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## Eldest First

by Lorraine Gailey

I grew up the eldest in a family of five girls. My mother, grandmother and great-grandmother had also been the eldest in their families, so I was the eldest daughter in a long line of eldest daughters.

What that meant was that I was responsible for my sisters, and I took my responsibilities seriously even if they didn't. I did my best to walk all of us to school on time, failing every day because they wouldn't walk as fast as they needed to and they weren't worried about the consequences of being late as I was. When squabbles broke out at home, which was several times every day, it was my place to 'know better' and stop them even when I wasn't involved in the fight. And so on.

Fast forward thirty five years, and two careers later – careers in which I found myself holding positions of leadership and responsibility, fulfilling my natural place in the world in a somewhat more satisfying way because I could at last claim some authority and respect for my position.

I was chatting with one of my aunts at a family birthday party a few years after my mum died when she made a casual remark that changed my world.

'Of course,' she was saying, 'Your mum was devastated when she lost the baby who'd have been her first child when she got married.'

In that moment, everything I knew to be true about myself until then was gone.

I might not have been the eldest!!

The exhilaration I felt was indescribable. The burdens, the obligations, the responsibilities – they might have been someone else's, not mine. In that instant I saw

with crystal clarity how my life choices had all been influenced by my perceived position as the eldest child. And now I was free of that!

Funnily enough, it wasn't too long before I began to realise that I actually liked my positions of responsibility ... the difference was that now it felt it was my choice, not predetermined by an accident of birth.

So when I discovered a few years later that my aunt had been mistaken and my mum's miscarriage had happened between my third and fourth sisters, it didn't really matter any longer. I still felt free to be the person I had become, eldest daughter or not.