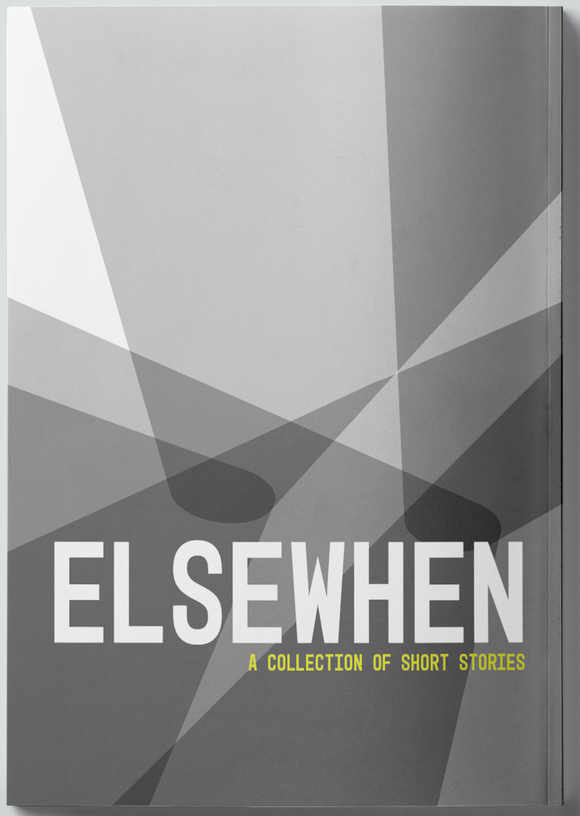

THE PEDESTRIAN

RAY BRADBURY

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do. He would stand upon the corner of an intersection and peer down long moonlit avenues of sidewalks in four directions, deciding which way to go, but it really made no difference; he was ALONE in this world of A.D. 2053, or as good as alone, and with a final decision made, a path selected, he would stride off, sending patterns of frosty air before him like the smoke of a cigar.

Sometimes he would walk for hours and miles and return only at midnight to his house. And on his way he would see the cottages and homes with their DARK windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a GRAVEYARD where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows. Sudden grey PHANTOMS seemed to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still undrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a torn-like building was still open.

Mr Leonard Mead would pause, cock his head, listen, look, and march on, his feet making no noise on the lumpy walk. For long ago he had wisely changed to sneakers when strolling at night, because the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel his journey with barkings if he wore hard heels, and lights might click on and faces appear and an entire street by startled by the passing of a LONE FIGURE, himself, in the early November evening.

On this particular evening he began his journey in a westerly direction, toward the hidden sea. There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside; you could feel the COLD LIGHT going on and off, all the branches filled with invisible snow. He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through the autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whittle between his teeth, occasionally picking up a leaf as he passed, examining its SKELETAL pattern in the infrequent lamplights as he went on, smelling its rusty smell.

"Hello, in there," he whispered to every house on every side as he moved. "What's up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?"

The street was SILENT and LONG and EMPTY, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in mid-country. If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the centre of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company.

"What is it now?" he asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch. "Eight-thirty pm? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?"

Was that a murmur of laughter from within the moon-white house? He hesitated, but went on when nothing happened. He stumbled over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk. The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass. In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, NOT ONCE in all that time.

He came to a cloverleaf intersection which stood SILENT where two main highways crossed the town. During the day it was a thunderous surge of cars, the gas stations open, a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarab-beetles, a faint incense puttering from their exhausts, skimmed homeward to the far directions. But now these highways, too, were like streams in a dry season, all stone and bed and moon radiance.

He turned back on a side street, circling around toward his home. He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a FIERCE white cone of light upon him. He stood entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn toward it.

A metallic voice called to him: STAND STILL. STAY WHERE YOU ARE! DON'T MOVE!

He halted.

PUT UP YOUR HANDS!

"But –" he said.

YOUR HANDS UP! OR WE'LL SHOOT!

The police, of course, but what a rare, incredible thing; in a city of three million, there was only one police car left, wasn't that correct? Ever since a year ago, 2052, the election year, the force had been cut down from three cars to one. Crime was ebbing; there was no need now for the police, save for this one lone car wandering and wandering the empty streets.

YOUR NAME? said the police car in a metallic whisper. He couldn't see the men in it for the bright light in his eyes.

"Leonard Mead," he said. SPEAK UP!

BUSINESS OR PROFESSION?

"I guess you'd call me a writer."

NO PROFESSION, said the police car, as if talking to itself. The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through his chest.

"You might say that," said Mr. Mead. He hadn't written in years. Magazines and books didn't sell any more.

Everything went on in the tomblike houses at night now, he thought, continuing his fancy. The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicoloured lights touching their faces, but never really touching them.

NO PROFESSION, said the phonograph voice, hissing. WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT?

WALKING!

WALKING, JUST WALKING, WALKING?

WALKING WHERE? FOR WHAT?

WALKING FOR AIR. WALKING TO SEE.

YOUR ADDRESS!

AND THERE IS AIR IN YOUR HOUSE,

YOU HAVE AN AIR CONDITIONER, MR. MEAD?

AND A VIEWING SCREEN IN YOUR HOUSE TO SEE WITH?

NO? ARE YOU MARRIED, MR. MEAD?

DON'T SPEAK UNLESS YOU'RE SPOKEN TO!

JUST WALKING, MR. MEAD?

BUT YOU HAVEN'T EXPLAINED FOR WHAT PURPOSE.

HAVE YOU DONE THIS OFTEN?

GET IN.

GET IN.

GET IN.

WELL IF YOU HAD A WIFE TO GIVE YOU AN ALIBI, the iron voice said. BUT–

TO THE PSYCHIATRIC CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON REGRESSIVE TENDENCIES.

square and warm in the cool darkness.

"That's my house," said Leonard Mead.

No one answered them.

The car moved down the empty river-bed streets and off over, leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and NO SOUND and NO MOTION all the rest of the chill November night.