1998: Part 1

My grandmother's feet should have been bound. Tiny, “lotus” feet were treasured back then. No matter that by the time Puo-puo was born, the practice had been outlawed; no matter that the process was long and painful. Daughters had to be married off, no matter what.

First, the toes were bent till they touched the soles. Then, little by little the soles were broken. All the while bandages were wrapped and unwrapped around the broken feet. The feet were alternatively massaged and broken so that they remained flexible. Girls were made to stand on them to further the breaking. Sometimes gangrene set in. Girls lost toes, sometimes a whole foot.

The process for Puo-puo never got that far. The first night, her feet hurt so much, she removed the bandages herself.

At least this is the story Huang Lei tells me, and always with a flourish, pantomiming the removal of the bandages – *whoosh!* – as a magician whisks away a handkerchief to reveal a flock of birds. I enjoy this story and want to believe, but I know she's gotten it wrong, that it was the nuns at my grandmother's school who removed the bandages because my grandmother wouldn't stop crying at the top of her lungs.

Her family shrugged it off. Fewer and fewer families were doing it. Even the Empress Dowager Cixi didn't have bound feet, although that was because she was Manchu and not Han.

Huang Lei admires my grandmother. “Your puo-puo is so smart,” she says. “She notices everything. Plus her handwriting.” Between us is a letter from Puo-puo to me, which Huang Lei is helping me read. She runs her hand over the characters. “So beautiful. It's rare, you know, for a woman Puo-puo's age to be able to read and write.”

This is also not true. In the beginning of the 20th century, more and more girls, at least in the bourgeoisie, were being taught to read and write. It was Huang Lei's grandmother, Puo-puo's older sister and my great-aunt, who was illiterate, who had bound feet. “As big as this,” says Huang Lei, making a fist. It was her grandmother who stayed after the Communist Revolution, whose only son, Huang Lei's father, joined the People's Liberation Army. It was my grandmother who left.

The flight is interminable. I have an aisle seat but still feel cramped. The one thing I want to do is lie down, and I hate the old Chinese lady who snagged an empty row of seats before takeoff.

I grow more and more nervous as the hours tick by. The men beside me seem to be religious devotees, one a Korean minister, and the other, a short balding man of indeterminate race who seems to be friends with all the stewardesses and

covers his eyes when any scantily-clad women appear on the TV. The men are excited about their trip.

“We’ll check into the hotel, have a wonderful dinner. China, here we come!” They clink glasses.

“I can't wait to get to the hotel,” says the stewardess. “I'm getting one of those massages again.”

I wish I were them, returning to someplace familiar and going home soon after. I wish I wasn't me, going away to strange land for an entire year.

I sleep a little but not much. I drink tons of water, even stealing from the pitcher in the flight attendants' station. I eat everything I can because who knows what awaits me when I land.

Finally, over 18 hours later, we've arrived.

I struggle to get down my suitcase of toiletries. A middle-aged woman helps me.

“*Ai yeu*!” she proclaims at its heaviness.

I hoist the suitcase down the moveable staircase – no jet bridge for the Beijing International Airport – and roll it across the hot tarmac. I'm surprised at how strong the sun is, stronger even than during the dog days of summer in New York. Later, upon seeing a map, I'll realize it's because we're on the edge of the Gobi desert, far from the China Sea. I squeeze onto a tram with what feels like a hundred Chinese people, someone's unwashed scalp right at nose level.

At baggage claim, an older woman asks me something I don't understand. I say, as my parents have suggested, “Excuse

me but I'm American. Can you please repeat what you said a little slower?" She doesn't repeat what she said. She only smiles faintly, as one might at a crazy, potentially dangerous person.

I drag my bags out into the waiting area and lean against a wall. A girl with glasses materializes beside me. "Are you from Hong Kong?" she asks.

Confused I shake my head. As she scurries off, I glance down at myself. T-shirt, jeans, sneakers. Why would she think I was from Hong Kong?

In my pocket is a picture I've been studying all summer. Guochen, Huang Lei, her father, and younger sister in front of a little bungalow on what will be my campus. Guochen is tall and bushy-haired with glasses. Huang Lei wears sunglasses and her long hair in a braid. When I showed Joe the photo, he was surprised.

"They look so modern," he said. "I thought they'd all be wearing Commie outfits." Partially he was kidding; partially neither of us had any idea what it was like over here.

Suddenly, Guochen bursts through the crowd. I'd recognize him anywhere. Head down, he doesn't see me at first, but then he looks up and recognizes me too.

"Little Gem," he says, calling me by my nickname. He holds out his hand.

"Big Brother Guochen," I respond, as instructed, clasping his hand in both of mine. I've never been happier to see someone in my life.

"Your sister is over there," he says in slow English.

My sister? I wonder as he takes off. Then I understand: he means my cousin, or *biao jie*, literally "older sister cousin." A moment later he returns.

Huang Lei is smaller than I imagined. She's thin with bird-like arms and legs. Tentatively she touches my elbow.

"Little Gem," she says.

"Little Red," I say back, although this is wrong. I'm supposed to call her "Big Sister Little Red," as she's three years older than I am, a monkey to my rat, but I forget. Then I see that she's not shorter than I am, that we are in fact the same height. We see eye to eye.

We make our way across the crowded parking lot to a white van. A pair of socked feet hang over the driver's seat by way of greeting.

"Yo!" calls Guochen, the way we'd say, "Here!" in Mandarin class in college.

The driver sits up, sleepily rubbing his eyes. At the time, I don't know he's a hired driver. I think he's their friend.

Guochen puts my bags in the back. "I thought you would have many more things," he says.

On the ride to campus, Huang Lei sits with her arm looped protectively through mine. Guochen, sitting behind us, speaks to me in that same, painfully slow English. Once or twice he lapses into Russian. I know that he has been practicing, that

he'll be leaving in October for a year-long sabbatical in Moscow. I want to tell him he can speak Chinese to me, but I don't want to be rude.

In the rearview mirror, the driver keeps staring at me. He's very dark with small eyes, like a Mongolian. I'm not sure why he keeps looking, but it's making me more and more uncomfortable.

“What do you think of China so far?” Huang Lei asks of the modern tree-lined highway.

“It looks like home,” I answer in Mandarin, and it's true: the highway could be any interstate in New Jersey or Westchester.

My cousin laughs. “That's exactly what your mother said.”

They bring me to my house, one of those little bungalows from the picture in my pocket. It's surprisingly large – too large for one person – and, I'm glad to see, has modern toilets. There's even a washer, though no drier and no running hot water. Guochen points out the contraption set up next to the shower.

“Turn the heater on,” he says, “for hot water.”

Nearby are a few other bungalows and, farther off, a hotel. “You’ll be living here by yourself?” says the driver. “You should be careful. You don’t know what might happen, who might come along.”

Huang Lei laughs weakly. I can tell she's annoyed by him. “*Ai ya*, don't say that,” she says. “You're scaring her.”

We go to a restaurant for dinner. The décor is extremely spare. The floors are linoleum, and the tables and chairs wrapped up in plastic. On the otherwise bare walls are, inexplicably, Christmas decorations, although it's the tail end of summer. At a nearby table several red-faced men in army uniforms smoke, shout, and laugh. Huang Lei presses her lips together in distaste.

We order a spicy diced chicken dish, a side of cold cucumbers, *mantou*, and *la bing*, a kind of crispy pancake we pulled apart with our fingers. Everything is surprisingly tasty, especially the *la bing*, which makes my fingers greasy. The napkins are thin – more like toilet paper – and do little to clean my hands.

Billie Jean comes on over the loudspeaker. I point up in surprise. “Michael Jackson?” I say.

Huang Lei says, “He’s dying you know.”

“*Zhen de*?” I exclaim. “Really?” It's my first Chinese spoken without thinking.

She looks at me as though she's realized this as well. “Really. I read it in the paper.”

I decide then that I like my cousin. She's interested in Hollywood gossip, like me.

The driver eats with us. “So this is an American,” he keeps saying.

I still don't see what the big deal is. I don't know yet that many native Chinese have never seen a foreigner before, and

that despite my Chinese face and upbringing, I'm considered a foreigner too.

Huang Lei understands better. She explains my background, my grandparents immigrating, where I was born and grew up.

“Welcome home,” the driver now says, raising his glass.

Trying to smile, I clink mine with his. I don't say that if this was my home, I'd want to leave as soon as possible.