

The Turtle

By Robert Wallace

"Mom, you almost hit it," Geri said. "The turtle. There's a turtle in the middle of the road back there."

Out of the rearview window, I could see Geri point out the back. "But I did miss it?" I asked.

"I think," she said. "But—"

"You better turn around, Mom," Joe said. "If you don't she'll have you believing the turtle's shell is flat against the road."

"Joe's right. You could have flipped it, Mom."

"See," Joe said, laughing.

I could hear Geri smack Joe with her book.

"I'll just turn around," I said. "It won't take long. We have plenty of time before the carnival starts."

"There it is!" Geri shouted as we came upon the turtle. "It looks as though it hasn't moved."

I pulled over and turned on the flashers. "You two stay in here," I said.

"It looks smashed," Joe said.

Geri struck Joe with her book again. "I want to pick it up," she said.

The turtle straddled the double-white lines. It withdrew its head when I came near.

Using my fingertips, I picked it up along its marginal shield, the very edge a mustard-yellow.

"Is it all right?" Geri asked breathlessly, as if she had run a long way.

"Seems to be," I said, turning the turtle over. Its forelegs stretched out of the shell, searching for something to grab, and finding only air, receded. "Did you see those claws? This is a freshwater turtle. It must . . ." and realizing we still stood in the middle of the road, I motioned my daughter to the side opposite the car.

"The turtle was going in that direction," Geri said, pointing to the field across the road. "I'm sure of it."

"Yes. Well, unless that ditch is full of water, the only water I see is that pond way over there."

"How do you know there isn't a pond over the ridge on the other side?" Geri asked.

"I don't," I said.

"Then I think we should let it go in the direction it was found. May I?"

I handed the turtle to Geri, who took it gently in the palm of her hand.

"Oh, the underside is so soft." She turned the turtle over, touched the soft underbelly. "Do you suppose it's ticklish?"

I laughed. Geri had always assigned human emotions to animals, felt that she could, if given them, communicate with any living thing. Once when she was 6, she caught a frog in the front yard, kept it in the house under a makeshift home made of cardboard and screening. At the time, I wasn't aware of her confiscation. One day when I was cleaning her room, I found the frog under her bed. She had filled an all-plastic container with water, and the frog sat crouched in the tub; the upper half of its body, including the yellow, bulging eyes, emerging like a ship stuck on a sand bar. I took the frog, box and all, and put it on the front porch. That weekend, to appease Geri, we built a small pond in the back yard, covered the lip of the black plastic tub with flat rocks removed from the hole.

Now, as I watched Geri flip the turtle back over, I am reminded that her frog was killed by the neighbor's cat. While pulling weeds near the pond, I had found the mutilated body lying on its back, the hind legs extended and bent at the knees, as if ready to leap. I buried the frog in the back, covered it with a pile of leaves and a large rock. When Geri returned from school, I hadn't the heart to tell her about the frog's death. I could only think to tell her that the frog may have moved on to a bigger pond.

I grabbed the turtle. "I'll walk it over to the pond," I said.

"I'm coming with you," Geri said. She still hadn't fully let the turtle go.

"No. If you want me to take it to the pond, then I'm going to do it alone. Otherwise we let it go right where we stand." Sometimes I can be forceful, though I don't find it easy. I knew if Geri argued further that I would give in. Maybe she knew it, too. "Go back to the car," I said, sternly.

After Geri relinquished the turtle, smilingly, I watched her get in the car before I set off. I held the turtle with the tips of my fingers. Surrounding the pond was a white, wooden fence with three boards attached to each round post and a single wire tethered to the top. From a distance, I couldn't tell if the wire was electrified or barbed.

I turned around to make sure Geri wasn't by the side of the road, watching me. The hill rose sharply enough so that I couldn't see the car at all, but I felt a momentary panic seeing traffic come form up the road. I knew the car rested dangerously, the curb being so narrow. I hurried out of the field and onto freshly mowed grass, smelling the spicy and sweet. At

the fence, I saw that the wire was electrified. Like a child, I felt an impulse to test the wire to see if it was hot. The gaps between the slats of wood measured about two feet, enough room, I thought, to squeeze between. Raising my leg over the second board, I ducked my head under another, but as I arched my back to slip between the boards, I forgot to swing my trailing arm down, and I scraped against the wire. Instinctively I jerked my arm, dropping the turtle, though, I realized immediately, the wire wasn't hot. Hearing the shell thud against a post, I scrambled to pick it up before it had even fully come to rest on the ground.

I lay on my stomach.

"Oh, turtle," I said aloud. "Are you all right? Have I broken you?"

Thinking of Geri, I reached out and lightly put a finger to the soft flesh. It felt slick as silk. "Goochy, goochy, goo," I said, laughing. And the head snapped out and snatched an unsuspecting gnat.

I turned the turtle upright, inspected its shell. I noticed a small crack along its central shield, but I chose to believe it had already been there, a result of some other mishap. Carefully, I picked the turtle up and walked it to the pond, letting it go at the edge. The ponderous hind legs slowly emerged, then the front claw legs, and it slipped into the water.

Back at the car, breathing heavily, but suddenly refreshed in a way I couldn't explain, I said, "Read."

"What took you so long, Mom?" Geri asked.

"I couldn't very well run with a turtle in my hand, could I."

"No. Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Mom," Geri said.

"On the way back from the carnival, we'll drive by, just to see if we see him again."

But afterward we were tired and sweaty, and we forgot all about the turtle.