

foot and nail

I wanna see, wanna see 'em dancing

Walking around on those, what do you call 'em?

- Jodi Benson

As your great-granddaughter Pinki gets to know you, she starts to paint her fingernails obsessively. Months and years later, she will find flakes of the glittery *Mermaid Birthday* nail polish everywhere. Strange, hard to reach places. Today, one makes it into her breakfast omelette. She extracts the sparkly chip out of the cheese with a toothpick like surgery, then etches it onto a napkin rife with pen scribbles and question marks.

You are difficult to trace at first.

There are two albums filled with your oldest photos but those are with Uncle Erwin which means Pinki won't be inquiring about them. Years ago, the two of them fell out of touch after he gambled away his family's life savings and then made a drunken pass at her younger sister at a wedding in Kuala Lumpur. In a rare performance of impulsivity, Pinki slung the plum sauce all over his face and suit, sauce meant for the first course spring rolls. The whole table wished the spring rolls weren't so dry.

At first, the only thing anyone can tell Pinki about her 太嫵 is that you were a bitch. Given her own character flaws, Pinki is not surprised that she comes from a lineage of hot-tempered, brooding matriarchs. But these scant testimonials quickly bore her. She seeks out other means of being in relation with you.

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At the stern command of piano teacher after piano teacher, Pinki kept her fingernails trimmed down to invisible for her childhood and teenage years. On the day of her last piano exam, she walked out of the chilling auditorium and asked her father to drive to London Drugs. She bought nail polish for the first time with the intention of sporting long, classic red fingernails for the rest of her life. The only trouble was that her colouring-within-the-lines technique was garish; her hands appeared like those of a toddler dabbling in finger painting. A long spell of unpolished nails ensued.

Next, she learns you had bound feet. Given that you were born in Southern China around the turn of the 20th century, this was to be expected. But when Pinki goes to Google foot-binding, a singular, striking image comes up: child-sized “lotus shoes” to maximize a woman’s eroticism (aka matrimonial potential). Underneath the photo is the description and history of foot-binding, provided by American epidemiologist, Steve R. Cummings. In fact, Pinki can’t find a single article about the implications of foot-binding that is not written by a white man.

When she reads “four inches in length”, she traces out the length on the palm of her hand, then closes her eyes as nausea swells. She looks down at her wide-spilling, muscular, calloused feet—those of a 21st century urban dweller/contemporary dance artist who also bandaged bloody toes, arches, and heels—but for entirely different reasons.

Cummings explains that after the bones have been repeatedly broken (from the age of four and onwards), impact includes limited mobility, scoliosis, hip fractures, and all sorts of other undocumented lifelong ailments. Reading this, Pinki instinctively brings her hand to her sacrum, where they say soul and sex meet, where her gruelling scoliosis flared during years of professional dance training. A surge of emotion runs through her and Pinki goes to the kitchen to eat something oily and heavy because she wants the weight of the food to settle the floating feeling inside.

There is a scene in the original 1964 *Mary Poppins* in which a giddy Uncle Albert is laughing so uncontrollably, he has a case of floating. The laughter is contagious, as is the floating, and soon, to Mary’s dismay, Bert is floating, and so are the children, Michael and Jane. Everyone is bouncing off the ceiling like helium balloons, unable to come down.

Pinki has always found this scene disturbing. The last thing she could want is to float away. But as she feels her own structure stacked and sturdy upon the hardwood floor, she thinks of the mangled toes underneath your meaty fists of feet. Pinki imagines you would’ve done anything to float.

At this moment, for levity, Pinki has an impulse to interject with a whimsical quote about outer space or zero-gravity chambers. Instead, out of nowhere, she breaks song. It's that iconic anthem from Disney's *Little Mermaid*. *Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun. Wandering free, wish I could be.* The song is one of Pinki's favourite, although she always found Ariel rather vain and superficial, with her incessant grooming and her hoarding of thingamabobs.

Pinki contemplates the theatre students she works with, those with a fraught relationship to gravity—feeling it too much in some areas, too little in others. Is one's sense of gravity helpful to lose, in order to find? How does that Mary Poppins scene resolve anyway? She recalls that the only solution to the floating condition is sorrow. Uncle Albert recalls something sad, and this makes the others sad, and as their joy dissipates, each of them descends “back to earth” so to speak. Being grounded, then, Pinki surmises, is a luxury that does not come without sobering responsibility.

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On a dating app, a stranger comments on Pinki's profile photo on the beach with a message: *Pebbles between your toes are good luck.* She does not know if this is true but when she closes all four tabs open on her browser about foot-binding to stand up and stretch, she does feel lucky.

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Pinki has her mother over for dinner. Before departing, her mother remarks again, *your 太嫚 was a real bitch, you know*. She says this because she is eager to help with the research project.

Tonight, having had a few glasses of wine, maybe a few glasses too many, Pinki snaps. *If I had eight broken toes, nine children in ten years, I would be a bitch too*. Hot and ancient breath escapes her mouth, her skin vibrates like a mirage.

She was miserable when born. And when she realized there was no climbing back into the womb, back into the warm sac of muted tones and colours, Pinki stayed miserable. She spent years screaming until blue in the face, until met with exhausted slumber in her own angry vomit. Her zombie-eyed parents came and went from clinics, hospitals, specialists, begging for answers. Each time, they returned home no closer to understanding, only closer to their wits' end.

One day, as if the demons had been exorcised, as if the misery had finally wrung out like a rag, she woke up in quiet, delighted awe. Thinking back to this now, Pinki acknowledges an inconvenient truth: healing takes its own sweet time.

Pinki paints her nails. Waits for WhatsApp calls. Searches the web. Queries the body. She tries to be still enough to hear.

In the scalding shower, she inspects her weeks-old manicure. The nails are ugly shapes and lengths, some sporting blots of residual polish. She shovels away at the colour left, glitter flakes spiralling down the drain as she attempts to map out your life in her head. Name — unknown. Birth date — unknown. Death date — unknown. Bound feet. Bitch. Nine children. Conflicting stories leaving only math of the imagination. Perhaps she is getting a taste of how women are written into history, or how they are not. She narrows down the Malaysian aunties and uncles who have proven most willing to dig in the ancestral dirt on her behalf, those who are the least bothered by her baffling western “art assignment”. The most trustworthy source suggests that you may have gone by the nickname Ah Ying.

One day, the jangling of Pinki’s glass earrings ignites your love of jewellery. You admit to her that your beauty and vanity *was the one thing I could call mine*. Pinki now understands who has been doing her nails. *You bitch*, she weeps and laughs. Gently, she dances your feet. Your two sacrum weaves like a kaleidoscope. She is glad she took your scoliosis to physiotherapy all those years.

I want to float, you say. Pinki gestures for you to go ahead.

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The next time Pinki sees her mom, they are at Saturday morning dim sum in Burnaby. Among the fragrant spread of their favourites is a dish of chicken feet in gelatinous black bean and garlic sauce, nestled in its bamboo steamer.

Pinki stares at the feet with all the toes drawn together like a collapsed umbrella, as if protecting the flesh of the foot's palm. She spots a glint of *Mermaid Birthday* glitter. Then she gorges, taking the entire foot in her mouth. She snaps each joint apart with her teeth, sucking the sweet, flavourful skin and stringy tendon off the bone. She waits for her mother to bring it up again—your bad behaviour. But today, her mother comes bearing important new facts, courtesy of Uncle Erwin, of all people. Pinki unfolds the tea-stained napkin from under her plate and scribbles away. ¹

¹ The ancestral research shared in this essay is made possible by my continual study within the Arrivals Personal Legacy Process, led by founder and scholar Diane Roberts. arrivalslegacy.com