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THE THINGS WE DO FOR FAMILY

I FINALLY MET the girl I want to make a part of my family. After five years of working in bars, of half-heard conversations and half-seen faces, Kelly made me want to turn on the lights and turn off the music. After the parade of one night stands I refer to colloquially as “my twenties,” simply holding her hand felt like putting on clothes after using fabric softener for the first time (something, incidentally, that I’ve finally started doing since dating her).

But as much as I want to take the next step, for Kelly to meet my family, it’s not as simple as just dropping by my parents’ house for Sunday dinner. My mother died when I was very young, and my father and I were never close. I have no siblings, no aunts; all I have is Gammy.

I’ve told Kelly half of the truth about Gammy. I’ve told her that I have to take care of Gammy because of her illnesses (true), but not the nature of the symptoms or the root of their cause. I’ve told her that we can’t go back to my apartment because it will upset Gammy (very true), but not that when Gammy is upset she can become dangerous and violent. I’ve told her that Gammy will not care that Kelly isn’t Jewish (probably true), but not that Gammy *will* care that Kelly is new and unfamiliar to her. Most importantly, I have told her that Gammy is my family, my blood (true and true), but I have not told her that Gammy is not human. Gammy is actually a member of an extinct species of cat-sized lizard from which human beings

in general (and I specifically) are directly descended. It is either because of this, or just because she is old and curmudgeonly, that Gammy has so much trouble adjusting to new things.

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So, HOW IS it that I'm taking care of a relative who is also an extinct lizard?

About six months ago, some asshole walked into the bar where I work and began talking about time travel. He said he was from the future, and that no one in the future used fossil fuels or drank PBR, so we were idiots for doing both. He talked about some movies that hadn't been made yet but we still "had to see," and he told us that you can't fully appreciate *Pulp Fiction* until you seen all four vignettes simultaneously by using something called beta wave technology. He hit on one of the female regulars by telling her that she had a really "classic" look, then he downed a shot of what he called "*Vintage Jack*," paid his bill, and left the bar. That's when I noticed that he had left his bag.

This happens all the time. Some patron will get shitfaced and leave something. We put it behind the bar, and usually they come the next morning to get it.

Also, I look through their stuff.

I realize it is not the most ethical thing in the world, but someone needs to look through the bag to make sure there isn't a bomb or a human head inside. Anyway, I'm really into music, and sort of a curious person in general, so it's hard for me not to look in their iPod or laptop and scope out

the bands they listen to. I've been doing this for a couple of years now, and have scrutinized the files of six laptops, eleven iPods, five smart phones...

And now I've done it to one time machine.

It was shockingly easy to use, though I suppose technology only gets more user-friendly with each iteration. It took me a little bit of time to get used to the telekinetic link up—which felt like imagining you are still playing Tetris after a long day playing Tetris—but after that it was pretty self-explanatory. It had a ton of apps too. There was a simple historical app that took you to canonical events (World Wars and such), but there were some weird ones too. One app took you to witness famous hookups throughout history (like JFK and Marilyn Monroe, or like Jesus's parents and stuff), which I wasn't really into.

But there was one app that caught my eye. It was labeled GENEALOGY, and the icon was a family tree. If you clicked on it, it brought up a list of your relatives going back hundreds of years and gave you the option to go visit them. Scrolling down took you as far back as you wanted to go, but I was new to the interface and held down the button for way too long. Next thing I knew, I had travelled 500 million years into the past, and I was looking at my great-great(to the whateverth)-grand lizard.

I'd always wanted a lizard, and the guy who used to have my apartment had left a pretty large terrarium and a few heat lamps behind. (Admittedly, he had used them, unsuccessfully, to grow weed, not extinct lizards, but it still felt like kismet.) But there was more to it. I'd never been close to my family, but here was this lizard who, albeit at some remove,

begat me. Here was this creature from whom all that I am and could ever hope to be had begun. I couldn't leave it there in that swamp, perhaps to be eaten up by a younger and more violent lizard. It was my chance to finally worry about something more than myself, to take care of a family member in a way that my father (with his new bleached step-family) never did. So, I grabbed it up. The genealogy app assured me that it had already had all its lizard babies, so I wouldn't be affecting the timeline. It sort of makes sense. I guess no one person or thing is ever as important to the flow of time as they think they are.

As much as I wanted to keep playing with the time machine, I went straight back to my present so I could get the lizard situated. Also, even though I had a time machine, I still couldn't shake the feeling that I was late for something. I needed to get the guy's time machine back into his bag before he came and picked it up.

I named the lizard "Gammy" because she sort of has my great-grandmother's eyes, or, at least, what I imagine her eyes looked like when she got off the boat from the Ukraine: yellow and jaundiced.

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KELLY HAS BEEN pushing to meet Gammy. With each new suggestion for how to make this happen ("What if the three of us went for a walk?" "What if we went out to dinner?") I have had to come up with a new half-truth to delay it ("Gammy doesn't really *walk* the way you and I do." "Gammy is on a very particular diet." Et cetera).

You might wonder why I didn't just tell Kelly that Gammy was my pet lizard. Women like pets, and they like men who are responsible and sensitive enough to take care of them. But Gammy is not a cuddly or fluffy pet, nor does her appearance (or that of the apartment that she has overtaken) suggest she is in the hands of a responsible caretaker. Here are the principle concerns that I have about exposing Kelly to Gammy:

(1) Gammy has wreaked havoc on my already unimpressive apartment. On our first day together, whatever hopes I had that she would live happily in the terrarium were dashed as she proved able to dislodge the screen lid and push the tank onto its side. The entire process was so traumatic for the two of us that I decided to give up on it. Besides the physical trauma—she wriggled and scratched throughout the entire procedure, and though I was wearing yellow rubber dish-washing gloves I'd taken from the bar's kitchen, she still managed to tear at my vintage shirt and break my skin—there was the sadness of looking into her yellow eyes as I finally secured her in the tank, wedging the lid and sides with some milk crates full of records. I knew I couldn't let her live like that. I moved my futon into the living room and, following the spirit that led me to want to care for her in the first place, gave her the (one) bedroom. Suffice it to say, my feng shui is way fucking off, and I am not fit to receive guests at the moment.

(2) Gammy is *not* cute. She is roughly the size of a cat, and she has hardened skin that looks like it is caked in mud or shit. (Much of the time, she *is* caked in shit, as she has the odd penchant for rubbing herself in her

own feces before I have opportunity to change the newspapers in her room or go through the mutually traumatic ordeal of getting her into the bathtub to sanitize her as rigorously as my frustration with her resistance and the outmatched cleaning products of the twenty-first century will allow).

(3) Gammy always looks as if she is dying, except for the times when she looks as if she is dead. Her eyes are further on the sides of her head than seems possible, always giving me the feeling that she has either broken her face since the last time I looked at her or she is simply succumbing to gravity one body part at a time. Her movements are slow, and her stomach never quite makes it up off the carpet. She vacillates between committed lethargy—only waking up to eat the crickets that I buy from Petco in weird yogurt tins, and to disseminate their digested remains across the carpet—and active destruction of whatever scraps of my security deposit are still recoverable. Much of the time she lies in a lumpy ball in the warmest corner of the room, and when I open the door to check on her or to feed her, she seems to be nothing more than a brown lump on the floor. I don't know how to read a lizard's pulse, to say nothing about the pulse of an extinct species of cold-blooded animal whose survival instincts may have required lowering their heart rate to a pace that even moderately lizard-savvy people (a bar I fail spectacularly to hurdle) might not detect.

(4) Gammy *smells* like she is dying. And this goes beyond the normal smells of animals that are not completely in balance with their domestic environs (the ammonia of piss, the rank, overtoasted nuttiness of sundried feces, and the outmatched artificial floral scents meant to

mask them). When I brought Gammy home, I thought that getting a pet wouldn't affect the smell of my apartment, primarily because it already was pretty gross. Piles of dirty clothes, crusty dishes, un-dumped ashtrays: these were the mountain ranges of my bachelor homestead. I knew that taking care of Gammy was going to force me to clean up a little more, and I thought that could only be a good thing. Even if thirty was the new twenty, it seemed like twenty should be less of a shit hole. But, as much as I wanted to be a little more grown up, nothing prepares for you walking down the air freshener aisle of the drug store while trying to figure out whether peach or mango would go slightly better with the scent of vomited cricket, as if you are a sommelier in hell.

(5) Gammy probably *is* dying. I've done a little research, and it seems as if the oxygen levels in twenty-first century Earth are not quite the same as they were 300 million years ago. Nor are the crickets I feed her fully meeting her needs (no matter how much their packaging looks to have come straight from the Whole Foods nutrition section). Each day, she seems to have a little more difficulty breathing and her eyes seem to be giving up on life a little more. She takes less time deciding exactly where to pee (her primary form of expression and recreation), and I even get the sense she has less energy to commit to wallowing in her own shit, as it is becoming easier and easier to clean her. Taking her to the vet seems out of the question (how could I explain what she is and where I got her? What if they took her? What if she had to live out her dying days among strangers and not her family?), so all I can do is make her comfortable and try not to

admit how much easier my life will be when she's dead.

And as much as I like to think that Gammy would like Kelly, and that Kelly would make Gammy as happy as she makes me, I am worried. I am worried that Gammy will attack her, that Gammy is bitter enough to use her last gasp of stored energy to leap up and mar Kelly's gorgeous, freckled face. I am worried that there will be a gap between them that I cannot bridge. I am worried I will have to choose between them. And more than the choice (I would choose Kelly for *anything* right now. Door number Kelly! Kelly for president!), I am worried about looking Gammy in the eye as I turn my back on her.



LAST NIGHT, LYING in her bed, Kelly and I talked about our families. The top of her dresser is decorated with a collection of seashells—the only surface of her room not covered in books—and I asked her about them.

She told me stories about spending summers with her grandmother at the seaside, and how she still has the collection of shells they found together. Her grandmother told her that, whenever she was alone, she could put her ear to the shell, hear her family whistling and whispering to her, and know they were thinking of her. She pointed to the two biggest shells, which bookended the collection, and said that they were standing watch over the others.

I was silent. Just before I noticed the seashells, I had been thinking

about how perfectly my arm fit under her neck as we spooned. Whether this was some genetic lottery we had hit, or if it was a learned practice we had developed together, it was real evidence of our connection. But then, in came this story about her family, whose connection to her was irrefutable - unseverable! As long as she had a fucking seashell she would have her family on speed dial. Our relationship might be fleeting, but her love of family was as eternal as the oceans (which, even in the event of the apocalypse, are only going to get bigger). She turned over to face me, forcing me to pull my arm out from underneath her, and asked me about my family.

“Do you have a favorite memory?” she asked in a late night whisper, though there was no one we might disturb.

I do not have many happy memories of family. Of my mother, I only remember a song about mashed bananas she would sing while feeding them to me. My father, I remember far too well. So, instead of a memory, I told her a story.

I told her about my great-grandmother who had come from Ukraine to America as a young woman. But, she was worried that there would be no chickens in the New World, so she tried to smuggle her jar of schmaltz (fat) onto the boat. The customs agents in New York refused her, and the schmaltz jar was thrown into the river.

“That’s a beautiful story,” she told me. Then she riffed for a few minutes about its metaphorical importance, how the fat signified memory. While she talked about the semiotics of schmaltz, I looked over at her shell collection. Part of me wanted to ask her if I could have one, so we would

always be connected. I could put it to my ear, and even if the sound of her family was garbled, it would still be more coherent than the sounds my family makes when it tromps around the bedroom. But I didn't ask. Not because I thought it was too personal a request, but because I was worried she would pick out the smallest shell to give to me.



TODAY, GAMMY AND I had a bad fight. I had decided that I was ready for her and Kelly to meet. Obviously, I couldn't tell her that the lizard was the "Gammy" I had told her about, but it still seemed important for the two most important women in my life to meet. I would tell Kelly that this was my pet lizard, and that the "Gammy" I take care of was at the hospital for a few days for routine tests or something. If the meeting went alright, then the human Gammy would move to a nursing home, or maybe die. I hadn't thought it out that far. And yes, it would be starting our relationship out on a lie, but if it was the only one I told her, it would be ok.

The meeting was to take place in a controlled way. I would put Gammy back in the terrarium (even if only while Kelly was over) and do whatever it took (buy cleaning products from whatever infomercial) to make the apartment seem habitable for humans.

I opened the door to Gammy's room, armed, as always, with a can of Lysol and heightened reflexes (as much as I thought of Gammy as family, it is impossible to be in the presence of something so prehistoric and not give any thought to instinct). The room is ten feet by twelve, shaped with

whatever drywall cookie cutter is passed from slumlord to slumlord across the country. I had furnished it with a combination of assorted pet toys (ranging from a dog's squeaky toy to a hamster wheel, anything that was on clearance) and whatever dead tree branches I could find in the park. They lay in the front corner, while the rest of the room was covered in soiled, free community newspapers whose circulation statistics had gone through the roof since Gammy had come to stay with me. I had hoped (naively) that separating the room into TOY and BATHROOM sections might lead Gammy to better spatially compartmentalize her endeavors. Gammy (or a coil of scale and limbs) was in her usual ball in the far left corner.

“Hi, Gammy,” I said, not expecting a response. Gammy does not often respond to stimuli, and when she does it is in swift, slashing motions. Normally, I lay out the crickets on the rock she likes, and then refill her water bowl (which usually ends up being turned upside down), but this time I decided to try something different. I put the cricket in my hand, placed in front of her mouth (or where I assumed her mouth was, difficult as it is to tell when she is in mound position).

Her eyes moved slowly over to my hand, and she sat up, looking almost like a real, non-dying lizard for a moment, before flicking her tongue out of her clenched mouth and swallowing the cricket. What a moment we'd just shared! It was so domestic and touching that I felt as if, perhaps, we were really starting to trust each other. I pulled the terrarium out the closet (it was the only item in there since all of my clothes had been relocated to the living room) and put it on the floor underneath the window. I'll admit

that it isn't huge, but it isn't tiny. It's about the length and width of a desk, and came up to my knee. A lizard who barely moves could be happy in there. "Come on, Gammy," I said, in the sweetest voice that I could make. "Gammy, let's get you home."

I reached to pick her up. Usually, in her ball form, I slip my hands underneath as much of her as I can, hoping that I'm holding on to the right parts of her to maintain my grip all the way to the bathtub. But in that moment, as she sat there looking like a lizard, I bent down, put my arms underneath her, and cradled her.

Immediately I heard the trickle of urine and felt my sleeve dampen. But I didn't let this discourage me. The terrarium was already lined with newspaper and takeout menus, and the rest of the crickets were inside it, displayed appetizingly on her rock. The few toys that she seemed to occasionally use were there for her entertainment. She would be happy in this home, and we would finally be able to strike a balance. I lowered her into the tank, prepared for more urine (despite the questions it raised about how she could drink so little and piss so much) or worse. I wasn't prepared for the sound.

In the six months that I'd had Gammy, she'd made plenty of noise, but all of it had been indirect. The sound of torn carpet. The sound of scaled leather scattering shredded newspaper. I'd always assumed that lizards didn't really talk (I mean, Old McDonald did not have a lizard with a "lizard noise here" and a "lizard noise there"), or that perhaps they were on some wavelength that humans can't pick up. But, as I tried (so patiently, I had

been so fucking patient with this lizard) to lower her into this home that I had built for her, she made a noise of such unmistakable inhumanity that I was startled to the point of dropping her. It was sound with a high and a low register—the shriek of a bird combined with the guttural bellow of a cow—that seemed at war with itself, as if she was channeling the sounds of birth and death simultaneously, conveying how little there was to her but the base and purposeless instinct to simply continue to exist. I had dropped her into the terrarium, and she was banging against its walls, screaming and shrieking this terrible noise. And that’s when I lost it.

“Jesus Christ, will you calm down for one fucking minute?” I screamed at her, adding my rage to hers. “Is it so terrible to be trapped in that little house? I’ve been living on my couch for six months because of you, and you can’t relax and just be okay in your custom, furnished habitat for even five seconds?” And looking at it—this bizarre leather balloon of gas and fury—struggling against its captivity, I realized how trapped I had become. Imprisoned in my living room. Unable to bring my girlfriend—my future, my *real* family—to my home because I needed to take care of a fucking lizard! Even if we were related (whatever that meant), we had nothing in common, and I owed it nothing. I couldn’t give it away (too many questions) but, right then, I knew I couldn’t keep it. I flung open the window and lifted Gammy onto the windowsill. “You want to be free? You want to stretch out? Fucking go for it!” I yelled.

I waited for a moment in terror and excitement for her to plop down (I lived on the first floor, the three foot drop down to the street

wouldn't bother her), but, of course, she refused. Instead, she stretched herself out on the sill, mocking my open window as she went to sleep in the sun.



THE NIGHT WHEN I first took Gammy home, after setting Gammy up in my bedroom and before returning the time machine to the bar, I went on another trip with the genealogy app. I was more familiar with the interface and could scroll through my family tree without skipping millions of years at a time. So, I thought I would spend a little time with my mother.

The device set me down out of sight. I was obscured by a tree, but could see her sitting at a table with a much younger version of my father. She was exactly as I remembered from photographs, but he looked so oddly young that I had trouble placing him at first. He was smiling and far too relaxed to be the man I was related to. And she, she was a stranger. I looked at her, tried to stare hard enough to see beyond her face and body to the thing I was supposed to feel connected to, but I couldn't. There was no banana song, and I had no other context in which to love her.

Unsettled, confused, I left. I went back to look at my grandparents, but found that they too were too young (younger than I was) for me to make sense of how I came from them. I went further back, but soon everyone was speaking in Jewish or whatever, and everyone was wearing such cartoonish clothing (nothing like the "vintage" clothes that dominate the hipster scene) that it barely felt like I was looking at people any more, to say nothing of *my*

people. I kept scrolling, and kept scrolling, and again I skipped millions of years, until I was looking at my great-to-the-nth grand-monkey.

He looked pretty stoned. He was sitting in a tree, not even gathering berries or anything, just letting this other monkey chick (who the genealogy app was telling me was *not* my grandmother monkey) eat bugs off him. Then, he saw me and jumped down from the tree and pounded his chest. I guess he was worried that I was going to try to challenge him for the lady monkey, or for his tree or whatever, which I obviously wasn't (though it was sort of nice to be acknowledged). I backed away a couple of feet (making sure not to step on any key evolutionary butterflies), making it clear that I was submitting to him. He chilled out a little bit, but he was still giving me the death glare. I don't know what I expected. I mean, I didn't really think that he would see me and know that he was contributing to the development of life in a profound and beautiful way, and that even though his life was unimaginably gross and exhausting, that his descendants (however abstractly connected) millions of years later would be magnificent, almost godlike manifestations of the possibilities inherent in existence. I really didn't. But I did hope that we would have some kind of connection.

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IT IS THE day after opening the window. After giving it some thought, I have decided to release Gammy back into the wild. Admittedly, it is not her wild, but it is closer than what I've provided in my apartment. I doubt she will have a terrible effect on the food chain (there are only so many bugs she can

kill before finally succumbing to one of her countless illnesses), and there are no dude-extinct-lizards with which she could mate (gross), so it's not as if I'm introducing an entire invasive species. Perhaps I am betraying my family but, to be honest, my family has betrayed me plenty, and it is time to build a new family. Kelly for family. Kelly for home.

I wonder if the pet store cashier knows what's up when I buy an animal transport case and not my usual supply of crickets. The case is large enough to fit Gammy, even after I line it with fleece blankets to muffle whatever sounds she might make during the effort.

I decide it would be best to let her go in the state park. It is summer, there will be plenty of insects for her to eat, plenty of dry rocks to lie on. I am doing as right by her as anyone in the same situation could.

I borrow a friend's car and drive out there. She seems to be asleep in the transport case, or perhaps just resigned to what is happening, because she doesn't make a sound the whole drive. I walk a half-mile down the trail and feel lucky not to have encountered anyone (though I have a bullshit story about wanting to take my cat for some country air in case I am interrogated). I find a patch of dry grass on the edge of the woods, lay down the case, and open up the gate. Gammy waddles out in that way she does, seeming with every step to only push herself forward by dumb luck. Her eyes seem wider than usual, as they were when I first saw her in the swamp 500 million years ago, and I feel vindicated in my decision to release her here. It seems as if she will make her way into the woods, into her new (old?) life before anyone sees her. She does not look up at me as she walks away.

But then, I see a small group of people coming down the trail. And, you've got to be shitting me, it is Kelly and what must be her parents (same red hair, everyone wearing glasses, either they are family or they had all been cast to play one in a commercial). I knew that she saw them at least once a week (she'd told me the night she told me about the shells), and I knew that they are all into nature (she was the one who explained to me that Girl Scouts did more than just sell cookies), but this is a disaster. I can explain being out here by myself (maybe I have decided to start jogging?) but how to explain the pet carrying case and the cat-sized dinosaur at my feet. But, clearly, Kelly had seen me before I'd seen her, and even more ominously, she's seen Gammy, because I hear her scream and call out to me in warning, "The lizard! Watch out!"

It would be so easy to scream along with her. To pretend that I have never seen this creature before, to run toward Kelly and even act as if I am protecting her from it somehow. But I don't. Because as much as I can see Gammy through Kelly's eyes—blood and skin and bone and instinct, just as I had seen her the day I opened the window—in this moment, I see Kelly through Gammy's eyes too. I see a screaming, charging body (carbon copy of the other red haired bodies behind her) who, as much as I feel connected to it, is every bit as separate and foreign to me as the sad-eyed lizard who does not want to move. I reach down and scoop up Gammy, petting the top of her head.

I walk over to Kelly and her parents, and say, "Kelly. This is my Gammy that I've been telling you about."