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Ugly game played with people's lives

Big Cat

IT IS said that memories are shaped in the hearts and clouded by time. Some are truly unpleasant that it would be better if they were completely wiped out. Somehow, harrowing experiences are almost impossible to forget when indelible inscriptions are left on the heart.

Imagine, after so many years, the word polygyny still sounds unpalatable. Only after much deliberation and contemplation have I decided to open Pandora's Box to reveal the ugly side of polygyny. The paramount reason for this is the anxiety surrounding my 72-year-old mother's sudden coma lasting for four hours on Jan 3.

Only recently had we taken her to the Raya open house at Sri Perdana. "Mak nak salam dengan Dr Mahathir dan Dr Siti Hasmah dan bergambar peluk dua-dua. Ini tahun terakhir dia, nanti tak ada peluang lagi."

She had wanted to do this for years but her wishes could only be fulfilled this year when some of us finally owned cars. The drive to and from Johor Baru and the scorching heat must have taken its toll on her. But we were glad we made the effort.

It was in 1963 that news of my father taking a second wife was broken to us. My father was a leading government officer then and my eldest sister and I were in Standards Four and Two.

"Your father has married another," our mother had said.

It was like doomsday for us. We thought our father did not love us anymore. We, all five of us, cried in each other's arms. Our sixth brother was an infant.

Things were never the same after that. Father was now only half ours and on alternate days only. The next day mother ran to our grandfather's house with four of the younger siblings. The next two weeks were to be among the gloomiest days of our lives. Father managed to persuade our grandfather to bring mother and the kids home again.

He promised never to be separated from mother and the children. It was just that he had taken another wife.

A few months later, father was promoted and transferred to another state. It was here, away from family and relatives that mother agreed to make peace with the second wife.

As we grew older, we slowly understood the more melodramatic aspects of polygyny. Wretched is the appropriate word.

One night, while the whole family was experiencing sheer joy, due to my father's presence, my father's second wife turned up asking why he wasn't home with her.

It was her turn that night she said. She claimed their children had run out of milk and she would not leave until he left with her.

Although it was technically my mother's turn, she made him leave with her to keep the peace. Stepmother's voice was getting louder and mother feared the neighbours would hear.

When father came home the next day, the magic and warmth of that wonderful night were gone. We were never to come close to that feeling ever again.

In 1974 when father was again promoted and transferred to another location, mother made what must be the biggest mistake of her life. She opted to stay behind and let him leave with stepmother.

That together with the fact that father later suffered a stroke caused our finances to suffer a great deal. Out of his salary of RM3,150, father

would provide us a monthly allowance of RM1,000. After his stroke, we only received RM195 for the next eight years. Our house rent alone was RM280. We were told cuts were necessary to help pay father's medical bills.

Rumours also went round that mother had been divorced.

Father eventually died. Even at the funeral we were made to feel like visitors. Mother remained calm. We paid our respects and left.

Why do lies and deceit come in so many guises?

Until today, whatever property left by my father has not been amicably settled. I know our father would never have neglected us. We were his beginning. He would have provided for both families.

How many polygynous marriages are based on the solid bedrock of divine foundation? In most cases it is a game people play with the lives of others and their own. It is definitely not a healthy lifestyle.

* The writer can be contacted at features@nstp.com.my