

“Future Me” by J.B. Johnson

"So, let me get this straight...you're me from the future?...Uh, huh..."

"I know it's hard to believe, but just hear me out," he pleads.

"Hear you out? How about I throw you out instead? I don't even know how you got in here." He tries to explain how he got into my house but I don't listen because I'm busy looking for some kind of weapon. All I find is my old toy light-saber, but it sounds like this guy is a little crazy so maybe he'll fall for it.

"Wait, wait, wait," he says, "I know you don't think time travel is possible, but that's just because you haven't finished inventing it yet."

"Hold on," I say, striking my best Jedi pose. "I haven't posted anything about my time travel theories. How do you know about that?"

"I told you, I'm you."

"Whatever, Future Me. You must have hacked into my computer or something. You have like a nano-second to get out of my house, and I don't care if it's in your imaginary time machine or..." I don't finish that sentence. A blade of light bursts through the wall and sweeps quickly across the room, dissecting everything in its path. Before I know it, we're both on the floor. He shoves me headfirst through a hole that wasn't there until just now. *I would know if there had been a hole in the floor of my bedroom.*

He joins me in the basement, picks up the round chunk of what used to be my bedroom floor, and lifts it back into place. Holding it with one hand, he taps something on his phone with his other hand, and a tiny laser comes out from what should have been the headphone jack. He traces the laser around the edge of that chunk of floor and it seems to weld back into one piece.

"Whoa, what brand of phone is that?" I ask.

Apparently he thinks we're safe in the basement, because he takes off his cap and sunglasses and relaxes a little. And then I see it — he really is me! It's the weirdest feeling ever. Besides a few wrinkles and some distinguished-looking gray around the temples, he's me. *I'm kind of nice looking when I'm older*, I think to myself.

He starts talking and I decide to listen this time. "You're going to have a breakthrough later tonight and finally figure out how time travel works. But being a dumb kid,"

"Hey!"

"Shut up, you are. Being a dumb kid, you can't hold it in and you're going to tell your secret to that guy in 8th hour that always does the 'live long and prosper' thing with his fingers."

"Chuck?"

"Right, except now he goes by Charles." Future Me gets a smirk on his face and continues, "You should see him now...I mean, in the future. He's almost as rich as I am, and believe me, people don't pick on him anymore. Anyway, you're going to tell Chuck your idea and he's going to act like he doesn't understand a word of it. But then he's going to steal your idea and start developing it."

"Wait," I interrupt, "what do you mean 'almost as rich as I am'? Do I become rich?"

"Unimaginably rich, yes, but did you hear what I said about Charles?"

"Yeah, okay, don't tell Chuck. Cool. Like...how rich?" I ask with an involuntary grin.

"I'm the richest person who ever lived, but..." The next thing I know, I'm up against the wall, he's just inches in front of me, and his hand is over my mouth. "Don't do that!" he says excitedly but quietly. "Do you want them to hear us?"

"Do what?" I mumble through his hand.

"You yelled 'Nooo waaay!! This is sooo cool!'"

"No, I didn't," I say. "Did I?"

He removes his hand and says "You definitely did." Then showing me the phone in his left hand, he adds "but I teleported a few things from down here to random places around the world, so they'll be busy tracing those signals for a while. When they don't find anything, they'll come back here."

"Wait, you did what?" I ask. "We were just standing here talking and you said I'd become rich." The grin creeps back onto my face as I remember that part, and I feel the excitement building up inside, but a stern look from Future Me stops it from surfacing.

"Okay, let me explain a few things," he starts. He finds some folding chairs against the wall and we sit down. "Time travel doesn't work the way everyone thinks it should. You can't go back in time and witness historic events and all that. It only takes you back about 30 seconds, and your body doesn't physically go back. Everyone and everything rewinds — the entire fabric of time and space — and only the person who initiated the reset knows what happened."

I start to ask 'then how come you're here?' but he doesn't give me a chance to get a word in. "You see someone get hit by a car," he continues, "so you reset and stop them from crossing the road; you're arguing with your wife and say something you immediately regret, so you reset and don't say it this time; you turn your head away from your toddler and miss seeing his first steps, so you hit reset and make sure you don't miss it this time." He stops for a second, looking a little sad. "So after your outburst just now, I did a reset, teleported a couple of things while we were talking, and then covered your mouth before you yelled out."

"You had time to do all that in 30 seconds?" I ask.

He answers matter-of-factly, "it just takes a few taps if you have your teleport app set to *random location*. Anyway, after I had my breakthrough, I developed a handheld "time reset" machine, took my invention to the government, and proved that it worked by letting them try it. They promised me a certain amount each time they used it, and I started raking in the money. They've used it to save civilians from terrorist attacks, save soldiers from IEDs, even save the president from assassination. They've saved thousands of lives over the last few decades...that is, the coming few decades for you."

When he pauses, I ask, "How do you know what all they've done if only the guy who initiates it knows what happened?"

"I'm the government's main defense contractor, so they keep me in the loop. I don't actually remember the assassination attempt, but I was briefed on it after the fact."

"Okay," I say, "but that's all good stuff. I don't get what's wrong with telling Chuck."

"Charles wasn't as smart as I was...as you are. He developed his own version of a reset machine several years after I did, but he didn't use a strong enough encryption on his machine's software. Someone reverse-engineered it and started selling pirate copies on an online auction site. Someone else bought one and found a less expensive way to mass-produce them, and it became the 'next big thing.' Hundreds of thousands of reset machines were sold. Of course, it was just a matter of time until someone else made an app out of it and another someone else copied that and made a free ad-supported version, and within weeks billions of people had the "reset" app on their device.

"So?" I say, "It sounds pretty sweet, like an 'undo button' for life."

"Well, imagine this: The president gets shot, but Agent Jones of the Secret Service does a reset and jumps in to take the bullet. The assassin has a reset app, so he goes back and this time fires two shots, one for Agent Jones and one for the president. Agent Smith also has the app, so he does a reset and shoots the would-be assassin. But the assassin had his thumb on the reset icon so as he falls down dead and releases his thumb, everything resets and he dodges the bullet this time.

"It works in any situation. Car dealers manipulate their deals based on your responses to their earlier offers. The opposing team in a football game is never tricked by a fake hand-off because the coach has the app ready. Ambassadors negotiating a peace treaty always know just what to say so they won't give away too much to the other side. The police rarely catch anyone because the criminals have lookouts ready to reset whenever necessary.

"And of course in each of those situations, the other side also has the app and resets to their own advantage too. Since you know the other side has that capability, you have to predict when they're going to reset and try to beat them to the punch. It's a never-ending cycle of deceit and cover-ups." He looks directly at me — which is kinda creepy, like I'm looking into one of those camera apps that makes you look older — and he asks, "What do you think it's like to live in a world like that?"

I'm honestly surprised. "I guess you wouldn't know who you could trust."

"You can't trust anyone," he emphasizes. "Everyone who has a device or a watch has the app, and they don't have any qualms about using it since no one will ever know if they do. I can't trust my neighbors, my colleagues, or my so-called friends. And you always have to look over your shoulder because a thief can be watching where you put your wallet and do a reset to rob you. Crime is rampant, the political scene is in turmoil, and personal and business relationships are meaningless. Society is basically collapsing."

"It sounds awful," I say seriously. "I can see why you want to stop it." I finally remember my other question and ask, "wait, you said your body doesn't physically go back in time. Then how come you're here now? ...and you're definitely from more than 30 seconds in the future."

"More like 30 years," he answers. "It was another breakthrough I had, just yesterday. It was a surprisingly simple modification to a few lines of code. I immediately knew I had to come back and stop any of this from ever happening. I just hope my plan works," he concludes. "We should know before too long."

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Over the next half hour, Future Me tells me about some of the things he's done in these last thirty years. He leans back and stares into space a few times, like he's relaxing on some private beach, and I can tell he's really enjoyed his life. He tells me about his classic sports cars and his private yacht

and all the other benefits of having a basically unlimited bankroll. He says he's funded missionaries, given scholarships, started hospitals and orphanages in developing countries, and on and on. At that, he gets a sad look on his face again, like I saw earlier.

When he pauses, I interrupt, "You look like something's bugging you. Listen, if you're thinking that my knowing all this will mess up the future, don't worry about it one bit! I'll live my life just like I was going to anyway. Knowing all this won't change a thing." *Of course, I know that's not true.*

"That's the thing," he almost whispers, not looking at me. "None of that is going to happen this time around, if my plan works. I just wanted you to kind of know what it was like."

"What do you mean it won't happen?" I ask, but then I slowly start to put it together. "Oh... you're not here to stop me from telling Chuck my idea."

"No."

"You're here to stop me from having the breakthrough in the first place."

"Right."

"But...but...what about all that cool stuff? The yacht? The '67 Camaro? That beautiful red and white convertible Corvette? You mean I'll never see those things?" I ask, almost crying. I know it's childish of me, but I can't help being a little upset.

"I'm not saying you'll never get those things," the older and wiser version of me says, "just that you'll have to get them some other way. Time reset isn't the only thing I've invented."

I don't like it, but I know he's probably right. "So, what do we do," I ask at a loss, "stay down here all night so that I'm not in whatever situation I'm supposed to be in tonight when I have the breakthrough?"

"That's Plan B. Plan A obviously hasn't worked," he says sardonically. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned the Corvette."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. If I convince you not to go through with it, then you'll never develop time resets, right? And if you don't develop the reset code, then you'll never make the slight modifications that make physical time travel possible, right? So...." He looks at me expectantly, as if I should know what he's talking about.

And then suddenly I do. "Then you won't travel back in time to come here." This whole time paradox thing is a little over my head, but I think I get the basic idea. "So the fact that you're still here proves that I'm still going to develop time travel."

"Right," he sighs. "My breakthrough came a little after 10p.m., while I was crunching numbers on my laptop, so maybe if we stay away from the laptop until then, we can stop it from ever happening."

"And then you'll just disappear?" I ask.

"Beats me," he says, sounding less like the world's greatest inventor and more like a teenager, like me.

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And so we wait. To pass the time, he gives me a future-history lesson about the rest of the world in the coming 30 years. I have a hundred questions and he patiently answers them all. Of course, it could all change. Neither one of us knows how much of the future we're altering by changing the events of this one night, but our main goal is to prevent the chaos that time resets will inevitably create.

Eventually, Future Me looks up at the ceiling and then taps on his phone a few times. "They're back," he says, "but I turned on some blockers so they can't get down to us." He adds with a frustrated look, "I didn't realize anyone else was working on a technique to come back physically."

"Why didn't they set their machine for even earlier than yours so they could be waiting for you when you arrived here?" I ask. "Or why didn't they go back just an hour or so, break into your house, and stop you from leaving in the first place? I assume it would take more than 30 seconds to break into your house."

"Yes, I have an amazing security system, but what's your point?"

"Well, they must have been spying on you and just piggy-backed on your signal," I explain.

"Hmm, you're right," he says. "You're kind of smart for a teenager."

"You said I was dumb a little while ago," I say with a grin.

"You are dumb. Shut up." I like this guy.

"Who are they anyway?" I ask with a start, suddenly remembering that I almost got killed earlier. "And why are they trying to kill me?"

"They're trying to kill me, not you, at least not until after you invent time travel. They'll probably lock you away in some secret underground lab and force you to work for them."

"I'll refuse," I say, trying to be brave.

"Oh, they have ways of making people do things," he says. "We've come a long way these last few decades."

"But if I don't have the breakthrough at all," I suggest, "then time travel won't be invented and they won't have any way or any reason to be here, so they'll just disappear, right?"

"Theoretically," he answers. Then Future Me taps on his device and looks up with a blank stare.

"What'd you do?" I ask. "Did you get rid of them?"

"No...I was just checking the time."

"What? I thought you teleported them to the moon or something!"

"It's 10:17," he says, "and they're still up there, which means Plan B didn't work either."

"What? Why not? You've convinced me!" I say truthfully. "I won't develop time travel now, even if I get a breakthrough tomorrow or the day after that or any other day." I'm trying to stay calm but it's not easy. "Why didn't it work? Why didn't they disappear?"

"I don't know," he says, barely able to get the words out.

We sit in silence for a minute or two, and then he quietly says, "How could I have been so dumb? We've altered the timing, but we haven't prevented the breakthrough. Now we're sitting ducks. They know I've had plenty of time to tell you about the problems with time travel, so they also know they'll have to force you to cooperate, but they're more than willing to do that. We'll have to go upstairs eventually, so they're just waiting. They'll kill me on sight and kidnap you."

"They'll kill you and kidnap me? Can't you teleport us out or cut through the wall with that laser-thingy?" I offer.

"They've put up some very strong blockers," he says. "The only way out is through the door at the top of the stairs, which I'm sure is right where they're waiting."

"Can you...I don't know...travel back in time again, arrive a few hours earlier, and get me out of the house?"

"That's a great idea, but I don't have any way to do it. As it is right now, physical time travel is a one-time phenomenon. If I had more time, I might be able to modify the code again, but time is one thing we don't have."

"Really?" I ask, a little stunned. "You can't go back to the future? Then you're stuck here?"

"Not really," he explains. "If you never invent time travel, then I'll never come here, right? You'll just live your life as if none of this ever happened. You probably won't even remember this conversation. I'm not sure; this is uncharted territory. To be honest, I didn't even know if I would survive the jump, but the whole world is in chaos because of what I invented, so I had to try."

"You say they'll force me to work for them?" I ask.

"Undoubtedly."

"So that great life you described isn't going to be so great, and all that charity work you did isn't going to happen?"

"No," Future Me says, as if in a trance. "You'll be under their control as soon as we leave this basement, so you'll never tell Chuck or the government or anyone else about the invention. No one will ever copy your machine or turn it into an app."

"But that's good, right?" I ask. "No app, no chaos. Problem solved."

"Except that whoever these guys are working for will be the only entity in the world with the power of time resets and physical time travel. I can't believe I was fool enough to lead them to you!"

"You didn't know they would come," I say, trying to make him (or myself) feel better.

"You're right," he admits, "but what difference does it make now?" He adds with finality, "they'll rule the world, and there's nothing we can do to stop them."

"Yes there is. They're not as smart as we are," I say, sounding less like a teenager and more like him, like Future Me. "Thank you," I add, and give him — myself — a hug.

He looks confused, but understanding comes gradually as I pick up his cap and sunglasses and start up the stairs. "Are you sure?", he asks.

"I'm not afraid to die," I say. "I know where I'm going." I rub my fingers in the dust on the floor and dab some into the hair around my temples. Then I put on the cap and sunglasses and slowly open the door.

THE END