

First Prize
Drako
by Heather Rath

I love reptiles.

My parents hate them.

They warned me—repeatedly—*no snakes, frogs, or other reptiles in this house ... ever!*

If I brought one home, I'm sure my parents would kill me.

I'm allergic to fur. As a developing artist at 15, I need to study—and draw—real, live animals and people. Only it's hard to find people to pose. They don't like sitting or standing still for a long time.

Was hanging around a pet shop in our neighborhood. I spy this sign speaking directly to me: "Allergic to fur? We have the right pet for you!"

Donning my facemask against germs, I enter. Masked salesman quickly approaches. Toady-looking guy with a croaky throat. Waves me over to a small section of the shop by the fish. Points out a large aquarium. Home to various scaly, creepy-looking creatures doing nothing much but hanging out on a hot rock. Salamanders, bug-eyed red toads, fancy-bearded dragon, leopard gecko, veiled chameleon, Bahaman anole, Pacman frog, long-tailed lizard.

And then, this beauty. In an aquarium all by himself. Caught my eye with just the slightest move. A green iguana from some tropical forest. Depending on where you looked, his green skin changed different shades. Awesome. You'd never find any magnificent creature like this in Ohio.

Fell in love immediately. Called him Drako. Stunning. With his long tail, he easily measured three feet. Flicked his tongue while I looked him over carefully.

"What's he eat?" I ask the toady guy.

"He's a vegetarian, kid. Likes to nibble on lettuce, grapes, even houseplant leaves ... easy to feed him. Jist gotta watch he won't escape. Fast like lightning." He pauses. "Thinkin' of getting' him?"

"Ah, man, love to. Gotta check my finances first. Only have a part-time job at Food Basics. Need an aquarium, too?"

“Yep. And them’s expensive, kid. Gotta get one large enough for the critter. And a hot rock, too. These fellas need heat. Specially here up north.”

I nod. “Expect to sell him fast?”

“Ya never know these days. What with this virus and all, people are doin’ strange things. We can’t keep puppies in stock. Gone as soon’s we get ‘em. But this here iguana? Somehow don’t think too many folks are lookin’ for this green guy. Can’t cuddle him. But he’s neat to watch.”

“And he’s beautiful,” I add. “Look at the different colours of green on his skin.”

“Uh-huh,” says Toady-man. Not convinced, I can tell.

“How much?”

“One hundred dollars. Plus his aquarium.”

“Look, man, I’ve been lookin’ all over for a pet like this. I can afford him. Take good care of him, too.”

“Ya want I should mark him sold?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod.

Jog home. My two bros are on screens. Dad not home yet. Mom in kitchen. I’ll work on her first.

“Just found this neatest pet. A mini-dragon.”

No reaction. She’s watching the small countertop TV. Looking at ingredients for a Mexican recipe. Eating South of the Border for some reason lately.

“Hmmm?” she says, pulling her head in my direction. Cigarette hangs out of her red lipstick mouth.

“Found a non-consequential pet for me. No trouble for you. He’s even vegetarian.”

“Sounds good to me, Rory-kins. He big?” She turns back to the mini-TV.

“No. He fits in an aquarium, and I’ll clean it.”

“Can’t be too big, then.”

“He’s not.”

“Uh-huh.” Still concentrating on the TV recipe.

I go through a similar conversation with my dad. When he comes home, he's tired of wearing a mask all day, mixes a cocktail of some kind, sinks in a stupor into his favorite living room chair.

"What's your mom say?" He squints through his glasses at his smartphone as he half listens to me.

"As long as I clean the aquarium, she says no problem."

"Okay, then. What is it? A fish?"

Just then his smartphone rings. I disappear.

Jog back to the pet shop. Tell Toadman. "Help me choose the right aquarium for him."

That night I hop with excitement in my bedroom. Find a suitable place atop my desk and sit there thinking ... wow! Tomorrow! Finally! A pet! Of my own choosing! Sooo excited.

Next day everyone's busy doing whatever it is they do each day. No one's paying attention to me. This time bike to the pet shop with my backpack and a carrier. Bike home again with the goods.

Haul the extra-large aquarium with the hot rock and the Drako container to my bedroom. Set up the tank. Plug in the hot rock. Close my bedroom door.

Carefully carry the Drako box to the tank. Coax him gently into the aquarium. Watch him flick his tongue. Explore.

Am ecstatic. He fascinates.

Sometime later, I decide to slowly remove the aquarium top. Touch his cool skin and marvel.

Like lightning, Drako leaps from the hot rock to the log in the aquarium to the top of the tank. He's out!

I know he's arboreal, so I look up.

Scan top of the curtained windows. He's there! Thinks he's hiding but his long tail hangs down. Already I love his personality.

He scurries along the wooden curtain rod.

Sudden steps on the stairs. Panic!

Mom enters my room.

“Rory ... what the hell?” she raises her voice. Sees the aquarium. Looks up. Sees Drako.
Screams.

Mom still screaming. Dad rushes in.

“What the?”

Looks up. Spies Drako. Mouth opens wide. Grabs my baseball bat in the corner. Raises his
arm and takes aim.

“No!” I yell.

He swings the bat with great force. Misses Drako. Hits me bull’s-eye on the head.

More screaming.

Told you my parents would kill me.

Author Bio: An award-winning writer, Heather Rath edited a weekly newspaper and
monthly business magazine before heading communications at a multinational company.