

REBECCA FOUST

Iguana Iguana

IGGY WAS SWEET. Everyone in the family said so, even if they didn't share the boy's belief that the iguana also was beautiful, with skin the milky shade of a raw lima bean, and along his spine a line of mauve dots, each ringed with an apricot halo. Picked up, he'd stretch along your forearm placid as cat sleeping on a sill, breath concaving his throat and inflating it again in a great, pale bubble. Bubble, blink. Bubble, blink. The boy sometimes stood like that for an hour or more until his arm went numb.

His mother found reptiles repulsive, but she was grateful that this one at least was not a meat eater. She couldn't have faced buying live moth larvae, or worse, frozen mice embryos horribly called "pinkies" that had to be thawed then prodded with a broom straw to fool lizards into thinking they were stalking live prey. And, unlike the three-foot monster her brother-in-law had once kept in a bathtub, Iggy didn't seem to be growing very fast.

Leslie had to admit that the lizard was a good friend to her son, for whom friends were in short supply even with expectations that shrank with each passing year. Small for his age, he avoided the team sports that bonded his fifth-grade classmates and after school generally went to his room to play video games or sit at the kitchen table to draw or do homework.

The iguana was his father's idea. The subject came up while Jack, home for the weekend for family time, was watching Leslie make Sunday dinner.

"He needs a pet," Jack was saying. "Something to take care of, a friend."

"Lizard BFF, great," said their teenage daughter, Lani, breezing through the kitchen and leaving behind the faintest trace of what her mother hoped was cigarette smoke.

"Easy for you to say." Leslie stopped stirring the soup and turned to face Jack. "I'll have all the work."

"We're not talking a dog, here." Jack said. "Lizards don't have to be trained. They don't have to be walked. Even easier than cats, that's what Corwin always said—" he stopped, seeing his wife wince.

"What? Oh, c'mon, Lay. You know Corwin loved those lizards. No one took better care of their pets. Anyway, just saying. The boy's alone

all the time.” Jack stood up and took a step toward his wife, who at the same time stepped away. He sighed and asked, “Should I call the kids for dinner?”

In the end Leslie gave in. “Here’s the deal,” she told her son. “I’ll buy supplies, but the rest is up to you. You’re in charge of keeping the cage clean. And the feeding. Okay?” The boy agreed and nodded when his mother said to wash his hands *every time*. Leslie knew better than to blurt her fears about bites and bacteria—didn’t Rilke die from an infection that started in a finger pricked by a rose?—but she did take the time to explain that wild things can sometimes be dangerous.

“Iggy wouldn’t mean to scratch you,” she said, “but his toenails and teeth are super sharp.” She glanced down, smoothing out the curled fingers of the pair of leather gloves in her hand. “I always wear these in the garden, and you should too when you are handling Iggy.”

But the boy liked how Iggy’s skin felt against his hands—cool and dry, pebbled but still strangely smooth. He stopped wearing the gloves after the first time, and since his mother was never in the room when he opened the cage, she never knew.

The feeding routine was always the same. First, check to make sure the door and windows in his room were latched in case Iggy wriggled free. Even though “he never moves *at all*,” Lani liked to point out, “just lays there like a stupid stuffed animal.” Next, line up supplies. The gloves, in case his mother came in. The little plastic measuring cup to fill the drinking pan. Spinach and kale scissored into narrow strips, fruit for a treat. Slipping his hand through the wire trapdoor, he was careful not to make sudden movements, and when his fingers closed around Iggy they held him gently as an egg.

One afternoon he came home from school to find his mother bustling around the kitchen, banging pots and pans. “Dad’s coming over tonight,” she said. This confused the boy, used to seeing his father only on weekends. He sat down at the dining room table and opened his book bag.

“Not there,” his mother said. “Uncle Corwin’s coming too, and we’re going to have a real sit-down dinner. Can you set the table? With you, me, and Lani, that makes five.” She wiped her hands on her apron and moved closer. Then stopped, narrowing her eyes. “Hey, how’d you get that bruise on your forehead?”

“It’s nothing, Mom.” He swatted down the lock of hair she’d brushed back. “Hit by a dodgeball, no big deal.”

“You were playing dodgeball? With the other kids?” Leslie’s delight

flickered out when she saw his face, shuttered like a window. “Okay,” she said, “never mind. Go on upstairs now and feed Iggy.”

When the front doorbell rang, the boy heard his father and mother talking, then a third voice he did not recognize. He slipped through the hall into his sister’s room and tapped her shoulder to get her attention.

“S’up?” Lani asked, looking up from her phone. “I’m busy.”

“Uncle Corwin’s here,” her brother said. “Let’s go see him.”

“Nah,” she replied. “Grown-ups don’t like to be bugged right away like that. And—boring. Bad enough we have to sit through a whole dinner with them.”

The boy sat on the edge of the bed. He liked Lani’s room, the purple walls and the big poster of someone she said was the artist formerly known as Prince. Her bedroom had been Uncle Corwin’s when he and their father were growing up in the house, and the boy preferred it to his own, even though everyone said both rooms were the same size. Maybe it was just the skylight that made it feel brighter and bigger.

“What do you know about him? How come we never see him?” he asked.

“He lives in Chicago,” his sister replied, eyes still on the screen. “About a million miles away from Darien. He had lizards and snakes as pets when he was a kid. And, he’s gay.” She looked up. “Please tell me you know what that means.”

“Like he thinks he’s a girl?” the boy asked.

“No, idiot. Gay does not mean you think you are a girl. That’s trans. And they don’t *think* they are girls, they *are* girls. Gay means Uncle Corwin would rather be, like, married, to a guy.” She put the phone down and sat down next to him. “He’s still a boy but instead of a girlfriend, he has a boyfriend.”

The boy had heard about this before, of course. One kid in his class had two mothers, and the teacher took time in Friday “town meetings” to explain all the different combinations that can make up a family: kids with a mom and a dad, or two moms or dads. Or just one mom or dad. Kids with parents who were married, or not. Whose mom and dad were, like his parents, married but not living together.

“Okay,” Lani said, tapping her phone. “Let’s see what we can find out.” Corwin wrote and produced shows for cable TV and had won a few Emmys, so there was a ton of feed. One interview said he collected cruise ship memorabilia from the grand old days of teak chaises lined up on teak decks, things like Royal Derby china stamped with the QE II

logo and cunningly made boxes that, like the tents in the Harry Potter books, opened into something impossibly larger. One unfolded into a table always set, Corwin said, with candles and linen napkins folded into his favorite Bishop's Miter knot.

The boy stared at a photo of his uncle standing between Michelle and Barack Obama.

"Whoa, he's famous," he said.

"Hard to believe he used to be married to Aunt Viv, right?" his sister was saying. The pieces were falling into place. Their cousins had been raised by their aunt and, as far as the boy knew, with no dad in the picture. It seemed normal because that was the way it had always been.

"Doesn't Uncle Corwin want to be a dad to Sammy and Alex?" he asked.

"Duh." Lani tickled him to show she didn't mean it. "Yeah he does. But you know Aunt Viv, choir director at the church and all. She got Uncle Corwin to let the girls live with her, then moved back here and, well, it just got hard I guess."

"Guys!" Their father called from downstairs. "Dinner's ready!"

Corwin was not like anyone the boy had ever seen. Everyone in his family was fair and compact, but his uncle was tall, with dark hair combed back in glossy waves. The sun was blazing outside, but he looked cool in a light-colored suit as comfortable on him as the polo shirt and khaki shorts worn by the boy and his father.

"So, this is my niece and nephew, all grown up." Uncle Corwin took a step back. "Lani, I love your hair! And you, wow, last time I saw you, you were just a baby, a nub, a sprig!"

The boy mumbled hello, then looked up. His uncle's shirt was orange, the exact shade of a Dreamsicle, and worn with a bright aqua tie. His father dressed down for the office most of the time. But even the occasional suit donned for a client, the boy knew, would not look like this. His mother always wore beige, black, or white, and didn't like bright colors. But Lani did, and it was the reason she was grounded now.

He'd been doing homework when he heard his mother's wail. "Your hair, your beautiful hair! Oh Lani, what were you thinking?" He'd found his sister on the stairs lacing up her high-tops, taking breaks to run her fingers through the unevenly hacked-off tufts dyed a color she called "magenta."

"Lani," their mother had tried again. "A girl's hair is her treasure. It makes you look—well, I hate to say it—but tacky, low class." Lani had

slammed the door on her way out and did not come back until well after midnight.

“I like your shirt,” the boy said now, shyly, and Uncle Corwin looked down at him and smiled.

Dinner was grilled chicken breasts cooked with capers and lemons from their own tree in a pot on the terrace, plus a salad dressed with fig, goat cheese, and walnuts. The boy slipped the figs into his napkin to give Iggy later.

“Excellent,” Jack said. “As always.”

“Really, do you like it?” Leslie asked. “That’s your mother’s vinaigrette, by the way, just without the sugar.”

“In-com-par-able!” the boy and his sister chimed in on cue, and they all laughed at the old family joke.

In truth, the boy hadn’t tasted the salad; his attention was riveted on Uncle Corwin, who ate using a fork and knife in either hand, something his mother called “barbaric” but to him looked deliberate and precise. Uncle Corwin ate without talking, savoring the food. When finished, he wiped his mouth with his napkin, then shook it out, folded it, and placed it next to his plate.

“Thank you, Leslie,” he said. “It’s good to eat with family again.” He turned to his nephew.

“I hear you have an iguana,” he said. “What’s its name?”

“Iggy,” the boy said. “He’s beautiful. And nice. Mom makes me wear gloves to touch him, but I know he’d never hurt me.”

“*Iguana iguana*,” Uncle Corwin said.

“What?” The boy was confused.

“Latin for the common green iguana,” his uncle replied. “You know, the genus and species. You’re lucky you got a nice one—they can be a handful. The Internet calls them ‘disposable pets’ because so many owners wind up giving them back.”

“We’d never do that!”

“Of course not,” Uncle Corwin replied. “It’s just that people don’t always know what they’re getting into when they decide to have pets.” His grin was quick and sly. “Kinda like having kids, right?” He pushed back his chair. “Iguanas are amazing. Did you know they can fall fifty feet without getting hurt? Very intelligent. And beautiful, too.”

“Yes,” the boy said. “Like little dragons.” He had a sudden vision of Iggy escaping his cage and leaping from the second-floor window to alight in the grass before disappearing into the woods at the edge of the lawn.

“How about that parietal eye— weird, right?” Uncle Corwin winked. “You never know where they’re looking.”

“What’s that?” the boy asked. “A parental eye?”

“No.” Uncle Corwin laughed. “*Par-i-et-tal*. A third eye, on top of the head.”

“Iggy doesn’t have one,” the boy said.

“Yeah he does,” Uncle Corwin said. “It’s not a true eye, more a specialized photoreceptive scale. But maybe could become one, you know, if evolutionary conditions were right.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, then, noticing his sister-in-law’s expression, asked, “Where can I smoke? I’m fine with outside.”

“Yes, that’s best,” Leslie said. She got up and began to clear. “Why don’t you *all* go outside for the sunset while I do the dishes?”

On the stone terrace, the sky glowed a humid mauve, a few stray fireflies already winking in the grass. Uncle Corwin drew in on his cigarette, making the end glow like a red eye. Lani requested and was refused a drag before she settled in with her phone, and Jack got up to wander out onto the lawn to check a sprinkler head he said needed adjusting.

“You had iguanas, right?” the boy asked. “I guess that’s why you know so much about them.”

“Actually,” Corwin said. “I was a lizard in a former life. A chameleon, though, not an iguana.” He smoked quietly for a second, then laughed. “Just kidding. I mean, I wish. But I did have a regular menagerie of pets like Iggy when I was about your age.”

“More than one? In your bedroom?”

“Yep, right in my room. Your grandmother wasn’t thrilled, but she put up with it as long as there was no smell. And I had to take care of the food, of course. That part really appalled her. Especially the pinkies.”

“You had meat eaters?” Lani looked up, and the boy got out of his chair to drag it in closer.

“Yes, a pair of leopard-spotted lizards, beautiful. Skin like pelts, stunning markings. And a corn snake, in a separate tank of course.”

“What happened to them? Where are they now?”

“Oh, you know, college, the dorm didn’t allow pets.” Uncle Corwin paused and shifted his weight. “I had to make other arrangements.”

“How long did you have them?”

“Seven years. I tried to make their tanks as much like a natural habitat as possible, learned that from a guy in the pet store, Crocket something, really good with reptiles.”

“Crocket!” the boy said. “He still works there. But how could you give them away, Uncle Corwin? Didn’t you miss them?”

His uncle looked at him steadily. “I missed them horribly,” he said. “But what it came down to was keeping them or going away to school, and I had to go away to school.”

He leaned forward then, and grinned. “Tell you a secret.”

“What?” The boy leaned in too, and Lani looked up.

“I didn’t have to worry about the corn snake, because she got away. A week before I left for Cambridge, I woke up one morning, and the tank was empty.” He let out some smoke in a ring. “Must’ve left the lid ajar. Regan, I called her. She looked like sunrise.”

“How do you do that, with the smoke?” the boy asked. And, “Weren’t you scared?”

“I’ll teach you sometime when your mom’s not around.” Corwin released another ring and they watched its undulating ascent. “The only thing I was scared of was your grandmother finding out. Corn snakes are harmless—tiny milk teeth, no venom. My guess is Regan’s still here somewhere, in the walls.” He winked. “Bet you’ve never had a problem with mice.” Behind them, Lani snorted and laughed out loud.

Something was nagging at the boy. “Did you say ‘tank’? Like a fish tank?”

“Well, yes,” his uncle replied. “Like Iggy’s tank, right?”

“No,” the boy said. “We keep him in an old birdcage. He has lots of room—iguanas grow to the size of what you keep them in, right? I put in new leaves every day so it’s like a real rain forest. And some roof tiles propped up, to make like a little cave. Wanna see him?”

“Sure,” his uncle said getting up and stubbing out his cigarette. “Let’s go.”

The boy led his uncle upstairs, then took Iggy out to show how he’d lie along his arm, relaxed and still. He knew, somehow, it was okay not to wear the gloves.

Corwin was quiet while he picked Iggy up, supporting the legs and turning the body over gently. He put the lizard back in the cage and turned to face his nephew.

“Iggy’s sick,” he said. “Iguanas need to be kept a good fifteen degrees warmer than our rooms. And need to bask in an even hotter place an hour a day. That’s why we use tanks, to keep the heat in.”

“What?” Hot tears pricked the boy’s eyelids. “But I love Iggy! I take really good care of him!”

“Of course you do, and this isn’t your fault,” Uncle Corwin said. “It’s because you took such good care that he lasted this long. As soon as you warm it up for him, he’ll get better. But you must get a tank with a heat source, soon.” He hesitated, the corners of his mouth tugging up. “Just one more thing.”

“What?” asked the boy, still upset.

“He is a she. Iggy’s a girl.”

Later, after Jack left to drop Corwin at the train station, Leslie promised a trip to the pet store the very next day. “We’ll see what they have to say about it,” she said.

“That was a mistake,” she told Jack when he banged back in through the screen door.

“What do you mean? It was fine.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “Corwin got him all upset, telling him Iggy was sick and we weren’t caring for him properly. He said that, Jack. That we weren’t taking good care of him.” She stopped short of saying out loud what they both were thinking.

Corwin didn’t tell anyone about getting into Harvard, just announced at the end of the summer he was quitting his ushering job at the Rivoli and would be moving out in a week. A few days later Jack walked into his brother’s room to find the row of tanks empty.

“What happened?” He asked. “Where are they, Cor?”

Corwin turned away from him, stooping to coil an extension cord.

“Oh, you found someone . . .” Jack stopped, confused. “But won’t they need their tanks and stuff?”

“No,” Corwin replied. “They won’t be needing their tanks.” He stood up and turned around. “I’ll try donating this stuff back to the pet store before I leave.”

“Why so quiet?” Jack asked Leslie now. “It’s a good thing, you know, the kids spending time with Corwin. He’s still—just Corwin. My brother. Their uncle. Things are different now, Lay. Mom was wrong to say what she did, and I feel bad about it now, how we all acted when Cor told us.”

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Nothing. I’m just tired, need to go to bed.”

“How long?” Jack said.

“How long what?” Leslie kept her back to him, folding and refolding the dishtowel.

“Are you going to keep punishing me?”

“Jack, we talked about this—”

“Yes, and we’re going to talk again. Right now. C’mon, Lay. I miss you, and the kids are acting out. We need to be a family again.”

“There’s nothing to say. Please lock the door on the way out.”

“Lay, it was *one time*. One screwup in twenty years of marriage.”

Leslie turned and looked at him then, and Jack knew better than to say anything else.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Leslie and the boy returned from the pet store with a thirty-gallon glass tank and a heat lamp built into its wire mesh lid.

“There,” she said after they finished setting up. “Remember what the man at the store — Crocket — said about checking the thermostat. And make sure you unplug the top before you go in there spritzing water on the ferns.”

“I like that guy,” the boy said. “He sure knows a lot about iguanas.”

Iggy thrived in her new home, moving around more and gobbling her food. Her color deepened, and she began to grow. Delighted, the boy let her out into his room for exercise anytime his mother left the house. Lani was pretty nice about it, limiting her remarks to the occasional “Oh, gross” and once saying she liked the way the iguana’s skin color changed in different light.

“Iggy needs more room,” the boy told his mother. They got a bigger tank, then a month later, a bigger one yet. The tanks piled up in the garage, and the boy dreamed about filling them with more lizards, maybe a small pink snake.

When Iggy moved now, she shimmered in red, blue, and yellow pixels melding into an overall impression of green. And she was always moving, pacing the cage from end to end. She resisted being picked up, struggling and thrashing her tail. The boy could not help being afraid, but his love only grew along with the iguana as if, like the procession of tanks, it could expand indefinitely to hold them both.

He began wearing the gloves and, after the bite that drew blood through leather, fed Iggy with his hand sheathed in a chain-mail glove his mother kept for shucking oysters. He liked the way the glove’s little metal circles clinked and gleamed like the fairy-forged armor Frodo wore under his rough shirt. But the tender trough between his right thumb and first finger reddened and swelled, and when it began to leak yellow pus, he went to his mother.

She was silent when she used the Betadine and gauze, her lips set in a tight, straight line.

“Iggy didn’t mean to,” the boy said. “She thought my finger was part of the food.”

“She’s getting too big to be held,” his mother said. “I’m beginning to think she’s just getting too big, period. She’ll be in the bathtub soon, and then what?”

The boy changed his Band-Aid every day, disinfecting the wound like his mother showed him, and eventually it closed. But inside was a hard lump like a pearl.

“Hon,” his mother said one day near the end of the summer, coming into his room and sitting down on the bed. “We need to talk. This situation is not fair to Iggy. She’s running out of space. We’re all afraid of her.” She stopped, her voice softening. “You’re even a little scared sometimes, aren’t you?”

“I want to let her go,” he said. He remembered his vision of Iggy sailing from the second story window then melting into the trees.

“She’ll die,” his mother said.

“No,” the boy said. “She’s strong.”

“Winters are too cold here. Iguanas need a tropical climate,” his mother replied. “Remember how sick she was before the heat lamp? Besides, next year is middle school, and you’re going to be too busy to be spending all this time taking care of her. Let me talk to the pet shop and vet, 4-H, someone who knows about these things.”

“Mom,” the boy said. “Please.”

Leslie stood up, brushing the front of her blouse and skirt. “We have to do what’s best for Iggy,” she said and went back to the kitchen to make the calls.

Crocket, it turned out, was a professional reptile handler who worked at the pet store between gigs at schools and county fairs, and after talking to three vets, Leslie understood that leaving Iggy with him was their best option. He lived just a few miles away, so they went for a visit. The trailer was neat and clean, with glass tanks ranked along nearly every available wall. “Iggy’s new vacation home,” Crocket said, opening the door to a bathroom warmed by a heat lamp and filled with potted palms and ferns. “She can stretch out a little here, walk around.” The boy imagined Iggy breathing in the thick, warm air and basking in the lamp’s cauldron eye.

With some difficulty, Crocket hunkered down on one knee to get his face level with the boy’s. “It’s easy biking distance, and you can visit anytime you like. And can help when I take her to the shows.” He stayed like that, little lines crinkling the corners of his eyes, until the boy finally nodded.

Leslie didn't think she'd like Crocket, but she did. The Internet confirmed what she needed to know about him not having a criminal or bad driving record. Two years of vet school till the money ran out, the pet store manager told her, and no matter, since all Crocket really cared about was making a safe place for lizards returned, usually in terrible shape, by their bewildered owners. What clinched the deal, though, was how Iggy acted when Crocket came to the house to pick her up.

"She likes you," the boy said, almost against his will. "How do you get her to let you hold her like that?"

"Ever hold a dragonfly?" Crocket asked. The boy shook his head.

"It's not really holding them. More like you just give them a place to stand," Crocket said. He set Iggy down on the floor and extended a stiff forearm until she leaped lightly up.

"Come as often as you want," Crocket said. "We'll be there, I promise. And I'll teach you how to get Iggy comfortable with you holding her again."

They loaded the pickup together, Corwin tucking a blanket over the tank's top and sides. Fall was coming, and the boy shivered in his light windbreaker. School would be starting soon, a new school with new kids. He watched until the last red of the taillights disappeared down the road, then went back into the house.

His mother came over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "I know it's hard, hon, but you'll get used to it. And Iggy will love it there. It's like a spa for lizards, right?" They stood like that for a minute until she said, "Hey, *Farmer's Almanac* predicts a full moon, rising early. Wanna get out your telescope and have a look before dinner?"

"Yeah, I guess so, the boy said. "Whatever."

Leslie kept her voice light. "Good, I'll just finish up here." She turned back to a pale round of dough on the counter. "Making your favorite, chicken pot pie. Lani's at band practice, so just you and me tonight. Come down when you're ready to set up the tripod."

Upstairs, the corner that used to hold Iggy's tank stood empty, and the bedroom felt dark and cold. The boy crossed the hall to his sister's room. He thought about the e-mail he'd gotten from Uncle Corwin inviting him for a visit in the fall and how, probably because she felt guilty about Iggy, his mother had agreed he could go. They'd go to the Herpetological exhibit at the Museum of Natural History, also the Sears Tower, anything he wanted. When he thought about going by himself to Chicago, the boy got a feeling inside like supermarket doors swinging open wide to the outside.

Puddled on the floor of Lani's room was her latest thrift shop find, an old silk kimono snagged from a jumble of clothes in a big bin. "I didn't notice the color at first," she'd said when she showed it off to her brother. "Just how nice it felt. But then I saw how it changes in the light, like Iggy. And my hair." She'd raked her fingers through it until it stood on end, and waited until he was laughing before adding, "Oh, by the way? I know you come in here sometimes when I'm not around, and it's okay."

The boy stood in the room as it grew dim and the rising moon's first rays reached the skylight. The kimono was soft when he held it to his cheek. Squinting into rainbow-drenched green, he imagined the leaves of a very old forest, stippled with movement and shadow. In the corner something moved, something long and patterned in the pink shades of sunrise. The snake opened its gold eye, put out a quick tongue, and like that, was gone.