



The First Playground Whistle?

by Douglas Evans

The Perfect Playground

In school days gone by, many recesses ago, a public school, P.S. 100, had the cleanest, tidiest playground in all the land. The blacktop lay smooth and flat as a chalkboard. Not a smudge of mud, scuff of a shoe, or scrap of litter marked its surface. The slide gleamed, the swings sparkled, and the soccer field was trimmed as fine as a putting green. The tetherball poles stood tall and straight as flagpoles, and every rubber ball was pumped for the perfect bounce.

The students at P.S. 100 were proud of their playground. No one dared misbehave for fear of missing recess. But once outside, they rarely played. Instead, they got to work scrubbing the jungle gym, straightening the ball closet, and mopping the rubber mats under the climbing structure. Rather than hang from the

monkey bars, the fifth graders polished them with velvet rags. The fourth graders whitewashed the hopscotch lines daily, the third graders dusted the tire swing, and the second graders raked the sand in the sandbox.

Miss Spic-N-Span, a stern and serious woman, served as P.S. 100's playground monitor. Each recess, she patrolled the grounds like a general reviewing her troops. She checked every corner for signs of wear and tear.

If a leaf fluttered down from a tree, she'd snap her fingers and shout, "Leaf!"

At once, a squad of first graders would rush out with wide brooms to sweep it away.

If she hollered, "Weed!" the kindergarteners would race onto the soccer field with their tiny trowels.

The playground at P.S. 100 was famous throughout the land, and people came from far and wide to marvel at this spotless, shining place.

The Tweet Snail

But one recess, while the students vacuumed the basketball court and polished the merry-go-round, disaster struck. The messiest thing of all appeared. A silver snail, no bigger than a pencil sharpener, crawled onto the perfect blacktop.



“Tweet! Tweet!” it sang, loud and shrill like a steaming teakettle.

As the silver creature crept along, it left behind a shimmering trail of gooey slime.

Madam Spic-N-Span waved her arms and cried, “Tweet snail!”

At once, two fourth-graders, Yoyo and Pogo, charged onto the blacktop. They carried a snow shovel and a scrub brush.

“Tweet! Tweet!”

Yoyo scooped up the snail with the shovel. He carried it straight toward the playground fence.

“Oh, please, my friend, don’t take me back!” the snail cried. “I’m just a slow snail hoping to nibble the fresh clover on the far side of the playground.”

“You’re a slimy tweet snail, and you’re going back to where you came from,” Yoyo said. With one swift motion, he flung the creature far over the fence. “So long, and keep off our playground.”

Meanwhile, Pogo dropped to her knees to scrub up the six-foot-long trail of slime. She was the fussiest cleaner in the school. With her stiff brush, she’d scrub up the smallest bird dropping, the littlest orange juice spill, or the faintest spot of dirt.

“Nothing’s harder to clean than tweet snail slime,” she said, scrubbing furiously. “It’s as gooey as gum, as sticky as syrup, and as thick as peanut butter.”

No sooner had Yoyo and Pogo returned their tools to the cleaning supply shed than a familiar sound echoed across the blacktop.

Tweet! Tweet!

The tweet snail was back. It oozed across the blacktop, heading for the clover patch. This time, its trail of slime was even thicker.

A marble lay in the snail's path. Without stopping, it opened its mouth and swallowed the marble whole.

“Scooper! Scrubber!” shouted Miss Spic-N-Span. “Quickly!”

Once again, Yoyo and Pogo grabbed their cleaning tools and dashed toward the silver creature.

“Oh no, please, my friends, let me reach the clover patch,” the snail cried. Now its voice trilled like a warbling bird. “This playground is too big for me to crawl around.”

“Messy tweet snails aren't wanted on our clean playground,” said Yoyo, scooping it up. “Good-bye and stay away.”

“I'll be scrubbing until summer to get off your slime,” said Pogo, dropping to her knees.

The Jump Rope Snake

All recess, the playground dusting, sweeping, and polishing continued. The students were so busy cleaning, no one noticed a new creature slither onto the blacktop--a long, skinny jump rope snake. It slid beneath the spiral slide and coiled itself up as tight as a spring.

At first glance, the snake looked like an ordinary blue jump rope, right down to its red, tube-shaped head and tail. But this was no playground toy; it was the deadliest creature in the land. In a single gulp, it could swallow any child who reached for it, wanting to skip rope.

Now the snake lay in wait beneath the slide. As it hunted for its next meal, it hissed a chilling jump-rope-snake rhyme,

*"Come, tasty boy; delicious girl.
Come for a jump; come for a twirl."*

Unfortunately, Pogo spotted the jump rope snake first. She was busy waxing the long, winding slide surface.

"How careless," she said. "Someone left a jump rope on our playground."

Without a second thought, she climbed down the slide ladder. She stepped up to the coil and bent over.

She reached for one end--

the wrong end,

the mouth end.

Eyeing Pogo's wiggling fingers, the snake hissed another rhyme,

*"Skipping me will be bad for thee,
For skipping meals is bad for me."*

In the meantime, Miss Spic-N-Span stood on the soccer field, checking for crabgrass. From across the playground, she spotted Pogo reaching for the coil beneath the spiral slide.

She thought, *"Every jump rope is hanging neatly in the ball closet. That means the coil can be only one thing."*

At the top of her lungs, she shouted, "Jump rope snake! Run Pogo! Run!"

Her voice rang out, but not loud enough. Pogo didn't hear her warning. Her hand inched closer and closer to the serpent's mouth.

The snake tensed. It opened its jaws wide, ready to strike. Pogo's fingers

hovered an inch from its fangs when...

"Tweet! Tweet!!"

The silver tweet snail had returned to the playground.

Pogo stood up straight. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Humph!" she said. "That tweet snail just won't leave us alone. Look at all the slime I have to scrub up."

Grabbing her scrub brush, the fourth-grader sprinted toward the snail. Behind her, the jump rope snake uncoiled. Silently, it slithered off the blacktop. As it slipped into the bushes, it hissed one last rhyme,

*"That snail picked a bad time for tweeting.
Now none of these kids will I be eating."*

Meanwhile, Miss Spic-N-Span raced over to Pogo, who was already down on her hands and knees.

"Good thing that snail got your attention, Pogo," she said, breathless. "Another second and a jump rope snake would have eaten you for lunch."

The girl set down her brush and sat up. She glanced from the empty space under the slide to the silver snail.

"Oh, my," she said. "That wasn't a jump rope after all. It was a hungry snake."

The playground monitor nodded. "I was shouting from the soccer field, but you couldn't hear me."

"So the snail saved my life," said Pogo. "Its tweeting was like an alarm. It kept me from harm. It warned me just in time."

By now, the tweet snail had reached the far end of the playground. No one, not even Miss Spic-N-Span, tried to stop it. It crawled into the clover patch and

began nibbling.

Its silvery slime trail split the playground in two, but Pogo didn't mind. She picked up her brush and returned to scrubbing. She wore a smile.

"I owe that tweet snail a lot," she said. "If not for its loud tweets, I'd be inside the jump rope snake right now."

The Playground Whistle

From that recess on, despite its slimy trail, the tweet snail became a welcome guest on the playground at P.S. 100. But over the next week, it ate so much clover it outgrew its shell. As tweet snails do, it slipped out of the silver chamber to begin growing a larger one.

One recess, Pogo found the empty silver shell in the clover patch. The marble still rattled inside. Like a conch shell from the beach, she held it to her lips and blew. To her delight, the familiar warbling trill rang out:

Tweet! Tweet!

Pogo gave the silver shell to the playground monitor.

"Now, when you need our attention, you can blow into this," she said. "It's loud and clear, and everyone can hear it for sure."

Miss Spic-N-Span looped a lanyard through the shell and hung it proudly around her neck. Then she gave it a sharp blast.

Tweet!

"I see an ant crawling on the snack table."

Tweet!

"There are fingerprints on the tetherball pole!"

That tweet snail shell became the very first playground whistle. And to this day, teachers still blow tweet snail-like whistles to get kids' attention.

Tweet!

"Stop running up the slide!"

Tweet!

"Don't kick the red balls!"

Twieeeet!

"Recess is over! Time to head inside."

But few children know that it all began with a determined tweet snail from long ago--a slow silver snail that only wanted some clover and had to cross a spotless playground to reach it.