



## How Come a School Year is Nine Months Long?



In an ancient era of schools, a boy named Pupil Come-On sat at his classroom desk. Pupil's teacher, Miss Persevere, had assigned three pages in his reading workbook to complete. Bored with the work, Pupil raised his hand and asked, "May I go to the hall for a drink?"

Miss Persevere scowled. "You know the rule about getting drinks during reading, Pupil," she said.

A smile spread across Pupil's face. He cupped his hands under his chin. "Oh, please, Miss Persevere," he said. "I am so thirsty. Pretty please. I haven't had a drink all day. Please. Pleeeseese."

Miss Persevere's face softened. Her shoulders slumped. "Oh, all right, Pupil," she said. "Go drink all the water you want."

Pupil Come-On was an expert pleader. His skill at begging for favors was famous throughout the school. Even the strictest teacher couldn't resist his charm. Whenever Pupil asked for something in class--more free time, a new pencil, a better chair, or an extra sheet of drawing paper--teachers always gave in to his requests.

Now Pupil rushed into the hall for a drink. But hardly had he reached the water fountain when the floor wobbled and the walls shook.

"Earthquake!" he said.

Having gone through numerous earthquake drills, Pupil knew what he should do, stand in a doorway. But with the world rocking around him, all he could manage was to stand with his legs spread like a sailor on a tossing ship.

After a long twenty seconds, the quaking stopped and Pupil tottered back to his classroom. At the door he stopped. Something was terribly wrong. Not a sound came from within the room, no student chatter or laughter. Why couldn't he hear Miss Persevere calling out orders?

Cautiously, Pupil opened the door. He took two steps forward and froze. His toes hung over the edge of a wide, crack that split the classroom from end to end.

Leaning forward, Pupil peered into the deep chasm. Billowing smoke blocked his view, but a low rumble came from far below.

“My teacher and entire class are missing,” he said. “They must have fallen into this fault.”

As he spoke, the *tap, tap, tap* of footsteps reached his ears. Turning, he saw a two-legged creature about the size of a kindergartner standing on the teacher’s desk. Was it a person? An animal? No, it was both, a creature with the furry legs and tail of a goat, but the top half of a young boy. His ears were pointed and two short horns sprouted from his forehead. He was playing a recorder in the shape of a fountain pen while his two hooped feet danced a jig.

“Who are you?” Pupil asked. “What are you? And why are you in my classroom.”

The creature lowered his recorder. “I’m Pen, the faun, brother of Pan, Pin, and Pun,” he said. “Super, the head God of Education, sent me here to deliver a message to you.”

“Super sent a message for me?” said Pupil. “Does this have anything to do with this crack in my classroom?”

Pen nodded his horned head. “Flunk, the God of Failure, has taken your teacher and class to his gloomy classroom below the earth. The fissure in the floor is Flunk’s fault. Super requests that you, Pupil Come-On, journey down to Flunk’s realm and bring your classmates and Miss Persevere back to school.”

“Why is Super asking me?” Pupil asked. “I’m just an average kid who gets average grades and has average P.E. skills.”

“Because of your power of persuasion, Pupil,” replied Pen. “The twelve Gods of Education know that you are the only student who can talk Flunk into releasing his captives. The gods are impressed with your pleading ability. Digit, Goddess of Math, was in awe the time your teacher allowed you to visit the Boys’ Room five times in a single math period. And Jimmy, God of PE, will never forget how you talked your PE teacher into letting you skip warm up drills because you didn’t want to get your new tee-shirt sweaty. Yes, Pupil Come-On, no student can beat you when it comes to begging for favors.”

Pupil pointed into the smoky crack splitting his classroom. “But why should I go down there? This room is peaceful without classmates bugging me and Miss Persevere dishing out assignments.”

Pen played a short tune on his recorder before answering. “Recess, Goddess of Playgrounds, is saddened by the loss of her favorite teacher and class. She is ignoring her duties. As long as your class remains in the Under-School Ground, recesses are canceled. Playgrounds everywhere will turn to thorny swamps and no students will be allowed outside. You can imagine the drastic effect this can have on education.”

Pupil checked the fault again. For the first time, he noticed a flight of wooden steps leading down into the black abyss.

“Well, OK,” he said at length. “But I sure expect some extra credit or bonus points on my report card for this.

“The Gods of Education will be forever grateful, Pupil Come-On.” said Pen.

Pupil lowered a sandaled foot onto the first step to start his journey downward. Step by step he descended. For over an hour he climbed down, down, down before reaching a slick, damp floor. When his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he found himself standing on the banks of a river flowing with a bubbling black liquid. Tied to the riverbank was a raft on which stood a bald, withered man. He held a pole with a stop sign attached to one end.

“Pass please,” the man called to Pupil.

“Pass?” said Pupil. “Why would anyone need a pass to enter this depressing place?”

The man frowned. “My name is Crossing Guard, and I ferry no one across the River Tardy without a pass.”

Pupil tilted his head sideways. “Please take me across, Crossing Guard,” he said. He batted his eyelashes and wore his sweetest smile. “Super sent me. I’m supposed to find my class. Please. Just this once. Please. Please. Pleeeeeease.”

Crossing Guard lowered his stop sign. “Well, ok. Step onto the raft. Why not? I’ll ferry you to the far bank.”

Once across the River Tardy, Pupil followed a cinder path to a tall chain-linked fence with a locked gate. Before the gate crouched a giant black cat with two-heads.

“I’m Copycat, I’m Copycat,” the cat’s two mouths said one after the other. “I’m head of Under-School Ground security. I’m head of the Under-School Ground security. And you can’t come in. And you can’t come in.”

Pupil placed palm against palm as if praying. “Oh, please let me through the gate, Copycat. I must visit Flunk. Please let me. You can do it. Please. Pretty please.”

Copycat sat on its haunches. A blank look crossed its two faces.

“Let me through,” Pupil continued. “Oh, pleeeeeease. Please with a cherry on top.”

The two-headed cat lifted a giant paw and opened the gate. “OK, OK. But hurry, But hurry.”

Pupil Come-On ran through the fence. Following the cinder path, he made his way across a misty, gray landscape, filled with the murky ghosts of teachers past.

At length, he came to a classroom constructed of coal and lit by a single candle. Inside, his classmates sat with their heads down on desktops of shiny, black marble. At the front of the room, Miss Persevere, looking pale and frightened, sat behind a golden teachers’ desk studded with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies.

Pupil stepped forward. His gaze fell upon a tall stool in a dimly-lit corner. On the stool sat a black-bearded man dressed in black armor. A large golden F gleamed on his breastplate. His black helmet shimmered in the candlelight.

“You must be Flunk,” Pupil said. “I’ve come to take my class and teacher back to school.”

Flunk pounded the F on his chest. “Welcome to my *Classroom of No Hope*, Pupil Come-On,” he said. “You’re in the land where the souls of dropouts and delinquents dwell. No boy or girl who enters this place can ever leave. Sit at the desk in back and put your head down.”

Pupil drew in a deep breath. He knew that this must be the greatest pleading performance of his life.

“Flunk, sir,” he began. “Can I *please* take my class and teacher back to our school? Please. Recess is making life miserable for students up there. Please, let us go. It’s important. I beg you.”

Flunk’s laughter sent a chill through the air. “Your pleas won’t work on me, Pupil Come-On. My dark classroom was lonely before I took your class and teacher. You and your classmates will become my aids and your teacher will be my queen.”

The students moaned and Miss Persevere sobbed.

“But I beg of you, Flunk,” Pupil continued. “Let me take my class back. Please. Pretty please. Be a pal. Please.”

Pupil saw that the dark god was weakening, and he pressed harder.

“Pleeeeeease. You can do it. I have to take them back. Just this once. Please let me. Please with sugar on it. Pretty pretty please. I’ll never ask you for another favor as long as I live. Oh, pleeeeeeeeeeease. Oh, pleeeeeeeeeeease.”

Flunk dropped from his high stool. He stood with his arms folded across the F on his chest. “OK, OK, I give in,” he said. “You can take your class back to school on one condition. During your returned journey, no student can



look back. If anyone takes the slightest glance backward, the entire class must stay down in my classroom forever.”

“That sounds fair,” said Pupil. “Let’s go, everyone. We’re returning to school. It’s almost recess time up above. Just don’t turn around. It’s that simple.”

With Pupil Come-On leading the way, Miss Persevere and her students filed from the gloomy classroom. They marched up the cinder path, through the gate guarded by Copycat, and onto the banks of the Tardy River. But as the class was boarding Crossing Guard’s raft, a boy named Curious turned around. He couldn’t help it. He had to see what was behind him.

At once, Pupil found himself and his class sitting back in Flunk’s *Classroom of No Hope*.

“Ha, I knew an entire group of students could never follow instructions during a class trip,” said the God of Failure. “Now you are my aids forever, and Miss Persevere shall be my queen.”

The students moaned and the teacher sobbed.

Pupil began pleading again, but it was useless. Flunk’s black heart could not be softened a second time. For many weeks, Miss Persevere and her class sat in that cold, dismal classroom doing meaningless math drills and spelling worksheets. Life was dull and depressing until one

morning a silver light appeared on the teacher's golden desk.

Pupil looked forward. Pen, the faun, stood there playing his recorder.

"Pen!" Pupil shouted. "Help us! Get us out of here!"

The faun addressed the God of Failure, who sat on his stool in the corner. "Super sent me down here with a message, Flunk. He orders you to give back Miss Persevere and her students. Schools in the upper world are in trouble. Recess mopes all day long. Playgrounds remain swampy and students are skipping school because all the fun is gone."

Flunk slid from his stool. He knew he must obey the head god.

"But that's not fair," he said. "If I give back my helpers and queen what will I get in return."

"Super has agreed to cut a deal, Flunk," Pen said. "Miss Persevere's class can remain in school above for nine months. For three months of the year they will stay down here with you."

Pupil leaped to his feet. "Great deal, Flunk" he said. "How about it? Three months is better than none. Please let us go, Flunk. Pleeeeeease."

Flunk nodded and the bargain was struck.

Joyfully, Miss Persevere returned with her class to their classroom. The month was September and they stayed there through May. At the start of June, the classroom floor split open and the teacher and class marched down the steps to be with Flunk.

To this day, Recess still mopes whenever Miss Persevere's class is below in the Under-School Grounds. That's why our schools are closed during the summer months. But in September, when Miss Persevere and her class return, Recess brightens and schools reopen.

As for Pupil Come-On, the Gods of Education assured that his name would be honored forever. Even today, students often speak the name of the famous pleader when they ask teachers for favors. Listen in on a classroom and you might hear,

“Please, teacher! Come on! Pretty please. Oh, come on. Please! Please! Come oooooon!”

