

When You Find Yourself On An Island

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“The Island”, the small, beloved fragment of woods across the road from my home, was a stage for the imagination when my sister and I were children. Every stick, when correctly carved, held the potential to be a hiking pole or foundation of a makeshift fort. Every bit of moss could be rearranged as a fluffy, meticulously crafted mat for a meal of “wild” berries, harvested from the backyard. Every rock was a puzzle piece in the ring of our pretend camp fire, and every flower a small ornament in our hair. Our imaginations further exploded when my Dad lovingly built a treehouse across the way, drumming up our stories of a cabin in the sky. The trees were our sanctuary. Save our childish exclamations at everything delightful, the wind was gentle, and the forest was quiet.

Except when it wasn't.

Typically, nothing on The Island could spook us. The woods were bright and open, and no wildlife could unwittingly surprise us with their presence. But then

there was the rustling. Suddenly and without notice, a rustling would often begin with no reasonable explanation as to its origin. Granted, my sister and I were not about to explore *towards* the noise. We were most confident that it had to be a bear (in a suburban neighborhood) or a stranger with a shovel (who was invisible). Naturally, the only correct course of action was to run shouting out of the woods, across the street, and back to Mom's arms to offer a panicked explanation as to the danger we had just been subjected to. Perhaps my memory is failing me, but I seem to recall this occurring on several occasions, each without a good reason for the most clamorous scuffle that had befallen our once placid Island. After several fearful accusations pertaining to the woods' mal-intent, my Dad made his way across the street to investigate, my sister and I suspiciously in tow.

Rustle...rustle...crinkle...rustle.

"See??" We shouted. "There's something in the woods!"

Looking back on this experience, I can't help but laugh. How scared we were. How eager to prove to our parents that we were up against the great terror of the forest. If only we had known that this "great terror" causing us such worry and chasing us out of the sanctuary of trees was a bird. A Spotted Towhee, to be precise. This bird, you see, enjoys dancing about in the foliage of the forest floor, wrestling with the leaf debris left undecomposed from seasons before. I might add, the Towhee does so quite loudly, mimicking the distant sound of footfall on

twigs or the lumbering of a passing bear. At least, that is what the minds of an eight and ten year old would think. Towhees rummage about, occasionally in unison, scouring and crinkling and making a great chorus of noise much like tearing cardboard. Towhees are also quite harmless.

To this day, I hear the Spotted Towhee in the woods. To this day, I chuckle with glee and pause in bewilderment as to how such a small bird can make such an unusual racket. But they can, and they do, and I am no longer afraid. Now, on walks in these woods, I gravitate towards the sounds of rustling, hoping to catch a glimpse of this bird doing whatever it is they do in the leaf litter; maybe uncovering bugs or grubs or simply enjoying the opportunity to tap dance. Who is to say?

All I can say is this: I hope for myself that I do not approach the world with trepidation. I hope for other young children that they, too, can learn the wonders of the woods and neglect the modern screen for an immersive film found only in one's backyard. A combination of lack of exposure to the outdoors and our innate fear of the unknown brews an unfortunate modern-day ale of wonderless, lackluster imagination in adults and children alike. And, possibly since fear does not prefer to act alone, perhaps it finds solace in partnership with distrust and greed, two qualities of which I am doubtful any earnest parent would aim to instill in their children.

I know the world is scary. But an antidote to fear is learning. So, I do hope in

times of uncertainty, wariness, and distrust that you will not immediately run from the unknown, but approach with healthy caution and curiosity to find, in the end, a tap-dancing bird instead.