



# BIGGER THAN A SHOE BOX

by Dorothy Ellen Palmer

**THERE** are three of us—my feet and I—and I am not in charge. My left foot, Herkimer, and his bickering right partner, Horatio, pinch out each footfall like miser-clutched pennies. At size 2.5, Herkimer is the more flexible, but the most fragile. My brawny Horatio, a full size stubbier at 1.5, wields the axe that cleaves my right ankle, chops me to the ground at least once a day. Together, we negotiate each step of my life.

Since there are two of them and one of me, I'm frequently outvoted. Especially lately. I'm sixty-one now. My disability is degenerative. With each passing year, I'm less spring and more chicken. Despite the surgeries and meds, I'm in pain. When I fall on my knees, I don't hear angel voices. I do

hear cussing. Usually mine.

It took all our voices to hammer out a more useful language, to redefine one four-lettered word, to restore our joint contract.



*Pain: the unpleasant sensation accompanying or resulting from noxious insult or injury, derangement, defect, malformation, overstrain, or obstruction of the physical powers.*

Each working day, meaning any day my feet agree to let me work, I deliberately turn a morning ankle getting out of bed. Because then I take control. I get the reassurance learned in physio, that I can fall and get back up again. And because there I am alone, I get the day's first fall in private. Rug is softer than sidewalk. Carpet has no eyes, mocking, pitying or contemptuous. And none of the day's commentary:

“Look at that fat old broad! She waddles like a penguin.”

“Oh, Mommy, no! Poor lady falls down!”

“Just another drunk, dear. Come away, hush!”

For the rest of the day, I'll have no control. My two bosses will be greedy, but capricious. They'll demand forced labour, then call a wildcat

walkout. And they're bean counters. They tally each step toward that moment when they can boot me to the curb for good. Until then, I carry the sound of a running horse, rhythmic, melodic, pulsing. I'll gallop until the scream, the snap, firewood dry, definitive. I'll imagine the escape of speed until hobbled by defeat. But my feet have no intention of telling me if we'll work for another decade, or snap on a Tuesday. So, I'm waiting for Tuesday, living the interim, resisting the erotic nausea of self-pity that builds, and claims, and beckons.



*Pain: the presence of bodily and/or mental suffering, and the anxiety of future suffering*

“Simply put, Mrs. Palmer, your daughter needs an operation. Several, in fact.”

It is 1964. I am nine. In sugar-white gloves, my mother holds her own hands.

Dr. Salter, Surgeon-in-Chief of Sick Children's Hospital, lifts his pen to my x-rays.

“A normal human foot contains twenty-six bones: seven tarsals or

ankle bones, five meta-tarsal or foot bones, and fourteen phalanges or toes. Dorothy's tiny toes have two bones each. Her left foot has three tarsals, two meta-tarsals, and two unique fused bones. Her right foot has three tarsals, three meta-tarsals and three fused bones. Instead of twenty-six bones, her left foot has seventeen and her right has nineteen. Both feet flop over, like a permanently twisted ankle."

Mother sighs. "That's what I was afraid of. She's deformed. She has clubbed feet."

Dr. Salter frowns at her, smiles at me.

"No, Dorothy, you don't. Clubbed feet can't place themselves flat on the ground. With effort, with considerable pain, yours can. One in every thousand babies has a degree of clubfoot. Your congenital abnormalities are more complex. Much rarer."

I can't see any of this. He is making it up.

"Here's the skivvy, Princess. I don't know how many years you'll walk for. Maybe into your thirties, or forties. That's up to your feet, not to you or to me." He smiles. "But I think I can help you walk better for longer. It's experimental. So, no guarantees. But it's worth a try."

I cup my left foot. Make a promise I can't keep. "I won't let them cut

you.”

He explains *a triple arthrodesis*. An operation every two years. Removable metal pins and permanent metal staples. I have to close my eyes or barf. I tune back in and wish I hadn’t.

“Each recuperation requires six weeks on crutches, another six in a walking cast. A year of physio. Corrective shoes. I’ll begin with the left foot. Cut fused bones for range of motion. Implant stabilizers. Fuse abutting bones to articulate more like the joints of a normal foot.”

Articulate? A crazy man wants to cut me open. A man who thinks feet can talk.

Mother takes his lunacy straight in her chair, poised, attentive, accepting.

“She didn’t walk when we got her at three. Children’s Aid called it Failure to Thrive, said she might be retarded. She falls so often, it’s embarrassing. After this, will she pass for normal?”

As my doctor stacks my x-rays, one falls from his hands. A bone grey dove fluttering down.

“Your daughter’s feet, Mrs. Palmer, have virtually no cartilage.”

I know that word from Health Class. “Like in the rim of our ears?”

“Yes, Princess. Connective tissue between joints, like gristle. A shock absorber. Cushions impact. You limp because without it, every movement registers as pain.”

“Is that why she’s always complaining that her feet hurt?”

“Mrs. Palmer, I repeat, your daughter *is* in pain. All the time. Sitting or standing. Worse when walking. Unbearable by nighttime. Imagine this.” He rams his knuckles together, grates them hard. “These are her bones. Without cartilage, they’re grinding themselves into splinters.”

Mother averts her gaze, smooths her gloves. He tugs on my braid. Winks at me.

“So you fall down. So what? The longer I’m in this business the more impressed I am by kids like you. I’m proud of you, Princess. I don’t know how you walk at all.”

All the pieces of my life fly together. I’m not a lazy, lying, complaining, clumsy excuse for girl. It hurts. He said so. The sanest man on earth. He can cut me anywhere he wants.

Mother makes the sound reserved for my brother when he picks his nose.

“Excuse me, I’m wondering about high heels?”



*Pain: the care, trouble, effort, or exertion expended to affirm or deny, to take pains.*

For the next decade, I think I'm the only one he calls Princess. His lovely, ugly face leans over me the last breath before anesthetic. "Rise and shine, Princess." His high-ridged forehead my first sight fighting the fog, as I awaken to the screams of my newly articulate joints. With vocal chords cut free, my feet announce their names. Herkimer whimpers for days, 'Poor me.' Horatio wakes up swearing, cuss words I didn't know I knew.

My bosses. My bullies. My newborn children. Operation by operation, this is how we learn to negotiate stairs.

HERKIMER: Make Horatio go first. I went first yesterday.

HORATIO: Stop whining. Pull your own weight for a change.

ME: Confirm balance. Lift Herk. Bend Horatio's knee. Aim. Set teeth. Drop. Breathe.

HERKIMER: Impact: Lateral edge. Pain: 6/10

HORATIO: Impact: Tarsal 6/7 articulation. Pain: 8/10

ME: Concentrate. Confirm balance. Breathe. Repeat.

HERKIMER: Slow down, or I'll put you back in bed.

HORATIO: Flat on your back, bitch. Where you belong.

After each surgery, Mother buys me pair after pair of dainty, unwearable shoes. Patent pink slip-ons slip off. White T-straps chafe my scars. They open. They bleed. I'm trying.

When I get my Orthopedic Oxfords, Wendi Hilton says I can't come to her party because of my shoes. My shoes. They defy and replicate centuries of Japanese foot-binding. My shoes. Squat, black, ugly, Mother says they look like caskets.



*Pain: from the Latin poena, meaning fine or penalty.*

“What’s the very last thing you’d take off in front of a boy?” I’m asked at a pajama party.

I didn’t know it was a philosophical debate between my panties and my bra, so I tell my truth.

“My socks.”

For the next three decades, I play the girl game better: I collaborate. I

listen to other women complain about how hard it is for them to find shoes and I pretend it doesn't hurt me.

'I once had to go to three shoe stores, just to find white two-inch heels!'

I had a high heel once, I long to say. On my walking cast. It didn't have enough padding. The metal pin drilled into my heel, bent through my skin like a fork tine. When they pulled it out with pliers, it took three men to hold down a ten-year-old girl.

This is how I shop for shoes: always alone. Fearing I'll see someone I know. Girl's shoes are too narrow, so I'm in the boys' section, in tears, with little boys and their mommies staring. Forget colour. Forget style. If I can lace them up and stand, I have to buy them. Two pairs. Herkimer needs the extra length of a 2.5; Horatio must be confined in a 1.5 or he'll use the extra room to roll my knees.

I carry two boxes home. Orphan shoes wail in my closet.



*Chronic Pain: from mild to excruciating, the experience of unrelenting discomfort.*

In 1980, I am twenty-five and pregnant. I phone Dr. Salter expecting to have to beg his red-nailed secretary for a photocopy of my records. “Hello, Princess!” He is on the phone. I’m stunned by his immediacy because of a reputation that precedes him and follows me. “*The Dr. Salter?*” other doctors ask, gripping my feet to touch the great man himself. A saint’s artifacts. His doing, not mine. His name in their textbooks. The map on his office wall confidently thick with red marking pins of all those he has served, pinprick incisions in deserts, rainforests, snow.

“I don’t think your defects are hereditary, Princess. I think it was cinching. Your natural mother probably pulled her belt too tight. Your baby should be fine.”

Who am I to think otherwise? In textbooks, I’m Patient 617: Female Child. On his map, I’m a pinhead. I thank him. I all but genuflect. But when I call, I’m only two months pregnant. By three months, his verbal suturing unlaces. At four, the only thing related to me begins to kick.

For the entire nine months, I never wear a belt, but can’t uncinch the fear.

My third operation at Sick Kids, I owned the place, needing no passport but the blue wristband declaring me HIS patient. I wheeled next

door to see Brandy, in for an eye operation, and there was Edwina. Edwina Elephantiasis. Edwina, the It-Girl.

Brandy's eyes were bandaged. Mine weren't.

Edwina's left foot leapt from her ankle longer and thicker than her thigh. Three toes. Three grapefruit toes with toenails like tiny TV screens. Her left arm ended at the elbow, capped with a swiveling metal hook. Her right arm-thing lay still. It crushed the pillow, smeared the pillow, a heavy yard long, an infected lobster claw, red, cracked, crusty. Two clucking pincers, no fingers.

"Hi," says Brandy, hearing my chair. "This is Edwina. She doesn't talk much."

The It-Girl turns. Edwina Squashed Nose. Edwina Idiot Face. I run—that's what you call it even in a wheelchair—certain from that moment and forever that she was there to get her other arm cut off, that it would float still sporting its blue band in some noxious-smelling aquarium tank, float like a prized pickled egg with pimply student fingers snickering, freak, freak, freak.

For nine months, I am convinced my own It-Girl squats in my womb. I count one foot and one claw. She shifts; I feel two legs but no feet. Then

perfect feet with twenty-six countable bones, three of them sticking out of its bum like flippers. I am Princess Dorothy of Freak. I carry a monster.

When the bloody bundle arrives it's a difficult birth. I have to get a spinal. The nurses apologize, pity in the creases between their eyes. For the first and only time, I'm not in pain and they apologize.

A glance at the baby reveals the appropriate number of waving appendages. I tell them to take it away. I tell my husband to fuck off. He laughs, says I'm only supposed to swear during birth. I say, "That's right. This is my birth. Get out."

In private, I cradle the girl I would have been. Could have been. Should have been. This is how others live. This is what they take for granted. A body unfettered, without bosses, in charge. No pain obstructing. No pain interrupting. Gone like Edwina's arm. A brain building speed, running with words, able to gallop thought ta-da thought, without plotting the step that hurts the least. Without hesitation. Without Herkimer's whine, or Horatio's abuse. Without waiting for bone to snap. This is all Mother wanted for me. Not much. Everything.

My newborn normal life lasts forty minutes. No one apologizes.

When I leave the hospital, friends come to see the perfect baby with

kissable toes, and these pain-free, adoption-free, freak-free bundle admirers tell me that the waiting, wondering, worrying pain, must have been worse than any physical pain. Must have been, for their sakes.



*Collective Pain: trauma experienced over time by a group with shared, injurious experience.*

It took forty-four years to draft the ownership clause to my anger. It took *Forrest Gump*.

In 1994, at the movie's nastiest moment of fairy-tale ableism, when "Run, Forrest, run," ridiculously sheds his braces to discover not just that he can walk, but that in heavy orthopedic shoes he can run, instantly, freely, painlessly, and effortlessly, faster than anyone else, I stood up and yelled, "Horse shit. Fuck that. Fuck all of you for making him think he had to run."

When the usher escorted me out, I glowed. Because of course I didn't just mean Forrest. I'd finally called out the most crippling Tiny-Tim lie of all: that we should want to be cured. That our disabled selves aren't good

enough, aren't human, unless and until we are cured.

None of us can out run our authentic selves. And none of us should be asked to try.



*Pain: the weight of distressing or afflicting emotions, uniquely and individually borne.*

My Doctor Knows Best didn't. I walk into my sixties. As a mother, Drama teacher, improviser, and union Branch President, my feet and I work for three decades.

I laugh off my bruises. I make love in my socks.

And I learn to dance.

At fifty, my first partner is a flashy aluminum crutch, a fickle bad boy named Beau. Like my ex-husband, he delights in dumping me. At sixty, I enjoy a more adult relationship. My squat blue walker, Wenceslas, is no looker, but is a kindly soul who patiently dints the snow as I tread safely in his wheel tracks. Together, we waltz in and out of places pain-free people never get to go. We perfect a two-step of waiting, a tango of stamina and self-pity. We tap around the palm trees of defeat, soft-shoe ever closer to

the retirement sun gleaming on the wheelchair-in-waiting. As nauseating as geriatric Florida, as beckoning, restful, and final, as Florida.

I spend whole days in bed. Then negotiate one more walking day.

My feet defy defeat because I stopped fighting them. I learned to listen, to share power and reject shame. As we work in the disabled community, my pair of frenemies have become my longstanding friends. Incisions between boss and worker, doctor and patient, parent and child, do not heal. But honouring the scars enables disabled love. Today, I'm not "so lame," I'm splendidly lame. My disabled life is authentically mine. My feet and I are a threesome, proud to tell the world we were born that way. Without Herkimer and Horatio, I'd be merely pedestrian.



*Pain: the counterpoint of pleasure.*

In 2016, I am sixty-one years old. In a crowded dentist's office, I sit on my walker to give a child my chair. Melissa tells me she's nine. All of nine. In lime green flip-flops, with polished purple toes, her feet are perfect. But she points at her braces and whispers, 'It hurts.'

Out of my mouth, comes my mother's denial and decorum. "Just keep smiling, dear."

Melissa shakes her head. "But it's bigger than braces. My teeth hurt in my heart."

We both deserve an unboxed answer. I tug on her braid. "Yes, they do. Lucky you."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Ellen Palmer is a retired Drama teacher, improv coach, binge knitter, mom, and disabled senior writer. Long-listed for the ReLit Award, her first novel, *When Fenelon Falls*, (Coach House, 2010), is the semi-autobiographical story of a disabled teen plotting to free a bear from a cage during the Moonwalk/Woodstock summer of 1969. Her second novel, *Kerfuffle*, follows a Toronto improv troupe struggling to make sense and nonsense of the G20 protests. As championed by The Festival of Literary Diversity, she believes CanLit stands uniquely poised to expand diversity to include

the authentic, own voices of people with disabilities. *Bigger Than A Shoe Box* draws on her memoir in progress: *So Lame: My Sixty Years in the Disabled Closet*.

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