

## Chapter 6: SoundPlay: A Sonic Experience of Digital Loose Parts

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### 3. “Burnt Out” by Stan Bottcher

I took the same route as always. A path had been worn into the ground from the years of my too-big boots dragging through the dirt. It looked different now than it did; my absence had allowed skunk cabbage and daffodils to take over, reminding me that nothing in the woods truly belonged to us, despite our best efforts to control it. I hopped across the first creek, passed our first base, and headed to the meeting spot, a deep hole created by a fallen tree. In the past, I’d have stopped to pick up around the base. Not today. Today was different.

I arrived at the meeting spot early. I set my faded blue backpack down and cleared a space for a fire, collecting all the nearby sticks I could find. I waited for my neighbors Jacob, Sofie, and Ben. At last, I heard the rustle of leaves as they approached.

“Did you guys remember to bring your maps?” I asked, in a hushed tone, even though there was no one to hear us.

“I’ve got all of mine,” said Ben, as he pulled a torn paper folder labeled “Coupons” from his bag.

“We brought ours too,” Jacob added, as Sofie pulled a neatly folded wad of papers from her sweatshirt pocket.

“Let’s get started then, yeah?” I asked, still unsure of whether or not we really intended to incinerate our most valuable possessions. We had spent 4 years exploring and mapping out every inch of a 3-mile stretch of creek bed behind our homes. We knew the best places to find clay in the banks, and where the best sand was. We had built nearly a dozen bases and bridges, with secret stashes of band aids, a steak knife, and two rusting lighters all stolen from our homes. The only physical evidence we had to show for this was a collection of maps drawn on notebook paper. Each of the four of us was responsible for mapping one area of the creek. I had the farthest section, which I didn’t mind because it had the most interesting features, like a wading area smooth with sand and a tree fallen across the creek that caught amazing trash any time it rained hard. The sheer volume of stuff that would collect was surprising. We found two-by-fours and car tires and all kinds of rope and cans, which we used to build and expand our constructions.

“Here’s a lighter,” said Ben as he drew the rusting purple Bic from his pocket. As Jacob created a teepee of sticks to start the fire, I gathered the maps in a pile and placed them gingerly on a stump. Jacob lit the fire, and we sat in silence, watching it grow larger and larger as he fed it sticks until we had a mound of coals. The silence was reassuring. There was nothing left to be said.

We had talked about what we would do if we ever decided to leave the creek. Ben was a year older than the rest of us, and he was heading to high school in a week. He couldn’t keep coming to the creek, he was a “high schooler” now, and “high schoolers” didn’t do that sort of thing. Roaming the creek was too childish, and even though we loved it, we were tired of it too. It was a lot of work to maintain our forts and bridges. We didn’t want anyone to be able to find our bases. Naturally, burning the maps seemed the only course of action.

“Okay, who’s going first?” asked Jacob nervously.

“I’ll go,” Ben responded, carefully placing the first of his maps over the flame. Glowing ashes danced, delicate in the rising smoke. “Me next,” Sofie muttered, crumpling and throwing hers onto the flame. We went around the circle five or six times until every inch of every map was burnt to ash.

We sat in silence watching the fire burn down, and the sun go down. And the woods grew dim, as if they were sad to see us go. I watched the final flame grow smaller and smaller, until it finally burnt out, like a whisper that you could barely hear but you know was there.

I grabbed a handful of dirt and dumped it unceremoniously on the remaining embers.  
I stomped them out.