

A Soliloquy For The Ambiguity Of Aging

I found myself staring long and hard back at myself in the dance studio's mirror. Although I was completely alone, I couldn't take my socks off, and I instantly thought of her. I believe even since an early age, I always danced with socks on. I can't remember a time when I didn't, because it presented itself some time after the assault. Matching toes, on both feet, both of my fourth toes are deformed, underdeveloped. My aunt had this deformity as well, and I resented her for it deeply, because I thought in some way, she had caused it, and I spiraled. I spiraled in every different direction – I could not surmount the embarrassment of anyone but those closest to me knowing about my feet, only my family members, but surely not any of my friends. It was to be a familial secret, and later on, I would be made to be aware that there were more of those looming over us than I could ever anticipate.

Even on the days where I craved to revel in the summer heat and feel the cool rush of the waves move across all my body as I jumped into the wide pool, I begged my mom to wear pool shoes, so that my toes, and the majority of my feet, were covered, so as to not arouse suspicion from anyone. These pool shoes were meant for the beach, especially as one treaded the rocks underneath the water, and could encounter potential shards of glass from wrongfully disposed beer bottles by drunkards, but even in a pristine pool, albeit public, I could not muster having anyone see my toes, even if they were strangers. I remember once also being on a vacation at the Poconos Mountains with extended family, and, entering the rented house's jacuzzi by myself, I believed I had no reason to hide my toes.

Soon thereafter, my younger cousin, 7 years old at the time, exclaims as she stands next to her mother in the doorway, "Mommy, what is that?" and her face contorts itself into a

disgusted expression. Her mother faces her and begins to gently explain that all bodies are different, but at that point my eyes widen at her question, anxiety rushes over me, and I eventually zone out, dropping my head in shame. Even after her mom steps into the kitchen to grab us snacks, and my cousin begins to enter the jacuzzi, I lift myself out of it. Then, I quietly retreat to the guest room, vowing not to speak to any of them for the rest of the evening. Furrowing my eyebrows as I pretend to read a book once my brother walks in, noticing I'm alone, asks me, "Why aren't you out there spending time with us?"

A year later, at 14 years old, I sat in the office of a podiatrist, uneasy about if there was to be a cure for what I considered to be a *curse*. I avoided public pools and beaches because I was getting older, and wearing pool shoes was not "cool" or socially acceptable anymore, and as I was beginning to gain interest in dating boys, I wanted to change my body immediately. This, of course, I did not mention to either the podiatrist or my mother, but my mother could definitely gather that I had been unhappy with my feet for quite some time. Even on the bus ride, as we traveled over 40 minutes to see the podiatrist, I scribbled away in my notebook, listing all the reasons why this procedure was absolutely necessary, it was an urgent *need*. Ignoring the fact that this was only the consultation, I hoped that somehow, he would find time in his busy schedule to accommodate my needs, and perform the surgeries then and there. My mother was acutely aware of the myriad of reasons why I felt owed the surgery, and instead of lashing out at her another time, I needed to distract myself by affirming in my notebook all these reasons why I *needed* the procedure. I absolutely *needed* it.

"Unfortunately, some of your tendons failed to develop," the podiatrist started, glancing over at his notes after we did scans of my feet and took measurements. "Each foot will take 6 months to heal, and the procedures have to be done separately for each foot. Also, your insurance

does not cover these procedures, as they are considered to be cosmetic. So, it will be \$100,000 per foot.” My mother mouthed a “wow” as she looked down at her fingers, hands crossed and sitting in her lap. I let out a deep sigh, giving the podiatrist a blank stare, wishing he could see from my expression that I didn’t ask to be born with these deformities. “Is there truly no way for me to fix both toes at once?”

He replied, “It’s not recommended. We need to make sure the procedure is successful for one foot, in case it rejects the device we’d insert to extend the tendon. You’d need to be in a wheelchair if so, and that would present great challenges in your daily life”. I began to wonder what it would be like to live life in a wheelchair, but I became even more depressed, realizing I would be even more *undesirable* to men. Seemingly, to cheer me up, he then showed me images on his computer screen of a previous but recent client, now in her 60s, at different beaches, with her toes all fixed. He mentioned how she had the same deformity as I do, but her smile was eerie. I felt something strange and off about her expression, not so much of a relief from not having the deformity anymore, but probably stress from being in crushing debt and pretending she wasn’t, or even the fact that her life is more than halfway complete, and she lived all of it with that *burden*.

On the ride back home, I was even more distressed at not being able to do the procedure because of the financial strain it would place on my parents, but also the impracticality of fixing one foot at once. I began to think back to all the mythical creatures I dreamt about and imagined meeting someday as a child, wishing for a creature akin to a tooth fairy, who could easily repair my toes overnight. I wish this fairy could greet me with a warm hug, assure me it’ll all work out in the end, snap her fingers, and change my feet instantly, exclaiming “Ta-da!” as I looked upon them, seeing them glimmer. My thoughts on such were interrupted when my mom interjected,

“You know, it’s not so bad. Your aunt Delilah had a really happy childhood and adult life, even though she had the same issues on her feet. She was lucky enough to have a husband and family who loved her unconditionally, but unfortunately, did not have enough time to live.”

I was taken aback at this nonchalant manner of expression from my mother. I knew my mother to be quite hesitant to speak about her deceased sister because of the traumatic childhood she had, which she does not remember much of. She does not outright refuse to speak of such childhood, but she does remain silent anytime I’ve asked in the past. However, I eventually began to understand the numbing of it all, because the things not said begin to accumulate. However, life can be beautiful and sorrowful at the same time.

That same night, as I laid my head to rest, I found my mind haunted by the thought of my aunt. I thought I could surmount the thoughts, keep my mind busy and elsewhere, but she remained a fleeting constant. I watch her come, then go, then remain where she once was. All at once, I find myself paralyzed by her voice, as she begins, “Do not be afraid, my dearest one. I am here now and I have always been, watching over and looking out for our family. Remember, I was once also like you. Seeing the doctor examine my abnormally short toes that were caused by polio, the consequent limp, and the warning signs of brain cancer, I knew the end was coming. He was stunned by all these deformities and illnesses I had, but did I let him choose how I was to live my life? Fuck no! Because I refused to live in fear, silence, or without love.” Though my eyes were closed, I gave her a closed-mouthed smile, knowing that she was right. I responded, “You also taught me the joy of dancing. Remember? I at 4 years old, rambunctiously moving all the limbs of my body, as you delightfully reciprocated, with an immense love, and also for all the little ones in the room, exclaiming our names with elation, squeezing our face cheeks, hugging

our frail bodies, and kissing the tops of our heads with unbridled joy. Please tell me you remember.”

As quickly as she arrived, she vanished. But I knew she was right. I inherited what my favorite aunt had, and anytime I have the privilege to walk anywhere and begin a new journey that is a new day, she is right there with me. While some only hold memories of someone they lost, I have those, and a physical embodiment of her resilience. She was never ashamed about her deformities or disabilities, proudly wearing sandals all throughout the spring and summer. 34 years of life, and it’s been 17 years since she’s been gone, an exact midpoint. I am now notoriously precise with time because I know of its limits, but I must *live*, if not for me, then for her.

After finishing up a class at my local community center’s dance studio, I decided to visit the same church we held my aunt’s funeral in. It’s an over an hour commute by train, but I still make the trip anyway, because my family doesn’t organize reunions like before. A part of it is my family’s conflicting opinions on *choosing sides* – “It’s the mother’s fault for leaving her child with someone she barely knew. I mean, sure, celebrate your marriage by cooking a meal with your new husband, but don’t leave her with the quiet, creepy stepson.” I was 6 years old, he was 16 when he sexually assaulted me. He *knew* what he was doing. I don’t remember much of it, just the exasperated yells from my father as he kicked and punched my half-brother in another room, and sobbing from my mother as she fell with me onto the floor, clutching me in her arms.

I find myself looking up now, towards the church ceiling, imagining the grey clouds as they fade, awaiting my aunt’s presence. I then remember, my aunt is one of my favorite stars, watching the world from above like an audience member in front of a stage. I hope one day she and I can meet again, for I wish life was more forgiving. Her care and trust was abundant, and if

she had lived with us, she would have made sure the assault never happened. I've always firmly believed that my feet stopped growing after the assault, and also have frequently wondered if my aunt had something similar happen to her. My mother never tells us about her childhood, and I wonder if there were sinister happenings from adults onto children as a result of such silence.

The air is sweet with her scent, of fresh fruits and bliss, an appetite I've wanted for a while, a permeating feeling. I can't relinquish this feeling unless it is forced out of my control. I want to squeeze all the juice out of this weekend that I can. Imagining a dragon fruit, I want to scoop all the years out of my veins, conglomerate my age. On my way home, I am wistful for words. I vow to myself that I'll never change my feet, because that is how I preserve familial memory, especially that of my aunt. I begin to think of all the instances when I lashed out at my mother for wanting to change my feet, and I realize she deserves more apologies than I can give. What good was it for? I exit the train station and am mere avenues away from home, and a grey stray cat crosses my path. Her kitty feet look just like mine, she prances all-knowingly – I am reminded that beauty is not defined by a single object, word, or feeling. I just hope that I become a better person, regardless of how heartbroken I feel, because of her absence.