

Culture Shock

I woke up to soft white light emanating from all around me. The walls of my travel pod hugged my sides, and as my senses returned, I heard a voice from the ship's speakers.

“Welcome to Earth 5, passengers. The local date is March 26th, 3007, and the local time is 3:55pm,” said the voice. “The local climate is currently safe. Remember to avoid intense auditory or visual stimuli for four hours after waking from cryogenic sleep, and to avoid Culture Shock please refrain from expressing strong opinions for at least 10 days. Thank you for traveling with Pearl.”

I rubbed my eyes, turning this memo over in my mind. I'd never flown interworld before, and now only for one of the hardest-to-get jobs ever. Looking around, I saw the rest of the passengers, about 15 of us. I wondered to myself how many of them had been rejected, stripped of their memories, and how many were like me, migrants.

By the time I stepped off the ship, the watch on my wrist read 4:17pm. This watch was an heirloom. My grandfather had owned it back on Earth 0, before the terraforming revolution. He had worked on 2, monitoring atmospheric adjustments, and kept this watch to remind him of his family back on 0. When the planet was ready, his family got to move there first in the spirit of our Earth 2 motto, *Innovation and Progress*. I've always been proud that my family embodied that motto perfectly, I even followed in his footsteps. Now here I was on a planet whose values centered around tradition.

Twyla Nunes-Ueno

English 2

Mr Kay

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The train that would take me to my new corporate apartment was modeled after electric subterranean train lines from 0, rather than the mag-lev ones we had on 2. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the pointless inefficiency of it all, a nostalgia-powered waste of energy. *Culture Shock*, I reminded myself, *is real*.

Work was uneventful. I'd worked at environmental firms before, and despite the traditionalism, the work wasn't much different. After I checked out, an older woman with a cross necklace approached me.

"My name is Christina," the woman said, "I'm from 7."

"Hi, I'm Jace. I'm fresh from 2."

All I seemed to remember about seven was descriptions of more spirituality than normal. I shook her hand. Meeting another migrant felt unbelievable.

"How long have you been here?"

"About 10 years. I moved for the job you're working right now. They can't seem to find someone from here to do it." Then, lowering her voice, "Just don't speak up too much. They're laxer with new arrivals, but you don't wanna risk getting rejected. It almost happened to me once." At a normal volume once again, "just let me know if you have any questions, I'm happy to help."

Rejection had never been something to be concerned about on 2. It was my home. I barely even heard of the fate befalling others.

"Thanks."

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It was about a week before I talked to Christina again. All week, I wanted to tear out my hair over the antiquated nature of seemingly everything. On the second day, I was denied access to one of the company restrooms because they were separated by gender.

Eventually, I approached Christina once again, curious how she learned to navigate everything.

“Is your home much different from here? You seem so well adjusted,” I told her.

“It was rough at the start. You don’t realize how conditioned you are from your own world until you leave. I’m part of a group that meets to help ease Culture Shock once a week,” she replied, “you should show up.”

That’s how I found myself in a stranger’s basement. Around me I saw others, also migrants, I assumed.

“Welcome all,” said a tall man with graying hair, “I’m Otto. Does everyone agree to not disclose any information shared here and turn off recording devices?”

Everyone around me nodded their heads, and I found myself doing the same.

“I’m gonna start by talking about my home, Earth 4. I realized that they brainwashed me as much as this place brainwashes everyone. I fully believed that those who didn’t live to start families were morally wrong. I thought that if you weren’t ready to sacrifice your hopes and dreams for your elders you were a bad person.”

I had never thought about raising a family in my own life, my parents prioritized their careers and taught me to do the same. But I’d always had the watch to remind me of my tether to those I loved and those who came before me. Perhaps that was similar to how Otto grew up. Maybe that wasn’t a bad thing.

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“Now I’ve given it some thought,” Otto continued, “and I don’t think any world is innocent. They’re all extremes that give us tunnel vision.”

Everyone nodded their heads. Then, Christina spoke.

“I agree completely. And I’ve been thinking about the purpose of this group. At first it was to help new arrivals assimilate, but maybe it doesn’t have to be. Maybe we could work on safe ways to introduce parts of *our* cultures to the rest of them.”

At this, there was a clamor. I heard the word *Rejected* a few times. How did Christina even want to go about this? Talking about other cultures was unheard of. My whole life I’d been taught that Earth 0 had been a melting pot of chaos, and all the sensible people soon ended up on 2. Everywhere else was delusional people of 0. *Wait a second. 0.*

“What if instead of making it about our cultures we frame our ideas as education about the diversity of 0? People here love old-world nostalgia, and that’s where all our worlds stem from,” I found myself saying.

“Maybe we could have a fair to celebrate our parts of Earth 0. I’ve seen them happen before for things like ancient safety practices,” said a woman to my left.

And with that, our small rebellion was born.

After a month of planning and researching, we were ready. The goal wasn’t anything drastic, we just wanted to open people’s minds. We wanted to have a dialogue about the echo chamber we all lived in.

Otto carried a poster about Confucianism, and how it impacted the personal and family values held by Earth 4. Christina and some others set up a banner reading *WE ALL STARTED FROM ZERO*. I helped someone named Eno man a booth with information about how the

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industrial revolution, capitalism, and consumerism affected the Western “enterpernial spirit” which lives on in the culture of Earth 2.

I talked to several people. Many simply refused to engage with me if what I said contradicted what they’d been taught.

“Yeah, of course there were folks who believed in preserving traditions but at times in history they were in the minority, or even held these values in tandem with ideas about a radically different future,” I told one man. “For example, my grandpa was all about terraforming. He couldn’t wait for humanity to leave 0 behind. But at the same time he wanted his kids to grow up going to in-person school and playing on real playgrounds. He always felt bad that he was gone, because he didn’t think VR chats were enough to connect him to his children. That’s why I still have this watch, even though it doesn’t do much but tell time, to me it’s come to represent that I can contain multitudes like he did.”

He nodded, the first one to not walk away. “That’s interesting stuff. Where are the meetings? I’d love to show up and learn more about the other worlds out there. I’m Jason by the way.”

I cheered internally. I wrote down the address and time of our weekly meetings on a slip of paper and handed it to him. As he walked away I high-fived Eno, and none of the people we failed to reach mattered.

The next meeting we recapped our event. Much to everyone’s joy, Jason decided to show up. After about five minutes, he left to make a phone call. Otto’s eyes narrowed at the fact that his phone wasn’t powered down, but we continued talking.

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“People need to be let out of the cave this planet chains them in, yes, but we can’t forget to be gentle. I think we all stayed well within guidelines,” Otto said.

I was talking to Christina, when we heard sirens outside. The next thing I knew, heavy boots were kicking in Otto’s doors. Jason stood outside those doors, behind the policemen. *Of course. He set us up. He came to the meeting when he realized he couldn’t get anything rejection worthy at the fair.*

“Listen up! This group has violated the Community Guidelines section of Earth 5!” The policeman shouted. “Faces to the wall everyone, and don’t resist.”

I turned to press myself against the cold wall, and a moment later felt metal on my wrists as I was cuffed. The officer led me away into the old fashioned red blue and white police car.

Rejections are always handled in court. All that must be present is proof that you violated the Community Guidelines, and someone to attest you aren’t a “a good fit” for the world you are on. They happen most often to people who are already migrants, and there’s the rare jerk who goes looking for migrant groups to reject. I guess that was our friend Jason.

The wooden seat pressed uncomfortably to my spine as Jason played a recording of Otto speaking just earlier that day.

“.... people need to be let out of the cave this planet chains them in—”

I cringed at how out of context this recording was taken. It didn’t matter here.

I turned in all my belongings, all my documents. I gave up my grandfather’s watch. They handed me new papers with a new name, and rolled a die (how in character) to decide which Earth I would inhabit next. I felt like I was signing all those papers in a trance.

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Next, I was led to the ship. When we arrived at the pods, I sighed and laid down in my little oblong tomb, going over all my favorite memories, before I lost them forever and started anew. Then, a man in white pulled a long needle from his briefcase and said, "I wish you luck."