

Janis Wyman Mayfield

## Rites of Spring

Mo woke up today. I have not seen her eyes since she closed them four months ago when a fall chill filled the air and smoke wafted from my neighbor's chimney. I visited Mo and her sister, Sammy, bi-monthly while they remained almost lifeless in an insulated hibernation box in our garage.

“Hi, Mo. You're awake.”

No answer. California desert tortoises do not communicate with sound except for a *whoosh* of legs and head retreating if I startle the unsuspecting creatures. Sammy wakes up slowly, preferring to sleep in, but not Mo, the more aggressive of the sisters. She instantly creeps from the box.

“I must get you to water.”

I lift the heavy, round body into a shallow pan. Mo lowers her front half, leaving her rear in the air, like a muscle-car with Hijackers™. She drops her head and slowly draws water through her mouth. Leaving her head down, she blows bubbles when she exhales. Strong muscles in her outstretched reptilian neck contract and release in rhythmic swallows. Twenty minutes later, she lifts her head and slowly moves from her drinking pool. Legs and face darkened and shiny from the water, she looks like she needs a towel and bathrobe. She smacks her lips and I see a bright pink tongue inside. Relieved to see the color, I now know she has awakened healthy, not anemic.

I see Sammy's eyes open, and strong legs move to turn the cumbersome body. I place her in the shallow water. She repeats the same ancient ritual as her sister while Mo crunches a romaine leaf.

The tortoises came into my life sixteen years ago, no larger than a twenty-five-cent coin. I could hold both of them in one palm. My friend, Dianne, gave me the hatchlings, whose parents belonged to her mother when she was she was a girl. These two tiny reptiles would be a lifetime commitment, not just for my young daughter, but also for her children and grandchildren.

Not knowing their sex until full development at ten years or more, we gave them generic names. The larger of the two we named Samson, and the other Ke-mo-sa-be, or Mo, because of a dark mask around her eyes. We kept the hatchlings in a terrarium the first year, and each subsequent year their enclosure in our backyard included more territory. In an area separated from our dogs by a picket fence, the tortoises enjoy non-toxic landscaping and a heated doghouse.

Sammy, the well-behaved one, rarely gets into trouble. But not so with Mo. She likes to explore. She roams the fence line, pushing each picket. One time she found a loose one and escaped for a few hours, so she never gives up hoping that it could happen again. She climbs the rock pile and gets high-centered, legs dangling, reminding me of rock-crawling in our Jeep. Or she digs under the shadowy ferns, making herself almost invisible in the gray and brown earth beneath. Or she tries to climb the fence, stretching vertically on hind legs and toppling backward.

In a tortoise-imposed game of hide-and-seek, I often find Mo flipped upside-down, waving her legs frantically for help, or worse, motionless in a puddle of excretions, signs of a desperate struggle to right herself. In the desert, the leg-flailing carves a crater in the sand and lowers the tortoise. Legs can then reach ground to turn the shell over. If not, the hot sun may kill them. In our tortoise enclosure, half

concrete-pavers and half dirt and grass, Mo tries until exhausted, then gives up to wait for rescue.

Guests frequently show surprise to watch the tortoises come when I call. Not quickly, mind you, but surely.

“Sammy, Mo, I have lettuce for you.”

With much effort, Mo lifts her weight onto stubby legs and navigates toward me from sunning herself on warm brick pavers. From the doghouse, Sammy turns her unwieldy shell and hurries to claim her share. Mo plants herself atop the veggie pile so her sister cannot get to it. If I feed Sammy in an alternate location, Mo changes direction and plops herself on the new food.

Both are picky eaters. Sammy prefers broccoli, and Mo prefers zucchini. They both agree on yellow roses over pink or red. Neither cares much for grass. An optimum tortoise diet should consist mostly of grass, so I sneak some into their daily veggies, petals, and leaves, and sprinkle with calcium powder for healthy shell-development.

The mountain of greens and blooms the four-legged tanks consume increases to twice daily in late summer and early fall. Time spent in feeding, caring for, and cleaning up after them also increases. My husband says they eat better than we do. Perhaps he is right. Sometimes I wish for a tortoise life—eating what I choose, when I choose, as much as I choose, and growing strong and fat enough to sleep four months and wake up rested and skinny.

In late fall, Sammy and Mo enter the doghouse as they do each day at sunset, but this time, with a difference. They scratch. And scratch and scratch and scratch. The

neighbors hear the constant scraping and inquire what it is. Instinctually, the tortoises scratch on the doghouse floor with long claws, as if digging a burrow. After weeks of this annoying sound, they stop—stop scratching, stop eating, stop drinking. I unplug their heater. After a week of deep sleeping, the tortoises are moved silently and carefully to an insulated hibernation box in the garage. Easy-care pets during the holidays, they sleep through Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's Day, and Presidents' Day.

Spring comes early to our house. Each year some primeval clock tells our domesticated tortoises to arise the first week of March. Whatever the weather, I am always happy to see them.