

The Inner Voice of an Eldest Daughter

I am the oldest daughter in my family. My family consists of my father, mother, younger brother, and my dog. We live in a not luxurious but nice and cozy house located in a small city in the Western part of the country.

My father is an industrious man who provided us with food, cloth, education, medical care, and everything else we needed. He did not go to high school, which is quite rare in my country, but started working at the age of fifteen to attain what he has now. My mother is also a hardworking woman who juggles the roles of a mother and an office worker. I sometimes pity her for how relentless her life is; however, I wholeheartedly appreciate her devotion to taking care of her family. My brother is three years younger than me and an accomplished runner. He also has been that popular kid in school who is excellent at all kinds of sports, unlike me who quit multiple sports clubs because I failed to excel in them. Lastly, my dog is a 10-year-old toy poodle whom my father decided to buy from the pet store because seeing her in a small cage sold as a leftover made him emotional.

That's all about my family. About myself? — I don't know. I don't feel like I have ever achieved anything to write about.

My parents often say that I was an easy kid who was quiet and did her homework without having to scold her with a sandal like Asian parents stereotypically do. In fact, I have never skipped school, broken windows, or asked my parents to buy me expensive toys. I remember hiding the fact that my friend group left me out in the fifth grade because I didn't have the video game everyone played after school. I couldn't ask them to buy me one because I thought they would perceive me as a demanding child and an inappropriate model for my little brother.

I was surely an easy kid for them. But was it easy for me to be an easy kid? — Not really. I did it only because I felt like I had to. My parents never forced me to study all day, engage in five club activities, or do the housework my father and my brother never did, but I did all of them anyway because I sensed the silent pressure from them to be a successful daughter and a mature sister whom they can brag to their neighbors. I wanted my parents to be proud of me. But the efforts to build a good daughter persona sucked my energy up throughout my childhood only to create a burnout teenager.

I succeeded in performing as a good daughter throughout my childhood. But maintaining the image drained me even more during my teenage years. I was crying inside my successful daughter's facade but oddly addicted to the sense of reward when my parents mentioned my efforts. This way, a permanent curse of self-improvement was created. I kept bringing good grades home and acting as the second mom of the family. However, as my

parents fixated on my character as “the reliable eldest daughter,” it started to replace my whole identity. As a result, I developed a fear of being unhelpful, dumb, and immature and considered it as a threat to my meaning of existence. I put myself in constant judgment to avoid embarrassing myself. In the end, the being-a-successful-daughter project exhausted me to the point where the only thing I could think about was my reputation. My life became boring and daunting. At this point, it was no longer my parents who pushed me to this expectation. I alone suffocated myself with such an ideal.

When I was around sixteen, my mom started to be absent from home due to her promotion. Accordingly, my stress grew bigger since my responsibility as the caretaker of the family increased. What is more, her job deprived me of her emotional availability as well. She was always tired and irritated after work. If I were to ask her to sign a document from school, she would say, “Can’t you see that I’m tired after working for thirteen hours? Can you just let me enjoy my beer peacefully?” She was not there even when she was right there.

Meanwhile, my dad started to say, “What’s the dinner?” as soon as he got home from work. I stopped by the grocery store on my way home and cooked for my family on weekdays. I came home at five p.m. but could finally sit down after eight p.m. Regardless, my dad dared to tell me the dish was too bland. I felt like flipping the table, but I didn’t. Instead, I decided to give up on him.

In my patriarchal household, my dad and my brother did not help me do any of it. I

was just seventeen, but I didn't have time to be seventeen. I wanted to go to karaoke with my friends after school. I wanted to spend my weekends watching Netflix without feeling guilty. I still wanted to be taken care of. But it was all too late because my efforts to be a good daughter ironically set my parents' expectations even higher. I even lost a sense of accomplishment because doing my best was the default. I had no choice but to keep going.

What if I were a boy? Would I have all the pressures and struggles that haunted me throughout my life if I were a son? I would still have been imposed certain expectations to get all As and maybe to be a soccer player. But my parents would never expect me to do the dishes, make dinner for my family, or sense my dad's mood swings and act as a mediator not to provoke his anger. In other words, my parents were one thing; but social and sexist norms were another thing that tormented me until I burned out.

Culturally, East Asian people are not communicative, emotional, or affectionate. Therefore, never have I ever felt like my parents loved me or appreciated me enough when I achieved something due to the absence of communication. Furthermore, Confucianist values that fantasize about the traditional family with a father who works outside for his family and a mother who stays home to take care of her family imposed me with the role of a substitute mom because of my mother's "failure" to follow traditional motherhood. This experience motivated me to study gender inequality, patriarchy, and misogyny.

When I was eighteen, I decided to move out of my hometown for college. I studied

fourteen hours every day for three months and got into my home university hoping I could finally be relinquished from the responsibility as the eldest daughter. However, an unexpected situation happened to me; parental pressure followed me to a city hundreds of miles away from home without them. Whenever I tried to reward myself with a break, my inner voice told me that I was lazy. Moreover, I realized I wasn't even that smart as I got overwhelmed by how much I didn't know about my fields of study, and this realization strikingly hurt my self-esteem. By the time I was a sophomore, my self-esteem hit zero because educational accomplishments had been the only source of my pride. However, my fear of judgment and longing for success were already unfixable. This forced my eldest daughter's persona to keep me running, dragging along my demotivated self. Eventually, I managed to put my burnout soul and exhausted body together after months of a depressive battle between my ideal and reality. But I felt like an assembly of broken pieces of glass stitched with glue. My complete self still hasn't come back. I am still trying to heal, fix, and rediscover myself.

What I obtained from this eldest daughter's sickness are anxiety, isolation, and self-sacrifice. I might have gained independence and a great sense of responsibility too, but were they worth acquiring when they deprived me of the experience of just enjoying my life as a girl? I was never hungry or couldn't buy textbooks for my classes, nor was I ever abused by my parents. I was materialistically blessed. But I had something missing growing up—validation and pure happiness.

I wish my parents told me that they cared about me. I wish my parents acknowledged my dedication to my family. I wish my parents told me I was worthy even without good grades. I wish my dad didn't impose patriarchal expectations on me just because I was a girl. I wish my mom wasn't always too tired to chat with me. I wish my brother didn't take me for granted when I did the house chores. I wish I could tell my parents that I was still a child.

All the expectations and pressures sat on my shoulders didn't allow me to jump into a new environment for a long time, because, what if I failed to succeed? What if I disgraced the good daughter persona that I have built over the years? However, I broke the curse and decided to spend the second half of my college life abroad this summer. I might get 63 on the exam. I might face a linguistic barrier that makes me feel stupid. Or, I might not succeed overall. But will it really ruin my life? Because I should be allowed to live my life for joy, satisfaction, and happiness, not to prove that I am a good daughter.