

— PART ONE - 1916 —

BECOMING A WOMAN

*“If women’s tears were gathered
they would make a river wider
and longer than the Yangtze River.”*

—Anonymous Nu Shu

It was almost midnight and Blossom had just finished sewing the binding cloths for her daughter Lili’s feet. She had put off starting the foot binding process until Lili was almost seven years old. She had heard rumors that foot binding was now illegal in China but she didn’t believe it. Neither did anyone else she knew, and everyone was still binding their daughters’ feet. She knew that now she really needed to begin and her plan was to start the next morning. Blossom looked at the cloth – red for good luck, and to dull the shock of the blood, too. Maybe it will not frighten Lili so much when she sees blood on her feet for the first time, she thought. Maybe it will not look so ugly against the red of the cloth as it would on some other color.

Blossom remembered the first time she saw blood on her own binding cloths, when her own mother was working so

diligently to make her feet beautiful. She was terrified. She knew that foot binding was important and painful. But blood. She had never envisioned blood, and she was sure Lili had not either. So she decided – back when Lili was a toddler, just learning to walk – to use red cloth so the contrast would not be so stark.

The sun was as bright as could be the next morning, blasting through the windows with a vengeance and making the metal table in the kitchen shine in the children's eyes as they ate breakfast. The two boys wolfed down their food and followed their father – waiting impatiently – out to the fields. Only little Lili lingered over her food, maybe picking up a vibe from her anxious mother, maybe sensing that something was going to happen this morning.

When Lili put her chopsticks down beside her rice bowl, Blossom scooped her up from her chair and held her close. So tight that Lili's little six-year-old body squirmed in her mother's arms.

"It's time, Lili," Blossom said. "We're going to start your feet this morning. We're going to turn you into a beautiful woman."

Lili felt a rush of excitement and fear, so closely mixed together she couldn't separate the two emotions.

"My feet, Mama?" she said. "Oh, no. Not yet. Please. I'm afraid."

Lili had no older sisters so she had not seen the process first hand. But she was already learning Nu Shu, the women's secret writing, with her sworn sisters, her best friends. Two of them had

had their feet bound and the others had watched their sisters go through it. They all knew it hurt. Some had cried. Others had been brave and choked back the tears. But they all had been in pain and everyone knew it. One girl even told the story of a cousin who had died from infections in her feet because her mother had not kept the binding cloths clean enough.

A wave of fear gripped Lili and she circled her arms around her mother's neck. Her arms were strong and she held on tight but her stomach was weak. It churned and churned and Lili felt that she might lose her breakfast.

Blossom loosened Lili's arms and set the child down on the edge of the kitchen table.

"We must do this, Lili, if you are to become a beautiful woman and find a husband. If you don't marry, your brothers will have to take care of you for all of your life and they will not like that. And you will never have children of your own if you don't marry. Come now, we will start today. It will not hurt so much if you are a brave girl."

Blossom kept Lili sitting on the kitchen table and removed the soft slippers she wore in the house. She looked at her daughter's perfect little six-year-old feet and wished she didn't have to bind them so tight that the bones would break, wished the two of them could just go over to the fireplace and sew together all morning. She hated to make her child cry, but there were no choices here. Blossom had lived through it and Lili would too.

First Blossom took a clean rag and soaked it in warm, soapy

water. Then she washed Lili's feet gently and carefully, taking special care to clean between the toes where infection could start early on in the process. Finally she reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out the red binding cloths.

"Look, Lili. I've sewn them just for you. They wish you beauty and happiness all your life. Can you read the Nu Shu?"

Lili might have been able to read the symbols if only she could have seen them clearly. But when she tried, they all began to move on the red cloth, swimming in a watery haze of her own tears, which she was desperately trying to keep from rolling down her cheeks.

But at last the tears freed themselves and Lili cried and begged her mother to wait just one more day. Blossom took Lili's feet and quickly wrapped each one in a red cloth. She didn't make the cloth too tight. There would be plenty of time for that the next day. This was just to get Lili used to the idea that the cloths would be on her feet for at least part of every day for the rest of her life. That's what Blossom hoped. She didn't want Lili to turn into one of those women who unwrapped their feet after they were married, but she knew she would have no control over that.

The next day Lili sat quietly on the edge of the table while her mother washed her feet and wrapped them – a little bit tighter than the day before. And the next day, tighter still. After the feet were wrapped Lili was made to walk. Every day it became more and more difficult to walk. More painful. Harder to keep her balance. The pain shot up through her arches, through her calves,

up her thighs and into her hips. All she wanted to do was lie down but Blossom would not let her stop until she walked from the kitchen to the bedroom two times, every day. Sometimes Lili cried. Sometimes Blossom turned her head so Lili would not see the tears filling her own eyes.

“Like this,” Blossom would say, and she would demonstrate the walk for Lili. As if Lili had not seen her mother walk every day of her young life.

Sometimes Lili would lose her balance and fall. It happened often in the beginning. It felt so strange to walk with her feet so cramped in her tiny shoes. As her feet grew, her bones broke, one after another, every time with a new wave of pain, and each foot settled into its new shape, both almost exactly the same but not quite. Only Lili could notice the slight difference between them.

Every night Blossom would unwrap Lili’s feet and wash them again. She would sigh with relief when there was no smell of rotting flesh that would signify the start of an infection. She would look at the bottom of each foot to see how much like a lotus flower it was beginning to look. She handled the tiny broken bones as carefully as she could. After some months they began to look right to her. And Lili’s walking got better. The pain subsided. She smiled again sometimes. When Lili smiled, Blossom smiled.

Lili was seven years old by this time and ever so much more worldly. She liked the way her feet looked. She comforted her friends when they began their foot binding. She thanked her mother for making her a beautiful woman.

Blossom and Lili became closer than ever. Lili loved her father and she loved her two brothers. But when it was time for her to be married out and move two miles away to Lonely River, where her new husband's family lived, it was her mother she missed the most.

She longed for her mother to be with her when she had her own children. But Blossom could never leave her duties at home. Lili's husband's family never wanted to spare her from her chores so she could go back to see her mother. In fact, it was ten years from the time of her marriage until Lili was able to find a way to make a trip home. When she did, she found that nothing was as she had left it.