

Holding on to Hope

An original student-led showcase

3:52am

Written by Sarah Neel

It was a cold, December night. Hendrick was alone in his dark bedroom, sitting in his bed. He had already finished the third season of "Parks and Rec" and was looking for something new to do. He opened Discord to check in on the server he had made with his friends, but the last message in general was from October. *It isn't worth trying to revive something that's gone*, he thought somberly, even though his heart wanted a different outcome. He decided to check the clock to distract himself. 3:52:04. *Geez. It was going to be daylight in two hours. Where had the time gone?* It felt like his brain had been on autopilot.

He turned on his bedside lamp and looked around the room. The pile of clothes on the floor looked significantly larger than it had last week. His bookshelf hadn't been touched since his brief reading phase over the summer. His robotics trophies glimmered slightly from the light of the moon, and he thought back to those competition days. They felt like another timeline in his mind, another reality. Light years away from his current state.

At this point in the night, he'd usually just lie back in bed, look at his phone for another hour, and fall asleep. But there was something weird keeping him sitting up. Hendrick felt an external force tugging on him. He decided to get out of bed and peer through the window. It was a dry night, not yet snow season, and the wind didn't seem to be too cold. It was a

full moon as well, and he hadn't been outside since the weekend.

Why stay inside like every other night? Why not try something new?

The decision was made.

He threw on shoes and a sweatshirt, tiptoed silently past his siblings' and parents' rooms and unlocked the front door. The December night was fairly cold, but he had expected that anyways. *Where to go next?* Hendrick looked around the block, and found his gaze landing on top of Death Hill. Death Hill was just above his house and was nicknamed by the kids who would try to sled down its steep slope when it snowed. However he knew it had a pleasant view, so he began to walk to the top, up the sloped sidewalk. He rested comfortably on the large rock, which sat atop the hill next to one of the houses.

"Hey."

Having sat on the point of the rock, he was startled and lost his balance, only barely catching himself. A person was coming near him. *Of course this was a bad idea*, he thought. He was now stuck between jumping off toward the bottom of a steep slope or letting this stranger approach him. Given he was paralyzed with fear, he chose the latter.

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"Don't. Panic. It's me. Well, it's you."

He knew there were some interesting characters running around at 4am, but he didn't expect this.

"Sir, I'm a little bit busy —."

"No you're not." The mysterious figure came closer into view, and Hendrick began to notice strange things about his appearance. He seemed to have a pale blue glow surrounding him and was wearing a sweatshirt that looked quite similar to one of his own. He sat next to Hendrick on the rock. "Nice moon. Forgot about how pretty it was."

Hendrick straightened his spine. "Uh, I think I need to leave. . ."

"No you don't. You need to talk to me."

"And why's that?"

"Because I'm you. And you're me. I'm just a year in the future."

All the gears in Hendrick's brains stopped turning.

"Look, I've got limited time here, and I'd like to answer some questions for you. You just gotta trust me. I'm wearing your sweatshirt, right? The one Mom got from the county fair."

Hendrick was pretty sure this had to be a hallucination. After all, it was almost 4:00 in the morning. But given this "Future Hendrick" didn't seem to pose a threat, and he was stuck on a rock, why not humor him?

"Ok, ok, I believe you. But why are you here?"
"Because you're miserable."

Present Hendrick shifted toward the skyline and cracked his knuckles. "Not necessarily."

Future Hendrick laughed. "Oh buddy, I'm you, remember? I know what's going on inside your head. I remember this time last year, during the pandemic." He faced the moon as well.

"I just remember the feeling of. . . Cold," they said together.

Present Hendrick continued, "Yeah, it's cold all the time. And I feel like all I do now is watch the clock. I watch hours go by while I sit and do nothing. The same hours fly by soon enough, and I've still done nothing. I expected things to get better around Christmastime, you know, cause it's supposed to be magical. But everyday is still the same old thing."

Both looked out for a moment. A tree nearby shifted in the wind. The city skyline glimmered in the distance, the bright yellow moon shining down over them. The only sound to be heard was of birds flying from tree to tree, and a sole car starting.

Future Hendrick turned to face his counterpart. "Do you want to hear about my timeline?"

"Only if it's over."

"It is."

Present Hendrick let out a sigh of relief he

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hadn't even realized he'd been holding. He realized he was so past the point of delusion there was no point in going back now. "Sure. Tell me."

"I've been instructed to not tell you many specific details, but here's what I can say. It's warm again. Mom and Dad keep the curtains open. We actually got a tree this year, since there was no hassle with the van. And you're back in school."

Right. School. A part of life that seemed so impossible to Present Hendrick. "I can't imagine being back at school, with all those people. . ."

Future Hendrick squirmed excitedly. "No no! But don't worry! You have friends and it's great."

Present Hendrick began to feel his cheeks heat. "I don't have friends now. I haven't spoken to anybody from the old group since October. You can't just expect me to believe things will just magically heal in a year."

"I mean, nothing happened magically, more gradually, but I'm not alone anymore..."

Present Hendrick's voice clogged his throat, and the arm around him felt cold. "I'm alone now. And it doesn't seem like that's gonna change for a while. I know the end is somewhere out there but it's so hard to have faith in something you can't see. How am I supposed to keep going?"

Future Hendrick paused for a moment. He found himself struggling to get back into the mindset, to push himself back into the dark

hole Present Hendrick was in. He watched the car down the hill pull out of the driveway and move down the street.

"When I came back to talk to you, I didn't expect everything to be so similar to how it is now. The buildings downtown haven't changed. The moon still orbits the Earth. This rock hasn't moved. I've still got this sweat-shirt. There are all these permanent things around you that will hold you steady. And I guess that's a sign of hope, right? That there are positive, immovable things. Which means there's stuff from your old life that's still here too. You just need to know where to look."

Present Hendrick looked into the distance, to the city where he had grown up his whole life. Maybe future him was right. Mom and Dad were still around. His friends were out there, somewhere on the bottom of the hill. Maybe they were stuck in the same place he was. Maybe he had isolated himself to the point of being unable to see the great expanse of life around him.

He turned to face his future counterpart, but the only thing next to him was blue dust, illuminated by moonlight. Hendrick was surprised feel sad to let this "Future Hendrick" go, although it was probably just his imagination. Now that he was all alone, he noticed how cold the December air was on his skin and how uncomfortable the rock was beneath him. It was time to go home.

