

A Major Mal-Miscommunication

Lewis had watched the contents of the article unfold on the news a few days ago, but she read through it all the same. Scrolling up and down, manipulating the screen with the slightest touch of her thumb, she read the story over and over again. Each time, the written words echoed in her head with the same voice that would've glittered like cheap sequins do as they fall off a child's Halloween costume. Plastic.

New Study Shows Your Worldview Will Never Be The Same Once You've Seen More Than One!

By *one*, the slightly over-enthusiastic reporter who'd regurgitated the news story had meant a planet. Your worldview would never be the same once you'd seen more than one planet. Well, Lewis never believed secondary sources, so she was just going to have to find out herself.

She'd made it to the launch site two hours before her shuttle was scheduled to take off, bowing to the old panicked frenzy her mother had every time they needed to go to the airport. At first, Lewis hadn't been able to find a discernible difference between the launch site and an airport. Lines had snaked around the massive building from the security lines all the way back to the baggage check. Suffocating smells wafted through the air, all mixing in a nauseating perfume of pizza, coffee, and Americanized Asian food. Lewis stood in a line so long she thought she'd die right there, and yet through some strange displacement of space and time, she still ended up at the gate an hour before the shuttle was set to launch. Already exhausted, she plopped down in one of the chairs facing the glass wall that peered out across the asphalt. It was then her mother's contagious old habit allowed her to take in how truly different this experience was going to be, leaving her with a pang of what was either guilt, regret, fear, or all of the above.

Outside the main building of the launch site, pavement stretched out to meet a looming structure in the distance. That structure was a mountain of scaffolding, all designed to hold up the shuttle and the rocket booster that would help it break through the Earth's atmosphere. Lewis stared out at it for almost three whole minutes, but no matter how hard she tried to remain focused on the view, her mind kept slipping back to the article.

The basic principle of the article hinged around the idea that humanity's view of itself was so very narrow that people with even narrower experiences could never achieve a higher level of consciousness. It was the whole *travel broadens the mind*, spiel repackaged and tied up with a new bow. However, the communication psychologist who'd completed the study had taken a much more aggressive stance with her conclusions. Lewis didn't think she'd ever get rid of the woman's sequin voice.

That's right Jessica, the psychologist had addressed the news anchor so aggressively Lewis almost feared for dear Jessica's safety. Much like the walls of the launch site's main building, the studio seemed like it was made of glass. Everything was just a little too clean.

I personally have been to at least five different colonies, the psychologist had droned on. *The way people interact with one another changes so much, both verbally and nonverbally*. She went on to cite different rituals and artifacts those humans who'd grown up in the wild wild west of the universe had accumulated. Lewis hadn't paid all that much attention to it, but when the psychologist had been wrapping up her monologue, she'd said something that had yanked her right back in.

Now you'll like this Jessica... you've been to what? Three different planets?

The anchor nodded so enthusiastically it looked as though her head might fall off. *Oh yes, I've been to Nickel, Greta, and Dory.* The woman looked quite pleased with herself as she rattled off her list. She was about to get an even larger ego boost.

That's excellent. That means you have what we are now calling the Modern View or a worldview that accounts for the greater changes humanity has undergone. What we're seeing is that you really don't get that view until you've been to at least two different planets. Essentially, a division is forming between those who travel and those Earth lifers. It has become impossible to truly understand humanity, at least not from at home on your couch. If you never leave, humanity will leave you behind.

Jessica looked like she was going to absolutely die from delight. *Well, you heard it here first. If you ever needed an excuse to take some time off work to go see the stars, now you have it.*

Lewis wasn't sure if she'd used the report as an excuse, or as a challenge. Either way, she'd taken all of five seconds to charge one four-hundred dollar ticket to her credit card, and now here she was, headed to a city called Amber on a planet in a system lovingly dubbed the Dead Sea. She actually had no idea what any of that meant, or if the name was affectionate in the slightest, but she was about to find out.

A soft ping announcing the intercom was about to be in use sounded throughout the main building of the launch site.

"Attention, all passengers headed for shuttle 906, the buses have arrived," a feminine voice danced through the air. "If you would please line up according to the boarding group on your tickets, we'll have you out to that shuttle and on your way as soon as possible. Thank you for choosing Venus Commercial for your flight today."

The seats on the shuttle were oriented vertically, meaning Lewis was practically lying on her back with her seatbelt pressing her down by her shoulders. The position and the protesting of Earth's gravity against the orientation made it difficult for Lewis to get a good look around, but she could visualize some of the scenes based on the ambiance. Closing her eyes, she let the white noise filter in through her ears. There was a nervous excitement filling the air. Someone was leaving home, and another was headed home. People were either going to miss someone, or they already did. All that heartache and yearning infected Lewis just a little bit, but when it came to missing, she'd been infected a long time ago. There wasn't a single empty seat on the shuttle. The ambiance was so loud she didn't think she could consider it background noise at all. Someone laughed, someone cried, and of course, someone coughed. Someone always coughed.

After deciding her mental picture was complete enough, Lewis used all the effort she could muster to yank a brochure out of the seatback in front of her. The shuttle had no windows. The aerospace industry had collectively decided they weren't worth the aerodynamic trade-off long before mass tourism had exploded its way into the great beyond. In place of the real thing, the brochure carefully laid out all the sights they wouldn't be seeing. It also contained a short history of the launch site. The original site had been built in the 1960s, although it had been overhauled so many times since then it didn't even resemble what it used to be. Venus Commercial had purchased the plot of land back when NASA nostalgia was very much at the forefront of popular culture. However, like most things, the nostalgia ended up being little more than a passing phase, relegated back to relative obscurity in a matter of years. Since then, Venus Commercial had endured life as a budget shuttle line. Not all of that was in the brochure, Lewis had looked it all up beforehand. She had to admit, she was a little disappointed the company only included a select few passive-aggressive facts about the launch site. It made her sad to see they

couldn't fit the countless lives that had come and gone on this corner of the universe, all the people who'd used the site to touch the stars. It was possible no words could describe everything that had come and gone, but Lewis still would've liked them to give it a try.

A ragged voice bled out of the intercom as a low rumbling began to emanate from the rocket strapped onto the shuttle. "We would like to thank you all again for choosing Venus Commercial for your Voyage today. On behalf of your flight crew, I'd like to welcome you aboard. We will be departing within the next two minutes, so please be sure you have that seatbelt fastened and that you have reviewed the material in the safety card in the seatback in front of you."

Lewis tucked the brochure back in its place and eyed the seatback suspiciously. She didn't think she even had a safety card. It would probably be fine. Nothing had gone wrong since NASA had owned the site. And there was that pang of sadness again.

Whoever had been speaking on behalf of the flight crew had not been exaggerating about the timetable for the launch. It felt like the voice had only just finished speaking over the intercom when Lewis felt herself violently shoved back into her seat as the shuttle lifted off the ground. Perhaps it was because she'd never experienced it before, but it was disorienting to the point of absolute confusion. The brain inside of her skull felt like it turned into an ocean, cycling through a thousand different emotions. She was scared, confused, thrilled, and sick all at once. She didn't even get the chance to process all of those feelings before the shuttle had leveled off in space and the turmoil had passed. While she could see or feel no evidence of such an occurrence, Lewis knew the rocket booster must've detached. The shuttle's own engines kicked in and began accelerating quickly enough to produce near Earth-like gravity. Having bought into NASA nostalgia herself when it had been popular, she knew it had once taken months or even

years for a spacecraft to reach its destination. It didn't anymore, but she couldn't have articulated why. The industry was notoriously tight-lipped about how they got around so quickly, offering only one explanation for their secrecy: the technology was proprietary. Lewis didn't mind that as much as she thought she would've. It just wasn't the mystery she came to solve.

A shrill tone sounded in the body of the shuttle and the fasten-seatbelt sign dimmed overhead. The voice came back on over the intercom, presumably telling everyone it was safe to get up and move about the cabin. The words were drowned out by Lewis's disinterest. Unbuckling the seatbelt at the waist where the two straps intersected, she got up and got to work. Before she arrived, she wanted to find the people. Finding the people had been another one of her mother's specialties. She'd been able to find them anywhere, passing along that gift to her daughter. These were not just any people. They were *the* people. People crazy enough to make a journey worthwhile. Sane enough to make sure you didn't get lost on the way. *The People*.

The new orientation of the vessel had succeeded in eating away most of the novelty of space travel. The fuselage was made entirely of rows and rows of seats. Dark blue curtains strung across bulkheads acted as dividers for the different classes, all of which were really just the same experience with a different price tag tacked on. Up and down the isles, attendants wearing smokey blue dresses, suits, and little pillbox hats plastered on some of the most plastic smiles Lewis had ever seen as they checked on their passengers. Sequin smiles.

There'd been a poster in every elementary school classroom Lewis had learned in: the picture of a fish swimming against the current. That was how she felt trying to navigate the shuttle. She was rapidly approaching one of those sequin smiling attendants. There was a moment of hesitation where Lewis felt her feet shuffle and catch on the old worn-out carpeting. To Lewis's relief, the attendant stepped out of the aisle, courteously bowing his head. Lewis

offered the attendant a smile lacking any attempt at eye contact. However, just when she was prepared to celebrate the end of the superfluous interaction, the attendant called from over her shoulder.

“Ma’am? Is there anything I can help you with?”

Lewis turned slightly, not wanting to commit the entire alphabet of her body language, trying to keep up her smile. The muscles in her face were less than pleased. She considered the attendant for a moment, but the young man looked as ironed as his pants. Like something about him had been smoothed away.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “Thanks.” The interaction ended with her turning away too soon to tell if he’d been as relieved as her. She liked to imagine he had been. He was not one of the people.

Lewis made it to the front of the shuttle. She couldn’t feel it, but she had to be hurtling through the vacuum of space faster than she could’ve ever imagined. She could picture what she didn’t understand: stars passing by as streaks against the black void. Asteroids hanging in space like they were suspended on a string. She had the same feeling she had any time she flew on an airplane: a fall from this height would kill her before she even knew what was happening. Suddenly, she was filled with regret. Everyone she’d passed on the shuttle had the same closed-off look in their eye. She kept looking for a way to connect, but she didn’t have the password. The sequin voice of the psychologist echoed in her head again, but instead of feeling like a challenge, this time it just made her feel alone.

“Ma’am,” the flight attendant she’d passed earlier was back. “Are you sure I can’t get you anything?”

Without looking at him, Lewis shook her head and returned to her seat. She had a feeling she was going to be white-knuckling it the rest of the journey. She wasn't in Kansas anymore.

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When Lewis had been a small child, her backyard had dropped down into a steep ditch that acted like the fence around the yard. It was full of trees and densely packed bushes that made it seem like a whole nother world. She and some of the neighbor kids had tried to build a treehouse down there once. They'd taken planks of wood, a hammer, and some nails and tried to build a box large enough for them all to fit up in a tree. The structure ended up looking like how you would've expected after being built by people who didn't quite know where to start. That feeling of an idea that never quite worked out in practice was personified by the orbital station hanging in a synchronous orbit around the city of Amber. The floor plating was crooked, and half the station was round while the other half had the sharp lines of a rectangular prism. Somehow, it ended up looking like the engineer who'd built it didn't know where to start at the same time they didn't know where to stop.

The station was one of the most densely populated places Lewis had ever been. Trails of steam hissed out from pipes, punctuating the cacophony of habitation that lived in that hunk of metal like a lake rippling within its boundaries. Across that twisting and churning sea, Lewis caught sight of the first thing she could comfortably call truly alien. Fighting her way against the current, she found herself face to face with a portal no larger than the size of her head. It was made out of a material that mimicked glass and was supported by metallic mesh that threatened to obstruct the view of the planet just outside.

The planet was either a lot larger or a lot closer than Lewis thought it would be. From her perspective through the portal, it filled up enough of the horizon to appear as the sky. A burnt

orange beyond with violent streaks of golden clouds. In the distance, she could see thick cords tugging along what looked like tram cars. That must've been how people got down--or perhaps up--to the planet from the station. Lewis had never seen anything like it, and that feeling from the space shuttle crept right back in under her skin where it would've gotten stuck if her attention hadn't been pulled in a different direction.

A few feet away from the portal, the sea of people condensed and funneled itself into a far more narrow passageway. There, people had set up booths and stands in the strangely familiar shape of a marketplace. Lewis ran her eyes over the passageway like they could feel and found the sight strangely pleasant. The screaming was a little obnoxious, but otherwise, it was, at the very least, charming.

The screaming originated from a woman dragging someone out of the passageway by the collar of their shirt.

"No," she hissed. "No, no, no."

"You don't understand," the ragged voice of the man attached to the shirt was protesting. "It's mine, you can't sell it! It doesn't belong to you!"

The woman didn't seem to care. She deposited the man on the ground outside the market, dusted off her hands, and spun on her heel. The man stood up to follow her again, but he was stopped by a pair of guards who shoved him right back out again. Lewis didn't think this was going to be a *the-customer-is-always-right* kind of place. The man stood up again, hands on the back of his head like he was trying to catch his breath. For a moment, he looked up and they made eye contact.

Being wrong was a certainty in life, one of the only certainties human existence had to offer. In Lewis's experience, as long as a person admitted when they were wrong, it didn't need

to be such a bad thing. Lewis could admit she was wrong. With that in mind, she slowly slunk out of view of the man she'd been so quick to misjudge: the flight attendant. He was going to be The Person after all.

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It was a running theme in popular culture to have all the bad and ugly only occur under the cover of darkness. Lewis wasn't sure if movies and tv shows always played it out that way because they thought people who stole and killed were afraid of being caught by others, or if they were more afraid they'd have to see themselves. It was difficult to decipher which one the audience wanted to be true. Lewis couldn't decide either.

She'd had as difficult a time following the flight attendant back into the marketplace as he'd had breaking back in. The station had entered the night phase of its life, or at the very least, the lights had been dimmed to give that illusion. Light from the planet below still burned through the portals like the sun casting blood-red silhouettes that filled the negative space around the shadows.

About an hour earlier, Lewis had followed the flight attendant through an abandoned hallway which appeared to be closed for maintenance. He'd found a gash in the wall that bled industrial piping and electrical wires, and tore a pipe out. He'd tossed it up and down in his hands for a moment like he was deciding what to do with it, but his indecision lasted less than a minute.

Lewis didn't know much about the situation. She knew the lady from the marketplace had something that wasn't hers. The flight attendant seemed to want it, so on the surface, Lewis guessed whatever *it* was must've belonged to him. She'd followed him as he floated soundlessly through the back entrance of the market. The soft clinking of wind chimes dangling from the

ceiling of someone's booth did enough to cover his--and her--footsteps. Lewis followed him mindlessly, her brain failing to decode the clutter they wove through to reach their destination.

I need you to show me something, her brain told the back of the flight attendant's head as they crept towards what Lewis assumed was the woman's booth. *Come on buddy, show me something.*

The booth in question was almost dead center in the market's set up. Climbing over the padlocked display case the flight attendant disappeared inside. Lewis crouched down just outside. The glass from the case was fogged and scratched with age, but she could see well enough. Inside, the lady who had tossed the flight attendant out of the marketplace earlier was sound asleep. She rested in a mess of torn and frayed decorative pillows and an assortment of painted vases scattered on her floor. In her arms, she cradled a kitchen knife. Lewis was surprised she hadn't rolled over on it and impaled herself.

The flight attendant had melted into the shadows. He was looming over the sleeping woman like a gargoyle. The light the planet framed what little of him she could still make out. It took every ounce of strength she had not to close her eyes.

The flight attendant was twisting the pipe in his hands. *Don't blink.* The flight attendant raised the pipe over his head. *Don't blink.* The flight attendant took a step forward. *Don't blink.* The pipe started coming down again. Lewis blinked.

When she opened her eyes again, the lady was still completely still. Lewis held her breath until she saw her chest rise and fall again. She was still alive. Her chest went up and down, and up again. It felt like she was unknowingly breathing life back into Lewis's lungs. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding her own breath, but the second she started to relax, the display case she'd been peering through made her regret it. It smashed into a million pieces, sending bits

of its body raining down on Lewis who barely had time to cover her head. Remaining very still against the onslaught, she heard a shuffling noise punctuated by footsteps growing farther and farther away. The flight attendant had taken back what he'd come for. With her heart beating so far up her throat she thought she'd spit it out again, Lewis hurried after him. They ended up back in the main section of the station where the dimmed lights had actually done very little to slow down the foot traffic.

The flight attendant stopped for a moment, examining what he'd stolen like he was trying to make sure it was still in one piece. At first, it just looked like a heaped pile of cloth worn and ragged around the edges. However, the closer Lewis got to the mess of cotton and thread, the more she understood. All those different layers of cloth were connected, forming a blanket, but not just any blanket. It was a protective quilt.

The making and distribution of protective quilts was a deep-seated tradition that, over time, had danced along the border of becoming a religion. The quilts were made for one specific person, and given to them upon the death of the maker. Painted with graphic scenes of monsters and battlefields, the maker would decorate the quilt with representations of the demons they'd faced throughout their lives. The quilt was meant to ward off those same demons. They were supposed to act as a *keep out* sign, or as one of the shrines people put up in their front yards dedicated to the security company that guarded their house: what they meant to say was *this place and these people are protected*. However, in truth, Lewis found the quilts to scream a far different, but no less meaningful message: *this person wants to be protected*.

The flight attendant's quilt was no different. The cotton squares making up its body had been painted in seas of blood, wrecked ships, and depictions of the same person drowning over and over again.

“Do they tell you,” Lewis asked, approaching him from behind. He whirled around at the sound of her voice. She half expected him to run away, but perhaps marred by what he had just done, and what he’d chosen not to do, he opened himself up like a book.

The flight attendant held the quilt closer to his chest and eyed her curiously. “What?”

“What it means,” she nodded at the quilt. “When they give it to you, do they tell you what they want to protect you from?”

The flight attendant shook his head and looked at Lewis like he couldn’t understand why she didn’t understand. For a moment, Lewis considered that his confusion might’ve stemmed from the quilt not actually belonging to him.

“They didn’t have to.” He answered finally. Reluctantly, the flight attendant turned the quilt so she could see the painting more clearly. “Look.”

In the mess of dark colors making up the scene, at first, Lewis wasn’t able to pick out what he was trying to show her, but the longer she looked, the more it made sense. The person who had been drowning, over and over again, was always depicted again immediately over the water looking down. Sometimes the person was passive, just watching themselves drown, and other times they seemed to be actively attempting to keep themselves from rising to the surface.

“The greatest monster you’re ever going to face is the one you make out of yourself,” the flight attendant said like he was echoing something he’d been told repeatedly. He’d said it more to himself than to Lewis, but it was something she understood.

Off in the distance, a crashing sound followed by frantic screeches left from the marketplace. The lady was awake. Actually, Lewis was amazed she’d stayed asleep as long as she had. The flight attendant looked over his shoulder and started walking away, still watching Lewis. He looked at her like he’d known all along that she’d been following him.

“Thank you,” he said. Lewis knew what he meant, and didn’t, all at the same time. “I have to...” Another loud crash followed by much angrier yelling seeped out into the main body of the station.

“Go,” Lewis told him, gesturing with her hands. “Stop trying to kill people.” She wasn’t sure he’d heard her as he disappeared into the sea of people walking back and forth on the hunk of metal floating out in the stars. To remain unseen, Lewis melted into the crowd, but she couldn’t keep the grin off her face. Her interaction with the flight attendant had been short and so chaotic it made her a little sick inside, but she’d gotten what she needed. He’d had something to show her after all.

She could go back to Earth. She could take the space tram down to Amber. It didn’t really matter, she could’ve thought of either as home. She’d thought she’d come all this way to find out that humanity had left itself behind, but she knew introspectively that she’d been more afraid it had left her behind than anything else. As it turned out, the distance between all the different planets and systems was just being used as an excuse for people to stop talking. That made humanity just the same as it always had been. As desperately sad as the stagnation of society should’ve been, Lewis couldn’t help but feel comforted, like she was wrapped in a blanket of the familiar. With all those people standing around her, she did wonder for a moment if she was the only one who could feel it. But in the end, she knew they all felt the same way, somewhere inside of themselves. That was probably why nothing ever changed. Lewis didn’t have to face being left behind. Lewis heard the sequin smile of the psychologist echoing in her head again, but this time, she felt like she’d won.