

Futures

Cosmic countdown

Time is running out. By Jason P. Burnham

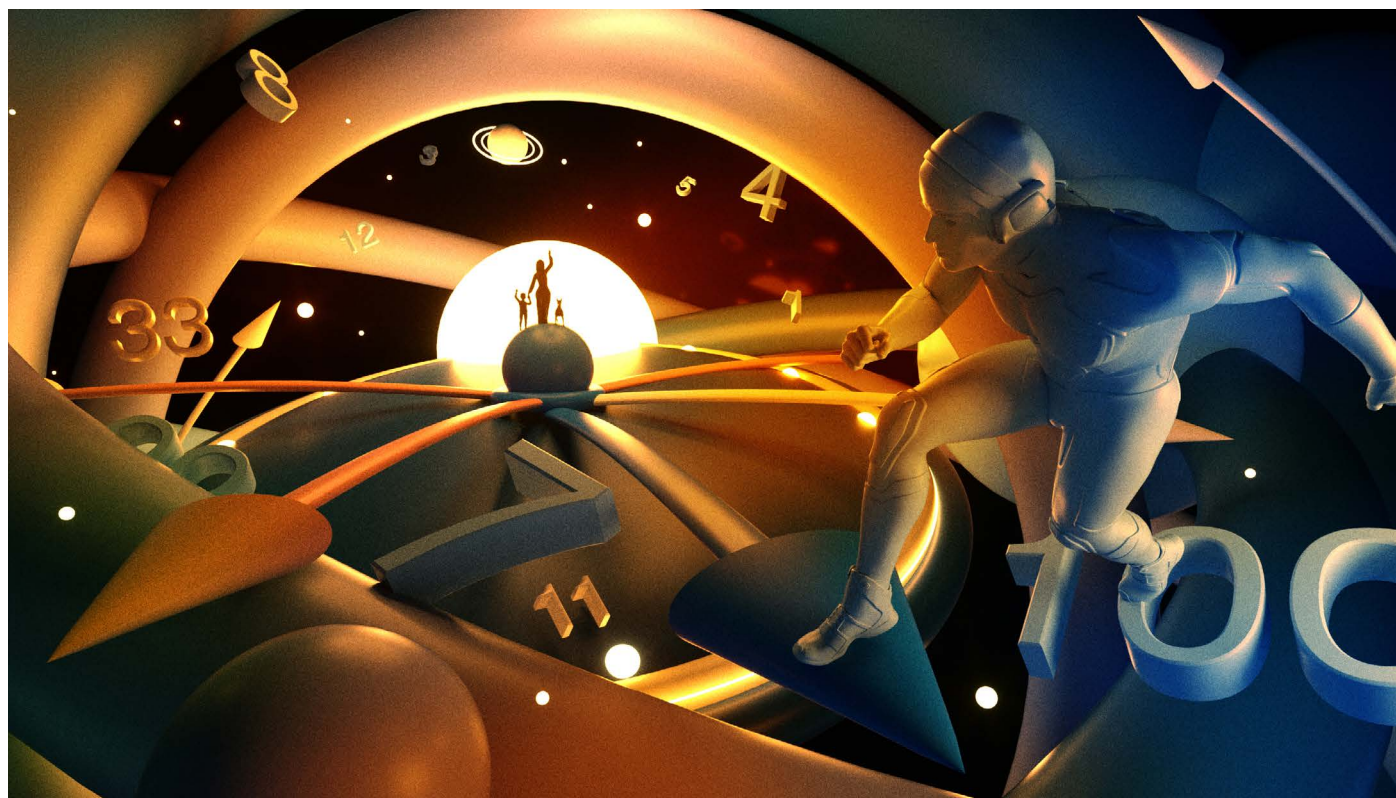


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

One hundred seconds. That's all you have. It takes only one to abort the colony ship's self-destruct sequence. You could use the other ninety-nine to hug your wife, your kids, your dog, one last time. You could try to hug your cat, but Whiskers has always hated hugs, so better to squeeze the kids tighter for an extra second.

The main problem is that you don't know if this is your timeline.

Sure, it'd be great to save your family in an alternative timeline, but they're not the ones you've spent the past 40 years with.

Changing timelines takes three seconds. The other thing you could do with those ninety-nine extra seconds would be to go to twenty-four other timelines, abort self-destruct sequences in each, and hope that one of them was *your* timeline.

And what if *you* from other timelines did the same? What's the maths on that? Would every timeline be saved? You don't think so, because

the timelines are infinite. On the other hand, if the timelines are infinite, then the *yous* are infinite. But if all of you only have a hundred seconds ...

You don't have time to do the maths. You have only ninety-nine seconds.

You hit abort; you've already lost one second, and are thereby now maxed out at twenty-four timelines to be saved.

The timeline slipstream shifts, half a second too slowly. In your haste and frustration at things going awry, you forget to look at your family's faces before the switch. You lose another half second swearing to yourself.

In the next timeline, the abort sequence is slower. You lose three whole seconds. You're down to twenty-three potential timeline savings.

This delay again makes you forget to look closely at your family, although you do steal the tiniest glimpse. Did your wife always have a freckle above her right eyebrow?

Trying to picture your wife's freckle pattern

loses you another second. How many is that now? You look at your timepiece and another two tick away. You can't keep track of the seconds. You should have done this as a countdown, not starting from a random time. Although you didn't really have a choice when the slipstream device malfunctioned. You wish you understood timeline changes better.

Wishing for understanding loses you at least another second or two. The abort sequence button is in the same spot as a previous timeline and it thankfully only takes a second. You slipstream to another timeline. That was a good run.

The next three timelines go smoothly – mastery, finally. You're proud of yourself.

You still haven't looked at your family, except for noticing an errant spousal freckle. Or was it a mole?

The next timeline hits you like a space brick. You can't remember if there really are bricks in space. Slipstreaming with the malfunction

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seems to be damaging your memories, or at least altering them.

In this timeline, you're not on a ship at all. What is this place?

You look at your timepiece, only to find it's missing. Your heartbeat races, much quicker than a hundred beats per minute; you won't be able to use it to count.

You look around, who knows how many seconds elapsing. You've never been very efficient and you're falling back into your old ways. You'll never save your family if you don't stay on top of things. You have only a hundred seconds; now is not the time to let things fall apart.

Above is dark, a few dots twinkling, obscured by flashing greens, blues and purples. You gasp. You can't believe it. You're back on Earth. Nobody's been on Earth in ...

The Northern Lights look just like they did when you were a kid, the last time you saw them before you had to leave.

You look at your hands again; they're as old as

you remember. You haven't gone back in time.

You shiver – it's cold out. You're wearing a jacket and a hoodie, long snow pants. On the ground around you is a waterproof blanket. Scattered across it are your kids, your wife, your dog and some snacks. Too cold for Whiskers.

You blink. How long does it take to blink? One-tenth of a second. You've lost no time for that. How long does it take for tears to form? For them to freeze on your cheeks?

You shake your head. What about the other timelines?

Dread grabs at your stomach, but something inside you makes it let go. You pull your wife close, the kids closer. The dog jumps on top of you, wags its tail.

"Thanks honey, this is really great," says your wife.

You smile; it feels warm despite the cold.

You count to yourself.

One one thousand

Two one thousand

Has somebody fixed the slipstream malfunctions? Are all the yous across all the timelines no longer doomed? Who fixed it? How? It certainly wasn't you; you've scarcely made an indent. You're no massive timeline saviour. You saved how many? Four, five? Was doing your best somehow finally good enough?

Your smile falters, but only for a moment. It's too warm and pleasant, despite the cold. Family, together, finally. At home, on the Earth you had no business leaving in the first place.

You keep the count going to yourself, numbering the colour changes flashing above.

Ninety-eight.

Ninety-nine.

You wonder what comes after ...

One hundred.

Jason P. Burnham is an infectious-diseases physician and researcher. He loves many things, among them sci-fi, his wife and sons, metal music, Rancho Gordo beans and equality (not necessarily in that order).

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Jason P. Burnham reveals the inspiration behind *Cosmic countdown*.

This piece is deeply rooted in the pressures of parenthood and the constant struggle for balance between work, life, and perfection in both, of trying to never miss a moment, which results in precisely accomplishing the opposite. It's a piece wherein the protagonist finally comes to terms with imperfection and slows down to just enjoy the life that's happening around them. And as to what happens after that? Well, that's up to the reader's imagination.

