



Long After Midnight, Ray Bradbury

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Mr. Montag dreamed.

He was an old man hidden with six million dusty books. His hands crawled, trembling, over yellow pages, and his face was a smashed mirror of wrinkles by candlelight.

Then, an eye at the keyhole!

In his dream, Mr. Montag yanked the door. A boy fell in.

“Spying!”

“You got books!” cried the boy. “It’s against the law! I’ll tell my father!”

He grabbed the boy, who writhed, screaming.

“Don’t, boy,” pleaded Mr. Montag. “Don’t tell. I’ll give you money, books, clothes, but don’t tell!”

“I seen you reading!”

“Don’t!”

“I’ll tell!” The boy ran, shrieking.

A crowd rushed up the street. Health officials burst in, followed by police, fierce with silver badges. And then himself! Himself as a young man, in a Fire uniform, with a torch. The room swarmed while the old man pleaded with himself as a young man. Books crashed down. Books were stripped and torn. Windows crashed inward, drapes fell in sooty clouds.

Outside, staring in, was the boy who had turned him in.

“No! Please!”

Flame crackled. They were charring out the room, with controlled, scientific fire. A vast wind of flame devoured the walls. Books exploded in a million live kernels.

“For the love of God!”

The ancient lawn of the room sizzled.

The hooks became black ravens, fluttering.

Mr. Montag fell shrieking to the far end of the dream.

He opened his eyes.

"Blackjack," said Mr. Leahy.

Mr. Montag stared at the playing cards in his cold hand. He was awake. He was in the Fire House. And they were dealing Blackjack at one-thirty in the dark morning.

"You're doing badly, Montag."

"What?" Montag shivered.

"What's eating him?" Everyone raised their black eyebrows.

A radio was playing in the smoky ceiling over their heads. "War may be declared any hour. This country is ready to defend its destiny. War may be declared ..."

The room shook. Some planes were flying over, filling the sky with invisible vibration. The men played their cards.

They sat in their black uniforms, trim men, with the look of thirty years in their blue-shaved faces and their receding hair, and the blue veins on the back of their hands becoming more prominent. On the table in the corner in neat rows lay auxiliary helmets and thick overcoats. On the walls, in precise sharpness, hung gold-plated hatchets, with inscriptions under them from famous fires. Under their nervous feet, under the wooden floor, stood the silent huge fire apparatus, the boa-constrictor hoses, the pumps, the glittery brass and silver, the crimson and gold. The brass pole, distorting their game, stood mirror-shiny through the floor-hole.

"I've been thinking about that last job," said Mr. Montag.

"Don't," said Mr. Leahy, putting down the cards.

"That poor man, when we burned his library."

"He had it coming to him," said Black.

"Right," said Stone.

The four men played another game. Montag watched the calendar on the wall which was mechanical and which now read five minutes after one A.M. Thursday October 4th, in the year 2052 A.D.

"I was wondering how it'd feel if Firemen broke in my house and burned my books."

"You haven't any books." Leahy smiled.

"But if I did have some."

"You got some?" The men turned their faces to him.

"No," he said.

Yes, Mr. Montag's mind said. He had some books, hidden away, unread. In the last year, in the crashing and breaking, in burning confusion, his hand, like a separate thief, had snatched a volume here, a volume there, hid it in his fat coat, or under his pompous helmet, and, trembling, he had gone home to hide it before drinking his nightly glass of milk, and so to bed with Mildred, his wife.

"No," he said, looking at his cards, not the men. He glanced at the wall suddenly. And there hung the long lists of a million forbidden books. The names leaped out in fire, he saw the names burning down the years, under his ax, under his hose that sprayed not water but kerosene!

"Was it always like this?" asked Mr. Montag. "The Fire House, our duties, the city, was it?"

"I don't know," said Leahy. "Do you, Black?"

"No. Do you, Stone?"

Stone smiled at Mr. Montag.

"I mean," said Montag, "that once upon a time—"

"Once upon a time?" said Leahy, quietly. "What kind of language is that?"

Fool! cried Mr. Montag to himself. You'll give it away. That book. The last fire. A book of fairy tales. He had dared to read a line or so ...

"Old fancy language here," said Leahy, looking at the ceiling.

"Yeah," said Black.

"I mean, once there were fires in the town, houses burnt down. That was before houses were completely fireproof, I guess. And Fire Men went to fires to put them out, not start them."

"Oh?" said Leahy.

“I never knew that.” Stone drew forth a rule card from his shirt pocket and laid it on the table where Montag, though knowing its message by heart, could read it:

RULE ONE: ANSWER THE ALARM QUICKLY.

TWO: START THE FIRE SWIFTLY.

THREE: BE SURE YOU BURN EVERYTHING.

FOUR: REPORT BACK TO THE FIRE HOUSE RAPIDLY.

FIVE: STAY ALERT FOR ANOTHER ALARM.

“Well, well,” said Mr. Stone.

They watched Montag.

Montag said, “What will they do to that old man we caught last night?”

“Thirty years in the insane asylum.”

“But he wasn’t insane.”

“Any man’s insane to think he can fool the government or us.” Leahy began to shuffle the cards.

The alarm sounded.

The bell kicked itself thirty times in five seconds. The next thing Mr. Montag knew there were three empty chairs, the cards in a kind of snow flurry on the air, the brass pole trembling and empty, the men gone, their hats gone with them. He still sat. Below, the mighty engine coughed to life.

Mr. Montag slid down the pole like a man returning to a dream.

“Hey, Montag, you forgot your hat!”

And they were off, the night wind hammering about their siren noise and their mighty metal thunder.

IT WAS A TWO-STORY HOUSE in the old district of town. A century old it was, if it was a day, but it, like many others had been given a thin fireproof coating fifty years ago, and as a result the thin preservative layer seemed to be holding it up. One sneeze and ...

“Here we are, boys!”

Leahy and Stone and Black clubbered across the sidewalk making the ridiculous wet rubber sounds of men in thick soft boots, suddenly odious and fat because of their thick coats, suddenly childlike and full of games because of the thick huge hats on their heads. Mr. Montag followed.

“Is this the right place?”

“Voice on the phone said 757 Oak Knoll, name of Skinner.”

“This is it.”

They walked through the front door.

A woman was running. They caught her.

“I didn’t do anything,” she said. “What did I do? I didn’t harm anyone!”

“Where is it?” Leahy glared about as if the walls were poisonous.

“Come on now, fessup, where are they?”

“You wouldn’t take an old woman’s pleasures from her.”

“Save that. It’ll go easier with you if you tell.”

She said nothing but simply swayed before them.

“Let’s have the report, Stone.” Stone produced the telephone alarm card with the complaint signed in telephone duplicate on the back. “It says here, you’ve an attic full of books. All right, men!”

Next thing they were up in the musty blackness, clumping with their boots and swinging hatchets at doors that were unlocked, tumbling through like children at a playpool in summer, all rollick and shout.

“Hey!” A fountain of books leaped down upon Montag as he climbed shuddering up the steep stair well.

Books struck his head, his shoulders, his upturned, lined, pale face. He held his hands up and a book landed obediently in them, like an open flower! In the dim light a page fell open and it was like a petal with words delicately flourished there. In all the fervor and rushing he had only time to read a line, but it blazed in his mind for the next minute, as if he had been stamped with a hot bronze iron. He dropped the book, but almost immediately another fell into his hand.

“Hey, there, you, come on!”

Montag closed his hand like a trap on the book, he crushed it to his breast. Another fount descended, a gush of books, a torrent of literature, Stone and Black seizing and hurling them down in shovelfuls from above, down down through dusty space, through the echoing house toward Montag and the woman who stood like a small girl under the collecting ruin. "Come on, Montag!"

And he was forced to clump up and in to lend a hand, though he fell twice.

"In here!"

"This too shall pass away."

"What?" Leahy glared at him.

Montag stopped, blinking, in the dark.

"Did I say something?"

"Don't stand there, idiot, move!"

The books lay in piles like fishes left to dry, and the air was so thick with a gunpowdery dust that at any instant it might blow them through the roof into the stars. "Trash! Trash!" The men kicked books. They danced among them. Titles glittered like golden eyes, gone, falling.

"Kerosene!"

Stone and Black pumped out the fluid from the white hose they had carried up the stairs. They coated each remaining book with the shining stuff. They pumped it into rooms.

"This is better than the old man's place last night, eh?"

That had been different. The old man had lived in an apartment house with other people. They had had to use controlled fire there. Here, they could rampage the whole house.

When they ran downstairs, with Montag reeling after them, the house was aflame with kerosene. The walls were drenched.

"Come on, woman!"

"My books," she said, quietly. She stood among them now, kneeling down to touch them, to run fingers over the leather, reading the golden titles with fingers instead of eyes, by touch in this instant, while her

eyes accused Montag. "You can't take my books. They're my whole life."

"You know the law," said Leahy.

"But ..."

"Confusion. People who never existed. Fantasy, pure fantasy all of it. No two books alike, none agreeing. Come on now, lady, out of your house, it'll burn."

"No," she said.

"The whole thing'll go up in one bloom."

"No."

The three men went to the door. They looked at Montag who stood near the woman. "Okay, Montag."

"You're not going to leave her here?" he protested.

"She won't come."

"But you must force her!"

Leahy raised his hand. It contained the concealed igniter to start the fire. "No time. Got to get back to the station. Besides, she'd cost us a trial, money, months, jail, all that." He examined his wristwatch. "Got to get back on the alert."

Montag put his hand on the woman's arm. "You can come with me. Here, let me help you."

"No." She actually saw him for a moment. "Thank you, anyway."

"I'm counting to ten," said Leahy. "Outside, Montag! Stone. Black." He began counting. "One. Two."

"Lady," said Montag.

"Go on," she said.

"Three," said Leahy.

"Come on," said Montag, tugging at her.

"I like it here," she said.

"Four. Five," said Leahy.

He tried to pull her, but she twisted, he slipped and fell. She ran up the stairs and stood there, with the books at her feet.

“Six. Seven. Montag,” said Leahy.

Montag did not move. He looked out the door at that man there with the apparatus in his hand. He felt the book hidden against his chest. “Go get him,” said Leahy.

Stone and Black dragged Montag yelling from the house. Leahy backed out after them, leaving a kerosene trail down the walk. When they were a hundred feet from the house, Montag was still kicking at the two men. He glanced back wildly. In the front door where she had come to look out at them quietly, her quietness a condemnation, staring straight into Mr. Leahy’s eyes, was the woman. She had a book in one hand. Leahy reached down and ignited the kerosene. People ran out on their porches all down the street.

“WHO IS IT?”

“Who would it be?” said Mr. Montag, now leaning against the closed door in the dark.

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

“No.”

“Why not? Turn it on.”

“I don’t want the light.”

The room was black.

“Take off your clothes. Come to bed.”

“What?”

He heard her roll impatiently; the springs squeaked. “Are you drunk?” He took off his clothes. He worked out of his coat and let it slump to the floor. He removed his pants and held them in the air and let them drop.

His wife said, “What are you doing?”

He balanced himself in the room with the book in his sweating, icy hand.

A minute later she said, “Just don’t stand there in the middle of the room.”

He made a sound.

“What?” she asked.

He made more sounds. He walked to the bed and shoved the book clumsily under the pillow. He fell into the bed and his wife called out at this. He lay separate from her. She talked to him for a long while and when he didn't answer but only made sounds, he felt her hand creep over, up along his chest, his throat, his chin. Her hand brushed his cheeks. He knew that she pulled her hand away from his cheeks wet.

A long time later, when he was at last drifting into sleep, he heard her say, "You smell of kerosene ..."

Late in the night he looked over at Mildred. She was awake. Many nights in the past ten years he had come awake and found her with her eyes open in the dim room. She would look that way, blankly, for an hour or more, and then rise and go into the bathroom. You could hear the water run into the glass, the tinkle of the sedatives bottle, and Mildred gulping hungrily, frantically, at sleep.

She was awake now. In a minute she would rise and go for the barbiturate.

And suddenly she was so strange to him that he couldn't believe that he knew her at all. He was in someone else's house, with a woman he had never seen before, and this made him shift uneasily under the covers.

"Awake?" she whispered.

"Yes. Millie?"

"What?"

"Mildred, when did we meet? And where?"

"For what?" she asked.

"I mean, originally."

She was frowning in the dark.

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

"Why it was at—"

She stopped.

"I don't know."

"Neither do I," he said, frightened. "Can't you remember?"

They both tried to remember.

“It’s been so long.”

“We’re only thirty!”

“Don’t get excited—I’m trying to think!”

“Think, then!”

She laughed. “Wait until I tell Rene! How funny, not to remember where or when you met your wife or husband!”

He did not laugh, but lay there with his eyes tight, his face screwed up, pressing and massaging his brow, tapping and thumping his blind head again and again.

“It can’t be very important.” She was up, in the bath now, the water running, the swallowing sound.

“No, not very,” he said.

And he wondered, did she take two tablets now, or twenty, like a year ago, when we had to pump her stomach at the hospital, and me shouting to keep her awake, walking her, asking her why she did it, why she wanted to die, and she said she didn’t know, she didn’t know, she didn’t know anything about anything. But he thought he had known for her ... She didn’t belong to him. He didn’t belong to her. She didn’t know herself, or him, or anyone. The world didn’t need her.

She didn’t need herself. And in the hospital looking down at her he had realized that if she should die in the next minute, he wouldn’t cry. For it was the dying of a stranger. And it was suddenly so very wrong that he had cried not at death but at the thought of not crying at death, a silly man, empty, beside an empty woman while the doctors emptied her stomach still more.

And why are we empty and lonely and not in love, he had asked himself, a year ago. Why are we strangers in the same house? That was the first time he had begun to think about the world and how it was made, and his job, all of it.

And then he realized what it was. They were never together. There was always something between. A radio, a television set, a car, a plane,

nervous exhaustion, a mad rushing, or, simply, a little pheno-barbitol. They didn't know each other. They knew things. They knew inventions. They had both applauded while science had built a beautiful glass structure, a fine glittering wonder, so precise and mechanical and wonderful that it was glorious, and, too late, discovered that it was a glass wall, through which they could not shout, through which they gestured empty pantomime silently, never touching, never hearing, never seeing really, never smelling or tasting one another.

Looking at her in the hospital he had thought, I don't know you, who are you, does it matter if we live or die?

That might not have been enough, if the people had not moved next door, with their beautiful daughter. Twelve months ago it had been, hadn't it, he had first seen the dark young girl?

PERHAPS THAT HAD BEEN THE START of his awareness. One night, as had become his custom over the years, he had gone out for a long walk. Two things happened as he strolled along in the moonlight. One, he realized that he had gone out to escape the crash of the television set, whereas always before he had put it down to nervous tension. Second, he noted what he had often seen but never thought about, that he was the only pedestrian in the entire city. He passed street after empty street. At a distance cars moved like fire-bugs in the misting darkness, faintly hooting. But no other man ventured upon the earth to test the concrete with foot or cane, in fact it had been so long since the sidewalks were steadily used that they were beginning to lump up and crack and become overgrown with hardy flowers and grass.

And so he walked alone, suddenly realizing his loneliness, exhaling a powdery vapor from his mouth and watching the pattern.

That was the night the police stopped him and searched him.

"What're you doing?"

"Out for a walk?"

"He says he's out for a walk, Jim."

The laughter. The cold precise turning over of his identity cards, the careful noting of his home address.

“Okay, mister, you can walk now.”

He had gone on, hands in pockets, in such a rage at being questioned for being a simple pedestrian, that he had to stop and hold onto himself, for his rage was all out of proportion to the incident.

And then the girl had turned a corner and walked by.

“Hello,” she said, half turning. “Aren’t you my neighbor?”

“Of course,” he said. She was smiling at him.

“We’re the only live ones, aren’t we?” she said. She waved at the streets. “Did they stop you, too?”

“Walking is a misdemeanor.”

“They flashed their lights on me for a minute and saw I was a woman and went on,” she said. She looked no more than sixteen. “I’m Clarisse McClellan. And you’re Mr. Montag, the fireman.”

They walked along together.

“Isn’t it like a city of the dead,” she said. “I like to come out and walk around just to keep my franchise on the sidewalks.”

He looked, and the city was like a tombyard, houses dark for television. He did not know what to say.

“Have you ever noticed all the cars rushing,” she said. “On the streets down there, the big ones, day and night. I sometimes think they don’t know what grass is or flowers, because they never see them slowly. If you showed them a green blur, oh yes they’d say, that’s grass. Or a pink blur, yes, that’s roses.” She laughed to herself. “And a white blur, that’s a house. And quick brown blurs, those are cows. My uncle drove slow on a highway once and they threw him in jail. Isn’t that funny and sad, too?”

“You think about a lot of things for a girl,” said Montag, looking over at her.

“I have to. I have so much time to think. I never watch TV or go to the races or the fun parks or any of that. So I have time to think lots of crazy things. Have you noticed the elongated billboards in the country, two hundred feet long. Did you know that once those billboards were

only 25 feet long? But cars started going by them so swiftly they had to stretch them out so they could be seen?"

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

"I bet I know something else you don't know," she said.

"What?"

"There's dew on the grass in the morning."

"Is there?" He couldn't remember, and it suddenly frightened him.

"And there's a man in the moon if you look."

He had never looked. His heart began to beat rapidly.

They walked silently from there on. When they reached her house the lights were all on, it was the only house on the street with bright lights.

"What's going on?" said Montag. He had never seen that many lights.

"Oh just my mother and father and my uncle and aunt. They're sitting around talking. It's like being a pedestrian, only rarer. Come over some time and try the water."

"But what do you talk about?"

She laughed at this and said good night and was gone.

At three o'clock in the morning he got out of bed and looked out the window. The moon was rising and there was a man in the moon, and upon the broad lawn, a million jewels of dew sparkled and glittered.

"I'll be damned," he said, and went back to bed.

He saw Clarisse many afternoons sitting on her green lawn, studying the autumn leaves, or returning from the woods with wild flowers, or looking at the sky, even while it was raining.

"Isn't it nice?" she said.

"What?"

"The rain, of course."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Believe me, it is nice."

He always laughed embarrassedly, whether at her, or at himself, he was never certain. "I believe you."

"Do you really? Do you ever smell old leaves? Don't they smell like cinnamon?"

“Well—”

“Here, smell.”

“Why, it is cinnamon, yes!”

She gazed at him with her clear grey eyes. “My gosh, you don’t really know very much do you.” It was not unkind, but concerned with him.

“I don’t suppose any of us do.”

“I do,” she said. “Because I’ve time to look.”

“Don’t you attend school?”

“Oh, no, they say I’m anti-social. I don’t mix. And the yelling extrovert is the thing this season, you know.”

“It’s been a long season,” observed Mr. Montag, and stood shocked at his own perception.

“Then you’ve noticed?”

“Where are your friends?” he asked.

“I haven’t any.”

“None?”

“No. That’s supposed to mean I’m abnormal. But they’re always packed around the TV, or rushing in cars, or shouting or hurting each other. Do you notice how people hurt people nowadays?”

“You sound ancient.”

“I am. I know about rain. That makes me ancient to them. They kill each other. It didn’t used to be that way, did it? Children killing each other all the time. Four of my friends have been shot in the past year. I’m afraid of them.”

“Maybe it was always this way.”

“My father says no, says his grandfather remembers when children didn’t kill each other, when children were seen and not heard. But that was a long time ago when they had discipline. When they had responsibility. Do you know, I’m disciplined. I’m beat when I need it. And I’ve responsibility, I tend to the whole house three days a week.”

“And you know about rain,” said Mr. Montag.

“Yes. It tastes good if you lean back and open your mouth. Go on!”
He leaned back and gaped.
“Why,” he said, “it’s wine!”

THAT HAD NOT BEEN THE END OF IT. The girl, while only 16, was always about, it seemed, and he caught himself looking for her. She was the only one who had ever given him the dandelion test.

“It proves you’re in love or not.

That was the day he knew he didn’t love Mildred.

Clarisse passed the dandelion under his chin.

“Oh, you’re not in love with anyone. What a shame!”

And he thought, when did I stop loving Mildred, and the answer was never! For he had never known her. She was the pale sad goldfish that swam in the subterranean illumination of the TV set, her natural habitat the yeasty chairs especially placed for viewing.

“It’s the dandelion you used,” he protested. “Use another.”

“No,” said Clarisse. “You’re not in love. A dandelion won’t help.” She got up. “Well, I’ve got to go see my psychiatrist. The school sends me to him. So I can go back to school, he’s trying to make me normal.”

“I’ll kill him if he does!”

He didn’t see Clarisse for a month. He watched for her each day. And after some forty days had passed, one afternoon, he mentioned it to his wife.

“Oh, her,” said Mildred, with the radio music jarring the table plates.

“Why, she was killed by an auto a month ago.”

“A month!” He leaped up. “But why didn’t you tell me!”

“Didn’t I? A car hit her.”

“Did they find whose car it was?”

“No. You know how those things are. What do you want for supper, dear, frozen steak or an omelet?”

And so with the death of the girl, 1 percent of the world died. And the other 99 percent was on the instant revealed to him for what it was. He saw what she had been and what Mildred had been, was, and always

would be, what he himself was but didn't want to be any more, what Millie's friends were and would forever be. And he saw that it was no idle, separate thing, Mildred's suicide attempts, the lovely dark girl with the flowers and the leaves being ground under a motor-car, it was a thing of the world they lived in, it was all a parcel of the world, it was part of the screaming average, of the pressing down of people into electric moulds, it was the vacuum of civilization in its meaningless cam-shaft rotations down a rotary track to smash against its own senseless tail. Suddenly Millie's attempts at death were a symbol.

She was trying to escape from Nothingness. Whereas the girl had been fighting nothingness with something, with being aware instead of forgetting, with walking instead of sitting, with going to get life instead of having it brought to her. And the civilization had killed her for her trouble, not purposely no, but with a fine ironic sense, for no purpose at all, simply the blind rushing destruction of a car driven by a vanilla-faced idiot going nowhere for nothing, and very irritated that he had been detained for 120 seconds while the police investigated and released him on his way to some distant base that he must tag before running for home.

Mildred. Clarisse. Life. And his own work, growing aware for the first time of what he was doing. And now, tonight. Burning that woman. And last night, the man's book, and him into an asylum. It was all such a nightmare that only a nightmare could be used as an escape from it.

He lay there all night, thinking, smelling the smoke on his hands, in the dark.

He awoke with chills and fever in the morning.

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

He looked at his wife. He closed his eyes upon the hotness and the trembling. "Yes."

"But you were all right, last night."

"I'm sick now." He heard the radio shouting in the parlor.

She stood over the bed, curiously. He felt her there, looking at him but he didn't open his eyes. He felt his body shake as if there was another

person in it somewhere pounding away at his ribs, someone pulling at the bars of a prison screaming, with no one to hear. Did Mildred hear?
“Will you bring me some water and aspirin.”

“You’ve got to get up,” she said. “It’s noon. You’ve slept five hours later than usual.”

There she lay with her hair burnt to straw, her eyes with a kind of cataract far behind the pupils unseen but suspect, and the reddened, pouting lips, and the body as thin as a praying mantis from diet, and the flesh like thin milk, and the voice with that metallic ferocity that came from imitating radio voices. He could remember her no other way.

“Will you turn the radio off?”

“That’s my program.”

“Will you turn it off for a sick man?”

“I’ll turn it down,” she said.

She went out of the room and did nothing to the radio. She came back.

“Is that better?”

He opened his eyes and wondered at her. “Thanks.”

“That’s my favorite program,” she said.

“What about the aspirin?” he said.

“You’ve never been sick before.” She went away again.

“Well, I’m sick now. I’m not going to work this evening. Call Healy for me.”

“You acted funny last night,” she said, coming back, humming.

“Where’s the aspirin,” he said, looking at the glass of water she handed him.

“Oh,” she said, and went off again. “Did something happen?”

“A fire, is all.”

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

“What doing?”

“Television.”

“What was on.”

“Programs.”

“What programs?”

"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 odor of kerosene was so strong that he vomited. She came back, humming. She was surprised. "Why'd you do that?" He looked with dismay at what he had done. "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."

"What for?"

"Television."

"Couldn't you get it on your own set?"

"Sure, but it's nice visiting."

"How's Helen?"

"All right."

"Did she get over that infection in her hand?"

"I didn't notice."

She went out into the living room. He heard her by the radio humming.

"Mildred," he called.

She came back, 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 and a woman."

"Forbidden books."

The radio was exploding in the parlor.

"Yes," he said. "Copies of Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare and Plato."

"Wasn't he a European?"

"Something like that."

"Wasn't he a radical?"

"I don't know, I never read him."

“He was a radical.” Mildred fiddled with the telephone. “You don’t expect me to call Mr. Leahy, do you?”

“You must!”

“Don’t shout.”

“I wasn’t shouting!” he cried. He was up in bed, enraged and flushed, trembling. The radio roared in the tight air. “I can’t call him. I can’t tell him I’m sick. You’ve got to do it.”

“Why?”

“Because ...”

Because you’re afraid, he thought. A child pretending illness. Afraid to call Leahy, because after only a moment’s discussion the conversation would run like this: “Yes, Mr. Leahy, I feel better already. I’ll be in at six o’clock. I’m fine.”

“You’re not sick,” she said.

Mr. Montag propped himself up in bed and felt, secretly, for the book under his warm pillow. It was still there. “Millie?”

“What?”

“How would it be if, well, maybe, I went away for a little rest. Quit my job awhile.”

Her mouth was open and now she had pivoted to stare at him.

“You are sick, aren’t you?”

“Don’t take it that way!”

“You want to give up everything. You need your head examined. Why your father was a fireman, and his father before him.”

“Mildred.”

“After all these years of working hard, to give it all up because one night, one morning you’re sick, lying to me, all because of some woman.”

“You should have seen her, Millie.”

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

“Shut up.”

“I won’t.”

"I'll shut you up in a moment," he cried, almost out of bed. "You weren't there. You didn't see. There must be something in books, whole worlds we don't dream about, to make a woman stay in a burning house, there must be something fine there, you don't stay for nothing."

"She was simple-minded."

"She was as rational as you or I, and we burned her!"

"That's water under the bridge."

"No, not water, Millie, but fire. You ever see a burnt house? It smolders for days. Well, this fire'll last me half a century. My God, I was trying to put it out all night, and I was crazy in trying!"

"You should've thought of that before becoming a fireman."

"Thought!" he cried. "Was I given a choice? I was raised to think the best thing in the world is not to read. The best thing is listening to radios, watching television sets, filling your mind with pap and swill. My God, it's only now I realize what I've done. I went into this job because it was just a job."

The radio was playing a dance tune.

"I've been killing the brain of the world for ten years, pouring kerosene on it. My God, Millie, a book is a brain, it isn't only that woman we killed, or others like her, in these years, but it's the thoughts I burned with fire reckless abandon."

He got out of bed.

"It took a man a lifetime to put some of his thoughts on paper, looking after all the beauty and goodness in life, and then we come along in five minutes and toss it in the incinerator!"

"I'm proud to say," said Mildred, eyes wide. "I never read a book in my life."

"And look at you!" he said. "Turn you on and I get predigested news, gossip, tidbits from daytime serials. Why even the music you hum is some deodorant commercial!"

"Let me alone," she said.

“Let you alone is what you don’t need. That’s what’s wrong. You need to be bothered. No one’s bothered any more. Nobody thinks. Let a baby alone, why don’t you? What would you have in twenty years, if you let a baby alone, a gangling idiot!”

A motor sounded outside the house. Mildred went to the window, “Now you’ve done it,” she wailed. “Look who’s here.”

“I don’t give a damn.” He stood up and he was feeling better, but he didn’t know why. He stalked to the window.

“Who is it?”

“Mr. Leahy!”

The elation drained away. Mr. Montag slumped.

“Go open the door,” he said, at last. “I’ll get back to bed. Tell him I’m sick.”

“Tell him yourself.”

He hurried back, cold and suddenly shaking again, as if lightning had struck just beyond the window. In the white glare, he found the pillow, made sure the terrible book was hidden, climbed in, and had made himself uneasily comfortable, when the door opened and Mr. Leahy strolled in.

“SHUT THE RADIO OFF,” said Leahy, abstractedly.

This time, Mildred obeyed.

Mr. Leahy sat down in a comfortable chair and folded one knee over another, not looking at Mr. Montag.

“Just thought I’d come by and see how the sick man is.”

“How’d you guess!”

“Oh.” Leahy smiled his pink smile and shrugged. “I’m an old hand at this. I’ve seen it all. You were going to call me and tell me you needed a day off.”

“Yes.”

“Take a day off,” said Leahy. “Take two. But never take three. Not, that is, unless, you’re really ill. Remember that.” He took a cigar from his pocket and cut off a little piece to chew. “When will you be well?”

“Tomorrow, the next day, first of the week.”

“We’ve been talking about you,” said Leahy. “Every man goes through this. They only need a little understanding. They need to be told how the wheels run.”

“And how do they?”

“Mr. Montag, you don’t seem to have assimilated the history of your honorable trade. They don’t give it to rookies any more. Only fire chiefs remember it now. I’ll let you in on it.” He chewed a moment.

“Yes,” said Montag. Mildred fidgeted.

“You ask yourself why, how, and when. About the books.”

“Maybe.”

“It started in the early 1900s, I’d say. After the Civil War maybe. Photography invented. Fast print presses. Films. Television. Things began to have mass, Montag, mass.”

“I see.”

“And because they had mass, they had to become simpler. Books now. Once they appealed to various bits of people here and there. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. Plenty of room for elbows and differentness, right?”

“Right.”

“But then the world got full of mass and elbows. And things for lots of millions of people had to be simple. Films and radio and TV and big big magazines had to be a sort of paste-pudding norm, you might say.

Follow me?”

“I think.”

“Picture it. The nineteenth century man with his horses and books and leisure. You might call him the Slow Motion man. Everyone taking a year to sit down, get up, jump a fence. Then, in the Twentieth Century you speed up the camera.”

“A good simile.”

“Splendid. Books get shorter. Condensations appear. Tabloids. Radio programs simplify. The exquisite pantomime of great actors become the pratfall. Everything sublimates itself to the joke, the gag, the snap ending. Everything is sacrificed for pace.”

"Pace." Mildred smiled.

"Great classics are cut to fit a fifteen minute show, then a two minute Book column, then a two line Dictionary resume. Magazines become picture books! Out of the nursery to the college back to the nursery, in a few short centuries!"

Mildred got up. She was losing the thread of the talk, Montag knew, and when this happened, she began to fiddle with things. She went about the room, cleaning up. Leahy ignored her.

"Faster and faster the film, Mr. Montag, quick! Men over hurdles, dogs over stiles, horses over fences! CLICK? PIC, LOOK, EYE, NOW? FLICK, HERE, THERE? QUICK, WHY, HOW, WHO, EH?, Mr. Montag! The world's political affairs become one paper column, a sentence, a headline. Then, in mid-air, vanishes. Look at your man now, quick over hurdles, over stile, horse over fence so swift you can't see the blur. And the mind of man, whirling so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broad-casters that the centrifuge throws off all ideas! He is unable to concentrate."

Mildred was smoothing the bed now. Montag felt panic as she approached his pillow to straighten it. The book was behind the pillow! And she would pull it out, not knowing, of course, in front of Leahy!

"School is shortened. Short cuts are made, philosophies and languages dropped. English dropped. Spelling dropped. Life is immediate. The job is what counts. Why learn anything except how to work your hands, press a button, pull a switch, fit a bolt?"

"Yes," quavered Montag.

"Let me fix your pillow," said Mildred, smiling.

"No," whispered Montag.

"The button is replaced by the zipper. Does a man have time to think while he dresses, a philosophical time, in the morning."

"He does not," said Montag, automatically.

Mildred pulled at the pillow.

"Get away," said Montag.

"Life becomes one Big Prat Fall, Mr. Montag. No more of the subtleties, everything is bang and boff and wow!"

“Wow,” said Mildred, yanking at the pillow.

“For God’s sake, leave me alone,” said Montag. Leahy stared at him. Mildred’s hand was thrusting behind him.

“The theatres are empty, Mr. Montag. Something that was getting meaningless is replaced by something evermore massive and meaningless, the television set, and after that The Clam.”

“What’s this?” said Mildred. Montag crushed back against her hand.

“What’ve you got hidden here?”

“Go sit down,” he screamed at her. She drew back, her hand empty.

“We’re talking.”

“As I was saying,” said Leahy. “Cartoons everywhere. Books become cartoons. The mind drinks in less and less. Impatience. Nervous impatience. Time to kill. No work. Highways full of crowds going somewhere, anywhere, nowhere. Impatience to be somewhere they are not, not where they are. The gasoline refugee, towns becoming almost exclusively motels. And people in vast nomadic moves from city to city, impatient, following the moon tides, living tonight in the room where you slept last night and I slept the night before.”

Mildred went in the other room and shut the door. She turned on the radio.

“Go on,” said Montag.

“Along with the technological rush, there was the minority problem. The bigger a population, the more minorities. It’s hard to find a majority in a big mass. And since the Mass Market was with us there were ten thousand minorities, union minorities, church minorities, racial minorities, dog lovers, cat lovers.”

“Professional Irishmen, Texans, Brooklynites,” suggested Mr. Montag, sweating. He leaned back hard on the hidden book.

“Right. Swedes, Britons, French, people from Oregon, Illinois, Mexico. You couldn’t have doctors as villains, or lawyers, or merchants or chiefs. The UN prevented your doing films on past wars. The Dog Protectors had to be pleased and bull fights were banished. All the minorities with

their own little navels that had to be kept clean. Intelligent men gave up in disgust.

“Pictures became puddings. Magazines were tapioca. The book buyer, the ticket buyer bored by dishwater, his brain spinning, quit buying, the trades died a slow death. There you have it. Don’t blame the government. Technology coupled with mass exploitation, coupled with censorship from minorities. All you’ve got today to read is comic books, confessions, and trade journals.”

“I know,” said Montag.

“The psychologists killed off Edgar Allan Poe, said his stories were bad for the mind. They killed off fairy tales, too. Fantasy. Not facing facts, they said.”

“But why the firemen,” said Montag at last. “Why all the fear and the prejudice and the burning and killing now?”

“Ah,” said Leahy, leaning forward to finish. “Books went out of fashion. Minority groups in order to insure their security made sure the censorship was fastened tight. Psychiatrists helped. They needn’t have bothered. By that time people were uneducated. They stayed away from books, and, in ignorance, hated and feared them. You always fear something you don’t know. Men have been burned at the stake for centuries, for knowing too much.”

“Yes,” said Montag. “The worst thing you can call a man today is a ‘professor’ or ‘intellectual.’ It’s a swear word.”

“Intelligence is suspect, for good reason. The little man fears someone’ll put something over on him as does the big man. So the best thing is to keep everybody as dumb as everybody else. The little man wants you and me to be like him. Rewrite the slogan. Not everyone born free and equal, but everyone made equal. Crush the IQs down to the sub-norm. A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shout out of the weapon. Unbreach men’s minds. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man. And so, the Fire Men came into being. You, Mr. Montag, and me.”

Leahy stood up. “I’ve got to go.”

“Thanks for talking to me.”

“You needed to be put straight. Now that you understand it, you’ll see our civilization, because it’s so big, has to be placid. We can’t have minorities stirred and upset. People must be content, Mr. Montag. Books upset them. Colored people who don’t like Little Black Sambo are unhappy. So we burn Little Black Sambo. White people who read Uncle Tom’s Cabin are unhappy. We burn that, too. Keep everyone calm and happy. That’s the trick.”

Leahy walked over and shook Mr. Montag’s hand.

“One more thing.”

“Yes.”

“Every fireman gets curious.”

“I imagine.”

“What do the books say, he wonders. A good question. They say nothing, Mr. Montag, nothing you can touch or believe in. They’re about people who never existed. Figments of the mind. Can you trust figments? No. Figments and confusion. But anyway, a fireman steals a book at a fire, almost by accident, a copy of the Bible, perhaps. A natural thing.”

“Natural.”

“We allow for that. We let him keep it 24 hours. If he hasn’t burned it by then, we burn it for him.”

“Thanks,” said Mr. Montag.

“I think you have a special edition of this one book the Bible, haven’t you?”

Montag felt his mouth move. “Yes.”

“You’ll be at work tonight at six o’clock?”

“No,” said Montag.

“What!”

Montag shut his eyes and opened them. “I’ll be in later, maybe.”

“See that you do,” said Leahy, smiling. “And bring the book with you, then, eh, after you’ve looked it over?”

“I’ll never come in again,” yelled Montag, in his mind.

“Get well,” said Leahy, and went out.

He watched Leahy drive away in his gleaming beetle the color of the last fire they had set.

Mildred was listening to the radio in the front room.

Montag cleared his throat in the door. She didn't look up, but laughed at something the radio announcer said.

"It's only a step," said Montag. "From not going to work today to not going tomorrow, and then not for a year."

"What do you want for lunch?" asked Mildred.

"How can you be hungry at a time like this!"

"You're going to work tonight, aren't you?"

"I'm doing more than that," he said. "I'm going to start killing people and raving and buying books!"

"A one man revolution?" she said, lightly. "They'd put you in jail."

"That's not a bad idea." He put his clothes on, furiously, walking about the bedroom. "But I'd kill a few people before I did get locked up. There's a real bastard, that Leahy, did you hear him? Knows all the answers, but does nothing about it!"

"I won't have anything to do with all this junk," she said.

"No?" he said. "This is your house, isn't it, as well as mine?"

"Yes."

"Then look at this!"

She watched as he ran into the hall, peered up at a little ceiling vent. He got a chair and climbed up and opened the vent. Reaching in, he began tossing books, big books, little books, red, yellow, green, black-covered books, ten, thirty, forty of them into the parlor at her feet. "There," he cried. "So you're not in this with me? You're in it up to your neck!"

"Leonard!" She stood looking at them. She looked at the house, the furniture. "They'll burn our house down if they find these, and put us in jail for life or kill us." She edged away, wailing.

"Let them try!"

She hesitated, and then in one motion bent and threw a book at the fireplace.

He caught her, shrieking, and took another book from her hand. "Oh, no, Millie, no. Never touch these books. If you do I'll give you the beating of your life." He shook her. "Listen." He held her very firmly and her face bobbed; tears streaked down her rouged cheeks. "You're going to help me. You're in it now. You're going to read a book, one of these. Sit down. I'll help you. You're going to do something with me about men like Leahy and this city we live in. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear." Her body was sagging.

The door bell rang.

They both jerked about to glance at the door and the books strewn about in heaps.

The door bell rang again.

"Sit down." Montag pushed his wife gently into the chair. He handed her a book.

The bell rang a third time.

"Read." He pointed to a page. "Out loud."

"The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright."

The bell sounded.

"Go on."

"But the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness."

Another ring.

"They'll go away after a while," said Montag.

"A wholesome tongue is a tree of life."

In the distance, Montag thought he heard a fire siren.

The Sieve and the Sand

THEY READ THE LONG AFTERNOON THROUGH, WHILE THE fire flickered and blew the hearth and the rain fell from the sky over the house. Now and again, Mr. Montag would quietly light a cigarette and puff it, or go bring in a bottle of cold beer and drink it easily or say, "Will you read that part over again? Isn't that an idea now?" And Mildred's voice, as colorless as a beer bottle which contains a beautiful wine but does not know it, went on enclosing the words in plain glass, pouring forth the beauties with a loose mouth, while her drab eyes moved over the

words and over the words and the cigarette smoke idled, and the hour grew late. They read a man named Shakespeare and a man named Poe and part of a book by a man named Matthew and one named Mark. On occasion, Mildred glanced fearfully at the window.

“Go on,” said Mr. Montag.

“Someone might be watching. That might’ve been Mr. Leahy at our door a while back.”

“Whoever it was went away. Read that last section again, I want to think on that.”

She read from the works of Jefferson and Lincoln.

When it was five o’clock, her hands dropped open. “I’m tired. Can I stop now?” Her voice was hoarse.

“How thoughtless of me,” he said, taking the book. “But isn’t it beautiful, Millie, the words, and the thoughts, aren’t they exciting!”

“I don’t understand any of it.”

“But surely ...”

“Just words,” she said.

“But you remember some of it.”

“Nothing.”

“Try.”

She tried to remember and tell it. “Nothing.”

“You’ll learn, in time. Doesn’t some of the beauty get through to you?”

“I don’t like books, I don’t understand them, they’re over my head, they’re for professors and radicals and I don’t want to read any more. Please, promise you won’t make me!”

“Mildred!”

“I’m afraid,” she said, putting her face into her shaking hands. “I’m so terribly frightened by these ideas, by Mr. Leahy, and having these books in our house. They’ll burn our books and kill us. Now, I’m sick.”

“Poor Millie,” he said, at last, sighing. “I’ve put you on trial, haven’t I? I’m way out front, trying to drag you, when I should be walking beside you, barely touching. I expect too much. It’ll take months to put you in

the frame of mind where you can receive the ideas in these books. It's not fair of me. All right, you won't have to read again."

"Thanks."

"But you must listen. I'll explain. And one day you'll understand why these books are so fine."

"I'll never learn."

"You must, if you want to be free."

"I'm free already, I couldn't be freer."

"But aware, no. You're like the moth that got caught in the interior of a bell at midnight. Numb with concussion, drunk on sound. Thirty years of that confounded blating radio, no ideas, no beauty, just noise. A moth in a bell. And we've got to—"

"You're not going to forbid me my radio, are you?" Her voice rose.

"Well, to start—"

She was up in a fury, raging at him. "I'll sit and listen to this for a while every day," she cried. "But I've got to have my radio, too. You can't take that away from me!"

"Millie."

The telephone rang. They both started. She snatched it up, and was almost immediately laughing. "Hello, Ann, yes, yes! Of course. Tonight. Yes. You come here. Yes, the Clown's on tonight, yes and the Terror, it'll be nice."

Mr. Montag shuddered. He left the room. He walked through the house, thinking. Leahy. The Fire House. These books.

"I'll shoot him, tonight," he said, aloud. "I'll kill Leahy. That'll be one censor out of the way. No." He laughed coldly. "For I'll have to shoot most of the people in the world. How does one start a revolution? What can a single lonely man do?"

Mildred was chattering. The radio was back on again, thundering.

And then he remembered, about a year ago, walking through a park alone he had come upon a man in a black suit unawares. The man had been reading something. Montag hadn't seen a book, he had seen the

man move hastily, and his face was flushed, and he had jumped up as if to run, and Montag had said, "Sit down."

"I didn't do anything."

"No one said you did."

They had sat in the park all afternoon. Montag had drawn the man out. He was a retired professor of English literature, who had lost his job forty years before when the last college of arts had been closed. His name was William Faber, and yes, shyly, fearfully, he produced a little book of American Poems he had been reading, "Just to know I'm alive," said Mr. Faber. "Just to know where I am and what things are. To be aware. Most of my friends aren't aware. Most of them can't talk. They stutter and halt and hunt words. And what they talk is sales and profits and what they saw on television the hour before."

What a nice afternoon that had been. Professor Faber had read some of the poems to him, none of which he understood, but the sounds were good, and slowly the meaning crept in. When it was over, Montag said, "I'm a fireman."

Faber had almost died on the spot from a heart attack.

"Don't be afraid. I won't turn you in," said Montag. "I've stopped being mean about it years ago. I take long walks. No one walks anymore. Do you have the same trouble? Are you stopped by the police as a robbery or burglary suspect simply because you're on foot?"

He and Faber had laughed, exchanged addresses verbally, and parted. He had never seen Faber again. It wouldn't be safe to know a former English lit. professor. But now ... ?

He dialed the call through.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Professor Faber?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Mr. Montag. Remember, in the park, a year ago."

"Oh yes, Mr. Montag. Can I help you?"

"Mr. Faber ..."

“Yes?”

“How many copies of Shakespeare are there left in the world?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The voice grew cold.

“I want to know if there are any copies at all.”

“I can’t talk to you now, Montag.”

“This telephone line is closed, there’s no one listening.”

“Is this some sort of trap? I can’t talk to just anyone on the phone.”

“Tell me. Are there any copies left?”

“None!” And Faber hung up.

None. Montag fell back in his chair, gasping. None! None in all the world, none left, none anywhere, all of them destroyed, torn apart, burnt. Shakespeare at last dead for all time to the world! He got up shakily and walked across the room and bent down among the books. He took hold of one and lifted it.

“The plays of Shakespeare, Millie! One last copy and I own it!”

“Fine,” she said.

“If anything should happen to this copy he’d be lost forever. Do you realize what that means, the importance of this copy here in our house.”

“And you have to hand it back to Mr. Leahy tonight to be burned, don’t you?” she said. She was not being cruel. She merely sounded relieved that the book was going out of her life.

“Yes.”

He could see Leahy turning the book over with slow appreciation. “Sit down, Montag, I want you to watch this. Delicately, like an eggplant, see?” Ripping one page after another from the book. Lighting the first page with a match. And when it had curled down into a black butterfly, lighting the second page, and so on, chain-smoking the entire volume page by printed page. When it was all finished, with Montag seated

there sweating, the floor would look like a swarm of black moths had died in a small storm. And Leahy smiling, washing his hands.

“My God, Millie, we’ve got to do something, we’ve got to copy this, there must be a duplicate made, this can’t be lost!”

“You haven’t time.”

“No, not by hand, but photographed.”

“No one would do it for you.”

He stopped. She was right. There was no one to trust. Except, perhaps, Faber. Montag started for the door.

“You’ll be here for the television party, won’t you?” she called after him. “It wouldn’t be fun without you!”

“You’d never miss me.” But she was looking at the daylight TV program and didn’t hear. He went out and slammed the door.

Once as a child he had sat upon the yellow sands in the middle of the blue and hot summer day trying to fill a sieve with sand. The faster he poured it in, the faster it sifted through, with a hot whispering. He tried all day because some cruel cousin had said, “Fill this sieve with sand and you’ll get a dime!”

Seated there in the midst of July, he had cried. His hand was tired, the sand was boiling. The sieve was empty.

And now, as the underground jet-tube roared him through the lower cellars of town, rocking him, he remembered the sieve. And he held the copy of Shakespeare, trying to pour the words into his mind. But the words fell through! And he thought, in a few hours I must hand this book to Leahy, but I must remember every word, none must escape me, each line can be memorized. I must remember, I must.

“But I don’t.” He shut the book and tried to repeat the lines.

“Try Denham’s Dentifrice tonight,” said the jet-radio in the bright wall of the swaying car. Trumpets blared.

“Shut up,” thought Mr. Montag. “To be or not to be—”

“Denham’s Dentifrice is only surpassed by Denham’s Dentifrice.”

“—that is the question. Shut up, shut up, let me remember.” He tore the book open feverishly and jerked the pages about, tearing at the lines with his eyes, staring until his eyelashes were wet and quivering. His heart pounded.

“Denham’s Dentifrice, spelled D-E-N-H ...”

“Whether it is nobler—”

A whispering of hot yellow sand through empty sieve.

“Denham’s, Denham’s, Denham’s does it! No dandier, dental detergent!”

“Shut up!” It was a cry so loud that the radio seemed stunned. Mr. Montag found himself on his feet, the shocked inhabitants of the loud car staring at him, recoiling from a man with an insane face, a gibbering mouth, a terrible book in his hand. These rabbit people who hadn’t asked for music and commercials on their public vehicles, but who had got it by the sewerful, the air drenched and sprayed and pummeled and kicked by voices and music every instant. And here was an idiot man, himself, suddenly scrabbling at the wall, beating at the loud-speaker, at the enemy of peace, at the killer of Shakespeare!

“Mad man!”

“Call the conductor!”

“Denham’s, Denham’s Double Dentifrice for dingy dentures!”

“Fourteenth Street.”

Only that saved him. The car stopped. Mr. Montag, suddenly shocked by the lack of motion, swayed back, dropped from the seat, ran past the pale faces, screaming in his mind soundlessly, the voice crying like a sea-gull on a lonely shore after him, “Denham’s, Denham’s ...” fading. Professor Faber opened the door and when he saw the book, seized it.

“My God, man, I haven’t seen Shakespeare in years!”

“We burned a house last night. I stole this.”

“What a chance to take.”

“I was curious.”

“Of course. It’s beautiful. There were a lot of lovely books once. Before we let them go.” He turned the pages hungrily, a thin man, bald, with slender hands, as light as chaff. He sat down and put his hand over his

eyes. "You are looking at a coward, Mr. Montag. When they burned the last of the evil books, as they called them, forty years back, I made only a few grunts and subsided. I've damned myself ever since."

"It's not too late. There are still books."

"And there is still life in me, but I'm afraid of dying. Civilizations fall because men like myself fear death."

"I have a plan. I'm in a position to do things. I'm a fireman, I can find books and hide them."

"True."

"I lay awake last night, thinking. We might publish many books privately when we have copies to print from."

"It's been tried. A good many thousand men have sat in the electric chair for that. Besides, where will you get a press?"

"Can't we build one? I have a little money."

"If we can find a skilled craftsman who cares."

"But here's the really fine part of my plan." Montag almost laughed. He leaned forward. "We'll print extra copies of each book and plant them in firemen's houses!"

"What!"

"Yes! Ten copies, twenty copies in each house, plenty, more than plenty of evidence, criminal intent. Books on philosophy, politics, religion, fantasy!"

"My God!" Faber jumped up and paced the room, looking back at Montag, beginning to smile. "That's incredible."

"Do you like my plan?"

"Insidious!"

"Would it work?"

"It'd be fun, wouldn't it?"

"That's the word. Christ, to hide the books in houses and phone the alarm and see the engines roar up, the hoses uncoil, the door battered down, the windows crashed in, and the fireman himself accused, his house burnt and himself in jail!"

“Positively insidious.” The professor almost danced. “The dragon eats his tail!”

“I’ve a list of all firemen’s homes here and across the continent. With an underground organization we could sow books and reap fire for every bastard in the industry.”

“But how will you start?”

“A few books here and there. And build the organization.”

“Who can you trust?”

“Former professors like yourself, former actors, directors, writers, historians, linguists. There must be thousands boiling under the skin.”

“Ancient, most of them. There’ve been no new crops lately.”

“All the better. They’ll have fallen from public notice.”

“I know a few.”

“We could start with those, spread slowly in a network. Think of the actors who never have a chance to play Shakespeare, or Pirandello or Shaw anymore. We would use their anger, my God, to good purpose! Think of the historians who haven’t written a line of history for forty years, and the writers who’ve written pap half a century now, who go home nights and vomit to forget. There must be a million such people!”

“At least.”

“And perhaps we could get small classes in reading started, build an interest in the people.”

“Impossible.”

“But we must try.”

“The whole structure must come down. This isn’t a façade job, we can’t change the front. We’ve got to kick down the skeleton. The whole works is so shot through with mediocrity. I don’t think you realize, Montag, that the burning was almost unnecessary, forty years back.”

“Oh?”

“By that time the great mass had been so pulverized by comic books, quick digests of digests, that public libraries were like the great Sahara, empty and silent. Except, of course, for the science dept.”

“But we can bring libraries back.”

“Can you shout louder than the radio, dance faster than the freak dancers, are your books enough to interest this population breast-fed from infancy through senility? Look at your magazine stands. Half naked women on every cover. Your billboards, your films, sex. Can you get the American man from under his crankcase, the woman out of her beauty salon, both of them away from their friend, the TV?”

“We can try.”

“You’re a fool. They don’t want to think. They’re having fun.”

“They only think they are. My wife has everything. She, like a million others, tried to commit suicide last week.”

“All right, they’re lying to themselves, but if you try to show them to themselves, they’ll crush you like a bug.”

A flight of warplanes shook the house, going west.

“There’s our hope,” said Faber, pointing up. “Let’s hope for a good long bad war, Montag. Let the war take away the TVs and radio and comics and true confessions. This civilization is flinging itself to pieces. Wait for the centrifuge to break the wheel.”

“I can’t wait. There has to be another structure, anyway, ready and waiting when this one falls. That’s us.”

“A few men quoting Shakespeare or saying I remember Sophocles? It would be funny if it weren’t so tragic.”

“We must be there to remind them that there is a little more to man besides machines, that the right kind of work is happiness, rather than the wrong kind of leisure. Man must have something to do. He feels useless. We must tell him about things like honesty and beauty and poetry and art, which they lost along the wayside.”

“All right, Montag.” The professor sighed. “You’re wrong, but you’re right. We’ll do a little, anyway. How much money could you get me today?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

“Bring it here then. I know a man who once printed our college paper years ago. I remember that year very well. I came to my class one morning and there was only one student there to sign up for my

Ancient Greek Drama. You see, that's how it went. Like a block of ice melted on an August afternoon. Nobody passed a law. It happened. And when the people had censored themselves into a living idiocy, the Government, realizing it was to their advantage that the public read only pap and swill, stepped in and froze the situation.

Newspapers were dying as far back as the nineteen fifties. They were dead by the year 2000. So nobody cared if the government said no more newspapers. No one wanted them back anyway. The world is full of half-people. They don't know how to be happy because they know neither how to work, nor how to relax. But enough of that. I'll contact the printer. We'll get the books started. That part'll be fun. I'm going to really enjoy it."

"And we'll plan the reading classes."

"Yes, and wait for the war," said Faber. "That's one fine thing about war. It destroys machines so beautifully." Montag stood up. "I'll get the money to you some time today or tomorrow. You'll have to give me back that Shakespeare, though. It's to be burned tonight."

"No!" Faber held it out before him, turning the pages.

"I've tried to memorize it, but I forget. It's driven me crazy trying to remember."

"Jesus God, if only we had time."

"I keep thinking that. Sorry." He took the book and went to the door.

"Good night."

The door shut. He was in the street again, looking at the real world.

You could feel the war getting ready in the sky that night. The way the clouds moved aside and came back, and the way the stars looked, a million of them between the clouds, like the enemy planes, and the feeling that the sky might fall upon the city and turn the houses to dust, and the moon turn to fire, that was how the night felt. Montag walked from the bus stop, with the money in his pocket. He was listening abstractedly to the Sea-Shell radio which you could stopper in your left ear "Buy a Sea-Shell and hear the ocean of Time"—and a voice was

talking to him and only him as he put his feet down toward his home: "Things took a sudden turn for the worse today. War threatens at any hour."

A flight of jet-bombers, like the whistle of a scythe, went over the sky in one second. It was less than a radio impulse. Montag felt of the money in one pocket, the Shakespeare in the other. He had given up trying to memorize it now, he was simply reading it for the enjoyment it gave, the simple pleasure of good words on the tongue and in the mind. He unscrewed the Seashell Ear Radio and read another page of Lear by moonlight.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK the front door scanner recognized three women and opened, letting them in with laughter and loud, empty talk. Mrs. Masterson, Mrs. Phelps, and Mrs. Bowles, drinking the martinis Mildred handed them, laughing like a crystal chandelier that someone has pushed, tinkling upon themselves in a million crystal chimes, flashing the same white smiles, their echoes repeated into empty corridors. Mr. Montag found himself in the middle of a conversation the main subject of which was how nice everybody looked.

"Doesn't everyone look nice?"

"Nice."

"You look fine, Alma."

"You look fine, too, Mildred."

"Everybody looks nice and fine," said Montag. He had given up the book. None of it would stay in his mind. The harder he tried to remember Hamlet, the quicker it vanished. He was in a mood to walk, but he never did that any more. Somehow he was always afraid he might meet Clarisse, or not meet her, on his strolls, so that kept him in, standing here upon the blond tenpins, blasting back at them with leers and blatherings, and somehow the television set was put on before they had finished saying how nice everyone looked, and there was a man selling orange soda pop and a woman drinking it with a Cheshire cat smile, how in hell did a person drink and smile simultaneously? A real advertising stunt! Following this, a demonstration of how to bake a

certain new cake, followed by a rather inane domestic comedy, a news analysis that did not analyze the news. "There may be war in 24 hours. Nobody knows." And an intolerable a quiz show naming the capitols of states.

Abruptly, Montag walked to the televisor and switched it off.

"Hey!" said everyone as if this were a joke.

"Leonard," said Mildred, nervously.

"I thought we might enjoy a little silence."

They thought about it and blinked.

"I thought we might try a little conversation for a change."

Conversation!

A flight of bombers going East shook the house and trembled up through their bodies to shake the drinks in their hands. Mr. Montag followed the sound with his eyes.

"There they go," he said.

Everyone glanced at him.

"When do you suppose the war will be?"

Silence.

At last: "What war?"

"There isn't going to be any war."

"What about your husbands? I notice they're not here tonight."

Mrs. Masterson looked sidewise at the empty TV screen. "Oh. My husband'll be back in a week or so. The Army called him. But they have these things every month or so." She laughed.

"Don't you worry? About the war?"

"Well, even if there was one, heavens, it's got to be fought and got over with, we can't just sit, can we?"

"No, but we can think about it."

She sipped her drink charmingly. "Who wants to think about war. I'll let Bob think of all that."

"And die."

"It's always someone else's husband dies, isn't that the joke?" The women all tittered. "Bob can take care of himself."

Yes, thought Montag, and if he doesn't, what'll it matter, we've learned the magic of the replaceable part from factories. A man after all is just a man. You can't tell one from another these days.

As for these women. His wife, the others, with their barbarously bright faces, the neon lipstick, the doll-lash eyes. Why worry about Bob or Mary or Tom, if there is a Joe or Helen or Roger to replace them, just as vacuous. In the land of television pallor, where the tanned face? In the land of the spread gluteus maximus, where the muscular thigh? In the land of blanc mange and vanilla pudding where the crisp bacon, the sharp roquefort? Where in this world of dull paring knives the mind like a machete to cut to the heart of the matter! Why these women couldn't peel the rind from a bit of smalltalk without lopping their arms off at the elbow!

The silence in the room was like a cotton batting.

"Did you see the Clarence Dove film last night, wasn't he funny."

"He's funny!"

"He sure is funny."

"But what if Bob should be killed, or your husband, Mrs. Phelps ..."

"He's already dead," said Mrs. Phelps. "He died a week ago, didn't you know? Jumped off a building."

"I didn't know." He fell silent, embarrassed.

"But back to Clarence Dove, he's really funny," said Mildred.

"Why did you marry Mr. Phelps?" said Montag.

"Why?"

"Yes, what did you have in common."

The poor woman waved her hands helplessly. "Why, because he had such a nice sense of humor, and we liked the same TV programs, and things like that. He danced nice."

He had seen other widows at funerals, dry-eyed, even as this woman was dry-eyed because the dead man was a robot turned out on assembly belt, gay, casual, but replaceable by another gay casual chap who would pop up like the clap pipe so mistakable for the one you just blew to bits at the shooting gallery.

"And you? Mrs. Masterson, have you any children?"

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Come to think of it, no one here has any children,” said Montag.

“Except you, Mrs. Bowles.”

“Four, by Caesarian section. It’s so easy.”

“The Caesarians weren’t physically necessary?”

“No. But I always said I’ll be damned if I’ll go through all that agony just for a baby. Four Caesarians.” She held up her fingers.

Yes, everything easy. To mistake the easy way for the right way, how delicious the temptation, but it wasn’t living. A woman who wouldn’t have a baby, or a man who wouldn’t work didn’t belong. They were passing through, they were expendables. They belonged to nothing and did nothing.

“Have you ever thought, ladies,” he said, growing more contemptuous of them by the minute, “that perhaps this isn’t the best of all possible worlds? That perhaps the Negroes and Jews and civil rights and every damned other thing is still where it was a hundred years ago, maybe worse?”

“Why that can’t be true,” said Mrs. Phelps. “We’d have heard about it.”

“On that pap-dispenser?” said Montag, jerking his thumb at the TV. “On that censoring machine?”

“You’re lying,” said Mrs. Phelps.

He drew a paper from his pocket, shaking with irritation.

“What’s that?” Mrs. Masterson squinted.

“A poem from a book, I want you to hear it.”

“I don’t like poetry.”

“Have you ever heard any?”

“I detest it.”

Mildred jumped up, but Montag said, “Sit down.” The women all lit cigarettes nervously, twisting their mouths, their nicotined hands gesturing in the smoky air. “Well, go on,” said Mrs. Masterson, impatiently “Let’s get this junk over with.”

Mrs. Phelps was squealing. "This is illegal, isn't it? I'm afraid. I'm going home."

"Sit down, we'll talk about that later." He cleared his throat. The room was quiet. He glanced up and the women were all looking with expectation at the television set, as if looking would turn it back on.

"Listen," he said. "This is a poem by Matthew Arnold, titled 'Dover Beach.'" He waited. He wanted very much to speak it right, and he was afraid that he might stumble. He read:

"The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet in the night air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land
Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

"Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

"The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

“Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash night.”

He stopped reading.

Mildred got up. “Can I turn on the TV now?”

“No, god damn it, no!”

Mildred sat down.

Mrs. Masterson said, “I don’t get it.”

“What was it about?” said Mrs. Phelps, her eyes frightened.

“Don’t you see the beauty?” asked Montag, much too loudly.

“Hardly worth getting excited about,” said Mrs. Masterson.

“That’s just it. Because it is such a little thing, it’s big. We don’t have time for poetry or anything anymore. We don’t like rain. We seed clouds to make it rain away from our cities. On Christmas we dump the snow in the sea. Trees are trouble, rip them out! Grass needs cutting, pour cement over it! We can’t be troubled to live anymore.”

“Mr. Montag,” said Mrs. Masterson. “It’s only because you’re a fireman that we haven’t turned you in for reading this to us tonight. This is illegal. But it’s silly. The poem was silly.”

“Of course, because you can’t plug it in anywhere, it isn’t practical.”

“Ladies, let’s get out of here.”

“We don’t want to get caught here with him and his poem,” said Mrs. Phelps, running.

“Don’t,” said Mildred.

Not speaking, the ladies ran. The door slammed.

“Go home and plug in your blankets and fry!” yelled Montag. “Go home and think of your first husband, Mrs. Masterson, in the insane asylum, and you Mrs. Phelps of Mr. Phelps jumping off a building!”

The house was quiet.

He went to the bedroom where Mildred had locked herself in the bath. He heard the water running. He heard her shaking the sleeping tablets out into her hand.

He walked out of the house, slamming the door.

“THANK YOU, MONTAG.” Mr. Leahy took the copy of Shakespeare and without even looking at it, tore it slowly apart and threw it into a wall slot. “Now, let’s have a game of blackjack and forget all about it, Montag. Glad to see you’re back.” They walked upstairs in the fire house.

They sat and played cards.

In Leahy’s sight, he felt the guilt of his hands. His hands were like ferrets that had done some evil deed in Leahy’s sight, and now were never at rest, were always stirring and picking and hiding in pockets, or moving out from under his alcohol-flame gaze. If Leahy so much as breathed on them, Montag felt his hands might turn upon their backs and die and he might never shake them to life again, they would be frozen cold, to be buried forever in his coat-sleeves, forgotten.

For these were the hands that acted on their own, that were no part of him, that snatched books, tore pages, hid paragraphs and sentences in little wads to be opened later, at home, by match-light, read, and burned. These were the hands that ran off with Shakespeare and Job and Ruth and packed them away next to his crashing heart, over the beating ribs and the hot, pouring blood of a man excited by his theft, appalled by his temerity, betrayed by ten fingers which at times he held up and looked upon as if they were covered with fresh blood.

He washed the hands continually. He found it impossible to smoke, not only because of having to use his hands in front of Leahy, but because

the drifting cigarette clouds made him think of the old man and the old woman and the fire that he and these others had set with their brass machines.

“You’re not smoking any more, Montag?”

“No. I’ve a cigarette cough. Got to stop.”

And when he played cards he hid his hands under the table so that Leahy wouldn’t see him fumble. “Let’s have our hands on the table,” said Leahy. “Not that we don’t trust you. You got extra cards under there.” And they all laughed. While Montag drew forth the guilty hands, the stealers and the seekers, shaking, to place his cards during the long game.

The phone rang.

Mr. Leahy, carrying his cards in his quiet hand, walked over and stood by it, let it ring once more, and then picked up the receiver.

“Yes?”

Mr. Montag listened.

“Yes,” said Leahy.

The clock ticked in the room.

“I see,” said Leahy. He looked at Mr. Montag and smiled and winked. Montag looked away. “Better give me that address again.”

Mr. Montag got up and walked around the room, hands in pockets. The other two men were standing, now, ready. Leahy gave them a nod of his head, toward their hats and coats, as if to say, on the double. They shoved their arms in their coats and pushed on their helmets, joking. Mr. Montag waited.

“I understand perfectly,” said Leahy. “Yes. Yes. Perfectly. No, that’s all right. Don’t you worry. We’ll be right out.”

Mr. Montag put down the phone. “Well, well,” he said.

“A call?”

“Yes.”

“Books to be burned?”

“So it seems.”

Mr. Montag sat down. “I don’t feel well.”

“What a shame, for this is a special case,” said Leahy, coming forward slowly, putting on his slicker.

“I think I’m tendering my resignation.”

“Please wait. One more fire, eh, Montag. And then I’ll be agreeable, you can hand in your papers and we’ll all be happy.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Have I ever lied to you.”

Mr. Leahy fetched Montag his helmet. “Put it on. It’ll all be over in an hour. I understand you, Montag, really I do. And soon everything will be hunky-dory.”

“All right.” Montag arose. They slid down the brass pole. “Where’s the fire this time?”

“I’ll direct you, Mr. Brown,” shouted Leahy up at the man on the engine.

The engine blasted itself to life and in gaseous thunder they all climbed aboard.

They rounded the corner in thunder and siren, with concussion of tires, with scream of rubber, with a shifting of kerosene bulk in the glittery brass tank, like the food in the stomach of a giant, with Mr. Montag’s fingers jolting off the silver rail, swinging into cold space, with the wind tearing his hair back from his bleak face, with the wind whistling in his teeth, and him all the while thinking of the women, the chaff women, with the kernels blown out from under them by a neon wind, and his reading the book to them, what a silly thing it was now, for what was a book, a bit of paper, a bit of type, why should he care about one book, ten books, five thousand books, he was the only one in the world who cared about books, really. Why not forget it all, let it drop, let the books lie?

“Turn here!” said Leahy.

“Elm Street?”

“Right!”

He saw Leahy up ahead, with his massive black slicker flapping out about him. He seemed to be a black bat flying over the engine, over the brass numbers, taking the wind. His phosphorescent face glimmered in the high darkness, pressing forward, and he was smiling.

“Here we go to keep the world happy!” he shouted.

And Mr. Montag thought, no, I won't let the books die. I won't let them burn. As long as there are men like Leahy, I can't quit. But what can I do. I can't kill everyone. It's me against the world, and the odds are too big for one man. What can I do? Against fire, what water is best? He didn't know.

“Now over on Park Terrace!” That was Leahy.

The Fire Engine blundered to a stop, throwing the men forward on themselves. Mr. Montag stood there, looking at the cold rail under his loose fingers, trembling.

“I can't do it,” he murmured. “I can't go in there. I can't burn another book.”

Leahy jumped down from his perch, smelling of the fresh wind that had hammered at him. “All right, Montag, fetch the kerosene!”

The hoses were being reeled out. The men were running on soft bootheels, as clumsy as cripples, as quiet as spiders.

Mr. Montag at last looked up.

Mr. Leahy said, “What's wrong, Montag?”

“Why,” said Montag. “That house. It's my house.”

“So it is,” said Leahy.

“That's my house!”

All the lights were on. Down the street, lights were burning yellow in every house. People were coming out on porches, as on to stages. The door of Montag's house stood wide. In it, with two suitcases at her feet, was Mildred. When she saw her husband she stooped, picked up the suitcases, and came down the steps with dream-like rigidity, looking at the third button on his jacket.

“Mildred!”

She didn't speak.

"Okay, Montag, up with the hoses and the axes."

"Just a moment, Mr. Leahy. Mildred, you didn't telephone this call in, did you?"

She walked past him with her arms rigid and at the ends of them, in the sharp fingers, the valise handles. Her mouth was bloodless.

"Mildred!"

She put the valises into a waiting cab and climbed in and sat there, staring straight ahead.

Montag started toward her, but Leahy held his arm. Leahy jerked his head toward the house. "Come on, Montag."

The cab drove away slowly among the lighted houses.

There was a crystal tinkling as the windows of the house were broken to provide fine drafts for fire.

Mr. Montag walked but did not feel his feet touch the sidewalk, nor the hose in his cold fingers, nor did he hear Leahy talking continually as they reached the door.

"Pour it on, Montag."

"What?"

"The kerosene."

Montag stood looking in at the strange house, made strange by the hour of the night, by the murmur of neighbor voices, by the broken glass and the lights burning in each room, and there on the floor, their covers torn off, the pages spilled about like pigeon feathers, were his incredible books, and they looked so pitiful and silly and not worth bothering with there, for they were nothing but type and paper and raveled binding.

But he knew what he must do to quench the fire that was burning everything even before set ablaze. He stepped forward in a huge silence, and he picked up one of the pages of the books and he read what it had to say.

"I'll memorize it," he told himself. "And some day I'll write it down and make another book from what I remember."

He had read three lines when Leahy snatched the paper away from him, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Oh, no, no," said Leahy, smiling. "Because then we'd have to burn your mind, too. Mustn't have that."

"Ready!" said Leahy, stepping back.

"Ready," said Montag, snapping the valve lock on the fire-thrower.

"Aim," said Leahy.

"Aim."

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

He burnt the television set and he burnt the radio and he burnt the motion picture projector and he burnt the films and the gossip papers and the litter of cosmetics on the table, and he took pleasure in it, and he burned the walls because he wanted to change everything, the chairs, the tables, the paintings, he didn't want to remember that he had lived here with that strange woman who was an interchangeable part, who would forget him tomorrow, and who was, really, to be pitied, for she did not know anything about the world or the way it was run.

So he burned the room.

"The books, Montag, the books!"

He directed the fire at the books. The books leaped up and danced about, like roasted birds, their wings ablaze in red and yellow feathers. They fell in charred lumps. They twisted and went up in founts of spark and soot.

"Get Shakespeare there, get him!" said Leahy.

He burned Mr. Shakespeare to a turn.

He burned books, he burned them by the dozen, he burned books, with water dripping from his eyes.

"When you're all done, Montag," said Leahy. "You're under arrest."

Books Without Pages

THE HOUSE FELL INTO RED RUIN. IT BEDDED ITSELF DOWN to sleepy pink ashes and a smoke pall hung over it, rising straight to the sky. It was ten minutes after one in the morning. The crowd was going back into their houses, the fun was over.

Mr. Montag stood with the fire-thrower in his hands, great islands of perspiration standing out under his arms, his face dirty with soot. The three other firemen stood there in the darkness, their faces illumined faintly by the burnt house, by the house which Mr. Montag had just burned down so efficiently with kerosene, fire-thrower, and especial aim.

“All right, Montag,” said Leahy. “Come along. You’ve done your duty. Now you’re under arrest.”

“What’ve I done?”

“You know what you done, don’t ask. The books.”

“Why so much fuss over a few bits of paper?”

“We won’t stand here arguing, it’s cold.”

“Was it my wife called you, or one of her friends.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Was it my wife?”

Leahy nodded. “But her friends called about an hour ago. One way or the other, you’d have got it. That was pretty silly, quoting poetry around free and easy, Montag. Come on, now.”

“No,” said Montag.

He felt the fire-thrower in his hand. Leahy glanced at Montag’s trigger finger and saw what he intended before Montag himself had even considered it. After all, murder is always a new thing, and Montag knew nothing of murder, he knew only burning and burning things that people said were evil.

“But I know what’s really wrong with the world,” said Montag.

“Don’t!” screamed Leahy.

And then he was a shrieking blaze, a jumping sprawling, babbling thing, all aflame, writhing on the grass as Montag shot three more blasting squirts of liquid fire at him. The sounds Leahy made were horrible. He twisted in on himself, like a ridiculous black wax image and was silent. The other two men stood appalled.

“Montag!”

He pointed the weapon at them. “Turn around!”

They turned. He beat them over the head with the weapon, he didn’t want to burn them, too. Then he turned the firethrower on the fire engine itself, set the trigger, and ran. The engine blew up, a hundred gallons of kerosene in one great flower of heat.

He ran away down the street and into an alley, thinking, that’s the end of you, Leahy, that’s the end of you and what you are.

He kept running.

He remembered the books and turned back.

“You’re a fool, a damned fool, an awful fool, but definitely a fool,” he told himself. “You idiot, you and your stinking temper. And you’ve ruined it all. At the very start, you ruin. But those women, those stupid women, they drove me to it with their nonsense!” he protested, in his mind.

“A fool, nevertheless, no better than them! We’ll save what we can, we’ll do what has to be done.”

He found the books where he had left them, beyond the garden fence. He heard voices yelling in the night and flash-beams jerked about. Other Fire Engines wailed from far off and police cars were arriving.

Mr. Montag took as many books as he could carry under each arm, ten on a side and staggered away down the alley. He hadn’t realized what a shock the evening had been to himself, but suddenly he fell and lay sobbing, weak, his legs folded. At a distance he heard running feet. Get up, he told himself. But he lay there. Get up, get up. But he cried like a child. He hadn’t wanted to kill anybody, not even Leahy, killing did nothing but kill something of yourself when you did it, and suddenly he

saw Leahy again, a torch, screaming, and he shut his eyes and crawled his sooty fingers over his wet face. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Everything at once. In one 24 hour period, the burning of a woman, the burning of books, the trip to the professor's, Leahy, Shakespeare, trying to memorize, the sand and the sieve, the bank money, the printing press, the plan, the rage, the alarm, Mildred's departure, the fire, Leahy into a torch, too much for any one day in any one life. Too much.

At last he was able to get to his feet, but the books were impossibly heavy. He staggered along the alley and the voices and sound faded behind him. He moved in darkness, panting.

"You must remember," he said. "You must burn them or they'll burn you. Burn them or they'll burn you."

Six blocks away the alley opened out onto a wide empty thoroughfare, that looked like an amphitheatre, so broad, so quiet, so clean, and him, alone, running across it, easily seen, easily shot down. He hid back in the shadows. There was a gas station nearby. First he must go there, clean up, wash, comb his hair, become presentable. Then, with books under arm, stroll calmly across that wide boulevard to get where he was going.

"Where am I going?"

He didn't know.

THERE WAS THE WIDE BOULEVARD, a game for him to win, there was the vast bowling alley at two in the morning, and him dirty, his lungs like burning brooms in his chest, his mouth sucked dry from running, all of the lead in the world poured into his empty feet, and the gas station nearby like a big white metal flower open for the long night ahead.

The moon had set and a mist was come to shelter him and drive away the police helicopters. He saw them wavering, indecisive, a half mile off, like butterflies puzzled by autumn, dying with winter, and then they were landing, one by one, dropping softly to the streets where, turned

into police cars, they would scream along the boulevard, continuing their search.

Approaching from the rear, Mr. Montag entered the men's wash room. Through the tin wall he could hear a voice crying, "War has been declared! War has been declared. Ten minutes ago—" But the sound of washing his hands and rinsing his face and toweling himself dry cut the announcer's voice away. Emerging from the washroom a cleaner, newer man, less suspect, having left ashes and dirt behind down the drain, Mr. Montag returned to his bundle of books, picked them up and walked as casual as a man looking for a bus, out upon the boulevard.

He looked north and south. The boulevard was as clean as a pinball machine, but, underneath, one could feel the electrical energy, the readiness to dart lights, flash red and blue, and out of nowhere, rolling like a silver ball, might flash the searchers. Two blocks away, there were a few headlights. He took a deep breath, and kept walking. He would have to chance it. A hundred yards across the boulevard in the open, plenty of time for a police car to run him down if one came.

There was a car coming. Its headlights leaped out and caught him in mid-stride. He faltered, got a new hold on his books, and forced himself not to run. He was now one third of the way across. There was a growl from the car motor as it put on more speed.

The police! thought Montag. They see me. Careful man, careful.

The car was coming at a terrific speed. A good one hundred miles an hour, if anything. Its horn was blaring. Its lights flushed the concrete and the heat of them, it seemed, burned his cheeks and eyelids and brought the sweat coursing from his body.

He began to shuffle and then run. The horn hooted. The sound of the motor went higher, higher. He ran. He dropped a book, hesitated, let it lie, and plunged on, babbling to himself, he was in the middle of the street, the car was a hundred yards away, closer, closer, hooting, pushing, rolling, screeching, the horn frozen, him running, his legs up

and down, his eyes blind in the flashing hot light, the horn nearer, upon him.

They're going to run me down, they know who I am, it's all over, it's all done! said Mr. Montag. But he held to the books and kept racing. He stumbled and fell.

That saved him. Just an instant before reaching him the wild, hysterical car swerved to one side, went around him and was gone like a bullet away. Mr. Montag lay where he had fallen. Wisps of laughter trailed back with the blue exhaust.

That wasn't the police, thought Mr. Montag.

It was a carful of high school children, yelling, whistling, hurraing, laughing. And they had seen a man, a pedestrian, a rarity, and they had said to themselves, Let's get him! They didn't know he was wanted, that he was Montag, they were out for a night of howling and roaring here and there covering five hundred miles in a few moonlit hours, their faces icy with the wind, their hair flowing.

"They would have killed me," thought Montag, lying there. "For no reason. They would have killed me."

He got up and walked unsteadily to the far curb. Somehow he had remembered to pick up the spilled books. He looked at them, oddly, in his hands.

"I wonder," he said, "if they were the ones who killed Clarisse." His eyes watered, standing there. The thing that had saved him was self-preservation. If he had remained upright, they'd have hit him, like a domino, sent him spinning. But the fact that he was prone had caused the driver to consider the possibility that running over a body at one hundred miles an hour might turn the car over and spill them all out to their deaths.

Montag glanced down the avenue. A half mile away, the car full of kids had turned and was coming back, picking up speed.

Montag hurried into an alley and was gone long before the car returned.

The house was silent.

Mr. Montag approached it from the back, creeping through the scent of daffodils and roses and wet grass. He touched the screen door, found it open, slipped in, tiptoed across the porch, and, behind the ice-box, beyond another door, in the kitchen, deposited five of the books. He waited, listening to the house.

“Billett, are you asleep up there?” he asked of the second floor in a whisper. “I hate to do this to you, but you did it to others, never asking, never wondering, never worrying. Now it’s your house, and you in jail awhile, all the houses you’ve burned and people you’ve killed.”

The ceiling did not reply.

Quietly, Montag slipped from the house and returned to the alley. The house was still dark, no one had heard him come or go.

He walked casually down the alley, around a block to an all night druggist’s, where he closed himself in a booth and dialed a number.

“Hello?”

“I want to report an illegal ownership of books,” he said.

The voice sharpened on the other end. “The address?”

“11 South Grove Glade.”

“Who are you?”

“A friend, no name. Better get there before he burns them.”

“We’ll get there, thanks.” Click.

Montag stepped out and walked down the street. Far away, he heard sirens coming, coming to burn Mr. Billett’s house, and him upstairs, not knowing, deep in sleep.

“Good night, Mr. Billett,” said Montag.

A RAP AT THE DOOR.

“Professor Faber!”

Another rap and a long silence. And then, from within, the lights flickering on as the Professor sat up in bed, cutting the selenium rays in his room, all about the house the lights winked on, like eyes opening up.

Professor Faber opened the door. "Who is it?" he said, for the man who catered was scarcely recognizable. "Oh, Montag!"

"I'm going away," said Montag, stumbling to a chair. "I've been a fool." Professor Faber stood at the door half a minute, listening to the distant sirens wailing off like animals in the morning. "Someone's been busy." "It worked."

"At least you were a fool about the right things." Faber shut the door, came back, and poured a drink for each of them. "I wondered what had happened to you."

"I was delayed. But the money is here." He took it from his pocket and laid it on the desk, then sat there and tiredly sipped his drink. "How do you feel?"

"This is the first night I've fallen right to sleep in years," said Faber.

"That must mean I'm doing the correct thing. I think we can trust me, now. I didn't."

"People never trust themselves, but they never let others know. I suppose that's why we do rash things, to expose ourselves in such a position we do not dare retreat. Unconsciously, we fear that we may give in, quit the fight, and so we do a foolish thing, like read poetry to women." He laughed at himself. "So I guess I'll be on the run now. It's up to you to keep things moving."

"I'll do my damndest," Faber sat down. "Tell me about it. What you did just now, I mean."

"I hid the books in three houses, in different places in each house so it would not look planned. Then I telephoned the firemen."

Faber shook his head. "God, I'd like to have been there. Did the places burn!"

"Yes, they burned very well."

“Where are you going now?”

“I don’t know. I’ll keep in touch with you. You can leave some books for me to use, from time to time, in vacant lots. I’ll call you.”

“Of course. Do you want to sleep here for a while?”

“I’d better get going, I wouldn’t want you to be held responsible for my being here.”

“Just a moment. Let’s listen.” Faber waved his hand three times at the radio and it came on, with a voice talking rapidly.

“—this evening. Montag has escaped but will be found. Citizens are alerted to watch for this man. Five foot ten, 170 pounds, blond-brown hair, blue eyes, healthy complexion. Here’s a bulletin. The Electric Dog is being transported here from Albany.”

Montag and Faber glanced at each other, eyebrows up.

“—you may recall the stories recently of this new invention, a machine so delicate that it can follow a trail, much in the way bloodhounds have done for centuries. But this machine always finds its quarry, without fail!”

Montag put his drink down and he was cold.

“The machine is self-operating, on a miniature cell motor, weighs about sixty pounds, and is propelled on a series of seven rubber wheels. The front part of this machine is a nose which, in reality, is a thousand noses, so sensitive they can distinguish ten thousand foods, five thousand flower smells, and remember the identity index odors of 15,000 men without resetting.”

Faber began to tremble. He looked at his house, at the door, the floor, the chair in which Montag sat. Montag interpreted this look. They both looked together at the invisible trail of footprints leading to this house, coming across this room, the fingerprints on the door knob, and the smell of his body in the air and on this chair.

“The Electric Hound is now landing, by helicopter, at the burned Montag house, we take you there by TV control!”

And there was the burned house, the crowd, and something with a sheet over it, Mr. Leahy, yes, Mr. Leahy, and out of the sky, fluttering,

came the red helicopter, landing like a grotesque flower while the police pushed back the crowd and the wind blew the women's dresses.

Mr. Montag watched the scene with a solid fascination, not wanting to move, ever. If he wished, he could sit here, in comfort, and follow the entire hunt on through its phases, down alleys, up streets, across empty running avenues, with the sky lightening to dawn, up other alleys to burned houses, so on to this place here, this house, with Faber and himself seated here at their leisure, smoking idly, drinking good wine, while the Electric Hound sniffed down the paths, wailing, and stopped outside that door right there, and then, if he wished, Montag could rise, go to the door, keeping one eye on the television screen, open the door, and look out, and look back, and see himself standing there, limned in the bright screen, from outside, a drama to be watched objectively, and he would watch himself, for an instant before oblivion, being killed for the benefit of a TV audience that was thousands bigger now, for the TV stations across the country were probably beeping-beeping to waken the viewer to a Scoop!

"There it is," said Faber.

Out of the helicopter came something that was not a machine, not an animal, not dead, not alive, just moving. It glowed with a green light, like phosphorescence from the sea, and it was on a long leash, and behind it came a man, dressed lightly, with earphones on his shaven head.

"I can't stay here," said Montag, getting up, his eyes still fixed to the scene. The Electric Hound shot forward to the ruins, the man running after it. A coat was brought forward. Montag recognized it as his own, dropped in the back yard during flight. The Electric Hound studied this implacably. There was a clicking and whirring of dials and meters.

"You can't escape," Faber sighed and turned away. "I've heard about that damned Hound. No one has ever escaped."

"I'll try anyway. I'm sorry, Professor."

"About me, about this house? Don't be. I'm only sorry we didn't have time to do more."

“Wait a minute.” Montag moved forward. “There’s no use your being discovered. We can wipe out the trail here. First the chair. Get me a knife.”

Faber ran and brought a knife. With it, Montag attacked the chair where he had been sitting. He cut the upholstery out, into bits, then he shoved it, bit by bit, into the wall incinerator. “Now,” he said, “After I leave, rip up the carpet, it has my footprints on it, cut it up, burn it, leave the floor bare. Rub the doorknobs with alcohol, and after I’ve left here, turn the garden sprinkler on full. That’ll wash away every trace.”

Faber shook his hand vigorously. “Thank you, thank you! You don’t know what this means. I’ll do anything to help you in the future. The plan can go on then, if they don’t burn my house.”

“Of course. Do as I say. And one more thing. A suitcase, get it, fill it with your dirty laundry, the dirtier the better, some denim pants, a shirt, some old sneakers and socks.”

“I understand.” Faber was gone, and back in a minute with a suitcase which they sealed with scotch tape. “To keep the odor in,” said Montag, breathlessly. He swabbed the suitcase with a thick pouring of cognac and whiskey. “I won’t want that Hound to pick up two odors at once. When I get a safe distance away, at the river, I’ll change clothes.”

“And identities. From Montag to Faber.”

“Christ, I hope it works! If your clothes are strong enough, which God knows they seem to be, I might at least confuse the Hound.”

“Try it, anyway.”

“Now, no more talk. I’ll run.”

They shook hands again and looked at the screen. The Electric Hound was on its way, followed by mobile camera TV units, through alleys and across empty morning streets, silently, silently, sniffing the great night wind for Mr. Leonard Montag, going on through the town to bring him to justice.

“We’ll show the Hound a thing or two,” said Montag.

“Good luck.”

“Be seeing you.”

And he was out the door, lightly, running with the suitcase. Behind him, he saw and felt and heard the garden sprinkler system jump up, filling the dark air with moisture to wash away the smell of a man named Montag. Through the back window, the last thing he saw was Faber tearing up the carpet and cramming it in the wall incinerator.

Montag ran.

Behind him, in the city, ran the electric Hound.

HE STOPPED NOW AND AGAIN, across town, to watch through the dimly lighted windows of wakened houses. He peered in at silhouettes of people before television screens, and there on the screens saw where the Electric Hound was, now at Elm Terrace, now at Lincoln Avenue, now at 34th Avenue, now up the alley toward Mr. Faber’s, now at Faber’s!

Montag held his breath.

Now passing on! Leaving Faber’s behind. For a moment the TV camera scanned Faber’s. The house was dark. In the garden, the water was sprinkling in the cool air, softly.

The Electric hound jumped ahead, down the alley.

“Sleep tight, professor.” And Montag was gone, again, racing toward the distant river.

As he ran, he put the Thimble in his ear and a voice ran with him every step of the way with the beat of his heart and the sound of his shoes on the gravel: “Look for the pedestrian, look for the pedestrian, citizens, look for the pedestrian. Any one on the sidewalks or in the street, walking or running, is suspect, look for the pedestrian!” How simple, of course, in a city where no one walked. Look, look for the Walking Man, the man who proves his legs. Thank god for good dark alleys where men can walk or run in peace. House lights flashed on all about, porch lights. Montag saw faces peering streetward as he passed behind them, faces hid by curtains, pale, night-frightened faces like animals peering from electric caves, faces with grey eyes and grey souls, and then he

hurried on, panting, leaving them to their tasks, and in another minute was at the black, moving river.

The boat floated easily on a long silence of river and went down stream away from the town, bobbing and whispering, while he stripped in darkness down to the flesh, and splashed his body, his arms, legs, and face with raw alcohol. Then he changed into Faber's old clothing and shoes. Whether the stratagem would work or not, there was no way of telling. There could be a delay while they rode the electric Hound up and down river to see where a man named Montag had stepped ashore. Whether or not the smell of Faber would be strong enough, with the aid of raw alcohol, to cover the familiar scent of Montag, was something else again. He must remember to cover his mouth with an alcohol soaked rag after stepping ashore, the particles of his breathing might remain in an invisible cloud for hours after he had passed on.

He saw the distant black butterflies in the sky, three police helicopters bumbling in the air, throwing down great legs of yellow light with which they strode over the earth ahead of the Electric Hound. They were as remote as autumn moths now, but in a few minutes ... ? He couldn't wait any longer. He was below the town now, in a lonely place of weeds and old rail tracks. He rowed the boat in toward shore, poured the rest of the alcohol on his handkerchief, tied it over his nose and mouth, and leaped out as the boat touched briefly upon the shore.

The current took the boat and the clothes away from him, turning slowly. "Farewell to Mr. Montag," he said. "Hello, Mr. Faber."

He ran into the woods as the sun was rising.

IT WAS AN OLD SECTION OF TOWN. He found his way along railroad tracks that had not been used in a dozen years, crusted with brown rust and overgrown with weeds. He listened to his feet moving in the long grass. He paused now and then and checked behind to see if he was followed, but there was nothing.

Firelight shone ahead, and as he came into its illumination he saw a half dozen figures gathered about the light, their hands out to the flames,

conversing quietly. In the distance, a train rolled along a track and was gone.

Montag waited half an hour in the shadows. And then a voice called to him. "All right, you can come out now."

He shrank back. "It's okay," said the voice. "You're welcome."

He let himself stand forth and then he walked toward the fire, peering at the men there.

"Sit down," said the man who seemed to be the leader of the little group. "Have some coffee."

He watched the dark steaming mixture poured into a collapsible cup which was handed him straight-off. He sipped it gingerly and felt the scald on his lips. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. We don't want to know who you are or where you're from. We're all named Smith. That's the way it is."

"A good way." Montag sipped again and winced.

"Take this," said the man, holding out a small bottle.

"What is it?"

"Take it. Whoever you are now, a few hours from now you'll be someone else. It does something to the perspiratory system. It changes the content of your sweat. Drink it and stay here, otherwise you'll have to move on. If there's a Hound after you you'll be bad company."

Montag hesitated, then drank. The fluid stung and was bitter on its way. He was sick for a moment, a blackness in his eyes, and a roaring in his head. Then it passed.

"That's better." The man took back the empty bottle. "Later, if you want, we can use plastic surgery on your face. Until then, you'll have to stay out of sight."

"How did you know you could trust me?"

The man gestured to the small radio beside the fire.

"We've been listening."

"Quite a chase."

They turned the radio up. "The chase is now veering south along the river. On the eastern shore the police helicopters are converging on Avenue 87 and Elm Grove Park."

"You're safe," said the stranger. "They're faking. You threw them off at the river, but they can't admit it. Must be a million people listening and watching that bunch hound after you. They'll catch you in five minutes. Watch."

"But if they're ten miles away, how can they ..."

"Look."

He turned the TV up.

"Up that street somewhere is a poor son-of-a-bitch, out for an early morning walk, maybe, having a smoke, taking it easy. Call him Billings or Brown or Baumgartner, but the search is getting near him every minute. There! See!"

In the video screen a man turned a corner. The Hound rushed forward, screeching.

"There's Montag now!" shouted the radio voice.

"The search is over!"

The innocent man stood watching the crowd come on. In his hand was a cigarette, half smoked. He looked at the Hound and his jaw dropped and he opened his mouth to say something, then a God-like voice boomed. "All right, Montag, don't move. We've got you, Montag!" By the quiet fire, with six other men, Montag sat ten miles away, the light of the video screen on his face.

"Don't run, Montag!"

The man turned and bolted. The crowd roared. The Hound leaped ahead.

"The poor son-of-a-bitch."

A dozen shots rattled out. The man crumpled.

"Montag is dead, the search is over, a criminal is given his due!" cried the announcer.

The camera panned up near the dead man. Just before it showed his face, however, the screen went black.

“We now switch you to the Sky room of the Hotel Lux in Pittsburg for a half hour of dance music by—”

The stranger cut it off. “They couldn’t show the man’s face, naturally. Better if everyone thinks it’s Montag.”

The man put out his hand. “Welcome back from the dead, Mr. Montag.” Montag took the hand a moment. The man said, “My name is Stewart, former occupant of the T.S. Eliot Chair at Cambridge. That was before it became an Electrical Engineering school. This gentleman here is Dr. Simmons from U.C.L.A., wasn’t it, Doctor?” A nod.

“I don’t belong here,” said Montag. “I’ve been an idiot.”

“Rage makes idiots of us all, you can only be angry so long and then you blow up and do the wrong things, and it can’t be helped now.”

“I shouldn’t have come here, it might endanger you.”

“We’re used to that. We all made mistakes, too, or we wouldn’t be here. When we were separate individuals, all we had was rage. I struck a fireman who had come to demand my library in 2010. I had to run. I’ve been running ever since. And Dr. Simmons here ...”

“I started quoting Donne in the midst of a genetics lecture one afternoon. You see? Fools, all of us.”

They looked into the fire for a moment.

“So you want to join us, Mr. Montag?”

“Yes.”

“What have you to offer.”

“The book of Job, no more, no less, I’m afraid.”

“The Book of Job will do very well. Where is it?”

“Here.” Montag touched his head.

“Ah-ha!” said Stewart. Simmons smiled.

“WHAT’S WRONG, ISN’T IT ALL RIGHT?” asked Montag.

“Better than all right, perfect. Mr. Montag, you have hit upon the secret of our organization. Living books, Mr. Montag, living books.

Inside the old skull where no one can see.” He turned to Simmons. “Do we have a book of Job?”

“Only one. A man named Harris in Youngstown.”

“Mr. Montag.” The man reached out and held Montag’s shoulder firmly. “Walk slowly, and carefully, and take care of yourself. If anything should happen to Harris, you are the book of Job. Do you see how important you are?”

“It scares the hell out of me. At first I didn’t remember, and then, tonight, on the river, it suddenly came back, all of it.”

“Good. Many people are fast studies but don’t know it. Some of God’s simplest creatures have the ability called eidetic memory, the ability to remember entire pages of print at one glance. It has nothing to do with IQ. No offense, Mr. Montag. It varies. Would you like, one day, to read Plato’s Republic?”

“Of course.”

Stewart gestured to a man who had been sitting to one side. “Mr. Plato, if you please.”

The man began to talk. He stared into the fire idly, his hands filling a corncob pipe, unaware of the words tumbling from his lips. He talked for two minutes without a pause.

Stewart made the smallest move of his hand and the man stopped.

“Perfect word for word memory, every word important, every word Plato’s,” said Stewart.

“And,” said the man who was Plato, “I don’t understand a damned word of it. I just say it. It’s up to you to understand.”

“None of it?”

“None. But I can’t get it out. Once it’s in, it’s like glue in a bottle, there for good. Mr. Stewart says it’s important, that’s good enough for me.”

“We’re old friends,” said Stewart. “Grew up together. Met a few years ago on that track, somewhere between here and Seattle, walking, me running away from the firemen, him away from cities.”

“Never liked cities. I always felt that cities owned men, that was all, and used men to keep themselves going, to keep machines oiled and dusted, so I got out. And then I met Stewart and he found out I had this eidetic memory as he calls it, and he gave me a book to read and then we burned the book so we wouldn’t be caught with it, and now I’m Plato, that’s what I am.”

“He is also Socrates.”

The man bowed.

“And Schopenhauer.”

The man nodded again.

“And Nietzsche.”

“All that in one bottle,” said the man. “You wouldn’t think there was room. But I can open my mind up like a concertina, and play it. There’s plenty of room if you don’t try to think about what you read, it’s when you start thinking that all of a sudden it’s crowded. I don’t think about anything except eating and sleeping and traveling. There’s plenty of room.”

“So here we are, Plato and his confreres in this man, Mr. Simmons in really Mr. Donne, Mr. Darwin and Mr. Aristophanes. These other gentlemen are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we are not without humor, despite this melancholy age, and I’m bits and pieces, snatches of Byron and Shaw and Washington and Galileo and DaVinci and Washington Irving. A kaleidoscope. Hold me up to the sun and give me a shake. And you are Mr. Job, and in half an hour or more, a war will begin, while those people in the anthill across the river have been busy with chasing Montag, the war has been getting underway. By this time tomorrow the world will belong to the little green towns and the rusted railroad tracks and the men walking the ties, that’s us. The cities will be soot and ash and baking powder.”

The TV set rang a bell. “Final negotiations are now arranged for a conference tomorrow with the leaders of the enemy government, too—”

Stewart switched it off.

“Well, what do you think, Mr. Montag?”

“It’s amazing, it’s not to be believed. I was pretty blind, trying to go at it the way I did, planting books and calling firemen.”

“You did what you thought you had to do. But our way simply is better to keep the knowledge intact and not get excited or mad, but just wait quietly until the machines are dented junk, and then step up and say, here we are, we’ve been waiting and now you’ve come to your senses, civilized man, perhaps a book will do you good.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Thousands on the road, on the rails, just bums on the outside, libraries on the inside. It wasn’t really planned, it grew. Each man had a book he wanted to remember. He did. Then we discovered each other and made the plan. Some of us live in small towns across the country. Chapter one of Walden in Nantucket, chapter two in Rhode Island, chapter three in Waukesha, chapter four and five in Tucson, each according to his ability, some people can memorize a lot, some only a few lines.”

“The books are safe then.”

“Couldn’t be safer. Why, there’s one little village of 200 people in North Carolina, no bomb’ll ever touch it, which is the complete Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. You could pick the people up and flip them like pages, almost, a page to a person. People who wouldn’t dream of being seen with a book, gladly memorized a page. You couldn’t be caught with that. And when the war’s over and we have the time and need, the books will be written again, the people will be called in one by one to recite what they know and it’ll be in print again until another Dark Age when maybe we’ll have to do the whole damned thing over again, man being the fool he is.”

“What do we do tonight?” asked Montag.

“Just wait, that’s all.”

“Not anymore,” said Simmons. “Look.”

But even as he said it, it was over and done, the war.

Montag glanced up.

THE BOMBS BEGAN TO FALL ON THE CITY. They stood in the sky as if someone had thrown up a handful of wheat grains and they were balanced there for a moment between the buildings and the stars, and then they fell down. They picked the buildings apart, separated windows from doors, beams from jousts, roofs from walls, and people from bricks, then put them all back together again in a powdery heap. The sound came after this.

“Isn’t it funny,” said Mr. Bedloe at the fire, watching. “Man comes along and throws stones and cement and water into a concrete mixer and pours it and it’s a city, then he comes along with the biggest damn concrete mixer of all time and throws the city back into it and grinds it around and you’ve got stones and dust and water again.”

“My wife’s somewhere in that city,” said Montag.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

The city took another flight of bombs. Now it was burning.

“As I was saying,” said Mr. Bedloe. “It all has to come down. There it is, coming down fast. And here we are, waiting for it to finish falling.”

“I wonder if she’s all right,” said Montag.

“Whatever she is now she’s better than she was,” said Bedloe. “Being dead is better than being dull, being dead is better than not being aware.”

“I hope she’s alive.”

“She’ll be fretting tomorrow because the television isn’t on. Not because the city’s dead, no, or the people, but because she’ll be missing Zack Zack, the greatest comedian of all time.”

The bombardment was finished and over, even while the seeds were in the windy sky, even while they drifted with dreadful slowness down upon a city where all of the people looked up at their destiny coming upon them like the lid of a dream shutting tight and becoming an instant later a red and powdery nightmare, the bombardment to all intents and purposes was finished, for once the ships had sighted their target and alerted their bombardier at three thousand miles an hour, as quick as the whisper of a knife through the sky, the war was finished;

once the trigger was pulled, once the bombs took flight, it was over. Now, a full three seconds, all of the time in history, before the bombs struck, the enemy ships themselves were gone, around the visible world, it seemed, like bullets a caveman might not believe in because they remain unseen, but nevertheless the heart is suddenly struck, the body falls into separate divisions, the blood is astounded to be free on the air, and the brain gives up all its precious memories, and still puzzled, dies.

This war was not to be believed. It was a gesture. It was the flirt of a great metal hand over the city and a voice saying, "Disintegrate. Leave not one stone upon another. Perish. Die."

Montag held the bombs in the sky for a precious moment, with his mind and his hands. "Run," he cried to Faber. To Clarisse: "Run, get out, get out!" But Faber was out. There, in the deep valleys of the country, went the dawn train on its way from one desolation to another.

Though the desolation had not yet arrived, was still in the air, it was as certain as man could make it. Before the train had gone another fifty yards on the track, its destination would be meaningless, its point of departure made from a metropolis into a yard, and in that metropolis now, in the half second left, as the bombs perhaps were three inches, three small inches shy of her hotel building, Montag could see Mildred, leaning into the TV set as if all of the hunger of looking would find the secret of her sleepless unease there, leaning anxiously, nervously into that tubular world as into a crystal ball to find happiness. The first bomb struck. Perhaps the television station went first into oblivion.

Montag saw the screen go dark in Mildred's face and her screaming, because, in the next millionth part of time remaining, Mildred would see her own face reflected there, hungry and alone, in a mirror instead of a crystal, and it would be such a wildly empty face that she would at last recognize it, and stare at the ceiling almost with welcome as it and the entire structure of the hotel blasted down upon her and carried her with a million pounds of brick, metal and people down into the cellar, there to dispose of them in its unreasonable way.

Montag found himself on his face. The concussion had knocked the air across the river, and turned the men down like dominoes in a line, blown out the fire like a last candle, and caused the trees to mourn with a great voice of wind passing away south. Montag raised his head. Now the city, instead of the bombs, was in the air, they had displaced each other.

For another of those impossible instants the city stood, rebuilt and unrecognizable, taller than it had ever hoped to be, taller than man had built it, erected at last in gusts of dust and sparkles of torn metal into a city not unlike the shakings of a kaleidoscope in a giant hand, now one pattern, now another, but all of it formed of flame and steel and stone, a door where a window ought to be, a top for a bottom, a side for a back, and then the city rolled over and fell down dead. The sound of its death came after.

“THERE,” SAID THE STRANGER.

The men lay like gasping fish on the grass.

They did not get up for a long time, but held to the earth as children hold to a familiar thing, no matter how cold or dead, no matter what has happened or will happen, their fingers were clawed into the soil, and they were all shouting to keep their ears in balance and open, Montag shouting with them, a protest against the wind that swept over them and made their noses bleed. Montag watched the blood drip into the earth with such an abstraction that the city was forgotten.

The wind died.

The city was flat as if one took a heaping tablespoon of baking powder and passed one finger over it, smoothing it to an even level.

The man said nothing. They lay awhile like people on the dawn edge of sleep, not yet ready to arise and begin the day with its obligations, its fires and foods, its thousand details of putting foot after foot, hand after hand, its deliveries and functions and minute obsessions. They lay blinking their stunned eyelids. You could hear them breathing faster, then slower, then slow.

Montag sat up but did not move farther. The other men did likewise, sun was touching the horizon with a faint red tip. The air was cool and sweet and smelled of rain. In a few minutes it would smell of dust and pulverized iron, but now it was sweet.

Silently, the leader of the small group arose, felt his arms and legs, touched his face to see if everything was in its place, then shuffled over to the blown-out fire and bent over it. Montag watched. Striking a match, the man touched it to a piece of paper and shoved this under a bit of kindling, placed together tiny bits of straw and dry kindling, and after a while, drawing the men slowly, awkwardly to it, the fire was licking up, coloring their faces pink and yellow, while the sun rose slowly to color their backs.

There was no sound except the low and secret talk of men at morning, and the talk was this:

“How many strips?”

“Two each.”

The bacon was counted out on a wax paper. The frying pan was set to the fire and the bacon laid in it. After a moment it began to flutter and dance in the pan and the sputter of it filled the morning air with its aroma. Eggs were cracked in upon the bacon and the men watched this ritual, for the leader was a participant, as were they, in a religion of early rising, a thing man had done for many centuries, and Montag felt at ease, among them, as if during the night the walls of a great jail had vaporized around them and they were on the land again and only the birds sang on or off as they pleased, no schedule, and no insistence.

“Here,” said the old man, dishing out the bacon and eggs to each from the hot pan.

And then, without looking up, breaking fresh eggs into the pan, the leader, slowly, and with a concern both for what he said, recalling it, rounding it, but careful of making the food also began to recite snatches and rhythms, even while the day brightened all about as if a pink lamp had been given more wick, and Montag listened and they all looked at the tin plates in their hands, waiting a moment for the eggs to

cool, while the leader started the routine, and others took it up, here or there, about, and when it was Montag's turn he spoke, too:

"Thy days are as grass ..."

"To be or not to be, that is the question ..."

The bacon sputtered.

"She walks in beauty like the night ..."

"Behold, the lilies of the fields ..."

The forks moved in the pink light.

"They, oil not, neither do they spin ..."

The sun was fully up.

"Oh, do you remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt ... ?"

Montag felt fine.

The end