



## Footbinding

THE PREPARATION FOR MY FOOTBINDING TOOK MUCH LONGER than anyone expected. In cities, girls who come from the gentry class have their feet bound as early as age three. In some provinces far from ours, girls bind their feet only temporarily, so they will look more attractive to their future husbands. Those girls might be as old as thirteen. Their bones are not broken, their bindings are always loose, and, once married, their feet are set free again so they can work in the fields alongside their husbands. The poorest girls don't have their feet bound at all. We know how they end up. They are either sold as servants or they become "little daughters-in-law"—big-footed girls from unfortunate families who are given to other families to raise until they are old enough to bear children. But in our so-so county, girls from families like mine begin their footbinding at age six and it is considered done two years later.

Even while I was out running with my brother, my mother had already begun making the long blue strips of cloth that would become my bindings. With her own hands she made my first pair of shoes, but she took even more care stitching the miniature shoes she would place on the altar of Guanyin—the goddess who hears all women's tears. Those embroidered shoes were only three and a half centimeters long and were made from a special piece of red silk that my mother had saved from her dowry. They were the first inkling I had that my mother might care for me.

When Beautiful Moon and I turned six, Mama and Aunt sent for the diviner to find an auspicious date to begin our binding. They say fall is the most propitious time to start footbinding, but only because winter is coming and cold weather helps numb the feet. Was I excited? No. I was scared. I was too young to remember the early days of Elder Sister's binding, but who in our village had not heard the screams of the Wu girl down the way?

My mother greeted Diviner Hu downstairs, poured tea, and offered him a bowl of watermelon seeds. Her courtesy was meant to bring good readings. He began with me. He considered my birth date. He weighed the possibilities. Then he said, "I need to see this child with my own eyes." This was not the usual case, and when my mother fetched me her face was etched with worry. She led me to the diviner. She held me in front of him. Her fingers clutched my shoulders, keeping me in place and frightening me at the same time, while the diviner performed his examination.

"Eyes, yes. Ears, yes. That mouth." He looked up at my mother. "This is no ordinary child."

My mother sucked in her breath through closed teeth. This was the worst announcement the diviner could have made.

"Further consultation is required," the diviner said. "I propose we confer with a matchmaker. Do you agree?"

Some might have suspected that the diviner was trying to make more money for himself and was in league with the local matchmaker, but my mother didn't hesitate for an instant. Such was my mother's fear—or conviction—that she didn't even ask my father's permission to spend the money.

"Please return as soon as you can," she said. "We will be waiting."

The diviner departed, leaving all of us confused. That night my mother said very little. In fact, she would not look at me. There were no jokes from Aunt. My grandmother retired early, but I could hear her praying. Baba and Uncle went for a long walk. Sensing the unease in the household, even my brothers were subdued.

The next day, the women rose early. This time sweet cakes were made, chrysanthemum tea brewed, and special dishes brought out of cupboards. My father stayed home from the fields so he could greet the visitors. All these extravagances showed the seriousness of the situation. Then, to make matters worse, the diviner brought with him not Madame Gao, the local matchmaker, but Madame Wang, the matchmaker from Tongkou, the best village in the county.

Let me say this: Even the local matchmaker had not been to our house

yet. She was not expected to visit for another year or two, when she would serve as a go-between for Elder Brother as he searched for a wife and for Elder Sister when families were looking for brides for their sons. So when Madame Wang's palanquin stopped in front of our house, there was no rejoicing. Looking down from the women's chamber, I saw neighbors come out to gape. My father kowtowed, his forehead touching the dirt again and again. I felt sorry for him. Baba was a worrier—typical for someone born in the year of the rabbit. He was responsible for everyone in our household, but this was beyond his experience. My uncle hopped from foot to foot, while my aunt—usually so welcoming and jolly—stood frozen in place at his side. From my upstairs vantage point, the conclusion was evident on all the faces below me: Something was terribly wrong.

Once they were inside, I went quietly to the top of the stairs so I could eavesdrop. Madame Wang settled herself. The tea and treats were served. My father's voice could barely be heard as he went through the polite rituals. But Madame Wang had not come to speak trivialities with this humble family. She wanted to see me. Just as on the day before, I was called to the room. I walked downstairs and into the main room as gracefully as someone can who's only six and whose feet are still clumsy and large.

I glanced around at the elders in my family. Although there are special moments when the distance of time leaves memories in shadows, the images of their faces on that day are very clear to me. My grandmother sat staring at her folded hands. Her skin was so frail and thin that I could see a blue pulse in her temple. My father, who already had plenty of aggravations, was speechless with anxiety. My aunt and uncle stood together in the main doorway, afraid to be a part of what was about to happen and afraid to miss it too. But what I remember most is my mother's face. Of course, as a daughter I believed she was pretty, but I saw her true person for the first time that day. I had always known she had been born in the year of the monkey, but I'd never realized that its traits of deceit and cunning ran so strongly in her. Something raw lurked underneath her high cheekbones. Something conniving lay veiled behind her dark eyes. There was something . . . I still do not quite know how to describe it. I would say that something like male ambition glowed right through her skin.

I was told to stand in front of Madame Wang. I thought her woven silk jacket was beautiful, but a child has no taste, no discrimination. Today I would say it was gaudy and unbecoming a widow, but then a matchmaker is not like a regular woman. She does business with men, establishing bride prices, haggling over dowries, and serving as a go-between. Madame Wang's

laugh was too loud and her words too oily. She ordered me forward, clasped me between her knees, and stared hard into my face. In that moment I changed from being invisible to being very visible.

Madame Wang was far more thorough than the diviner. She pinched my earlobes. She put her forefingers on my lower eyelids and pulled the skin down, then ordered me to look up, down, left, right. She held my cheeks in her hands, turning my face back and forth. Her hands squeezed my arms in rough pulses from my shoulders down to my wrists. Then she put her hands on my hips. I was only six! You can't tell anything about fertility yet! But she did it just the same, and no one said a word to stop her. Then she did the most amazing thing. She got out of her chair and told me to take her place. To do this would have shown terribly bad manners on my part. I looked from my mother to my father for guidance, but they stood there as dumb as stock animals. My father's face had gone gray. I could almost hear him thinking, Why didn't we just throw her in the stream when she was born?

Madame Wang had not become the most important matchmaker in the county by waiting for sheep to make decisions. She simply picked me up and sat me on the chair. Then she knelt before me and peeled off my shoes and socks. Again, utter silence. Like she had with my face, she turned my feet this way and that and then ran her thumbnail up and down my arch.

Madame Wang looked over at the diviner and nodded. She stood again and with an abrupt movement of her forefinger motioned me out of her chair. After she had once again taken her seat, the diviner cleared his throat.

"Your daughter presents us with a special circumstance," he said. "I saw something in her yesterday, and Madame Wang, who brings additional expertise, agrees. Your daughter's face is long and slender like a rice seed. Her full earlobes tell us she is generous in spirit. But most important are her feet. Her arch is very high but not yet fully developed. This means, Mother, that you should wait one more year to begin footbinding." He held up a hand to prevent anyone from interrupting him, as if they would. "Seven is not the custom in our village, I know, but I think if you look at your daughter you will see that . . ."

Diviner Hu hesitated. Grandmother pushed a bowl of tangerines in his direction, so he might have a way to gather his thoughts. He took one, peeled it, and dropped the rind on the floor. With one section poised before his mouth, he resumed.

"At age six, bones are still mostly water and therefore malleable. But

your daughter is underdeveloped for her age, even for your village, which has endured difficult years. Perhaps the other girls in this household are, as well. You should not be ashamed."

Until this time I had not thought there was anything different about my family, nor had I considered that there was anything different about me.

He popped the wedge of tangerine into his mouth, chewed thoughtfully, and went on. "But your daughter has something besides smallness from famine. Her foot has a particularly high arch, which means that if the proper allowances are made now, her feet could be the most perfect produced in our county."

Some people don't believe in diviners. Some people think they make only commonsense recommendations. After all, autumn is the best time for footbinding, spring is the best time to give birth, and a pretty hill with a gentle breeze will have the best *feng shui* for a burial spot. But this diviner saw something in me, and it changed the course of my life. Still, at that moment there was no celebration. The room was eerily quiet. Something continued to be terribly amiss.

Into this silence, Madame Wang spoke. "The girl is indeed very lovely, but golden lilies are far more important in life than a pretty face. A lovely face is a gift from Heaven, but tiny feet can improve social standing. On this we can all agree. What happens beyond that is really for Father to decide." She looked directly at Baba, but the words that traveled into the air were meant for my mother. "It is not such a bad thing to make a good alliance for a daughter. A high family will bring you better connections, a better bride-price, and long-term political and economic protection. Though I appreciate the hospitality and generosity that you have shown today," she said, emphasizing the meagerness of our home with a languid movement of her hand, "fate—in the form of your daughter—has brought you an opportunity. If Mother does her job properly, this insignificant girl could marry into a family in Tongkou."

Tongkou!

"You speak of wonderful things," my father ventured warily. "But our family is modest. We cannot afford your fee."

"Old Father," Madame Wang responded smoothly, "if your daughter's feet end up as I imagine, I can rely on a generous fee being paid by the groom's family. You will also be receiving goods from them in the form of a bride-price. As you can see, you and I will both benefit from this arrangement."

My father said nothing. He never discussed what happened on the land or ever let us know his feelings, but I remembered one winter after a year of drought when we didn't have much food stored. My father went into the mountains to hunt, but even the animals had died from hunger. Baba could do nothing but come home with bitter roots, which my mother and grandmother stewed into broth. Perhaps in this moment he was remembering the shame of that year and conjuring in his mind how fine my bride-price might be and what it would do for our family.

"Beyond all of this," the matchmaker went on, "I believe your daughter might also be eligible for a *laotong* relationship."

I knew the words and what they meant. A *laotong* relationship was completely different from a sworn sisterhood. It involved two girls from different villages and lasted their entire lives, while a sworn sisterhood was made up of several girls and dissolved at marriage. Never in my short life had I met a *laotong* or considered that I might have one. As girls, my mother and aunt had sworn sisters in their home villages. Elder Sister now had sworn sisters, while grandmother had widow friends from her husband's village as late-life sworn sisters. I had assumed that in the normal course of my life I would have them as well. To have a *laotong* was very special indeed. I should have been excited, but like everyone else in the room I was aghast. This was not a subject that should be discussed in front of men. So extraordinary was the situation that my father lost himself and blurted out, "None of the women in our family has ever had a *laotong*."

"Your family has not had a lot of things—until now," Madame Wang said, as she rose out of her chair. "Discuss these matters within your household, but remember, opportunity doesn't step over your threshold every day. I will visit again."

The matchmaker and the diviner left, both with promises that they would return to check my progress. My mother and I went upstairs. As soon as we entered the women's room, she turned and looked at me with that same expression I had just seen in the main room. Then, before I could say anything, she slapped me across the face as hard as she could.

"Do you know how much trouble this will bring your father?" Mama asked. Harsh words, but I knew that slap was for good luck and to scare away bad spirits. After all, nothing guaranteed that my feet would turn out like golden lilies. It was equally possible that my mother would make a mistake with my feet as her mother had made with hers. She had done a fairly good job with Elder Sister, but anything could happen. Instead of

being prized, I could totter about on ugly stumps, my arms constantly flapping to keep my balance, just like my mother.

Although my face stung, inside I was happy. That slap was the first time Mama had shown me her mother love, and I had to bite my lips to keep from smiling.

Mama did not speak to me for the rest of the day. Instead, she went back downstairs and talked with my aunt, uncle, father, and grandmother. Uncle was kindhearted, but as the second son he had no authority in our home. Aunt knew the benefits that might arise out of this situation, but as a sonless woman married to a second son, she had the lowest rank in the family. Mama also had no position, but having seen the look on her face when the matchmaker was talking, I knew what her thoughts would be. Father and Grandmother made all decisions in the household, though both could be influenced. The matchmaker's announcement, although a good omen for me, meant that my father would have to work very hard to build a dowry appropriate for a higher marriage. If he didn't comply with the matchmaker's decision, he would lose face not only in the village but also in the county.

I don't know if they agreed on my fate on that day, but in my mind nothing was ever the same. Beautiful Moon's future also changed with mine. I was a few months older, but it was decided that the two of us should have our feet bound at the same time as Third Sister's. Although I still continued to do my outdoor chores, I never again went to the river with my brother. I never again felt the coolness of rushing water against my skin. Until that day Mama had never hit me, but it turned out that this was just the first of what would become many beatings over the next few years. Worst of all, my father never again looked at me the same way. No more sitting on his lap in the evenings when he smoked his pipe. In one instant I had changed from being a worthless girl into someone who might be useful to the family.

My bindings and the special shoes my mother had made to place on the altar of Guanyin were put away, as were the bindings and shoes that had been made for Beautiful Moon. Madame Wang started to make periodic visits. Always she came in her own palanquin. Always she inspected me from head to toe. Always she questioned me about my house learning. I would not say she was kind to me in any way. I was only a means to make a profit.

DURING THE NEXT year, my education in the upstairs women's chamber began in earnest, but I already knew a lot. I knew that men rarely entered

the women's chamber; it was for us alone, where we could do our work and share our thoughts. I knew I would spend almost my entire life in a room like that. I also knew the difference between *nei*—the inner realm of the home—and *wai*—the outer realm of men—lay at the very heart of Confucian society. Whether you are rich or poor, emperor or slave, the domestic sphere is for women and the outside sphere is for men. Women should not pass beyond the inner chambers in their thoughts or in their actions. I also understood that two Confucian ideals ruled our lives. The first was the Three Obediences: "When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son." The second was the Four Virtues, which delineate women's behavior, speech, carriage, and occupation: "Be chaste and yielding, calm and upright in attitude; be quiet and agreeable in words; be restrained and exquisite in movement; be perfect in handiwork and embroidery." If girls do not stray from these principles, they will grow into virtuous women.

My studies now branched out to include the practical arts. I learned how to thread a needle, choose a thread color, and make my stitches small and even. This was important, as Beautiful Moon, Third Sister, and I began working on the shoes that would carry us through the two-year footbinding process. We needed shoes for day, special slippers for sleep, and several pairs of tight socks. We worked chronologically, starting with things that would fit our feet now and moving to smaller and smaller sizes.

Most important, my aunt began to teach me *nu shu*. At the time, I didn't fully understand why she took a special interest in me. I foolishly believed that if I was diligent, I would inspire Beautiful Moon to be diligent too. And if she was diligent, perhaps she would marry better than her mother had. But my aunt was actually hoping to bring the secret writing into our lives so that Beautiful Moon and I could share it forever. I also did not perceive that this caused conflict between my aunt and my mother and grandmother, both of whom were illiterate in *nu shu* just as my father and uncle were illiterate in men's writing.

Back then I had yet to see men's writing, so I had nothing to compare it with. But now I can say that men's writing is bold, with each character easily contained within a square, while our *nu shu* looks like mosquito legs or bird prints in dust. Unlike men's writing, a *nu shu* character does not represent a specific word. Rather, our characters are phonetic in nature. As a result, one character can represent every spoken word with that same sound. So while a character might make a sound that creates the words for

"pare," "pair," or "pear," context usually makes the meaning clear. Still, much care has to be taken to make sure we do not misinterpret meaning. Many women—like my mother and grandmother—never learn the writing, but they still know some of the songs and stories, many of which resonate with a *ta dum, ta dum, ta dum* rhythm.

Aunt instructed me on the special rules that govern *nu shu*. It can be used to write letters, songs, autobiographies, lessons on womanly duties, prayers to the goddess, and, of course, popular stories. It can be written with brush and ink on paper or on a fan; it can be embroidered onto a handkerchief or woven into cloth. It can and should be sung before an audience of other women and girls, but it can also be something that is read and treasured alone. But the two most important rules are these: Men must never know that it exists, and men must not touch it in any form.

THINGS CONTINUED THIS way—with Beautiful Moon and me learning new skills every day—until my seventh birthday, when the diviner returned. This time he had to find a single date for three girls—Beautiful Moon, myself, and Third Sister, the only one of us to be the proper age—to begin our binding. He hemmed and hawed. He consulted our eight characters. But when all was said and done, he settled on the typical day for girls in our region—the twenty-fourth day of the eighth lunar month—when those who are to have their feet bound say prayers and make final offerings to the Tiny-Footed Maiden, the goddess who oversees footbinding.

Mama and Aunt resumed their pre-binding activities, making more bandages. They fed us red-bean dumplings, to help soften our bones to the consistency of a dumpling and inspire us to achieve a size for our feet that would be no larger than a dumpling. In the days leading up to our binding, many women in our village came to visit us in the upstairs chamber. Elder Sister's sworn sisters wished us luck, brought us more sweets, and congratulated us on our official entry into womanhood. Sounds of celebration filled our room. Everyone was happy, singing, laughing, talking. Now I know there were many things no one said. (No one said I could die. It wasn't until I moved to my husband's home that my mother-in-law told me that one out of ten girls died from footbinding, not only in our county but across the whole of China.)

All I knew was that footbinding would make me more marriageable and therefore bring me closer to the greatest love and greatest joy in a

woman's life—a son. To that end, my goal was to achieve a pair of perfectly bound feet with seven distinct attributes: They should be small, narrow, straight, pointed, and arched, yet still fragrant and soft in texture. Of these requirements, length is most important. Seven centimeters—about the length of a thumb—is the ideal. Shape comes next. A perfect foot should be shaped like the bud of a lotus. It should be full and round at the heel, come to a point at the front, with all weight borne by the big toe alone. This means that the toes and arch of the foot must be broken and bent under to meet the heel. Finally, the cleft formed by the forefoot and heel should be deep enough to hide a large *cash* piece perpendicularly within its folds. If I could attain all that, happiness would be my reward.

On the morning of the twenty-fourth day of the eighth lunar month, we offered the Tiny-Footed Maiden glutinous rice balls, while our mothers placed the miniature shoes they had made before a small statue of Guanyin. After this, Mama and Aunt gathered together alum, astringent, scissors, special nail clippers, needles, and thread. They pulled out the long bandages they had made; each was five centimeters wide, three meters long, and lightly starched. Then all the women in the household came upstairs. Elder Sister arrived last, with a bucket of boiled water in which mulberry root, ground almonds, urine, herbs, and roots steeped.

As the eldest, I went first, and I was determined to show how brave I could be. Mama washed my feet and rubbed them with alum, to contract the tissue and limit the inevitable secretions of blood and pus. She cut my toenails as short as possible. During this time, my bandages were soaked, so that when they dried on my skin, they would tighten even more. Next, Mama took one end of a bandage, placed it on my instep, then pulled it over my four smallest toes to begin the process of rolling them underneath my foot. From here she wrapped the bandage back around my heel. Another loop around the ankle helped to secure and stabilize the first two loops. The idea was to get my toes and heel to meet, creating the cleft, but leaving my big toe to walk on. Mama repeated these steps until the entire bandage was used; Aunt and Grandmother looked over her shoulder the entire time, making sure no wrinkles saw their way into those loops. Finally, Mama sewed the end tightly shut so the bindings would not loosen and I would not be able to work my foot free.

She repeated the process on my other foot; then Aunt started on Beautiful Moon. During the binding, Third Sister said she wanted a drink of water and went downstairs. Once Beautiful Moon's feet were done, Mama called for my sister, but she didn't answer. An hour before, I would

have been told to go and find her, but for the next two years I would not be allowed to walk down our stairs. Mama and Aunt searched the house and then went outside. I wanted to run to the lattice window and peek out, but already my feet ached as the pressure on my bones built and the tightness of the bindings blocked my blood's circulation. I looked over at Beautiful Moon, and her face was as white as her name implied. Twin streams of tears ran down her cheeks.

From outside, Mama's and Aunt's voices carried up to us as they called, "Third Sister, Third Sister."

Grandmother and Elder Sister moved to the lattice window and looked out.

"*Aiya*," Grandmother muttered.

Elder Sister glanced back at us. "Mama and Aunt are in the neighbors' house. Can you hear Third Sister squealing?"

Beautiful Moon and I shook our heads no.

"Mama's dragging Third Sister down the alley," Elder Sister reported. Now we heard Third Sister yell, "No, I won't go, I won't do it!"

Mama scolded her loudly. "You're a worthless nothing. You're an embarrassment to our ancestors." These were ugly words but not uncommon; they were heard almost every day in our village.

Third Sister was pushed into the room, but as soon as she fell to the floor she clambered to her feet, ran to a corner, and cowered there.

"This will happen. You have no choice," Mama declared, as Third Sister's eyes darted frantically around the room, looking for a place to hide. She was trapped and nothing could stop the inevitable. Mama and Aunt advanced on her. She made one final effort to scramble under their outstretched arms, but Elder Sister grabbed her. Third Sister was only six years old, but she struggled and fought as hard as she could. Elder Sister, Aunt, and Grandmother held her down, while Mama hurriedly applied the bandages. The whole while, Third Sister screamed. A few times an arm broke free, only to be restricted again. For one second, Mama loosened her grip on Third Sister's foot, and soon that entire leg flailed, the long bandage twirling through the air like an acrobat's ribbon. Beautiful Moon and I were horrified. This was not the way someone in our family should act. But all we could do was sit and stare, because by now growing daggers of pain were shooting from our feet up our legs. Finally, Mama finished her task. She threw Third Sister's wrapped foot to the floor, stood, looked down at her youngest daughter with disgust, and spat out a single word: "Worthless!"

Now I will write about the next few minutes and weeks, the length of which in a lifetime as long as mine should be insignificant but to me were an eternity.

Mama looked at me first, because I was the eldest. "Get up!"

The idea was beyond my comprehension. My feet were throbbing. Just a few minutes ago I had been so sure of my courage. Now I did my best to hold back my tears and failed.

Aunt tapped Beautiful Moon's shoulder. "Stand up and walk."

Third Sister still wailed on the floor.

Mama yanked me out of the chair. The word *pain* does not begin to describe the feeling. My toes were locked under my feet so that my body weight fell entirely on the top of those appendages. I tried to balance backward on my heels. When Mama saw this, she hit me.

"Walk!"

I did the best I could. As I shuffled toward the window, Mama reached down and pulled Third Sister to her feet, dragged her to Elder Sister, and said, "Take her back and forth across the room ten times." Hearing this, I understood what was in store for me, and it was nearly unfathomable. Seeing what was happening and being the lowest-ranked person in the household, my aunt roughly took her daughter's hand and pulled her up and out of the chair. Tears coursed down my face as Mama led me back and forth across the women's chamber. I heard myself whimpering. Third Sister kept hollering and trying to wrestle away from Elder Sister. Grandmother, whose duty as the most important woman in our household was merely to oversee these activities, took Third Sister's other arm. Flanked by two people much stronger than she, Third Sister's physical body had to obey, but this did not mean that her verbal complaints lessened in any way. Only Beautiful Moon buried her feelings, showing that she was a good daughter, even if she too was lowly in our household.

After our ten round-trips, Mama, Aunt, and Grandmother left us alone. We three girls were nearly paralyzed from our physical torment, yet our trial had barely begun. We could not eat. Even with empty stomachs, we vomited out our agony. Finally, everyone in the household went to bed. What a reprieve it was to lie down. Even to have our feet on the same level as the rest of our bodies was a relief. But as the hours passed a new kind of suffering overtook us. Our feet burned as though they lay among the coals of the brazier. Strange mewling sounds escaped from our mouths. Poor Elder Sister had to share the room with us. She tried her best to comfort us with fairy stories and reminded us in the most gentle

way possible that every girl of any standing throughout the great country of China went through what we were going through to become women, wives, and mothers of worth.

None of us slept that night, but whatever we thought we felt on the first day was twice as bad on the second. All three of us tried to rip our bindings, but only Third Sister actually freed a foot. Mama beat her on her arms and legs, rewrapped the foot, and made her walk an extra ten rounds across the room as punishment. Over and over, Mama shook her roughly and demanded, "Do you want to become a little daughter-in-law? It's not too late. That future can be yours."

Our whole lives we had heard this threat, but none of us had ever *seen* a little daughter-in-law. Puwei was too poor for people to take in an unwanted, stubborn, big-footed girl, but we hadn't seen a fox spirit either and we believed fully in those. So Mama threatened and Third Sister temporarily surrendered.

On the fourth day, we soaked our bandaged feet in a bucket of hot water. The bindings were then removed, and Mama and Aunt checked our toenails, shaved calluses, scrubbed away dead skin, dabbed on more alum and perfume to disguise the odor of our putrefying flesh, and wrapped new clean bindings, even tighter this time. Every day the same. Every fourth day the same. Every two weeks a new pair of shoes, each pair smaller. The neighbor women visited, bringing us red-bean dumplings, in hopes that our bones would soften faster, or dried chili peppers, in hopes that our feet would adopt that slim and pointed shape. Elder Sister's sworn sisters arrived with little gifts that had helped them during their footbinding. "Bite the end of my calligraphy brush. The tip is thin and delicate. This will help your feet to become thin and delicate too." Or, "Eat these water chestnuts. They will tell your flesh to think small."

The women's chamber turned into a room of discipline. Instead of doing our usual chores, we walked back and forth across the room. Every day Mama and Aunt added more rounds. Every day Grandmother was enlisted to help. When she tired, she rested on one of the beds and directed our activities from there. When it got colder, she pulled extra quilts over her body. As the days grew shorter and darker, her words got shorter and darker too, until she rarely spoke but just stared at Third Sister, willing her with her eyes to keep up with her rounds.

For us, the pain didn't lessen. How could it? But we learned the most important lesson for all women: that we must obey for our own good. Even in those early weeks, a picture began to form of what the three of us

would be like as women. Beautiful Moon would be stoic and beautiful in all circumstances. Third Sister would be a complaining wife, bitter about her lot, ungracious about the gifts that were given to her. As for me—the so-called special one—I accepted my fate without argument.

One day, as I made one of my trips across the room, I heard something crack. One of my toes had broken. I thought the sound was something internal to my own body, but it was so sharp that everyone in the women's chamber heard it. My mother's eyes zeroed in on me. "Move! Progress is finally being made!" Walking, my whole body trembled. By nightfall the eight toes that needed to break had broken, but I was still made to walk. I felt my broken toes under the weight of every step I took, for they were loose in my shoes. The freshly created space where once there had been a joint was now a gelatinous infinity of torture. The freezing weather did not begin to numb the excruciating sensations that raged through my entire body. Still, Mama was not happy with my compliance. That night she told Elder Brother to bring back a reed cut from the riverbank. Over the next two days, she used this on the backs of my legs to keep me moving. On the day that my bindings were rewrapped, I soaked my feet as usual, but this time the massage to reshape the bones was beyond anything I had experienced so far. With her fingers Mama pulled my loose bones back and up against the soles of my feet. At no other time did I see Mama's mother love so clearly.

"A true lady lets no ugliness into her life," she repeated again and again, drilling the words into me. "Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you find peace. I wrap, I bind, but you will have the reward."

Beautiful Moon's toes broke a few days later, but Third Sister's bones refused. Mama sent Elder Brother out on another errand. This time he needed to find small stones that could be wrapped against Third Sister's toes for extra pressure. I have already said she was resistant, but now her cries were even louder, if such a thing were possible. Beautiful Moon and I thought she responded this way because she wanted more attention. After all, Mama was devoting her efforts almost entirely to me. But on the days when our bindings were removed, we could see differences between our feet and Third Sister's. Yes, blood and pus seeped through our bandages, as was normal, but with Third Sister the fluids that oozed from her body had taken on a new and different smell. And while Beautiful Moon's and my skin had wilted to the pallor of the dead, Third Sister's skin shone as pink as a flower.

Madame Wang came for another visit. She inspected the work my mother had done and made a few recommendations of herbs that could be made into a tea to help the pain. I did not try that bitter brew until the days of snow set in and the bones in my mid-foot cracked apart. My mind was in a haze brought on by the combination of suffering and the herbs, when Third Sister's condition suddenly changed. Her skin burned. Her eyes glittered with water and fever insanity, and her round face waned into sharp angles. When Mama and Aunt went downstairs to prepare the mid-day meal, Elder Sister took pity on her pathetic sibling by letting her stretch out on one of the beds. Beautiful Moon and I took a break from our walking rounds. Afraid to be caught sitting, we stood at Third Sister's side. Elder Sister rubbed Third Sister's legs, trying to give her some relief. But it was the deepest part of winter and we all wore our clothes with the heaviest padding. With our help, Elder Sister pulled Third Sister's pant leg up to her knee so she could massage the calf directly. That's when we saw the brutal red streaks that rose from underneath Third Sister's bindings, snaked their way up her leg, and disappeared back under her pants. We looked at one another for a moment and then quickly examined the other leg. The same red streaks were there too.

Elder Sister went downstairs. To tell what we'd found, she had to confess her failure in her duties. We expected to hear Mama's hand strike Elder Sister's face. But no. Mama and Aunt hurried back upstairs instead. They stood at the top of the landing and surveyed the room: Third Sister staring at the ceiling with her little legs exposed, two other girls waiting meekly to be punished, and Grandmother asleep under her quilts. Aunt took one look at the scene and went to boil water.

Mama walked to the bed. She didn't have her cane and she flapped across the room like a bird with broken wings, and as a person she was about as useless to help her own daughter. As soon as Aunt returned, Mama began to unwrap the bindings. A disgusting odor infused the room. Aunt gagged. Although it was snowing, Elder Sister tore away the rice paper that covered the windows to give the stench an exit. Finally, Third Sister's feet were fully exposed. The pus was dark green and the blood had coagulated into brownish, putrid mud. Third Sister was brought to a sitting position and her unbound feet set into a steaming bowl of water. She was so far away in her mind that she didn't cry out.

All of Third Sister's screams of the past weeks took on a different meaning. Did she know on that first day that something bad might happen? Was that why she had resisted? Had Mama made some terrible mis-

take in her haste? Had Third Sister's blood poisoning been triggered by wrinkles in her bindings? Was she weak from bad nutrition as Madame Wang claimed I had been? What had she done in her previous life to deserve this punishment now?

Mama scrubbed at those feet, trying to remove the infection. Third Sister fainted. The water in the bucket became murky with noxious discharge. Finally Mama pulled the broken appendages from the bucket and patted them dry.

"Mother," Mama called to her mother-in-law, "you have more experience than I. Please help me."

But Grandmother didn't stir under her quilts. Mama and Aunt disagreed about what to do next.

"We should leave her feet open to the air," Mama suggested.

"You know that's the worst thing," Aunt came back. "Many of her bones have already broken. If you don't bind them, they will never heal properly. She'll be crippled. Unmarriageable."

"I would rather keep her on this earth unmarried than lose her forever."

"Then she would have no purpose and no value," Aunt reasoned. "Your mother love tells you this is no future."

The whole time they argued, Third Sister didn't move. Alum was spread over her skin and her feet were rebound. The next day, the snow still fell and she was worse. Though we were not rich, Baba went out into the storm and brought back the village doctor, who looked at Third Sister and shook his head. It was the first time I saw that gesture, which means that we are powerless to stop the soul of a loved one from leaving for the spirit world. You can fight it, but once death has grasped hold, nothing can be done. We are meek in the face of the afterworld's desires. The doctor offered to make a poultice and prepare herbs for a tea, but he was a good and honest man. He understood our situation.

"I can do these things for your little girl," he confided to Baba, "but they will be money spent on a no-use cause."

But the bad news of that day was not yet done. While we kowtowed to the doctor, he looked round the room and saw Grandmother under her quilts. He moved to her, touched her forehead, and listened to the secret pulses that measured her *chi*. He looked up at my father. "Your honored mother is very sick. Why did you not mention this before?"

How could Baba answer this and save face? He was a good son, but he was also a man, and this business fell within the inner realm. Still, Grand-

mother's welfare was his most important filial duty. While he was downstairs smoking his pipe with his brother and waiting for winter to end, upstairs two people had fallen under the spell of ghost spirits.

Again, our whole family set to questioning. Was too much time spent on worthless girls that the one woman of value and esteem in our home was allowed to weaken? Had all that walking back and forth across the room with Third Sister stolen Grandmother's storehouse of steps? Had Grandmother—tired of hearing Third Sister's screams—closed down her *chi* to shut out the irksome racket? Had the ghost spirits who'd come to prey on Third Sister been tempted by the possibility of another victim?

After so much noise, and after all the attention that had been paid in recent weeks to Third Sister, all focus now shifted to Grandmother. My father and uncle left her side only to smoke, eat, or relieve themselves. Aunt assumed all the household duties, making meals for everyone, washing, and caring for all of us. I never saw Mama sleep. As the first daughter-in-law, she had two main purposes in life: to provide sons to carry on the family and to care for her husband's mother. She should have watched Grandmother's health more assiduously. Instead, she had allowed man-hope to enter her mind by shifting her attention to me and my good-luck future. Now, with the fierce determination born of her earlier neglectfulness, she performed all the prescribed rituals, preparing special offerings to the gods and to our ancestors, praying and chanting, even making soup from her own blood to rebuild Grandmother's life force.

Since everyone was occupied with Grandmother, Beautiful Moon and I were assigned to watch over Third Sister. We were only seven and did not know the words or actions to comfort her. Her torment was great, but it was not the worst I would see in my lifetime. She died four days later, enduring more suffering and pain than was fair for such a short life. Grandmother died one day after that. No one saw her suffer. She just curled up smaller and smaller like a caterpillar under an autumnal blanket of leaves.

THE GROUND WAS too hard for burial to take place. Grandmother's two remaining sworn sisters attended to her, sang mourning songs, wrapped her body in muslin, and dressed her for life in the afterworld. She was an old woman, who had lived a long life, so her eternity clothes had many layers. Third Sister was only six. She did not have a lifetime of clothing to

keep her warm or many friends to meet her in the afterworld. She had her summer outfit and her winter outfit, and even these were things that Elder Sister and I had worn first. Grandmother and Third Sister spent the rest of winter under a shroud of snow.

I would say that between the time of Grandmother's and Third Sister's deaths and their burials much changed in the women's chamber. Oh, we still did our rounds. We still bathed our feet every four days and changed into smaller shoes every two weeks. But now Mama and Aunt watched over us with great vigilance. And we were heedful too, never resisting or complaining. When it came time for bathing our feet, our eyes were as riveted to the pus and blood as Mama's and Aunt's. Each night after we girls were finally left alone, and every morning before our routine began again, Elder Sister checked our legs to make sure we were not growing serious infections.

→ I often think back on those first few months of our footbinding. I remember how Mama, Aunt, Grandmother, and even Elder Sister recited certain phrases to encourage us. One of these was "Marry a chicken, stay with a chicken; marry a rooster, stay with a rooster." Like so much back then, I heard the words but didn't understand the meaning. Foot size would determine how marriageable I was. My small feet would be offered as proof to my prospective in-laws of my personal discipline and my ability to endure the pain of childbirth, as well as whatever misfortunes might lie ahead. My small feet would show the world my obedience to my natal family, particularly to my mother, which would also make a good impression on my future mother-in-law. The shoes I embroidered would symbolize to my future in-laws my abilities at embroidery and thus other house learning. And, though I knew nothing of this at the time, my feet would be something that would hold my husband's fascination during the most private and intimate moments between a man and a woman. His desire to see them and hold them in his hands never diminished during our lives together, not even after I had five children, not even after the rest of my body was no longer an enticement to do bed business.



## The Fan

SIX MONTHS PASSED SINCE OUR FOOTBINDING, TWO MONTHS since Grandmother and Third Sister died. The snow melted, the earth softened, and Grandmother and Third Sister were prepared for burial. There are three events in Yao lives—no, *all* Chinese lives—on which the most money is spent: birth, marriage, and death. We all wish to be born well and marry well; we all wish to die well and be buried well. But fate and practical circumstance influence these three events like no others. Grandmother was the matriarch and had led an exemplary life; Third Sister had accomplished nothing. Baba and Uncle gathered together what money they had and paid a coffin maker in Shangjiangxu to construct a good coffin for Grandmother. Baba and Uncle made a small box for Third Sister. Grandmother's sworn sisters came again, and at last we held the funeral.

Once again, I saw how poor we were. If we had more money, perhaps Baba would have built a widow arch to commemorate Grandmother's life. Perhaps he would have used the diviner to find a propitious spot with the best *feng shui* elements for her burial or hired a palanquin to transport his daughter and niece, who still could not walk very far, to the grave site. These things were not possible. Mama carried me on her back, while Aunt carried Beautiful Moon. Our simple procession went to a place not far from the house, yet still on our leased land. Baba and Uncle kowtowed