



# Adam

Adam woke up in the basement.

He lay in bed for a few seconds, blinking, then switched on his light and sat up. The basement was the same as always: quiet, tidy, with neat shelves of books and boxes, a table for working to one side. There were no windows, and the light hanging above him was harsh and white. Adam had hung coloured material and paper shapes around it to spread the light around the room and make it seem more like sunshine. The floor was concrete, and the walls. There was a door tucked in the corner, behind more boxes.

The alarm clock pinged, and he put out a hand to stop it. He sat for a few seconds, then swung his feet down to the floor, stood, and started his day.

Breakfast first, sitting at the little table. One table leg wobbled, and he frowned; he would need to repair it again. He sat over his plate and read a book, swinging

his legs absently.

After breakfast, schoolwork. Adam cleared away the breakfast things and brought out a collection of ancient schoolbooks and jotters. The jotters were full of writing, down to the last corners of every page, smaller and smaller until he hadn't been able to squeeze in any more. There was no more paper, and that had been a problem, but in the end he'd started again at the first page and carefully traced over the words already written. It didn't really matter: his pencil had long since worn down to nothing, and now he only pretended to write, with a stick.

He read today's sections in his schoolbooks and traced over the words in his jotter. He made a point of sticking his tongue out slightly as he wrote. At break-time he played by himself, practising juggling and keepy-up with small stones. He was very good; he could keep three stones in the air using just his feet. He knew he could probably do more but three seemed like the right number.

During break-time, something new happened.

A very slight tremor shook the basement, almost too faint to notice, as if something had *clanged*, quite far away. Adam looked up and watched tiny spirals of dust fall from the ceiling. He made a note of the time: eleven-

oh-three plus seven point zero-eight-two seconds, although he knew the way to say this was "around eleven o'clock". He waited for five minutes, but nothing else happened, so he returned to his work.

Then lunchtime, then speaking practice. At first it hadn't occurred to him to do this, and he'd been alarmed one day to realise he might forget how to talk. Now he practised once every day. Since a new thing had happened today, he talked to himself about that.

"What could have caused a tremor like that?" he asked himself.

He paused. "Perhaps two things falling together. Rocks, or buildings," he answered at last. "Nothing that affects me."

"Perhaps I should go and investigate."

This was an interesting idea. Adam considered it for a while.

"No," he said, finally. "I should stay here, like Father said."

He nodded. There. A conversation.

After speaking, playtime, with the toys. Not proper toys, of course, just things he'd found in the boxes on the shelves: pieces of old machinery, nuts and bolts; plastic and super-plastic shapes moulded to look like hip joints, or hands, or eyes; piles of ancient green

circuit boards. He used them to make little models of cars, houses, people, and practised playing with them.

This was very difficult. He had to think about the people, and who they were, and what they would say. They didn't live in a basement, of course, but that meant he didn't really know *what* they did. He had to imagine things that weren't real. It was the hardest part of his day, and exhausting, but he carried on dutifully for two hours, making up conversations they might have about things he couldn't understand. Afterwards, he went back to bed for a rest.

Then chores: clearing the toys, sweeping up, checking the lights, carrying out repairs. He remembered where he had saved a tiny sliver of wood from the last pencil, and used it to stop the table wobbling, and felt pleased.

Then dinner time. For more speaking practice, he told the empty table about what he'd been doing, and how good he was getting at keepy-up, and how he'd fixed the wobbling table, and about the tremor that had happened at *around eleven o'clock* and had lasted for *about five seconds*. He smiled as he said it. It felt good to have something exciting to talk about.

Then he got ready for bed and laid out his storybook. The book was faded and very fragile, and he was careful

not to tear its thin pages as he found his place. He laid it on the bed, open, and sat and listened as if someone were reading to him. Occasionally he smiled, or laughed, or frowned. After eight minutes and thirty-five seconds he sighed and closed the book.

“Goodnight,” he said.

There was no response.

“I love you too,” he said.

He turned to the wall behind his head and scratched a small, careful mark, and studied it for a few seconds. Then he switched off his light, closed his eyes and lay in the dark, listening to the tiny *ping-ping-ping* sound of the lamp as it cooled.

He slept.

Adam woke up in the basement.

He switched on his light and sat up; stopped the alarm when it rang, climbed out of bed, ate breakfast, did his schoolwork. At eleven-oh-three he looked up, wondering if there would be another tremor, but there wasn't. Lunch, speaking practice, playtime – today he pretended the little people had felt a tremor, and were very excited – then rest, then chores, then bedtime. He opened his book carefully at the next chapter and listened as nobody read it. Then he said goodnight, told

the empty basement that he loved it too, scratched a mark, closed his eyes, and slept.

Adam woke up in the basement. There was no tremor. He mended a small tear in the lampshade and talked about it at dinner time. In the evening, he laid out the next chapter of the book and listened. Scratched a mark. Closed his eyes. Slept.

Adam woke up in the basement—

Something was different.

He lay, quietly blinking in the dark. It wasn't time for getting up yet, but he was awake because he had heard something. Something had *woken him up*. A banging noise, perhaps twenty metres away, seeming to come from somewhere out beyond the door. Banging, something breaking, and then a shuffling sound, coming nearer.

What should he do? Should he turn the light on? He wasn't sure. The light was for morning. He left it off and listened. The sound was just beyond the doorway now. Two sounds, he thought, distinct, little flutters of something, like, like...

*Speaking*. It was two people speaking to each other. Adam tried to process this but instead found himself

blinking again and again, apparently without his control. He sat up and waited.

There was a scratch at the door. The voices were right outside. Then a movement; he could see the door trembling. A metallic *click*, and the door opened. Just a crack; just until it pushed against a box piled against it. Light moved from behind it, two thin lances of light. The voices muttered again. "*Stuck,*" one of them said.

Then the door shuddered open, pushing the box out of the way, and two figures followed it. They pointed their lights around, but not at Adam, at first. He sat still and watched them in astonishment.

They were young. One was only twelve perhaps, the other a bit older. They wore clothes he didn't recognise, a mix of different colours patched together. Some of the material was plastic, some fur, and all battered and torn. The older one was taller, and moved more cautiously. The shorter figure's right hand glinted and Adam realised it was prosthetic, made of plastic and metal.

"Whoa," said the shorter one, pointing at shelves of machine parts. The light came from the artificial hand, Adam realised; it must have a torch built into it. "Look at this stash!"

"What about batteries?" muttered the other. This

one's voice was deeper, and more wary.

"Nothing yet. Hey, look!"

The torch played over the table in the corner where Adam had set out tomorrow's breakfast plates.

"What the hell?" The shorter one walked to the table and touched the plates. "This is weird. It's like someone was playing..." Then silence. Then: "Linden, look."

"What?"

"There's no dust on the plates."

The taller one, Linden, stopped looking and turned. "What?"

"There's no..." The shorter one swung her torch-hand around to point at the shelves and boxes. "It's weird. There's no dust anywhere. It's like—" Then, in a gasp: "Someone's *cleaned* this room! Linden, someone's *been* here!"

The one called Linden stepped across quickly. "Don't move, Runa! Don't go any further!" Torchlight flickered over the table, the walls, the shelves ...

... and over Adam, sitting in bed.

"Hello," said Adam.

"Aargh!"

"Run!" They crashed back towards the door. "Move! Runa, *move!*"

Adam stared after them. This was all very confusing.



He tried to think what to say, but he wasn't sure what the situation was. Were they guests? That didn't seem right.

"Here's the door, go, go!"

"Stop!" he tried. "Hello?"

The taller one held the door open. The younger one, Runa, started through, then stopped. The torch-hand pointed back over Adam.

"What is it?"

"Who cares? Go!"

But Runa hesitated, then stepped carefully towards Adam, slipping away from the other's grasp.

"Runa, come *back!*"

Torchlight shone again over Adam's face.

"Look at it."

"I can see it!"

"Did it just speak to us? Was it talking?"

"Yes," said Adam. "Hello."

"Aargh! Runa, come *on!*"

But Runa still didn't move.

"My name is Adam," said Adam. "Are you friends of Father?"

"Oh, wow." Runa's voice sounded scared, but also surprised. "Can you understand us?"

"Yes," said Adam. "You are Runa. Your friend is Linden. I am Adam."

Runa laughed suddenly. "Oh, wow. Linden, look at this! Look at it!"

Linden hesitated at the door, then cursed and came back. "I see it." Torchlight shone straight into Adam's eyes. "I see it."

"What do you think it is?" asked Runa.

"You *know* what it is," growled Linden. "It's *dangerous*. It's tin. It's a Funk."

They moved closer, keeping their torches on Adam until they were only a few centimetres away from his face.

"It's a *robot*."

"Hello," tried Adam again.