

*We all live in a snow globe called the Oort Cloud, a vast orb of particulate ice enclosing our entire solar system. Far beyond the farthest planet, and orchestrated by the Sun's gravitational pull, the Oort Cloud spins in an intricate synchronization — time made solid — time moving as trillions and trillions of frozen silver slivers.*

*But once in a while, the Sun gets careless, passes a little too close to another star, and a piece of the Oort Cloud breaks free. Goes sailing. Ice originating from a time so limitless it conforms to no temporal template. Acknowledging no calendric segmentation of weeks nor months nor years, it sails through space to us. An iceberg in the sky.*

*On a spring evening in 1997, Bill and I are sitting on our patio and waiting for just such a visitation. But the ice behaves like a coy maiden on her wedding day, keeping out of sight until it can make a spectacular entrance. Such hesitation is appropriate given that this particular ice has been traveling such a vast distance — at its closest to Earth, it is still 31 million miles farther than the Sun. And the journey has taken it millennia — the only previous sighting of it had been recorded about a thousand years before the Red Sea parted and Moses climbed the mountain and God gave him the tablets. A thousand years before all that, this same ice swept past and inspired some unknown mason to record its sighting in the pyramid of Pepi I, the second monarch in Egypt's sixth dynasty— twenty-seven more dynasties, each with generations of pharaohs, would follow.*

*And, so, in the spring of 1997, with the great grinding turn of a new Common Era millennium within earshot, Bill and I wait the return of ice. I look up the old millrace slicing through our back yard and see it, a spectacular, frothy vision, a white, dazzling ball trailing a glimmering veil across a tenth of the evening sky. An extraordinary interplanetary visitor with a funny name: Comet Hale-Bopp.*

*Only it doesn't project the shy, withholding aspect of a virginal bride. But rather it oddly casts the benign knowingness of a wise old nursemaid. A nursemaid, who, having been abed in the manor house's cold, upper reaches, suddenly awakens with an uneasy premonition about her charges below, and so, without venturing from her designated floor, calls over the railing, "What are you up to down there?"*

*"Nothing, Nurse."*

*"Are you behaving yourselves?"*

*"Oh, yes, Nurse."*

*"No fighting?"*

*"Oh, no, Nurse."*

*"Would you swear to that?"*

*"Oh, yes, Nurse."*

*And then, knowing full well we'll resume whacking each other before she's tucked her feet under her coverlet, she trundles back to bed — her charges will grow up someday — children always do.*

*No wonder I experienced that comet's presence as profoundly intimate and natural — it rekindled the memory of an elemental embrace.*

*Before any of us ever were, we were held by ice. Scientists once thought that life sprang from Earth's fiery core. That Earth's volcanic womb spewed forth the carbon compounds, water vapor and other gases that eventually coalesced into mobile, eating, reproducing creatures such as ourselves. But now some scientists believe that the midwife of life is ice. That as microscopic stardust-buds we were carried by comets and delivered to our earthen mother. Like interstellar*

*storks, comets hurtled past the sucking gravity of the solar system's giants and skirted the glowering, stony asteroids to reach this middling planet with a warm, green bosom.*

*No wonder Hale-Bopp twinkled with almost parental beneficence. As if locked in its frozen core it held some prior knowledge, some reassuring certainty about ourselves the we had yet to discover. Something it knew but about all of us.*

*As if, having visited us a thousand years before Moses, it could judge how far we'd come. And knew how far we had to go. And that from its vantage point beyond the sun it saw the whole sweep of time and knew that in the end, we'd all be all right.*

###

**Dec. 19, 2008**

**Dear Bill,**

**What a rainy day. I was going to skate after I went out to lunch, but I didn't.**

When Bill dies I slide under the surface of life. My face pressed to a crystalline partition, I view the work-a-day world through a distorting lens of grief and self-pity. Compared to my own state of suspended animation people in the "real" world seem to move at a feverish pace, as though what they are doing matters. Whereas I know it doesn't. I have met Absolute Zero. Compared to that, nothing matters.

Soon others join me in my state of emotional entropy — a neighbor at the end of my block, a member of my writing circle, Carolyn from my bereavement group. Beneath the surface of life, we live in a sodality of the sorrowing, a society of the separate. From ordinary, daily rhythms, we-who-grieve are detached, disconnected. Our internal clocks reset themselves so our days veer from listless wakefulness to fitful sleep, while following no predictable pattern.

Nor do our behaviors follow any recognizable code of civility — the most sophisticated among us eats with her hands, fails to bathe, and screams "Oh, Fuck!" at midnight. The loss of

our loved ones is followed by the loss of sound reason, judgment, volition, perspective, self-awareness, interest, motivation, focus, and inquisitiveness. We are unhinged. And just sane enough to know it.

And too lost to care.

The winter after Bill died, on Saturday nights, right before going to bed, I take a glass of wine, sit on the balcony off my library and study the stars. Why I perform this ritual on Saturday nights and no other, I cannot say. Nor I can tell why I do it on the balcony, where Bill and I never sat, and not the patio, where we always did. Perhaps because the balcony is higher than the patio and I feel closer to him up there. Perhaps because I feel, believe, he is out there somewhere, shining for me. After all, he told me he would wait “Right behind the door.”

So I know he is out there. I just have to find the right star. I only search on Saturday nights, when, in the fevered logic of grief, it seems perfectly reasonable to slip my bare feet into boots, put a coat over my night gown, and have a glass of wine while sitting in a lawn chair on a balcony at midnight.

Many of those stars, I know, are already dead. But it doesn't matter that I am seeing the light from extinguished fires. What matters is how that light becomes miraculously alive on the rods of my eyes. I welcome that evidence of life after death because if light can live after its source is dead, can't a man?

The Saturday nights it snows, I am puffed with pride at my devotion. I drink my wine with the snow blinkering any hope of seeing stars, the cold seeping through to my bones, and lift my glass in a toast to my thin faith that somewhere stars are shining, and that Bill's is among them. In the light of alpenglow I can make out silvery fringes growing around the rocks in the creek bordering my property — ice is forming, a miracle of matter.

There are other gifts, as well. Occasionally I see a plane sliding across the Saturday night sky, and my heart sends a wave of benign telepathy toward all those weary travelers in their fetid cabin, their limbs cramped and their mouths fuzzed with sour duff. Their bladders twitching and their minds over-oxygenated. A voyeur to the singular misery of the Saturday night flyer I raise my glass, and for a few seconds the horrible separateness between me and the work-a-day world melt, and I connect with those tired travelers on the plane.

# # #

The next spring, the rains come and never leave. Umbrella-optional mists grout weepy days and towering storms.

For months I've been under the pressure of a big writing project due in March, but when it's complete I find myself without focus, and the weather gives me an excuse to vegetate. I write a little and skate some, but neither gives me any satisfaction. So, I decide to try something I've never done before: housepainting — usually Bill's task.

But at the Home Depot, the multiplicity of color choices overwhelms me — picking out paint always had been something Bill and I did together.

"I can't get any traction in my life," I blurt to the man behind the counter and he looks at me as if to say "Lady, the whole East Coast is a giant mudslide, and you want traction?"

Yes, I want traction. Everyone in my bereavement group does. Midway through our monthly dinner meetings one of us will invariably sigh and say, "I feel so adrift." And we'll all agree, "Adrift. That's it. That's what this feels like." Severed from our pasts, with nothing recognizable on our horizons, we bob along without any compass. In the rest of the world one-hundred-pound manhole covers are flying off overburdened storm sewers and spewing rivers of

sludge onto downtown streets, but to us, flying manhole covers only evidence what we already know: life is full of the unexpected, most of it worse than anything imaginable.

I call Sue, my friend since we'd worked together at the printer. Now, some thirty years later, in a fledgling restaurant with less than a dozen customers, I send a tidal wave of grief across the table to her.

"I'm utterly aimless," I say. "I start things, then stop and start something else. I say I'm going to skate and then I don't. There are things I want to write, but I can't get started. So, I need to know, how long did it take for you to get over that guy who never called and asked you to come back to Baltimore after you took that job in New York?"

But I already know the answer: Sue never really got over him. She has a fine career, many, many friends, close ties with her extended family, but not the life she had wanted, not the life a wife and mother.

"When you cry yourself to sleep five or four nights a week and then find you're crying only two or three, are you really getting better yet? Or are you just crying less?" she answers.

"How long did it go on?" I ask.

"A long, long time."

Her answer, the prospect of it, terrifies me. I cry very little for Bill, but inside I feel as if I have a Hoover Dam about to burst. Once I let my tears spill, I'm afraid they'll never stop.

Our waitress is almost manically solicitous. Again and again she asks, "Is everything here okay?" until I want to scream, "No, everything is not okay. Okay? My husband had died and I'm never going to be okay again. Okay?"

But Sue merely rolls her eyes. Jobs, our careers, have always been one of the common strains of our friendship. Except that I had Bill to fall back on whenever I was out of work, but Sue had only herself. One false step by even such a conscientious, resourceful worker such as herself could lead to disaster, and now she's afraid that she's made exactly such a step.

A few weeks earlier, she tells me, she'd been talking with a colleague, a man she'd known for some time, but not well, when he suddenly told her about a recent experience that changed his life.

He'd fallen through the ice. On a river behind his home. He'd been skating when the ice gave way. He fell through. And sank. Thirty minutes passed before he was rescued. He told Sue he thought he was going to die. "But I came back," he told her. "I came back."

"I didn't know what to do," Sue tells me, "so I hugged him. I went over and put my arms around him. He seemed to need comfort, so I just gave him this spontaneous hug. But now I'm wondering if that was appropriate."

I stare across the table, incredulous that anyone could possibly interpret such an innocent gesture as a come on. But then I'm not in Sue's situation; I'm too new to a life lived with only myself to rely on to have attained her caution. Or maybe her wisdom.

"Sue," I tell her, "that guy told you something enormously important. Maybe he felt he could trust you, or maybe, at that moment he just needed to tell someone and you were handy, who knows? The point is, he needed to unburden himself, and so he did. To you. And you gave him a hug. That's all."

"Then he asked me to go see him play in his band."

"What?"

"He plays in a band and he asked me to go. It was in some bar."

"So you went?"

It was cold and rainy, Sue says, and she was tired after working all week. And by the time she had found the bar, the lot was full, and she couldn't find a place to park, and she didn't want to walk far in the rain. So she'd gone home.

Later, on the drizzly dark street as she and I say good-bye, we leave unspoken what we both understand: that women who have had their hearts broken are not always eager to drive through the rain to watch men play in bands, even men who have survived falling through ice.

My friendship with Sue has endured because we respect its parameters: That conversation is about as close as we've ever come to baring our souls. But I can't help wondering if I shouldn't have risked more, if I shouldn't have told her to apologize to that man. After all, what had he felt on that rainy Friday night, when he looked out over the faces of the people who had come to hear him play and didn't see hers? I should have told her that, but I didn't.

###

The May meeting of my bereavement group is rained out, but in June we meet at a restaurant deep in one of the verdant valleys ringing Baltimore like an exquisite necklace studded with rolling farmland, horse pastures and discrete old-money estates.

Perhaps it's because I've allowed enough time for the drive and don't feel stressed. Or that the rain has finally stopped. Or that somehow I've weathered the one-year anniversary of Bill's death, but the farther I drive into valley's lush variegated green, the more peaceful I feel.

Every mile presents a memory of those early years, when, first married and poor, and gas costing thirty-five cents a gallon, we would go for a drive with Bill Barnes riding in the backseat beside Kurt in an infant carrier. The declivity in a ridge where my Bill had pointed out an abandoned road, the vegetable stand where we'd bought pumpkins, the house we'd loved but couldn't afford, I pass them all without having my heart ripped out. Instead, I experience them as I might a familiar painting in which I suddenly notice an added depth and richness.

The bereavement group's meeting is the best we'd ever had — we've each passed our one-year anniversary, so we sit long after dessert and trade the startled laughter of survivors. The

restaurant, Friendly Farm, has white ducks wandering in its drive, and generous portions served “family style” by cheerful waitresses, who are tucking their smiles into their apron pockets by the time we say our good byes.

Driving home, I take a road running along the bottom of Greenspring Valley, the valley closest to Baltimore. Almost black, the sky throws down only enough silver to silhouette the ridgelines. The land has gone shimmer and black, and I smell green. Passing a horse pasture deep in a vale where someone built a modern-day version of log cabin, I remembered commenting to Bill years earlier that neither the log cabin nor its pastures’ creosoted fences go with the valley’s clapboard farmhouses and the white fences of its estates. Still, here they are now, years later, cabin and fence, looking as permanent as anything around, and behind them, something amazing — a pink tinge in a corner of the sky. Amid all that black and silver — pink! Too easterly to be sunset’s last rays, too northerly to be Baltimore’s afterglow, I have no idea where that pink comes from. My mind reaches for Bill’s as it automatically has done since he died. But instead of the usual void, I got a wordless reply: enjoy. Friendly farm’s white ducks, the green smell, the pink sky — enjoy.

The feeling of contentment ebbs in the following weeks. And then comes one morning when I write and go skating, something I hadn’t been doing. A week or two off the ice is enough to make me feel very unsteady, but this time, I feel surprisingly comfortable. The rink isn’t the one shimmed into a golf course, but another where the ice has great texture and I can feel my blades gripping it.

It’s midday and the rink isn’t crowded. Two teenagers, whose youthful beauty is almost too radiant to behold skate round and round, the boy in a yarmulke, and the girl with the darkest

eyes in whole history of dark- eyed girls. They skate as if they're afraid to stop. Afraid they'll fall into each other, and then what will happen?

Their evident attraction to each other calls to mind myself as a girl and the sailor I loved.. Of the night he and I were going to skate, but didn't. Of how close I had come to going over the edge. And I wish these two . . . what? Happiness. That's it: happiness. No matter if they go around together forever or if they become each other's poignant memory, that's what I wish them: happiness.

On the way home I stop at a country store advertising sandwiches and eat my ham and rye on a bench out back, then drive into Baltimore to the bank bookended on one end by an antiques store that once had been an ice cream parlor where we took our boys and on the other by Petite Louis, where Bill and I had gone to lunch for the final time. But I'm not overtaken by nostalgia: I have to get to the bank and check my balance. I need a new car.

Even before Bill became sick ours had a lot of mileage, but after he died, I was too tired to shop for one. Now, however, I can't put it off any longer. I test drive one model, then another, withstand the blandishments of the salesman, and tell him I want to check out other dealers. Then I meet Sue again. The waitress I had found so annoying is gone, and it's clear that the restaurant soon will be following her. It doesn't matter. The company makes up for what the food and service lack.

During dessert, Sue invites me to see a play titled "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," but, then, as we are walking to our cars she starts to equivocate — a most-un-Sue-like behavior — "I'll call you about the play . . . it might not be all that good . . . maybe we should wait for the reviews . . . now that I think about it, I may have something else that weekend."

"What?"

“It’s that guy, remember? . . . The one who fell through the ice.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he’s asked me to go see his band again. I think maybe I should do that.”

Do that? Do THAT? Of course she should do that!

I tell her forget Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Go see the guy play in his band. We are standing a block away from the little Episcopal school my boys had gone to school. In the same neighborhood where Scott Fitzgerald had lived during his sad Baltimore years. And where a man sits on the stoop of his brownstone and smokes a cigar. The spring evening air carries a hint of melancholy, a gracenote reminder that life is short and nothing is guaranteed. At any moment the ice make crack and someone might fall through. The best you can hope for is to hold your edge and keep your balance. And go for it. Whatever the risk, go for it.

###

**Tue. Feb. 16, 2010**

**Dear Bill,**

**A good day . . . sort of. Taught — I actually got to work early enough to have a cup of coffee at a bakery. Then, back to campus, met with students**

A widow of nineteen months, I begin teaching at McDaniel College, thanks to Herb Smith, who once broke my heart when I saw him put his hand on the back of his wife Beth when they rose to sing a hymn — Herb is an esteemed professor there and doubtless his recommendation helped. The college is situated on a hill overlooking Westminster, Maryland, and from my desk on the third floor of Hill Hall I look out a multi-paned window and see nothing but sky. One morning, as I’m watching clouds carrying a hint of spring charge across that blue expanse, I think how did I get here? How did a kid who could have made any number

of wrong turns end up with an office like this? A kid who grew up in, Bridgeport, a city known as the armpit of New England, get here, in this beautiful office with a dozen polite students who call her “Professor Schultheis”?

Because you earned it I tell myself.

Not only do I teach, but I am awarded a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, on the campus of Sweet Briar College outside of Lynchburg. The whole experience of getting myself organized to get there — prepaying my bills, finding someone to mind my cat, loading my car, driving down past Charlottesville — ratchet up my identity as “widow” because they are all tasks I would have relegated to Bill.

I feel his absence most acutely when I get lost on my way and end up outside of Appomattox Courthouse, exactly the sort of place that Bill, with his encyclopedic knowledge of history, would have made come alive for me. Instead, I hear only heavy, dank silence, fetid with defeat.

I study my roadmap, right my direction and make it to the center before sundown. Residencies at the center are awarded on a competitive basis, and this is my first experience as a writer/artist. Not only are meals and rooms provided, but “studios” as well. Mine is the same where one of my favorite writers, Alice McDermott, labored on *Charming Billy*, a book that the National Book Award.

In addition to a large desk beneath a window, my studio has a bed, which I steal myself to resist, and a comfy, leather armchair, which seduces me entirely. I am three chapters, into writing this memoir, but my first morning in my studio, that armchair calls to me, so, rather than work earnestly at my computer, I relax into its squishy cushions and from the pile of books I’ve

brought, pull out *Balance* by Scott McCredie. I've read and taken notes on McCredie's book already, but that morning, I read it afresh and realize that everything I've written thus far is junk.

Writers are not like sopranos singing a solo before an adoring audience nor a skater competing for a medal. For sopranos and skaters there are no do-overs, but we writers can do-over endlessly. And we do. I once heard Alice McDermott say she was halfway through a book before realizing she had written it in the wrong voice: her story needed to be told by a first-person narrator, not an omniscient third. Months, maybe even years of work, to be done over.

So that morning at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, I'm not discouraged to realize that my first three chapters are junk. Writing junk is part of the process. Recognizing what's bad is just as important as recognizing what's good. And sometimes trudging through the muddy slough is the only way to the verdant meadow. Toward noon a sentence comes to me so fully formed I'm impelled to get out of my comfy chair and write it down. I write *Balance I have read, is the action of not moving*. And then I go to lunch.

In many ways I feel like an imposter in my new life as a teacher in a private college and in being awarded a residency at a writers' colony. And I certainly am not an ice skater, although I have brought my skates because there is a rink in Lynchberg.

The rink is on the campus of Liberty University and once or twice during the week I'm at the VCCA, I drive down there and skate. Unfamiliar rinks are always unsettling. Their size, their lighting, and, most importantly, the texture of their ice all demand adjustments from the skater, and I have spent all my inner resources just getting to the VCCA, so I circle the rink by pumping with my toepick not caring how ridiculous I look.

Moving slowly has its advantages; I can read the advertisements on the boards and gain insight into the commercial side of the Christian right. I learn that I could have a home theater

installed to enhance my viewing of sacred videos. That if my heart breaks, to call Jesus, but if my water heater springs a leak, call a Christian plumber, available twenty-four/seven. And that a cake from a particular baker is “the sweetest blessing this side of heaven.” By the end of the session, I feel like an alien who’s landed in a cruciform universe: nothing was rounded nor ambiguous; everything was straight-edged and right-angled. For every question there’s an answer and at Liberty University no one cries “Oh Fuck!” at midnight. I drive back to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, with relief. There I feel like a stranger, but at least I’m a stranger among like-minded strangers.

Even with my fresh direction for this project, my dedication to writing is haphazard — the armchair’s allure is stronger than the computer’s. Plus, I’m distracted by plans for my upcoming trip to Turkey and Greece with Carolyn. Also, I enjoy the company of my fellow artists more than struggling to get my looping memories onto paper.

Toward the end of my week at the center Mary Zeppo, a poet from California, and I cross the highway separating the VCCA from the main of Sweet Briar. Sweet Briar has closed for good now, but that late March afternoon, the campus is nearly deserted for another reason: the students are on spring break. Unlike Liberty University’s campus, which is primarily concrete and utilitarian, Sweet Briar’s is brick and Georgian and scaled to the human spirit’s need for apportionment.

Mary and I wander a bit, noting the “riding ring” for Sweet Briar girls who want to bring their horses to college. And then she and I go into the Memorial Chapel, a beautiful, hushed place inviting calm communion with one’s self. Also weddings. I imagine the Sweet Briar brides who must have walked up the center aisle, their heads full of optimism and hearts full of love. And how eagerly they vowed “Til death do us part,” when, in fact, they were mouthing

words their youthful imaginations could not grasp — marriage is about life, not death. And only time teaches that it's about both.

As Mary and I are leaving, off to the right, behind the last pew, I notice a sign announcing a space dedicated to quiet contemplation. Curiosity draws me to it, but an unseen hand opens the door. There, on the wall emblazoned across a piece of fabric as rough as burlap is a message just for me — “Find balance in the seasons.”

Of course . . . balance. The message affirms that I'm on the right path for my memoir and maybe for my life going forward. And then, down below, I notice that whoever crafted the wall hanging has attributed its message to Hesychia, In Greek mythology, Hesychia is the personification of silence, the primary principle behind the Greek Orthodox religion's practice of contemplative silence. And perhaps the power who brought me this little room in the rear of a chapel on a nearly deserted campus. “Find balance in the seasons.”

Ever since Bill died, I'd been living in a season of grief, grief defined me, colored my palette, shaded my thoughts. Moreover, I experienced every step away from grief as a step away from him. I wanted to stop not only myself, but everything else from moving. I wanted to stop time. But the master mechanic who designed the universe designed it to expand with divine proportionality. I left the chapel, thinking that whatever season I'm in is the best season I'm in, and if I'm to keep my balance I have to move as the seasons change.

My residency at the VCCA over, I return home, finish teaching the semester at McDaniel, and the day after I hand in my final grades, leave for Turkey and Greece with Carolyn. When our plane lifts off from Dulles International Airport, Bill has been dead for exactly two years, seventeen hours and twenty-two minutes, and I have missed him for every second. But I am flying.

###

**Feb. 27, 2013**

**Dear Bill,**

**I went skating in Rockefeller Center. I love you. Pat**

When a novice skater is having a good time, her face sometimes assumes a bemused, inwardly focused expression, suggesting that her imagined self is far more beguiling than anything onlookers see. Never mind that her inward and outward realities aren't in sync: her inward reality is telling her she's as graceful as a swan, so that's the reality she skates to, going round and round while sporting a crooked little smile and eyes dazed with an effortlessness only she senses.

Poor dear, her delusion is not her fault. Blame it on an image imprinted on her brain, a particularly American image a public space, as iconic as the Golden Gate Bridge, and built just about the same time. Blame it on Rockefeller Plaza.

When he planned the complex bearing his name, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. envisioned a commercial enterprise that would present a unified and beautiful architectural whole "attained to the fullest extent possible compatible with an adequate return on the investment." The sunken plaza, which was intended as a public space, first appeared in the center's plans, in 1931.

But the plaza, dominated by a gigantic statue of Prometheus, the bringer of fire, failed to draw the expected crowds, and worse, it failed to draw them into the surrounding shops to spend their money. In short, Prometheus's fire warmed no hearts, kindled no spark, excited no spirit. The center's management was becoming worried until someone suggested that fire be damned . . . what the plaza needed was ice!

M.C. Carpenter, an Ohio inventor, had developed a method of keeping outdoor artificial skating rinks from melting and so the sunken plaza was altered to accommodate a rink. On

Christmas Day, 1936, with America still reeling from the Great Depression and the unemployment rate kissing seventeen percent, the rink opened. And people went ice skating in the center of Manhattan. And a star was born.

And from then on every skater dreams of her stardom in the center of Manhattan. From Radio City Music Hall to its towering office buildings, Rockefeller Center is an arena for unleashed human possibility, and skating, with its speed, elegance and promissory grace perfectly externalizes that possibility. America has hundreds of rinks, but only one represents something more than itself. Only one ignited fire with ice.

For many skaters, the ice rink at Rockefeller Plaza is a cathedral, the place that first inspired their dream of their graceful selves. Sunken and surrounded by skyscrapers, it's perfectly situated to feed skating's demand for self-display — Look at me! Look at me! So, just as other believers do, skaters make pilgrimages to the place they admit initially inspired them.

But I never had skated at Rockefeller Plaza. I wanted to, but I never did. I remember talking with Vida about going. And with Peggy. But I was always waiting to get better, maybe to master a little waltz jump, or an inside three-turn, or just some power stroking. But every year whatever few skills I had eroded more and more.

Then four and a half years after Bill died, I received a Christmas card with a scene of Rockefeller Plaza and skaters. One spinning. One gliding. A third falling. All under the gaze of Prometheus, who's girdled by the zodiac, mankind's first attempt to tell the story of the stars. The card had been sent to me by Pam Bower, the granddaughter of my aunt Jane, and the daughter of my cousin Howard. The card from her is a reproduction of a watercolor from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It had been painted by Joseph Webster Golinkin in 1940, three years before I was born, and only four years after the rink at Rockefeller Center

had opened. Within four years the rink had captured Golinkin's imagination and so he had to paint it. A midnight blue sky over New York, the buildings lit from below, as if Manhattan's bedrock were glowing and lighting to gold the facades of its skyscrapers.

Behind Prometheus towers Golinkin's Christmas tree. It has no auxiliary lights, but it does have a star. All Golinkin's figures, his skyscrapers, his tree, even his skaters have soft edges, suggesting something illusory or transitory, all motion, fleeting and unstable. His star alone is fixed. Painted with five-point simplicity, it's as straightforward as a star licked and stuck onto an outstanding book report, precise, predictable, a testimony to spatial geometry.

And it floats. It hovers near the top of his Christmas tree, but also in front of it, detached and unified onto itself. A position without a basis in reality. But then, in 1940, reality had no basis in reality. Golinkin had been a naval officer during World War I, and had lived through the Great Depression, and in 1940 knew that with most of Europe under the Nazi boot, war was coming to America again. His skyscrapers, his tree, his skaters — their Christmastimes were numbered, and maybe that's why he painted their lines blurry. And his star, alone, solid and stationery.

The February after I receiving that card, Amtrak advertises inexpensive rates, so I go to New York with Anne Gossette, another widow. And I bring my skates. When Anne goes for a drink with a former colleague, I take my skates to Rockefeller Plaza because I don't give a damn any more. In August I'll be seventy, the age my mother had been when she danced at Pam Bower's wedding, and I no longer give a damn of how I look or what people think of me. I don't give a damn about anything but skating at the most glamorous rink in the world.

Under the gaze of golden Prometheus, I do not become miraculously transformed into the skater I feel myself to be. I perform no dizzying spins, deathless spirals, nor soaring jumps. My outward skater does not externalize my inward one.

The plaza's ice is extremely hard, so my edges have no grip. And again I have to pump around with my toe pic, until I eventually sense my balance awakening. Then round and round I go with all the others, the joyful and the terrified, the fleet and the faltering, the graceful and the awkward, the naturals and the clueless. I'm not among the best, not by a longshot, but among the sixty-nine year olds, I rank among the medalists.

The more I skate, the more confident I feel, and at one point, I execute a few backward crossovers, an easy move delivering a visual wallop. Arms outstretched, left foot crossing in front of right, right sliding out behind me, I perform in front of the restaurant windows looking out onto the ice. A middle-aged couple is seated before me, and they look miffed at each other, especially the woman. At one point, the man looks up and I catch his split-second glance. And I see a spark of appreciation. Not for beauty. And not for grace. But for daring. For daring to be out on the ice at all. Under the eyes of the onlookers. And the gaze of the fire-bringer. And of the distant, shining stars.

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Two weeks before my seventieth birthday I am sitting in a second-floor office converted from a bedroom overlooking the back yard of an astrologer named Jean Lall. Soon, Jean and I will have a disagreement over the purpose of my visit, but at the moment I am entranced by her office's harmony. Her home was built in the era of radiators and solid plaster walls, and the room has smoky violet walls and bright, white trim. Everything in it is either squared – the edges

of her stacked astrology journals, the base of her computer to the end of its little table — or rounded like the black beret Jean once wore back when she skated.

. For Jean astrology is no leftover, flower-power fad. She is a learned woman and for her astrology is a lifelong study, one begun in college when she went as a Fulbright scholar to India. In addition, she has a deep knowledge of Jungian psychology.

Ten years earlier, for my sixtieth birthday, I had given myself a gift of having Jean develop my astrology chart. Then, I had weathered the deaths of Sally and my parents, plus Bill's first bout of cancer, and thought I deserved a larky treat. But Jean's learned approach had flummoxed me . . . too many houses and retrograde movements. I had left my reading interested, but insufficiently seduced by Jean's seriousness to become a true star-believer.

And now she assumes that I am back for another reading. Only I'm not. I thought I had made it perfectly clear that I wanted to see her again in order to ask whether she sees a connection between skating and stars, because I had always sensed a promise of transcendence in skating's push and glide, a sense of flight's possibility in its speed . . . the dream of lift-off.

"As a Leo," Jean begins, "you are a life force. You need an outlet for self-expression." But I interrupt her. "But what about skating and stars?"

Jean looks at me quizzically, then says, "Well, yes, remember when we used to take Timmy's class? Remember how he told us to fix our eyes on a point down the rink and skate to it as if it were guiding us?"

Soft-spoken, she chooses her words deliberately, but they hit like a boomerang. How long ago had it been: twenty-five years? Thirty? Weekday evenings, our arms outstretched, our chins high, our eyes fixed on the flag hanging on the opposite wall, we'd start: push, glide; push,

glide, our bodies moving beneath our still heads, fixed and guided by the white star on a blue field on the flag at the end of the rink.

“Your strong air sign is Saturn,” Jean says, circling back to my chart. “But Saturn is not a liberated planet. Maybe your moon, Sagitarius, will help you. It likes to move through space. Sagitarius likes to see things from afar.”

“When you used to skate, did you see a connection between skating and stars?” I repeat.

“Well, I suppose there is.”

Jean stands, raises her arms, and, mimics skating’s rhythmic push-glide, her graceful, long grey dress swaying, while the crystal pendant hanging between her breasts stays plumb relative to her body’s position. She’s tall, with hair as gray as mine, but her eyes darken and become spiced with almost as much mischief as they had held when first I met her. That recollected motion enacted in this calming, pristine room has rekindled her inner, wistful girlishness and I watch her eyes focus on a point in her distant past; she seems to be listening, but to what? The suss of steel on ice? Her blades? Those of the skater’s on her left? On her right?

“When you skate,” she says, still bending her knees, pushing with her inner foot, rising up, “when you skate, of course, you need to balance. But there’s also the balance of choreography, and that’s related to astrology. In choreography a story unfolds, just as tales are told by the constellated stars. There’s the individual’s story, and the broader, bigger picture . . . . Whichever it is, there’s always a story to be told. And just as the stars come in on time across the heavens, skaters have to do that in choreography.”

When she returns to my chart, she tells me that as a widow I have a Virgo archetype; I am a woman alone, but a woman who is rooted. Virgo knows cycles, she holds sheaves of grain; she embodies the ripeness of harvest time.

I try once more to redirect the conversation to skating, telling her about my memoir.

“Skating isn’t like running,” Jean answers. “It’s circular. When we skate, we move like the planets, but there is a fundamental contradiction. In ice, everything is frozen, slowed down, and yet, we need ice in order to fly. In order to push with the result being flight. Our humanity has to lift. We have to ascend.”

Jean then tells me I don’t have “much air in my chart,” and I think this is true. Bill has been dead over five years, and I’ve been getting along, putting one foot in front of the other: skating, writing, visiting our boys, our grandsons, teaching, traveling, not a bad life. But, still, an airless life. Not suffocating, but definitely a weighed down life, mirthless, joyless. No fire to lift my balloon. And the stars in my chart have no answer for that. And my Catholic education is too engrained for me not to hear the good sisters’ admonition: God always answers our prayers, Girls. Only sometimes his answer isn’t the one we want. Both God and the stars have given me the same answer: If I want life in my life, I’ll have to find it for myself.

As Jean and I clear up our misunderstanding about the intention of my visit and whether or not I should pay for an updated astrological chart I really don’t want, she urges something upon me, almost as if she regrets my leaving without a clear message from the tight-lipped stars. “It’s important to get that manuscript done,” she urges about my intended memoir. “You must finish it.”

We’re standing at her front door and Jean’s dark eyes glow with fervid intensity, as if she senses that this project has been a journey back through time and tinged by grief. And that

only by completing it, can I lay those events aside and achieve lift. I began it memoir three years after Bill died, and have interrupted it regularly to write short stories or essays or book reviews, but now the memoir itself is weighing me down. I need to move on. I need to take the next step. I need to trust my sense of balance.

###

A skater performs on a miracle. Every time she executes a back crossover, hazards a three-turn, or simply skates forward, she does it on the remains of comets, those early, interplanetary midwives, who, having no way to leave the Earth, made themselves useful by transforming themselves into the planet's most necessary substance: water . . . lots and lots of water . . . 3, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000 tons by some estimates.

But water never lost its affinity for its first form, its frozen form. No other substance shape-shifts so easily and with as little violence as solid water does when it absorbs the heat of whatever is nearby. Whether it's two fingers of Scotch, or ice cream laced with blueberries, ice will absorb the heat, cool the substance and melt itself. On a larger scale, seasonally melting ice is heralded as a harbinger of spring, a cycle so intimately linked to our own bodily rhythms, we scarcely pay it any mind. For us, the results of those galactic dust-buds, the spring thaw is as visceral as the rise and descent of the constellations, the heavenly mile markers of ice's first home.

This particular afternoon, I'm at Mount Pleasant Ice Arena in east Baltimore to learn about rink ice, which is as divorced from natural ice and its rhythms of freeze and thaw as a tasseled circus elephant is from a full-tusked bull charging through the African savannah. Like so much about skating, I'm to learn that rink ice begins with a contradiction. It begins with heat.

With Scott White, the rink manager, I'm going visit the rink's heart, the great pumps that send hot and cold glycol through two lattices of pipes. I follow him up an aisle between the bleachers and a gummy layer of gray sand that's fringed along the boards with melting ice. It's summer and for a week the rink has been closed and the ice has been thawing so that routine maintenance can be undertaken before the upcoming skating season that begins with the school year. The entire arena smells dank and fetid. Strewn over the bleachers lay long strips of plastic: the narrower ones, red; the wider ones blue.

"Those are the hockey lines," Scott says over his shoulder. Seeing those plastic strips out of context is like seeing someone with whom you're familiar, like your doctor or plumber, standing in line ahead of you for popcorn at the multiplex. Like many municipal rinks, Mount Pleasant is used for both figure skating and hockey, and every figure skater I know, appropriates the red circles establishing hockey zones and uses them to practice frilly crossovers on. Scott remarks about the plastic strips, "We'll put them back as soon as we get the new ice on and paint it."

Did I hear him right? . . . Did he say "Paint the ice"? In all my years of skating, I've never heard of painted ice. To me, rink ice is white because it's naturally opaque. At least I always had thought so. But, of course, I should have known: nothing about rink ice is natural. Not even its color.

When we get into the maintenance room, Scott tells me about the heat. The gummy, wet sand, he says is actually about three feet deep and beneath it lay two lattices of pipes: one near the sand's upper surface, and one near the bottom. This lower lattice is used for warming. If the temperature outside gets too cold, he explains, the ground and the three-foot layer of sand will

freeze, expand, and push upwards until it cracks the skating surface. So warm brine is pumped through the lower lattice to keep the sand at 40 degrees.

The upper lattice is the one for cooling, and like the lower lattice — Scott calls it a mat — its thermostat has two read-outs: one for the sand surrounding its pipes; and one for the ice. The sand is set for sixteen degrees and the ice for twenty.

Keeping the brine running through the network of pipes and set at the appropriate temperatures requires a keen understanding of mechanics and the Scott who shows me the rink's circulatory system is a very different man from the one who takes tickets and rents out skates. That Scott is called Bubba and tattoos garland his muscular arms, tattoos, which, when asked about, make him mutter, "Oh, something I did long ago . . . long, long ago." Still, his compact physique and close cropped, dark hair suggest a certain visceral intensity, as do his eyes, which are blue-green and alert. These are the eyes of Scott White, the animated man who's showing me the rink's inner workings. He tells me how, once the ice is fully melted and the lattices have been checked for leaks, the flooding of the rink will begin, and that once there's a thin layer of ice, it will be painted with heat-transfer paint and the hockey markings reinstalled. And that as soon as the ice is about an inch thick, he will use the Zamboni to build the ice by spraying water over its surface.

Over the years, I've skated at several rinks and know that ice-making is like surgery: it depends on who does it. And at Mount Pleasant it's done very well, with just enough softness to give a grip. Once or twice I've come to an early morning session and almost gasped at how easy skating felt, as if the whole promise of the sport was at my command and that ice was a medium I controlled.

“Don’t worry,” Scott assures me when I start to leave. “We’ll have it all up and running in a few weeks.”

The target date for the rink’s reopening is Aug. 12, the day after my seventieth birthday, and I don’t disabuse him of the notion that I’m eagerly anticipating skating. But I’m not. It’s always been too frustrating. And I have dozens of excuses for quitting: I need to skate three times a week to simply maintain what I have, and rarely have energy for anything else. The rink is clear across Baltimore and skating eats into my day — at least four hours given the commute. And there’s the possibility of falling and its dire consequences at my age. Plus, I’ve recently taken up yoga and that should be enough exercise. Finally, my skates are beginning to “break down.”

To support a skater’s ankles, skating boots are stitched with multiple layers of leather and padding. And recently, I’ve noticed that stitching in mine has started to deteriorate, “break down” in skating parlance.

It’s been nearly fourteen years since the Christmas before my mother died when Bill gave me my current boots. I could put them away for good without feeling pierced by the sense I was betraying him as I do when I put away other tokens more clearly linked to our shared lives — the albums from our trips, the pictures from our painting classes.

If I put my skates away, the regret I’ll feel will be for the time I spent on a sport for which I have no talent. Time I might have spent otherwise like seeing my grandchildren more, volunteering at Hopewell, writing, or just going to the movies with friends.

On the other hand, maybe I’ll just buy myself one more new pair. Foolish? Yes, but at seventy certainly some indulgences are permitted. The leathery smell of new bright white boots alone can be worth the price. If I do buy them, given my age and how little my skating will

demand of them, those skates will be in fine shape, practically new, whenever I do leave the ice for good.

I look out at the sodden gray sand, pocked with puddles and as devoid of the promise of grace as possible. But, still, the promise is there, if not in my eyes, then in those of some little girl who, one day, will put on skates and feel like I did when Uncle Leo knelt before me and I tried on my cousin Carolyn's skate — she feel like Cinderella when she tried on the glass slipper.

Maybe if I do get new skates, someday they'll find their way to her, and she'll think they're beautiful. And, as soon as stands in them, she'll feel she's beautiful, too. Maybe she'll find her true center. Her irreproachable balance. Her inner eagle.

And arms outstretched, head high, tummy tucked, she'll move over the ice like an angel.

And from wherever I am, I'll reach out my hand to her. And feel the brush of grace. The breath of heavenly motion.