Zero Hour

By Ray Bradbury

Oh, it was to be so jolly! What a game! Such excitement they hadn't known in years. The children catapulted this way and that across the green lawns, shouting at each other, holding hands, flying in circles, climbing trees, laugh-ing. Overhead the rockets flew, and beetle cars whispered by on the streets, but the children played on. Such fun, such tremulous joy, such tumbling and hearty screaming.

Mink ran into the house, all dirty and sweat. For her seven years she was loud and strong and definite. Her mother, Mrs. Morris, hardly saw her as she yanked out drawers and rattled pans and tools into a large sack.

'Heavens, Mink, what's going on?'

'The most exciting game ever!' gasped Mink, pink-faced.

'Stop and get your breath,' said the mother.

'No, I'm all right,' gasped Mink. 'Okay I take these things, Mom?'

'But don't dent them,' said Mrs. Morris.

'Thank you, thank you!' cried Mink, and boom! She was gone, like a rocket.

Mrs. Morris surveyed the fleeing tot. 'What's the name of the game?'

'Invasion!' said Mink. The door slammed.

In every yard on the street children brought out knives and forks and pokers and old stovepipes and can-openers.

It was an interesting fact that this fury and bustle occurred only among the younger children. The older ones, those ten years and more, disdained the affair and marched scornfully off on hikes or played a more dignified version of hide-and-seek on their own.

Meanwhile, parents came and went in chromium beetles. Repairmen came to repair the vacuum

elevators in houses, to fix fluttering television sets or hammer upon stubborn food-delivery tubes. The adult civilization passed and repassed the busy youngsters, jealous of the fierce energy of the wild tots, tolerantly amused at their flourishings, longing to join in themselves.

'This and this and *this*,' said Mink, instructing the others with their assorted spoons and wrenches. 'Do that, and bring *that* over here. No! *Here*, ninny! Right. Now, get back while I fix this.' Tongue in teeth, face wrinkled in thought. 'Like that. See?'

'Yayyy!' shouted the kids.

Twelve-year-old Joseph Connors ran up.

'Go away,' said Mink straight at him.

'I wanna play,' said Joseph.

'Can't!' said Mink.

'Why not?'

'You'd just make fun of us.'

'Honest, I wouldn't.'

'No. We know *you*. Go away or we'll kick you.'

Another twelve-year-old boy whirred by on little motor skates. 'Hey, Joe! Come on! Let them sissies play!'

Joseph showed reluctance and a certain wistfulness. 'I *want* to play,' he said.

'You're old,' said Mink firmly.

'Not *that* old,' said Joe sensibly.

'You'd only laugh and spoil the Invasion.'

The boy on the motor skates made a rude lip noise. 'Come on, Joe! Them and their fairies! Nuts!'

Joseph walked off slowly. He kept looking back, all down the block.

Mink was already busy again. She made a kind of apparatus with her gathered equipment. She had appointed another little girl with a pad and pencil to take down notes in painful slow scribbles. Their voices rose and fell in the warm sunlight.

All around them the city hummed. The streets were lined with good green and peaceful trees. Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the

country, across the continent. In a thousand other cities there were trees and children and avenues, businessmen in their quiet offices taping their voices, or watching television. Rockets hovered like darning needles in the blue sky. There was the universal, quiet conceit and easiness of men accustomed to peace, quite certain there would never be trouble again. Arm in arm, men all over earth were a united front. The perfect weapons were held in equal trust by all nations. A situation of incredibly beautiful balance had been brought about. There were no traitors among men, no unhappy ones, no disgruntled ones; therefore the world was based upon a stable ground. Sunlight illumined half the world and the trees drowsed in a tide of warm air.

Mink's mother, from her upstairs window, gazed down.

The children. She looked upon them and shook her head. Well, they'd eat well, sleep well, and be in school on Monday. Bless their vigorous little bodies. She listened.

Mink talked earnestly to someone near the rose bush—though there was no one there.

These odd children. And the little girl, what was her name? Anna? Anna took notes on a pad. First, Mink asked the rose bush a question, then called the answer to Anna.

'Triangle,' said Mink.

'What's a tri,' said Anna with difficulty, 'angle?'

'Never mind,' said Mink.

'How you spell it?' asked Anna.

'T-r-i-' spelled Mink slowly, then snapped, 'Oh, spell it yourself!' She went on to other words. 'Beam,' she said.

'I haven't got tri,' said Anna, 'angle down yet!'

'Well, hurry, hurry!' cried Mink.

Mink's mother leaned out of the upstairs window. 'A-n-g-l-e,' she spelled down at Anna.

'Oh, thanks, Mrs. Morris,' said Anna.

'Certainly,' said Mink's mother and withdrew,

laughing, to dust the hall with an electro-duster magnet.

The voices wavered on the shimmery air. 'Beam,' said Anna. Fading.

'Four-nine-seven-A-and-B-and-X,' said Mink, far away, seriously. 'And a fork and a string and a—hex-hex-agony—hexagonal!'

At lunch Mink gulped milk at one toss and was at the door. Her mother slapped the table.

'You sit right back down,' commanded Mrs. Morris. 'Hot soup in a minute.' She poked a red button on the kitchen butler, and ten seconds later something landed with a hump in the rubber receiver. Mrs. Morris opened it, took out a can with a pair of aluminium holders, unsealed it with a flick, and poured hot soup into a bowl.

During all this Mink fidgeted. 'Hurry, Mom! This is a matter of life and death! Aw—'

'I was the same way at your age. Always life and death, I know.'

Mink banged away at the soup.

'Slow down,' said Mom.

'Can't,' said Mink. 'Drill's waiting for me.'

'Who's Drill? What a peculiar name,' said Mom.

'You don't know him,' said Mink.

'A new boy in the neighborhood?' asked Mom.

'He's new all right,' said Mink. She started on her second bowl.

'Which one is Drill?' asked Mom.

'He's around,' said Mink evasively. 'You'll make fun. Everybody pokes fun. Gee, darn.'

'Is Drill shy?'

'Yes. No. In a way. Gosh, Mom, I got to run if we want to have the Invasion!'

'Who's invading what?'

'Martians invading Earth. Well, not exactly Martians. They're—I don't know. From up.' She pointed with her spoon.

'And *inside*,' said Mom, touching Mink's feverish brow.

Mink rebelled. 'You're laughing! You'll kill Drill and everybody.'

'I didn't mean to,' said Mom. 'Drill's a Martian?'

'No. He's—well—maybe from Jupiter or Saturn or Venus. Anyway, he's had a hard time.'

'I imagine.' Mrs. Morris hid her mouth behind her hand.

'They couldn't figure a way to attack Earth.'

'We're impregnable,' said Mom in mock seriousness.

'That's the word Drill used! Impreg—That was the word, Mom.'

'My, my, Drill's a brilliant little boy. Two-bit words.'

'They couldn't figure a way to attack, Mom. Drill says—he says in order to make a good fight you got to have a new way of surprising people. That way you win. And he says also you got to have help from your enemy.'

'A fifth column,' said Mom.

'Yeah. That's what Drill said. And they couldn't figure a way to surprise Earth or get help.'

'No wonder. We're pretty darn strong.' Mom laughed, cleaning up. Mink sat there, staring at the table, seeing what she was talking about.

'Until, one day,' whispered Mink melodramatically, 'they thought of children!'

'*Well!*' said Mrs. Morris brightly.

'And they thought of how grown-ups are so busy they never look under rose bushes or on lawns!'

'Only for snails and fungus.'

'And then there's something about dim-dims.'

'Dim-dims?'

'Dimens-shuns.'

'Dimensions?'

'Four of 'em! And there's something about kids under nine and imagination. It's real funny to hear Drill talk.'

Mrs. Morris was tired. 'Well, it must he funny. You're keeping Drill waiting now. It's getting late in

the day and, if you want to have your Invasion before your supper bath, you'd better jump.'

'Do I have to take a bath?' growled Mink.

'You do! Why is it children hate water? No *matter* what age you live in children hate water behind the ears!'

'Drill says I won't have to take baths,' said Mink.

'Oh, he does, does he?'

'He told all the kids that. No more baths. And we can stay up till ten o'clock and go to two televisor shows on Saturday 'stead of one!'

'Well, Mr. Drill better mind his p's and q's. I'll call up his mother and—'

Mink went to the door. 'We're having trouble with guys like Pete Britz and Dale Jerrick. They're growing up. They make fun. They're worse than parents. They just won't believe in Drill. They're so snooty, 'cause they're growing up. You'd think they'd know better. They were little only a coupla years ago. I hate them worst. We'll kill them *first*.'

'Your father and I last?'

'Drill says you're dangerous. Know why? 'Cause you don't believe in Martians! They're going to let *us* run the world. Well, not just us, but the kids over in the next block, too. I might be queen.' She opened the door.

'Mom?'

'Yes?'

'What's lodge-ick?'

'Logic? Why, dear, logic is knowing what things are true and not true.'

'He *mentioned* that,' said Mink. 'And what's im-pres-sion-able?' It took her a minute to say it.

'Why, it means—' Her mother looked at the floor, laughing gently. 'It means—to be a child, dear.'

'Thanks for lunch!' Mink ran out, then stuck her head back in. 'Mom, I'll be sure you won't be hurt much, really!'

'Well, thanks,' said Mom.

Slam went the door.

At four o'clock the audio-visor buzzed. Mrs. Morris flipped the tab. 'Hello, Helen!' she said in welcome.

'Hello, Mary. How are things in New York?'

'Fine. How are things in Scranton? You look tired.'

'So do you. The children. Underfoot,' said Helen.

Mrs. Morris sighed. 'My Mink too. The super-invasion.'

Helen laughed. 'Are your kids playing that game too?'

'Lord, yes. Tomorrow it'll be geometrical jacks and motorized hopscotch. Were we this bad when we were kids in '48?'

'Worse. Japs and Nazis. Don't know how my parents put up with me. Tomboy.'

'Parents learn to shut their ears.'

A silence.

'What's wrong, Mary?' asked Helen.

Mrs. Morris's eyes were half closed; her tongue slid slowly thoughtfully, over her lower lip. 'Eh?' She jerked. 'Oh, nothing. Just thought about *that*. Shutting ears and such. Never mind. Where were we?'

'My boy Tim's got a crush on some guy named *Drill*, I think it was.'

'Must be a new password. Mink likes him too.'

'Didn't know it had got as far as New York. Word of mouth, I imagine. Looks like a scrap drive. I talked to Josephine and she said her kids—that's in Boston—are wild on this new game. It's sweeping the country.'

At this moment Mink trotted into the kitchen to gulp a glass of water. Mrs. Morris turned. 'How're things going?'

'Almost finished,' said Mink.

'Swell,' said Mrs. Morris. 'What's *that?*'

'A yo-yo,' said Mink. 'Watch.'

She flung the yo-yo down its string. Reaching the end it—

It vanished.

‘See?’ said Mink. ‘Ope!’ Dibbling her finger, she made the yo-yo reappear and zip up the string.

‘Do that again,’ said her mother.

‘Can’t. Zero hour’s five o’clock! Bye.’ Mink exited, zipping her yo-yo.

On the audio-visor, Helen laughed. ‘Tim brought one of those yo-yos in this morning, but when I got curious he said he wouldn’t show it to me, and when I tried to work it, finally, it wouldn’t work.’

‘You’re not *impressionable*,’ said Mrs. Morris.

‘What?’

‘Never mind. Something I thought of. Can I help you, Helen?’

‘I wanted to get that black-and-white cake recipe—’

The hour drowsed by. The way waned. The sun lowered in the peaceful blue sky. Shadows lengthened on the green lawns. The laughter and excitement continued. One little girl ran away, crying. Mrs. Morris came out the front door.

‘Mink was that Peggy Ann crying?’

Mink was bent over in the yard, near the rose bush. ‘Yeah. She’s a scarebaby. We won’t let her play, now. She’s getting too old to play. I guess she grew up all of a sudden.’

‘Is that why she cried? Nonsense. Give me a civil answer, young lady, or inside you come!’

Mink whirled in consternation, mixed with irritation. ‘I can’t quit now. It’s almost time. I’ll be good. I’m sorry.’

‘Did you hit Peggy Ann?’

‘No, honest. You ask her. It was something—well, she’s just a scaredy pants.’

The ring of children drew in around Mink where she scowled at her work with spoons and a kind of square-shaped arrangement of hammers and pipes. ‘There and there,’ murmured Mink.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Mrs. Morris.

‘Drill’s stuck. Half-way. If we could only get him all the way through it’d be easier. Then the

others could come through after him.'

'Can I help?'

'No thanks. I'll fix it.'

'All right. I'll call you for your bath in half an hour. I'm tired of watching you.'

She went in and sat in the electric relaxing chair, sipping a little beer from a half-empty glass. The chair massaged her back. Children, children. Children and love and hate, side by side. Sometimes children loved you, hated you—all in half a second. Strange children, did they ever forget or forgive the whippings and the harsh, strict words of command? She wondered. How can you ever forget or forgive those over and above you, those tall and silly dictators?

Time passed. A curious, waiting silence came upon the street, deepening.

Five o'clock. A clock sang softly somewhere in the house in a quiet musical voice: 'Five o'clock—five o'clock. Time's a-wasting. Five o'clock—' and purred away into silence.

Zero hour.

Mrs. Morris chuckled in her throat. Zero hour.

A beetle car hummed into the driveway. Mr. Morris. Mrs. Morris smiled. Mr. Morris got out of the beetle, locked it, and called hello to Mink at her work. Mink ignored him. He laughed and stood for a moment watching the children. Then he walked up the front steps.

'Hello, darling.'

'Hello, Henry.'

She strained forward on the edge of the chair, listening. The children were silent. Too silent. He emptied his pipe, refilled it. 'Swell day. Makes you glad to be alive.'

Buzz.

'What's that?' asked Henry.

'I don't know.' She got up suddenly, her eyes widening. She was going to say something. She stopped it. Ridiculous. Her nerves jumped. 'Those children

haven't anything dangerous out there, have they?' she said.

'Nothing but pipes and hammers. Why?'

'Nothing electrical?'

'Heck, no,' said Henry. 'I looked.'

She walked to the kitchen. The buzzing continued. 'Just the same, you'd better go tell them to quit. It's after five. Tell them—' Her eyes widened and narrowed. 'Tell them to put off their Invasion until tomorrow.' She laughed, nervously.

The buzzing grew louder.

'What are they up to? I'd better go look, all right.'

The explosion!

The house shook with dull sound. There were other explosions in other yards on other streets.

Involuntarily, Mrs. Morris screamed. 'Up this way!' she cried senselessly, knowing no sense, no reason. Perhaps she saw something from the corners of her eyes; perhaps she smelled a new odor or heard a new noise. There was no time to argue with Henry to convince him. Let him think her insane. Yes, insane! Shrieking, she ran upstairs. He ran after her to see what she was up to. 'In the attic!' she screamed. 'That's where it is!' It was only a poor excuse to get him in the attic in time. Oh, God—in time!

Another explosion outside. The children screamed with delight, as if at a great fireworks display.

'It's not in the attic,' cried Henry. 'It's outside!'

'No, no!' Wheezing, gasping, she fumbled at the attic door. 'I'll show you. Hurry! I'll show you!'

They tumbled into the attic. She slammed the door, locked it, took the key, threw it into a far, cluttered corner.

She was babbling wild stuff now. It came out of her. All the subconscious suspicion and fear that had gathered secretly all afternoon and fermented like a wine in her. All the little revelations and knowledges and sense that had bothered her all day and which she had logically and carefully and sensibly rejected and censored. Now it exploded in her and shook her

to bits.

'There, there,' she said, sobbing against the door. 'We're safe until tonight. Maybe we can sneak out. Maybe we can escape!'

Henry blew up too, but for another reason. 'Are you crazy? Why'd you throw that key away? Damn it, honey!'

'Yes, yes, I'm crazy, if it helps, but stay here with me!'

'I don't know how in hell I *can* get out!'

'Quiet. They'll hear us. Oh, God, they'll find us soon enough—'

Below them, Mink's voice. The husband stopped. There was a great universal humming and sizzling, a screaming and giggling. Downstairs the audio-televisor buzzed and buzzed insistently, alarmingly, violently. *Is that Helen calling?* thought Mrs. Morris. *And is she calling about what I think she's calling about?*

Footsteps came into the house. Heavy footsteps.

'Who's coming in my house?' demanded Henry angrily. 'Whose tramping around down there?'

Heavy feet. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty of them. Fifty persons crowding into the house. The humming. The giggling of the children. 'This way!' cried Mink, below.

'Who's downstairs?' roared Henry. 'Who's there!'

'Hush. Oh, nononononono!' said his wife weakly, holding him. 'Please, be quiet. They might go away.'

'Mom?' called Mink. 'Dad?' A pause. 'Where are you?'

Heavy footsteps, heavy, heavy, very *heavy* footsteps, came up the stairs. Mink leading them.

'Mom?' A hesitation. 'Dad?' A waiting, a silence.

Humming. Footsteps toward the attic. Mink's first.

They trembled together in silence in the attic, Mr. and Mrs. Morris. For some reason the electric humming, the queer cold light suddenly visible under the door crack, the strange odor and the alien sound

of eagerness in Mink's voice finally got through to Henry Morris too. He stood, shivering, in the dark silence, his wife beside him.

'Mom! Dad!'

Footsteps. A little humming sound. The attic-lock melted. The door opened. Mink peered inside, tall blue shadows behind her.

'Peekaboo,' said Mink.