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Title of submission: My Story

Stream: Open Category, Senior

Category: Back to the future

My dear child,

As I type, your Tracerlight trails paths you've never walked before, away from everything you've ever known, away from me. No doubt your mind is scattered, and it pains me that I've caused your hurt. For I have nothing to lose except you, I want to tell you my story. I don't blame you for being angry at me -- just know your mother only wanted to keep you safe.

It's hard to say where the story starts and ends, or even which one to tell. This is about COVID-19's aftermaths, but as much as it surrounds the past, it is one of *your* present and future.

Above all, it is my story to tell.

Where do I start? There's much you know, but don't *know*. Like the Tracer Act of 2037 -- you, like all Hong Kongers nowadays, cannot imagine life without your own Tracer implant. How would you function without HealthTracer customizing every meal delivered to your home, GeoTracer giving you access to public spaces, TracerID taking your work-at-home attendance? It's why your lifespans surpass the world's average, why our economy skyrockets from our innovations. Hong Kong wouldn't be in its present-day glory if not for Tracer. You are taught it was created by Health Inc. to combat COVID-32, the Resurgence that took your father's life, later developed by Hi-Tech into the multi-purpose implant you use today. But this you already know.

What you don't know starts with this: I invented Tracer.

Do you remember asking me what my greatest regret was when you were 6? I said it was that I couldn't save your father. You snuggled into my arms and said it wasn't my fault -- how mature you were for your age! Your father must be proud of you, and my heart broke knowing he would never see you grow up.

Today, my answer would differ -- not that I don't still miss your father. Maybe it's morbid, but it comforts me that he doesn't have to witness how the seeds of our shared creation have grown beyond either of our imaginations.

The truth is, I could have saved him, but I was too late.

When the Resurgence -- COVID-32 -- surfaced, we just had you. Like the rest of the world, we thought the pandemic was behind us, and you'd grow up in a world unencumbered by the past. The world erupted in pandemonium. But there was a glimmer of hope: COVID-19 survivors were immune to the mutated virus. Your father and I, budding medical experts wanting to ensure their newborn's future, proposed a solution: tracers implanted into COVID-19 survivor's bodies to examine how their

unique antibodies fought the mutation. Our findings would be used to create a vaccine for those of us who weren't immune.

Our passion was tireless; we would never give up. It pushed us to graduate top of our classes and co-lead an ambitious team. It was also why he shut himself in the lab for days with no food or sleep. More than once, I found him dozing by the Petri dishes, lab goggles slipping from sunken eyes. I should've stopped him. But we were silent soldiers unwilling to admit defeat. I told myself I'd force him to stop if he went a day without rest, then two, then three, but I'd let him go too far, he must've been infected by our specimens, he was rushed to the ER, and a week later he died from the disease he poured his heart into decoding. He'd lost the battle against COVID not once, but twice.

If your father was self-destructively persistent, my tenacity from bereavement and guilt for not saving your father was twofold. I suppose it's good you didn't inherit our obstinance. Life's unfair. Not only do I live to this day, but our team also broke through just one year after his death.

Tracer was born -- it was a huge success. A vaccine was created, saving thousands of lives, and our new knowledge of the virus was invaluable to further research. It took me years to reconcile the fact that it would never be enough. Your father died too early; I will always be too late.

In fact, it was so successful that after the pandemic had receded for good, it remained. Our team sold it to Health Inc., exhilarated by promises of tracing diseases that have confounded scientists for centuries. And they've delivered: cancers, Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis have become myths from a distant past for most. It was beyond what your father and I had dreamed of. That year, the first person celebrated their 120th birthday -- a measly number by today's standards. Somewhere along the lines, there was talk of giving everyone an implant: think of the opportunities for research and universal healthcare! It was humane. It was equality.

It nagged at the back of my mind that something was wrong. But how could I oppose a miracle?

Lustre takes time to corrode. When Tracer Act passed in 2037, mandating all over 18 to receive implantations, the dire implications dawned on us. The uneasiness I'd felt echoed with the public, first by whispers, then something bigger. What would happen to bodily integrity? Who would handle our data? What control would we have over our personal privacy?

It's strange how the fear of regret changes a person. I couldn't bear to think that my creation, albeit out of my control, had the potential for harm. When it was time for me

to receive my own implant, I supported the cause wholeheartedly and ignored the gnawing doubts.

Here's where what you know and don't know blurs. You know Hi-Tech bought Tracer and transformed it into a multi-purpose chip. You know it hasn't only improved healthcare, but social harmony -- everyone acts in sync, not because Tracer tracks your every action, but because it's shaped the mindset of a generation. But will you ever know the simple pleasures of leaving your home simply because you want to, without instinctively going through every justification for visiting the post office? Will you know the freedom of choosing between a sandwich or pasta for lunch, or not worrying if your stride suggests "unseemly activity"?

Your Tracerlight is still. It's past midnight and you're alone in a park, something you've probably never thought of doing your whole life. How ironic, that as I put these words to screen, it reassures me to know you're safe. I think you're starting to understand, though, even if you'll never *know*.

Perhaps you can forgive me for removing my own Tracer and being debilitated as I am now. It was after your 18th birthday, right after your Implantation Ceremony. Looking at your pride for reaching this coveted milestone, I couldn't fool myself that this was the world your father and I had imagined when we created Tracer. That night, I surgically removed the chip from my own arm and recoded it to send false information to Hi-Tech. It hasn't been able to track me -- and apparently, my lung cancer -- for years. The scar still hurts sometimes.

68 is much too young to die these days, but I don't regret the surgery -- as Tracer continues to improve, I'll either become obsolete or be caught out. And anyway, I don't think I can face what I've inadvertently done to us all, though no one may know it. Except you, now. My one regret is Tracer.

In telling my story, all I ask is that you don't forget the invisible strings tying you to your past, your father, to me, as you trace a path into a future I cannot follow.

Most importantly, live a good, long life for me. I'll be content on my deathbed knowing my creation has granted this much.

Love,
Your mother

22-02-2070