

*The Story of a Snail
Who Discovered the
Importance of
Being Slow*

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ALMA BOOKS

ABOUT THIS STORY



A few years ago in our garden, my grandson Daniel was closely observing a snail. All at once he looked up at me and asked a very difficult question: why are snails so slow?

I told him I didn't have an answer there and then, but promised I would give him one some day.

Since I pride myself on keeping my promises, this story is an attempt to respond to his question.

And, naturally, it is dedicated to my grandsons Daniel and Gabriel, to my granddaughters Camila, Aurora and Valentina, and to all the slow snails in my garden.

The
Story
of a Snail who
Discovered
the Importance
of Being
Slow





ONE

In a meadow close to your house or mine, there lived a colony of snails. They were quite sure they lived in the best place in the whole wide world. None of them had travelled as far as the borders of the meadow, let alone to the tarmacked road that began where the last blades of grass grew. As they had not travelled, they had no way of making any comparisons. They did not know for example that, for squirrels, the best place to live was at the very top of beech trees. Or that for bees there was nowhere nicer than the wooden hives at the far end of the meadow. The snails could not compare these

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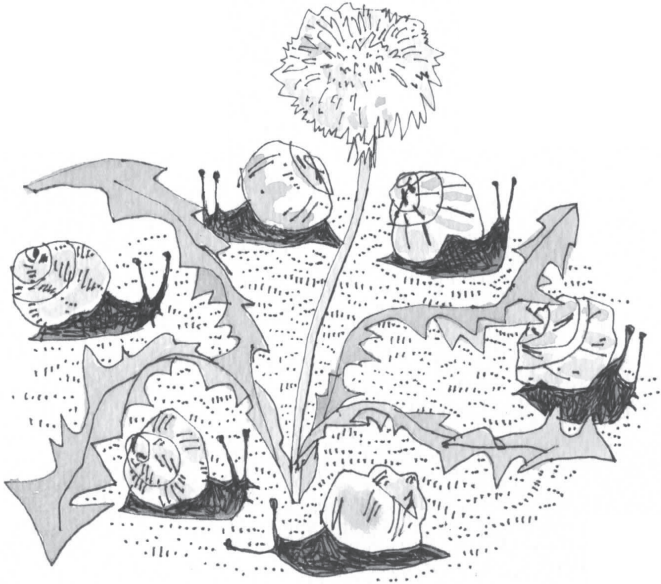
things, and they didn't care. They thought that the meadow where the rain helped lots and lots of dandelion plants to grow was the very best place to be.

When the first days of spring arrived and the sun began its warm caress, they woke from their winter sleep. Making a huge effort, they raised their shells enough to stick their heads out, then stretched out their tentacles with eyes on the tips. They were so happy to see that the meadow was covered with grass, tiny wild flowers and, above all, delicious dandelions.

Some of the older snails called the meadow Dandelion Land. They also called home the leafy calycanthus bush that each spring grew with renewed strength from leaves scorched by the winter frosts. The snails spent most of their time underneath its leaves, hidden from the birds' greedy gaze.

Among themselves they simply called one another "snail". This sometimes caused

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confusion, which they resolved with slow determination. For example, it might be that one of them wanted to talk to another one. It would whisper: "Snail, I want to tell you something." At this, all the others would turn their heads. Those to the right would move them to the left; those to the left to the right; those in front would look behind; those behind would stretch their tentacles; all asking: "Is it me you want to tell something to?"

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Whenever this happened, the snail that wanted to talk to another one would crawl slowly, first left and then right, forwards and then backwards, repeating all the time: “I’m sorry, it’s not you I want to tell something to.” On and on until they finally reached the snail they did want to talk to, generally about something related to life in the meadow.

They all knew they were slow and silent. Oh-so-slow and silent. They also knew that this slowness and silence made them vulnerable. Much more vulnerable than other animals who could move quickly and raise the alarm. So as not to be frightened by this slowness and silence, they preferred not to mention it. Slowly and silently, they accepted what they were.

“The squirrel squawks and leaps from branch to branch. The goldfinch and the magpie fly quickly. One of them sings, the other caws. The cat and the dog can run quickly too. One meows, the other barks. But we are slow and silent.

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That's life: there's nothing we can do about it,"
the oldest snails would whisper.

But among the group there was one snail who,
despite accepting an oh-so-slow life of whispers,
still wanted to know the reason why they were
slow.



TWO

Like all the others, the snail who wanted to know why they were oh-so-slow had no name. This worried him a lot. He thought it was unfair, and whenever one of the older snails asked him why he wanted a name, he replied, also in a whisper: “Because the calycanthus is called that – calycanthus – which means that for example when it rains we say we’re going to shelter beneath the calycanthus leaves. And the delicious dandelion is called dandelion. This means that when we say we’re going to eat some dandelion leaves, we don’t get it wrong and end up eating nettles.”

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But the arguments of the snail who wanted to know why they were so slow didn't really interest the other snails. They muttered to one another that things were fine as they were. It was enough to know the names of the calycanthus, the dandelion, the squirrel and the magpie, as well as the meadow that they called Dandelion Land. They felt they needed nothing more to be happy as they were: slow, silent snails, busy keeping their bodies wet and putting on enough weight to survive the long winter.

One day, the snail that wanted to know why they were oh-so-slow heard the older snails whispering. They were talking about the owl who lived in the trunk of the oldest and tallest of the three beech trees that grew on the edge of the meadow. They said he knew lots of things, and that on nights when the moon was full he hooted a long list of trees called walnut, chestnut, elm and oak, which the snails had never heard of and couldn't even imagine.

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So the snail decided to ask the owl why they were so slow, and slowly, oh-so-slowly, he crawled to the oldest beech tree. When the dew was making the meadow glisten with reflections of the morning sun, he left the shelter of the calycanthus leaves. He arrived at the tree when the shadows were spreading over the meadow like a silent blanket.

“Owl, there’s a question I want to ask you,” he whispered, raising his body up towards the bird.

“Who are you? Where are you?” the owl wanted to know.

“I’m a snail and I’m at the foot of your trunk,” he replied.

“You’d better climb up to my branch. Your voice is as weak as the growing grass. Come on up,” the owl invited him. So the snail began another oh-so-slow journey.

As he climbed to the treetop, his way lit only by the distant gleam of the stars twinkling through the leaves, the snail passed a squirrel sleeping curled up with her babies. Higher up, he crawled round the web a hard-working spider had woven

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between the branches. By the time he reached the owl's branch, the snail was tired out, and the light of a new day had renewed all the beech's shades and colours.

"Here I am," whispered the snail.

"I know," replied the owl.

"Don't you need to open your eyes to see me?"

"I open them at night and see all there is to see. During the day I close them, and see all there was to see. What is your question?" asked the owl.

"I want to know why I'm oh-so-slow," whispered the snail.

At this, the owl opened his huge round eyes and studied the snail closely. Then he closed them again.



CHAPTER TWO

“You’re slow because you’re carrying such a heavy weight,” he said.

This answer didn’t convince the snail. He had never found his shell heavy. Carrying it around never tired him, and he had never heard any other snail complain about the weight. He said so to the owl, and waited for the bird to finish swivelling his head around.

“I can fly, but I choose not to. Before, a long time before you snails came to live in the meadow, there were many more trees than you see now. There were beeches and chestnuts, elms, walnut trees and oaks. All of them were my home. I used to fly from branch to branch. Now the memory of those trees weighs on me so heavily I prefer not to fly. You’re a young snail, and everything you’ve seen, everything you’ve experienced, the sweet and the sour, the rain and the sun, the cold and the night – all that travels with you. It weighs you down, and since you’re so small, the weight makes you slow.”

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“And what’s the use of me being oh-so-slow?”
whispered the snail.

“I don’t have the answer to that. You’ll have to find it yourself,” said the owl. He fell silent, and the snail knew he wouldn’t listen to any more questions.