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teen spirit

{The Alien Inside Me} By Jeannine Amber

The summer before I turn 15, something inside me crumples up like a piece of paper and settles in my chest. It leans on my stomach and squeezes into my throat. It reaches up along my spine and pounds against my skull. All night it keeps me up, sitting on the edge of my bed, trying to hold myself

together. This thing is hurting me. I press my fists into my ribs, tears spill down. I think about cutting it out of me with my mother's black-handled kitchen knife. In the mirror above my dresser, morning comes. I go to school. »



SILVIA FLACHY

First thing: no one can know.
Second thing: watch out for people staring at me.

Everyone is looking at me. I hear them laughing and I feel their eyes boring holes in my back. I walk—almost run, trying to look casual—into the girls' bathroom and stand in a stall until the bell rings. When the corridors clear, I run from the building, my book bag banging in to my legs.

Third: watch for Signs.

The Signs are tricky. Sometimes I know what they mean before I see them, sometimes I have to figure them out as they come along. If, on my way to school, the light at the intersection is green the moment my foot hits the last square of pavement before the asphalt, then I have to cross the street and go to school. That would be a Sign. If the light is red, then I have to stay on my side of the road and follow the Signs somewhere else. I don't go to school those days.

Once I tried to explain it to a friend. Insistent and pleading, I tell her I have no control over anything. I can't do anything. Oh sure you can, she says and rattles off a list of stupid things that aren't true or don't count. What I mean, what she doesn't get, is that nothing I do matters. I can't change anything. Every day it takes all the energy I have just to dodge those stares and look for my Signs.

There are lots of books about how at 13 girls fall off a cliff and sink into some kind of adolescent abyss. We don't do well in math anymore, we hate our bodies, we fight with our parents, we take up smoking. We are filled with doubt, and the books lay blame on everything from hormones to television. For me, the explanations don't matter much. All I know is, when I was a kid, life was just regular days punctuated by birthday parties, science projects, and secret clubs. Then things changed. After 12, everything got magnified and distorted.

But inside my head was only half of the problem. What really put me over the edge were the boys. Not so much what they did—the touching and staring and showing me things I didn't want to see—but that I couldn't stop any of it. All I could do was brace myself for whatever they threw my way. For me that's what it meant to be a girl—you don't get to be in charge of anything, and not being in charge is the worst thing in the world.

This is where it starts.

I'm 12. I'm not ugly but I'm not pretty either. I have glasses and wear my hair in braids because I don't know what else to do with it. No boys like me. I'm the black girl. I'm nobody.

Every morning I have to take the subway to school. Sometimes I'm in the car by myself. Today it's me and a guy in a gray suit and shiny black shoes. I glance over and he's reading the paper. I look at the milk poster hanging over his head then back at him. He's moved his newspaper. In his lap with his right hand he's holding his dick. I can see it darker and smoother than the skin of his hand shining a little in the fluorescent light poking up over his ear. This is the fourth time a guy has done this to me. It's always the same. Suddenly, so I don't know what's going on until it's too late.

When I was six something similar happened, only the man was nicer. He asked me first: *Would it be okay if I put my hand in your pants?* Afterward, he gave me a quarter.

This guy here knows that I see what he's doing because he smiles when I look his way. Now I have to concentrate on looking everywhere else. My eyes go back to the ad. I trace every letter, the poster's metal border, and the picture of the smiling cow. Even so I can still see what he's doing. He's curved in his seat like a C. He rubs his dick like this: up fast and down real slow. The newspaper slides off his lap and lies folded like a little tent next to him. My neck hurts from staring up. In my head the numbers

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start: *Two times two is four, four times two is eight, eight times two is 16.* With that thing in his hand he's got me trapped in my seat. I want to scream but instead I sit there staring at the cow, my hands in fists in my pockets. Something inside me shifts.

I'm 14 and hiding between the stacks at the school library with a book I've found called *Growing Up Dead*. On the cover it says "A Hard Look at Why Adolescents Commit Suicide." I stick it in my bag and take it home. Excerpted in the book are the journal entries of Peter Walker. Peter is my age—14. "Life is just one big dilemma," he writes. "And I'm stuck in the middle of the horns crying for help. . . . I can't stand and will not be able to cope with my present situation for long."

I have this fantasy about calling Peter. He seems bright; we could figure out where these bad feelings come from. Peter writes: "I seem to be such a moody person. Sometimes I'm high. . . . But other times I get so low that I could do a somersault under a worm. Strangely enough, every time I feel low I always seem to enjoy living in a depression. I seem to like feeling really down."

In addition to the diary excerpts, the book tells me this: One frigid February afternoon Peter went into a field behind his parents' house, aimed a shotgun at his face, and showered the snow with blood.

What would it take to do something like that? I imagine his courage. There's the obvious nerve of taking a gun and pressing it to your temple. But I'm more fascinated by the courage to tell someone, anyone, that something is wrong. That's what Peter did: pulled the trigger and said, I hurt this much.

I think something bad is happening to me. But I have no idea how to say anything to anyone. I can't wrap my mouth around the words. I don't even know which words to use. I try to write it down. Under the heading "Problems Written in a Rational State," I write: (1) Schizophrenic (suspected), (2) Paranoid, (3) Really insecure, (4) Negative thoughts (must be gotten rid of). None of this makes enough sense to say out loud. So I tell no one.

Not even the guidance counselor I get sent to because I'm always late for school. Mrs. A., who, with blue eyeshadow up to her brows, looks a little crazy herself, tries different things, like telling me I have to come to her office every time I'm late. I don't understand how this is punishing me, and I end up seeing her every day. I don't tell her about my list of problems. Instead, we talk about how everyone hates me. Mrs. A. shakes her head. Over and over she tells me things like "You have so much to offer." Other times we talk about my boyfriend.

The song in my head goes: *My boyfriend was la la/la a lifeguard was la la/and he's older was la la.* He's 17 and the second boy to ever kiss me on

the mouth. The first for everything else. I know that's kind of odd for me, but he says it's okay because we can really talk. Mostly what we talk about are his needs. I try to make a deal with him. I say, how about you be my boyfriend but could you please please do it with someone else, please? He says no, we'd have to break up in that case. He says if we don't do it soon, he's not going to be able to stand it. I know this is a bad arrangement. I know about feminism. I know about "I don't need a man." I know all of that. Yet, when I weigh it out, on one side I'm alone, and on the other side everyone says he's so cute, plus he has lots of friends and I hardly have any. If I can just stand there beside him, with a grin plastered on my face that registers as almost cool, no one will know how pathetic I really am. Already I see that no one would talk to me if it weren't for him.

My boyfriend is the one I run to when I decide to run away.

One night I'm telling my friend Janet about my latest screaming match with my father, and she says, "Do it. Leave. Take your favorite things, put them in a bag, and just run away."

My favorite things? I pause over Mickey. Is it okay, at 14, to run away from home with a stuffed bear? Mickey goes in the bag, then I take him out. Then he goes back in. Then I take him out. I sit him on my bed and phone my boyfriend.

When I get to his house he says, "You must be very upset. You need a drink." He pours me a glass, filled to the rim, and red wine drips down on the sheets of his parents' bed. "Drink up," he says. I drink, and he watches. He pours some more and smiles. Bottle's finished and he's banging my head into the headboard. I squeeze

I'm 15 now and sometimes, when I can't sleep, I take a black magic marker and make an X on the place on my arm I'd like to cut. Then I take an X-Acto knife, or a kitchen knife, or a razor I pry from a disposable shaver, and press it to my skin. But I never press hard enough and in the morning I have to scrub off the marker.

There are all kinds of people who would have pushed the blade in, but not me. I can't even swallow pills. Whenever I get sick, my mother has to mash up aspirin in a spoon and mix it with juice. Not swallowing pills isn't really a problem until December rolls around. I read in a newspaper that a lot of people get really depressed in December. All I know is, December 5 there are all those Signs.

First, the light turns red just as my foot hits the last square of pavement on the corner two blocks from school. So I have to turn left. Then a July-coming out of the drugstore opens the door right in my face. That means go inside. Then the pharmacist looks me right in the eye: I have to buy something.

I chew them. Two hundred and seventy Bayer aspirin, bitter and chalky between sips of apple juice.

Dying isn't really the point. I just don't know what else to do. Maybe feeling this bad is different when you're old. You'd have evidence of a once-normal life: a job, a house, some children. But what do I have? Look backward, and I'm just a kid: sticky hands, big dogs, wet beds. And then 14. And then nothing. If I happen to die, that would be fine. But mostly, I just want things to change.

It's disgusting how they get those aspirin out of me. Then they wheel me upstairs to 5E, Adolescent Psychiatric.

It's not the sex, it's the fact that I didn't want to do it but it happened anyway. Then, because it happened, I had to act like I wanted it. And the only way I can do this is to create a new girl.

my muscles shut. "There's something wrong with you," he says, because he can't get in. But he doesn't stop trying. And then he's in.

He tells everybody. Every body. One of his friends asks me if I'm okay. I look at him blankly. "He said you were deformed."

Summer fades away and I begin to evaporate. Inside me, something I imagine as an airy mist between my ribs seeps away and is replaced by that hard tight thing in my chest. It's not so much the sex, it's the fact that I didn't really want to do it but it happened anyway. Then, because it happened, I had to act like I wanted it. And the only way I can do this is to create a new girl. A girl who would have done that thing. A girl who wouldn't have minded. A girl who would have liked it.

In my body I put a new personality. There's a lot of lying involved. I laugh when I don't want to. I smile when what I want is to kill someone. Late at night, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and practice my smile to make sure I do it right. I smile and give a little wave. I throw my head back in a laugh. I do it over and over. I get terrible headaches.

All I want is for the pain to go away. After my parents leave for work, before I go to school, I slip into the liquor cabinet and have a little drink. Canadian whisky or Jamaican rum. Whatever I think they won't miss. Sometimes I mix stuff together. Sometimes I drink too much. One morning, I end up at school drunk, wander into the wrong classroom, and everyone laughs at me. I do my smile, back out of the room, and run from the building.

The hospital is supposed to be one of the best, so I don't know why we hardly see any doctors. It's the caseworkers who take care of us. They don't do a very good job. Mostly they watch the Anorexics to make sure they aren't baring up their lunch. The Anorexics tell me their secrets, teach me what to do. One day a caseworker comes into the bathroom and wrinkles her nose because it smells like throw up. I'm standing at the sink brushing my teeth. "Who's been in here?" she demands. "No one," I say. "Just me." She doesn't get it.

One afternoon, my parents come for family therapy. We sit in a little office. I'm embarrassed they're here. My mother is very private. CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Amber

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My father is very impatient. I know this isn't going to go well. The doctor, whom I've never seen before, who has never asked me anything about anything, tells my parents that I did this because of them.

This doctor doesn't know what he's talking about. For it to be their fault they would have to know what's going on in my head, and they don't. They don't have a clue. If I tell them about my boyfriend, I'll get in trouble. If I tell them about the pain creeping around my chest,

I'm so pleased with myself, I tell the psychiatrist, "I've figured out what to do." He listens quietly and nods. Finally he says, "I can't let you go home."

they'll think I'm crazy for sure. So I tell them nothing. Or I lie. I look my parents straight in the eye and say, "I'm going baby-sitting, but don't phone because you'll wake the baby." Then I go out with my boyfriend, or go to some party, or go get drunk and hitchhike around the city even though I have no place to go.

If I told my mother any of this, she'd probably die. My mother is a very pure woman. At my age she wore a school uniform and her hair in plaits. Her favorite subject was Latin. From what I can tell, girls in Jamaica don't have the same kind of problems I do, they just go to school and study Latin. Nothing in my mother's life would have prepared her for me, her dirty devil-child. She can't help me, and that sad look, the way she shakes her head, is just too much for me. So I tell her over and over that everything is okay. I don't know if she believes me, but I need her to stop asking me questions.

After the therapy my dad and I have a talk. He knows I'm not right. He's the one who gives me lectures that start with "I know you're having a difficult time" and end with him telling me what to do. I think it's a Jewish thing, his compassion mixed with an almost crazy need to fix everything even when he can't. We sit down in my room. "Look," he says, "you need to understand. Death is not an option." I tell him life is way harder than he thinks. "How can I make it easier?" he wants to know. I tell him I need more clothes, so he raises my allowance.

A few weeks after the doctor says this is all my parents' fault I'm allowed to go home. That thing in my chest pushes up inside me harder than before. It's hot in me now, I can feel it, inflamed and red like a sick child's tonsils. Nights drag on.

All I want is some peace. Despite what my father says, I consider death, which I'm sure means relief. If not death, maybe a great purge. I imagine a roaring, rushing tide of blood washing everything out of me. Sometimes I creep out of bed and stick pins in my arms. In the mornings my head pounds enough to explode.

Nothing's getting better. I walk through the corridors at school with my fake smile. I lean over to get a drink of water. One boy says, "Look at those lips. You have a mouth made for blowjobs." Then he laughs. I straighten up. I smile. I want to fall through the floor. His friend says, "Hey, I have a really bad headache. Do you have any aspirin?" I want to fly through the ceiling.

I barely know these boys. They are friends of my boyfriend. I don't know anything about blowjobs and I don't know how they know anything about the aspirin. They can't be talking to me, they must be talking to that other girl. The one I made up. She turns to the first boy: "Well wouldn't you like to find out . . ." She turns to

the other: "Fuck you."

My head is sailing off my body. I've left my skin and bones to stand in the corridor. I float around with nothing to hang on to. I pinch myself under my coat. I want to feel something. I want to be back in my body. I want it to be mine. Two times two is four. . . . I float away.

Winter goes by and another spring. I'm 16 now. I'm riding the subway, and the car is almost empty. I'm eating a Cadbury Easter Creme Egg. I bite off the chocolate top. I don't really like chocolate, I want the sweet stuff inside. I dip my tongue into the egg, swirl

it around, and scoop up some insides. It's too sweet. I make a "yuck" face and look up.

This guy is looking at me. He's young, maybe 20. He has greasy brown hair parted on the side and plastered over his forehead. He's wearing round plastic glasses that magnify his eyes so he looks like a bug. He looks like he smells bad and he's staring at me.

I put away my chocolate. When my stop comes, I get off and walk up the stairs. The bug-eyed guy is behind me. Then suddenly he's on top of me, holding me close with his hands on my breasts squeezing and pumping while I scream. Someone I can't see yells, "Hey what's going on?" The bug-eyed guy runs away and so do I.

I can't ever control these people. These men. They sneak up behind me and squeeze me and stick fingers and tongues and all of their stuff all over me. They make me filthy.

I go home and make myself sick. Out slides the chocolate and shame. Empty, I feel so much better.

I leave school in the middle of the day and spend hours in front of the mirror squishing my breasts flat against my chest. I decide not to eat. No flour, no sugar, nothing white, nothing fried, nothing fat people eat. Nothing at all. For a while I have some power. I can change this body of mine. But then my plan backfires and turns in on itself. I get hungry and dizzy and I eat. Then I feel bad so I have to get rid of it. Over and over and over. Some days I make myself throw up more times than all the fingers on both my hands. It's a lot of work. It's like a job. It never stops.

Minute by minute, another year rolls by. I'm 18 now and it's hotter than hell. I'm sitting in a café with a boy on our very first date. There's something wrong with his eyes. His pupils are huge—some eye disease, he explains. He looks high or scared. He's wearing a bright pink thrift-store shirt with the sleeve rolled down and buttoned at his wrists. He's skinny as a junkie. I think he's beautiful. Like an angel.

He doesn't talk much so I've brought a list of "Discussion Topics." It's in my lap, under the table. I look at the crumpled paper. Weather. "It's, like, really hot," I say. He smiles. No, he's laughing at me. God, I am so lame. I light a cigarette. "Well, aren't you, you know, hot, with that shirt on?"

He smiles a little, his head bobbing down between his shoulders. Finally, he shows me his arms. They are covered with these unbelievable scars. Shiny and round, at least a dozen of them. He tells me he'd started at his wrists and wound perfect spirals up to his elbows, each time pushing the red burning tip of a cigarette in so deep that he had to re-light it to scar a new hole. He was just starting to burn a dragon design on his

chest when his roommate Johnny walked in and asked real casually what he was up to. The next day his thin ivory arms turned ashen, then gray, then black. His blood was poisoned. He almost died. And now, he has these magnificent scars.

I fall in love right there and then. He was the first of a string of wounded boys I would take in my arms. One, a long-haired poet, had lain down in front of a racing car and still had tire tracks embedded in the soft flesh of his back. These boys put their pain on the outside, like some badge of endurance: I live through this. Or a plea, see how I hurt, come here and help me. There are people who feel bad and leap from buildings or in front of trains or swing from a rope. But those people are different, their act is final. People who only hurt themselves still flirt with the possibility of rescue.

I want that angel-boy. We belong together. He'll understand the razor blades I've started to keep in my purse.

One night I have a fight with my father that shakes the house. I scream at him to shut up and lock myself in my room by pushing my dresser in front of the door. You do not say shut up to my father. I've crossed some line. I have to leave. In the middle of the night, I push the dresser away and run to that pretty angel-boy's house. He and his scars live with some punk rockers and a cat. There is no kitty-litter box in this house. The cat shits on the floor. Because of that and the broken glass left from the dishes I had thrown against the wall in a tantrum, everyone wears boots inside. This is where I decide to live.

During the day, I lie in bed. At night, I waitress. I am now completely broken apart. My boyfriend is not allowed to put his hands anywhere near my body, except to tell me if I feel skinny or fat. I smash his mirror. I smash his lamp. I sob uncontrollably. Even my well-practiced smile fails me. At work my manager asks, "How are you?" I open my mouth and nothing comes out. I start to cry. A customer is holding me, saying it's okay, everything is going to be okay. I don't like that she's touching me, so when no one is looking, I run through the back door.

I walk a few blocks and suddenly my heart is beating too fast. I start to run. I hide inside a phone booth. I knock the receiver off the hook. My palms are sliding down the glass. I'm on the ground, the receiver dangling by my face. I can't breathe. I suck in gulps of air. I can't breathe. That thing has crawled into my throat.

Now I've had it. I'm not doing this anymore. I've seen doctors and social workers, been hospitalized and therapized, and nothing makes any difference. I've thought about this for a long time. Now I'm ready.

If I had cancer, people would understand. They'd say, "She wakes up, she's in pain. She goes to sleep, she's in pain. Every minute in between, she's in pain. That's no way to live." But that is exactly how it is for me. Every second I feel it. It's taken over all of my insides. It's in my stomach, my heart, my throat. It pounds against my skull. It hurts.

I have a new package of 10 double-edged razor blades. I have 50 Valium and some quaaludes I buy from the Ramones freak who stops by the house. I have a bottle of red wine to wash it all down with. Wednesday, I'm doing it Wednesday. I've made a list of who gets what: my records, my books, the money in my bank account. I write instructions that I want to be cremated. I don't give a shit what they do with the ashes. I'm not scared. I take out my razor blades and spread them on the mattress. I pick one up and slide my index finger along the edge. I put it in the palm of my hand and squeeze my fist closed. Sharp.

For the first time in longer than I can remember I feel a little hope. I've found an escape hatch, a way to make things better. I'm not going to have to live like this anymore.

I'm so pleased with myself, I tell Dr. Ka-

plan, the psychiatrist I've been seeing for almost a year. His office is in a hospital, and when I first went to see him, explaining how I keep my weight down, how it's all gotten out of hand, how everything is in chaos, he sent me for tests. "Here's normal," he said, his index finger tracing a line on a graph about electrolytes. "Here's you," and his finger traced another line. "You're not well," he said. He's the only one who takes me seriously, so when I finally have a plan, he's the one I tell.

"I've figured out what to do," I say. I'm proud of my preparation. I tell him that I've even booked time off from work so there won't be a big scheduling crisis. He listens quietly and nods. Finally he says, "I can't let you go home," and gets up from his chair. Discussion over. He calls in his receptionist and she takes me by the arm and leads me downstairs though the maze of hospital corridors to some guy who puts me in a wheelchair and takes me to the psychiatric ward. I fold my arms and glare at the floor. "This is so stupid!" is all I have to say.

Upstairs a nurse tells me to give her my clothes so she can lock them in the cupboard. She hands me two hospital gowns. "One goes on front to back, the other back to front so you'll be covered up," she explains. I hate when they do this, take away our clothes, but I guess they need us to know there's something wrong with us.

I need to pace. Down the hall, past the nurses, past the exercise bike, past the guy on the floor, past the telephone. At the end of the hall is the lounge. Two people are in there. We all stare at each other. I'm trying to look cool, but I'm wearing pajamas. The guy wants to show me his scars, hideous welts running up his forearms. He cuts himself with razors, glass, anything he can get his hands on. He's been in and out of this hospital for 10 years, he says. Some of his teeth are missing.

The woman grabs me by the arm and makes me sit beside her. Her face is blotchy and covered in thin purple veins, her mouth turned down with age. She tells me she eats and throws up. It's all she does and all she talks about. She lost her job because of it. Her hair is falling out.

I still think of that woman. She's the first one who makes me think that this is something I'm going to have to live with instead of die from.

She has seizures. She's only 30. Crazyness turns you ugly real fast.

I go back to my room and stare at the wall. I don't remember the name of the social worker who comes in to speak with me, but compared to all the broken people in my life, she looks like no one special. She pulls a chair from across the room, and sits right beside my bed. "You cannot do this," she says. Not gently, but like she's angry with me. "This is not the way to handle your problems." I stare at the wall. She leans in close, her face is right beside me. "I know this is difficult. I know you hurt, but you have to get through this." I let her words float over my head, swirl around me, pass through my ears. I stare at the wall. "I need you

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to promise me that you will not do this. Everything else comes after that."

Slowly, like the girl in *The Economist*, I turn my head toward her. I want to punch her. I start to cry.

She leans back in her chair and exhales as though she's been holding her breath the whole time. She doesn't say anything. Then she gets up and leaves the room. The next day she comes back. And again the next. My eyes move from the wall, to my hands, to her face, and then we argue. "This isn't a sudden decision," I'm almost yelling. "I've been thinking of this for years." She doesn't care. I plead and beg and reason with her to see things my way. "No," she keeps say-

ing. "You have to live through this." She won't let me go. She wears me down. Finally, she extracts a promise, a deal. "I promise I won't do it," I say, "now." That's the best I can offer.

Once in a while I still think of that woman. Her broad face close to mine, yelling at me to get away from that cliff. I wish I could remember her name. She's the first one who makes me think that maybe this is something I'm going to have to live with instead of die from.

Soon after our last talk, I'm allowed to leave the hospital. I put my razors in the back of my drawer and try to figure out what to do with this thing burning inside me. I try desperately to make it go away. I slow my life down until it's

almost still. I get a dog. I learn to cook. I go to college. Once a week I see my doctor. Twice a day I take my pills. Even so, that tornado whips up in my head.

There I am, storming down the street whispering, I'm fine I'm fine I'm fine. Then I'm screaming, I'm fine! and running into traffic, an alarmed loverboy chasing after me because he thinks I've lost my mind.

An older friend once told me that the key to becoming an adult is knowing that what you are is what you are. When I was young I thought this thing inside would kill me. Then I thought I had to beat it down, pack it away, put in on a shelf. But now it seems that this is just the way things are going to be.

Inside me, at the core, is this rotten thing. Sometimes it settles in my chest. Sometimes it

leans on my stomach and squeezes into my throat. Sometimes it reaches up along my spine and pounds against my skull keeping me up all night, sitting on the edge of my bed, trying to hold myself together. I can't wish it away and I can't ignore it. What I have to do is keep an eye on things. How heavy is that thing in my chest? How loud is the noise in my head? How often do I cry? How little do I sleep? I monitor myself because if I start to slip down the slope I have to take extra special care just to make sure I get through each day.

But most of the time it's just there, floating under the surface; enough to make me cry in the shower, but not so much that I can't brush away the tears before I leave the house. The challenge is to work around it, dance around it, make my life around it. And that's what I do. ♦