

Humanity

A chime resounded throughout the ship followed by a sharp buzzing noise. The daytime workers would retire for the night and be replaced by the nighttime workers. Of course, daytime and nighttime were relative terms on the ship. The ship was not near enough to a star to orbit it and produce an actual light/dark day/night cycle, and workers were not allowed to own timepieces. They relied solely on the ship to tell them what to do and when. The lighting in the ship remained harsh and consistent at all hours, making the concept of day and night even more abstract. Despite this fact, the people aboard the ship insisted upon clinging to anything that connected them to "Earth" the planet that their ancestors had once lived upon. Now it was uncertain if there was anybody left aboard the ship who had actually seen Earth. Only stories remained. No photos. No memories.

The halls were filled with workers, half too exhausted to speak, the other half noisy and full of energy. Daytime workers entered their small bedrooms and ate as hastily as possible so that they could get to bed quickly and rest their tired feet. Work was difficult, but no one complained. As for the nighttime workers, they began work as the daytime workers had begun, lively and animated. There would be no on-site accidents today. No one would get hurt. No one aboard the ship had ever felt pain, and they likely never would.

Men and women alike worked on the ship, some outside, wearing spacesuits and tethered securely to support beams, and some inside, managing the large expanses of machinery that kept life support running and the ship moving. Jobs were on a rotating cycle, with no one person working too long on a single task. There was no inequality. Everything was fair. Everybody received the same food

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during mealtime. All living quarters were built to be exactly the same. There was no sense of want or jealousy or hatred.

A strict schedule was maintained, but all workers followed it willingly without a fault. They were never pressured into doing anything and never felt unsure or uncertain. All decisions were made for them, so they never had to worry about choosing correctly.

This was how life was aboard the ship. In a way, it ran itself. No one questioned anything or wondered who truly was in charge of the ship. No one was curious as to where the ship was going or why it had left "Earth" in the first place. Everyone was taken care of. There was no hunger, no war, no fear. No one could have asked for a more secure place to be. No one tried to break the natural order of the ship, and no one knew how to question anything that was going on. It was the perfect environment. The perfect world.

At least that was what everyone believed- until the ship made a mistake.

The daytime workers had just finished their shift and were now all eating comfortably in their rooms. It was quiet. This area of the ship was on the opposite side of the ship from the main machinery, so the nighttime workers could not be heard. There was a constant soft hum reverberating throughout the ship, but the workers hardly noticed it. It had always been there. They were used to it.

One worker, a young woman named Antona, was peering out of the small window that her room, and all other rooms, contained. She always looked out the

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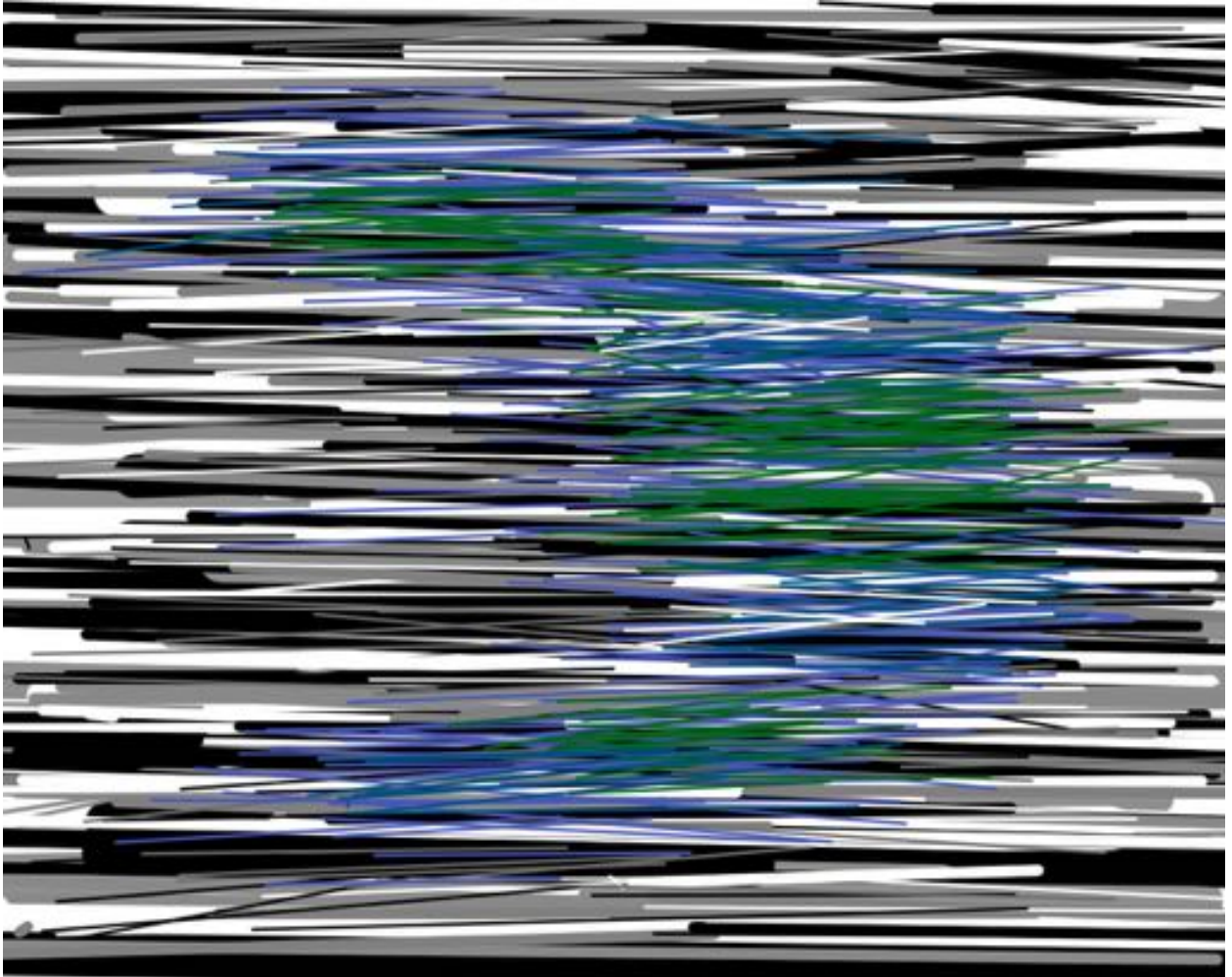
window while she ate. It was a ritual of sorts. She was careful to pay close attention to the stars and their positions in the hopes of tracking the progress of the ship. Workers were not allowed pen or paper, however, so she was rarely able to remember exactly where the stars had been the previous night. This did not concern her. Looking at the stars was merely an activity meant to pass time. She was not concerned with the ship's progress. She had no reason to be. The ship knew where they were going, and it knew the course. That was all that mattered.

The stars that night were beautiful, as always. If Antona squinted her eyes, she could faintly see a distant nebula. She opened the prepackaged meat, vegetables, and potatoes that had been delivered to her room and began to eat. The food was good, in a familiar homey way. She pulled the single chair within her room over to the windowsill. When finished eating, Antona disposed of her food tray in her room's waste receptacle and once more maintained her useless watch upon the stars. She crossed her arms over the windowsill and laid her head down upon them. She often fell asleep like that, not even bothering to remove her shoes. This was frowned upon, but the ship had not taken any actions against it.

Antona felt herself drifting off to sleep when all of a sudden the scene in the window before her began to change. She sat back up. The window showed nothing but black and white static, and then for a matter of no more than a few seconds, a new image appeared. Now the window was displaying a large sphere surrounded by the darkness of space. The sphere was mostly blue, with large masses of green and brown. Wisps of white drifted across the globe's surface. Antona only had a moment

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to take in the scene before it was replaced with the familiar expanse of black space, broken apart only by the usual scattered stars.



Antona had recognized the globe as soon as she saw it. It was “Earth,” the fabled planet that Antona knew her people had come from. Her entire life, she had heard stories and folk tales telling of the strange planet. The ship had actually encouraged the spreading of these tales. It was important for the workers to remember at least a small amount of their heritage, and the image that had briefly appeared before her perfectly fit all description she had heard of Earth. *Everything*, down to the wispy white clouds matched the descriptions.

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But why, Antona wondered, did *Earth* appear on the other side of the window, even for the briefest amount of time. For years, as long as she could remember, there had been nothing but empty space surrounding the ship.

Antona stood up. Looked around. She walked over to the door of her room, which would lead to a long hallway connecting all of the worker's rooms to the rest of the ship. She then did something that she had never tried before. Antona attempted to open the door. She had never had any reason to do this previously. The door opened automatically at the beginning and end of every workday, and she had never been outside of her room when it wasn't time for the daytime worker's shift. She needed to know if anybody else had seen what she had. Why had it happened? What *had* happened, exactly? For the first time in her life, Antona felt curiosity. She couldn't remember ever feeling something like this before- she had never had a *need* to feel curiosity before.

To her slight amazement, the door opened easily. There was not even a latch, the door simply slid into the wall. Antona stepped into the corridor. Unsurprisingly, she was the only person there. She suddenly experienced another new feeling, nervousness. This unpleasant emotion confused her, something else that was new. Her curiosity proved to be more powerful than these other feelings, though, and Antona walked to the nearest door. Her steps seemed too loud in the silent hallway. She tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge. She tried the next one. It was sealed securely. As was the next, and the next, and the next after that. Antona glanced back to the door of her own room, which remained open- she could still go back.

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Instead, she continued to the end of the hallway. Not back towards the machinery where she usually worked during the day. The nighttime workers would be there. Instead, Antona went in the opposite direction. She had never been this way before, though there was a large doorway at the end of the hall. Perhaps this would lead to the command center of the ship? But why would a fully automated ship need a designated command center? Antona began to wonder- the machines running the ship were in the opposite direction, and worker's rooms were along this hall, what else did the ship need? She continued walking, her steps echoing deafeningly against the walls, despite her best efforts to muffle them.



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After what felt like a very long time, Antona finally reached the door at the end of the hall. This door was different from all the others, in that it actually had a doorknob and latch. The others were simply touch activated. She placed her hand upon the doorknob and turned it, but nothing happened. She waited a moment, and then tried again, this time pushing slightly. The door still did not budge. Antona glanced back down the hall, back to the open door of her room, which now seemed dreadfully far away. It hadn't been long since her work shift had ended, so she still had some time before the nighttime workers would return and notice her. She turned back to the door before her and decided to try opening it once more. This time, she threw her full weight into the door in an attempt to open it.

The door gave way easily, and Antona fell inward.

Antona stumbled and regained her footing. She glanced around at the room she had entered. Unlike the rest of the ship, this room was completely dark, and there were no windows. Antona could barely see anything and the darkness made her feel as if a blanket had been draped over her entire body, dulling every sense, not just sight. She could just barely tell where the walls were on either side of her, and turned just in time to see the door she had passed through swing shut, throwing the room into an even deeper darkness. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Antona could tell that this was another hallway, though considerably shorter than the one she had traversed to get here, and there were no doors on either side. Antona glanced back to where she knew the now-closed door to be. She momentarily considered going back to her room. She had gone far enough, and doubted whether anybody was supposed to be in this part of the ship anyways. But

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she *had* already come this far, and her curiosity as to why Earth had appeared on the other side of her room's window was mounting with each step that she took.

Antona turned her back to the door, and the light, and the familiarity and comfort that was only a few steps away, took a deep breath, and carried onwards further into the dark. It wasn't until a few moments later that Antona realized that the constant humming that was usually in the background of the ship was gone. Now she was in total silence. This added to the sense of total seclusion that the darkness had brought.

Antona placed one hand against the wall to her left and began walking slowly toward the other end of the corridor. She counted her steps.

One... two... three... each step brought her closer to the end of the hall.

... eleven... twelve... thirteen... fourteen...

Finally her foot hit something in front of her, making a startlingly thunderous noise. She reached out, expecting to find another doorknob. She was surprised to find that this was a simple touch-activated door like most of the other doors on the ship. It slid open with a quiet hiss.

Antona stepped forward and heard the door hiss shut behind her. The room she stepped into was unlike any she had ever seen. Its lights were dim and it was filled with all sorts of machinery and control panels so complex that Antona could make little sense of them, despite her many years as a worker operating the ship's engine and life support. What startled her even more was the fact that she wasn't alone in the room. There was one other person, whose silhouette Antona could

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barely distinguish. The person was seated in a large chair with its back to the door, making it impossible for Antona to tell who it was or what they were doing.

Antona stepped forward, opening her mouth to say something, but the person held up a hand as if to shush her before she could speak.

“Come here” the person said to Antona, not even turning to look at her.

Antona forced herself to move forward, though it was now taking her full willpower not to turn and run back to her room, forgetting the entire experience and ignoring the memory of that brief glimpse of Earth.

Her earlier feelings of nervousness and uncertainty were now being overshadowed by an even stronger emotion- fear.

As much as she wanted to further inspect the unusual gadgets that she passed by, Antona could not take her eyes off of the chair. Finally, she was right beside it, and with one more step she could see the figure seated in the chair. The person was female. Tall and well built, with wide shoulders but a generally slender frame. Squinting, Antona could make out the person’s face. She did not look terribly old, no more than forty-five years, but her eyes looked tired. The woman still did not look at Antona, and Antona followed her line of sight to a window in the side of the ship. It was like the window in Antona’s room, but much larger. There on the other side of the window, Antona once again saw a globe, one that now seemed familiar to her. It was Earth. Of that, she was positive.

“Tell me Antona- what do you see?” the woman asked.

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Antona glanced at her, surprised that the woman knew her name without even looking up at her. "I see... Earth." Antona stood silent for a moment and then added, "It's quite beautiful."

For the first time, the woman glanced at Antona. "Is it?" the woman asked.

"Well, umm... I guess so," Antona responded.

"When I look down upon that globe, I don't see beauty" the woman said, once again shifting her gaze towards the window. "I see unhappiness. I see a race that destroyed not only themselves, but most other life forms residing on that planet."

Antona needed to ask the question that had been on her mind ever since she saw Earth in her own window for the first time. "Why are we here? I thought we left Earth in search of a new place to live. We abandoned Earth, didn't we?"

"Yes and no. We could not find another planet near enough that our currently primitive technology could take us there. We tried and tried to develop new technology, but nothing was being produced fast enough. In the end we had to resort to our last option."

"Wait." Antona was still unsure of what the person was trying to tell her.

"Why did we have to leave Earth in the first place?"

The woman smiled, in a sad sort of way. "It is human nature. Someone always had to be superior; someone always had to be more powerful. And our displays of power were getting larger and larger. We couldn't help ourselves. Finally, we got to the point where *no one* could live safely. Sadness and despair swept over the land like an epidemic, and still it didn't solve any problems. Human emotion led to mistakes that couldn't be reversed. People did things that affected the whole planet,"

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the woman's words drifted off. "As for the last option... that was this spaceship. The people of Earth decided that we would simply let the world repair itself devoid of human life. Eventually, the planet's atmosphere and natural ecosystems will do their work and the world will become habitable by humans once again. In the meantime, we are in this ship striving to prevent the same problem from occurring again in the future."

This was completely different from what Antona had been told her entire life. All she had ever known was that the ship had left Earth in search of a new planet. She had never known exactly what that meant or what it entailed. Antona had many questions. "What do you mean by, 'this ship is trying to prevent the same problem from occurring again?' How?"

The woman sighed deeply. "Did you notice that you were the only person who decided to investigate the momentary appearance of Earth when you had only ever known stars to be outside your window? And how shocked you were when you experienced the feelings of curiosity or fear?" The woman shut her eyes for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts, "All windows on this ship are screens, except for the one before me. It is showing a real image of what is before us- Earth. Whenever someone is working outside of the ship, they are positioned so that the hull of the ship is between them and Earth, blocking their view. All necessary precautions have been taken so that nobody ever sees Earth. So that they never know where we truly are. It was emotion and human stubbornness that caused so much damage to mankind in the first place, so these traits have been removed. It has taken generations- several attempted revolutions took place on this ship- but finally

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all people aboard this ship are docile, they follow orders and act intelligently and logically. They do not need to worry. They are taken care of and need not learn to fear or hate. Life is perfect for them.”

“Then why do you look so sad?” Antona asked. She continued pressing for more information, though she could tell the woman was growing tired, and the sudden rush of information frightened Antona.

“I spend my days sitting in this small room alone, with the Earth as my only companion. It is uncertain when we will return to our planet, and it certainly will not be in my lifetime. I will never be able to feel the Earth’s wind against my skin or swim in its endless oceans. All I can do is look upon it from afar, waiting.”

The room was suddenly filled with silence. Antona decided that she had enough information for now- she desperately wanted to return to the security and certainty of her room. She turned back towards the door she had entered through. The woman sitting in the chair made no move to stop her and Antona quickly reached the door and attempted to open it.

It would not move. Antona tried sliding the door into the wall manually, but it still would not budge. She smacked the door, and this also had little effect. She looked back at the chair. The woman seated there remained motionless.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said expressionlessly. “The ship won’t let you leave. You seem to possess curiosity and emotion, and you now know the Earth’s true story. The ship cannot risk letting you tear apart the perfect equilibrium of peace that has taken generations to achieve.”

Antona was speechless.

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“The flickering of the window-screen was an accident on the ship’s part, but it decided to take advantage of the situation and discover any discrepancies aboard the ship. It appears you were the only discrepancy.”

The woman stood and looked at Antona, “This means that you will be doomed to the same fate as I. You will be doomed to remain in this room for the remainder of your life.”

“If the ship doesn’t want to risk discrepancies being around other workers, why doesn’t it get rid of us?” Antona was shocked by the sudden turn of events, but this did not stop her from remaining curious.

“I wondered that too when I first found this room,” the woman replied. “What is keeping the ship from simply eliminating all discrepancies? The answer soon became clear, though. As curiosity, emotion, and so many other traits were bred out of humans, less and less new technology was being created and people began to rely heavily on their pre-existing technology to make decisions for them. The ship soon realized that while the eradication of these traits prevented conflict, this eradication also prevented free thought and creativity. Inspiration and new ideas were no longer being acted upon, when they came at all. In a way, the ship was destroying all of the traits that made us human. So the ship realized that eventually, these traits would have to be reintroduced into the human mind. How this can safely be achieved, not even the ship knows.” The woman paused and looked at Antona, “that is where we come in. The ship analyzes our faulty genes- the parts of our brain that did not allow curiosity to be abolished from our systems completely.” The woman cocked her head. “In the mean time, it is our responsibility to decide when these

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traits should be introduced and how to give these traits to the currently pacified human race so that chaos does not once again erupt.”

“Shouldn’t the computer solve that problem?” Antona asked. “Surely it is better equipped for the task.”

The woman smiled. “The computer has a much wider understanding of the human psyche than we ever will. But that is not what is important.” The woman pointed to her head, “this is an issue that the human mind must solve. And we-“ The woman now gestured towards herself and Antona, “are the only two humans in existence capable of doing this.”

Antona felt as if she were in a daze. When she had left her room earlier that evening, she had never expected something like this to happen. She had no idea what to do, or what to tell the ship to do regarding the fate of the human race. There was one thing Antona knew for certain, though: she would have an entire lifetime to decide how to bring humanity back into the minds of mankind.

