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Resolutely Coming Out of Her Shell

At This Museum, An Exhibition of Will

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When my husband and I visited a natural history museum recently, a woman rounded the corner of a glass case filled with Massachusetts birds mounted on the wall. "Hello," she said in a warm voice.

"Hello," I said. Her short wash 'n' go hairstyle, elastic-waist slacks and loose polo shirt suggested a woman who valued comfort over style, a preference I share. She stood about my height -- the average American woman's 5-4. Her eyes shone with life.

She must be another tourist, I thought. Then she spoke.

"Talk bad. Brain good," said the woman, Tina, in a slow drawl. She told me in a few more short sentences that she was a former nurse who'd suffered a stroke. But Tina had figured out how to communicate well enough to volunteer as a docent.

I'd raced ahead of my husband in my impatience with the museum exhibits. The terse, typewritten labels about the birds didn't tell enough of a story to intrigue me. They seemed as tired as the institutional yellow walls and scuffed floor. He caught up with me as I was talking with Tina.

"Three stories," she said, pointing to the case of birds.

She paused to take a breath before starting her tale.

"Story one."

"Big bird," she said, pointing with one hand to a hawk with massive wings.

"Bird in sky. Bird see bird." She pointed to a small creature, probably a sparrow.

"Big bird down." Tina's hand swooped down toward her waist.

"Goodbye, bird."

Tina ensnared with me with her powerfully delivered narrative. The energy that she directed into each movement and word made me think of a stage actress projecting to the back of a deep auditorium.

Tina told us a couple more bird stories in similarly economic language and pantomime. Then she motioned to us to follow her into the next room. There she picked up a diamondback terrapin that sat forlornly in a tank on the floor. The turtle's head and legs dangled in a relaxed posture.

"Soft," she said, stroking one of its black and white patterned legs. Then she passed the turtle to me. Its skin was soft and smooth.

"Boy or girl?" asked my husband as he took the turtle from me.

"Girl."

Tina struggled with a word to describe the other turtle she picked up. It sounded something like "steamy" to me.

She struggled with some more indistinctly pronounced words, her eyes suggesting both frustration and determination.

I frowned and made some wild guesses.

Finally Tina said, "Yuck," and I got it. "Slimy" was the word.

When we reached another tough word, Tina pulled a small spiral-bound notebook from her pocket and scribbled the word with her left hand. Her right arm hung loosely at her side.

I've never been much of a talker. My preschool teacher once wrote: "I know there's a New England tradition that children should be seen and not heard, but Susan is too quiet. She sits by herself and doesn't play with the other girls and boys."

When I tried to reach out, I didn't like the results. After my family moved to a new school district at the end of first grade, I rode a bus to school for the first time. I got on the bus and recognized Carol from the neighborhood with an empty seat beside her.

"Okay, act as if you belong, Susan," I said to myself.

I walked to her row and prepared to plop down on the grainy, forest green plastic seat.

Whack!

Carol slapped her hand on the seat. "This seat is saved."

My face reddened and tears surged in my eyes.

I felt sure that everyone was thinking how stupid I was. It was like I was the Massachusetts sparrow in the museum that didn't know hawks pounce and kill.

I went through elementary school and high school fearing another incident like that. Since I expected to be rejected, I was. I stayed quiet, trying to bother no one. I did my homework and took solace in good grades and reading books.

I've loosened up since then, thanks to many friendly encounters as an adult. But even now when my husband and I meet socially with others, he'll sometimes turn to me and say, "Susan, you haven't said anything. Say something."

Allan's request usually startles me. Sometimes I'll simply spit out "Something" when I can't come up with the perfect conversational gambit.

My shyness and unwillingness to take risks made me appreciate Tina's reaching out. She inspired me to be more outgoing. When Tina offered me the turtle, I resisted my urge to pull back and say "No, thank you." Instead, I stretched my open hand.

I couldn't disappoint such a brave woman.

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