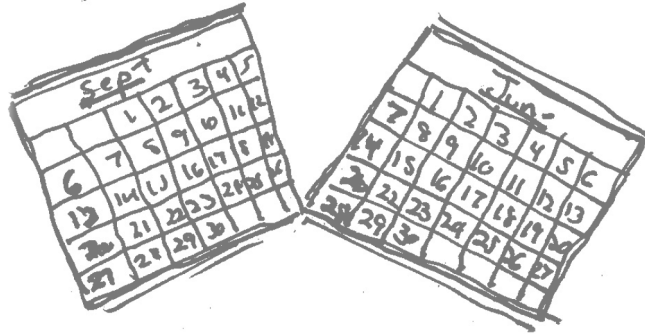




How Come a School Year is Nine Months Long?

In the ancient days of schools and school heroes, a boy named Pupil Come-On sat at his desk. Pupil wasn't the top student in the class, but he had a remarkable talent that set him apart from the others. Pupil was an expert pleader. He could talk any teacher into giving him exactly what he wanted. Even the strictest 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, “May I get a drink?”

Miss Diameter scowled. “Pupil, you know the rule, no drinks outside of recess.”

A smile spread across Pupil Come-On’s face. His eyes widened and he cupped his hands under his chin. “Oh, please, Miss Diameter,” he said. “I’m so thirsty. I haven’t had a single sip all day. I’ll die without some water. Pretty please. Pleeese.”

Miss Diameter’s face softened. Her shoulders sagged. “Oh, all right, Pupil,” she said. “But be quick.”

Pupil darted into the hall. But just as he reached the water fountain, the floor wobbled and the walls shook.

“Earthquake!” he said.

Having gone through many earthquake drills, Pupil Come-On knew what he should do, stand in a doorway or duck under a desk. But with the ground pitching beneath him, all he could do was spread his feet wide apart and stand like a sailor on a stormy sea.

After a long twenty seconds, the shaking stopped. Pupil steadied himself and stumbled back to his classroom. At the door, however, he stopped. Something was wrong. Not a sound came from inside the room—no chatter, no laughter, no scraping chairs or flipping pages. 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. Smoke curled upward, thick and gray. From deep within, rose a low echoing rumble.

“My teacher...my entire 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 person? 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 out from his curly hair, and two short horns sprouted from his forehead. He was playing a recorder shaped like a fountain pen, and 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 Come-On, I’m Pen, the faun, brother of Pan, Pin, and Pun,” he said. “Super, the Head God of Education, has 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 fissure is Flunk, the God of Failure’s, fault. He has taken your teacher and class to his gloomy Underschool beneath the earth.”

The faun paused, danced a few more steps, and added, “ Super has chosen you, Pupil Come-On to journey into Flunk’s realm and bring Miss Diameter and your class back to school.”

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

“Because of your incredible power of persuasion, Pupil,” replied Pen. “The Gods of Education know you’re the only student who can convince Flunk to release his captives. They’re impressed with your pleading skills. Digit, Goddess of Math, still marvels at the time your teacher let you 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 just to keep your new T-shirt clean. Yes, Pupil Come-On, no student beats you at begging for favors.”

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

Pen played another short jig on his recorder before answering. "Recess, Goddess of Playgrounds, is saddened over the disappearance of her favorite teacher, Miss Diameter. She's ignoring her duties. As long as your class remains trapped in Flunk's Underschool, all recesses will be canceled. No students will be allowed outside. You can imagine what cost to education this will cause."

Pupil checked the fault again. For the first time, he noticed a narrow flight of wooden steps winding down into the darkness below.

"Well, OK," he said. "But I expect some extra credit or at least a few bonus points on my report card."

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

Pupil places one foot on the top step and began his descent. For over an hour, he climbed down, deeper and deeper, 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 bank was a creaky wooden raft on which stood a bald, withered man. He wore a faded yellow vest and 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? I'll never ask you for another favor."

Crossing Guard sighed and lowered his stop sign. "Well, all right. 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. Crouched in front of it was 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 can't come in...You can't come in."

Pupil Come-On placed palm against palm like he was praying. "Oh, please let me through the gate, Copycat. I must visit Flunk. You can do it. Please let me pass."

Copycat sat back 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 raised one enormous paw and

unlatched the gate. “OK, OK. But hurry...But hurry.”

Pupil slipped through the fence. Following the cinder path, he made his way across a misty, gray landscape, where the shadowy ghosts of old teachers drifted silently through the gloom.

At last, he came to a one-room schoolhouse built from blocks of coal and lit by a single flickering candle. Inside, his classmates sat motionless, their heads down on desks of shiny, black marble. At the front of the room, Miss Diameter, 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 my school.”

Flunk pounded the iron F on his chest. His booming laughter rattled the coal walls. “Welcome to the Classroom of No Hope, Pupil Come-On,” he sneered. “This is where the souls of dropouts and delinquents dwell. No students who enters may leave. Now, sit at the desk in 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 beg you.”

Flunk’s laughter turned the air icy. “Your pleas won’t work on me, Pupil Come-On. 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.

“But I beg of you, Flunk,” Pupil went on. “Let me take them back. Please. Be a pal. Please.”

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

“You can do it, Flunk. I have to take them back. Just this once. Please let me. Please with a cherry on it. Pretty pretty please. 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 sigh. “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."

"That sounds fair," said Pupil. He turned to his class 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."

With Pupil Come-On 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 boy named Curious glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't help it. He had to see what was behind him.

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

Flunk grinned. "Ha! I knew an entire class could never follow instructions on a field trip," said the God of Failure. "Now you are my aids forever, and Miss Diameter will be my eternal queen."

The students moaned. Miss Diameter 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 that cold, dismal schoolhouse filling our meaningless spelling drill and endless grammar worksheets. 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 recorder and turned to the God of Failure, who sat on his high stool in the corner. "Super sent me down here with a message, Flunk," he said. "Release Miss Diameter and her students or spend eternity in detention."

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

"Schools in the upper world are in trouble," Pen continued. "Recess mopes all day long. Playgrounds are turning into thorny swamps from lack of use."

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

"It's not fair," he said. "If I give back my aids and my queen what do I get in return?"

"Super has agreed to a deal, Flunk," Pen said. "Miss Diameter and her class may remain in the upper school for nine months each year. But for the other three

months, they belong to you.”

Pupil leaped to his feet. “That’s a great deal, Flunk” he said. “How about it? Three months is better than none. Please let us go. Pleeeeease.”

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. It was September and they stayed through May. But on the first morning of June, the classroom floor split open once more, and teacher and students marched down the dark stairway to spend the summer months with Flunk.

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 reappear, Recess brightens and schools across the land fling open their doors.

As for Pupil Come-On, the Gods of Education made sure his name would be remembered through the ages. Even now, when students beg their teacher for a favor, they speak the legendary pleader's name.

Listen in on any classroom, and you might hear:

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