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A snail's crawl: accuracy of life

My first encounter with a snail was when I was only four years old. I was just a wee little boy, and an extraordinarily curious one. I was curious about everything in my sight, often going around trying to test out how everything worked or behaved.

At the same time, I was an avid nature lover. I loved to go to the park nearby to spend time with nature. Oftentimes after school, I'd rush back home, throw my backpack on my bed, and dart off to visit my beloved creatures: spiders, ants, worms… and snails.

Oh, the snails. I noticed that occasionally I would see them, their shifting slug-like bodies morphing as they moved. Their antennae—or maybe they were eyes—shrunk and pointed rhythmically. Behind each one, a short, slimy trail glittered under the sun. The trail was never longer than my arm, the earlier parts having already evaporated or dried into nothing.

I kept staring at one in particular. Soon I took a small branch and poked it, analyzing how it reacted. With each poke, its body would morph a little. Every four or five pokes, it would hide completely into its shell. Around thirty to forty of my own heartbeats later, it would return out, patient and unbothered.

I really enjoyed watching it, this little experiment in patience. So I went home, found a glass container, a piece of plastic wrap, and a rubber band, and went back to the park. The snail was still there, not far off from where I had left it.

I carefully picked it up, along with some leaves and branches, and stored it in its new, transparent home. I took good care of it, I thought. I fed it the vegetables I ate myself, watching as it slithered along the branches in that very tight space. It was always slowly inching, always moving, a tiny world contained within my walls.

One day, I brought it with me to a Christmas family feast. I took a bowl of food and fed it some salad from my plate. Then I tried the soup. Wow, it was very yummy. So, thinking I was

sharing a wonderful treat, I took the snail out of its container and dripped a few drops of the warm soup onto the table for it to sip.

It seemed to be enjoying it, and then it went into its shell to sleep. And it slept. It slept for the whole night. It was still sleeping the next day, and the day after that, its world now permanently shrunk to the size of its own shell.

It was dead. The soup was too salty, and it had died. Oops.

In my mind, it was a simple, childish mistake, a failed experiment. But a small, heavy feeling settled in my chest—the first, faint whisper of a lesson. My curiosity and my desire to share my world had, without any malice, destroyed the very thing I found so fascinating. I learned that intention doesn't always dictate outcome, and that even love, when applied without true understanding, can be a poison. The snail taught me about unintended consequences.

The second encounter with a snail happened years later. I was out at the same park to play at night with my friends. We were running around, chasing each other under the dim streetlights. Our laughter cut through the dark. We were just kids, lost in the joy of speed and freedom.

And then, suddenly, CRACK.

I stepped on something. It felt like stepping on a small, delicate egg, followed by a sickening, gooey blob under my shoe. My stomach lurched. I knew what it was instantly. It was a snail.

I was so weirded out. It felt so disgusting and made me want to vomit. I dared not look down at the blob, at the life I had just carelessly extinguished. I quickly scraped my shoe on the grass and ran off, trying to forget the sound and the feeling, but it stuck with me.

Where the first snail died because of my focused, albeit misguided, attention, this one died because of my complete and utter lack of it. I was moving too fast, looking too far ahead at my friends and the fun we were having. I was completely blind to the small, slow world at my feet.

That snail taught me a second lesson: that haste and inattention have their own cost. A life lived at a reckless sprint can leave a trail of destruction you never even meant to create. It was a lesson in awareness, or rather, the consequences of having none.

The third and most memorable encounter with a snail was last year. I was at a campsite, walking alone at night, quietly meditating. A lot had happened in the years between. I was twenty years old already, living in Hong Kong. The simple dilemmas of childhood had been replaced by more complex anxieties.

Let me share a little bit about myself. I am someone who has many interests, and I have very high expectations and goals for all of them. Some examples are basketball, Rubik's cube, arts & crafts, swimming, reading, cardistry & magic, sculpting, and many more.

All of them are loved, yet all of them I couldn't balance. When I put more time into one, others are sacrificed. It often troubled me, this constant internal debate over what I should devote myself to. I wondered how I should go about every day. How could I stop being merely okay at everything? I was haunted by that saying, "jack of all trades, master of none."

As I walked, my mind churning through these thoughts, I saw it. Right at the corner of my eye, a snail was slowly crawling along a wooden railing, just like they always do. But this time, I had a different thought.

I stopped and really looked at it. This snail, with its slow, deliberate crawl, its journey seemed never-ending. It was so slow that if it had just made a single wrong turn, it could feel like it had wasted what, for it, would be ten years.

I paused and thought. It truly needs to be extra careful in choosing which direction it wants to go each day. Once it decides, it has to stick to that one goal, that single route, until it achieves it. It can't afford to stray; it doesn't have the speed or time to correct major errors.

It hit me hard. I stared at it for a long time, and I thought about the other two snails. I thought about the first one in the jar, killed by a misguided act of sharing. I thought about the second one on the path, crushed by a reckless, unaware sprint.

And now, this third one, moving with a purpose so quiet it was almost silent. It wasn't just about focus, and it wasn't just about slowness. It was about carrying your home with you—your priorities, your center. It was about understanding your own nature and your own limits.

The snail knows it cannot run, so it does not try. It knows it cannot be in two places at once, so it commits to one path. It knows the world is full of dangers, like salty soup and careless feet, so it moves with a gentle, constant awareness.

I was astonished. This was how I should live my life. Not being greedy in doing many things at once, but choosing my path for each day clearly and living with a clear goal.

From that day on, every time I saw a snail, it reminded me of this message. I now understood how I should live my days, my life. I need to choose my allocation of hard work well. I should not have too many endeavours burning me out in all directions.

I should be like the snail, knowing its limits. It does one thing every day, and it does it steadily until it achieves it. It moves forward, not with speed, but with a profound and unwavering certainty. It carries its home on its back, a quiet teacher on a long, slow road.