



HOW COME WE GO TO SCHOOL FOR NINE MONTHS? BY DOUGLAS EVANS

In the ancient days of schools and school heroes, a boy named Pupil sat at his desk. Pupil wasn't the brightest student in the class. He wasn't the most popular or the most athletic. But he had one extraordinary talent that set him apart from the others. Pupil was an expert pleader. He could talk any teacher into giving him anything he wanted. Even the strictest, sternest, most serious teacher couldn't resist his begging. Was it his expression? His tone of voice? The words he used? No one knew. But whenever Pupil asked for something—more free time, a new pencil, a better chair, or an extra sheet of drawing paper--the answer was always yes.

Today Pupil's teacher, Miss Diameter, had assigned twenty long division problems. Bored with the math work, Pupil raised his hand and asked, "Can I get a drink?"

Miss Diameter frowned. "Pupil, you know the rule. No drinks outside of recess."

A smile spread across Pupil's face. His eyes widened, and he cupped his hands under his chin. "Oh, please, Miss Diameter," he said. "I'm so thirsty. Come on. I haven't had a single sip all day. I'll die without water. Pretty please. Just this once. Pleeeeeese!"

Miss Diameter's face softened. Her shoulders sagged. "Oh, all right, Pupil," she said. "But be quick."

The Earthquake

Pupil stepped into the hall. He stretched his back and strolled toward the tall marble drinking fountain halfway down the corridor. But before he reached it, the floor wobbled beneath him. The walls shook, and plaster rained from the ceiling. The fountain tipped and shattered on the tiles.

"Earthquake!" he shouted.

Having practiced countless earthquake drills, Pupil knew what he should do—stand in a doorway or duck under a desk. But with the ground pitching and rolling, all he could do was plant his feet wide and stand like a sailor on a stormy sea.

After a long rattling twenty seconds, the shaking stopped. Pupil steadied himself and stumbled back to his classroom. But at the door, he stopped. Something was wrong. Not a sound came from inside the room—no chatter, no

laughter, no scraping chairs or slamming desks. Strangest of all, Miss Diameter wasn't barking orders about aftershocks or earthquake safety. Why was the room so quiet?

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.

He leaned forward and peered into the deep chasm. Thick gray smoke curled upward. From far below rose the deep rumble of galloping hooves.

"My teacher...my whole class," Pupil said. "They must have fallen into this fault."

As he spoke, a faint tap, tap, tap reached his ears. He turned to see a two-legged creature no bigger than a kindergartner standing on the teacher's desk. Was it a boy? An animal? Somehow, it was both. The creature had the furry legs and tail of a goat, but the upper body of a young boy. Pointed ears poked through his curly hair, and two short horns sprouted from his forehead. He played a recorder shaped like a fountain pen, while his hooved feet danced a lively jig.

"Who are you?" Pupil asked. "What are you? And what are you doing in my classroom?"

The creature lowered his recorder. "Greetings, Pupil, I'm Pen, the faun, brother of Pan, Pin, and Pun, and messenger of the Gods of Education, " he said. "Super, the Head God, sent me here to deliver you a message."

"Super sent a message for me?" said Pupil. "Does this have something to do with the giant crack in my classroom?"

Pen nodded his horned head. "That's the fault of Flunk, God of Failure. He

rode into your room on his great black chariot, scooped up your teacher and classmates, and carried them down to his gloomy Underschool beneath the earth.”

Pupil sighed. "I stepped out for one moment and missed all the excitement."

The faun danced a few more steps and said, “Super has chosen you, Pupil, to journey into Flunk’s dark realm and bring back Miss Diameter and your class.”

“Me?” Pupil said. “Why me? I’m just an average kid. I get average grades and have average P.E. skills.”

“Because of your incredible power of persuasion, Pupil,” replied Pen. “The Gods of Education know you’re the only student clever enough to talk Flunk into releasing his captives. Your pleading skills are legendary.”

"Well...I'm flattered," said Pupil, sitting down at his desk.

"Digit, Goddess of Math, still talks about the time you got permission to visit the Boys’ Room five times in one math period," said the faun. "And Jimmy, God of P.E., will never forget how you sweet-talked your gym teacher into skipping warm-up exercises just to keep your new T-shirt clean. Yes, Pupil, no student beats you at begging for favors.”

Pupil pointed into the smoky crack splitting the classroom. “But why should I go down there?" he asked. "This room is kind of peaceful without the other kids bugging me and Miss Diameter dishing out schoolwork.”

Pen played another quick jig on his recorder before answering. “Recess, Goddess of Playgrounds, mourns the loss of her favorite teacher, Miss Diameter. The goddess is ignoring her playground duties. As long as your class remains trapped in Flunk’s Underschool, all recesses are canceled.”

Pupil gulped. "No recess?"

"No fresh air. No sunshine," said Pen. "Not even five minutes to stretch your legs or eat a snack."

"Not even one round of four square?" Pupil asked.

The faun nodded gravely. "Just think of it, Pupil, a full school day. No recess. Not a single second."

Pupil peered into the fault again. For the first time, he spotted an iron spiral staircase winding down into the darkness.

"Well...okay," he said. "But I'd better get some extra credit for this. Or at least a few bonus points on my report card."

"The Gods of Education will be forever grateful, Pupil," said Pen.

Into the Underschool

Pupil placed a foot on the top step of the spiral stairs and began his downward journey. For over an hour, he climbed deeper and deeper, around and around, until he stood upon a slick, damp floor. When his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he found himself standing on the banks of a river, its black waters bubbling like tar. Tied to the rocky bank was a creaky wooden raft. Aboard stood a bald, withered man in a faded yellow vest. He gripped a long 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 and gave his most charming smile. “Please take me across, Crossing Guard,” he said, batting his eyelashes. “Super sent me. I’m supposed to rescue my class. Just this once. Please? Pretty pleeeeeease?”

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

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

“I’m Copycat...I’m Copycat,” the two mouths said one after the other. “You are forbidden to pass through the Underschoolyard Gate...You are forbidden to pass through the Underschoolyard Gate.”

Pupil pressed his palms together as if he were praying. “Oh, please. Please let me through, Copycat. Good, kitty. Nice, kitty. You can do it. Please?”

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

“Come on, Copycat,” Pupil continued. “Just this once. Please, please, please, please.”

The two-headed cat let out two low mews. It raised an enormous paw and unlatched the gate.

“Enter...Enter,” it said. “But hurry...But hurry.”

Pupil slipped through the fence. He followed the cinder path across a misty, gray landscape. Shadowy ghosts of bygone teachers drifted silently through the gloom.

"Ooooooo, do your homework," they howled. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Walk in the halls! Don't take cuts! Keep your hands to yourself!"

At last, Pupil reached a one-room schoolhouse built from bricks of black coal. A single candle flickered inside. His classmates sat with their heads down on desks of polished, black marble. At the front, Miss Diameter, pale and frightened, sat behind a golden teacher's desk studded with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies.

Pupil stepped forward. In a dimly lit corner, he spotted a tall stool. On it sat a black-bearded man clad 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 our school."

Flunk pounded the F on his chest. His booming laughter rattled the coal-black walls.

"Welcome to the Classroom of No Hope, Pupil," he sneered. "This is where the souls of dropouts and delinquents are doomed to dwell. No student who enters ever leaves. Now, sit at the desk in the back and put your head down."

Pupil took a deep breath. This would have to 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'm begging you."

Flunk's laughter chilled the air. "Plead all you like, Pupil. Your words are wasted on me. My dark Underschool was lonely until your class and teacher

arrived. Now your classmates serve as my aids, and Miss Diameter is my queen.”

The students groaned. Miss Diameter let out a quiet sob.

Pupil dropped to his knees. “Let them go, Flunk. Please. I know you can do it. Be a pal. Please.”

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

“Come on, Flunk. I have to take them back. Just this once. Please let me. Please with a black cherry on top. I swear, I’ll never ask you for another favor as long as I live. Oh, pleeeeeease. Oh, pleeeeeeeeeeease.”

Flunk climbed down from his high stool. He stood with his arms folded across the F on his chest. “Fine, I give in,” he said. “You may take your class back to the upper world...on one condition.

Pupil sighed. "Yes, yes, there's always one condition," he muttered. "What is it?"

"During your return journey, no student can look back," said Flunk "Not a glance. Not a peek. If one student turns around, your class and teacher will remain in the Underschool...forever.”

“Fine. That sounds fair,” said Pupil. He stood and faced his classmates and teacher. “Let’s go, everyone. We’re heading back to school. It’s almost lunch time up there. Just don’t turn around. Don’t look back. It’s that simple. That’s all you have to do.”

Back to School

With Pupil leading the way, Miss Diameter and her students filed out of the black classroom. They followed the cinder path across the land of ghostly teachers,

through the gate guarded by Copycat, and down to the banks of Tardy River.

But as they boarded Crossing Guard's raft, a small boy named Curious glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't help it. He just had to see what was behind him.

In a flash, Pupil and his class found themselves back in Flunk's Classroom of No Hope.

The God of Failure grinned. "Ha! I knew no class could ever follow every rule on a field trip," he thundered.

Pupil nodded. "There's always one kid who ruins it for the rest."

"And now you are mine forever," Flunk said, spreading his arms. "My eternal helpers. And Miss Diameter, my everlasting queen."

The students moaned. The teacher buried her face in her hands and wept.

Pupil tried pleading again, but it was useless. Flunk's black heart would not melt a second time.

For many weeks, Miss Diameter and her class sat in the cold, dismal schoolhouse, filling in endless grammar sheets and pointless math pages. Life was dull and depressing until one morning, a silver light glowed upon the teacher's golden desk.

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

"Pen!" the boy cried. "Help us! Get us out of here!"

The faun lowered his instrument and faced the God of Failure, who sat on his high stool. "Super sent me down here with a message, Flunk," he said. "Release Miss Diameter and her students, or you will be sent to Forever Detention."

The smirk left Flunk's face. He folded his hands in his lap.

"Schools in the upper world are falling apart," Pen went on. "Recess mopes all day long. Playgrounds are turning into thorny swamps from lack of use. Without recess, students are climbing the walls."

With a grumble, Flunk slid from his stool. He knew better than to disobey the Head God.

"If I give up my aids and my queen, what do I get in return?" he said.

"Super is offering a deal, Flunk," Pen said. "Miss Diameter and her class may remain in the upper world for nine months each year. But for the other three months, during the summer, they belong to you."

Pupil sprang to his feet. "That's a great deal, Flunk," he said. "How about it? Three months is better than none. Come on. Please let us go. What d'ya say?"

Flunk scowled. His fingers drummed on his chest plate. He nodded slowly. The bargain was made.

With cheers and sighs of relief, Miss Diameter and her class returned to their school above. From September through May, they learned their lessons and played on the playground once more. But on the first morning of June, the classroom floor split open again, and down the spiral stairway they marched, teacher and students together, to spend the summer months with Flunk.

Nine Months

To this day, Recess still sulks when Miss Diameter's class returns to the Underschool. That's why schools close for the summer, and playgrounds sit dusty and deserted. But come September, when Miss Diameter and her class return,

Recess brightens, and schools across the land fling open their doors for the next nine joyful months.