



# The Fireman, Ray Bradbury

The Fireman

Fire, Fire, Burn Books

The four men sat silently playing blackjack under a green drop-light in the dark morning. Only a voice whispered from the ceiling:  
“One thirty-five a.m. Thursday morning, October 4th, 2052, A.D... . One forty a.m... . one fifty ...”

Mr. Montag sat stiffly among the other firemen in the fire house, heard the voice-clock mourn out the cold hour and the cold year, and shivered.

The other three glanced up.

“What’s wrong, Montag?”

A radio hummed somewhere. “War may be declared any hour. This country is ready to defend its destiny and ...”

The fire house trembled as five hundred jet-planes screamed across the black morning sky.

The firemen slumped in their coal-blue uniforms, with the look of thirty years in their blue-shaved, sharp, pink faces and their burnt-colored hair. Stacked behind them were glittering piles of auxiliary helmets. Downstairs in concrete dampness the fire monster itself slept, the silent dragon of nickel and tangerine colors, the boa-constrictor hoses, the twinkling brass.

“I’m thinking of our last job,” said Mr. Montag.

“Don’t,” said Leahy, the fire chief.

“That poor man, when we burned his library. How would it feel if firemen burned our houses and our books?”

“We haven’t any books.”

“But if we did have some.”

“You got some?”

“No.”

Montag gazed beyond them to the wall and the typed lists of a million forbidden books. The titles cringed in fire, burning down the years under his ax and his fire hose spraying not water but—kerosene!

“Was it always like this?” asked Mr. Montag. “The fire house, our duties. I mean, well, once upon a time ...”

“Once upon a time?” Leahy crowed. “What kind of language is that?”

Fool! cried Mr. Montag to himself. You’ll give yourself away! The last fire. A book of fairy tales. He had dared to read a line or so. “I mean,” he said quickly, “in the old days, before homes were completely fireproof, didn’t firemen ride to fires to put them out, instead of start them.”

“I never knew that.” Stoneman and Black drew forth their rule books and laid them where Montag, though long familiar with them, might read:

1. Answer the alarm quickly.
2. Start the fire swiftly.
3. Be sure you burn everything.
4. Report back to the fire house.
5. Stand alert for another alarm.

EVERYONE WATCHED MONTAG.

He swallowed. “What will they do to that old man we caught last night with his books?”

“Insane asylum.”

“But he wasn’t insane!”

“Any man’s insane who thinks he can hide books from the government or us.” Leahy blew a great fiery cloud of cigar smoke from his thin mouth. He idled back.

The alarm sounded.

The bell kicked itself two hundred times in a few seconds. Suddenly there were three empty chairs. The cards fell in a snow flurry. The brass pole trembled. The men were gone, their hats with them. Montag still sat. Below, the orange dragon coughed to life.

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

“Montag, you forgot your hat!”

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

It was a flaking three-story house in the old section of town. A century old if it was a day, but, like every house, it had been given a thin fireproof plastic coat fifty years ago, and this preservative shell seemed to be holding it up.

“Here we are!”

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

They crashed the front door and caught a woman, running.

“I didn’t hurt anyone,” she cried.

“Where are they?” Leahy twisted her wrist.

“You wouldn’t take an old woman’s pleasures from her, would you?”

Stoneman produced the telephone alarm card with the complaint signed in facsimile duplicate on the back. “Says here, Chief, the books are in the attic.”

“All right, men, let’s get ’em!”

Next thing they were up in musty blackness, swinging silver hatchets at doors that were, after all, unlocked, tumbling through like boys all rollick and shout.

“Hey!”

A fountain of books sprayed down on Montag as he climbed shuddering up the steep stair well. Books bombarded his shoulders, his pale face. A book lit, almost obediently, like a white pigeon, in his hands, wings fluttering. In the dim wavering light a page hung open and it was like a

snowy feather, the words delicately painted thereon. In all the rush and fervor, Montag had only an instant to read a line, but it blazed in his mind for the next minute as if stamped there with a fiery iron. He dropped the book. Immediately, another fell into his arms.

“Montag, come on up!”

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

“Montag!”

He climbed up into the attic.

“This too shall pass away.”

“What?” Leahy glared at him.

Montag froze, blinking. “Did I say something?”

“Move, you idiot!”

THE BOOKS LAY IN PILES like fishes left to dry.

“Trash! Trash!” The men danced on the books. Titles glittered their golden eyes, falling, gone.

“Kerosene!”

They pumped the cool fluid from the white snake they had twined upstairs. They coated every book; they pumped rooms full of it.

“This is better than the old man’s place last night, eh?”

That had not been as much fun. The old man had lived in an apartment house with other people. They had had to use controlled fire there.

Here, they could ravage the entire house.

They ran downstairs, Montag reeling after them in the kerosene fumes.

“Come on, woman!”

“My books,” she said, quietly. She knelt among them to touch the drenched leather, to read the gilt titles with her fingers instead of her eyes, while her eyes accused Montag.

“You can’t take my books,” she said.

"You know the law," said Leahy. "Pure nonsense, all of it. No two books alike, none agreeing. Confusion. Stories about people who never existed. Come on now."

"No," she said.

"The whole house'll burn."

"I won't go."

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

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

"She won't come."

"But she's got to!"

Leahy raised his hand. It contained the concealed igniter to start the fire. "Got to get back to the station. Besides, she'd cost us a trial, money, jail."

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

"No." She actually focused her eyes on him for a moment. "Thank you, anyway."

"I'm counting to ten," said Leahy. "One, two ..."

"Please," said Montag.

"Go on," said the woman.

"Three," said Leahy.

"Come." Montag pulled at her.

"I want to stay here," she replied, quietly.

"Four, five ..." said Leahy.

The woman twisted. Montag slipped on an oily book and fell. The woman ran up the stairs half way 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 pink face, pink and burned and shiny from too many fires, pink from night excitements, the pink face of Mr. Leahy with the igniter poised in his pink fingers.

Montag felt the book hidden against his pounding chest.

“Go get him!” said Leahy.

THE MEN DRAGGED MONTAG yelling from the house.

Leahy backed out after them, leaving a kerosene trail down the walk. When they were a hundred feet away, Montag was still shouting and kicking. He glanced back wildly.

In the front door where she had come to gaze out at them quietly, her quietness a condemnation, staring straight into Mr. Leahy’s eyes, was the woman.

Leahy twitched his finger to ignite the fuel.

He was too late. Montag gasped.

The woman in the door, reaching with contempt toward them all, struck a match against the saturated wood.

People ran out of houses all down the street.

“WHO IS IT?”

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

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

“I don’t want the light,” he said.

“Come to bed.”

He heard her roll impatiently; the springs squeaked. “Are you drunk?”

He worked out of his coat and let it slump to the floor. He held his pants out into an abyss and let them fall forever and forever into darkness.

His wife said, “What are you doing?”

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

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

He made a small sound.

“What?” she asked.

He made more soft sounds. He stumbled toward the bed and shoved the book clumsily under the cold pillow. He fell into bed and his wife

cried out, startled. He lay separate from her. She talked to him for what seemed a long while and when he didn't reply 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 finally floating into sleep, he heard her say, "You smell of kerosene."

"I always smell of kerosene," he mumbled.

Late in the night he looked over at Mildred. She was awake. There was a tiny dance of melody in the room. She had her thimble-radio tamped into her ear, listening, listening to far people in far places, her eyes peeled wide at deep ceilings of blackness. Many nights in the last ten years he had found her with her eyes open, like a dead woman. She would lie that way, blankly, hour upon hour, and then rise and go soundlessly to the bath. You could hear faucet water run, 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 barbiturates.

"Mildred," he thought.

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, like those jokes men told about the gentleman, drunk on life, who had come home late at night, unlocked the wrong door, entered a wrong room. And now here Montag lay in the strange night by this unidentified body he had never seen before.

"Millie?" he called.

"What?"

"I didn't mean to startle you. What I want to know is, 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 was it, and when?"



“Why, it was at ...”

She stopped.

“I don’t know.”

He was frightened. “Can’t you remember?”

They both tried.

“It’s been so long.”

“Only ten years. We’re only thirty!”

“Don’t get excited, I’m trying to think!” She laughed a strange laugh.

“How funny, not to remember where or when you met your husband or wife!”

He lay with his eyes tight, pressing, massaging his brow. It was suddenly more important than any other thing in a lifetime that he knew where he had met Mildred.

“It doesn’t matter.” She was up, in the bathroom now. He heard the water rushing, the swallowing sound.

“No, I guess not,” he said.

And he wondered, did she take twenty tablets now, like a year ago, when we had to pump her stomach, and me shouting to keep her awake, walking her, asking her why she did it, why she wanted to die, and she saying she didn’t know, she didn’t know, she didn’t know anything about anything!

She didn’t belong to him; he didn’t belong to her. She didn’t know herself, him, or anyone; the world didn’t need her, she didn’t need herself, and in the hospital he had realized that if she died he would not cry. For it was the dying of an unknown, a street face, a face in the newspaper, and it was suddenly so wrong that he had begun to cry, not at death but at the thought of not crying at death, a silly empty man beside an empty woman while the doctors emptied her still more. And why are we empty, lonely, and not in love? he had asked himself, a year ago.

They were never together. There was always something between, a radio, a television, a car, a plane, a game, nervous exhaustion, or,

simply, a little pheno-barbitol. They didn't know each other; they knew things, inventions. They had both applauded science while it had built a beautiful glass structure, a glittering miracle of contraptions about them, and, too late, they had found it to be a glass wall. They could not shout through the wall; they could only pantomime silently, never touching, hearing, barely seeing each other.

Looking at Mildred at the hospital, he had thought, does it matter if we live or die?

That might not have been enough if the people had not moved next door with their daughter.

Perhaps that had been the start of his awareness of his job, his marriage, his life.

ONE NIGHT—IT WAS SO LONG AGO —he had gone out for a long walk. In the moonlight, he realized that he had come out to get away from the nagging of his wife's television set. He walked, hands in pockets, blowing steam from his mouth into the cold air.

"Alone." He looked at the avenues ahead. "By God, I'm alone. Not another pedestrian in miles." He walked swiftly down street after street. "Why, I'm the only pedestrian in the entire city!" The streets were empty and long and quiet. Distantly, on crosstown arteries, a few cars moved in the dark. But no other man ventured upon the earth to test the use of his legs. In fact, it had been so many years since the sidewalks were used that they were buckling, becoming obscured with grass.

So he walked alone, aware of his loneliness, until the police car pulled up and flashed its cold white light upon him.

"What're you doing?" shouted a voice.

"I'm out for a walk."

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

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

"Okay, mister, you can walk now."

He had gone on, stomping his feet, jerking his mouth and hands, eyes blazing, gripping his elbows. "The nerve! The nerve! Is there a law against pedestrians?"

The girl turned a corner and walked toward him.

"Why, hello," she said, and put out her hand. "You're my neighbor, aren't you?"

"Am I?" he said.

She was smiling quietly. "We're the only live ones, aren't we?" She waved at the empty sidewalks. "Did the police stop you, too?"

"Walking's a crime."

"They flashed their lights on me, but saw I was a woman—" She was no more than sixteen, Montag estimated, with eyes and hair as dark as mulberries, and a paleness about her that was not illness but radiance.

"Then they drove away. I'm Clarisse McClellan. And you're Mr. Montag, the fireman."

They walked together. And she began to talk for both of them.

"Isn't it a graveyard, this town," she said. "I like to walk just to keep my franchise on the sidewalks."

He looked, and it was true. The city was like a dark tomb, every house deep in television dimness, not a sound or move anywhere.

"HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED all the cars rushing?" she asked. "On the big boulevards down that way, 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! A pink blur, yes, that's roses!" She laughed to herself. "And a white blur's a house. Quick brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slow on a highway once. They threw him in jail. Isn't that funny and sad, too?"

"You think about a lot of things for a girl," said Montag, uneasily.

"That's because I've got time to think. I never watch TV or go to games or races or funparks. So I've lots of time for crazy thoughts, I guess. Have you seen the two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country? Well, did you know that once billboards were only twenty-five feet

long? But cars started going by so quickly, they had to stretch the advertising out so it could be seen.”

“I didn’t know that.” Montag laughed abruptly.

“I bet I know something else you don’t.”

“What?”

“There’s dew on the grass in the morning.”

He couldn’t remember, and it suddenly frightened him.

“And, if you look, there’s a man in the moon.”

He had never looked. His heart beat rapidly.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they reached her house, its lights were all blazing. It was the only house, in a city of a million houses, with its lights burning brightly.

“What’s going on?” Montag had never seen that many house lights.

“Oh, just my mother and father and uncle sitting around, talking. It’s like being a pedestrian, only rarer.”

“But what do they talk about?”

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

At three o’clock in the morning, he got out of bed and stuck his head out the front window. The moon was rising and there was a man in the moon. Over the broad lawn, a million jewels of dew sparkled.

“I’ll be damned,” said Montag, and went back to bed.

HE SAW CLARISSE MANY AFTERNOONS and came to hope he would be seeing her, found himself watching for her sitting on her green lawn, studying the autumn leaves with a fine casual air, or returning from a distant woods with wild yellow flowers, or looking at the sky, even while it was raining.

“Isn’t rain nice?” she said.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Believe me, it is nice.”

He always laughed embarrassedly. Whether at her, or at himself, he wasn’t sure. “I believe you.”

“Do you really? Do you ever smell old leaves? Don’t they smell like cinnamon? Here.”

“Why, it is cinnamon, yes!”

She gazed at him with her clear dark eyes. “My gosh, you don’t really know very much, do you?” She was not unkind, just concerned for him.

“I don’t suppose any of us know much.”

“I do,” she said, quietly, “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 bully is the thing among kids this season, you know.”

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

“Then you’ve noticed?”

“Yes. But what about your friends?”

“I haven’t any. That’s supposed to prove I’m abnormal. But they’re always packed around the TV, or racing in cars, or shouting or beating one another. Do you notice how people hurt one another 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 children.”

“Maybe it was always this way.”

“My father says his grandfather remembered 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 and responsibility. Do you know, I’m disciplined. I’m spanked when I need it, and I’ve responsibility. I do all the shopping and housecleaning. By hand.”

“And you know about rain,” said Mr. Montag, with the rain beating on his hat and coat.

“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 had talked to him one bright afternoon and given him the dandelion test.

“It proves you’re in love or not.”

She brushed a dandelion under his chin. “What a shame! You’re not in love with anyone.”

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 television parlor, her natural habitat.

“It’s the dandelion you use,” protested Montag.

“No,” said Clarisse, solemnly. “You’re not in love. A dandelion won’t help.” She tossed the flower away. “Well, I’ve got to go see my psychiatrist. My teachers are sending me to him. He’s trying to make me normal.”

“I’ll throttle him if he does!”

“Right now he’s trying to figure out why I go away from the city and walk in the forests once a day. Have you ever walked in a forest? No? It’s so quiet and lovely, and nobody rushing. I like to watch the birds and the insects. They don’t rush.”

Before she left him to go inside, she looked at him suddenly and said, “Do you know, Mr. Montag, I can’t believe you’re a fireman.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re so nice. Do you mind if I ask one last question?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Why do you do what you do?”

But before he knew what she meant or could make a reply, she had run off, embarrassed at her own frankness.

“What did she mean, why do I do what I do?” he said to himself. “I’m a fireman, of course. I burn books. Is that what she meant?”

He didn't see Clarisse for a month. He watched for her each day, but made no point of her absence to his wife. He wanted to go rap on her parents' door, but decided against it; he didn't want them misunderstanding his interest in the child. But after thirty-six days had passed, he brought Clarisse's name up offhand.

"Oh, her?" said Mildred, with the radio music jarring the table plates.

"Why, didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"She was killed by an automobile a month ago."

"A month! But why didn't someone tell me!"

"Didn't I? I suppose it slipped my mind. Yes, a car hit her."

"Did they find whose car it was?"

"No. You know how those things are. What do you want for supper, frozen steak or chops?"

And so Clarisse was dead. No, disappeared! For in a large city you didn't die, you simply vanished. No one missed you, no one saw you go; your death was as insignificant as that of a butterfly carried secretly away, caught in the radiator grille of a speeding car.

And with Clarisse's death, half of the world was dead, and the other half was instantly revealed to him for what it was.

He saw what Mildred was and always would be, what he himself was but didn't want to be any more. And he saw that it was no idle thing, Mildred's suicide attempts, the lovely dark girl with the flowers being ground under a car; it was a thing of the world they lived in. It was a part of the screaming, pressing down of people into electric molds. It was the meaningless flight of civilization down a rotary track to smash its own senseless tail. Mildred's flight was trying to die and escape nothingness, whereas Clarisse 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. Killed by a vanilla-

faced idiot racing nowhere for nothing and irritated that he had been detained 120 seconds while the police investigated and released him on his way to some distant base that he must tag frantically before running for home.

Montag felt the slow gathering of awareness. Mildred, Clarisse. The firemen. The murdering children. Last night, the old man's books burned and him in an asylum. Tonight, that woman burned before his eyes. It was such a nightmare that only another nightmare, less horrible, could be used to escape from it, and Clarisse had died weeks ago and he had not seen her die, which made it somehow crueler and yet more bearable.

"Clarisse. Clarisse."

Montag lay all night long, thinking, smelling the smoke on his hands, in the dark.

HE HAD CHILLS AND FEVER IN THE MORNING.

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

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

"But you were all right last night."

"No, I wasn't all right." He heard the radio in the parlor. Mildred stood over his bed, curiously. He felt her there; he saw her without opening his eyes, her hair burned by chemicals to a brittle straw, her eyes with a kind of mental cataract unseen but suspect far behind the pupils, the reddened pouting lips, the body as thin as a praying mantis from dieting, and her flesh like raw milk. He could remember her no other way.

"Will you bring me an analgesic and water?"

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

"Will you turn the radio off?" he asked

"That's my favorite program."

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

"I'll turn it down."

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

"Is that better?"



"Thanks."

"That's my favorite program," she repeated, as if she had not said it a thousand times before.

"What about the analgesic?"

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

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

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

"Where's the analgesic?" He glanced at the water glass.

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

"A fire, that's 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 big shows."

"Yes, the big shows, big, big, big." He pressed at the pain in his eyes and suddenly the odor of kerosene made him vomit.

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

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

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

"Couldn't you get the shows on your own TV?"

"Sure, but it's nice visiting."

"Did Helen get over that finger infection?"

"I didn't notice."

SHE WENT OUT INTO THE LIVING ROOM. He heard her by the radio, singing.

"Mildred," he called.

She returned, singing, snapping her fingers softly.

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

"What about it?"

"We burned a thousand books and a woman."

"Forbidden books."

The radio was exploding in the parlor.

"Yes: copies of Plato and Socrates and Marcus Aurelius."

"Foreigners?"

"Something like that."

"Then they were radicals?"

"All foreigners can't be radicals."

"If they wrote books, they were." 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, suddenly, enraged and flushed, shaking. The radio roared in the hot air. "I can't call him. I can't tell him I'm sick."

"Why?"

"Because ..."

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

"You're not sick," she said.

Montag fell back in bed. He reached under his pillow and groped for the hidden book. It was still there.

"Mildred, how would it be if—well, maybe I quit my job a while?"

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

"You should have seen her, Millie!"

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

"You weren't there. You didn't see," he said. "There must be something in books, 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 and burn 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 burned house? It smolders for days. Well, this fire'll last me half a century. My God, I've been trying put it out, in my mind, all night, and I'm crazy with trying!"

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

"THOUGHT!" HE SAID. "Was I given a choice? I was raised to think the best thing in the world is not to read. The best thing is television and radio and ball games and a home I can't afford and, Good Lord, now, only now I realize what I've done. My grandfather and father were firemen. Walking in my sleep, I followed them."

The radio was playing a dance tune.

"I've been killing the brain of the world for ten years, pouring kerosene on it. Millie, a book is a brain. It isn't only that woman we destroyed, or others like her, in these years, but it's the thoughts I burned and never knew it."

He got out of bed.

"It took some 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 two minutes and heave it in the incinerator!"

"Let me alone," said Mildred.

"Let you alone!" He almost cried out with laughter. "Letting you alone is easy, but how can I leave myself alone? That's what's wrong. We need not to be let alone. We need to be upset and stirred and bothered, once in a while, anyway. Nobody bothers any more. Nobody thinks. Let a baby alone, why don't you? What would you have in twenty years? A savage, unable to think or talk—like us!"

Mildred glanced out the window. "Now you've done it. Look who's here."

"I don't give a damn." He was feeling better but didn't know why.

"It's Mr. Leahy."

The elation drained away. Mr. Montag slumped. "Go open the door," he said, at last. "Tell him I'm sick."

"Tell him yourself."

He made sure the book was hidden behind the pillow, climbed back into bed, and had made himself tremblingly comfortable, when the door opened and Mr. Leahy strolled in, hands in pockets.

"Shut the radio off," said Leahy, abstractedly.

This time, Mildred obeyed.

Mr. Leahy sat down in a comfortable chair with a look of strange peace in his pink face. He did not look at 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."

"WELL, TAKE A DAY OFF," said Leahy, looking at his hands. He carried an eternal match with him at times in a little case which said, Guaranteed: One Million Cigarettes Can Be Lit with this Match, and kept striking this abstractedly against its case as he talked. "Take a day off. Take two. But never take three." He struck the match and looked at the flame and blew it out. "When will you be well?"

"Tomorrow, the next day, first of the week. I ..."

"We've been wondering about you." Leahy put a cigar in his mouth.

"Every fireman goes through this. They only need understanding, need to know how the wheels run, what the history of our profession is. They don't give it to rookies any more. Only fire chiefs remember it now. I'll let you in on it." He lit the cigar leisurely.

Mildred fidgeted.

"You ask yourself about the burning of books, why, how, when." Leahy exuded a great gray cloud of smoke.

"Maybe," said Montag.

“It started around about the Civil War, I’d say. Photography discovered. Fast printing presses coming up. Films at the early part of the Twentieth Century. Radio. Television. Things began to have mass, Montag, mass.”  
“I see.”

“And because they had mass, they became simpler. Books now. Once they appealed to various small groups of people, here and there. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of mass and elbows. Films and radios and magazines and books had to level down to a sort of paste-pudding norm. Do you follow me?”  
“I think so.”

Leahy looked through a veil of smoke, not at Montag, but at the thing he was describing. “Picture it. The nineteenth-century man with his horses, dogs, and slow living. You might call him a slow motion man. Then in the Twentieth Century you speed up the camera.”

“A good analogy.”

“Splendid. Books get shorter. Condensations appear. Digests. Tabloids. Radio programs simplify. Everything sublimates itself to the gag, the snap ending.”

“Snap ending.” Mildred nodded approvingly. “You should have heard last night—”

“Great classics are cut to fit fifteen minute shows, then two minute book columns, then two line digest resumes. Magazines become picture books! Out of the nursery to the college, back to the nursery, in a few short centuries!”

MILDRED AROSE. 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, picking up.

“Faster and faster the film, Mr. Montag! Quick, Click, Pic, Look, Eye, Now! Flick, Flash, Here, There, Swift, Up, Down, Why, How, Who, Eh? Mr. Montag, digest-digests, political affairs in one column, a sentence, a headline, and then, in mid-air, vanish! The mind of man, whirling so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, publicists, ad men, broadcasters 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. In a moment, with sublime innocence, she would be pulling the hidden book out from behind the pillow and displaying it as if it were a reptile!

Leahy blew a cumulus of cigar smoke at the ceiling. "School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling neglected, finally ignored. Life is immediate. The job counts. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting bolts?"

"Let me fix your pillow," said Mildred, being the video housewife.

"No," whispered Montag.

"The zipper replaces the button. Does a man have time to think while dressing in the morning, a philosophical time?"

"No," said Montag, automatically.

Mildred tugged at the pillow.

"Get away," said Montag.

"Life becomes one big Prat Fall, Mr. Montag. No more subtleties. Everything is bang and boff and wow!"

"Wow," reflected Mildred, yanking the pillow edge.

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

Leahy stared.

Mildred's hand was frozen behind the pillow. Her hand was on the book, her face stunned, her mouth opening to ask a question ...

"Theaters stand empty, Mr. Montag, replaced by television and baseball and sports where nobody has to think at all, not at all, at all." Now Leahy was almost invisible, a voice somewhere back of a choking screen of cigar smoke.

"What's this?" asked Mildred, with delight, almost. Montag crushed and heaved back against her hands. "What've you hid here?"

"Sit down!" Montag screamed. She jumped back, her hands empty.

"We're talking!"

LEAHY CONTINUED, MILDLY. "Cartoons everywhere. Books become cartoons. The mind drinks less and less. Impatience. Time to kill. No

work, all leisure. Highways full of crowds going somewhere, anywhere, nowhere. The gasoline refugee, towns becoming motels, people in nomadic surges from city to city, impatient, following the moon tides, living tonight in the room where you slept last night and I the night before.”

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

“Go on,” said Montag.

“Intelligent writers gave up in disgust. Magazines were vanilla tapioca. The book buyer, bored by dishwater, his brain spinning, quit buying. Everyone but the comic-publisher died a slow publishing death. There you have it. Don’t blame the Government. Technology, mass exploitation, and censorship from frightened officials did the trick. Today, thanks to them, you can read comic books, confessions, or trade journals, nothing else. All the rest is dangerous.”

“Yes, but why the firemen?” asked Montag.

“Ah,” said Leahy, leaning forward in the clouds of smoke to finish.

“With schools turning out doers instead of thinkers, with non-readers, naturally in ignorance, they hated and feared books. You always fear an unfamiliar thing. ‘Intellectual’ became a swear word. Books were snobbish things.

“The little man wants you and me to be like him. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot out of the weapon. Un-breach men’s minds. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? And so, when houses became all fireproof and there was no longer need of firemen for protection, they were given the new job, as official censors, judges, jurors, punishers. That’s you, Mr. Montag, and me.”

Leahy stood up. “I’ve got to get going.”

Montag lay back in bed. “Thanks for explaining it to me.”

“You must understand our civilization is so vast that we can’t have our minorities upset and stirred. People must be contented. Books bother them. Colored people don’t like Little Black Sambo. We burn it. White

people don't like to read Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it, too. Anything for serenity."

Leahy shook Montag's limp hand.

"Oh, one last thing. Once in his career, every fireman gets curious. What do the books say, he wonders. A good question. Well, they say nothing, Mr. Montag. Nothing you can touch or believe in. They're about non-existent people, figments. Not to be trusted. But anyway, say, a fireman 'takes' a book, at a fire, almost by 'accident.' A natural error."

"Natural."

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

"I see," said Montag. His throat was dry.

"You'll be at work tonight at six o'clock?"

"No."

"What!"

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

"See that you do."

"I'll never come in again!" yelled Montag, but only in his mind.

"Get well."

Leahy, trailing smoke, went out.

MONTAG WATCHED THROUGH THE FRONT window as Leahy drove away in his gleaming beetle which was the color of the last fire they had set.

Mildred had turned on the afternoon television show and was staring into the shadow screen.

Montag cleared his throat, but she didn't look up.

"It's only a step," he said, "from not working today, to not working tomorrow, to not working ever again."

"You're going to work tonight, though?"

"I'm doing more than that," he said. "I'm going to start to kill people and rave, and buy books!"



"A one man revolution," said Mildred, lightly, turning to look at him.

"They'd put you in jail, wouldn't they?"

"That's not a bad idea. The best people are there." 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 as well as mine, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I have something I want you to see, something I put away and never looked at again during the past year, not even knowing why I put them away and hid them and kept them and never told you."

He dragged a chair into the hall, climbed up on it, and opened an air-vent. Reaching up, he began throwing books, big ones, little ones, red, yellow, green books, twenty, thirty, fifty books, one by one, swiftly, into the parlor at her feet. "There!"

"Leonard Montag! You didn't!"

"So you're not in this with me? You're in it up to your neck!"

She backed away as if she were surrounded by a pack of terrible rats. Her face was paled out and her eyes were fastened wide and she was breathing as if someone had struck her in the stomach. "They'll burn our house. They'll kill us."

"Let them try."

She hesitated, then, moaning, she seized a book and ran toward the fireplace.

He caught her. "No, Millie! No! Never touch my books. Never. Or, by God, if you do, touch just one of them meaning to burn it, believe me, Millie, I'll kill you."

"Leonard Montag! You wouldn't!"

HE SHOOK HER. "Listen," he pleaded down into her face. He held her shoulders firmly, while her face bobbed helplessly, and tears sprang from her eyes.

“You must help me,” he said, slowly, trying to find his way into her thinking. “You’re in this now, whether you like it or not. I’ve never asked for anything in my life of you, but I ask it now, I plead it.

We just start somewhere. We’re going to read books. It’s a thing we haven’t done and must do. We’ve got to know what these books are so we can tell others, and so that, eventually, they can tell everyone. Sit down now, Millie, there, right there. I’ll help you, we’ll help each other. Between us, we’ll do something to destroy men like Leahy and Stoneman and Black and myself, and this world we live in, and put it all back together a different way. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.” Her body sagged.

The doorbell rang.

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

“Leahy!”

“It can’t be him!”

“He’s come back!” sobbed Mildred.

The bell rang again.

“Let him stand out there. We won’t answer.” Montag reached blindly for a book on the floor, any book, any beginning, any start, any beauty at all would do. He put the book into Mildred’s shaking hands.

The bell rang a third time, insistently.

“Read.” He quivered a hand to a page. “Out loud.”

Mildred’s eyes were on the door and the bell rang angrily, loudly, again and again. “He’ll come in,” she said, “Oh, God, and set fire to everything, and us.”

But at last she found the line, with Montag standing over her, swaying, any line in the book, and after trying it four times, she began to fumble out the words of a poem printed there on the white, unburned paper:

“And evening vanish and no more

The low pale light across that land—”

The bell rang.

“Nor now the long light on the sea:  
And here face downward in the sun ...”

Another ring.

Montag whispered. “He’ll go away in a minute.  
Mildred’s lips trembled:

“To feel how swift, how secretly  
The shadow of the night comes on ...”

Near the ceiling, smoke from Leahy’s cigar still lingered.

The Sieve and the Sand

THEY READ THE LONG AFTERNOON THROUGH, WHILE THE fire flickered and blew on the hearth and the October rain fell from the sky upon the strangely quiet house. Now and again, Mr. Montag would silently pace the room, or 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?”

Mildred’s voice, as colorless as a beer bottle which contains a rare and 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 rain rained 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 understand 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 took the book from her. "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."

"But you remember some of it."

"Nothing."

"You'll learn. It's difficult at first."

"I don't like books," she said. "I don't understand books. 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 the house. They'll burn our books and kill us. Now, I'm sick."

"I'm sorry," 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 aloud again."

"Thanks."

"But you must listen. I'll explain."

"I'll never learn. I just know I won't."

"You must if you want to be free."

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

"You can't be free if you're not aware."

"Why do you want to ruin us with all this?" she asked.

"Listen," he said.

SHE LISTENED.

Jet-bombers were crossing the sky over their house.

Those quick gasps in the heavens, as if a running giant had drawn his breath. Those sharp, almost quiet whistles, here and gone in so much less than an instant that one almost believed one had heard nothing. And seeing nothing in the sky, if you did look, was worse than seeing something. There was a feeling as if a great invisible fan was whirring blade after hostile blade across the stars, with giant murmurs and no motion, perhaps only a faint trembling of starlight. All night, every night of their lives, they had heard those jet sounds and seen nothing, until, like the tick of a clock or a timebomb, it had come to be unnoticed, for it was the sound of today and the sound of today dying, the Cheyne-Stokes respiration of civilization.

“I want to know why and how we are where we are,” said Montag.  
“How did those bombers get in the sky every instant? Why have there been three semi-atomic wars since 1960? Where did we take the wrong turn? What can we do about it? Only the books know this. Maybe the books can’t solve my problem, but they can bring me out in the light. And they might stop us from going on with the same insane mistakes—”

“You can’t stop wars. There’ve always been wars.”

“No, I can’t. War’s so much a part of us now that in the last three days, though we’re on the very rim of war, people hardly mention it. Ignoring it, at least, isn’t the answer. But now, about us. We must have a schedule of reading. An hour in the morning. An hour or so in the afternoon. Two hours in the evening—”

“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 if you want me to for a while every day,” she cried. “But I’ve got to have my radio programs, too, and every night on the TV—you can’t take that away from me!”

“But don’t you see? That’s the very thing I’d like to counteract—”

The telephone rang. They both started. Mildred snatched it up and was almost immediately laughing. "Hello, Ann. Yes, oh, yes! Tonight, you come here. Yes, the White Clown's on tonight and the Terror will be fun."

Mr. Montag shuddered, sick. He left the room. He walked through the house, thinking.

Leahy, the firehouse, these dangerous 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. "I'd have to shoot most of the people in the world. How does one start a revolution? I'm alone. My wife, as the saying goes, does not understand me. What can a single lonely man do?"

MILDRED WAS CHATTERING. The radio was thundering, turned on again.

And then Mr. Montag remembered; about a month ago, walking through the park alone, he had come upon a man in a black suit, unaware. The man had been reading something. Montag hadn't seen a book; he had only seen the man move hastily, face flushed. The man had jumped up as if to run, and Montag had said, simply, "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 fine arts had been closed. His name was William Faber, and shyly, fearfully, he admitted he had been reading a little book of American poems, forbidden poems which he now produced from his coat pocket.

"Just to know I'm alive," said Mr. Faber. "Just to know where I am and what things are. To sense things. Most of my friends sense nothing. 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 Montag, none of which Montag understood, but the sounds were good, and slowly the meaning crept in. When it was all over, Montag said, "I'm a fireman."

Faber had looked as if he might die on the spot.

"Don't be afraid. I won't turn you in," said Montag, hastily. "I stopped being mean about it years ago. You know, the way you talk reminds me of a girl I knew once, name of Clarisse. She was killed a few months ago by a car. But she had me thinking, too. We met each other because we took long walks. No one walks anymore. I haven't seen a pedestrian in ten years on our street. Are you ever stopped by police simply because you're a pedestrian?"

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

He dialed the call.

"Hello, Professor Faber?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Montag. You remember? The park? A month ago?"

"Yes, Mr. Montag. Can I help you?"

"Mr. Faber." He hesitated. "How many copies of the Bible are 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 discuss such things, Montag."

"This 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?"

"None!" And Faber hung up

None.

Montag fell back in his chair. None! None in all the world, none left, none anywhere, all, all of them destroyed, torn apart, burned. The Bible 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 old and new testaments, Millie! One last copy and we have it here!”

“Fine,” she said vaguely.

“Do you realize what it means, the importance of this copy here in our house? If anything should happen to this book, it would be lost forever.”

“And you have to hand it back to Mr. Leahy tonight to be burned, don’t you?” said Mildred. She was not being cruel. She was merely relieved that the one book, at least, 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 a head of lettuce, see?” Ripping one page after another from the binding. Lighting the first page with a match. And when it had curled down into black wings, lighting the second page from the first and the third from the second, and so on, chain-smoking the entire volume chapter by printed chapter. When it was finished, with Montag seated there sweating, the floor would resemble a swarm of black moths that had fluttered and died in one 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 if we could photograph it.”

“No one would do it for you.”

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

“You’ll be here for the TV party, won’t you?” Mildred called after him.

“It wouldn’t be fun without you.”



“You’d never miss me.” But she was looking at the late afternoon TV show and didn’t hear. He went out and slammed the door, the book in his hand.

Once as a child, he had sat upon the yellow dunes by the sea in the middle of the blue and hot summer day, trying to fill a sieve with sand. The faster he poured, 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 middle of July, he had cried. His hands were tired, the sand was boiling, the sieve was empty.

And now, as the jet-underground car roared him through the lower cellars of town, rocking him, jolting him, he remembered that frustrating sieve and he held this precious copy of the old and new testaments fiercely in his hands, 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 each word, no phrase must escape me, each line can be memorized. I must remember, I must.

“But I do not remember.” He shut the book and pressed it with his fists and tried to force his mind.

“Try Denham’s Dentifrice tonight!” screamed the radio in the bright, shuddering wall of the jet-train. Trumpets blared.

“Shut up,” thought Mr. Montag in panic. “Behold the lilies of the field—”

“Denham’s Dentifrice!”

“They toil not—”

“Denham’s Dentifrice!”

“Behold the lilies of the field, shut up, let me remember!”

“Denham’s Dentifrice!”

He tore the book open furiously and flicked the pages about as if blind, tearing at the lines with raw eyes, staring until his eyelashes were wet and quivering.

“Denham’s, Denham’s, Denham’s! D-E-N—”

“They toil not, neither do they ...”

A whisper, a faint sly whisper of yellow sand through empty, empty sieve.

“Denham’s does it!”

“Behold the lilies—”

“No dandier dental detergent!”

“Shut up!” It was a shriek so loud, so vicious that the loudspeaker seemed stunned. Mr. Montag found himself on his feet, the shocked inhabitants of the loud car looking at him, recoiling from a man with an insane, gorged face, a gibbering wet mouth, a flapping book in his fist. These rabbit people who hadn’t asked for music and commercials on their public trains 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 loudspeaker, at the enemy of peace, at the killer of philosophy and privacy!

“Mad man!”

“Call the conductor!”

“Denham’s, Denham’s Double Dentifrice!”

“Fourteenth Street!”

Only that saved him. The car stopped. Montag, thrown into the aisle by the grinding halt, rolled over, book in hand, leaped past the pale, frightened faces, screamed in his mind soundlessly, and was out the opening door of the train and running on the white tiles up and up through tunnels, alone, that voice still crying like a seagull on a lonely shore after him, “Denham’s, Denham’s ...”

PROFESSOR FABER OPENED THE DOOR, saw the book, seized it. “My God, I haven’t held a copy in years!”

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

“What a chance to take!”

Montag stood catching his breath. “I was curious.”

"Of course. It's beautiful. Here, come in, shut the door, sit down." Faber walked with the book in his fingers, feeling it, flipping the pages slowly, hungrily, a thin man, bald, with slender hands, as light as chaff. "There were a lot of lovely books once. Before we let them go." 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 feeble protestations 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've a plan," said Montag. "I'm in a position to do things. I'm a fireman; I can find and hide books. Last night I lay awake, thinking. We might publish many books privately when we have copies to print from."

"How many have been killed for that?"

"We'll get a press."

"We? Not we. You, Mr. Montag."

"You must help me. You're the only one I know. You must."

"Must? What do you mean, must?"

"We could find someone to build a press for us."

"Impossible. The books are dead."

"We can bring them back. I have a little money."

"No, no." Faber waved his hands, his old hands, blotched with liver freckles.

"But let me tell you my plan."

"I don't want to hear. If you insist on telling me, I must ask you to leave."

"We'll have extra copies of each book printed and hide them in firemen's houses!"

"What?" The professor raised his brows and gazed at Montag as if a bright light had been switched on.

"Yes, and put in an alarm."

"Call the fire engines?"

“Yes, and see the engines roar up. See the doors battered down on firemen’s houses for a change. And see the planted books found and each fireman, at last, accused and thrown in jail!”

The professor put his hand to his face. “Why, that’s absolutely sinister.”

“Do you like it?”

“The dragon eats his tail.”

“You’ll join me?”

“I didn’t say that. No, no.”

“BUT YOU SEE THE CONFUSION and suspicion we could spread?”

“Yes, plenty of trouble there.”

“I’ve a list of firemen’s homes all across the states. With an underground, we could reap fire and chaos for every blind bastard in the industry.”

“You can’t trust anyone, though.”

“What about professors like yourself, former actors, directors, writers, historians, linguists?”

“Dead or ancient, all of them.”

“Good. They’ll have fallen from public notice. You know hundreds of them. I know you must.”

“Nevertheless, I can’t help you, Montag. I’ll admit your idea appeals to my sense of humor, to my delight in striking back. A temporary delight, however. I’m a frightened man; I frighten easily.”

“Think of the actors alone, then, who haven’t acted Shakespeare or Pirandello. We could use their anger, and the rage of historians who haven’t written for forty years. We could start small classes in reading ...”

“Impractical.”

“We could try.”

“The whole civilization must fall. We can’t change just the front. The framework needs melting and remolding. Don’t you realize, young man, that the Great Burning forty years back was almost unnecessary? By that time the public had stopped reading. Libraries were Saharas of emptiness. Except the Science Department.”

“But—”

“Can you shout louder than radio, dance faster than TV? People don’t want to think. They’re having fun.”

“Committing suicide.”

“Let them commit it.”

“Murdering.”

“Let them murder. The fewer fools there will be.”

“A war is starting, perhaps tonight, and no one will even talk about it.”

The house shook. A bomber flight was moving south. It had slowed to five hundred miles an hour and was trembling the two men standing there across from each other.

“Let the war take away the TVs and radio, and bomb the true confessions.”

“I can’t wait,” said Montag.

“Patience. The civilization is flinging itself to pieces. Stand back from the centrifuge.”

“There has to be another structure ready when this one falls,” insisted Montag. “That’s us.”

“A bunch of men quoting Shakespeare and saying I remember Sophocles? It would be funny if it were not tragic.”

“We’ve got to be there. We’ve got to remind those who are left that there are things more urgent than machines. We must remember that the right kind of work is happiness, instead of the wrong kind of leisure. We must give people things to do. We must make them feel wanted again.”

“They will only war again. No, Montag, go on home and go to bed. It was nice seeing you. But it’s a lost cause.”

MONTAG PACED ABOUT the room for a few moments, chafing his hands, then he returned and picked up the book and held it toward the other man.

“Do you see this book? Would you like to own it?”

“My God, yes! I’d give my right arm for it.”

"Watch." Montag began ripping the pages out, one by one, dropping them to the floor, tearing them in half, spitting on them and rolling them into wads.

"Stop it!" cried Faber. "You idiot, stop it!" He sprang forward. Montag warded him off and went on tearing at the pages.

"Do you see?" he said, a fistful of pages in his tightening fist, flourishing them under the chin of the old man. "Do you see what it means to have your heart torn out? Do you see what they do?"

"Don't tear any more, please," said the old man.

"Who can stop me? You? I'm a fireman. I can do anything I want to do. Why, I could burn your house now, do you know that? I could burn everything. I have the power."

"You wouldn't!"

"No. I wouldn't."

"Please. The book; don't rip it any more. I can't stand that." Faber sank into a chair, his face white, his mouth trembling. "I see; I understand. My God, I'm old enough so it shouldn't matter what happens to me. I'll help you. I can't take any more of this. If I'm killed it won't make any difference. I'm a terrible fool of an old man and it's too late, but I'll help you."

"To print the books?"

"Yes."

"To start classes?"

"Yes, yes, anything, but don't ruin that book, don't. I never thought a book could mean so much to me." Faber sighed. "Let us say that you have my limited cooperation. Let us say that part of your plan, at least, intrigues me, the idea of striking back with books planted in firemen's homes. I'll help. How much money could you get me today?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Bring it here when you can. I know a man who once printed our college paper. That was the year I came to class one morning and found only two students there to sign up for Ancient Greek Drama. You see, that's how it went.

Like an ice-block melting in the sun. And when the people had censored themselves into a living idiocy with their purchasing power, the Government, which of course represents the people's will, being composed of representative people, froze the situation. Newspapers died. No one cared if the government said they couldn't come back. No one wanted them back. Do they now? I doubt it, but I'll contact a printer, Montag. We'll get the books started, and wait for the war. That's one fine thing; war destroys machines so beautifully."

MONTAG WENT TO THE DOOR. "I'm afraid I'll have to take the Bible along."

"No!"

"Leahy guessed I have a book in the house. He didn't come right out and accuse me, or name the book ..."

"Can't you substitute another book for this?"

"I can't chance it. It might be a trap. If he expects me to bring a Bible and I've brought something else, I'd be in jail very quickly. No, I'm afraid this Bible will be burned tonight."

"That hard to accept." Faber took it for a moment and turned the pages, slowly, reading.

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

"Oh, God, if we only had a little time."

"I keep thinking that. Sorry." He took the book. "Good night."

The door shut. Montag was in the darkening 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 hovering between the clouds, like the enemy discs, and the feeling that the sky might fall upon the city and turn the homes to chalk dust, and the moon turn to red fire; that was how the night felt.

Montag walked from the subway stop with his money in his pocket—he had been to the bank which stayed open until all hours with mechanical tellers doling out the money—and as he walked he was listening abstractedly to the Seashell radio which you could cup to your ear (Buy

a Seashell and hear the Ocean of Time!) and a voice was talking to him and only him as he turned his feet toward home. "Things took another turn for the worse today. War threatens at any hour."

Always the same monologue. Nothing about causes or effects, no facts, no figures, nothing but sudden turns for the worse.

Seven flights of jet-rockets went over the sky in a breath. Montag felt the money in his pocket, the Bible in his hand. 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 uncapped the Seashell radio from his ear and read another page of the Book of Job 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 drank the martinis Mildred handed them, rioting 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 topic of which was how nice everyone looked.

"Doesn't everyone look nice?"

"Real nice."

"You look fine, Alma."

"You look fine, too, Mildred."

"Everybody looks nice and fine," said Montag.

He had put the book aside. None of it would stay in his mind. The harder he tried to remember Job, for instance, the quicker it vanished. He wanted to be out paying this money to Professor Faber, getting things going, and yet he delayed himself. It would be dangerous to be seen at Faber's twice within a few hours, just in case Leahy was taking the precaution of having Montag watched.

Like it or not, he must spend the rest of the evening at home, and be ready to report to work at eleven so that Leahy wouldn't be suspicious.



Most of all, Montag wanted to walk, but he rarely did this anymore. Somehow he was always afraid that he might meet Clarisse, or not meet her again, on his strolls, so that kept him here standing among these blonde tenpins, bowling back at them with socially required leers and wisecracks.

Somehow the television set was turned on before they had even finished saying how nice everyone looked, and there on the screen was a man selling orange soda pop and a woman drinking it with a smile; how could she drink and smile simultaneously? A real stunt! Following this, a demonstration of how to bake a certain new cake, followed by a rather dreary domestic comedy, a news analysis that did not analyze anything and did not mention the war, even though the house was shaking constantly with the flight of new jets from four directions, and an intolerable quiz show naming the state capitols.

Montag sat tapping his fingers on his knee and exhaling.

Abruptly, he walked to the televisor and snapped it off.

“I thought we might enjoy a little silence.”

Everyone blinked.

“Perhaps we might try a little conversation ...”

“Conversation?”

THE HOUSE SHOOK with successive waves of jet bombers which splashed the drinks in the ladies' hands.

“There they go,” said Montag, watching the ceiling. “When do you suppose the war will start?”

“What war? There won't be a war.”

“I notice your husbands aren't here tonight.”

Mrs. Masterson glanced nervously at the empty TV screen. “Oh, Dick'll be back in a week or so. The Army called him. But they have these things every month or so.” She beamed.

“Don't you worry about the war?”

“Well, heavens, if there is one, it's got to be over with. We can't just sit and worry, can we?”

“No, but we can think about it.”

"I'll let Dick think of it." A nervous giggle.

"And die maybe."

"It's always someone else's husband dies, isn't that the joke?" The women all tittered.

Yes, thought Montag, and if Dick does die, what does it matter. We've learned the magic of the replaceable part from machines. You can't tell one man from another these days. And women, like so many plastic dolls—

Everyone was silent, like children with a schoolmaster.

"Did you see the Clarence Dove film last night?" said Mildred, suddenly.

"He's hilarious."

"But what if Dick should die, or your husband, Mrs. Phelps?" Montag insisted.

"He's dead. He died a week ago. Didn't you know? He jumped from the tenth floor of the State Hotel."

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

"But to get back to Clarence Dove ..." said Mildred.

"Wait a minute," said Montag, angrily. "Mrs. Phelps, why did you marry your husband? What did you have in common?" said Montag.

The woman waved her hands helplessly. "Why, he had such a nice sense of humor, and we liked the same TV shows and—"

"Did you have any children?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Come to think of it, no one here has children," said Montag. "Except Mrs. Bowles."

"Four, by Caesarian section. It's easy that way."

"The Caesarians weren't necessary?"

"I always said I'd be damned if I'd go through all that agony just for a baby. Four Caesarians. Nothing to it, really."

Yes, everything easy. Montag clenched his teeth. To mistake the easy way for the right way, how delicious a temptation. But it wasn't living. A woman who wouldn't bear, or a shiftless man didn't belong; they were passing through. 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 our civil rights and other previous possessions haven’t been taken away in the past century, but have, if anything, been given away by us?”

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

“On that pap-dispenser?” cried Montag, jerking his hand at the TV. Suddenly he shoved his hand in his pocket and drew forth a piece of printed paper. He was shaking with rage and irritation and he was half blind, staring down at the twitching sheet before his eyes.

“What’s that?” Mrs. Master squinted.

“A poem I tore from a book.”

“I don’t like poetry.”

“Have you ever heard any?”

“I detest it.”

Mildred jumped up, but Montag said, coldly, “Sit down.” The women all lit cigarettes nervously, twisting their red mouths.

“This is illegal, isn’t it?” squealed Mrs. Phelps. “I’m afraid. I’m going home.”

“Sit down and shut up,” said Montag.

The room was quiet.

“This is a poem by a man named Matthew Arnold,” said Montag. “Its title is ‘Dover Beach.’”

The women were all glancing with expectation at the television set, as if it might save them from this moment.

Montag cleared his throat. He waited. He wanted very much to speak the poem right, and he was afraid that he might stumble. He read. His voice rose and fell in the silent room and he found his way through to the final verses of the poem:

“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.”

The four women twisted in their chairs.  
Montag finished it out:

“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 by night.”

Montag let the white piece of paper fall slowly to the floor. The women watched it flutter and settle.

Mildred said, “Can I turn the TV on now?”

“No, God damn it, no!”

Mildred sat down.

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

“What was it about?” said Mrs. Phelps, her eyes darting fearfully in flashes of white and dark.

“Don’t you see?” shouted Montag.

“Nothing to get upset about,” said Mrs. Masterson, casually.

“But it is, it is.”

“Just silly words,” said Mrs. Masterson. “But, Mr. Montag, I don’t mind telling you—it’s only because you’re a fireman that we haven’t called in an alarm on you for reading this to us. It’s illegal. But it’s also very silly. It was nonsense.” She got to her feet and mashed out her cigarette.

“Ladies, don’t you think it’s time for us to leave?”

"I don't want to come back here, ever," said Mrs. Phelps, hurrying for the door.

"Please stay!" cried Mildred.

The door slammed.

"Go home and think of your first husband, Mrs. Masterson, in the insane asylum, and of Mr. Phelps jumping off a building!" yelled Montag through the shut door.

The house was completely abandoned. He stood alone.

In the bathroom, water was running. He heard Mildred shaking the sleeping tablets out into her palm.

"You fool," he said to himself. "You idiot. Now you've done it. Now you've ruined it all, you and your poem, you and your righteous indignation."

He went into the kitchen and found the books where Mildred had stacked them behind the refrigerator. He carried a selection of them into the back yard, hid them in the weeds near the fence. "Just in case," he thought, "Mildred gets a passion for burning things during the night. The best books out here; the others in the house don't matter."

He went back through the house. "Mildred?" he called at the bedroom door but there was no sound.

He shut the front door quietly and left for work.

"THANK YOU, MONTAG." Mr. Leahy accepted the copy of the Bible and, without even looking at it, dropped it into the wall incinerator. "Let's forget all about it. Glad to see you back, Montag."

They walked upstairs.

They sat and played cards at one minute after midnight.

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

For these were the hands that had acted on their own, that were no part of him, that were his swift and clever conscience, that snatched books, tore pages, hid paragraphs and sentences in little wads to be opened later, at home, by match-light, read, and burned. They were the hands that in the last year had darted off with Shakespeare and Job and Ruth and shelved them away next to his crashing heart, over the throbbing ribs and the hot, roaring blood of a man excited by his theft, appalled by his temerity, betrayed by ten fingers which at times he held up to watch as if they were gloved with blood.

The game proceeded. Twice in half an hour, Montag got up and went to the latrine to wash his hands. He came back. He sat down. He held his cards. Leahy watched his fingers fumble the cards.

“Not smoking, Montag?”

“I’ve a cigarette cough.”

And then, of course, the smoke reminded him of old men and old women screaming and falling into wild cinders, and it was not good any more to hold fire in your hand.

He put his hands under the table. “Let’s have your hands in sight,” said Leahy, casually. “Not that we don’t trust you.”

They all laughed.

The phone rang.

MR. LEAHY, CARRYING HIS CARDS in one pink hand, walked slowly over and stood by the phone, let it ring twice more, and then picked it up.

“Yes?”

Mr. Montag listened, eyes shut.

The clock ticked in the room.

“I see,” said Leahy. He looked at Montag. He smiled. He winked.

Montag glanced away. “Better give me that address again.”

Mr. Montag got up. He walked around the room, hands in pockets. The other two men were standing ready. Leahy jerked his head toward their coats, as if to say, “On the double!” They shoved their arms in their coats and pushed on their helmets, joking in whispers.

Mr. Montag waited.

"I understand perfectly," said Leahy into the phone. "Yes. Yes. Perfectly. No, that's all right. Don't you worry. We'll be right out." Leahy deposited the receiver. "Well, well."  
"A call? Books to be burned?"

"So it seems."

Mr. Montag sat down heavily. "I don't feel well."

"What a shame; this is a special case," said Leahy, coming forward slowly, putting on his slicker.

"I think I'm handing in my resignation."

"Not yet, Montag. One more fire, eh? Then I'll be agreeable; you can hand in your papers. We'll all be happy."

"Do you mean that?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

Leahy fetched a helmet. "Put this on. The job'll be over in an hour. I understand you, Montag, really I do. Everything will be just as you want it."

"All right."

They slid down the brass pole.

"Where's the fire?"

"I'll drive!" shouted Leahy. "I've got the address."

The engine blasted to life and in the gaseous tornado they all leaped aboard.

THEY ROUNDED A CORNER in thunder and siren, with concussion of tires, with scream of rubber, with a shift 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 he 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? Sheets of paper, lines of type. Why should he fret for books—one, two, or ten thousand of them, really? He was the only inhabitant of a burning world that

cared, so why not drop it all, forget it, let the now-meaningless books lie?

“Here we go!” shouted Leahy.

“Elm Street?”

“Right!”

He saw Leahy up on his driver’s throne, with his massive black slicker flapping out behind. He seemed to be an immense black bat flying above the engine, over the brass numbers, taking the wind. His pink, phosphorescent face glimmered in the high darkness, pressing forward, and he was smiling furiously.

“Here we go to keep the world happy!”

And Mr. Montag thought, “No, I can’t let the books rot; I can’t let them burn. As long as there are souls like Leahy, I can’t hold my breath. But what can I do? I can’t kill everyone. It’s me against the world, and the odds too big for one man. What can I do? Against fire, what water is best?”

“Now over on Park Terrace!”

The fire engine boomed to a halt, throwing the men off in skips and clumsy hops. Mr. Montag stood fixing his raw eyes to the cold bright rail under his gripped fingers.

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

Leahy jumped from his throne, smelling of the wind that had hammered him about. “Okay, Montag, fetch the kerosene!”

The hoses were snaked out. The men ran on soft boots, as clumsy as cripples, as quiet as deadly black spiders.

Mr. Montag turned his head.

“What’s wrong, Montag?” Leahy asked, solicitously.

“Why,” protested Montag, “that is my house.”

“So it is,” agreed Leahy, heartily.

All the lights were lit. Down the street, more lights were flicking on, people were standing on porches, as the door of Montag’s house



opened. In it, with two suitcases in her hands, stood Mildred. When she saw her husband she came down the steps quickly, with a dream-like rigidity, looking at the third button on his coat.

“Mildred!”

She said nothing.

“Okay, Montag, up with the hose and ax.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Leahy. Mildred, you didn’t telephone this call in, did you?”

SHE WALKED PAST HIM with her arms stiff and at the ends of them, in the sharp, red-nailed fingers, the valise handles. Her mouth was bloodless.

“You didn’t!”

She shoved the valises into a waiting taxi-beetle and climbed in and sat there, staring straight ahead

Montag started toward her. Leahy caught his arm.

“Come on, Montag.”

The cab drove away slowly down the lighted street.

There was a crystal tinkling as Stoneman and Black chopped the windows to provide fine drafts for fire.

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

“Pour the kerosene on, Montag.”

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

Montag stepped forward in a huge silence and picked up one of the pages of the books and read what it had to say.

He had read only three lines when Leahy snatched the paper from him.

“Oh, no,” he said, smiling. “Because then we’d have to burn your mind, too. Mustn’t have that.” He stepped back. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Montag snapped the valve lock on the fire-thrower.

“Aim,” said Leahy.

“Aim.”

“Fire!”

He burned the television set first and then the radio and he burned the motion picture projector and he burned the films and the gossip magazines and the litter of cosmetics on a table, and he took pleasure in it all, and he burned the walls because he wanted to change everything, the chairs, the table, the paintings. He didn’t want to remember that he had lived here with some strange woman who would forget him tomorrow, who had gone and forgotten him already and was listening to a radio as she rode across town. So he burned the room with a precise fury.

“The books, Montag, the books!”

He directed the fire at the books. The books leaped and danced, like roasting birds, their wings frantically ablaze in red and yellow feathers. They fell in charred lumps.

“Get that one there, get it!” directed Leahy, pointing.

Montag burned the indicated book.

He burned books, he burned them by the dozen, he burned books with sweat pouring down his cheeks.

“When you’re all done, Montag,” said Leahy behind him, “you’re under arrest.”

Water, Water, Quench Fire

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 drew back into their houses: The fun was over.

Mr. Montag stood with the fire-thrower in his stiff hands, great islands of perspiration standing out under his arms, his face smeared with soot.

The three other firemen waited behind him in the darkness, their faces illumined faintly by the burnt house, by the house which Mr. Montag had just charred and crumpled so efficiently with kerosene, flame-gun, and deliberate aim.

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

“What’ve I done?”

“You know what you did. Don’t ask.”

“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 turned in an alarm earlier. I let it ride. One way or the other, you’d have got it. That was pretty silly, quoting poetry around free and easy, Montag. Very silly. Come on, now.”

“I think not,” said Montag.

He twitched the fire-trigger in his hand. Leahy glanced at Montag’s fingers and saw what he intended before Montag himself had even considered it. In that instant, Montag was stunned by the thought of murder, for murder is always a new thing, and Montag knew nothing of murder; he knew only burning and burning things that people said were evil.

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

“Look here, Montag—” cried Leahy.

And then he was a shrieking blaze, a jumping, sprawling, gibbering thing, all aflame, writhing on the grass as Montag shot three more blazing pulses of liquid fire over him. There was a hissing and bubbling like a snail upon which salt has been poured. There was a sound like spittle on a red-hot stove. Montag shut his eyes and yelled and tried to get his hands to his ears to cut away the sounds. Leahy twisted in upon himself like a ridiculous black wax doll and lay silent.

The other two firemen stood appalled.

“Montag!”

Montag jerked the weapon at them. “Turn around!”

They turned stiffly. He beat them over the head with the gun shaft; he didn't want to burn any other thing ever again. They fell. Then Montag turned the fire-thrower on the fire engine itself, set the trigger, and ran. Voices screamed in several houses. The engine blew up, hundreds of gallons of kerosene in one great flower of heat.

Montag 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 were!”

He kept running.

HE REMEMBERED THE BOOKS and turned back.

“You're a fool, a damned fool, an awful fool, but most of all a fool.” He stumbled and fell. He got up. “You blind idiot, you and your pride and your stinking temper and your righteousness, you've ruined it all, at the very start, you fumbler. But those women, those stupid women, they drove me to it with their nonsense!” he protested to himself.

“A fool, nevertheless, no better than they! We'll save what we can.

We'll do what has to be done. We'll take a few more firemen with us if we burn!”

He found the books where he had left them, beyond the garden fence. He heard voices yelling in the night and flash-beams were swirling 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 and staggered away down the alley. He hadn't realized what a shock the evening had been to him, but suddenly he fell and lay sobbing, weak, his legs folded, his face in the gravel. 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 anyone, 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 hand over his wet face, gagging. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

Everything at once. In twenty-four hours the burning of a woman, the burning of books, the trip to the professor's, Leahy, the Bible, memorizing, the sieve and the sand, 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.

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

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

He searched his pockets. The money was there. In his shirt pocket he found the Seashell radio and slapped it to his ear.

"Attention! Attention, all police alert. Special alarm. Wanted: Leonard Montag, fugitive, for murder and crimes against the State. Description ..."

Six blocks away the alley opened out onto a wide empty thoroughfare. It looked like a clean stage, so broad, so quiet, so well lit, and him alone, running across it, easily seen, easily shot down.

"Beware of the pedestrian, watch for the pedestrian!" The Seashell stung his ear.

Montag hid back in the shadows. He must use only alleys. There was a gas station nearby. It might give him the slightest extra margin of safety if he were clean and presentable. He must get to the station rest room and wash up, comb his hair, then, with books under arm, stroll calmly across that wide boulevard to get where he was going.

"Where am I going?"

NOWHERE. THERE WAS NOWHERE to go, no friend to turn to. Faber couldn't take him in; it would be murder to even try; but he had to see Faber for a minute or two, to give him this money. Whatever happened, he wanted the money to go on after him. Perhaps he could make it to open country, live on the rivers and near highways, in the meadows and hills, the sort of life he had often thought about but never tried.

Something caught at one corner of his vision and he turned to look at the sky.

The police helicopters were rising, far away, like a flight of gray moths, spreading out, six of them. 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 cars, they would shriek along the boulevards or, just as suddenly, hop back into the air, continuing their search.

And here was the gas station. Approaching from the rear, Mr. Montag entered the men's wash room. Through the tin wall he heard a radio voice crying, "War has been declared! Repeat—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, Mr. Montag walked as casually as a man looking for a bus, to the edge of the empty boulevard.

There it lay, a game for him to win, a vast bowling alley in the dark morning. The boulevard was as clean as a pinball machine, but underneath, somewhere, one could feel the electrical energy, the readiness to dark lights, flash red and blue, and out of nowhere, rolling like a silver ball, might thunder the searchers! Three blocks away, there were a few headlights. Montag drew a deep breath. His lungs were like burning brooms in his chest; his mouth was sucked dry from running. All of the iron in the world lay in his dragging feet. He began to walk across the empty avenue.

A hundred yards across. He estimated. A hundred yards in the open, more than plenty of time for a police car to appear, see him, and run him down.

He listened to his own loud footsteps.

A car was coming. Its headlights leaped and caught Montag in full stride.

"Keep going."

Montag faltered, got a new hold on his books, and forced himself not to freeze. Nor should he draw suspicion to himself by running. He was now one third of the way across. There was a growl from the car's motor as it put on speed.

THE POLICE, THOUGHT MONTAG. They see me, of course. But walk slowly, quietly, don't turn, don't look, don't seem concerned. Walk, that's it, walk, walk.

The car was rushing at a terrific speed. A good one hundred miles an hour. Its horn blared. Its light flushed the concrete. The heat of the lights, it seemed, burned Montag's cheeks and eyelids and brought the sweat coursing from his body.

He began to shuffle idiotically, then broke and ran. The horn hooted. The motor sound whined higher. Montag sprinted. He dropped a book, whirled, hesitated, left it there, plunged on, yelling to himself, in the middle of concrete emptiness, the car a hundred feet away, closer, closer, hooting, pushing, rolling, screeching, the horn hunting, himself running, his legs up, down, out, back, his eyes blind in the flashing glare, the horn nearer, now on top of him! They'll run me down, they know who I am, it's all over, thought Montag, it's done!

He stumbled and fell.

An instant before reaching him, the wild car swerved around him and was gone. Falling had saved him.

Mr. Montag lay flat, his head down. Wisps of laughter trailed back with the blue car exhaust.

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

It was a carful of high school children, yelling, whistling, hurrahing. And they had seen a man, a pedestrian, a rarity, and they had yelled "Let's get him!" They didn't know he was the fugitive Mr. Montag; they were simply out for a night of roaring five hundred miles in a few moonlit hours, their faces icy with wind.

“They would have killed me,” whispered Montag to the shaking concrete under his bruised cheek. “For no reason at all in the world, 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 shuffled them, oddly, in his numb hands.

“I wonder if they were the ones who killed Clarisse.”

His eyes watered.

The thing that had saved him was falling flat. The driver of that car, seeing Montag prone, considered the possibility that running over a body at one hundred miles an hour might turn the car over and spill them all out. Now, if Montag had remained upright, things would have been far different...

Montag gasped. Far down the empty avenue, four blocks away, the car of laughing children had turned. Now it was racing back, picking up speed.

Montag dodged into an alley and was gone in the shadow 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 refrigerator in the kitchen, deposited three of the books. He waited, listening to the house.

“Mrs. Black, are you asleep up there?” he asked of the second floor in a whisper. “I hate to do this to you, but your husband did just as bad to others, never asking, never wondering, never worrying. You’re a fireman’s wife, Mrs. Black, and now it’s your house, and you in jail a while, for all the houses your husband has burned and people he’s 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, and came to an all night, dimly lighted phone booth. He closed himself in the booth and dialed a number.

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

The voice sharpened on the other end. “The address?” He gave it and added, “Better get there before they burn them. Check the kitchen.” Montag stepped out and stood in the cold night air, waiting. At a great distance he heard the fire sirens coming, coming to burn Mr. Black’s house while he was away at work, and make his wife stand shivering in the morning air while the roof dropped down. But now she was upstairs, deep in sleep.

“Good night, Mrs. Black,” said Montag. “You’ll excuse me—I have several other visits to make.”

A RAP AT THE DOOR.

“Professor Faber!”

Another rap and a long waiting. Then, from within, lights flickered on about the small house. After another pause, the front door opened.

“Who is it?” Faber cried, for the man who staggered in was in the dark for a moment and then rushing past. “Oh, Montag!”

“I’m going away,” said Montag, stumbling to a chair. “I’ve been a fool.”

Professor Faber stood at the door 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.” Montag patted his inside pocket. “The money’s here.” He took it out and laid it on the desk, then sat tiredly sipping his drink.

“How do you feel?”

“This is the first night in many years I’ve fallen right to sleep,” said Faber. “That must mean I’m doing the right thing. I think we can trust me, now. Once, I didn’t think so.”

“People never trust themselves, but they never let others know. I suppose that’s why we do rash things, expose ourselves to positions from which we don’t dare retreat. Unconsciously, we fear we might give in, quit the fight, and so we do a foolish thing, like reading poetry to women.” Montag laughed at himself. “So I guess I’m on the run. It’ll be 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 my remaining books in four firemen’s homes. Then I telephoned an alarm. I figured I might be dead by morning, and I wanted to have done something before then.

“God, I’d like to have been there.”

“Yes, the places burned very well.”

“Where are you going now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Try the factory section, follow the old rail lines, look up some of the hobo camps. I didn’t tell you this before—maybe I didn’t quite trust you yet, I don’t know—but they were in touch with me last year, wanting me to go underground with them.”

“With tramps?”

“There are a lot of Harvard degrees on the tracks between here and Los Angeles. What else can they do? Most of them are wanted and hunted in cities. They survive. I don’t think they have a plan for a revolution, though; I never heard them speak of it. They simply sit by their fires. Not a very lively group. But they might hide you now.”

“I’ll try. I’m heading for the river, I think, then the old factory district. I’ll keep in touch with you.”

“In Boston, then. I’m leaving on the three o’clock train tonight—or, rather, this morning. That’s not long from now. There’s a retired printer in Boston that I want to see with this money.”

“I’ll contact you there,” said Montag. “And get books from you when I need them, to plant in firemen’s houses across the country.”

MONTAG DRAINED HIS DRINK.

“Do you want to sleep here a while?” Faber asked.

“I’d better get going. I wouldn’t want you held responsible.”

“Let’s check.” Faber switched on the televisor. A voice was talking swiftly:

“—this evening. Montag has escaped, but we expect his arrest in 24 hours. Here’s a bulletin. The Electric Hound is being transported here from Green Town—”

Montag and Faber glanced at each other.

“—You may recall the interviews recently on TV concerning this incredible new invention, a machine so delicate in sense perception that it can follow trails much as bloodhounds did for centuries. But this machine, without fail, always finds its quarry!”

Montag put his empty glass down and he was cold.

“The machine is self-operating, weighs only forty pounds, is propelled on seven rubber wheels. The front is a nose, which in reality is a thousand noses, so sensitive that they can distinguish 10,000 food combinations, 5,000 flower smells, and remember identity index odors of 15,000 men without the bother of 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 stared together at the invisible trail of his footprints leading to this house, the odor of his hand on the brass doorknobs; the smell of his body in the air and on this chair.

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

So they must have a game, thought Montag. In the midst of a time of war, they must play the game out.

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 and menacing flower.

MONTAG WATCHED THE SCENE with a solid fascination, not wanting to move, ever. If he wished, he could linger here, in comfort, and follow the entire hunt on through its quick phases, down alleys, up streets, across empty running avenues, with the sky finally lightening with dawn, up other alleys to burned houses, and so on to this place here, this house, with Faber and himself seated at their leisure, smoking idly, drinking good wine, while the Electric Hound sniffed down the fatal paths, whirring and pausing with finality outside that door there.

Then, if he wished, Montag could rise, walk to the door, keep one eye on the TV screen, open the door, look out, look back, and see himself, dramatized, described, made over, standing there, limned in the bright television screen, from outside, a drama to be watched objectively, and he would catch himself, an instant before oblivion, being killed for the benefit of a million viewers who had been wakened from their sleeps a few minutes ago by the frantic beep-beeping of their receivers to watch the big game, the big hunt, the Scoop!

“There it is,” whispered Faber, hoarsely.

OUT OF THE HELICOPTER glided something that was not a machine, not an animal, not dead, not alive, just gliding. It glowed with a green phosphorescence, and it was on a long leash. Behind it came a man, dressed lightly, with earphones on his shaven head.

“I can’t stay here,” Montag leaped up, his eyes still fixed to the scene. The Electric Hound shot forward to the smoking 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 it for only a moment. There was a shirring and clicking of dials and meters. “You can’t escape.” Faber mourned over it, turning away. “I’ve heard about that damned monster. No one has ever escaped.”

“I’ll try, anyway. I’m sorry about this, Professor.”

“About me? About my house? Don’t be. I’m the one to be sorry I didn’t act years ago. Whatever I get out of this, I deserve. You run, now; perhaps I can delay them here somehow—”

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

Faber ran and fetched a knife. With it, Montag attacked the chair where he had sat. He cut the upholstery free, then shoved it, bit by bit, without touching the lid, 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, air the house. Rub the doorknobs with alcohol. After I go, turn your garden sprinkler on full. That’ll wash away the sidewalk traces.”

Faber shook his hand vigorously. “You don’t know what this means. I’ll do anything to help you in the future. Get in touch with me in Boston, then.”

“One more thing. A suitcase. Get it, fill it with your dirty laundry, an old suit, the dirtier the better, denim pants maybe, a shirt, some old sneakers and socks.”

Faber was gone and back in a minute. Montag sealed the full suitcase with scotch tape. “To keep the odor in,” he said, breathlessly. He poured a liberal amount of cognac over the exterior of the case. “I don’t want that Hound picking up two odors at once. Mind if I take this bottle of whisky? I’ll need it later. When I get to the river, I’ll change clothes.”

“And identities; from Montag to Faber.”

“Christ, I hope it works! If your clothes smell strong enough, which God knows they seem to, we might confuse the Hound, anyway.”

“Good luck.”

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

“Be seeing you.”

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

Montag ran.

Behind him, in the night city, the Electric Hound followed.

HE STOPPED NOW AND AGAIN, panting, across town, to watch through the dimly lighted windows of wakened houses. He peered in at silhouettes 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, now up the alley toward Mr. Faber's, now at Faber's!

"No, no!" thought Montag. "Go on past! Don't turn in, don't!"

He held his breath.

The Electric Hound hesitated, then plunged on, leaving Faber's house behind. For a moment the TV camera scanned Faber's home. The windows were dark. In the garden, the water sprinkled the cool air, softly.

THE ELECTRIC HOUND jumped ahead, down the alley.

"Good going, professor." And Montag was gone, again, racing toward the distant river, stopping at other houses to see the game on the TV sets, the long running game, and the Hound drawing near behind.

"Only a mile away now!"

As he ran he put the Seashell at his ear and a voice ran with every step, with the beat of his heart and the sound of his shoes on the gravel.

"Watch for the pedestrian! Look for the pedestrian! Anyone on the sidewalks or in the street, walking or running, is suspect! Watch for the pedestrian!"

How simple 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 could run in peace. House lights flashed on all about. Montag saw faces peering streetward as he passed behind them, faces hid by curtains, pale, night-frightened faces, like odd animals peering from electric caves, faces with grey eyes and grey minds, and he plunged ahead, leaving them to their tasks, and in another minute was at the black, moving river.

He found what he was looking for after five minutes of running along the bank. It was a rowboat drawn and staked to the sand. He took possession.

The boat slid easily on the long silence of river and went away downstream from the city, bobbing and whispering, while Montag stripped in darkness down to the skin, and splashed his body, his arms, his legs, his face with raw liquor. Then he changed into Faber's old clothing and shoes. He tossed his own clothing into the river with the suitcase.

He sat watching the dark shore. There would be a delay while the pursuit rode the Electric Hound up and down stream to see where a man named Montag had stepped ashore.

Whether the smell of Faber would be strong enough, with the aid of the alcohol, was something else again. He pulled out a handkerchief he had saved over, doused it with the remainder of the liquor. He must hold this over his mouth when stepping ashore.

The particles of his breathing might remain in an electronically detectable invisible cloud for hours after he had passed on.

He couldn't wait any longer. He was below the town now, in a lonely place of weeds and old railway tracks. He rowed the boat toward shore, tied the handkerchief over his face, and leaped out as the boat touched briefly.

The current swept the boat away, turning slowly.

"Farewell to Mr. Montag," he said. "Hello, Mr. Faber."

He went into the woods.

HE FOUND HIS WAY along railroad tracks that had not been used in years, crusted with brown rust and overgrown with weeds. He listened to his feet moving in the long grass. He paused now and then, checking behind to see if he was followed, but was not.

Firelight shone far ahead. "One of the camps," thought Montag. "One of the places where the hobo intellectuals cook their meals and talk!" It was unbelievable.

Half an hour later he came out of the woods and the forest into the half light of the fire, for only a moment, then he hid back and waited, watching the group of seven men, holding their hands to the small blaze, murmuring. To their right, a quarter mile away, was the river. Up the stream a mile, and still apparent in the dark, was the city, and no sound except the voices and the fire crackling.

Montag waited ten minutes in the shadows. Finally a voice called: "All right, you can come out now."

He shrank back.

"It's okay," said the voice. "You're welcome here."

He let himself stand forth and then he walked tiredly toward the fire, peering at the men and their dirty clothing.

"We're not very elegant," said the man who seemed to be the leader of the little group. "Sit down. Have some coffee."

He watched the dark steaming mixture poured into a collapsible cup which was handed him straight off. He sipped it gingerly. He felt the scald on his lips. The men were watching him. Their faces were unshaved but their beards were much too neat, and their hands were clean. They had stood up, as if to welcome a guest, and now they sat down again. Montag sipped. "Thanks," he said.

The leader said, "My name is Granger, as good a name as any. You don't have to tell us your name at all." He remembered something.

"Here, before you finish the coffee, better take this." He held out a small bottle of colorless fluid.

"What is it?"



“Drink it. Whoever you are, you wouldn’t be here unless you were in trouble. Either that, or you’re a Government spy, in which case we are only a bunch of men traveling nowhere and hurting no one. In any event, whoever you are, an hour after you’ve drunk this fluid, you’ll be someone else. It does something to the perspiratory system—changes the sweat content. If you want to stay here you’ll have to drink it, otherwise you’ll have to move on. If there’s a Hound after you, you’d be bad company.”

“I think I took care of the Hound,” said Montag, and drank the tasteless stuff. The fluid stung his throat. He was sick for a moment; there was a blackness in his eyes, and roaring in his head. Then it passed.

“THAT’S BETTER, MR. MONTAG,” said Granger, and snorted at his social error. “I beg your pardon—” He poked his thumb at a small portable TV beyond the fire. “We’ve been watching. They videoed a picture of you, not a very good resemblance. We hoped you’d head this way.”  
“It’s been quite a chase.”

“Yes.” Granger snapped the TV on. It was no bigger than a handbag, weighing some seven pounds, mostly screen. A voice from the set cried: “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 Granger. “They’re faking. You threw them off at the river, but they can’t admit it. Must be a million people watching that bunch of scoundrels hound after you. They’ll catch you in five minutes.”

“But if they’re ten miles away, how can they ... ?”

“Watch.”

He turned the TV picture brighter.

“Up that street there, somewhere, right now, out for an early morning walk. A rarity, an odd one. Don’t think the police don’t know the habits of queer ducks like that, men who walk early in the morning just for the hell of it. Anyway, up that street the police know that every morning a

certain man walks alone, for the air, to smoke. Call him Billings or Brown or Baumgartner, but the search is getting nearer to him every minute. See?"

In the video screen, a man turned a corner. The Electric Hound rushed forward, screeching. The police converged upon the man.

The TV voice cried, "There's Montag now! 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 started to say something when a godlike voice boomed, "All right, Montag, don't move! We've got you, Montag!"

By the small fire, with seven other men, Mr. Montag sat, ten miles removed, the light of the video screen on his face.

"Don't run, Montag!"

The man turned, bewildered. The crowd roared. The Hound leaped up.

"The poor son-of-a-bitch," said Granger, bitterly.

A dozen shots rattled out. The man crumpled.

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

The camera trucked forward. Just before it showed the dead man's face, however, the screen went black.

"We now switch you to the Sky Room of the Hotel Lux in San Francisco for a half hour of dance music by—"

GRANGER TURNED IT OFF. "They didn't show the man's face, naturally. Better if everyone thinks it's Montag.

Montag said nothing, but simply looked at the blank screen. He could not move or speak.

Granger put out his hand. "Welcome back from the dead, Mr. Montag." Montag took the hand, numbly. The man said, "My real name is Clement, 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."

“I don’t belong here,” said Montag, at last, slowly. “I’ve been an idiot, all the way down the line, bungled and messed and tripped myself up.” “Anger makes idiots of us all, I’m afraid. You can only be angry so long, then you explode and do the wrong things. It can’t be helped now.”

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

“We’re used to that. We all make mistakes, or we wouldn’t be here ourselves. When we were separate individuals, all we had was rage. I struck a fireman in the face, once. He’d come to burn my library back about 40 years ago. I had to run. I’ve been running ever since. And Simmons here ...”

“I quoted Donne in the midst of a genetics lecture one afternoon. For no reason at all. Just started quoting Donne. You see? Fools, all of us.” They glanced at the fire, self-consciously.

“So you want to join us, Mr. Montag?”

“Yes.”

“What have you to offer?”

“Nothing. I thought I had the Book of Job, but I haven’t even got that.”

“The Book of Job would do very well. Where was it?”

“Here.” Montag touched his head.

“Ah,” said Granger-Clement. He smiled and nodded.

“What’s wrong, isn’t it all right?” said Montag.

“Better than all right—perfect! Mr. Montag, you have hit upon the secret of, if you want to give it a term, 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, be careful, take your health seriously. If anything should happen to Harris, you are the Book of Job. Do you see how important you are?”

“But I’ve forgotten it!”

“Nonsense, nothing is ever forgotten. Mislaid, perhaps, but not forgotten. We have ways, several new methods of hypnosis, to shake down the clinkers there. You’ll remember, don’t fear.”

“I’ve been trying to remember.”

“Don’t try. Relax. It’ll come when we need it. Some people are quick studies but don’t know it. Some of God’s simplest creatures have the ability called eidetic or photographic memory, the ability to memorize entire pages of print at a glance. It has nothing to do with IQ. No offense, Montag. It varies. Would you like, one day, to read Plato’s Republic?”

“Of course.”

Stewart nodded to a man who had been sitting to one side.

“Mr. Plato, if you please.”

THE MAN BEGAN TO TALK. He looked at Montag idly, his hands filling a corncob pipe, unaware of the words tumbling from his lips. He talked for two minutes without a pause or stumble.

Granger made the smallest move of his fingers. The man cut off.

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

“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.”

“Don’t you understand any of it?”

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

“We’re old friends,” said Granger. “We hadn’t seen each other since we were boys. We met a few years ago on that track, somewhere between here and Seattle, walking, me running away from firemen, he running from cities.”

“Never liked cities,” said the one who was Plato. “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 Granger and he found out that I had this eidetic memory, as he calls it, and he gave me a book to read and then we burned the book ourselves so we wouldn't be caught with it. And now I'm Plato; that's what I am."

"He is also Socrates."

The man nodded.

"And Schopenhauer."

Another nod.

"And John Dewey."

"All that in one bottle. You wouldn't think there was room. But I can open my head like a concertina and play it. There's plenty of room if you don't try to think about what you've memorized. It's when you start thinking that all of a sudden it's crowded. I don't think about anything except eating, sleeping, and traveling. I let you people do the thinking when you hear what I recite. Oh, there's plenty of room, believe me."

"So here we are, Mr. Montag. Mr. Simmons is really Mr. John Donne and Mr. Darwin and Mr. Aristophanes. These other gentlemen are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And I am Ruth."

Everyone laughed quietly.

"You see, we are not without humor in this melancholy age. I'm also bits and pieces, Mr. Montag, snatches of Byron and Shelley and Shaw and Washington Irving and Shakespeare. I'm one of those kaleidoscopes. Hold me up to the sun, give a shake, watch the patterns. And you are Mr. Job, and in half an hour or less, a war will begin. While those people in the anthill across the river have been busy chasing Montag, as if he were the cause of all their nervous anxiety and frustration, 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 on them; that's us. The cities will be soot and ash and baking powder."

The TV rang a bell. Granger switched it on.

“Final negotiations are arranged for a conference today with the enemy government—”

Granger snapped it off.

“Well, what do you think Montag?”

“I think I was pretty blind and ferocious 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 is simpler and better and the thing we wish to do is keep the knowledge intact and safe and not to excite or anger anyone; for then, if we are destroyed, the knowledge is most certainly dead. We are model citizens in our own special way—we walk the tracks, we lie in the hills at night, we bother no one, and the city have none, and our faces have been changed by plastic surgery, as have our fingerprints. So we wait quietly for the day when the machines are dented junk and then we hope to walk by and say ‘Here we are,’ to those who survived this war, and we’ll say ‘Have you come to your senses now? Perhaps a few books will do you some good.’”

“But will they listen to you?”

“Perhaps not. Then we’ll have to wait some more. Maybe a few hundred years. Maybe they’ll never listen; we can’t make them. So we’ll pass the books on to our children in their minds, and let them wait in turn, on other people. Some day someone will need us. This can’t last forever.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Thousands on the road, on the rails, bums on the outside, libraries on the inside. It wasn’t really planned; it grew. Each man had a book he wanted to remember and did. Then we discovered each other and over twenty years or so got a loose network together and made a plan. The important thing we had to learn was that we were not important, we were not to be pedants, we were not to feel superior, we were nothing more than covers for books, of no individual significance whatever. Some of us live in small towns—chapter one of Walden in Nantucket, chapter two in Reading, chapter three in Waukesha, each according to his ability. Some can learn a few lines, some a lot.”

“The books are safe then.”

“Couldn’t be safer. Why there’s one village in North Carolina, some 200 people, no bomb’ll ever touch their town, which is the complete Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. You could pick up that town, almost, and flip the pages, a page to a person. People who wouldn’t dream of being seen with a book gladly memorized a page. You can’t be caught with that. And when the war’s over and we’ve time and need, the books can 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.”

MONTAG LOOKED AT THE MEN’S FACES, old, all of them, in the firelight, and certainly tired. Perhaps he was looking for a brightness, a resolve, a triumph over tomorrow that wasn’t really there. Perhaps he expected these men to be proud with the knowledge they carried, to glow with the wisdom as lanterns glow with the fire they contain.

But all the light came from the campfire here, and these men seemed no different than any other man who has run a long run, searched a long search, seen precious things destroyed, seen old friends die, and now, very late in time, were gathered together to watch the machines die, or hope they might die, even while cherishing a last paradoxical love for those very machines which could spin out a material with happiness in the warp and terror in the woof, so interblended that a man might go insane trying to tell the design to himself, and his place in it.

They weren’t at all certain that what they carried in their heads might make every future dawn dawn brighter. They were sure of nothing save that the books were on file behind their solemn eyes and that if man put his mind to them properly, something of dignity and happiness might be regained.

Montag looked from one face to another.  
“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” said someone.  
A soft laughter moved among them.  
Montag turned to look at the city across the river.  
“My wife’s in that city now,” he said.  
“I’m sorry to hear that.”  
“Look,” said Simmons.  
Montag glanced up.

The bombardment was finished and over, even while the seeds were in the windy sky. The bombs were there, the jet-planes were there, for the merest trifle of an instant, like grain thrown across the heavens by a great hand, and the bombs drifted with a dreadful slowness down upon the morning city where all of the people looked up at their destiny coming upon them like the lid of a dream shutting tight and become an instant later a red and powdery nightmare.

The bombardment to all military purposes was finished. Once the planes had sighted their target, alerted their bombardier at five 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, half around the visible world, it seemed, like bullets in which an island savage might not believe because they were unseen, yet the heart is struck suddenly, 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 merely 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!” To



Mildred, "Get out, get out of there!" But Clarisse, he remembered, was dead. And 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 junkyard.

And Mildred!

"Get out, run!" he thought.

He could see Mildred in that metropolis now, in the half second remaining, as the bombs were perhaps three inches, three small inches shy of her hotel building. He could see her leaning into the TV set as if all of the hunger of looking would find the secret of her sleepless unease there. Mildred, leaning anxiously, nervously into that tubular world as into a crystal ball to find happiness.

The first bomb struck.

"Mildred!"

Perhaps the television station went first into oblivion.

Montag saw the screen go dark in Mildred's face, and heard her screaming, because in the next millionth part of time left, she would see her own face reflected there, hungry and alone, in a mirror instead of a crystal ball, 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, carrying her with a million pounds of brick, metal and people down into the cellar, there to dispose of them in its unreasonable way.

"I remember now," thought Montag, "where we first met. It was in Chicago. Yes, now I remember."

Montag found himself on his face. The concussion had knocked the air across the river, 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 lay with his face toward the city. Now it, 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 or strived to be, taller than man had built it, erected at last in gouts of dust and sparkles of torn metal into a city not unlike a reversed avalanche, 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.

The sound of its death came after.

AND MONTAG LYING THERE, his eyes shut, gasping and crying out, suddenly thought, "Now I remember another thing. Now I remember the Book of Job." He said it over to himself, lying tight to the earth; he said the words of it many times and they were perfect without trying. "Now I remember the Book of Job. Now I do remember ..."

"There," said a voice, Granger's voice.

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 them, shaking their hair, tearing at their lips, making their noses bleed.

Montag watched the blood drip into the earth with such an absorption that the city was effortlessly forgotten.

The wind died.

The city was flat, as if one had taken a heaping tablespoon of flour and passed one finger over it, smoothing it to an even level.

The men said nothing. They lay a while like people on the dawn edge of sleep, not yet ready to arise and begin the day's 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 with the slowness of normality.

Montag sat up. He did not move any farther, however. The other men did likewise. The sun was touching the black 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.

And across the world, thought Montag, the cities of the other nations are dead, too, almost in the same instant.

Silently, the leader of the small group, Granger, arose, felt of 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, Granger touched it to a piece of paper and shoved this under a bit of kindling, and shoved together bits of straw and dry wood, and after a while, drawing the men slowly, awkwardly to it by its glow, the fire licked 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 no more than this:

“How many strips?”

“Two each.”

“Good enough.”

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, thought Montag, a thing man had done over and over again, and Montag felt at ease among them, as if during the long night the walls of a great prison had vaporized around them and they were on the land again and only the birds sang on or off as they pleased, with no schedule, and with no nagging human insistence.

“Here,” said Granger, dishing out the bacon and eggs to each from the hot pan. They each held out the scratched tin plates that had been passed around.

Then, without looking up, breaking more eggs into the pan for himself, Granger slowly and with a concern both for what he said, recalling it, rounding it, and for 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, round about.

WHEN IT WAS MONTAG’S TURN, he spoke too:

“To everything there is a season,  
And a time to every purpose under the heaven...  
A time to be born, and a time to die...  
A time to kill, and a time to heal ...”

ORKS MOVED IN THE PINK LIGHT. Now each of the men remembered a separate and different thing, a bit of poetry, a line from a play, an old song. And they spoke these little bits and pieces in the early morning air:

“Man that is born of a woman  
Is of few days and full of trouble ...”

A WIND BLEW IN THE TREES.

“To be or not to be, that is the question ...”

THE SUN WAS FULLY UP.

“Oh, do you remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt ... ?”

Montag felt fine.

The End