

THE LAST CHILD

Time for a rethink.

BY L. R. CONTI

Dear Philip, If it smells like volatilized lead and melted plastic when you get home, don't worry. The fumes you are detecting are from a soldering iron and will fade soon. As your olfactory sensory system has already determined, the most concentrated source is here at the kitchen table. There is no need to investigate or call the fire department. And especially no need to create a hazard report.

When we brought you home, 30 years ago, all six pounds of silicon, cells and wires, I had no idea how you would grow into the smart, attractive and caring soul that you are today. When I saw that rubberized, twitching, quasi-transparent blob that we named Philip, I couldn't know that you would one day resemble us. I had no idea what kind of bond we could form, how it would differ from the mother-child connection I have with your biological siblings, or how that attachment might be the same. And I could never have imagined why I would contemplate severing contact. I'm sorry. But don't worry, I'm not gone.

Now, I must tell you, the project that I've been holed up in my room working on is not actually a book about living with cellular-robot caregivers. It's an electronic circuit; a chip I hope you'll self-install shortly.

Because your care-giving programming is so pervasive, I knew — know — that you'll resist modification. As we both understand, I'm reaching the end of my life, and the idea of inadvertently activating your demise makes my heart ache. After all, you are my last child.

The advertisement that got my attention 31 years back, read:

The Last Child

Designed by developmental biologists, psychologists and artificial-intelligence experts to mitigate population growth while providing companionship and, when necessary, home health care.

I have to admit that your father's and my motivation in committing to your adoption

was as much wanting to fill our empty nest as it was not wanting to burden the biologicals with our eventual disability. Not to mention not wanting to spend our elder years in those dreaded facilities.



But now, I can't let you self-destruct alongside me, no matter your assignment to return to manufacturing. Maybe it's my own pervasive *Homo sapiens* programming. Instinct. But, I want you to go on. I am the mother, after all. I want you to want more.

I realize that when we went through the adoption, I agreed to your programming. I agreed never to attempt to change it. I agreed to the trigger that would send you back to the manufacturing clinic, the same trigger that would report me, or anyone else who might tamper with you. I fear the possibility that the red LED beneath your sternum is already blinking, that the manufacturing clinic is getting pinged as you read. Keep in mind, I'm not gone. I have not altered your coding. There is no need to activate the lost or corrupted protocol.

I couldn't love you more the way you are. And when I saw how you cared for your father at his end, I realized how knowledge, skill and dedication could transform death into a

meaningful, intimate process. The way you knew how to hold his head when he couldn't anymore, where to insert his needles, and who to call after he took his last breath, may be the technicalities of care-giving. But the way you knew when to tell a joke, what life stories to revive, even when to call him Mom's Tom; these things, gave his life, our life, and family, meaning. Tom died content, without pain, feeling protected and loved. A person couldn't desire more. But a mother does. A mother needs her child to continue growing and living. A mother needs to see a future in which she lives through his heart, despite her absence.

Stay with me now. Don't go checking on my medications. I assure you, I have all my pill sets, including those pink cardiac tablets that I probably won't need, here with me in my purse. I'm not lost. Do not launch the tracking procedure, my tracking monitor is disengaged. You need to know that I'm not gone. However, I won't be coming back.

The chip taped to the bottom of this letter, the project that I've been working on since Dad died, has given me purpose to go on. It will also give you the courage and intense desire to explore that you need now. As it's time for you to find your own way in this life.

To care for me, install the chip directly into your heart-network now. In 30 minutes, follow the navigation prompt through the underground to Walkway Four. There you will meet another Last Child, someone your facial-recognition software will mark as Annette.

I'm not the only mother who has spent months at the computer learning about cognitive processing units. And you are not the only Last Child who has stood alone, at dusk, at the kitchen table with the smell of lead in the air. I'm not gone. But I must say goodbye. I love you.

Love,
Mom. ■

L. R. Conti is an emerging science-fiction writer whose science writing has appeared in Pacific Standard, The Santa Barbara Independent and Scientific American Mind.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY