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The world is not round. Nor is it suspended in space, a coin of earth and water in the void. There aren't any turtles involved, either.

The world is not round. It's oblong. There are low metal railings around the world, and a gate. The gate is locked at night, but you can put your leg over the railings and climb in if you want to. Several small animals have also dug under the railings, but I don't want to think about them.

The world is an oblong with a sand pit at one end and a concrete path running down the middle. There is a seesaw, two climbing frames – one large, one small – and a slide. There are, it being a human world, swings and roundabouts (although *swings and roundabouts* is a good way of describing the Boethian Wheel of Fortune that dominates the lives of mortals, these are not metaphorical, but are actual swings and roundabouts).

The world is a playground.

It is located somewhere on the upper spiral arm of the Milky Way.

It is located somewhere near Plympton, on the outskirts of Plymouth.

It is located in the very heart of God's consciousness.

It is handy for the local primary school.

It is a jewel in the head of the Buddha.

It is a short walk from the Spar at the top of the hill, which means the children who play there are never short of lucky bags and sherbet dip.

Its name is known only to four rabbis in Prague.

It is open between the hours of 9am and 6pm during the week, and 10am until 5pm at the weekends.

It transcends time, for it was here before the universe and it will be here when there is no universe.

It has those little elephants on springs.

The world is a playground, and the playground is the world. There are of course other playgrounds, just as there are other worlds, but this is *the* playground. The children who play here are the world's children, and the adults who look on, seated on benches, or

holding push bikes or skateboards, or pretending to watch their kids on the climbing frame while sneaking looks at their mobile phones, are the guardians of the children of the world.

I used to have a recurring dream about the playground. I was six, and I was a little boy on the swings, and I swung so high that my seat almost wrapped itself around the A frame of the swings. And as I reached the highest point, I saw, not a view of the playground below, nor the clouds and sun above me, but a mouth in the sky. The mouth was red and its teeth were yellow, and its grey lips curled back hungrily, waiting to snatch me from the swing.

At that point in the dream I would always wake, sweating and sometimes crying.

I had the dream many, many times as a child and one day, when the dream had been more vivid than usual, and the vision of the mouth had stayed with me even until I was awake, a revelation came to me.

The last time I had the dream was also the first time I could see all of the playground. As I swung back down, losing momentum, I was able to see the ground at my feet, the other children, the slide, the seesaw, the swings and the roundabout. I could see the grass and the path, the railings and the gate. I could even see where small animals had managed to dig under the railings from outside. I did not want to think about them, or where they had come from.

Every playground is roughly the same. Some are old, some are new, some tatty, some refurbished. Some are tiny, cramped in the looming towers of a housing estate, and some are large, expansive in the palm of an old Victorian park. But they all have a slide, a seesaw, the swings and the roundabout. They all have the grass, the path and the children.

But some have the suspended wheel.

Nobody seems to know what the suspended wheel is really called. Sometimes it's an actual wheel, hung on chains from a frame; sometimes it's a lorry tire, held on with long cables. And sometimes, if it's a new playground, it's a purpose-built wheel, rubber or plastic at the edges with a kind of wicker base inside it.

Whatever it's called, the wheel is meant for one or two, or more, children to sit on, and be pushed, and enjoy the wheel's dizzying, elliptical spin. But this rarely happens, because kids very rarely get a chance to sit on it.

There are certain items of playground furniture which are from time to time commandeered by the wrong people. Big climbing frames are, mostly in the evening, often taken over by small groups of screaming teenagers, keen to impress each other with their climbing skills. Swings, too, are infested with those old enough to know better. Roundabouts are regularly over-subscribed, as children of all ages vie for supremacy, usually at the expense of the smallest, who sometimes fails to hold on tight enough and flies off to roll weeping across the tarmac.

The wheel, however, despite the odd spurt of teenage dominance, is by and large the territory of one person and one person only. That person is the fat dad.

No-one knows how and why the fat dad first became attracted to the wheel. Perhaps long ago a first fat dad saw the wheel and decided that it would be a good thing to rest on for a minute. Maybe he was with his son or daughter and thought he would amuse them by sprawling, like an oversize spider in a too-small web, across the centre of the wheel. Or perhaps he just wanted to lie down and gaze at the clouds spinning above his head. Whatever the reason, any playground wheel will always have a fat dad on it.

I know this can be annoying. Parents tutting as their impatient daughter whines that she wants a go, mummy. Sensitive kids wondering if the fat dad is unconscious as he slowly rotates. Other dads muttering under their breath that “some people are too old to be in here.” But believe me, a fat dad on a wheel is an essential part of that playground.

I know, because in this playground, on this wheel, I am the fat dad.

After I had my revelation, it was clear to me. I had to protect the playground from the mouth in the sky and its acolytes. There were too many innocents for me to stand aside. So I became the fat dad. Each day I go to the park, and lie on the big wheel. I lie on it for as long as I can, ignoring the remarks of parents and the jeers of teenagers. I stay there from dawn until dusk and only when the park is closing do I stiffly rise and go home.

It isn't much, but I do what I can.

And as I lie there, I can hear them. Tunnelling, burrowing, digging.

Every day they're getting closer.

