of the cats pawed at his leg.

I smiled, thumbed my phone, copied the address of a website, hit send. Dad looked down as his pocket buzzed, grinned at the screen, gave me a covert thumbs up.

Then he’d grabbed his panier bag, put his bike helmet on, and left.

Later that night, I’d received a picture message of his finger poised above a ‘book now’ button on his laptop screen – the website of a holiday company that I’d sent him the link to earlier.

I don’t know if he’d *really* booked that holiday or not. One of the things that got lost in the time afterwards. What I do know is, on that last Sunday evening, I’d gone to sleep in a state of happiness I didn’t realise I’d had.

Until afterwards. Until it was gone

Dad had been on his way to that meeting when his train exploded.

Or rather, it had *been* exploded.

A young guy with a backpack had got on at Dad’s station, stood in the middle of the carriage, swaying with the other commuters for a few minutes. Then his backpack blew up.

They said that Dad was near the centre of the blast and would have been killed instantly.

We were supposed to see this as a kind of bonus, I think.

Some weren't killed so instantly. One woman took a week to die.

THREE

There was a service at Westminster Abbey for all the victims' families. Some important people talked about *sacrifices* and how they *won't be forgotten*. We sat right at the front, just behind the important people who kept getting up to make speeches.

All the way through I couldn't stop thinking about Greek theatre. Mrs Dinet, our drama teacher, had told us that if one of the characters in ancient Greek theatre died, they wouldn't perform it on stage. The death would take place off stage and someone would describe it to the audience. Then, to prove that it was true, they'd part some curtains at the back of the stage, or bring in some kind of trolley on wheels, and reveal the body. Sometimes they'd use animal blood or intestines to make the death look realistic. Especially if it was a violent one.

All the way through that service I wondered whether they were going to open a curtain or roll out a trolley. I couldn't decide whether I wanted them to or not.

How do you show someone who's had a bomb rip through them?

The papers were all saying how it could have been worse. There was only one bomb, but they'd planned

another one. The other bomber was left paralysed after his bomb didn't go off properly and the detonation blast took a chunk out of his spine. His trial was very public. And quick. This was supposed to show our efficient justice system and our intolerance of acts of terror against our way of life.

A few weeks later, the train line re-opened. This was supposed to be an act of defiance against the people who killed my dad.

There were a lot of things that were *supposed to be*.

If you ask me, Dad being killed wasn't one of them.

There were thirty-nine families in that service.

Thirty-nine things that weren't supposed to be.

Thirty-nine trolleys.

All this was just over two years ago. About the time when I stopped reading books about the end of the world, and all the adults dying.

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