

Let's Play "Poison", Ray Bradbury

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"We hate you!" cried the sixteen boys and girls rushing and crowding about Michael in the school room. Michael screamed. Recess was over, Mr. Howard, the teacher, was still absent from the filling room.

"We hate you!" and the sixteen boys and girls, bumping and clustering and breathing, raised a window. It was three flights down to the sidewalk. Michael flailed.

They took hold of Michael and pushed him out the window.

Mr. Howard, their teacher, came into the room. "Wait a minute!" he shouted.

Michael fell three flights. Michael died.

Nothing was done about it. The police shrugged eloquently. These children were all eight or nine, they didn't understand what they were doing. So.

Mr. Howard's breakdown occurred the next day. He refused ever again, to teach! "But, why?" asked his friends. Mr. Howard gave no answer. He remained silent and a terrible light filled his eyes, and later he remarked that if he told them the truth they would think him quite insane.

Mr. Howard left Madison City. He went to live in a small nearby town, Green Bay, for seven years, on an income managed from writing stories and poetry.

He never married. The few women he approached always desired— children.

In the autumn of his seventh year of self-enforced retirement, a good friend of Mr. Howard's, a teacher, fell ill. For lack of a proper substitute,

Mr. Howard was summoned and convinced that it was his duty to take over the class. Because he realized the appointment could last no longer than a few weeks, Mr. Howard agreed, unhappily.

“Sometimes,” announced Mr. Howard, slowly pacing the aisles of the school room on that Monday morning in September, “sometimes, I actually believe that children are invaders from another dimension.”

He stopped, and his shiny dark eyes snapped from face to face of his small audience. He held one hand behind him, clenched. The other hand, like a pale animal, climbed his lapel as he talked and later climbed back down to toy with his ribboned glasses.

“Sometimes,” he continued, looking at William Arnold and Russell Newell, and Donald Bowers and Charlie Hencoop, “sometimes I believe children are little monsters thrust out of hell, because the devil could no longer cope with them. And I certainly believe that everything should be done to reform their uncivil little minds.”

Most of his words ran unfamiliarly into the washed and unwashed ears of Arnold, Newell, Bowers and Company. But the tone inspired one to dread. The little girls lay back in their seats, against their pigtails, lest he yank them like bell ropes, to summon the dark angels. All stared at Mr. Howard, as if hypnotized.

“You are another race entirely, your motives, your beliefs, your disobediences,” said Mr. Howard. “You are not human. You are— children. Therefore, until such time as you are adults, you have no right to demand privileges or question your elders, who know better.”

He paused, and put his elegant rump upon the chair behind the neat, dustless desk.

“Living in your world of fantasy,” he said, scowling darkly. “Well, there’ll be no fantasy here. You’ll soon discover that a ruler on your hand is no dream, no faerie frill, no Peter Pan excitement.” He snorted. “Have I frightened you?”

I have. Good! Well and good. You deserve to be. I want you to know where we stand. I'm not afraid of you, remember that. I'm not afraid of you." His hand trembled and he drew back in his chair as all their eyes stared at him. "Here!" He flung a glance clear across the room. "What're you whispering about, back there? Some necromancy or other?"

A little girl raised her hand, "What's necromancy?"

"We'll discuss that when our two young friends, Mr. Arnold and Mr. Bowers, explain their whispers. Well, young men?"

Donald Bowers arose. "We don't like you. That's all we said." He sat down again.

Mr. Howard raised his brows, "I like frankness, truth. Thank you for your honesty. But, simultaneously, I do not tolerate flippant rebellion. You'll stay an hour after school tonight and wash the boards."

After school, walking home, with autumn leaves falling both before and after his passing, Mr. Howard caught up with four of his students. He rapped his cane sharply on the sidewalk. "Here, what are you children doing?"

The startled boys and girls jerked as if struck upon their shoulders by his cane. "Oh," they all said.

"Well," demanded the man. "Explain. What were you doing here when I came up?"

William Arnold said, "Playing poison."

"Poison!" Their teacher's face twisted. He was carefully sarcastic.

"Poison, poison, playing poison. Well. And how does one play poison?"

Reluctantly, William Arnold ran off.

"Come back here!" shouted Mr. Howard.

"I'm only showing you," said the boy, hopping over a cement block of the sidewalk. "How we play poison. Whenever we come to a dead man we jump over him."

"One does, does one?" said Mr. Howard.

"If you jump on a dead man's grave, then you're poisoned and fall down and die," explained Isabel Skelton, much too brightly.

"Dead men, graves poisoned," Mr. Howard said, mockingly. "Where do you get this dead man idea?"

"See?" said Clara Parris, pointing with her arithmetic. "On this square, the names of the two dead men."

"Ridiculous," retorted Mr. Howard, squinting down. "Those are simply the names of the contractors who mixed and laid the cement sidewalk."

Isabel and Clara both gasped wildly and turned accusing eyes to the boys. "You said they were gravestones!" they cried, almost together. William Arnold looked at his feet. "Yeah. They are. Well, almost. Anyway." He looked up. "It's late. I gotta go home. So long."

Clara Parris looked at the two little names cut into the sidewalk. "Mr. Kelly and Mr. Terrill," she read the names. "Then these aren't graves? Mr. Kelly and Mr. Terrill aren't buried here? See, Isabel, that's what I told you, a dozen times I did."

"You did not," sulked Isabel.

"Deliberate lies," Mr. Howard tapped his cane in an impatient code.

"Falsification of the highest caliber. Good God, Mr. Arnold, Mr. Bowers, there'll be no more of this, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled the boys.

"Speak up!"

"Yes, sir," they replied, again.

"Mr. Howard swung off swiftly down the street. William Arnold waited until he was out of sight before he said, "I hope a bird drops something right smack on his nose—"

“Come on, Clara, let’s play poison,” said Isabel, hopefully. Clara pouted. “It’s been spoiled. I’m going home.”

“I’m poisoned!” cried Donald Bowers, falling to the earth and frothing merrily. “Look, I’m poisoned! Gahhh!”

“Oh,” cried Clara, angrily, and ran away.

Saturday morning Mr. Howard glanced out his front window and swore when he saw Isabel Skelton making chalk marks on his sidewalk and then hopping about, making a monotonous sing-song with her voice. “Stop that!”

Rushing out, he almost flung her to the pavement in his emotion. He grabbed her and shook her violently and let her go and stood over her and the chalk marks.

“I was only playing hopscotch,” she sobbed, hands over her eyes.

“I don’t care, you can’t play it here,” he declared. Bending, he erased the chalk marks with his handkerchief, muttering. “Young witch. Pentagrams. Rhymes and incantations, and all looking perfectly innocent, God, how innocent.

You little fiend!” He made as if to strike her, but stopped. Isabel ran off, wailing. “Go ahead, you little fool!” he screamed furiously. “Run off and tell your little cohorts that you’ve failed. They’ll have to try some other way! They won’t get around me, they won’t, oh, no!”

He stalked back into his house and poured himself a stiff drink of brandy and drank it down. The rest of the day he heard the children playing kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, Over-Annie-Over, jacks, tops, mibs, and the sound of the little monsters in every shrub and shadow would not let him rest. “Another week of this,” he thought, “and I’ll be stark staring.” He flung his hand to his aching head. “God in heaven, why weren’t we all born adults?”

Another week, then. And the hatred growing between him and the children. The hate and the fear growing apace. The nervousness, the

sudden tantrums over nothing, and then—the silent waiting, the way the children climbed the trees and looked at him as they swiped late apples, the melancholy smell of autumn settling in around the town, the days growing short, the night coming too soon.

“But they won’t touch me, they won’t dare touch me,” thought Mr. Howard sucking down one glass of brandy after another. “It’s all very silly anyhow, and there’s nothing to it. I’ll soon be away from here, and—them. I’ll soon—”

There was a white skull at the window.

It was eight o’clock of a Thursday evening. It had been a long week, with the angry flares and the accusations. He had had to continually chase the children away from the water-main excavation in front of his house.

Children loved excavations, hiding places, pipes and conduits and trenches, and they were ever ascramble over and on and down in and up out of the holes where the new pipes were being laid. It was all finished, thank the Lord, and tomorrow the workmen would shovel in the earth and tamp it down and put in a new cement sidewalk, and that would eliminate the children. But, right now—

There was a white skull at the window!

There could be no doubt that a boy’s hand held the skull against the glass, tapping and moving it. There was a childish tittering from outside.

Mr. Howard burst from the house. “Hey, you!” He exploded into the midst of the three running boys. He leaped after them, shouting and yelling. The street was dark, but he saw the figures dart beyond and below him. He saw them sort of bound and could not remember the reason for this, until too late.

The earth opened under him. He fell and lay in a pit, his head taking a terrific blow from a laid water-pipe, and as he lost consciousness he had an impression as of an avalanche, set off by his fall, cascading down cool moist pellets of dirt upon his pants, his shoes, upon his coat, upon

his spine, upon the back of his neck, his head, filling his mouth, his ears, his eyes, his nostrils . . .

The neighbor lady with the eggs wrapped in a napkin, knocked on Mr. Howard's door the next day for five minutes. When she opened the door, finally, and walked in, she found nothing but specules of rugdust floating in the sunny air, the big halls were empty, the cellar smelled of coal and clinkers, and the attic had nothing in it but a rat, a spider, and a faded letter. "Funniest thing," she said many times in the following years, "what ever happened to Mr. Howard."

And adults, being what they are, never observant, paid no attention to the children playing "Poison" on Oak Bay Street, in all the following autumns. Even when the children leaped over one particular square of cement, twisted about and glanced at the marks on it which read:

"M. HOWARD—R.I.P."

"Who's Mr. Howard, Billy?"

"Aw, I guess he's the guy who laid the cement."

"What does R.I.P. mean?"

"Aw, who knows? You're poison! You stepped on it!"

"Get along, get along, children; don't stand on Mother's path! Get along now!"

The End