

# Zero Hour



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Ray Bradbury was a voracious reader and a prolific writer. Bradbury was born in small-town Illinois but moved to Los Angeles in 1934. He penned short stories throughout high school, and his stories only appeared in niche fantasy magazines for several years. In 1946, one of his short stories was published in the prestigious annual publication *The Best American Short Stories*, which propelled Bradbury into the spotlight. A publisher named Walter Bradbury (no relation to Ray) was the first to suggest that Bradbury string together his existing short stories to form novels. Bradbury did just that with all eleven of his novels, including [Fahrenheit 451](#) and *The Illustrated Man*. In *The Illustrated Man*, all eighteen short stories retain their individual identities. However, novels like [Fahrenheit 451](#) (1953), *Dandelion Wine* (1957), and [Something Wicked This Way Comes](#) (1962) read more like standard novels than short story collections. Throughout his lifetime, Bradbury penned and published hundreds of short stories and earned several honors, including a National Medal of the Arts, a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, an Oscar nomination, and an Emmy Award.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II came to an end in 1945, two years prior to the initial publication of “Zero Hour.” For the United States, peace was only temporary—two years later, the Cold War began, and three years after that, the Korean War. “Zero Hour” was published during this brief, tenuous moment of peace in 1947. The parents in “Zero Hour,” like Mrs. Morris and Helen, grew up during World War II, so they are no strangers to worldwide conflict, fear, and destruction. However, in the story’s present (set in the future, around 1980 or 1990), the world is enjoying seemingly permanent world peace and stability, and adults have grown complacent. Such assuredness in this peace and in their country’s strength blinds the adults to the possibility of an outside attack—an alien invasion. Somehow, children under the age of ten are able to build highly complicated contraptions that aid the aliens in teleporting to Earth. This focus on technology and innovation—especially when used to bring about death and destruction—echoes the extraordinary technological advances that took place during World War II. With helicopters, computers, nuclear bombs, and the V-2 missile (which set the stage for future advancements in rockets and space travel), World War II brimmed with technological advancements that enabled the bloodiest war in history. “Zero Hour” wrestles with the way that technology has the power to

suddenly wipe out democracy and humankind.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bradbury’s “Zero Hour” resembles H.G. Wells’ 1897 novel, [The War of the Worlds](#). In it, Martians invade London, which is a hub of political and economic power. The Martians bring chaos and destruction to the seemingly invincible British Empire, just as Drill and his fellow aliens successfully target the “impregnable” United States. Both works provide an unsettling reminder that peace and political strength are fleeting, and that even strong, powerful countries aren’t impervious to conflict. “Zero Hour” is also thematically similar to Bradbury’s short story “The Last Night of the World,” which also appears in *The Illustrated Man*. In the story, a husband and wife come to terms with the impending destruction of the Earth. Unlike in “Zero Hour,” the end of the world is gentle, like the “closing of a book.” However, the husband and wife must grapple with similar feelings of fear and denial that plague Mrs. Morris in “Zero Hour.” In addition, Bradbury’s “Marionettes, Inc.,” also in *The Illustrated Man*, has an eerie tone that mirrors that of “Zero Hour.” In both short stories, ignorant adults realize they have been blind to a dangerous situation, but the realization comes far too late, and the adults are overthrown or even killed.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Zero Hour”
- **When Written:** 1947
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** Originally published as a standalone story in 1947; republished as part of *The Illustrated Man* in 1951
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science fiction; short story
- **Setting:** The suburbs of New York
- **Climax:** When Mr. and Mrs. Morris hide in the attic from the aliens, who have successfully invaded the Earth
- **Antagonist:** Drill and his fellow aliens
- **Point of View:** Third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**As Seen (Briefly) on TV.** ABC’s *The Whispers* is a science fiction show inspired by Bradbury’s “Zero Hour.” The show only lasted one season, airing for just two months in 2015.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Covered in dirt and sweat from playing an exciting game with the other neighborhood kids, seven-year-old Mink Morris runs into her house in search of supplies. As she crams pots and pans into a sack, her mother, Mrs. Morris, asks what's going on. Mink explains that she needs the kitchen supplies for a new game called "Invasion." Mink runs back outside, slamming the door behind her.

Mrs. Morris peers out the window and watches Mink playing below. Mink is talking animatedly to a **rosebush**, but no one is there, which Mrs. Morris thinks is odd. When Mink comes in for lunch, she gulps her milk down quickly and tries to run back out to play, but Mrs. Morris forces her to sit and wait for the soup to be done. While she waits impatiently, Mink talks to her mother about a boy named Drill. Mrs. Morris asks if he's a new boy in the neighborhood, but Mink is evasive and fends off her mother's questions by claiming that she'll "make fun" of Drill just like "everybody" does. Mrs. Morris asks about the Invasion game, and Mink explains that Martians—who are "not exactly Martians," as she's not sure what planet they're from—are invading the Earth.

Mrs. Morris tries not to laugh, and Mink continues, explaining that the aliens had a hard time figuring out how to attack Earth, and it wasn't until recently that they came up with a plan. She says that, according to Drill, the aliens needed the element of surprise and help from the enemy but couldn't figure out how to do so. Recently, however, the aliens realized they could use children to help them from within. Mink says the plan is a good one because "grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or lawns." Bored of Mink's chatter, Mrs. Morris sends her daughter back outside but reminds her to be back in time for her bath. Mink declares that after the Invasion, kids won't have to take baths anymore. According to Drill, kids will get to watch more television, go to bed later, and even rule the world—and even better, Drill promised that Mink will be queen.

Mink tells her mother that she hates the older kids in the neighborhood, like Pete Britz and Dale Jerrick, because they refuse to believe in Drill and just make fun of the younger kids. She also tells her mother that parents don't believe in Martians, which means parents are dangerous. Mink pauses and asks her mother about two words Drill used earlier that day, which she didn't understand: "lodge-ick" and "im-pres-sion-able." Mrs. Morris explains that logic is knowing what's true and false, while impressionable means "be[ing] a child." Mink thanks her mother and tells her that she "won't be hurt much" in the Invasion. She runs back outside to play.

Mrs. Morris talks on the video phone with her friend Helen, and the two women are surprised to realize that their kids are playing the same Invasion game, even though they live in different parts of the United States. The women reminisce on

the games they used to play as children back in 1948 (including one called "Japs and Nazis") and affirm that "parents learn to shut their ears" to children's distracting chatter and silly games. Mink runs in for a glass of water but runs right back outside, yelling that "zero hour" is at 5:00 P.M., so she needs to hurry.

When Mr. Morris gets home from work at 5:00 P.M., he greets his wife warmly. Suddenly, a strange buzzing noise engulfs the neighborhood and gets increasingly louder. Mrs. Morris nervously asks her husband to tell the kids to put off their Invasion game until the following day. Before he can do so, an explosion shakes the house. Mrs. Morris screams and drags her husband upstairs to the **attic**. She locks the door behind them and tosses the key across the room, "babbling wild stuff" as she does so. Mr. Morris thinks his wife has gone crazy, but she is overcome by all the little realizations and suspicions about the Invasion being real that she had logically ignored all day.

Below them, Mr. and Mrs. Morris hear their house fill with the sound of footsteps, belonging to at least fifty people. Mr. Morris shouts about trespassers in his house, but Mrs. Morris begs him to be quiet. The footsteps get louder, accompanied by Mink's voice, calling out for her parents. Suddenly, the lock melts, and the attic door swings open. Surrounded by "tall blue shadows," Mink says, "Peekaboo."



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Mrs. Mary Morris** – Mrs. Morris is seven-year-old Mink's mother and Henry Morris' wife. She is somewhat exhausted by her excitable, imaginative daughter, though she often plays along with Mink's happy rambling. Like all of the adults in the story, Mrs. Morris is extremely logical and thus believes—until it's too late—that the Invasion is just a harmless, fictitious game for kids. On a subconscious level, though, it seems that Mrs. Morris does understand the gravity of the game. When "zero hour" strikes and the aliens successfully invade, Mrs. Morris' mind is flooded with all of the little realizations and suspicions that she carefully concealed from herself all day. Mrs. Morris's inner conflict over the Invasion illustrates how blinding it is to see the world through a purely logical lens. She also fails to take her daughter seriously for most of the story, highlighting the story's criticism of the way adults are flippant about things children say and do, assuming their words and ideas are of little value.

**Mink Morris** – Mrs. Morris and Henry Morris's daughter Mink is a spunky, spirited seven-year-old girl who, like many of the other neighborhood children, is obsessed with the Invasion game. She is extremely loyal to Drill, the leader of the aliens, as he promises that she will be queen after the Invasion. He also wins her loyalty by promising her (and the other children) that kids will rule the post-Invasion world, and there will be no more

baths. Mink loves the excitement of the game and allows herself to be swept away in it, never pausing to think logically about if helping an alien Invasion is a good thing and if it's perhaps more than just a game. She is a leader among the local neighborhood kids and doesn't hesitate to boss them around—or call them “scarebabies” if they get too scared to play the invasion game, like Peggy Ann. Mink seems to love her mother but is annoyed by the way that Mrs. Morris doesn't take her seriously and often laughs at the things she says.

**Drill** – Drill is the apparent leader of an alien force, who successfully convinces Mink—and the rest of the children in America (or perhaps the world) under ten years old—to help the aliens invade Earth. He never appears in person in the story, and is only revealed by what Mink says about him. Drill seems to have a keen understanding of what children want, promising the children more privileges and fewer rules. In claiming that the post-Invasion world will be run by kids, and that there will be later bedtimes, more television, and no baths, Drill wins the children's loyalty. Drill is somehow able to communicate with Mink through a **rosebush**, and Mink later tells her mother that, according to Drill, parents “are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns.” Drill has managed to capitalize on parents' indifference to what their children do or say, consequently allowing an Invasion to unfold right under the adults' noses.

**Mr. Henry Morris** – Mr. Morris is Mrs. Morris's husband and Mink's father. He appears to be the typical middle-class white-collar business man living in a cookie-cutter suburban neighborhood. As a logical adult, Mr. Morris thinks his wife has gone crazy when she starts babbling about an alien Invasion. It's not until Mr. Morris has tangible signs of the invasion—the sound of heavy footsteps belonging to at least fifty people crowded in his house, a strange blue light behind the **attic** door, an odd smell, and a foreign sound in his daughter's voice—that Mr. Morris finally accepts the Invasion as reality.

**Helen** – Helen is Mrs. Morris's friend who lives in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Her son, Tim, is also crazy about the Invasion game, which is the story's first indication that something serious and widespread is going on. Like Mrs. Morris, Helen doesn't take her child seriously and even goes so far as to say that “Parents learn to shut their ears” to their children's rambling.

**Joseph Connors** – Joseph Connors is a twelve-year-old boy in the neighborhood who wants to play the Invasion game with Mink and the younger children. Mink prevents him from participating, claiming he is too old to play and would just laugh at them. Although Joseph's desire to play is genuine (he asks Mink several times if he can play and is dejected when he finally gives up), he illustrates the younger children's fear of not being taken seriously by someone older than them—even if that someone is just twelve years old.

**Peggy Ann** – Peggy Ann is one of the younger children in Mink's neighborhood. She initially participates in the Invasion game, but eventually leaves the yard in tears. Mink tells Mrs. Morris that Peggy Ann “grew up all of a sudden” and is a “scarebaby.” This suggests that Peggy Ann had a sudden realization of the negative repercussions of aiding an alien invasion, and thus was overcome by anxiety. Her implied ability to think logically about the Invasion (that is, realize that the Invasion is real and a potentially dangerous, destructive thing) sets her apart from the other children, who are easily swept away by Drill's promises and their own excitement and imaginations.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Pete Britz** – Pete Britz is an older boy in Mink's neighborhood whom Mink hates. Like Dale Jerrick, Pete refuses to believe in Drill, makes fun of the younger kids, and acts “snooty.” Mink ominously declares that she and the aliens will kill Pete and Dale first.

**Dale Jerrick** – Dale Jerrick is an older boy in Mink's neighborhood. He makes fun of Mink and the other younger kids, is “snooty” because he thinks he's so grown up, and refuses to believe that Drill is real. Mink vows to kill him first, along with the similarly behaved Pete Britz.

**Anna** – Anna is one of the young girls in Mink's neighborhood who plays the Invasion game. She is in charge of writing notes on a notepad, but she has trouble spelling and writing in general, which makes Mink impatient.

**Tim** – Tim is Helen's son. Like Mink, he is obsessed with the Invasion game.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### IMPRESSIONABILITY AND MANIPULATION

In “Zero Hour,” a short story written by Ray Bradbury, a group of aliens manipulates young children into helping the aliens invade the earth. Drill, the apparent leader of the aliens, convinces the impressionable children that Invasion is a game, and that the children can win if they successfully follow instructions and aid the aliens in coming to Earth. According to Drill, the rewards for winning the game are manifold: later bedtimes, two television shows on Saturday nights instead of one, and no more baths. The aliens

specifically target children under ten years old—that is, children who are most naïve and trusting. By taking advantage of the children’s impressionability, the aliens successfully manipulate the children into helping bring about the Invasion and the end of humankind (or at least, as the story implies, the destruction of all adults). In the story, Bradbury reveals how impressionability is an essential part of childhood, as it allows children to learn and grow. However, through the character of Mink Morris, Bradbury cautions that such naivety means children are easily manipulated and taken advantage of.

The story shows how all children are impressionable when they’re young, and that this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. When Mrs. Morris forces her daughter, Mink, to pause her game to eat all of her soup at lunchtime, Mink protests, “Hurry, Mom! This is a matter of life and death!” Amused, Mrs. Morris replies, “I was the same way at your age. Always life and death. I know.” Gesturing back to her own childhood, Mrs. Morris illustrates how children have a distorted sense of urgency about things, but that this is common and even charming. It seems that Drill may have told Mink that he and his fellow aliens would die if they couldn’t invade the Earth, which tugged at her heart strings and convinced her to help with the Invasion. Of course, the Invasion really is a “matter of life and death,” because the story’s ending implies that all adults (and possibly all humans) will be destroyed. At lunch, Mink even asks her mother what “im-pres-sion-able” means, implying that Drill openly called her and the other children impressionable, but they didn’t know what the word meant. “Laughing gently,” Mrs. Morris answers, “It means—to be a child, dear.” Instead of painting impressionability in a negative light (as a lack of critical thinking skills and a proclivity to be taken advantage of or be easily influenced), Mrs. Morris simply points to the way that impressionability is inextricably linked to childhood.

However, the story emphasizes that is easy—and of course, morally abhorrent—to take advantage of an impressionable child. Mink describes Drill’s plan to Mrs. Morris, who fails to take it seriously: “‘they couldn’t figure a way to surprise Earth or get help. [...] Until one day,’ whispered Mink melodramatically, ‘they thought of children!’” It appears that Drill straightforwardly told Mink about his plan to manipulate the children, but because of her wide-eyed innocence, Mink didn’t process the fact that she was being used. Later, Mink asks her mom what “lodge-ick” is. Mrs. Morris answers that “logic is knowing what things are true and not true.” Mink excitedly replies, “He *mentioned* that.” From this conversation, it again seems that Drill directly told Mink that he was targeting children because they are impressionable and not logical—however, since she didn’t know what the words meant (and still doesn’t fully understand), Mink didn’t comprehend that she and the other children were being taken advantage of. Furthermore, Mink is convinced that Drill will let her be queen if she helps with the Invasion. Of course, it’s doubtful that the

leader of the aliens would allow Mink—a random seven-year-old girl—to be queen. The aliens are likely to want all of the power for themselves and are merely stringing the children along to get them to help with the Invasion as a “fifth column.” Drill also convinces the children in the neighborhood that they—along with “the kids over in the next block”—will “run the world” after the Invasion. Considering the fact that the Invasion game has swept the entire nation (and perhaps the world), it seems odd that Drill would specifically choose Mink and her friends (and the kids from the next block) to rule the world. It’s more likely that he made this same promise to every group of children helping with the Invasion. By making the disclaimer that “the kids over in the next block” will rule, too, Drill keeps kids from different neighborhoods from being suspicious that perhaps more than one group of kids has been told they can rule the world, and then suspecting that perhaps the aliens shouldn’t be trusted.

Drill and the other aliens capitalize on the children’s impressionability, ultimately manipulating them into bringing about an alien Invasion. Although Bradbury highlights the negative repercussions of children’s impressionability, he doesn’t blame the children. Instead, he emphasizes the adults’ failure to tap into that impressionability to help their children learn and grow. The children in “Zero Hour” are left to their own devices, and are thus vulnerable for Drill to take advantage of them.



## ADULTS VS. CHILDREN

In “Zero Hour,” Ray Bradbury depicts a perfect, cookie-cutter neighborhood in the suburbs of New York. However, amidst the meticulously manicured lawns and streets “lined with good green and peaceful trees,” a dangerous game called “Invasion” has cropped up, and every child in America under ten years old is in on it. According to Drill, the leader of the aliens, the goal of the game is for the children to help the aliens successfully invade the earth. If the Invasion goes as planned and the children “win” the game, they will be rewarded with more television, later bedtimes, no more baths, and the chance to “run the world.” Even though the game is real—the children really *are* aiding an alien Invasion—parents across the nation casually write it off as imaginative play. Through the story’s portrayal of seven-year-old Mink Morris and her interactions with her mother, Mrs. Morris, it’s clear that this flippant attitude is what bothers children the most. Essentially, the story suggests that children long to be taken seriously by their parents.

Mrs. Morris and the other adults in the town assume the children’s activities are a silly game of pretend, so they don’t pay attention to the things their children say or do. Unbeknownst to the adults, the children are in the midst of a dangerous, life-threatening game that could destroy humankind and the earth. However, the parents largely ignore

the game and the children altogether: “Meanwhile, parents came and went in chromium beetles. [...] 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.” The parents wish to take part in what they see as the frivolous “flourishings” of childhood, emphasizing what little weight they give to the things children say or do. While Mink is out playing, Mrs. Morris’ friend Helen calls. The two women laugh about the silly Invasion game, and Helen says, “Parents learn to shut their ears.” Helen’s comment implies that the things children talk about and are interested in are unimportant and distracting for adults, so adults learn to tune out their children’s meaningless chatter.

Even the slightly older neighborhood children—those over the age of ten—fail to take the young children or the Invasion seriously. The older children in the neighborhood, meaning “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.” The older children are “scornful” and “dignified,” illustrating a sharp divide between the younger children, who aren’t taken seriously, and the older children, who think they are too serious and mature for such childish games. When twelve-year-old Joseph Connors wants to play the Invasion game, Mink shoos him away, claiming, “You’d just make fun of us.” Joseph’s friend tells the boy to give up and “Let them sissies play [...] Them and their fairies! Nuts!” Joseph’s friend considers the children’s game to be make believe (like “fairies”) and thus immature and foolish. Later, Mink admits to her mother, “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*.” The feeling of not being taken seriously runs so deep in Mink that she threatens to kill all those who are “snooty” and “growing up.”

Mink Morris is clearly bothered by the flippant attitude that the adults and older children display and wishes to be taken seriously—an attitude, the story implies, almost all young children share. When Mrs. Morris asks her daughter who Drill is, Mink replies, “You’ll make fun. Everybody pokes fun. Gee, darn.” Mink’s comment is defensive, underscoring her deep discontent at being treated as insignificant and foolish by seemingly “everybody.” Mink eventually explains to Mrs. Morris that the aliens are “not exactly Martians. They’re—I don’t know. From up.” Her mom replies that the aliens are also from “*inside*,” and she touches Mink’s forehead. Realizing that her mother is insinuating that the aliens are just inside of her head (that is, just a product of her imagination), Mink is frustrated that her mom fails to take her words and beliefs seriously: “You’re laughing! You’ll kill Drill and everybody! [...] 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.” By claiming that she may get to “run the world” and “be queen,” Mink illustrates how the aliens have successfully strung the children along with the promise of power and influence—two things they crave but don’t have in the world run by adults.

Throughout the story, Bradbury illustrates a sharp division between adults and children, as children long to be taken seriously and listened to, while adults casually disregard the things their children say and do as being silly and rooted in imagination. The aliens manage to capitalize on this conflict, to devastating effect. Through “Zero Hour,” then, Bradbury spins a cautionary tale, urging parents to pay closer attention to their children and value what they have to say.



## PEACE, WAR, AND ALIEN INVASIONS

In “Zero Hour,” a group of aliens (lead by an alien named Drill) convinces all children under ten years old to take part in an exciting game called Invasion.

The goal of the game is for the children to successfully build specific apparatuses and other contraptions that will allow the aliens to teleport through the fourth dimension and invade the Earth. If the kids “win” the game, they will be rewarded lavishly with more television, later bedtimes, and the chance to run the world. The adults, however, are oblivious to the seriousness of the game and fail to intervene. It’s a time of extraordinary world peace, and the adults are confident nothing can change that. Through the course of the story, Bradbury cautions readers that peace is not forever. War and conflict often come as a complete surprise, so growing complacent in times of peace is dangerous.

The narrator’s descriptions of the peaceful state of the world ironically emphasize how peace is temporary. The story depicts the adults as having foolish, false confidence in their current situation. The narrator notes, “There was the universal, quiet conceit and easiness of men accustomed to peace, quite certain there would never be trouble again.” The narrator considers humankind to have a “quiet conceit,” meaning that they are prideful and excessively confident about this peaceful time. Furthermore, it’s impossible to be “quite certain” that there will “never be trouble again.” Such bold confidence in the future feels unreasonable and even irresponsible, as it leads people to become complacent and too comfortable. As it becomes clear to the reader that the children really are helping with an alien invasion, the narrator abruptly transitions into an indulgent description of the streets “lined with good and peaceful trees” that “drowsed in a tide of warm air.” This builds a sense of tension and highlights the rest of the world’s ignorance to the brewing conflict. In addition, the narrator claims that “Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the country, across the continent.” Of course, the Invasion game is clearly sweeping the nation (as protagonist Mrs. Morris later learns from her

friend Helen), so there is much more ruffling the city, country, and continent than just the breeze.

The most dangerous conflicts come as a surprise, implying that it's dangerous to feel too comfortable and confident in times of peace. The narrator notes, "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." Initially, such deep-seated peace seems impossible to shake. Seven-year-old Mink, one of the players of the Invasion game, explains to her mother that the aliens have had a difficult time attacking Earth. Mrs. Morris is unsurprised, confidently declaring, "We're impregnable. [...] We're pretty darn strong." Although Mrs. Morris is speaking about the Invasion in "mock seriousness" to play along with what she thinks is Mink's vibrant imagination, her response reveals her utmost confidence that the current peaceful state of the world is too strong to break. This is why Drill's method of surprise is so effective—he uses humankind's feelings of comfort and stability to his own advantage, shattering their peace when they least expect it. Mink explains this strategy to her mother: "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." Mink explains excitedly that Drill and the other aliens felt hopeless about invading the earth—"Until one day," whispered Mink melodramatically, "they thought of children! [...] And they thought of how grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns." Drill uses children as his element of surprise, because adults are unlikely to take children seriously, and children are easily manipulated and are thus an easy "fifth column."

The adults in "Zero Hour" aren't total strangers to times of war and conflict—Mrs. Morris and Helen talk about when they were children in 1948 and played a game called "Japs and Nazis," an obvious gesture to World War II. Having enjoyed peace for so long, however, adults have grown complacent and negligent, ultimately allowing a deadly alien Invasion to unfold right before their eyes. Through the adults' rude awakening, Bradbury reminds his readers to be on guard, recognizing that peace is temporary, and that bad things can happen at any time.



## IMAGINATION AND LOGIC

Ray Bradbury's "Zero Hour" depicts a picture-perfect suburban neighborhood in New York teeming with children, all playing game called "Invasion." The game revolves around helping a group of aliens invade the earth. Parents across the nation—including seven-year-old Mink's mother, Mrs. Morris—are unable to step out of their logic-driven mindsets and consider that the game is actually terrifyingly real, and that earth is on the brink of an

alien invasion. Meanwhile, the children are swept away by the novelty and excitement of their so-called game and are unable to think logically about whether or not aiding an alien invasion of earth is *really* a good idea. The kids are too excited imagining the future world that the aliens promise: later bedtimes, more television, and no baths. Through the parents' and children's inability to balance imagination with logic, Bradbury highlights how relying on exclusively one or the other can be dangerous and blinding. Instead, both imagination and logic are necessary for a healthy, balanced view of the world.

The kids' excitement for the Invasion shows the dangers of being swept away in imagination. Mink is mesmerized by the aliens' promise of a world in which children rule. She tells her mother, "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." It's unlikely that Drill, the leader of the aliens, would allow a random seven-year-old girl to be queen of the world, especially since children all over the nation are involved in the Invasion game. Instead, it seems that Drill gains Mink's loyalty by catering to her imaginary dream world in which she is not just a princess (a common dream for many seven-year-olds), but a *queen*. Mink also tells her mother that in this beautiful new world, children are free from parents' stifling rules: "Drill says I won't have to take baths [...] 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!" Mink is so captivated imagining such a perfect existence that she doesn't consider if Drill's promises are genuine or if the Invasion could have serious negative implications.

Meanwhile, the parents' reactions highlight how a staunchly logical worldview is just as dangerous. Excitedly explaining the Invasion game to her mom, Mink declares, "Martians [are] invading Earth. Well, not exactly Martians. They're—I don't know. From up." "Touching Mink's feverish brow," Mrs. Morris answers, "And *inside*." Mrs. Morris implies that the Invasion is all inside Mink's head. This reaction irritates Mink, who cries, "You're laughing! You'll kill Drill and everybody!" Mink is likely repeating the propaganda that Drill has instilled in her and the other children to turn them against their parents, but Mrs. Morris's sensible, logical adult mind fails to grasp the significance of Mink's words. Thus, Mrs. Morris remains ignorant of what's going on just outside her doorstep. Mink also tells her mother, "Drill says you're dangerous! Know why? 'Cause you don't believe in Martians!" Drill and the other aliens know that the adults' logical minds will keep them from taking the Invasion game seriously, thus stepping aside to let the Invasion take its course.

Ultimately, the story suggests that thinking both logically and imaginatively is necessary for a balanced view of the world. At 5:00 P.M., "zero hour," a low humming noise engulfs the neighborhood. Henry, Mrs. Morris' husband, asks what the sound is, and Mrs. Morris "[gets] up suddenly, her eyes

widening. She was going to say something. She stopped it. Ridiculous. Her nerves jumped. [...] ‘Tell them to put off their Invasion until tomorrow.’ She laughed, nervously.” In this moment, it seems that Mrs. Morris’ logical nature is fighting to keep her from believing in the game, even though her reaction indicates that she knows something unusual is going on. Mrs. Morris realizes that her husband will think she’s crazy for believing in the Invasion: “There was no time to argue with Henry to convince him. Let him think her insane.” Once in the **attic**, Mrs. Morris begins to come to terms with how her logical, adult mind blinded her to the terrifying reality at hand: “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.” Mrs. Morris finally sees beyond her carefully constructed logical view of the world, but it’s too late.

In “Zero Hour,” Bradbury highlights the shortcomings of clinging desperately to logic or being swept away in imagination. While the children fail to think rationally about the Invasion, the adults fail to suspend their sensible, logical ways of thinking and consider the Invasion as something other than a silly game. Both perspectives have serious repercussions.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE ROSEBUSH

In “Zero Hour,” the rosebush symbolizes adults’ failure to take their children seriously and be involved in their lives, and how this failure can have dangerous repercussions. Upon seeing her seven-year-old daughter, Mink, talking to a rosebush, Mrs. Morris thinks to herself that her daughter is “odd.” Mrs. Morris likely assumes Mink has an imaginary friend, but what she fails to realize is that Mink is actually communicating through the rosebush with Drill, the leader of the aliens, about the impending alien Invasion. Later, Mink even hints at this arrangement herself, telling her mother that the aliens decided to use children as their “fifth column” because the aliens knew parents wouldn’t intervene. She explains, “they thought of how grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns!” Mrs. Morris answers, “Only for snails and fungus.” Mrs. Morris fails to connect the fact that her daughter is talking wildly about aliens and was just seen talking to a rosebush herself. Instead, Mrs. Morris makes a painfully logical, adult comment about how grownups only look at rosebushes and lawns to make sure

there are no snails or fungus destroying them. Ultimately, this unflinching commitment to logic will prove much more destructive than snails or fungus, as the story’s ending implies that the aliens destroy humankind, starting with the adults.



## THE ATTIC

At the end of the story, Mrs. Morris and her husband, Henry, hide in the attic, which symbolizes Mrs. Morris’ impulse to stuff down all of her suspicions and realizations throughout the afternoon for the sake of being a logical, sensible adult who would never believe in such a thing as aliens or a real Invasion. Mrs. Morris tries to hide in the attic to escape the reality of the Invasion, but all of these little suspicions come pouring out, and she’s finally forced to face the situation at hand: “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.” Just as Mrs. Morris’ desire to hide from things that seem scary, strange, and impossible fails to protect her, so too does the attic ultimately fail to protect Mr. and Mrs. Morris from the Invasion. In the final moments of the story, the aliens melt the lock, and the attic door swings open.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon and Schuster edition of *The Illustrated Man* published in 1949.

### “Zero Hour” Quotes

●● 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, laughing. 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.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 254

### Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of the story, the narrator explains that the neighborhood children are playing a new game, and it’s the most fun they’ve had in years. The passage immediately introduces the idea of childlike excitement and imagination,

as the children are swept away by their “tumbling and hearty screaming” and are unaware of anything else—like the rockets flying overhead and the cars humming by in the streets. Likewise, the rockets and cars (that is, the adults in the town) also carry on like normal, unaware or indifferent to the children’s game. This hints at the idea that adults fail to take children seriously (and also places the story in a “futuristic” world of the 1980s or ‘90s).

Furthermore, the passage introduces the game as just that—a game. The narrator presents the game from the children’s perspective, and thus the festivities seem innocent, “jolly,” and wholesome. Later, it becomes clear that the game (called Invasion) is actually incredibly dangerous and has the power to alter the entire course of humankind. By first presenting it simply as “tremulous joy” and “tumbling and hearty screaming,” however, the narrator emphasizes the children’s failure to think logically and critically about certain situations.

☛ 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. [...] 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.

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 255

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator notes that the Invasion game has a strict age limit—only children under ten years old can play. It’s strange that a nine-year-old could play the game, while a ten-year-old would “disdain the affair” and feel “scornful” and “dignified.” Such a staunch age limit feels unnatural, suggesting that the younger children have imposed the age limit themselves, and that perhaps the older kids feel “disdainful” because they’re sharply excluded. Regardless, the divide introduces the idea that the younger children themselves later espouse: one is either a young child or an adult, and there is no in between. This sets the stage for the ingroup and outgroup dynamics that resonate throughout the story. The impressionable younger children believe that everyone who has “grown up” (that is, everyone

over the age of nine) is against them—an ideology that Drill instills in the children to ensure they’ll be loyal to the aliens rather than their friends and family.

This passage also reemphasizes that the adults more or less ignore the children: “The adult civilization passed and repassed the busy youngsters.” In their comings and goings, the adults do little to engage with the children or find out about the game. Instead, adults are just “tolerantly amused” at what they see as childlike theatrics. This profound misunderstanding endures to the very end of the story, when it’s too late for adults to intervene.

☛ “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.”

[...]

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.”

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris, Joseph Connors (speaker), Drill

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 256

### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, a twelve-year-old boy in the neighborhood asks to join in the game, and Mink rejects him on the grounds that he will “just make fun” of the younger kids because of his age. Mink is adamant that the older kids can’t play the Invasion game because they’ll “only laugh and spoil the Invasion,” which is likely ideology that Drill has ingrained in her.

Of course, the older kids probably *would* “spoil the Invasion,” as they’re likely to be more rational and less naïve because of their age. Drill and the other aliens probably understand that if the older kids were to play, they’d quickly realize it’s not a game and not a good idea to aid an Invasion, and would promptly get adults involved to make sure the whole



thing doesn't happen. To ensure the older children don't play the game and thus "spoil the Invasion" for the aliens, Drill taps into the younger kids' fear of being made fun of. By telling Mink that older kids will just ridicule her if she lets them play, Drill motivates Mink to do his dirty work of ensuring that no "grownups" (including twelve-year-olds) intervene.

- 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. [...] 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.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 256

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator zooms out from Mrs. Morris and Mink's life to give the reader a sense of the city, nation, and world as a whole. The passage reveals that the story is set during a time of profound and seemingly unshakable world peace. However, the lavish language and absolute statements reveal that this peace may be too good to be true, and that adults are foolish for being too comfortable and trusting in the current stable state of the world. The narrator notes that "Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the country, across the continent." The word "only" feels far too strong, as it implies that there aren't even small conflicts or arguments going on anywhere in the world. Further, the narrator asserts that in this world, there are "no traitors among men, no unhappy ones, no disgruntled ones." This, too, seems hard to believe, as it directly claims that absolutely no one is unhappy on Earth.


The narrator subtly criticizes humans for their confidence in such peace, stating, "There was the universal, quiet conceit and easiness of men accustomed to peace, quite certain there would never be trouble again." In using the word "conceit," meaning excessive confidence and pride, the narrator makes it clear that humans are unwise for maintaining this attitude. The last sentence in the passage

bolsters this sense of complacency: the narrator shifts from talking about world peace to detailing how "Sunlight illumined half the world and the trees drowsed in a tide of warm air." This sentence feels calm, sleepy, and even lethargic, echoing the adults' lack of awareness about the Invasion unfolding right under their noses.

- Mink talked earnestly to someone near the rosebush—though there was no one there. These odd children.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Mary Morris (speaker), Drill, Mink Morris

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 256-257

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mrs. Morris watches Mink and the other children out her window. The kids bustle about, preparing for what Mrs. Morris logically believes is a pretend alien invasion. This passage is one of the many times that a rosebush is evoked—each time, Mink is either talking to it or about it. It later becomes clear that Mink is somehow communicating with Drill, the leader of the aliens, through the rosebush. He dictates directions, like how to build the strange contraptions and apparatuses that the children are constructing out of pots, pans, and other housewares, and she relays those directions to the other children. Ignorant to this arrangement, though, Mrs. Morris seems to assume her daughter is just talking to an imaginary friend or is being an "odd child." Mrs. Morris fails to give any weight to the things her daughter does or says, which eventually proves dangerous. The rosebush, which Mrs. Morris notices but never questions, represents her profound inattention to the Invasion unfolding in plain sight.

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

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris (speaker), Drill, Mrs. Mary Morris

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 258


### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mink is inside for lunch, telling her mother about Drill and the Invasion. Mrs. Morris clearly thinks Mink is just being a theatrical, imaginative child and thus fails to stifle her laughter and smiles at the odd things Mink says. In response, Mink is sharp and defensive, claiming, “You’re laughing! You’ll kill Drill and everybody.” For some reason, Mink associates Mrs. Morris’s laughter with Mrs. Morris desiring to kill “everybody.” This strange leap in logic emphasizes that Mink is only seven years old and is thus impressionable and struggles to think rationally and critically. In addition, it also implies that Drill has convinced Mink that people who make fun of her—including her own mother—are actually dangerous and threatening. Once again, Drill targets children’s insecurity of not being taken seriously, using it as a way to turn children against their friends and family and shift their loyalty to the aliens.

“They couldn’t find 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. [...] And they couldn’t find a way to surprise Earth or get help. [...] Until, one day,” whispered Mink melodramatically, “they thought of children! [...] And they thought of how grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns!”

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris (speaker), Drill, Mrs. Mary Morris

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 259

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mink is having lunch inside while telling her mom about the aliens’ strategy for the Invasion. Rosebushes appear again in this passage, reemphasizing the lack of attention that adults give to children, and how this has dangerous repercussions. Like most “grownups,” Mrs. Morris can’t be bothered to “look under rosebushes.” If she did, she would presumably find out how Drill and Mink are communicating (and, of course, realize that Drill and the alien Invasion are real). Furthermore, Mrs. Morris doesn’t look “on lawns,” where the children are building strange and

highly technical apparatuses out of household objects to help the aliens teleport to Earth. Mrs. Morris is so inattentive to her daughter that Mink literally tells her that the aliens said, “grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns,” and Mrs. Morris *still* thinks nothing of it.

Meanwhile, the rest of Mink’s explanation of the aliens’ strategy is significant because it reflects her inability to think logically and critically, which the aliens use to their advantage. She notes, “[Drill] says also you got to have help from your enemy.” Mink unknowingly spells out that children *are* part of the enemy that aliens are maliciously targeting, and that the aliens are only pretending to befriend the children. Instead of seeing Drill as a threat, though, Mink talks about Drill with excitement and evident fondness, highlighting that he successfully endeared himself to the children and won their loyalty.

“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 be 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.” “Drill says I won’t have to take baths [...] He told all the kids that. No more baths. And we can stay up till ten o’clock and go to two television shows on Saturday ‘stead of one!”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Mary Morris, Mink Morris (speaker), Drill

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 260

### Explanation and Analysis

Mink continues telling her mother about why the aliens needed children’s help with the Invasion. Clearly, Mrs. Morris thinks Mink’s ramblings are wild and imaginative, as she sends Mink right back outside to continue helping with the Invasion. The narrator points out that “Mrs. Morris was tired” to reaffirm that she finds her daughter taxing to listen to and barely pays attention to what Mink says.

This passage also reveals part of how Drill gained the children’s unflinching loyalty. In promising later bedtimes, more television (or “television shows,” presumably an invented futuristic device), and no more baths, Drill essentially promises more privileges and fewer rules. This resonates with the children, who, throughout the story,

demonstrate their desire for more autonomy (Mrs. Morris later thinks to herself that children must consider parents to be “tall and silly dictators” who are full of arbitrary rules). The tempting promises regarding bedtime, baths, and television also stress how young and innocent the children are—all those helping the Invasion are under the age of nine—and consequently how morally abhorrent it is that the aliens are manipulating them.

☛ “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 worse. 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.”

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Mary Morris, Mink Morris (speaker), Dale Jerrick, Pete Britz, Mr. Henry Morris, Drill

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 260

### Explanation and Analysis

Mink is having lunch with her mother and explaining how the Invasion game is going. She voices her frustration with the older kids in the neighborhood (who are just *slightly* older than her, since they “were little only a coupla years ago”) and specifically complains about the way they make fun of her and the other younger children. Once again, Mink is incredibly sensitive to being made fun of and hates when she’s not taken seriously by someone she considers a “grownup” (even if that so-called grownup is about twelve years old). She strengthens the divide between the younger kids (who are helping with the Invasion) and the older kids and adults (who think the Invasion is silly and make-believe), furthering an ingroup-outgroup dynamic. Mink shows genuine animosity towards those in the outgroup, and her words are chilling, as it later becomes clear that she is *not* joking about killing people. She threateningly claims, “You’d think they’d know better,” and declares, “We’ll kill them *first*.”

This passage also gives insight into how Drill succeeded in turning the children against their parents. She tells her

mother, “Drill says you’re dangerous. Know why? ‘Cause you don’t believe in Martians!” Drill managed to turn himself and the other aliens into the victims and the parents into predators by tapping into the children’s deep hatred of not being believed or taken seriously. Mink also reveals that Drill made the grand, sweeping promise that kids from Mink’s neighborhood (plus those in the next block), will get to “run the world.” Dazzled by the thought of this power and influence (and clearly enamored by her so-called friend, Drill), Mink doesn’t realize that this promise is probably not genuine, underscoring her impressionability.


☛ “Mink, was that Peggy Ann crying?”

Mink was bent over in the yard, near the rosebush.

“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.”

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris, Mrs. Mary Morris (speaker), Drill, Peggy Ann

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 262


### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Mrs. Morris notices one of the younger children, Peggy Ann, running away in tears from the other kids, who are still busy with their Invasion game. Uncharacteristically, Mrs. Morris intervenes in the situation, which is a brief moment of redemption for her. However, she once again fails to consider why Mink is “bent over in the yard, near the rosebush,” ignorant to the fact that this is how Mink is communicating with Drill.

Mink’s claim that Peggy Ann ran away in tears because she’s a “scarebaby” and “grew up all of a sudden” feels contradictory. It seems that a younger child would be more susceptible to being a “scarebaby,” so it’s odd that Mink attributes fear and crying with people who have grown up. However, it seems that Peggy Ann suddenly realized how serious and scary the Invasion is, which is how she “grew up all of a sudden.” This newfound anxiety and ability to think logically and critically about the situation at hand does mark her as a “grownup” as far as the other kids are concerned. Just as Mink barred anyone who was “too old” from helping with the Invasion, she also kicks Peggy Ann out of the game.

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** Mink Morris, Mr. Henry Morris, Mrs. Mary Morris

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 265

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Morris and a very confused and irritated Mr. Morris hide in the attic from the Invasion,

which has just begun. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Morris suddenly realizes that the Invasion is terrifyingly real, which challenges what her logical adult mind considers to be in the realm of possibility. This passage exposes that she was actually harboring “subconscious suspicion and fear” throughout the afternoon but wasn’t fully aware of it. Even the reader wasn’t privy to this information, emphasizing just how well Mrs. Morris was hiding those realizations from herself on the basis of them not being logical.

Now, however, all those “little revelations and knowledges” come pouring out. This moment shows the downfall of relying purely on a logical, rational mindset. In acting “logically and carefully and sensibly,” Mrs. Morris actually blinded herself to the reality at hand, failed to intervene, and basically stepped aside and let the Invasion unfold. Her newfound understanding that the Invasion is real “exploded in her and shook her to bits,” which chillingly echoes the sounds of the explosions just outside her window, as the aliens successfully teleport to Earth.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## “ZERO HOUR”

A new game has swept the neighborhood, and the children are overjoyed. Laughing, whooping, climbing trees, and running wildly across the grass, the children are enjoying “excitement they hadn’t known in years.” Meanwhile, rockets streak across the sky, and “beetle cars” zoom quietly along the streets. The game is “such fun, such tremulous joy, such tumbling and hearty screaming.”

Covered in dirt and sweat, Mink Morris runs into her house frantically looking for pots, pans, and various tools, which she stuffs into a sack. At seven years old, Mink is “loud and strong and definite.” Mrs. Morris, Mink’s mother, is horrified by the mess Mink is making and demands an explanation. Cheeks flushed from exertion, Mink breathlessly tells her mom that she’s playing “The most exciting game ever,” called “Invasion.”

Mink runs back outside “like a rocket,” the door slamming behind her. All along the street, children are pouring out of their homes, with their own sacks filled with pots, pans, tools, forks, and can openers. Only the younger children—those under ten years old—take part in the excitement. The older kids look on with disdain, believing themselves too “dignified” for the Invasion game.

Parents also bustle about, coming and going in their “chromium beetles.” Repairmen poke in and out of houses, fixing “vacuum elevators” and “food-delivery tubes.” Although the adults are busy with their own tasks, they admire the kids playing outside, “tolerantly amused” by the game and wishing they still had such “fierce energy.”

Meanwhile, Mink bosses the other children around, telling them where to place their various tools and kitchen gadgets. One of the older kids in the neighborhood, twelve-year-old Joseph Connors, runs up and asks to play. Mink tells him to go away, as he’s too old to play the game and would “only laugh and spoil the Invasion.” Another twelve-year-old boy tells Joseph, “Let them sissies play. [...] Them and their fairies,” claiming that the younger kids are “Nuts.”

*The detail about rockets and silent “beetle cars” reveal that this story takes place in the future (somewhere around 1980 or 1990, which was a distant future for Ray Bradbury, who wrote the story in 1949). As the children are swept up in a game of pretend, life goes on normally for the adults, who pay them no mind.*



*While Mink is captivated by her game and finding the perfect props to use for it, Mrs. Morris only sees a mess growing in her kitchen. This sharp divide between children’s imaginative view of the world and adults’ logical view of the world will resonate throughout the story.*



*Bradbury emphasizes another divide—one between younger children (those under ten) and older children. The older children act like little adults, as they think themselves too “dignified” and mature to participate in the game. Like the adults (as the story will later show), the older children don’t take the younger ones seriously.*



*The adults are just “tolerantly amused” by the children—that is, they merely “tolerate” the children’s game, suggesting that the children are somewhat of an annoyance. Most of the adults barely pay any attention to the children, though, and this indifference will have a steep cost.*



*Mink strengthens the divide between older and younger children by excluding Joseph from the game. She is clearly anxious that Joseph—and older kids in general—will make fun of her. This is the first instance of younger children wanting to be taken seriously by the grownups (and twelve-year-olds) in their lives.*



When Joseph leaves, the younger kids go back to their game. Mink makes an “apparatus” with the assorted tools and kitchen supplies, while a little girl takes notes “in painful slow scribbles.” As the children play, life in the city goes on normally. The streets are dotted with “good green and peaceful trees,” and “Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the country, across the continent.” The global community is peaceful and harmonious, marked by a “beautiful balance” and “equal trust” among nations.

From an upstairs window, Mrs. Morris peers down on the children in the yard and shakes her head with amusement. She notices Mink talking to someone by the **rosebush**, but no one is there. Mrs. Morris thinks the children are “odd.” She watches Mink ask a question to the rosebush and then call out the answer to Anna, the girl taking notes. Mink tells Anna to write down the word “triangle,” and Anna struggles to spell it. With a laugh, Mrs. Morris calls down the spelling from the window. As she leaves her perch, Mrs. Morris can faintly hear Mink instructing Anna to write, “Four-nine-seven-A-and-B-and-X [...] And a fork and a string and a—hex-hex-agon-hexagonal!”

When Mink comes in for lunch, she drinks her milk in a single gulp and tries to dash back outside, but Mrs. Morris forces her to drink her soup. Squirming in her seat, Mink tells her mom to hurry, because it’s “a matter of life and death.” Mrs. Morris says she felt the same sense of urgency about things when she was Mink’s age. Mrs. Morris tells her daughter to eat slower, but Mink says she can’t—Drill is waiting for her.

Mrs. Morris prods Mink to find out who Drill is and if he’s a new boy in town. Mink answers vaguely, telling her mom that she’ll just “make fun” of Drill, because “Everybody pokes fun.” Mrs. Morris asks if Drill is shy, and Mink says, “Yes. No. In a way. Gosh, Mom, I got to run if we want to have the Invasion!” Mink then explains that aliens are invading Earth. She claims that they’re “not exactly Martians.” All she knows is that they’re “From up.” Mrs. Morris brushes her hand over Mink’s sweaty forehead and says that the aliens must also be from “inside.”

*The small detail of seven-year-old Mink making an apparatus (a piece of technical equipment) with the assorted tools is startling—the story hints that the children may be preparing for a real alien Invasion and may be capable of actually bringing it about. Meanwhile, the peace in the rest of the world is so profound it seems unlikely that the adults would believe anything could threaten it—and especially not an alien Invasion.*



*Mrs. Morris probably assumes that her daughter is talking to an imaginary friend, but instead of considering that sweet or charming, Mrs. Morris finds it “odd.” This may be her thinking somewhat scornfully of her daughter, or it may be her first hint that something serious is going on. Meanwhile, Anna and Mink’s struggle with spelling the word “triangle” emphasizes how young they are, while Mink’s incomprehensible instructions suggest that the children are building complicated contraptions based on the aliens’ instructions, which Mink somehow receives through the rosebush.*



*Mrs. Morris is somewhat able to put herself in Mink’s shoes in this moment and remember how it feels to be a child. However, Mrs. Morris doesn’t ask why it’s “a matter of life and death,” which is yet another lost opportunity to intervene. This is also a dark moment of foreshadowing, as the game really is “a matter of life and death” for humankind.*



*Just as Mink wouldn’t let Joseph in on the Invasion game because she worried he would make fun of her, she is reluctant to tell her mother anything that might result in teasing. In claiming that “Everybody pokes fun,” Mink gestures to a much wider problem—that she (and likely the other younger children) feel like they’re constantly made fun of and not taken seriously. Mrs. Morris does little to help this, as she affirms that the aliens are from “inside” Mink’s head.*



Mink accuses her mom of laughing and claims that Mrs. Morris will “kill Drill and everybody.” Mink says she’s not sure which planet Drill is from, but “he’s had a hard time.” Mrs. Morris hides her smile by covering her mouth with her hand, and Mink continues, explaining how the aliens haven’t been able to find a way to attack Earth. In “mock seriousness,” Mrs. Morris says that’s because Earth is “impregnable.” Excitedly, Mink says that Drill used the same word earlier. Mrs. Morris says that Drill must be extremely bright for his age.

Continuing, Mink explains that according to Drill, “to make a good fight,” one needs the element of surprise and help from the enemy. Mrs. Morris says that this is called a “fifth column,” and Drill affirms that that’s what Drill called it, too. Mink says the aliens couldn’t figure out how to have that element of surprise or how to get help from within—until they realized they could use children. Mrs. Morris exclaims “brightly” at this idea, and Mink explains that aliens know that “grownups are so busy they never look under **rosebushes** or lawns.” Mrs. Morris adds that grownups do look under those things, but “Only for snails and fungus.”

Mink then rambles on about four “dim-dims,” and Mrs. Morris realizes she means the four “dimensions.” Mink adds that Drill also said “something about kids under nine and imagination.” Tired of listening to her daughter’s excitable chatter, Mrs. Morris sends Mink back outside as to not keep Drill waiting any longer. She tells Mink that she needs to hurry if she wants to have her Invasion before her nightly bath. Mink grumbles that Drill says that after the invasion, kids will no longer have to take baths. They’ll also get to stay up till 10:00 P.M., and watch two television shows on Saturdays instead of just one. Mrs. Morris says that Drill needs to “mind his p’s and q’s” (mind his manners), or else she’ll call his mother.

Backing out the door, Mink tells Mrs. Morris that she and the other kids have been having problems with some of the older kids like Pete Britz and Dale Jerrick. Mink thinks they’re growing up, which makes them “snooty” and keeps them from believing in Drill. She says she hates them more than anyone else, and that “We’ll kill them *first*.” Mrs. Morris jokingly asks if she and her husband, Henry, will be killed last. Mink answers that according to Drill, all parents are “dangerous” because they don’t believe in aliens. She continues, declaring that the aliens are going to let her and the other kids (plus the kids from the next block) “run the world.” Plus, Mink says, she might even be queen.

*Strangely, Mink associates Mrs. Morris laughing at the concept of aliens with Mrs. Morris wanting to “kill Drill and everybody.” It seems that this is propaganda that Drill has ingrained in the children as a way to turn them against their parents. This is one of the first moments where it seems that the aliens have manipulated the children into helping with the Invasion. Meanwhile, by calling Earth “impregnable,” Mrs. Morris demonstrates her blind trust that the peaceful state of the world will prevail.*



*Drill told Mink that the aliens needed “help from the enemy,” so they chose to target children. Strangely, Mink and the other children don’t seem to realize that this makes them the enemy, too. When Mrs. Morris replies “brightly,” it’s clear that she’s just playing along with what she assumes is a fictitious game. This failure to take children seriously is exactly why Drill and his fellow aliens target children in the first place—adults will let an alien Invasion (passed off as a game) unfold on their lawns without realizing it, because all adults look for on lawns is “snails and fungus.”*



*Once again, Mink’s struggle to pronounce big words underscores that she’s only seven years old and probably does not really grasp what dimensions are and, more significantly, what the impacts of aiding the Invasion will be. This passage reveals that Drill is using bribery to manipulate the children into helping, making the (probably empty) promise that kids will have more privileges and fewer rules in the post-Invasion world.*



*Mink’s use of the word “We” in, “We’ll kill them first,” is ominous, as it implies a world in which aliens and children are banded together for the sake of doing evil and getting revenge. (Of course, it’s also possible that the aliens will discard of the children immediately after the Invasion, having no use for them anymore.) Mrs. Morris fails to pick up on Mink’s serious tone, once again illustrating how she doesn’t give weight to the things her daughter says or does. Mink again emphasizes that this is what children hate more than anything. Drill seems to know this, as promising the children the chance to “run the world” is promising some semblance of power and influence that they crave but don’t currently have.*



Halfway out the door, Mink asks her mother what “lodge-ick” is. Mrs. Morris answers that “logic is knowing what things are true and not true.” Excited, Mink affirms that Drill mentioned that same word. She also asks about what “im-pres-sion-able” means, pronouncing the word with difficulty. With a laugh, Mrs. Morris answers that impressionable means “to be a child.”

Mink thanks her mother for lunch and runs out the door, only to return a few seconds later, calling, “Mom, I’ll be sure you won’t be hurt much, really!” Mrs. Morris says, “Well, thanks,” and the door slams behind Mink.

At 4:00 P.M., Mrs. Morris receives a video call from her friend Helen, who lives in Pennsylvania. Both women admit they’re feeling tired because of their children. Sighing, Mrs. Morris says that Mink won’t stop going on about some “super-Invasion.” Helen laughs, saying that her kids are obsessed with the same game. She says that by tomorrow, the kids will be crazy about “geometrical jacks and motorized hopscotch.”

The two women reflect on the games they used to play as children back in 1948, especially one called “Japs and Nazis.” Mrs. Morris says she can’t believe her parents put up with her. Helen says that “Parents learn to shut their ears.” Mrs. Morris goes quiet, lost in thought. After a moment, Helen asks what’s wrong, and Mrs. Morris is startled, saying she was just thinking about “Shutting ears and such. Never mind. Where were we?”

Helen says her son, Tim, has a crush on a boy named Drill, and Mrs. Morris says that Mink likes him too, and that the word Drill “Must be a new password.” Helen is surprised that the game got all the way to New York through word of mouth. She says that her kids are also collecting random tools and kitchen supplies, and that the yard “Looks like a scrap drive.” Helen says her friend Josephine, who lives in Boston, said that her kids are also playing the Invasion game.

*Mrs. Morris’s comment suggests that being impressionable is simply part of being a child. This is also the story’s stance, as it avoids blaming children for their impressionable natures (and consequently getting roped into an Invasion scheme) but instead blames the aliens for taking advantage of innocent children, as well as parents for being inattentive and flippant regarding what their children say and do.*



*Once again, Mink makes a disturbing comment that her mother fails to take seriously. This is also a moment of foreshadowing to the end of the story, when Mink leads the aliens to her parents so that, the story implies, the aliens can kill them. It’s also startling that Mink talks so casually about her parents getting hurt, suggesting that her loyalties have fully shifted to Drill.*



*The two women’s conversation reveals that they live in different states, and that the game has somehow swept the nation. While Helen attributes this spread to word-of-mouth, it seems that aliens have actually individually targeted neighborhoods of kids across the nation or world (perhaps deceptively promising all kids the chance to “run the world” and “be queen”).*



*The game “Japs and Nazis” (including a slur for Japanese people) reveals that the women grew up during and after World War II, when Japan and Germany were America’s enemies. As impressionable children, Mrs. Morris and Helen absorbed the information they heard about the war (which was very real and terrifying) and turned it into a game. Mink and her friends are doing just that—naively misinterpreting a dangerous situation and making it into a game.*



*Although the two women are surprised by the game’s reach and popularity, they aren’t concerned by it. Helen’s comment about her son having a crush on Drill implies that Drill has a way of endearing himself to the children and making them trust him. It’s also revealed here that the Morrisses live in New York state.*





Mink runs in for a glass of water, and Mrs. Morris asks how the game is going. Mink says that the game is “Almost finished.” She tosses her yo-yo, which magically vanishes when it reaches the end of its string. Mrs. Morris is dumbfounded and asks Mink to do it again, but Mink says she can’t—“zero hour” is at 5:00 P.M., so she has to hurry. Still on the video call, Helen laughs and says that Tim was playing with the same yo-yo that morning but wouldn’t show her how it worked. When he left it inside, Helen tried to use the yo-yo herself, but she couldn’t get it to work. Mrs. Morris tells Helen that the yo-yo didn’t work for her because she’s “not *impressionable*.”

The hour passes slowly. When the sun begins to set, the children are still out in the yard, whooping with delight—except for a young girl named Peggy Ann, who runs away in tears. Noticing this, Mrs. Morris orders Mink to explain why Peggy Ann was crying. Mink, crouched near the **rosebush**, distractedly answers that Peggy Ann is just a “scarebaby,” and that she is “getting too old to play. I guess she grew up all of a sudden.” Unsatisfied with this answer, Mrs. Morris demands to know if Mink hit Peggy Ann and made her cry. Mink pleads innocence, claiming that “It was something—well, she’s just a scarey pants.”

Scowling, Mink mumbles that Drill is “stuck” and only made it halfway to Earth. She explains to her mother that if the kids can get Drill through successfully, then all the other aliens can follow. Mrs. Morris says she’s tired of watching Mink and goes inside.

Back in the house, Mrs. Morris sips a beer in her massage chair and thinks about how one minute, children hate their parents, and the next, they love them. She wonders if children ever go on to “forget or forgive the whippings and the harsh strict words of command.” She realizes that it’s hard to “forget and forgive” authority figures—“those tall and silly dictators.”

A clock in the house chimes, announcing that it’s 5:00 P.M. Mrs. Morris laughs to herself, realizing that (according to Mink) it is now “zero hour.” A car pulls into the driveway, and Mr. Morris gets out, waving hello to Mink. Mink ignores her father and continues to prepare for the Invasion with the other kids. When he goes inside, Mr. Morris affirms that he had a “Swell day. Makes you glad to be alive.”

*It’s unclear where the magical yo-yo toys come from—whether they’re a product of Bradbury’s ultra-futuristic world, if they’re a present from the aliens for participating in the Invasion, or if they’re one of the contraptions that Drill instructs the kids to build. Regardless, the two women’s surprise underscores that these yo-yos are out of the ordinary. However, the women fail to investigate further and once again write their kids off as being silly and “impressionable.”*



*Mink is repeatedly seen talking to a rosebush, suggesting that she is somehow communicating with Drill through it. She calls Peggy Ann a “scarebaby” and a “scarey pants” for running away from the game in tears, suggesting that Peggy Ann suddenly grasped the terrifying reality of the Invasion and didn’t want to participate anymore. Once again, Mink is clearly turned against anyone who has “grown up” and doesn’t see the world through her perspective.*



*Mrs. Morris straightforwardly says that she’s tired of watching her daughter play, one again stressing that adults in the story are inattentive and indifferent to children—an attitude that will ultimately prove fatal.*



*Mrs. Morris’s inner thoughts are jarring and seem out of place, as she thinks coldly about “whippings” and “harsh strict words of command” that children endure from their parents. It doesn’t appear that Mrs. Morris physically or verbally hurts her daughter, so perhaps these are recollections of Mrs. Morris’s own childhood. The phrase “tall and silly dictators” also emphasizes the divide between adults and children, as despite their similarities, one group has total control over the other.*



*This moment reminds readers that “Zero Hour” was originally published in 1947. The Morrises appear to be the perfect cookie-cutter suburban family, with Mrs. Morris as a stay-at-home mom, and Mr. Morris as a white-collar worker (who arrives home promptly at 5:00 P.M. to greet his wife). Mr. Morris’s dated slang (that it was a “Swell day”) also points back to the late 1940s and provides a cheerful, optimistic tone that will soon be shattered.*



A low buzzing noise begins to sound, and Mrs. Morris' eyes widen. Nervously, she asks Henry if the kids were playing with electricity or anything else dangerous, but Henry says no. With a hollow laugh, Mrs. Morris asks her husband to tell the kids to "put off their Invasion" until the next day. The buzzing gets louder.

Suddenly, an explosion shakes the house, and Mrs. Morris screams. She and Henry hear several explosions go off in other people's yards. Frantically, Mrs. Morris screams for her husband to follow her to the **attic**. She knows that he'll think she's "insane," but there's not enough time to convince him otherwise. Another explosion goes off, and the children outside "screamed with delight, as if at a great fireworks display." Henry yells that the sound is coming from outside, not the attic.

Once in the **attic**, Mrs. Morris locks the door behind them and tosses the key into a far corner of the room. All of the "subconscious suspicion and fear" that she had been stuffing down all afternoon finally bubbles up—all of the realizations and suspicions she had "logically and carefully and sensibly rejected and censored." Wildly, Mrs. Morris tells Mr. Morris that they should be safe until nightfall, but then they should try to sneak out.

Henry yells that his wife has gone crazy, but upon hearing Mink's voice downstairs, Mrs. Morris hushes him. The buzzing intensifies, and the video phone begins to ring "insistently, alarmingly, violently." Mrs. Morris thinks it's Helen calling.

Suddenly, the house is filled with the sound of footsteps coming from at least fifty people, and Henry angrily shouts about who is "tramping around" in his house. Through the sounds of the buzzing and children's giggles, Mrs. Morris and her husband hear Mink calling out for her parents. As Mink wanders up to the **attic**, the sound of heavy footsteps follows her closely. There is a "queer cold light" visible through the crack in the door. Henry hears "the alien sound of eagerness" in his daughter's voice as she calls out again for her parents.

*Mrs. Morris's nervousness reveals that she's starting to internalize that the Invasion game may not be fictitious after all. Significantly, it takes something more tangible—the buzzing noise—for her to begin this realization, underscoring how she sees the world through a logical, adult lens and needs proof.*



*The explosions in different yards remind the reader that the children were building strange contraptions outside, so it seems the aliens have used those contraptions to teleport to Earth. Mrs. Morris and the kids both scream, but Mrs. Morris is doing so in horror (logically understanding that an alien Invasion is a terrible thing), while the children are screaming with joy (thinking they have won the Invasion game).*



*Throughout the day, Mrs. Morris didn't appear to feel any sort of "subconscious suspicion and fear" about the Invasion game—she repeatedly treated Mink as a silly, imaginative child, and the Invasion as a fictitious game. However, in this moment, it's clear that Mrs. Morris has been picking up on clues that the Invasion is real, but her logical, adult mind repressed them.*



*Helen is likely calling about the Invasion, which is probably unfolding in her front yard as well. Mrs. Morris thinks the phone is ringing "insistently, alarmingly, [and] violently," emphasizing her newfound understanding of the dire situation at hand.*



*Like his wife, Henry doesn't believe in the Invasion until he has more proof (for him, the "queer cold light" and his daughter's unhuman voice), showing how his commitment to being logical and rational is blinding. Meanwhile, the fact that Mink's voice does sound different implies that the aliens have done something to the children. Perhaps Mink is no longer acting on her own accord—which makes the next moment all the more unnerving.*



Mink calls out for her mother and father again, and the lock on the **attic** door melts. The door opens, revealing Mink, flanked by “tall blue shadows.” Seeing her parents trembling together in the dark attic, Mink says, “Peekaboo.”

*Although it was supposed to keep Mr. and Mrs. Morris safe, the lock on the attic door melts, revealing the aliens' power and humans' helplessness. Mink still treats the Invasion as a game, seen by the way she playfully (but chillingly) says “Peekaboo,” as if they were playing an innocent game of hide-and-seek. Since Mink is surrounded by “tall blue shadows” (the aliens), it seems that Mink led them to her parents so that the aliens could kill them.*





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