

## A Script

by Jenny Nguyen

### Youth Runner-up

‘Con có bạn trai chưa?’ my mother asks me in Vietnamese. *My child, do you have a boyfriend yet?*

I pause – I hope it does not seem for long. ‘Dạ không, mum,’ I respond. *No, mum.*

‘Tại sao?’ my mother persists. *Why not?*

‘I have a son, mum,’ I smirk and nod in the direction of my little brother. ‘I don’t have time for a boyfriend.’

My brother is scurrying on the dusty floor, looking for anything to satiate his imagination. He settles with attempting to tie the end of a long strand of grass to a stray crooked branch. He’s adamant on becoming a marine biologist when he grows up.

He is 6 years old, the youngest in a family of three children. The eldest son to the eldest son: *đích tôn*. A default title considering he is the only son to an only son – the golden child nonetheless. I am fourteen years his senior. Our age gap a product of the need to carry on the family name.

It is not unusual for people to assume I am my brother’s mother. It does not help that he often doesn’t notice or care to correct them. An arbitrary technicality in his mind, really. He knows who his mother is, why does it matter what others think?

I like to joke that he has two mothers anyway.

A florist by trade, my mother has a talent for crafting expressions of love. She loves that flowers can embody feeling and thought in a way that words cannot always capture.

Such a seemingly delicate art comes at the price of her body. She has told me that she grieves her once soft, tender hands – a marker of beauty and femininity in Vietnamese culture. Her fingers are now swollen and rough, her nails permanently tinged by chlorophyll. Her hands ache even when she is not working.

She has always said she doesn’t know what else she would be doing if not this. She does not regret sacrificing to provide a better future for her children. She struggles so that we don’t have to. I know that I don’t fully understand her struggles (which I am grateful for) and I know she doesn’t fully understand mine. I’m not sure either of us ever will.

I look back to my mother. I can tell she’s thinking. I know better than to ask.

‘*He’s not going to be a child forever, you know,*’ she says softly.

‘But he is now.’

That’s safe. Palatable. Honest but under the radar.

Being with my brother is safe. There is a familiar script with raising him. I confide in the comfort of the image of the selfless eldest daughter fiercely devoted to her family.

I am afraid to want anything more than this for myself.

I tell myself that this is enough for now.

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I’m in my brother’s bedroom, having just finished reading him a bedtime story. I contemplate the silence. I hesitate. But I decide it’s worth a try.

‘Hey, you know how you have a mum and a dad?’ I poke at him.

‘Yeah?’ He’s burrowing into his side of the bed, blankie in one hand and a soft toy under the other arm.

‘Some families are a bit different to ours.’

He’s finally found the sweet spot of comfortability and lays still. ‘How?’

‘Well,’ I begin. ‘Some people have a mum and a dad, some people have just a mum or just a dad. And some people have two mums or two dads.’

My brother gasps and his eyes widen. I hold my breath.

‘I want- I want A HUNDRED MUMS!’ he exclaims, arms outstretched and a grin ear to ear. His eyes glisten with joy and excitement.

My heart lurches in surprise. I laugh.

‘A hundred mums hey?’ I wrap my arms around him, playfully wrestling his glee into the bed.

‘Yeah! I love mums!’

His little body is enveloped by his blanket. I watch him be soothed to sleep by the idea of being bathed in unconditional love and affection. I admire him for being unapologetically who he is, for knowing he deserves to be loved. I hope the world will always be kind to him.

‘You know what? I do too. I love mums too.’

I close my eyes and listen to the hum of the night. I let myself stop and imagine what could be: a future that is more, that includes me. And perhaps maybe – just maybe – that’s not too much at all.