

CHAPTER ONE

I step onto the ice at the rink, edge away from the gate and, still as stone, balance on my blades. Balance, I have read, is the action of not moving, and this is true. Compared to the other skaters swirling past, I appear inert, but, in fact, I am very active. I am actively addressing the ice, directing my consciousness to the soles of my feet and through them to my blades and then to the ice below. I am saying, praying, “Bone, blade, ice, we are all elemental: let’s be kind to one another.”

In my life, I have been many things: daughter, sister, wife, mother, teacher, writer, widow, but never a pagophile, never a lover of ice. Although I’m usually glad I’ve skated, I’m rarely eager to do it, and am almost always the last on and the first off the ice. The truth is that I have no innate ability to skate, and the ice, perhaps sensing an interloper, has taken my money — by a rough calculation enough to support a woman in Barundi through two and a half lifetimes — and in return has given me decades of frustration and a calcified lump on the back of my head where it hit the ice when I fell twenty years ago.

Lately, since I’ve turned seventy, Ice and I are even less compatible. Like a partner plotting a pairing’s final dissolution, Ice has been secreting away the few skills I had cultivated. I can’t locate my back outside edges, my power stroking, and the decent front cross overs I once had. When I urge “Ice be kind,” I mean it. But Ice is, as always, unyielding, opaque.

I begin on my more trustworthy right side, which is longer compared to my left that childhood polio has shortened by an inch. Unlike ponds, where skating follows no set pattern, on rinks there’s a rotation, usually counterclockwise, around the edges, and if I begin with my left foot I could be whipped by the skating asteroid belt into the rink’s naked center. And have nothing to grab onto.

But since I turned seventy, I have a problem with my right foot, too. Its nerves seem to have developed skater's Alzheimer's. In my boot they sputter with misfired electric intentions.

Still, after my unheard prayer, there's nothing to do but push off. If I feel secure while shifting my center of gravity over my right blade, I'll lift my left foot off the ice, balance and glide. If not, I'll pump with my left toepick as though my right skate were a scooter. Although I know raising them like wings would give me better balance, I keep my arms stiff at my sides, and once, twice, around the rink propel myself. I don't need to see my reflection in the protective Plexiglas to know I look ridiculous. White-haired and wrinkled now, after three decades on the ice, I sometimes still appear as tentative as a toddler. It doesn't matter: I also know that in the hierarchy of loss, dignity doesn't even place in the medal round. Also, as the end of my earthly journey nears, I've begun to realize that dignity isn't a particularly divine quality — if God wanted humans to have dignity, why did he create us with bodily functions so devoid of it?

Eventually, however, my neural pathways waken to the task of keeping me upright, and I can stroke around the rink, shifting my weight, never gracefully, certainly never quickly, but with momentum enough to keep my balance. At seventy, an hour or so on the ice can't offset the tipping scales of my life — I can only go around so many times in life —but for the hour or so that I'm on the ice I can regain my balance, get my feet under me. And move.

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Water saves us.

On summer Sunday mornings, here's what my mother does: Gets up before dawn; dresses my two sisters and me; hustles us and our father into our car; prays at seven o'clock Mass; directs my father about what to buy at the bakery; cooks a breakfast fit for a team of trenchermen; washes the dishes; dries the dishes; packs a picnic lunch; packs a beach bag. And,

last of all, puts the beef for dinner into the oven to slow roast while we spent the day at one of the beaches ringing Bridgeport, my Connecticut hometown.

In the minefield that is my parents' marriage, the beach is a sanctuary, neutral territory. From the backseat of our second-hand Plymouth, between my sisters, I can almost see the tension in our parents' shoulders ease as soon as the salty scent of the Long Island Sound drifts into the Plymouth's open windows.

Turning to us, our mother says, "Smell that, Girls?" Doesn't it smell clean?" She has a passion for clean.

We have our choice of "spots" for our blanket, arriving as we do before the sun has blanched the sky white hot and before the beach is thronged with crowds. In our family, self-endowed with a sense of its own exceptionalism, we know those crowds, know the sort of people they're made of, the sort of people who hadn't managed to get themselves up at first light, hadn't gone to church and who probably had lazed through breakfast, if they had bothered with it at all, but who, nevertheless, feel they have every right to get to the beach whenever they please and then spread out wherever they want with their portable radios and noisy kids who eat hotdogs from the stand, not sandwiches like my mother makes.

Once our blanket is spread in our "spot," here's what she does: snaps us into bathing caps, brushes sand off the blanket, watches us swim, brushes sand off the blanket, wraps us in towels, brushes sand off the blanket, hands out sandwiches, brushes sand off the blanket, doles out peaches, brushes sand off the blanket, pours drinks, brushes sand off the blanket. Until the moment comes when she allows herself to stand at the shoreline.

I remember watching her gaze over the water, a spent wave's foamy last ripple brushing her ankles, her trim little body shown to advantage in a halter-style bathing suit. She'd watch my father, first one arm, then the other, slice the chill Long Island Sound, like the dorsal fin of a shark. His head turning for a quick grab of air before tucking under again, then disappearing altogether for a second or two before the foamy flutter of his kick revealed him. He swam with an easy rhythm, and tirelessly, stopping whenever he chose to, not because he was tired. I remember him standing up, hiking up his trunks with his thumbs, flicking water from his eyes and nose, his gaze inward, like someone who had just communed with some profound and unassailable part of himself. And then his eyes homing to hers, a slight smile between them, below the surface of their prickly marriage, some supporting secret shared, keeping them afloat.

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For her, water was best solid. At the beach she could manage a beginner's dog paddle, but frozen water was her true element. Ice – the remembrance of herself gliding over it – that was the memory she held fast.

"I used to skate. I was good at it." Another dinner, another day, done, she's washing the supper dishes, her back to me, and me, slow to finish my supper, the cold potatoes on my plate, congealing into a solid, white mass, and watching her face, shadowed in the darkened little window over her sink, her incantatory tone set to the timbre of recollection.

"I used to skate. All day . . . all day I stood at the GE . . . on the assembly line the foreman never let us sit. And then I'd walk home, eat a piece of bread sprinkled with sugar . . . your grandmother didn't believe in cooking, and grab my skates. I was good at it . . . I could do

figure-eights. The boys would build bonfires. Sometimes we'd play crack the whip. Or some boy would take your hand . . . it didn't mean anything. We'd skate round and round together. We wouldn't even talk."

And then she sighs and takes away my plate, knowing I'll never eat those potatoes she worked so hard to mash, and empties the little red plastic pan she stores under the sink where she keeps her cleaning supplies beside my father's liquor.

Beyond her own reflection in the dark window over her sink, I think my mother caught a glimpse her girlish self, skates over her shoulder, heading to the pond that would be drained and paved with a parking lot when the Hyway Theater is built.

Maybe those boys and bonfires were as innocent as the picture she painted on those long ago winter nights. And maybe her melancholy tone was only for her girlish former self and not for some particular boy's hand. Not until I began writing this memoir and dug into my own memory store did I consider the latter might be the case, but I don't know for certain. I never will. Memory, it's wily, slippery, a shabby keeper of truth.

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I'm in the kitchen, in my regular chair between the wall and the table. It is a dreary March Saturday and I am alone with my mother. The little light shining over her sink bathes her in sulfur-yellow — late winter's unremitting gloom making extra light necessary. Especially if she's going to get her potatoes peeled in time for dinner.

If I am eleven, she is forty-one. I remember her then, a wife for nearly twenty years, and working like some monastics pray: without ceasing. Her considerable intelligence buried beneath obligations, her life running on a narrow gauge track from refrigerator to stove to sink, her

sewing machine on a little spur line ending by the window near the back door. A housewife in the 50's, the decade of demonic domesticity, and the daughter of Polish immigrants who had spent all their emotional resources getting to America, she saw no way to get through the day except to tackle chores with an almost expiatory intensity, as if sewing one more skirt, ironing one more sheet, would prove her worth or assure her sanctuary from forces beyond her control.

Within three years, in her late thirties, I had contracted polio, my younger sister, Susan, had been born and my grandmother had a crippling stroke, a confluence of stressors that had turned my mother's hair gray. Like myself, she was the middle of three sisters (although she also has a younger brother), and like myself she considered herself the triad's least luminous. Her gray hair actually enhanced her dark eyes, but she experienced it as another betrayal, the promises of marriage and motherhood having proven unfulfilling, and even her hair having turned against her.

In my childhood, I remember two people as accepting me unconditionally, my aunt Jane, who was my godmother and my mother's younger sister, and my older sister Sally, who slept in the twin bed across from mine. But by the afternoon I'm remembering, Sally is nearing fourteen and increasingly, Susan, who's almost three, has become the object of Sally's burgeoning maternal instincts. Maybe the two of them have gone to the Hyway Theater, and maybe I'm not with them because I'm sick again— even five years after having polio I am weak and prone to colds. Or maybe I'm home because I've broken my eyeglasses again and my father's deducting the expense of replacing them from my allowance, so I don't have money for a movie. On this particular afternoon he's somewhere too, leaving me alone with my mother. A massive coal furnace in our basement heated our house and maybe the ashes that my father had thrown on our

wooden back stairs for traction crunched when someone came up the steps that afternoon: I don't remember. And maybe there was a knock on the door: I don't remember that either.

What I do remember is my mother turning from her sink and saying "Leo!" Her tone not quite masking her annoyance that her husband's brother has just stepped into her kitchen, that he hadn't had the decency to phone first, that he hadn't realized that you don't just barge in, that he hadn't thought of how some people have work to do.

I've sometimes wondered why my smart father, the valedictorian of his class at Harding High, hadn't had the initiative to leave Bridgeport. But I never wondered that about Leo. Of the four brothers in my father's family, Leo clearly was the dullest. In my family's strange and often contradictory calculus, intelligence equaled higher moral character while at the same time granted an exception from conventional modes of behavior: Leo enjoyed no such exception. However, he wasn't so dull as to not know where that calculus fixed him as a vassal in the family hierarchy.

Across the tiny kitchen he looks at my mother the way a brother or sister sometimes does at the spouse of a sibling, and sees something utterly alien and confounding — an unthinkable mate for the fruit of the common womb.

Stiff-armed as a child handing in a failing arithmetic test he sticks out his fist. It's holding something white. And wondrous. Something with high, dark heels and long laces. And silver blades!

"Patsy," he blurts.

My mother reaches for a dishtowel, wipes her hands. "What?"

“Patsy . . . I brung Patsy skates.”

“Skates?” .

“I brung Patsy skates.”.

“ They’re not for Sally?”

“They’re too small for Sally. They were Carolyn’s. They don’t fit her no more. They’re for Patsy.”

Aside from the skirts and jumpers my mother sews for me or those that my aunt Jane buys, most of my clothes are ones Sally wore. I expect everything that comes my way to be a hand-me-down, and don’t care one whit that the skates my uncle holds are ones my cousin, his youngest daughter, has outgrown. But my mother has a problem.

By the time I am eleven, she increasingly pinpoints me as the source of her disappointment in her circumscribed circumstances. I want to believe she loves me as she says she does. But my inner gyroscope warns she doesn’t like me, and I experience a chronic disconnect between what I’m told I see and what I feel I see. And that afternoon, I feel she’s unhappy over my uncle’s giving me and not my sisters an unexpected gift. He’s broken our family’s natural chain of ownership, and, worse, in announcing that the skates are for me, he’s circumvented her authority as the prime dispenser of favors and rewards.

“Can I try them on, Mom?”

“What? . . . No, the blades will cut up my linoleum.”

“She should try them on, Clara. I can give them to someone else if they’re no good for her.”

“Just try on one, Patsy. Just one. If one fits, the other will.”

. “She should try on both. To see how she does.”

“ Just one, Patsy. It’s almost three o’clock. You have to get to confession.”

“She needs to try on both.” My uncle crosses the kitchen to my chair and hunkers down before me, opening the boots wide. When I take off my left shoe my big toe sticks through a hole in me green sock. At the sight of it, my uncle chuckles and tugs the sock over my toe so it’s covered. But my mother winces. I’ve exposed her worst nightmare: that she’ll be perceived as a bad mother.

The kitchen’s thin yellow light glints off my uncles bald scalp as he threads the laces, crisscrossing them through one hole then the other and knots them snug.

“Stand up, Patsy,” he says.

And when I do, when I balance on those slender, silver blades I suddenly feel like Cinderella must have in the glass slipper. I feel transformed. More than pretty, I feel I possess of an easy elegance. I feel the emergence of the confident me I always sensed inside my puny body.

Carolyn’s skates are the old-fashioned sort that lace halfway up the calf; they complement the line of the female leg beautifully, but provide no support. And, like my eyesight, my ankles are weak, so I take my first wobbly steps, my ankles flex in and out.

“Stay on the rug by the sink, Patsy,” I hear my mother saying. “Those blades will cut my linoleum and it’s bad enough as it is.” But I have to get off her rug. I have to keep my balance and see how far I can go. I toddle from sink to stove and back again. And I enjoy a new

perspective. The blades and the boots' stacked, black heels, give me almost four additional inches of height. The potatoes resting in my mother's sink, her Formica-topped table, her dishtowel on the counter, I am seeing them all from an enhanced vantage point.

Leo doesn't know it, but thanks to him, skating had captured me two years earlier, when on another Saturday, and bundled against the cold my mother was certain would make me sick, we had waited for our father to come home. He was an accountant and had an appointment with someone who wanted him to do their taxes, but after he came home we were going to New Haven! We were going to the Ice Capades.

And then the backdoor burst open and our father came thundering in. "Damn it! . . . God damn it! . . . The one time . . . The one God damn time!" The battery in our second-hand Plymouth had died. "Damn it! God damn battery!"

"Can it be fixed, Ralph? Can it be fixed?" Our mother, her tone tight with anxiety, not over the possibility of missing the Ice Capades, but over the cost of a new battery. It was always that way with us. What in other families might be a problem, in ours was a crisis, and at the root of every crisis was money. Sometimes unspoken, but always heard — "How much? How much?"

I remember my father calling Leo, asking to borrow his car. And, so, it was because of Leo I had first fallen under skating's spell, seeing not skaters and certainly not their skill, but otherworldly beings moving with seemingly effortless grace. That Saturday afternoon in New Haven, the skaters moved as easily as morning birds sing. High in the New Haven Arena, I watched them flow in ever-changing, but always harmonious patterns, and in a world tense with

the expense of dead batteries and resounding God damns, what little girl wouldn't have wanted to move as if she were flying?

I sometimes wonder if Leo sensed that I was the overwhelmed child, pinched between two brilliant sisters in a family who prized intelligence above all else – he once brought me a pet white rabbit and for my thirteenth birthday, his wife, my aunt Katherine, gave me a pair of Bobby sox just like the ones I had thought looked so cool on my cousin Carolyn. Leo and Katherine had three daughters of their own – Carolyn was their youngest– they must have known how hard it is to celebrate each child's individuality. Maybe he saw how hard I tried just to get some traction in my family. Or maybe he recognized that he and I were minor stars in our family's constellation.

His generous heart will give out before he reaches sixty years old, and Sally and I will drive up from Maryland for his funeral. The night before he's buried, we'll sit at the kitchen table with our mother. Sally will have had her third child by then, and I will be pregnant with my second. And we both will be so flush with our procreative powers and thrumming with our bodies' generative force that we'll regard Leo's death as a little glitch, not as what it was: the first gong sounding a generation's passing. I remember being giddy that evening, the three of us, laughing, the three of us at the table where once I had sat while Leo knelt and laced up my skates . . . “These are for Patsy.”

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A Breugel-grey sky glowers over southern Connecticut the first time I use Carolyn's skates,. I've replaced my former best friend, Linda Jean Windeler, with Sharon Ryan, a new girl

in St. Ambrose Elementary School who wears glasses like I do and is small like me, too. Sharon and I have no secret we cannot share because unless we share them, they're worthless.

When, for Christmas, Sharon's mother buys her a knitted blue skirt and sweater set trimmed with white fur, my mother buys me the exact style, only in pink. Sharon and I could be twins. Best-friend twins.

Bridgeport in those days was a stew of aging European immigrants and their first-generation American children felt themselves tainted by their parents' peasant backgrounds and also excluded from the WASP-dominated mainstream. Without standards to measure themselves and others, they established varied and nuanced norms ranging from whether you owned or rented your home to the cleanliness of the white gloves you left behind in the pew when you knelt at the communion rail every Sunday. So my "Thank you, Mr. Ryan," is freighted with deep knowledge of a very circumscribed world, as if, having studied light refracting off a single blue rosary bead I had grasped the power of the sun.

Sharon's father is a printer, and, so, on Bridgeport's aspirational scorecard my family tabulates, the Ryans are a rung below us — my father, when he has a full-time job, at least wears a tie. So, when Sharon's father drops us off behind the junior high school, I know to add a dash of condescension to my "Thank you, Mr. Ryan."

Mr. Ryan leaves us in foreign territory, the rear of a junior high school, a public school, where the kids are tough, and don't use proper grammar, and maybe even smoke. The ice behind the junior high isn't really a frozen pond: it's more like a frozen puddle. And that's a problem. Over the long winter, all its water has transformed into ice, which, without any liquid to

replenish itself, has grown brittle, dried-out. The surface is the yellowish, gray shade of heavy mucus. And, as we skate, our blades make the womby sound of an ax hitting a hollow tree.

The puddle doesn't lend itself to the natural rotation of a rink, so Sharon and I skate any old way, sliding past trees and stumbling over the withered weeds poking through the surface like hairs on a hag's chin.

None of this matters: I am experiencing something I never have before. Something playful. But not quite play. An utterly novel sensation of movement. A different dimension of knowing my body. A radical awareness of my self in space.

Before they're born, babies can balance. The vestibular system, the first system the human fetus develops, some researchers theorize, is what signals the fetus when the time has arrived to perform its final somersault in the womb and orientate itself headfirst toward the waiting world. After that, from walking to riding a bike, to snowboarding, many childhood milestones, are achievements of balance, refinements of our first bodily skill.

But my bodily skills are limited. I was six years and two weeks old in 1949 when I caught polio. It was a middle-class disease. Children whose mothers cleaned furiously as mine did were more likely to contract it than those whose mothers didn't — virologists now theorize that children exposed to more pathogens developed greater resiliency. Ironically, the meticulous mothers suffered for their efforts, and in a milieu of quick judgments, their families and homes were seen as tainted and possibly contagious.

The case I had wasn't bad: no iron lung, no braces. After two weeks in a special hospital where no one but overworked nurses was allowed to touch me, I came home a changed, clinging child.

In addition to my shortened left leg, polio left me with an abiding anxiety and an almost complete absence of bodily awareness. Body was weak, couldn't keep up with the others my age, made me break down into tears, tantrums. Made me throw-up at the thought of an arithmetic test, or of forgetting my homework, or of losing a library book, made my parents furious when I did. I tried so hard not to throw up, the vomit came out my nostrils. My cheeks would balloon out in an effort to retain it, and I learned to swallow it.

By the time I'm eleven I'm not throwing up any longer, but Body and I still aren't very good friends. I don't trust Body. And it doesn't respond to me.

But that afternoon, in those second-hand skates, I feel a dawning reconciliation between Body and myself. A melding of our rhythms. A fresh embrace. That afternoon, in those hand-me-down skates, I whoop and holler and feel free. Feel that maybe Body is something more than the tabernacle of my soul as the good nuns at St. Ambrose School tell us. That maybe Body belongs to me, and I can govern it. Maybe make it skate.

In skating there's no waiting in the outfield or sitting on the bench. It's a sport of the present moment and encases the skater in pure sensate experience. Once you're on the ice, if you're not standing still, you're skating. No matter how badly, you're skating. Sharon and I skate as best we can and count our spills. I fall more. But she falls harder. The oldest of three children, Sharon is her family's capable child. But after breaking a fall with her arm, she sits on the ice, holding her wrist and crying. I laugh. Here's Sharon, who's skated before, sitting on the ice, crying, and here I am, my first time and still standing. I don't even help her up.

Why would I when I don't see her? Smart and capable like Sally, Sharon exists in my mind only as the repository of my own girlish confidences. She is to me what the pool was to Narcissus: I look at Sharon and see Me, Me, Me.

When her father comes for us, she isn't in tears anymore, but she tells him her wrist still hurts. The next day she's not in school. And the day after that, she comes back to school with a cast on her arm. Signing it is so cool.

A few weeks later, Lent ends, and spring's possibilities begin in earnest, flourish, and pass. And when summer comes, I win a contest on Bridgeport history sponsored by the organizers of the festival honoring the city's favorite son, P. T. Barnum. I win a savings bond, and my parents have me put it in the bank for college.

But they also reward me by buying me a three-speed bike. I love to ride my bike. I love the freedom I experience, the way I can steer by shifting my weight, the speed. And this bike is an "English" bike. With handbrakes. And narrow tires. The first person I call to tell about it is Sharon. That she might be envious or maybe saddened by the knowledge that her parents would probably never be able to afford an "English" bike for her never occurs to me.

All through the seventh grade I ride that bike to her house, two miles away. I thrill at the bike's easy responsiveness and elegant lines. Even the name of its manufacturer, "Raleigh," suggests sophistication to me. I can't imagine that Sharon would ever be anything less than happy to see me.

But by the middle of eighth grade fissures in our friendship begin appearing. Sharon's little sister Patty has Down Syndrome, and Sharon, who takes care of her, knows the weight of responsibility, and how to put aside childish things and get on with the business of growing up.

Plus, she knows, the relative importance of boys and how to handle that, too. By the time we graduate from St. Ambrose she's left me behind.

We go to the same high school, but Sharon has a sense of purpose, and I'm in a warren of confusion. My freshman year in high school, I'm still riding my bike, sometimes throwing my skates into the basket and, on my way to Stratford's Longbrook Park, peddling down Arbor Street in Stratford where my aunt Jane, once lived. I think I look cool. In a white cable knit sweater Jane knitted for me, but, the truth is I'm behaving as though I'm twelve, not fourteen. Whenever Sharon and I pass each other in the hallways in the Catholic high school we attend, we catch each other's eye and look away, embarrassed that we both had been so wrong, that something we both had found so solid could just have melted away.

Several years ago, a Harvard educator interviewed girls at a boarding school to determine if the expectations, standards and values the girls had for themselves correlated with those of the broader culture. One girl, named Gail, said she felt frozen, unable to marshal a coherent plan to correct her bad grades or focus her life. Her goal was to attain some ill-defined "it" enabling her to fulfill the promise of her potential. But Gail said she felt thwarted by "A giant block of ice. This tall . . . very thick. A cube standing in front of me."

Gail expressed my experience of high school perfectly. Clever enough in grammar school, by the end of the first semester, freshman year, I am overwhelmed, unable to get any traction.. Worse, it is the late 1950s, an era of muscular sexuality and teasing flirtation. Every song on the radio promises Johnny Romance and every ad is a valentine, one frequently featuring ice skaters. A red head whose skirt flips up when she does a perfect hockey stop sells Lucky

Strikes. And a male skater pushes his beloved in a sled across the ice and urges us to buy Omega watches!

Between every popular girl's breasts hangs a boy's high school ring. And that means she is going steady. And that means she soon will be going to the Chapel of Love. Where she goes after that doesn't matter. I had heard my mother's incantatory tone as she recalled skating as a girl, and I had seen her weary reflection in the dark window as she washed yet another dinner's dishes, but I remain confident that my life, my marriage will be a triumph of love.

I go to every sock hop, basketball game, and pep rally looking for some boy to hand me an identity, to say I am his so I won't have to forge my own self.

In Sister Raymond Loretta's English class, we read "Sixteen," a cautionary skating tale by Maureen Daly, in which, on a night when "the stars winked down like a million flirting eyes," a young girl skates with the "best dancer in town." He walks her home, brushes the snow from her hair, and then does the unthinkable. He never calls. Never! I feel betrayed. We all do.

Poor Sister Raymond Loretta, what is she to do? "Yes, Girls, but . . . Yes, Girls. This story is fiction, but it's fiction as life really is."

As real as Kathleen, whose kidneys are failing. Or Marilyn, whose mother's diabetes has left her an orphan. Or Agnes, whose brother is lost in Korea. Despite all the bitter reality all around us, we can imagine no future where we aren't married and perfectly happy, happy, happy.

And I protest the loudest. I had heard my mother warming her girlish memories. . . *Some boy would take your hand . . . You wouldn't even talk . . . You'd just skate.* And I want what she once had, what she once had thought was possible. I want to lose my balance when some boy

takes my hand, lifts me up, and throws me. I want some boy, any boy, to sweep me up and toss off my feet.