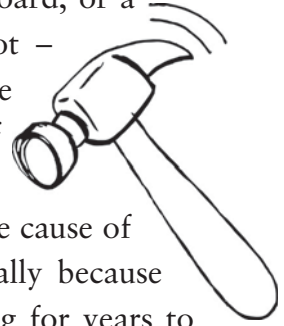


Slugfest

I wonder if you've ever had the experience of watching someone pounding something with great force – perhaps your father slugging a nail into a fence board, or a spice rack or, accidentally, his own foot – when suddenly his hand slips a little to one side and, rather than pounding the head of the nail, he pounds the nail of his thumb.



A father pounding his thumb is usually the cause of great excitement in a household, especially because your mother has undoubtedly been trying for years to convince your father to take up dance and, suddenly, there he is, dancing around the garage, shaking his hand and flitting about with all the energy and verve of a Nureyev or a Baryshnikov. If you had been listening very closely, you might very well have heard the strange exclamation “Jiminy Cricket!” in amongst the colourful string of projectile expletives that would naturally have shot out from between his twisted lips, as he undulated and oscillated over the oil stains on the cement floor. You might have wondered if your father had gone mad, and was blaming a cricket for his misfortune, or calling for a cricket to be brought to him for some bizarre primal purpose, or ordering someone named Jiminy to begin playing cricket immediately. In fact, as scandalous as it may be, what your father was doing was substituting the name Jiminy Cricket for another, even more famous name – one that is allowed to be spoken reverentially in a church, but not in a garage after bashing one’s thumb

with a hammer. I will leave you to figure this shocking riddle out for yourselves, because I don't want to end up like Socrates, charged with corrupting the youth of the city and forced to drink hemlock, which is not only deadly but tastes terrible.

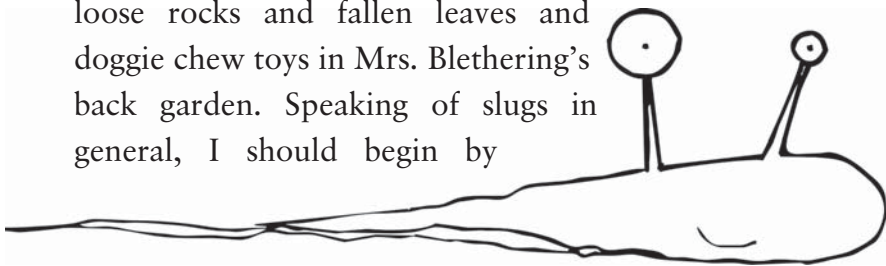
Jiminy Cricket, as you may know, is not just a substitution for somebody else. He is the wise and highly safety conscious insect of the orthopterous family Gryllidae, who was once instructed by the Blue Fairy to serve Pinocchio in the capacity of official conscience. What this meant was that whenever Pinocchio found himself at a moral crossroads and required assistance in determining right from wrong, he needed only to "give a little whistle," and the ever-dapper Jiminy Cricket would suddenly appear, in top hat and spats and sporting an umbrella, and offer the much-needed advice – which, by the way, Pinocchio always ignored because – let us face the facts – Pinocchio was a bit of a dummy. (Let us not judge too harshly, though; of all the wooden puppets I have known well enough to take out for a cream bun on a Sunday afternoon, Pinocchio was far and away the least fatheaded of them all.) Each one of us is like Pinocchio in that we each have a conscience – which is that little voice that warns us not to freeze shampoo in the ice cube tray, nor to put lipstick on the dog, nor to flush a bad report card into the great beyond, and so forth. Unlike Pinocchio, that little voice that reminds us not to be evil normally does not come from a cricket wearing a top hat, but rather, from inside our

own heads. Of course, usually people who hear voices inside their own heads are considered to be nutbars and wind up living on a funny farm, but we seem to make an exception with regards to the voice of conscience. It is perfectly acceptable to say, for example, “I listened to the voice of my conscience,” and is, in most instances, deeply preferable to saying, “I listened to the voice of a cricket wearing a top hat.” Try it and see for yourself.

It may surprise you to learn that the most moral of all creatures on our planet Earth – that is, those animals with the greatest consciences of all – are not, in fact, human. And, Jiminy Cricket aside, they are not even insects. No, the creature with the biggest conscience is amongst the smallest of all and, if you are a budding zoologist keen on the subject of animal classification, you will guess what it is immediately when I tell you that it belongs to the phylum Mollusca, the class Gastropoda, the order Pulmonata, and that the species have glorious names that sound like constellations and Roman emperors, such as *Arion hortensis* and *Limax maximus*. Yes, the animal to which I refer is none other than the mighty slug, and if you are indeed a budding zoologist and guessed slug rather than, say, Chihuahua or star-nosed mole, you should give yourself a standing ovation. If you are *not* a budding zoologist, you should give yourself a standing ovation if you guessed Chihuahua or star-nosed mole and not, say, elephant or blue whale. (If you guessed elephant or blue whale, perhaps you’d like to come and join me and my

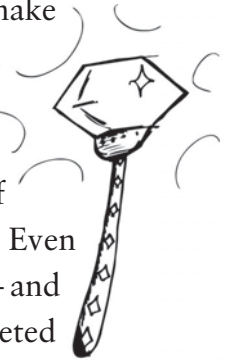
other puppet friends next Sunday afternoon for a cream bun.)

Let us turn our attention then to the magnificent slug – first generally, and then specifically, to an entire community of slugs that live only a few houses away from you, under the loose rocks and fallen leaves and doggie chew toys in Mrs. Blethering’s back garden. Speaking of slugs in general, I should begin by



pointing out that they are among the most misunderstood of all creatures, and when given an examination on the subject of slugs, human beings and wooden puppets usually get exactly the same grade. Perhaps we are embarrassed to admit that the seemingly lowliest of creatures is superior to us in so many respects. For example, human beings have, on average, 32 teeth, all of which are rather dull and none of which will replace itself if it falls out in adulthood. Slugs, on the other hand, have as many as 27,000 teeth, all as sharp as knives, and all of which routinely replace themselves – and so, unlike us, they never have to go to the dentist. This is a tremendous saving for the slug, but personal finance is not the only way in which they are smarter than us. Slugs are hermaphrodites – both male and female at the same time – meaning that they don’t waste a lot of time trying to decide if they should wear a stiletto

heel or a steel-toed rigger boot on their foot (and they have only *one* foot, by the way, meaning that *we* spend twice as much money on socks and toenail polish). Being both male and female means that slugs are beautifully psychologically balanced creatures who are not given to extreme behaviours associated with the genders. You don't find slugs endlessly shopping for handbags or drinking too much beer at football games with their delinquent cohorts. In addition to all this, slugs play an essential part in the ecosystem, dispersing seeds and spores, breaking down decaying plant matter, and recycling what we mistakenly think of as garbage. Unlike slugs, humans *can't even tell* what the *real* treasures of this planet are; for example, in our ignorance, we make important things like wedding rings and royal sceptres out of gold, when really we ought to be making wedding rings and royal sceptres out of slug droppings because these are, objectively, of far greater value than gold could ever possibly be. Even plants, who have no brains at all, understand this – and it is slug droppings, not gold, that are fiercely coveted by all growing things who need a rich and fertile home. Lucky for them that human beings have failed to grasp this simple fact.

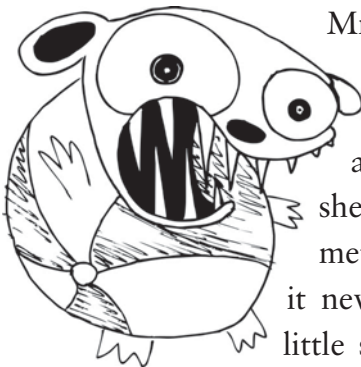


There are many more miraculous things to say about slugs (for example, they don't have noses but, rather, a breathing hole called a pneumostome; they can stretch out to twenty times their normal length; they build shimmering, silvery

superhighways out of only slime; and they have eyes on the end of stalks that allow them to sit in the back row of movie theatres and not miss a moment of the action), but for now, let us meet one of the remarkable slugs who lived in Mrs. Blethering's back garden. Her name was Pulmonatia (I say "her" only because Pulmonatia sounds like a girl's name), and she was a slug of tremendous grace and dedication, eating almost constantly to maximize her output and therefore her worth to all living beings. Pulmonatia had the great honour of being born (or rather, hatched) a banana slug, which is the second largest species of slug in the world – and given that we know of no slugs on other planets, it is not unreasonable to claim that the banana slug is the second largest species of slug *in the whole universe*. Pulmonatia, though very small for her age and species, was tremendously smart and, in fact, once went to the local elementary school to become better acquainted with the finer points of math, language arts, and especially science. In the end, however, this was a disastrous experience, because although Pulmonatia was always at her desk on time and waved her eye stalks about vigorously when she knew the answer to a question (and she knew most of them), she was too small and unexpected to be noticed by humans and was therefore treated very badly, as if she didn't exist at all. One of her parents, Gastropodicus, wrote a note to the teacher that read: "My child is a slug in your class and has so far not received any homework. Is there a problem?" But it was to

no avail, as the note was only a few millimetres square, and Gastropodicus's handwriting was too small to be read without the aid of a powerful microscope – and so Pulmonatia continued to be overlooked and, in the end, gave up all hope of formal education. Luckily though, Pulmonatia was a resilient creature, and so after a good cry, she wiped her eye stalks, blew her pneumostome, and continued with the essential work of eating, digesting, and excreting.

Considering the exemplary work performed by Pulmonatia and the other slugs in Mrs. Blethering's backyard, it was a terrible shame that Mrs. Blethering herself appreciated it so little and made the lives of the slugs as difficult as possible. By way of description, I should explain that Mrs. Blethering was a little round pudding of a woman who smoked like a chimney, with a tight poodle perm in her unnaturally red hair, and fuzzy pink slippers on her tiny feet. She had four little dogs, all shaped like beach balls with legs, and these dogs were a terror as they were too stupid to tell the difference between a slug and a chew toy.



Mrs. Blethering herself was not overly bright but, worse yet, was afflicted by molluscophobia (a fear of slugs and snails), which might explain why she devised ever more gruesome methods of slug assassination. Of course it never occurred to her to simply post little signs that read, “No slugs, please,”

presumably because she thought the slugs couldn't read signs because of their poor eyesight. No, she had to try to pour salt on them, drown them in beer (and slugs *do* love their beer), squash them with a boot, electrocute them with copper, cut them to bits with a knife, and even leave them to roast in the hot sun – but the banana slugs in her garden knew how to outfox her at almost every turn, and so thankfully very few of them were sent to a moist and verdant afterlife by her meaty little paws.

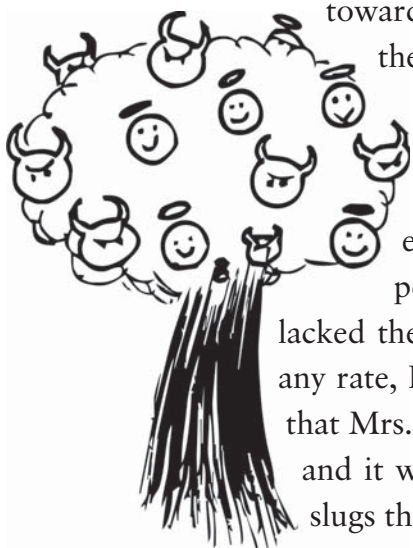
It seemed to Pulmonatia that what Mrs. Blethering needed was a conscience, and whether it took the form of an inner voice or a cricket in spats mattered not a whit to her. Slugs, you see, had been nibbling at the fruit that hung on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil long before Adam and Eve had ever even noticed it – and judging by their behaviour

toward slugs, it seemed to Pulmonatia that

the idea that humans had ever even *tasted* the fruit of knowledge, let alone eaten it, was a laughable one.

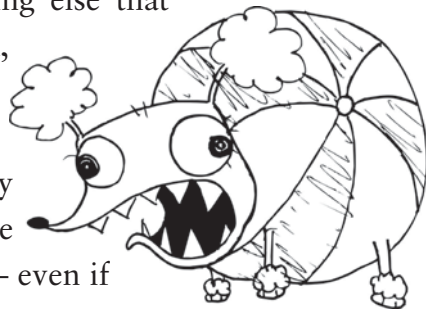
Certainly *Mrs. Blethering* had not eaten the fruit of knowledge – or perhaps she *had* eaten the fruit but

lacked the enzymes necessary to digest it. At any rate, Pulmonatia could see little evidence that Mrs. Blethering knew right from wrong, and it wasn't only her beastly treatment of slugs that made her believe this.



You see, Mrs. Blethering, like many humans, was an environmental nightmare. She drove an enormous SUV, and every time she started up the engine, the little banana slugs in the undergrowth by the driveway would start to cough from the terrible fumes, and they'd draw in their eyestalks and cry for their mothers. The SUV went everywhere Mrs. Blethering went – to the mall, to the mailbox, and even to her neighbour's, since she would simply back out of her own driveway and back into theirs. Although she had lovely rich soil in her garden (courtesy of you-know-who), Mrs. Blethering never grew any of her own food in it; everything that journeyed through her digestive tract was imported from exotic places like Ecuador and Chile and Peru. (Note that slug droppings cost no money whatsoever – but Mrs. Blethering's droppings represented a dollar value that would have been astronomical, had any admittedly strange person bothered to calculate it.) Mrs. Blethering did not compost her orange peels from Pakistan, or her banana skins from Burundi, or her coffee grounds from Colombia – she already had four rotten little stinkers in the form of dogs and felt that she didn't need anything else that

was rotten, or that stank, hanging about in her yard. Mrs. Blethering didn't recycle either, and she simply adored packaging because then everything she bought – even if



it was a plastic-wrapped, Styrofoam tray of meat – was like a present, and Mrs. Blethering loved presents. Mrs. Blethering did not own a clothesline, and she tumble-dried everything, even her holiest rags and the dog's chew toys. In fact, she even tumble-dried her fat little dogs in order to give them a little exercise. When her dishwasher broke down, she ate off paper plates and drank from Styrofoam cups for weeks until it was fixed. And although *she* was well-insulated, her three-bedroom bungalow was not, and her monthly heating bill was equivalent to that of Buckingham Palace. She could not bear the heat or the cold, the dryness or the damp – and so she kept her house at 21 degrees and 45 percent relative humidity, winter and summer, through the use of furnaces and fans, heaters and air conditioners, humidifiers and dehumidifiers. By keeping her own home at the perfect temperature for herself and her dogs, she was raising the temperature of the planet for everybody else – but this didn't bother her very much, for two very good reasons:

The first reason was that Mrs. Blethering was, in fact, doing her bit to save the planet – her bit being to turn off the tap whenever she brushed her teeth. This made her feel very virtuous indeed, but not nearly as virtuous as she felt when she compared herself to her wasteful next-door neighbours, the Pinkertons. The Pinkertons were the second reason why her conscience wasn't wailing like a police siren day and night. They had a seven-car garage packed from floor to ceiling with SUVs, and Mr. Pinkerton had perfected the art

Visit <http://www.ihsmythe.ca>
to buy Stories For Animals
and find out what happens to
Pulmonatia!