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Sundee T. Frazier

BRENDAN BUCKLEY'S SIXTH-GRADE EXPERIMENT



Brendan Buckley's Sixth-Grade Experiment

ALSO BY SUNDEE T. FRAZIER

The Other Half of My Heart
Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything In It



**BRENDAN
BUCKLEY'S
SIXTH-GRADE EXPERIMENT**

Sundee T. Frazier

Delacorte Press

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To Matt—
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CHAPTER 1

My green anole has no table manners. He munches crickets like my best friend, Khalfani, eats Pringles. Mouth wide open. Crunching them so hard and fast, they're gone in no time flat. With Khal, it's gross. But with my lizard, Einstein, it's *amazing*. In fact, it may be the coolest thing I've ever seen.

I'd watched Einstein chase and devour his food six times since I'd gotten him a couple of weeks before—a gift from my parents for my eleventh birthday—and it had been exciting every time. I'd recorded every single cricket he'd eaten in my brand-new green spiral notebook.

Across the cover of the notebook, I'd written my anole's name, EINSTEIN, and on the title page,

The Life and Times of a Green Anole
by Brendan S. Buckley

I planned to record everything about keeping my new pet. I'd made sections for six categories and marked them with little sticky tabs I'd found in Mom's desk: *Feeding*, *Tank Temps* (which I would be checking every day until I was sure I wasn't accidentally going to roast or freeze him to death), *Behavior*, *Other Observations*, *Research*, and the most important one of all—*Questions*.

Some people never ask questions. Maybe they're afraid they'll look dumb, or maybe they don't think of things to ask. But not me. It's like my brain is one big bowl of Rice Krispies and all my questions are the milk. It's a constant *snap*, *crackle*, and *pop* up there.

Mom encourages all my inquiries and investigations. But Dad has his limits. "Enough with the questions, Brendan," he'll say. But I can never stop asking questions. It's just what scientists do.

I sat on my bed and opened my notebook to the section titled *Research*. Here's what I'd written down so far:

- Anoles eat grubs, crickets, cockroaches, spiders, moths—any arthropod that will fit in their mouths. (Arthropod: any of a phylum—Arthropoda—of invertebrate animals, such as insects, arachnids, and crustaceans, that have a segmented body and jointed appendages.)
- Don't feed them anything bigger than one-half the size of their heads!

- Insects caught in the wild may be accepted eagerly. (Cool! Try this out!)

I created another bullet point for the information I hadn't had time to record the night before. Dad may be the stricter parent, but when it comes to eating healthy food and sticking to bedtimes, Mom turns into the Enforcer. I wrote down what I had read on [The ReptileZone.com](http://TheReptileZone.com), a site for herpetologists like me:

- Green anoles turn brown when stressed. Causes of stress: temperature in tank too hot or cold; too much handling.

Next, I flipped to the *Feeding* section and made my seventh entry: "Saturday, September 1, 8:00 a.m." I'd learned from the man at the pet store that if you fed your anole at the same time every day, he'd start showing up early for the grub.

I pulled out my cricket keeper from under the table we'd set up to hold the twenty-gallon tank. The tank was against the wall closest to the foot of my bed, next to the door. I stared into the plastic case at the few remaining crickets. They weren't called pinheads for nothing. They were practically microscopic. "Sorry, guys, I'm back."

I felt a little bad for the insects. Their only reason for

existing was to serve as lizard chow. But then again, that's what the food chain is all about. The big guys eat the little guys. Then the even bigger guys come along and eat *them*. That's life. Something has to die so something else can live.

I slid out one of the black tubes from the keeper and shook several crickets into a plastic Baggie. I scooped up one spoonful of vitamin powder and dumped it in with the crickets. Then I shook the bag to coat them.

"Mmm-hmm. Just like your Grampa Clem's favorite, Shake 'n Bake!" my Grandma Gladys had said the first time she'd seen me feed Einstein. It had made me wish that Grampa Clem could have been there. He would have thought that watching a lizard eat crickets was one of the coolest things he'd ever seen, too.

I had just lifted the wire-mesh top to dump in Einstein's meal when I heard Grandpa Ed's truck door slam in our driveway. He was there to pick me up for my first official rock expedition with the Puyallup Rock Club. A whole day in the mountains to dig for quartz crystals. We were even camping overnight!

I quickly closed the tank's lid, set the supplement container on the mouth of the cricket Baggie so the little buggers wouldn't get away, and headed for the door. "I got it!" I shouted. I took the stairs two at a time.

"Did I miss breakfast?" Grandpa Ed held up a baby-food jar filled with wood shavings. "I brought Einstein a treat."

I took the jar and peered inside. “Mealworms! Thanks!” I closed the door.

“And another batch of crickets for you.” He held up a container full of pinheads hopping all over each other. “Well, I mean, for your lizard.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard they taste pretty good fried, but I think I’ll let Einstein have them.” I smiled.

Grandpa Ed chuckled.

“And you didn’t miss anything. I was just about to feed him.”

We met Dad at the top of the stairs, headed into the kitchen. He was in his police uniform already. The edges of his hairline and goatee looked as if they’d been created with an X-Acto knife. He smelled like his aftershave—like spicy pine trees. “Hello there, Ed. How you doing this morning?”

“Couldn’t be better. Been looking forward to this time with my grandson for the last three weeks.” We smiled at each other.

Dad stepped over to the coffeemaker. “Coffee for the road?”

“Thanks, I’ve got some in the truck. Sorry you’re not able to join us. Would’ve been great to have you along.”

I tugged on Grandpa Ed’s sleeve. “Come on, Grandpa. I’m trying to train Einstein to come out every morning at eight.” I didn’t feel like hearing Dad’s excuses for why he wasn’t coming as he’d said he would.

Dad’s spoon clanked against the side of his travel

mug. “Yeah, I thought it might work out, but then I got my first reading assignment. I’m not the quick study Brendan is.” He looked at me with a raised eyebrow and a half smile. I looked at my socked feet. “So while you’re hitting the mountainside, I’ll be hitting the books.”

Dad had enrolled in a program to finish his bachelor’s degree. It was something he said Grampa Clem had been disappointed with him about—dropping out of college. Plus, he couldn’t advance any further in the police department without it.

I tugged Grandpa Ed’s sleeve again.

“Maybe another time, then,” Grandpa Ed said. He pulled his arm from my grasp and put his hand on my shoulder. He was trying to get me to be patient, but I didn’t have time for this.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Probably not was more like it.

“I’m glad for you two to get some time together, though.” Dad screwed the lid on the coffee mug. He picked up his keys and wallet from the counter. “Have a good time, Brendan. See you tomorrow.” He ruffled my hair, which has looser curls and is never as neat as his.

“Okay. Bye.” As soon as Dad was past us on the stairs, I pulled Grandpa Ed to my room at the end of the hall. Einstein was sitting near the front of the tank. “He’s waiting for his food,” I whispered. I didn’t want to scare him back into the fake ivy.

I lifted the lid and shook the calcium-coated crickets

in. The first one's legs had barely touched the bark on the bottom of the tank before Einstein snatched it up. "Whoa!" Grandpa Ed said. "I'd say the feller was hungry."

The other crickets hopped away. Catching them would give Einstein a chance to get some exercise, after he finished the one clamped in his jaws. He munched and chewed, mouth opening wide between bites.

"He needs some work on his table manners," I said, thinking of Dad, who is a stickler about chewing with your mouth closed and not talking while you eat, something I sometimes find hard to do.

Grandpa Ed chuckled. "Maybe so, but I don't see it happening. Now, if you put a *lady* lizard in there . . ."

"Nah. Einstein's going to be a bachelor. He'll be happier that way."

"You don't think he'll get lonely while you're off at school all day?"

"I researched it. Green anoles are more or less solitary in the wild. Plus, I was lucky even to get *one* anole. Mom had to work pretty hard to convince Dad." Einstein had been cheap, but all his gear—not so much. There was the tank, of course, and then three different kinds of lamps, thermometers (for both the cool and warm sides of the tank), a hygrometer, fake plants, a couple of real plants, substrate to line the bottom (which has to be changed regularly)—even a trip to the reptile vet. The guy at the pet store recommended it since Einstein had

been captured in the wild, just to make sure he was free of parasites and all that.

Dad had complained when we'd gotten the vet's bill in the mail. "You've got to be kidding me!" Then he practically made me swear on Grampa Clem's grave that I wouldn't kill Einstein through neglect. "Ignorance is also no excuse. You're smart. After all this money, you'd better figure *out* how to keep this animal alive."

The only thing we hadn't bought was the big rock I'd found at the park and put in Einstein's tank for a basking spot, which was where he was lying now, after having polished off a second cricket.

I opened the container of mealworms and plucked one out. It wriggled in my fingers. I dropped it near the rock. "Here you go, Einstein. Dessert on Grandpa Ed. See you tomorrow."

He lifted his long, thin snout in the air as if sniffing the new presence in his tank. His white-spotted pink throat fan shot out from his bright lime-colored body, warning other anoles to stay away. This was his territory, his grub. Of course, he didn't have to worry. There was no one there but him. He would learn soon enough. I just hoped he would be happy in his new home. And that I wouldn't accidentally kill him.

I recorded the crickets and the mealworm in my notebook, misted the tank with purified water from the spray bottle Mom had given me, then put away the feeding stuff and grabbed my backpack. On my way out

the door, I reached up to the shelf above Einstein's tank, where I kept the rock and mineral collection I'd started this summer. I touched the glass-lidded wood box Grandpa Ed had made me for my birthday. Inside sat the chunk of Ellensburg Blue agate that we'd found on our last expedition—a secret outing that had almost gotten Grandpa Ed killed.

Bring me luck, I thought. I wanted to come home with something big. Something impressive. Something that might even make Dad regret skipping the trip.