

Tales from the sleepers

As part of my Galactographic project, I tried to imagine the things that might interest the reader of the future. It occurred to me that the subject of pre and post faster than light travel could be a good source of ideas.

Therefore these two stories came about. They both feature the same main character but the approach differs.

1)

I awoke and gazed straight ahead. That was when the fear kicked in. I had been expecting to see the inside of my pod, with red lettering scrolling across the plasto-glass giving me a status update. I should be encased in my mesh, the metal bodysuit that zapped my muscles with electrical stimulation, keeping them toned during my long sleep.

I wasn't in the mesh and I wasn't in the pod. I could hardly lift my head but I appeared to be in a hospital. As my senses returned I could smell antiseptic, my bed was uncomfortable and there was a background noise of clicking machinery. The ceiling was white and glowed with diffuse light; there was no visible source, no windows or doors.

My first thought was that there had been an emergency and I had returned to Earth. Then as my mind processed more memories I realised that shouldn't be possible. No, that wasn't possible; I had been awakened a little while ago, to check out a planet the computer had spotted. And by then I was two hundred years into the mission. Two hundred years from Earth.

I guess you could say that I had been the lucky one; everyone else on the ship was sound asleep. I was the one who would be woken if a likely planet was spotted. I could check it out and if it was suitable for colonisation I could wake the rest. I had been awoken three times and hadn't had to do it yet. And yet here I was, awake on a planet with recognisable things, beds, drips, lights. But so far there were no other people.

I had to be back on Earth, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. Maybe Einstein was right? Space was curved and I gone all the way round and come back to where I had started? My head started to ache from the questions and the fear. Why hadn't I woken on the ship? Where were the rest of my crew?

This was hopeless, I needed more information than I could currently get. I had to start again.

I was here, wherever here was. And I was alive. I moved my arms and legs, no restraints. I saw that my left arm had a drip attached; the cannula was taped to the back of my hand. Following the line took me to a clear fluid in a bag. I couldn't make out the writing; the bag was turned away from me. My right hand was clutching a small box. I lifted it to my eyes. A red button on a box on a wire. I knew straight away what pushing that button would do.

There was a door; it was behind me, out of sight. And I was definitely in a hospital, I could tell from the nurses that came running, out of breath and pushing machinery, they must have been poised, ready to kick start me. They had the standard scrub uniforms and caps pulled down over their hair but they were definitely human. They moved like humans, not like robotics. At least I wasn't surrounded by some alien race, intent on experimenting. I relaxed slightly.

They fussed with the drip and other things that I couldn't see, bobbing in and out of my view as they worked in silence.

"Where am I," I croaked, my voice was a bit rusty from years of inactivity; my throat was dry.

I thought I had felt fear when I awoke. When they spoke I really knew fear. I couldn't understand a word of what they said. In a panic, I tried to get out of the bed, equipment scattered as I pulled the drip from my arm. I felt the drag of other tubes as strong hands gripped my weak body. Then there was a scratch on my arm, a strange taste on my tongue and I was asleep again.

When I awoke I had a raging pain in my left ear, it felt like someone was pushing a large, red-hot needle through the eardrum into my brain. I thrashed my head.

"Keep still," a calm woman's voice. Her hand was on my shoulder, not pushing, just there. Reassuring me, even though I couldn't see her.

"Relax, the cochlear implant will feel sore for a while," her voice continued. I realised that I could understand every word. A hand passed me a bottle with a straw, I drank, water, cool and fresh.

"Where am I?"

"You're in a hospital," the voice was soothing, it made me relax.

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, you need to rest." She moved around to stand beside me as she adjusted something on the side of the bed. She had short brown hair and a kind face, blue eyes and a wide smile. The standard white coat covered what looked like a brown boiler suit, zipped to the neck. The stethoscope was familiar. I must be on Earth. I just needed confirmation.

"Am I back on Earth?"

“Patience,” she said with that smile, “just sleep and recover your strength, then we’ll tell you everything.”

She lifted her hand to my shoulder moved it down my arm. There was the scratch again.

The next time I awoke the pain in my ear had gone. So had the drip. I tried to get out of the bed, found that I could stand if I held on to the frame. My legs shook with the effort, the mesh must have stopped working, I hadn’t had this problem last time I had awoken, on the ship. The ship! My crew, I must have been rescued.

There was a seat by the bed and I fell into it, gasping for breath.

The door opened and two people came in. There was the doctor again and a man, tall and imposing. He was in some sort of weird uniform that I didn’t recognise. But judging by the amount of braid, he outranked me.

“How are you feeling Captain Barber?” asked the man, “the doctor here says that the prolonged sleep has left you weak but you will be fine as soon as your muscles recover.”

“I’m getting better,” I answered, “but I need to know some things.”

The man lifted his arm, waving me to silence. “It will be easier if I explain what I can, you just listen, answer briefly and save your questions to the end.” It seemed more of an order than a request. But spoken in a friendly voice. I nodded.

“Great,” he cleared his throat. “Now records from that time are quite fragmented, what with the solar flares of the late twenty-fourth century quite a lot of magnetic media was wiped. But we know you left Earth in the ion drive ship Neo 2 somewhere around the year 2350.” He paused.

“That’s right, I remember the day, it was raining, April 14th, 2347. Where is my ship? Please.”

“I said no questions,” his voice changed to a commander’s voice, “but in the circumstances it's understandable. Briefly; your ship was found drifting; it had suffered a hull failure, probably a meteor strike. You were the only survivor. I’m sorry.”

So I was alone here, Tina, my fellow crew, all the people that had depended on me, they were all gone. The devastation washed over me like an ocean wave, cold and brutal. I sagged in the chair.

“Sir, that was less than tactful, he needed telling gently,” the Doctor was on my side at least.

“Had to be done,” the man replied, “best to get it out of the way.” Wherever I was the military hadn’t changed, get the bad news done without the psychobabble.

“Moving on,” he continued, “am I right that you were all in deep sleep, you and your crew, to be woken when the ship reached a possible planet for you to land on.”

“That’s right, the orbiting telescopes outside Pluto had detected the presence of several promising planets, the Neo ships were sent to colonise them if possible.”

He made notes on what looked like a tablet computer, “and you left at sub-light speed?”

“The ion engine gives constant acceleration, we hoped to get to 97 percent light speed, of course then we had to slow down as well. But it was all controlled by the latest quantum computers.”

They both nodded, as if this was old news, “So where do you think you are?” It looked like it was time for my questions.

“I was hoping you would tell me, back on Earth somehow I guess, although that seems impossible.”

They exchanged glances, “What?” I started to get angry. “Come on you can tell me. I’ve just found out my ship and crew are all gone, I’m in a strange place. Whatever you tell me from now is hardly likely to make things worse.” The fear was kicking in again.

“Were you told,” asked the doctor, “how time would pass at a different speed for you, compared with those you left behind on Earth?”

“Of course we were, time dilation is part of Einstein’s theory. It was unimportant to us. It was a one-way trip, we all knew that. We were all asleep, we weren’t communicating with Earth. There was no issue with it.”

“Well, some of this might not be too much of a shock to you then.” That sounded ominous. “About a year after you left, the light barrier was broken. In ten years after that, the first light ships went out. They ranged far and wide. We found that the conditions for life were widespread, although we never found any trace of other intelligent life.”

So no aliens then, in its own way it was a relief.

“Humans colonised many planets. And over time, a long time, the human race expanded. As you’ve probably gathered, you’re on one of those planets now.”

So I wasn’t back on Earth, I had just slept through the future of humanity. At least I was here to see the end result. Now for the biggie, “and how long was I asleep?”

The man looked me straight in the eye, “well by your calculations a little over six hundred years.”

No wonder my legs were weak, and goodness knows how much of that had been drifting in a broken hulled ship, surrounded by the dead, while time rushed by all around me.

“And by yours?”

The military man went to the flat, featureless wall; I could make out a small panel in the corner. He pushed buttons and the walls became glass.

I blinked, this couldn't be true. We were looking out on the towers of a city. There was a red planet with large rings visible in the clouded sky. Craft flew past the window in a variety of shapes.

“Welcome,” said the Doctor, “to Enmaya.”

“And to 11,031,” said the man.

2)

I woke, the mesh holding me tight. Above my head, red letters raced across the inside of the pod. ‘Planet detected,’ they said. ‘Time to wake up Captain Barber.’

The pod hissed open and the mesh retracted. It was designed to help me keep fit in deep sleep, electrical impulses in the mesh stimulated my muscles. Even so, as I swung my legs down and stood, I felt weak.

Everyone else was still sleeping in their pods, as I entered the control room I could see that all the lights were green. Sitting at the desk, I punched buttons and systems came to life. The Neo 2 was doing its job perfectly.

We had set off from Earth in 2347, long range telescopes had found a number of planets that might be habitable and the new ion drive made them reachable, even if we did have to sleep all the way. Of course, we had no way of communicating, this was a one-way trip. We were a colony of sleeping people, frozen embryos, plant seeds, animals and everything else we might need to start again. Right down to the ploughshares.

And if the first planet we passed wasn't suitable, there were others on the route that had been plotted. If it came to it, we could start a colony in orbit around the last. And from our experiences in the solar system, we had the equipment to do a little terraforming; make the place like home for our descendants.

This was the second time I had been awoken; the first planet that we had approached had been no use to us at all, it was far too close to an unstable star. But this place looked like a much better prospect; the ship had been scanning it for a while before it had woken me. All the information it had collected so far was promising, there was an acceptable atmosphere, water and the temperature was fine. The computer had been decelerating to get a better look.

It was time for me to make a decision. But first I needed feeding, I had been asleep for several hundred years and although the pod had nourished me, I missed the taste of real food. Or at least as real as I could get on here.

Six hours later, I was fed and full of coffee. My strength had come back and I felt great. I had studied the scans and decided. I woke Tina, the other environmental scientist to come and take a look.

She was not a morning person. Probably like I had been six hours ago, her body ached and although I woke her with tea and food she still grumbled and clung defiantly to sleep. She was small and serious, dark-haired and intense.

Once she had got herself used to the idea of being awake she was very good at her job. She sifted through the information on her screen before agreeing with me. "It looks suitable," she finally declared. "We should go and have a look in the shuttle."

"I agree." I would have gone for a look even if I hadn't, I'd only been awake a few hours but I was bored. Who wouldn't want a bit of activity and a chance of success? We set up the pre-flight routines on the shuttle and sorted out the ship, it had been slowing as it approached the planet,

so that we could have a look around and catch it up. If the place was suitable we would have to course correct and swing the ship around to attain orbit. The computer could sort all that out, it would take a while, but we would be asleep while it did. And when we woke again, we could begin.

We walked through the deserted ship to the shuttle craft, we could never land the Neo on a planet, it was too big and had been assembled in space. It was really only a framework with engines and a bridge; all the important bits were stored in craft like this one, merely attached to the main hull. After we got on board we were ready to go.

As soon as we dropped down through the atmosphere we could see that the place was perfect. There were clouds and rain and we emerged over a large ocean. The scanners had got a rough map of the landmasses on our approach, and all the things we found confirmed that it was a good place to stop. Racing across the ruffled waters, a line grew on the horizon and turned into cliffs of red stone. A headland thrust out into this alien ocean, waves crashed against rocks at the base on both sides. It was beautiful, like the places I remembered from Earth. Birds flocked and perched on the cliffs, they scattered as we passed. A red sandy beach stretched away on each side of the rocks.

As I lifted the shuttle up over the shoreline I spotted a moss covered pile of rubble on the headland. It looked unnatural. My imagination ran away with me, "It's the perfect place for a lighthouse," I exclaimed. Beside me, Tina looked baffled.

"To warn ships of the rocks," I explained.

"But wouldn't they have scanners?" was her reply. Like I said; she was serious.

I was flying the shuttle and I slowed and circled around the pile, it definitely looked like it might have been the remains of a building. Some of the stones in the pile appeared to be edged. And

there were pieces of what looked like rusted metal in amongst the stones. I took video and stored it for later analysis.

“Look at that,” shouted Tina, pointing inland. There were two lines of trees stretching away from the rubble into the distance. There was just no way that could be a natural feature.

“Let’s follow them,” she said. It sounded like a good plan, there was something strange here. It felt familiar, even though that sounded ridiculous.

We set off again just above the trees, they seemed to frame some sort of road and it led us over hills of waving grass and fields of what looked a lot like wheat. There was no doubt that this planet was inhabited. Or had been.

But by who?

The road kept on, overgrown in places but clear in others, sometimes with the trees and sometimes without. It crossed hills and valleys and there were the remains of bridges, then an intact one. It all looked old and tired, uncared for. In the distance, we could see an irregular shape. As we approached it became a city, skyscrapers and all manner of buildings.

But when we arrived, it was deserted and obviously abandoned. Weeds grew and some of the buildings had fallen. Abandoned vehicles littered the streets. There had certainly been a civilisation here once, but it was long gone.

We found an open space and landed the shuttle. Tests on the air showed it was breathable but even so we suited up before emerging. Just in case there were poisons in the air that we couldn't detect.

“What is this place,” asked Tina, her serious side was being replaced by puzzlement and wonder.

All the buildings were human sized, the doors and glassless windows perfect for our use.

“We need to find a public building,” I replied, “I’ve got two possible scenarios in mind; I’m hoping it’s not the first.

“What’s that? And what’s the second?”

“Let’s wait and see,” I didn’t want to panic her but I had a very bad feeling. Either of my two ideas were bad, I was hoping for a third. “If we can find a library or administrative centre there will be records, we can maybe find out who lived here, what they called it and where they went.”

“That makes sense,” she agreed, “I’d rather we didn’t split up and search though if that’s OK with you.” I was fine with that. I didn’t want to be on my own here.

We searched the buildings, which up close were not as well preserved as they looked.

Doors were stuck, swollen with age and damp, walls wobbled under our footsteps. The last thing we wanted was to get injured out here. We were very careful but the evidence was all around us, we found out a lot of things quickly.

There were signs in plastic and metal that had remained legible. There were shops although all of the stock had turned into lumps of rust or mould. The surprise was finding that the language was based on English, the bigger one that some of the letters were reversed or even unfamiliar. The more I thought about it I realised that possibility one was way out, a product of wishful thinking, unfortunately, the more I saw made possibility two more plausible.

Tina had been trudging around, seeing the same things as me but I don’t think she was reaching the same conclusions. Her conversation had stopped as if her senses were overloaded by what she was observing. She had picked up a few things and placed them in her satchel.

“What do you think then,” I asked her after she had been silent for a long while.

“Do you know where we are?” she answered in a blank tone.

“No, but I still think that one of my ideas is correct, let's get back into the shuttle and I'll explain.

Back on board we made coffee and settled down. The day was ending and it was getting darker in the dusk. Overhead a red planet had risen, framed with a large ring system.

“I had two ideas,” I started, “At first I wondered if we had somehow proved Einstein was right and that space was curved. I thought maybe we had gone all the way round and returned to Earth.”

“But it looks different, the star and everything was different.”

“Yes and I realised that pretty quickly.” I didn't say that I had hoped to be home, it wouldn't have helped.

“Okay,” she said, “so what was your other idea? It has got to be more logical than our first one.”

“I'll tell you what I now think has happened. In the time we were asleep, man learned to travel faster than light. This planet has been settled by Earth, or from somewhere settled by people from Earth. With the time dilation, we've only gone and slept through the colonisation of the galaxy.”

She was dubious, “So if that's true, where are they now, the colonists? How long have they been gone? And why did they go?”

That was the big question.

“There's any number of reasons why they moved on,” I said. “Disease, alien invasion, war? Who knows? Perhaps they ran out of raw materials or found a better planet. Whatever, they're long gone now, maybe they exist somewhere else but not here, they might come back but I doubt it.”

Tina was silent, she started to sob, her shoulders shaking. “Then it was all for nothing,” she said between sobs, “Our lives, the mission, All for nothing.”

“Not really, we can put down here, set up our colony; there must be places on the planet that are untouched. We can start again. If we search we can maybe find out where they've gone, perhaps even send them a message.”

“It’s not exactly what I signed up for,” she said. I changed the subject.

“What have you got in the satchel?” I asked. I wanted to take her mind off of the despair and give her something to do.

She tipped its contents out, a few lumps of coloured rust and a plastic sign. She turned it over.

In large letters, it said, “Enmaya Trading, the best from the Galaxy.”

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Notes

I think that there is a lot of mileage in the idea here; it could be developed to include all sorts of scenarios. Meeting your descendants or arriving as deities are just a couple of other versions of the same story that leap out at me, maybe I’ll follow them up next time.