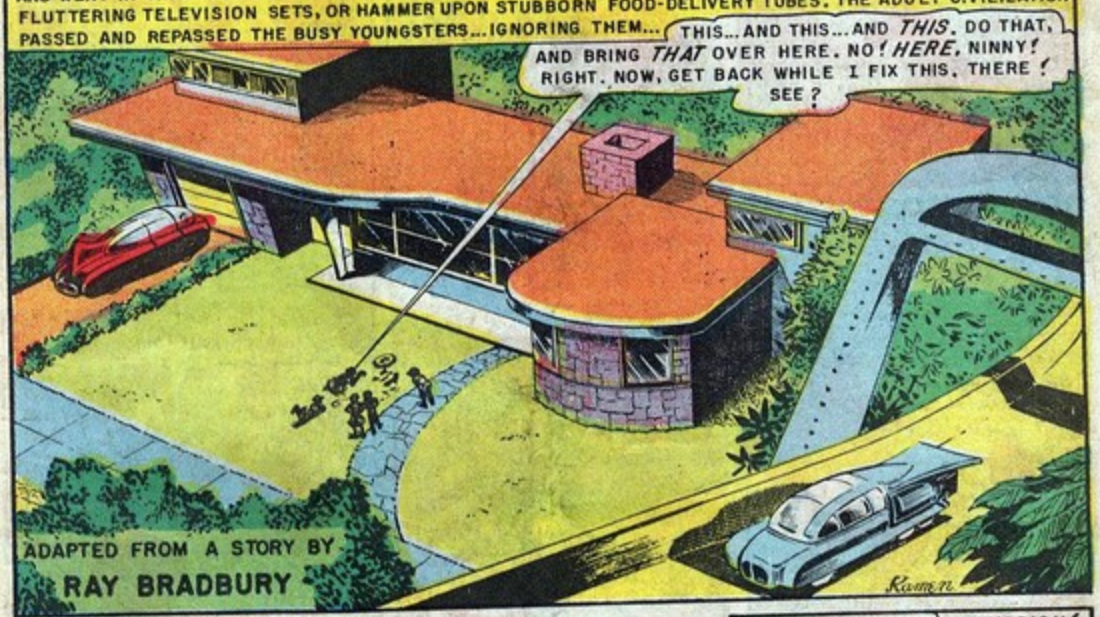
ZERO HOUR

IT WAS AN INTERESTING FACT THAT THE 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 GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK ON THEIR OWN. MEANWHILE, PARENTS CAME AND WENT IN CHROMIUM BEETLE CARS. REPAIRMEN CAME TO REPAIR 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... IGNORING THEM...



THE CHILDREN CATAPULTED ACROSS GREEN LAWNS, SHOUTING AT EACH OTHER. MINK RAN INTO HER HOUSE, ALL DIRT AND SWEAT...

FOR HER SEVEN YEARS, MINK WAS LOUD AND STRONG AND DEFINITE! HER MOTHER, MRS. MORRIS, WATCHED HER AS SHE YANKED OUT DRAWERS AND RATTLED PANS AND TOOLS INTO A LARGE SACK...

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IN ALMOST EVERY YARD ON THE STREET, CHILDREN BROUGHT OUT KNIVES AND FORKS AND POKERS AND OLD STOVEPIPES AND CAN OPENERS...
I WANNA PLAY.
GO AWAY. YOU'D JUST MAKE FUN OF US.
TWELVE-YEAR-OLD JOSEPH CONNERS SURVEYED THE YOUNGER CHILDREN WITH RELUCTANCE AND A CERTAIN WISTFULNESS...
HONEST, I WOULDN'T MAKE FUN. LET ME PLAY...
YOU'RE TOO OLD. YOU'D ONLY LAUGH AND SPOIL THE INVASION.
JOSEPH WALKED OFF SLOWLY. HE KEPT LOOKING BACK, ALL DOWN THE BLOCK. MINK TALKED EARNESTLY TO SOMEONE NEAR THE ROSE BUSH.. THOUGH THERE WAS NO ONE THERE. ANNA TOOK NOTES ON A PAD...
TRIANGLE!
HUH? HOW DO YOU SPELL IT?
MINK'S MOTHER, FROM HER UPSTAIRS WINDOW, GAZED DOWN...
T-R-I... OH, SPELL IT YOURSELF! NOW... BEAM!
I STILL HAVEN'T GOT TRI... ANGLE DOWN YET!
A-N-G-L-E, ANNA!
OH, THANKS, MRS. MORRIS!
THAT'S ALL RIGHT, ANNA!
NOW... BEAM! THEN... FOUR-NINE-SEVEN-A-AND-B-AND-X...
MINK'S MOTHER WITHDREW, LAUGHING, TO DUST THE HALL WITH AN ELECTRO-DUSTER MAGNET...
...AND A FORK... AND A STRING... AND A HEX... HEX... HEXAGONY... HEXAGONAL!
AT LUNCH, MINK GULPED MILK AT ONE TOSS AND WAS AT THE DOOR. MRS. MORRIS SLAPPED THE TABLE...
YOU SIT RIGHT BACK DOWN AND FINISH...
BUT MOM! DRILL'S WAITING FOR ME!
DRILL? WHAT A PECULIAR NAME? WHO'S DRILL?
YOU DON'T KNOW HIM, MOM. YOU'LL MAKE FUN, EVERYBODY POKES FUN. GEE, DARN. I GOT TO RUN IF WE WANT TO HAVE THE INVASION!
WHO'S INVADING WHAT?
MARTIANS... INVADING EARTH!
2

MRS. MORRIS HID HER MOUTH BEHIND HER HAND...
YOU'RE LAUGHING! SEE? YOU'D... YOU'D KILL DRILL AND EVERYBODY.
I...I DIDN'T MEAN TO, MINK. SO... SO DRILL'S A MARTIAN?
UH-HUH! AND HE'S HAD A HARD TIME. THEY COULDN'T FIGURE A WAY TO ATTACK EARTH. DRILL SAYS IN ORDER TO MAKE A GOOD FIGHT, YOU GOT TO HAVE A NEW WAY OF SURPRISING PEOPLE! AND YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE HELP...FROM YOUR ENEMY!
A FIFTH COLUMN, EH?
YEAH! THAT'S WHAT DRILL SAID. AND THEY COULDN'T FIGURE A WAY TO SURPRISE EARTH OR GET HELP... UNTIL, ONE DAY, THEY THOUGHT OF THE CHILDREN!
WELL!
AND THEY THOUGHT OF HOW GROWNUPS ARE SO BUSY THEY NEVER PAY ATTENTION TO CHILDREN! AND THEN THERE'S THE DIM-DIMS!
DIM-DIMS?
DIMENSIONS! FOUR OF 'EM! AN' THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT KIDS UNDER NINE, AND IMAGINATION... AND...
WELL, IF YOU WANT TO HAVE YOUR INVASION BEFORE YOUR BATH...YOU'D BETTER HURRY ALONG...
DRILL SAYS I WON'T HAVE TO TAKE BATHS AFTER THE INVASION. NO MORE BATHS... AND WE CAN STAY UP TILL TEN O'CLOCK TO WATCH TELEVISION... AND GO TO TWO MOVIES ON SATURDAY 'STEAD OF ONE... AND HAVE ALL THE COMICS WE WANT...
WELL, MR. DRILL BETTER MIND HIS P'S AND Q'S. I'LL CALL UP HIS MOTHER AND...
DRILL SAYS PARENTS ARE DANGEROUS. 'CAUSE WHY? 'CAUSE YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN MARTIANS! THEY'RE GOING TO LET US RUN THE WORLD! THE KIDS...
THAT'S NICE! NOW, RUN OUT AND PLAY...
MINK WENT TO THE DOOR...
MOM! WHAT'S IM-PRES-SION-ABLE MEAN?
WHY, IT MEANS IT MEANS... TO BE A CHILD, DEAR.
MINK RAN OUT, THEN STUCK HER HEAD BACK IN...
MOM! I'LL BE SURE YOU WON'T BE HURT MUCH...REALLY!
WELL... THANKS!
3

AT FOUR O'CLOCK, THE AUDIO-VISOR BUZZED. MARY MORRIS FLIPPED THE TAB AND THE SCREEN LIT UP...
HELLO, HELEN! THIS IS A SURPRISE! HOW ARE THINGS IN NEW YORK? YOU LOOK TIRED!
HELLO, MARY. I AM TIRED. THE CHILDREN UNDERFOOT...
MY MINK, TOO. THE SUPER-INVASION!
ARE YOUR KIDS PLAYING THAT GAME TOO?
LORD, YES. WERE WE THIS BAD WHEN WE WERE KIDS, HELEN?
WORSE. DON'T KNOW HOW MY PARENTS PUT UP WITH ME. I GUESS PARENTS LEARN TO SHUT THEIR EARS!
A SILENCE...
WHAT'S WRONG, MARY?
EH? OH, NOTHING. JUST THINKING... ABOUT SHUTTING EARS AND SUCH. NEVER MIND. WHERE WERE WE?
MY BOY TIM'S GOT A CRUSH ON SOME GUY NAMED... DRILL, I THINK IT IS!
MUST BE A NEW PASS-WORD. MINK LIKES HIM TOO.
DIDN'T KNOW IT HAD GOTTEN AS FAR SOUTH AS PHILADELPHIA, MARY! I TALKED TO MY SISTER IN BOSTON AND SHE SAID HER KIDS ARE WILD ABOUT THIS NEW GAME!
IT... IT MUST BE SWEEP-ING THE... COUNTRY!
AT THIS MOMENT MINK TROTTED INTO THE KITCHEN. MARY MORRIS TURNED FROM THE AUDIO-VISOR...
WHAT'S THAT YOU HAVE THERE, MINK?
A YO-YO, MOM. WATCH.
MINK FLUNG THE YO-YO DOWN ITS STRING. REACHING THE END, IT... VANISHED...
SEE?
GASP...
DIBBLING HER FINGER, MINK MADE THE YO-YO REAPPEAR AND ZIP UP THE STRING...
D-DO THAT AGAIN!
CAN'T! ZERO HOUR'S FIVE O'CLOCK! 'BYE!
4

ON THE AUDIO-VISOR HELEN LAUGHED... TIM BROUGHT ONE OF THOSE YO-YOS IN THIS MORNING, MARY. 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!

MRS. MORRIS WHISPERED...
YOU'RE ...NOT IMPRESSIONABLE, HELEN!
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 DAY WANED. THE SUN LOWERED IN THE PEACEFUL BLUE SKY. ONE LITTLE GIRL RAN OFF CRYING...
MINK, WAS THAT PEGGY ANN CRYING?
YEAH. SHE'S A SCAREBABY. WE WON'T LET HER PLAY, NOW. SHE'S GETTING TOO OLD TO PLAY.

MINK WAS BENT OVER IN THE YARD NEAR THE ROSE BUSH...
I GUESS SHE GREW UP ALL OF A SUDDEN.
MINK! DID YOU HIT PEGGY ANN?

NO. HONEST. YOU ASK HER. IT WAS SOMETHING... WELL, SHE'S JUST A SCAREDY PANTS. GOLLY. GOLLY!
WHAT'S WRONG?

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...
DRILL'S STUCK HALF-WAY.
HALF-WAY?

IF WE COULD ONLY GET HIM ALL THE WAY THROUGH, IT'D BE EASIER. THEN ALL THE OTHERS COULD COME THROUGH AFTER HIM!
CAN I... HELP?

NO'M, THANKS. I'LL FIX IT.
ALL RIGHT, DEAR. HALF AN HOUR MORE. THEN BATH-TIME...
5

MRS. MORRIS WENT BACK INSIDE. TIME PASSED. A CURIOUS, WAITING SILENCE CAME UPON THE STREET, DEEPENING...
FIVE O'CLOCK... FIVE O'CLOCK. TIME'S A-WASTING. FIVE O'CLOCK...
THE VOICE-CLOCK SANG SOFTLY IN A QUIET MUSICAL VOICE, THEN PURRED AWAY IN SILENCE. MRS. MORRIS CHUCKLED IN HER THROAT...
ZERO... HOUR...
MR. MORRIS'S BEETLE CAR HUMMED INTO THE DRIVEWAY. HE GOT OUT, STOOD FOR A MOMENT WATCHING THE CHILDREN, THEN CAME INSIDE...
HELLO, DARLING.
HELLO, HENRY.
MRS. MORRIS LISTENED. THE CHILDREN WERE SILENT... TOO SILENT. MR. MORRIS EMPTIED HIS PIPE...
SWELL DAY. MAKES YOU GLAD TO BE ALIVE.
WHAT'S THAT?
A BUZZING SOUND... MARY GOT UP SUDDENLY, HER EYES WIDENING...
THOSE CHILDREN HAVEN'T ANYTHING DANGEROUS OUT THERE, HAVE THEY?
NOTHING BUT PIPES AND HAMMERS. WHY?
THE BUZZING CONTINUED...
NOTHING ELECTRICAL?
HECK, NO! I LOOKED.
JUST THE SAME, YOU'D BETTER TELL THEM TO QUIT. IT'S AFTER FIVE. TELL THEM... HEH, HEH... TELL THEM TO PUT OFF THEIR INVASION UNTIL TOMORROW...
THE BUZZING GREW LOUDER...
SAY! WHAT ARE THEY UP TO? I'D BETTER GO LOOK...
THE EXPLOSION...
6

THE HOUSE SHOOK WITH A DULL SOUND. THERE WERE OTHER EXPLOSIONS IN OTHER YARDS ON OTHER STREETS...
UP THIS WAY! IN THE ATTIC!
IT'S NOT UP THERE! IT'S OUTSIDE!
THERE WAS NO TIME TO ARGUE WITH HENRY. LET HIM THINK HER INSANE! SHRIEKING, SHE RAN UPSTAIRS...
I'LL SHOW YOU! HURRY! HURRY! I'LL SHOW YOU!
MARY!
ANOTHER EXPLOSION OUTSIDE. THE CHILDREN SCREAMED WITH DELIGHT AS IF AT A GREAT FIREWORKS DISPLAY. HENRY RAN AFTER MARY... UP INTO THE ATTIC...
THERE, THERE. WE'RE SAFE UNTIL TONIGHT! MAYBE WE CAN SNEAK OUT. MAYBE WE CAN ESCAPE.
ARE YOU CRAZY, MARY? WHAT'S GOT INTO YOU?
SHE WAS BABBLING WILD STUFF NOW. IT CAME OUT OF HER. ALL THE SUBCONSCIOUS SUSPICIONS AND FEAR. SHE SLAMMED THE DOOR... LOCKED IT... FLUNG THE KEY INTO A FAR, CLUTTERED CORNER...
WHY'D YOU THROW THE KEY AWAY, MARY?
QUIET! THEY WILL HEAR US. OH, GOD, THEY'LL FIND US SOON ENOUGH..
BELOW THEM, MINK'S VOICE. THEN FOOTSTEPS CAME INTO THE HOUSE. HEAVY FOOTSTEPS...
WHO'S THAT TRAMPING AROUND DOWN THERE?
MOM? DAD? WHERE ARE YOU?
HEAVY FEET. TWENTY, THIRTY, FORTY OF THEM...
WHO'S DOWNSTAIRS?
HUSH, HENRY! OH, NONONONO! PLEASE BE QUIET! THEY MIGHT GO AWAY!
HEAVY, VERY HEAVY FOOTSTEPS CAME UP THE STAIRS. MINK LEADING THEM. THEY TREMBLED TOGETHER IN SILENCE IN THE ATTIC, MR. AND MRS. MORRIS. THEY STOOD SHIVERING IN THE DARK SILENCE...
MOM? DAD?
A LITTLE HUMMING SOUND. THE ATTIC LOCK MELTED. THE DOOR OPENED. MINK PEERED INSIDE... TALL BLUE SHADOWS BEHIND HER...
PEEKABOO!
-THE END-