

Fahrenheit 451

I remember the paper and the sticks and the coal;

- my mother striking a match and it flaring into life and the paper catching alight and the golden flames spreading;

- and the kindling beginning to smoulder giving birth to the fire and I remember the coal burning bright, glowing and throwing out heat

and light.

I remember sitting in front of the blazing fire with my mother feeling safe and warm; her telling me stories and reading from books;

- I remember her smell and how she felt;

- and I remember all the things she taught me.

Mother taught me lots of things before she left, little trinkets of information, mostly of no consequence but important none the less. Not school things, one and one makes you bright, a verb is a doing thing. No, interesting stuff. Like, for example, if you're ever lost in a desert and dying of thirst look out for bees; they'll take you straight to water. And because you don't *have* to remember, like you *have* to at school, you do. You say to yourself that's interesting and you remember it, just like that. No effort. You squirrel it away and store it in the back of your mind. One night while snuggling in front of the fire, looking at pictures of animals in one of my books, she cupped her mouth with her hand (as you do to keep a secret) and spoke softly into my ear and told me that monkeys could talk. I didn't believe her and replied, only in cartoons. She said they did. But they didn't, she told me, when people were about because they didn't want to be sent off to work!

I find it hard to remember her face, fire reminds me.

I can see the fire though; feel the warmth of her body as she cuddles me. I can still see the golden glow reflected on the walls of our small home, shadows of flames dancing on the walls. Mothers love. I can hear her whispering to me, telling me things she thinks I should know. Promising she'll always be with me, telling me not to forget that she loved me. Just like ash is proof that a fire once raged, the things she told me are the remnants of her existence. Only when a fire is burning bright do I see her again, as I remember her; her hot breath on my cheek; and hear her whispering in my ear.

Or is it my mind playing tricks?

I struck a match once and felt my mother's presence.

As it blazed between my fingers, I couldn't let go. I still to this day have the scars seared into my flesh by the flames. I remember her calling my name. I only strike matches to be with my mother; is that so wrong? Doesn't everyone want to be with their mother, safe and sound and secure? As the flames leap up to the sky I know she can see my beacons because that's when she comes back to me, she never fails; and as each fire crackles and grows brighter she tells me lots more things. It was about then that people started to say that I was disturbed by bad memories. But for me they were good, so good that I struck more matches.

I can remember her touch,

I also remember her presence,

And I can remember how she felt.

He can't hear this of course sitting by my side as I lie on the couch. I've decided only to answer the questions I'm asked, not to tell what I'm thinking. I know, and he knows that I know, what he's doing. At least two of them need to agree about me before a final decision is made. I know the form, what has to happen. Two consultants need to be of the same mind.

Nothing to do with me, it's my mind they think is broken. Cracked, gone askew, different to theirs and yours. I am asked an endless number of questions about my childhood and parents and religion. And I give them different answers. Not to confuse them, just to make my life seem more interesting than theirs. When they compare notes to arrive at a conclusion, they may mutually diagnose that they are simply talking with a muddled-up boy who loved and still desperately misses his mother.

Having asked all their questions, probed my hidden psyche, one of them brings out a set of white cards covered in splodges of black and coloured pigment. My task is to interpret them, tell what I think they represent. In the first I see a duck sitting on a pond, in the second a white elephant on a tiger hunt. But I think it's the last picture that the first of my inquisitors shows me that intrigues him most. I just had to smile when I noticed his hooded eyebrows furl, the tram lines on his forehead knit when I described the tabby cat sitting trapped in a gilded cage, the yellow canary sitting content on top looking in at the ferocious beast.

But I don't see any of that,

I see other things,

I see my mother,

I see fire,

I hear screams,

That's the truth.

But it's when we start to play word associations that I really excel. Watch, they say - and I say what? No they say not look, 'watch', so to make them happy I say 'tick tock'. The next words are more difficult to play around with. They say 'eye' to which I reply, as any sane person would, 'dun-see'. 'Toe' I'm given to interpret to which I tell a blatant lie and say 'spanner'. You see we are back playing a game that they know, that I know, we are

playing. But I know, that they don't think I know that soon they are going to trick me, not very subtly – blatantly in fact. But they do know I will find the words hard to resist.

'Match' they say and I say 'erection', at which point they always, without fail, imperceptibly nod their heads, they know they've got me, and so do I. One writes down a strange looking word on his note pad. I can't pronounce it; it could be Greek for all I know. 'Flames' they say without hesitation, 'pleasure' tumbles off my tongue, and inside I smile, but I don't allow it to set my eyes alight. That would be giving too much away too soon. I would lose before having begun, and they will win, they always do. That's inevitable. 'Fire' they say and I say 'ejaculate' and feel the pleasure surging. We are nearly there now one more word and their diagnosis, their scholarly opinion of what I am will be complete. 'Blaze' they say with relish, as though enjoying this as much as I - and I find it hard to resist saying 'mother'.

Why do you say that they ask?

And I, in all my innocence, always reply and tell them it's because mothers spread warmth and love... why else?

Can you remember your mother they ask?

Yes, I do I reply.

She told me that paper ignites at 451 degrees Fahrenheit.