

# Roads Were Burning

By Adam Roberts

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## One

Roads were burning in the north, all across the country, or so the news was saying. York, Sheffield, Manchester, places like that. And fire was spreading, it seemed, into Scotland and down to the south. Or so the radio said. It was one of those news-stories that struck an offtone, a surreal note in the brain, the sort of the story that you hear on the radio with half an ear, whilst you are concentrating on something else, the sort of thing that snags somewhere in your thoughts, *that can't be right, surely I misheard*. So. On the other hand, Jonathan didn't have much of an opinion about the North. He had been to Manchester a few times, but he hadn't liked it much. Manchester, he thought, was all Croydon and no Primrose Hill. It hadn't tempted him from London. And in London there were other things to worry about than burning roads.

So he found himself in Swel's large apartment: Barons Court, over-looking Hammersmith Cemetery and beyond that the Talgarth Rd with its constant, sluggish flow of cars. Swel had given him a set of keys, told him to use the place if he liked. Swel had gone off somewhere: to Asia, or Africa, or to the southernmost part of South America, maybe. Jonathan didn't really care where, since he had the keys to the apartment. It wasn't that it was an especially beautiful apartment; but, ex-council, it was nicely spacious, and Swel had decorated it stylishly. The best thing about it was his sensory dep-rivation tank, and this was where Jon planned to spend the

rest of the day. Take some heroin, lie in the black waters with white noise playing through the speakers in his ears, let it all wash away in the fullest sense. All wash away. He pictured himself, emerging dripping, pure, at the end of the process.

He had tried it once before, nurse-maided by Swel, but the experience had not been a success. Jonathan had set-tled in alright, *all-right, all-righty*, and it had been nice if a little clammy, until his nicotine craving had started scratching and itching at his skin, mon-strously magnified by the lack of other sensory anchors, and Jonathan had been forced to thrash about and push the lid off and emerge. "I disappoint myself," he had said, standing on the carpet in a bathrobe, lighting up a ciggie. Swel had shaken his large head, slowly. But (I reasoned, without telling Swel) a little heroin in his system would buffet him from the need for cigarettes. A little heroin and he could enjoy it properly. "You mustn't use the appa-ratus when I'm not there to supervise you," Swel had chided, on the phone from the airport, en route to wherever he had gone. "I mean, you're welcome to use the place, but not that. OK?" "Of course not," Jonathan had replied, thinking how pompous it was to call it *the apparatus*, and thinking also where he could most cheaply obtain some good quality heroin.

It wasn't an *apparatus*. It was simply a watertight box, with a padded cradle fixed to the inner wall and a mouth-mask plumbed to the air outside like a snorkel. The earplugs were regular walkman plugs piping white noise through. The manufacturers warranty probably said you weren't supposed to get them wet, but they didn't seem to mind, they worked under water, so it didn't matter. You had to fill *the appa-ratus* with a hose from the bathroom. There wasn't even a heater. Swel said that he used to turn the general thermostat up to keep the room warm and stop the water getting too cold. I mean, how primitive is that?

Jonathan set it all up carefully. He didn't want to take the heroin and zonk out on the floor, high, whilst still fiddling with harnesses and tubes for *the apparatus*. He had to get the timing right. When the moment came he wanted to be able to climb in, pull the lid over his head, fix mouthpiece and earplugs and settle down before the bliss poured too overwhelmingly through his muscles.

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**Two**

And so he got in. But no sooner was he comfortable, settled, than the quality of light changed, turned a sort of yellow in a rectangle above him. Somebody (he worked it out slug-gishly) had taken the lid off, fuck them, how could they? What were they playing at? Fuck them—Jonathan thought the words with a extreme clarity in his head like drops falling from a tap onto a taut, still pool. *Fuck. Them.* He surfaced, pulled the mask off, and was trying to focus on the person standing there, preparing to say something cutting. But his throat was rasping, and his legs wobbly.

“I *thought* somebody was in there,” said the newcomer.

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### Three

He'd got into the tank in the mid-evening gloom. Now the sunset was visible through the windows of the flat. He must have been inside one whole night and one day. He couldn't believe it. Above all, he couldn't believe that he didn't feel purified or clean. He felt the reverse; his throat was sore, his arms trembled, he struggled to hold down the soup that Justine heated for him. “Jesus,” he said, several times. “I can't believe it—that felt like an eye-blink.” From, he thought, evening one day to sunset the next day.

“Is that the craziest place to be in London,” Justine said, “at this time? Have you found the single craziest place to *be*?” Her voice was low, a smoker's voice. Her eyes were violet coloured. She dressed in black, pants and sweater marked with precision, designer folds. She was middle-aged. Late middle age. Older, maybe. Was she forty? Forty-five? “Inside that tank?” she said. “In this flat?”

“At this time?” asked Jonathan. Or *not asked*, because he didn't particularly care whether she answered or not. Let's say *croaked*. Maybe that would be the better word. Or *groaned*.

“Haven't you heard?” she drawled. “The roads are burning.”

This was only a small memory in Jonathan's mind. More important, he realised, almost abruptly, was a ciga-rette. He walked, stumbled, to his jacket and fumbled one out. There were times, and this was one such time, when the cigarette he was about to smoke was the most beautiful thing, the purest, the clearest object, in all the windy, stony universe. That all his being and desire could be focused into something so small. Like the hyphen-ated white lines down the middle of a road, leading you on, keeping you to the

proper side. That was smoking to Jonathan: he thought of all his ciga-rettes like this, at once, one continuous line made up of myriad white strokes. He put the ciggie in his mouth and lit the end of it.

“You are a friend of Swel,” he said, after several draws.

“I suppose you are too,” she replied.

Jonathan, coming out of the tank, had thought her forty, maybe. But now that he looked more closely he could see that she was a fair bit older than that. She was well preserved, but not young. She had that quality sometimes called “ageless,” Cleopatra, excepting only the way a gentle roughness of her neck suggested her advanced age. When she smiled widely enough a cas-cade of fine lines came into being from each cheek bone in two arcs past the corners of her mouth and to her neck. And then, when you looked carefully enough, you noticed how large were her ears, half-hidden beneath a static coiffure of uniform black. You noticed how pronounced were her knuckles, like knots in cord. But then again, Jonathan thought to himself, Swel himself was no spring chicken, he was bound to have many older friends. Was she sixty? Sixty-five?

This sort of age was inconceivable to Jonathan except as a sort of abstraction. He was the moist, tender tobacco strand, wedged in close to the filter. She was the ash dropping onto Swel’s carpet.

“I don’t intend to stay here,” she said, her face emotionless. “I intend to get out. Do you have a car? It doesn’t matter if you don’t, as I sup-pose you don’t. The roads are all blocked anyway. It doesn’t matter whether you have a car or not, we’ll be walking.”

Jonathan stared at her. There was, he realised, no sound coming through the window. There was no noise of traffic at all. The horizontal metal waterfall of the Talgarth road had ceased its eternal crashing. He got up, still unsteady, and went to the north-facing window. The cars were still there, glinting in the late afternoon sunlight, but they were all still and dead. The sunset lights burned in tan-gerine colours off their windscreens. “That’s odd,” he said.

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## Four

She had, she told him, as he dressed hurriedly, been walking west. She had come from South Ken, where she lived—Earls Court, more precisely,

she said, but she was in the habit of saying South Ken, when people asked. Posher. Nicer than Earls Court, let's be honest. At this she laughed. Jonathan wasn't really taking it in.

"Why were you walking west?" he asked.

"I had the notion to get over the river to Kew. But I'm not sure it's such a good idea now. I don't think I had—truly—*taken on board* the enormity of it. Maybe a crowd of people has gathered in Kew. I don't know. To cross the river. Imagine them all huddling together with walls of flame all around. But then," and for no reason that Jonathan could determine, she laughed with a raspy glee, "maybe it'll be like that everywhere."

"I don't understand," said Jonathan.

"I don't," she said, agreeing with him. "What can you do? The radio said it was the rain. It was raining all yesterday, and people were saying that maybe that would put the fires out. But now they're saying the rain seems to have sped the process up. So maybe it's something to do with a particular chemical mix—you know? I don't know a great deal about chemistry. Do you?"

"Flame under spoon," said Jonathan. "That's as much chemistry as I've ever known." It was the sort of remark that might have prompted a low laugh at the sorts of parties he attended, but Justine only looked at him blankly.

"I think it's time to go," she said.

"Don't you think," he said, taking a deep breath and settling himself—adopting, with a degree of self-consciousness, his pose, his cool—"don't you think we should wait til morning? Do we really want to go walking through the night?"

"Night?" she said. "You want to wait until night?"

Jonathan was still at the window. "That sunset, over there," he said, and laughed. "And after sunset, night. Isn't that conventional?"

"Oh," she said, "sunset. At nine in the morning?"

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He came and sat down, checked the day and the time properly with Justine. He had been in the apparatus for two nights, not one. Justine had stayed in Swel's apartment the night; she had checked the apparatus only on a whim, a sort of instinct, before leaving in the morning.

"I'm eager to go," she said, stand-ing at the window herself. "Those flames look very close, just over the horizon. That's Brentford burning. That's Hounslow." Her deadpan voice, purring and calm, sounded eerie to Jonathan now. Brentford burning? An old boyfriend of his lived at Brentford, in a ground-floor flat near where the Brent flowed into the Thames.

Burning?

"What do you mean anyway?" he asked, with one of his headaches threatening. "How burning? Has somebody dropped a bomb?"

"They dropped a bomb on the M1 at Watford, Radio 4 said." She said this as one word, *radiofour*. "To make a firebreak. But it didn't work." Then she said "the radio isn't broadcasting any more."

"I don't understand a word of what you're saying. It's just not going into my noggin."

"You're very pretty," said Justine, passionless, "but you don't catch on too sharp. Didn't you hear me? The roads are burning. It's been in the news a week or more. Don't you follow the news?"

Jonathan pressed the blades of his fingers against his cheeks, an A-shape of pressure from the bridge of his nose to the corners of his mouth. Sometimes that stopped migraine pain spreading down his sinuses. And his headaches could be killers. He did not have a headache at that moment, though; he made the gesture to compose himself. "Look, miss, look," he said. "Justine, look. I'm sorry. I've just lost two nights and a day in that tank there. I'm taking a little time waking up. Why are the roads burning?"

"Chemistry," said Justine, in an uninflected tone. "I don't know. It's the tar in the matrix, the tar in tarmacadam. We're going now. I don't want to die in Swel's flat."

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They went down to the deserted, car-strewn streets and made their way on foot, Justine stepping sprightly and assured, Jonathan walking more slowly and occasionally having to insert camp little skips into his steps to keep pace.

Justine walked as if she were a practised fellwalker, which perhaps she was. Jon never walked anywhere unless he absolutely had to. “How did it start?” Jonathan asked.

“You mean who started it?” said Justine. “I don’t know. How should I know?”

“But,” said Jonathan. He couldn’t see how to finish this sentence. He didn’t say anything for a while.

They reached Fulham Palace Road. To the west and north the sky was dark with what looked like storm-clouds, except the clouds were blushed cherry-colour nearer the ground. “It’s like the Blitz,” said Jonathan. “It’s incredible.”

They turned south, down Fulham Palace road towards Putney. The sky in that direction looked clearer. It wasn’t blue, but was at least not black: a sort of whisky-colour, more promising. Both lanes of the road were blocked with discarded cars, like the two strings of a giant metal rosary. They saw nobody else. Not one other person. The whole of London had a dreamlike silence to it. There was no birdsong, no car-alarms, no car stereos sharing thudding music through open windows, no yelling, no honking, no sirens. There was nothing at all. The great tidal rushing continuum of traffic, that mighty noise, so familiar as to become like silence to Londoners, was gone altogether; although, maybe, in some conch-like turn of Jonathan’s inner ear, its ghost remained—because Jonathan could almost hear the noise of traffic, far away in the distance. It occurred to him only as they passed the grounds of Fulham Palace that this noise in his ears was real, but that it wasn’t cars, it was the massed crackling of flames in the distance. Not a roaring, but a steady, staccato, rattling noise.

He stepped more briskly, panting now. Unused to the exercise.

“I supposed,” said Justine, un-prompted, as they approached the bridge, “that it was terrorists.”

“The burning?”

"You asked who started it," she said, stopping beside a roadside bench to get her breath. Jon, glad of the break, settled beside her and tried to control his breathing. "I suppose it was terrorists," she said again. "On the radio they were saying that perhaps somebody had treated the roads up in South Yorkshire—driven over and round the road network spraying, or dribbling, or somehow *depositing* a chemical upon them. Tar is pretty inert, usually. It takes a high heat to make it combust. This is what radio-four said. But maybe if it were treated, the tar, then it would burn more easily. The tar, this mystery chemical, water—that's oxygen, isn't it? That's hydrogen? Isn't it odd that water is used to put out fires when it's made of two such com-bustible things? They thought the rainfall would put it out, but it seems to have made it worse. Now all the roads are burning. Some of the motorways are concrete, but even they have tarmac hard-shoulders."

They both took seats on the bench, and sat in silence for half a minute, just breathing.

"Tar," said Jonathan. A thin drizzle was starting down, touching his face like pins-and-needles. "I guess it burns in cigarettes. Does it?"

"Tar is our bloodstream," said Justine. "The roads, do you see, are our circulatory system. I mean to say. They go everywhere in this country, roads. There's nowhere they don't go."

"I once saw," said Jonathan, pulling the lapels of his coat around his neck, "a plasticated body. You know? They'd filled all the blood vessels with this sort-of plastic, and then, I don't know, dissolved the rest of the body, so the blood vessels were all that was left. Like a sculpture of a human body made entirely out of thin red wire." He put his hand on Justine's knee, trying for *supportive*, for *friendly*.

They were quiet for a moment. "I'm saying," he said eventually, "that I understand what you mean. The roads, they go everywhere. There's no real escape from them. Maybe in the Grampians, I don't know. Maybe in the Lake District, or somewhere like that. It's ok," he said, patting her leg. "I'm tired too. I'm so out of shape."

At this, as at a rebuke, she got to her feet. Jonathan copied her.

They trudged over the deserted, traffic-clogged hump of Putney Bridge in silence. The drizzle stopped. The traffic lights were still blinking through their monotonous cycles of greens and oranges and reds on the far side, though the cars were all stalled and empty, filling every road. Outside the cinema at the bottom of Putney Hill Jonathan saw one car



occupied, a shape in the passenger seat, but when he hurried over to it the person was dead. Just sitting in the car dead, staring ahead.

Heart attack, or something.

They made their way up Putney High Street. The shops on either side were unlooted. The line of cars stretched all the way up the hill. A bus, tall as a house, was stuck in the flow halfway up, a red dinosaur drowning in the tar-pits.

"It was stupid of me," said Justine, panting slightly as they paused by the railway station. "I stopped at Swel's place last night because I was so tired. I should have pushed right on. But I was too tired, so I fell asleep on his bed. And I didn't set an alarm or anything, so I slept right through until eight or thereabouts. I should have been long out of this city."

Jonathan thought, *me too*. But he said: "if the roads were only burning because some terrorists treated them, why are they burning down here? Or did these terrorists treat all the roads? That doesn't seem very likely to me. And who are they anyway, these terror-ists?"

Justine looked at him, not witheringly exactly, too blankly to be judgmental, but a look that shut him up. "I should know?" she said. "Maybe it wasn't terrorists. Maybe it is the Wrath of God, and this is Sodom-London."

"Oh, please," said Jonathan. And then, because he couldn't help himself, his love for word-games was too ingrained, "Londom." He tittered. "I'll buy a ribbed condom in Londom."

"Maybe it's just a chain reaction," said Justine blankly. "The roads burn, and they get so hot the tar just combusts. Maybe it was just a matter of initial conditions, and now the roads are so hot that rain doesn't cool them, just fuels the burning. The radio was saying that the individual pieces of gravel in the matrix were exploding, flying around like shrapnel." She paused, before add-ing in an uninflected tone, "it's a disaster."

But Jonathan had never known a disaster. To him the word had only ever meant personal inconvenience, or relationship breakdown. *The cab got caught in traffic and I missed my flight, it was a disaster. Tim and I, what can I say, it's just a disaster.* Even at this stage he didn't believe these burning roads were disas-trous. Nothing disastrous had happened to him, except that he had been compelled to go on this lengthy, tiresome

walk. How could it be a disaster if nothing specifically disastrous had happened to him? It couldn't, of course, except in some distant, cerebral sense. Some notional, unreal sense. In this respect he was exactly like any-body else.

They pushed on up Putney Hill, and behind him the rattling, surf noise was getting louder.

"Maybe," said Justine. They passed Putney Girl's school, walking beside the double line of deserted cars. "Maybe it's a radioactivity thing. Maybe that's why the tarmacadam has overheated like this." She said *tarma-cadam* with exactness through pursed lips; an oddly prissy locution. "But whatever it is, it's spreading faster, not slower. It's running down the roads. Fire is running along all the roads like they were fuses. Smaller roads burn quicker."

Jonathan thought of all the small roads in London, all the capillaries branching from M1 arteries and M4 arteries and M3 arteries and M2 arteries. "When I was young," he said, as they passed a black of expensive-looking flats. "I used to say *tarmadam*. Like I was thanking a lady, you see? I really thought the word was *tarmadam*." He snickered again. Justine did not laugh.

Away behind them there were dis-tant banging noises, like fireworks.

"Up ahead," she said, panting, "it's Wimbledon Common. Maybe we should leave the road there and strike out over the common. Maybe that would be safer."

"Don't they have cycle-paths over the common?" Jonathan said. Justine stopped and turned to face him. "I guess they'd burn," he added, by way of explanation. "I mean, I think it's a good idea. I really do. I'm just saying." For the first time, actual emotion was visible on Justine's well-preserved face; the lineaments of dismay. The banging noises were louder. She was looking over Jonathan's shoulder.

He turned. The view was clear down across Putney and Wandsworth, and over the river to Fulham and Chelsea. Except that it was all burning, all red and yellow in throbbing and luminous patches under a dark sky, scarlet blotches reflecting off the ceiling of the cloud cover like (Jonathan thought this, because this was the way his imagination worked) a pepperoni pizza. The roads had all burned, with the absolute, ticking advance of perfect fuses, and the build-ings alongside had caught and now burnt too. Down below Jonathan could see that the fire had burned its way over the bridge

they had crossed half an hour before. Now it was popping cars like fireworks, crashing them into flame, flipping them up in the air. It was simply pouncing on them. The bus was still visible, but the flame crept inexorably on, over the traffic lights and starting up the hill. The bang-bang of exploding petrol tanks were so loud, the growl of the huge fire so ubiquitous, it was amazing to Jonathan that he had not noticed it before. Unless it was like the roar of traffic had used to be. Unless his brain had become desensitised to such sounds. That could be it, of course. Perhaps a lifetime of living in London had worn out that part of his brain.

His brain.

He had the sudden, vivid, almost hallucinatory image of the whole of Britain like a human being, its impossibly lacework-intricate web of roads like, as Justine had put it, the circulatory system; and this great burning, this apocalyptic fire, moving its way outward from north-England's lungs, taking its magical heat up to Scotland's elephantine brain-pan, and down through England's torso to Welsh arms, to midlands belly, to where Tower Bridge's puckering arsehole gave out between the flabby buttocks of Essex and Kent, and on down through the stretched-out thigh of Surrey and Devon's calves and Cornwall's feet, until the whole body thrilled with the deadly burning vein-fed chemical.

Jonathan lit a cigarette. His fingers weren't trembling at all. This, after all, was what a disaster was. This was what it felt like, and it didn't feel too bad. It felt insulated. When the ciggie was alight and in his mouth he said, "Justine," taking her right hand in his left. He felt a certain command, a personal authority, and he felt it for the first time in his life. "Justine, let's have a race, what do you say? Let's see if we can outrun this fire, and get up the rest of this hill." The fire was cracking metal car-shells behind them like chestnuts with smart, detonating crack sounds. He could feel its heat now on his skin. "Both of us," he said, slightly less distinctly because he was holding his lit fag in his lips, "running, towards the Common. Make it to the Common before the fire. What do you say?"

Justine's face was grey as the roads, but she nodded. She squeezed his hand. She turned south as Jonathan did, looking uphill, and the two of them started their ungainly, clumsy-stepped, joint run towards the acres of common land half a mile distant. It was the hopelessness of it that fired him, that made it exciting. And beyond Wimbledon, the endless concrete fields of South London, roads and tracks and paths stretching all the way to the water. "Thank you, madam," he gasped, to Justine, or to somebody else, as they jogged. He saw, with firework clarity, the truth of their circumstance: he was going to die. But he wasn't dead yet. And isn't that all

any person can ever say? "Thank you," he said again.

Though painful, it was a kind of bliss.

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