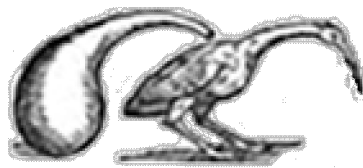


Segue

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Human Resources

The phone rang four times before Terri picked it up. I looked at the alarm clock: 1:30 a.m. “Hello...Hello...” Her voice was all rasp and annoyance.

I lay there, listening, with my eyes closed. Little Hannah, lying between us, roused by the disturbance, rolled over and kicked me softly in the ribs.

From inside the telephone receiver came a loud, high-pitched multi-tonal static sound, like a chorus of electric screams, but like other things too. She listened for a moment and then she hung up.

“Who—what was that?” I whispered to my wife, already rolled up again in her third of the covers.

“Aliens,” she rasped back.

“That’s strange,” I said. “They usually don’t call this late.” I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn’t.

I lay there for what seemed like a long while, but I’m not sure, because it’s hard to understand time after being woken up in the middle of the night like that.

As a child I’d always been really scared of aliens. They had seemed to me so real, so possible, and the more real something seemed to me, the scarier it was. Monsters and shit like that didn’t scare me. I was scared of kidnappers, killers, rogue devil worshipers who kidnapped babies and sacrificed them on an alter of blood, real people doing weird things, things you saw on the news. But mostly I was scared of aliens, because they seemed so possible to me, and they looked just human enough to be entirely terrifying. The people who talked about them on TV, the people who had supposedly seen them, were really intriguing to me too. They themselves seemed like aliens, not quite human, but still very real. Their descriptions of aliens were horrifying. As I lay there, I remembered this show that used to come on right before my bedtime, when I was about eight. It was called *How Bizarre*. It was a half hour show, and after every segment all the people in the audience and the panel of guests would say, “How bi-zarre!” A chorus of crazies. They had all kinds of freaks on that show: they had guys with bee beards, woman with six foot long writhing Medusa finger nails, escape artists who could do Harry Houdini-type shit, female contortionists and fire eaters, all sorts of majorly out-there people. One episode had a whole panel of these jittery mental patients who had seen, or had been abducted by, aliens. After all their stories and theories on what they thought these aliens were looking for and why the aliens had picked them, someone from backstage wheeled out this sculpture, this bust of an alien. An artist had sculpted it according to the descriptions of these wick-wicks who had supposedly seen the aliens. It was a composite. It had that classic alien look: huge v-shaped head, skinny neck, big, slanting black eyes, but the guy who had sculpted it was a real Michelangelo because this thing looked so real, it looked alive, and it scared the living shit out of me. I didn’t sleep right for weeks. Now, thinking about that alien face, after that weird phone call, I was feeling a little creeped out, so I tried to think of something else.

For some reason I started thinking about my wife’s ass. It doesn’t now seem to me like a logical sequence of thoughts: aliens—wife’s ass. But I guess it wasn’t that simple. It was probably more like this: creepy phone call, aliens, alien abductees, the dreaded alien abductees’ anal probe, wife’s ass.

She had a good ass, and it wasn't a scary thing to think about, not compared to aliens. I got an idea. Maybe I could touch it and she wouldn't even know I was touching it. Hannah moved a little and made a pretty baby sound. I turned over and slid my right hand under the covers and past Hannah's tiny body and I felt my wife's bare side, the valley north of the base of her hip. She felt so nice and soft and warm—her body was always so warm—and I could feel an erection coming on, and I hiked my hand up the slope of her hip, to the roundness of her miraculous cheek, slid it over the side strip of her soft cotton panties, then further south, back onto bare flesh, and stopped when I could cup my hand over the smooth, cotton-covered peak of round cheek. What a great ass. What a serious ass. I'd always characterized my wife's ass as possessing something special, a real prima donna of an ass, an ass of renown. I rubbed the palm of my hand back and forth over her cheek, and I closed my eyes, and pictured it, the perfect little thing that was right there under the sheets, under my hand, and I got harder. With my index finger, I followed the raised edge of her panties, tracing the firm, warm cheek around to the underneath part of her ass, the part that dead ends into the back of the top of the thigh, my all-time favorite part of a woman's ass, of this woman's ass, and I cupped it; the soft geometry of that last anguished portion of posterior molded into the palm of my hand. I was in ass heaven. I closed my eyes and absorbed the moment.

"Honey, what are you doing?"

I jumped. My wife's ass sent a shock to my hand, and then my whole body.

"You're awake," I whispered. Hannah squirmed.

"SShhh..." she said. "I can't sleep after that call."

"It's just a phone call. Phone calls can't hurt you." My erection was completely nonexistent, into negative numbers now. Not that it really mattered. I wasn't going to do anything with it, at least not to her, anyway.

We were both quiet for a few minutes.

"Why aren't *you* asleep? Not scared, too, are you?" She turned around and squinted toward my face.

"No. I'm just having trouble getting tired again. Plus, she keeps kicking me and rolling on me." We both looked at Hannah, spread out between us, her small body somehow taking up a good third of the bed.

"Hey, lying here, I was thinking of something."

"Yeah." I reached over and uncurled one of Hannah's baby curls. By now, my eyes were so adjusted to the dark that I could see almost everything.

"Hey."

"what?"

"I was talking to you."

"I was listening."

"No you weren't. I've got work tomorrow. I need to sleep. G'night." She rolled over and curled up a little.

"Wait. Tell me what you were gonna tell me." I cupped her cheek and rubbed it.

"Quit touching my ass. You're such a pervert. If I hadn't been awake earlier, you probably would have worked your way up to my tits." She squeezed her breasts. I could feel an erection brewing again.

I didn't say or do anything.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” she said.

“Great. I’ll never get back to sleep,” but I did around 2:45am.



I wake to a finger in the nose. I look at the alarm clock: 8:13 a.m. “How ‘bout nine, Hannah?” She laughs and puts her finger, the one that had been in my nose, in her mouth. “Gross, Hannah.”

At nine the phone rings.

It’s a telemarketer: “Can I talk to the head of the household, please?” Click.

I derive a lot of pleasure from hanging up on them. Terri is different, very official and professional about it. She asks for their names and she tells them to take us off their calling lists and, please, she says, never call here again, thank you. She says it in this really intimidating voice. She can be scary when she wants to be. Sitting on the bed, dressing Hannah, I start thinking about my wife’s badass little ass again. It shocked me, like an electric eel.



It’s around ten and we’re in the living room and Hannah is watching Sesame Street. There is this Spanish-Latin-Salsa-type music coming from somewhere on Sesame Street and Hannah is dancing to it and she looks so perfect whirling her little torso around with the furry monsters and laughing a little.

I go over to the dining room table to work on some bills and, of course, Hannah comes over and puts her arms out, telling me not to work on them. I pick her up—I know I’m spoiling her—and we sit there making sounds at each other.

At 10:30 the phone rings again. Telemarketer. Click. Hannah, who is now under the table with her left arm through one of the straps of my flip-flops like it’s a purse, laughs. I look at the pile of bills on the table. “They can wait.” Sometimes I wish I were still working so I wouldn’t be the sole person dealing with this kind of shit—bills, telemarketers. Plus, I’m probably spending too much time with our daughter. Sometimes I’m scared I’m going to fuck her up, mold her into a sullen teenager, a repressed and/or suicidal twenty-something, or just a weirdo elementary-school kid who gets picked on and in trouble all the time for doing oddly inappropriate things, like bringing liquor to school from her pop’s liquor cabinet, or wearing horrifyingly mismatched clothes to school, and having tangled hair, and permanently untied shoes, and chasing and trying to kiss all the boys on the playground. (There was a girl like that at my elementary school. All the girls made fun of her and all the boys were terrified of her kiss. I, of course, had a crush on her, but she never tried to kiss me.)

I am always putting her in mismatched clothes, too. That’s not really my fault, though, because I’m colorblind. I get my reds and greens mixed up. But one time I had Hannah in a plaid top and polka-dotted purple-or-something stretch baby pants, and she was just at home playing so, to me, it didn’t matter, but my wife came home and she wasn’t thoroughly happy about it. “Hun,” she said.

“She hasn’t been in these clothes all day, has she?” I said yeah, she had, and she told me that my mismatching patterns like that didn’t have shit to do with being colorblind and that I should have known better. She was right.

I’m fucking up our daughter, piecemeal. My bad fashion sense is just the tip of the fucked-up iceberg. She needs to be around more kids, other adults besides me, more people in general. I’m definitely probably fucking her up. But I hated teaching and I had to quit. I had 120 kids and I was fucking up all of them. I’m sure of it. I could see it. Every day they looked and acted more and more fucked up. It’s different when its just one kid, and it’s yours, but you can’t go around fucking up other people’s kids, too.

Hopefully I’ll find something soon, a job-job, like one of those sitcom jobs where everyone hangs around the break room making fun of each other all day and then they all go out for drinks after work. I’d like something like that, behind a desk, in my own office, or even a cubicle, limited contact with others (except for the time when we get to stand around by the water cooler and joke), shuffling papers or pushing around a mouse, something like that. I don’t know. I don’t really want to do anything, not really.

At 11:15 Hannah and I are watching a cartoon about a super tiny kid who can fly when the phone rings again. This time it isn’t a telemarketer.

It’s the aliens again.

I listen. I don’t hang up. I let it scream until it stops and then I wait for something else, and there is something else:

Whispering. I hear a giggle and I hear a whisper that clearly says *hang up, hang up*. The phone clicks and there is total silence in the phone. I hang up and pick up again and dial * 69 and a voice that sounds like a relative of the static-scream sound of the aliens says something about not being able to tell me the number of the aliens.

1:00 p.m. Hannah is napping. I call my wife at work. “The aliens called again.”

“Oh.” She sounds distracted.

“I think it’s a prank call because I heard some whispering at the end. Sounded like kids. I did a star 69 but it didn’t work.”

Oh, again.

“Do you need me to go? I can go.”

“No, no it’s okay.”

“Listen, I don’t want to make dinner, so let’s go somewhere tonight.”

“Okay. Cheap, though.”

“Okay. Hannah’s out of it so I’m going to go so I can get some things done while she is.”

“Okay. If the aliens call again, try communicating with them.”

“Right,” I say. We say bye, and I say I love you, and we hang up.

When I check on Hannah, she looks perfectly asleep. Her arms are hugging a pillow. I think about how much I love her and how I never really knew about love until she was born. When I saw her for the first time, I realized that I hadn’t ever really loved anyone before. Before she was born, when I thought about love, when I tried to think about what the word meant, all I could do was picture the word love. I just pictured the word love in all capitals, real tall, standing against a solid background, like on Sesame Street or something. To me, the word love meant the word love. That’s it. Nothing

was attached to it. Now, I know how sad and empty that is, because now when I think of love, of what it means, I picture Hannah sleeping like this. No words.

It's two. I'm lying on the couch, rereading parts of *Fires* for the billionth time, and when the phone rings I jump up and run into the kitchen to pick it up before it rings a second time and wakes up Hannah. It's the aliens. I listen to the scream and when it's over I hear nothing but the low, low hiss of waiting.

Say something. Say something to them. Quickly, quickly.

"You don't know what love is," I say. I'm not sure why I say it but I do and after I hear the words, it feels like the right thing to have said.

Several seconds go by and I don't hear the click. The aliens aren't hanging up. Several more seconds pass. Then breathing, I hear someone breathing. Then someone, a human, says, "Fuck you, man." Then click.

2:15 and the phone rings, but I don't have to run anywhere because after last time I wised up and kept the phone with me. I put down the book and pick up the phone. "Hello," I say.

"You don't fucking know me, man," the voice says.

This is great, I think. This is my opportunity. I can really do something here. I roll my shoulders a few times, like the way boxers do, and I try cracking my neck by tilting my head side to side, but it doesn't work. I even stand up and do that boxer dance they do. Finally I say, "Hey, man, what fucking planet are you from that you think you can call people at all hours of the night? I was just wondering your thoughts on that, shit head."

I start thinking of Hannah, and my wife, my beautiful wife with her phenomenal, out-of-this-world ass, her electric ass, and I start thinking about our home, the sanctity of our home. I start thinking about purpose and meaning and scary alien busts and everything, and I start feeling really fucking aggressive."

The alien reiterates: "Man, you don't know me. You don't know anything about me." The alien sounds like he's losing it some.

"Listen," I say, "don't ever call here again. I'm fed up with this shit."

"Fuck you, old man," says the alien.

"Brilliant," I say, "a fucking academic," and then I say: "Here's what you're going to do, asshole. You're going to hang up and you're never going to call here again. You're never going to call anyone again, not like this, not like a little fucking coward-prick like this." I yell all this and the alien kid is listening. I can feel that he is listening, and when I'm finished I say, "Now. Hang up."

I hear a sigh. I hear a snort, and he speaks: "Mr. S? Mr. S, you still there?"

I am still there and I say so.

"I'm sorry. This won't happen again, Mr. S."

I know this voice. It occurs to me that this is a familiar voice. "Who is this?" I say.

"It's Hector, sir. Hector Ruiz. I was in your third period Language Arts class last year. I didn't mean to upset you so much. At least, I didn't think all this would happen. You kind of freaked me out, man, yelling and everything, and I guess I kind of freaked you out too."

"Hector—" I hear Hannah cry for a few seconds and then she stops. "Hector, I don't have much time. I gotta go, but listen—no more prank calls, okay?"

"Okay. Sure. Sorry again, Mr. S."

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, but I feel like I’m saying it to myself, and I’m about to hang up when he says:

“Mr. S.”

I pause, but say nothing.

“What you said is not true,” he says. “That one thing you said is not true at all, not about me,” and then click.

Hannah is full crying now, so I go into the room and I get her, pick her up off the bed, and I give her a kiss, and I hope he is right, I hope it’s not true at all.



That evening when my wife gets home, I tell her what happened. I tell her about Hector Ruiz, the alien. I tell her about the things we said to each other over the phone, which are really pretty funny now, funny and silly. I tell her about all that, and she tells me about Richard in human resources.

Richard Martin: Dick.

She tells me all about Dick and about how it just happened and she hadn’t meant it to and neither had Dick, of course, and she doesn’t know what to do and she is sorry.

And of course I feel like puking.

And the whole time she’s telling me, she’s holding Hannah in her lap and Hannah is just sitting there and you can tell she’s really listening to all this crap. She’s not even two and she’s really listening, and I’m not even looking at my wife, I’m looking at Hannah, and Hannah and I are listening together.

We hear every word.

But then I start thinking, picturing Richard, Dick, touching my wife’s hot ass, holding it, doing things I’d rather not think about to my wife’s crazy little arrogant ass, an ass that, I realize now, is mostly hype, not such a great ass...

Not much of an ass at all, really.

Hannah looks at me and whimpers and then she looks at my wife, my cheating wife, her mother, and whimpers again, and she looks back at me and she tells me telepathically that she doesn’t want a step dad named Dick, and I tell her telepathically don’t worry, it will never happen, but I start feeling awful.

I feel like I might cry, but I don’t want to because I don’t want them to know how upset I am.

And then, for some reason, I think about Hector Ruiz and I know that even though he’s a prank caller, he’s a pretty good kid, and maybe, I think, I had something to do with that. I was his teacher after all. And Hannah—she is a beautiful person, age one-and-a-half, and I know I had something to do with that, and I know she’s the reason I don’t see the word love anymore. I take a deep breath.

My wife is crying and she’s still telling us why, and she has some good reasons. All reasons are good to someone.

I’m surprised she hasn’t asked me anything yet. She just keeps talking. It’s been several minutes now. She’s probably surprised I haven’t said anything yet: cut her off, cussed her, something.

Hannah climbs off her mom's lap and walks over to me and I pick her up and put her on my lap.

She is still talking. I wish she would stop.

Hannah squirms so I put her down.

She runs over to one of her toys on the floor, a pink Barbie phone that rings and has a dial tone and talks, and everything. You can even leave messages. Hannah knows what all the buttons mean. She really knows how to use it.

She finally stops.

"Aren't you going to say something?" My wife looks at me with her sad wet eyes. She's pleading to me with them, her sad eyes, begging me to say something. I don't say anything. I can't.

The little pink phone rings.

Hannah picks it up and presses the speaker button and there's a pause, some static, and then a voice, a robotic teenaged boy says, "Hi. This is Ken. Do you want to go to the beach later?"

Hannah laughs, and, I swear, she says yes.

About the Work

I wrote this story sometime during a six month period between quitting teaching 6th grade language arts and getting a new job as a non-MLS librarian at a public library. It was an emotional time that produced a lot of writing: three decent short stories, all of which have now been accepted for publication, a first draft of a novella, *Beautiful Music from a Bad Mouth*, about some time I spent in Taiwan, a personal essay on the writer Larry Brown's influence on my writing and life, and a handful of good poems, many of which have been published both online and in print journals.

Like the main character in "Human Resources," I was once an unemployed stay-at-home dad who had, like him, tried my hand at teaching middle school English ("language arts") but decided it wasn't for me, and, like him, I also have a daughter and a wife. That's where the autobiographical material ends. My wife has never, to my knowledge, cheated on me, and we have never, to my knowledge, received creepy phone calls from any of my former students.

I don't remember how this story developed, but I believe I just began writing one day and a few hours later there was the first draft (a rare occurrence). I think I quickly (the course of a week?) knocked out a few more drafts of it, and then set it to the side for a month or so. I revised it, over a period of four years, six or seven times before it reached its current final version, and I believe it was rejected by six or seven publications before finding a home at *Segue*.

As I said, I don't remember much about the writing process on this one, but I can say this: generally speaking, I write in the same craftless way I do everything. I just struggle along until something feels right. It's usually easy to scribble out a first draft. The long and hard part is taking that usually pretty flat, lackluster first draft and shaping it into something other people might want to read.

It seems to me now that the most challenging part of writing this story was coming up with the ending. I can remember fooling with it for a long time, trying to produce something that, to me, felt natural. The current ending, Hannah picking up her play phone, sort of mocking and mimicking (unintentionally?) her parents, didn't avail itself to me until one of the final drafts of the story. I don't remember reasoning it out or thinking too much about it; it just came out through the pen, thankfully. I think it's a pretty good ending that ties things up nicely.

I read in an interview once where a writer said, "I make messes." I like that. I think that pretty succinctly sums up a large part of the writing process. I spend a considerable amount of time creating a mess, i.e. a first draft of a story. Of course, I want the mess to come. I want there to be a mess. I can't do without it. And then, once the glorious mess is there, I spend the rest of the time trying to clean it up.

About the Author

Gavin S. Lambert has had fiction appear most recently in *Poor Mojo's Almanac(k)*, *Thieves Jargon*, and *Torkstar*. He was also a "Top 25 winner" in *Glimmer Train's* winter 06/07 Very Short Fiction Award. A story of his is forthcoming in the December issue of *The Externalist*. His poetry has appeared in "remark," *Orange Room Review*, *Haggard and Halloo*, *The Adirondack Review*, and *Dead Mule*. He lives in Northeast Florida with his wife and daughter, where he works in a library.

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