



How Come the Janitor's Room Is So Small?

by Douglas Evans

Grouching

Once there was a school janitor named Mr. Squeegee who grouched about his job.

“The school hallways are too long to sweep,” he grouched to the principal.

“The chalkboards are too wide to wipe,” he grouched to the teachers.

“And the lunch tables? They're too huge to roll up and down,” he grouched to the lunch servers.

During breaks, Mr. Squeegee would sit in his janitor's room and grumble to himself. “The sinks are too large to scrub. The front steps are too steep to shovel

on snowy days. And the gym floor? That's just too big, period.”

The janitor’s windowless room was as big as any classroom. Gray, stringy mops and brooms of various sizes hung neatly along the walls. The shelves were packed with yellow sponges, reams of paper towels, cases of light bulbs, boxes of trash can liners, cans of floor wax, bags of dust rags, and bottles of window spray. A wheeled mop bucket and a floor buffer stood in the corner. Still, there was enough space for him to dance the cha-cha with a shaggy mop, which he often did.

“The trash cans are too heavy to haul,” Mr. Squeegee kept grouching. “The desks are too bulky to move. And the flagpole out front! It takes forever to raise the flag to the top. It's just too tall!”

Yet no matter how much he complained, Mr. Squeegee always did an excellent job of sweeping, fixing, wiping, scrubbing, and shoveling. The school stayed in tip-top shape, and the students and staff appreciated him very much.

A Birthday Wish

On Mr. Squeegee’s birthday, April 1, every student in the school made him a birthday card. Nelly Woo, a first-grader, brought Mr. Squeegee a chocolate cupcake with a single candle stuck in the center.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Squeegee,” she said. “Thank you for everything you do for our school.”

The janitor nodded and took the cupcake. But not until after school, when the students and staff had gone home, could he finally sit down in his janitor’s room to eat the treat and read the cards.

He struck a match and lit the candle.

“Before I eat Nelly’s treat, I’m going to make a birthday wish,” he told himself. “I’m getting old. I can’t do all the work I used to. My wish is a simple one. I wish this school weren’t so big to clean. That’s all.”

He closed his eyes and blew out the candle.

The janitor ate the cupcake and washed it down with a carton of milk. Afterward, he sat at his desk to order more light bulbs, floor wax, and paper towels. Once the paperwork was done, he looked up and got the surprise of his life. The walls were closer. Much closer. He could reach out and touch both side walls at once. Frowning, he grabbed a broom and tapped the front and back walls with the handle.

“My room has shrunk!” he said. “It’s a quarter of its normal size!”

Mr. Squeegee jumped to his feet. He nearly bumped his head on the overhead lights. He had to stoop and suck in his stomach to squeeze out the door. In the hall, the surprises continued. The entire school was smaller. The gym was now the size of the first-grade classroom. The first-grade classroom was no bigger than the school office. And the office? It was smaller than a coat closet. Everything inside the rooms—the desks, chairs, and chalkboards—had shrunk as well, perfect miniatures fit for a playhouse.

“What’s happened?” Mr. Squeegee said. “How did the school get this way?”

He paused and remembered.

“This is my doing,” he said. “I wished for a smaller school, and that’s what I got. A mini-school.” He looked around at the toy-sized hallway, the shrunken doors, and the foot-tall drinking fountains. “What have I done? The children can’t learn

in a place this cramped and tiny.”

He ran from one end of the hallway to the other. It took only seconds.

“All the classrooms are too small for learning,” he said. “The desks are too short to sit behind, and the books are too tiny to read. What have I wished for?”

He shook his head. “How can I undo my foolishness? I need another birthday candle to make another birthday wish. I must wish the school back to its regular size.”

More Wishes

On hands and knees, Mr. Squeegie hunted through the shrunken office. He found a teeny candle inside the little secretary’s desk. He struck an itty-bitty match and lit the wick, just as the tiny clock on the wall struck midnight.

Too late. His birthday had passed. Another birthday wish wasn't possible.

The janitor paced the short hallway, thinking hard. “I’ve seen the children make many wishes,” he said. “There’s more than one way to wish. Our school must return to its full size before the children arrive in the morning.”

He hurried to the school kitchen. In a tiny trash can, he found a wishbone from the day’s chicken lunch. Pinching each end between his thumbs and forefingers, he closed his eyes.

“I need a lucky break,” he said. “I wish the lunchroom would grow back to its regular size.”

He gave the wishbone a sharp pull—*snap!* --and opened his eyes. Nothing. The lunchroom was still doll-sized.

“But there are still more ways to make a wish,” Mr. Squeegie said, and off

he dashed to the playground.

Next to the swing set stood the school's old stone well, the one that supplied their drinking water. Now it was no bigger than a shoebox.

Mr. Squeegee pulled a nickel from his pocket and closed his eyes. "I hope this is a wishing well, because I have an important wish," he said.

He held the coin tight in his fist.

"I wish the playground would grow back to the size it was yesterday."

He dropped the coin into the little well and listened. A faint *kerplunk* came from far below.

When he opened his eyes, he sighed. The playground was still small. Still useless.

"But there are still more ways to wish," he said.

The janitor raced back into the shrunken school and entered the small first-grade classroom. On a miniature shelf, he found a tiny bottle of blue finger paint. He poured a drop of paint on a scrap of paper and spread it around with his pinkie.

"I once heard the first-grade teacher recite a wishing rhyme," he said. "*Touch blue and your wish will come true.*"

Closing his eyes, he whispered, "I wish this classroom would return to the way it was."

But when he opened his eyes, he frowned. No change. The classroom was still a quarter of its usual size.

"How else do children make wishes?" he asked himself.

Mr. Squeegee crawled into the small library. In the quiet hush of the night,

he sat on the floor, thumbing through a wee book called WAYS TO WISH.

He tried everything it suggested. He blew a fluffy seed off a dandelion stem. He rubbed an old lamp, hoping a genie would appear. He clicked his heels together three times. He even blew on a fallen eyelash. However, by dawn, the school remained no larger than it had been before.

As the sun peeked over the horizon, Mr. Squeegee sat on the shrunken front steps of the school, sipping coffee from his teeny-weeny mug.

"The children will arrive in an hour," he said. "How will I explain this puny school? How ashamed I am of the wish I made. Why did I grouse so much about my work?"

The School Star

By now, the sky had turned a deep purple, and one by one the stars were blinking out. All but one. A single golden star still shone brightly above the undersized school.

"The School Star!" Mr. Squeegee said.

Children often spoke of the School Star. Each morning, while waiting for the bus, they'd spot it twinkling above the playground. It was the star they wished on for good grades, fair games, kind teachers, and lessons that made sense.

"I've seen them wish on the School Star countless times," Mr. Squeegee said.

"This is my last chance. I'll wish on it, too."

He bent his head back, crossed his fingers and toes, and said,

"School Star, Wishing Star, far above our school,

I have been thoughtless. I have been a fool.

Please grant one wish for the classrooms, hallways, too.

Let them shine this morning, like they used to do.”

He waited.

Nothing happened.

“So, a School Star wish is as worthless as a wishbone wish or a wishing well wish,” the janitor said. “Now all I can do is wait for the children to arrive.”

Mr. Squeegie entered the school and shuffled down the hallway. He was heading into the tiny teachers’ lounge when he felt the floor shift beneath his feet.

“I’m just woozy from lack of sleep,” he said. “That’s all.”

But when he looked ahead, he gasped. The hallway stretched out before him.

“It’s growing!” he cried. “The School Star wish worked! Oh, but can I add to the wish?”

The janitor dashed into the library. “School Star,” he said, breathing hard. “I wish this wonderful place would grow and grow.”

At once, the four walls creaked outward and the ceiling upward. The shelves rose to full height, and every book ballooned. Chairs expanded. Tables widened. The wish was working.

“Thank my lucky star!” Mr. Squeegie said.

He skipped out to the playground and shouted, “School Star, I wish the playground would stretch and stretch.”

He bounded to the gym. “And I wish the gym floor were as ginormous as it used to be.”

Room by room, the janitor raced through the school, calling out wishes as he

went. Walls widened, ceilings rose, and floors expanded. Everything inside grew longer, taller, and heavier, until the school looked exactly as it had the day before.

When he reached the office, he spotted the first school bus rolling into the parking lot.

“Just in time,” he said. “The school is back the way it should be.”

Mr. Squeegee grabbed the American flag and hurried out the front door. He clipped it to the top of the stubby flagpole.

“School Star,” he said, looking upward. The single star still twinkled above the school. “I wish this flagpole would grow...twice as tall as it was before my selfish wish.”

Whoosh! The flagpole shot skyward, stretching high above the school roof.

At that moment, the school bus pulled up to the curb. The door opened, and the students poured out. They filed into the school as if nothing at all had changed during the night--except for the towering flagpole.

"Cool flagpole, Mr. Squeegee," a fifth-grader called out.

Nelly Woo stopped by the janitor. “Did you like my birthday cupcake?” she asked.

“I sure did,” he said. “And I learned something important...be careful with your birthday wishes.”

It wasn't until morning recess that Mr. Squeegee returned to his janitor's room. As he reached for his wide push broom, he stopped short. In all his rush to wish the school back to normal, he'd forgotten one small thing. His janitor's room was still tiny. Far too small to dance in with a mop. But he smiled anyway.

“The School Star has vanished,” he said with a shrug. “But no matter. I’ll spend this day cleaning and fixing, just as I always do. And from now on, I promise not to grouse about my job.”

* * *

These days, schools have grown much larger. Classrooms are bigger, hallways stretch farther, and playgrounds are the size of football fields. But the janitors' rooms? They're still small.

Now you know why.