

သူ. ကုသိုလ်
Thu Kutho
His act of merit

A short story
by Ma Sanda

**In all, there were five brothers and sisters. ...
When they were young they were all as close and
loving as can be. Over time, as often happens,
they drifted apart, each one finding a wife or
husband outside the family and settling down
with their partner.**

He came third amongst five siblings, bang in the middle. Above him he had one brother and one sister. Below him he had another brother and another sister. Altogether there were five of them. When you added in all their wives and husbands it came to eleven all together.

You might think there would be ten but his younger brother had taken a second wife so altogether there were eleven of them. Being eleven people there were eleven mouths and that made eleven voices. As time passed there were differences, disagreements, irritations between the brothers in law and the sisters in law, and so the couples all grew apart.

As he was the one stuck in the middle of the five, he was left on his own. He was not close either to his two older siblings or to his two younger siblings. As regards money, he was the least successful so he was left to lead a quiet life dealing with his own problems. Another thing that didn't help this isolation was his wife. Compared with the other wives she was the least educated, the least bright. She was just quiet and normal. Actually to say she was quiet and normal is to put it politely. Many would just say she was a dimwit.

But overall he felt reasonably satisfied with the hand that life had dealt him. Despite his wife not being very well schooled, he tried to think the best of her and think of her as like one of the four noble women of the scriptures. He tried to take pride in the fact that she had other good qualities, such as not being one to gossip or babble about petty matters. Nor did she grumble or complain too much. He believed that fewer than one women in a hundred had qualities like these.

When my older brother's 'learned' wife comes to our house she first says to my older wife, "It's your own fault that you're in this mess. If it was me I would slap the younger wife and kick her out of the house." Then she goes off to my younger wife and tries to make her jealous saying, "the older wife has a big fancy necklace but yours is a tiny skimpy one. Your husband is playing favourites." She's just trying to stir up mischief.'

After the children, his nephews and nieces, had finished eating he and his sister were left alone eating together.

He said quietly, "Can you possibly let me have 150K, we're in a bit of bother." His sister let out a small sigh. Since he arrived she had been suspecting that he was back because he needed money again. She nodded and said "Yes" but he thought from her expression that she wasn't too happy about it.

"You all think I'm well off. Actually I have to spend a lot to survive.

“Hmm, yes, If I die now, I take no merit with me.’

The thought made him break out in a sweat. Even though he was nearly fifty he hadn’t yet acquired any merit.

“Ah! You're getting on. You should think about bringing your brothers and sisters together again.”

People said that his wife was not smart, but he didn't think any of the other wives could come up with such excellent advice.

“Okay, I will try.”

“If you're going to try you should start soon -- you're not young any more.”

“Before I die I will bring my brothers and sisters together. How's that?”

“You’ll get good merit, my love, if you do something like that. There is plenty of merit in a deed like that.”

“Yes, okay, since I don’t have any merit apart from this then it’s just what I need. I’ll take that merit with me into my next life.”

They were treating it lightly, but they knew that, though they might have forgotten about Death, Death would not forget them. They knew the words of the Buddha: before you can straighten the arm you have bent, before you can bend the arm you have straightened They behaved as if these words applied to other people and not to themselves. It didn't occur to him for a moment that they might have immediate reference to him.

He went straight to the office. It was really crowded on the bus so he started to sweat more and got dizzy. When he arrived at the office he tried to cool himself down by sitting under the fan by his desk. He got up and reached out to slow down the fan from its highest setting but his eyes went dim, and then he fainted. Before you can bend the arm you have straightened ... -

'Yesterday his face looked really haggard. Just before he was leaving he said thank you to me. He said, if he hadn't had this money then his family would have had to pawn their ration-book. He didn't feel easy about taking the money -- I grumbled and made a fuss about giving it to him. He said the mutton curry was really good. I saw he had only a little curry in his bowl, but I was afraid there wouldn't be enough for our dinner that night, so I didn't offer him any more. He didn't help himself either. Dear Nga Soe, I've been mean to you.

She suddenly remembered how, when she was small and going to school, instead of staying in her own classroom she used to go to Ko Soe's class in tears. Ko Soe would hold her and try to soothe her and then he'd carry her back to her classroom, struggling under her weight.

When Ko Moe heard his older sister crying he went to comfort her and put his arms round her shoulders.

Ko Toe said “Dear Mi Myo, you'd better get up. They still have things to sort out,” and he put his arms round her.

All four brothers and sisters stood beside Ko Soe's body and cried together. They were hand in hand together just as they had been when they were young.

It had been a long time since they had held each other's hands. Now as they were hand in hand, their hearts, which had been hard and rigid, softened and became warm again. With their hearts overflowing with grief they held each other's hands tightly.

Ko Soe's wife looked at the four brothers and sisters standing beside him. Then she sobbed, "You gained good merit brother. That good merit that you wanted, you have it now."

