

## A Little Alienation

When Allison went outside to fetch the cat, she discovered three things:

1. Aliens had landed on Earth.
2. Aliens were about two inches tall.
3. Her cat Brigadier was already making first contact.

Brigadier made first contact with his teeth, followed by his esophagus. Allison was still deciding whether to scream when the tiny figure disappeared into his mouth. The cat sniffed at the ground where he'd made his kill before turning to her and trotting over proudly.

"It... didn't even fight back," Allison heard herself say, half accusatory, half bewildered. "Shouldn't aliens have lasers or something?"

There was a hunk of metal embedded in her yard that Allison's exhausted brain concluded was a spaceship. Nothing was coming out now except smoke. There was a smell to it, like microwaved fish, and that might have been why she felt like fainting. She teetered on her feet, but ultimately decided to remain upright; Thomas would be awake soon and require a conscious mother.

The only thing in her yard Allison had power over was the cat. She scooped up Brigadier and stumbled them into the kitchen before any aliens that *did* carry laser guns showed up. "Should I call the vet? Are aliens poisonous? God, no, the vet won't know that. Briggy, please tell me you're not going to die because you couldn't keep your teeth to yourself."

Brigadier squirmed loose of her arms to put himself next to his food bowl. Apparently, aliens weren't filling.



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“No! I’m not going to feed you *more*, not when— when you’re probably going to puke anyway. God, I hope you puke this thing out.” Brigadier had a delicate stomach. He was known to throw up after eating a single blade of grass, or a mouthful of off-brand kibble. It would be too cruel a twist of fate for alien meat to be the thing that stayed down.

“Actually,” Allison said, reconsidering. She still had an old bag of the off-brand food they’d unsuccessfully tried to switch Brigadier to a few months before. Allison fetched it and poured some out. “Here. Please. Puke fast.”

Experience told Allison it was about 20 minutes to the upchucking. She wanted to stay and watch for signs of alien poisoning, but she also needed to know if the ship in her yard was going to explode, or if her baby in the other room had already exploded.

Raising babies was like cooking hollandaise sauce, in that they broke if left unattended too long. There was always a timer ticking down in her head to when she needed to fuss over Thomas again. She stored Brigadier in the bathroom while she checked on the baby, and only when she was satisfied that both of them were secure did she go out to see if her yard was swarming with E.T.s.

The thick, yellowish smoke was the only thing coming from the spaceship. It looked very crashed. The fish smell was even more pungent, now, coating the back of Allison’s tongue.

“Someone will notice,” she whispered. She glanced at her neighbor’s yard. His wall of azaleas mostly hid the wreck, but not the smoke signal. “Someone will call the police, and they’ll ask questions and wake up Thomas.” She hunkered to stare into a



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gaping hole in the ship, a door or a puncture wound. “Hey? Guys? Anyone alive in there?”

No answer.

“Right. Dead. Okay.” Allison pressed her hands over her face. Images flashed across her eyelids of police, of white-coated scientists with malicious goatees, of men in suits mummifying her yard in caution tape. She imagined being trapped in her kitchen holding a screaming Thomas as she was crushed by questions, and questions, and questions. “I can’t deal with this right now,” she said. She would have screamed, if that idea didn’t sound so tiring.

There was a hose rolled up by the house, and a tarp in the shed. Allison pulled out the hose and doused the ship until the smoke and the fish stink subsided. It took three tries to heave the tarp over the ship in a way that didn’t leave any incriminating whatzits sticking out.

“You’d better be already dead in there,” she said to the hypothetical aliens.

The ticking timer in her head was pretty loud, by then. Allison headed in to check on Thomas, and halfway there, he announced his wakefulness in the traditional fashion. Like everything else in the world, screaming for her attention.

Only once she was settled by his crib, shoving Thomas at a nipple and begging him to latch, did Allison feel an enormous shudder ripple through her, a delayed heebie-jeebies over everything she’d seen.

“Nothing more, please,” she whispered. “No more.”

From the other room, there was the sound of a cat, finally, vomiting.



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Christine came home already talking about herself. “My boss, Greg? He’s trying to kill me.” Her eyes skipped across the panic in her wife’s eyes without seeing it. “He’s just making up words with our clients. Today he promised an accounting firm an ‘AI-driven workforce redistribution manager’. Sure, Greg, I’ll whip that up once I figure out what the hell it is.”

“...Yeah?” Allison whispered. Her hands were raw from scrubbing dead alien and cat vomit off the bathroom tile. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw a tiny, puckered face, caked in half-digested kibble.

Her fantasy of resuscitating it and shoving it back in its ship had evaporated on seeing that limp, swollen corpse. Apparently interstellar travel was less taxing than stomach acid. The thought *I might have caused a space war by letting my cat outside* hopscotched through Allison’s brain.

The murder victim was now in a Tupperware in the shed. Her shed was an alien morgue, Thomas had only agreed to nurse twenty minutes ago, and now she remembered that she hadn’t made dinner.

“Hope you didn’t spend too long on dinner,” Christine said, as if she could hear Allison’s thoughts. “Mike bought us pizza because we were working late. I figure you already ate? If it’s okay, I’m going to work more tonight on this imaginary AI thing. Could you cover baby duty for a few more hours?”

“A few more hours,” Allison echoed.

“Just for tonight, babe, I promise.” Christine’s arms slid around Allison’s neck, another weight on her shoulders. “You’re such a warrior. My incredible wife. It’s only a



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few more weeks, right? Only until I clinch this promotion and finally take time off for my amazing baby, and then you'll get the longest nap you've ever had."

"I know. I know that's what we agreed on." Allison sagged against Christine's chest. The words *Aliens landed in our yard* stuck in her throat like a half-chewed Dorito. She didn't want to think of where the conversation would go after that. Christine had almost had a breakdown the week before when Cub Foods stopped carrying their favorite pasta sauce—Allison couldn't imagine that her wife's response now wouldn't lead to goatees and caution tape.

Christine pulled away, off to invent software bullshit. Allison swayed on her feet and tried to remember what dinner was supposed to have been.

The mommy blogs said Allison should be sleeping right now, because Thomas was asleep, and she was a person-shaped extension of his body. Instead, she squirmed restlessly in bed like a worm on a rainy sidewalk. Sleep was a thing that happened to Christine, and to people without babies.

Sleep was a thing that happened to people without spaceships in their yards.

There were probably space guns pointed at the house. Nobody would send just one ship to another planet, probably. Probably the aliens already had surveillance cameras showing a closeup of Allison's bedhead and eyebags. Running wouldn't do any good because they probably had a space antenna that could smell her DNA or... something.

Somewhere in the haze of 1AM, Thomas made enough noise for Allison to stop pretending to sleep. There was poop on his face. He had the motor skill of a jellyfish,



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and had gotten poop on his own face. The alien surveillance team had probably seen that, too. When she was done sanitizing the baby, Allison folded the cadaver that was her body into the chair by Thomas's crib, son cradled in her arms, mumbling reassurances that he would not be a fatality of the space war.

Maybe she drifted off, and that was why she saw Brigadier across the room, glowing gently and hovering six inches off the ground.

"Sweetheart? Babe, go to bed. I've got him. Get some real sleep."

Allison jerked awake. "What? I—"

"I've got him. Go to bed."

Allison looked from Thomas, to Christine, to Brigadier sitting under the crib. None of them were glowing or floating.

"Yeah," Allison said. "Bed. Thank you."

Morning sent Christine back to work and, for once, put Thomas to actual sleep. Allison took the opportunity to stare at the Tupperware in her shed.

Whatever it had started as, the alien was bloated and indistinct after its day-long marinade. It was recognizably *animal*, though: four limbs, a few tendrils of tail, a crumpled orifice in what might have been its face. Bright purple droplets of an unknown substance pooled on its skin.

"Were you a person?" Allison asked.

There was soft soil in the garden. Allison held a funeral there—stacked pebbles for a headstone, herself and the baby and the murderous cat as mourners. Someone could have studied the body, she knew. A biologist, maybe. That should have mattered,



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should have given Allison the duty to get it into their hands, but her limp, unresponsive brain just didn't *care*.

She tried to play with Thomas after that, to pretend that she was a normal, perky mom and everything was fine, but his vacant infant eyes kept staring past her at the tarp.

The fish stink was back. She wondered if her neighbor could smell it, across the azaleas, a reek like sticking your head in a rotting tuna. She walked over to look at the edge of the tarp, where the grass had gone yellow. When she stooped, she saw the grass was not only discolored, but *thick*, like the individual blades were swollen. She bent to touch one and it ruptured in a burst of pale light and dust.

"Shit! Shit. It's... it's poisoning my lawn."

Brigadier had looked fine since his terrible culinary decision. Allison had been keeping an eye on him, and he'd been completely normal, give or take a glowing dream. The grass was apparently not so fortunate. The ship was releasing something into the air, or the soil, and leaving it here would grow the problem into something impossible to hide.

The realization was almost a relief. She would have to deal with this, but then it would be *done*. Someone else could handle the looming space war. In a few months, she could convince herself it was all a weird postpartum dream.

She fetched a shovel from the shed and started learning how to move a spaceship.



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However far the ship had come to get here, it had decided it was going no farther. It clung to the dirt like a cat on carpeting, ignoring all efforts to push, pull, or undermine it.

If not for the ticking in her skull telling her to give Thomas his lunch and change his diaper, Allison would have been too absorbed in the task to know time was passing at all. Even with that, she didn't realize when afternoon sank into evening. She didn't hear Christine get home, not the car, nor the sound of the door opening and closing and opening again.

"There's my two favorite people!" Christine chirped, coming around the side of the house. "Good news: I just invented 'AI-driven workforce blah blah blah'. You're free to congratulate me. I was— what is that?"

Panic crawled up Allison's spine. She turned slowly, shovel still in hand. "Chris." Her voice came out in an unfamiliar octave. "You're... here. Here you are."

"Here I am," Christine agreed, a note of wariness crossing her tone. "What happened? Did a neighbor dump that here?"

A laugh wheezed out of Allison's chest. Her mind was already two steps ahead in the conversation, floundering for ways to calm a panicking Christine, trying to shove her wife back out of this situation so it wouldn't be a fight as well as a burden. "Yeah, uh, a neighbor, or— yes. They left it here."

"What *is* it?"

There was a scream caught behind Allison's teeth. It wanted to be let out. Instead she said, "A custom go-cart?"



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“Pfft, yeah, wouldn’t that be something? Farting around the track in this thing? Actually, though. What is it?”

“A spaceship,” Allison said, without particularly meaning to. She dropped her shovel like it was to blame for all this, and turned away to fuss over Thomas.

It was the reaction, and not the words, that made Christine survey the scene more carefully. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Nothing is ever wrong here at home, so you can go back to your— your AI workhorses. Go to work and leave us alone and I’ll deal with this.”

“Babe,” Christine said: a ‘babe’ teetering on the edge of crisis. She put a hand on her wife’s shoulder. “You’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know!” The words came out sharp enough that Thomas scrunched his face in pre-scream disapproval. Allison took a breath so that her next words wouldn’t convert her baby in to a tornado siren. “I don’t know what’s happening. Yesterday this *thing* crashed here, and I *think* it’s aliens, but somehow no one else noticed? I’ve been dealing with it and I don’t know what the hell I’m doing and please, *please* be cool about this. I can’t handle caution tape or goatees right now.”

Christine visibly swallowed the first several statements on her lips. “...It crashed *yesterday*? And you didn’t tell me?”

Allison didn’t want to see the hurt in her wife’s face. Feeling betrayed was a luxury reserved for people who didn’t abandon their wives at home with babies. “No! I knew you’d react like this. You’re making it about you. You lost your mind over pasta sauce last week—how could I possibly trust you with aliens?”



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“Of course I’m going to lose my mind over this! Why aren’t you? Aliens! What the hell?” Christine’s tone was more restrained than her words. She clutched at her face as though physically holding herself together, fighting to not be the person her wife had accused her of being.

Allison felt guilty at that, and angrier for feeling guilty. “Do you even care what happens here? Do you give a damn what Thomas and I do as long as we’re here for you to play with at the end of the day? You don’t even ask what I’ve been doing anymore!”

“Right, because when I did ask, you were so forthcoming! Why would I bother when every day you would just say, ‘Oh, you know’? Or ignore the question entirely? How can I be anything *but* useless when you won’t tell me anything that’s going on?”

“You never—what the fuck?” Allison snapped her head up toward the horizon. For a moment, her brain convinced itself that there was another ship flying in, but the sight resolved into a fleet of black helicopters.

Christine jerked around to see what was happening, then relaxed. “It’s just helicopters.”

“No, it’s—” Allison’s brain spun like a roulette wheel and settled on an explanation. “That’s the *government*. It’s got to be. We can’t let them find the ship here.”

“Why? If they come and take the ship it won’t be our problem anymore.”

“Because Brigadier ate an alien.”

Of all the things that had been said, that was what made Christine pull up short, looking lost. “What?”



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“When the ship first crashed. An alien came out—it was tiny and didn’t have a laser gun and Briggy just *ate* it. If the government figures that out they’ll dissect him.”

Christine sagged against the wall, head in hands. “...Is he okay? Brigadier?”

“I think so. I made him throw up right away. He’s looked fine, since.”

In the following silence, Allison braced for another outburst. She was sick with what she’d said, and with what she might say next. She didn’t want to be in this conversation. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be in this *life*. She and Christine had fought through shitty families and shittier hometowns to get the prizes at the end: marriage, house, baby. All the boxes checked. Why was everything still so hard?

“...Let’s make sure the ship is hidden,” Christine said. “As long as the helicopters can’t see it, they’ll have no reason to start searching here. If they even are looking for it. Once they’re gone, we can dump the ship somewhere for them to find.”

Allison blinked slowly. She looked at her wife, and in that moment, remembered who she’d married—someone who had marinara breakdowns, yes, but also someone capable of incredible grace under pressure when others were depending on her. Allison had forgotten that, at some point.

“Okay,” Allison said. “Let’s do that.”

They did. A quick tarp adjustment hid the ship from above, and the three of them acted casual until the helicopters had passed. Then, it was a hasty pivot back to spaceship excavation.

With two people working, they were able to determine that part of the ship was buried to the point of being hooked under the dirt. A shovel and some strategic leverage popped it out like uprooting a tulip. It wasn’t too heavy for the two of them, together.



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Allison glanced often at her neighbor's yard and the road, but there was no suspicious movement beyond the azaleas.

"I'll dump it behind Carson's hardware store," Christine said, when the ship was loaded on top of the folded back seats of their car. "Because fuck that guy. Let him deal with it."

"Yeah, fuck that guy," Allison agreed. "Should Thomas and I come with you?"

Christine chewed her lip. "...No. Stay here, see if you can make this—" She gestured at the giant splat of dirt and mutated grass in the middle of their lawn. "—look like yard work."

Allison nodded. "I'll see what I can do." She paused before turning away and, after a brief hesitation, leaned in and offered a kiss to Christine—half question, half apology.

Christine accepted the kiss, reaching up to cradle Allison's face. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. Do you really think I don't care what you and Thomas are up to?"

Allison winced and trailed a hand up Christine's arm. "I don't know. It's been... too much, being alone here every day. Hours of guessing why he's crying and trying to get him to nurse and crying myself when he won't. Just me, and him, and no sleep. I love him, but god, it's hard."

"I'm sorry," Christine said, again. "I want to be here. I *would* be here, and I will, but— Greg. My dumbass boss. He's actively destroying our team at this point, and I think if I took maternity leave and tried to come back my job wouldn't exist anymore. If I



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get this promotion I'm off the team and secure again. If it weren't a question of losing my job—losing health insurance for you and Thomas—I would already be here.”

“...You never said anything about that.”

“You never said anything about breastfeeding being hard. I—”

Christine was cut off by a sound like a xylophone being played through an old-timey speaker. She and Allison both looked, instinctively, at Thomas, before whirling to see something hovering next to their car.

At first Allison thought the crashed ship had come back to life. That one, though, was still loaded on the seats—this one was new, with fewer holes. The air around it bubbled like the surface of a boiling pot. The noise wasn't loud, but it seemed to come from everywhere. It was impossible to tell if the ship was making it, or if that was the sound the sky made as it was being mutilated.

Thomas wailed in reply. Allison moved to shield him, holding her breath. She felt Christine grab her hand, but neither of them took their eyes off the ship. It hovered close to the open back hatch of the car. Allison thought, nonsensically, *Oh, it's going to climb in with its friend*. But there wasn't room for two. The new ship could only stick its nose into the car, and just at the point the two ships would have touched, there was a noise like an enormous drop of water hitting a windshield. The original ship vanished in a cloud of white dust that would probably never vacuum out of the seats.

The new ship removed its nose from their sensible compact car. It looked, for a moment, like maybe it had found what it was looking for, and would leave them be.

Something truly alien rose in Allison's chest, bright and unfamiliar. For the first time since the jaws of motherhood had closed around her, she *wanted* to see what



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came next. She wanted to have the conversation that would happen once the ship was gone. She thought maybe she would find her family again at the end of all this, that there would *be* an end, that the people she missed would be there for her to find. She became aware that she was crushing Christine's hand like a lobster with a paper cup. Thomas was still crying.

The ship paused in the air, a bumblebee surveying a flower. Then it dropped low to the ground and lanced out a hundred slender, spearlike protrusions.

"No!" Christine shouted, leaping in front of her family, but the protrusions weren't for them. At the tip of each one, a pale yellow droplet appeared, swelling and transforming until a hundred or so bulbous aliens, like the one Brigadier had eaten, extruded from the ship.

They looked less animal when they were alive. The tendrils weren't a tail. Every tendril on every tiny body pointed at Allison and Christine.

Out of the corner of her eye, Allison saw Brigadier come around the side of the house. Her brain scraped together the thought, *Maybe he'll eat these ones, too.*

"What do you *want?*" Christine demanded. It occurred to Allison that she might know the answer to that, but it was too late now, because the tendrils were glowing purple. The points of light converged to a single beam, pointed at her family.

She should have screamed. Maybe exhaustion stole her voice, or maybe it was the choking unfairness, that Christine was protecting her and she was protecting Thomas and none of it mattered. They'd fought for the life people said they couldn't have, and weren't strong enough to live it; they could stand together or fall apart and it didn't matter. Their problems were so much bigger than they were.



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Purple light arced toward them, graceful, almost ponderous. At the same time, Brigadier charged. Maybe he intended to eat the aliens after all. After a few steps, though, he rose into the air, flying, much faster than Allison would have guessed a flying cat could go. His body glowed to life with its own purple light. He didn't seem to notice anything was amiss, streaking forward with back arched, tail bottlebrushed, a scream of a growl ripping from his body.

This was his family, too.

Brigadier flew in front of the beam as it reached for them. Its light struck his own glowing aura, and both lights vanished. Brigadier dropped to the ground, landing on his feet. The tendrils of every alien sagged, limp. The crowd collectively wobbled, and those nearest Brigadier scrambled backward on their four limbs.

Allison didn't wait for more alien bullshit to happen. "Don't let Briggy eat anyone," she breathed to her wife, and took off toward the garden plot. She was, mentally and physically, far past the point of finding her shovel. She dug with her hands, fingernails caking with loam until she ripped a Tupperware free of the earth.

The hope was in her chest again, drowning out everything else—the pain of a nail snapped backward, worry for her family or herself. All she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears. Allison faced the alien horde with hands extended, showing them the clear plastic of the coffin. A hundred faces pointed their puckered, expressionless orifices at her.

"Here," she said. "I'm sorry for what happened. We didn't mean any harm. We just want things to be okay again."



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The aliens stared up, identical and unmoving. The ship hung in space. Christine clung to Brigadier desperately, and Thomas was still crying. Allison opened the Tupperware. Purple goo glistened on the corpse, and the stink of fish billowed out.

One alien stepped forward, tendrils extended. It could only reach a few inches up, but the gesture was clear. Allison stooped to offer the body. The alien hoisted its fallen comrade over its head, like an ant with a leaf, or like a really ugly Pikmin. Allison stepped back.

The ship extended its metal rods again, one to every alien. It sucked them up like liquid through straws. The body went with them, leaving behind a lawn that was yellow and swollen and empty.

The ship hovered for a few seconds before disappearing in a haze of bubbling air. That, too, lasted only another breath before smoothing back to silent sky.

Allison sat straight down in a puff of exploding grass. Christine released Brigadier, but without any remaining targets, all he had to hiss at was empty space. Thomas was *still* crying, and Christine gathered him up and shooshed him. She sat next to Allison, taking more care not to pop their remaining lawn.

“Are we all okay?” Christine asked.

Allison just looked at her. Brigadier came to hunker at her side, showing no signs of glowing or hovering.

“Did we know he could do that?” Christine gestured at the cat. “And what do we do if they come back?”



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Allison's brain was crashing back into exhaustion. It didn't have room for answers to those kinds of questions, or much else, really. There was only one thought left in her mind, and she held onto it with all the hope in her body:

Her family was very beautiful.

She put one hand on Christine's where it cradled Thomas's head, and stroked Brigadier with the other. It was a long time before she found any words at all. "...We would get by if you lost your job," she said. "I could reopen my online shop, sell art prints. We could... get Obamacare, probably. If Obamacare still exists after the alien invasion."

Christine stared like she didn't understand this language. Then she laughed a few times, like hiccups. "We could supplement Thomas with formula, if he's bad at breastfeeding. Or switch over entirely. I bet they'll still make formula even if the aliens start a war."

"And that wouldn't make me a bad mom?"

"Not any worse than I would be if I lost my job."

Allison nodded, slowly. "I don't know how things got this bad. I thought we were good at loving each other."

"We are. We're just... regular human people, dealing with alien problems."

There were no helicopters around to surveil them, or neighbors to peer through the azaleas. Their family—women, baby, and cat—had a long, unbothered moment to sit with each other, without the rest of the world pressing in. That lasted until Thomas pooped himself, and Brigadier started yowling to be let inside, and they realized they hadn't had dinner.



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“I’ll take Thomas and heat something up for us,” Christine said. “You lie down for a bit.”

Allison did go lie down. Maybe the aliens would come back, but until then, she could trust her wife to make dinner and change diapers. There would be conversations about contacting the government and bringing in the caution tape and goatees, but until then, they could talk about switching to formula, and keeping Brigadier indoors so he didn’t start a space war. Until then, they could see about crying a little less.

Until then, they could give each other time to take naps.