Jeff Frawley

A Trip to the Coast

This year the boys take the train alone. At the coast, where they're headed, it will be warm. The journey takes two hours, crosses plains towards the mountains. Suddenly hills everywhere, wooded, dark. They barrel through a tunnel, emerge in scraggy hinterland. Before long the small seaside town appears: adobe and cinderblock houses painted pinks, yellows, blues, cobbled together when the foreign workers started coming. Behind the town jut the smokestacks of the engineering giant. Across from the station are the pubs and grilled meat cafés their father likes to frequent. And there on the platform—the older boy is the first to notice, sticking a hand out the window—he shuffles back and forth, khaki trousers a bit long in the leg, stomach big beneath his cardigan. He pivots several times, gray hair standing in handsome shocks. He looks, thinks the boy, like an old prince freed from a prison in the mountains.

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It's good to have the company, he's telling them, bounding down the sidewalk. So much has changed! The boys, weighed down by bags, struggle to keep up. Little lizards dart about the cobblestone road. The street is alive with townspeople shopping, eating, drinking. Music spills from darkened cafés. Their father ducks into a fish griller's up ahead, gestures for them to hurry. The younger boy spots a lizard freshly smashed in the road, guts fanned like wings—has his father crushed it in his haste? Why, he calls to his brother, are the lizards not in the trees?

At the table he talks a mile a minute: thanks to an influx of clients he's going to show them a *really* good time this year. It's the factory, he tells them, they're bringing people from across the globe, engineers even—some weeks I have to *turn down* new clients. He signals to the man behind the counter and the man brings him a beer. The fish is bream, he explains, showing them how to fork it from the bone. The flesh bears char marks from the grill, smells of pepper and lime. They share a platter of potatoes soaked in butter and lemon, sprinkled with parsley. With

each bite he moans with pleasure, gulps beer, belches into the collar of his shirt to the delight of the older son. Tell me, he asks his boys, what does your mother say? The younger son mentions Maurice, the glass blower she is seeing. You should see his garage, the boy says, there's a big oven in the back. Maurice's face is red, he looks like a raccoon! His brother elbows him to be quiet. But their father is distracted by something in the street. They turn: a trio of men stand around a scooter, laughing, passing a pack of cigarettes. The father stares, runs a hand down his face, exhales. He slides his fish for the older son to finish. A tough break, he says, though it's unclear to what he refers.

He takes them to the seawall, a rocked-in alcove where men in padded helmets bash about the water. It's a water polo match, goals fastened to the rock. A dozen townspeople spectate, smoking intently, while two women grill meats on a portable stove. Look at them, the father says, waving to someone in the crowd. Does anyone wave in return? Back on the road, they cross the street and stare at the sea from an observation platform. A mile offshore hangs a wall of clouds, milky blue, rolling forward, spanning the coastline. Shivering, the younger son asks, What's that? and his father replies, A storm.

They find giant lizards sunning along rooftops, hundreds of them, some emerald-green, others gray, legs splayed, ancient faces smiling, crests waving in the breeze. Iguanas! cries the younger son. His father says, They're a nuisance, they shit everywhere, chew up the gardens. He points: roofs, gutters, buildings all slaked in white. Ahead, past a bend in the road, the eucalyptus quakes; beneath an errant orange tree reptiles big as cats feast on rotting fruit. Don't get too close, calls the father as his younger son dashes ahead. An iguana rears up and hisses, causing the boy to squeal. Take a photo, calls the father, to show your mother.

He indicates buildings: where my friend Tomas lives, where I play cards Friday nights with clients. Beside a cluster of convenience markets, pinned to the community bulletin board, is a large poster, an illustration of a man hanging by bound wrists from what appears to be a smokestack enveloped in smog. Several words accompany the image, words the older boy has never heard before. He asks what it means. Nothing

worth going into, replies the father, giving a little laugh. Just something with migrant workers, a bit of ugliness a few months back. They were supposed to take these down. He goes to the bulletin board and inspects the poster, pinching its corner as though he might pry it free; instead he says, You and I, your brother, we don't have to worry about things like that. They hear the younger boy crashing through the woods. Go find him before he gets bitten, says the father. He enters a shop and emerges with a package of beer, a box of crackers, a few chocolate bars with raisins and hazelnuts.

His apartment is on the third floor of a modest building perched atop a hill, opposite the sea; there is a bedroom, a sofa, a balcony overlooking a ravine thick with pitcher plants and scrub pine. Before dinner they'll visit a beach, he tells them, arching an eyebrow, a beach where college students, home for break, sunbathe topless even in winter. But he disappears into his bedroom and when he emerges some time later he prepares a frozen pizza. This pizza, he says, you won't believe it, better than Gino's. His big, tilting frame fills the living room. So how old is this Maurice? he asks, sliding the pizza into the oven. Thirty-four, the older boy answers. The father shakes his head, laughs, says something the boys can't hear.

On the balcony they talk basketball: there's a good team, he explains, an amateur men's league, not sponsored but they travel town to town. One of his clients plays center. The father offers the older boy a beer, with orange and a bit of salt, how they drink it here. Look, says the boy, pointing to the ravine: the ground crawls with iguanas. This place is great! cries the younger boy. Beaming, his father pats his head. Inside he finishes his beer in four long gulps, removes the pizza, rejoins his boys. The sun sets over the sea, splashing the clouds red. Before long the wind picks up and the temperature drops. They retreat inside, eat pizza to a game show on television. Then the father rises, says goodnight and goes to bed. They hear him talking in his room for some time, to whom it's unclear, until suddenly he is quiet.

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That night there's a cold snap. They wake to the balcony door rimed with frost. The woman on the news, with a graveness

as though announcing the assassination of a president, says a low pressure front will blanket the coast up to three days. At least, says their father, stuffing his shirt into his pants, it'll feel like Christmas. His face is puffy, eyes pink. Christmas isn't big here, he says. You'll be happier back in the city with your mother. He tells them to bring something to occupy themselves, he'll drop them at a café down the street.

On the road winding into town he hustles the younger boy who pauses to watch iguanas in the trees. They're not moving, says the boy. Are they cold? His brother says they'll warm once the sun crests the mountains. But the sky is blanketed with clouds.

The café is called Bad Rabbit. Their father jokes with the barista while she makes his coffee. The boys order ham and cheese croissants. The woman says they're microwaved not baked, to which the father replies, They don't care. The older son says they'll need more money if they're to wait several hours. I skipped breakfast so you could get those sandwiches, says the father, showing the boy his last bill. But then, face flushed, he hands it over. One of my clients will pay cash, he says. Make it last, we won't be eating until late, we've got special plans. He tells the barista, Don't let them give you any trouble, winks, then leaves. They watch him jog down the street. What does he do? asks the younger boy and his brother shrugs. The barista brings their sandwiches. Your father's talked about you for weeks, she says. Are you his friend? asks the younger boy. She laughs. He sure is a talker, she replies before leaving the boys to bury themselves in books.

At eleven thirty a.m. an iguana drops into the street. Large, nearly two feet in length; they hear the thwack, go to the window. Is it dead? asks the younger boy. His brother exits the café, the barista shouting from her counter. Outside he toes the thing and already it seems irrevocably stiff. His brother joins him and they stare until a bread truck comes shuddering around the corner. They signal but the driver doesn't stop, runs over the lizard. The older boy covers his brother's eyes at the burst of blood and viscera.

Back inside, against his brother's warnings, the younger boy periodically checks the window. The café is empty of

customers. Suddenly the boy shouts, taps the glass: scattered along the road, the sidewalk, the cinderblock walls lay dozens of iguanas, some on their backs, others their stomachs. Another falls from a telephone pole and the boy screams. The barista grabs him, says, Away from the window.

By late afternoon the streets and gutters, the little drained canal are littered with corpses. The cold snap, they hear on the radio, has caused the lizards' temperature to plunge. Several pedestrians, warns the reporter, have been struck. An elderly woman hospitalized. Avoid streets with trees, traffic crews have been deployed.

The boys assume the first townspeople with plastic sacks are part of the cleanup effort, yet they take only two or three lizards apiece. One woman wraps each in cloth before stacking them in a cooler. They come and go, pausing to chat or shake hands. The boys ask the barista what's happening and the woman says, Come pick something from the pastry case. By the time their father returns, nearly four p.m., the boys have counted twenty scavengers. One man took a dozen, most fewer than six. And yet the street is still strewn with dead iguanas. Their father pushes through the door with a wild grin on his face. What a day! he shouts, tousling the younger boy's hair. Says, No need to be afraid. Just then a trio of men enters, each toting a sack. They bark for coffee. The father barks an order too. For tonight, he says, patting the boys' backs. For our big expedition. He shows them his billfold, thick now with money.

He takes them to a gymnasium at the edge of town, a rusting old hangar rising above the seawall. Here the street is lined with shanty-like pubs big enough for four or five people, offering meat and slices of bread, spicy mustard, raw onion on the side. Everyone in the street, or so it seems, discusses the iguanas. They sound drunk. Inside a pub a bartender cooks them sausage on a griddle beside the beer spigots. Broad men, much bigger than the men back home, pause to peer inside before moving along. A group of women stops; the father whistles, invites them in. The women giggle, look at one another, continue. Two men call the father's name. These are my boys! he shouts, but the men move on. The light inside the pub is golden, glistening off the taps, walls lined with photos of people

standing in the sea, arms crossed, frowning. Their father gulps beer while the boys nibble sausages. They hear a band clang inside the gym. Tonight, he tells them, we're going to have some fun. Two men enter the pub. One raises a sack, gestures at the grill. The bartender asks, How much? The man says a price and the bartender nods, eying the boys. He takes the sack, removes two iguanas stiff as ears of corn. Then he produces a cutting board and knife. Let's go, says the father. The men laugh, catcall the boys.

The basketball team is called, naturally, the Iguanas. The players totter out, looking less like athletes than garbage collectors. That one there, says the father, that's my friend. He points to a brute with a head of shaggy hair. The man must be in his forties; his teammates look no older than twenty-five. The wooden bleachers hold a few hundred locals chugging beer and laughing at the opposing team. The players are very poor, explains the father, that is why they're laughing. The older boy asks if he can have a beer. The father brightens, thrusts a finger in the air, greets the vendor by name. He buys the boy a beer before turning to two women, thirty-somethings in tight jeans and sweaters. He leans forward, whispers; they giggle in response. The band smashes violent, brassy songs while the opponents run layups, arms and legs spindly compared to the thick, hair-swirled hocks the local players brandish.

The visiting team is down by twenty at halftime. The crowd points and laughs and throws cups as the men cower towards the locker room. A man in vest and bowtie takes center court with an ancient-looking microphone. They assume he's an entertainer but the man begs the crowd to settle or risk forfeiture, per league rules. The microphone shrieks feedback and he's roared off the court. Yet when the opposing team emerges the crowd behaves. The father has vanished, along with the women. When he returns, midway through the third quarter, he wears a slightly stupid, peaceful look. The women bite their knuckles to keep from laughing, faces and necks red. The father's friend, the brute, sends a player tumbling into the stanchion. The crowd erupts, tosses cups onto the sidelines. The brute tries to calm them by patting the air. On the second free throw attempt—the older son sees it sail through

the air—someone tosses an iguana onto the court. The arena sounds as though it might implode.

Afterwards they wait outside, accompanied by the two women. Before long the brute emerges. The father introduces his sons before leading the gang through town, uphill towards the café, the adults talking chaotically the entire way. They point and shout about the iguanas still littering the road, brushed now into gutters. Up ahead a couple collecting lizards retreats into shadows at the sound of the approaching mob. The road is lined with courtyards and patios canopied with bougainvillea, hibiscus, honeysuckle. The older boy notices, with odd discomfort, that people mill about these patios, smoking in the dark, drinking, chatting in groups. He sees, thanks to streetlamps, people grilling iguana. He imagines the taste, shudders. His brother asks what's wrong. Nothing, says the older boy, pointing to strange clouds glowing in the sky. It is cold, they can see their breath, and yet people still wear t-shirts. On one patio a fat man loudly sucks meat off the bone, a leg perhaps.

As they wind past the father's apartment the basketball player trails back and says, Your papa teach me English. Now I work at factory. He points towards a building perched atop the hill, an old hotel perhaps, explains that this is where they're going. Does papa permit to drink beer? he asks the older boy. Your papa like a party. He whistles and the two women drift over. The younger boy says it's weird that no one cares about the iguanas. The women shrug their shoulders; one says there are lots of iguanas in this town—like squirrels where he's from. The older boy asks if they've eaten it. The women only giggle. The basketball player waves his hands and says, That is food for the poor. The younger boy asks if his father is poor, to which one of the women replies, What sort of silly-head worries about that?

The cliffside building, turns out, is an old hospital. Above the entrance flashes a neon sign in cursive script: *L'Hôpital*. The facility is modest: three stories, crumbling stone balustrades, colonnades hiding the entrance. Multicolored lights strobe behind curtained windows. Several strains of music thump. What is this place? asks the older boy. His father, handing the doorman cash, replies, Where everybody comes.

Inside, beside a crumbling fountain, grows an old oak

tree. The place is packed, people clustered about, some perched upon the oak's broad bow. The courtyard tapers into darkness, strobelights revealing hallways, doors, silhouettes of people hiding amongst pillars. Above them hang two additional stories. At the end of the courtyard plays a trio of musicians: a stand-up bassist, a saxophonist muttering doleful notes, a drummer slapping his small kit. When the song ends they hear others echoing from the building's bowels. Stay close, shouts the father, leading the women to a long, brilliant bar, lightbulbs sparkling, bottles gleaming like tropical birds. Everyone seems untroubled, even those elderly men and women who stand about sucking cigarettes, faces deepened by the lights. At the bar the father orders sodas for the boys while the musicians blast frenetic jazz: thundering bass, shrieking saxophone. The basketball player shouts about a game in which he scored forty points. Their father dances amongst young men and women, arms at his sides, hands balled into fists, seeming to scream at the top of his lungs. The basketball player hoists the younger boy. He offers the older boy a sip from a bottle of pungent, licorice-flavored liquor. The boy coughs, takes another sip, feels his muscles melt. He shuts his eyes and pictures people torn apart, pictures iguanas smashed onto pavement. He takes a third sip, gives a goofy laugh. No more, says the basketball player. The boy slaps the bottom of one of the women. She turns and shouts. But a moment later she asks how old he is. Fifteen, he replies, laughing at the funniness of his voice. A blade of sweat runs down her shirt; he smells her deodorant or perfume activated by heat.

They visit a room with blinding neon lights, a woman strumming reverb-drenched guitar. They visit a room where someone plays music that sounds like rain, dancers' heads lolling on their shoulders. They visit a room where a trumpet bleats over rumbling bass, the humidity so thick it fills the lungs. The basketball player drinks from his bottle, tries to get the boys to dance. They visit a room in which no music plays at all; instead people cloister in the shadows smoking cigarettes and whispering. Tangles of ivy hang from the ceiling, reaching towards partygoers. In the hallway the older boy spots several of the posters: silhouette bound and dangling from the smokestack. Those same unfamiliar words. What, he tries to shout, does it

mean? The giant's licorice-flavored liquor causes him to disintegrate into laughter. The next room is packed, three men on stage, one barking then crooning into a microphone as if going mad. The younger boy covers his ears. The second man grinds chords from an enormous guitar; the third pummels a beat from a device like an accordion sprouting wires. The older boy signals for the bottle, steals several sips before the giant yanks it back.

They return to the courtyard, find their father cajoling a group of young women, his hair messy, his face wild. Eyes bulging, he spots his boys and throws up his hands, shouts. The jazz trio's been joined by a woman, or a man dressed as a woman, who groans about an olive grove and some sort of horror. Come, she croons. Come, come, I'll show you the graves. Again the older boy asks about the posters. The basketball player's story is difficult to follow, his breath terrible when he leans in to shout: a car crash, a family and their little girl, the factory, three migrant workers the town is certain were to blame… Midway through, distracted by shouts, the boy turns and sees his father arguing with another man, red in the face, thrusting his fists at his feet. Muscles bulge along his neck. The other man is short and holds up his hands, yet a smirk sneaks across his face. The basketball player says, Go find your brother, just as the father jabs the short man's face with his finger. Then he screams a word that causes others to gasp, to cry for him to stop. The boy has heard this word before—earlier, at the game, at the height of the taunting. He feels a tiredness flood his hands and feet as his father slaps the man. For an instant, so it seems, the entire hall goes silent. Then chaos erupts. But the fight is quickly separated, bystanders lunging for both men's arms, the basketball player dragging the father away as though he were a child.

When the brothers return they find him leaned against the bar, arms outstretched, smiling euphorically. He's surrounded by people, beaming and sweat-soaked, looking like a man at the end of his wedding night, about to be sent by well-wishers into the rest of his life.

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The rest of their visit passes quickly. By the following evening he's back to his usual self. For dinner one of his clients, a

Japanese businessman, visits the apartment in a peach-colored suit. He's brought books for the boys and three iguanas in a sack. He explains that a neighbor taught him how to cook it. Apologizing for the mess, he guts the lizards in the kitchenette, blanches them in water, skillfully slices off heads, legs and tails. Look away, says the father, but the older boy doesn't. He's been allowed a beer. The businessman peels back steaming skin. Feeling funny with beer, the boy asks his father what it means, exactly, the word he said the night before, the word that caused everyone to shout. Then the boy repeats it. The father appears momentarily confused, then he glances at the businessman, who's focused on slicing, before laughing and excusing himself to the balcony.

The businessman brings plates of long, whitish flanks peppered and yellowed with sauce. The younger boy refuses to eat. Don't worry, says his father, they were already dead, it's what the lizards would have wanted. The boy tries a bite, swallows, accepts a little more. The smell and taste, everyone agrees, are delicious. The businessman blushes at the compliments. Soon the sun sets, the cold settles in, they retreat inside to watch television. Later, after the businessman leaves, the older boy telephones home. On the third ring Maurice picks up. He covers the mouthpiece, takes a swig of beer, tells his mother's boyfriend they're having a good time. Maurice's careful questions sound as though he's navigating a hostage negotiation. The mother snatches the phone and says, What's your father done now? But the boy says they're having fun. He mentions the iguanas. Sounds like your father, the mother snorts. Whatever you do, don't miss tomorrow's train.

In the living room he finds his father comforting his sobbing brother. It's what the townspeople do, the father whispers, no different than chicken, we participated in a local custom. The boy stutters that something is wrong, something bad will happen. The father laughs and rubs the boy's back, kisses his forehead, goes to get a beer, brings a second for the older boy. See? he says. Everything's fine, there's nothing wrong in the world.

But something is. They wake the next morning to the squeal of brakes. A metallic thump. From the balcony they see

an old Mercedes rammed against the roadside wall. Its driver, a woman in a headscarf, is out of her car, inspecting the crumpled hood. She looks up at them and screams, pointing down the road. There, as far as they can see, lizards swarm the street—hundreds of iguanas. The father joins them on the patio, asks what's happened. The older boy watches the woman wipe sweat from her face, smearing heavy makeup. He looks skyward: the sun hangs over the sea in a bright white ball. The temperature is already thirty, forty degrees warmer than the previous day. The iguanas have returned to life, metabolism rekindled. The younger boy looks to his brother, eyes wide. What, he asks, have we done?

That afternoon he takes them to the station. All in all, he says, an A-plus trip. Tell your mother about the sea. That things are good. Tell her Merry Christmas. The older brother, surprisingly, says he wishes they could stay an extra day. The father stiffens, says, Well why not? There's a telephone in the ticket office— But their mother would never go for such a thing. They wait ten, fifteen minutes until the train appears. Are you sure? the older boy asks. Though his father seems not to understand, has already forgotten the conversation to which the question applies, the man smiles, closes his eyes, says, I've never been more sure in my life. Then, to the younger boy boarding the train, he offers one last wave before disappearing into the throng.

When, some time later, he telephones their mother's, they'll huddle around the earpiece and hear the roar of a crowd. Are you at the game? the older boy will ask. The father, chuckling, says, You didn't tell your mother about that night, did you? He is silent; more cheering. Listen, he says, that word I said that night at the club, you shouldn't say a thing like that—your mother would agree. A second stretch of silence. Then he tells them the reason he's called: a new job in another town. Inland, the other side of the country. No more of this English stuff. Better pay. More rewarding. He'll be happier in the long run. The right thing to do, he declares. Laughing, he says, I sure am glad you could make it when you did. The younger boy is about to speak when the father, over the roar of the crowd, shouts that for now their summer visit must be put on hold.

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