



How Come a Bell Starts the School Day? by Douglas Evans

In school years of yore, school days of yesterday, when school hallways stretched for miles and wild beasts roamed the halls, a second-grader named Gig was sent to the office.

Gig was having a fidgety day. With the air outside cold and the classroom heat turned up high, she found it impossible not to wriggle and squiggle in her seat.

“Gig, stay still!” her teacher scolded. “Don’t fiddle. Don’t fuss. Don’t fidget.”

But still, Gig bounced and flounced in her chair.

In those long-ago school times, teachers carried tall, crooked rods called teaching staffs. The modern term *staff*, meaning a school worker, comes from those very sticks.

As Gig rocked and wiggled, the teacher pointed her staff at her. “Gig, go to the office,” she said. “You’ve been fidgeting far too much today.”

Gig went pale. She glanced at the classroom door. Who knew what creatures could be lurking on the other side? A blue-lined lion? A comma-covered leopard? Just that morning, on the way to the gym, her class had heard the toe-curling roar of a ferocious chalk-dusty bear.

“I’ll be good,” Gig said. “I’ll stay still. I’ll never fidget again in my life.” And to prove it, she sat up as straight, stiff, and still as a ruler.

The teacher checked the clock. “It’s noon, Gig. Most of the wilds nap at this hour. A giant rhinotherosaurus or a three-holed noteboar won’t bother a student during nap time.”

“What about the humpbacked mathjackal that carried off the kindergartner last week?” Gig whispered.

The teacher thumped her staff on the floor. “That young lad should have known better than to tug a mathjackal’s tail,” she said. “Now off with you. You’ve got plenty of time to reach the office before the wilds wake up. Besides, the walk will be good for your fidgetiness.”

Gig slid from her seat. She wasn’t fidgety anymore. She was just plain scared. Her classmates watched in wide-eyed silence as she stepped toward the door. She opened it a crack and peeked into the hall.

“Hello?” she called out. “Anything out there?”

The teacher waved her staff. “Go, Gig!” she shouted, and the girl was out the door.

* * *

Gig stood alone in the long, straight hallway. Far in the distance, the office was a small white dot over a mile away. Never in her years at school had she been in the hall without her teacher and class. Even during nap hour, the chance of running into an eraser-bottom hippopotamus or a yellow-scaled pencil lizard was enough to keep most students from asking for a drink of water or a trip to the restroom.

The hallway clock read ten past twelve.

“In fifty minutes, the wilds will be on the prowl again,” Gig whispered. “Should I run to the office? No, the noise might wake the beasts. Should I tiptoe? No, they'd wake before I got halfway there.”

She decided to slide her sneakers along the tiled floor, quietly but quickly.

Step, slide. Step, slide.

Before reaching the next classroom, Gig stopped. Each classroom door stood a few feet back from the hallway. This left a dim, shadowy space between the corridor and the classroom.

“Wilds like to nap in those dark places,” Gig told herself.

Holding her breath, she leaned forward and peeked around the corner. Phew! The space was empty.

“But there are many more classrooms to pass before I reach the office,” Gig whispered. “And time is running out.”

She started again. *Step, slide. Step, slide.* At each doorway, she paused and checked the dark nook. *Step, slide. Step, slide.*

By the time she passed a dozen doors, the gym, and the library, she was worn out.

“I need a drink,” she said. “Just a little sip of water.”

Across the hall stood a drinking fountain. Without checking the floor first, she dashed toward it. That was a mistake. After two steps, she tripped over something large, lumpy, and furry.

“Yaaaaar!” the thing howled, springing up on four clawed feet.

“Yaaaaah!” Gig shrieked, stumbling backward.

She found herself staring into the round yellow eyes of a scissor-toothed tiger, the fiercest wild ever to roam the hallway.

Thick yellow fur bristled along the beast's arched back. Its eyes narrowed. With a hiss, it bared its jaws and slashed the air with two silver fangs, each a foot long.

“Yaaaaar!” it roared again.

“Yaaaaah!” Gig shouted.

She braced for the blades to slice her into scraps.

“Yaaaaar!”

“Yaaaaah!”

“Stop! Stop!” the tiger said.

Gig was so surprised she nearly toppled over.

“Stop?” she said. “Stop what?”

The tiger lowered its shaggy head. “Stop scaring me.”

“Scaring you?” said Gig. “You’re a scissor-toothed tiger. You’re the one doing

the scaring.”

The tiger mewed like a kitten. It wiped its whiskers with mitten-sized paws.

“A scissor-toothed tiger wouldn’t hurt an eraser-crumb flea,” it said. “It’s you students who are scary. Every time one of you comes near me, you scream.”

“But I screamed because you growled at me,” said Gig.

“And I growled because you screamed. Have you ever looked at yourself in the restroom mirror while screaming? It’s terrifying.”

Gig paused. “Is that true for all the wilds in the hall? The blue-lined lions? The comma-covered leopards? Do they growl because kids scare them first?”

The scissor-toothed tiger nodded, flashing its silver fangs. “Even for the eraser-bottomed hippopotamus and the yellow-scaled pencil lizard. Once, a new glue gnu I knew was migrating south and spotted an open playground door. Rather than walk around the school, it took a shortcut through the hallway.”

Gig leaned in. “And?”

“A kindergarten saw the spiral-horned animal and screamed. Startled, the new glue gnu turned right around and started migrating north instead.”

Gig thought some more. “What I need is a warning signal,” she said. “Something to let the wilds know I’m coming. That way, I won’t startle you, and you won’t scare me.”

Next to the drinking fountain was the small janitor’s room. The door stood open, and Gig peered inside. Wild traps, nets, and cages hung on the walls.

“Those traps seem pretty pointless now,” she said.

Her eyes landed on a brass bell resting on the janitor’s workbench. She

grabbed it by the wooden handle and waved it up and down.

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“From here to the office I’ll ring this bell,” she told the tiger.

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“That way, all the wilds will know that fidgety Gig is coming.”

The scissor-toothed tiger yawned. “And I can go back to sleep,” it said.

“There’s still twenty minutes left in nap time.”

Waving the bell, Gig started down the hall again.

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“Here I come, giant rhinotherosaurus!” she called. “Hello, three-holed noteboards.”

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“Don’t be startled mathjackle. It’s just me, Gig, on my way to the office for fidgeting too much.”

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

Gig passed more classroom doorways. A red-snouted ink slurper lay curled in one. A thumbtack-o’-pine dozed in another. Neither growled at her. A checkered cheating cheetah even looked up and smiled.

Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“The bell works well,” Gig said. “My arm is ready to fall off, but that beats getting scared out of my skin.”

When Gig finally reached the office, the principal made her sit in a timeout chair for the rest of the day. This made her even more fidgety, but it also gave her

plenty of time to think.

“I’ll be the first student at school tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll march up and down the long hall, ringing my bell. That’ll warn the wilds that students are on their way.”

* * *

Gig’s bell idea changed schools forever. Years later, she became a teacher and carried a staff of her own. Before the school year started, she hung a large brass bell above the school roof. From then on, all she had to do was pull a rope—*Ding-ding! Ding-ding!*--and the sound rang through the halls and across the playground.

“It’s a good thing I used to be such a fidgeter,” Gig told her class. “Ever since the day I was sent to the office, no student has startled a wild, and no wild has startled a student.”

For over a hundred years, not a single blue-lined lion or comma-covered leopard has been spotted in any school hallway. Still, a bell--usually an electric one--rings at the start of every school day. After all, who knows how many red-snouted ink slurpers or checkered cheating cheetahs might still be lurking around your schoolyard, hoping to sneak inside for a nice warm nap?