

The True Story of Tuttle and Piper: A Twenty Year Love Affair
Recounted by Tina Thompson

December 2, 1985

“Hurry up mom! We’re going to be late for school.” David, age 8, waited impatiently at the back door while I gathered my school bag. “I’ll meet you at the car.”

When I arrived in the driveway, there was David frozen in place standing at our brand new 1985 blue Chevy Nova, its door ajar, and, just inches away from David’s head, a lovely beige bird sitting on the top of the open door. It was hard to see which of the two faces had the more quizzical expression.



“Mom! When I opened the car door, this bird just flew down and landed on top of it! I can’t close the door on it. What should I do?” Very puzzled, and more than a little rushed to get to school, I went to the driver’s door, got in and tried to gently shoo the bird away with my mitten. As I reached across the front seat to the passenger door, the driver’s side door wide open, the bird flew over the roof of the car, and headed to my open door, as if trying to hitch a ride! I let out a little shriek at the startling turn of events and the bird flew off to a nearby tree.

“Well that was kind of weird”, David understated. Off we drove to Friends School Haverford where David went to his third grade classroom to greet Miss Savage and I went off to mine. When we returned home that afternoon, we learned that the bird had stayed in the yard, close to the house the whole day. Don and Beth (age 5) had been giving the bird seed much of the day, the bird approaching to within inches of their seed-filled hands. Clearly, this was a tame bird, accustomed to human contact. I called Dr. Green, an amateur ornithologist and member of Haverford Meeting, to come to the house to help identify the bird. Dr. Green arrived and quickly identified the ring-necked turtledove. The bird was indigenous to much warmer countries and climates and would certainly not survive the fast approaching northeast winter. Dr. Green tried unsuccessfully to cage the bird and left us to puzzle about where this bird was from, what it was doing in our backyard, and what its fate would be.

December 3, 1985 (the next day)

It was a raw and wet December day, almost on the verge of sleet. When we came downstairs for breakfast and looked out back, there was the same bird, sitting on the clothes line under the protection of our back porch. Why was the bird there? Was it simply the bird feeders that were in our backyard? Surely there were other feeders on the block that the bird could have chosen.

Later in the afternoon, as I stood on the back porch, holding a wicker basket, the turtledove flew to a nearby bird feeder. Neither the bird nor I could have predicted what would happen next. From a nearby sugar maple, an aggressive and hungry young squirrel pounced on the bird to claim the feeder for himself. The startled bird flew directly to where I was standing as if seeking refuge in the basket. I turned the basket over onto the frightened bird.

Disbelieving, I brought the bird into the warm house and began to arrange a temporary home until we could learn more about the bird's origins and its future. After several phone calls to the zoo, a veterinarian, and the Academy of Natural Science there was consensus – the obviously tame bird had escaped from its home and, without our help, would certainly perish if released to the outdoors.

That was it! The Thompson family had been adopted as the bird's family of choice.



Day One of Tuttle's residency:

Tuttle sits on Beth's hand for the first time, developing a relationship with the family that would last for years. The cage in the picture was replaced by a much larger cage the next day.

December 4

A trip to the pet shop produced a cage large enough to safely house "Tuttle" (short for "Tuttledurve") from the attention of the Thompson Himalayans – Pauline, Chuck and Graybel. The dining room was the perfect spot for Tuttle. It had doors that would keep the cats at bay while Tuttle interacted with the family and got in regular flight time.

Tuttle became a magical figure in our home. Her soulful coo and gentle cuddling endeared her to all who met her. She was especially fond of sitting on people's heads, possibly for the warmth and, certainly, for the attention. One day when Grandpa Bill was visiting from California, Bill was on the phone with an important overseas client. As the two men discussed their very serious business, Piper landed on Bill's head and proceeded to coo into the phone for the duration of the call. Needless to say, the customer on the other end of the phone line was delighted by the mental image of Bill Thompson, CEO, on the other end of the line acting as a landing pad and performance stage for a turtle dove.

Winter and Spring 1985-86

Tuttle filled our house with cooing that usually began by four a.m.! She loved the attention she received not only from the family but from the families in the neighborhood and the many piano students who came for their weekly lessons. She taught all who met her to coo and she would hold regular conversations with any obliging audience. Everyone agreed that this story of the magical appearance of this special bird could not be topped!

It was.

June 1986 (six months later)

Saturday mornings on Drexel Road in Ardmore were always filled with kids, fun, and weekend activities. This particular Saturday morning was sunlit and warm, all windows and doors open to let in the beautiful spring air. Pete, our five-year-old godson who lived two doors down, was in our backyard getting a haircut. As I snipped his hair I could hear soft cooing. "Pete, is that you?" (Pete could imitate Tuttle's coo like a champ!) "Nope. It wasn't me." Hmm.... We concluded that it just must have been Tuttle that we were hearing through the open dining room window.

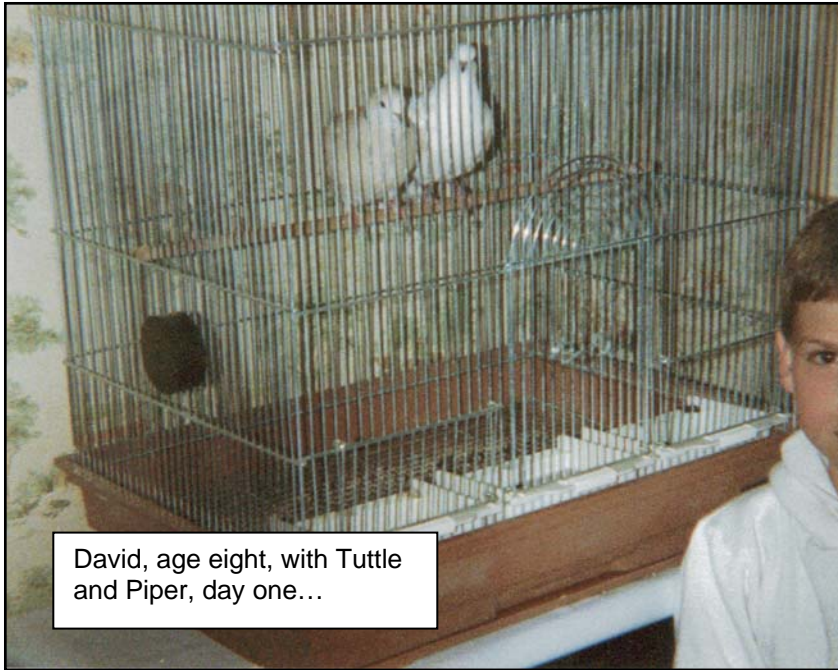
Later that day, Beth, now six and a beginning reader, and I were sitting on the front porch reading our books. It was a perfect and peaceful spring day. The sound of Tuttle's coos were filling the air. The sound of Tuttle's coos were *Hold on! That cooing was coming from OUTSIDE! How could this be? Did Tuttle escape?* I ran into the house to check on her. Tuttle was in her cage in the dining room, safe and sound.

Running back to the porch the sound of the responding coo could be tracked to a telephone wire across the street. There he was – a second turtledove! Clearly, the two doves, the one safely ensconced in our home, and the one flying freely above our home, were talking to each other. The calls and responses between the two were unmistakable.

I did the only thing that I felt I could do. I went into the house, gently picked up Tuttle in her cage and placed the cage on the sidewalk in front of our house. Within seconds the visiting dove flew down and began to circle the cage, bowing, cooing, and what could only be described as laughing. It was as if two long-lost friends had finely found each other. It was a joyful noise, not unlike a joyful reunion.

Taking a leap of faith and knowing that the birds would know the right thing to do, I opened the door to Tuttle's cage. Those next few moments could be the end of our relationship with Tuttle..... I pictured her flying off with her friend to a blissful life together in a less than hospitable climate.

Time seemed to stand still. *What would happen?* The cage was on the sidewalk, Tuttle was on her perch, and the second dove approached the cage. What we were seeing couldn't be happening!



David, age eight, with Tuttle and Piper, day one...

The visiting dove hopped into the cage! Immediately, the courtship began (continued?). Within minutes Tuttle and Piper, were mating. The cooing and laughing lasted for hours, and, ultimately, for years.

June 1986, Sunday, the next day

In the morning, I checked the cage to see if what had happened the day before had just been a dream. There were not only two very happy and contented turtledoves, but a tiny white egg in the corner of the cage.

The Thompson kids searched their closets for a suitable box to serve as a nest and placed it in the cage. Strips of paper and straw were added to the cage and immediately the two adults began the task of nest-building.

June 1986, Monday, the next day



There is a second egg! Tuttle and Piper are both in the nest incubating the tiny white eggs together.

Through our research we learned that the incubation period for turtle doves is fourteen days. The two parents loyally tended the eggs, rolling them and keeping them warm. Occasionally the two birds would relieve each other for eating, drinking and sleeping. The “changing of the guard” was smoothly choreographed, allowing

us fleeting glimpses of the tiny eggs that lay beneath them. We learned about the brood spots, the section of the parents’ underbellies that are not feathered. The exposed skin, placed on the incubating eggs, provides the perfect temperature for the developing eggs.

We were all expectant parents during this period. There was a quiet tension as we wondered what would happen at the end of fourteen days.

June 1986, a Sunday morning two weeks later

Checking on Tuttle and Piper, they were both on the nest just as we had left them the day before. Upon closer inspection we spotted a piece of shell in a corner of the cage. Obviously, at least one of the eggs had hatched! Later in the day more pieces of shells appeared – this was a very good sign. Within hours we saw a tiny head emerge from under Piper’s belly. Turtledove hatchlings are relatively immobile, have closed eyes, lack down, and must be cared for by the adults. Altricial young are born helpless and require care for a comparatively long time.



Look closely to see a tiny pink head near Piper’s beak. The altricial babies are being fed pigeon’s milk, produced by both parents. These feedings will last for three weeks. Two healthy babies are receiving the best of parental care!

It was fascinating to watch the stages of growth not only in the babies, but in Tuttle and Piper’s evolution as parents. They doted on the babies and were very patient with the human attention the cage and its inhabitants were receiving.



At left: babies at two weeks.

Below: the babies at three weeks getting ready for their first flight.



The day has come. A successful first flight! Within the week, the babies took up residence with their new adoptive family. The magic was spreading. Over the next few years there were several more broods of babies born and raised in our home and in the FSH preschool classroom. The babies went to families eager to welcome these docile creatures into their homes.

One story stands out...

Spring 1990

The turtledoves were living a wonderful life in the preschool classroom during the school year and at home with the Thompson family during the summer. Like the previous years, the preschool children at school were enchanted by Tuttle and Piper's presence in the classroom. A large tree branch hung suspended from the ceiling where the doves watched the activity of the room and serenaded the class with their cooing. Zachary, an earnest young preschooler and his family, had been promised the next brood of babies. When the eggs appeared in the nest, Zack watched with great interest and suspense. Knowing that it was important for Zack to know that not all clutches of eggs were successfully hatched, I reminded him that if the eggs were fertile they would hatch in two weeks – an eternity in the eyes of a three-year-old. By the second week of incubation, Zack's excitement was bubbling over. He came into the preschool classroom that Monday morning and asked, "Mrs. Thompson did the eggs hatch?" to which I replied, "If the eggs are fertile, they will hatch on Friday." Zack took me at my word and joined the activity of the room. On Tuesday, Zack entered the classroom and asked, "Mrs. Thompson did the eggs hatch?" to which I again replied, "Zack, if the eggs are fertile, they will hatch on Friday." This was turning into a lesson for Zack on relative time, the days of the week, and delaying gratification as well as ornithology. On Wednesday and Thursday Zack entered the class where the same exchange occurred.

Early Friday morning I went into school to discover, happily, the successful hatching of two tiny baby doves. Finally, Zack's patience had paid off. I couldn't wait to see his face! At 8:00a.m. I walked Zack.

"Zachary! Guess what? The babies hatched!" I could hardly contain my excitement and relief. *"What are you going to call them?"* Zack looked at me with a confused expression on his face, as if I had asked him a trick question. He quietly replied, *"I will name them Fertile."* Ahhhh, of course.... 'If they're Fertile, they will hatch on Friday'. (In fact he named only one of the birds Fertile. The second was named Janet. Zack is a grown man now, but will forever remain in my heart an earnest, young preschooler filled with wonder.)

June 1994

The school year was over and the pace of life was slowing. Tuttle and Piper's cage was in its usual spot on the porch where the couple was enjoying an especially pretty early summer morning. As I headed to the porch with my first cup of tea, I heard the frantic sounds of a squirrel. It was coming from the porch. When I looked out I was horrified by the tragic scene. Searching for food, the squirrel found an easy target. He slid the door of the cage up long enough to slip into the cage and long enough for one of the birds to fly out of the cage to safety. Sitting on the rafter of the porch was Piper who managed to save himself but who was not able to save Tuttle who was nesting in the cage. The squirrel was not able to free himself from the cage and was trapped until the animal warden came to resolve the situation. It was an extremely violent end to the life of a very peaceful creature and life would not be the same for Piper.

1994-2006

Piper spent the next twelve years residing in preschool during the school year, and spending summers at home with the family. His gentle cooing was as natural as the air around us.

Through the years we ached for Piper's loss, but we knew that his life mate could not be replaced.

October 2006

After a long bout of illness, Piper passed away and was buried in the family garden. We believe that our lives were touched by magic.



Piper at school, 2005