

**Sincerely, Yourself**

Dear Brandon,

I hope this letter finds you well. Retroactive mailing in 2042 can be shockingly disappointing at times. You'd think Elon Musk would've found a better way of doing this by now, but honestly, ever since he landed on Mars, he hasn't really been the same. I don't blame him, though. Some of the stuff he's discovered there is just out of this world... Get it? I hope you did. It took me decades to become old enough to think of and appreciate a joke that lame.

Anyhow, with my fortieth birthday fast approaching, I thought it commemorative or even apt to write this letter to you, my eighteen-year-old self. I confess that lately, I've developed a penchant for reminiscing upon my younger years, particularly 2020. I remember the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing socioeconomic repercussions vividly. I also recall the disheartening disappointment, ubiquitous uncertainty, and fearful frustration that came along with being a college freshman, the son of a small business owner, and an Asian-American during those times. With that said, if I may, I'd like to tell you a short story that might contain some underlying, universal themes applicable to your present circumstance.

In 1973, a young girl was born in the slums of Saigon, Vietnam (soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City). By all accounts, she was an incredibly bright girl, exhibiting an innate inquisitiveness despite her shier disposition. More importantly, it was clear to anyone who knew her that she possessed a naturally empathetic spirit, amplified by an altruistic maturity beyond her years. Unfortunately, as you'd expect for any child growing up in the ghettos of postwar Vietnam, she concurrently lacked supportive resources, meaningful opportunities, and obviously, economic stability. In fact, at just the young age of nine, she had already dropped out of school

and began working multiple jobs just to help keep food on her family's dinner table — a metaphorical dinner table of course. They weren't nearly privileged enough to actually own one.

By day, she wandered the streets of Ho Chi Minh City selling lottery tickets. Relatively speaking, it wasn't a particularly unique job for Vietnamese youth. Nonetheless, it was indeed a rather extraordinary endeavor when looked at macroscopically. A nine-year-old girl, absent of any supervision, navigated the country's largest and most urbanized city every day in order to approach hundreds of random strangers with the opportunity to buy lottery tickets from her. Truly, it is nothing short of exceptional.

By night, she "enjoyed" the slightly less hazardous task of helping maintain her family's makeshift chicken coop — another source of income they depended upon to feed their family of seven. It should be noted as well that this coop happened to be located in the same squalid room that multi-purposely served as their kitchen/dining room/living room/bathroom/bedroom. Occasionally, if she was lucky, the local bar would need some extra hands cleaning up after a messy brawl or a bloody knife fight. With the extra money, she might purchase a single orange to be shared amongst herself and her four siblings — an exciting and welcomed deviation from their usual, anemic bowl of rice and water. I'm sure you get the picture by now, Brandon. This little girl didn't have the most advantageous childhood. But what about the rest of her life?

Well, when she was seventeen, she met a rather zestful boy gifted with a certain quirkiness she found charming. His unmitigated exuberance and ambition perfectly juxtaposed her own introversion and diffidence — an exemplary case of opposites attract if I've ever seen one. To be clear, though, this boy was no knight in shining armor coming in to save his damsel from the distresses of poverty. He himself arguably bore even greater burdens. For much of his childhood, he was split from his siblings and his father was imprisoned — both consequences of

fighting on the losing side of the Vietnam War. Like the girl, he was also deprived of educational opportunities, but unlike her, he seldom had a complete family to lean on at the end of the day. If he had armor, it was rustic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two eventually married. And by their late twenties, they welcomed their first child into the world, a baby boy. It should be known, however, that the boy's father was absent for his son's birth. You see, the father was all the way in California building the foundations of what he hoped would be a better life for his family. Years prior, he and his wife agreed they cannot and dared not allow their children to be chained to the same shackles of poverty that encumbered their own upbringing. So, with few marketable skills and no credentials whatsoever, he set off to the land of opportunity. Of course, it wasn't easy at first. His lack of a formal education, limited English, and nonexistent resume relegated him to low-skilled, low-wage labor. He was a preposterously hard worker and an impressively quick learner in each of his pursuits but was nonetheless constantly undercut by racism and xenophobia at each stop. Stubbornly, he persisted. In accordance with much his life thus far, he picked himself up, because he knew no one else was there to do it for him. He took his new life day-by-day, and eventually, the day came where he opened his very own small business — an auto repair shop tucked in downtown San Jose. More importantly, he was now finally ready to welcome his wife and his son to that better life he had promised them.

Their son was three when he and his mother finally immigrated to the United States, reuniting with his father and emancipating themselves from the aforementioned conditions of their former home. That little girl who wandered the streets of Vietnam all those years ago selling lottery tickets now found herself halfway across the world hoping to similarly acquire the mythical golden ticket to prosperity here in America. Of course, just like for her husband, it was

never going to be that easy. At the same time, though, she found comfort in knowing that whatever trials were awaiting them in the future, her child's ability to maximize his potential and overcome such tribulations would not, unlike hers, be capped merely by the conditions of his surroundings. And there were indeed tribulations.

It was here in America that she fretfully wept when it was recommended to her by her son's school that he be evaluated for learning disabilities, because he was the worst student in his class by a concerning margin. But it was also here that she tearfully hugged him when it turned out he wouldn't be held back in third grade — the grade level at which she left school. It was here that she jumped when she saw his first-ever A on a fifth-grade report card. It was here that she breathed a sigh of relief when her formerly at-risk son began high school, the first in his family to do so. It was here that she celebrated when he gained admission to a couple of those fabled Ivy League schools she'd heard about. It was here that she couldn't stop smiling when she proudly flew with him to Los Angeles for his scholarship interview at USC. And it was here, after nearly a year's delay, that she finally sent him off to college. I'm technically not suppose to tell you this next part since it hasn't happened in your timeline yet, but it was also here, in the year 2030, that she shook hands with the president after her son landed his dream job as one of the president's speechwriters.

I sure hope this story sounds familiar, Brandon. After all, it's yours. It's the story of you, your mother, and your father. Now, I don't often tell it to garner any sort of astonishment or adulation. I tell it because I believe your story, our story, touches at the foundational themes of the broader tale of humanity.

I have faith that when the story of mankind is finally written, it will be one of resilience, fortitude, family, hope, and community. There's little doubt you are currently experiencing a

critical turning point in history. However, it is still largely up to you, along with the rest of the world, to personally and collectively decide whether history remembers this very chapter as merely falling action towards a ruinous resolution or the time when a special generation of people overcame perhaps the greatest obstacles ever encountered. It is my suspicion that the underlying, unspoken truth about people is that when the going gets tough, we come together and we rise to the occasion. Be it economic, social, political, or epidemiological, we humans have an uncanny habit of being inspired, rather than stifled, by adversity.

I've already retold you your story. But I'd remind you it's a story not yet finished. So as you pick up the proverbial pen and craft future chapters, remember that persistence isn't just a warm feeling or hopeful sentiment. It's a responsibility, bound to us by our very humanity, to believe in ourselves and each other. And through that unifying trust, we find the courage, the audacity, to turn hardship into story as I have done for you in this letter.

Sincerely,

Yourself