

# Alien Associations

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This story is a highly fictionalized account of events that took place during a year of Fellowship in Forensic Psychiatry, 1997–1998, at the Yale University School of Medicine, Division of Psychiatry and the Law. It is dedicated to my co-fellow, Theresa Stathas, MD, whose kindness, warmth, and support were appreciated during my fellowship year. She generously provided me with alien-themed items, such as a ballpoint pen decorated with 23 alien heads and 56 alien eyes, throughout that year.

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“I once had an alien as a pet,” she said.

She purchased it impulsively at a check-out stand the day one job ended and only hours before the new one began. She restlessly fingered things stacked and dangling as she advanced toward the cashier. She passed over jewel-toned lighters, resisting the allure of flicking a flame to life. Lighters had their hypnotic appeal. She would want to insert things into the flame. Not a good choice. A pause at the pink, orange, and yellow ponytail holders because she could stretch and snap the elastic over the delicate skin of her inner wrist. A metronome to pace her heart beats to a slower rhythm. At 20 for two dollars it would be months before they stretched out so far as to make them unusable for hair or for the snap of a reminder to think, think, think. As she replaced the holders, the back of her hand brushed against a moist, rubbery object that she thought would leave traces of itself on her skin. Like the slick a snail leaves on a sidewalk as it passes by. It was the last one, pushed back against the pegboard. When she pulled it up and over the slight tilt of the hook that was loose and rattling in its hole, she thought all might clatter onto the belt that circled at the cashier’s whim. However, as she grasped the last glow-in-the-dark alien keychain, all else stayed in place. She was saved from embarrassment. It was time to pay.

The cashier, a pale young man with eruptions of violet hued acne, wore an oversized vest that could not hide the exaggerated S curve of his spine. He had not adjusted to his most recent growth spurt and hunched over the register. His sad eyes met hers. Remarkably, he did not start the belt whirring, but opened and extended his hand, and she passed the pale, gray-green, glow-in-the-dark alien keychain to him. He bagged it separately from her other items. Its surface stuck to the inside of the plastic shopping bag. When she got home, she washed it with mild dish soap and warm water, then dried it with a soft, clean towel. This was how she took care of many delicate objects, usually following directions on Proper Care, but nothing was provided about the upkeep of an alien keychain. She realized she could free it from the circular ring so that it was no longer identifiable as a keychain. It was now a free-standing alien that could be stretched to new lengths, with legs split apart or arms separating farther and farther, only to creep slowly back to their original size and shape after she let go. It did not break or crack. It did not suffer from repeated manipulations as she contemplated the new office, the new faces, and the new expectations of tomorrow. She put it by her purse so she would not forget it in the morning. She was upstairs by the time it began to create a warm, green circle of light around and above itself on the counter.

She picked up the alien as she walked out the door, struck again by how it was moist in her hand, though no beads of alien liquid seemed to congeal on its surface. Was it perpetually refreshed by some odd

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exchange of molecules between its jellied surface and the air around it? It began to intrigue her more, and she found herself rubbing it repeatedly between her thumb and her forefinger during the day. The longer she touched the alien, the less slimy it felt. When she was finally alone in her office, after numerous introductions and wan smiles, she placed it in a square of sunlight on her desk. One window brought in a beam of light from outside. The alien absorbed the heat like a lizard warming its blood to begin its day of slithering.

During the first week of her new, more taxing job, she carefully transported her alien back and forth between home and office. She had the challenge of remembering to tuck the alien into her purse. She did not forget. She learned to wrap it in a tissue to protect it from the dust it would otherwise collect in the bottom of her bag. If alone in her office, arranging appointments on the phone or typing reports on the old, slow computer, she allowed the alien to observe her diligently performing her duties. Propped up against the keyboard, it became a familiar presence. She grew used to the alien's seeming more normal than many of the events she described in her reports. If her hands were stiff from typing, she pulled its arms out to maximum extension between her fingers. She began to rub its head before she left the room to attend seminars and meetings where she presented information for group review and criticism. On at least one occasion, she tucked the alien into her pocket because even its slight pressure against her thigh as she sat at the conference table was a comfort and support. If she went to the ladies' room down the hall, she left it out so it would greet her when she returned to the small office, musty with its smell of dried-up books and ephemera.

It was a sharp turn from the hallway to the narrow passage, defined on one side by overstuffed file cabinets and the other by a blank expanse of wall. No falsely cheery posters promoting the benefits of hand washing or possible treatments for unusual diseases. It was 10 feet to her door. She had yet to meet or see the occupant of the office next to hers. Their rooms were side by side, and she sometimes heard a shuffling walk, the scratch of a key finding the lock, and a dry cough as the door was opened and closed. Never rapidly, and never when she ventured out to use the oversized copier in the square of exposed space created between the office doors and the backs of the black and green extra-wide files. The other

office belonged to the Psychology Department. Hers was the outlier of a larger group farther down the wide center hallway where offices opened up to chattering secretaries. The light was brighter there. By the time her work was finished, voices no longer carried down the corridor. She didn't mind walking out by herself. The dark of the evening embraced her. She curled her hand around her alien. If it had soaked up enough light during the day it would emit a soft glow of light through the narrow spaces between her fingers. Heckling panhandlers grew quiet and ceased to beg for money when she turned and opened her hand to fully reveal the splendor of the alien cradled in her palm.

She did not delude herself. Seasoned secretaries would not be charmed into extending deadlines. Hours were needed to transform quotes and observations into documents that could be distributed with appropriate gravitas. The alien absorbed her muttered complaints. Reports were passed and re-passed across the wide hallway. After a quick excursion to deposit and retrieve work in progress, she returned to find her colleague sitting in the metal-framed chair with thick green pads that looked more comfortable than it was. The alien, which she had been stroking before leaving her office, seemed luminous as she crossed the room and sat down. While exchanging greetings she was thinking wildly of whether she should try to slide it into a drawer, cover it with random papers, or pick it up and introduce it to her colleague. No option presented itself as more favorable than others. She feared a request to share the alien and the comfort it provided. Her colleague's office had a wall of windows that would keep it shining all day long. It would not want to return to her less glamorous office. The anticipation of that loss was unbearable. Perhaps it would be better to lay the alien down on the rusted, stained bottom of the gray metal trash can in the corner. If others might claim it, let them find it before its last shimmer of green was extinguished. Better to walk into an empty office after the custodian's midnight rounds than to have the alien change its allegiance.

Her colleague discussed an equitable division of the work they were expected to complete to be deemed trained and ready for future independent endeavors. A productive exchange ensued. At the end of their discourse, the colleague reached out and gently, with one fingertip, caressed the alien's chin. Standing up to leave, the colleague said, "I think we'll

be friends.” Surprised and confused, she was not able to determine, even after replaying the exchange numerous times in her head, if the colleague meant her or the alien. As the click of the colleague’s high-heeled shoes echoed down the corridor, the alien seemed to be glowing more than would be expected on a cloudy afternoon. “Remember who rescued you from a place where you had no light at all. It was your lucky day when I walked into that store,” she whispered.

She hoped a bond of loyalty would bind the alien to her. The colleague was more cosmopolitan, frequently flying to distant cities. The alien might yearn to be above the earth, to be able to gaze, not down like other passengers, but up into the blue-black sky curving away above. She tried to talk with the colleague in places other than her office so that the alien would not become part of their discussions. Despite her attempts, the colleague began to pass by her office and mention she was going to lunch, “If anyone else is hungry.” It was the colleague’s voice that caused the unnamed psychologist to leave his door ajar, allowing glimpses of a verdant interior. Green fronds undulated, seemingly stirred by some interior breeze. Drops of condensation collected on his door in a spray pattern as oxygenated air escaped into the small space between their offices. Once, as her colleague summoned her, she noticed the broad toe of a thick-soled shoe at the edge of his door. She felt him listening, stilling his movements and breathing so as not to intrude on their conversation. Her senses flared. The corridor gleamed. Her hands grew warm from suddenly thickened blood coursing throughout her body. She longed for the coolness of the alien. She retreated to her office while her colleague walked on.

She was reminded of the tenuousness of her situation. Her work was stolid, but not creative. No flair for research or presentation had been discovered. The alien grew stiff as winter settled in and no longer oozed as it had in the last humid days of summer. Shorter, darker days meant its glow faded before she left for home. Even when she placed it directly under her desk lamp, it took longer for it to tinge the air with any glow at all. Once, idly tugging the alien as she read over a document, a piece of its left arm broke off. The misshapen bit of alien wrist, hand, and fingers made hers seem massive by comparison. She pondered means of disposal before scratching her fingernail a few times in the dry dirt of the one plant

in her office. A small hole appeared. She quickly pushed the alien piece under the surface and covered it, turning the pot so that the disturbed soil would not be noticed, though she could think of no one who would be curious if the plant suddenly began to bloom with flowers, drip honeyed nectar on the floor, or otherwise reveal that a remnant of alien now rooted in its pot.

Her colleague no longer scanned the office when she entered to ask a question or pass on a piece of gossip. Sophisticated and smart, her colleague deduced that the alien was likely the only surprise behind her door. Alien association had not been so exotic after all. The colleague learned the name and duties of the neighboring psychologist and casually spoke about his position in the organizational hierarchy. She had turned fragments of bulbous shoe tips, thick fingers, and humidified office air into a man referred to by name. Undistracted by interior mysteries, her colleague had a considerable advantage in becoming known to others. She observed from a distance that good intentions and parlor tricks narrowed, but did not erase. She stretched the alien farther and farther. She coiled it around her wrist so that it could channel its proven ability to create energy—dull molecules transformed into luminescence—directly to her. This sapped the alien’s power. It withered and fell to her desk. Alienation of affection had occurred.

The alien was no longer safe from decay. It began to disintegrate. An ear rubbed off as she worked her way through stacks of index cards with names and information needed for the upcoming exam that assessed professional competence. Her colleague provided assistance with memorization and review. They would stay together in a midwestern hotel where hundreds of overdressed examinees would gather in the ornate lobby. The atmosphere would be hushed, reflecting the serious nature of their profession. They might catch glimpses of senior examiners, including those from their own institution. The danger of the alien’s being discovered in such a rarified atmosphere was too great for her to risk. She told herself that the alien no longer dreamed of escaping to the sky. Its color grew grayer. Previously distinct features, sharp nose and big eyes, began to blur into one expressionless oval. She hoped it might rejuvenate itself if freed for a time from her needs. She impulsively drew a thin, elongated heart on its chest.

In preparation for departure, she created a bedlike structure for the alien. An exotically scented box had long ago been tucked into the back of a drawer where it would not derail her with hints of a different life. Stamped with foreign calligraphy, it retained a memory of fragrance, heavy with spices and ambergris. She folded a square of silk, its faded patterns of pink, green, and red softly blurring together, to line the box. The alien was shrunken and thin. There was enough silk to tent over him as he reposed in what had become her box of treasures. She decided to set it down in front of the office door next to hers, transforming the alien into a foundling for her unseen neighbor. A note was needed to tuck into the box. She wrote one, then another, and another. Page after page piled up, spilling off the edge of her desk. One that asked for assistance was discarded because she didn't like the way her script slanted upward on the page. One had suggestions for warming the alien's heart, but a couple of words were illegible when she examined the note. She didn't want there to be any misunderstanding. She wanted the writing to be even across the page, the curves of her f's and y's to not obscure smaller letters below. She desired to put on

the page what was in her heart and her mind. None in the pile pleased her entirely. She tried drawing the outline of the alien on one and liked the personal touch this brought to the note. If only she could add the heart without smearing it or making it too big. She gripped her red pen and slowly outlined the heart of her dreams. It was the perfect representation of the one she had wanted to draw on the real alien, whose current dry and cracking surface had made its heart look uneven. Lopsided. There was nothing more to say.

Final preparations for the exam were needed. The building was quiet in the way it became during the night. Hushed, yet humming from the low vibrations of copiers, water fountains, and soda machines. She briefly cradled the silk-swaddled alien against her as she backed out of the office, pulled her door closed, and bent to set the box down. She was not alarmed when a sliver of light spread from her neighbor's door. The spoke of brightness widened as she straightened, made eye contact, and passed the alien over the threshold.

"I once had an alien as a pet," she said, "and now he's yours."