

*Skaters are peacocks. Other athletes must execute, but skaters must execute beautifully. For them, self-display is essential. The very tools they need to maintain balance — their outstretched arms and extended legs — give their bodies attenuated lines crying out for notice. The result is a dimension of exhibitionism beyond balletic grace. Elusive, skaters bewitch; emotive, they tempt.*

*Even the youngest skaters, once they've mastered a few basic moves, express a serpentine seductiveness. As one move flows into another, the curvy undulations they create resemble those traced by sloe-eyed snakes.*

*At heart, all figure skaters are Salome.' Take the spiral, a move marrying pure line with seemingly effortless grace. Bending from her waist, a skater balances on one foot while stretching her other leg out and up. Arms wide, free leg reaching toward the ceiling, back and neck arched, she smiles. If she's in a competition, she glides past the judges like a five-point star balanced on a single tip.*

*The more she widens the gap between her free leg and skating foot, the better her reward; points accrue to the skater who exposes the apex of her womanhood the most. If skating weren't an Olympic sport, a spiral might be considered pornographic. Sometimes, watching a competition on television, I've sensed the cameraman's reluctance to focus as a skater glides past: that could be his daughter, his little girl out there with her leg up.*

*Points also accrue to the skater who the holds her spiral longest. But striving for those few extra seconds of exposure can be dangerous. If a skater waits too long to straighten her back and lower her free leg she can be caught balancing on one foot but with no momentum, and momentum is what helps her stay upright. If she lose it, she can topple over, like a bicycle when it stops. Once her leg is lowered she must perform an act so subtle no one watching can see it: within her boot she must shift her center of gravity from her skating foot to her middle as if a plumb line were running from her head to between*

*her legs so her weight is evenly distributed. Only then she is ready for her next move, when knees flexed, chin up, head high, she'll push off into her next display of herself. Maybe in a spin. Or a jump. What a whirl! What a leap! Whatever she does, her body will be crying "Look at me! Look at me! How can you not love me?"*

A May evening and my mother is trimming the prickly shrubs beside our concrete front steps. As soon as the supper dishes were washed and dried Sally had begged to go hang out at her friend Margie's, so the job of "keeping an eye" on Susan has fallen to me. I don't mind: Susan is smart and obedient and won't eat the red berries on the bushes that our mother has told us are poisonous. With every snap of her clippers my mother spritzes the cool air with the scent of fresh evergreen; I taste pine-flavored twilight on the back of my tongue.

"You'll have to rake these up in the morning, Patsy," she says of the clippings.

"Do I still have to clean my half of the bedroom too?"

"Sally can take care of that. Just be sure to make your bed. Then rake these up."

A small price. Most of my friends live in three-story houses with an aunt below and a grandmother above. It's a point of pride for my parents, and by extension for myself, that they've managed to build their own single family Cape Cod. It has only four rooms, but its yard is double-wide. The evening I'm remembering my father is in the back, cutting the grass, a two-evening enterprise - no one we know has a power mower. His rotor's steady whirl plays the snare to my mother's clippers. She chops, he cuts: my parents syncopate their dedication to their property.

Suddenly the rhythm of their work is broken. A large car beaches itself alongside our front fence. Our property has no sidewalk or curb, so the driver just parks on the grass — everyone does. Like his car, the driver is big and heavy; he thuds his door shut with an easy swing. His smile is easy, too. The

woman in the passenger seat gets out like an afterthought. She smiles, too, but shyly. My parents have friends, the McGuinnesses, the Kranicks, couples they've known since before they were married, but I've never seen these two before.

"Clara?" the man says.

With one hand, my mother brushes away the wave of hair over her forehead; with the other she holds her clippers. She looks hard at the man. "Stosh?"

"Yeah, it's me, Stosh. Hard to believe, huh? "

The elaborate latch on our gate flummoxes him for a moment, but then he laughs and opens it. His curly hair is the color of new pennies, and his sweater's as red as a cardinal's cap.

The woman with him bundles herself and her bashful smile through the gate after him, but she's on her own. Stosh and my mother are lost in an eye-lock.

"Stosh, well, gee, Stosh . . . after all these years," my mother says.

At that moment, Susan and I are no more important than the clippings at her feet. The rotor in the back yard stops.

"Yeah, well, it's me," Stosh says. "I've been meaning to get in touch, but you know how it goes . . . something always comes up. But I've been meaning to get in touch."

"It's been a time. How many years?"

"Long time . . . yeah, long time."

He introduces the woman as his wife. Like him, she's big, and her good-natured smile never stops. My father, wiping his hands on a bandana, comes around the corner of the house. He knows Stosh too.

My parents had gone to St. Michael's Elementary School, the school for the Poles of Bridgeport, but they had been three years apart and always claimed they hadn't known each other then. Perhaps that was true: in elementary school, three years is a generation.

However, they both remember Stosh from St. Michaels. The three of them talk about the Franciscan nuns and priests, and about learning every subject twice: once in Polish, and again in English. They talk about the Polish homework. The English homework. The Polish books. The English books. And they talk about Father Charles, the parish's tyrannical pastor. I watch Stosh and my parents toss memories in a game of three-way catch. Stosh's wife didn't go to St. Michael's: she can't play, but Stosh and my parents seem to have entered a portal of memory where she and Susan and I don't exist, a portal to a happy, free time. With every cycle around the three of them, their reminiscences grow more luminous, more vibrant.

And then their memory store runs dry.

And Stosh looks at Susan and me as if he's seeing us for the first time. "So, Clara, I see you've got quite a family."

"Oh, the oldest's at a friend's"

"So, then, you've got three?"

His wife's smile fades, but Stosh doesn't look at her.

"Yeah, three girls."

"Wow, all girls!" He looks at me, with my glasses and sallow complexion and then at blond, blue-eyed Susan. Again, "Wow, three girls!"

My mother's still holding her clippers. "Want to come in? I can't offer you anything . . . I didn't get a chance to bake today."

“No, thanks,” says Stosh. “I just wanted to stop by. Like I said, I’ve been meaning to get in touch.”

“You sure you won’t come in?” my father says. “How about a beer? Sure you don’t want a beer, Stosh?”

“Thanks, Ralph, but I just felt like stopping by . . . see how you and Clara were doing. Maybe next time.”

“Sure. Next time.”

I feel Susan and myself drifting out of the adults’ focus again. We’ve been acknowledged, but we’re peripheral to what’s going on.

Stosh looks hard at my mother and then says what the convergence of memory and time has pulled him toward during all the years he’s been remembering her.

“Clara,” Stosh says, “remember skating?”

My mother doesn’t answer, doesn’t look at him. Instead, she gazes into the gap between his big shoulders and his wife’s. I watch her middle-distance gaze travel into the garden of our neighbors, the Blascos, across the street, whose property ends at the base of a hill. Between the darkening hillside and the gathering night, the blossoms on their apple trees are as iridescent as stars. Fleet as a single snowflake, a little smile ripples across my mother’s lips. “Oh, yeah, I remember skating.”

“Skating,” Stosh says. “It was something.”

“You know, they drained the pond. The town of Stratford drained the pond.”

“I know, they wanted to build the Hyway Theater, so the pond had to go. But they didn’t do it right, and, you know, last year when Hurricane Edna hit, it flooded. When I read that in *The Post*, I thought to myself, ‘Serves ’em right.’ ”

Stosh and my mother laugh. His wife and my father, not so much.

“So, you don’t skate no more, Clara?” Stosh says.

“Oh no . . . the girls and all . . . even if the pond was still there, when would I have time?”

“Still, it was something. You remember holding hands?”

“Oh, yeah, holding hands.”

“And the bonfires?”

“Gosh, where you guys ever got the wood, I don’t know.”

“Oh we got it, we got it, don’t you worry about that . . . we got it.”

“Those bonfires were something.”

“And making out, remember making out, Clara?”

I know what “making out” means from Sally, but I’ve never heard it spoken by an adult, so boldly, so unashamedly. Stosh says “making out” without a trace of flirtation, says it as if he really wants to know. As if the pressure of not knowing has simply grown too great.

My mother shifts the clippers in her hands and says. “You must have me confused with someone else, Stosh.”

Stosh looks at Susan and me, then back at my mother. “Sure, Clara. You’re right. It must have been someone else.”

Of course I knew that my parents had lives before I was born – I’d heard my mother’s stories about the dances she went to with Claire McGuinness and about how my parents had babysat Howard, my aunt Jane’s son, before they were married, but to me those were lives converging toward a single possible outcome . . . ME!

But Stosh is talking about a level of that pre-Me life I’d never considered. He’s talking about a life that could have sent my mother off in a different direction entirely, one that wouldn’t have led to me.

But then his wife intervenes, remarking that we have a beautiful yard. And then my father again asks if anyone wants a beer. And Stosh again says No, they have to go, and then my parents thank him and his wife for “stopping by” and say they’ll have to get together sometime soon.

And then Stosh and his wife are at the gate, and in their car and driving away. And taking that alternate possibility of my mother’s life with them.

But my parents never do get together with Stosh and his wife. They see his wife once more. But not Stosh.

A week after his visit, my mother, her potatoes peeled and boiling for dinner, has spread the evening paper on the kitchen table before her. I come out of the bedroom I share with Sally, and notice that our mother’s eyes have the same middle-distance stare that they had held when they looked into the Blascos’ garden. Sometime between peeling her potatoes and seeing me her world has cracked open. She talks over my head to the Blessed Virgin statue high in the little moon-shaped shrine at the end of our hallway.

“Stosh is dead,” she says. “Two days ago . . . a heart attack. He was forty-four . . . forty-four.”

I sense that I’m missing something that “forty-four” holds some significance that I’m failing to grasp, but I am only ten years old and forty-four means nothing to me. For me time’s slow orbit rolls from summer to Christmas and back to summer. Everything comes round again. And nothing ever leaves the orbit. I am growing up, but no one was growing older.

Today, I feel every breath I take ticking away another moment in time’s slow winding down. Sally, like my uncle Leo, will die in her fifties. And I will be made a widow in my sixties.

And when I wonder why Stosh came to see my mother days before he died I think maybe it was because she incarnated a vitalizing memory he needed to etch onto his soul before it floated away. What

difference does it make if his memories of their making out were right? Or her more innocent ones were? Memories, they're only sparks. They burn and then they burn away.

Now I think that maybe those nights when she washed the supper dishes and talked to her reflection in the dark little window over the sink my mother was recalling Stosh . . . *Some boy would take your hand . . . take your hand.*

I can imagine her, sylph-like, soft brown eyes, heart-shaped mouth, free and floating. And I can imagine Stosh racing to catch her, to take her hand and skate. The two of them, wordless, moving in one rhythm over the ice and beneath the stars. The two of them, young and speechless at their own easy syncopation. Where to go, then? Oh, where to go, when the wonder of skates and speed and stars burn too hot? When their blades slice the ice and their blood is on fire? Do they find the circle of darkness just beyond the bonfire's light? Does she lose herself in the big boy's arms? And he envelop her delicate frame?

The only truth lies in what our memories drive us to do. On a long-ago evening a big man whose days were numbered drove to see a woman who, as a girl, once had lit the ice on fire. And the woman's middle daughter had stood silently by and witnessed the man offer his memories like a communion cup, and had seen her mother refuse them — she had no choice: her innocent daughters were watching.

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In the Catholic cosmos of mid-century Bridgeport, every girl had heard the whispers in the kitchen, been sent to her room out of earshot, but not before she'd heard of a danger so unthinkable none dared speak its name. In those days girls got in "trouble," but never "pregnant."

In 1957, the year I enter it, Notre Dame High School is virgin territory: no student has ever stepped foot into it. The school is a monument to the second-generation American Catholics who had

pledged the money for its construction, and is designed like an angel with two wings: one for boys; another for girls. Perhaps in blueprints the concept appeared divinely inspired, but in actuality, it's hellish. Only two areas are common to both sexes: the library and the chapel. The stiff plastic curtain slicing down its middle makes the cafeteria quasi-common. At lunchtime we girls hear the boys, even smell their pungent mix of Brylcreme and what I will later recognize as testosterone. But if we see a boy? . . . oh if we see one, we'll freeze into pillars of salt. If God doesn't do that to us, the good nuns will.

Elsewhere, girls are getting into trouble – Leo's middle daughter, my cousin Leona, will be the subject of much whispering in our kitchen, when she marries at sixteen and has a baby five months later.

But at Notre Dame, girls are supposed to get into good colleges, not trouble. The course of study is rigorous and wholly unimaginative, designed to stamp out any whiff of creativity in a maze of Ciceronian arguments and logarithms. We shoulder on, stooped by the chemistry, Latin, Spanish, and trigonometry books we carry like shields across our chests. Some of us make it successfully to the maze's end. But not all.

Three weeks short of graduation, the intercom flips on. The star of our class, a girl who's won a fistful of scholarships, is called to the office. Twenty minutes later, we see her. Every girl on our side of the girls' wing sees her. She's walking outside, walking the whole length of the wing, walking, as we'll later learn, because the good nuns won't let her wait inside for her mother. It's noon, and as she passes the windows of one classroom after another, the girl with a fistful of scholarships casts no shadow. Like a dead person. Schadenfreude, the good nuns couldn't get enough of it. Schadenfreude was, I think, the only form of titillation they permitted themselves.

I had known her, but not well. She was so brainy, I think she was embarrassed to see me struggling so. Chemistry, trigonometry, Cicero, they nearly defeated me, whereas she learned like Sally did, seemingly effortlessly.

. The only place I had outshined her had been on the school paper, where, along with a boy who would become a priest, I had been co-editor and where she had been only a reporter. Down in the school's bowels, in the room dedicated to the paper, she and I used to crack wise about the nuns. And she used to tell me how she and her boyfriend made out behind the bleachers at the local Jesuit prep school he went to, and in his parents' garage, and under the bridge to the beach. Made out everywhere. How narrowly I had escaped the hole she fell into. Senior year, when she had been making out with her boyfriend everywhere, I had been doing the same with mine.

After years of looking for love at every record hop and basketball game, the summer before my senior year I had been invited to a party with a beatnik theme. My father drove me. I wore a black dress. And no shoes. I went down the stairs to a knotty pine basement and met a sailor.

He had gone to the same Jesuit prep school as my brainy classmate's boyfriend, but, like me, he had found high school overwhelming. When the time came to choose a college, he had enlisted in the Navy. He told me he's a petty officer, an electrician on a nuclear submarine. I told him the only thing I know about electricity is what I had learned in chemistry class: that electrons have charges. He laughed and said that's more than most of the men he works with know. We danced. I was in heaven.

He was smart, funny, and dangerously manipulative with a Byronic attitude that ensnares me entirely. His cynicism, his contempt for authority, his self-loathing, they balance my own neediness, dependency and longing. When he asserts he's too good for me, I assure him he's the most wonderful person I've ever met. When he claims he's just an ignorant brute, I tell him he's so smart most people

can't understand him. And when he tells me I should stay away from him, I tell him he's the love of my life.

His duty in the Navy is dangerous and secret. His sub is based in Groton, up the Connecticut coast, and when it is in port we saw each other every weekend. And then he was gone. Once in a while, I'd get a letter, but for three months at a time, he is mostly gone. What he does and where he is when he isn't with me doesn't matter. All I knew is that I am his, and that when he is gone, the pain of his absence is my only reality. The three months he is away are scarcely enough to recover from the stupor of desire he wraps me in. And then he returns. And we'd make out . . . everywhere.

The year I date him a cold snap gripped Connecticut with such ferocity that Bunnell Pond in Bridgeport's Beardsley Park froze. The deeper water is, the longer it takes to freeze, and Bunnell Pond is very, very deep — we were never allowed swim there because of my mother memories. "Someone drowned at Beardsley Park," she'd tell us. "A boy. They couldn't pull him out. I was there."

The rarity of Bunnell Pond being frozen is compelling, and when my petty officer calls, I said we should go skating.

"Skating," he says, "that's for silly people."

"Oh, come on."

"For silly people. Only silly people do things where they can break their legs."

"But Beardsley Park is frozen."

"You want to break your leg, Patsy?"

"Oh, please."

"Okay, Patsy, we'll be silly people."

But he and I never do skate. As soon as he parks beside the pond, he pulls me to him. And he kisses me. And kisses me. All over. For hours. My wildest dreams don't hold so many possibilities for pleasure.

Whatever sex education we had in those days were skewed by the Cartesian mind/body split — the mind was rational and pure; the body was animalistic and wild. Integrating the two wasn't possible. To assure that the body stayed suppressed the nuns handed out universal and negative absolutes. Give a boy what he wants and he won't respect you. Never trust a boy who asks you to prove you love him. Dictums preached by women wearing wedding rings signifying a marriage to a heavenly but incorporeal man: these were our guides.

When I leap over the crevasse separating my mind from my body and into my petty officer's arms, I do it without any acknowledgement my own desire. The only thing stronger than my desire is my delusion of utter blamelessness, a roll that complements his Byronic stance.

But a few weeks before the girl with no shadow is called to the office, even he is afraid of the danger we're slipping toward. He sends me a letter saying that we needs to cool things down, that, yes, he needs to take responsibility, but I need to do the same. It is a message I'd never heard from him, and I'm crushed: he's stepped out of our assigned roles of the brute and the innocent. And now I don't know what I was supposed to play.

My mother finds the letter, and lets me know she's read it by leaving it on my bed. My parents, especially my mother, despises my petty office, and now she has a concrete reason. But she says nothing.

Our house is frequently filled with tension, mostly arising from money issues, but I sense the tension after my mother finds the letter as a charged malignancy. As soon as I come home from school

or from my job at the A&P, it crackles around my legs, my face. I feel I'm the rod for some fury that's about to strike. But I didn't know when. Or from where.

"What's going on?" I ask Sally. She'd always been my most trusted confidante — my true mother, one therapist will call her. But she doesn't like my petty officer either, and the year I dated him she was already in college, a nursing student at the University of Bridgeport. Plus, who'd gotten pinned to Hank, a Polish Ph.D. student at Temple University. She was claiming her own life, one that didn't include me, and she doesn't have time for my teen-aged drama.

But she does volunteer that our father had looked in my bankbook and seen that I haven't saved enough for college. He thought that maybe I'd been giving money to my sailor. Such a bizarre conflation of facts and motives, wasn't unusual for my father whose mind was keen but sometimes irrational. But, since he says nothing to me, I have nothing to refute.

I go to my senior prom with my sailor and am beginning to think that I'd imagined everything. But no, the stage was merely being set. My mother has a seasonal job at a factory, so she is working the night shift, and Sally had taken Susan somewhere, so there are only two players. My father is at the kitchen table and I am at the ironing board, wrestling with a green slipcover my mother has washed. My father starts slowly, telling me I'm a fool, but not saying why.

I can't protest: compared to my brilliant sisters I often feel like a fool. And I know I'm a burden because whereas Sally has scholarships to the University of Bridgeport, and Susan surely will do likewise, I barely made it into Albertus Magnus College, let alone receive a scholarship. So, I accept "fool."

I am struggling with the slipcover's endless ruffle, when his argument starts to skitter like a hockey puck, hitting first one irrational point, then another. First his sister Margaret who died. Why? Because she married a fool who couldn't take care of her, that's why. And then my cousin Leona who

threatened to swallow a bottle of aspirin if my uncle Leo didn't let her see her boyfriend. And how Leo should have bought her the goddamned aspirin. And how I'll end up dead, too, if I don't break it off with my sailor. By then I am sobbing and protesting, but I still had the slipcover to finish.

"You know who knows how to love?" he thunders. "Hank, that's who. The way he comes up from Philadelphia every weekend for your sister . . . that's love." He goes on about how Hank had waited and waited for Sally, until she stopped running around with every "Tom, Dick and Harry." And why did Hank do it? "Because he loves her . . . that's why. Because any goddamned Romeo can tell you he's in love with you. But it takes a real man to wait until you're through making a fool of yourself."

I am nearly through ironing when he rages that he will break my legs. If I don't break up with my sailor, God damn it, he will. If I was going to live in his house, goddamn it, he'll show me who's boss.

I finish the slipcover and drape it over the little armchair in the living room, before rushing out of the house — I couldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing me make the call he demanded, so I go to the nearest payphone, the one in the lobby of the Hyway Theater and, still sobbing, I say good-bye to my sailor. The movie that evening is "The Parent Trap."

I call my best friend, Patty Burns, but when I tell her that my father has made me break up with my sailor, even she says "Good." I'm distraught and can find comfort nowhere.

A few weeks afterwards, I write to my aunt Jane and ask if I can come visit her. She and her second husband have moved from New Hampshire to a suburb of Philadelphia where her new house has a swimming pool and where I spent idle afternoons bobbing around, convinced that no one's heart had ever been as broken as mine.

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That fall I begin commuting from Bridgeport to Albertus Magnus, a Catholic Women's College, in New Haven. At seven o'clock every morning, my father is waiting in the car. And every morning through the rain and snow and then the rain again I sit beside him in absolute silence as he drives me to the train station. For a whole year I scarcely speak to him. Compressed into that tiny four-room house, our family is nevertheless splitting apart.

Hank gives Sally a diamond and the whole family is thrown into a tizzy at the prospect of her leaving, at the prospect of planning a wedding. One afternoon, shortly after she gets engaged I sit on my twin bed across from hers and tell her she's making a mistake, that she doesn't really love Hank. I don't know how I know that, but I sense that she's struggling to convince herself that she loves him and tell her that four years of their on-again, off-again romance should mean never again.

Sally tells me to go to hell: she's keeping the ring.

When Bunnell Pond freezes again, she and Hank let me come skating with them. It's night and on the shore, bonfires spark like erupting fireworks. And the night replies with the pulsing light from its trillion stars. Beneath my blades, the ice is alive and primal. A crystalline force that groans and grinds against the frail earthen banks that would constrain it. Those banks, adequate for liquid water, are too tight for ice, and the ice arches itself, splitting and thundering into the night, while beneath my blades, the surface is as black as an unblemished bolt of dark velvet. And beneath this frozen, transparent sheath, the Pequenock River, dammed to create the pond, runs to join the ancient Atlantic beyond.

On the shore, near the bonfires, Sally and Hank are laughing. And then, they're not. They're kissing . . . the silence carries the ring of sudden wonder to me as I skate alone toward the pond's center.

But to me, for that one night at least, compared to the elemental dynamism embracing me on the ice, love seems a pale promise. Everything around me is alive - the fires, the stars, the ice, the river -

and in that whole vibrant landscape, I feel more alive than I ever have. And I'm experiencing skating as never before. I'm sensing the singularity of my self moving through space. In that landscape of moonlit glimmer and joyful glide, the me who I've been birthing all my painful teen-aged years arrives and takes me hand. The ice beneath me is new and unblemished, and, like fingers running down black velvet, the edges of my blades etch its surface. That night, I can see every line my blades trace. Every mark I make.

Farthest from the shore, the ice is smoothest. And the thinnest. And that's where I go. Separated from the running river by how much ice? Three inches? Two? One? What danger had I been in that night all alone with only the distant stars above me and the indifferent river below? I'll never how perilously close I'd been to going over the edge.

All year, I've been sneaking out with my sailor, cutting a biology class to be with him, having a friend of his friend of his pretend to take me out and deliver me to him. But college is becoming a wedge between us. Saturdays, after working all day, I am putting myself on display and going to mixers at Yale, where the boys toss out bon mots that I volley back with ease. Compared to that, my sailor's s Byronic stance strikes me as so burdensome, so high school.

That June, Sally graduates summa cum laude from the University of Bridgeport one weekend. And the next she marries Hank. Susan is her junior bridesmaid. I am her maid of honor. I wear my hair in a French twist and a pink dress with a bateau neckline — my mother's friend, Margaret Kranick, will say that I look like an Egyptian princess. Perhaps I do, but inside I'm a roiling mass of confusion.

"You're leaving me?" I wail as we pose for pictures at Seaside Park.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Sally hisses, so I pull myself together as we drive in a second-hand car my father has borrowed from one of his clients to the reception, a champagne brunch that's over by one o'clock. All the guests, including those from out of town like Jane, have left Bridgeport by three. That

evening we retreat, the four of us remaining, as though we've failed or done something shameful. As though we've been betrayed. That evening each of us retreats to a separate corner. Susan is in her bedroom, and my father is in the attic, which doubles as his office, and I'm in the bathroom, taking the pins out of my French twist while my mother's in the living room, reading the paper in the chair whose slipcover I had ironed months earlier. She sees an ad for the secretarial course offered by the State of Connecticut, and when I come out of the bathroom says, "I'm taking this." That course will be the foundation for her job at Bridgeport Hospital and for a whole new chapter of her life.

Sally moves to Maryland so Hank can fulfill his ROTC obligation at Edgewood Arsenal. And with her gone, I feel exposed and unprotected. That summer, I scarcely see my parents. During the summer, I work the nightshift, putting nozzles and caps on cans in a factory manufacturing hairspray, and on weekends I work in the bakery so I can maintain my job during the school year.

When a classmate from Albertus Magnus who's a day student like I am asks me to a party at her house, I manage to get a night off. I wear a white dress and balance a red belt with red Capezio flats. Before I sail out the door my mother says I look "adorable." My father drives me, and I tell him not to worry about how I will get home: someone will give me a ride.

And someone does. Broad-shouldered and barrel-chested, he has dark hair and chocolate brown eyes. I watch him dance with other women before he asks me and when he does, it's a slow dance, and he holds my hand to his chest. And his aftershave had notes of leather, cedar, and lemon, and a sophistication so much deeper than my sailor's Old Spice. We're parked under the streetlight in front of the Blascoe's house, and I'm babbling about the classes I'll take in the fall, when I feel his palm on my cheek. He turns my head and kisses me. He's a twenty-two. A chemist who's just graduated from Tulane. And Jewish.

He's droll and smart, and we have deep and probing discussions about our religions but only as topics of interest. We both sense that there's no hope of converting the other, and with the natural barrier of religion between us, we have no expectations of the other. My schedule means I work thirteen days straight without time off, and I know during that time he's seeing other women, but somehow that doesn't bother me. I sense that he's attracted to as well as bemused by me and for those reasons he needs to maintain emotional distance.

Compared to high school, I had found the first year of college liberating. In Theology we studied Aquinas's proof of the existence of God, raising the possibility that he might not, and in the courtyards designated for smoking my classmates discuss the metaphysical outlook of Yale men. My mind is primed for the challenges my chemist presents that summer: What is so awful about Vietnam going Communist? What do I think of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement? He challenges me, makes me consider different points of view, but never makes me feel stupid.

When the summer ends, he stops calling, and I figure "summer romance . . . just one of those things. The barrier of our religions had buffered my heart, and compared to the loss of my sailor, the pain is survivable. Besides, fall means all those Yale mixers.

One evening, just before school starts, I am babysitting my cousin Howard's new baby, a little girl named Lauren. I'm pushing her carriage through a leafy neighborhood near Stratford's Long Brook Park, where I sometimes had skated when I was in high school. It's twilight and quiet, and I round a corner and nearly collide into the girl from high school who'd won a handful of scholarships. She's pushing a baby carriage too. We laugh, embarrassed at our near miss. And for everything we cannot speak.

That evening, over the hoods of our respective baby carriages, we talk. She asks about college, and I tell her I like it all right. And she . . . I can't imagine what she's been doing. She shows me her

baby . . . her little girl. The baby, about six months old, smiles and waves her balled fists and kicks her feet. And then Lauren starts fussing, so I and her mother say good-bye. And then girl who had won a fistful of scholarships pushes her baby carriage away from me, down the street and into the evening shadows.

# # #

“Some boy called,” my mother says on a Sunday morning after a Saturday night mixer. “He didn’t leave a name.”

She tells me when he calls a second and a third Saturday night, and, then, on a January night when there’s no mixer the phone rings.

At first I don’t recognize the chemist’s voice, and then I do and ask “What are you doing home on a Saturday night?”

He laughs and says, “What are *you* doing home? And then he asks to see me again.”

We’re sitting in his old Chrysler when he tells me how I had said something to him that summer that changed his life. How I had tossed of a remark, an observation so evident, I thought it scarcely rated articulation, but which nevertheless had made him take stock of himself.

“If you applied yourself to you career the way you chase women,” I had told him, “you’d really amount to something.” A chiding comment that had prompted him to enroll in a doctorate program at the University of Connecticut.

He kisses me, then asks “Will you keep seeing me?”

“Sure.”

“You say that so easily,” says. And I do because I assume he knows that my heart’s true task is to catch a Yale man The barrier of our religions is impenetrable, and I’ll have to look elsewhere to find my true partner. But what does develop between us is a four-year romance during which I’ll learn that a

kiss is not a promise. And sex is not a down payment. And that a barrier can save you from being engulfed by your own desire.

The following summer, I write to the Dean of Students at Albertus Magnus asking if she knows of any New Haven families needing a live-in babysitter – paying to board in a dorm was out of the question, but I was nearly twenty: the time had come for me to leave home. The dean finds a family named Greenspan. The father is a professor at Yale Medical School, and he and his wife have four children. The night my father drives me to live with them, my mother is ironing.

“Don’t put on so much lipstick,” she says by way of good-bye. In addition to my clothes, I pack my bike and my skates.

On Sunday afternoons, when I should have been studying, I go to the public sessions at the Yale hockey rink. In those pre-coed days, what was I thinking? That some Yale man, for whose private enjoyment the rink had been built in the first place, would be skating at a public session? That he would be going round and round among all the mothers and their tumbling children?

But I actually do meet a Yale man, not at the rink, but at a mixer. He not only comes from a working-class Connecticut family akin to mine, but he’s Catholic and Polish-American as well. A perfect match.

Except it’s not. My Polish, Catholic Yalie is impressed with finding himself at such a prestigious institution, and with being a member of one of its elite clubs, and for the brilliant future he anticipates for himself, a future where he will need a wife who will display herself with a sophisticated shrug and a spritz of sprezzatura. A wife not like me.

By April that year I am spinning out of control, dating my Yalie well as my chemist. And Mrs. Greenspan isn’t happy about the way I am taking care of her children. And my grades are abysmal.

When I get a D on my midterm in American Literature, my mind cracks. It splits and I suddenly slip into a crevasse of near-catatonia.

It is a spring afternoon, beautiful with the campus's dogwoods blooming, and its old oaks sprouting new green. At the start of class, Sister Vincenza had returned our tests and I can hear her lecture on Henry James – she so loves Henry James, but her words sound distant, as if she's above me and I'm hearing her through a thick, impenetrable surface. The few words I do make out carry no meaning. When class is over, I walk across the campus, but everything looks exaggerated, cartoonish. Absurd. The other girls in their spring skirts strike me as over-bright and sharp-edged: they lack dimensionality. I feel my self uncoupling from the world.

Eventually I make my way to the school nurse. But when I try telling her what is wrong, my voice sounds as though it is coming from a wizened second head perched on my left shoulder. One that gray with gnomish malignancy.

“Break down,” I hear the nurse tell the Dean of Students. “Patricia has had a break down.”

Years later I will hear the term “break down” said about skates that have stitching coming loose, or tongues losing their padding, or weakening support for a skater's ankles. But that will be decades into my future. That afternoon “break-down” is said about me and it is appropriate. Perhaps someone stronger than I was, someone less reactive and more sure of her identity could have withstood a D in a midterm, could have gathered herself up from disappointment and shouldered on. But even at twenty, I was all shell and very little solid center, and when the shell got hit, it had nowhere to go but into its own hollow core. My only awareness that afternoon was of the dimming light of my retracting self.

My parents come to the Greenspans and take me back to Bridgeport along with my bike and my skates. My Yalie leaves for Europe, from where he will send me a letter saying we shouldn't see each other anymore. Perhaps he had dreamt the same dream I had: that it was our wedding day and I was

walking toward him up the aisle, a prospect that felt so wrong, I awoke up in a cold sweat. But that didn't stop me from sobbing when I read his letter.

I get a job at a summer camp, but my mother learns that I had earned so much the previous summer that I can collect unemployment benefits, so I do. Mostly that summer I stare into space. My consciousness keeps slipping into a vivid, restful place beneath the surface of everyday life. Whenever I go into that interior reality, time feels suspended and I experience its passage much as I did in childhood when time was circular and I bore no responsibility for the events transpiring over its slow orbit

My father tells me he will pay for me to live on campus my senior year, but that I must never expect him to pay for a wedding. In light of the letter I've received from my Yalie, I see no wedding on my horizon, so I agree. I also agree to take out a five hundred dollar student loan as my part of the deal.

Some weekends I go out with my chemist, who is tender and solicitous and gives me nothing but the moment. And I will learn to regard myself from across the Cartesian divide and see my desires for exactly what they are . . . *mine*.

###

That fall I practice teach to earn my certificate and return to college, where my sailor will call me at two in the morning, drunk and incoherent and infuriating the housemother to the point she quits. And where I will borrow a red mohair suit my friend Pat Burns sewed for herself for a date with my chemist. And where, that spring, I write a letter asking for a job at *Commonweal*, a magazine published by lay Catholics. I'm invited for an interview and the editor offers me \$100 a week. I turn him down. He goes up to \$120, and I turn him down again. I have that student loan, I explain, and I don't see how I can pay it off at the salary he's offering plus live in New York.

"Can't your parents help?" he asks.

“No they can’t.” I never even consider that as a possibility. Back at Albertus I tell my friend Pat Keefe about *Commonweal* and she asks what my parents think. But I’ve never told them about writing to *Commonweal*. That other people might discuss such things with their parents comes as a revelation. Decisions in my family were never arrived at rationally. Despite their intelligence, my parents had limited horizons and saw any attempt by their daughters to expand those horizons as a threat.

So I keep quiet about *Commonweal* and, although my heart isn’t in it, determine to go into teaching, which, according to the terms of my loan will reduce by a hundred dollars for every year I’m in the classroom. Half hoping that distance will prompt my chemist to leap over the barrier of our religions and because I’ll be near Sally and Hank, I take a job in Baltimore, and on a Sunday afternoon in the August board a southbound train.

As it nears New York, it slows, then stops at Grand Central Station, and I’m tempted to get off. The job at *Commonweal* doubtless is gone, but I have my English degree, am skilled in repartee and look as cute as the Dickens in my new checked suit. Surely I’d get other offers.

But then the doors to the platform close, and the train lurches forward and pulls away, and I’m on my way again. Out the window I watch New Jersey pass, then a sliver of Pennsylvania and then Delaware. We cross the wide expanse of the Susquehanna and we’re Maryland where the landscape is flat and ribbed with creeks and rivers emptying themselves into the Chesapeake. Soon after we pass Edgewood where Sally and Hank live the view becomes more urban. We’re rumbling past the narrow backyards of Baltimore’s famed rowhouses when a tall young man with dark hair two seats behind mine comes up to me. He’s going to be an intern at Shepherd Pratt, a psychiatric hospital, he says. He must have heard me tell someone that I’m going to be a teacher in Baltimore because he says that we try to get in touch with each other. I tell him No.

“Come on,” he says, “it can be fun. You don’t know anyone there . . . I don’t know anyone. We can explore the city together.”

But again I tell him No. I am twenty-two. My acne has cleared up. I have my mother’s trim little figure. I have no trouble attracting men. But in this man with his wavy dark hair and easy come-on I sense another heartbreak. That he truly might be worried about moving to a strange city where he doesn’t know anyone doesn’t occur to me.

Well-educated, good-looking, he embodied the same sense of possibility as New York. A brass ring I wanted. And feared lest I lose my balance when I reached out for it.

Or perhaps I said No to New York and No to the young doctor because I sensed I was traveling to a different destiny, one as ineluctable as the rails meeting the grooved wheels of that southbound train. How else can I explain the convergence of circumstances that happens next?

Before school starts there are four days of meetings, and at the end of the second, the principal asks if anyone has any questions. I stand up and ask “Does anyone need a roommate?” I am serious: I am staying at the YWCA and need to find a furnished apartment, but the principal is not amused, especially when the hand of prematurely balding history teacher shoots up and everyone laughs.

For lunch we throng into a crab house and I watch him spend the whole hour joking with a Baltimore Colt cheerleader. “Taken,” I think to myself.

By the next Sunday, I have found a roommate and, although I haven’t moved yet, an apartment. I’m alone in my room in the YWCA when the switchboard operator rings. “There’s a man to see you. He says his name is Bill Schultheis.”

I had gotten names confused and go downstairs expecting to find a science teacher named Jimmy Kimos. And here is the prematurely balding history teacher, so what am I to do?

He asks me if I want to go to a baseball game, but I say no . . . “Let’s go to the zoo.” I have no idea why I say that because I actually like baseball, but we spend the afternoon at the zoo, where we watch the penguins. We climb a little hill, and I lose my footing. And Bill stretches out his hand. And I take it. And for forty-one years I won’t let go.

Toward evening I will show him the apartment I’m moving into and we will sit in the summer kitchen and drink instant coffee while he talks. Like the Polish Catholic Yalie I’d dated, he was a history major, but, for my Yalie history was academic, whereas for Bill it’s immediate and palpable. It’s story, and its plot is unfolding all around us all the time. The railroad five blocks from my apartment resulted in *this*. And after Baltimore’s central core burned in 1904, the city expanded *here*. And Woodrow Wilson taught at Johns Hopkins *when*.

This man is so lonely, I think. And smart. And shy — we’re alone in this apartment and he hasn’t made a pass at me. He probably doesn’t know how electric his grip had felt. Or how attractive his soft Appalachian burr is. Or what how steady he seems.

That night I will call my mother and tell her about my date. I’ll tell her we went to the zoo, and she’ll say, “Boy, a real big-time spender.” And I’ll say, “No, Mom. It was fun.” And it was.

Years, decades later, on a Saturday morning, after I’ve skated, and he and I have done the grocery shopping and we’re driving home, and his horrible diagnosis is reaching its conclusion, we will stop at a red light near the zoo and he will say, “This is where it all began. This is where it all began.”

And he will be right . . . “It” . . . the life we began together. The life we’d both been looking for. So many stumbles and tumbles, I took finding him. Until that Sunday afternoon when everything converged. And life became as simple his reaching out his hand. And my taking *it* . . . the surest grip I’ve ever felt. The truest love I’ve ever known.

\* \* \*

Sally and Hank will have three children before my warning she refused to hear so many years earlier proves accurate, and she and Hank divorce. She'll be married twice more and living in California when the Hepatitis C she contracts from one of her patients develops into liver cancer. Five months after being diagnosed and two weeks after her fifty-fifth birthday she'll be buried

And two years after that, Bill and I will sit in a small chapel outside of Chicago where her son Mike will get married. Waiting for the ceremony to begin, the possibility of happiness after such crushing sorrow will drive us guests to near delirium. And a nun to bustle up the aisle and hold her finger to her lips.

“Shush,” she will admonish us. “This is a house of the Lord.”

But we will not be shushed. We have been through a hell of loss and this is a joyful day. What can that poor benighted bride of Christ know of the bravery required to proclaim faith in the power of possibility by marrying a mere mortal and not God? What can she know about such stubborn hope? And so we chatter until the ceremony begins, and when it's over, we cheer. And at the reception we celebrate like mad. Thousands of white lights illuminate a massive tent. And a bagpiper Mike has hired will serenade his Irish-American bride. And on a large dance floor Hank will sway with his second wife, Evie — the knees of the man who once had skated over the black ice of Bridgeport's Bunnell Pond now so riddled with arthritis he has to prop himself up with two canes. But, still, he's there, under a thousand white lights on a summer night.

And Sally is everywhere, too. In her picture near the guestbook. In the remarkable, sweeping eyebrows of her children. And in the inchoate rage at the snatching hand of fate I feel in my heart and suspect others do as well. Later, when I'm walking up the narrow path from the parking lot where I've gone for a shawl, I meet Evie coming toward me. This second wife of my former brother-in-law is big-boned like Stosh's wife had been. And she radiates toward me the same bashful, tenderhearted smile.

“I just wanted to say that I’m so sorry about Sally,” she says. “She would have wanted to be here so.”

Inside, I feel my amorphous rage toward fate gathering itself into a phlegmy wad I want to spew out. I know Evie is sincere in expressing her sympathy, but I feel as though she’s ripped me open and exposed my glowing core of pain. I just want to get past her and dance a little with Bill. And maybe have another glass of champagne. I want to have as good a time as I possibly can.

I manage to be civil and say, “Yes, it was awful, just awful.” I try to move around her, but Evie holds her place. And then she says something that stuns me.

She says “Hank, I think he always loved her.”

“What?”

“Things didn’t work out between them,” she says. “But I think he always loved her. Sometimes that’s just the way it is with two people.”

I toss out a platitude. “Well, they married very young.”

“That’s how it goes sometimes,” she says. “Just because two people can’t live together doesn’t mean they don’t love each other. He cried so. How he cried when she died. I couldn’t do anything for him . . . he cried so hard.”

And then I know why this woman, this wife of my former brother-in-law has come down the path to see me: she wants to confess her own inadequacy to comfort a man who sobbed for another woman. This big woman’s self-effacement and generosity of heart overwhelm and humble me. With a thousand stars as her witness she has ceded primacy of place in her husband’s heart to his first love.

But when I remember that night I think the greater love was hers. She was the one with the wisdom to let the past and the past’s loves have their bittersweet dominion. Without Sally Hank

wouldn't have been waiting for her to return to the tent so he could sway on canes and call it dancing.

Or love.

\* \* \*

First love . . . girls like I had been turn themselves into peacocks it. A first love's intensity can propel us to the very edge of ourselves, igniting our inner fires and liberating our inner beauties. If right, a first love's torch can burn for decades. If wrong, it can taunt us with treachery, make us tumble, fall.

We may get up, move on, but we'll move a little slower.

None of this matters.

In the end, love isn't a competition. Gold and silver are for anniversaries, but not for love. In the end, whether it's our first love, or our twenty-first, what matters is that someone takes our hand, and we take his. And that hand-in-hand, we go round and round. Together through the number of our days. Over every slippery surface. Every unseen crack. And every unexpected bump. Hand-in-hand, together. To the very edge of our allotted time.