

# Bygones

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## 1. genesis

*What is past I know, but what is for to come I know not.*  
—*The Apocrypha, 2 Esdras, IV, 46*

The world was young, but the sun was dying. It pulsed wildly, threatening annihilation. On the world were birds with plumage of brilliant blue, eyes that were round and black, and golden beaks. There were grazing animals of purest white, and emerald forests filled with orchids and deep shadows. The oceans were filled with fish, and red coral. The world was young. It could have been at peace, for there weren't any men. But there was the sun.

A silver thing appeared. It hung in mid air for a moment only, and there came from it a clap of thunder such as only the gods, or man, can make. Below the silver thing, trees were stripped of branches. Beside those, others were knocked to the ground. Life was swept from a portion of the forest.

The thing fell to the ground and bounced to rest with a crunch. It was a perfect sphere on top of which was a much larger parabolic structure somewhat resembling a flower, and pointing up. Presently, an opening appeared in the sphere. From the opening stepped a man and two women.

"Well, we made it," said one of the women.

"Yes, we made it," said the man.

"We always do," answered the woman. Her name was Juliet.

"You always say that." The man's name was Frank. He was large and muscular. He seemed uninterested in the conversation.

The other woman, whose name was Lynne, began scrambling through the debris of the wrecked forest. She reached the sunward side of the thing, which they called a capsule. With a nervous glance over her shoulder at the erratic sun, she began clearing debris. "Come on!" she called. "We only have two hours 'til it explodes! We have to move the capsule!"

"I wonder that she doesn't break her neck," said Frank.

"She never does," was Juliet's practiced reply.

"You always say that."

They moved more cautiously around the capsule and began helping Lynne to clear debris. At a critical moment, that they all anticipated perfectly, the capsule suddenly rolled toward them. They stepped back as it moved, unsurprised by the sud-

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den motion, and stood watching as it came to rest exactly where they knew it would.

“Perhaps I should verify its position.” Frank was the technician of the group.

“It’s always right,” said Juliet. “It’s never aimed itself wrong yet.” She seemed almost to be reciting a script, but without the emotion requisite for a live performance.

“You always say that,” said Frank.

Glancing again at the sun, Lynne spoke. “Don’t you two ever get tired of this conversation?”

“You couldn’t possibly believe,” snapped Juliet with sudden feeling, “how tired of it I am!”

“Sorry,” whispered Lynne. “I try, but I can’t help it. I just can’t change anything. God how I try!”

Frank shrugged then climbed back into the capsule. The two women stood together in a kind of resigned anticipation. Later, Frank called, “It’s time!”

Without comment, the women climbed into the capsule.

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## 2. exodus

*And on her lover's arm she leant,  
And round her waist she felt it fold,  
And far across the hills they went  
In that new world which is the old.*

*—The Day-Dream. The Departure, Stanza I  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

In the command chair, Lynne scanned her instruments. “We didn’t come any further back this time than we ever did before.”

“We never do,” commented Frank.

Juliet swore. “If we could just get a couple of extra years maybe we could break out! God Damn it! Will this never end!?”

Lynne touched the keys on her panel and murmured to herself, “They never wear. We must have done this a million times, but they never wear.”

“Don’t start,” begged Juliet. “Please! Not another paradox discussion!”

“There is no paradox,” remarked Frank.

“But they never wear,” insisted Lynne. “If we have memory, the keys should wear. They’re like brand new.”

“What’s memory?” asked Frank. “We’ve been here less than two hours. Before that we didn’t exist. Neither did they.”

“Yes we did!” shouted Juliet. “We’re not new! They’re not new! They did exist before! I can remember!”

“Please, Juliet,” said Frank, “Don’t get excited again. You always do this.”

It was more than Juliet could bear and she sobbed uncontrollably. “You always do this! You always say that! What the hell am I supposed to say?”

“Juliet, you’re getting hysterical again.”

“Of course I’m getting hysterical again! I can’t stand it! This never ends and Lynne just sits there on her goddamned stinkin’ ass and does her goddamned fuckin’ countdown as if we could miss the explosion of a sun and you just sit there calm as shit, you son of a bitch!”

With a touch of regret, Frank replied, “I can’t be a son. I don’t have a mother. None of us has.”

“Two minutes,” said Lynne.

“How do you know we don’t have mothers! What the hell’s a mother!?! I can’t re-

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member that far back! And if we don't, where in hell did we come from? Answer me that, you piece o' shit!"

Frank sat unperturbed, watching his instrumentation.

"An', come right down to it, why can't we have kids? God knows I've offered enough times, but oh no, not here! Not now! Mr. technician Frank's too good for that! Where would we do it? Jesus! Why not do it on the goddamned floor. Lynne never sees anything but her goddamned stinkin' clock anyway, so who's to notice? Aw, come on Frank! If we had a kid, at least it might break the cycle! It'd be a new variable! Something'd have to change somewhere!"

"One minute," said Lynne.

"Receptor on line," replied Frank.

"You're not listening!" shrieked Juliet.

"You know we can't," said Frank. "We have to go back or we'll roast when the sun explodes."

"It ain't enough!" sobbed Juliet. "It ain't enough. Two hours ain't enough. There's gotta be more to life than this."

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**∞ revelation**

- 1 *And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.*
- 2 *And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years . . . .*  
—*Revelation 20*

The sun exploded. Enormous energy poured into the receptor, which drank it greedily. Only during such an abundance of energy was it possible to do what was intended. So intense was the fall of energy that it would have melted the capsule, had the receptor not channeled it to a more useful purpose. Beyond a certain limit, it would have melted the capsule anyway. Lynne monitored her instruments, cautious of that limit.

Inside the capsule, Frank operated the enigmatic machinery that channeled the energy, machinery that he didn't understand, machinery that no one within living memory understood. Lynne waited as long as she dared, watching receptor temperature. At the last critical instant before it began to melt, she initiated the time push and shoved them back into time. Once, Lynne had refused to act, determined to end it all. That time, some unexpected overload device has done it for her. Since then, she had never failed to perform and, as always, she performed with superb skill. She waited for the accumulation of every bit of the energy that could be captured, to traverse every possible instant into the past. The capsule vanished.

As always, Juliet watched with numb horror. She knew that, again, they would move back 2.16 standard hours. They couldn't go any further because the receptor couldn't collect any more energy. She knew where they would land. She knew how many times they would bounce. She knew that Frank would leave the capsule first, that she would follow, to be followed in turn by Lynne. She knew that Lynne would, unprompted, begin removing debris from the sunward side of the capsule, and call to them for help. Again, as she had so many times before, Juliet determined to change something. This time, she tried to get to the door before Frank but had difficulty with the buckle on her safety belt. It had worked perfectly before but jammed briefly and would not let her loose. As always, she got to the door before Lynne, but after Frank.

"Well, I did the best I could," said Lynne. She waited while Juliet followed Frank out the door and then she followed Juliet. "Let's get busy."

A sense of resignation overcame Juliet. When she stepped from the capsule she was calm again. "Well," she said, "we made it."

"Yes," said Frank, "we made it."

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