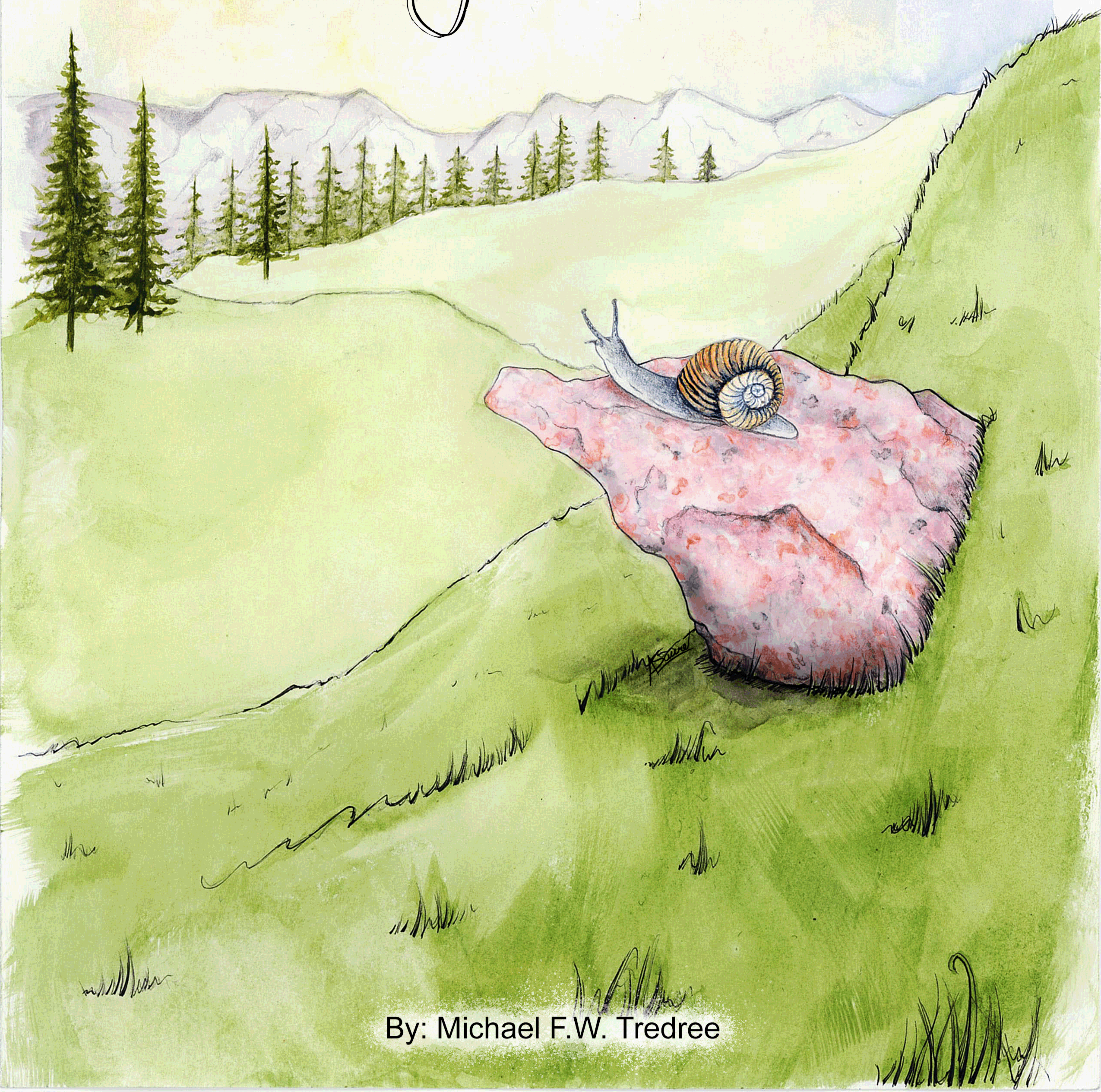


# The Arrogant Snail



By: Michael F.W. Tredree



The warm glow of the morning sun crested the hill, shimmering on the valley floor like diamonds in the grass. The shadows of night quickly faded along the east facing slope as the sun's giant spotlight shone on a single, pink granite stone that jutted sharply from the meadowed landscape. This stone was a distinguished landmark within the valley and home to a single snail that had remained there for his entire life. He had not seen other snails, and rarely saw other creatures at all, apart from the occasional insect, bird, or snake.

From his granite perch, the arrogant snail had all that he needed in life. The stone provided shelter from harsh weather and there was more than enough nourishment from the surrounding vegetation to eat, grow and become strong. Each day was a great day; the sun shone down from the sky and warmed the stone with its light, making it pleasant to touch for long after nightfall. It also boasted a beautiful panoramic view of the valley beneath. The snail had never ventured too far away from his paradise nor did he have any desire to leave.

Waking from sleep, he had but one thought, ***I am the BEST. I'm the GREATEST, MOST SPECTACULAR SNAIL EVER!!*** Each morning, next to the protruding stone where a thick patch of lush green grass and wildflowers grew, a collection of water droplets would form a pool. At first light within the valley, the snail would crawl down to gaze in wonder at his reflection. His eyes remained transfixed on the mirrored image within the pooled water as he spoke,

"My my my, look at *that* shell. It's ***GORGEOUS!***" he said aloud. "Look at my skin and how smooth and supple it is, not a single crease or wrinkle to be seen." He stretched out his neck, flexed and opened his pores, "even my *slime* is *divine*." He smiled at his reflection and continued gloating out loud to himself of his handsome qualities and lofty entitlements, oblivious to anything else. This exhibition continued until the dewdrops had dried up and evaporated. Bored without the distraction of his mirror, the arrogant snail slowly slimed his way back to the pink stone to look out over the flowers and greens of the valley, and to the dark clouds that were rolling in.

The wind blew strong through the meadow, over the stone, chilling the snail to his shell. The sky became thick with cloud and looked angry, as a low and not so distant rumble echoed within the valley. Deep vibrations ran through the ground and shook the snail

gently. He did not move from his place on the stone but instead anchored his foot to the surface and hid in his shell hoping that the rumble would not return. It did. Suddenly, the sky opened up with intense forceful rain, booming thunder and flashes of fork lightning.

Through the storm, the snail waited without sense. He could feel his anchor foot getting wet with fast rushing water but did not dare move. Deeper and dirtier was the water that poured over the rock in gushes as the storm raged within the valley. The snail remained locked in place with a tight grip, unable to move an inch. There was nothing left to do but hold on.

***WHAAAAACK!!!***

A great force of mud came flowing over the rock and swallowed the snail from behind. The momentum dislodged him from his anchor and pushed him aggressively down the hill. The snail curled up and retracted deep inside his shell and held on for dear life, rolling end over end down the slope. To brace for impact, he closed his eyes and expanded his body, pressing firmly against his inner shell.

***CRUUUNCH!***

The snail ricocheted off a boulder and became wedged against the edge of another large, sharp rock within the lower valley. The pressure of the mudflow squeezed the hood of the shell against the rock's edge, pinning him down. He could feel it grinding over the spiraled surface of his shell like the jaws of some great beast. He didn't know the extent of the damage, but he feared that perhaps his beautiful shell may not be strong enough to endure.

Eventually, the rain stalled and the storm passed on, leaving the valley soggy and drenched. The snail could feel the force behind him relent, and the flowing water and mud stop. He did not stir, but instead remained deep in his shell until morning when he thought it was safe. Through the drying mud, the snail could feel the warmth of the sun, which energized him with hope. The storm was over and he began to believe that it may now be time to move on. His soft body slowly maneuvered its way towards the opening of his shell, but was halted by a plug of wet mud.

Several days had passed since the storm, yet still he couldn't break free from under the stone. Over the hours of pushing and pulling against the mud, he had managed to gain more space between the dirt and the opening of his shell, but sadly was still pinched between the rock and the earth. In desperation, he fully extended himself outside his shell with his powerful neck, pushing whole heartedly against the dirt. To no avail, he struggled, until finally, he felt the sharp stone begin to grind over his shell and give way. He suddenly broke free and popped out the other side of the hardened earth into the cool darkness of night. Relieved, but frightened, he returned to the depths of his shell where he would stay until the morning sun lit the valley.

Once again, the sun's warmth reinvigorated the snail and gave hope of a new day, a better day. He had escaped the cocoon of soil that had trapped him for days and now he was completely free to find his own way. He expanded his soft and supple body to the opening of his shell and felt the ground around him; it was firm and familiar. It was now time to have a peek at his surroundings and begin his journey home.

The snail poked his head entirely out of his shell and looked around, but he did not recognize this strange place where he lay. He thought that perhaps he had been transported down the hill away from his pink granite stone by the storm and mud and, even though he was uncertain as to which direction to take, he must find a way back. Cautiously, he continued to explore, but everything was different, even his shell felt different. The grass seemed a little thicker, the soil a little deeper, and there were lines of ants and other insects marching to and fro from one place or another.

As he moved through the terrain, he caught his reflection in a small dewdrop that had collected in the leaves of grass. He could see that a large chip had broken at the hood of his shell, at the very opening where his head and neck emerged. It was a substantial and obvious fragment. There was also a long deep gash that had been ground into the beautiful spiral pattern caused from the time spent trapped under the rock. He shuddered as he gazed at these horrible scars against his once perfect shell.

Despairingly, he continued to crawl away from the dewdrop that offered him the visual proof of the destruction. His mind was blank and fragile. He was in a foreign place and his concerns of a now imperfect exterior had been confirmed. Life had changed and was not what it once was. He longed for what was and in a deep sorrow, he wept. The

unknown terrified the snail, and in defeat, he hung his head and inched his way along the vast valley without any real sense of direction or hope.

Lost in his own thoughts, the disheartened snail hardly even noticed when he crossed the path of a very large American toad. The toad just sat there, motionless, like a bump on a log. The giant amphibian paid no attention, and said nothing to the much smaller snail that stood in front of him.

"Excuse me," said the snail, "but have you seen a pink granite stone near to here? I'm lost and I can't seem to find my way back home."

The toad with his big, bulging eyes and belly just belched and stared at him, as if he didn't hear or care to hear the words that the snail spoke. The toad and snail stared at one another for several moments in silence.

The snail tried once more with sincerity, "excuse me, Mr. Toad, but I could really use your help." The toad blankly stared at the snail without acknowledgement and hopped away, without a word.

Alone, the disheartened snail thought about his current plight, but before he could sink too low in his grief, he came across a familiar sight, another snail! Relieved, he approached the other snail with a cautious excitement and said, "Excuse me, friend, but have you seen a beautiful pink granite stone near to here?"

"Do I know you?" answered the strange snail in a snarky and indifferent tone of voice.

"No, I don't think so", said the despaired snail, "but I'm lost and could really use some help from a friend that knows this area."

"Well, I've never seen this pink granite stone," said the strange snail as he encircled his new acquaintance, "It sounds like a place that doesn't exist, certainly not in this valley at least."

"I beg your pardon but I swear it *does exist*," answered the arrogant snail, "I lived there for my whole life until now. It is a truly magical place, and I *must* get back."

"BAAAHHHH, you must be crazy," interrupted the stranger, "Why would a snail ever leave a place like that?" he asked, "And what is wrong with your shell? It's all busted up. You have some *real* problems, *friend*, so I'd just forget about that stone and focus on what's in front of you."

The *arrogant* snail was stunned in disbelief by the harshness of the comments made by the strange snail towards his loss. He didn't know what to do, or how to do it, but he felt that he had to try and just maybe he would find his way home. It was the only thing that seemed worth doing, but for now he stayed put like a statue and let his mind whirl around inside his snail brain. The stranger had left him there with nothing but his thoughts about what he'd left behind.

Out of nowhere, a voice from behind broke the silence and asked; "Are you OK?"

The arrogant snail did not respond. He didn't even register that someone had spoken to him. He just stood there silently.

"Excuse me, but are you alright?" asked the voice again.

This time the arrogant snail heard the voice and swung his head around to see who was speaking. It was another snail. "Excuse me, can you hear me?" said the cute, little friendly snail. She crawled over to him and looked into his eyes. "You aren't from the valley are you?" she asked."

"No, I'm not," he said.

"Well, where are you from if not from the valley?" she questioned.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," said the arrogant snail, "there is a pink granite stone on the hill that was the most amazing place to live. It gave me the right amount of sun, the perfect amount of rain, the most spectacular view of the valley and the stars at night. The stone itself was rich in delicious minerals. I didn't know I could *miss* something so much," he said sadly.

"Wow, that place sounds unbelievable. We don't have any places like that around here, it's mostly dirt... and more dirt," she said earnestly.

He looked at her and couldn't help but notice her shell. "You've got a really nice shell," he said, "my shell used to be nice like that."

"Thank you," she said, "sometimes I polish it on a mossy rock to make it really shine. Please, don't tell anyone."

"I won't," he replied with a glint in his eye.

"So do you know the direction of the stone that you came from?" She inquired inquisitively, "Because it must have been uphill. That's the only direction you could have possibly come."

The arrogant snail thought for a moment, "I think it must have been from up the hill because I got washed out from there during the storm. It must be so far away from here, I don't think I'll ever find it." He said with defeat.

"Don't say that, we'll find it." She said with a hopeful optimism.

"We?" asked the *arrogant* snail.

"Well, yes, if you'd share that magical place with a friend like me," she said.

"What if we don't find it?" he asked.

*"Then I guess we'll spend our lives searching for it!"*





*The End*

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Illustrated by Alex Sauret

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Special thanks to family, friends and Mme Harrison's  
grade 6 class of 2018