



# BUT ALWAYS MEETING OURSELVES

— A Short Story —

LEO HUNT



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NEON SINGLES

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**THE TIME MACHINE FIRST ARRIVED** during the summer. I was outside, mowing the lawn, when it insinuated itself into the shrubbery. The time machine was a tall yellow cylinder, like a can of pop someone had stretched. I remember it smelt like the carpets at my grandmother's house, which I had crawled across as a child. I turned off the lawn mower. A slot opened in the machine and my future self climbed out.

The first time my voice was recorded and played back to me, I loathed it. Although I knew the voice was mine, it sounded alien and suspect when no longer rumbling from beneath my ears. Meeting my future self was somewhat like this feeling, but applied to one's entire body. My future self was a reflection of me that did not match my movements, but rather walked hesitantly across the half-mown lawn, fumbling with a green notebook. He looked older, of course, thicker

around the waist, with creases burrowing into his forehead. I felt I could live with such a body, when the time came.

“When was the last time you recall seeing our father?” my future self asked me.

“How important is the answer?”

“Completely. Utterly.”

“I last saw our father three days ago. I had driven to see him. We cleared some trees so he could install a larger bird bath.”

“I see.”

My future self marked some pages in his notebook. I noticed that he was picking at his ear, unconsciously, as he thought. I resolved to stop the habit.

“I’m too early,” he announced, “this doesn’t happen yet. I’ll be with you momentarily.” He turned and marched through the uncut grass to the time machine. He climbed through the slot and the machine vanished. I began to trim the grass again, rank upon rank.

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**I NEXT SPOKE WITH** the time traveller a month later. I was standing on my porch, thinking about possibly digging a pond. It was a ripe summer afternoon and the air was heavy with barbecue smoke and insects. Although I had told nobody about my conversation with the time traveller, I had begun to find myself in the garden more and more, simply waiting. On this afternoon he returned.

The yellow cylinder was again present in my shrubbery, forcing the well-groomed bushes aside. My future self stepped from the contraption, apparently only seconds after we had last spoken. I noticed he was wearing a heavy flannel shirt, too thick for the weather.

“When did you last—”

“About a week ago. We went to the theatre and then had dinner at that pizza place he insists upon. He paid.”

My future self flipped through his notebook.

“Excellent!” He smiled at me, and I was gratified to notice that my chipped tooth wasn’t very visible. “We can talk now. I see you finished the lawn.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I had a whole month to do it. You want some squash?”

“Strawberry and apple?”

“We both know it’s the best flavour,” I said.

I sat with my future self on my patio, a pitcher of squash between us. We smelt burgers cooking three gardens down and I could see a red frisbee arcing far away on the hills. My future self was too hot in his shirt but he said nothing, just tugged at the collar when he thought I wasn’t looking.

“I’d imagine there’s a lot you want to ask me,” my future self said.

“You have no idea.”

“I’ll say this now: I’m not going to tell you.”

“How much older are you?” I asked.

“Can’t say.”

“Do many people become time travellers?”

“Loose lips sink ships.”

“Do I ever get published?”

“No comment.”

I took a gulp of squash. The frisbee was still flying, red against blue.

“You’re an asshole,” I told him.

“We’re both assholes. You just haven’t admitted it yet.”

“Hah,” I said, “so there’s a clue.”

“Listen,” he said, “we love books, you know? You get to the end of a great one, and then you’re pushing it on one of your friends?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Like, the plot is sublime... and you can’t even wait for them to find out? You just want to grab them and tell them everything? You can’t wait for them to finish reading, you just want to talk about it because it’s that good.”

“I know the feeling,” I said. He refilled his squash.

“But,” my future self continued, “you know that the pleasure is in the telling, the reading. Watching it unfold. Achilles gets to choose between living anonymously or dying a hero, takes the latter. Whole story right there. But. Not as good as reading the Illiad, was it?”

“An analogy. I see.”

“Anyway.” He took another drink. “I’m here to say none of that shit matters anyway. All you’re worrying about? Will I be famous, am I a good writer, am I good in bed, should I dig that pond... none of it matters.”

“Please continue, exalted Buddha. Free me from my prison.”

“You know, nobody likes that we’re sarcastic,” he said, “I’ve discovered that.”

“Was there a point to this?” I asked him, “If you’re not here to say anything useful. Not that I don’t appreciate you coming by, but I can talk to myself whenever, and honestly I’m not great company.”

“Sure there’s a point,” he said. The jug of squash was empty. My future self was pricking with sweat on his nose and forehead. He reached into his jeans and pulled out a photograph. He pushed it at me, face up on the patio table. It showed a road in a hot country somewhere, a place where the sun never slept and the clouds never came and the land was burned red and orange. There was trash by the road, and thin children, baked slivers of children, clustered around a dead tree. The tree was like a hand reaching for mercy.

“That’s your clue,” said my future self. He was grinning.

“For what?”



“For your future. For how to find the time machine.”

“Who took this? Where is it?”

“I tell you where it is, then that’s no fun. As for who took it, well... I was given it by a time traveller. So who knows?”

“That’s so obnoxious.”

“I’m just threading the needle. Looping the loop. First port of call once I finally got my hands on the time machine.”

“Well thanks,” I said.

He tugged his collar.

“I really must go,” he said. “Don’t have all the time in the world. Lots to see and do.”

“Of course.”

“Busy man with a time machine. You understand.”

“Absolutely.”

“Stay safe,” he said. My future self stood up. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“You can trust me.”

“And listen,” he said as he left, “if you see me again, don’t give him – us – the time of day.”

“Why—”

My future self turned, one leg in the time machine, and gave me a big grin. He hauled himself inside and was gone. I looked at the empty juice jug, wondered how he’d gone through so much. I must have been hot, in my future.

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**AT THE END OF THAT YEAR**, which was, for reasons I trust are apparent, something of a turning point or epiphany in my adult life, the snows came. The heat of the summer was matched by the spite of the winter. Christmas was fast approaching and I was throwing a party

in my house, one of the last I ever held there. I had bought cheap wine and expensive wheels of cheese, and lit candles on the kitchen table. I invited seventy people and more than half managed to struggle through the ice. They drank heavily and I made cheese sandwiches on the grill.

I found myself outside, late in the evening, on the porch with a female acquaintance whom I had admired for a few months. The mood was marred by her extreme inebriation, exacerbated by an as yet undiagnosed intolerance to goat's cheese. She was wearing a stunning dress of gold sequins and had been explaining her mutual admiration for me when she was overtaken by nausea. She was vomiting over the railing of my porch while I stood sober, wrapped in a coat, feeling that as usual I had been denied a pleasant and easy life. As she retched, I caught a strange smell in the air. I realized it was the scent of my grandmother's carpet. I ventured into the snow-fattened garden.

The time machine was in its usual spot. I followed the tracks from the machine and ended up in front of the newly-dug pit for the pond.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

My future self had changed. His hair was bone white, receding to a stubble. He was unshaven, with a wattle of flesh hanging from his neck. I put him as thirty years older than the man who had visited me in the summer. He was wearing a bathrobe, and reached for me with scarred hands.

“What fuckin—” he began.

“You fell into my pond,” I explained. He lay there in the snow. He started to fumble a silver flask from his robe.

“What, do we drink now?” I asked.

“Do you want to know when I last saw our father?” he asked. “He was full of cancer. Chewed up, nothing left. Begging to die. Went there that last time, to be with him, could hardly get in the door. Was

full of... us. Me. Room full of us, thirty of us. Fifty. We were at the windows too. All there for his final breath. I can't stop going back. All of us clearing our throats, each one looking for the exact right thing to say."

"Don't tell me this," I said.

He took a swig from the flask.

"Know why everything isn't meant to happen at once? Took a long time to work it out but I fucking know now."

"Please, just—"

"When it's just the past it happens and it's done. You move on. But for me... it's all still happening. He's still dying."

"He's still alive," I said. "We could go see him."

"You don't understand," said my future self. "That makes it worse! That's what makes it worse! You don't know now, but you will!"

The snow was settling on his face, his hands.

"You're going to get hurt," I said to him. "It's too cold."

"Give me that photo," he said, "give it. Not too late."

"I don't have it," I said. We both knew it was in my desk drawer, both knew I had booked flights to Africa, was taking the photo to every expert I could.

"That's the other thing. Can't stop it. You think life is a roller coaster, but it's a tram ride to your grave and you have to keep your hands inside the vehicle."

"You're not making sense. I think... you should go."

"Will go." My future self hauled himself up from the frozen hole. I held my hand out but he ignored it. "Don't know what the fuck you're getting into. No idea."

He shuffled back into the machine and left. The snow had thinned and I could see the house, porch lights a molten orange in the dark. My female acquaintance was still on the porch.

"I feel alright now," she said.

“Good.”

“Better out than in. Who were you talking to?”

“Huh?”

“There was someone there. I heard.”

“Nobody you know,” I told her.

The snow kept falling.

“I could smell something too. Like the back yard smelt when I was a kid. The flowers, you know? I could smell my mother’s flower garden.”

“I think time machines smell of nostalgia,” I said.

She didn’t hear me. I took her hand and we went back into the house. We danced slowly, pressed against each other, until the guests had all gone and every candle was burned down to a stump.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Leo Hunt** is a student of the Creative Writing program at UEA. His previously published work took the form of messages written in blood on the walls of his hometown, for which he received national media attention and a brief custodial sentence. Read more of his work at **[coldstarharbor.tumblr.com](http://coldstarharbor.tumblr.com)**.