

Spontaneous Combustion

He was absolutely and unquestionably drunk. It was a splendid affair, like sitting in a pool of warm mud—from the neck up.

Adam Golding, in umpteen ways at least—though probably more—was peculiar. He was like a left-handed man who had been forced since boyhood to use his feet.

Adam was unemployed and, quite probably, unemployable. The Social Security office—a focus for his ubiquitous contempt—took care of his daily needs with no expectation of thanks. It was like the father he had never had. Adam was twenty-two and lacked ambition.

The walls of his flat were all painted black. The living room was separated from the outside world by dusty curtains, kept permanently drawn, while thirty watt bulbs, hidden behind unusually loud speakers, suggested illumination without actually providing it. In the corner, on the wine red carpet, an old black and white television sat in a permanent state of blankness. Close by, an agreeable steel string guitar leaned casually against the wall, with a vast record collection just beside. In the stead of a couch, two single mattresses lay one upon the other, covered with a pet blanket that copiously shed its hair. The remainder of the flat was Spartan, boasting of Adam's almost religious devotion to poverty; a Japanese stereo the exception that questioned the rule. He took good care of his questionable stereo, knew all its knobs and lights and needles, switches and buttons. He liked it and was sure it liked him.

Adam had painted strange murals about the place: a skull

and cross-bones here, an atomic mushroom cloud there, a tremendous crack in the earth somewhere else. The death they suggested, gave life to the black walls.

It was 11:00 p.m. Adam took another passionate swig of his home-made lager. Although he lived in a council flat, Adam's brewing was extensive enough to meet the criteria of a cottage industry. He was not so much concerned with flavour and quality, as with specific gravity; and this one was a particularly grave batch.

Lying perfectly still on his couch, supping the lager with devotion, the room filled to the brim with the sound of music, Adam looked something like death warmed up. He was supping his way somewhere else—had just arrived, and was already lost. He was lost in the tangle of music, and the moving waves of inebriation. Lost in a wordless world.

Back in the living room, Adam took another swig, draining the glass. He stumbled into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and found only one bottle remained.

"Poor old beer," he thought. "All by yourself. No one to talk to except a carton of eggs." He took the bottle, gently, lovingly, and saw his face reflected in the curving brown glass, all discoloured and distorted. "Poor beer," he thought, and decided to drink it quickly—for its own sake as much as his.

Walking back into the living room, Adam guzzled thoughtfully; finally slumping back into the couch.

It was a small park.

Adam's clothes were covered in holes, he had no shoes, and his feet were black with filth. He was spread out on the lawn, surrounded by a collection of old weather-worn alcoholics. He watched as they passed around a bottle of something that looked like water, and tasted like fire. The

bottle did its rounds, and finally Adam took a long hot drink, closing his eyes to keep in the flames. Passing the bottle, he noticed two girls, walking by on the path outside, peering through the mesh of the fence as they trotted their female trot. Adam could read their lips. One said: "Look at 'im in there, wiv all those tramps." The other answered, "Yeah, I know. I wonder 'ow 'e got like that?" Adam was good: not only could their read lips, he could read their accent too.

It seemed dreadfully romantic. And then the music from the questionable stereo infused itself into the drama, like sunlight sneaking through a cloud. Adam smiled.

It must be time for bed, he supposed. Adam switched off the questionable stereo, turned out the hidden lights and staggered away. He stripped and tumbled into bed.

So Tuesday—the best day, the day the Giro check arrived—was over. It was as unlikely as it was true. He sat around all day, doing anything he felt like doing—which was often nothing at all—and then Tuesday came around and thin money came falling through a hole in the door. Why would anyone even bother to work? The working class had failed the final exam: that was it. They were stupid and knew no better.

So Tuesday was over.

Suddenly his thoughts of Tuesday being over came to a sudden halt. Adam noticed things peculiar; things unpleasant. There were things abnormal going on. Firstly, the bed seemed about ten times harder than it really was. It was as hard as something not the least bit soft. There was no give to it. Secondly, the sheet and quilt seemed to be airborne: not flying about the room, or anything like that; they just seemed to float a few inches from his body. It was as if some force were busy pushing them away from

his skin, holding them off. And then Adam noticed what it was. Heat. He could feel heat oozing out of his body. A terrific heat. An unusual heat centred around his penis and testicles, like hot spots on a radio active landscape. And yet he was not sweating: it was not that kind of heat. It was a deviant kind of heat. It was like the sun's heat, from the point of view of the sun. Adam was not so much scared, as intrigued. Once, he had read in a magazine—dutifully stolen from the public library—about Spontaneous Combustion: people just bursting into flames as they zipped their zippers, or jogged themselves jogging. Maybe that was it. Maybe he was coming down with a case of Spontaneous Combustion. It surely felt that way. Perhaps these were the first symptoms.

He was walking in the street, the next morning, when suddenly he burst into flames—right in front of the fire station.

He was in a corner shop, buying smoked oysters. The cashier handed him his change and—puff, smoked Adam.

He was talking to a Catholic priest, when suddenly he became a burnt offering.

He was swimming. Whoof, hiss. Floating ash.

The heat was still there, constantly there; the sheets still refused to have anything to do with his skin; the bed still seemed ten times harder than it really was. Adam became increasingly convinced that this was the first stage of Spontaneous Combustion. He had definitely caught it; but was there a cure?

At length, Adam fell into a drunken slumber that was filled with spontaneous images of erotic combustion.

When Adam awoke next morning, the first thing he noticed was that the bed and covers were normal, and that the heat

had gone.

Adam dressed and turned on the kettle. He scouted around for a piece of paper, and then sat himself down at the kitchen table.

Wednesday, October, 1990.

I think I've caught Spontaneous Combustion. I noticed last night in bed. I felt this strange heat coming out of my body. This morning I feel fine, except I have a bit of a headache.

Words, to Adam, were like soap: to be used sparingly.

The kettle whistled.

Adam made tea and toast for breakfast. He didn't really like tea, but it was cheaper than coffee—and in any case, he hated coffee. It was cold in the flat. He sat himself down again at the table, wrapping his hands around the steaming mug for warmth.

Adam was thin—the last thing he wanted to do was waste his money on food—and the single slice of toast made him full. He lit a cigarette and smoked, blowing rings into the cold kitchen air, still thinking about Spontaneous Combustion.

It was 11:00 a.m. Adam put on his coat and left the chilly flat. He lived on the ninth floor of a tower block. A large open hallway featured the lift, a rubbish shoot and staircase opposite, and the pale blue doors of the flats on each side. The lift was directly off-centre, and served as a kind of uneven border line. There were only two flats on Adam's side, and four on the other. Adam stood outside his door, peering through the meshed window at the world below. He could hear the faint and familiar sound of army band

marching music, coming from his neighbour's flat and bouncing gently about the reflective hallway. Still he gazed outwards; and from where he stood, up on the ninth floor, the landscape seemed unreal. The up and down hills looked flat, like zigzags of chalk on a fallen blackboard. Dreary roads and drab houses: more childish scribble. It was raining, and the chalky images were all getting wet and smeared, blending together.

Rain raining. Rain falling. Falling all the way to the ground. He was falling shouting, falling down, falling down shouting. He looked into flat windows on the way down, glimpsed the naughty things people were doing, and then splatter, he hit the floor. He could feel all the other broken raindrops come to him and hug him, and they all had wet broken sex together.

As Adam turned away, he noticed a shadow of movement behind the frosted window of his neighbour's door. It was the old soldier. Adam had never actually seen the old soldier, only his shadow behind the frosted glass, or the quivering of net curtains, the sense of an old soldier eye peering through the spy hole in the door. This time, Adam decided to knock. This was war. The old soldier lived on the wrong side of the border. It was supposed to be a nice girl living there, who liked to lend cups of sugar. He knocked. The curtain stirred again, as if the old soldier had been startled, and then nothing happened. He knocked again.

"Is someone there?" he called. His voice sounded silly, and its echo mocked him. He knocked again. "Come on Private Parts," he thought. "Open the damn door." Adam pushed open the letter box and gawked inside. The doors to all the rooms were closed, and all he saw—in a flat identical to

his—was a gloomy passage with no carpet. Suddenly, two other eyes looked back at his. He jumped away and the letter box slammed shut with a metallic clatter.

“I’ll get you for that!” he shouted. “You fuckin’ bastard.” Adam walked away, pressed the button for the lift, and thought about his strategy for revenge.

The bus took ages to arrive. Whenever it was raining, and it was almost always raining, the bus took ages to arrive. Adam went upstairs and sat at the front. It was nice and warm inside the bus, and he wore the warmth like a king might wear a robe.

Adam sat sideways in the seat, his legs up, feet dangling, watching the female passengers not with surreptitious looks—those casual accidentally on purpose whoops I didn’t know you were there I’d better turn away again glances—but with arrant lack of shame.

The bus arrived in the city centre. As he strolled down the street, people turned and stared at him in the same way he stared at girls—though for entirely different reasons. There was some inexplicable and indefatigable quality about Adam that seemed to shout obscenities at the world.

As he walked, the rain rolled harmlessly off his greasy tangled hair.

First things first: he marched into a post office, joined the queue, and after ten minutes of shuffling, changed the thin money: the Giro cheque, into real fat money: pounds and pence.

He stepped into the Victorian market. With its domed roof and decorated pillars, it was like a cathedral, built in deference to the god of materialism. People came from all over, to strain their necks looking at the vaulted ceiling and all the fancy decoration. It was hard to steal anywhere

else—the departments store detectives sniffed him out like blood hounds—but here, with the motley mass, he was less conspicuous.

He strolled into Stringers Books, quickly moving to the science fiction section. There was no time to waste. He dared not dilly. He dared not even dally. He picked up a book, pretended to read the back cover, glanced about, here and there, and then slipped it into a large pocket sewn into the inside of his coat. He took three more, then wandered about the shop, stopping just beside the shop keeper for several elongated seconds, to prove how wonderfully innocent he was. And then he made his way to the exit. He was almost out. This was where they nabbed you, when they nabbed you. He was almost out. Then, quite unexpectedly, a hand grasped his shoulder.

“I’m nabbed,” he thought.

“Could you—” he heard. Adam, without looking back, decided he could not, dashed forward, and the hand found no grip. He ran, dodging in and out of the crowd of coats and boots. There was shouting from behind. He knocked a fat woman over, who fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes. And all the coats and boots nearby went, “Tut, tut.” It was a good thing, being thin: he could slip through places that suggested a good deal of unslipability.

At last, he was out of the market. The rain, still coming down, felt nice and cool and fresh on his face. He continued to run, turning up a narrow side street where he slowed to a casual walk, his heart beating like a drum drum drum. Adam, removing the price tickets from the books, glancing back now and again to make sure nobody followed, smiled to himself. It was fun. It was exciting. It was a game.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," the policeman said, gripping Adam in places that should not be gripped.

The judge was wearing a wig. He was also wearing a pair of knickers and a bra—but only Adam knew that.

The prison was like a working class holiday camp. There was good food, a ping-pong table, television, and it was heated.

Adam wandered towards the high street. The rain was beginning to stop, and the autumn sun peeped out from behind tired clouds. He sat on a bench, watched the girls go by, and smoked a cigarette, puff by puff.

"Fish cake and chips with scraps on, to eat now," he told a woman, who looked herself like a fish cake. He covered them generously with salt and vinegar, and sat on the town hall steps to eat. He watched all the suit and ties going up and down, busy busy busy. They eyed him condescendingly, wearing superiority like a mask; busy busy busy. There was no time like the present, and they were all thinking about the future. To those straight and narrow shirts and ties, ambitious with places to go shirts and ties, Adam, gaunt and lackadaisical, was like dirty underwear.

It was an extravagance Adam allowed himself once a week: fish cake and chips. He savoured every hot bite, until there was nothing left to either savour or bite.

He stood, ready to attend to the business of the day, and walked in the loose direction of a famous frozen food shop that boasted, with great modesty, a mountain of the cheapest meat pies in town. Their contents guaranteed unguessable—or your money back—these were exceptional meat pies; a favourite with the unworking class; the staple of Adam's diet. Their nutritional value was rumoured equal to

Kellogg's Corn Flakes, though inferior to the cardboard box they were packed in; and Adam's thin body, pale skin, sunken eyes and lack of muscle tone gave more sustenance to the rumour than the meat pies gave to him. But Adam had not seen himself for a long time. He could barely remember what he looked like, though he knew he had hair.

Adam bought sixteen meat pies.

The famous frozen food shop was located in an untidy and mucky pedestrian shopping centre, whose only distinguishing feature was a real life outside tree growing beneath its glass roof. The real life outside tree was distressed: the climate had gone mad; the seasons had been kidnapped. It was imprisoned in the peculiar heat of permanent summer. It was an outside tree forced to live inside.

Adam carried his frozen meat pies passed the wilting outside tree, and into the supermarket opposite. There he bought:

ten pounds of potatoes
six cans of beans
one pound of margarine
a large loaf of bread
a packet of tea
eight packets of biscuits
one pound of rice
six eggs.

As usual, he stole a chunk of cheese.

Adam's shopping list, the result of year's experimentation, was the absolute minimum weekly provision for a thin human who had no desire to get thinner, and absolutely no chance of getting fatter

Adam, who had also purchased two cans of the strongest, cheapest lager he could find, sat himself down on the floor

of the shopping centre, his back against the trunk of the suffering outside tree, and guzzled away. He was a creature of habit—and the habit was stronger than the creature. He guzzled. Adam drew strange looks from passers-by. It was a tremendous comfort to him. He guzzled, and smoked a friendly cigarette.

Adam sat on the bus, again in his usual forward seat on the upper deck, his obligatory Wednesday programme almost done. His only company was a young girl suffering from acute ugliness, so Adam looked out of the window at the tops of peoples heads.

"Oh god," she said. "Squeeze them."

"Phew," he thought, and squeezed.

"Oh yes. Oh yes!" she insisted. He moved up, kissing her stomach on the way, and they exchanged spit. She took hold of his erection, and waved it about like a magic wand. She put the magic wand in her mouth, rubbed it over her face, all the time whispering age old spells.

"Do you want to tie me up?" she asked again. "I don't normally ask men I just met," she explained. "But I think you're all right."

"In a bit," he said. She was too easy. He wanted to want. She wanted to give.

"Come on top of me," she said. "I like to be dominated."

"Phew," he thought.

They were complete strangers. She had called into The Red Bull on her way home from the Polytechnic, ordered half a pint of lager and lime, and then uncovered him in the corner, uncovering her. He turned away, embarrassed. When she came over towards him, his heart was already racing and his penis surging for the finish line.

"Oh god," she said, piously.

His fingers dug into her flesh, scratching for a fortune less durable than gold.

"Hit me," she begged.

"What's ya name?" he asked between gasps.

"Karen."

"You're a fuckin' nymph, Karen."

"I know."

He slapped her face. "D'ya like that?"

"Yes," she told him. And it was true.

There were no tower blocks about. This was a private estate, and the middle class liked to live close to the ground. The only panorama they knew was wall to wall fitted carpeting.

Ding-dong.

"How come the door was locked?" Adam asked.

"There was a strange looking fellow, out in the street earlier," his mother told him.

"Maybe it was me," Adam said dryly, and walked in. The back door led directly into the kitchen.

"Shall I put the kettle on?"

"Might as well."

Adam put his shopping bags down and went to the toilet.

"Is Kaz home yet?" he called. The prestigious house had a toilet on both floors. Adam's mother made no reply. She refused to talk with people when they were in the toilet. The toilet flushed, and Adam reappeared.

"Did you wash your hands?"

"Yes. My feet as well."

"Your hair's getting awfully long, Adam."

"I know. Where's Kaz?" Adam walked into the living room,

as if the answer was of no importance.

"Karen isn't back from the Polytechnic," she answered, bringing the tea to her son. "Why?"

"No reason. I've got your money." Adam took a handful of notes from his pocket.

"Thanks," she said, taking it and placing it under a ceramic cat on the mantle piece.

"You're not going to count it?"

"No," she answered.

"Does that mean," Adam began, with the voice of a small boy, "you trust me, mummy?"

"Mummy knows better than that."

They heard the door open.

"That must be Karen now." Adam's sister entered the living room, throwing her coat on the back of a chair.

"Can you hang it up, please?" their mother said.

"Hi, Kaz," Adam offered.

"Hi, Adam," she replied, laboriously picking up the coat and taking it into the hall.

"Where've you been?" Adam called.

"Adam, do you always have to shout at people from different rooms?"

Adam turned to his mother. "All right, you win. From now on, I'll only shout at people from the same room."

"I went to a friend's, after class," Karen said, returning to the living room.

"Lucky friend," Adam said, somewhat abstrusely

"Mmm. What's this?" Karen asked, seeing the money under the ceramic cat.

"It's Adam's."

"Oh."

"It's not mine. How can it be mine when I owe you it?"

It was certainly outside Adams philosophy, this sense of liability. It was even alien to his character. But this was family. Family was different.

"Do as you please," she said. "You know I don't want your money."

"And I don't want yours, either. In any case, we're almost quits."

"Listen," she changed the subject, "I've got to go to the supermarket. What would you like for dinner?"

"I don't mind—Oh Jesus, I forgot to put my frozen meat pies in the 'fridge." He ran his fingers through his greasy hair and wondered how to get someone else to put them away.

"I don't know, Adam. Why don't you spend your money on some decent food for a change? You need good food more than all that beer and cigarettes."

"Don't forget records," Adam added.

"Did you look at yourself lately?"

"No."

"Well you should. You're terribly thin. It's no good living the way you live."

"It's worse than you think," Adam said.

"What do you mean?"

"I think I've caught a serious case of Spontaneous Combustion."

"What are you talking about?" she said, shaking her head. "You get worse." And she prepared to be off, shop shop shopping.

"I'm going, then. I won't be long," their mother said, and the door slammed gently shut.

"I wasn't joking, you know," Adam said, turning to his sister.

"What about?"

"Spontaneous Combustion. I've got it—for real. When I went to bed last night, there was this strange heat. I could feel it oozing out of my body. I tell you, it was really weird."

"Were you drunk?"

"Well, yes." And they both smiled. "But that's got nothing to do with it." He took a drink of tea.

"Hey, Adam, your frozen meat pies."

"Oh, shit. Can you put them away for me?"

"Crippled are you?"

"No. I've told you. It's this Spontaneous Combustion: it makes me tired."

Karen smiled, and went to put away the meat pies.

When she returned, Adam was standing with his back to the gas fire, warming his posterior. He watched his sister slump into the couch. She was a good looking sister. She never wore a bra. She had always been a good looking sister, even when they were little kids.

"You think I'm joking, don't you?" There was something wrong about not wearing a bra.

"What're you looking at, Adam?" she asked, with a half concealed smile.

"Eh?" He moved his eyes to hers. "Nothing. Anyway, I know I have it. There's no mistaking Spontaneous Combustion. Once you have it, you know it. The heat—"

"Are you sure you didn't just work up a sweat wanking?"

"Funny," he said, offering a sarcastic smile. "I tell you, it was really weird. The heat was really weird."

"You've been deprived of sex too long—that's all."

"Unlike you," Adam retorted.

There were two lifts in the ground floor hallway, for the

odd and even numbered floors; and, as usual, Adam had pushed the call buttons of both. Adam waited with his bags of food and a teenage girl, leaning against the tiled wall, looking her over. She was nice. Underneath all the make up—there to disguise her youth—she was nice. He bet himself a bottle of beer that she would not be taking the same lift.

Both lifts arrived at the same time. Adam took a step back, the girl took a step forward. He was in luck: he owed himself a bottle of beer.

"Which floor?" he asked.

"Seventh."

Adam pressed the button twice—the lift was old and needed encouragement. Adam put the plastic bags down, leaned into the front corner of the lift and stared at the girl. She glanced at him for a moment, and then turned to face the doors. Her flimsy coat was unfastened. She looked back at him.

"Do you always stare at people?"

"Just about," he answered. She turned back to the front without breathing another word.

When Adam arrived at the ninth floor, he glanced across at the old soldier's door; but there was no sign of him. Searching for his key, Adam again contemplated his revenge.

It was chilly inside. Adam turned up the electric heater and sat on it, waiting for the warmth.

There was perfect quiet. The flat was like a lost island, a sky island, and Adam saw himself romantically as a castaway. Visiting his mother and sister was like sailing down to the mainland; but it was cheating. Castaways were not supposed to go off sailing, visiting relatives. Adam, after those visits, felt like a cheat. Sitting there, waiting for the heat, he felt like a cheat. He felt

disturbed. He needed a drink. He walked into the kitchen and found the refrigerator had somehow managed to empty itself.

The spare room was an interesting place. There was a sign painted on the door that read: "Staff Only." Inside, the window was blacked out with cardboard and rubbish bags. The floor was uncovered, and on the left side sat rows and rows of bottles, ready to open. They looked, to Adam, like a crowd of little fat brown people, waiting for something profound to happen, to make all that waiting worthwhile. Opposite, under the blank window, were white plastic containers: buckets busy brewing. In the far right corner, more bottles, not yet ready to join in with the serious waiting. And on the walls, rough shelves sagged and tilted under the weight of beer books, tubes, tablets and assorted paraphernalia.

Adam picked up as many bottles as he could uncomfortably carry, and took them into the kitchen. It was thirsty work, all that work. When the refrigerator was finally bursting with beer, Adam took a bottle into the living room. The glass from the previous evening was laying conveniently on the floor, and Adam conveniently filled it. He turned on some music, set the volume high, stared for a moment at the black painted wall, perched himself back on the heater, and gulped down the beer.

Later, as the early hours crept around, Adam picked up the agreeable guitar. He had borrowed it from his old high school. One night, he had broken in through a skylight and wandered around though the spooky corridors, pretending he was a secret agent or something. Before discovering the guitar, he came upon some poster paint in the art room, and decided to paint messages on the walls. He named names:

"Mr. Glenn Fucks Reptiles." He placed places. "In the mouth." He dated dates: "Every morning." Adam also informed the school that the headmaster ate bubble gum all day long, and stayed behind after school to stick pieces under the desks of the girls he fancied, hoping it would be later discovered and the culprit sent to his office for a spank on the bum. It was the wordiest graffiti the school had ever known.

That night, in bed, it started again. The symptoms of Spontaneous Combustion had returned. The mattress was hard, the covers floating, the heat oozing. And this time Adam felt worried. Suddenly, exploding into flames did not seem quite so romantic. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

Thursday, October, 1990

I had it again last night. I think the heat was even hotter than before. What I can't figure out is, how the hell I got it in the first place? Maybe if I figured out how I got it, I could figure out how to get rid of it.

Adam ate his toast, drank his tea, then opened up a beer. He stared into the glass and thought about Spontaneous Combustion.

The sign read, "Westwood Public Library." Adam visited the library once or twice a week, during the cold months. Mainly it was to save on the electric bills—though he also visited the library several times a week during the warm months as well.

Three librarians worked inside. They were all women, and looked as if they had been reading too often.

"Do you know where I could find something about Spontaneous Combustion?"

"Spontaneous combustion?" the librarian repeated, looking over the top of her narrow eye glasses, wondering if he was drunk this time.

"Yes."

"Mm, let me think now." She was the oldest of the three, and the least likely to smile. Her nose was long and spindly, and all the children thought she was a witch. She came out from her witch's castle, and, without giving Adam a further glance, walked away. He followed uncertainly at her heels.

"Do you think you have something?" he asked the back of her neck.

"I'm not sure," she answered in mid witch stride, not bothering to turn.

"I've caught it, you see."

"What?"

"Spontaneous Combustion."

"Oh," she said, glancing back for a moment.

The witch arrived at a busy section of the library, her eyes darting expertly across the rows of books. She pulled one out.

"You can check in that one," she said coldly, handing it to him. Before Adam could read the title, she thrust another into his hands. "And that one," she said. Adam watched her witch movements, sharp movements, nervous movements, the stationary head and the moving eyes, the steering spindly nose.

"That's all I can see," she said. "There may be something in the Encyclopaedia." And then, to avoid Adam's eyes, she continued her search a few moments longer. Finally, with

the shortest of narrow glances, she turned away.

"Thanks," Adam said, as she stepped her staccato step.

Adam looked down at the two books. He had the strangest feeling that they were exhibits in a trial that would eventually prove him guilty—of everything. Adam pulled a face. He had been expecting medical journals, but instead he had *Unsolved Mysteries*, and *It's a Wonder*.

Adam wandered into the reading room, where easy chairs offered comfort to readers of hard words. He opened up *It's a Wonder*.

It was interesting. In return for scientific and technological knowledge, the American Government had sold its people to aliens. These aliens were superior to humans, except they had neither souls nor emotions, and were busy doing experiments to find out what they were missing.

There were pictures of these aliens, drawn, the book said, by eye-witnesses from all corners of the world. The similarities were quite astounding. The head was triangular, the eyes big, and the nose nonexistent. There was something very alien about the way those aliens looked. But most astounding of all, Adam realised, was the astounding coincidence that all the eye-witnesses could draw so well.

The book said the aliens were very dangerous.

For some reason, Adam had decided to go camping. He was inside his tent, wondering why, when the flying saucer landed. The creature that emerged had a triangular head, large eyes and a nonexistent nose. It was not easy: armed with only a can opener and a tooth brush, Adam somehow managed to capture the captain. He tied it to a tree with his shoe laces, and sat down opposite. And then he set to work, drawing carefully, line by careful line, that

triangular head, those big eyes and nonexistent nose.

He skimmed fruitlessly through the remaining pages, and then turned to Unsolved Mysteries. Here he found chapters on: out of body experiences, Voodoo, hypnotism, witchcraft, mind reading, mind writing, telepathy, reincarnation, water divining, the Shroud of Turin, electric shock treatment, haunted houses, exorcism, the secret power of pebbles, channelling, changelings, mediums, the Bermuda Triangle, hallucinogens, black magic, white magic, green magic, astrology, and more still. There seemed to be something about everything, with the exception of Spontaneous Combustion.

Adam's last resort was The Encyclopaedia Britannica, which proved more forthcoming, though totally irrelevant. It described the oxidation of piles of coal and stacks of hay.

Sunday, October, 1990

It seemed quite interesting to have Spontaneous Combustion, but that was only when I didn't really believe I had it. It was the idea I liked.

I don't think Spontaneous Combustion is actually a disease. If it were something you could catch, like a cold or something, there would be epidemics of people bursting into flame. It's just not like that. And I don't think you can be born with it either, because that would mean it runs in the family, and nothing runs in my family. Things either sit down, or walk really slowly. None of my relatives ever had anything that ran. Certainly none of them ever breathed fire without meaning to.

Here's what I think it is. I think Spontaneous Combustion is something that other people make happen to you. Like

when you're a kid, and just starting to be somebody real, if they squeeze you too much, if they try to shape you too much away from your real shape, well it starts to mess up your brain, and that's when you get it. It's all in the brain. It's like friction in the brain. Of course, I'm only guessing all this. It could be something really crazy that gives you it, like wearing the same socks for three weeks, or something.

Every night, since that first terrible night, Adam had climbed into bed with Spontaneous Combustion. Some nights were worse than others. Sometimes he would lie until the late hours of the early hours, feeling the hardness of the bed, feeling the dry heat, not feeling the covers as they floated, refusing to touch his skin; and wishing things would get back to normal.

Adam walked up the long hill, away from his tower block, towards Westwood. Familiar things spontaneous and combustible had been pushed to the back of his mind. Something had happened. Something had happened, and the only person he could tell was his sister.

As he plodded along, Adam realised that plodding seemed to provoke thought. The legs moved back and forth, automatically, the feet went plod, and there was nothing else to do but think. It was worth remembering, and he would try to sit down more often.

Adam pushed open the back door.

"Anyone in?"

"Hi, Adam." Karen's voice came from the living room.

"Hi, Kaz." She was alone, sitting at the table, with half a dozen books spread about. "Well look at the dedicated

student. Who're you trying to fool?"

"Myself."

"Well that's good. If you can fool yourself, you can fool anyone."

"Are you drunk?"

"I refuse to answer, on the grounds that I might tell the truth."

"You don't need to worry about that, Adam: since when did you tell the truth?"

"Maybe I've made an old year's resolution."

"And pigs might fly."

"Only if they get pilot licenses."

"Clever Dick."

"Not just clever. Big."

"That's what they all say."

"You should know."

"Hey, be nice."

If Adam could not be nice, he could at least change the subject.

"Mother at the club?"

"As usual. You staying for dinner?"

"As usual."

"Good."

"Why good?" Adam was in a mood to be difficult.

"Why not?" Karen laboriously closed up the books, one by one.

"Guess what happened?"

"I give in."

"I think I killed someone."

"An assassination was it? Who'd you get, the Minister of Social Security."

"Ho ho. Don't you know girls aren't supposed to be

funny?"

"What are they supposed to be?"

"Sexy."

"What about sexy and funny?"

"What about sardines and custard. They never appear in the same dish."

"You're clever today."

"I'm always clever. It's just that you're normally too dumb to realise."

"Anyhow, I am sexy."

"It was the fellow across the hall."

"What was?"

"The one I killed."

"The old soldier?"

"Yeah," Adam snorted a brief laugh. "He fought in his last battle."

"Why, what happened?"

"Well I decided to get my own back on him, for the other day."

"What other day?"

"You know. I told you, when he scared me with his eyes."

"Oh, yes. Poor baby. Did the old soldier scare you with his big eyes?"

"I told you, you're not supposed to be funny. Anyway, I decided to get him back, so I went to the shop and bought a packet of bangers."

"Good one Adam. Sausages. That'll teach him."

"Fireworks, Kaz. Will you be serious?" Karen tried to look serious. "I tied them all together and—"

"The sausages?"

"Yes. The sausages. I tied all the sausages together, and went across the landing, lit them all at once, knocked on

his door and dropped them in through the letter box."

"You should grow up, Adam."

"It was only for fun."

"That's what I mean. That's what little kids do for fun. You're not a little kid anymore."

"So how come I still do pee-pee in my pants?"

"I thought you were serious?"

"Oh, yes. Anyway, I could hear the sound of the bangers fizzing, and then his footsteps, and then bang."

"What was it?"

"What?"

"The bang?"

"The bloody bangers. What do you think? It was really good. It echoed like mad. I went back into the flat, just in case he came out, and laughed my head off."

Karen stood up and sat opposite her brother, in an armchair that seemed to grab hold of her and not want to let go.

"I think he died of the shock," Adam concluded.

"Come on Adam. A few bangers going off . . . People don't die like that."

"They do in books."

"This isn't a book."

"How do you know? The thing is though, I've been watching out for him ever since, and there's been no sign. Every time I leave the flat, I watch his door, like there might be a shadow, you know, through the glass, like usual."

"And?"

"Nothing. Not even the shadow of a shadow."

"Well maybe he's just decided to stop spying on you."

"That's what I thought. Anyway, I put a piece of cotton thread against his door, the other day, and it's still

there. It hasn't moved. I've knocked a few times, as well."

"Maybe you killed him."

"That's what I said. What should I do though? He'll start to smell soon."

"You'd better call the police."

"I want to keep out of it."

"Keep out of it?" Karen shook her head. "You shouldn't have got into it."

"I told you, it was only for fun. It's not my fault. He's the one who did all the peeping, not me. I just don't want him stinking up the place, that's all."

"Don't you care about anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Of course I do."

"Who? Give me an example."

"I care about you, don't I?"

"Thanks, Adam," she said sarcastically. "I'm chuffed."

"And mother, I suppose, in my own way."

"Everything's in your own way."

"We're talking about what I'm supposed to do—not what I'm supposed to be."

Just then they heard the back door opening.

"Oh, hello Adam. What're you doing here?" It was their mother.

"Is that the way to greet your loving son? Don't I give meaning to your hum drum existence?"

"I suppose you want dinner?"

"Only if you insist. Thanks."

She hung up her coat in the hall, and returned with, "You sound drunk."

"How does drunk sound?"

"Like you," she said, somewhat cheerlessly.

On his way home, Adam decided to take Karen's advice. He called the local police from a public telephone, and, doing his best impersonation of someone with short hair, told them maybe something had happened at 134 Rothering Towers.

By the time he reached the bottom of the hill, a police car and ambulance were already parked outside the tower block. Up on the ninth floor, as the lift doors grumbled open, he was greeted by a deceptive silence, and thought perhaps something else had happened on another floor. He stood for a moment, still inside the lift, looking out at the blank wall ahead, with the staircase on one side and the rubbish shoot on the other. He listened. Nothing seemed to be happening. As he stepped out of the lift, he saw a policeman, standing outside the old soldier's open door.

"Can I help you?" the policeman asked.

"No. I live there," Adam pointed.

"Oh, you do, do you," he said, in that redundant policeman way. Without taking his eyes from Adam, he called, "Captain!"

The captain appeared. He was old and oval shaped.

"What is it?" he asked in an old oval shaped voice.

"This . . . gentleman . . . lives opposite." And he nodded at Adam's door, in case the captain had forgotten the meaning of opposite.

"You live there," he asked, redundantly.

"Yes. What's happened?" Adam was good at acting. He was a well practised pretender. He could play the fool, and this was just another fool's game.

"Could we go into you're flat for a few moments? There're a few questions I'd like to ask."

The captain was surprised at the blackness of the walls, the mushroominess of the atomic mushroom cloud, and the boniness of the skull and crossbones. But when he saw the tremendous crack in the earth, he seemed almost to have been expecting it.

"Now then, sir, I'd like your full name and address." The captain was armed with an official pencil and note pad.

"Adam Golding. Here."

"Here. That would be?" he asked, licking the tip of his pencil.

"That would be where we are now."

"Yes sir," the captain looked up. "Very droll. The actual address."

"133 Rothering Towers."

The captain scribbled. "Now then, what can you tell me about your neighbour?"

"Nothing. I've never even seen him. Why, what's up?"

"How long have you been living here?"

"About three years."

"And you never once set eyes on him?"

"Never. I don't think he goes out much."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, but I think I know his address."

"Have you heard anything strange in the last few days? Any loud noises or whatnot."

"From over there? No. No whatnot. Whynot? Couldnot. I play my records loud."

"Yes sir. Very amusing." Luckily, the captain was a captain, and not a mere constable. Captains don't like nose blood on their boots clean. Constables do. They believe it is good for the leather. "You didn't make a call to the police station, then," the clean booted captain asked.

"Me? Call the police. I don't think so."

"You see, we received an anonymous call telling us that something might have happened to Mr. Tanner."

"That's my neighbour?"

"Yes. We found him dead."

"Oh."

"He died of a heart attack. Someone threw some fireworks in his letter box."

"Must've been kids. They go play up on the roof."

"Do you know any of them?"

"No."

When Adam closed the door, he almost choked on a particularly sharp laugh bone. It became lodged in his throat, and only a long glug of lager could get rid of it.

Thursday, October, 1990

How long have I had this friction in my brain? I didn't even know I had it, but now I do, because everything is starting to make sense.

Whenever you think or want or do something that's wrong for you, the wrongness starts rubbing against the knowing that it's wrong. Even if you don't know it's wrong for you, you know really. Deep down, there's like a plan of how you are. You might not know it, but you know it. This is how Spontaneous Combustion gets going.

It starts in school, when they fill your head with other people's ideas. Other people's ideas are fine for other people, but they don't belong in anyone's head except the one who thought them in the first place. A good idea is only good for the person who thought it. The moment you put it into someone else's head, it becomes wrong; and then it starts rubbing against the knowing that it's wrong.

How many of my secret thoughts are actually my secret thoughts? Not many. Most of them were given to me.

Adam checked the clock. It was 4:35 a.m. He was trying to cheat Spontaneous Combustion, had decided to stay up all night and sleep during the day. He was tired: his eyes from too much reading; his ears from too much music; his head from too much beer. Adam was not feeling like the life and soul of the party. Luckily, he had not invited anyone.

He pushed the curtains aside and looked out. The streets were dark and doomy quiet: roads barren, paths cracked and unwanted. It was as if the whole world were dead. Nothing had survived. Tinkle-tinkle. The whirr of an electric engine. Tinkle-tinkle. Nothing had survived except the tenacious milkman; that strange, shy and gentle creature, rarely seen during the day.

The window steamed up where his mouth kissed the glass, and he wiped it clear. Adam reached for the glass of beer, took a single sip and put it down again. It was starting to taste bad.

"It's a funny life," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. The timbre of his voice seemed all wrong. "I don't sound like that," he said, in a voice that sounded like that, and was not his own.

Adam was sitting on the couch. Like so many other times, Adam was in retreat: a pair of headphones having sex on his head, their orgasm music to his ears, and the effect of alcohol were floating, combining, forming a world of sensibility. The curtains had been pulled open and he sat, twisted towards the window. But there was no outside. There was only the sound of electric orgasm and the landscape of alcoholic stupor. It was better. Tears welled up, trickled

down. Everything that was, was not, was not, was. Tears welled up, trickled down. The sense of touch had been reduced to the nonsense of touch. There was nothing to touch. There was nothing to hold. There was nothing to grab and grapple. Music. Only music. Ethereal real real realness, shifting and swirling like clouds of shifting swirling light.

As the silent sun appeared from behind distant hills, it seemed that he awoke from a dream. From a dream. Adam took off the headphones. Was it only a dream? Silence. Was it only a dream? No answer. Silence. It was dawn, and there was no answer. He could see his face reflected in the window. Was he:

in, looking out,
or out, looking in?
Silence. No answer.

The swelling music, the absence, the secret messenger bringing the semblance of wisdom.

The rising sun, the street, the public postman bringing the Giro cheque.

Where was the answer?

Friday, October, 1990

I've been up all night. I have a feeling something bad is going to happen. I don't know why. I feel depressed. I feel like a fool. I'm wondering about everything. Worst of all, I'm sure everything is wondering about me.

Just after 8:00 a.m., Adam stumbled into his bedroom, stripped and fell into bed. It felt hard as concrete. Fear grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulled him here and there, refused to let go. The bed had never felt so solid,

so ungiving. He pulled the covers over his head, seeking comfort in the blackness, away from the silent rising sun; but the covers would not hide him, would not even touch him. And then the sudden surge of sudden heat, radiating from his body. Tears welled up again, only now they were terrible tears that ran bubbling, hissing, steaming down his cheeks.

Adam rolled over on his concrete bed.

There seemed to be a knocking, thousands of miles away. What? Adam opened his eyes. He was awake, yet something, some noise, some knocking still lingered, like the echoes of a bad knocking dream. Knock-knock. It was the door. The thin, naked, malnourished body climbed from bed. Out in the hall, the shiny floor tiles felt so cold they were hot, like coals on his fire-walking feet. Adam opened the door.

"Do you always answer the door naked?" It was Karen.

"Only when I'm not wearing clothes. Come in, quick. It's cold."

"Are you just getting up?"

Slam. The door banged closed.

"No. I'm just sleeping. What the hell's the time?"

"Three-thirty," she told him. And then, by way of an afterthought, added, "In the afternoon."

"I guessed."

"How come you're sleeping so late?" Karen was standing in the doorway to his bedroom, watching him pull on a pair of underpants. They were blue, with tiny yellow stitches that zigged almost as much as they zagged. "I mean, this is late isn't it—even for you?"

"I didn't go to bed last night. I stayed up until this morning. Do you want to put the kettle on? I need a cuppa."

"You getting shy?"

Adam was trying to find a clean shirt. Actually, he was trying to find a dirty shirt that looked clean.

"No, just thirsty," he said.

Karen went into the kitchen, leaving Adam to dress alone. She stared at the kettle for a moment, lost in thought.

"Can I turn the heat up?" she called. "It's cold." She had wrapped herself up, her arms crossed in front, hands clutching bare arms, forming a mantle that forced up her small breasts.

"You don't need to shout," Adam said, grinning from the doorway.

"Spying on me?" she asked.

"Sure Kaz. It turns me on when you hold yourself like that."

"I thought so. Speaking of spying: what happened with the old soldier?"

"He lost the war. He's dead. Spiritually, constitutionally, and legally."

"He really died?"

"Yes. A heart attack."

"Because of your fireworks?"

"Seems like it. At least according to the Old Bill."

"So you called them, finally."

"Yeah. I pretended I was somebody else."

"You are somebody else."

"Only according to other people. Anyway, it's all over now."

"It is for the old man."

They sat at the table, drinking tea.

"Guess what?" Adam began.

"I give in."

"I've been thinking about getting a job."

"You? I thought work was a dirty word."

"So is fuck, but I still like to do it."

"What kind of work?"

"Pff," he said, "I don't know. I probably won't. I'm just toying with the idea."

"I'm sure you won't. Why are you even thinking about it though?"

"I don't know. Who knows why we think of things? We don't choose what we think about."

"Of course we do."

"I don't."

"Why don't you go back to school."

"What, and be just like you? Why is it everybody wants everybody else to be just like they are?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Anyway, my marks are too bad."

"Why, who's been beating you?"

"Funny girl."

"You were good in English."

"Goodish. Listen, I'm going to take a bath and try to wake up. I feel like I've been in a coma." He left the room, and shortly the sound of silence mixed with the sound of running water.

Adam reappeared in the kitchen, topless, and said, "What are you doing around here, anyway?"

"Do I need a reason to visit my big brother?"

"No, but I'm sure you have one."

"Actually I do. I decided to skip school for the afternoon, and I didn't have anywhere to go. You know what mother's like."

"That's why I live here. I think my bath's ready."

When she came into the bathroom, Adam was blowing bubbles

through his nose.

"Want me to wash your back?" she asked, with a note of innocence.

By the time Adam sat up and said, "I don't think so," the soap was already in her hand.

"Don't be silly. Everybody likes to have their back washed," was what she said.

The bar of soap was small, and Adam could feel her hand rubbing against his skin, firstly between his shoulder blades, then his neck and down his back, and finally at the base of his spine.

"I don't think you should, Kaz." He could feel the lather, lathering.

"Do you remember when we were kids?" she asked. "We used to take baths together. Every Sunday evening."

"I remember." She started to wash his chest.

"I always had the feeling our mum didn't like it. But she was too used to giving in to us." Karen breathed a kind of laughed, laughed a kind of breath.

"You don't have a very hairy chest," she said. Adam was starting to feel aroused. His sister's hand slipped down to his stomach a few times. Adam wondered if she knew what she was doing.

"Kaz."

"I think I should get in with you. We could have a bath together, like we used to. Eh?" Adam looked up at her for the first time, into her eyes; and then her hand went all the way down.

"Kaz," he offered, aimlessly, and watched her undress. She climbed into the bath, tangled her legs in his, and lay at the opposite end, watching.

"Do you remember how we used to touch each other?" Karen

moved her hand between his legs, took the soap in her other hand, slid it across her breasts.

"Do you like them?"

The thermostat had been turned up full blast. They were on the couch, hot and bothered. Karen watched—she watched everything—what she did to Adam, what Adam did to her. Watching. Adam closed his eyes and disappeared. He used the sensations like alcohol. He escaped. The world, with all its millions of chalky images, had been wiped out with one erotic foul sweep. Karen used the knowledge. Adam escaped from it. Their bodies glistened with sweat.

As Adam reached orgasm, as it came spurting out like blood from a slashed artery, a strange incomprehensible feeling stirred, like a black beast in his soul. And then came the notion that the silent sun was again rising from behind distant hills.

"What did we do?" Adam asked, feeling heat in the pit of his stomach.

"It was only sex," she told him. There was silence.

"Listen, I'm going to get dressed."

"Already?"

Adam put on his clothes, went directly to the kitchen, put on the kettle. He looked out of the window. He could see people down there, walking about; rubbish, blowing about; roads tying themselves into knots; cars and busses—and policemen in tall hats. It wasn't all chalk. It didn't wipe away. It was always there, beneath everything. It looked nicer in the night, when everything seemed dead.

He turned around and saw Karen standing in the doorway, watching him.

"Are you getting dressed?" he asked.

"If you want." She turned and disappeared.

"Do you want some tea?" he called after her. It was funny, this tea business. People seemed to enjoy making it more than drinking it—and Adam knew why.

They sat sipping the hot drink. Adam lit up a cigarette.

"You look tired," she said. He wanted her to go, to leave him alone. He had things to sort out.

"I am," he said. It was hard to make the words come out. They wanted to stay inside.

"You never told me why you stayed up all night."

Adam wondered if he should bother telling her. All of a sudden, talking to her was a bother. It never had been, but now it was.

"I was trying to cheat Spontaneous Combustion," he bothered.

"How?"

"By cheating."

"Don't tell me then."

"There's nothing to tell. Every night, as soon as I get in bed, I have these weird symptoms. So I figured I'd try sleeping in the day instead." Karen tried not to smile.

"And?" she asked, trying not to smile.

"It didn't make any difference," he began, aware that she was trying not to smile. "As soon as I got in bed, it started to happen."

"Adam, you know there's no such thing as Spontaneous Combustion, don't you? It's all in your head."

"All right, Kaz." It was no use trying to explain.

"It's fine to be a bit crazy, but . . . I think you should go see someone. You need help."

"I should see someone? I need help? What about screwing your brother?"

"I said it's fine to be a bit crazy. You're mixing things up."

Friday, October, 1990

Maybe there's no such thing as Spontaneous Combustion. Maybe it's all just in my head. I think I need help. I don't feel crazy though. But they say crazy people never feel crazy. They always get you with those twisty ideas.

Anyway, I'm starting to think the only things that are real are the things we can touch and smell and bite. That already sounds like an improvement. Maybe I can cure myself.

Adam was sitting with his back against the outside tree that was forced to live inside. He had bought his famous frozen meat pies, his weekly ration of food, and was sipping on a can of beer. It was noon, and the shopping centre was exceptionally busy. Hardly anyone noticed Adam, with his back against the outside tree. Hardly anyone noticed until he suddenly gave a loud cry. Everyone stopped, turned, looked. It was not the kind of cry they were used to hearing. It was an unknown cry. Indefatigable. As the crowd stopped still in its tracks, watching and wondering, the cry finally faded to nothing. A solid silence hung in the air, people still stood, waiting, knowing something else would happen. And then came another terrible shriek. Those closest saw the skin on Adam's face and hands bubble like grilling cheese. And then, almost at once, Adam Golding exploded into flame. The gathering of people stood, too shocked to react.

The outside tree was ignited also, and long after Adam had been reduced to ashes, the crackling sound of its

burning branches crackled on, and the flames reflected in hundreds of eyeballs.