



### *Creature Comforts*

## Two Turtle Loves

A pair of red-footed tortoises provides writer Leigh Crandall and her family with a lesson on living in the moment.

**T**he west side of St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, was a wild place. Iguanas, mongeese, and hermit crabs scuffled through the bush while, above, pelicans occasionally dropped their catch onto the roof of our home, which held its own menagerie of pets. It was usually my brother, Dale, and me who campaigned to add new creatures to the mix, so we were surprised when our father was the one to adopt a pair of red-footed tortoises.

He'd spotted the duo at the local holiday fair on the first weekend in December. The woman at the Humane Society booth explained they'd been rescued from someone's home, and Dad, who believed they shouldn't be confined inside, decided the land around our house would be the perfect place for the pair to live, outdoors and free.

Dale and I dubbed the tortoises Herdman and Angel, a tribute to our favorite holiday book, Barbara Robinson's *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. We filled a small pool for them to drink from, picked piles of hibiscus for them to eat, and even tacked a tinsel garland to the house above the tortoises' spot in the garden.

We marveled at every detail, from the patterns on their shells to the red spots on their stout legs. For three days, we waved to them as we headed off to school each

morning and said good night before bed. Then, on the fourth morning, Herdman and Angel were gone.

Their tracks led to the woods, and Dale and I couldn't help but feel a little insulted. Pets didn't just *leave*, especially when we'd made such a nice home for them. But Dad insisted we shouldn't expect these animals to operate on our terms, festive decor or not. Weeks passed without the tortoises. We kept busy with the activities leading up to the holiday break, though we still set out fresh flowers each day and called their names into the dense tropical forest.

Then, on Christmas Eve, we woke up to find the tortoises next to their pool, unannounced holiday visitors helping themselves to mouthfuls of hibiscus.

Dale and I were sure they'd stay this time, but Herdman and Angel set out again before the New Year, off on some unseen walkabout. This was the tortoises' pattern the whole time we lived at this house, both of them vanishing for weeks, then suddenly stopping by for a spell. We missed them while they were gone, but we loved waking to discover they'd returned, a thrill each time, like kids on Christmas morning.

—Leigh Crandall is a writer and contributing editor at *Country Living*.

