

RAY BRADBURY  
FAHRENHEIT 451

This one, with gratitude, is for DON CONGDON.

FAHRENHEIT 451:

The temperature at which book-paper catches fire and burns

PART I

IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BURN

IT was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history. With his symbolic helmet numbered 451 on his stolid head, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black. He strode in a swarm of fireflies. He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.

Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame.

He knew that when he returned to the firehouse, he might wink at himself, a minstrel man, burnt-corked, in the mirror. Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark. It never went away, that smile, it never ever went away, as long as he remembered.

He hung up his black-beetle-coloured helmet and shined it, he hung his flameproof jacket neatly; he showered luxuriously, and then, whistling, hands in pockets, walked across the upper floor of the fire station and fell down the hole. At the last moment, when disaster seemed positive, he pulled his hands from his pockets and broke his fall by grasping the golden pole. He slid to a squeaking halt, the heels one inch from the concrete floor downstairs.

He walked out of the fire station and along the midnight street toward the subway where the silent, air-propelled train slid soundlessly down its lubricated flue in the earth and let him out with a great puff of warm air and to the cream-tiled escalator rising to the suburb.

Whistling, he let the escalator waft him into the still night air. He walked toward the corner, thinking little at all about nothing in particular. Before he reached the corner, however, he slowed as if a wind had sprung up from nowhere, as if someone had called his name.

The last few nights he had had the most uncertain feelings about the sidewalk just around the corner here, moving in the starlight toward his house. He had felt that a moment before his making the turn, someone had been there. The air seemed charged with a special calm as if someone had waited there, quietly, and only a moment before he came, simply turned to a shadow and let him through. Perhaps his nose detected a faint perfume, perhaps the skin on the backs of his hands, on his face, felt the temperature rise at this one spot where a person's standing might raise

the immediate atmosphere ten degrees for an instant. There was no understanding it. Each time he made the turn, he saw only the white, unused, buckling sidewalk, with perhaps, on one night, something vanishing swiftly across a lawn before he could focus his eyes or speak.

But now, tonight, he slowed almost to a stop. His inner mind, reaching out to turn the corner for him, had heard the faintest whisper. Breathing? Or was the atmosphere compressed merely by someone standing very quietly there, waiting?

He turned the corner.

The autumn leaves blew over the moonlit pavement in such a way as to make the girl who was moving there seem fixed to a sliding walk, letting the motion of the wind and the leaves carry her forward. Her head was half bent to watch her shoes stir the circling leaves. Her face was slender and milk-white, and in it was a kind of gentle hunger that touched over everything with tireless curiosity. It was a look, almost, of pale surprise; the dark eyes were so fixed to the world that no move escaped them. Her dress was white and it whispered. He almost thought he heard the motion of her hands as she walked, and the infinitely small sound now, the white stir of her face turning when she discovered she was a moment away from a man who stood in the middle of the pavement waiting.

The trees overhead made a great sound of letting down their dry rain. The girl stopped and looked as if she might pull back in surprise, but instead stood regarding Montag with eyes so dark and shining and alive, that he felt he had said something quite wonderful. But he knew his mouth had only moved to say hello, and then when she seemed hypnotized by the salamander on his arm and the phoenix-disc on his chest, he spoke again.

"Of course," he said, "you're a new neighbour, aren't you?"

"And you must be"-she raised her eyes from his professional symbols-"the fireman." Her voice trailed off.

"How oddly you say that."

"I'd-I'd have known it with my eyes shut," she said, slowly.

"What-the smell of kerosene? My wife always complains," he laughed. "You never wash it off completely."

"No, you don't," she said, in awe.

He felt she was walking in a circle about him, turning him end for end, shaking him quietly, and emptying his pockets, without once moving herself.

"Kerosene," he said, because the silence had lengthened, "is nothing but perfume to me."

"Does it seem like that, really?"

"Of course. Why not?"

She gave herself time to think of it. "I don't know." She turned to face the sidewalk going toward their homes. "Do you mind if I walk back with you? I'm Clarisse McClellan."

"Clarisse. Guy Montag. Come along. What are you doing out so late wandering around? How old are you?"

They walked in the warm-cool blowing night on the silvered pavement and there was the faintest breath of fresh apricots and strawberries in the air, and he looked around and realized this was quite impossible, so late in the year.

There was only the girl walking with him now, her face bright as snow in the moonlight, and he knew she was working his questions around, seeking the best answers she could possibly give.

"Well," she said, "I'm seventeen and I'm crazy. My uncle says the two always go together. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane."

Isn't this a nice time of night to walk? I like to smell things and look at things, and sometimes stay up all night, walking, and watch the sun rise."

They walked on again in silence and finally she said, thoughtfully, "You know, I'm not afraid of you at all."

He was surprised. "Why should you be?"

"So many people are. Afraid of firemen, I mean. But you're just a man, after all..."

He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact. Her face, turned to him now, was fragile milk crystal with a soft and constant light in it. It was not the hysterical light of electricity but-what? But the strangely comfortable and rare and gently flattering light of the candle. One time, when he was a child, in a power-failure, his mother had found and lit a last candle and there had been a brief hour of rediscovery, of such illumination that space lost its vast dimensions and drew comfortably around them, and they, mother and son, alone, transformed, hoping that the power might not come on again too soon ....

And then Clarisse McClellan said:

"Do you mind if I ask? How long have you worked at being a fireman?"

"Since I was twenty, ten years ago."

"Do you ever read any of the books you bum?"

He laughed. "That's against the law!"

"Oh. Of course."

"It's fine work. Monday bum Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then bum the ashes. That's our official slogan."

They walked still further and the girl said, "Is it true that long ago firemen put fires out instead of going to start them?"

"No. Houses. have always been fireproof, take my word for it."

"Strange. I heard once that a long time ago houses used to burn by accident and they needed firemen to stop the flames."

He laughed.

She glanced quickly over. "Why are you laughing?"

"I don't know." He started to laugh again and stopped "Why?"

"You laugh when I haven't been funny and you answer right off. You never stop to think what I've asked you."

He stopped walking, "You are an odd one," he said, looking at her. "Haven't you any respect?"

"I don't mean to be insulting. It's just, I love to watch people too much, I guess."

"Well, doesn't this mean anything to you?" He tapped the numerals 451 stitched on his char-coloured sleeve.

"Yes," she whispered. She increased her pace. "Have you ever watched the jet cars racing on the boulevards down that way?"

"You're changing the subject!"

"I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly," she said. "If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! he'd say, that's grass! A pink blur? That's a rose-garden! White blurs are houses. Brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. He drove forty miles an hour and they jailed him for two days. Isn't that funny, and sad, too?"

"You think too many things," said Montag, uneasily.

"I rarely watch the 'parlour walls' or go to races or Fun Parks. So I've lots of time for crazy thoughts, I guess. Have you seen the two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country beyond town? Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long?"

But cars started rushing by so quickly they had to stretch the advertising out so it would last."

"I didn't know that!" Montag laughed abruptly.

"Bet I know something else you don't. There's dew on the grass in the morning." He suddenly couldn't remember if he had known this or not, and it made him quite irritable.

"And if you look"-she nodded at the sky-"there's a man in the moon."

He hadn't looked for a long time.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, hers thoughtful, his a kind of clenching and uncomfortable silence in which he shot her accusing glances. When they reached her house all its lights were blazing.

"What's going on?" Montag had rarely seen that many house lights.

"Oh, just my mother and father and uncle sitting around, talking. It's like being a pedestrian, only rarer. My uncle was arrested another time-did I tell you?-for being a pedestrian. Oh, we're most peculiar."

"But what do you talk about?"

She laughed at this. "Good night!" She started up her walk. Then she seemed to remember something and came back to look at him with wonder and curiosity. "Are you happy?" she said.

"Am I what?" he cried.

But she was gone-running in the moonlight. Her front door shut gently.

"Happy! Of all the nonsense."

He stopped laughing.

He put his hand into the glove-hole of his front door and let it know his touch. The front door slid open.

Of course I'm happy. What does she think? I'm not? he asked the quiet rooms. He stood looking up at the ventilator grille in the hall and suddenly remembered that something lay hidden behind the grille, something that seemed to peer down at him now. He moved his eyes quickly away.

What a strange meeting on a strange night. He remembered nothing like it save one afternoon a year ago when he had met an old man in the park and they had talked .... Montag shook his head. He looked at a blank wall. The girl's face was there, really quite beautiful in memory: astonishing, in fact. She had a very thin face like the dial of a small clock seen faintly in a dark room in the middle of a night when you waken to see the time and see the clock telling you the hour and the minute and the second, with a white silence and a glowing, all certainty and knowing what it has to tell of the night passing swiftly on toward further darknesses but moving also toward a new sun.

"What?" asked Montag of that other self, the subconscious idiot that ran babbling at times, quite independent of will, habit, and conscience.

He glanced back at the wall. How like a mirror, too, her face. Impossible; for how many people did you know that refracted your own light to you? People were more often-he searched for a simile, found one in his work-torches, blazing away until they whiffed out. How rarely did other people's faces take of you and throw back to you your own expression, your own innermost trembling thought?

What incredible power of identification the girl had; she was like the eager watcher of a marionette show, anticipating each flicker of an eyelid, each gesture of his hand, each flick of a finger, the moment before it began. How long had they walked together? Three minutes? Five? Yet how large that time seemed now. How immense a figure she was on the stage before him; what a shadow she threw on the wall with

her slender body! He felt that if his eye itched, she might blink. And if the muscles of his jaws stretched imperceptibly, she would yawn long before he would. Why, he thought, now that I think of it, she almost seemed to be waiting for me there, in the street, so damned late at night ... .

He opened the bedroom door.

It was like coming into the cold marbled room of a mausoleum after the moon had set. Complete darkness, not a hint of the silver world outside, the windows tightly shut, the chamber a tomb-world where no sound from the great city could penetrate. The room was not empty.

He listened.

The little mosquito-delicate dancing hum in the air, the electrical murmur of a hidden wasp snug in its special pink warm nest. The music was almost loud enough so he could follow the tune.

He felt his smile slide away, melt, fold over, and down on itself like a tallow skin, like the stuff of a fantastic candle burning too long and now collapsing and now blown out. Darkness. He was not happy. He was not happy. He said the words to himself. He recognized this as the true state of affairs. He wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back.

Without turning on the light he imagined how this room would look. His wife stretched on the bed, uncovered and cold, like a body displayed on the lid of a tomb, her eyes fixed to the ceiling by invisible threads of steel, immovable. And in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind. The room was indeed empty. Every night the waves came in and bore her off on their great tides of sound, floating her, wide-eyed, toward morning. There had been no night in the last two years that Mildred had not swum that sea, had not gladly gone down in it for the third time.

The room was cold but nonetheless he felt he could not breathe. He did not wish to open the curtains and open the french windows, for he did not want the moon to come into the room. So, with the feeling of a man who will die in the next hour for lack of air, he felt his way toward his open, separate, and therefore cold bed.

An instant before his foot hit the object on the floor he knew he would hit such an object. It was not unlike the feeling he had experienced before turning the corner and almost knocking the girl down. His foot, sending vibrations ahead, received back echoes of the small barrier across its path even as the foot swung. His foot kicked. The object gave a dull clink and slid off in darkness.

He stood very straight and listened to the person on the dark bed in the completely featureless night. The breath coming out of the nostrils was so faint it stirred only the furthest fringes of life, a small leaf, a black feather, a single fibre of hair.

He still did not want outside light. He pulled out his igniter, felt the salamander etched on its silver disc, gave it a flick....

Two moonstones looked up at him in the light of his small hand-held fire; two pale moonstones buried in a creek of clear water over which the life of the world ran, not touching them.

"Mildred ! "

Her face was like a snow-covered island upon which rain might fall; but it felt no rain; over which clouds might pass their moving shadows, but she felt no shadow. There was only the singing of the thimble-wasps in her tamped-shut ears, and her eyes all glass, and breath going in and out, softly, faintly, in and out of her nostrils, and her not caring whether it came or went, went or came.

The object he had sent tumbling with his foot now glinted under the edge of his own bed. The small crystal bottle of sleeping-tablets which earlier today had been filled with thirty capsules and which now lay uncapped and empty in the light of the tiny flare.

As he stood there the sky over the house screamed. There was a tremendous ripping sound as if two giant hands had torn ten thousand miles of black linen down the seam. Montag was cut in half. He felt his chest chopped down and split apart. The jet-bombs going over, going over, going over, one two, one two, one two, six of them, nine of them, twelve of them, one and one and one and another and another and another, did all the screaming for him. He opened his own mouth and let their shriek come down and out between his bared teeth. The house shook. The flare went out in his hand. The moonstones vanished. He felt his hand plunge toward the telephone. The jets were gone. He felt his lips move, brushing the mouthpiece of the phone. "Emergency hospital." A terrible whisper.

He felt that the stars had been pulverized by the sound of the black jets and that in the morning the earth would be thought as he stood shivering in the dark, and let his lips go on moving and moving.

They had this machine. They had two machines, really. One of them slid down into your stomach like a black cobra down an echoing well looking for all the old water and the old time gathered there. It drank up the green matter that flowed to the top in a slow boil. Did it drink of the darkness? Did it suck out all the poisons accumulated with the years? It fed in silence with an occasional sound of inner suffocation and blind searching. It had an Eye. The impersonal operator of the machine could, by wearing a special optical helmet, gaze into the soul of the person whom he was pumping out. What did the Eye see? He did not say. He saw but did not see what the Eye saw. The entire operation was not unlike the digging of a trench in one's yard. The woman on the bed was no more than a hard stratum of marble they had reached. Go on, anyway, shove the bore down, slush up the emptiness, if such a thing could be brought out in the throb of the suction snake. The operator stood smoking a cigarette. The other machine was working too.

The other machine was operated by an equally impersonal fellow in non-stainable reddish-brown overalls. This machine pumped all of the blood from the body and replaced it with fresh blood and serum.

"Got to clean 'em out both ways," said the operator, standing over the silent woman.

"No use getting the stomach if you don't clean the blood. Leave that stuff in the blood and the blood hits the brain like a mallet, bang, a couple of thousand times and the brain just gives up, just quits."

"Stop it!" said Montag.

"I was just sayin'," said the operator.

"Are you done?" said Montag.

They shut the machines up tight. "We're done." His anger did not even touch them. They stood with the cigarette smoke curling around their noses and into their eyes without making them blink or squint. "That's fifty bucks."

"First, why don't you tell me if she'll be all right?"

"Sure, she'll be O.K. We got all the mean stuff right in our suitcase here, it can't get at her now. As I said, you take out the old and put in the new and you're O.K."

"Neither of you is an M.D. Why didn't they send an M.D. from Emergency?"

"Hell!" the operator's cigarette moved on his lips. "We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built. With the optical lens, of course, that was new; the rest is ancient. You don't need an M.D., case like this; all you need is two handymen, clean up the problem in half an hour."

Look"-he started for the door-"we gotta go. Just had another call on the old ear-thimble. Ten blocks from here. Someone else just jumped off the cap of a pillbox. Call if you need us again. Keep her quiet. We got a contra-sedative in her. She'll wake up hungry. So long."

And the men with the cigarettes in their straight-lined mouths, the men with the eyes of puff-adders, took up their load of machine and tube, their case of liquid melancholy and the slow dark sludge of nameless stuff, and strolled out the door.

Montag sank down into a chair and looked at this woman. Her eyes were closed now, gently, and he put out his hand to feel the warmth of breath on his palm.

"Mildred," he said, at last.

There are too many of us, he thought. There are billions of us and that's too many. Nobody knows anyone. Strangers come and violate you. Strangers come and cut your heart out. Strangers come and take your blood. Good God, who were those men? I never saw them before in my life!

Half an hour passed.

The bloodstream in this woman was new and it seemed to have done a new thing to her. Her cheeks were very pink and her lips were very fresh and full of colour and they looked soft and relaxed. Someone else's blood there. If only someone else's flesh and brain and memory. If only they could have taken her mind along to the dry-cleaner's and emptied the pockets and steamed and cleansed it and reblocked it and brought it back in the morning. If only . . .

He got up and put back the curtains and opened the windows wide to let the night air in. It was two o'clock in the morning. Was it only an hour ago, Clarisse McClellan in the street, and him coming in, and the dark room and his foot kicking the little crystal bottle? Only an hour, but the world had melted down and sprung up in a new and colourless form.

Laughter blew across the moon-coloured lawn from the house of Clarisse and her father and mother and the uncle who smiled so quietly and so earnestly. Above all, their laughter was relaxed and hearty and not forced in any way, coming from the house that was so brightly lit this late at night while all the other houses were kept to themselves in darkness. Montag heard the voices talking, talking, talking, giving, talking, weaving, reweaving their hypnotic web.

Montag moved out through the french windows and crossed the lawn, without even thinking of it. He stood outside the talking house in the shadows, thinking he might even tap on their door and whisper, "Let me come in. I won't say anything. I just want to listen. What is it you're saying?"

But instead he stood there, very cold, his face a mask of ice, listening to a man's voice (the uncle?) moving along at an easy pace:

"Well, after all, this is the age of the disposable tissue. Blow your nose on a person, wad them, flush them away, reach for another, blow, wad, flush. Everyone using everyone else's coattails. How are you supposed to root for the home team when you don't even have a programme or know the names? For that matter, what colour jerseys are they wearing as they trot out on to the field?"

Montag moved back to his own house, left the window wide, checked Mildred, tucked the covers about her carefully, and then lay down with the moonlight on his cheekbones and on the frowning ridges in his brow, with the moonlight distilled in each eye to form a silver cataract there.

One drop of rain. Clarisse. Another drop. Mildred. A third. The uncle. A fourth. The fire tonight. One, Clarisse. Two, Mildred. Three, uncle. Four, fire, One, Mildred, two, Clarisse. One, two, three, four, five, Clarisse, Mildred, uncle, fire, sleeping-tablets, men, disposable tissue, coat-tails, blow, wad, flush, Clarisse, Mildred, uncle, fire,

tablets, tissues, blow, wad, flush. One, two, three, one, two, three! Rain. The storm. The uncle laughing. Thunder falling downstairs. The whole world pouring down. The fire gushing up in a volcano. All rushing on down around in a spouting roar and rivering stream toward morning.

"I don't know anything any more," he said, and let a sleep-lozenge dissolve on his tongue.

At nine in the morning, Mildred's bed was empty.

Montag got up quickly, his heart pumping, and ran down the hall and stopped at the kitchen door.

Toast popped out of the silver toaster, was seized by a spidery metal hand that drenched it with melted butter.

Mildred watched the toast delivered to her plate. She had both ears plugged with electronic bees that were humming the hour away. She looked up suddenly, saw him, and nodded.

"You all right?" he asked.

She was an expert at lip-reading from ten years of apprenticeship at Seashell ear-thimbles. She nodded again. She set the toaster clicking away at another piece of bread.

Montag sat down.

His wife said, "I don't know why I should be so hungry."

"You-?"

"I'm HUNGRY."

"Last night," he began.

"Didn't sleep well. Feel terrible," she said. "God, I'm hungry. I can't figure it."

"Last night-" he said again.

She watched his lips casually. "What about last night?"

"Don't you remember?"

"What? Did we have a wild party or something? Feel like I've a hangover. God, I'm hungry. Who was here?"

"A few people," he said.

"That's what I thought." She chewed her toast. "Sore stomach, but I'm hungry as all-get-out. Hope I didn't do anything foolish at the party."

"No," he said, quietly.

The toaster spidered out a piece of buttered bread for him. He held it in his hand, feeling grateful.

"You don't look so hot yourself," said his wife.

In the late afternoon it rained and the entire world was dark grey. He stood in the hall of his house, putting on his badge with the orange salamander burning across it. He stood looking up at the air-conditioning vent in the hall for a long time. His wife in the TV parlour paused long enough from reading her script to glance up. "Hey," she said.

"The man's THINKING!"

"Yes," he said. "I wanted to talk to you." He paused. "You took all the pills in your bottle last night."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," she said, surprised.

"The bottle was empty."

"I wouldn't do a thing like that. Why would I do a thing like that?" she asked.

"Maybe you took two pills and forgot and took two more, and forgot again and took two more, and were so dopy you kept right on until you had thirty or forty of them in you."

"Heck," she said, "what would I want to go and do a silly thing like that for?"

"I don't know," he said.

She was quite obviously waiting for him to go. "I didn't do that," she said. "Never in a billion years."

"All right if you say so," he said.

"That's what the lady said." She turned back to her script.

"What's on this afternoon?" he asked tiredly.

She didn't look up from her script again. "Well, this is a play comes on the wall-to-wall circuit in ten minutes. They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some box-tops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The home-maker, that's me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines: Here, for instance, the man says, 'What do you think of this whole idea, Helen?' And he looks at me sitting here centre stage, see? And I say, I say --" She paused and ran her finger under a line in the script. " 'I think that's fine!' And then they go on with the play until he says, 'Do you agree to that, Helen!' and I say, 'I sure do!' Isn't that fun, Guy?"

He stood in the hall looking at her.

"It's sure fun," she said.

"What's the play about?"

"I just told you. There are these people named Bob and Ruth and Helen."

"Oh."

"It's really fun. It'll be even more fun when we can afford to have the fourth wall installed. How long you figure before we save up and get the fourth wall torn out and a fourth wall-TV put in? It's only two thousand dollars."

"That's one-third of my yearly pay."

"It's only two thousand dollars," she replied. "And I should think you'd consider me sometimes. If we had a fourth wall, why it'd be just like this room wasn't ours at all, but all kinds of exotic people's rooms. We could do without a few things."

"We're already doing without a few things to pay for the third wall. It was put in only two months ago, remember?"

"Is that all it was?" She sat looking at him for a long moment. "Well, good-bye, dear."

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"Good-bye," he said. He stopped and turned around. "Does it have a happy ending?"

"I haven't read that far."

He walked over, read the last page, nodded, folded the script, and handed it back to her. He walked out of the house into the rain.

The rain was thinning away and the girl was walking in the centre of the sidewalk with her head up and the few drops falling on her face. She smiled when she saw Montag.

"Hello! "

He said hello and then said, "What are you up to now?"

"I'm still crazy. The rain feels good. I love to walk in it."

"I don't think I'd like that," he said.

"You might if you tried."

"I never have."

She licked her lips. "Rain even tastes good."

"What do you do, go around trying everything once?" he asked.

"Sometimes twice." She looked at something in her hand.

"What've you got there?" he said.

"I guess it's the last of the dandelions this year. I didn't think I'd find one on the lawn this late. Have you ever heard of rubbing it under your chin? Look." She touched her chin with the flower, laughing.

"Why?"

"If it rubs off, it means I'm in love. Has it?"

He could hardly do anything else but look.

"Well?" she said.

"You're yellow under there."

"Fine! Let's try YOU now."

"It won't work for me."

"Here." Before he could move she had put the dandelion under his chin. He drew

back and she laughed. "Hold still!"

She peered under his chin and frowned.

"Well?" he said.

"What a shame," she said. "You're not in love with anyone."

"Yes, I am ! "

"It doesn't show."

"I am very much in love!" He tried to conjure up a face to fit the words, but there was no face. "I am ! "

"Oh please don't look that way."

"It's that dandelion," he said. "You've used it all up on yourself. That's why it won't work for me."

"Of course, that must be it. Oh, now I've upset you, I can see I have; I'm sorry, really I am." She touched his elbow.

"No, no," he said, quickly, "I'm all right."

"I've got to be going, so say you forgive me. I don't want you angry with me."

"I'm not angry. Upset, yes."

"I've got to go to see my psychiatrist now. They make me go. I made up things to say. I don't know what he thinks of me. He says I'm a regular onion! I keep him busy peeling away the layers."

"I'm inclined to believe you need the psychiatrist," said Montag.

"You don't mean that."

He took a breath and let it out and at last said, "No, I don't mean that."

"The psychiatrist wants to know why I go out and hike around in the forests and watch the birds and collect butterflies. I'll show you my collection some day."

"Good."

"They want to know what I do with all my time. I tell them that sometimes I just sit and think. But I won't tell them what. I've got them running. And sometimes, I tell them, I like to put my head back, like this, and let the rain fall into my mouth. It tastes just like wine. Have you ever tried it?"

"No I--"

"You HAVE forgiven me, haven't you?"

"Yes." He thought about it. "Yes, I have. God knows why. You're peculiar, you're aggravating, yet you're easy to forgive. You say you're seventeen?"

"Well-next month."

"How odd. How strange. And my wife thirty and yet you seem so much older at times. I can't get over it."

"You're peculiar yourself, Mr. Montag. Sometimes I even forget you're a fireman. Now, may I make you angry again?"

"Go ahead."

"How did it start? How did you get into it? How did you pick your work and how did you happen to think to take the job you have? You're not like the others. I've seen a few; I know. When I talk, you look at me. When I said something about the moon, you looked at the moon, last night. The others would never do that. The others would walk off and leave me talking. Or threaten me. No one has time any more for anyone

else. You're one of the few who put up with me. That's why I think it's so strange you're a fireman, it just doesn't seem right for you, somehow."

He felt his body divide itself into a hotness and a coldness, a softness and a hardness, a trembling and a not trembling, the two halves grinding one upon the other.

"You'd better run on to your appointment," he said.

And she ran off and left him standing there in the rain. Only after a long time did he move.

And then, very slowly, as he walked, he tilted his head back in the rain, for just a few moments, and opened his mouth....

The Mechanical Hound slept but did not sleep, lived but did not live in its gently humming, gently vibrating, softly illuminated kennel back in a dark corner of the firehouse. The dim light of one in the morning, the moonlight from the open sky framed through the great window, touched here and there on the brass and the copper and the steel of the faintly trembling beast. Light flickered on bits of ruby glass and on sensitive capillary hairs in the nylon-brushed nostrils of the creature that quivered gently, gently, gently, its eight legs spidered under it on rubber-padded paws.

Montag slid down the brass pole. He went out to look at the city and the clouds had cleared away completely, and he lit a cigarette and came back to bend down and look at the Hound. It was like a great bee come home from some field where the honey is full of poison wildness, of insanity and nightmare, its body crammed with that over-rich nectar and now it was sleeping the evil out of itself.

"Hello," whispered Montag, fascinated as always with the dead beast, the living beast.

At night when things got dull, which was every night, the men slid down the brass poles, and set the ticking combinations of the olfactory system of the Hound and let loose rats in the firehouse area-way, and sometimes chickens, and sometimes cats that would have to be drowned anyway, and there would be betting to see which the Hound would seize first. The animals were turned loose. Three seconds later the game was done, the rat, cat, or chicken caught half across the areaway, gripped in gentling paws while a four-inch hollow steel needle plunged down from the proboscis of the Hound to inject massive jolts of morphine or procaine. The pawn was then tossed in the incinerator. A new game began.

Montag stayed upstairs most nights when this went on. There had been a time two years ago when he had bet with the best of them, and lost a week's salary and faced Mildred's insane anger, which showed itself in veins and blotches. But now at night he lay in his bunk, face turned to the wall, listening to whoops of laughter below and the piano-string scurry of rat feet, the violin squeaking of mice, and the great shadowing, motioned silence of the Hound leaping out like a moth in the raw light, finding, holding its victim, inserting the needle and going back to its kennel to die as if a switch had been turned.

Montag touched the muzzle. .

The Hound growled.

Montag jumped back.

The Hound half rose in its kennel and looked at him with green-blue neon light flickering in its suddenly activated eyebulbs. It growled again, a strange rasping combination of electrical sizzle, a frying sound, a scraping of metal, a turning of cogs that seemed rusty and ancient with suspicion.

"No, no, boy," said Montag, his heart pounding.

He saw the silver needle extended upon the air an inch, pull back, extend, pull back. The growl simmered in the beast and it looked at him.

Montag backed up. The Hound took a step from its kennel.

Montag grabbed the brass pole with one hand. The pole, reacting, slid upward, and took him through the ceiling, quietly. He stepped off in the half-lit deck of the upper level. He was trembling and his face was green-white. Below, the Hound had sunk back down upon its eight incredible insect legs and was humming to itself again, its multi-faceted eyes at peace.

Montag stood, letting the fears pass, by the drop-hole. Behind him, four men at a card table under a green-lidded light in the corner glanced briefly but said nothing. Only the man with the Captain's hat and the sign of the Phoenix on his hat, at last, curious, his playing cards in his thin hand, talked across the long room.

"Montag . . . ?"

"It doesn't like me," said Montag.

"What, the Hound?" The Captain studied his cards.

"Come off it. It doesn't like or dislike. It just `functions.' It's like a lesson in ballistics. It has a trajectory we decide for it. It follows through. It targets itself, homes itself, and cuts off. It's only copper wire, storage batteries, and electricity."

Montag swallowed. "Its calculators can be set to any combination, so many amino acids, so much sulphur, so much butterfat and alkaline. Right?"

"We all know that."

"All of those chemical balances and percentages on all of us here in the house are recorded in the master file downstairs. It would be easy for someone to set up a partial combination on the Hound's 'memory,' a touch of amino acids, perhaps. That would account for what the animal did just now. Reacted toward me."

"Hell," said the Captain.

"Irritated, but not completely angry. Just enough 'memory' set up in it by someone so it growled when I touched it."

"Who would do a thing like that?." asked the Captain. "You haven't any enemies here, Guy."

"None that I know of."

"We'll have the Hound checked by our technicians tomorrow."

"This isn't the first time it's threatened me," said Montag. "Last month it happened twice."

"We'll fix it up. Don't worry"

But Montag did not move and only stood thinking of the ventilator grille in the hall at home and what lay hidden behind the grille. If someone here in the firehouse knew about the ventilator then mightn't they "tell" the Hound . . . ?

The Captain came over to the drop-hole and gave Montag a questioning glance.

"I was just figuring," said Montag, "what does the Hound think about down there nights? Is it coming alive on us, really? It makes me cold."

"It doesn't think anything we don't want it to think."

"That's sad," said Montag, quietly, "because all we put into it is hunting and finding and killing. What a shame if that's all it can ever know."

Beatty snorted, gently. "Hell! It's a fine bit of craftsmanship, a good rifle that can fetch its own target and guarantees the bull's-eye every time."

"That's why," said Montag. "I wouldn't want to be its next victim."

"Why? You got a guilty conscience about something?"

Montag glanced up swiftly.

Beatty stood there looking at him steadily with his eyes, while his mouth opened and began to laugh, very softly.

One two three four five six seven days. And as many times he came out of the house and Clarisse was there somewhere in the world. Once he saw her shaking a walnut tree, once he saw her sitting on the lawn knitting a blue sweater, three or four times he found a bouquet of late flowers on his porch, or a handful of chestnuts in a little sack, or some autumn leaves neatly pinned to a sheet of white paper and thumb-tacked to his door. Every day Clarisse walked him to the corner. One day it was raining, the next it was clear, the day after that the wind blew strong, and the day after that it was mild and calm, and the day after that calm day was a day like a furnace of summer and Clarisse with her face all sunburnt by late afternoon.

"Why is it," he said, one time, at the subway entrance, "I feel I've known you so many years?"

"Because I like you," she said, "and I don't want anything from you. And because we know each other."

"You make me feel very old and very much like a father."

"Now you explain," she said, "why you haven't any daughters like me, if you love children so much?"

"I don't know."

"You're joking!"

"I mean-" He stopped and shook his head. "Well, my wife, she . . . she just never wanted any children at all."

The girl stopped smiling. "I'm sorry. I really, thought you were having fun at my expense. I'm a fool."

"No, no," he said. "It was a good question. It's been a long time since anyone cared enough to ask. A good question."

"Let's talk about something else. Have you ever smelled old leaves? Don't they smell like cinnamon? Here. Smell."

"Why, yes, it is like cinnamon in a way."

She looked at him with her clear dark eyes. "You always seem shocked."

"It's just I haven't had time--"

"Did you look at the stretched-out billboards like I told you?"

"I think so. Yes." He had to laugh.

"Your laugh sounds much nicer than it did"

"Does it?"

"Much more relaxed."

He felt at ease and comfortable. "Why aren't you in school? I see you every day wandering around."

"Oh, they don't miss me," she said. "I'm anti-social, they say. I don't mix. It's so strange. I'm very social indeed. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn't it? Social to me means talking about things like this." She rattled some chestnuts that had fallen off the tree in the front yard. "Or talking about how strange the world is. Being with people is nice. But I don't think it's social to get a bunch of people together and then not let them talk, do you? An hour of TV class, an hour of basketball or baseball or running, another hour of transcription history or painting pictures, and more sports, but do you know, we never ask questions, or at least most don't; they just run the answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film-teacher. That's not social to me at all. It's a lot of funnels and a lot of water poured down the spout and out the bottom, and them telling us it's wine when it's not. They run us so ragged by the end of the day we can't do anything but go to bed or head for a Fun Park to bully people around, break windowpanes in the Window Smasher place or wreck cars in the Car Wrecker place with the big steel ball. Or go out in the cars and race on the streets, trying to see how close you can get to lamp-

posts, playing 'chicken' and 'knock hub-caps.' I guess I'm everything they say I am, all right. I haven't any friends. That's supposed to prove I'm abnormal. But everyone I know is either shouting or dancing around like wild or beating up one another. Do you notice how people hurt each other nowadays?"

"You sound so very old."

"Sometimes I'm ancient. I'm afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always used to be that way? My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot in the last year alone. Ten of them died in car wrecks. I'm afraid of them and they don't like me because I'm afraid. My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other. But that was a long time ago when they had things different. They believed in responsibility, my uncle says. Do you know, I'm responsible. I was spanked when I needed it, years ago. And I do all the shopping and house-cleaning by hand.

"But most of all," she said, "I like to watch people. Sometimes I ride the subway all day and look at them and listen to them. I just want to figure out who they are and what they want and where they're going. Sometimes I even go to the Fun Parks and ride in the jet cars when they race on the edge of town at midnight and the police don't care as long as they're insured. As long as everyone has ten thousand insurance everyone's happy. Sometimes I sneak around and listen in subways. Or I listen at soda fountains, and do you know what?"

"What?"

"People don't talk about anything."

"Oh, they must!"

"No, not anything. They name a lot of cars or clothes or swimming-pools mostly and say how swell! But they all say the same things and nobody says anything different from anyone else. And most of the time in the cafes they have the jokeboxes on and the same jokes most of the time, or the musical wall lit and all the coloured patterns running up and down, but it's only colour and all abstract. And at the museums, have you ever been? All abstract. That's all there is now. My uncle says it was different once. A long time back sometimes pictures said things or even showed people."

"Your uncle said, your uncle said. Your uncle must be a remarkable man."

"He is. He certainly is. Well, I've got to be going. Goodbye, Mr. Montag."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye...."

One two three four five six seven days: the firehouse.

"Montag, you shin that pole like a bird up a tree."

Third day.

"Montag, I see you came in the back door this time. The Hound bother you?"

"No, no."

Fourth day.

"Montag, a funny thing. Heard tell this morning. Fireman in Seattle, purposely set a Mechanical Hound to his own chemical complex and let it loose. What kind of suicide would you call that?"

Five six seven days.

And then, Clarisse was gone. He didn't know what there was about the afternoon, but it was not seeing her somewhere in the world. The lawn was empty, the trees empty, the street empty, and while at first he did not even know he missed her or was even looking for her, the fact was that by the time he reached the subway, there were vague stirrings of un-ease in him. Something was the matter, his routine had been disturbed. A simple routine, true, established in a short few days, and yet . . . ? He almost turned back to make the walk again, to give her time to appear. He was

certain if he tried the same route, everything would work out fine. But it was late, and the arrival of his train put a stop to his plan.

The flutter of cards, motion of hands, of eyelids, the drone of the time-voice in the firehouse ceiling ". . . one thirty-five. Thursday morning, November 4th,... one thirty-six . . . one thirty-seven a.m..." The tick of the playing-cards on the greasy table-top, all the sounds came to Montag, behind his closed eyes, behind the barrier he had momentarily erected. He could feel the firehouse full of glitter and shine and silence, of brass colours, the colours of coins, of gold, of silver: The unseen men across the table were sighing on their cards, waiting.

". . .one forty-five..." The voice-clock mourned out the cold hour of a cold morning of a still colder year.

"What's wrong, Montag?"

Montag opened his eyes.

A radio hummed somewhere. ". . . war may be declared any hour. This country stands ready to defend its--"

The firehouse trembled as a great flight of jet planes whistled a single note across the black morning sky.

Montag blinked. Beatty was looking at him as if he were a museum statue. At any moment, Beatty might rise and walk about him, touching, exploring his guilt and self-consciousness. Guilt? What guilt was that?

"Your play, Montag."

Montag looked at these men whose faces were sunburnt by a thousand real and ten thousand imaginary fires, whose work flushed their cheeks and fevered their eyes. These men who looked steadily into their platinum igniter flames as they lit their eternally burning black pipes. They and their charcoal hair and soot-coloured brows and bluish-ash-smearred cheeks where they had shaven close; but their heritage showed. Montag started up, his mouth opened. Had he ever seen a fireman that didn't have black hair, black brows, a fiery face, and a blue-steel shaved but unshaved look? These men were all mirror-images of himself! Were all firemen picked then for their looks as well as their proclivities? The colour of cinders and ash about them, and the continual smell of burning from their pipes. Captain Beatty there, rising in thunderheads of tobacco smoke. Beatty opening a fresh tobacco packet, crumpling the cellophane into a sound of fire.

Montag looked at the cards in his own hands. "I-I've been thinking. About the fire last week. About the man whose library we fixed. What happened to him?"

"They took him screaming off to the asylum"

"He. wasn't insane."

Beatty arranged his cards quietly. "Any man's insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us."

"I've tried to imagine," said Montag, "just how it would feel. I mean to have firemen burn our houses and our books."

"We haven't any books."

"But if we did have some."

"You got some?"

Beatty blinked slowly.

"No." Montag gazed beyond them to the wall with the typed lists of a million forbidden books. Their names leapt in fire, burning down the years under his axe and his hose which sprayed not water but kerosene. "No." But in his mind, a cool wind started up and blew out of the ventilator grille at home, softly, softly, chilling his face. And, again, he saw himself in a green park talking to an old man, a very old man, and the wind from the park was cold, too.

Montag hesitated, "Was-was it always like this? The firehouse, our work? I mean, well, once upon a time..."

"Once upon a time!" Beatty said. "What kind of talk is THAT?"

Fool, thought Montag to himself, you'll give it away. At the last fire, a book of fairy tales, he'd glanced at a single line. "I mean," he said, "in the old days, before homes were completely fireproofed " Suddenly it seemed a much younger voice was speaking for him. He opened his mouth and it was Clarisse McClellan saying, "Didn't firemen prevent fires rather than stoke them up and get them going?"

"That's rich!" Stoneman and Black drew forth their rulebooks, which also contained brief histories of the Firemen of America, and laid them out where Montag, though long familiar with them, might read:

"Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies. First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin."

RULE 1. Answer the alarm swiftly.

2. Start the fire swiftly.

3. Burn everything.

4. Report back to firehouse immediately.

5. Stand alert for other alarms.

Everyone watched Montag. He did not move.

The alarm sounded.

The bell in the ceiling kicked itself two hundred times. Suddenly there were four empty chairs. The cards fell in a flurry of snow. The brass pole shivered. The men were gone.

Montag sat in his chair. Below, the orange dragon coughed into life.

Montag slid down the pole like a man in a dream.

The Mechanical Hound leapt up in its kennel, its eyes all green flame.

"Montag, you forgot your helmet!"

He seized it off the wall behind him, ran, leapt, and they were off, the night wind hammering about their siren scream and their mighty metal thunder !

It was a flaking three-storey house in the ancient part of the city, a century old if it was a day, but like all houses it had been given a thin fireproof plastic sheath many years ago, and this preservative shell seemed to be the only thing holding it in the sky.

"Here we are !"

The engine slammed to a stop. Beatty, Stoneman, and Black ran up the sidewalk, suddenly odious and fat in the plump fireproof slickers. Montag followed.

They crashed the front door and grabbed at a woman, though she was not running, she was not trying to escape. She was only standing, weaving from side to side, her eyes fixed upon a nothingness in the wall as if they had struck her a terrible blow upon the head. Her tongue was moving in her mouth, and her eyes seemed to be trying to remember something, and then they remembered and her tongue moved again:

" 'Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.' "

"Enough of that!" said Beatty. "Where are they?"

He slapped her face with amazing objectivity and repeated the question. The old woman's eyes came to a focus upon Beatty. "You know where they are or you wouldn't be here," she said.

Stoneman held out the telephone alarm card with the complaint signed in telephone duplicate on the back

"Have reason to suspect attic; 11 No. Elm, City. --- E. B."

"That would be Mrs. Blake, my neighbour;" said the woman, reading the initials.

"All right, men, let's get 'em!"

Next thing they were up in musty blackness, swinging silver hatchets at doors that were, after all, unlocked, tumbling through like boys all rollick and shout. "Hey! " A fountain of books sprang down upon Montag as he climbed shuddering up the sheer stair-well. How inconvenient! Always before it had been like snuffing a candle. The police went first and adhesive-taped the victim's mouth and bandaged him off into their glittering beetle cars, so when you arrived you found an empty house. You weren't hurting anyone, you were hurting only things! And since things really couldn't be hurt, since things felt nothing, and things don't scream or whimper, as this woman might begin to scream and cry out, there was nothing to tease your conscience later. You were simply cleaning up. Janitorial work, essentially. Everything to its proper place. Quick with the kerosene! Who's got a match!

But now, tonight, someone had slipped. This woman was spoiling the ritual. The men were making too much noise, laughing, joking to cover her terrible accusing silence below. She made the empty rooms roar with accusation and shake down a fine dust of guilt that was sucked in their nostrils as they plunged about. It was neither cricket nor correct. Montag felt an immense irritation. She shouldn't be here, on top of everything!

Books bombarded his shoulders, his arms, his upturned face. A book alighted, almost obediently, like a white pigeon, in his hands, wings fluttering. In the dim, wavering light, a page hung open and it was like a snowy feather, the words delicately painted thereon. In all the rush and fervour, Montag had only an instant to read a line, but it blazed in his mind for the next minute as if stamped there with fiery steel. "Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine." He dropped the book. Immediately, another fell into his arms.

"Montag, up here! "

Montag's hand closed like a mouth, crushed the book with wild devotion, with an insanity of mindlessness to his chest. The men above were hurling shovelfuls of magazines into the dusty air. They fell like slaughtered birds and the woman stood below, like a small girl, among the bodies.

Montag had done nothing. His hand had done it all, his hand, with a brain of its own, with a conscience and a curiosity in each trembling finger, had turned thief.. Now, it plunged the book back under his arm, pressed it tight to sweating armpit, rushed out empty, with a magician's flourish! Look here! Innocent! Look!

He gazed, shaken, at that white hand. He held it way out, as if he were far-sighted. He held it close, as if he were blind.

"Montag! "

He jerked about.

"Don't stand there, idiot!"

The books lay like great mounds of fishes left to dry. The men danced and slipped and fell over them. Titles glittered their golden eyes, falling, gone.

"Kerosene! They pumped the cold fluid from the numbered 451 tanks strapped to their shoulders. They coated each book, they pumped rooms full of it.

They hurried downstairs, Montag staggered after them in the kerosene fumes.

"Come on, woman!"

The woman knelt among the books, touching the drenched leather and cardboard, reading the gilt titles with her fingers while her eyes accused Montag.

"You can't ever have my books," she said.

"You know the law," said Beatty. "Where's your common sense? None of those books agree with each other. You've been locked up here for years with a regular

damned Tower of Babel. Snap out of it! The people in those books never lived. Come on now! "

She shook her head.

"The whole house is going up;" said Beatty,

The men walked clumsily to the door. They glanced back at Montag, who stood near the woman.

"You're not leaving her here?" he protested.

"She won't come."

"Force her, then!"

Beatty raised his hand in which was concealed the igniter. "We're due back at the house. Besides, these fanatics always try suicide; the pattern's familiar."

Montag placed his hand on the woman's elbow. "You can come with me."

"No," she said. "Thank you, anyway."

"I'm counting to ten," said Beatty. "One. Two."

"Please," said Montag.

"Go on," said the woman.

"Three. Four."

"Here." Montag pulled at the woman.

The woman replied quietly, "I want to stay here"

"Five. Six."

"You can stop counting," she said. She opened the fingers of one hand slightly and in the palm of the hand was a single slender object.

An ordinary kitchen match.

The sight of it rushed the men out and down away from the house. Captain Beatty, keeping his dignity, backed slowly through the front door, his pink face burnt and shiny from a thousand fires and night excitements. God, thought Montag, how true! Always at night the alarm comes. Never by day! Is it because the fire is prettier by night? More spectacle, a better show? The pink face of Beatty now showed the faintest panic in the door. The woman's hand twitched on the single matchstick. The fumes of kerosene bloomed up about her. Montag felt the hidden book pound like a heart against his chest.

"Go on," said the woman, and Montag felt himself back away and away out of the door, after Beatty, down the steps, across the lawn, where the path of kerosene lay like the track of some evil snail.

On the front porch where she had come to weigh them quietly with her eyes, her quietness a condemnation, the woman stood motionless.

Beatty flicked his fingers to spark the kerosene.

He was too late. Montag gasped.

The woman on the porch reached out with contempt for them all, and struck the kitchen match against the railing.

People ran out of houses all down the street.

They said nothing on their way back to the firehouse. Nobody looked at anyone else. Montag sat in the front seat with Beatty and Black. They did not even smoke their pipes. They sat there looking out of the front of the great salamander as they turned a corner and went silently on.

"Master Ridley," said Montag at last.

"What?" said Beatty.

"She said, `Master Ridley.' She said some crazy thing when we came in the door.

`Play the man,' she said, `Master Ridley.' Something, something, something."

"We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out," said Beatty. Stoneman glanced over at the Captain, as did Montag, startled.

Beatty rubbed his chin. "A man named Latimer said that to a man named Nicholas Ridley, as they were being burnt alive at Oxford, for heresy, on October 16, 1555." Montag and Stoneman went back to looking at the street as it moved under the engine wheels.

"I'm full of bits and pieces," said Beatty. "Most fire captains have to be. Sometimes I surprise myself. WATCH it, Stoneman!"

Stoneman braked the truck.

"Damn!" said Beatty. "You've gone right by the corner where we turn for the firehouse."

"Who is it?"

"Who would it be?" said Montag, leaning back against the closed door in the dark.

His wife said, at last, "Well, put on the light."

"I don't want the light."

"Come to bed."

He heard her roll impatiently; the bedsprings squealed.

"Are you drunk?" she said.

So it was the hand that started it all. He felt one hand and then the other work his coat free and let it slump to the floor. He held his pants out into an abyss and let them fall into darkness. His hands had been infected, and soon it would be his arms. He could feel the poison working up his wrists and into his elbows and his shoulders, and then the jump-over from shoulder-blade to shoulder-blade like a spark leaping a gap. His hands were ravenous. And his eyes were beginning to feel hunger, as if they must look at something, anything, everything.

His wife said, "What are you doing?"

He balanced in space with the book in his sweating cold fingers.

A minute later she said, "Well, just don't stand there in the middle of the floor."

He made a small sound.

"What?" she asked.

He made more soft sounds. He stumbled towards the bed and shoved the book clumsily under the cold pillow. He fell into bed and his wife cried out, startled. He lay far across the room from her, on a winter island separated by an empty sea. She talked to him for what seemed a long while and she talked about this and she talked about that and it was only words, like the words he had heard once in a nursery at a friend's house, a two-year-old child building word patterns, talking jargon, making pretty sounds in the air. But Montag said nothing and after a long while when he only made the small sounds, he felt her move in the room and come to his bed and stand over him and put her hand down to feel his cheek. He knew that when she pulled her hand away from his face it was wet.

Late in the night he looked over at Mildred. She was awake. There was a tiny dance of melody in the air, her Seashell was tamped in her ear again and she was listening to far people in far places, her eyes wide and staring at the fathoms of blackness above her in the ceiling.

Wasn't there an old joke about the wife who talked so much on the telephone that her desperate husband ran out to the nearest store and telephoned her to ask what was for dinner? Well, then, why didn't he buy himself an audio-Seashell broadcasting station and talk to his wife late at night, murmur, whisper, shout, scream, yell? But what would he whisper, what would he yell? What could he say?

And suddenly she was so strange he couldn't believe he knew her at all. He was in someone else's house, like those other jokes people told of the gentleman, drunk, coming home late at night, unlocking the wrong door, entering a wrong room, and bedding with a stranger and getting up early and going to work and neither of them the wiser.

"Millie.... ?" he whispered.

"What?"

"I didn't mean to startle you. What I want to know is ...."

"Well?"

"When did we meet. And where?"

"When did we meet for what?" she asked.

"I mean-originally."

He knew she must be frowning in the dark.

He clarified it. "The first time we ever met, where was it, and when?"

"Why, it was at --"

She stopped.

"I don't know," she said.

He was cold. "Can't you remember?"

"It's been so long."

"Only ten years, that's all, only ten!"

"Don't get excited, I'm trying to think." She laughed an odd little laugh that went up and up. "Funny, how funny, not to remember where or when you met your husband or wife."

He lay massaging his eyes, his brow, and the back of his neck, slowly. He held both hands over his eyes and applied a steady pressure there as if to crush memory into place. It was suddenly more important than any other thing in a life-time that he knew where he had met Mildred.

"It doesn't matter," She was up in the bathroom now, and he heard the water running, and the swallowing sound she made.

"No, I guess not," he said.

He tried to count how many times she swallowed and he thought of the visit from the two zinc-oxide-faced men with the cigarettes in their straight-lined mouths and the electronic-eyed snake winding down into the layer upon layer of night and stone and stagnant spring water, and he wanted to call out to her, how many have you taken TONIGHT! the capsules! how many will you take later and not know? and so on, every hour! or maybe not tonight, tomorrow night! And me not sleeping, tonight or tomorrow night or any night for a long while; now that this has started. And he thought of her lying on the bed with the two technicians standing straight over her, not bent with concern, but only standing straight, arms folded. And he remembered thinking then that if she died, he was certain he wouldn't cry. For it would be the dying of an unknown, a street face, a newspaper image, and it was suddenly so very wrong that he had begun to cry, not at death but at the thought of not crying at death, a silly empty man near a silly empty woman, while the hungry snake made her still more empty.

How do you get so empty? he wondered. Who takes it out of you? And that awful flower the other day, the dandelion! It had summed up everything, hadn't it? "What a shame! You're not in love with anyone !" And why not?

Well, wasn't there a wall between him and Mildred, when you came down to it?

Literally not just one, wall but, so far, three! And expensive, too! And the uncles, the aunts, the cousins, the nieces, the nephews, that lived in those walls, the gibbering pack of tree-apes that said nothing, nothing, nothing and said it loud, loud, loud. He

had taken to calling them relatives from the very first. "How's Uncle Louis today?" "Who?" "And Aunt Maude?" The most significant memory he had of Mildred, really, was of a little girl in a forest without trees (how odd!) or rather a little girl lost on a plateau where there used to be trees (you could feel the memory of their shapes all about) sitting in the centre of the "living-room." The living-room; what a good job of labelling that was now. No matter when he came in, the walls were always talking to Mildred.

"Something must be done!!"

"Yes, something must be done!"

"Well, let's not stand and talk!"

"Let's do it! "

"I'm so mad I could SPIT!"

What was it all about? Mildred couldn't say. Who was mad at whom? Mildred didn't quite know. What were they going to do? Well, said Mildred, wait around and see. He had waited around to see.

A great thunderstorm of sound gushed from the walls. Music bombarded him at such an immense volume that his bones were almost shaken from their tendons; he felt his jaw vibrate, his eyes wobble in his head. He was a victim of concussion. When it was all over he felt like a man who had been thrown from a cliff, whirled in a centrifuge and spat out over a waterfall that fell and fell into emptiness and emptiness and never-quite-touched-bottom-never-never-quite-no not quite-touched-bottom ... and you fell so fast you didn't touch the sides either ... never ... quite . . . touched . anything.

The thunder faded. The music died.

"There," said Mildred,

And it was indeed remarkable. Something had happened. Even though the people in the walls of the room had barely moved, and nothing had really been settled, you had the impression that someone had turned on a washing-machine or sucked you up in a gigantic vacuum. You drowned in music and pure cacophony. He came out of the room sweating and on the point of collapse. Behind him, Mildred sat in her chair and the voices went on again:

"Well, everything will be all right now," said an "aunt."

"Oh, don't be too sure," said a "cousin."

"Now, don't get angry!"

"Who's angry?"

"YOU are ! "

"You're mad!"

"Why should I be mad!"

"Because!"

"That's all very well," cried Montag, "but what are they mad about? Who are these people? Who's that man and who's that woman? Are they husband and wife, are they divorced, engaged, what? Good God, nothing's connected up."

"They--" said Mildred. "Well, they-they had this fight, you see. They certainly fight a lot. You should listen. I think they're married. Yes, they're married. Why?"

And if it was not the three walls soon to be four walls and the dream complete, then it was the open car and Mildred driving a hundred miles an hour across town, he shouting at her and she shouting back and both trying to hear what was said, but hearing only the scream of the car. "At least keep it down to the minimum !" he yelled: "What?" she cried. "Keep it down to fifty-five, the minimum! " he shouted. "The what?" she shrieked. "Speed!" he shouted. And she pushed it up to one hundred and five miles an hour and tore the breath from his mouth.

When they stepped out of the car, she had the Seashells stuffed in her ears.  
Silence. Only the wind blowing softly.

"Mildred." He stirred in bed.

He reached over and pulled one of the tiny musical insects out of her ear. "Mildred. Mildred?"

"Yes." Her voice was faint.

He felt he was one of the creatures electronically inserted between the slots of the phono-colour walls, speaking, but the speech not piercing the crystal barrier. He could only pantomime, hoping she would turn his way and see him. They could not touch through the glass.

"Mildred, do you know that girl I was telling you about?"

"What girl?" She was almost asleep.

"The girl next door."

"What girl next door?"

"You know, the high-school girl. Clarisse, her name is."

"Oh, yes," said his wife.

"I haven't seen her for a few days-four days to be exact. Have you seen her?"

"No."

"I've meant to talk to you about her. Strange."

"Oh, I know the one you mean."

"I thought you would."

"Her," said Mildred in the dark room.

"What about her?" asked Montag.

"I meant to tell you. Forgot. Forgot."

"Tell me now. What is it?"

"I think she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Whole family moved out somewhere. But she's gone for good. I think she's dead."

"We couldn't be talking about the same girl."

"No. The same girl. McClellan. McClellan, Run over by a car. Four days ago. I'm not sure. But I think she's dead. The family moved out anyway. I don't know. But I think she's dead."

"You're not sure of it! "

"No, not sure. Pretty sure."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Forgot."

"Four days ago!"

"I forgot all about it."

"Four days ago," he said, quietly, lying there.

They lay there in the dark room not moving, either of them. "Good night," she said.

He heard a faint rustle. Her hands moved. The electric thimble moved like a praying mantis on the pillow, touched by her hand. Now it was in her ear again, humming.

He listened and his wife was singing under her breath.

Outside the house, a shadow moved, an autumn wind rose up and faded away. But there was something else in the silence that he heard. It was like a breath exhaled upon the window. It was like a faint drift of greenish luminescent smoke, the motion of a single huge October leaf blowing across the lawn and away.

The Hound, he thought. It's out there tonight. It's out there now. If I opened the window . . .

He did not open the window.

He had chills and fever in the morning.

"You can't be sick," said Mildred.

He closed his eyes over the hotness. "Yes."

"But you were all right last night."

"No, I wasn't all right." He heard the "relatives" shouting in the parlour.

Mildred stood over his bed, curiously. He felt her there, he saw her without opening his eyes, her hair burnt by chemicals to a brittle straw, her eyes with a kind of cataract unseen but suspect far behind the pupils, the reddened pouting lips, the body as thin as a praying mantis from dieting, and her flesh like white bacon. He could remember her no other way.

"Will you bring me aspirin and water?"

"You've got to get up," she said. "It's noon. You've slept five hours later than usual."

"Will you turn the parlour off?" he asked.

"That's my family."

"Will you turn it off for a sick man?"

"I'll turn it down."

She went out of the room and did nothing to the parlour and came back. "Is that better?"

"Thanks."

"That's my favourite programme," she said.

"What about the aspirin?"

"You've never been sick before." She went away again.

"Well, I'm sick now. I'm not going to work tonight. Call Beatty for me."

"You acted funny last night." She returned, humming.

"Where's the aspirin?" He glanced at the water-glass she handed him.

"Oh." She walked to the bathroom again. "Did something happen?"

"A fire, is all."

"I had a nice evening," she said, in the bathroom.

"What doing?"

"The parlour."

"What was on?"

"Programmes."

"What programmes?"

"Some of the best ever."

"Who?"

"Oh, you know, the bunch."

"Yes, the bunch, the bunch, the bunch." He pressed at the pain in his eyes and suddenly the odour of kerosene made him vomit.

Mildred came in, humming. She was surprised. "Why'd you do that?"

He looked with dismay at the floor. "We burned an old woman with her books."

"It's a good thing the rug's washable." She fetched a mop and worked on it. "I went to Helen's last night."

"Couldn't you get the shows in your own parlour?"

"Sure, but it's nice visiting."

She went out into the parlour. He heard her singing.

"Mildred?" he called.

She returned, singing, snapping her fingers softly.

"Aren't you going to ask me about last night?" he said.

"What about it?"

"We burned a thousand books. We burned a woman."

"Well?"

The parlour was exploding with sound.

"We burned copies of Dante and Swift and Marcus Aurelius."

"Wasn't he a European?"

"Something like that."

"Wasn't he a radical?"

"I never read him."

"He was a radical." Mildred fiddled with the telephone. "You don't expect me to call Captain Beatty, do you?"

"You must! "

"Don't shout!"

"I wasn't shouting." He was up in bed, suddenly, enraged and flushed, shaking. The parlour roared in the hot air. "I can't call him. I can't tell him I'm sick."

"Why?"

Because you're afraid, he thought. A child feigning illness, afraid to call because after a moment's discussion, the conversation would run so: "Yes, Captain, I feel better already. I'll be in at ten o'clock tonight."

"You're not sick," said Mildred.

Montag fell back in bed. He reached under his pillow. The hidden book was still there.

"Mildred, how would it be if, well, maybe, I quit my job awhile?"

"You want to give up everything? After all these years of working, because, one night, some woman and her books--"

"You should have seen her, Millie! "

"She's nothing to me; she shouldn't have had books. It was her responsibility, she should have thought of that. I hate her. She's got you going and next thing you know we'll be out, no house, no job, nothing."

"You weren't there, you didn't see," he said. "There must be something in books, things we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing."

"She was simple-minded."

"She was as rational as you and I, more so perhaps, and we burned her."

"That's water under the bridge."

"No, not water; fire. You ever seen a burned house? It smoulders for days. Well, this fire'll last me the rest of my life. God! I've been trying to put it out, in my mind, all night. I'm crazy with trying."

"You should have thought of that before becoming a fireman."

"Thought! " he said. "Was I given a choice? My grandfather and father were firemen. In my sleep, I ran after them."

The parlour was playing a dance tune.

"This is the day you go on the early shift," said Mildred. "You should have gone two hours ago. I just noticed."

"It's not just the woman that died," said Montag. "Last night I thought about all the kerosene I've used in the past ten years. And I thought about books. And for the first time I realized that a man was behind each one of the books. A man had to think them up. A man had to take a long time to put them down on paper. And I'd never even thought that thought before." He got out of bed.

"It took some man a lifetime maybe to put some of his thoughts down, looking around at the world and life, and then I came along in two minutes and boom! it's all over."

"Let me alone," said Mildred. "I didn't do anything."

"Let you alone! That's all very well, but how can I leave myself alone? We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were really bothered? About something important, about something real?"

And then he shut up, for he remembered last week and the two white stones staring up at the ceiling and the pump-snake with the probing eye and the two soap-faced men with the cigarettes moving in their mouths when they talked. But that was another Mildred, that was a Mildred so deep inside this one, and so bothered, really bothered, that the two women had never met. He turned away.

Mildred said, "Well, now you've done it. Out front of the house. Look who's here."

"I don't care."

"There's a Phoenix car just driven up and a man in a black shirt with an orange snake stitched on his arm coming up the front walk."

"Captain Beauty?" he said,

"Captain Beatty."

Montag did not move, but stood looking into the cold whiteness of the wall immediately before him.

"Go let him in, will you? Tell him I'm sick."

"Tell him yourself!" She ran a few steps this way, a few steps that, and stopped, eyes wide, when the front door speaker called her name, softly, softly, Mrs. Montag, Mrs. Montag, someone here, someone here, Mrs. Montag, Mrs. Montag, someone's here. Fading.

Montag made sure the book was well hidden behind the pillow, climbed slowly back into bed, arranged the covers over his knees and across his chest, half-sitting, and after a while Mildred moved and went out of the room and Captain Beatty strolled in, his hands in his pockets.

"Shut the 'relatives' up," said Beatty, looking around at everything except Montag and his wife.

This time, Mildred ran. The yammering voices stopped yelling in the parlour.

Captain Beatty sat down in the most comfortable chair with a peaceful look on his ruddy face. He took time to prepare and light his brass pipe and puff out a great smoke cloud. "Just thought I'd come by and see how the sick man is."

"How'd you guess?"

Beatty smiled his smile which showed the candy pinkness of his gums and the tiny candy whiteness of his teeth. "I've seen it all. You were going to call for a night off." Montag sat in bed.

"Well," said Beatty, "take the night off!" He examined his eternal matchbox, the lid of which said GUARANTEED: ONE MILLION LIGHTS IN THIS IGNITER, and began to strike the chemical match abstractedly, blow out, strike, blow out, strike, speak a few words, blow out. He looked at the flame. He blew, he looked at the smoke. "When will you be well?"

"Tomorrow. The next day maybe. First of the week."

Beatty puffed his pipe. "Every fireman, sooner or later, hits this. They only need understanding, to know how the wheels run. Need to know the history of our profession. They don't feed it to rookies like they used to. Damn shame." Puff. "Only fire chiefs remember it now." Puff. "I'll let you in on it."

Mildred fidgeted.

Beatty took a full minute to settle himself in and think back for what he wanted to say. "When did it all start, you ask, this job of ours, how did it come about, where, when? Well, I'd say it really got started around about a thing called the Civil War. Even though our rule-book claims it was founded earlier. The fact is we didn't get along well until photography came into its own. Then--motion pictures in the early twentieth century. Radio. Television. Things began to have mass."

Montag sat in bed, not moving.

"And because they had mass, they became simpler," said Beatty. "Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films and radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm, do you follow me?"

"I think so."

Beatty peered at the smoke pattern he had put out on the air. "Picture it. Nineteenth-century man with his horses, dogs, carts, slow motion. Then, in the twentieth century, speed up your camera. Books cut shorter. Condensations, Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending."

"Snap ending." Mildred nodded.

"Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up at last as a ten- or twelve-line dictionary resume. I exaggerate, of course. The dictionaries were for reference. But many were those whose sole knowledge of Hamlet (you know the title certainly, Montag; it is probably only a faint rumour of a title to you, Mrs. Montag) whose sole knowledge, as I say, of Hamlet was a one-page digest in a book that claimed: 'now at least you can read all the classics; keep up with your neighbours.' Do you see? Out of the nursery into the college and back to the nursery; there's your intellectual pattern for the past five centuries or more."

Mildred arose and began to move around the room, picking things up and putting them down. Beatty ignored her and continued

"Speed up the film, Montag, quick. Click? Pic? Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, There, Swift, Pace, Up, Down, In, Out, Why, How, Who, What, Where, Eh? Uh! Bang! Smack! Wallop, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digest-digests, digest-digest-digests. Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes! Whirl man's mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!" Mildred smoothed the bedclothes. Montag felt his heart jump and jump again as she patted his pillow. Right now she was pulling at his shoulder to try to get him to move so she could take the pillow out and fix it nicely and put it back. And perhaps cry out and stare or simply reach down her hand and say, "What's this?" and hold up the hidden book with touching innocence.

"School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?"

"Let me fix your pillow," said Mildred.

"No!" whispered Montag,

"The zipper displaces the button and a man lacks just that much time to think while dressing at dawn, a philosophical hour, and thus a melancholy hour."

Mildred said, "Here."

"Get away," said Montag.

"Life becomes one big pratfall, Montag; everything bang; boff, and wow!"

"Wow," said Mildred, yanking at the pillow.

"For God's sake, let me be!" cried Montag passionately.

Beatty opened his eyes wide.

Mildred's hand had frozen behind the pillow. Her fingers were tracing the book's outline and as the shape became familiar her face looked surprised and then stunned. Her mouth opened to ask a question . . .

"Empty the theatres save for clowns and furnish the rooms with glass walls and pretty colours running up and down the walls like confetti or blood or sherry or sauterne. You like baseball, don't you, Montag?"

"Baseball's a fine game."

Now Beatty was almost invisible, a voice somewhere behind a screen of smoke "What's this?" asked Mildred, almost with delight. Montag heaved back against her arms. "What's this here?"

"Sit down!" Montag shouted. She jumped away, her hands empty. "We're talking ! " Beatty went on as if nothing had happened. "You like bowling, don't you, Montag?"

"Bowling, yes."

"And golf?"

"Golf is a fine game."

"Basketball?"

"A fine game."

"Billiards, pool? Football?"

"Fine games, all of them."

"More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don't have to think, eh?"

Organize and organize and superorganize super-super sports. More cartoons in books. More pictures. The mind drinks less and less. Impatience. Highways full of crowds going somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, nowhere. The gasoline refugee. Towns turn into motels, people in nomadic surges from place to place, following the moon tides, living tonight in the room where you slept this noon and I the night before."

Mildred went out of the room and slammed the door. The parlour "aunts" began to laugh at the parlour "uncles.",

"Now let's take up the minorities in our civilization, shall we? Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don't step on the toes of the dog?lovers, the cat?lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second?generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. The people in this book, this play, this TV serial are not meant to represent any actual painters, cartographers, mechanics anywhere. The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They did. Magazines became a nice blend of vanilla tapioca. Books, so the damned snobbish critics said, were dishwater. No wonder books stopped selling, the critics said. But the public, knowing what it wanted, spinning happily, let the comic?books survive. And the three?dimensional sex?magazines, of course. There you have it, Montag. It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade?journals."

"Yes, but what about the firemen, then?" asked Montag.

"Ah." Beatty leaned forward in the faint mist of smoke from his pipe. "What more easily explained and natural? With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual,' of course, became the swear word it deserved to be. You always dread the unfamiliar. Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally 'bright,' did most of the reciting and answering while the others sat like so many leaden idols, hating him. And wasn't it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of

course it was. We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won't stomach them for a minute. And so when houses were finally fireproofed completely, all over the world (you were correct in your assumption the other night) there was no longer need of firemen for the old purposes. They were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior; official censors, judges, and executors. That's you, Montag, and that's me."

The door to the parlour opened and Mildred stood there looking in at them, looking at Beatty and then at Montag. Behind her the walls of the room were flooded with green and yellow and orange fireworks sizzling and bursting to some music composed almost completely of trap-drums, tom-toms, and cymbals. Her mouth moved and she was saying something but the sound covered it.

Beatty knocked his pipe into the palm of his pink hand, studied the ashes as if they were a symbol to be diagnosed and searched for meaning.

"You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these."

"Yes."

Montag could not read what Mildred was saying in the doorway. He tried not to look at her mouth, because then Beatty might turn and read what was there, too.

"Coloured people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. Take your fight outside. Better yet, into the incinerator. Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. Five minutes after a person is dead he's on his way to the Big Flue, the Incinerators serviced by helicopters all over the country. Ten minutes after death a man's a speck of black dust. Let's not quibble over individuals with memoriams. Forget them. Burn them all, burn everything. Fire is bright and fire is clean."

The fireworks died in the parlour behind Mildred. She had stopped talking at the same time; a miraculous coincidence. Montag held his breath.

"There was a girl next door," he said, slowly. "She's gone now, I think, dead. I can't even remember her face. But she was different. How? how did she happen?"

Beatty smiled. "Here or there, that's bound to occur. Clarisse McClellan? We've a record on her family. We've watched them carefully. Heredity and environment are funny things. You can't rid yourselves of all the odd ducks in just a few years. The home environment can undo a lot you try to do at school. That's why we've lowered the kindergarten age year after year until now we're almost snatching them from the cradle. We had some false alarms on the McClellans, when they lived in Chicago. Never found a book. Uncle had a mixed record; anti-social. The girl? She was a time bomb. The family had been feeding her subconscious, I'm sure, from what I saw of her school record. She didn't want to know how a thing was done, but why. That can be embarrassing. You ask Why to a lot of things and you wind up very unhappy indeed, if you keep at it. The poor girl's better off dead."

"Yes, dead."

"Luckily, queer ones like her don't happen, often. We know how to nip most of them in the bud, early. You can't build a house without nails and wood. If you don't want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. If the Government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it. Peace, Montag. Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely `brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy. Any man who can take a TV wall apart and put it back together again, and most men can nowadays, is happier than any man who tries to slide-rule, measure, and equate the universe, which just won't be measured or equated without making man feel bestial and lonely. I know, I've tried it; to hell with it. So bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your dare-devils, jet cars, motor-cycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic reflex. If the drama is bad, if the film says nothing, if the play is hollow, sting me with the theremin, loudly. I'll think I'm responding to the play, when it's only a tactile reaction to vibration. But I don't care. I just like solid entertainment."

Beatty got up. "I must be going. Lecture's over. I hope I've clarified things. The important thing for you to remember, Montag, is we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought. We have our fingers in the dyke. Hold steady. Don't let the torrent of melancholy and drear philosophy drown our world. We depend on you. I don't think you realize how important you are, to our happy world as it stands now."

Beatty shook Montag's limp hand. Montag still sat, as if the house were collapsing about him and he could not move, in the bed. Mildred had vanished from the door. "One last thing," said Beatty. "At least once in his career, every fireman gets an itch. What do the books say, he wonders. Oh, to scratch that itch, eh? Well, Montag, take my word for it, I've had to read a few in my time, to know what I was about, and the books say nothing! Nothing you can teach or believe. They're about non-existent people, figments of imagination, if they're fiction. And if they're non-fiction, it's worse, one professor calling another an idiot, one philosopher screaming down another's gullet. All of them running about, putting out the stars and extinguishing the sun. You come away lost."

"Well, then, what if a fireman accidentally, really not, intending anything, takes a book home with him?"

Montag twitched. The open door looked at him with its great vacant eye.

"A natural error. Curiosity alone," said Beatty. "We don't get over-anxious or mad. We let the fireman keep the book twenty-four hours. If he hasn't burned it by then, we simply come and burn it for him."

"Of course." Montag's mouth was dry.

"Well, Montag. Will you take another, later shift, today? Will we see you tonight perhaps?"

"I don't know," said Montag.

"What?" Beatty looked faintly surprised.

Montag shut his eyes. "I'll be in later. Maybe."

"We'd certainly miss you if you didn't show," said Beatty, putting his pipe in his pocket thoughtfully.

I'll never come in again, thought Montag.

"Get well and keep well," said Beatty.

He turned and went out through the open door.

Montag watched through the window as Beatty drove away in his gleaming yellow-flame-coloured beetle with the black, charcoal-coloured tyres.

Across the street and down the way the other houses stood with their flat fronts.

What was it Clarisse had said one afternoon? "No front porches. My uncle says there used to be front porches. And people sat there sometimes at night, talking when they wanted to talk, rocking, and not talking when they didn't want to talk. Sometimes they just sat there and thought about things, turned things over. My uncle says the architects got rid of the front porches because they didn't look well. But my uncle says that was merely rationalizing it; the real reason, hidden underneath, might be they didn't want people sitting like that, doing nothing, rocking, talking; that was the wrong kind of social life. People talked too much. And they had time to think. So they ran off with the porches. And the gardens, too. Not many gardens any more to sit around in. And look at the furniture. No rocking-chairs any more. They're too comfortable. Get people up and running around. My uncle says . . . and . . . my uncle . . . and . . . my uncle . . ." Her voice faded.

Montag turned and looked at his wife, who sat in the middle of the parlour talking to an announcer, who in turn was talking to her. "Mrs. Montag," he was saying. This, that and the other. "Mrs. Montag?" Something else and still another. The converter attachment, which had cost them one hundred dollars, automatically supplied her name whenever the announcer addressed his anonymous audience, leaving a blank where the proper syllables could be filled in. A special spot-wavex-scrambler also caused his televised image, in the area immediately about his lips, to mouth the vowels and consonants beautifully. He was a friend, no doubt of it, a good friend.

"Mrs. Montag?now look right here."

Her head turned. Though she quite obviously was not listening.

Montag said, "It's only a step from not going to work today to not working tomorrow, to not working at the firehouse ever again." ,

"You are going to work tonight, though, aren't you?" said Mildred.

"I haven't decided. Right now I've got an awful feeling I want to smash things and kill things :'

"Go take the beetle."

"No thanks."

"The keys to the beetle are on the night table. I always like to drive fast when I feel that way. You get it up around ninetyfive and you feel wonderful. Sometimes I drive all night and come back and you don't know it. It's fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs. Go take the beetle."

"No, I don't want to, this time. I want to hold on to this funny thing. God, it's gotten big on me. I don't know what it is. I'm so damned unhappy, I'm so mad, and I don't know why I feel like I'm putting on weight. I feel fat. I feel like I've been saving up a lot of things, and don't know what. I might even start reading books."

"They'd put you in jail, wouldn't they?" She looked at him as if he were behind the glass wall.

He began to put on his clothes, moving restlessly about the bedroom. "Yes, and it might be a good idea. Before I hurt someone. Did you hear Beatty? Did you listen to

him? He knows all the answers. He's right. Happiness is important. Fun is everything. And yet I kept sitting there saying to myself, I'm not happy, I'm not happy."

"I am." Mildred's mouth beamed. "And proud of it."

"I'm going to do something," said Montag. "I don't even know what yet, but I'm going to do something big."

"I'm tired of listening to this junk," said Mildred, turning from him to the announcer again

Montag touched the volume control in the wall and the announcer was speechless. "Millie?" He paused. "This is your house as well as mine. I feel it's only fair that I tell you something now. I should have told you before, but I wasn't even admitting it to myself. I have something I want you to see, something I've put away and hid during the past year, now and again, once in a while, I didn't know why, but I did it and I never told you."

He took hold of a straight-backed chair and moved it slowly and steadily into the hall near the front door and climbed up on it and stood for a moment like a statue on a pedestal, his wife standing under him, waiting. Then he reached up and pulled back the grille of the air-conditioning system and reached far back inside to the right and moved still another sliding sheet of metal and took out a book. Without looking at it he dropped it to the floor. He put his hand back up and took out two books and moved his hand down and dropped the two books to the floor. He kept moving his hand and dropping books, small ones, fairly large ones, yellow, red, green ones. When he was done he looked down upon some twenty books lying at his wife's feet. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't really think. But now it looks as if we're in this together." Mildred backed away as if she were suddenly confronted by a pack of mice that had come up out of the floor. He could hear her breathing rapidly and her face was pale out and her eyes were fastened wide. She said his name over, twice, three times. Then moaning, she ran forward, seized a book and ran toward the kitchen incinerator.

He caught her, shrieking. He held her and she tried to fight away from him, scratching.

"No, Millie, no! Wait! Stop it, will you? You don't know . . . stop it!" He slapped her face, he grabbed her again and shook her.

She said his name and began to cry.

"Millie! " he said. "Listen. Give me a second, will you? We can't do anything. We can't burn these. I want to look at them, at least look at them once. Then if what the Captain says is true, we'll burn them together, believe me, we'll burn them together. You must help me." He looked down into her face and took hold of her chin and held her firmly. He was looking not only at her, but for himself and what he must do, in her face. "Whether we like this or not, we're in it. I've never asked for much from you in all these years, but I ask it now, I plead for it. We've got to start somewhere here, figuring out why we're in such a mess, you and the medicine at night, and the car, and me and my work. We're heading right for the cliff, Millie. God, I don't want to go over. This isn't going to be easy. We haven't anything to go on, but maybe we can piece it out and figure it and help each other. I need you so much right now, I can't tell you. If you love me at all you'll put up with this, twenty-four, forty-eight hours, that's all I ask, then it'll be over. I promise, I swear! And if there is something here, just one little thing out of a whole mess of things, maybe we can pass it on to someone else."

She wasn't fighting any more, so he let her go. She sagged away from him and slid down the wall, and sat on the floor looking at the books. Her foot touched one and she saw this and pulled her foot away.

"That woman, the other night, Millie, you weren't there. You didn't see her face. And Clarisse. You never talked to her. I talked to her. And men like Beatty are afraid of her. I can't understand it. Why should they be so afraid of someone like her? But I kept putting her alongside the firemen in the house last night, and I suddenly realized I didn't like them at all, and I didn't like myself at all any more. And I thought

I didn't like them at all, and I didn't like myself at all any more. And I thought maybe it would be best if the firemen themselves were burnt."

"Guy! "

The front door voice called softly:

"Mrs. Montag, Mrs. Montag, someone here, someone here, Mrs. Montag, Mrs.

Montag, someone here."

Softly.

They turned to stare at the door and the books toppled everywhere, everywhere in heaps.

"Beatty!" said Mildred.

"It can't be him."

"He's come back!" she whispered.

The front door voice called again softly. "Someone here . . ."

"We won't answer." Montag lay back against the wall and then slowly sank to a crouching position and began to nudge the books, bewilderedly, with his thumb, his forefinger. He was shivering and he wanted above all to shove the books up through the ventilator again, but he knew he could not face Beatty again. He crouched and then he sat and the voice of the front door spoke again, more insistently. Montag picked a single small volume from the floor. "Where do we begin?" He opened the book half-way and peered at it. "We begin by beginning, I guess."

"He'll come in," said Mildred, "and burn us and the books!"

The front door voice faded at last. There was a silence. Montag felt the presence of someone beyond the door, waiting, listening. Then the footsteps going away down the walk and over the lawn.

"Let's see what this is," said Montag.

He spoke the words haltingly and with a terrible selfconsciousness. He read a dozen pages here and there and came at last to this:

" `It is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death rather than submit to break eggs at the smaller end.'"

Mildred sat across the hall from him. "What does it mean? It doesn't mean anything!

The Captain was right! "

"Here now," said Montag. "We'll start over again, at the beginning."