

# Beauty in Time

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I sat in the lounge, tapping my feet against the tile floor with the ferocity of a dying star. It seemed that in spite of months of research, there was no solution to the problem at hand. They were as condemned to their fate as they were months before.

“Come on Amanda, we can’t give up yet; there’s still trillions of years left for crying out loud, surely you’ll find something. Maybe we should revisit the-”

“It’s not possible. You and I both know that. You’re right, you still have trillions of years left, so for now, humanity will press on. Living out your lives as best you can is the only thing you can do.”

As much as I hated to admit it, my partner was right; I could not give in just yet, I felt the urge to press on, and I was beginning to reach into desperation. I couldn’t let them to disappear to the gruesome indifference of time, not like this. There was nothing to be done, though...

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The assembly was enormous; vast chasms extended out in every direction, with cables the width of starships hugging their walls. Next to the towers of unfathomable length shooting up into the dark heavens above, the small array of consoles and flashing lights at the centre of the assembly looked sheepish and frightened, as if it were afraid some enormous bolt of energy would come crashing down and smite it out of existence.

Fortunately, there were no bolts of energy left to speak of. The stars had died long ago, and in this last stand of defiance, the children of humanity stood nervously, going about their daily business with the ever-growing threat of entropy casting a dark shadow over their lives. I was supposed to stop it; I built the assembly, and although it’s done a fine job of keeping them safe, it isn’t enough; it was never going to be enough. Most parts have gone dark now, with only a few sections in the centre remaining active. Energy continues to leak out in the form of radiation, and very few people remain. The rest are dead.

Finally, I am in front of the console, and reach tentatively for the service button. I hesitate, knowing that what I am about to do can never be undone. For a moment, I gaze up at the heavens, darkened to the most derelict of blacks now that the great engines of fusion have been gone for so long. The service buttons stares back at me, pleading, driving the cries of a thousand living and a hundred billion dead into my soul. My body crumples to the floor in defeat. The last person born of humanity sheds a tear for the universe.

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“Hey, you okay?”

“Mm? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. How’re things with you?”

“Um... look, Amanda, I couldn’t help but notice that you’ve been a little distracted lately... You aren’t thinking about, uh... that thing, again, right?”

“What thing?”

“...entropy.”

Everything seemed to freeze in an instant. Only the quiet whirring of fans and the murmur of a gentle breeze beyond the window remained. The very air seemed to tense up with fear, as if reality was unsure of itself.

Yes, I had been thinking about entropy again. I tried to put it past me, but I couldn’t. I saw time buzzing about me in all its beauty. I watched on as the humans slowly but surely progressed towards a better reality, leaving their childish brutality as an indecipherable relic of the past, stepping ever closer to understanding the nature of the world around them and their place within it.

Most of all, it was my partner. Every morning I watched her stumble drowsily down the hall, her hair in a mess, barely even conscious of her surroundings. Each day, I saw her start a pot of coffee before retreating to the bathroom, and when she returned she would tentatively reach out for her mug and drop onto the sofa, grasping it in both hands with the innocence of a child. One day her entire race will be gone, and there will be no one left to fill their place. It broke my heart. I couldn’t stand to see something so beautiful be delivered such a cruel fate.

“Amanda... I’m sorry... you have to move on...”

“I know. I... I know. I just don’t know how.”

“Look, I know you would have fixed it. I know you want to, but you can’t. It’s over. You can’t just turn back time, we’re here, now, in the present. There’s nothing you can do. So, like you said a year ago, you should just live out your life. We’ll be fine, there’s still trillions of years left after all!”

Something in her sentence reached out and pierced my mind. I didn’t quite understand why, but I felt a powerful emotion, like something was pulling me in, desperately trying to get my attention to tell me... something. The solution I had been looking for burst out of the shadows. *You can’t just turn back time*. With that, my face cracked with the most mischievous grin the human race will ever see.

“Why... why are you smiling? Did I say something?”

“Yes, you marvellous creature, you’ve said quite a bit!”

“Y-You don’t mean...?”

I grabbed her by the hands and spun around the lounge, all the while beaming like the face of the sun. My partner was less pleased, edging in looks of confusion, but it didn’t matter. Everything was going to be okay, because I had finally found the solution. We came to a rest next to the window, and

stared out at the horizon, past the buildings and the hills, peering into the shimmering cosmos above us. Even the stars seemed to shine a little brighter, partaking as the whole of reality rejoiced.

“I’m going to stop entropy. I’m going to save the universe.”

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I don’t remember falling asleep, but nevertheless I was woken up by the sounds of footsteps near the console. I figured it was nothing, and yet, the unmistakable resonance of something walking across the paper-thin metal plating was growing louder in a deafening rhythm. Sure enough, a pair of sneakers stopped in front of me.

I should jump in surprise, or yell in anger, or do anything at all. Nobody but me has walked upon the surface of the assembly’s core for centuries, and sneakers... the legs that occupied them... those have not existed for far longer. I react with none of this; instead, I just look up, glaring into the face hovering above me. Perhaps in the same way the service button stared at me.

“Hey.”

I didn’t respond. Surely I’m hallucinating, what I’m seeing could not possibly be real; the universe is dying, and yet here is another human, standing in front of me as if nothing were wrong. This isn’t possible, and yet, here she is.

“What’s that button do, the one glowing orange?”

I hesitate for a moment, before beginning my response. “It’s the service button. When I press it, the assembly will go into repair mode, shutting down the reclamation apparatus. It will extend the life of the people left by about ten years, but... the assembly can’t be turned back on again. There isn’t enough power left. Once I press that button, that’s it, our time will never be extended again.”

“Huh. Neat.”

“Why are you speaking one of the ancient languages?”

“Oh, you mean English? A friend of mine spoke it, I miss her sometimes. Say, where have all the humans gone, are they still around?”

“We are the children of humanity, there are several thousand of us left, but most have died.”

“But, you’re not human, you’re machines.”

Apparently seeing my confusion, a look of realization sweeps across the girl’s face. She seems dismayed at first, but by the time her lips parted once more, she was looking as cheery and ignorant as before.

“So, how long have the humans been gone then? What killed them?” Upon the word *killed*, a corner of her mouth shot up slightly, as if she was trying to hide a grimace. It’s as if the very word itself hurt to speak.

“A very long time, or at least, that’s what I thought, before I saw a human standing here atop the assembly. They died by their own hand.”

“Ha, I’m not human, I’m far too old for that. So, it was a war then, that did them in?”

“No, they no longer fought wars. They died by their own hand; they asked for an answer, for the cure, and we answered the best we could.”

“Ah. I see.”

There is a long silence. The girl claims to be very old, but looks no more than twenty five. Of course, no human has been born in millennia, only their children remain. So, perhaps she is speaking the truth after all.

A look of sadness radiates from her face now like soft beams of light; I feel it deep within me, and somewhere in the distance a cooling section of the assembly groans as if in agreement. Glancing up at her face, I notice that her eyes are dancing with fire, but like everything else in this world, they seem to be dying.

When her pupils suddenly flash with a spark of emotion, I feel everything. I feel her sorrow for the humans. I feel each shallow breath she takes, and know why she continues to breathe despite there being nothing but vacuum around us. I see a familiar person, a human, and although I do not recognize them, I cannot help but mourn. I see a thousand other faces as well, but I can’t even identify their species; some appear distorted, as if their very geometry can’t be fit into my mind in any reasonable way.

The sensation ends abruptly, as my eyes are torn away from her face. Disoriented, I look around to find the girl sitting down next to me, under the glowing light of the console and the immense decision it is burdened with.

“They were wrong, you know.”

“What?”

“About the answer. They did have purpose.”

“I know.”

“I wish they did.”

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“The doctors say I’m not going to make it.”

“I know.”

“Don’t look so sad! You can see the future, right? You know I’m going to be fine!”

“ ... ”

“Oh.”

She had been sick for a long time, and with her being just a mortal human, I knew this day would come eventually. But nothing could have prepared me for this. My mind was numb, all I could manage was to sit next to the bed and hold her hand.

“Amanda, can you tell me that story again, about the nebula people?”

“Sure. They lived out in-”

“Wait, no. Tell me the other one, your story.”

“Ah. Well, a long time ago, there was nothing but a single mind. No matter, no energy, just thoughts. It wasn’t happy. Being alone for all of eternity isn’t likely to be, of course. So, at some point, it decided to fix this dilemma.

“It split itself in two, creating an entity of logic and reason. This entity came to be known as the universe, and within its thoughts it imagined an entire cosmos full of particles which interacted in strange and unexpected ways. Some of them gave way to organisms which could replicate on their own, and to those an immense gift was bestowed.

“Each life form in the universe’s imagined reality was granted another small piece of the great mind, so that each and every one of them could truly live as their own. Only one problem remained: the crushing march of the universe’s algorithmic way of existence influenced the tiny mind fragments too much, preventing them from achieving any happiness.

“So, a final piece was created, larger than the fragments afforded to mortal organisms, but far smaller than the universe. Its purpose was to observe beauty, and through doing so it would influence the other fragments just enough so that they could hope to lead beautiful lives as well.

“Every piece of the great mind had been sent away now, to perform their dutiful purpose, and its memories and thoughts ceased to be; the mind was all but dead, existing only in the fragments of itself it had left behind. As the mortal beings lived and died, their fragments of mind were exchanged with beauty, and as they died, beauty’s influence on the universe would increase, so that it could regulate its function and preserve the life born within it.

“Mistakes were made, however. Too much of the mind was afforded to the universe, and its march became an unstoppable force of nature; not even with the fragments of every mortal organism would beauty have enough influence to stop it; it seemed the destruction of reality itself was inevitable, as the great mind no longer existed to calibrate the scales.”

By the time I finished, my partner's face was deathly pale, and although she may not be able to see through time, it was clear by the tears streaking down her face that she knew her time has come. I weep as well, not for her death, but for a lonely universe in which her beaming face is absent.

"Thanks, Amanda."

"What, I'm not done yet! I think there's been some changes since I last told you this one."

I paused for a moment, before continuing my recount. "Beauty was a clever thing, but it lacked the chaos, the creativity, needed to find a solution to the wrath of time invented by the universe. Fortunately, with the help of a certain lovely mortal, the plan was set. Although beauty could not stop the universe entirely, the combined power of every fragment would allow the rules to be bent such that reality could be preserved in spite of the imbalance left behind in the great mind's absence.

"One day in the future, this plan will be set in motion, but until then, beauty rests, continuing its function in bringing happiness to the life within the universe. Even now, there is nothing more running through her mind than a desire to help the one she cares for."

"I love you, Amanda. Hey, and don't you say 'I know-'"

"I love you too, Emily."

For a moment we sit together, hands bound tightly, and although our cheeks are stained and damp, the tears have stopped flowing. The world around us melts away into the background, and we are alone. Two lost souls in a deserted universe.

"Thank you, Amanda. It's been good."

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We sat together for a long time, glancing up at the empty horizon beyond the assembly. I cannot help but feel a certain sense of closure, reminiscing on the past with this mysterious girl, as if we were waiting for the world to end. Finally I climb to my feet with a solemn effort, and the girl stands with me. I cautiously rest my hand against the service button, watching the girl glance at me with curiosity out of the corner of my vision.

"I have to do it. It's the only way"

"I know. If you don't, they'll all run out of power in a couple of days anyways."

I spin around in shock. There is no way this girl could know how much is left in the power reserves, let alone how fast the energy is being consumed. Something isn't right, and a morbid curiosity is wrapping itself around me.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The girl sighed, and sat back down again. “Call me Amanda. It’s an old name, but quite fitting, considering the circumstances. I’m here because the universe is about to end.”

“You’re a little early, Amanda; like I said, there’s still another few years left.”

“No, there isn’t. When you press that button, conduit 42A will rupture, causing the main processor to fail. Everyone will die. Granted, the assembly will still be here for quite some time, but there won’t be any people left.”

“What if I don’t press the button?”

“You will.”

A long silence presses in. Somehow, I know Amanda is right. There is nothing I can do. For a moment I’m horrified, but a familiar sense of apathy soon washes over my mind like a crashing tide carrying grains of sand out to sea. There is nothing to be done.

“Should I press it now?”

“If you like. It won’t change anything.”

“Why are you really here?”

Amanda stood up again and gave me a weak smile. “I have been here the entire lifetime of the universe, wandering the stars, knowing that some day I will have a monumental task to perform. When you are gone, I will continue to wait. I will wait until every atom of the assembly has been reduced to nothing, and then I will wait until every last sunbeam wandering the void has been shifted out of existence as well, and then, I will do what I came here to do. I reset the clock, and everything goes back to the beginning. The universe lives on.”

“But, it won’t be the same. Quantum physics forbids it.”

“Oh, I know. You said before you knew the answer the humans didn’t; surely you know that beautiful things are only beautiful because they never last. Everything has its time, and that’s what gives your world its meaning. It couldn’t be any other way.”

A new feeling sweeps through me, seeping across my mind like a warm embrace. I feel terrified, and mournful, but not alone. It’s as if the world is about to end, and everything will be okay.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. You’ve done a lot of good for your people, the humans would be proud.”

Amanda takes one of my hands in her own, and her gentle smile seems to calm every part of my soul. I relieve a small pressure with my other hand, and the click of a service button cascades outwards into an empty cosmos.

Somewhere in an empty universe, a small violet flame materializes, floating in the void. It flickers momentarily, before expanding outwards in a brilliant flash. Faces begin to appear in the flame, the faces of people lost to time long ago, and further still the flame expands. Entire civilizations appear in its heat, whizzing by like a leaf in a hurricane. An uncountable number of souls from a vast number of worlds is burned into the retinas of the universe itself, for it is one of but two left to observe them.

The universe is a raging inferno now, every nook and cranny ablaze with the light of each and every person to ever gift the world with their presence, and now the flame shifts from a swirling violet to a white hot explosion brighter than the suns of every civilization combined. There are new images dancing in the chaos, from realities not yet conceived; a trillion unobserved spectacles wavering in the light of the new universe, born from the ashes of the past.

Time begins again.

Recommendations from the author:

- Isaac Asimov's "*The Last Question*" was a huge inspiration. See an incredible comic adaptation (not mine) posted here: <https://imgur.com/gallery/9KWrH>
- Exurb1a's "*The Prince of Milk*" was an inspiration and a very good read. You can see some of his other work on his YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/willunicycleforfood>
- A previous short story I wrote titled "*The Last One*" is referenced, in the discussion about humanity's request for "the cure". It is short, but unfortunately does not meet the same level of quality of this one. All of my work is posted here: <https://leagueh.xyz/u/katherine.peeters/>