

RAY BRADBURY



FAHRENHEIT

451

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*Fahrenheit 451—
The temperature at which
book paper catches
fire and burns . . .*

Ray Bradbury

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This one, with gratitude, is for
DON CONGDON

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The Hearth and the Salamander

It was a pleasure to burn.

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

Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame. He knew that when he returned to the firehouse, he might wink at himself, a minstrel man, burnt-corked, in the mirror. Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark. It never went away, that smile, it never ever went away, as long as he remembered.

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

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

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

The last few nights he had had the most uncertain feelings about the sidewalk just around the corner here, moving in the starlight toward his house. He had felt that a moment prior to his making the turn someone had been there. The air seemed charged with a special calm as if someone had waited there quietly, and only a moment before he came, simply turned to a shadow and let him through. Perhaps his nose detected a faint perfume, perhaps the skin on the backs of his hands, on his face, felt the temperature rise at this one spot where a person's standing might raise the immediate atmosphere ten degrees for an instant. There was no understanding it. Each time he made the turn, he saw only the white, unused, buckling sidewalk, with perhaps, on one night, something vanishing swiftly across the lawn before he could focus his eyes or speak.

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

He turned the corner.

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

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

"Of course," he said, "you're our new neighbor, aren't you?"

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

"How oddly you say that."

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

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

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

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

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

"Does it seem like that, really?"

"Of course. Why not?"

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

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

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

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

"Well," she said, "I'm seventeen and I'm crazy. My uncle says the two always go together. Whenever people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane. Isn't this a nice time of night to walk? I like to smell things and look at things, and sometimes stay up all night, walking, and watch the sunrise."

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

He was surprised. "Why should you be?"

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

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

And then Clarisse McClellan said:

“Do you mind if I ask? How long’ve you worked at being a fireman?”

“Since I was twenty, ten years ago.”

“Do you ever *read* any of the books you burn?”

He laughed. “That’s against the law!”

“Oh. Of course.”

“It’s fine work. Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn ’em to ashes and then burn the ashes. That’s our official slogan.”

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

“No. Houses have *always* been fireproof, take my word for it.”

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

He laughed.

She glanced quickly over. “Why are you laughing?”

“I don’t know.” He started to laugh again and stopped. “Why?”

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

He stopped walking. “You *are* an odd one,” he said, looking at her. “Haven’t you any respect?”

“I don’t mean to be insulting. It’s just I love to watch people too much, I guess.”

“Well, doesn’t this mean *anything* to you?” He tapped the numerals 451 stitched on his charcoal-colored sleeve.

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

“You’re changing the subject!”

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

“You think too many things,” said Montag, uneasily.

“I rarely watch the ‘parlor walls’ or go to races or Fun Parks. So I’ve lots of time for crazy thoughts, I guess. Have you seen the two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country beyond town? Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long? But cars started rushing by so quickly they had to stretch the advertising out so it would last.”

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

“Bet I know something else you don’t. There’s dew on the grass in the morning.”

He suddenly couldn’t remember if he had known this or not, and it made him quite irritable.

“And if you look”—she nodded at the sky—“there’s a man in the moon.”

He hadn’t looked for a long time.

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

“What’s going on?” Montag had rarely seen that many house lights.

“Oh, just my mother and father and uncle sitting around, talking. It’s like being a pedestrian, on a rarer. My uncle was arrested another time—did I tell you?—for being a pedestrian. Oh, we’re *mo* peculiar.”

“But what do you *talk* about?”

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

“Am I *what*?” he cried.

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

“Happy! Of all the nonsense.”

He stopped laughing.

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

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

What a strange meeting on a strange night. He remembered nothing like it save one afternoon a year ago when he had met an old man in the park and *they* had talked. . . .

Montag shook his head. He looked at a blank wall. The girl’s face was there, really quite beautiful in memory: astonishing, in fact. She had a very thin face like the dial of a small clock seen faintly in a dark room in the middle of a night when you waken to see the time and see the clock telling you the hour and the minute and the second, with a white silence and a glowing, all certainty and knowing what she has to tell of the night passing swiftly on toward further darknesses, but moving also toward a new sun.

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

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

What incredible power of identification the girl had; she was like the eager watcher of a marionette show, anticipating each flicker of an eyelid, each gesture of his hand, each flick of a finger, the moment before it began. How long had they walked together? Three minutes? Five? Yet how large that time seemed now. How immense a figure she was on the stage before him; what a shadow she threw on the wall with her slender body! He felt that if his eye itched, she might blink. And if the muscles of his jaw stretched imperceptibly, she would yawn long before he would.

Why, he thought, now that I think of it, she almost seemed to be waiting for me there, in the street so damned late at night. . . .

He opened the bedroom door.

It was like coming into the cold marbled room of a mausoleum after the moon has set. Complete

darkness, not a hint of the silver world outside, the windows tightly shut, the chamber a tomb-work where no sound from the great city could penetrate. The room was not empty.

He listened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mildred!”

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

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

As he stood there the sky over the house screamed. There was a tremendous ripping sound as if two giant hands had torn ten thousand miles of black linen down the seam. Montag was cut in half. He felt his chest chopped down and split apart. The jet bombers going over, going over, going over, one two, one two, one two, six of them, nine of them, twelve of them, one and one and one and another and another and another, did all the screaming for him. He opened his own mouth and let their shriek

come down and out between his bared teeth. The house shook. The flare went out in his hand. The moonstones vanished. He felt his hand plunge toward the telephone.

The jets were gone. He felt his lips move, brushing the mouthpiece of the phone. "Emergency Hospital." A terrible whisper.

He felt that the stars had been pulverized by the sound of the black jets and that in the morning the earth would be covered with their dust like a strange snow. That was his idiot thought as he stood shivering in the dark, and let his lips go on moving and moving.

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

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

"Got to clean 'em out both ways," said the operator, standing over the silent woman. "No use getting the stomach if you don't clean the blood. Leave that stuff in the blood and the blood hits the brain like mallet, bang, a couple thousand times and the brain just gives up, just quits."

"Stop it!" said Montag.

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

"Are you done?" said Montag.

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

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

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

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

"Hell!" The operator's cigarette moved on his lip. "We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special machines built. With the optical lens, of course, that was new; the rest is ancient. You don't need an M.D., case like this; all you need is two handymen to clean up the problem in half an hour. Look"—he started for the door—"we gotta go. Just had another call on the old ear-thimble. Ten blocks from here. Someone else just jumped off the cap of a pillbox. Call if you need us again. Keep her quiet. We got a contrasedative in her. She'll wake up hungry. So long."

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

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

"Mildred," he said, at last.

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

Half an hour passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One drop of rain. Clarisse. Another drop. Mildred. A third. The uncle. A fourth. The fire tonight. One, Clarisse. Two, Mildred. Three, uncle. Four, fire. One, Mildred, two, Clarisse. One, two, three, four, five, Clarisse, Mildred, uncle, fire, sleeping tablets, men, disposable tissue, coattails, blow, wad, flush, Clarisse, Mildred, uncle, fire, tablets, tissues, blow, wad, flush. One, two, three, one, two, three! Rain. The storm. The uncle laughing. Thunder falling downstairs. The whole world pouring down. The fire gushing up in a volcano. All rushing on down around in a spouting roar and rivering stream toward morning.

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

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

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

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

melted butter.

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

"You all right?" he asked.

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

Montag sat down.

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

"You—"

"I'm *hungry*."

"Last night," he began.

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

"Last night—" he said again.

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

"Don't you remember?"

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

"A few people," he said.

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

"No," he said, quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

"The bottle was empty."

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

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

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

"I don't know," he said.

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

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

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

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

She didn't look up from the script again. "Well, this is a play comes on the wall-to-wall circuit in ten minutes.

"They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some box tops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The homemaker, that's me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines. Here, for instance, the ma

says, 'What do you think of this whole idea, Helen?' And he looks at me sitting here center stage, see? And I say, I say—" She paused and ran her finger under a line on the script. "I think that's fine!" And then they go on with the play until he says, 'Do you agree to that, Helen?' and I say, 'I sure do!' Isn't that fun, Guy?"

He stood in the hall looking at her.

"It's sure fun," she said.

"What's the play about?"

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

"Oh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I haven't read that far."

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

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

"Hello!"

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

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

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

"You might if you tried."

"I never have."

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

He could hardly do anything else but look.

"Well?" she said.

"You're yellow under there."

"Fine! Let's try *you* now."

"It won't work for me."

"Here." Before he could move she had put the dandelion under his chin. He drew back and she laughed. "Hold still!" She peered under his chin and frowned.

"Well?" he said.

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

"Yes, I am!"

"It doesn't show."

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

"Oh, please don't look that way."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't mean that."

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

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

"Good."

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

"No, I—"

"You *have* forgiven me, haven't you?"

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

"Well—next month."

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

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

"Go ahead."

"How did it start? How did you get into it? How did you pick your work and how did you happen to think to take the job you have? You're not like the others. I've seen a few; I *know*. When I talk, you look at me. When I said something about the moon, you looked at the moon, last night. The others would never do that. The others would walk off and leave me talking. Or threaten me. No one has time any more for anyone else. You're one of the few who put up with me. That's why I think it's so strange you're a fireman, it just doesn't seem right for you, somehow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Montag touched the muzzle.

The Hound growled.

Montag jumped back.

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

“No, no, boy,” said Montag, his heart pounding.

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

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

Montag stood, letting the fears pass, by the drop hole. Behind him, four men at a card table under a green-lidded light in the corner glanced briefly but said nothing. Only the man with the Captain’s hat

and the sign of the Phoenix on his hat, at last, curious, his playing cards in his thin hand, talked across the long room.

“Montag . . . ?”

“It doesn’t *like* me,” said Montag.

“What, the Hound?” The Captain studied his cards. “Come off it. It doesn’t like or dislike. It just ‘functions.’ It’s like a lesson in ballistics. It has a trajectory we decide on for it. It follows through. It targets itself, homes itself, and cuts off. It’s only copper wire, storage batteries, and electricity.”

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

“We know all that.”

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

“Hell,” said the Captain.

“Irritated, but not completely angry. Just enough ‘memory’ set up in it by someone so it growled when I touched it.”

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

“None that I know of.”

“We’ll have the Hound checked by our technicians tomorrow.”

“This isn’t the first time it’s threatened me,” said Montag. “Last month it happened twice.”

“We’ll fix it up. Don’t worry.”

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

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

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

“It doesn’t think anything we don’t want it to think.”

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

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

“That’s why,” said Montag, “I wouldn’t want to be its next victim.”

“Why? You got a guilty conscience about something?”

Montag glanced up swiftly.

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

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

day after that calm day was a day like the furnace of summer and Clarisse with her face all sunburnt in the late afternoon.

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

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

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

“Now you explain,” she said, “why you haven’t any daughters like me, if you love children so much?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re joking!”

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

The girl stopped smiling. “I’m sorry. I really thought you were having fun at my expense. I’m a fool.”

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

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

“Why, yes, it *is* like cinnamon in a way.”

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

“It’s just I haven’t had time—”

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

“I think so. Yes.” He had to laugh.

“Your laugh sounds much nicer than it did.”

“Does it?”

“Much more relaxed.”

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

“Oh, they don’t miss me,” she said. “I’m antisocial, they say. I don’t mix. It’s so strange. I’m very social indeed. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn’t it? Social to me means talking to you about things like this.” She rattled some chestnuts that had fallen off the tree in the front yard. “Or talking about how strange the world is. Being with people is nice. But I don’t think it’s social to get a bunch of people together and then not let them talk, do you? An hour of TV class, an hour of basketball or baseball or running, another hour of transcription history or painting pictures, and more sports, but of course you know, we never ask questions, or at least most don’t; they just run the answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film-teacher. That’s not social to me at all. It’s a lot of funnels and a lot of water poured down the spout and out the bottom, and them telling us it’s wrong when it’s not. They run us so ragged by the end of the day we can’t do anything but go to bed or head for a Fun Park to bully people around, break windowpanes in the Window Smasher place or wreck cars in the Car Wrecker place with the big steel ball. Or go out in the cars and race on the streets, trying to see how close you can get to lampposts, playing ‘chicken’ and ‘knock hubcaps.’ I guess I’m everything they say I am, all right. I haven’t any friends. That’s supposed to prove I’m abnormal. But everyone knows I know is either shouting or dancing around like wild or beating up one another. Do you notice how people hurt each other nowadays?”

“You sound so very old.”

“Sometimes I’m ancient. I’m afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always used to be that way? My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot in the last year alone. Ten of them died in car wrecks. I’m afraid of them and they don’t like me because I’m afraid. My uncle says he

grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other. But that was a long time ago when the had things different. They believed in responsibility, my uncle says. Do you know, I'm responsible. I was spanked when I needed it, years ago. And I do all the shopping and housecleaning by hand.

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

"What?"

"People don't talk about anything."

"Oh, they *must!*"

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

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

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

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

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

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

Third day.

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

"No, no."

Fourth day.

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

Five, six, seven days.

And, then, Clarisse was gone. He didn't know what there was about the afternoon, but it was no seeing her somewhere in the world. The lawn was empty, the trees empty, the street empty, and while at first he did not even know he missed her or was even looking for her, the fact was that by the time he reached the subway, there were vague stirrings of disease in him. Something was the matter, his routine had been disturbed. A simple routine, true, established in a short few days, and yet . . . ? He almost turned back to make the walk again, to give her time to appear. He was certain if he tried the same route, everything would work out fine. But it was late, and the arrival of his train put a stop to his plan.

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

hour of a cold morning of a still colder year.

“What’s wrong, Montag?”

Montag opened his eyes.

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

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

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

“Your play, Montag.”

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

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

“They took him screaming off to the asylum.”

“He wasn’t insane.”

Beatty arranged his cards quietly. “Any man’s insane who thinks he can fool the government and us.”

“I’ve tried to imagine,” said Montag, “just how it would feel. I mean, to have firemen burn *our* houses and *our* books.”

“We haven’t any books.”

“But if we did have some.”

“You *got* some?”

Beatty blinked slowly.

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

Montag hesitated. “What—was it always like this? The firehouse, our work? I mean, well, once upon a time. . . .”

“Once upon a time!” Beatty said. “What kind of talk is *that*?”

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

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