The Playground, Ray Bradbury

The Playground

A thousand times before and after his wife's death Mr Charles Underhill ignored the Playground on his way to and from his commuters' limited train. He neither liked nor disliked the Playground; he hardly knew it existed.

But only this morning his sister Carol, who had occupied the empty space across the breakfast table from him each day for six months, quietly broached the subject.

'Jim's almost three years old now,' she said. 'So tomorrow I'm going to start him at the Playground.'

'Playground?' said Mr Underhill.

At his office, he underlined a memorandum with black ink: Look at Playground.

That afternoon, the thunder of the train subsiding in his body, Underhill struck up through town on his usual path home, newspaper tucked crisply under arm to prevent reading himself past the park. So it was, at five-ten in the late day, that he came to the cool iron fence and the open gate of the Playground, and stood for a long, long time, frozen there, gazing in at it all…

At first there seemed absolutely nothing whatever to see. And then as he adjusted his attention outward from his usual interior monologue, the scene before him, a gray, blurred television image, came to a slow focus.

Primarily, he was aware of dim voices, faint underwater cries emerging from a series of vague streaks and zigzag lines and shadows. Then, as if

someone had kicked the machine, screams jumped at him in full throat, visions leaped clear.

Now he saw the children! They were dashing across the Playground meadow, fighting, pummeling, scratching, falling, every wound bleeding or about to bleed or freshly caked over. A dozen cats thrown among sleeping dogs could not have shrieked as loud. With incredible clarity, Mr Underhill saw the tiniest cuts and scabs on knees and faces.

He weathered the first blast of sound, blinking. His nostrils took over when his eyes and ears retired in panic.

He sniffed the cutting odors of salve, raw adhesive, camphor, and pink Mercurochrome, so strong it lay bitter on his tongue. An iodine wind blew through the steel fence wires which glinted dully in the gray light of the overcast day. The rushing children were hell cut loose in a vast pinball table, colliding, and banging, a totaling of hits and misses, thrusts and plungings to a grand and as yet unforeseen total of brutalities.

And was he mistaken or was the light within the Playground of a peculiar intensity? Every child seemed to possess four shadows: one dark, three faint penumbras which made it strategically impossible to tell which way their swift bodies were racing until they bashed their targets. Yes, the oblique, pressing light made the Playground seem deep, far away, and remote from his touching. Or perhaps it was the hard steel wire fence, not unlike those barriers in zoos, beyond which anything might happen.

A pen of misery, thought Underhill. Why do children insist on making life horrible for each other? Oh, the continual torture. He heard himself sigh with immense relief. Thank God, childhood was over and done for him. No more pinchings, bruisings, senseless passions and shattered dreams.

A gust of wind tore the paper from his hand. He ran after it down the Playground steps. Clutching the paper, he retreated hastily. For in that

one brief instant, stranded in the Playground's atmosphere, he had felt his hat grow too large, his coat too cumbersome, his belt too loose, his shoes too big; he had felt like a small boy playing businessman in his father's clothes; the gate behind him had loomed impossibly tall, while the sky pressed a huge weight of grayness at his eyes, and the scent of iodine, like a tiger's breath exhaled upon him, blew his hair. He tripped and almost fell, running back.

He stood outside the Playground, like someone who has just emerged, in shock, from a terrible cold sea.
'Hello, Charlie!'

He heard the voice and turned to see who had called him. There on top of a metal slide, a boy of some nine years was waving. 'Hello, Charlie…!'

Mr Charles Underhill raised a hand. But I don't know that boy, he thought. And why should he call me by my first name?

The boy was smiling high in the misty air, and now, jostled by other yelling children, rushed shrieking down the slide.

Underhill stood bemused by what he saw. Now the Playground was an immense iron industry whose sole products were pain, sadism, and sorrow. If you watched half an hour there wasn't a face in the entire enclosure that didn't wince, cry, redden with anger, pale with fear, one moment or another.

Really! Who said Childhood was the best time of life? when in reality it was the most terrible, the most merciless era, the barbaric time when there were no police to protect you, only parents preoccupied with themselves and their taller world. No, if he had his way, he touched the cold fence with one hand, they'd nail a new sign here: TORQUEMADA'S GREEN.

And as for that boy, the one who had called out to him, who was he? There was something familiar there, perhaps in the hidden bones, an

echo of some old friend; probably the son of a successfully ulcered father.

So this is the Playground where my son will play, thought Mr Underhill. So this is it.

Hanging his hat in the hall, checking his lean image in the watery mirror, Underhill felt wintry and tired. When his sister appeared, and his son came tapping on mouse feet, he greeted them with something less than full attention. The boy clambered thinly over him, playing King of the Hill.

And the father, fixing his gaze to the end of the cigar he was slowly lighting, finally cleared his throat and said, 'I've been thinking about that Playground. Carol.'

'I'm taking Jim over tomorrow.'
'Not really? That Playground?'

His mind rebelled. The smell and look of the place were still vivid. That writhing world with its atmosphere of cuts and beaten noses, the air as full of pain as a dentist's office, and those horrid ticktacktoes and frightening hopscotches under his feet as he picked up his newspaper, horrid and frightening for no reason he could see.

'What's wrong with that Playground?' asked Carol.
'Have you seen it?' He paused in confusion. 'Damn it, I mean, the children there. It's a Black Hole.'
'All the children are from well-to-do families.'

'Well, they shove and push like little Gestapos,' said Underhill. 'It'd be like sending a boy to a flour mill to be crushed into meal by a couple of two-ton grinders! Every time I think of Jim playing in that barbaric pit, I freeze.'

'You know very well it's the only convenient park for miles around.'

‘I don’t care about that. All I care is I saw a dozen kinds of bats and clubs and air guns. By the end of the first day, Jim would be in splinters. They’d have him barbecued, with an orange in his mouth.’

She was beginning to laugh. ‘How you exaggerate.’
‘I’m serious!’

‘You can’t live Jim’s life for him. He has to learn the hard way. He’s got to take a little beating and beat others up; boys are like that.’
‘I don’t like boys like that.’

‘It’s the happiest time of life.’

‘Nonsense. I used to look back on childhood with great nostalgia. But now I realize I was a sentimental fool. It was nothing but screaming and running in a nightmare and coming home drenched with terror, from head to foot. If I could possibly save Jim from that, I would.’

‘That’s impractical and, thank God, impossible.’
‘I won’t have him near that place, I tell you. I’ll have him grow up a neurotic recluse first.’
‘Charlie!’

‘I will! Those little beasts, you should’ve seen them. Jim’s my son, he is: he’s not yours, remember.’ He felt the boy’s thin legs about his shoulders, the boy’s delicate fingers rumpling his hair. ‘I won’t have him butchered.’

‘He’ll get it in school. Better to let him take a little shoving about now, when he’s three, so he’s prepared for it.’

‘I’ve thought of that, too.’ Mr Underhill held fiercely to his son’s ankles which dangled like warm, thin sausages on either lapel. ‘I might even get a private tutor for him.’

‘Oh, Charles!’
They did not speak during dinner.

After dinner, he took Jim for a brief walk while his sister was washing the dishes. They strolled past the Playground under the dim street lamps. It was a cooling September night, with the first dry spice of autumn in it.

Next week, and the children would be raked in off the fields like so many leaves and set to burning in the schools, using their fire and energy for more constructive purposes.

But they would be here after school, ramming about, making projectiles of themselves, crashing and exploding, leaving wakes of misery behind every miniature war.

‘Want to go in,’ said Jim, leaning against the high wire fence, watching the late-playing children beat each other and run.

‘No, Jim, you don’t want that.’
‘Play,’ said Jim, his eyes shining with fascination as he saw a large boy kick a small boy and the small boy kick a smaller boy to even things up. ‘Play, Daddy.’
‘Come along. Jim, you’ll never get in that mess if I can help it.’ Underhill tugged the small arm firmly.

‘I want to play.’ Jim was beginning to blubber now. His eyes were melting out of his face and his face was becoming a wrinkled orange of color.

Some of the children heard the crying and glanced over. Underhill had the terrible sense of watching a den of foxes suddenly startled and looking up from the white, hairy ruin of a dead rabbit.

The mean yellow-glass eyes, the conical chins, the sharp white teeth, the dreadful wiry hair, the brambly sweaters, the iron-colored hands covered with a day’s battle stains. Their breath moved out to him, dark licorice and mint and Juicy Fruit so sickeningly sweet, so combined as to twist his stomach.

And over this the hot mustard smell of someone tolerating an early chest cold: the greasy stink of flesh smeared with hot camphorous salves cooking under a flannel sheath.

All these cloying and somehow depressing odors of pencils, chalk, grass and slate-board erasers, real or imagined, summoned old memory in an instant.

Popcorn mortared their teeth, and green jelly showed in their sucking, blowing nostrils. God! God!

They saw Jim, and he was new to them. They said not a word, but as Jim cried louder and Underhill, by main force, dragged him like a cement bag along the walk, the children followed with their glowing eyes. Underhill felt like pushing his fist at them and crying, 'You little beasts, you won't get my son!'

And then, with beautiful irrelevance, the boy at the top of the blue metal slide, so high he seemed almost in a mist, far away, the boy with the somehow familiar face, called out to him, waving and waving.
'Hello, Charlie…!'

Underhill paused and Jim stopped crying.
'See you later, Charlie…!'

And the face of the boy way up there on that high and very lonely slide was suddenly like the face of Thomas Marshall, an old business friend who lived just around the block, but whom he hadn't seen in months.
'See you later, Charlie.'

Later, later? What did the fool boy mean?
'I know you, Charlie!' called the boy. 'Hi!'
'What?' gasped Underhill.

‘Tomorrow night, Charlie, hey!’ And the boy fell off the slide and lay choking for breath, face like a white cheese from the fall, while children jumped him and tumbled over.
Underhill stood undecided for five seconds or more, until Jim thought to cry again, and then, with the golden fox eyes upon them, in the first chill of autumn, he dragged Jim all the way home.

The next afternoon Mr Underhill finished at the office early and took the three o’clock train, arriving out in Green Town at three twenty-five, in plenty of time to drink in the brisk rays of the autumnal sun.

Strange how one day it is suddenly autumn, he thought. One day it is summer and the next, how could you measure or tell it? Something about the temperature or the smell? Or the sediment of age knocked loose from your bones during the night and circulating in your blood and heart, giving you a slight tremble and a chill? A year older, a year dying, was that it?

He walked up toward the Playground, planning the future. It seemed you did more planning in autumn than any other season. This had to do with dying, perhaps. You thought of death and you automatically planned.

Well, then, there was to be a tutor for Jim, that was positive; none of those horrible schools for him. It would pinch the bank account a bit, but Jim would at least grow up a happy boy.

They would pick and choose his friends. Any slam-bang bullies would be thrown out as soon as they so much as touched Jim. And as for this Playground? Completely out of the question!

‘Oh hello, Charles.’
He looked up suddenly. Before him, at the entrance to the wire enclosure, stood his sister. He noted instantly that she called him Charles, instead of Charlie. Last night’s unpleasantness had not quite evaporated. ‘Carol, what’re you doing here?’

She flushed guiltily and glanced in through the fence.
'You didn't,' he said.

His eyes sought among the scrabbling, running, screaming children. 'Do you mean to say…?'
His sister nodded, half amused. 'I thought I'd bring him early—'

'Before I got home, so I wouldn't know, is that it?'
That was it.
'Good God, Carol, where is he?'
'I just came to see.'

'You mean you left him there all afternoon?'
'Just for five minutes while I shopped.'

'And you left him. Good God!' Underhill seized her wrist. 'Well, come on, find him, get him out of there!'

They peered in together past the wire to where a dozen boys charged about, girls slapped each other, and a squabbling heap of children took turns at getting off, making a quick run, and crashing one against another.

'That's where he is, I know it!' said Underhill.

Just then, across the field, sobbing and wailing. Jim ran, six boys after him. He fell, got up, ran, fell again, shrieking, and the boys behind shot beans through metal blowers.
'I'll stuff those blowers up their noses!' said Underhill. 'Run, Jim! Run!'

Jim made it to the gate. Underhill caught him. It was like catching a rumpled, drenched wad of material. Jim's nose was bleeding, his pants were ripped, he was covered with grime.

'There's your Playground,' said Underhill, on his knees, staring up from his son, holding him, at his sister. 'There are your sweet, happy innocents, your well-to-do piddling Fascists. Let me catch this boy here

again and there'll be hell to pay. Come on, Jim. All right, you little bastards, get back there!' he shouted.

'We didn't do nothing,' said the children.
'What's the world coming to?' Mr Underhill questioned the universe.

'Hi! Charlie!' said the strange boy, standing to one side. He waved casually and smiled.
'Who's that?' asked Carol.
'How in hell do I know?' said Underhill.

'Be seeing you, Charlie. So long,' called the boy, fading off.
Mr Underhill marched his sister and his son home.
'Take your hand off my elbow!' said Carol.

He was trembling, absolutely, continually trembling with rage when he got to bed. He had tried some coffee, but nothing stopped it. He wanted to beat their pulpy little brains out, those gross Cruikshank children, yes, that phrase fit them, those fox-fiend, melancholy Cruikshank children, with all the guile and poison and slyness in their cold faces. In the name of all that was decent, what manner of child was this new generation!

A bunch of cutters and hangers and bangers, a drove of bleeding, moronic thumbscrewers, with the sewage of neglect running in their veins? He lay violently jerking his head from one side of his hot pillow to the other, and at last got up and lit a cigarette, but it wasn't enough.

He and Carol had had a huge battle when they got home. He had yelled at her and she had yelled back, peacock and peahen shrieking in a wilderness where law and order were insanities laughed at and quite forgotten.

He was ashamed. You didn't fight violence with violence, not if you were a gentleman. You talked very calmly. But Carol didn't give you a chance, damn it! She wanted the boy put in a vise and squashed. She wanted him reamed and punctured and given the laying on of hands.

To be beaten from playground to kindergarten, to grammar school, to junior high, to high school. If he was lucky, in high school, the beatings and sadisms would refine themselves, the sea of blood and spittle would drain back down the shore of years and Jim would be left upon the edge of maturity, with God knows what outlook to the future, with a desire, perhaps, to be a wolf among wolves, a dog among dogs, a fiend among fiends. But there was enough of that in the world, already.

The very thought of the next ten or fifteen years of torture was enough to make Mr Underhill cringe; he felt his own flesh impaled with BB shot, stung, burned, fisted, scrounged, twisted, violated, and bruised. He quivered, like a jellyfish hurled violently into a concrete mixer. Jim would never survive it. Jim was too delicate for this horror.

Underhill walked in the midnight rooms of his house thinking of all this, of himself, of the son, the Playground, the fear; there was no part of it he did not touch and turn over with his mind. How much, he asked himself, how much of this is being alone, how much due to Ann's dying, how much to my need, and how much is the reality of the Playground itself, and the children?

How much rational and how much nonsense? He twitched the delicate weights upon the scale and watched the indicator glide and fix and glide again, back and forth, softly, between midnight and dawn, between black and white, between raw sanity and naked insanity. He should not hold so tight, he should let his hands drop away from the boy.

And yet—there was no hour that looking into Jim's small face he did not see Ann there, in the eyes, in the mouth, in the turn of the nostrils, in the warm breathing, in the glow of blood moving just under the thin shell of flesh, I have a right, he thought, to be afraid.

I have every right. When you have two precious bits of porcelain and one is broken and the other, the last one, remains, where can you find

the time to be objective, to be immensely calm, to be anything else but concerned?

No, he thought, walking slowly in the hall, there seems to be nothing I can do except go on being afraid and being afraid of being afraid.

'You needn't prowl the house all night,' his sister called from her bed, as she heard him pass her open door. 'You needn't be childish, I'm sorry if I seem dictatorial or cold. But you've got to make up your mind.

Jim simply cannot have a private tutor. Ann would have wanted him to go to a regular school. And he's got to go back to that Playground tomorrow and keep going back until he's learned to stand on his own two feet and until he's familiar to all the children; then they won't pick on him so much.'

Underhill said nothing. He got dressed quietly, in the dark, and, downstairs, opened the front door. It was about five minutes to midnight as he walked swiftly down the street in the shadows of the tall elms and oaks and maples, trying to outdistance his rage and outrage. He knew Carol was right, of course. This was the world, you lived in it, you accepted it.

But that was the very trouble! He had been through the mill already, he knew what it was to be a boy among lions; his own childhood had come rushing back to him in the last few hours, a time of terror and violence, and now he could not bear to think of Jim's going through it all, those long years, especially if you were a delicate child, through no fault of your own, your bones thin, your face pale, what could you expect but to be harried and chased?

He stopped by the Playground, which was still lit by one great overhead lamp. The gate was locked for the night, but that one light remained on until twelve. He wanted to tear the contemptible place down, rip up the steel fences, obliterate the slides, and say to the children, 'Go home! Play in your back yards!'

How ingenious, the cold, deep Playground. You never knew where anyone lived. The boy who knocked your teeth out, who was he? Nobody knew. Where did he live? Nobody knew. How to find him? Nobody knew.

Why, you could come here one day, beat the living tar out of some smaller child, and run on the next day to some other Playground. They would never find you. From Playground to Playground, you could take your criminal tricks, with everyone forgetting you, since they never knew you.

You could return to this Playground a month later, and if the little child whose teeth you knocked out was there and recognized you, you could deny it.

'No, I'm not the one. Must be some other kid. This is my first time here! No, not me!' And when his back is turned, knock him over. And run off down nameless streets, a nameless person.

What can I possibly do? thought Underhill. Carol's been more than generous with her time; she's been good for Jim, no doubt of it. A lot of the love she would have put into a marriage has gone to him this year. I can't fight her forever on this, and I can't tell her to leave. Perhaps moving to the country might help. No, no, impossible; the money. But I can't leave Jim here, either.

'Hello, Charlie,' said a quiet voice.

Underhill snapped about. Inside the Playground fence, seated in the dirt, making diagrams with one finger in the cool dust, was the solemn nine-year-old boy. He didn't glance up. He said. 'Hello Charlie,' just sitting there, easily, in that world beyond the hard steel fence.

Underhill said, 'How do you know my name?'
'I know it.' The boy crossed his legs, comfortably, smiling quietly. 'You're having lots of trouble.'

‘How’d you get in there so late? Who are you?’
‘My name’s Marshall.’
‘Of course! Tom Marshall’s son Tommy! I thought you looked familiar.’

‘More familiar than you think.’ The boy laughed gently.
‘How’s your father. Tommy?’
‘Have you seen him lately?’ the boy asked.
‘On the street, briefly, two months ago.’
‘How did he look?’
‘What?’

‘How did Mr Marshall look?’ asked the boy. It seemed strange he refused to say ‘my father.’
‘He looked all right. Why?’

‘I guess he’s happy,’ said the boy. Mr Underhill saw the boy’s arms and legs and they were covered with scabs and scratches.
‘Aren’t you going home, Tommy?’

‘I sneaked out to see you. I just knew you’d come. You’re afraid.’
Mr Underhill didn’t know what to say.
‘Those little monsters,’ he said at last.

‘Maybe I can help you.’ The boy made a dust triangle.
It was ridiculous. ‘How?’
‘You’d give anything, wouldn’t you, if you could spare Jim all this? You’d trade places with him if you could?’
Mr Underhill nodded, frozen.

‘Well, you come down here tomorrow afternoon at four. Then I can help you.’
‘How do you mean, help?’

‘I can’t tell you outright,’ said the boy. ‘It has to do with the Playground. Any place where there’s lots of evil, that makes power. You can feel it, can’t you?’

A kind of warm wind stirred off the bare field under the one high light. Underhill shivered. Yes, even now, at midnight, the Playground seemed evil, for it was used for evil things. 'Are all Playgrounds like this?'

'Some. Maybe this is the only one like this. Maybe it's just how you look at it, Charlie. Things are what you want them to be. A lot of people think this is a swell Playground. They're right, too.

It's how you look at it, maybe. What I wanted to say, though, is that Tom Marshall was like you. He worried about Tommy Marshall and the Playground and the kids, too. He wanted to save Tommy the trouble and the hurt, also.'

This business of talking about people as if they were remote made Mr Underhill uncomfortable.
'So we made a bargain,' said the boy.
'Who with?'

'With the Playground. I guess, or whoever runs it.'
'Who runs it?'

'I've never seen him. There's an office over there under the grandstand. A light burns in it all night. It's a bright, blue light, kind of funny. There's a desk there with no papers in it and an empty chair. The sign says MANAGER, but nobody ever sees the man.'

'He must be around.'
'That's right,' said the boy. 'Or I wouldn't be where I am, and someone else wouldn't be where they are.'
'You certainly talk grown-up.'

The boy was pleased. 'Do you want to know who I really am? I'm not Tommy Marshall at all. I'm Tom Marshall, the father.' He sat there in the dust, not moving, late at night, under the high and faraway light, with the late wind blowing his shirt collar gently under his chin, blowing the cool dust.

‘I’m Tom Marshall, the father. I know it’ll be hard for you to believe. But it is true. I was afraid for Tommy. I was the way you are now about Jim. So I made this deal with the Playground. Oh, there are others who did the same, here. If you look close, you’ll see them among the other children, by the expression in their eyes.’

Underhill blinked. ‘You’d better run home to bed.’
‘You want to believe me. You want it to be true. I saw your eyes just then! If you could trade places with Jim, you would. You’d like to save him all that torture, let him be in your place, grown-up, the real work over and done.’

‘Any decent parent sympathizes with his children.’
‘You, more than most. You feel every bite and kick. Well, you come here tomorrow. You can make a deal, too.’

‘Trade places?’ It was an incredible, an amusing, but an oddly satisfying thought. ‘What would I have to do?’
‘Just make up your mind.’

Underhill tried to make his next question sound very casual, a joke, but his mind was in a rage again. ‘What would I pay?’
‘Nothing. You’d just have to play in the Playground.’

‘All day?’
‘And go to school, of course.’
‘And grow up again?’
‘Yes, and grow up again. Be here at four tomorrow afternoon.’

‘I have to work in the city tomorrow.’
‘Tomorrow,’ said the boy.
‘You’d better get home to bed, Tommy.’
‘My name is Tom Marshall.’ The boy sat there.
The Playground lights went out.

Mr Underhill and his sister did not speak at breakfast. He usually phoned her at noon to chat about this or that, but he did not phone.

But at onethirty, after a bad lunch, he dialed the house number. When Carol answered he hung up. Five minutes later he phoned again.

‘Charlie, was that you called five minutes ago?’
‘Yes,’ he said.

‘I thought I heard you breathing before you hung up. What’d you call about, dear?’ She was being sensible again.
‘Oh, just called.’

‘It’s been a bad two days, hasn’t it? You do see what I mean, don’t you, Charlie? Jim must go to the Playground and get a few knocks.’
‘A few knocks, yes.’

He saw the blood and the hungry foxes and the torn rabbits.
‘And learn to give and take,’ she was saying, ‘and fight if he has to.’

‘Fight if he has to,’ he murmured.
‘I knew you’d come around.’

‘Around,’ he said. ‘You’re right. No way out. He must be sacrificed.’
‘Oh, Charlie, you are odd.’

He cleared his throat. ‘Well, that’s settled.’
‘Yes.’

I wonder what it would be like? he thought.
‘Everything else okay?’ he asked the phone.

He thought of the diagrams in the dust, the boy seated there with the hidden bones in his face.
‘Yes,’ she said.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ he said.
‘Speak up.’

‘I’ll be home at three,’ he said, slowly, piecing out the words like a man hit in the stomach, gasping for breath. ‘We’ll take a walk, you and Jim and I,’ he said, eyes shut.
‘Wonderful!’

‘To the Playground,’ he said and hung up.
It was really autumn now, the real chill, the real snap; overnight the trees burnt red and snapped free of their leaves, which spiraled about Mr Underhill’s face as he walked up the front steps, and there were Carol and Jim bundled up against the sharp wind, waiting for him.

‘Hello!’ they cried to one another, with much embracing and kissing. ‘There’s Jim down there!’ ‘There’s Daddy up there!’ They laughed and he felt paralyzed and in terror of the late day. It was almost four.

He looked at the leaden sky, which might pour down molten silver any moment, a sky of lava and soot and a wet wind blowing out of it. He held his sister’s arm very tightly as they walked. ‘Aren’t you friendly, though?’ she smiled.

‘It’s ridiculous, of course,’ he said, thinking of something else.
‘What?’
They were at the Playground gate.

‘Hello, Charlie. Hi!’ Far away, atop the monstrous slide stood the Marshall boy, waving, not smiling now.
‘You wait here,’ said Mr Underhill to his sister. ‘I’ll be only a moment. I’ll just take Jim in.’
‘All right.’

He grasped the small boy’s hand. ‘Here we go, Jim. Stick close to Daddy.’

They stepped down the hard concrete steps and stood in the flat dust. Before them, in a magical sequence, stood the diagrams, the gigantic ticktacktoes, the monstrous hopscotches, the amazing numerals and triangles and oblongs the children had scrabbled in the incredible dust.

The sky blew a huge wind upon him and he was shivering. He grasped the little boy's hand still tighter and turned to his sister. 'Good-by,' he said. For he was believing it. He was in the Playground and believing it, and it was for the best. Nothing too good for Jim.

Nothing at all in this outrageous world! And now his sister was laughing back at him. 'Charlie, you idiot!'

Then they were running, running across the dirt Playground floor, at the bottom of a stony sea that pressed and blew upon them. Now Jim was crying, 'Daddy, Daddy!' and the children racing to meet them, the boy on the slide yelling, the ticktacktoe and the hopscotchers whirling, a sense of bodiless terror gripping him, but he knew what he must do and what must be done and what would happen.

Far across the field footballs sailed, baseballs whizzed, bats flew, fists flashed up, and the door of the Manager's office stood open, the desk empty, the seat empty, a lone light burning over it.

Underhill stumbled, shut his eyes and fell, crying out, his body clenched by a hot pain, mouthing strange words, everything in turmoil.
'There you are, Jim,' said a voice.

And he was climbing, climbing, eyes closed, climbing metal-ringing ladder rungs, screaming, yelling, his throat raw.
Mr Underhill opened his eyes.

He was on top of the slide. The gigantic, blue metal slide which seemed ten thousand feet high. Children crushed at his back, children beat him to go on, slide! Slide!

And he looked, and there, going off across the field, was a man in a black overcoat. And there, at the gate, was a woman waving and the man standing there with the woman, both of them looking in at him, waving, and their voices calling. 'Have a good time! Have a good time, Jim!'

He screamed. He looked at his hands, in a panic of realization. The small hands, the thin hands. He looked at the earth far below. He felt his nose bleeding and there was the Marshall boy next to him. 'Hi!' cried the other, and bashed him in the mouth. 'Only twelve years here!' cried the other in the uproar.

Twelve years! thought Mr Underhill, trapped. And time is different to children. A year is like ten years. No, not twelve years of childhood ahead of him, but a century, a century of this.
'Slide!'

Behind him the stink of Musterole, Vicks VapoRub, peanuts, chewed hot tar, spearmint gum and blue fountain-pen ink, the smell of kite twine and glycerin soap, a pumpkin smell of Halloween and a papier-mâché fragrance of skull masks, and the smell of dry scabs, as he was pinched, pummeled, shoved.

Fists rose and fell, he saw the fox faces and beyond, at the fence, the man and woman standing there, waving. He shrieked, he covered his face, he felt himself pushed, bleeding, to the rim of nothingness.

Headfirst, he careened down the slide, screeching, with ten thousand monsters behind. One thought jumped through his mind a moment before he hit bottom in a nauseous mound of claws.

This is hell, he thought, this is hell!

And no one in the hot, milling heap contradicted him.

The end