

LIVES

The Iguana in the Bathtub

By Anne Doten

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When the temperature dipped below 40, iguanas started falling from the trees. Small, sleek green iguanas; big iguanas as long as four feet from snout to tail, scales cresting gloriously from their heads; orange-and-green iguanas, their muscled, goose-pimpled arms resolving into sharp claws. Iguanas were everywhere: in the bushy areas surrounding canals, on sidewalks, in backyards, lying helpless among the fallen, rotting fruit of mango and orange trees.

The iguanas lay on the ground as if they were dead, a rhapsody of corpses dotting the landscape like musical notation. But they weren't dead — not at first, anyway. They had lapsed into a sort of hibernation in response to the cold. If it warmed up fast enough, they would awaken from their deep slumbers and climb back onto their perches in trees or return to sunning themselves on rocks and the hot metal encasements of electrical boxes.

Cold snaps do sometimes occur in South Florida, but they usually pass within 48 hours. This time, the frigid temperatures lingered for days, and the iguanas remained motionless where they lay.

On the third day of the iguana plague, my husband, John, arrived home carrying a cardboard box. Inside was a large green iguana, slender and peaceful, lying on its back.

“What the hell?” I said.

“I think it's still alive,” he said.

I followed him to the bathroom. He placed the box inside the tub and edged past me toward the hallway.

“Where are you going?”



Anne Doten
John Magaña

He didn't answer but returned a minute later wearing yellow rubber gloves and carrying a stethoscope in his hands, the cheap one he used when he was in nursing school. He perched on the edge of the bathtub, stuck the rubber buds in his ears and carefully lifted the iguana out of the box. Its limp, lean arms looked strangely graceful. Balancing its body with one hand, John placed the flat circular end of the stethoscope against the reptile's chest.

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“I should get my camera,” I said. “Do you know how crazy this looks?”

“I’m checking for a heartbeat,” he said.

I was quiet for a few moments, then said: “Well? Did you find one?”

“Shh.” John stared at a space on the green tiled wall, face crimped in concentration. Then he frowned. “Maybe the stethoscope isn’t strong enough. Iguanas have really thick skin.”

“How about some chest compressions? Maybe a little mouth to mouth?”

He gave me a withering look as he gently returned the iguana to its cardboard cradle. He pulled the stethoscope out of his ears.

“Can you get a towel?” he said. “I want to keep him warm.”

I went to the closet and chose an old green towel that was badly pilled and fraying at the edges. I handed it to John.

“Let’s just wait until the morning,” he said. “Maybe he’ll come out of it.”

I peered down at the iguana. It did look as if it was sleeping. Maybe John was right. Maybe it was still alive, and it just took a while to thaw out of its hibernation. Its hands looked almost human, only they were green and slender and elongated, with sharp talons on the ends. I fought the insane impulse to reach out and grab its fingers, imagining it would squeeze back, like a newborn infant.

John laid the towel over the iguana, as if tucking it into bed.

We rose early the next morning. John put his ear to the closed bathroom door to listen for movement. Hearing nothing, he slowly opened it. I flinched, picturing the iguana lunging toward us, claws bared, ready to shred our skin like Cheddar. But nothing stirred. Together we tiptoed toward the tub and peered inside the box. The iguana was still immobile, and its skin was pale, almost gray instead of green. The thing was dead. It was definitely dead.

John bent down and lifted the iguana’s cardboard coffin. Still in my pajamas, I slipped on a pair of shoes and opened the front door. Our funeral procession to the Dumpster was short and somber. I held the lid open, and John dropped in the box. The thud reverberated inside the steel tomb.

We stared at the Dumpster for a few moments. “I thought I could save it,” John said.

Regret etched lines around his eyes. I grabbed his hand and squeezed.

“Sugar,” I said, using our pet name for each other. “Some things are just beyond saving.”