

The Unnecessary Parts of the Story

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You almost don't need the first half of the story at all. You know there's a spaceship. You know that its crew stops off at some out-of-the-way planet on some pretext or other, probably repairs, and that while they're there, somebody jars the wrong rock, or enters the wrong dark place, or something. You know that this person gets infected, that nobody notices, and that when they take off, a hostile alien intelligence takes off with them. Finally, you know that after some skulking around in corridors and a few isolated deaths, the carrier, call him Hennessy, is subdued and placed in isolation, where the others observe him worriedly on monitors.

All of that goes without saying. Because you've been here before.

What should happen now is the crew deciding after much rational and reasoned discussion that this is some heavy-duty alien shit, with any number of possible properties, and that the smartest possible thing to do is to write Hennessy off as a complete loss, and dump him into interplanetary vacuum.

But human beings are cute, not to mention slow learners, and so they come up with a different approach entirely. The Captain, and not some more disposable party, puts on an isolation suit and enters the lab in order to negotiate with the entity now controlling good old Hennessy. The Captain is wise, and the Captain is bearded, and the Captain is fully confident in the precautions already taken being able to prevent whatever's eating Hennessy from also taking charge of him. He cycles through the airlock separating the ship proper from the horror that sits in the isolation cell, and he stands and he peers through his faceplate at the figure who was until recently a respected friend and colleague if also a bit of a comical asshole, who is now secured by gleaming silvery rings to a chair that keeps him immobile; and it would only confuse us to ask just why this vessel on a mission of peaceful exploration, or freight hauling, or whatever, even has an isolation cell with a chair designed to keep a prisoner immobile. Right now,

it's enough to focus our attention on the immediate problem.

The Captain's probably thinking that he and his crew must be the most inobservant people alive. Hennessy did look a little grotty after leaving the planet, a little paler and sweatier than usual, possibly hung over, but even before he began to prowl the corridors, murdering his fellow crew members one by one, that grottness was left far behind, in favor of grotesquery. His complexion turned pitted and warty, his flesh flaking and blistered, his lips yellowish and pustulent, well past the point where he looked dead, and yet a number of those he cornered on his several days of winnowing down the opposition greeted his appearance not with a horrified, *Holy crap, Hennessy's been infected with something*, but a more neutral, *Jesus, man, you look like hell*. The ship's faithful cameras recorded the killing that followed but not whether any of the victims, upon ascertaining that a violent death was now their lot, devoted any of their remaining mental energy to excoriating themselves with a sad *stupid, stupid, stupid*. Because, really: a number of their demises were an exercise in not seeing the bloody obvious until it was too late.

It's hard to imagine anybody being taken in now, because Hennessy no longer looks even remotely human. He resembles a boil in the process of draining. Various nasty fluids leak from his cheeks, his mouth, his eyes. Even with his restraints on, his movements are twitchy, violent, and inhuman. But the thing occupying him manages a sneer as he confronts the Captain: "Come to negotiate? How cute."

The Captain says, "What are you, and what do you want?"

The faux-Hennessy leers at him, and through bubbling lips, explains, "I think it's fairly clear what I am. I'm an intelligent parasitic organism. Not evolved on that planet where you found me, but on another many light-years away, spreading from system to system the same way I've spread to you: via fools stumbling in where they don't belong. If I told you how many sentient races I've infected down to the very last organism, all because of uncounted stupid space travelers like yourself giving me a ride from one world to another, you would quail in horror. I will infect your entire civilization, and you will do nothing to stop me."

"Thank you," says the Captain. He leaves the room via the same aperture he used to enter, tells his crew that Hennessy is a lost cause, and with a quick flip of a switch ejects the isolation chamber into a nearby sun, incinerating his old friend, the monster occupying him, and any chance of the foulness spreading to the rest of the human race. Such a course of action would be cold, and it would be cruel, and it would lead to some hard questions from a fleet board of enquiry, but it would also be completely sensible.

Except, of course, that he doesn't do any of that. What he does is leave the room via the same aperture he used to enter, tell his crew that he's lost all the crew members he's going to, and that he wants options for curing Hennessy on his desk in one hour, damn it. Whereupon everybody disperses and lets the thing that used to be Hennessy continue to brew and mutate and become more dangerous, like a sausage plumping in its croissant dough.

How irresponsible! But this is not the worst part they miss.

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Another thing needs to be established here. Hennessy, while he was Hennessy, was just a guy. Oh, he was a good companion for this routine journey between the stars, even if, as you impartial observers would have noted if your humble narrator had seen fit to subject you to the kabuki sameness of the first part of the story, a bit of a jackass, precisely the kind of putz who was just naturally the one person out of all the crew to get himself infected by some kind of Lovecraftian alien blood tick. Were this a thriller, you the audience would be sitting there on your fat asses clucking, *well, of course, he was always the one I expected to go first*. But he was, again, just a guy: not particularly bright, not possessed of prodigious reservoirs of strength, not naturally capable of shrugging off a blaster burst to the chest, the way this Hennessy was, before a jury-rigged weapon made out of spare parts brought him down just when all seemed lost. There have clearly been physical changes inside him, some improvements to his connective tissue, some replumbing of his circulatory system, some toughening of his actual flesh, that made him as tough and as hard to kill as he was.

You only have to look at his current complexion, a little like a microwavable pizza with pus topping, to know that he's mutating in strange and terrifying ways, and that this process is accelerating.

It therefore follows—and absolutely should be obvious to the fellow crew members who are all in their respective departments working overtime to collate data for the meeting the Captain's called in one hour, or having a stand-up quickie in a maintenance niche—that these mutations are likely to continue and that, if the Captain's incomprehensible decision is to keep him on board, among the pressing tasks that need to be assigned to somebody is constant real-time monitoring. Somebody needs to be watching Hennessy every moment, measuring every infinitesimal change in his condition every moment, making a new threat assessment every moment. This is only common sense, and does it surprise you, at all, that nobody's been put on this duty? Instead, he's left in his chair, bubbling, cackling to himself, giving thanks to whatever alien deity he worships, and continuing his transformation from a Hennessy already beyond salvaging into a thing that even Hennessy's gray-haired old mother back in Wichita, a woman so doting that she breast-fed him until he was seven, would order an exterminator on in two seconds flat.

Nobody's there to say, "Uh, guys," when the creature who used to be Hennessy develops extra musculature around its greenish and glistening forearms, and when those powerful limbs begin to struggle with the restraints holding its arms in place.

Incredibly irresponsible!

Too stupid to be borne!

Evidence of a species that deserves to be infected by this horror!

And yet even this is not the most astonishing element they miss; not even close.

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You almost don't need the next part of the story, either. You have internalized the ingredients from long and enthusiastic ingestion and know that what follows next is the last chance the members of this doomed crew have to do something remotely intelligent. Instead, you watch them have what amounts to a board meeting.

During this meeting the various surviving members of the crew all play the parts that reflect their dominant personality traits. There is a Professorial Type who drones on for a little bit about past legends of such a creature, archaeological evidence on various worlds of prior civilizations subsumed and destroyed by it, and an obscure research vessel that a few years back self-destructed after sending out an unnecessarily ambiguous and fragmentary warning, too garbled to be worth much, of what he suspects to be precisely this problem; and while this is all learned and intelligently presented, it is not helpful at all. There is a Panicky Male who imparts pretty much the same message in fewer words by informing everybody that this is all fucked up, man. There's a Weepy Woman who merely sniffles. The Psychotic Type, fingering a combat knife with deep adoration, opines that the Captain should just let him into the isolation chamber with Hennessy, so he can take care of the problem in the way that none of you pussies could. There are a few angry rejoinders from the Hot Girl and Forgettable Guy who had their stand-up quickie less than an hour ago, and though they cleaned up well and are as close to professional as they ever are, there isn't a person in the room who doesn't know what they were just doing or that they unaccountably chose to do it now. The first intelligent comment comes from the Pragmatic Woman who says that Hennessy is already dead and that the thing pretending to be him should be spaced and the whole ship subjected to two days of internal, sterilizing radiation. The Cold Scientist says that it's worse than that, actually, because they know nothing of the alien organism's origins, least of all where it evolved and for that matter just what would have to be done to kill it, and that therefore, for the future of the human race, no chances should be taken; they really ought to head for the nearest sun and incinerate themselves in it. Everybody yells at the Cold Scientist for being so cold, and he says that he's only suggesting the most logical and prudent course. The Guy With A Sweetheart Back Home, acting as if he's the only person in the room with a reason to live, protests that Angie's waiting for him.

Among them, there are two who are closest to being right, the Pragmatic Woman and the Cold Scientist. You can see this, right?

It is astonishing how badly they both miss the big picture, and this is why it's sad, really, that this species ever developed space flight at all.

Still, it's the Captain's conscience that makes the decision. He says that he believes that if this organism is as dangerous as it professes to be, it's their duty to preserve it, so it can be investigated by authorities a lot smarter than anybody in this room. (This is a rather low bar, all told, but honestly, he is trying to do the right thing, so let's cut him some slack.)

Everybody talks over each other for a moment.

The Cold Scientist says, "That's insane. To even think of bringing that thing into Earth's biosphere . . ."

"I'm not," the Captain says. "We're stopping at the System Biological Hazard Laboratory, the one that's in orbit around Pluto. We'll send a dispatch up ahead so they know we're coming. Once we're there we'll get Hennessy quarantined, undergo stringent examinations and decontamination ourselves, and make absolutely sure that the ship is scrubbed before we head the rest of the way home. If we're lucky, they'll be able to cure him. If we're not, we'll give the mission payment to his next of kin. But until then, we'll do everything we can to make sure he's secured and comfortable. Is that clear?"

And once again everybody talks over one another, all with their own pressing reasons why this a terrible idea, but sooner or later the Captain cuts them off and reminds them that this is not a democracy: a truism meant to establish that he's in charge but really means that if he's making the worst possible decision, as he is, then they're stuck with it unless they want to kill him.

The reason you don't really need this part of the story is that it amounts to ultimately doing nothing, even as the thing that used to be Hennessy becomes more and more unrecognizable in its chair.

Really: human beings are adorable.

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You are a human being who has encountered this story in various forms, any number of other times, and you're still not getting it.

Perhaps it might help if we reference a related story type: the zombie plague.

In the incarnation we cite, one of many posited, a pathogen spread exclusively by biting escapes an isolated laboratory in the countryside. Somebody is infected, visibly deteriorates, becomes a lurching carnivorous zombie of either the rabid-but-living or the reanimated-corpse variety, and with no will other than that dictated by the virus starts biting others, who contract the same syndrome and commence spreading it themselves, at a terrifying geometric rate. You could predict the further course of the story in your sleep. In short order, it goes worldwide.

Our question is: if these are the conditions, why exactly does it go worldwide?

That it will go wide, that it will take uncounted lives and wreak almost unimaginable terror before any possibility of containing it, is a given. After all, the deadliest thing about these fast-moving plagues is that they pop up by surprise and spread like wildfire before their vectors are isolated. By the time people realize that they shouldn't consume any pastry baked by Mary Mallon, it's too late. But zombies? Those creatures with clouded eyes and blue complexions who stagger about with the gait of people who have forgotten how to use their knees, and are easy to peg as infected even at a distance, well, even in this theoretical model where you can be generous and posit that their spread is not noticed by the authorities until there are millions of them—even in this case, how exactly do they go worldwide? They are all walking billboards for their condition, and they become that way shortly after the point of initial exposure. Even before they start eating people, even before they cross the line between people who are still clinging to the behavior of the uninfected and those who will happily chow down on the slowest members of the pack, they don't look at all well; they look like what they are, which is sweaty, pale, and dying. Any well-armed perimeter with checkpoints will see them coming at a distance. They won't suddenly turn up on the far side of the planet because it takes longer to get to the other side of the planet than it does for the disease to incubate.

You want to design a zombie plague that will wipe out all of humanity? Posit multiple methods of exposure. Not just the traditional bite: also, let's say, sexual contact, blood transfusions,

ANALOG

exposure to contaminated surfaces, and airborne pathogens that can be spread at workplaces, social gatherings, schools, and in enclosed environments like pressurized airplane cabins. Let's say that you can infect everybody in a room by not covering your mouth when you sneeze. Let's say that you can do this while you still look and act perfectly fine. And finally, let's say that the disease lingers in your body for months before activating to the point where you transform and start biting people, months that you have spent spreading the plague to second and third generation carriers, who have themselves spread the plague to second and third generation carriers, all of whom will also prepare their food, kiss their children, and travel obliviously through crowds.

By the time hundreds of millions start biting people, it's everywhere.

That's how you start a zombie plague that can't be contained.

Make sure it's already done its damage before you even realize it's there.

A successful virus allows time for its own spread.

So this is the point the Captain doesn't get, that it is far more unbelievable to note that the Cold Scientist doesn't get. Take another look at Hennessy, who was showing symptoms within the very first few hours of exposure on an alien planet, even before his subsequent return to a spaceship that would take weeks or months to return to civilization depending on the physics you model. Within twenty-four hours, his personality was gone, and he was staggering around the ship's corridors killing people. Within forty-eight hours, he was strapped to a chair, viscous and repellent and oozing, openly telling his erstwhile companions that he was the avatar of an intelligent alien pathogen that had wiped out any number of sentient races and intended on going after human civilization next.

The question you need to ask is whether this is any way for a self-respecting malignant alien parasite to behave.

Why would it do this?

I ask you this question, those few of you who may have been smart enough to realize that it's that very infection talking: What advantage did evolution find in arranging for me to act that way?

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Here's another part of the story you don't need to see, even if it is the part of the story that you may enjoy.

The sound of tremendous destruction lures the various members of the crew back to the isolation chamber, where the increasingly powerful thing that used to be Hennessy has burst free of its shackles. It is now nine feet tall, disfigured past all past definitions of revolting, and glistening. It makes various raar-noises as it pounds on the door. The Hot Girl screams at the sight of him, the Cold Scientist utters some comments to the effect that this is fascinating, and the Pragmatic Woman shouts at the Captain that this would be a fine time to eject the module. The Captain, not being entirely stupid even if the events up to this point establish that it is certainly within his Venn Diagram, agrees and slams his fist on the big red button, the one that's sitting right there on the console for that precise purpose. A calm female voice commences announcing that the Ejection Program is inoperable for some reason. The Psychotic Type opines that he's done with this bullshit, and that he's going to smear that motherfucker over all four walls. To this end he breaks some safety glass and pulls out an impressive-looking projectile weapon that is, for some reason, stored right there. He gives the thing a *cha-chunk* to establish that it's loaded and orders the Hot Girl to open the door. The Captain shouts at her to Belay That Order, and there's some back-and-forth screaming over who's in charge and who should be in charge that prevents immediate action until the Hennessy-thing starts pounding on the walls with a raw strength that makes its imminent breach of the rest of the habitat an absolute, imminent inevitability. The Forgettable Guy tries to grab the weapon from the Psychotic Type and is blown away, in a convulsive and instinctive burst that the Psychotic Type didn't fire intentionally, which is not a great consolation to the Hot Girl, who starts screaming her head off. The Captain grabs a heavy tool that happens to be on hand and splits the Psychotic Type's skull for him. The bulkhead between all these observers and the isolation chamber is now only seconds from

breaching. The Pragmatic Woman manages to get her hands on the projectile weapon, superfluously cocks it a second time—because, in such stories, that gesture does not fulfill an actual mechanical purpose, but instead just communicates resolve as danger approaches—and aims it at the imminent breach in the bulkhead. The instant the crack appears and widens enough for a revolting moist tentacle to intrude, she starts firing.

It needs to be established here that they are attempting to splatter a material that is, essentially, medical waste, that needs to be isolated and safely disposed of and not, in the result the Pragmatic Woman probably envisions, reduced to a liquid and evenly distributed over every nearby surface. It doesn't matter. The tentacle sprays photogenic ichor but is not very inconvenienced by the inexplicably convenient projectile weapon. As it thrashes about, it decapitates Professorial Type, hits Pragmatic Woman with the same force but does not kill her, and enlarges the rupture enough for the thing that was Hennessy to penetrate further into the room. "Fall back!" the Captain screams. "Fall back!" And as the surviving members of the crew do just that, we can step away from all the inevitabilities that follow, from the increasingly desperate efforts to stop the creature in its tracks to the moments of valor that allow one crew member to sacrifice his life for another to the plans that don't work and really, everything you already know is going to happen because you have already seen it happen any number of times, enough to ask just why the alien life form that transformed Hennessy is acting this way, if its ultimate goal should be to preserve the disease vector long enough for all these intrepid people to bring it back to the home world of their species.

Really; its actions, my actions, make no rational sense.

You want a successful disease? Try Toxoplasmosis. It is spread by terrestrial cats and except when contracted by vulnerable outliers like pregnant women, its key survival strategy is to ensure future generations by instilling in its hosts an attraction toward cats. Rats with toxoplasmosis don't run from cats, as they should if they prefer to avoid being tortured and eaten, but toward them, drawn by a tropism that they might experience as love and/or as a baffling, incomprehensible and terrifying impulse. Eaten, they spread the toxoplasmosis to the cats, who then spread it to any other rats they may encounter but fail to kill, who then seek out more cats. It's essentially a device to make sure that cats are loved forever. Toxoplasmosis is endemic among human beings and may well be the explanation for crazy cat ladies and the internet.

That is the way a *successful* parasitic disease acts, by encouraging the behavior that ensures its own propagation.

Now ask yourself, again, just what I think I'm doing, by turning Hennessy into a big scary glistening monster that his fellow crewmembers have every reason to want to kill, especially when—I won't recount the actual moment but will assure you that it occurs—Hennessy continues to rant as he pursues everybody, reminding them again and again that he intends to infect all of human civilization. After all, wouldn't it be easier for the disease to spread if Hennessy had remained the same tolerable jackass he'd always been, and if it had therefore had the chance to spread peacefully among a crew that would never have any real reason to suspect that it was sick?

You are very close to the answer now.

* * *

Draw a curtain over subsequent events, and you now find the two remaining members of the crew, now in quarantine over Earth.

Yes, we have skipped the entire climax. You don't need to dwell on that part. Again, you have encountered it before, and you have internalized it, and you could almost certainly recreate it yourself if you were of a mind to.

At this point, Hennessy is gone, as the last three survivors managed to lure him into the ship's core, one of them making the ultimate sacrifice in the process. They incinerated him, even as he screamed in final confrontation of his fate, with all appropriate pathos. Because nobody else ever came down with symptoms as extreme or as upsetting as his, it is widely presumed that he never passed on the contagion to anyone else, and that humanity is safe. It is true that he never passed on the contagion to anyone else and is also true that humanity is safe, but it is not true

ANALOG

that humanity has gone uninfected. In fact, I now look out at the universe from billions of eyes, perfectly happy to be here, and perfectly happy to go without much in the way of overt mind-control for as long as your race's policies of space exploration spread my diaspora throughout the stars.

The Captain is dead, the Cold Doctor is gone, the Hot Girl is gone, and the Guy With a Sweet-heart Back Home is gone.

The Pragmatic Woman, who you likely imagined to be the hero of the piece, is also gone, as she was the one who pragmatically gave her life to help the other two survivors lure what was left of Hennessy into the all-consuming core.

Those survivors, who we now find hand in hand as they look down on the civilization they have entirely infected, are the Panicky Male and the Weepy Woman, both of whom, I can assure you, had a character arc, showing hidden reserves of courage and strength as the battle to save the ship came down to the last few minutes. They're in love now, mostly because it strikes me as fitting and just that they should be. It amounts to a happy ending, I suppose. For them, and for me.

However disappointing they would find it, their hidden reserves of courage of strength were not entirely self-generated, but were the result of a chemical assist from inside, arranged by me.

You see, although they were all infected before they left the planet, every last one of them, it was entirely necessary that Hennessy transform into an object of terror. I could have picked any one of them to show obvious symptoms, but I assessed his personality and theirs at the moment of contact and thought he would be the most advantageous.

The Professorial Type and the Cold Doctor had to go, because they were the ones most likely to figure out what I was doing. The Captain had to go because, once everything went down, he was the one most likely to realize that piloting the ship into a sun was likely the best course of action. This also happens to have been true of the Pragmatic Woman. The Psychotic Type had to go because he was the most suicidally reckless, and in the unlikely event the true explanation of events had occurred to him, he would have had no problem killing everybody. I would have liked to save the Hot Girl and the Forgettable Guy and the Guy With Somebody Who Loved Him Back Home, but their demises, staged at key moments of the violent journey from that isolation cell to the ship's core, helped steer the rapidly shrinking crew toward the actions I wanted, the ones that would accomplish what I needed to accomplish. The only two I really wanted to keep alive were Panicky Male and Weepy Woman, who were between them the two most likely in the aftermath to say, "Thank God we lived; it's over now," without ever really contemplating the premise that maybe it wasn't. They were the two worst decision-makers, and so they did exactly what I intended them to do all along, the one thing I ran riot in Hennessy to accomplish: forgot all other considerations, and not incidentally, called off the rest of their survey mission, in favor of a beeline back to where I wanted them to be.

You might well protest that all the horror and death I put them through with Hennessy was unnecessary, given that this is exactly where they would have ended up anyway.

Strictly speaking, this is true.

But I am a parasite and a disease.

Doing what I did shortened my journey by a full six months.

Adam-Troy Castro's short fiction has been nominated for two Hugos, three Stokers, and eight Nebulas. His 27 books include three novels about far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and six about the very strange young boy named Gustav Gloom. See www.adamtroy-castro.com.