

The First Two Pages: “Frozen Iguana”

By Debra Lattanzi Shutika

From *Florida Happens: Tales of Mystery, Mayhem, and Suspense from the Sunshine State*, edited by Greg Herren (Three Rooms Press)

Thank you for including me in this series, Art. I’m happy to be included here and looking forward to Bouchercon 2018.

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I wrote “Frozen Iguana” after my friend and colleague, Laura Scott, challenged me to compose a story for consideration in the Bouchercon anthology. It was near the end of winter break at George Mason University, where I teach Folklore and chair the English Department. My first thought was *I’ll write about the iguanas*. I had watched videos and read news accounts of iguanas dropping from south Florida trees earlier in the month and was intrigued. Two weeks later, I had a story.

“Frozen Iguana” opens with the real-life phenomenon that inspired the story. The iguanas have no direct connection to the mystery, but they form a narrative anchor to situate the story in a Florida landscape that is exotic and quirky:

Thunk
Jimmy turned off the water and stood in the shower, shivering.
Thunk
Thunk, thunk thunk.
He looked up at the ceiling tile expecting a dent from the last---

Thunk

He wrapped a towel around his waist and eased out of the steamy bathroom, the trailer floor creaking with every step.

Jimmy pulled the blinds back from the front door window. The thermometer read 36 degrees, the sixth day of the Florida freeze. The iguanas had started to fall out of the trees like junkies after a hit. Across the way a car door slammed. At midnight, Jimmy watched his neighbor Kate, wearing her scrubs, her auburn hair tied back in a ponytail, hop down from her truck and head for her trailer. For the next hour, he made the pilgrimage to the window to watch the comings and goings of the park. Three and a half Buds later, Jimmy fell asleep for the night on the couch.

Kate and Jimmy form a bond as unlikely crimefighting partners. Kate is the title character in my novel in progress, *The Other Kate*. In that story, Kate was a narrative criminologist, investigating crime through storytelling. Her last case ended badly. In “Frozen Iguana” Kate describes herself as a “West Virginia exile”: she’s recently divorced and relocated to Florida to start a new career in nursing, presumably leaving sleuthing behind. But when her best friend dies under mysterious circumstances, she needs to find out why.

Jimmy has a longer history in Florida, working on oil rigs and odd jobs, now retired. Kate’s a newcomer to the trailer park, and although he’s not familiar with her backstory, Jimmy is drawn to her intrepid nature. **Jimmy observes Kate’s interactions, interpreting the world and people around her,** as when a policeman interrogates Kate when the opening scene continues::

“You Kate Lucci?” The cop towered over Kate.

“Yeah.”

“You know Liza Parks?”

Kate nodded, grabbed a cigarette and lit up. “What’s up?”

Jimmy guessed it was probably Liza’s bastard husband. He was always giving Liza grief about visiting the kids. Everyone in the park knew about Liza’s old man: a pill-pushing doctor who got her hooked on drugs then dumped her and took her kids.

“You have a key to her trailer?” the cop asked

“Yep.”

“Can you come with me?”

“Why?”

The cop didn’t answer, but motioned for Kate to follow. Jimmy watched Kate grab her sneakers and pull one on, then the other as she hopped down two cinder block steps at her front door. The trailer door slammed behind her.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Kate jumped over a trash bag that had blown onto the crushed shell sidewalk.

When’s the last time you saw Ms. Parks?”

“Yesterday afternoon, around one. I checked on her before I left for work.

“Where’s that?”

“The detox clinic in Davie.”

“And you left for work at around what time?”

“At two. I work the second shift.”

“How did she seem?”

“Liza? Fine. She was waiting for her ex to drop off her kids. She hadn’t seen them in a while.”

“Did you see anyone at the trailer before you left?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Can you open the door?”

Not until you tell me why you’re asking me all this.” Kate crossed her arms and took a long drag on her smoke.

“We got a call from her ex-husband that she wasn’t home last night when he came to drop the kids. He wasn’t surprised, he said.”

“You know Bryce Parks is an asshole liar, right?” She pointed her cigarette at him, then flicked ash and took another drag.

“Dr. Parks called Liza’s mother this morning. She also can’t reach her.”

The cop seemed calm, but Jimmy read the tension in his neck as he spoke, a perfect balance of a man who would be happy to beat the shit out of a woman or screw her, depending.

Kate leaned toward him. “Why didn’t Sylvia just call me?” She smiled when she said this. Did something about this jerk with a stick-up-his-ass appeal to her?

“She did. You didn’t answer. Now, do you mind?” He pointed toward the door. Kate handed him the key. “Thank you,” he said. He smiled and tipped his hat. “I do appreciate this.”

He wanted to screw her.

Despite Jimmy’s interest in Kate, it’s not clear at first that she will invite him into her investigation. He observes, then circles around cautiously until the iguanas bring them together:

Jimmy watched Kate for a long moment unnoticed, then decided to stroll her way.

At the crunch of his black boots she turned. She’d taken to calling him Lil’ Jimmy Dickens on account of the boots and white cowboy hat he wore every day. Jimmy liked that—everyone knew he was sweet on Kate, she was too young for him, and that was just fine. This morning he sported a puffy jacket that looked silly with the cowboy get-up, but it was damn cold. He lifted his hat, “G’ morning Miz Lucci.”

“Hey there Jimmy.”

“I see the poll-ice are paying a visit to Miz Parks. I hope she’s okay.”

“I don’t know anything. I just had her keys.”

He tipped his hat as Kate rubbed her arms and looked to the thermometer hanging inside the awning over Liza’s patio. “Dammit, Jimmy, it’s 34 degrees.”

Something slammed to the earth behind Kate. Jimmy strode up beside her and they both looked over a huge iguana, belly up on the crushed shell sidewalk.

“Damn, it’s been years since I seen that.” Sensing Kate’s confusion, he added, “They’re cold blooded creatures. When we have a bad cold snap, they freeze up an’ start droppin’ from the trees.”

“I heard something hit my roof this morning.”

“Well, you got that live oak near your lot, probably got pelted by a falling iguana. I had ‘em hit my place too.”

“Are they dead?”

“Some’ll die. Depends on how long they’re frozen. Last time we had bad cold snap, one of them animal rescue people picked up a bunch and put them in the back of his station wagon. When they warmed up, it was like freakin’ horror movie in that car.”

“What happened?”

“Poor bastard was all bit up. He hit a tree and totaled the car. The iguanas got out okay, though.”

The early versions of “Frozen Iguana” told the story from Kate’s point of view, but the story wasn’t coming together. As a Florida newcomer, Kate’s character wasn’t able to create the offbeat Florida atmosphere I wanted to showcase. Following the advice of my writer’s group, I shifted to Jimmy’s point of view. As the trailer park’s “unofficial mayor,” Jimmy is often a silent observer who interprets the action of the story. His surveillance of Kate’s interactions ultimately allows him to solve the mystery.

I enjoyed writing this story and I’m honored to be included in the anthology with so many authors I admire. I hope you enjoy reading it.

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Debra Lattanzi Shutika is a folklorist and writer from West Virginia. She is author of *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico* (California), winner of the Chicago Folklore Prize. Her short fiction has appeared in *Abundant Grace: Fiction by Washington Area Women*, edited by Richard Peabody. She is revising a novel, *The Other Kate*, a mystery.