60TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

FAHRENHEIT 451

RAY BRADBURY

With a new introduction by Neil Gaiman

Fahrenheit 451

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

Ray Bradbury

Introduction by Neil Gaiman

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History, Context, and Criticism

This one, with gratitude,
is for Don Congdon

Introduction

Sometimes writers write about a world that does not yet exist. We do it for a hundred reasons. (Because it's good to look forward, not back. Because we need to illuminate a path we hope or we fear humanity will take. Because the world of the future seems more enticing or more interesting than the world of today. Because we need to warn you. To encourage. To examine. To imagine.) The reasons for writing about the day after tomorrow, and all the tomorrows that follow it, are as many and as varied as the people writing.

This is a book of warning. It is a reminder that what we have is valuable, and that sometimes we take what we value for granted.

There are three phrases that make possible the world of writing about the world of not-yet (you can call it science fiction or speculative fiction; you can call it anything you wish) and they are simple phrases:

What if . . . ?

If only . . .

If this goes on . . .

"What if . . . ?" gives us change, a departure from our lives. *(What if aliens landed tomorrow and gave us everything we wanted, but at a price?)*

"If only . . ." lets us explore the glories and dangers of tomorrow. *(If only dogs could talk. If only I were invisible.)*

"If this goes on . . ." is the most predictive of the three, although it doesn't try to predict an actual future with all its messy confusion. Instead, "If this goes on . . ." fiction takes an element of life today, something clear and obvious and normally something troubling, and asks what would happen if that thing, that one thing, became bigger, became all-pervasive, changed the way we thought and behaved. *(If this goes on, all communication everywhere will be through text messages or computers, and direct speech between two people, without a machine, will be outlawed.)*

It's a cautionary question, and it lets us explore cautionary worlds.

People think—wrongly—that speculative fiction is about predicting the future, but it isn't; or if it is, it tends to do a rotten job of it. Futures are huge things that come with many elements and a billion variables, and the human race has a habit of listening to predictions for what the future will bring and then doing something quite different.

What speculative fiction is really good at is not the future but the present—taking an aspect of it that troubles or is dangerous, and extending and extrapolating that aspect into something that allows the people of that time to see what they are doing from a different angle and from a different place. It's cautionary.

Fahrenheit 451 is speculative fiction. It's an "If this goes on . . ." story. Ray Bradbury was writing about his present, which is our past. He was warning us about things; some of those things are obvious, and some of them, half a century later, are harder to see.

Listen.

If someone tells you what a story is about, they are probably right.

If they tell you that that is *all* the story is about, they are very definitely wrong.

Any story is about a host of things. It is about the author; it is about the world the author sees and deals with and lives in; it is about the words chosen and the way those words are deployed; it is about the story itself and what happens in the story; it is about the people in the story; it is polemic; it is opinion.

An author's opinions of what a story is about are always valid and are always true: the author was there, after all, when the book was written. She came up with each word and knows why she used that word instead of another. But an author is a creature of her time, and even she cannot see everything that her book is about.

More than half a century has passed since 1953. In America in 1953, the comparatively recent medium of radio was already severely on the wane—its reign had lasted about thirty years, but now the exciting new medium of television had come into ascendancy, and the dramas and comedies of radio were either ending for good or reinventing themselves with a visual track on the "idiot box."

The news channels in America warned of juvenile delinquents—teenagers in cars who drove dangerously and lived for kicks. The Cold War was going on—a war between Russia and its allies and America and its allies in which nobody dropped bombs or fired bullets because a dropped bomb could tip the world into a Third World War, a nuclear war from which it would never return. The senate was holding hearings to root out hidden Communists and taking steps to stamp out comic books. And whole families were gathering around the television in the evenings.

The joke in the 1950s went that in the old days you could tell who was home by seeing if the lights were on; now you knew who was home by seeing who had

their lights off. The televisions were small and the pictures were in black and white and you needed to turn off the light to get a good picture.

"If this goes on . . ." thought Ray Bradbury, "nobody will read books anymore," and *Fahrenheit 451* began. He had written a short story once called "The Pedestrian," about a man who is incarcerated by the police after he is stopped simply for walking. That story became part of the world he was building, and seventeen-year-old Clarisse McLellan becomes a pedestrian in a world where nobody walks.

"What if . . . firemen burned down houses instead of saving them?" Bradbury thought, and now he had his way in to the story. He had a fireman named Guy Montag, who saved a book from the flames instead of burning it.

"If only . . . books could be saved," he thought. If you destroy all the physical books, how can you still save them?

Bradbury wrote a story called "The Fireman." The story demanded to be longer. The world he had created demanded more.

He went to UCLA's Powell Library. In the basement were typewriters you could rent by the hour, by putting coins into a box on the side of the typewriter. Ray Bradbury put his money into the box and typed his story. When inspiration flagged, when he needed a boost, when he wanted to stretch his legs, he would walk through the library and look at the books.

And then his story was done.

He called the Los Angeles fire department and asked them at what temperature paper burned. Fahrenheit 451, somebody told him. He had his title. It didn't matter if it was true or not.

The book was published and acclaimed. People loved the book, and they argued about it. It was a novel about censorship, they said, about mind control, about humanity. About government control of our lives. About books.

It was filmed by Francois Truffaut, although the film's ending seems darker than Bradbury's, as if the remembering of books is perhaps not the safety net that Bradbury imagines, but is in itself another dead end.

I read *Fahrenheit 451* as a boy: I did not understand Guy Montag, did not understand why he did what he did, but I understood the love of books that drove him. Books were the most important things in my life. The huge wall-screen televisions were as futuristic and implausible as the idea that people on the television would talk to me, that I could take part if I had a script. *Fahrenheit* was never a favorite book: it was too dark, too bleak for that. But when I read a story called "Usher II" in *The Silver Locusts* (the UK title for *The Martian Chronicles*), I recognized the world of outlawed authors and imagination with a fierce sort of familiar joy.

When I reread it as a teenager, *Fahrenheit 451* had become a book about independence, about thinking for yourself. It was about treasuring books and the dissent inside the covers of books. It was about how we as humans begin by burning books and end by burning people.

Rereading it as an adult, I find myself marveling at the book once more. It is all of those things, yes, but it is also a period piece. The four-wall television being described is the television of the 1950s: variety shows with symphony orchestras and low-brow comedians, and soap operas. The world of fast-driving, crazy teenagers out for kicks, of an endless cold war that sometimes goes hot, of wives who appear to have no jobs or identities save for their husbands', of bad men

being chased by hounds (even mechanical hounds) is a world that feels like it has its roots firmly in the 1950s.

A young reader finding this book today, or the day after tomorrow, is going to have to imagine first a past, and then a future that belongs to that past.

But still, the heart of the book remains untouched, and the questions Bradbury raises remain as valid and important.

Why do we need the things in books? The poems, the essays, the stories? Authors disagree. Authors are human and fallible and foolish. Stories are lies after all, tales of people who never existed and the things that never actually happened to them. Why should we read them? Why should we care?

The teller and the tale are very different. We must not forget that.

Ideas—written ideas—are special. They are the way we transmit our stories and our thoughts from one generation to the next. If we lose them, we lose our shared history. We lose much of what makes us human. And fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over.

I knew Ray Bradbury for the last thirty years of his life, and I was so lucky. He was funny and gentle and always (even at the end, when he was so old he was blind and wheelchair-bound, even then) enthusiastic. He cared, completely and utterly, about things. He cared about toys and childhood and films. He cared about books. He cared about stories.

This is a book about caring for things. It's a love letter to books, but I think, just as much, it's a love letter to people, and a love letter to the world of Waukegan, Illinois, in the 1920s, the world in which Ray Bradbury had grown up

and which he immortalized as Green Town in his book of childhood, *Dandelion Wine*.

As I said when we began: If someone tells you what a story is about, they are probably right. If they tell you that that is *all* the story is about, they are probably wrong. So any of the things I have told you about *Fahrenheit 451,* Ray Bradbury's remarkable book of warning, will be incomplete. It is about these things, yes. But it is about more than that. It is about what you find between its pages.

(As a final note, in these days when we worry and we argue about whether ebooks are real books, I love how broad Ray Bradbury's definition of a book is at the end, when he points out that we should not judge our books by their covers, and that some books exist between covers that are perfectly people-shaped.)

—Neil Gaiman

April 2013

If they give you ruled paper, write the other way.

—*Juan Ramón Jiménez*

one

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

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

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

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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 a lawn before he could focus his eyes or speak.

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

He turned the corner.

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

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

"Of course," he said, "you're 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. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane. Isn't this a nice time of night to walk? I like to smell things and look at things, and sometimes stay up all night, walking, and watch the sun rise."

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

He was surprised. "Why should you be?"

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

He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact. Her face, turned to him now, was fragile milk crystal with a soft and constant light in it. It was not the hysterical light of electricity but—what? But the strangely comfortable and rare and gently flattering light of the candle. One time, 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 they, mother and son, alone, transformed, hoping that the power might not come on again too soon. . . .

And then Clarisse McClellan said:

"Do you mind if I ask? How long'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, 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 char-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, only rarer. My uncle was arrested another time—did I tell you?—for being a pedestrian. Oh, we're *most* peculiar."

"But what do you *talk* about?"

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

"Am I *what?*" he cried.

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

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"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 it has to tell of the night passing swiftly on toward further darknesses, but moving also toward a new sun.

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

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

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

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

He opened the bedroom door.

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

He listened.

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

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

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

The room was cold but nonetheless he felt he could not breathe. He did not wish to open the 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, 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.

o o o

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

The other machine, 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 a 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, 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 adders, took up their load of machine and tube, their case of liquid melancholy and the slow dark sludge of nameless stuff, and strolled out the door.

Montag sank down into a chair and looked at this woman. Her eyes were closed now, gently, and he put out his hand to feel the warmness 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 it 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.