

Operation Turtle:

Before post-9/11 airline regulations, and way before *Snakes on a Plane*, disaster ensues when a pair of reptiles is smuggled onto a flight from the west coast.

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There was a time when my family was really lacking in the Pet Department — which is odd, considering the menagerie that eventually accrued. A llama, two alpacas, the pygmy goat upon whom my father was surprised to stumble when he attempted, newspaper tucked under one arm, to enter the downstairs bathroom . . . then the miniature horse, followed by two parakeets, two rabbits, two dogs, more horses, and finally, eight chickens and a poor hen-pecked rooster named Wendell.

When I was little — a child who asked every day, much to my parents' consternation, *when am I going to get a pony* — such an array was beyond comprehension. We had nothing more than a few “decorative” goldfish in a concrete pond. Every year, my father would tie garbage bags over his suit-pants and Allen-Edmond oxfords to wrangle the fish into their winter accommodations in our garage. It was a sight so ridiculous that I felt sure my family just wasn't cut out to indulge my zoological desires.

Then came the turtles from San Francisco.

“Mom!” I'd squealed when I first saw them, stacked in cages outside a Chinese live food market. I pictured Dad chasing one or two around our suburban Cleveland yard.

My father, you must imagine, is a tall-ish thin-ish man, with hair that was more pepper then and is more salt now. He is of the sort prone to having business meetings with clients in far-away places. My mother is a shorter rounder woman, with a wit and charm that entices all types of strangers, mostly men, into conversation. She is of the sort prone to getting her family taken *along* on those business trips, thanks, very much, to the clients.

While Dad would meet with said clients, my mother, sister and I would go wandering around said far-away place, and, more often than not, attract said strange man. In the case of San Francisco, he was Andrew the Biologist, and he took us all over the Aquarium of the Bay, the harbor, and finally to China Town, where I made my discovery.

“Mom! Mom Rachel Mom! Mom Rachel, um, Andrew — there's turtles in cages! And there's a sign that says that they're supposed to be —” my moral compass had aligned at an early age; I lowered my voice dramatically “— *for soup.*”

I paused. No reaction.

“And,” I added quickly, well-steeped in family priorities, “They're only \$4.95.”

Andrew informed us that the turtles were Red Eared Sliders, and besides being a bargain, they were easy to take care of—*just cut-up fruit and a little fish and plenty of fresh water.* I looked up at my mom with big, brown, proto-vegetarian eyes. My sister Rachel probably said something diplomatic and subtly convincing. We left the market clutching one (female, Andrew informed us) Slider. We named her Andrea in his honor.

Andrea spent each night in the bathtub of our hotel, and each day, while we were out, hiding from *housekeeeeping* in an armoire drawer with a couple of damp towels for moisture. It is to my father's credit that he did not scream upon first finding Andrea in his morning shower. Nor did he scream when Andrew — a turtle

friend, not the eponymous human biologist who suggested the purchase of a mate — joined her a few days later. Dad did, however, put up a bit of a fuss when he was the one sent down to the hotel kitchen to ask for some raw halibut.

Between the lush accommodations and a steady diet of pilfered fish, Andrew and Andrea seemed quite happy. No one really considered the specifics of their resettlement in Cleveland, and it wasn't until our last night, when I heard my mom hanging up from Continental with a slam — *Fifty Bucks? Each!* — that I knew something mighty was afoot.

Early the next morning, Operation Turtle commenced. From the hotel, we gathered our supplies:

Two washcloths, dampened.

Two pillowcases, “borrowed.”

Complimentary pen, for use as hole-punch.

Takeout-carton of raw fish.

En route to the airport, we stopped at Wal-Mart and bought two large Tupperware containers and a carry-on duffel. With me in the backseat jamming pen-holes into the Tupperware lids, we careened toward San Francisco International, devising our plan. My dad tried not to listen.

Step 1: Put turtles in protective yet breathable hotel pillowcase; distribute to children.

Step 2: Tie pillowcases, each containing one live, squirming turtle, to belt-loops.

Step 3: Don large, poofy coats. Note: on Cleveland-bound flights, such outerwear is entirely plausible.

Step 4: Try to look entirely normal while sending duffel-bag containing only two towel-lined Tupperwares through x-ray scanners.

Step 5: Try to look entirely normal while walking through metal detector with turtle clawing tender-bits.

Step 6: Set off beeper. Consult turtle-smuggling manual, which will only now reveal “Step 3.5: Remove, I repeat, REMOVE, all metal from body.” Try to breathe as wand swirls vaguely above turtle-bearing region. Hand over metal hair clip. Hand over metal necklace. Walk through again. Be so meltingly glad you didn't wear belt.

Step 7: Panic as flight is called.

Step 8: Run to bathroom with duffel-bag. Fumble with pillowcase knots. Repackage turtles in Tupperware.

Step 9: Board plane at last possible second, panting.

Step 10: Make sure tray tables are locked, and all turtles are stowed completely under the seat in front of you. Sit back and relax.

Everything went all right until somewhere around the time the captain turned off the Fasten Seatbelt light. Rachel and I had been peaking into the duffel-bag at our feet, making sure Andrew and Andrea were comfortable, and not dying from, oh say, air expanding inside their shells or something like that. We peeled up the perforated Tupperware tops, alternating:

“Hello Andrew.”

“Hello-hello, Andrea.”

“Hello Andrew, cutie.”

“Hello-Hell — oh. No.”

“What?”

“Andrea.”

“Dead?”

“Gone.”

And so she was. Not just a little gone. Completely gone. Gone from the Tupperware, from the bag, from the area around our seat. I un-clicked my seatbelt and got on my hands and knees to look. Rachel started patrolling the aisle, up and down.

Ding. The captain has turned on the Fasten Seatbelt light.

I was sweating. A stewardess approached Rachel, no doubt entreating her to return to her seat. As she stammered, I crawled, peering between white Reeboks for a flash of leathery green-brown. Rachel must have alerted my parents sitting behind us, because they were scuffling in their seats, whispering frantically to the people in back of them.

I crawled faster up the aisle, my eyes darting left and right, left and right. Suddenly, they found themselves staring directly into a stern-looking pair of gray panty-hosed knees.

“Miss?”

Black pumps. Blue polyester. Uh-oh.

“I just . . . lost something.”

“The captain has turned on the Fasten Seatbelt light.” She sounded just like recording. Maybe she *was* the recording.

“I know — I just need to find — my —”

“What?”

“My —”

Pantyhose. Pumps. Polyester.

“My . . .”

Then, “Excuse me.” The voice of a man — bless his heart — muffled forth from several rows back. On my knees, I could see a crouched figure with his hand over a hat that either held ten gallons . . . or a turtle. I imagined my heart falling out of my chest like a yellow oxygen mask.

“I think I’ve found what you’re looking for.”

Now the incredible thing is that those hands, and that ridiculous hat, belonged to my father. Despite his role as perpetual critic and nay-sayer of the Appelbaum women’s antics, the tale of his heroic intervention is often recounted at business dinners. Needless to say, the story of Operation Turtle is a big hit with the clients — just like the stories of the alpacas, the llama, and the Bathroom Goat that followed. Indeed, if I had to guess, I’d say the primary reason we continued to amass animals had less to do with their presence in our home, and more to do with their presence around a table full of suits. Which, of course, suited me just fine.