

Futures

Why I can't get my alien to stay

A taste of freedom. By Emily Baulch



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

My alien left again this morning. It's alright. He'll be back. He always comes back. So this time, he will too.

But if you see him – lanky, average alien height, grey tartan pants – let me know. Don't speak to him. Don't take a photo. I don't think he would like that. Just ... let me know.

When Jasper, that's my alien, moved in all those years ago, I wasn't too sure about him. He wasn't too sure about me. He was too tall, too greasy, and what was with him and the couch? Sharing was not his forte.

I went to complain, I waited in line, I spoke to the government officials. I was told he was 'government-mandated' and that, although I could fill in the forms for a transfer, that was unnecessary. He'd tried that last week. It wasn't approved. He was to stay. With me. And I with him. They showed me the stamp. It made it official.

So we sidestepped each other, skirted 'the issue', and ogled one another with our peripheral vision. His side-sight was superior and

so he got the advantage. I think it was when he decided that I could be well trained with high-quality cups of tea, we made something of a pact. We made it work. My thoughts turned from 'get out of my house' and 'hey, that's my favourite blanket!' to, 'hey, what's up, Jasper, can I have a cookie?'. He got the couch.

They are rose-infused, those shortbread cookies he makes, with little sugar crystals and petals pressed carefully into the top. Jasper is an excellent baker. He bakes on Sundays. It's Wednesday. I miss him.

Have you seen him?

Not yet?

I guess it's too soon.

He'll be back next week.

See, just as I was getting comfortable, and slightly doughy around the hips, he was getting lonely. Or bored. Or itchy. Quite possibly the last. And yes, maybe my lack of baking skills combined with my inability to measure laundry powder has something to do with it – but really, if he'd just give my blanket back, maybe he'd be comfortable enough to stay.

But he doesn't. And some mornings, it's usually Tuesdays, he's gone. I come downstairs and find the blanket is folded on our couch – my couch – and I know. He's gone.

So I pick up the blanket and start taking it back to my room before I realize I really should wash it first. And I stand there, clutching a blanket heady with alien-musk, wondering if there are any new kinds of laundry powder I could try or if I should just take it all to the dry cleaners and be done with it.

It feels odd, to go from an alien invading my kitchen and changing my one container of home brand flour into a row of unbleached soft wheat flour for cookies and high-protein flour for bread and other white-grey substances masquerading under the name of flour to make confections that are, really, quite beyond me. To go from *that* to having my alien missing-in-action and the takeaway containers piling up on the bench and walking down the street to buy food-for-one and waving to my friends with their aliens, well, that's when I realize I'm unfamiliar with having

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no one to talk to.

My next-door neighbour always stops me, her alien hanging off her arm. Or maybe it's the other way around. I don't know. But she always stops me when Jasper isn't here.

"Jasper's gone again?"

"Yeah."

"He's a strange one, that alien."

"Yeah."

"He'll be back soon, though."

"Yeah."

It's not truly a conversation. Not at its heart.

Jasper's voice isn't raspy and it isn't honey. It isn't velvet nor is it wooden. It just is. And when you talk to him, really talk to him, well, you'd need to talk to him to understand and he isn't

here right now.

Last time, I stood there by the door, ready to take his muddy shoes and smooth that strange speckle off the back of his hand. I smiled at him. He frowned at me. I waited. Through tea and biscuits, I waited. I waited, I think, for him to be at home or to feel at home. I waited for him to speak and he watched me waiting.

Eventually, he asked me, "When I go, why do you stay? Why don't you leave? Why don't you run? Why do you stay?"

He tilted his head. I frowned at him. He smiled at me. He smoothed the tablecloth, adjusted the cookies, spun my teacup.

"But where would you go?"

He smiled again. A deep smile but not, I

think, a happy one. He added more milk to my tea. Piled the cookies higher. And he was gone again by Tuesday.

He's as true as clockwork, my Jasper. Which is how I know he'll be back.

I've decided that Jasper must be saving the world. Or even the Universe. Maybe he's out there now, making batches of cookies and cups of tea. For it must be something big and important that makes him leave. Otherwise, I'd get him to stay.

Emily Baulch is a PhD student from Brisbane, Australia. When she isn't studying books, she's writing them.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Emily Baulch reveals the inspiration behind *Why I can't get my alien to stay*

This story is an unapologetic usurper. When I was searching for the ideal place to locate another short story, I stumbled upon How to write for Nature Futures and found Jasper sitting in the corner munching cookies (he left soon after). And so, *Why I can't get my alien to stay* was born, revised, and submitted in a golden-lit Brisbane afternoon. It mixes issues of dependency, conditioning and cultural communication with the quirkiness of my other alien adventure stories. Please, have a cookie, and thank you for stopping by!

