

A Sailor on the Sea of Humanity

by [Andrew Burt](#)

Buchanan King stood atop the hill, its limbs crinkling away below him and covered with the green-tan of prairie grass in the late Summer. Small clumps of trees and brush dotted the rolling ground, down this hill and up its shorter neighbor, and off like fading waves out to the horizon. He sighed, wiping his handkerchief across the perspiration already forming on his forehead.

There was no city here.

The grass rustled with animal life, unseen, but thriving. A hawk wheeled in the blue overhead, circling for prey, suddenly diving for a kill. But no signs here or over the horizon hinted at the presence of humankind—no wisps of fires burning, no roads etched across the verdant fields, no towers trampling the dirt beneath them.

He already knew this, of course, before he'd taken the tender down from his ship moored in high Earth orbit. There had been no artificial satellites, no chatter on the spectrum, no lights on the night side. Some fires had caught his eye: But only dry forests kindled from lightning sparks. The shorelines were free of boats—he'd looked as he went past. The air, free of human dander. No pheromones wafted on the breeze.

Buchanan King was alone.

Twice—once long ago, once longer ago before that—this had been his home. On this very spot, some eight million years before, had stood a modest house, filled with the laughter of small children, cries of sibling fights, the kind and reproaching words of parents. A million years or so after that, he'd made his home again on this hill, for twenty years, living first out of the tender then in a cabin he and his new children had built out

of pine.

At least he'd called them his children, and they had called him father, the donors of their sperm and eggs lying under a million years of dust beneath their feet, alongside his real children and their mother. "Father," they would say, "show us again how to hunt the deer!"

"Show me your bows," he would say, "and your arrows. Good! Good!" And they would silently stalk their dinners though the hills.

Now they too were dust underfoot, seven million years in the past.

He'd visited many times since, and knew someday he might make this his home a third time, and watch his children sprout again, but that by doing so he would grow too old to make the journey and return another million years hence to see if they had flourished. Always he was driven to know; always he left; and on each return he asked himself, "Is this time the last? Do I stay?"

It had become almost a ritual now. His labor accomplished one more time today, he took out a portable chair, setting it to face the way he'd faced in his office back when he had walked among the living, the ten billion who had likewise called Earth home. There had been a window then, and he cupped his hands at his face to recall the view as he looked out over what had then been a sea of humankind.

Like each visit in the past, he again let his nose run and eyes weep as he recalled his hubris that had killed them. No, he hadn't killed anyone directly—he'd killed humanity. Nobody had suffered pain from his act, at least not of the physical kind; nor had anyone died before their time, unless it were from grief. He inspected his hands; they were clean of the blood of the billions of the living. They were stained with far worse: The blood of the tens and hundreds of billions who could never be born.

He would never know if they had tracked the virus back to him; he'd been gone by then. Stealing the ship had been out of fear. Had he committed the ultimate act of genocide? The only way to know would be to come back later to see. The deep-space mining and manufacturing barge was ideal. Fully automated, rarely manned, thus easily stolen, with the

necessary sub-light drive he would need; the manufacturing facilities ensured he would neither starve nor face a shortage of mechs for labor. Two long years he waited: A year to reach the asteroids, to take on mass; half a year accelerating toward the darkest point in space at a comfortable one gee, nestled safely inside a ship careening at a leisurely pace sixteen times that, almost to the speed of light; then braking back—relativity's time dilation leaving him two years older in a world a century in the future.

A world almost empty of humanity, save for the centenarians. They patiently awaited the end of time.

Others had gone out and come back too, they said, noting his youthful appearance of twenty-eight, or was he from one of the colonies? Hadn't those failed, they asked, cut off from Earth and all? Not to worry; the nannymechs would make him comfortable. But none had guessed it had been Buchanan King's mistake that caused their pain. He couldn't bring himself to visit his own children, if they were even alive, or their graves if not. It wouldn't help to tell them that he'd done this for them and their children: A virus to block Down's syndrome's extra group G chromosome, 100% infectious, the work of a student pursuing a graduate degree and tinkering with life. Buchanan locked away the shame, the absolute stupidity he felt at presuming to release a virus untested. He'd been so positive it would work—and that he would step forward to acclaims of brilliance—and if not, that it would be harmless, and he, anonymous. The capriciousness of youth.

Within a year it was inescapable: The media labeled it INVIR, the "Infertility Virus." Many were angry, but few panicked. A cure would surely be found.

And almost was, by eighty years after. Yet the remaining virologists were dying off, and the anti-virus, almost completed, had languished and been forgotten. The nannymechs made sure everyone was comfortable.

They had been so close, Buchanan saw. He was able to complete their anti-virus within months. But he couldn't bear to look into their wrinkled eyes to explain it would take years for the anti-virus to mutate INVIR into a harmless form. The thought that his own children might still be alive sealed his decision.

He left behind a supply of the anti-virus with a note, in exchange for stealing batches of frozen sperm, eggs, and blueprints for the incubators and nannymechs civilization had long ago ceased trying, resigned to their fate. He encouraged them in the note to try again, that maybe he was wrong in his estimate, that eggs might fertilize again sooner. If they could simply keep trying, until...

He stole away to his ship in the night.

Three years later, this time pinching the barrier of light speed far closer, to within a trillionth of a percent, a year out to nowhere and back—a million years had passed on Earth.

The hill on which his house stood a thousand millennia ago was more barren of human signs than it had been twice as long before, when primitive hominids had hunted there. Pristine, INVIR-free. In his atonement he had brought life. Sperm and eggs awoke from their frozen sleep, and he seeded the lands with a thousand incubator grown babes and a nanny-mech per tribe of thirty. He hoped the recordings he'd left with each would steer them to adulthood, and that at least some would survive.

Twenty years he stayed with one tribe, "ensuring the nannies could handle the tasks," he told himself. But more, so he could watch his mistake be reversed, to see children grow. He acted only in accord with what the nannies taught, so as not to bias their development. Hunting, fishing, planting; basic survival skills. He told them nothing of Earth's past, of their great technologies, nor of his own failings. Those they would have to recreate anew.

For years he found peace in the pastoral life. His children grew to adulthood. Yet his heart grew restless, and he had to know if he had succeeded, just as he had had to know of his failure before.

Without goodbyes he slipped away, some two decades later, and swooped past the sun, kidnaping an asteroidal mass for fuel and manufacturing, then dived out and back, a year apiece. The world was theirs now, not his. But Earth never roamed far despite his speed, relativity playing on him the cruel trick of shortening length behind him, so that the red-shifted image of the fragile blue planet never appeared in the telescope more than a light-month behind. He could have

veered away to end the illusion, but forced himself to stay the course and maintain a vigil on his home.

A million years more in the future, only four years past his fiftieth birthday, Buchanan King had returned.

And wept to find another empty world.

Again he seeded the humanless plains, left some thousand infants in the care of the ship's newly crafted nannies, and sped out to pass a million years.

Near the end of the outbound leg, when more than a year was passing on Earth for each hour his clock ticked off, he was sure the telescope had detected a burst of Doppler-shifted noise from directly behind. It lasted until he could no longer compensate for the shift, and was silent when he could compensate again as he slowed; it was perhaps as likely to come from some natural phenomenon as from civilization, but it gave him both hope and despair. Hope that humanity had taken hold. Despair that the signal had grown silent. He anxiously waited out the year—to find the world as he'd found it each time before. Alive with life; devoid of humankind.

Perhaps some natural disaster overtook them, he reasoned. And seeded the globe a third time.

Then a fourth. A fifth. A sixth.

Buchanan King had stood in this same spot, eight million years before, and tried to help humanity, and each time at million year ticks thereafter. He studied his hands, creased like the hills with his sixty-nine years, and felt his age. He was tired. It would be so easy to retire, he thought, leaning heavily on the incubators holding the next brood of humanity. His own mortality loomed before him as he contemplated how it should have been, eight lifetimes ago. The only real peace he felt his entire life, he mused, was the twenty years with the first repopulation. He had almost reached peace with himself for what he had done as he pranced about as a primitive, nurturing humanity back from the brink.

And twenty years from now he most likely would be dust, a sure limit on the number of trips he could yet make. If he stayed, he wouldn't have to know whether he had succeeded or failed. Let humanity fend for itself, a voice cried out within him. You've done enough.

The incubators chimed, one after another. A

nanny-mech hummed by, attending each one, popping the seal and plucking out one crying child after another.

Maybe one nanny to thirty children wasn't enough, he thought with horror. Maybe all the prior generations had been doomed because of his lack of foresight.

No. He knew it wasn't that easy. The nannies were designed for exactly this role, and the manufacturing ship replicated them flawlessly. The blame wasn't so simple to affix. The only fault, he knew, lay in human nature. The same nature that drove him to create and release the virus led his children to their end, each time. Perhaps if he tried harder. If he stayed this time. Taught them better.

The temptation to stay was a crushing in his chest.

He eased himself down upon the damp ground, grasping handfuls of moist earth. It felt good to touch, teeming with life. He struggled with his conscience, until he realized that the hole was no longer there. The pain of causing the end of his civilization, the pain he would only allow to surface at three year intervals here on Earth, the pain that once was a bonfire withering his every hope—that pain had faded, and was only a dull ache he could now bear. He had paid his debt, seven times over. If man's flower was not meant to blossom, who was he to raise his fist in defiance?

And he knew: He was free from his burden. Mankind was no longer his concern, and had never been. He was at peace with his error. Released from his bond.

Yet as he watched a nanny hover over a wriggling baby, he stood up, brushing the soil from his hands. With a final survey of the undulating, city-less hills, Buchanan King stepped back into the tender, sealed the door, and arced into the sky.

Would they be here in a million years? He had to know.

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A Note from the Author

Hi – I hope you enjoyed “A Sailor on the Sea of Humanity.” I’ve released this for reading on a “pay what you feel it was worth” model. Think of it like tipping in a restaurant. If you loved your service you might tip 20-25%, right? Maybe 15-20% for average service and 10-15% for poor service. But you wouldn’t stiff the server, would you? Authors need to pay the bills too, and our income from writing is how that happens. (If we’re going to write more stories and books for people to read, anyway!)

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