

Don't Drink the Liquor in Lizard LickMelissa Sibley

**Title:** "Don't Drink the Liquor in Lizard Lick"

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Don't Drink the Liquor in Lizard Lick

I AM LOST. MY HOME IS A SMALL TOWN WITH A FUNNY NAME—NEW BERN. OUR MAYOR CAN trace our history all the way back to Berne, Switzerland. Our sister city, you know. Proudly, we'll tell you that we used to be the capital of North Carolina, many moons ago. To New Bernians, the past is everything.

The future won't stop haunting me. New car, new school, new friends. I liked my old ones.

I am lost. My home is an old rusting Mustang, with memories and victories sewn into the stitching of the leather seats.

The future won't stop haunting me. Where I've been is no longer who I am. I don't know what to do about this.

I am lost. I no longer know where my home is.

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They say there exists another fearsome little community in eastern North Carolina that is in love with its history. It is a place lost in time, where modern technology bows down to the glory of the past.

The government knows about it, though you may not.

They say cell phone reception is nonexistent, and the citizens drive graying Oldsmobiles and station wagons with cherry wood paneling across the sides. They say technology of all kinds dies a dramatic death when it breathes Lizard Lick air. Perfectly well-ordered GPSes fall to pieces. Cell phones read *No Signal*. Clocks run backwards. They say that time itself is reversed when you cross the border.

They say that if you get lost anywhere in the continental U.S.—Frankfort, Carson City, Springfield, Charleston, anywhere in either of the Dakotas—you just might find yourself in Lizard Lick, North Carolina.

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I am lost. It's almost nine p.m., and Natasha's GPS is all-out malfunctioning, leaving her sputtering and gasping and recalculating like mad. She's killing herself trying to help me, but it is not enough; something is terribly wrong. Maybe the satellites are down, maybe the magnetic poles have suddenly switched, or maybe I've stumbled into the world's shallowest sinkhole, and am now heading straight for the center of the earth.

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Even when going upwards of 50 miles per hour on an empty, unknown road, Natasha is unnervingly quiet beneath me. The whole universe is quiet. In the twin blue beams of the headlights, I can make out the planks of an old-fashioned wooden fence running alongside the street. In a flash, I think I see something gleam on the fence, a silvery ripple of movement. My heartbeat climbs until it overpowers the blare of the radio. If a world exists beyond the fence, I can't see it.

A ridiculous thought spins in my mind: If I still had my Mustang, this wouldn't be happening.

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Yes, Lizard Lick is famous for its lizards.

They say that the lizards are invincible, but I've come to believe that even non-Lizard Lick lizards are in some ways unconquerable. After all, they are able to lose whole parts of themselves and regrow them anew, replacing cartilage as easily as you and I replace hair or fingernails. They say you can cut off a lizard's entire tail and it will not bat an eye. Lizards are special, you see. They have the ability to regenerate their limbs, no matter how many times life's teeth—predators, humans, change—bite them off.

They say that lizards drop their tails intentionally sometimes, to distract the predator and lure them away from the real meal.

Lizards know when it's time for change.

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I am lost. I drive a new model Kia SUV now. It's a terribly sensible vehicle, with four wheel drive, 28 miles to the gallon, plenty of room for my college gear, and a fancy GPS system installed in the dashboard. I've named the car Natasha, to instill her with good luck and breathe life into her quiet purring engine. I debated for days, but Natasha was the only name that fit—it sounded rugged and brave, the name of a girl who could climb mountains and tackle a 12 hour round trip from Asheville to New Bern with ease. My parents had made the car a stipulation if I insisted on going to school six hours away from home. When I traded in the Mustang, it felt like I was losing a lot more than a car; I was losing part of my history.

I should be happy. Natasha is a dream, the GPS a lifesaver; I am lucky to have her.

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But in my head I still hear the roar of a thunderous V8 engine, still feel the way my fifteen-year-old face lit up as I cranked my Mustang's ignition for the first time. I remember the way the car shuddered underneath me every time I topped 40 miles per hour, as though it would thrash itself apart with the joy of being alive.

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They say that in Lizard Lick, hundreds of Carolina anoles flock to the surrounding wooden fence. They hold their heads high, intimidating the rubberneckers by puffing out their red throats, fearsome and sparkling like rubies. Sometimes they bring their friends, the Horned lizards, who have been known to squirt blood from their eyes when they feel threatened. All the lizards just love to sprawl on the fence and bask in the sun, lolling out their tongues like scaly sentinels.

The government has a ready-made story for you, if you'd like to hear it. Some of it must be true. After all, the government never lies.

Back in the 19th century, horrible, nasty bootleggers ran rampant in the area we now know as Lizard Lick, where they distilled illegal moonshine, dressing it up and calling it "white lightnin'" and "mule-kick."

How feral and old-fashioned of them.

Around the 1880s, the federal government stepped in with its own dignified still and accompanying liquor store to discourage the tax-evading scoundrels. A wooden rail fence was constructed around the still, drawing clear lines between the past and the future. God-fearing people came from all around to get their quality store-bought whiskey.

Then the lizards came.

The government says there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. They say the lizards clustered around the still to catch insects attracted by the mash used to make the whiskey.

However, a sound faction of the community will swear up and down that the lizards were conjured with the use of dark magic, a farewell gift from the vexed bootleggers. Some say the lizards had always been there. Others say they arrived overnight, in a great swirling horde of long scabrous bodies and a mishmash of flickering tongues.

Rumor has it their tongues glowed pale blue, the exact color of a corpse gone cold.

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I am lost. I can't be more than two hours from the coast and salvation, but it is dark and any familiar landmarks are swallowed by the blackness. It's an innocuous Friday night, warm for September, and my first time driving home from school. The first four hours had gone swimmingly, shades on, me singing along to Kiss Country while gliding on I-40 east for over 200 miles.

Somewhere around Raleigh things started to get weird.

Natasha's GPS had led me on a curiously empty road. It felt wrong, but I kept on. I'd been using Natasha to get around the unfamiliar mountains of North Carolina for months, and never had there been the slightest hitch. I had been travelling along the line for over a half hour when I noticed that the arrival time on Natasha's touch screen was growing steadily longer instead of shorter. Impossibly, the GPS insisted it was still taking me home. The sun had set over an hour ago.

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The lizards were impossible to kill, they say. The few inhabitants of the community tried everything from cutting off their heads to shooting them off the fence with sawed-off shotguns. The government-appointed still workers even joined in the fray, but lizards do not like being told what to do or where to go, not even by the federal government.

They say one half-wild man, strung-out on the last of the moonshine, created a scarecrow of sorts to place at the mouth of the wooden fence. It was a ghastly creature, composed of rotting possum pelts, stuffed with sweetgrass and sand spurs, and covered with the silky black flight feathers of a mother raven. Rows of shark teeth lined the mouth, and glittering hunks of obsidian acted as eyes.

The lizards were not afraid.

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My Mustang was an aging metal mongrel, but we had history together. Though sometimes I wonder how much of me misses the actual car, and how much misses the way I felt in the car. It's a feeling that I can narrow down to one word:

Invincible.

In the Mustang, I ruled the streets of my sleepy, subservient hometown. I had explored every inch of my castle-city, every park, every development, every dirt road and abandoned piece of farmland. My grandmother had always said that New Bern was the most beautiful place in the world, surrounded on three sides by water. I'm not sure

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when I stopped thinking of the water as a moat that kept the enemies away, and more like an electric fence with no gate, no way to climb over or burrow beneath. In those days my Mustang and I paced the edges of our paddock, our breath huffing and puffing, but altogether invisible in the humid, salty air of the coast.

In the Mustang, I was never afraid of getting lost, because I never left the city limit, never ventured far enough away from home that I couldn't find my way back. To be in the Mustang was to be young and untouchable, before I graduated high school and decided to seek out a bigger pond.

I resent Natasha because right now, I feel anything but invincible.

By every estimation, I should be home by now, probably curled on the couch watching bad Sci-Fi movies with Dad, while Mom twirls around the house, glowing because her baby is finally home. Instead the lighted dash informs me that I'm almost out of gas. A couple of tears slip unbidden and gather in pools in the crevasse of the nylon seat, the inside of the steering wheel, in the dip of the gearshift. I'm not sure if I'm crying because I am lost, or because I have lost something.

Failure and fear war in my head. I don't want to call my parents; I don't want to tell them that somehow, even with the best GPS they could find, I had still gotten myself lost. I know exactly what they'll say: Lissa, stay where you are; we'll come get you. I pick up my phone.

*No Signal*, it says.

At first I think I'll lose it. I almost do; I almost decide to break down right there, pull over to the side of the road and cry until it's over. Cry until I have my Mustang back. Cry until I have the past back. Cry until the sun comes up and shows me the way home.

I'm about to put on my turn signal, unnecessarily, to pull over, but a dull light in the distance catches my attention. It is most likely either a gas station or the yellowed, open mouth of hell. Either one would be preferable to the unrelenting darkness that surrounds me.

I creep forward on the gas pedal. Natasha purrs at me, her low hum sounding for once close and reassuring. It sounds like *keep going*. I feel something fierce inside me yawn and shake itself awake. Something low and hiding, that had been basking in the moonlight, waiting for the right moment to open its eyes. Lizardlike, that fierce something slithers up my spine and whispers, *Tails grow back*.

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I force myself to remember every impossible thing I've done in my life. Things that I thought I'd never be brave enough to do. Moments flash in my mind like a rewinding VHS: In ninth grade, I told my parents that I wanted to leave my tiny backwoods Christian school for the new college-prep academy, forsaking familiarity and the safety of the kids I had known since pre-K. Tenth grade, I battled my debilitating shyness and stage fright, and my astonished parents watched me perform a lead role in the school play, *Antigone*. Eleventh grade, I worked all year and fought like hell to convince my parents to let me go on a 21 day trip to Europe. I was scared, but I had wanted so desperately to see something outside of my tiny town. And finally twelfth grade, when I convinced them and everyone else that *yes*, I can go to college on the other side of the state, even if it was a whole new world where I knew nothing and no one.

If I can do those things, I can do anything.

Natasha's GPS releases a little wail of terror as I turn it off with a final *click*. Who needs technology anyway?

Now I am utterly alone. Quiet. The world outside the car is impossibly dark and impenetrable; I am surrounded on three sides by blackness. Up ahead, the dull light does not get brighter, but it does get closer. The building manifests itself in front of my eyes like a mirage. It is, in fact, a gas station. The parking lot is empty, but inside a pale light perseveres, though it flickers in the dark like a candle riding a sea breeze.

I suppose everyone has to grow up at some point. Sometimes the drop of our tails is inevitable, sometimes it is intentional. Eventually, don't we all have to trade in the Mustangs of the past for the Kias of the future?

Sure, I had never driven outside of New Bern without the aid of a GPS before, but I am not helpless. I decide then and there that even if I *could* call my parents, I won't. I found my own way here, and I will find my own way home.

It occurs to me that the last thing my parents would tell me to do is stop and ask for directions. I smile for the first time in hours.

I'm not asking permission anymore.

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They say the government appointed politician Ed Pulley to be the official Whiskey Taster for the new still. Every afternoon, he would sample the day's run and make suggestions on how to streamline the distilling process and make the liquor better. Every evening, when he was good and numb, Ed would stalk the wooden fence with his walking

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cane on his way home, attempting to chase the lizards away with force and harsh words. He called the cane his “lizard licker.”

They say the lizards hissed and screamed in retaliation. They say some of them spewed their lifeblood at old Ed, gushing rivers that flowed in torrents from their fathomless black eyes. The first day Ed came home after work his wife Alice fell to the floor in fear, believing he had been shot. Ed was covered in so much blood that it thickened his hair down to the scalp and collected in pools on the inside of his boots.

They say by the second week Ed decided to cut up his beloved cane into tiny, splinter-like pieces. That night he burnt them in the fireplace like a dirty secret.

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The woman at the Swift Mart gas station is ancient. She has a disorderly cloud of white-blond hair, tortoise shell glasses, and a voice like steel wool. A cigarette hangs from her lip as she sizes me up from behind the counter, me and my sparkling red Kia. She wears a name tag, but the white space underneath the *hello, my name is* is empty.

I feel smaller under her gaze and the stark fluorescent lights of the Swift Mart. Suddenly I am afraid to admit my mistake, to tell her that I don't know where I am, let alone how to get where I'm supposed to be. When I speak, my words stutter and stop, trembling as they meet the stale air. I have never stuttered before in my life, but I do tonight.

The woman disappears into the back without a word, and my heart drops into my stomach. Surely an axe or a chainsaw will be coming out next.

No one told me growing up would get me killed.

My eyes skirt to the windows, looking desperately for help or assurance of some kind.

A little blue Cashpoints booth sits over by the pumps. I think I must be seeing things, but no, a giant metal lizard curls atop the sloping roof, with large unblinking eyes and a sprawling tongue painted icy blue. For some incomprehensible reason, the lizard is depicted with a short top hat on its head. I can't decide if the hat makes the lizard look more or less sinister. Across the street I see a junkyard the size of a city block, the carcasses of dead vehicles glowing bone-white under a meager floodlight. I can spot the remains of an orange Camaro and the capsized body of an ancient Pontiac near the street. Their glassy headlights stare like they can see through me. Like they know I abandoned one of their own.

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Movement by my foot brings my attention back inside the gas station. I squat on the greasy linoleum floor, squint my eyes, and still can't believe what I'm seeing. What appears to be a severed lizard tail writhes on the ground beside my left boot. There is no lizard in sight, but the tail remains, squirming left and right with surprising speed, as if it were still alive. I can see the long red fibers where the tail detached itself from the body. Its scales gleam a nauseous bluish-green.

*Tails grow back*, something inside me whispers.

"You're in Lizard Lick," the woman says, reappearing at the counter. "Technology acts kinda wonky around here. Happens all the time." Her smile is more like a baring of teeth. At least two of them are missing. When I glance back at the ground, the butchered tail is gone.

It is impossible, I think, that I could have ended up in a place called Lizard Lick. It is impossible that this one never-ending street could be called a town. It is impossible that on my way into the gas station, I saw shadows moving about on the ground, little tongues testing the air.

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Eventually Ed Pulley left the still, due to the fact that his boss, the head government operator, was caught using his resources to make his own "lizard liquor" on the side. Ed was sent home to Alice, the operator was sent to the jail house, and the whiskey still was shut down.

The lizards rejoiced. The town was theirs.

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The woman from Swift Mart spreads an enormous paper out on the counter, handling it with care. It is an atlas, tattered and torn, held together with tape in some places, connected by nothing but paper clips in others. It's got to be even older than she is.

It is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

*How old is this thing?* I wonder as I look at the crumbling paper. Little doodles and handwritten notes dot the paths, sketched by the loving hands of someone who came before. The woman grabs a magnifying glass, starts pointing things out to me, but my thoughts are a horde of lizards that cannot be stopped.

Perhaps change *is* inevitable, but surely preservation is important too, remembering where we come from. Otherwise there is no hope for figuring out where we're going. But maybe the future doesn't have to be synonymous

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with fear, or maybe the key is that fear does not have to be synonymous with *bad*. On the other side of fear there is hope; two sides, one coin.

I hope that whoever owns my Mustang now does not feel the old version of invincible which I mourned for so long. It is a false, unrealistic feeling.

True invincibility has everything to do with being afraid.

I return to the present, and together, the woman from Swift Mart and I figure out how to get back on the highway. "Take care," she warns me as I walk away, "of the lizards."

"The lizards?" I ask, my palm flat on the cool glass of the door.

"They have a taste for outsiders."

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Perhaps, as legend says, the lizards were invincible because of dark magic. Or perhaps they were merely resilient, able to adapt to every inevitable change in environment with pluck and perseverance. Perhaps with every blow, they were able to regenerate much more than just their tails.

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For the first time that I can remember, I navigate unfamiliar territory with nothing but street signs and my own intuition to guide me. It is an aching long journey, and I end up taking a wrong turn or two, forced to double back and try again. I miss the Highway 70 Bypass the first time, tricky little thing, and end up in a dodgy warehouse district. I think about giving up, but don't.

I am a lizard; I can regenerate.

I turn around, go back in time, and find what I missed before. Every correct move elicits a gush of pride, and every mile down feels like a victory. Goldsboro. Kinston. La Grange. Cove City.

By the time I reach the New Bern exit, Natasha and I have sprouted wings.

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Days later, when I research Lizard Lick and GPS failings, I am astonished to find other stories similar to mine. Not many, but a couple. Bold now that it's over with, the few posters on the forum seem to agree that finding their way out of the little uncharted community was a story none of them will ever forget. One of them even mentions the gas station where I stopped, atlas and all. Maybe the lizards have a way of intuiting those among us who need to get lost.

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I even email a government official from the Global Positioning System website. I report my trouble, ask if they've had any other incidents like mine in the area.

The next day I get a response. It says only this, and nothing more: *Thank you for your attention, but there is no cause for concern. The satellites over Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and the surrounding areas are 100% operational. Please feel free to go about your business as usual.*

*Take care,*

*Edmund Jedidiah Pulley  
Senior Member, Ground-Based Navigation Aid System Group  
Lizard Lick, NC*