

THE FIFTH DAUGHTER

I was the fifth daughter in my family. -“There were already too many girls”, my mother said. Then her voice trailed away went back to when she was due to give birth to me. My father was not by her side at the moment. When she was in labour, my auntie accompanied her to the local hospital.

I was born that day in the afternoon. My father came in later, to see how my mother was doing this time. When he learned that she had given him another daughter, he turned his back to her and walked away. My mother was very sad and disappointed, not because of his attitude, but because of me, her fifth daughter. “Girls are overly abundant in this family”, my mother thought. She, herself had wished for a boy too so she didn’t blame my father for his annoyance. In addition, I was not a healthy new-born. I was underweight, about “2000 grams plus”, as my mother put it, a very tiny creature. Breast feeding me was a big problem for her, because I needed sleep more than I needed her milk, so I kept falling asleep during feeding time. That caused her more concern (how could I survive without milk?) than my father’s anger at her for not given him a son.

I should make it known here that my mother was a widow when she was married to my father; she’d been widowed at age 20, but had no children. Technology and medicine in the 30s were not able to save her husband of two months. My father was 32 years of age, also a widower with three children, all boys, from his previous marriage. So my mother had matured into the stepmother of his children by age 23. My eldest half-brother was 15 at the time of their marriage and the youngest was 8; there was only 8 years different between my mother and her eldest stepson. I would not know how they all got on so well with each other. While I was growing up in my family I didn’t even know that we had been brought to this world by different mothers. Nobody in the family nor close or distant relatives ever mentioned the matter to me. We lived very happily together. For a very long time we all addressed my mother as “auntie “.

Until the day I moved to Secondary School, there I realized that there was something strange going on at home, because all the other girls at school addressed their mothers as “mum “, I was different. I kept that thought to myself and, one day I asked my friend’s mother, who knew my family well, to explain things to me. She told me the whole story. From that night on I called my mother “Mere “, which means “Mother” in French. I also took the matter to my father and asked him why we all called my mother “auntie”? His answer was: “My dear, there’s nothing bizarre about it. Following our tradition, that’s what stepchildren called their stepmother. In

your mother's case, her own children copied the older children and everyone ended up calling her "auntie". Since I began to address my mother as "Mere", I felt brave, I do not know why and I felt I love her more. The next day my eldest sister did the same, then my second half-brother and then all the other children in the family. She became "Mother" to all of us. I knew my mother loved her step-sons, she showed it and I witnessed that love on many occasions during her life. I also knew that all my half-brothers fully respected her. I grew up small size but good nature and emotional, loving and caring towards everyone, because I felt flooded by my family love in return.

Along the years my mother lost most of her daughters to illness. Only my eldest sister and I survived. Who said that five girls were too many? She only had two left. Then when I was six, my mother gave my father a beautiful gift: a son, my little brother, who now lives in Saigon, Viet Nam.

My parents passed away a long time ago. My big half-brother, who's in his 80s now, lives in Boston USA, and is still in good spirits. My second half-brother, who's in his late 70s, lives in our hometown, he is disabled after suffering a stroke last year. My youngest half-brother passed away from a heart attack three years ago. My eldest sister, who is in her 60s, lives in Jacksonville, USA, and still working very hard. And I am here, with my three children and three grand children, without any other relative from my mother's side. Whenever I think back to my extended family, I cry, as I am crying now.

Da-Thao Que Tran

PS: This prose, when I was writing it in the year 1999, 16 years had passed. All my older brothers now had passed away. Especially my eldest brother who was living in Boston, when he had been informed by the Doctor that he's got an uncurable cancer, he went back to Viet Nam and passed away at his own home in our hometown three months later, on the 20 of August 2000 at the age of 85.

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