

Wacky

The play barn provides pleasant piped pop music, instant coffee (with squirty cream and a sprinkle of cocoa if you prefer) and no-added sugar fruit shoots. The equipment is bright plastic-coated padding on a shell of scaffolding. It's like a monkey-house. The wild animals are inside while we watch from outside the mesh. We're entranced because they look so almost-human. Some parents are hyper-vigilant, others are no-where to be seen. They've gone through into the pub.

In the larger of the play areas, there's an upper level in which you walk across rope bridges. It's precarious, most children take a while to be able to do it. One of the delights of the place is watching a Mum or Dad go in after their child. Oversized, like a fairy-tale giant appearing in my poky terrace house, I like to watch their unwieldy bodies twisting though the obstacles. On the walkway today one boy has taken hold of another and is administering a ferocious beating. Both boys are solidly built. The aggressor has his face painted. He's Dracula. His hairline has been extended with a point on his forehead - a count Dracula widow's peak. At the corner of his black lips there are painted-on fangs. His face is unnaturally white. There's glint in his eye and he seems to suit the role - although there's nothing of the vampire's seductive charm here. He's thumping the blond boy. He's stood still. He attempts to fight back, but he can't match the aggression of the Count. He pulls away, but those walkways are tricky and the vampire has him fast by the shirt (long-sleeved so you don't burn your elbows on the slides).

'Leave my friend alone!' shouts an earnest little girl. Parents start to notice.

You are not supposed to bring glasses in to the play barn. It says so quite clearly around the pub. They will give you a plastic glass, if you ask. Do you ever just think: why do I keep it all in? Yes, I know violence is wrong. But this is a violent world, sometimes. Why do I think I am any better than anyone else? In my lazy, liberal and lager-impaired mind there's a suspicion that actually most arguments are won through decisive action. Often through violence. One child is bashing another. His parents, no doubt, have taught him not to fight. Perhaps that it's okay to hit in self-defence. That advice looks useless in this situation.

'Leave my child alone!' a mother yells through the nylon mesh. Too difficult to get in there quickly. She wants this to stop now. But another mother is belatedly registering what's happened. She has, of course, been supervising her undead offspring at all times. Although the area is monitored by trained staff. Now she calls to him. Moments earlier she was bouncing a girl on her knee. There seems to be something wrong with her. I'd already noticed this woman. She can't help looking like that, I know. But her eyes look entirely vacant. And she was bouncing the girl bizarrely - the child's shirt was almost coming off because of the vigour and abandon of the mother's movements. Through it all she seemed to be looking out into space. Or is it a challenge to the other parents?

'Mine says to me: "Talk to the hand." I tell her she'll get a slap. I've stopped in the middle of Tesco, I have. And given her a slap. People looking at me, I say I'll give you my address if you want to report me. Old people are the worst. I said to one last week, there - you have her!'

Man with closely shaved head, sips lager from a plastic pint glass. Stella. He's got faun coloured workboots on, not laced up. Tracky bottoms. His eyebrows look too close to his hairline. The collar of his football shirt is sticking up.

'Yeah, we've had to stop going. They keep dropping out. I might give Stubbsy a call. He said he was interested. Gary used to bring two, but one of them dropped out. It isn't worth the bother. I've booked the pitch, then they drop out. Dale can't make it, his missus won't let him out. Not worth it, is it?'

On the next table there's a woman with beige trousers down to her lower calf. She's wearing flip-flops with black canvas straps. She's eating her daughter's sweets out of a plastic bag. Looks like woolies pick 'n mix.

There's a man with a white shirt tucked in to jeans. Double denim. A brown steel-buckled belt. He has a neat square of moustache. He's bald and the top of his head is a shiny protuberance – like those ramming dinosaurs. He has the look of an accountant. Name of Steve. Bought his wife and kids out for Sunday lunch.

The next man I see wears a Fred Perry t-shirt. His hair is cropped. The edge of a necklace is visible at his neckline. Bling bling.

One of the team walk past. She's thin. Her badge tells me her name is Zoe. She's not wearing much make-up. Just eye-liner and some foundation to cover her bad skin. A red spot is brewing up beneath her right nostril. She's got those large incisors that make a mouth look strangely square – always about to break into a grin.

Table fat. This woman's calves are large and have the look of poultry. Very white, with pin-points of black where the shaved hair is growing back. She likes her food. I'd like to feel those calves. She's pretty. Pink decorated canvas shoes. Look sort of Chinese. Steve weaves past on his way to the bar. There's a magnetic repulsion as his arm comes close to my ear. This only operates over short distances. You wouldn't notice it if you saw him across a room. There's a field around him I can't bear to enter. Repellent, and no-one knows.

I go and buy a coffee. She talks too much. It isn't my fault she's so ugly. Her black t-shirt has the look of something chosen so that it won't show dirt. She has her upper lip pierced. Aneka. Her hair back in a small pony-tail; it's one of those messy 'unsymmetrical' cuts and she can't be bothered with it in the day-time. The lengths are blonde to within three inches of her scalp. I go back to my seat with my coffee. Aneka follows me then continues to the back of the room. She chucks a few balls back into the ball pool, collects some empty coffee cups.

The challenge is to walk up a plastic slide in socks. 'This is what you have to do,' explains my daughter. 'I need to go quicker than faster.' Get your hands on the side – there's a raised ridge – sweat helps them stick. Now move the feet up against gravity, despite the lack of friction. The motion is like a cat kneading its bed with slow urgency. Or try walking straight up the middle. A girl in peach trousers is doing it this way, putting her hands down each time her feet start to slide. She's like Sisyphus – she's both man and stone ball. At a certain point she drops to her knees and slides back – it's not within her control. The sound of damp palms squealing down plastic. 'I can do it, James, I did it.' Combo technique. One hand round the side of the ridge, one to the floor in front.

I begin to notice the children whose parents aren't in here. From time to time they call out and no-one's head turns. Their dads are in the pub. God knows where their mums are. There's a guy over there who doesn't look right. Did he come in with a child? Would Zoe and Aneka have noticed? I begin a discreet surveillance. He sips lager from a plastic pint-pot. He's reading the Daily Mail, but he can't find anything to hold his attention. He flicks through a few pages and then closes the paper. He folds it in half and stretches his legs out. He takes a slow deliberate slurp of beer, as if aware that he is being watched. I look away. My daughter is sitting on the slope between two sections of the play area having an involved conversation with a large vinyl-coated duck. When I look back the man has gone. I try to remember what he looks like, but it's impossible. Should tell Zoe, or Aneka.

'Daddy, can I have a fruit shoot?'

'Yes, okay. Which flavour would you like?'

'Orange.'

'Right.'

Someone has taken my table by the time Stephanie is sorted with a drink. I stroll towards the back of the room, where a birthday-child throne is looking abandoned in the grotty bit people avoid. I remind Steph she can't take the drink in, although of course she knows that. At some level I am guilty. Shouldn't I be taking her to a museum, or teaching her something? But this is what she wanted to do. In three hours I'll have to take her back home to her Mum. My weekend is almost over. Heartbreaking.

From my left I hear a shout - someone is in distress. I look across to where there is an arrangement of huge cylindrical blocks. You use them to get up into the second level. I can't see anyone where the voice is coming from.

'Steph, just go in there and see who's calling.' She hesitates, waving the drink bottle. I take it from her and put it on the floor. Steph ducks through the vinyl-edged archway into the rear of the play area. She pushes the dangling punch-bag-like danglers and looks over to me. I mouth: 'Go on,' using a hand signal like a swat-team cop - two quick jabs with my index finger. Now she's behind the cylinders and I can't really see what's happening. I scan round to see if anyone has noticed my covert op. Then she's running back, smashing into my knees with complete abandon.

'Daddy ...'

I wait. It sometimes takes her a minute to articulate things.

'Daddy ... a boy is stuck. He said I had to get someone straight now.'

'Right.'

I look around again, but no-one is checking for this boy. It's a bit like when you see money on the ground. I want to help the kid and I'm secretly sure that this whole episode reflects well on my skills as a parent. But I've got to check - is the owner aware that they have put their valuable possession in jeopardy? I'm also paranoid. This one time I picked up a tenner at work, on the car-park. Hardly anyone was in yet and no-one was parked nearby. I pocketed it. But then I was suddenly aware of the CCTV that we had installed. Was this some kind of test? Leave money on the deck and record staff responses. How many would hand it in to reception? Still - must try not to be paranoid.

So, I go in and speak to the kid. He's snivelling; his face is red and damp with tears. There's a space created by the way these cylinders are arranged. He must have slipped or climbed down into one of the gaps. Perhaps it was a gag - he was hiding like a trap-door spider, waiting for passing prey. But then he realised he didn't have the upper-body strength to pull himself out. He's inarticulate so, after another moment's hesitation (is it okay to touch this kid I don't know?) I reach into the hole and scoop him out. He runs off immediately, in search of his parent or just some other scrape to get into? I don't know.

A scream. At first you ignore this stuff in here: it's a play area - kids scream. But this dry has the richer tones and power of an adult woman. And she's not stopping. I look across to the main ball-pit. She's holding something that she's clearly just retrieved from the balls. For a moment, the things I'd really not want to step on in there come to mind. A nappy. Also, for some reason, I always worry that rats might get in there - fancy stepping on a dead rat! The thing she is holding up is a shirt. Automatically I scan round for a topless child. No. No-one has lost a shirt. But then I realise why she's screaming. The thing's covered with blood.

After that my eyes are glued to her. She throws the shirt down and scoops up her son, who's also looking for his sock. Luckily he hasn't found anything yet. Her face hardens into something like control and she tells the children to get out fast, there's a mess in the ball-pool. Then she's striding up to Zoe.

'Something's wrong. I found a shirt covered in blood. You'll have to ...'

But Zoe is already on her way in, having seen the whole thing.

'Yes, thank you. I'll see to it.'

There's blood everywhere. She tries to pull the boy out, sticky balls rolling slowly across her clothes, printing a crazy pattern of blood trails. His throat is cut in a jagged tear. He's limp in her arms. A dead weight. I turn to help and then look down at Steph. She's wide-eyed, trying to spit out a question. I turn away from the disaster and scoop Steph up, taking her to the other end of the warehouse. It's chaos. I drop my ticket on the counter and stalk out. Yes the police will want to question me, but not now. I've got to get Steph back to her Mum by 8.