

# Another Look at My Past

A novel by

Wayne McKinstry

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## Chapter 1

“All rise”.

Frank Mills was caught off guard. He normally did not go to gatherings where you had to stand up to show respect for someone. Quickly and he hoped unobtrusively he uncrossed his legs and got to his feet.

They all stood there. And waited.

After a moment professor Edgar Lively strolled into the auditorium and unhurriedly made his way to the podium. When you are the Grand Old Man of the University of Altgeld Historical Research, people can just stand up until you are ready to let them sit down.

For a long moment Professor Lively just looked at the group assembled. Then he began to speak. “I am looking at a very distinguished group of historians, as well as those from technical and security. Please, be seated. “ Having said that, he was ready to let them sit down.

“Each of you is here because he or she is the very cream of the cream. I know it is a cliché, but it an honor just to be here.”

Frank Mills felt a rush of pride. At twenty-two, praise from an older man still affected him. It made him feel proud in spite of the fact that he would not be here if he were not the great grandson of Captain McKinstry. **The** Captain McKinstry, as if there was any other. Captain McKinstry had led Altgeld back into space, and had also led the war against the pirate fleet when they had appeared at the edge of the Altgeld solar system. You could easily fill a book with just that story.

“Yo!” Shouted Timmy. “Do they have whiskey where we’re going?”

Everybody turned to look at Timmy Thatchenson. It was quite easy to pick Timmy Thatcher out of the crowd. Where everyone else was wearing muted browns and tans, Timmy was wearing a pink striped shirt and floral print pants. Where all the other men had short hair, Timmy’s hair hung in long greasy curls. Where everyone else seemed reasonably centered, Timmy had a wild crazy look in his eyes.

“Timmy, would you just shut **up!**!” Shouted Dick Burlington. “Let the grownups talk.”

“That’s what she said. Wo hoo!” Was Timmy’s reply. Timmy was immune to most forms of social pressure.

Frank Mills turned to Nelson Jones. He had known Nelson for as long as he could remember, and now they were side by side in this venture. “How did that maniac get in this elite group?”

Nelson leaned close to Frank. “**Because** the man has a powerful mind and can analyze facts and spot relevant cross associations while the rest of us are trying to sharpen our pencil. They say he has an IQ of”

“Five thousand two hundred and eighty.” finished Frank for his old friend. Yes, I’ve heard all that stuff too.”

Nelson started to reply that five thousand two hundred and eighty was the number of feet in a mile, but then Professor Lively was saying;

“Yes, they certainly do have whiskey where you are going. Whiskey raw, uncured, with some other things in it more likely than not. A lot of the time it has quite a bit of ether. Drink some of that and they could take out your appendix and you wouldn’t mind at all.”

That got a laugh from everyone. Including, Frank noticed, Timmy Thatchenson. Old professor Lively had handled the situation quite well. Now that he had control again, he plunged right back into his speech.

“Yes, it is an honor to be chosen for time travel, but you had better not just rest on your laurels. This will not be a vacation. A lot of things about the Heroic Period we really have no idea. In particular we are not sure what peoples’ attitudes were about quite a number of things. I very seriously recommend that you always be

slow to speak and give yourself time to size up the situation.”

Horace Wilson nodded his head in silent approval. Yes, things would go much better if everyone would just be quiet. Never mind Timmy Thatchenson; he was hopeless. But you would think Frank and Horace could manage not to sit there and whisper like a couple of chipmunks on too much coffee.

“You each of you need to understand that this journey to the past is not a guided tour. We are hoping to increase our knowledge of a time period for which there are very few surviving records. We are depending on you in this regard.

“Most of you are looking for a topic for your doctoral dissertation. What you find in the past will give you unprecedented original material that will shape the course of historical research for years to come. This will be a huge start for your career.”

Frank smiled to himself. Yes, he had to be thinking of his career path. Where you are a student there are all sorts of little trips and travel-while-you-study opportunities. Soon he would have to be a full-fledged card-carrying adult, and settle down and be responsible and everything. This foray into Altgeld's past would be a last adventure, as well give his career as a Historian a huge jump-start. Old Aunt Shirley had been saying that Frank was now in the twenty-first grade, and that if he had any more degrees he would have a fever. Well, this would make him a famous Historian, and tenure at the University of Altgeld would be only a formality.

## Chapter 2

“Navigator, what can you tell me?” Captain Samuels turned a very direct gaze towards Wayne Hubert, the ship’s Navigator. Captain Samuels had a very direct gaze.

“I am running a third degree retrorelational analysis of the transspatiional references. It won’t be done for a while.”

The navigator wished Captain Samuels would just go away and leave him alone.

“Is that going to tell us where we are?”

The Navigator did not reply nor did he attempt eye contact. Most of the crew would have been terrified to disrespect the Captain like that, but navigator Wayne Hubert did not see that it would make all that much difference.

Jack Hutchings watched this exchange without offering any contribution of his own. As First Mate of The Fair Winds he was on paper immediately under Captain Samuels. In actuality Captain Samuels was as far above him as God was above a rancid earthworm.

Jack saw that the Captain had finished his one-way conversation with the navigator. Now he had a chance to encourage the beleaguered Navigator.

“Wayne, I just want you to know that when life support on The Fair Winds starts to give out, I am going to kill you myself. Maybe with you dead, I can live a little longer. But of course if you actually find a habitable planet or get us back on our intended course, then I will let you live.”

“You people act like I got The Fair Winds lost on purpose.” Whined the navigator. “You should be giving me emotional support in a time like this.”

“Why are you having a meeting without notifying me? I demand free, unfettered access to any and all ship’s meetings.” Mike Paulson, passenger and de facto pain in the neck, had not mastered the art of small talk.

“Mike, you have no more rights than anyone else on this happy ship.” The First Mate took the trouble to answer mainly because it would keep Mike from talking for just a minute.

“The free press has an inalienable right to any and all information on this ship. Don’t make me show my press pass!! And I just might mention you in my blog.”

A slow smile came over First Mate Hutching’s face. “The complete and unvarnished truth is, The Fair Winds is a cultural survey ship on its way to do a preliminary cultural survey on the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. The passengers are mainly academic types in anthropology and neo-classical sociology. You were included to record the natives’ reactions to this survey.

“Or rather, we **were** on our way to the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. Until our distinguished” Hutchings rolled the word “distinguished” off his tongue like a choice morsel “navigator miscalculated a hyperspace jump and landed us in the middle of nowhere. He at that point could have simply performed the exact obverse of the jump just completed and we would have been back where we were. But no, he decided to just go on from the middle of nowhere. When that did not come out right, he tried another jump without checking his calculations. Now we are so lost that we aren't even sure how lost we are. We are out of contact with the rest of the known universe, *including* your precious blog.”

“Mommy, why are people yelling at each other? You told me that wasn't nice.” Three year old Eldon Smythe was a good boy, and he firmly believed other people other people should have to be good too. He and his mother had walked by the open door to the bridge of The Fair Winds when this discussion was doing

on.

“Honey don't worry about the silly grownups. You just be a good boy.” Samantha Smythe was not about to discuss the dire plight of The Fair Winds with her little son. She and her husband Woodford had signed on to this venture to enhance their credentials in xeno-crossbiometric analysis, not to die in deep space. After 15 months there was talk of just opening all the hatches and Getting It Over With. Samantha privately wondered if the crew had plans to jettison the passengers and use all the life support for themselves.

“Honey, I'm home.” Woodford Smythe stepped into their small but austere living quarters.

“Daddy, you stink.” Little Eldon had been taught to tell the truth, so he always said exactly what he thought.

“Daddy had to take care of Molly and Jack. You don't want our horses to go hungry, do you?” Woodford absolutely detested caring for the two Belgian horses in the hold of The Fair Winds. The only reason they were included was that there had been some money left in the budget. Belgian horses are gigantic creatures, originally bred to carry knights into battle. In more recent times they were used to pull heavy loads in situations where it is not feasible to use machinery.

“Daddy, can I ride them?” Eldon was already learning the art of turning a conversation to his advantage.

Woodford suppressed a shudder. This morning Molly had tried to pin him against the fence in her pen. She could have squished him like a bug. You have to be smarter than the horse, because you for sure aren't bigger or quicker.

The Smythe family started to get ready for dinner. The food on the Fair Winds was pretty good, since everyone agreed that the oxygen would give out first. Talk turned to trivial things. Little Eldon was pretty cute, and that kept the conversation going.

## Chapter 3

The Distinguished Professor Lively continued to speak. And speak and speak. Frank Mills listened attentively. Sitting straight in the chair, eyes directed toward the speaker, he **dared** anybody to prove he was not listening. In actuality, all this talk about the past was turning his thoughts to his own past, when he first started learning the history of his native planet Altgeld. Back to that day at school..

“Children, when did The Fair Winds land on Altgeld?” Miss Vaught looked at the class, wondering which of the children would know the answer.

“The first day.” Little Johnny raised his hand and immediately blurted out the answer.

Miss Vaught was pleased. “Yes, Johnny, that is right. The day The Fair Winds landed on Altgeld is called day one of year one.”

Johnny Johnson said nothing. He had no idea that was really the answer, he was just trying to get a laugh from everyone. Getting something right was a new experience for him. Too much of this could ruin his reputation.

Miss Vaught turned her attention back to the class. Some of these kids you had to watch every second. “And how many people were there on The Fair Winds?”

Nelson Jones raised his hand. He waited until Miss Vaught nodded at him even though he was really eager to tell the answer. “Four hundred and ninety-two.”

Miss Vaught went on the offensive. Turning to Frank she asked “Frank, how many of these are you descended from?” When Miss Vaught turned her baleful eye on you, you had better sit up straight and pay attention and have the right answer.

But Frank did know the answer. Sitting up as straight as he could he proudly announced “All of them.” Yes, it was documented, Frank Mills was descended from all four hundred and ninety-two persons who walked off The Fair Winds on that day. As were his mother and father and brother and sister. Actually 98.4 percent of the people on Altgeld were descended from all the Four Hundred And Ninety-Two. Visitors from off-world often commented that a lot of people kind of looked alike.

Miss Vaught resumed her lecture voice. It was getting up into the afternoon, and you had to assert yourself to keep these kids under control. “The Fair Winds set out in search of academic freedom. They endured many perils before coming to the planet where we now live. After they arrived they immediately set about making the planet fit for them and their children to live on...”

Everybody laughed at something Professor Lively said. Frank laughed too, because it was expected. He did not actually hear the joke, but it did not much matter. You listen politely and laugh when you are supposed to. Soon they would be hearing some real information, probably in the next meeting.

## Chapter 4

“I tell you I am going to strangle those horses myself. Do you have any idea how much they *breathe*?”

Woodford Smythe regarded Mike Paulson silently. Oxygen was becoming an emotional topic. Normally you could just ignore Mike's self-serving hysterics. This was not normally. Woodford had observed that Mike was about a week and a half ahead of the rest of the ship's company in terms of getting all worked up about something. And you could not really accuse Mike of stirring up dissent because all of them really were on a ship lost in deep space with life support failing.

“Go ahead and strangle the horses. They are huge Belgian horses and both your limp pale hands would not fit around one of their necks. Besides that they are both mean as hell, especially Molly. They will kill you dead and then there will be a little more life support for me.”

How best to bug Mike? Woodford knew just what to do. “We had a meeting a while back about the horses. First of all, no one was sure how we could kill them with the equipment on board. Computers don't kill very many things that size. But the biggest issue was what to do with the bodies. Two dead things that size would contaminate the air in this ship horribly, so the bodies would have to be disposed of immediately. Vent them out into space, obviously. The only airlock big enough to put them in is on the main hatch, which is on the starboard side. And by venting them out that hatch, we would lose all the oxygen in the airlock, since the pump for that airlock has quit working. We did the arithmetic, and we save a lot of oxygen by just leaving them down there breathing in and out.”

Mike was suddenly alert. “When was this meeting? I was not notified. I demand a complete and through explanation.”

Woodford grinned his biggest grin. “Mike that was when you were in the brig. I think it was for ... just being yourself.”

Mike decided to switch from furious to friendly. “Woody, buddy, I heard that the crew has a plan to open every hatch in The Fair Winds to space and Be Done With It. I even heard there is a special override programmed into the computer that only the Captain knows anything about. He enters this code and whomp, we're all dead.

Woodson looked at Mike for another long second. He hated being called “Woody” and he sure was not Mike Paulson's buddy. But then he did speak.

“What I wonder is if the crew has some kind of plan to get rid of us passengers and then use the life support for themselves. In times like this a lot of people look out for number one and nobody else.”

Mike's eyes bugged out a little as he absorbed this entirely plausible scenario. “When that happens we have to all stand together, shoulder to shoulder, nose to the grindstone, power to the people.”

Mike turned to go. “I need to start organizing the passengers. It isn't right for one group to take all the oxygen for themselves. There are more passengers than crew, I know that. If we strike first, we can get rid of the crew and run the ship ourselves. You spread the word too, Woody buddy.”

Eldon Smythe quietly played with his toys. It seemed like wherever he went, it was kind of stinky. To get his mind off that, he had asked his Mommy to tell him about the twin worlds of Calder and Grant. He always enjoyed hearing about their destination. But Mommy had taken him to his room and told him to play with his toys. So here he sat playing with his toys.

“Woah!!” Senior Navigator Wayne Hubert immediately regretted his outburst. He had already been told he would be the first person to die on The Fair Winds. But since he was also the only Navigator, Wayne hoped that he would not be the very first to die.

Ok, take the time to clean your glasses and look at it again. Yes, it was a yellow star, the type that *could* have a livable planet.

Captain Samuels strode over to the Navigator's station. “Anything to report, Navigator.” Captain Samuels was afraid to be hopeful so he did not use a question mark.

“Yellow sun. Two points off the port beam. A hundred light years, very approximately.” That was Navigator talk for “Left of the ship, a long ways away.”

“Do you see any planets?” This time Captain Samuels could not keep the question out of his voice. Captain Samuels had four days to live, just like everyone else. He had once watched this documentary about the last week of a man on death row. The poor wretch had spent the whole week staring at the clock.

“Too far away to tell, sir. For that we need to be no more than 10 light years away.”

“Helm, come about and make your course two points off the port beam.” The captain saw that the helmsman was already changing course without waiting for orders. He decided not to make an issue of it.

## Chapter 5

“Frank!! Over here!”

Frank stopped and looked across the street. There waving at him was his cousin Louise McCune. He waved back feebly and started across the street. He was careful to look both ways so that his time travel adventure would not be short circuited by an accident in the present. Unfortunately there was no traffic in either direction, so he soon joined Louise on her side of the street.

“Frank! What have you been doing? I haven't seen you in ages.”

Frank groped for a good way to answer. He did not think it would be a good idea to tell Louise about time travel.

“I've been busy.”

“I was talking to your mother just the other day. She said you had joined some kind of thing.”

No telling what kind of story Louise had gotten from his mother. “This is an exclusive, by invitation only, group. There were only a few places available.”

Frank wondered why he did not want to tell Louise about time travel. Maybe she would not believe him and think he was crazy like old Uncle Wayne. Frank wondered how much he really believed it. Better not ponder **that** too long. And Louise was talking again.

“Your Mom said it was some kind of research, or maybe you were going to be looking for something.”

It did not help that he had lied to his mother and now he was not real sure what he had said. “We are going to be prospecting for Californium in the third asteroid belt. They wanted to keep it kind of quiet so the competition would not get there first.”

As far as Frank knew Californium was a radioactive element with few practical uses. At least the third asteroid belt was at the very edge of the Altgeld solar system, so that would explain a long absence.

“I hope it's not dangerous.” Bless her heart, she was concerned for him. “And it seems so different from what you had been doing with historical research in the Heroic Period.”

“Oh, I'm not just a Historian. I have many far reaching interests.”

Frank looked around for a way to divert the conversation. He was rewarded with seeing Betsy Neuman coming down the sidewalk.

“Look Louise! There is Betsy Neuman, my academic adviser.”

Betsy spotted the pair. “Frank! I did not expect to see you downtown. And who is this pretty girl you're talking to?”

“This isn't a girl, it's my cousin.”

Hopefully Louise knew what he meant. “Betsy helped me get into advanced historical regression analysis when everybody else was telling me to just take philosophy instead. She really helped me out of that tight spot.”

The two women started chatting about purple widgets or clothes or some kind of girl thing. After a couple of minutes Frank excused himself and made his way to the bank. He needed to fill out an account stasis form, which was standard practice for anyone going off-world. He was not exactly going off-world, but that was as much of the truth as he was prepared to tell.

## Chapter 6

“Captain Samuels, we are at 10 light years from the star. You said to wake you the minute we got to that point. Sir.”

“I’ll be right there, Navigator.”

Navigator Hubert switched off the intercom. Captain Samuels was always crisp and businesslike no matter what time of ship's day or night it was.

First Mate Hutchings casually strolled over to the Navigator's station. “That man will come in here at practically a run, bright eyed and bushy tailed. Never mind that it's the middle of ship's night. I don't think he ever sleeps.”

The disgraced Navigator was not inclined to reply. He was saved from having to say anything when in hustled Captain Samuels, all business.

“Navigator, commence mid-range scanning. Helm, come about and turn our beam to the yellow star. Ahead, dead slow.”

A starship is a little like a submarine in that to examine its surroundings most effectively, it needs to slow down or stop. A submarine makes noise as it travels through the water, and any extra noise hinders the sonar operator. In the same way, a starship creases the structure of the space-time continuum as it folds space in its dimensional translator. You can imagine how that messes up the scanners!

The Navigator obediently switched on the mid-range scanners. Navigator, Captain and First Mate watched as the mid-range scanners plotted out their findings.

“Yellow star, stable.”

Captain Samuels was in no mood for small talk. “We knew that from the long range scanners. What else do you see?”

That was a very rhetorical question since all three men were standing there looking at the mid-range scanner display. Nonetheless, the Navigator decided to reply.

“Extensive asteroid belt at the edge of the system.”

“Asteroid belt. I feel better already. We don't need no stinkn' class M planets when we have an asteroid belt.” The First Mate was a little on edge.

“Multiple gas giants, a few comets.” The Navigator thought it best to summarize a bit.

“Request more power for the mid-range scanners.”

Captain Samuels did not deign to reply, but he reached past the Navigator and turned the Power knob all the way to the right.

“Scan is at one AU from the star”. An AU is the distance of the Earth from the sun. An Earth none of them would ever see again. A sun whose warmth they would never again feel on their faces. Yes, the Navigator was being careful not to say everything that came to mind.

“Showing ...” The Navigator suddenly fell silent. There on the display were cold hard facts:

Planet Class : M

Distance from star: .998472 AU

Atmosphere: Oxygen/Nitrogen/Carbon Dioxide/Xenon/Crypton.

Nobody wanted to say anything, for fear they would wake up and they would be that much closer to dead. Finally Captain Samuels went into action.

“Helm, plot a course for that planet.” By now everyone knew that a Class M planet had been sighted. Class M as in oxygen atmosphere and maybe we won't suffocate after all. The helmsman turned The Fair Winds in the intended direction without asking for any kind of clarification.

“Full speed ahead.”

“Approaching orbital range, Captain.” The Navigator read dutifully from the display they were all watching.

“Helm, hold your course.” ordered Captain Samuels with what he hoped was his usual clipped efficiency. He had checked the life support countdown - the real one - just before leaving his cabin a few minutes ago. He had an almost overpowering urge to look at it again.

The First Mate spoke up. “There is some kind of structure on the surface. It almost looks like a castle.”

No one took the trouble to answer. In a moment the First Mate opened his mouth again. “In universities in Illinois there are castle-like buildings, all named after a former governor named Altgeld. I went to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and there was an Altgeld building there.”

Finally the Captain and Navigator both turned to look at the First Mate. The man had such a compelling idiocy that they were both drawn from their vital work just to look at him.

“Maybe we could name this planet Altgeld, after the castle.” So it was that the dim-witted First Mate named the planet that was to be their home.

“Navigator, do you see any big open areas?”

“Uh, yes, Captain, right there.” The Navigator painted the area with the targeting laser.

“Put it down, right in the middle of the big open area.”

The university-educated First Mate spoke up. “Captain, it is standard protocol to orbit the planet and do a complete forty-nine point analysis. Then we have to follow with a Jefferson-Dugenstrader sweep for intelligent life so we do not violate the Prime Directive.”

**“I said put this ship down! If you don't, I'll kill you before I kill the Navigator! Then I'll just land it myself.”** Captain Samuels had reached the end of his patience.

So down came the Fair Winds. It takes a while to bring down a starship onto a planet with an atmosphere. Captain Samuels understood this, and he did not try to hurry this part at all. At last The Fair Winds was hovering about a hundred yards above what appeared to be a grassy meadow.

“Down there, right in the middle. Slow and steady.”

The Fair Winds touched the soil of Altgeld. After a few seconds the gravitational repulsors cut off and the full weight of the ship rested on the planet.

Nothing in particular happened. Nothing can be a very good thing to happen.

Captain Samuels walked to his command chair. Standing by the left arm, he pressed a button and said “Commence protocol Zebulon Omega. Cascade. Stat.”

Whoom! The main hatch flung itself open. Whoom! The secondary hatch, located near the stern, also opened with explosive force.

Next to open was the auxiliary secondary hatch, which was at the very nose of The Fair Winds. Then internal doorways started to open of their own accord. It was a huge article of faith in a starship that interior doorways were to be kept sealed when not actually in use. But now they were opening all by themselves. Last to open were the reinforced doors opening onto the bridge. In a moment the bridge crew felt a breeze. They were breathing the air of Altgeld for the first time.

Captain Samuels strode from the bridge of The Fair Winds. What is most significant is that he did **not** say, "You have the conn, Mister Hutchings". There was no longer a conn for anyone to have. The Fair Winds would never lift from the planet Altgeld.

Captain Samuels went directly to the main hatch. He looked out the open hatch at the green, slightly rolling landscape. He did not step onto the green meadow below because he had forgotten to program extending the ramp. A suicide program of opening the ship to the vacuum of space does not need to extend the ramp. As it happened, the same program was useful for opening the ship to the clean air of Altgeld.

The Captain sensed a presence behind him. He turned, and there was Mike Paulson. Mike began without preamble. "Tell me Captain, was that the same program you were going to use to give everyone a quick death?"

Captain Samuels did not answer directly. He took off his personal chronometer and found the secret display. The secret display that showed how much life support was really left. He showed it to Mike and said "I decided we needed to start breathing the local air right away."

Mike looked at the readout:

Life support left: 2 hours 56 minutes.

## Chapter 7

“Hello. My name is Betsy Neuman and I want to welcome all of you to the temporal-displacement intermediate focal point.”

Nelson nudged his old friend Frank. “What did she just say?”

“Welcome to the time travel center.” shouted Timmy.

“It would not have hurt her to just say that,” muttered Nelson.

“That's what she said! Woo-ho!!” That was Timmy's answer to a lot of things.

“Quiet both of you.” said Frank as softly as he could. With that he tried to turn his attention to the speaker.

“And now I present to you the genius who discovered the principles underlying time travel. Let's have a big round of applause for Jesse Plowshare.”

Jesse Plowshare came to the podium. He was probably young, but he moved almost as slowly as old Professor Lively. He stepped behind the podium but it came up to his eyebrows. After a second he just stood beside it.

“When you transmorgify the underpinnings of the space-time continuum, you get vectors of tempostational energy in the places where there are usually temporal constants. This is why if you want to change the past it just causes a paradox with null effectiveness.”

The time travelers were all young men. They were either still in school or not out of school for very long. They were used to sitting through all kinds of lectures they did not really understand or care about. So they settled in for another boring lesson.

Frank was vaguely aware of something going on at the back of the room. Suddenly Jesse's microphone quit working. Then Betsy rushed to the front, all apologetic. “Jesse, I'm *really* sorry our sound system just quit like that. No, don't ruin your voice by trying to talk without a mike. Thanks, thank you so much.”

Once Jesse had left the stage, she continued. “I'll just try to make myself heard without a sound system. There are some basic things that you have to agree to if you want to participate in this program. Timmy, do be quiet.

“First of all, time travel must remain a closely guarded secret. There could be all sorts of problems if everyone knew about this. If you quit the program and try to tell the world about time travel, we'll just say you are crazy. The pressure of graduate work finally got to you. Or you always did have a screw loose, even as a kid.

“Once you return we will allow you to use certain information from your travels in your doctoral dissertations. The time travel aspect will be downplayed until the public has had time to become accustomed to the idea.”

Frank Mills absorbed this information. It was good that he had lied to his mother and his cousin Louise and whoever else. But this still would be the adventure of a lifetime. That was how he was first approached for time travel, 'the adventure of a lifetime'. Some who had been initially approached for time travel were later deemed unsuitable. Those were sent on a really nice ski trip, and they were blissfully unaware that they had missed a chance to go back in time.

Frank realized that he was not a kid any more. The time for big adventures and summer camps was about over. He would do this one extraordinary journey before he had to Settle Down and Be Responsible.

Speaking of which, Ms. Neuman was still speaking.

“Another thing is that you simply must **not** change the past.

“I think Jesse was saying that it would not matter, since then you in our present time would no longer know that whatever it was “needed fixed”. At least we think that is what he was saying, to the extent we ever understand anything he says.

“But we don't really **know** what might happen if you interfere with some historical turning point. If for instance you assassinate General Armstrong or if you change the Battle of Overall, it could have far-reaching implications. If you have any questions about this aspect, do come see me afterwards.”

Frank leaned close to his friend Nelson. “Come see me so we can toss you out of the program.”

“The next thing is that you are not to ever step out of character. This is ..”

“Hey! Who are you to say how I am to react with people I meet in the past?” This was good old Dick Burlington. He was the type of man who was not happy unless he was unhappy.

At first Betsy just looked down at Dick the way she might look at someone who just does not get it. This mixture of pity and horror was the same thing she had used on Frank when he had asked if he could take only the courses that were interesting to him. After a moment she spoke.

“*Mister Burlington*, this is something for your own protection. The people in the past do not know about time travel. People in the present can't be trusted with that knowledge either, you will remember. The people you encounter in the Heroic Age are ill-educated and they will have little patience for things they do not understand. If you start saying 'I am from the future.' they just might decide you are a pathizer.

The whole group giggled nervously at the obscenity. Nelson turned to Frank. “Remember that day at school? Johnny yelled *that* out on the playground. Nobody knew what it meant.”

“Including Johnny, I think. I don't think Miss Vaught ever found out about it. The whole school would have been in trouble.” Frank remembered, all right.

Betsy Neuman was struggling to regain control of the meeting. “I think you are big boys now. And if profanity bothers you, you had better not venture into the past. The people of this time were very rough and ready. They lived close to the edge at best, and they had no time for niceties. Furthermore, we are not sure how many could even read and write. If a person cannot read, he gets his information from things he hears people say. If you stand out from the crowd or seem somehow odd, it could go hard with you.

“Now the next point. If you die back there in the past, you are dead. Permanently and forever, glory glory halleluiah, amen. No difference than if something happened to you in the present.”

Dick Burlington was on his feet again. “That can't be right. If someone gets killed, we can just go back right before it happens and stop it from happening. What do you say?” With the last statement, he looked to the rest of the time travelers for support.

Betsy fixed him with a glare that would freeze flowing lava. “NO! Any attempt to do that would set off a dual-causality feedback loop which could destroy anyone and everyone associated with time travel.”

Betsy held her microphone in front of one of the huge speakers on the stage. A loud surge of feedback had everybody covering their ears. “In the same way that feedback from a microphone just keeps growing, any attempt to do a rescue would create cascading catastrophic consequences.

We cannot and we will not perform any rescues.”

“Especially if it's you, Dick.” That was from Timmy and it got a big laugh.

Frank realized that the sound system was working now. When did that happen?

Betsy decided it was time to close the meeting. “That's all for now. Pick up your individual packets and start learning your cover story. Boot camp starts tomorrow.”

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