



By Ned Hickson

## Take it from me: You can't run from static electricity

When I was a kid I had a book called *Mysteries of the Unexplained* that contained *Amazing But True!* stories aimed at stirring the imagination, eliciting a sense of wonder, and prolonging the bed-wetting experience by at least three years. I'd huddle beneath the covers with my flashlight and read about strange psychic phenomena documented by real scientists, physicists, private investigators, and the occasional freaked-out paranormal expert who, at the end of the story, usually abandoned his profession to become a plumber:

"Even now, after all these

years, I can still feel those icy fingers whenever a cold breeze blows across my butt crack..."

Though the book was mostly about ghosts, aliens, strange disappearances and creepy folklore (...so stand alone in the dark, if you dare. Hold a mirror and repeat the words "Sassafras Sally." And prepare to be slapped by a pair of wet tea bags), it was spontaneous human combustion that really got to me. I think it's because, in my mind, ghosts, aliens, strange disappearance and folklore could all be avoided by exercising a little caution.

Spot an alien spaceship? Run.

Worried about Sassafras Sally? Introduce her to Chi tea.

Concerned about taking a cruise through the Bermuda Triangle? Go to Disneyland and settle for the "Pirates of the Caribbean" instead.

But burst into flames in the middle of Mrs. Frump's sixth-grade classroom, and chances are you'd be reduced to a pair of smoking sneakers long before you could acquire a hall pass and make it to a water source. Because of this fear, I mapped out the location of every fire extinguisher and water fountain at Jane Adams Elementary, and remained within eight feet of something to douse myself with throughout much of the sixth grade. Suffice it to say, except for visiting the public pool and local fire station, I missed most of my class field trips.

I'm 42 now, and, aside from "All-You-Can-Eat Frijole Night" at Jose's Cantina, I've overcome my fear of spontaneously combusting. At least until yesterday.

That's when "Peggy" from our composition department handed me a news article about a man in Warrnam-

bool, Australia whose clothes spontaneously built up 40,000 volts of static electricity. According to Frank Clewers, he was unaware of being a human power grid until a secretary noticed his shoes were burning a hole in the office carpet. After several awkward minutes of misinterpreting his secretary's warnings of "You're sizzling!" and "You're making my hair stand up!" as sexual innuendo, Frank realized what was happening and contacted the fire department. Fire official Henry Barton believes it was the combination of Frank's woolen shirt and synthetic nylon jacket rubbing together that created a charge "just shy of spontaneous combustion."

I'm no electrician, but had shag carpet been involved, I doubt Frank would still be alive.

After reading about this

incident, I thanked "Peggy" (whom I used to like), then slowly removed my nylon coat and wool sweater, trying to generate as little friction as possible, by cutting them from my body with a pair of scissors. That's because I'm one of those people who's constantly building up small amounts of static electricity. Our cat became aware of this phenomenon after rubbing on my leg once. This was followed by a loud "pop," a blue flash, and our cat performing a hissing cartwheel.

Needless to say, thanks to "Peggy," my condition has now escalated from minor

annoyance to full-blown phobia. I no longer leave the house without a copper wire running from my undershorts to the ground, and I go through at least four cans of "Cling Free" a day.

I'm sure I'll eventually overcome my fear again. In the meantime, I really need to finish mapping out the extinguishers and water sources in our office.

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