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Birthday

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Birthday

Her mother had never really liked shopping very much, and Lindsay preferred to stay at home copying French phrases from *Fodor's Paris '93*, but there was a family tradition ("going back centuries," said Lindsay's mom) that shopping was what mothers did with their daughters on special occasions. So they drove to the outlet mall every year on their shared birthday and had a contest to see who could stand the boredom the longest. The year before, they stayed until an hour and a half after the mall closed and had to be escorted out by security. This year, Lindsay planned to give in automatically if they were there past seven. It was an hours drive back and she had homework.

The night before, they stayed up playing Monopoly, another tradition. Lindsay's mom said she had played it with her own mother and her sister on birthdays, and her mother with her grandmother, and so on back down I-75 and into the hills of East Tennessee and way back over the Atlantic Ocean into the white-clay huts and forests of the past. Lindsay liked imagining the unbroken veins of tradition running backward through time, even though she knew from *1000 Amazing Origins of Everyday Things* that Monopoly wasn't invented until 1935.

Even her mother's scabby-skinned boyfriend the Lizard had to play. "It's bad luck if you don't," said Lindsay's mom. The Lizard was a constant now, lurking in the crevices of their life, Lindsay thought, absorbing their light. He was writing a massive bad novel called *The Chronicles of the Dragon* which he claimed to have abandoned when he took the job with his cousin's towing company, but which Lindsay sometimes caught him working on, late at night at the kitchen table with a can of Milwaukee's Best and a stack of paper beside him. When she caught him she would make fun of him. "Is that your book? Is that your *dragon* book?" She would threaten to tell her mom, and he would threaten to cut off her head and hang it from the empty flowerpot hooks over the door, where the seagulls would pluck her eyes and the songbirds would carry off strands of her hair for their nests.

Lindsay's mother was no good at Monopoly. She bought recklessly and mortgaged without thought. Later she kept trying to negotiate for properties and for immunity to taxes. She tried to bring in items from outside the game as bargaining tools: her melting makeup kits, her stained-glass necklace from

Arizona. "Hey, Linds," she whispered. "Do you still want to go to Montreal?" Eventually Lindsay threatened to quit the game if her mother didn't stop and her mother apologized and switched to embezzling from the bank. They ate Bugles and drank pink champagne laced with Kool-Aid. The rule was supposed to be that you couldn't have any until midnight of the night before your birthday, but Lindsay's mom was sometimes willing to bend the rules in order to start drinking early.

The Lizard lost all his money in the first hour, made sarcastic noises at everything Lindsay said, drank Pabst Blue Ribbon instead of champagne, and left the game in the middle of Lindsay's turn. "You can't leave the game early!" said Lindsay's mom. "It's bad luck! Are you trying to curse our birthday, or what?"

"I'm not cursing your birthday. Jesus. I would just like to actually get some sleep at some point tonight."

"If you want to disgrace the sacred traditions of Monopoly," said Lindsay's mom, "you can go right ahead. Just don't expect us to respect you or anything."

The Lizard rolled his eyes and crinkled shut the Bugles bag as if in protest.

A few minutes after he had wrapped himself in the thin pink sheets of the now-permanently pulled out couch bed, Lindsay's mother picked up the remote and turned their scratchy television on full-blast. Up in Bois Blanc it was possible to get the news and a few miles down M-337 there was nothing but a faint gray fuzz on every station, but where Lindsay and her mom lived the three stations were forever in flux, Schoolcraft County Public Access forever being ripped into by a Canadian channel dedicated entirely to heartfelt testimonials about kitchen gadgets. The Lizard sat straight up and squinted.

"Mellie, what the fuck."

Lindsay and her mother exchanged looks and began to giggle. Their voices when they laughed were the same. The whir of a Jack LaLane Juicer drowned them out and the Lizard buried his face in the pillow with a low reptilian moan.

From the far bedroom, Lindsay's little sister began to cry.

"Oh, honey," said Lindsay's mom. "You woke Alley up." The Lizard scowled. "Go tell her it's just you, or she might think there's a Komodo dragon in the house."

Lindsay's giggles exploded from behind her hand. She pulled her nightgowned knees up to her chin to muffle them.

The Lizard hissed and burrowed against the arm of the couch.

"Hey, how come you don't talk like a human being instead of making sounds?" said Lindsay. "Like for example, when Alley is sleeping and you don't want to wake her up with your sounds, you could say, 'Please turn down the television. I am trying to sleep.' Instead of being all arg ar what." Lindsay's mother laughed.

"Shut up, Genius," said the Lizard.

"That is what you sound like, though," said Lindsay's mom.

"Blargh," said Lindsay. She looked straight at her mother and made a face. Her mother giggled into her knees.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"One million o' clock!" said Lindsay.

"Quarter past infinity!" said Lindsay's mom.

"Yargle," said Lindsay, tipping her head back, lolling her tongue. "How come you don't find your own place to live, if you don't like it here?"

"Yeah," said Lindsay's mother. "How come?" Then she wrapped her freckled arms around the Lizard's head. She buried her lips in his grease-heavy hair. "Lin-lin's just being a silly-head, isn't she?"

"I am not."

"We love our dragon, don't we? We love our enchanted prince." She kissed him on the mouth, her thin hair hanging. Lindsay blocked her eyes with one hand and made loud gagging sounds. It was funny and gross how her mom, who could not stop making fun of the Lizard when he wasn't around and sometimes even when he was, could turn around in the same minute and paw

his face, and look into his cold reptile eyes and smile that nakedly bright, as if she were happy at last.

They left early in the morning when the sky was pink and the Lizard was still half-asleep on the couch bed. Lindsay's mom shook his shoulders until he shifted under the afghans and the yellow baby's blanket. "Honey, wake up," she said. "Don't forget to give Alley her breakfast, ok? We're going."

The Lizard propped himself up on scaly elbows. "Bring a sweater," he said, to Lindsay.

"Ok, *mom*," said Lindsay. "Whatever you say, *mom*."

"Whatever. It's going to get cold."

"The prophet has spoken," said Lindsay's mother.

The Lizard drew the blue-and-yellow afghan up to his incompletely bearded chin.

"Whatever," he said. "Do what you want."

"How come you always put up with him?" said Lindsay. Outside, the yellow trees and the swing set chains were damp with dew. The tall weeds of the lot next door sparkled in the light. Lindsay stopped to tie her shoe, untied the knot and re-tied it. She imagined sometimes that her eyes were a camera, that everything she saw would be played back one day with music in it.

"What do you mean?"

"The Lizard."

"Oh. He's ok. He's not that bad, actually."

"He's so gross."

"Yeah, well. Guys are naturally a little gross. You find that out when you start dating." "I'm not going to start dating."

Her mom laughed to herself in a way Lindsay didn't like. "Well, not now, I hope."

"I mean ever."

Lindsay's mom smiled into the air and swung her arms. She had worn her gold bracelets for the occasion, and her sinking sparkly shirt from Rainbow's End, and flecks of sunlight leapt from her like beads of water. "Anyway," said Lindsay's mother, "he's Alley's dad, so you have to like him for that, at least."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Lindsay.

The outlet mall was on the far side of a town of tall signs and faded motels. On the way, they ate from a bag of old Fritos and counted roadside souvenir shops and the shells of old cars with the grass growing through them. Lindsay's mom had the radio going, and Lindsay liked the way the birch trees and the motels fell past in time to the music, how the crows by the roadside walked to a perfect music-video beat. They were singing along with the end of "Love is a Battlefield" on the radio when the DJ's voice cut in through the guitars, and the first of the tall signs sailed toward them over the trees.

"Hey, look!" said Lindsay's mom. "We're almost there! Shut *up!*" she told the DJ, slapping the radio off. Lindsay giggled.

"Happy birthday, by the way."

"No," said Lindsay, "happy birthday to *you.*"

"No, happy birthday to you."

Lindsay's mom was fifteen. They had been born on the same day, fifteen years apart, in the same gray hospital, but Lindsay had grown up and her mother had stayed fifteen, and her mother showed every sign of staying fifteen forever. When Lindsay was younger it didn't bother her, but she was eleven this year, and next year she would be twelve, and in a few more years she would catch up with her mother and pass her. She wondered what she would tell people, when she was forty or fifty, crinkle-eyed and tall, and her mother still squirming in her seat like an impatient teenager, with a teenager's lineless face.

They used to tell people they were sisters, in the days before Riverview Mobile Estates and the Lizard, when they still had the gray Econoline and ate saltine crackers spread with jam and margarine in truck-stop diners that were always different and always the same. Orphans, Lindsay's mom would say, and look down, and sometimes people would buy them a milkshake out of sympathy. In real life, Lindsay's grandmother was alive and wheezing in West

Estonia, Michigan. Sometimes Lindsay's mom would start to call her on a payphone and hang up before the first ring.

"She's not home," she would say.

The outlet mall was a ring of big pastel buildings connected by an indoor food court. It was set at the top of a low, slow-sloping hill, with a parking lot that enveloped the hill like a cracked gray parachute. "Well?" said Lindsay's mother. "You ready to shop till you drop or what?"

They ate lunch at a flickering A&W: limp fries and ketchup from a pump, and her mother did imitations of the people at Brogan's IGA where she worked: slurry Rita Eggerston whose husband was in jail; Melanie Sorbek with the lazy eye and the deaf son; the sad high-school romances of the baggers. Lindsay laughed at all the faces and sipped root beer that was not as good as she remembered it. On the way to Half Price Books they stopped at a Chinese gift shop that hadn't been there last year. Lindsay's mom said, "When we get to Half Price Books I'll buy you something for your birthday, ok?"

The gift shop was full of beautiful small things. Lindsay knew from the tilt of her mother's head that she had come to shoplift. She moved to the back of the store, where the painted trunks sat among white-faced statues of people and dragons. She decided that when she was famous she would have a trunk with dragons painted on it, instead of a boring suitcase, and in her TV biography there would be a discussion of the trunk and what it meant to her. There would be words on the soundtrack, her own words that she would write in a letter to a friend she didn't know yet but would meet. *I like the romance of a trunk, the old-fashioned* – something, how would it go? *There's something comforting about a wooden trunk.* . . . She touched the limbs of some of the statues, which she knew was not allowed but could not help. There were voices colliding at the front of the store, but they barely reached her through the Chinese music on the loudspeakers. She could not tell if the music was phony or real, whether real Chinese people would consider it phony. She was fingering some silver dragon rings when the saleslady tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me." Her tired blue eyes were ringed with a thick black line, like charcoal-pencil drawings of eyes. "Was that your sister just now?"

"No," said Lindsay. "Was who my sister?"

"Girl just ran out the door."

"My sister's at home," said Lindsay.

The saleslady cracked her gum and looked past Lindsay, right over her head into the white limbs of the statues. "I saw you come in together," she said. "I just thought you might like to know."

Lindsay figured her mom would have gone on to Half Price Books, so she walked over. There was free coffee just inside the door and Lindsay loved the taste of coffee blunted by the powdered whitener they always used. She had been told it would stunt her growth, but she didn't believe it. She knew she would pass fifteen and keep going. Sometimes she thought there were already crow's feet around her eyes, which she could see by squinting at the mirror. She poured herself a cup and when she couldn't find her mother, she went back to the foreign-language books. There was a new *Fodor's Paris* and she flipped to the street map of the 5th Arrondissement, where she was going to live when she grew up. The whole time she was reading she expected to look up and see her mother, or to feel her hand on her shoulder. She was planning to say something about how she was already almost done with the book, how there was no need to buy it anymore because she had already finished it. But then she had read almost all of *Fodor's Paris* and her mother had not come by. She searched the store again, then went out into the mall. She sat down on the black wire bench outside the Chinese gift shop, under an artificial dogwood. Middle-aged women in floating dresses or khaki pants asked her if she was all right, if she was lost. Yes, she was, she told them; no, she wasn't, thank you. She wondered what would happen and then forced herself to stop wondering, because there wasn't any point.

She decided she would walk slowly to the information desk, the way she had taught herself to walk slowly to the bathroom and back at school. She counted out an hour in one-onethousand seconds and then she asked if they could please make the announcement Miss Melissa Jean Shrift, your daughter is waiting. They did. The words were louder than she had wanted. The mall sounded hollow and huge. Lindsay waited. She repeated in her head the French vocabulary for all the things she could see and all the people who passed, until there were no new things to name that she knew the word for. Then she asked if they could please make the announcement again. After the third announcement she said could she please have some change for the pay phone. She was very calm, as if she had been preparing for exactly this situation for years.

The payphones were at the far end of the mall, in a little rotting-wood annex that was half overgrown with grass. There were birds' nests in the rafters. Two

of the payphones had been torn out of their booths, and their bare red and gray wires were splayed out like veins or roots, but one was still intact. It was cold and getting colder. Lindsay's hand shook getting the coins up to the slot. In the old days of her childhood she had been alone in worse places, and she had felt no more afraid than if she were in her own bedroom, and her mother had always come back, almost always, unhurt and unchanged. She could not tell if she had grown soft or only more aware of the dangers. What dangers? She could not think of any that were not obviously melodramatic. Kidnappings, murders. Starving to death. Madness. She dropped the quarter twice before she heard the click, the hiccup in the dial tone. She dialed, and waited.

The Lizard should have known something like this would happen. He should have known not to trust Lindsay's mom ("your batshit mother,") to do anything, ever. Did she realize what a hassle she had caused? He would have to borrow his stepmom's car. He would have to waste the rest of the afternoon driving out there and back. The roads around here were for shit. He kept asking about his truck: was it all right? What did she do with his truck? Was the truck still there?"

"I don't *know*," said Lindsay. "I can find out but I have to get off the phone first and I can't get off the phone until you promise to come pick me up."

"What if I hang up on you?" said the Lizard. "Can you get off the phone then?"

"Just come pick me up."

The Lizard said she could stay there overnight, see if it didn't teach her a lesson. "*What* lesson?" she screamed. He said calm down, he would come, but maybe not for a while; he had things to do first. *What* things? None of her damn business what things.

"Your stupid *book*?" said Lindsay. "It better not be your stupid book. It better not."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," said the Lizard. He didn't have to listen to this crap. He had work to do. He couldn't just go driving halfway around the world in his stepmom's car because Lindsay's mother was a crazy-ass kleptomaniac who couldn't even play a game of Monopoly without cheating.

"Shut up," she said. "Shut. Up."

"I'm hanging up the phone now."

"Not until you promise to come get me."

There was a pause. "Ok. I promise."

"As soon as possible. Today."

The Lizard sighed. The phone filled with static.

"Hello?" said Lindsay. "Hello?"

"Jesus," said the Lizard. "Have some fucking faith in humanity."

Lindsay clenched her teeth. "As soon as you hang up the phone," she said.

"As soon as I can, ok?"

"Fine." Lindsay's voice was hoarse. "Fine. Whatever."

She went out to the parking lot to see if the Lizard's truck was still there, but she couldn't remember where they'd parked and the wind stung her face. The sky and the pavement were the same color, each as hard and blank as the other. She realized she hadn't given him a place to meet her, and that probably he wouldn't come at all. He would leave her there to teach her a lesson, it didn't matter what lesson. She went back to Half Price and tried to distract herself by comparing Bible translations to see which one was the worst. It was a tie between the Amplified New American translation and the Extreme Faith Teen Study Bible and then she got sick of comparing. She looked through some true-story magazines and felt the light fading and then she walked around the mall as slowly as she could, not even lifting her feet from the ground.

Outside it was almost dark. Lindsay could feel it even though she was far from the windows. In another hour she would find the bathrooms and hide there until everyone was gone, and then the mall would be hers. Maybe there would be a sympathetic janitor who would tell the security guard there was no one there, and after the coast was clear she would go down to the fountain and fish out enough money for breakfast the next morning. In the day she would sleep on the couches at Half Price Books and at night she would be alone and do what she wanted. It was a good story to reenact for the TV biography when she was famous: The Iron Creek Outlet Mall Years. There would be a blurry

video of her walking, just as she was walking now, past the thin trees in their shallow grated circles and the kiosk where an old man slumped half-sleeping among airbrushed memorial sweatshirts. There would be a voice that was not hers reading from her future diary over buzzing music and echoing sound effects. She touched every article of clothing in the Old Navy outlet before walking back to the information desk, so slowly that she was sure no one could tell she was moving at all. As slowly as the night, she thought. As slowly as the sun sets.

She had just passed the Chinese gift shop when her little sister came tottering out into the middle of the mall in her pink pajamas and a green winter hat. When Lindsay first saw her she didn't know it was her sister, and she smiled without meaning to, and then she realized who it was.

"Hey," she said. "Hey. Where'd you come from? Hi, Alley-alley-oxenfree. Alley-alley-alley-cat. They were asking about you, you know. I said you were at home."

"Ai," said Alley, who didn't know any real words yet other than Lin Lin and Daddy and Juice. "Ba." She raised her arms. Lindsay picked her up and twirled her around and Alley giggled and let her head fall limp. It always made Lindsay nervous when she did that, as if her neck might snap from the weight and kill her right there in her arms.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" she said. She tried to prop up Alley's head with one hand, but Alley kept pushing it down, giggling, hurting Lindsay's fingers. "Ow. Stop."

Alley pulled the green hat off her head and set it flat on top of Lindsay's, where it lay limp for a moment before sliding to the ground. Behind her was the Lizard. He was waiting at the information desk with a brown tote bag from Birch Bridge Used Books and Gifts and a lukewarm Dr. Pibb, which he held out to Lindsay as if toasting her from afar.

He didn't say, "Your crazy-ass mother." He didn't say, "You're lucky I was even home." He twisted a smile into thin air and waved at her through the long sleeves of his smelly overcoat like they had been best friends for years. In her mind, Lindsay made the gagging sound. She waved back without a smile.

"I brought your homework," he said. "Jesus Christ, this is a lot of homework." He lifted the tote bag and faked breaking his back. "What grade are you in, fifth? Sixth? When I was in the sixth grade you couldn't put a gun to my head

to make me do homework." He had brought her French exercise book, and the Xerox of response questions for *Jacob Have I Loved*, and two sheets of math problems, four pencils, and one of those plastic lap desks with a zebra-striped bean-bag cushion. The red Dollar Tree price tag was still on it. "That's your birthday present," he said. "Here. Happy birthday."

He handed her a card, with the pink lip of the envelope folded around it. It was a photograph of a caramel-colored horse, clumsily lined with pink and silver glitter. Inside the glitter-letters said, NO HORSIN' AROUND. . . HAPPY BIRTHDAY!! On top of the message he had written LINDSAY and beneath it his name and Alley's in his thin, squashed-looking hand. Lindsay hadn't liked horses in forever, but she pressed her lips together until they bent up at the ends and said, "Wow, thanks. I can do my homework in the car."

"Or anywhere," he added.

"Or anywhere, yeah."

"What do you say? Was it a decent idea or what?"

"It was a great idea," said Lindsay. "Thanks."

At the pretzel stand he bought her a pretzel that was rubbery and cold, and she ate it slowly, picking off the salt crystals with her two remaining fingernails and tearing it to tiny pieces with hands she knew were dirty. On the way home, she sat her little sister in her lap, squinting her eyes to block out every passing broken building, everything sad and chipped and peeling about the gas stations and the Gift Shacks between the outlet mall and home, and the Lizard was silent. She opened her birthday card and closed it, rubbing the glitter with her fingers and watching it catch the last light of the evening.

About Laura Breitenbeck

Laura Breitenbeck is Program Coordinator for the Disquiet International Literary Program in Lisbon. She earned an MFA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and is currently re-watching all of *Babylon 5*.