



My name is Kate Lipton, and I just want to say that my parents are crazy. I'm twelve and my brother Freddy is ten, and I honestly feel like I'm the grown-up in our family.

What do I mean? Well, it's hard to know where to start.

Maybe I'll start with the Miniature Horse Petting Farm. That was our parents' latest brilliant idea. And by *brilliant*, I mean *stupid*.

They both had normal jobs. Mom was a reading teacher at Gooding Elementary School across town. And Dad was an accountant for a chain of pharmacies here in Middle Village, Pennsylvania.

But they decided those jobs were boring. They saved up their money. And one day, they announced their big plan to Freddy and me.

The four of us were sitting around the kitchen table. Dinner was over, but we were still finishing up bowls of frozen yogurt for dessert. "We're quitting our jobs," Dad said.

Freddy did a spit take with his yogurt, spraying the whole table. “You’re *what?*”

Freddy thinks he’s a comedian. He thinks it’s hilarious to spit water or milk, and turn himself into a human geyser.

I don’t know why Mom and Dad put up with it. Well, I *do* know. They’re both crazy.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked. I’m the sensible one, remember?

“We bought twelve miniature horses,” Dad said. Mom flashed him an approving smile. “We’re going to sell miniature horses. Breed them and sell them.”

“Doesn’t that sound like fun?” Mom added.

“Fun?” I said.

“We’ll make a ton of money,” Dad said. “They’re totally adorable. Once you see one, you have to own one.”

“Where are we going to keep them?” Freddy asked. “Can I have one in my room?”

“We bought a farm to keep them on,” Mom answered.

Freddy and I both gasped. “You mean we’re *moving?*”

Mom shook her head. “No. We’re staying in the house. We bought a farm to keep the horses on. Wait till you see it. You’ll see how much fun it’s going to be.”

“We’ll all pitch in and take care of them,” Dad said.

“You mean we have to shovel up after them?”  
I asked.

Mom flashed me her Unhappy Look. “Kate, why do you always have to be so negative?”

*Because I’m not crazy?*

“You’ll fall in love with them. I promise,”  
Dad said.

Well . . . Freddy and I liked the little horses okay. They were cute and very sweet and funny.

But Mom and Dad couldn’t sell any of them. After three months, they still had twelve miniature horses.

Middle Village is a pretty small town. And people just don’t have room in their backyards for a miniature horse. We have a neighbor on the corner who has a pet pig named Jolly, and they keep Jolly in the house.

But you can’t keep a miniature horse in the house. That would be cruel—for everybody.

So, they came up with a new idea. They decided to turn the farm into a miniature-horse petting farm. “We’re not going to sell these wonderful animals,” Dad announced. “We’ll have huge crowds paying admission to come pet and feed them.”

“And we’ll give mini-horse rides to all the little kids,” Mom said.

Guess what? That plan didn’t work out, either.

See, you might want to pet *one* mini horse. That’s kind of fun. But once you’ve petted one, you don’t really want to pet eleven more.

Most petting zoos have a whole bunch of different animals to pet and feed. But we had only miniature horses. Bor-ing.

The crowds didn't come, and my parents were going broke. We couldn't even go on our annual summer vacation to the cabin at the lake. And Mom said when school started in the fall, we probably wouldn't shop for new school outfits. We'd probably have to make do with last year's clothes.

That's no problem for me. But Freddy grew at least two inches this summer, so he would look really dorky in his short jeans and tight shirts.

Then my parents had a "brilliant" new idea. Which is why we are all in Australia.

And if I tell you this idea, I swear you won't believe it.

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I don't want to come right out and tell you their insane plan. I'll just give you a hint: We are half-way around the world in Queensland, Australia. That's a long way from Middle Village. And guess what we're doing? We're looking at lizards.

My parents have always been lizard freaks. They have an entire shelf of books about lizards. They have a big painting of lizards sunning on rocks in their bedroom. They love shows on PBS about lizards. And they even collected little salamanders for a while.

Australia, Dad says, is the place for lizards. I guess they have more lizards there than anywhere on earth.

So, my aunt Lydia loaned Mom and Dad the money for this trip. And here we are, spending all our time doing guess what? That's right. Looking at lizards.

Freddy the comedian keeps pointing at the ugly, warty creatures and saying, "That one

looks just like Kate when she wakes up in the morning.” Or: “Look at those watery eyes. Just like Kate.”

He’s my brother and I love him. I just don’t have the heart to break it to him that he’s not funny.

Dad put a finger to his lips, motioning for Freddy to shut up. “Let’s be serious,” he said. “This is a serious place and we have serious work to do.”

The serious place is the Queens Park Wildlife Preserve. They have so many weird animals in Australia. I’d love to see a dingo or an emu or a kangaroo.

Dad says maybe we’ll get to those later. But we flew here for one reason—to check out the lizards.

“This is so fun,” Mom said. She always says that when she sees that Freddy and I aren’t having fun.

Don’t get me wrong. I love visiting a country so far away. I’m just not happy that my parents might want to bring lizards back to Middle Village and start a lizard petting zoo or something.

Freddy and I were hanging back. “Come over here.” Dad motioned with both hands. “You’re not going to see lizards like this back home.”

“I hope not!” Freddy exclaimed.

A low wire fence separated us from the lizards.

They sat sunning themselves on rocks or on the sandy shore of a narrow ribbon of water.

Dad pointed to the lizard guidebook in his hand. “See that one? That one is called a thorny devil. See? It has big, mean-looking pointed thorns poking out from all over its body.”

“Eww, gross,” I said.

“I think it’s *cute*,” Freddy said. He laughed. He knew the last thing you’d call that lizard is *cute*.

“The book says that Australia has seven hundred different kinds of lizards,” Dad said. “More lizards than anywhere in the world.”

“A fun fact,” Mom said.

Dad stared at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged.

“What’s that one?” I asked, pointing to a small lizard raising its head to the sun.

Dad checked through the book. “It’s a blue-tongue lizard. It says they’re very tame.”

Freddy gave me a push. “Go put your finger in its mouth. See if it’s really tame.”

“Go put your *head* in its mouth,” I said.

He grinned. “Dare me?”

Mom pulled her baseball cap lower on her forehead. “That sun is strong.” She turned to me. “Kate, can you picture these amazing lizards back home on our farm?”

I didn't get a chance to answer. Dad interrupted. "Whoa. Look at that one coming toward us. See its beard? It's a bearded dragon lizard."

I turned in time to see the lizard begin to hurtle toward us. It was at least two feet long. It snapped its jaws once. Twice. It didn't slow down as it approached the low fence.

"Look out!" Dad cried. "It's going to jump the fence! It's going to ATTACK!"