

Slugs at school

Puchu was an active pup, just a year old, and liked by all the children and teachers at the school where she lived. She raced with the older kids when they played soccer in the big field, and she let the first graders scratch her tummy during rest period. At other times, you could find the pup snuggled up on the library sofa. If not there, she would be in the principal's room, listening in on a conversation about how to improve the Grade VI curriculum.

What was singular about Puchu was her ex-traordinary curiosity. Her eyes were extra sharp, and she noticed everything that went on around the school. If a funny whining sound came from the craft shop, she just had to go over to check whether it was the electric saw or drill. If a child got hurt play-ing basketball, if a new child came to school and started crying in a corner, or if the crows created a racket over the big field, Puchu was the first there to investigate.

This morning, Puchu's attention was caught by the sight of two slugs over by the school's main entrance. She had seen slugs before, those grey, slimy, full-bodied creatures which looked so much like snails, only much larger and without the shells. She noticed that these two slugs were locked in an embrace, fitting neatly into each other's body



curves. “They are saying hello as friends do. They must have met after a long time,” Puchu thought to herself as she sniffed the slugs with her snout.

Inquisitive Puchu knew a thing or two about slugs, and had overheard the principal say a few more things about them as well. She knew, for example, that it was only recently that the slugs had made a come-back to the school grounds. One day, the principal had called out excitedly to a teacher, saying, “Have you noticed that this monsoon season we have had so many slugs around the school?”

The teacher was not impressed. She asked, “What’s so great about the slimy, yucky creatures? I’d just as soon not have any around.”

The principal answered, “Tch, tch, don’t you realise that the slugs’ return is a good sign? It means that our school has become greener, that it has more trees and plants to attract these sensitive creatures. It also proves that our decision not to use pesticide and artificial manure in our garden was correct. Here is proof that our school’s ecology is healthy, which is more than can be said for this city and this country!”

The teacher finally understood, as did Puchu, who thought it was great to be living in a school which was so committed to maintaining a good natural environment.

The pup knew that besides more slugs and species of birds around the school compound, there were also many more bees and other kinds of insects. But where there is a creature, there has to be its predator, and the return of the slugs had been accompanied by the arrival of a funny-looking



bug. It had scales all over its back, and many legs like a centipede's. No one in the school seemed to know the name of this creature, but all knew that it fed on slugs which were dead or dying. The teachers and children called this bug by a rather awkward name - "Tiger of the Slug". As a 'tiger', its job was to eat slugs.

The most exasperating thing about slugs for Puchu was that they were sooooo slow. Their brains were programmed so that the word 'hurry' (or its equivalent in slug language) did not seem to exist. Puchu was completely frustrated when trying to investigate these slow-motion creatures, because they took hours to get anything done.

The pup was curious to know what slugs did in their free time, what they ate, and where they met with their friends. But waiting on them to carry out any activity took forever. Under the midday sun, of course, the slugs would be out of sight, hiding in some fissure on the wall or in a damp spot behind the potted plants. They would emerge towards evening, and start moving...and moving...and moving, but never getting anywhere!

This slow-motion life was in sharp contrast to Puchu's own lifestyle. During the course of any half hour, for example, you could find the frisky pup running from the dining room to the principal's office, and from there through the library to the basketball court. If she was not playing with the children, she would be grooming herself, or barking at the street dogs who played outside the school gate.

Puchu was proud of the fact that she could run nearly as fast as the fastest boy in the school. But for your average slug, it seemed, speed meant nothing. Once, Puchu paced herself according to a slug's progress on a brick that had been left behind in the playground. By the time Puchu had run twice around the big field, the slug had barely inched its way across a third of the brick. Puchu had then gone on a larger romp, lapping water at the fish pond, entering Grade VII during Math class to wag her tail at the inmates, and watching the kitchen staff prepare lunch. By the time she remembered to come back to check, the slug had barely managed to traverse the length of the brick!

The pup began to understand that 'time' simply meant different things to dogs and slugs. The latter moved to different clocks. What seemed to Puchu to be a long time was not so long for slugs. The slug's clock was slower, that was all. And it also seemed that slugs did not need to do nearly as many things as Puchu to make their lives interesting.

Basing herself on this new understanding, Puchu began observing slugs with a bit more patience. She discovered that a slug's life was made up of one thing - the search for food. All day, they slept, and all night and sometimes into morning, they foraged.

The school slugs lived close to where there were soft and edible plants and vegetables. As evening came, they emerged from their lairs and headed for the choice cauliflower that beckoned from across the plant beds. No

matter that it took two hours to get there: the night was long enough for the slugs to have their dinner and return home.

Occasionally, of course, there would be an incident to interrupt the slug's slow glide across the plant beds. Mostly, it would be no more than a bee flying too close for comfort, or a leaf falling from the tree above. When that happened, the slug would protect itself by instantaneously retracting its two horns. These horns were the slug's valuable sensors, and also contained their eyes at the tips. When re-tracting the horns was not enough, the slug would curl up, trying to become as small as possible so that whatever was falling would miss.

Other than this, there was little that a slug could do to protect itself. It was, after all, a boneless creature, and a soft one at that. Luckily, for some reason, the birds that were aplenty around the schoolyard did not seem to relish the slimy creatures and left them alone. The slugs fell casualty mostly to human feet, which were constantly stepping on them and squishing them to death. At that point, the slug carcasses became food for the 'tigers' which were always on the prowl.

Thinking about the many slugs who had met a squishy end suddenly brought an end to Puchu's ruminating. For, here she was, looking down at the two slugs by the school entrance, still in firm embrace. Puchu knew that the school buses would be arriving any minute now, and look at the spot this foolish couple had chosen to be affectionate! Didn't



they know it was already late morning and they should be back in their lairs? Didn't they care that the strong sunlight of late morning would make their skin shrivel up?

Puchu stared down at the couple. They were oblivious to the dangers ahead. "I will just have to disturb them," Puchu decided. With her head resting on her paws, she began to bark and yelp. This seemed to make no impression on the couple. Nei-ther so much as retracted its horns in acknowledgement.

Puchu fretted for the slugs. Soon, the kids would be rushing through these gates, unmindful of anything in their path and headed for the big field to grab some moments of play before assembly time. The children could hardly be expected to notice the two slugs by the entrance, and their boots would squelch the life out of the poor creatures.

This horrible thought added urgency to Puchu's barking. There was nothing to do but keep trying to draw the attention of these slugs so that they would disentangle themselves and head for the shady wall on one side of the gate. Puchu did not even know if slugs had ears, but if she made enough of a racket, the vibrations might make an impression.

And they did. A few more minutes of insistent barking, and the slugs finally seemed to get Puchu's message. Either that, or they were done with hugging for the day. The two separated and began their slow glide towards the shade. They left two lines of shiny slime behind as they moved. One inch, two inches, five inches, but the pace was hardly good

enough, for they had three full feet to go before they were out of harm's way.

Puchu looked up nervously. The buses were a few minutes late today, but they would be here any moment! Looking down, she noticed that one slug was going a little slower than the other, but they had both barely gained a foot.

In a swirl of dust, the buses arrived! They braked and released scores of schoolkids out of the side doors. Puchu perceived little danger from the smaller children who had to be helped out of the bus, or from big kids who were too senior to be seen running. Children from grades III, IV, V, VI and VII were the ones that Puchu feared most this morning. They were always in a tearing hurry to get to the playground, and today, too, they came rushing up. Five pairs of legs, some wearing running shoes and others hard-leather dress shoes, pounded up the steps and through the gates, not caring whether Puchu was in their path or some innocent slugs.

Puchu closed her eyes in horror, not wanting to witness the carnage that was to ensue. Within seconds, the first group of kids was gone. She opened her eyes to look down. Amazingly, and miraculously, the pounding feet had missed the slugs, who were continuing their journey unperturbed. The danger was hardly over, though. A hundred more kids were coming up the steps, and the slugs with still a foot to go before they reached the safety of the shaded wall!

Puchu was expecting the worst, but suddenly she noticed that the pounding footfalls had gone silent. She looked up, and was confronted by the sight of a hundred pairs of eyes looking down. No, they were not staring at the pup, but at the slugs.

“Oh, so *cuuute!*” cried a boy from Grade V. Everyone else agreed, and the whole group seemed to be struck with wonder at two creatures which left slimy parallel trails across the main entrance. A girl from Grade VII told the others, “Let’s wait for these slugs to get to the wall. They’ll squish easily if we step on them.”

Puchu could have hugged the girl. She was also proud of all the kids, who were clearly more caring than she had given them credit for. Look at them, she thought, a hundred children watching patiently while two fat and slippery creatures inch their way to safety. It took another few minutes before the slugs reached the protection of the wall, after which the kids rushed in.

Puchu stayed behind for a while, watching the two slugs climb up the side. They did this slowly... very slowly, of course. Puchu had no patience to watch them any longer, so she too bounded off to the playground. A speedy game of hide-and-seek was what she needed right now.