

1.

They say never start a story with a waking, but when you've been hard asleep for thirty years it's difficult to know where else to begin.

Start with a waking, end with a wake, maybe.

Hard asleep is, I am informed, the technical term. Hard, because you're shut down, dried out, frozen for the trip from star to star. They have it down to a fine art – takes eleven minutes, like clockwork. A whole ship full of miscreants who are desiccated down to something that can . . . well, I was about to say survive indefinitely, but that's not how it goes, of course. You don't *survive*. You die, but in a very specific flash-frozen way that allows for you to be restarted again more or less where you left off at the other end. After all the shunting about that would kill any body – the permanent, non-recoverable kind of kill – who wasn't withered down.

They pump you full of stuff that reinflates you to more or less your previous dimensions – you'll note there's a lot of *more or less* in this process. It is an exact science, just not one that cares about the exact you. Your thought processes don't quite pick up where they left off. Short-term memory isn't preserved; more recent mental pathways don't make the cut. Start with a waking, therefore, because in that instant it's all you've got, until you can establish some connection

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to older memories. You know who you are, but you don't know where you are or how you got there. Which sounds terrifying but then let me tell you what you're waking up into: actual hell. The roaring of colossal structural damage as the ship breaks up all around you. The jostling jolt as the little translucent bubble of plastic you're travelling in is jarred loose and begins to tumble. A cacophony of vibration coming through the curved surface to you: the death throes of the vessel which has carried you all this way, out into the void, and is now fragmenting. There's a world below that you know nothing about, not in your head right then. And above you are only the killing fields of space. The fact there's a below and an above shows that the planet's already won that particular battle over your soul and you're falling. The oldest fear of monkey humanity, the one which makes a baby's rubbery hands clench without thought. Such a fall from grace as never mankind nor monkey imagined.

All around you, through the celluloid walls of your prison, you see the others too. Because it can't be hell without fellow sinners to suffer amongst. Each in their own bubble sheared away from the disintegrating ship. Faces contorted in terror: screaming, hammering on the walls, eyes like wells, mouths like the gates of tombs. You'll forgive the overwrought descriptions. I am an ecologist, not a poet, but mere biology does not suffice to do justice to the appalling sight of half a hundred human beings all revived at once, and none of them understanding why, even as *you* don't understand why, and the vessel coming apart in the wrack, and the world below, the hungry maw of its gravity well. Oh God! The recollection of it makes me sick to my gut. And of all things, in the midst of that chaos, to remember *I am an ecologist*.

ALIEN CLAY

Out in space where there isn't even an ecology. Was there ever a less useful piece of self-knowledge?

Some of us haven't reawakened. I see at least two bubbles whirl past me in which the occupant remains a dried-out cadaver, the systems failed. Acceptable Wastage is the technical term, and that's another unwelcome concept to suddenly have remembrance of. For there are always some who don't wake up at the far end. They tell you it's the inevitable encroachment of entropy over so long a journey. Maybe it is. Or maybe those who don't wake up are the most egregious troublemakers. It's hard to recognize anyone when their skin is stuck to their skull without the interposition of familiar flesh, but I think I see my old colleague Marquaine Ell go whirling past. She's been shipped all the way out here from Earth, even at the minimal expense they've boiled the process down to, yet they might as well have just thrown her into the incinerator for the same effect.

With the reminder of that minimal expense comes another piece of knowledge. Another couple of my neurons renewing a severed acquaintance, bringing understanding that's relevant but unwelcome. That this is *intentional*. It's no traumatic wreck of the Hesperus. Not a bug but a feature. Sending people into space used to be expensive, and for people anyone cares about it still is. You're encouraged to keep them reliably alive in transit, with actual medical care and life support and sporadic wakings to check on their oh-so-delicate physical and mental wellbeing. And, saliently, you're encouraged to arrange a means by which to bring them *back* home again, their tour of duty done. Big expensive ships that can do complicated things like refuel, slow down, speed up, turn around.

But if all you want to do is deliver some felons to a labour camp on a remote planet, because it's literally cheaper and easier than sending machines to do the same work, then you don't ever have to worry about them coming back. Because they won't. It's a life sentence, one-way trip. More unwelcome revelations fall into my head, even as my head, along with the rest of me, falls into the pull of Imno 27g.

I should be beating my newly revived fists against the inside of my bubble, except it's whirling round and round, having dropped out of the disintegrating ship, and the world below is growing in size. The void has become a sky, yellow-blue. Can you have a yellow-blue? Not on Earth, but this is Imno's sky. Blue for the oxygen the planet's biosphere has pumped into the atmosphere as a by-product of its metabolic pathways, just like on Earth. Yellow for the diffuse clouds of aerial plankton. Or they're yellow-black, actually, because of their dark photosynthetic surfaces. Blue-yellow-black should not be a colour, and of all things it should not be the colour of the sky.

We fall. At some point the chutes open: filmy transparent plastic, already biodegrading from the moment it contacts atmosphere. Like the ship, it's designed to last the minimum possible period of time to do its job. The ship, that unnamed plastic piece of trash which was printed as a single piece in Earth's orbit, no more than a one-shot engine and a pod to hold us all like peas. An egg-case, perhaps. Designed to carry its corpse-cargo across space to one of the current 'Planets Under Activity', as the Mandate's Expansion department terms it. To carry us to Imno 27g, then break apart in the upper atmosphere. Fragmenting into pieces even as the one-shot medical units resuscitate its cargo from cadaver to

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screaming lost souls tumbling to our doom. While some of us don't get the wake-up, others who do won't survive the descent. Doom is what we're all going to, sure enough, but it's less drawn-out for some than for others. My bones jar as my chute deploys, and while I see others similarly wrenched from the teeth of the ground, I also see the handful whose chutes have failed drop away. Still screaming, as they remember just enough to know they're about to die all over again.

I don't die from not waking up, and I don't die falling from the edge of the atmosphere either. I'm not written off on the ledgers as Acceptable Wastage. They have to work out very carefully the precise level of expense that's necessary, and the precise percentage of failed deliveries – meaning dead people – this entails. Because who wants to spend a single cent more than you have to when you're shipping convicts off to die in a distant world's work camp? People who've gone against the system and are now going to pay their dues permanently, for the rest of their lives. People like me. I hear the figures later: twenty per cent Acceptable Wastage. If that sounds like an absurd loss of investment, then you don't know the history of people shipping other people against their will from place to place.

They put manoeuvring jets on the pods. Little plastic things. One shot. As I fall – it seems to take so long! – I see them fire. Each one discharges its blast of bottled gas and destroys itself in the process. If that allows me to land where I'm supposed to, then good. If I end up somewhere distant from the work camp then they aren't going to waste the man-hours it would take to retrieve me. I'd die trapped in my bubble or outside it, because Imno 27g is full of things

that will kill you. Especially alone and with only half your head together. Not that there has ever been anything in my head that would have helped me survive on this alien world.

But that doesn't happen to me either. I come down with everyone else, those of us not covered under the Wastage provisions, around the same place, where they're waiting for us. The camp's Commandant has sent out the heavy mob, just in case we somehow managed to form a Revolutionary Subcommittee on the way down. On seeing the riot armour and guns – the 'minimally lethal' public order pieces I (now) recall from Earth, which only kill you an acceptable proportion of the time – I remember there *had* been a Revolutionary Subcommittee I was part of. Not, obviously, on the ship, because we'd all been flash-frozen corpses. And not on the way down, because we'd been far too busy screaming. But back on Earth, before they'd infiltrated our network, tracked our contacts, arrested everyone we knew for a discounted friends-and-family betrayal. I had actually been part of the problem, so I'd earned this. Back on Earth I had been stubbornly proud of the fact, too. In the prison attached to the space port, in the cramped orbital quarters, I had known that, yes, I was going to be deported to the camps, but at least I'd tried to do my bit, even a lowly academic like me.

Right now, after plummeting to this doom, then seeing the death-squad-slash-welcoming-committee, I regret it all. If a political officer magically manifested, offering a pardon if I signed a confession, I'd reach for the pen. Much unlike the song, I regret every one of my life choices that has led me to this point. It's a moment of weakness.

My bubble deflates around me. I have a fraught minute of fighting it off to stop the clammy plastic suffocating me

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before they cut me out. They have a special tool for doing this, like a heated knife. I gain a shallow, shiny slash along my thigh to testify to their general lack of care wielding it. One more person becomes Wastage when they're the last to be cut free and by then it's too late. All within tolerance, you understand. And that's it. We're down. I look up into an alien sky.