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Opening extract from

Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever and the Best Worst Summer Ever

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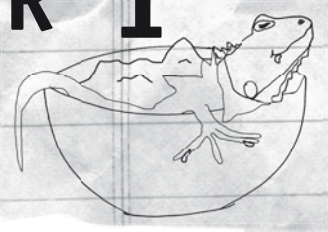
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CHAPTER 1



"DISGUSTING!" I groaned at my sister, Emily. "Get your lizard out of the cream cheese. She's leaving claw marks."

"Blueberry cream cheese happens to be Katherine's favourite," Emily said. "She loves the berry chunks."

We were standing in the middle of The Crunchy Pickle, the deli our family owns on the Upper West Side of New York. Correction. Emily and I were standing in the middle of the deli. Katherine, Emily's pet iguana, was standing in the middle of the cream-cheese bowl. She was perched on top of one of the booth tables, snapping up cream cheese from the smoked fish platter with her long, grey, bumpy tongue. A blob of blueberry cream cheese hung off her snout. It looked like an iguana spot.

"Reptiles are not allowed in restaurants,"

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I said. “It’s against the law.”

“Says who?” Emily wanted to know.

“Says me and the entire health department of the city of New York,” I answered.

Sometimes I wonder about Emily. I mean, what was she thinking, bringing Katherine here, tonight of all nights? We were having a big celebration, a party my mum throws every year that she calls “Beat the Heat with Deli Meat”. It’s a kick-off bash to get summer business started. The Crunchy Pickle was full of people, mostly friends and neighbours, who came to sample the food. There was barely room for all the people, let alone a cream-cheese-eating iguana.

“Sorry, Katherine old girl, party’s over,” I said, picking up the bowl of blueberry cream cheese and moving it away from her snout. Katherine hissed at me, whipping her tongue out so far that it actually touched my hand.

Help! Somebody get me a Wet One! I’ve been licked by lizard tongue!

Robert Upchurch, third-grade nerd and geek pal to my sister, came charging to her rescue. He’s a lizard lover just like Emily. He put his bony hand on my shoulder and looked me

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dead in the eye. He cleared his throat before he spoke. Then he cleared it again. Then one more time to get that last little bit of gunk out. As if you couldn't tell, Robert has a major mucous problem.

"Actually, Hank, I think it's lovely that Emily invited Katherine," he said.

Did he say *lovely*? What third-grader says anything is *lovely*? Lovely is a total grandma word. Something our neighbour Mrs Fink – who I noticed was standing by the buffet doing some serious damage to the hummus dip – might say. As in "Look, Hank, what *lovely* manners your sister has" or "That little beige jumper looks so *lovely* on you."

Robert took out a tissue from the little pack he keeps in the pocket of his white collared shirt. I wondered what else he keeps in there.

Oh, I know. Nasal spray. Probably extra-strength.

Robert blew his nose. This was no regular blow. It was a real honker. The only good thing about it was that it required Robert to take his bony hand off my shoulder.

"Katherine is not leaving, Hank," Emily said.

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"This is a family celebration. And Katherine is part of our family."

"I agree," Robert chimed in.

I was going to have to set my little sister and her congested boyfriend straight.

"Firstly," I said, "this is not a family celebration. This is 'Beat the Heat with Deli Meat' night, which is a business event, not a family celebration."

I don't think Katherine liked my tone of voice. She let out another nasty hiss and rolled one of her creepy eyes in my general direction.

Too bad, lady lizard. You may not like what I have to say, but it's the truth.

"And secondly," I continued, "Katherine is not a member of our family. She is a lower life-form who can't digest cabbage."

"Actually, it's true that cabbage gives iguanas wind build-up," Robert said. "And then they eventually explode. A horrible thought."

"Thanks for the useful info, Robert," I said. "I'll remember that."

"Now you understand why I find Robert so fascinating," Emily said, flashing Robert her ickiest smile.

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Fascinating? Robots are fascinating. The Mets baseball team statistics are fascinating. But Robert Upchurch, nose-blower and fact-spewer, is not – I repeat – NOT fascinating.

"And another reason Katherine is not a family member," I added, "is because we only happen to have humans in the Zipzer family."

"Then how did you get in?" Emily shot back. Ouch! You attack that girl's iguana and she goes for the throat.

Emily stuck her tongue out at me. I stuck out my tongue right back at her. OK, I know it's not the most mature thing for an almost eleven-year-old guy to do. But Emily is almost ten, and I didn't notice her tongue on a leash.

Papa Pete came out from behind the pastrami counter, where he had been making sandwiches. He's our grandfather, and he used to own The Crunchy Pickle. He's so nice! You want to hug him every time you see him.

Papa Pete could tell that we weren't exactly having a kissy-kissy brother-sister moment. It must have been our tongues sticking out that gave it away.

"What seems to be the problem, my darling

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grandchildren?" Papa Pete said, giving Emily's cheek a pinch with his big, plump fingers.

"Hank says Katherine can't be in here," Emily said.

"In this particular case, Hank is correct," Papa Pete said. "Animals and/or lizards are not allowed in restaurants."

My ears were having a party. You go, Papa Pete. Tell that girl a thing or two.

Emily pouted and stuck her arm out towards Katherine.

"Climb up to Mama," she said, trying to sound really pathetic. She was doing a good job of it too.

Katherine climbed up Emily's arm, digging her little claws into Emily's pink jumper until she made it all the way up to Emily's shoulder. Emily leaned over and rubbed Katherine's snout with her cheek.

"It's OK, Kathy," she whispered in her baby voice. "I still love you."

Couldn't you just throw up? I mean, what kind of person declares her love to a hissing lizard? My sister, that's who.

"Tell you what," Papa Pete said. "Give

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Katherine to me, and I'll take her back to the flat. Then you kids can stay here and have a good time."

Didn't I tell you Papa Pete was the greatest grandpa in the world? He was willing to leave the party just so Emily wouldn't have to. He lifted Katherine off Emily's jumper and gave her a little pat on the snout. Usually, that makes Katherine hiss, but instead she just settled into Papa Pete's big hand. Even that nasty-tempered iguana has to love Papa Pete.

"Why doesn't Emily take Katherine home herself?" I asked Papa Pete.

"Because Emily is a nine-year-old who isn't going walking by herself at night," Papa Pete said.

"It's not fair, Papa Pete. You shouldn't have to leave the party."

"Trust me, Hankie. It's my pleasure. Mrs Fink keeps trying to feed me hummus. What does she think I am, a baby? I need a break."

You already know that Mrs Fink is our next-door neighbour. But there are two other things you should know about her. One is that she has a crush on Papa Pete. The other is that she has

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false teeth. Both of these facts are probably the reason that Papa Pete was willing to leave the party. As a matter of fact, he grabbed Katherine and was out of the door so quickly, I thought I saw a trail of smoke coming from under his heels.

As Papa Pete raced out the door leading to Broadway, he almost knocked over Frankie and Ashley, who were just running in ahead of Frankie's dad. Frankie Townsend is my best friend, and Ashley Wong is my other best friend.

"Are we too late?" Ashley asked me. She stopped to catch her breath.

"I hope we didn't miss the Invent Your Own Sandwich Contest," Frankie said. "I've got a real winner."

Frankie always seems so confident. Why shouldn't he be? Things are easy for him. He and Ashley are both great students, not like me who has a difficult time at school.

"Check this out, Zip," Frankie said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "I'm going to start with a layer of soystrami, then a layer of pickles, soy turkey, a layer of green olives, soylami and a layer of pimentos. On bread, with melted cheese on each slice."

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"I must be really hungry," Ashley said, "because that's actually sounding good to me."

In case you aren't familiar with soystrami or soylami, they are what my mum calls "mock deli meats". My mum's mission in life is to create healthy deli luncheon meats for the twenty-first century. So she takes perfectly delicious foods like pastrami and salami and messes them up by adding stuff like soy and crushed walnuts, putting them smack in the middle of the no-taste zone.

"Wait until you hear my recipe," Ashley said. "I've got a triple decker that's going to roll your socks up and down."

But just as she opened her mouth to describe it, Dr Townsend stood up and clinked his glass with a spoon. Dr Townsend, Frankie's dad, loves to make speeches and toasts. Whenever I have dinner at their house, even if it's just a regular dinner on a Wednesday night, he clinks his glass to get everyone's attention and then launches into one of his long toasts. He's a professor of African-American Studies at Columbia University and he's really smart, but he uses more big words in one sentence than

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most people use in a year. I always need Frankie to translate what he's saying.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr Townsend began, once he'd got everyone's attention, "I believe we should all take this opportunity to salute the ancient ritual surrounding the summer solstice."

"Wow, that sounds like fun," I whispered to Frankie. "If only I knew what he was saying."

"Let us raise our vessels with joy and anticipation," Dr Townsend said, "as we surrender to the season of relaxation and renewal."

"Yes! Yes!" I shouted, before I could stop myself.

It all sounded so good that it took me a second to realize that I didn't have the slightest idea what I was yes-yes-ing.

"Frankie, can you translate?" I whispered.

"Sure, Zip. He said have a nice summer."

"He did? Then of course yes-yes!"

"And profound gratitude to the Zipzers," Dr Townsend continued, raising his glass to my mum and dad, who were standing next to the buffet. My mum had some coleslaw hanging from her blonde, curly hair. She always has something from the menu in her hair. My dad

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was wearing his glasses on the end of his nose, like he does when he's working on a crossword puzzle. They both looked kind of goofy but very happy. "You have our deepest appreciation for providing this neighbourhood festivity with a sumptuous feast," Dr Townsend said.

I looked at Frankie. I didn't even have to ask for a translation.

"He said thanks for dinner."

"Yes! Yes!" I hollered. Whoops, I did it again.

That really made Ashley laugh.

"And most of all, I raise my glass to the children in the room," Dr Townsend said, turning to us. "My congratulations on a finely executed school year. Enjoy this well-earned season of freedom as you begin your Junior Explorers Summer Programme, so rife with adventure, amusement and surprise."

Everyone in the deli started to applaud. Frankie stood up and took a bow. He loves the spotlight. Everyone applauded even louder.

"Come forward, children, so we can gaze at the bliss radiating from your faces," Dr Townsend said.

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All the kids went to stand next to Dr Townsend. Frankie and Ashley, Robert and Emily, Ryan Shimozato and Heather Payne, who go to school with us and live in the neighbourhood. We all took a bow. It was really fun.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from the back of the room, a voice that never, ever has anything nice to say. It was Nick the Tick McKelty, the meanest mouth in the entire fourth grade. I hadn't seen him come in, but his dad owns the bowling alley a few streets away, so I was sure my mum and dad had invited them.

"Sit down, Ziphead!" McKelty shouted. "He's not talking about you."

That McKelty. Leave it to him. I could feel my face turning red.

"He's talking about us kids in the Junior Explorers Programme," McKelty shouted, "not the dummies like you who have to go to summer school."

How could someone be so mean in public? I'll never, ever figure that out.

"Excuse me, Nicholas," Dr Townsend said. "I'm wishing *all* the children a wonderful summer, regardless of what programme they're attending."

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That was nice of him, but it was too late. Everyone in the deli had already heard McKelty. I'm sure they were all feeling sorry for me, the dummy who has to go to summer school.

They were right. Everyone else was going to be a Junior Explorer.

Not me, though. I was going to summer school.

Stupid, boring, horrible, hideous summer school.

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