

Falling

I don't like falling. I can't imagine that anyone really does. In a lot of instances your stomach jumps up into your throat, your brain panics, making you flail around like an idiot, and then you always – 100 percent without a doubt – hit the ground. Or the floor, or some hard surface. And that hurts. But what I've always wondered, not actively mind you, but just a question always flickering at the back of my brain – is falling terrible because of the impact at the end, or because of the buildup? The drum roll beforehand. It's puzzling. But at the end of the day, gravity's a bitch.

Now, I've fallen quite a lot. But it never gets any better. I could fall a million times, I'd still never be ambivalent to the million and first. And every time I do fall the memory is burned in my brain. I can't forget it. They are always there, milling around upstairs, having a cup of tea and delighting in sharing painful anecdotes. Mocking me. For instance, when I was quite young the first step out of my room was, as I now reason, a health hazard. It was more slippery than a piece of floor ought to be. And I, an eager youth, wanting to greet each outing with the enthusiasm and gusto they deserved, regularly charged at the hazardous area with high velocity in stocking feet. And so I fell. Flat on my stomach. An internal pane of glass shattering within me each time. Instant tears.

It was the stocking feet that did me in. Looking back, I would have served myself well by keeping my shoes in my bedroom rather than thrown around the house like Easter eggs. But for all the cautions I have taken, all the worries I have, I can't seem to ever keep track of my shoes. Not even now. I find tracking shoes is like herding cats.

But, you may ask yourself, why am I telling you this anyway? Why divulge boring childhood anecdotes to those I don't know? (My sincerest apologies if we, in fact, have met before). Well, I happen to be in the most unique of positions where I know what happens to me next. Most people have a good idea, but I know for sure. But before I get into all that I felt that the above was – well—not *necessary* to the story, but a *nice-to-have*, at least. And since I have the time I thought it'd be nice to have.

So now, with that out of the way, let's start at the beginning.

I work on an M-Class freighter. Basically, we haul *stuff* to and from the habitable planets. My specific job isn't relevant. Actually, it's barely relevant while I'm doing it. It really shouldn't even be a job. This job isn't designed, it isn't planned for, it's just a patch. If everyone else did their job, then my job wouldn't exist. In theory anyway. But luckily (?) for me, everyone did about 98% of their own jobs, so here I was. And on this particular Tuesday (Today) my 2% pickups had me below decks with my buddy Jack. Also a patch worker.

“I can't stand it down here.”

He also couldn't stand it down here.

I can't blame him. It sucks down here. It's poorly lit and gray and semi-deserted and nothing interesting usually happens. But we were down here a lot anyways, this is the hold, the storage area—this is where all that *stuff* is. And someone needs to keep track of it. And then someone needs to keep track of how they keep track of it. And that's where we come in.

“It's enough to drive you crazy. I mean, why. Just *why*. Ug, don't listen to me—sorry— I'm going to try and be optimistic today, I promise. The human being is capable of finding fulfillment in anything. This is a mindset issue. Yeah, I can *think* my way out of the misery.”

He did this every morning. Reassured himself that, even though it didn't really feel like it, what we did provided value, and if he couldn't be fulfilled by providing value, then the problem is with him.

I had a similar mindset once. But it wasn't optimism, it was just denial.

Not that you're interested, but this is our Standard Operating Procedure: We dock. The teams who run the docks bring the cargo into the hold and organize accordingly. The inventory guys come and log everything in our ship's system. Sounds straight forward. But no one in inventory has been able to agree on *how* to log everything. So you get some line items in the *originPlanet_Shipment#_item_date* format, and others in a *originPlanet_destinationPlanet_Shipment#_item_date_initials* format, or some just in a *Shipment#_item_Date* format – the list goes on and on. And then of course there's how you define the item piece. Some people write everything out, some people abbreviate, others put both. Some people use snake case, others camel case, a hybrid of the two, etc. etcetera.

So people like me and Jack have to go below decks to access the inventory logs and clean everything up. We use the *originPlanet_destinationPlanet_Shipment#_item*, and we abbreviate the items. It's clean, without redundancy, kind of a no brainer. Because this really isn't that hard. We have a standard list of all the abbreviations posted for everyone to see and everything, but the jerks in inventory don't seem to care.

Anyway, that's not the only thing I do, but it's the thing I do the most.

I know, I work on a freaking spaceship and I fix typos for a living. *Ew.*

But I'm getting distracted again, like I said I was below decks with Jack, who was trying to contact the head of inventory to figure out if we had 35 tons of Silicon or Silicone on board, and getting absolutely nowhere.

"I'm not quite understanding the issue" the nasal voice said through Jack's comm.

"The inventory log is saying we picked up a shipment of Silicone from Earth."

"Yes, and?"

"*And* I have conflicting documentation saying that it's Silicon."

"From whom?"

"From every other department, the retailer on Earth, the buyer on Kepler..."

"...So, I'm still unsure of why you're contacting me, I can't speak for the other departments."

"But you can speak for *your* department?"

"Just give up" I chime in. "They're never gonna give you a straight answer."

"I have to try, don't I?"

Hello?"

"Yes, I'm still here, and I obviously *can* speak for my department, I've been doing just that for the past 20 minutes."

"And you acknowledge that we have an issue?"

"You know, I think we're talking past each other, why don't you find sometime on my calendar and we can talk about this offline..."

Poor Jack. I walked away down the hall before I heard the end of the conversation, but “let’s talk about this offline” usually meant an awkward face to face meeting with an AI mediator present. The AI mediator is really just a bot, so if you steer the conversation a certain way you can ensure absolutely nothing will get accomplished—which seems to be Inventory’s only goal. But it’s company policy that they’re present since “let’s talk about this offline” used to mean “I will kick the living shit out of you.”

There was nothing remarkable or exciting down the hall, it just wasn’t the main Inventory computer port, there’s only so much time a person with a brain can sit in front of that thing. Sure, I had come to terms with my job by now, I was past denial, squarely in acceptance, but I wasn’t a robot (to the company’s dismay). I came to the end of the hallway where the airlock was, took a deep breath, felt the cool floor through my socks (I had kicked my shoes off hours ago, back before the great Silicon/Silicone debate), turned around and headed back.

This is where it gets interesting. This is where—in the middle of a dead-end gray, nothing of a hallway where nothing ever happens—something happens. To me, at that. This is where the airlock behind me blows, out of the blue, and I get sucked out into space—this is where I fall.

I was far enough away where the traction on my boots might have saved me. Of course.

The first few milliseconds when I whipped through the hallway, that’s all I could think about: My boots. Or lack thereof, more accurately. My stocking feet betray me again. But then I was in space, and my priorities changed.

As I fell, dying, I saw the ship fade away, the “Earth Commerce Shipping” logo getting smaller and smaller. I wondered if Jack was ok, I wondered what made the airlock go, I thought about this article I read this one time about how the People Who Died in Pompeii’s neurons turned to

glass because the blast was so hot. I convinced myself that I was turning to glass. That I soon would be hard and transparent. That, be it by silicone or silica, I was fading away.

But mainly, I just felt...relief? I didn't have to go back to the computer port, I'd never have to pick up anyone's slack ever again, sure, I was dying, but it was giving me the opportunity to actually live. I was free of responsibility! Yeah, my eyes were slowly freezing, but they were freezing on a beautiful, picturesque space void! And all the while I was physically distancing myself from my work.

This was so close to being the perfect vacation.

And then it was all over.

No, no, don't worry, I didn't die. Something even worse happened.

Time *reset* somehow.

I was falling through space, and then I was walking down to the hold with Jack *again*. It was Tuesday morning *again*. I was going to have to rename all those files *again*.

"...Ug, don't listen to me, sorry, I'm going to try and be optimistic today, I promise."

"Jack!" I interrupted and grabbed his arm and starred at him with (now unfrozen) bug eyes.

"I died" I said. I let out a painful yawp and cried for like 2, 3 minutes *tops*.

I could have handled it better, I guess.

Well, no, no 'I guess.' I'll hold myself to this one. I did not react well to dying a tragic death and then being displaced in time.

"Whoa, what? Are you ok, you do not look well...you *died*?"

Does this mean *I'm* dead? Is that why we're in hell?"

He was trying to make me feel better, and it helped, I won't lie. I didn't really know how to explain everything to him, so I just said I was fine and we finished making our way to the computer port.

We spent the next few hours in silence. Normally I'll listen to something while I'm renaming—music, chatlines, the audio recording of the Ikea catalogue—but not today. Not on Tuesday: Take Two. I was thinking about my fall.

And that catches you up.

Falling, terror, cold, relief. Falling, terror, cold, relief.

Just over and over and over in my head.

I can't stop. I'm immobilized. I'm—

“Still not having a great day today, huh?”

Jack's voice partially sprung me out of my daze.

“What? Why would you say that?”

“Well—and no judgment—but you're kind of just staring...ahead. Not really at anything in particular, you just kind of look...frozen.”

I flinched at the word.

“Don’t say that. I’m not frozen. I’m not frozen, *I’m not frozen.*” Those last two were to convince myself.

“Ok, yeah, sorry, You’re not frozen. I’m not sure why I said that.

But... you’re not really yourself either. Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?” That came out sounding more crazy than I intended.

“About...how you *died this morning?*” The question tip-toed out of his mouth, he was clearly uncomfortable with it, but pushed on regardless.

Good ole Jack. A real pal.

I wanted to respond. I wanted to say “I’m ok, thank you for your concern. This morning was a weird time, but just—let’s move on. Full steam ahead, these files aren’t going to name themselves, and I have a feeling you’re going to have your hands full with either silicon or silicone, so no time to waste” etc. etc.

But I just cried instead.

And Jack just let me cry.

And we did that for a while.

But slowly, like a sweet pea wriggling its way up from my gut, the important thing—the thing I couldn’t believe I forgot—rose to the surface, and I opened my mouth to let the blossom out.

“The air lock is going to blow” I muttered.

“What? How do you know?”

“I just do.”

I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“Oh my—wait. Is this wha—did you—so you really?—”

“Jack”

“Yes” His eyes were more sympathetic now, more frightened too.

“Are you able to access any info on the air lock down the hall. Number 182, I think.”

“Uh, I—I’m not an engineer.”

“On the payroll, no. But...”

We had switched rolls so quickly I hardly noticed. Now I was the one with the head on my shoulders and he was the pile of goo.

“*Jack*”

“Right. Right. Ok, yes, I—I mean, the—

Shouldn’t we just call engineering?”

“We don’t have time.” It was true too. I had been given a whole ‘nother Tuesday and I wasted it stuck in my head. I failed. I ruined my second chance. “I Got You Babe” started to fade in from the back of my head. We had minutes.

“Well I’m calling engineering”

I pushed Jack aside, gingerly, and fenagled my way into engineering portal from our computer. Meanwhile Jack was tied up in another unending loop of a phone call.

“Yes, we have reason to believe air lock 182 is damaged and is—no I can’t hold.”

We were both on fool's errands. I don't have clearance to do anything but look at the engineering schematics of the ship. But I'll be damned if I—If *Jack* dies. *Again*.

“Come on.” I yanked him from his seat and shoved him in front of me toward the closest door with an emergency seal feature. Once again I was whooshing down the hallway, but this time by my own volition, and in a much more encouraging direction. It was only about 10 seconds to the door, but it felt like an eternity. Time tends to slow down when you convince yourself it's all over.

I just kept thinking over and over again that this was it, from now on no more mess ups, no more goofs. No more falls. I was drawing a line in the sand. Perfection from here on out. How hard could that be?

We reached the door and sealed it behind us.

I was hesitant to look around, I think Jack was as well. We just looked at each other for a beat. But then we had to. How could you not?

It was worse than I imagined, from this point of view. It wasn't just the air lock, several doors to several cargo bays had opened as well. We just watched as what seemed like endless cargo was involuntarily jettisoned. A three-dimensional Pollock that looked an awful lot like the end of our contracts.

“So we are to an agreement, then” the bot chimed in.

“Yes, I'd say so.” The head of inventory looked—not disappointed—just angry. The agreement was that Jack and I were fired. Effective immediately. The head of inventory and the Captain's

chairs squeaked against the floor as they stood up and exited the small conference room. They were murmuring to each other on the way out.

“Let’s get ahead of this ASAP. Set up a meeting with Kepler so we can break the news about their Silicon shipment.”

“But we didn’t lose their Silicon, my manifest says we lost a shipment of Silicone.”

“Oh? That’s lucky...”

The voices trailed off down the hallway and I turned to look at Jack. How was I even going to begin to apologize? But his face didn’t seem to want an apology. He was grinning, ear to ear. He looked...happy? I don’t understand it.

He glanced down at my feet and then back up to my eyes, still grinning, got up, and walked toward the door, motioning for me to follow.

“Come on.”

Gentler words have yet to be spoken.

I started to get up, but something didn’t feel right. Now I too glanced down.

My shoes were off, lying lifeless under the table.

Oh for the love of god.

END