

The day I lost my soulmate

On December 25th, 2009, I ran down the stairs of my childhood home to see what Christmas presents were under the tree. Christmas was my favorite holiday, probably like most other twelve-year-olds. Downstairs I found a small terrarium sat right in the middle of the living room. It was obvious right away that there was something inside, a small white and yellow leopard gecko. Several other gifts were on the floor too, but none of those things mattered then. This little gecko could already light up the whole room. I immediately held the gecko and listened to my stepdad talk about my new pet. The gecko was male and already about a year old. He was a Banana Blizzard morph, according to the breeder that my stepdad bought him from. My first step in welcoming this new pet into our home would be choosing his name. I was obsessed with finding unique names for my pets at this age. I really felt I would impress people with my cool choices. It unfortunately really meant that no one would pronounce the names correctly. My new gecko was not the first in the family. I already had an "iinlhi reyllu", who was named because the spots on his head looked like letters. I had a bright orange gecko too, named Tamir, which I had found at least one website telling me meant "palm tree." The new addition to the family had to have just as great of a name as them, of course. So, I found "Lixue", a Japanese name that meant "pretty snow." It felt perfect because I thought he was beautiful, the prettiest snow in the world. I only found out later that Lixue was a name meant for a girl, but I'm happy that I didn't originally know that because there was honestly no better name for Lixue.

I quickly grew attached to Lixue. This love is what you feel when you are standing in the grassy field full of dandelions, the sun shining down brightly. You sing out loud, "you are my sunshine, my only sunshine...", and pray to a God you don't even believe in that your sunshine will never be taken. It's the shade under your favorite oak tree that you climb to hide from your biggest problems. It's that one knitted blanket with all the tears and holes, that doesn't even keep you warm, but it's been with you for your entire life, and you know you can hide underneath it to feel safe. It's the only light you can see in a world of darkness. Now when the light is taken and you are left alone in the dark, do you still feel the warmth of a light that is only in memory? I have spent these years mourning the loss of my light since 2019. Instead of remembering happiness, I mainly remember the guilt of everything that went wrong when Lixue was still here.

One of the first mistakes I made was when I introduced Lixue to my other leopard geckos. The geckos were all males, and male leopard geckos cannot cohabitate. Iinlhi attacked Lixue faster than I could do anything to intervene. He latched onto Lixue's head and started to death roll, like an alligator does. There was blood and I was panicking. I grabbed them both and ran inside to hold Iinlhi under the faucet water in hopes that it would make him let go. I also put my fingers over his nose so he wouldn't be able to breathe and would need to open his mouth. He was not budging, and his jaw was locked so I couldn't pry his mouth open. This went on for what felt like an eternity until eventually Iinlhi let go. Lixue had a huge wound on his head from the bite, and I hated myself for letting it happen. I learned that lesson the hard way, and never put the geckos together again. Even when the wound healed, the scar was always there to remind me of what he went through because of me.

I wish I could say that one mistake triggered me to be a better pet owner, but I still made mistakes, and for most of them I realize how fortunate I was. One of my bad habits was falling asleep at night with Lixue. He comforted me so much. Lixue was all that I had during the nights I went to sleep crying. He knew when I needed comfort, and he would curl up against me and give his little gecko kisses. He always waited until I fell asleep to leave. I would wake up in the morning and he would no longer be on the bed. He often was hidden in a closet or under a dresser. I was selfish to let this happen, and I risked his safety. There could have been a night when he didn't leave the bed in time, and I rolled over him in my sleep, crushing him to death. If one morning I couldn't find him, would he just be left to starve to death in a cold house? One day I woke up and lifted my nightstand to look for him, my hand slipped, and I dropped the nightstand. It landed on his tail and smashed it. Leopard geckos can lose and regrow their tails, but it doesn't make it better. I can't imagine how scary and painful that was for him. Or the potential outcome if the nightstand had landed on his body instead of his tail. He would have been gone much sooner and in a horrible way. After this I never slept with him again. Much like the scar on his head, the tail that regrew and would never look the same as it once did was also a constant reminder of how I messed up.

Do you know the ointment that you rub on your muscles when they are sore, and it feels hot? Well, when I got a hold of that stuff I was obsessed. I believe this was around the time that I was getting into yoga, and after one particularly hard yoga class I needed it. After practically covering myself in the ointment, I mindlessly picked Lixue up out of his terrarium. Imagine my shock and terror when a few moments later Lixue was bright red. I finally connected the dots and desperately begged my mom for help because I didn't know how to make it better. She wrapped Lixue in wet paper towels, and it didn't take too long before he turned the shade he was supposed to be. I will admit I find this story super amusing now. Lixue honestly didn't seem stressed out or in pain when it happened, he acted like his normal, chill self. Thank God for that, but wow was I an idiot!

From that point on the mistakes were not as severe. I tried my best to care for him. This was still a point in time where leopard gecko care information was seriously lacking. I had him living on paper towels because I learned that the pet store calcium sand and the carpets were bad for them. I used a heating pad, and later a heat emitting bulb. He was only in a 10-gallon tank and did not have a UVB bulb. I'm not sure when the care requirements for leopard geckos improved past that because honestly, eventually I stopped looking. I turned 18 and I moved away from my family. I thought that I was finally getting away from an abusive home, but instead I walked right into similar relationships with new people. I started dating my first boyfriend, and shortly after he moved in with me. This turned toxic fast, and I spent the beginning of my adult life crying, begging, and being physically abused. My fear of abandonment made sure that I was stuck, and I made the relationship my only priority. I couldn't even hold a job down because of it. I remember when I worked at Universal Orlando, I was crying when my boyfriend grabbed my phone and wouldn't allow me to call work to tell them I couldn't come in. He also kept my car keys from me. That was the first job to fire me. There were more to follow, always because of the fights. He hated when I went to work because I would be around men. He harassed me so much over who I would be near, meanwhile he was the one cheating on me the entire time. One night when we were going out, the neighbor walked up to the car with a gun and threatened to shoot my boyfriend. He said he heard our previous fights and saw my boyfriend get physical

with me outside one time. Like an idiot, I defended him. So, I wish that I could say I was the one that left, but I wasn't. One day he decided he was done with me, and he drove across the country to pursue a new life. I'm glad he did, but I still didn't learn. I jumped right into a new and different type of toxic relationship. When I look back on these events, my regret isn't even that I let myself endure these situations. I regret that I wasted the short time I had with Lixue, focusing on people that didn't care about me. I had this little gecko who put his entire life in my hands, and I was his mom. He spent those years stuck in a dull and lifeless terrarium, listening to crying and screaming every day. I used to keep a photo on my phone of a huge terrarium that went underneath a bed. I always dreamed of doing that for Lixue one day, but it never got to happen.

Lixue became sick towards the end of 2019. I took him to the emergency vet, and he was given antibiotics for an infection. The infection cleared up, but he stopped eating for an entire month. When I brought him back to the vet, I was told he had parasites and was given a new medication. Lixue would aggressively shake his head and try to spit it out the medicine every day I gave it to him. He then would spend the next two weeks laying outside of his cave not even lifting his head whenever I walked by. I could tell he was suffering but I believed the medicine would make him better in the end. I let him lay there and never touched him because I didn't want to make him feel worse. I was so stupid. One morning I saw him open his mouth like he couldn't breathe, and he weakly flailed his head around like he didn't have the strength to hold it up. I knew he was dying. I called the vet in hysterics begging them to let me bring him in. When I got there, he started to act normal, and I thought it was okay. The vet thought he could have a respiratory infection, and once again I was given a new medication. The vet injected it into his arm, showing me how I would do it at home. I left the vet, and ten minutes later Lixue would die in the car. He was laying in his cave that I had brought him in, and I was driving while talking to my sister on the phone. I didn't even get to hold him as he took his last breath. I hate myself for that.

When I checked on Lixue again, he wasn't moving. I frantically pulled into a parking lot and then shook his tiny body begging him to react. I tried to do compressions on his chest with my finger, and breathed air into his nose. I have never cried or yelled as loud as I did that day in the car. Even with all the terrible things I went through in my life, life was still in color until that day. When he died, it all became black and white. I went back to the vet with Lixue's lifeless body, running inside crying and yelling for someone to do something. I knew he was dead, but I didn't want to accept it. I wanted someone, anyone, to bring him back to life for me. A worker rushed me into a private room, and I waited despondently to hear what I already knew. The vet walked in and sat down. The first words out of her mouth, "Cremation will be \$\$". I can't even put into words the amount of disgust I still feel when I think about this. How little empathy can a human have that the literal first word they say to you when you lose a loved one, is financial. I was in too much pain to be mad. I wanted Lixue back, so I asked for his body, and I left. When I got home, I held his lifeless body against me, and I cried and sobbed for hours. Eventually I buried him. I planted my favorite flower above him, and I took his leftover food and fed it to the wild lizards above where he was buried. It felt like the right thing to do.

After Lixue died, I think I changed as a person forever. I was working and in school during this time, so I didn't have time to keep mourning. I didn't want to be alive without him, but I was going through the motions. I lost a lot of friends at this time because I refused to respond

to anyone. One of those days I got a call from a best friend that her brother who I was also friends with had got into a car accident and died. I drove south and I went to his funeral. Everyone was crying, I cried. No, honestly, not for my friend. I cried for Lixue. I just didn't have it in me to cry for anyone else then. I drove the three hours home that day, and I felt completely numb. When I was on the highway, I was driving behind a semi-truck and I pressed my foot to the pedal staring blankly at the truck prepared to slam into it at full speed. I stopped myself and I had to pull over to cry. I made it home that day. Do I wish I hadn't made it? Maybe. But it was stupid, I cared so little about everyone and everything around me during this time that I was going to cause an accident that would affect and maybe even kill people, not just me. I don't think I was ever so selfish before.

Today is November 2nd, 2024, Feliz Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). I learned about this Mexican holiday where you honor your loved ones who you lost, and their spirits can visit you. Sometimes you just need to celebrate a day you have never celebrated before. I put a photo of Lixue up and I lit candles to sit around it. I thought about one of my favorite things about him. I have read that smell is often the strongest memory trigger, and the way Lixue used to smell was my favorite thing in the world. I also remember the sound of his little heartbeat when we went to the vet, and I heard it for the first time. I would give anything to smell that scent again and hear that sound again. When he was alive, there was one song I would sing to him when I felt broken. The lyrics reminded me that Lixue would always be the only one in the dark I see. I sang that song for him tonight, like maybe he was really listening. I don't know if Lixue is still with me, but I miss him and I just hope that he knew how loved he was. I want the moments I held him, cried with him, and protected him to have made a difference. I was always fiercely protective of him. I remember one night we waited inside of the house as a hurricane come through Florida. I sat in the hallway holding Lixue to my chest, making sure I could keep him safe. I spent my whole life in Florida, living through each hurricane carelessly, but for Lixue I had to care. Even during that hurricane, he let me hold him throughout the hours of loud wind and rain, he didn't want to move. I had something so small and precious put complete trust in me, and that meant the world to me. So, I never want anyone to question how strongly I cared. I had every emotion that comes with loving someone. I had my fears, anxieties, and worries too. I often had this reoccurring nightmare about strangers breaking into our home and harming Lixue. If I left the house for longer than a night, I would anxiously imagine the house lighting on fire and being unable to save him. I would have genuinely given my life for that little gecko. If the universe granted me one wish, it would be to restart the time I had with Lixue, with the knowledge that I have now. So, I could give him the life he deserved to have, and maybe prevent his death from happening the way that it did. If his spirit still exists out there somewhere, I really hope he knows all these things.