**Lives; The Long Tale of Madonna the Iguana**

**By LINDA GREENHOUSEJAN. 16, 2000**

Madonna the Iguana came into our life when my daughter, Hannah, was 9 years old, desperately wanting a house pet but allergic to almost anything with fur or hair. The little lizard was like a tiny green jewel, small enough to fit in my hand and so fragile I worried each breath might be its last. Five years later, she (we deemed it a female, but we were never really sure) was a muscular, fully grown adult. Five feet long, she had outgrown three enclosures, the last the size of a stall shower, a two-level contraption with sliding glass doors.

She had also outgrown the affections of a teenage girl whose friends now shuddered at the sight of her huge reptilian roommate. I understood Hannah's embarrassment, but I was proud that while the great majority of iguanas die in their first year as house pets, Madonna was thriving. Without my wanting it to happen, this iguana had found a place in my heart.

So that became our story. A pet outgrew a girl. A girl outgrew her pet. And a mother tried, probably for longer than she should have, to hold on to both.

''But Madonna doesn't do anything!'' Hannah would sometimes say. That was true; these big lizards just bask in the sun munching on leaves and flowers. Visitors often asked if iguanas were smart. Smart enough, was all I could say of a species that had flourished through many millenniums. ''Does Madonna love me?'' my daughter asked early on. I don't really think so, I replied. ''Well, at least does she like me?''

Yet my relationship with Madonna was not just a one-way street. She perked up when I came into the room. She let me peel off her shedding skin like a giant green sunburn, stripes and all. The skin of her feet sometimes came off like a delicate glove, a mysterious artifact from a distant time and place.

At first she wouldn't eat while I watched, and I would peer from the hallway as she delicately picked through her dish to find her favorites -- broccoli, green beans and carrots always disappeared before collard greens or kale. Eventually, she ate in front of me. She liked pansies, which I grew as a special treat.

When the window was open, she would climb up the screen and hold herself upright, listening to the birds and watching the breeze intently. I half hoped that the sight of this enormous reptile would terrify someone, but no one noticed.

She did give us a scare when an ice storm knocked out our electricity, forcing us to vacate the house. Not knowing what else to do, we covered Madonna in a towel and left her lying still. Each day for three days, I came back to the cold, dark house to check on her. A mammal might well have died. But her coldblooded reptilian body simply slowed down to the minimum. When the heat came back on, Madonna warmed up and within hours was back to normal, with no damage done.

When the end came, it was without warning. Just as our Thanksgiving guests were due to arrive, we heard a huge crash from Hannah's room. We raced up the stairs to find the plate glass of Madonna's enclosure shattered. Madonna, uninjured, seemed just as surprised as we were. A random flick of that powerful tail probably hit the glass at a vulnerable point.

The glass could have been replaced. But to me, the message was clear. It was time. Hannah barely blinked. ''I'll get a sofa for that corner, where I can stretch out,'' she said.

An hour on the telephone the next morning confirmed that zoos have no interest in the outgrown pets of families who should have known better in the first place. But we did find a local pet shop that had an empty iguana habitat. Madonna would live there or be placed for adoption in a qualified home.

We were at the shop within half an hour, Madonna struggling in the unfamiliar surroundings of a plastic recycling bin. But she didn't fight as the clerk lifted her into her new home, taller and deeper than the one she left behind. She scampered up the climbing log and stared at us, breathing heavily.

I cried on the way home, embarrassed at my inability to stop my tears. ''I can't believe I'm crying over an iguana!'' I managed to say. ''She wasn't just an iguana to you,'' my husband said. ''You took responsibility for her.''

I suddenly remembered a scene from ''The Little Prince,'' in which a fox asks a boy to tame him. But why should you want me to tame you? the boy asks. Because, the fox replies, ''you become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.''

I never really tamed Madonna, of course, as the fading scars on my arms demonstrate -- any more than I can hope to tame my lovely, headstrong 14-year-old daughter, who picked out a new couch before I had even dismantled Madonna's enclosure. A tamed teenager would be as unnatural a creature as a tamed iguana. Both in their natural states are prickly, wary and inexorably growing into a strength under which things can shatter unexpectedly. In our iguana-less family, as Hannah reclaims her bedroom and looks beyond its walls to the world outside, I will try to remember what Madonna taught: that with responsibility, and love, comes the moment for letting go.