
A Short Story
THE IRRITATED PEOPLE
RAY BRADBURY

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TINY WINDOWS

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Charles Crossley, President of American Jet-Propelled Ships, felt himself spread-eagled in his favorite living room chair. The voice on the televisor moaned. Europe. Crossley twitched. Secret atomic factories. Crossley jerked. Semi-dictatorships. Crossley sweated. Political pressures. War. Crossley writhed.

His wife shut the televisor off indignantly. "Nonsense!" She stared at her limp husband. "Tri-Union hasn't any weapons, we haven't any, neither has Russia, Britain or anyone else. That was all settled and forbidden ages ago. When was it? 1960?"

Crossley stroked his receding hairline, sighing. "They're making atom bombs in secret," he said. He littered the rug with cigar ash.

"Stop that!" cried his wife. "My nice rug!"

"The rug, oh, the confounded rug," he said, and muttered away, closing his eyes for a long minute. Then he opened one eye. He looked at his wife. He looked at the rug, the cigar in his hand, the fallen ashes.

"The rug?" He shut his eyes again. Five minutes later he leaped up with an explosion of sound. "The rug! I've got it! I've got it!" He seized his wife, kissed her. "You are brilliant! I love you! That's it, that is it!"

He rushed madly off in the general direction of Europe!

Thus began the Tri-Union-American war of the year 1989.

The small jet-propelled ship crossed the Atlantic in fiery gusts. In it was Charles Crossley, a man with an idea. Behind it three thousand other ships tore along, putting space behind. They were his ships. They belonged to his company. He employed the men. This was his own private war.

"Ha!" Mr. Crossley laughed quite obviously.

The radio cut in on him. "Crossley?"

Crossley answered. "Speaking."

"This is the President, Crossley." The voice was sharp, and it fairly heated the interior of the ship. "Turn back, in the name of common sense. What are you up to! I'll seize your company!"

"This can't wait, Mr. President. We've been sweating it out for months. The Tri-Union won't admit it's setting up a fascistic skeleton in Europe, we can't find any proof they are, but there are rumors. We've got to get it out in the open. We can't wait. I'm sorry I have to act alone. Bombardiers?"

"Ready!" Three thousand voices.

"Crossley!" shouted the President, far away.

"Here comes Vienna!" Crossley jerked his hand down. "Bombloads, release!"

"Release!" Three thousand voices.

"Crossley!" The President.

"Bang!" said Crossley.

Pink confetti tumbled down through the clear cool summer air. Tons and tons of pink, whirling confetti! Confetti by the bombload, three thousand cargoes of very pink, very fine confetti!

"And to think," mused Crossley happily, as he turned his ship homeward, "to think the entire idea came from spilling ashes on the rug! Hi-ho!"

The President of the United States shook his fist.

"You bombed them!"

Crossley yawned. "There is no law against dropping waste paper," he said, quietly.

"You attacked the people of the Tri-Union states!"

"No one injured," said Crossley, calmly. "No explosions, no bruises, no fatalities. Did anybody even get a piece of confetti in his eye? The answer is no. A two letter word."

Crossley lit a cigarette. "Fifty thousand housefraus and one hundred thousand children swept sidewalks. Men flooded employment offices in Vienna for street sweeper jobs. But, ah, that clever, devilish confetti! It was electrically and chemically impregnated. It vanished when touched by human hands. It reappeared when humans withdrew from the immediate vicinity. Brooms helped little. When disturbed the confetti had a curious habit of jumping like tiddle-de-winks or jumping beans. Sensitive little

things. I dare say it'll be some weeks before Vienna is clean. That is what I have done to the Tri-Union. The World Organization forbids an attack. Was this an attack, sir? Confetti on the wind? Eh?"

"The World Organization forbids war!" cried the President.

"This is not war." Crossley leaned forward, tapped the desk earnestly. "Suppose we dropped confetti every day, causing the Tri-Union population to pluck and curry their lawns 365 days a year? And there are other things we can do, Mr. President. Little, irritating things. Imagine it, Mr. President, will you?"

The President imagined it for quite awhile. Then, slowly, he began to smile.

It was a sweet day, a morning in the Tri-Union state of Bruegher. The sky was blue, the clouds were nicely white. And upon the rolling green hills a picnic was spread, with thousands of tossed paper napkins, hundreds of bread heels, crusts, can openers, sardine tins, dropped eggs and wadded cardboard cartons. The picnic, like a river of several thousand parts, engulfed the park-like hills. One small boy running through the dells paused to leave his semi-digested lunch.

Laughter. Wine bottles gurgling! Songs!

The President of the United States and Mr. Crossley clinked glasses, heading the picnic, drank gustily, refilled, drank again. Others yelled, screamed in delight, played tag, threw away bottles!

And on twenty thousand other Tri-Union hills twenty thousand other small family ships landed. Twenty thousand more picnic riots began. Sixty thousand napkins, well wadded, were dropped from wiped lips! One hundred thousand shattered egg shells were spilled! Sixty thousand shiny soup cans were left gleaming in the sun. Three hundred million ants rushed out to welcome them. And the 30 million people of Greater Bruegher glared at the invasion, knowing not what to do. What was the world coming to?

At nightfall, the last little boy had emptied himself of his brackish contents, the last little girl plucked bawling from a poison ivy nest, the last sardine dispatched, the last beer bottle left a foamy vacuum.

Flying away into the night, the American invaders sent back their war cry which sounded remarkably like, and probably was, a belch.

General Krauss, personal representative of Brugh, the new semi-dictator of Europe, shouted out of the televisor:

"Mr. President, you, you were seen, by reliable witnesses, to peel an egg and, bit by bit, throw the shell under a one hundred year old linden tree!"

Crossley and the President stood together in the White House inner sanctum. The President spoke:

"Krauss, the peace laws specify no nation may manufacture weapons for killing, wounding or destruction of another's national populace or property. We are helpless to attack you, therefore. All the while, you, in secret, make weapons—"

"You can't prove that!"

"—make weapons," said the President, grimly. "So, in last recourse, we use weapons which are no weapons at all. We have destroyed nothing and no one."

"Ah-hah!" Krauss' eyes snapped on the visor. His face vanished. A new scene replaced it, showing a green meadow. Krauss' voice crackled behind it, in comment. "Property damage to Greater Bruegher! Listen! Rough estimate! Sixty-five thousand ants, large and small, both black and red, biting and non-biting, were trodden on at your picnic!"

The scene dissolved to yet another.

"Hark! Ten million grass-blades. Approximately. Ten million trampled and crushed. Two thousand pretty flowers. Picked!"

"That was an error," apologized Crossley. "The children got out of hand."

"Two thousand flowers," repeated Krauss savagely. "Picked!"

Krauss took time to get hold of himself. He cleared his throat and continued.

"Approximately thirty billion atomic particles of wood brushed off Great Bruegher sycamores, oaks, elms and lindens by adults playing tree tag—AND—sixty million particles scraped from Greater Bruegher fences by young men escaping angered Greater Bruegher bulls. AND! And—" he thundered. The scene dissolved once more, and a most interesting view was revealed. "And—sixteen thousand cubic feet of A-1, first class forest moss

crushed, rolled upon and otherwise malpracticed by young lovers idling in the thickets! There you are! The proof! The proof! This is war!"

The first Tri-Union airships flew over New York a week later. From them, on parachutes, little yellow boxes floated.

Crossley, in his garden resting, preparing new methods of attack on the enemy, was astonished as one of the devices hovered by the red brick garden wall.

"A bomb!" he cried, and leaped into the house, sorry he had started this infernal war.

Edith, his wife, peered from the rear window.

"Oh, come back," she said. "It's only a radio."

They listened. Music. Blues music.

"From back in the Mad Forties, when I wore pigtails," said Edith.

"Hmm," said Crossley.

The music, if such it could be called, concerned a lady afflicted with "—I got those mad about him, glad about him, but I get so sad about him bah-looze!"

"Interesting," said Crossley.

"Yes," she said.

The song ended. They waited.

The song began again.

"Is that all it plays?" said Edith. "I don't see any dials to change the record with."

"Oh, oh," said Crossley and shut his eyes. "I think I begin to see the light—"

The song ended and started a third time.

"That's what I expected," said Crossley. "Here, give me a hand."

The song flowed into its fourth, fifth and sixth renditions as they poked at the dangling machine. It dodged—like a hummingbird. "Radar-sensitives," gasped Crossley, giving up. "Oh, pfui!"

Edith covered her ears with her hands. "Oh, Charles," she said.

They went in the house and shut the door tight and shut the windows tighter. Nevertheless, the music penetrated.

After dinner, Crossley looked at Edith and said:

"What do you make it?"

She counted on her fingers. "This next time will be the one hundred and thirteenth repeat," she said.

"That's what I counted," said he, handing her wads of cotton.

He worked feverishly that evening. He made plans for war using confetti, toothpaste tubes that refused to function, a chemical that dulled razors with the first scrape, and—mmm, let me see....

His young son, age twelve, was doing his homework in the next room.

"Oblivious to that awful music," said Crossley in admiration. "Kids are marvels, can concentrate anywhere." He crept up on his son, looked over his shoulder.

The boy was writing a composition:

"Poe authored The Cask of Amontillado, Masque of the Red Death, and I Got Those Mad About Him, Glad About Him, But I Get So Sad About Him —"

"Blues," said Crossley. He turned. "Edith! Pack the suitcases! We're leaving home!"

They piled into the family helicopter. As the helicopter lifted into the sky, Crossley's small son said, looking down at the music box in the garden, "Two hund-derth time!"

Crossley hit him.

It was useless to flee. The hovering radios were everywhere, bawling. They were in the air and on the ground and under bridges.

They could not be shot down; they dodged. And the music played on.

Edith glared at her husband who was somewhat responsible for all this. His son tentatively eyed Crossley's shins for kicking.

Crossley called the President.

"YOU!" screamed the President. "CROSSLEY!"

"Mr. President, I can explain!"

So the war progressed. The World Organization hunched forward tensely awaiting the moment when either side got off bounds, fired a shot or committed a murder. But—

Normal civilized pursuits continued. Imports and exports flowed, foods, clothing, raw materials were exchanged.

If either country had broken relations, made guns, knives, grenades, the World Organization would have leaped in. But not a gun was fashioned, not a knife sharpened. There were no murders, wounded, or bruised. The World Organization was helpless. There was no war.

Well, almost none.

"Heinrich!"

"Yes, my wife?"

"Come look at this mirror!"

Heinrich, chief deputy of the police department in a Greater Bruegher village, came slopping in his easy slippers, holding his clay pipe like a small tame bird in his hand.

Heinrich looked into a mirror that was ridiculous, like at a carnival.

"What has happened to it over night?" he wondered. "Look at me. Ha, I look like an idiot!" He chuckled. "My face stretches like rubber, shivers, is distorted. Well. The mirror is warped."

"You are warped!" shouted his wife. "Do something about it!"

"I will buy a new one. In the meantime, the one upstairs—"

"Is also warped!" she snapped. "How will I get my hat on straight, or see if my lipstick is drawn fine, or my powder neat? Clumsy idiot, hurry and fetch a new one! Go, get, rush!"

Crossley had his orders. Find a way out. Or arrange a truce. If these next attacks by the United States did not produce results the United States must bargain for peace. Peace, yes. Peace from that abominable woman singing the abominable blues twenty times an hour, night and day. The American Public would hold the line as long as possible, said the President, but time was short and puncturing everybody's eardrums seemed a most unlikely way out. Crossley was to get in there, and pitch.

Crossley pitched. His jet plane streaked over Europe in the great offensive. Three thousand bombloads of something or other were dropped, at his order, and then the three thousand company ships curved and shot home. He lingered on, cruising the length of Europe, awaiting results.

He got them.

A large, unseeable beam took hold of his ship and drew it steadily down into the dark mountains of Greater Bruegher.

"Well," said Crossley. "Adventure."

The entire capture was quiet, convivial. When he stepped from his grounded craft he was politely escorted into a city of ultra-modern buildings and avenues between the mountains, and there, in a small edifice, in a small room, he met his enemy.

Krauss sat behind a desk as Crossley entered. Crossley nodded and bowed.

"Hello, Krauss. You'll be prosecuted for kidnapping."

"You're free to go any time," snapped Krauss. "This is an interview. Sit."

The chair was shaped like a low pyramid. You could sit, but you slid in all directions. The ceiling, where Crossley was expected to sit, was very low.

He had to choose between back-ache or slithering around on a pyramidal chair. He chose to slither.

Krauss reached over and pinched Crossley.

"Ouch!" said Crossley.

Krauss did it again.

"Stop that!" said Crossley.

"All right," said Krauss.

Under Crossley, the chair exploded.

Gibbering, Crossley leapt up. He banged his head on the ceiling. He held his back end with one hand, the head with the other.

"Mr. Crossley, shall we talk of peace?"

"Yeah," said Crossley, bent over. "When you stop making secret weapons. Otherwise, more confetti, more picnics and pigs-knuckles."

"And more music in America, ah, Mr. Crossley?"

Another pinch.

"Ow! We can stand the music long enough to use our next weapon. We always did have it over you stuffed-shirts over here. You were the inventors of psychological warfare, but we gave it a few improvements."

"Can one improve over music, Mr. Crossley?"

"We'll find a way. Ouch. Keep that away from me!"

"I'll detail our plans, Crossley. First, an oversupply of mosquitoes, in America. Hungry ones. Then, a chemical which causes all men's shoes to squeak with each step. Third, electrical pulses to make alarm clocks ring an hour early each morn—"

Crossley was professionally interested.

"Not bad. All within the Peace Rules. All harmless. Mmm, except those mosquitoes."

"Merely skin irritatives."

"Still, the World Org might rule against it."

"Out with the mosquitoes, then!"

"Ouch."

"Did I hurt you? Sorry. Well, let us see if we can hurt you a bit more. This paper on my desk. It is a radio report of your death five minutes ago. Your plane crashed, says the report. I have only to broadcast it, and then make sure you 'live' up to the facts contained therein. You see?"

Crossley grinned. "I'm to report to the President every hour. No report, immediate World Org investigation. Do you see?"

"Your plane crashed."

"No soap. The Brindly-Connors motors never conk. And the new reactive-propellants on my ships prevent bad landings. So."

Krauss fidgeted. "We'll think of some way."

"It's time for me to phone the President; may I?"

"Here." A phone was handed him.

Crossley took the phone. Electricity shot up his arm, into his chest.

"Jeepers!" He dropped the thing. "I'll report you!"

"You have no proof. We both play this irritation game, do we not? Go ahead. The phone."

This time, Crossley got the President:

"Crossley, you've heard the news, have you?"

"What news, sir?"

"The chewing gum, you moron, the chewing gum!"

"In the streets, sir?"

The President groaned. "In the streets, the roofs, the dog's fur, the cars, the shrubs, everywhere! Big as golf-balls. And sticky!"

Krauss gloated, listening.

Crossley said, "Courage, Mr. President. Use the croquet hoops."

"Croquet hoops?" Krauss seized Crossley's arm.

"Invisible croquet hoops," Crossley smiled.

"No." Krauss triumphed. "People will stumble, be hurt, even killed by them. The Word Org would stop you!"

"Oh," said Crossley. His face fell. "Look, Mr. President. About those hoops. Forget them. Proceed with Plan 40 and 45 instead."

Another phone rang. Krauss picked it up, answered it.

Your wife, Herr Krauss.

"All right, put her on."

"I'm okay, Mr. President. Had a little engine trouble."

"What!"

Darling, the most terrible trouble!

"Katrina, I have no time. There is much to do."

This is important, you fool! It's horrible!

"Well, what is it, my liebschen? I'm busy."

"Answer me, Crossley, were you shot down?"

"Not exactly, Mr. President. They're trying to figure out a way to kill me. Haven't hit on one yet."

"Mr. Crossley, please, not so loud, I can't hear my wife talking. Yes, darling?"

Hans, Hans, I have dandruff!

"Say that again, I have so much noise here, Katrina."

"I'll call you again in an hour, Mr. President."

Dandruff, Hans, dandruff. A thousand, five thousand flakes on my shoulders!

"You call to tell me this, woman? Good-bye!"

BANG!

Crossley and Krauss hung up in unison, Krauss on his wife, Crossley on the President.

"Where were we?" said Krauss, sweating.

"You were going to kill me. Remember?"

Again the phone. Krauss swore and answered. "What?"

Hans, I've gained ten pounds!

"Why do you insist on calling to tell me these things?"

Mrs. Leiber, Mrs. Krenschnitz and Mrs. Schmidst, they too have gained ten pounds!

"Oh?" Krauss hung up, blinking. "So." He glared at Crossley. "That's what it is. All right, Crossley, we, also, can be subtle. Doctor!"

A door slid open in the wall. There stood an evil looking rascal, sleeves rolled high, testing a hypodermic on his own emaciated arm, enjoying it. He looked up at Crossley and said:

"Practice."

"Get him!" cried Krauss.

Everybody jumped on Crossley.

Darkness.

"How do you feel, Crossley?"

How was he supposed to feel? All right, he guessed. He lifted himself from a kind of operating table and looked at the doctor and at Krauss.

"Here Doctor," said Krauss. "Explain to Mr. Crossley what he may expect ten years from now."

"Ten years?" said Crossley in alarm.

The doctor placed his thin fingers together, bowing. He whispered daintily.

"Ten years from now you may expect a—ah—little trouble. It will commence one year from now. Unobtrusively. Here or there a slight gastric upset, a cardiac disturbance, a minor intra-irritation of the lung sacs. Occasionally, a headache. A sallowness to the complexion, an earache, perhaps."

Crossley began to sweat. He held onto his knees.

The doctor continued, slowly, pleased with himself.

"Then, as the years pass, a small flicker, like bird wings, of the heart. A pain, as if stabbed in the groin. A twitching of the peritoneum. A hot sweating, late of nights, drenching your bedclothes. Insomnia. Night after night, cigarette after cigarette, headache after headache."

"That'll do," said Crossley bleakly.

"No, no." The doctor waved his hypodermic. "I'm not finished. Temporary blindness. I almost forgot that. Yes, temporary blindness. Fuzzy lights in your head. Voices. Paralysis of the lower limbs. Then, your heart, in one last explosion, lasting ten days, will beat itself into a bruised pulp. And you'll die, exactly—" he consulted a mental calendar, "—ten years, five months and fourteen days from today."

The silence in the room was touched only by Crossley's ragged breathing. He tried to lift himself, shivered, fell back.

"Best of all, there will be no evidence of what we have done to you," said Krauss. "Certain hormones and molecular impurities were put into your body. No analysis now or after death would reveal them. Your health will simply fail. We will not be held responsible. Clever, is it not?"

The doctor said, "You may go now. Now that we have fixed you, like a time-bomb, to die later, you are free to go. We would not want to kill you here, that would make us responsible. But, ten years from now, in another place, how can that be due to us?"

The phone. "Your wife, Herr Krauss."

My hair is falling out!

"Now, now, be patient, my wife."

My skin is yellowing! Do something!

"I will be home in an hour."

There will be no home here, then, YOU!

"We must go on to Victory, my sweet."

Not on a path strewn with my golden, golden hair!

"Yes, my wife, I will say hello to the doctor for you."

Hans, don't you dare hang up on me. Don't you—

Krauss sat down, fluttering his hands weakly. "My wife called me to say all is well."

"Ha," said Crossley, weakly.

Krauss reached over and pinched him.

"Ouch."

"There," said Krauss. "Speak when you're spoken to."

Crossley stood up, laughing. The doctor looked at him as if he were insane.

"I've got it. I'm going to commit suicide!"

"You're crazy," said Krauss.

"Ten years from now I die, so why not commit suicide here, thus bringing an investigation by the World Organization, eh, Mr. Krauss?"

"You can't do that!" said Krauss, dumb-founded. "I won't permit it!"

"I'll jump off a building, perhaps. You can't hold me here for more than another hour or the Organization will come to see what ticks. And the minute you let me go, I'll jump off a building."

"No!"

"Or crash my ship, purposely, on the way home. Why not? What've I to live for? And if it causes your trial, so much the better. Yes, I've decided. I'll die."

"We'll hold him here," said the doctor to Krauss.

"We can't," said Krauss.

"Release him," said the doctor.

"Don't be silly," said Krauss.

"Kill him!"

"Sillier still," gasped Krauss. "Oh, this is terrible."

"Which way," said Crossley, "to the tallest building in town?"

"You go down to the next corner—" said the doctor and stopped. "No. Stop. We must stop him."

"Get out of the way," said Crossley. "Here I go."

"But this is preposterous," screamed Krauss. "Doctor, we must think of something!"

Women sobbed in the streets, their hair trembling in their hands, detached from their heads. Puddles formed wherever women met to weep. See, see, my beautiful hair, fallen! Your hair, you butcher's mate; what of mine? Mine! Yours was hempen rope, a horse's tail! But mine, ach, mine! Like wheat in the high wind falling!

Crossley led the doctor and Krauss along a wide street.

"What goes on?" he asked naively.

"Beast, you know well enough," whispered the doctor fiercely. "My wife, my beauteous Thickel, her blonde hair'll be a ruin!"

"Speak roughly to me again," threatened Crossley, "and I'll hurl myself before this next bus."

"Don't, no!" cried Krauss, seizing his arm. To the doctor: "Fool. Is your wife more important than hanging?"

"My wife is good as your wife," snarled the doctor. "Katrina and her henna rinse!"

Crossley led the way into a building and up in an elevator. They walked on a terrace on the thirteenth floor.

"It is a riot," moaned the doctor, surveying the street below. "The women storm the beauty salons demanding help. I wonder if my Thickel is with them, raging?"

In huge clusters the women of the city held their heads in their hands as if they might topple and fall plunk on the ground. They argued, phoned husbands in high government circles, sent telegrams to the Leader, pummeled and kicked a bald man who laughed at them in their misery.

"Pardon me, Krauss," said Crossley. "There." He flicked a constellation of dandruff from Krauss' lapel.

"My hair," said Krauss, in realization. "My lovely hair!"

"Will you sign peace terms, or shall I jump from this building and let you and your wrathful wife become bald?"

"My wife," sobbed Krauss. "Bald! Ah, heaven!"

"Turn over all secret officers of your plan, admit your guilt in full, and the attack will stop. You will keep your hair," said Crossley. "And cure me of my fatal illness."

"That," said Krauss, "we cannot do. The illness, I mean. But the peace terms, ah, my sweet, balding wife, the peace terms, I reluctantly accept. Peace, it is."

"Fine," said Crossley. "But, one more term." He grabbed the doctor, held him out over the edge, as if to drop him.

"Stop!" Frantically, the doctor squirmed. "I lied! We did nothing to you. It was psychological. You'd have worried to death in ten years!"

Crossley was so surprised he let go.

He and Krauss stared down at the dwindling doctor, falling.

"I didn't really mean to drop him," said Crossley.

"Squish," murmured Krauss, a moment later, looking down.

Crossley pushed his jet-ship homeward.

"Edith, it's over! The music'll be off in an hour!"

"Darling!" she radioed. "How'd you do it?"

"Simple. They thought it enough to irritate people. That was their error. They didn't strike psychologically deep enough. Their type of irritant only touched surfaces, made people mad—"

"And sleepy."

"But we attacked their ego, which was something else. People can stand radios, confetti, gum and mosquitoes, but they won't take baldness or turning yellow. It was unthinkable!"

Edith ran to meet him as he landed. The radio still hung in the garden, drifting, singing.

"What do you make it, now?" he cried.

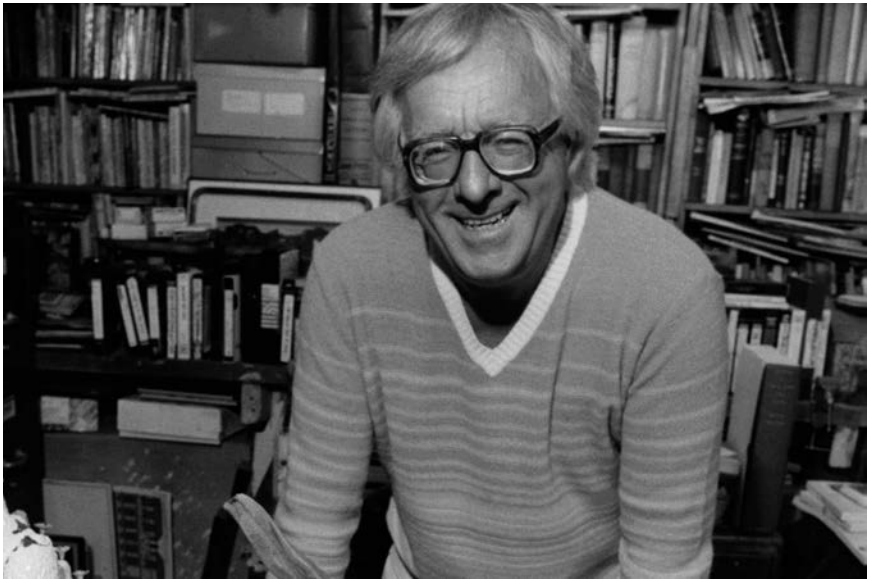
She kissed him.

Pulling back she counted swiftly inside her head, glanced at the floating radio and said, automatically:

"That makes two thousand three hundred and ten!"

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ray Bradbury (August 22, 1920 - June 5, 2012) inspired generations of readers and viewers to dream, think, and create. His childhood was spent in the Midwestern small town of Waukegan, Illinois, and he mastered his craft in Los Angeles, where he forged a special creative bond with the city and its many cultures, raised his family, and drew as feverishly as he wrote. He often told the story of an encounter with a carnival magician, Mr. Electrico, who reached out to the twelve-year-old Bradbury, touched him with his energy-charged sword, and commanded, "Live forever!" Bradbury said, "I decided that was the greatest idea I had ever heard. I started writing every day. I never stopped." And the literary landscape—as well as the broader American cultural landscape, from Hollywood to NASA—would never be the same again.

During a career that spanned seventy-plus years, he wrote more than 400 short stories and nearly fifty books across a variety of genres. He also penned numerous poems, essays, plays, operas, teleplays, and screenplays, making him one of the most productive and admired writers of our time, as well as one of the most widely translated in the world.

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