

The Saddest Slug Tale in the Whole Wide World

Chapter 29 from The Lost Lagoon

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*Tiptoes meets a slug crying its eyes out. She asks
what is wrong and this is the tale the slug told*

Once upon a time," said the slug, "a very long time ago, snails were huge, as big as elephants, even bigger—some were as big as ships. They would sail around on their silvery roads and munch on trees. Sometimes hundreds of them would get together around a stony mountain called Castle Hill and shoot darts at each other. They had a special dart sack inside of them that held the darts, and they would sail past each other, just like ships in the olden days, and shoot the darts from their sides like cannons. If a dart hit a snail's house it would bounce off harmlessly. But when a snail's foot got hit, he would say things like 'Ouch!' or 'Eeek!' and curl up inside his shell until the battle was over and it was safe to come out. The last snail not curled up in his house would be the winner and he would climb to the top of Castle Hill and shout: 'I'm the king of the Castle and you're the dirty rascals!' Then all the snails would come out and start the battle again, for it was really just a game.

And to this day children play games like King of the Castle—though they don't know why they say 'I'm the king of the castle' when they are on top of the hill. And snails still shoot darts at each other—but only if they are in love and want to get the other snail's attention."

Tiptoes looked at the slug in astonishment. "Snails shooting darts! That can't be true!" she said. "I've never heard such a thing!"

"It's true," said the slug. "Look it up and see for yourself."

"Anyways," he continued, "there was one snail who didn't like battles, even if they were just a game. 'Battles are such silly things,' he said to himself. 'Charging around and shooting darts and saying 'Eeek' and 'Ouch' is not for me. I have better things to do.'

The truth was, however, that this snail was very proud of his shell and didn't want it damaged. And he did have a lovely shell. It wound upwards in a smooth spiral of creamy brown stripes like a candy cane.

One day, as the snail was wandering around, he came upon a lady snail. She was gorgeously good-looking, with a long, extra-slimy foot and a beautiful shell covered with pretty spots.

“Oh, what a beautiful shell you have,” exclaimed the he-snail.

The lady snail was flattered and dipped her eyestalks demurely to the ground.

“Oh, no,” she replied politely, “you have a much more handsome shell than I. I love your creamy brown stripes and smooth spiral. Your shell is much more magnificent than mine!”

“Thank you,” said the he-snail courteously, “but really, your shell is so much finer than mine! I would much rather have your sumptuous spots than my silky stripes.”

Back and forth the two snails complimented each other, not wanting to be outdone by the other, and always saying (even though it wasn't really true) that they would much rather have the other snail's shell for a house, until, in the end, there was nothing left for the he-snail to do but to gallantly offer to swap shells. And the lady snail had made such a fuss about the he-snail's shell that there was nothing else to do but accept.

And so they both crawled out of their shells (blushing just a little bit to be seen without their houses on) and slowly slid towards their new homes. But right at that moment a Storm Dragon came raging over Castle Hill, shaking trees and sending leaves flying. The Storm Dragon's wings whipped dust and sand into the air and the snails had to pull their eyes inside their heads. Then, as quickly as he had come, the Storm Dragon was gone. The snails opened their eyes, and their houses, their beautiful houses, were gone! Gone! Gone! Gone! Their wonderful shells had vanished!”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” wailed the slug. “The wind had whisked their houses away! And even though they searched their whole lives they never found them. Then their children searched, and their children's children searched, and still to this day we search, always seeking, always hoping to find our beautiful shells.”

Tiptoes looked at the slug and shook her head.

“I never knew your true story,” she said. “What a sad tale!”

“Oh, yes! Yes!” agreed the slug sorrowfully. “We have the sorriest tale in the whole world. Whenever you see us slugs sailing along you can be sure we are looking for our lost shells,” and he slowly turned and sailed away on his silvery road.