

Reborn from the Ashes

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Montag's big black boots stirred up the dust on the ground; the dust of his neighbors and his fellow firemen, the remnants of his old life, and those ruins of the great city which had taken centuries to flourish and three seconds to demolish. He found himself thinking again about Mildred and her last moments, probably in a hotel with the bright pulsating lights from the walls reflecting off her animated face. She would be surrounded on all four sides by her 'family' who lived in the walls – they who could never love her back

Montag stopped in his tracks. Had he ever loved her? Mildred had been his wife, yet he could not muster the appropriate sadness at the thought of her death. Montag wondered what was wrong with him; no cutting pain had seared his heart nor had a bottomless hole robbed him and left him starved, empty, hollow. Instead, it felt like someone down the street had passed away. Had they really just been strangers living in the same home, bound by circumstances? Mildred had always viewed the 'aunts' and 'uncles' on the walls as her true family. Even he had taken to referring to them as such! Suddenly Montag wondered, would Mildred have noticed if one day he had decided to walk out the door and never come back? He doubted it; she had turned him in to the authorities as easily as a nosy neighbor barging in on someone else's life. Montag found that he was no longer angry, just slightly sad. Looking at the overcast sky, darkened with smoke, he thought, "Oh Mildred, if only you had known what I know now. You were so happy living out of reality, addicted to the color and the noise – the feeling that you were living when really you were trapped."

Sidestepping the rubble, Granger joined Montag and the rest of the group. "We need to search for survivors," he said slowly, looking at the ruins of the city. Montag mutely nodded and trained his eyes to the beaten yet solid earth. It had survived the calamity, unlike the immense skyscrapers which had imprisoned it in bonds of steel for so many years. Montag wondered again at Granger's story about the phoenix. How many life cycles would the human race have to go through before they got it right, before war and suppression were just a memory?

Clarisse McClellan. The name suddenly spun into his head, bringing with it swarms of memories. Montag had to admit that Clarisse had alerted him to his unhappiness, yet he harbored no ill will towards her. Wasn't it better to feel alive, even if life brought wounds and heartaches? Montag wondered what Clarisse was doing right then, if she had found a place where people stopped to look at the man in the moon and noticed that there was dew on the grass in the morning. He refused to believe that she was dead, simply run over by a speeding car. Dreamy seventeen-year-old Clarisse. Her pale orb-like face and wide, probing, curious eyes swam into Montag's mind. It was she who had asked him if he was happy and if he loved Mildred. She could have been like a daughter to him, Montag realized. He smiled, remembering her incessant chatter and the way she slowly walked down the street, as if a light but steady wind was pulling her thin frame along. No, Clarisse could not be dead. Her future could not be over, her bright star already fizzled out, leveled like these buildings. She could not have died before the change that she had craved. No, Montag knew that Clarisse was alive somewhere, probably doing the same thing as he at the moment, picking up and clearing away the remnants of a civilization. The thought made him want to smile and weep at the same time.

Montag's foot hit something hard and, looking down, he felt his blood freeze for an instant. At his feet were the remains of the Hound, its stinger poised with some of the clear dreaded fluid leaking out. Montag's throat suddenly felt constricted, as if the bacon he had eaten earlier was travelling up his throat. The sooty smell of kerosene that never went away, the salamander on his arm, 451 – it seemed like a forgotten nightmare, someone else's life that he had watched from afar. Montag wondered about

the poor fellow who had taken his place, an ordinary man who had been slaughtered to save face and to satisfy the bloodthirstiness of an eager audience. Someone whom everyone watched become the eager hound's main course, for no reason except that he was out walking at night and the authorities needed a scapegoat.

Seeing Montag's expression, Granger reached over and firmly clasped his shoulder. "The fireman's regime," he said calmly. "Everyone has lived in fear and censure so long. It will be hard to change, but not impossible." The calmness of his voice seemed to radiate and give strength to his men.

"Things will change," said Montag passionately. "Now that people can read books, everything will change. We will remember how to hold normal conversations with people and that unhappiness does not come from disagreement." Clarisse had it right all along, he thought. We were living but not living, trying to satisfy everyone, pretending.

Granger smiled sadly, his beard seeming to turn down at the corners. "Montag, you forget that people stopped reading on their own. There needs to be a different kind of change, a change with the new generation."

"Granger, I found somebody!" The man's voice pierced a hole through Montag's musings, and he abruptly looked up. The burly bearded man was carrying what appeared to be a bundle of clothes. Montag stepped forward warily, watching as Granger removed the top covering. A vestige from the outside world; already, Montag had started to identify himself with Granger and the other 'hoboes' who called the railroad their home.

The newcomer was a slight boy, around sixteen years old. "He's unconscious, but he'll make it," whispered one of the men, motioning for Montag to follow him back into the ruins. Montag stared, speechless, silent, wondering, into the boy's face. Could this be? Something in the boy's face reminded him painfully of Clarisse – the same soul-searching hunger, the same curiosity and vibrancy. Clarisse. The boy's chest rhythmically swelled and deflated as the boy clung to life, as if a strange power was pushing down just as the lungs had gotten enough air.

"Montag, you coming?" Granger glanced over his shoulder as he strode over to the group. "There might be more survivors out there." Montag brushed off the knees of his pants then slowly joined the men. Glancing back at the boy, Montag felt a fierce grin grip his face, similar to one not so long ago driven by flame and fire. This time, the boy who represented the new generation – a brand new phoenix – infused confidence and hope in Montag's head, and this newfound optimism put a buoyant spring into Montag's step as he headed toward the broken city.