

TAKING THE IGUANA HOME

By Diana Taylor

I am forty years old. For the last six months I have come to understand something with a precise clarity; something that will mark my very existence with permanence; something from which there will be no return. I am a child of the tropics and have been since I was small. It is a realization I have only come to in retrospect and one that I can no longer deny.

I have lived in the Northeast all of my life and this indeed is a cruel twist of fate. In my heart I know it is wrong that I have to wear a coat or boots or shovel snow or chip ice off my windshield. No, it is beyond wrong, it is some sort of sin, an injustice of the highest order.

I am the Iguana imported from its humid homeland to a pet store in Connecticut. Destined to live an existence of cramped quarters and endless days, like the lizard, I pray I can hold on just one more winter until I am able to return home. Unlike the lizard, I will be triumphant. I am certain of that.

The warmer climes have called to me for what seems like an eternity. Calling to me, calling with an every increasing intensity. The tropics with their sensual ways of soft breezes caressing bare skin, intoxicating floral fragrances that dance on star lit nights and turquoise green waters reflecting diamond like sparkles of brilliant sunshine. Calling to me in a restless yet sweet voice that, until now, I didn't quite understand.

As a youngster, I tuned in to every television show that was ocean oriented. Jacques Cousteau was my favorite with his ships and crews that dove beneath the sea in search of the life that lay there. And, oh, that French accent, how I was mesmerized by it. Perhaps it appealed to me especially so, more than any other, was because I considered it the native tongue of the Caribbean. And I considered the Caribbean my homeland.

But even the programs without accents, the ones set on deserted islands or in submarines, or even old moves about people living on a houseboat, they hooked me as well. The only criteria needed to capture and hold my interest was the ocean and a beach. Plot lines helped but they weren't essential.

My favorite was the show set and filmed in the Florida Keys. Two kids and a dolphin. On yeah, and a dad, too. What a life these guys had. It was always sunny and warm and they could go swimming ten months out of the year. More if they weren't too fussy about water temperature.

I'd be hard pressed to tell you what any of the episodes were actually about but I can tell you what the water and sky and beach looked like. And I can still hear the sounds of their footsteps on the wooden landing that led to the water's edge, and the dull thump of their boat as it bumped rhythmically against the dock that sat just yards from their house. Their pet pelican. The palm trees. I can smell, even now, the salt water in the air. I can feel its stickiness on my skin and in my hair. I pine with a fervor to go home; this home that I have never actually lived in, only visited and then just briefly.

I grew up on the water, a northern ocean, cold and battle ship gray, and it nearly took my life when I was fifteen. I was unforgiving after that and stayed away from it for a good many years. Then three years ago, after a seemingly endless series of long and tiresome winters, I found myself on the beaches of North Carolina's Ocracoke Island. A small island only accessible by ferry or private airplane, the beaches there are powdery soft choked with a vast array of seashells and virtually no made debris. A designated beach will offer restrooms and only a handful of people while other shores will be deserted leaving the beachcomber with nothing but his own thoughts and the sound of the ocean's heartbeat.

The Gulf Stream hugs the coast of Ocracoke until just north before it veers off into the Atlantic eventually finding its way to England where it serves, very nicely I might add, the palm trees that grow there in what appears to be a fluke of nature but in fact can quite logically be explained simply by watching the Weather Channel often enough. It is this band of plankton rich, warm and brilliantly colored water that first awakened in me a long slumbering and deeply buried memory. A bubble. A tangle of mangrove roots submerged in the collective soul of my former lives.

That summer I swam in the ocean for the first time in 25 years. Well, swim is a liberal interpretation of what I did. It was more like frolicking in the surf. But I was in the water and I let it overtake me. Underwater I heard the muffled, gurgling sounds of air bubbles from my own released breath and of those made by the movements of my limbs as I thrashed about in a combination of ecstasy and fear of having been unexpectedly toppled by what felt like an enormous wave, but in fact probably was nothing more than a baby wave hardly worth a body surfing attempt.

I was in the water. Eighty five degrees and turquoise green. This was my baptismal dance. I squirmed and wiggled and shrieked like the archetypical infant held in the arms of a godparent as the attending priest chants dogma and dabs holy water on the baby's head. I was in the water and I was able to identify right then and there the sorrowful ache I held in my heart and chest for all those years. The yearning. The emptiness. That missing portion of my life which looked and felt like a child's giant floor size jigsaw puzzle with a couple of pieces missing. I was in the water and loving it. Finally, I was on my way home.

I was to return to that island the following year and the one after that as well. I just couldn't get enough. Those three weeks each summer spent at the ocean were my life's breath. They would carry me through the New England winters.

But like a narcotic injected into the vein, I have come to need more of my drug. Unlike the addict though, who roams the street daily, hourly, trading, selling, hocking all that he has and then some, I do not forsake my life as it is now, where it is now, for that long awaited high. No, I recognize the importance of today and also of how it relates to tomorrow. But it is, nevertheless, a perpetual journey that I am on looking for my fix anywhere I can get it, mostly in the small things that significantly round out an otherwise uneven edge.

The rooms of my house are painted white with splashes of tropical color that abound with templed collections of seashells, books on the ocean, and even a surfboard that hangs midway up a 16 foot cathedral ceiling in the haven I call the Wallis Hoorn Room.

Named after two islands just west of Tahiti, the Wallis Hoorn Room serves not only my tropical need by my passion for music as well, and it is there that I sit and read basking in the early through late afternoon sunshine that streams in through the oversized, multi-paned windows. It is there that I listen to music in quiet contemplation. Jimmy Buffett. The *Boats* cd; a compilation of songs about harbors, steamer ships, and beaches.

I keep the rooms of my house very warm; a sanctuary against the cold weather outdoors. I read and write and peruse the travel brochures in shorts and a t-shirt and sometimes if the outside temperature has crept up without my noticing and thus not compensating for the wood stove factor, sometimes then I am able to walk barefoot as well.

The many travel brochures I receive almost daily are an oasis for me. Filling out the perforated reader service postcards that herald magazines such as the *New Yorker* and *Island Living*, I am heedful of the details: print clearly, circle the numbers of only the requested information (generally I circle the selection that reads "Please send me all the items listed" under the Caribbean section and change my name sometimes so the computer doesn't spit out my frequent requests.)

I read and read and read them all again. With an abundance of literature, I keep some of it on my bed stand (I'm hoping for a cerebral osmosis of sorts, I suppose) and the rest is distributed neatly throughout my life as inspiration, a photograph here and there: on my refrigerator (Cudjoe Key), in my car (St. Martin), and in the journal I keep for tracking my progress at the gym (St. Jean Beach in St. Barts.)

I track the winter temperatures for various points south including Cape Hatteras, Charleston, Key West, and several of the Bahamian islands. The World Wide Web provides me a tentacle of hope to my future and with these places bookmarked on my computer, I am able to summon in a flash the information I need to keep my heart and soul warm.

I sit sometimes under the inauspicious cloud of a cold night outside, tucked safely in the warm glow of both my television and computer screens watching Marshall Seese's local and far away Five Day Planners simultaneously and speak out loud, "78 degrees right now in Key Largo. Freezing rain here tonight."

Choosing not to live just a vicarious existence via the little electronic boxes of sunshine and sultry air temperature, I have made a point to journey south in search of a new home. The question is no longer "if" I will go, it is "when" I will go. I can no longer forsake the calling within me and I cannot bear the thought of many more winters, bone chilling or otherwise.

I will travel once again to Wilmington, North Carolina and further south still to the as yet unchartered (by me) shores of South Carolina and there is something special about that point not quite halfway between Key Largo and Key West called Islamorada that charms me still.

As I drive the streets, I will find a house to call my own and people who will have friendship written on their faces and I will pay particular attention to the markets because I will need a good place to shop daily for fresh fish and fruit and delectable baked goods, carrying them all home in an African woven basket.

With a fair amount of grace and the belief in guardian angels, I will find my new home, or maybe I should say it will find me because that seems to be the way these things happen.

And when I am ready, I will pack my things, my books and music separately, a brightly colored flag, because every house near the ocean has a flag that flies spiritedly in the breeze, and not too much furniture because I like to live sparsely, free from the trappings and confines of too many things. But I will leave behind two things: my winter coat and my ice scraper. I never want to see those things again for I am a child of the tropics and certainly I won't need them where I'm going.

© 1997 Diana Taylor

Note: Taking The Iguana Home was my very first published piece. It is here in its entirety as it first appeared in Healing Options, a now defunct alternative newsmagazine from Bennington, Vermont.