

We are born fallen. If the good nuns and priests who taught me were right, we come into the world knocked down by original sin. Ever since the sunny afternoon when we first spied the snake sliding over the garden wall, we've been laid low by sin. Like slithering silver he moved, all easy undulation and sweet temptation. And as we watched him, gradually the garden's unending, unmodulated bliss began to feel boring, while the serpent's flowing movements seemed mesmerizing. Then his gleaming eye caught ours. And he knew we wanted to know what he knew. Knew we wanted to move in one unending ripple, to slide soundlessly and to make ourselves at home where we didn't belong.

"Come on," he said. "You can do it . . . it's easy. All you've got to do is eat that fruit. The red one. Trust me, it's the sweetest thing you'll ever taste. And then you'll move like I move . . . you know you want to."

And so we overreached. Stretching out our arms, we grabbed the fruit. And we ate. But the serpent had been wrong: the fruit was sweet, yes, but it was so much more. It was perfect in every dimension. First, the color. From a distance its red had appeared unitary, but once we held it, its dappled skin offered a kaleidoscopic variety of yellows, greens and caramels. Next its size and shape, they fit in our hands, almost as if they'd been custom-sized for our palms. And when we opened our mouths, its smooth skin presented our teeth with just the right degree of resistance. Each bite had to be intentional, and being intentional, empowering. And when we pierced its skin, before its taste registered on our tastebuds, we heard a solid, satisfying crunch that softened around the edges into the sound of murmurous liquid. And only then did its white flesh tease our tongues with a texture at once pulpy and juicy. And last came the taste . . . oh, the taste! Sweet, but not sugary; no, something richer, a grace note of sour to hold our interest —

we would never be bored by the fruit. And so we ate. And we ate. Until, sated, we fell asleep while the sun sunk low behind the wall.

When we finally opened our eyes it was nearly dark and learned we'd fallen out of all favor we left in banishment from our garden home. And forever afterwards, we've been tripping over our own feet, as if the closer we are to down, the closer we feel to our retrograde selves.

Today, falling is an entertainment. Today we pay to see others fall. Pay to see skaters whose performances are heightened by the tension of a possible crash and have them serve as our surrogates in disaster. Athleticism can awe us. And beauty move us. But tension can absorb us into obliviousness and narcotize us for the moment to every niggling concern worrying our lives. Other athletes may drop a pass, strike out, hit the bunker but a skater may crash. Onto a surface as hard as concrete, at speeds approaching forty miles an hour, she may fall.

Oh, we may give a sympathetic gasp when she does, but our sympathy's not unmixed with shadenfreude. Like Incan children drugged and buried alive beneath the Andean ice as innocent sacrifices to a mountain god, a skater crumpled at the edge of a rink expiates within us some part of ourselves too dangerous to face, our grasping tendency that drove us to overreach at the expense of innocence and radiant love. And so we pay to watch some skater, ablaze with youthful beauty, climb the airless heights. Drink the elixir of speed and grace. And take the fall.

Past seventy now, for me to fall could be fatal — we've all heard the story of the healthy "senior" who never recovers from a broken hip. Still, I'm drawn to the ice. And with every susurrous stroke of my blades I hear that luring, leering snake. "See, you can still move. Twitch your hips back and forth. That's right . . . swish them side to side. Now, stretch out your arms . . . wide, wide. . You've got it. See the serpentine lines you've made. Look how they curve and wiiggle. Such a fundamental shape. Almost as if you were born for it."

Red blood, white ice, the first time I see them, I'm skating in a Cheeveresque scene. Late winter, a Sunday afternoon. A New England park. Everywhere, red earmuffs, charcoal gray slacks. Skaters gliding back and forth.

I am maybe fourteen and dressed like a 50's ingénue: cables running down the front of my white hand-knitted sweater, white rabbit-fur pompoms on my skates. After Sunday dinner, I had ridden my bike to the pond alone. But this afternoon, being alone is fine. All us skaters are alone together, united in shared sensation sensation: the biting blue winter sky, the wind stinging our skin, the dense air making the pond resound with staccato shouts.

The pond is a nearly perfect circle. Years earlier, in exchange for a place to sleep, three meals a day and a few dollars, WPA workers had drained some swampy acres near the center of Stratford to create it and the surrounding park. This afternoon, the flagstone curb rimming the pond serves as a shelf for the skaters' shoes. It's the decade when we all Love Lucy, Wonder Bread builds bodies eight ways and everyone likes Ike. In a time of such optimism and trust, things are left out in the open all the time: keys in cars; bikes on lawns; rings on windowsills over kitchen sinks as someone washes the Sunday dinner dishes. Things, like people, stay put.

No matter what, they must stay put because the 50's also is an era of unspoken rules, and "staying" is part of the social contract.

Because I might fall and break them, I'm not wearing my glasses. And my farsightedness air-brushes the old woman whose skates have scuffed brown boots, the red-haired boy whose ankles flip-flop like luffing sails, and a young father, as tall as my cousin Howard,

who's pulling a sled where a toddler who sits as impassive as a Buddha — the sort of undertaking that's more attractive in anticipation, and later, in memory, than in actuality.

In actuality pulling the Buddha is tricky. An even tension on the rope must be maintained lest the sled whip around into the father's ankle. Also, the rope is too short, making him hunch his back so he looks like a collier pulling a sledge of mine-waste. Meanwhile, his little boy rides as if riding were his due, oblivious to everything, the winter-blue sky and the skaters dashing by, his father's effort to create a precious winter memory. He appears bored by everything but the ice. He's fascinated by how the sled's runners shave it into frozen froth. With a blue mitten, he tries reaching for it . . . he wants it so.

“Keep your hands on your lap,” his young father shouts over his shoulder. “Keep your hands in your lap.” But the wind whips his words in another direction. And even if his little boy had heard them, why would he listen? He wants to taste frozen froth.

My far-sightedness gives me good distance vision, so when the father and his little boy skate past, cross the pond I see a bright-cheeked girl skating backwards. Large-boned — more Ava than Audrey — she sways her voluptuous hips and propels herself backwards in a series of half-circles, and with a big girl's lusty confidence she smiles at the gaggle of admirers around her. For the rest of us, to skate backwards on the lumpy ice is an amazing feat of skill, but this girl carries it off easily. Although she doesn't know me, I know her name is Judy Kowalski and that she's a regular at the Friday night Catholic Youth Organization dances Sally goes to.

And I know her secret; Sally has told me. Beneath Judy's sweater a boy's ring dangles on a chain, its stone warmed in the canyon between her ample breasts. All about her are the totems of the life that will be hers providing she doesn't fall. The dormered houses with stone chimneys running up their sides. The nearly perfect circle of the frozen pond. The sense of permanence

suggested by the cemented flagstones. All this can be hers if she doesn't break the rules. But for women incandescent with attraction like Judy, there are risks.

On my way to the pond I pedaled down Arbor Street and the little gray house where my cousin Howard had grown up. And where his mother, my godmother, Jane, once lived, too. Like Judy, Jane was a woman of such voluptuous beauty that your eyes never stopped when they looked at her: they just traveled from one curve to another, never resting, but never tiring either.

Jane would live in that little gray house on Arbor Street for twenty some years, married to Howard's father, a milkman, who toward the end of their marriage and desperate to keep her, would buy her a sheered beaver coat. But, eventually, neither the fur coat nor anything, could hold her. And one afternoon, when Howard was away at college, she would take off her wedding ring, put on the fur coat and walk away from the little gray house on Arbor Street, carrying nothing but a suitcase of unredeemed war bonds and accumulated guilt, the dowry she brought to her second husband.

"I never could let myself enjoy that second marriage," she will tell me, years later when I visit her in Florida. A widow from her third husband by then, but still beautiful, she will pour a little vodka into her morning orange juice and hum a few bars of "Catch a Falling Star," — Perry Como lives nearby.

"I felt so guilty for what I had done to Howard, I just couldn't let myself enjoy it. That's why it didn't last. The guilt ruined it."

Under a base note of woodsmoke from the nearby houses, the winter air that afternoon carries a faintly ozonic scent, like the ocean's. But if I were to pull my sweater's turtleneck over my nose, I'd smell the scent of the confessional, the odor of the miscreant dense with anxiety and the need for expiation.

When she walked away from Arbor Street Jane hadn't known how to knit, but she learned during the years she lived in New Hampshire with her second husband. Just as she learned to design and hook elaborate rugs and make apple sauce. Ratcheting up her womanly arts was her way of atoning for violating the code decreeing, "Stay. No matter how bad things become in a marriage, Everyone Must Stay. Otherwise the whole illusion of stability might collapse."

She would invite us to New Hampshire and send us unexpected presents like the sweater I'm wearing that afternoon, but nothing she did could erase entirely the fact of her transgression. It became part of who she was.

Before I see the blood I hear the screams. A child's keening wail. Then a pause, as long as two little lungs need to fill themselves with air. And then, again, the scream stripped of all modulating humanity, raw as a martyr's twisting in flames. And then I see the young father, And behind him, his toddler son, Buddha no longer, his thumb sliced open by the sled's runner, around his finger, his little blue mitten is a sponge dripping blood. For an instant, the father's eyes catch mine, and I see the weight of his guilt. His had been a simple hope. He had wanted to create a Currier & Ives memory of a winter afternoon. Of himself pulling his little boy across a nearly round pond. The sort of memory to set into the furnace of time until it's burnished to a warm sepia. Then, years later, maybe at Thanksgiving, or Christmas, he'd set it out. "Oh, how you loved that sled. Sunday afternoons, we'd go back and forth across the pond. Back and forth. Remember?" And now this . . . blood and no knowing how deep the slice. To the muscle? To the bone? Now this, a memory neither he nor his little boy would ever forget.

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Every woman who's ever menstruated has an intimate familiarity with the ferrous aroma of blood. It is the scent of womanhood, as elemental as the moon. But the afternoon I stand in my shower and smell aromatic iron, the smell is neither primal nor altogether natural. It is the stink of lunacy and arises from the water rinsing the blood-stiffened hair surrounding a small tonsure on my scalp where I had stitches five days earlier. I am in my 50's and in pursuit of a sport for which I have no talent I fell on my head . . . lunacy. Moreover, I am somewhat proud of my bald spot and injury, which will harden into a calcified lump on the back of my head. I think they distinguish me as true devotee of my sport; I regard the scarlet-tinged water running down the drain as a badge of honor. I think I am marked as a member of the righteously wounded.

Ice hoards a cache of treachery, and every older skater I know has been wiped out by it. The Sunday I split my head, ice caught the crocodile teeth of my blade's toepick, the end of a blade that a skater drives into the ice to vault herself into a jump. Although, I wasn't trying to jump. I was simply skating forward and hadn't lifted my free leg high enough after a stroke, so my toepick got snagged and ice snatched me backwards. Other skaters have suffered worse.

Eileen was giving a lesson in the corner of the rink when another skater hit her at thirty miles an hour. Even when her broken leg healed, Eileen didn't. Not entirely. She became tentative, stooped, finally giving instruction from behind the Plexiglass hockey barrier.

And then there was Cheryl, the strong skater who had complemented my edges. One night, she was simply standing in center ice and talking to a friend when her feet slipped out from underneath her and ice broke her wrist.

Sometimes, as with my gashed head, it's carelessness that trips us up, and other times, as with Cheryl's wrist, it's chance. And sometimes it's memory.

Skaters returning to ice after years, maybe even decades away, reveal themselves by subtle tells. First, they never rent skates. And the ones they bring frequently have scuffed, dried- out boots. Secondly, they don't immediately sit down and lace up. Instead, they look out at the rink. Like sailors who can anticipate a breeze by reading the waves, skaters judge ice. A shiny surface means the ice is smooth; an opaque one means it's chewed up, and skating will be hard.

Reading ice is important, because for the returning skater, ice presents a danger with every stroke. If it's true that we never forget how to skate, we never remember accurately either. Our memory of our past self is our personal home movie edited to show our preferred version of ourselves.

And if the memory of his youthful skills is false, it can be a crevasse hidden behind a scrim of nostalgia, until the evening ice catches him and strips away his delusion forever. On the other hand, perhaps he truly was as agile and strong as he recalls, but he fails to factor how time has winched his muscles. Round and round, he'll skate trying to catch his former self who's always just a stroke or two ahead. And in the pursuit of the past, he'll forget the present, forget that price for flying is falling.

At a weekly Tuesday-night session I am lacing up my skates when Vida nudges my arm. Standing in the lobby and gazing out at the ice is a man in a leather bomber jacket, grips scuffed-up hockey skates by their blades — a returning skater for sure. Slightly built, and gray-haired he looks out at the rink as if the ice can tell him where all the time has gone, how it all has melted

away. And then he does what I've seen so many returning skaters do: he sighs. Either from regret or resolve not to waste any more time, he sighs

Then he gets on his skates, and once on the ice he blends in with the rest of us, with the usual group of college kids, just out for a lark night, and with us regulars: Peggy. Cheryl, Vida, myself. .

During the first part of the session, he's fine — fluid and confident, but after the Zamboni has cleaned the ice for the session's second half, I am doing crossovers at one end of the rink, when I hear a noise like distant thunder. Or a far-off cannon shot. Low, dense and reverberative around the edges. My feet register it, too; shock waves snaking through the ice. At the other end of the rink the man with the scuffed skates is down. I skate over to him.

Even now, years later, I have no reason why I did that. The illnesses of the people I love are still years into the future so it isn't as if I have any ministering skill to lend. And I'm not morbidly curious. I get past traffic accidents as quickly as I can and don't like newsfeeds of disasters. Still, I went to him.

And when I do, he isn't moving. He shows no sign of pain. He shows nothing at all, except the startled mask of suddenly departed consciousness. He looks organic but not vital. His eyes are closed, and his mouth open. Two feet away, where they had skittered onto the ice, his false teeth gleam under the bright fluorescence. And from his right ear, a thin scarlet ribbon runs through his hair. He could be on a slab in a morgue.

No one stops skating. At least, not right away, so, bent to him, I have a serpent's eye view of the passing blades. Eventually, whistles are blown, and the music stops. And the ice is cleared of everyone except a few guards and the man. I leave him wait for the ambulance with Vita in the lobby, and when it arrives the EMTs hesitate to go onto the ice: they're afraid of

falling. And when they begin maneuvering toward the man, their gurney has no traction and keeps jackknifing. Meanwhile across the ice, no foot, no hand, no part of the man moves.

Eventually the EMTs reach him and once they lower the gurney and lift him onto it, his weight makes it more stable, so getting back to the lobby is easier. From the moment my feet felt his impact to when the ambulance leaves is maybe twenty-five minutes and a college boy in a yarmulke goes around asking people if they should get refunds because they didn't get the full ice time they'd paid for

Beside me, Vida mutters "Dear Mother of God. Dear Mother of God."

The next week the man is back and comes up to me. "I want to thank you for helping me. I don't remember anything, but I'm told you tried to help, so thank you."

"Well, you're welcome. I didn't do much."

"Still, thank you. I'm diabetic, and I think my blood glucose level crashed."

Maybe he's telling the truth — in the last stages of his cancer, I will see how Bill's glucose and insulin tag-team to complicate his type-2 diabetes — or maybe the man can't bring himself to admit what may be the truth: that his imagined, elusive, youthful self had tripped him up.

The next Tuesday I skip skating, so two weeks later Vida tells me that the man in the leather bomber jacket had been at the rink the week before. And that he had fallen again. Only harder. So hard we never see him again.

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The old house Bill and I buy when we move from Ranny Road is a restored worker's house adjoining another owned by one of my former supervisors from *The Sunpapers*, who doubtless had a hand in my being fired from there. This is an awkward situation for about five

minutes, and then Dan and I settle into being neighbors. He's an extraordinary young man: smart; capable; circumspect. His bright future at the paper is matched by his willingness to pitch in with neighborhood projects. For a small community it has several yearly celebrations, the major one being a three-day Fourth of July extravaganza, for which Dan and his wife Beth can always be counted on to host at least one event.

He and I are in the undercroft of the church in the heart of our community for cookies and lemonade following the annual parade when Dan suddenly turns to me.

"I have the worst headache," he says. A morning-after headache, I think, is understandable, given the libations that usually accompany our celebrations. Plus Dan's a new father. His baby boy sits in a carrier strapped to his father's shoulders. That night Dan's headache will become so bad he'll go to the hospital and by the next day the news will have spread throughout our community: Dan has leukemia. He will fight it for three years and lose the battle when he's thirty-three. The late afternoon Bill and I walk to the little Presbyterian church for Dan's memorial service, we see our neighbors pulling shut the gates of their picket fences and heading where we are going.

"This is how it used to be," Bill says. "This is what people did . . . they walked. When someone died, they saw each other." That afternoon, the measured pace of one step after another matches the rhythm of our sorrowing hearts, and when we reach it the church is nearly filled with *Sunpapers* people, so Bill and I squeeze in among our neighbors in the rear. And when the youthful minister raises his hands and says, "Let us praise God. For now Dan is with God," and I think that despite his having gone to Yale the minister is an idiot. No God who creates a man with as much promise as Dan had and then strikes him dead at thirty-three is deserving of praise, at least not from me.

After the service, Bill and I are chatting with a neighbor when someone grabs my arm and swings me around into a bear hug. Vida! It's been over a decade since the incident of the man in the bomber jacket, and probably more than a year since I've seen her, but she looks fantastic. She's let her hair go silver and wears a black suit — silver and black — only Vida could make a fashion statement out of such subtlety. And she's lost weight.

“You look terrific,” I tell her.

“I can't eat anything. I'm down to a size eight. Nothing stays in me.”

Six months later I'm lacing up my skates when I turn to the woman beside me on the bench and say, “I have a friend who's dying. I want to see her, but don't know if I should go.”

I don't know Sharon well, but I'm forever indebted to her for the piece of wisdom she gives me.

“Go,” she says. “What can happen? If she can't see you, she can't. That's just the way it is. Go.”

I buy blue hydrangeas and drive to Vida's townhouse. I ring the bell and wait. The door is opened by a large, sixtyish woman with a soft, sibilant accent.

“I'm Roma,” the woman says. “I am Vida's sister.”

I feel I've met history incarnate. I feel that the trek begun on the steppes of Lithuania had ended on the steps of Baltimore. And that I had come to bear witness.

“Wait here,” Roma says. “I'll see if she's okay. Your flowers are beautiful.” She returns, saying, yes, Vida wants to see me and leads me upstairs. Vida is resting against pillows piled at a flowered headboard . . . I remembered her telling me how she'd spent four days upholstering it herself. With her is Linell Smith, a reporter from the paper.

The three of us chat in a girly way, and then Linell asks the journalist's perfect question.

"What was your favorite dress, Vida?" she asks.

Vida smiles. "A blue velvet gown. Mom made it for a dance I'd been asked to. It was midnight blue. A very rich velvet. No polyester. And it was strapless." Vida, that drape of hair over one eye, floating into the room where her date waits. Vida. In a strapless gown. Vida in blue velvet. For a minute, against those pillows, she's the girl she used to be. For a minute, we all are.

When I return a few week or so later, it's raining, and Vida looks markedly sicker. She's surrounded on her bed by cards and tiny boxes. Roma sits down beside her, and the two of them bend over Vida's jewelry, deciding who should get the gold earrings, the emerald-cut diamond, the amethyst brooch. An intimate act of sisterhood. Having told the lie so long, they had at last made it true.

Roma closes the boxes and says she has to go to the drugstore. Could I please stay until she came back? I get Vida some ice cream, and halfway through eating hers Vida puts her spoon down. She takes me into her closet and tries to give me one of her sweaters. "Here, use it when you skate."

"I rather have your back crossovers."

"Okay, I'll send them to you," she says, then gets back into bed and tells me, "You know, I sometimes think I should have gone back to Byron. He wanted me to."

"But, Vida, where you're going, he'll be there," I say.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And want to know something else?"

"What?"

“You’ll have great sex.”

She perks up. “They have sex in heaven?”

“Hey, they don’t call it heaven for nothing.”

Two weeks later Bill leaves the paper folded on the table in our little sunroom, so Vida’s picture will be the first thing I’ll see when I come down for coffee. This time, the last time, the editors have put her on the front page.

We had never been friends, she and I. Friendship is reciprocal, and our relationship was one-sided. Wanting to believe in the reality of her ironic, successful persona, I unloaded bucket of neediness onto her — once, when I felt it was going to lose my job at the Notre Dame University of Maryland, I skipped Sunday morning skating and showed up at her house. She nursed me through a two-beer session of woe when I was sure she had better things to do, while I sat in her kitchen and bitched, using up what she prized the most: time. Time to spot a trend, plan a photoshoot, get the right quotes. Time to take care of her parents, to find the right tassels for her drapes, the right display case for her Japanese dolls.

June 10 1998, Yesterday Vida Roberts Died. A woman in ice skates and diamonds, that was Vida.

I don’t go to her memorial service. I know what it will be: one journalist after another praising her, when they wouldn’t know half the story. For all their vaunted reportorial skills, they would only tell half her life. The horror of her early years they never bothered finding out. And, of course, they’d leave out their own cruel remarks about Johnnie Walker’s designs and Jim Beam’s new spring lines. Their assumptive arrogance that they knew her at all infuriates me, so I go skating. I go where I remember her moving like she’s suspended from a silken thread, weightless, moving with grace.

I skate as if I can expunge my fury that someone who could have been cut down at any moment by the Nazis, survived only to be felled by fate. I want an explanation. A reason. A sense of balance in the universe. I want the possibility that Vita's vitality hasn't been extinguished; that it's incandescing someone else. Instead, I get a gift of sorts. From my mother.

When it wasn't crimson with rage, my mother's voice was amber. And when I call her and tell her that a friend of mine has died, that is the voice I hear, honey-hued and rich with sympathy. It's the voice I always hoped to hear and sometimes did. I hear it still, telling me she's sorry about my friend and that I was right to skip the memorial service and that's she's glad I went skating.

"Good for you, Pat," I hear her saying. "Good for you." A gift then. A gift now.

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In the nineteen months following Vida's death, that Bill's brother, Jim, will die, our son Kurt will get married, and Bill will have his laryngeal cancer. He will be so newly recovered from surgery and radiation that he'll still returning to his oncologist for monthly checkups the night my sister Susan calls. She's living in Maine, but has just gotten off the phone with our mother in California whose gouty foot and thumb have become infected. I call our mother several times during the next few days, but a week after Susan's call our mother is hospitalized and the next morning I'm flying out to California.

By the time I arrive at the little hospital on the outskirts of Sebastopol, evening is falling, and in her darkening room my mother lays alone, deep in sleep, her blanket pulled to her chin, a position so clearly suggesting eternal repose, I know I'm witnessing a harbinger of what's to come.

When I was a child my mother had craved sleep like a desert wanderer craves cool water. School days, frost etched like a silver mountain on the kitchen window over her sewing machine, she'd be at her stove, stirring our oatmeal, "God, I just want to check into a hotel and sleep," she'd say. "If I don't get some rest soon, I'll die."

And now, at last, her wish and her prediction are converging. Aside from the steady rise and fall of her chest, her sleep is so profound she seems to have withdrawn from her little body and is living in her dreams. I have been traveling for seventeen hours and am weary too, but I will not wake her. I pull up a chair and wait, thinking mine is not the face she'll want to see when she opens her eyes — temperamentally, she and Susan are much more alike. But I hear no hint of disappointment when she awakens and sees me.

"Pat, I'm glad you're here," she says, "I'm glad you're here."

And I'm glad, too.

The story of my birth is that the umbilical had been wrapped around my neck, and when I finally was free and screaming, the doctor exclaimed, "Such a little peanut to have caused so much trouble." Maybe the wariness between my mother and myself began at that moment, with one of us always twisting, tugging, pushing the other. But in the nearly four months I stay in California we become less enmeshed, our entanglement less toxic. We come to see each other from a fresh perspective.

The infections in her foot and thumb don't respond to antibiotics, so her doctors decide to operate. One day, when her foot still has its stitches, she's sitting in a chair and accidentally pees the floor. Nurses begin dancing around and yelling at her not to put her foot down in the puddle, but I can see she doesn't have the strength to hold it up. Summoning some life-saving maneuver I'd learned in Girl Scout camp decades before, I straddle the

puddle and interlace my fingers so she can rest her foot on my hands while the nurses mop. In our family I'd always been the hysteric, and this problem-solving aspect of me, probably rubbed off from Bill's steady reasonableness, is one my mother's never seen. More than once while I'm in California, she will remark about this incident, and how I was the one who "found an answer when all those nurses were acting nuts."

Her wounds begin healing slowly, but gout isn't her real problem: her heart is. She has congestive heart failure, and for that there is no operation. After several weeks she's transferred to a rehabilitation hospital and then back to the regular hospital.

Sebastopol is near Santa Rosa, and when the nurses hear that I like to skate they tell me about a rink there. Santa Rosa is the home of Charles Schultz, the creator Peanuts and the rink has giant murals of Linus and Lucy and Charlie Brown, all the gang having a wonderful time on cartoon ice. I rent a pair of skates, but their blades are dull and don't grip the surface. I get half way around when I suddenly freeze. I make it over to the edge of the ice and cling to wall, my heart racing and a cold sweat soaking my scalp.

What if I fall? What if I break a wrist? I'd be worse than no help: I'd be a burden. I'd be what I always thought had been her. Opinion of me.

Bill thought that it wasn't my difficult birth, but polio that made me feel never fully embraced by her. He thought that I had gone into the hospital cute and spunky and came out sallow, clingy, anxious, so that she didn't recognize me and certainly didn't recognize how deeply troubling it was for me not to recognize myself.

Whatever the reason for the tension between us, I'm determined not to fulfill her expectation of me as the family screw-up and so I cling to the wall of the Santa Rosa rink until I can get off the ice. The slight kid at the rental window has a fringe of sandy-colored

bangs beneath a knitted Peruvian cap that has flaps hanging like a second set of ears on either side of his narrow head. I tell him “These blades are dull.”

“Yeah, well we had a choice, you know. We could have sharpened them and have people cut themselves. Or we could keep them dull and let people fall. We decided to let them fall.” He gives me a slithery smile with a glint of pride at his misconstrued cleverness. He seems more of a cartoon than the Peanuts characters painted on the rink’s walls, so armored in disaffection and devoid of any reciprocal feeling that were I to tell him “My mother has an incurable heart condition,” he’d say, “Have a nice day.” I leave the rink and drive back to the hospital.

Sunday, March 26, 2000. I am sitting at my mother’s kitchen table in Sebastopol and I believe my mother is dying.

The day before I write this is my mother’s eighty-eighth birthday, and I’m surprised at the number of cards she’s received, from neighbors and friends, even the children of friends, back in Connecticut. But, even more surprising is the number from her co-workers at Bridgeport Hospital. My mother has been retired for twenty-some years then, and her former colleagues still think so highly of her that they remember her birthday even after she’s moved a continent away.

I take them her hospital room in Sebastopol and the festoon her condo with them so she can see them when she comes home. One evening, when she’s back there, I remark about the number of cards from people at her work.

“You always just thought of me as Mom, didn’t you, Patsy?” she says, and I’m nonplussed by the remark. Of course I thought of her as “Mom.” What else was she to me, if not “Mom”? She went to work at Bridgeport Hospital when I was a junior in college and

most of the years she worked there were the ones I was preoccupied with being a wife and mother and my own career.

Yes, I knew she enjoyed her job — we'd be visiting Connecticut and I'd watch how, as soon as she got home, she'd wash out her uniform and hang it on the line, so it would not only be clean, but smell clean as well. Or how she'd tell me about the immaturity of the nursing students, and the impossibility of reading the doctor's handwriting, but I was deaf to the note of fascination her voice carried. I didn't hear how her job released her from the imprisoning four little rooms of our house into a compelling, ever-changing, ever challenging environment. The Clara Podufaly who transcribed doctor's instructions and distributed medication wasn't the Clara Podufaly I grew up with, the Clara Podufaly who cursed and spanked me when I threw-up, who referred to me as "that little bitch," to her friends, who pulled a knife on my father one Sunday morning and then said I was to blame because I caused such tension in the family.

I begin to wonder if my fundamental distrust of her is mistaken. The sick, frail but cheerful woman I'm taking care of seems more like the person to whom the cards were sent, many of them with fond notes thanking her for some past thoughtfulness or kindness.

And then, one evening, after she's been home several weeks and we've gone over the old stories, of how she and Clair McGuinness went to dance halls when they were fifteen, and how she lived in New York for a brief time with her own old sister, Sally, and how she and my father used to babysit my cousin Howard before they were married, after we've laid out all those memories as if they were pieces of a pattern pinned to her life's

fabric and then stitched into a discernable shape, a question surfaces in my mind that's so obvious, so appropriate to this final time, that every other question lead up it.

“What was the happiest time of your life, Mom?” I ask.

“Before I had kids,” she answers.

She says it so easily, I might as well have asked, “What color are your eyes?”

“Before I had kids.” Wow! There it was, the hard nugget of truth, finally out after all those years. A validation that my own suspicions about her feelings were correct. I considered it a gift. She had tried desperately to be a good mother — she certainly worked hard at it — but she never truly enjoyed it, the way I sensed my friend's mothers did. The tension that tied my stomach in knots and made me throw-up, came, in part I think, from the tension within her. From her trying so hard to be a good mother while her true heart's desire was something else entirely.

Mother's Day in Sebastopol that year is cold and rainy, but in the afternoon I go for a walk. The next morning my mother is supposed to go to her doctor to see if he will reduce her medications, but now she isn't feeling well and I wander up and down the little's town's streets and alleys much like Bill and I had wandered the alleys of Charles Village, only now he's three thousand miles away and instead of looking down at Kurt in his carriage, I'm watching my mother slip away.

That night she has diarrhea and her stool indicates she has internal bleeding. The doctor actually makes a house call to see her, and she announces that she's “Through. I'm not taking any more medication.”

He tries dissuading her, but she won't hear of it. The hospice nurse tries, too, but my mother, sitting up in one of the twin beds Sally and I had slept in, snaps, "My mind's made up. Nothing . . . I'll take nothing."

When the hospice nurse joins me in the kitchen she asks, "Where's that sweet little old lady who I used to see?"

"She's off her Zoloft," I say. "This is who she is without it. This is who I grew up with."

Then the nurse, Jeannie, says, "You can't do this anymore alone. You've done enough. You need someone to help. You're worn out."

That evening I call Bill. Leaving the new car he had bought in Baltimore in anticipation of driving across country with Kurt, he flies out the next day. My mother is still climbing up and down stairs, even talking to her neighbors from her condo's porch, but she's also spending more time in bed.

Bill is downstairs and I'm in her bedroom, sitting in the caned-bottom chair that once was under one of the windows in her Connecticut living room, watching her sleep, when she suddenly opens her eyes and finally speaks out loud the secret that we've each been skating around for years, the dark fissure that neither of us dared cross.

"You had a miserable childhood," she says, meaning how I'd throw-up, how I tiptoed into the bathroom in the middle of the night, hoping she won't hear me, and then lay in a cold sweat in my bed lest the morning come and I'd have to face my school phobias. And, then, when I'm ten, after an especially brutal beating administered by my father, and I finally stop vomiting, she cannot stand me because of what we both know: that I had a miserable childhood, and she so wanted not to not love me outright.

“But there was nothing I could do,” she says from her bed. “Nothing I could do.”

And I let her have that, my gift to her because I’m aware of what her acknowledgement has cost her. Aware of the effort it took for her to give it to me before she left.

On Memorial Day weekend, a new hospice nurse visits. Most of my mother’s nurses have been on a steady rotation, but this woman is one we’ve never seen. Still, she’s competent and thorough and tells us that death is imminent. Night has nearly fallen and Bill is downstairs when I go up to lie in the twin bed opposite my mother’s. Her room is dark; I can’t see her and assume she’s in her bed. I lay down and then hear a rustling sound from the bathroom. Like someone’s crinkling cellophane. Or rustling a plastic bag.

Then my mother’s bathroom door opens and she comes out. The sound I had heard was her pulling up her diapers — weeks before she had fallen off her toilet and cleaning her and the floor had been an awful ordeal. No, she wasn’t going to be embarrassed twice; she was going to get her diapers up. I go to her, taking her hands, saying, “Mom, oh Mom.” But she doesn’t recognize me. She begins to shudder, seize, really, and from her throat rises an involuntary rattle. I scream for Bill and get my mother into bed.

“Why are you all here?” My mother demands, her eyes so wide she seems to be willing her vision to take in the whole world. But I don’t know who’s she’s seeing. Just as I don’t know what she means by “all” — Bill and I hardly constitute an “all.” Maybe she does mean just us two. Or maybe her “all” is all those others who have gone before: my father, Sally, her sisters, her brother, her parents, her aunts and uncles, Claire McGuinness. Or all the host of heaven. I’ll never know.

May 29, 2000. My mother died at 11:00 p.m.

I have a picture of her dancing with my father. She is seventy years-old and wearing a pink dress. Bill had taken it at the wedding of Pam, my cousin Howard's oldest daughter, and the first grandchild of my aunt Jane. When I sent the picture along with others to Jane and Sally, they both called to thank me. I had sent it to my mother, too, but didn't hear from her, so I called and asked about it.

"I cut it up," she said. "It made me look like a chicken . . . my legs look so skinny. I cut it up."

Her rages were like that . . . irrational and arising from self-loathing. To me, in that picture she looks vital and happy. And her dress is absolutely perfect. Not too glam — that was Jane's role. But not too stodgy. Ruffled neck, long, but sheer sleeves, flippy skirt. Just as she instructed me, she's wearing it now where at last, between Sally and my father, on a hill in California, she rests for however long she needs to.

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To live in Naples is to live under the unremitting reminder of mortality. The whole metropolis is pinched between the sea and the volcano. Out a window, up a street, around a corner — Vesuvius is everywhere. As if they hope that creating the image will prevent the real thing from blowing up, Neapolitans shrink the volcano's image to fit on baseball caps, T-shirts, plates, mugs and watch faces. Perhaps they hope by miniaturizing it, fate will never clap its hands, and that the last sound they will hear in their mortal lives will not be a cataclysmic bang.

Three years after my mother's death Bill and I travel to Naples in January. We had stumbled upon the benefits of traveling in winter the first time we went to London when the

rates were lower and the crowds fewer. Plus the hoteliers and restaurateurs have time to be attentive, time to see you as a person and not a customer.

Every night, besides a few locals, he and I are nearly the only ones in the little trattoria a few blocks from our hotel. Our fourth night eating there, a Sunday, halfway through our *risotto ai funghi porcini* our young waiter hesitates, then approaches us. Standing by our table, he's nearly contorted with anxiety.

"*Domani chiuso*" he blurts. "*Domani chiuso.*"

Bill and I look at each other . . . "*Domani chiuso.*"? What's that mean? Our meager collection of Italian phrases doesn't include "*Domani chiuso.*" But the young waiter is insistent. "*Domani chiuso!*"

And then somehow my mind mashes together the word for closed with another from an old Dean Martin song, and suddenly I understand "*Domani chiuso!*" The young waiter wants us to know that the little trattoria will be "Closed Tomorrow." He wants us to know that we'll have to find somewhere else to eat. He wants us not to starve. So kind! So Italian!

We've come to Naples for a more in-depth exploration of Pompeii than we had experienced on an earlier trip to Rome. And, while Pompeii and lesser-known but just as remarkable Herculaneum are fascinating, Naples itself offers astonishing charms: an astonishing shopping galleria; a street of artisans who hand carve giant Christmas scenes; subterranean Roman ruins with walls covered in graffiti written by desperate Napoleans hiding from Allied bombs during WWII. Our guide, whose inventiveness eclipses her English explains the bombing by yelling "Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Another couple may have thought they weren't getting their money's worth from "Boom! Boom! Boom!" but Bill and I think it's hilarious. Just as we find the juxtaposition of 20th century graffiti scribbled on the subterranean walls of two-thousand-year-old cistern while fiery harbingers of mortality were raining down are exquisite testimonials to human endurance.

"Maretede, quartordice de Gennaro. We didn't get going until eleven — down to the waterfront. Very posh and beautiful. We strolled up some fascinating little side streets and then went to the Bourbon castle, which was very large. They were making a movie! And outside there was a skating rink!"

"Go for it," Bill says. To skate under the Mediterranean sun overlooking the Bay of Naples . . . how rare! But I hesitate.

"Go for it!"

Scarcely anyone is on the ice, and the glistening surface reflecting the cerulean sky looks as unmarred as a beautiful mirror.

"Go for it!"

But I don't go for it. I tell him, no . . . the skates probably wouldn't fit, and most likely they wouldn't be sharp. The risk of falling is too great.

(From Bill's travel journal.) "Across the street was the Castle Nuova and next to it an outdoor ice rink with a few youthful skaters. I tried to entice Pat to give it a shot, but she declined since rented skates are hard to master."

But the real reason is that my ineptitude would be exposed. All those hours at the rink, and I still have no command on the ice. Out there, nearly alone on the ice, I'd be seen for what I am: awkward as Bambi on the frozen pond. Plus, I know Bill wants to take my picture, and that when it's developed we'd see different things. He'd see the wonderful improbability of our lives. The kid from Frostburg taking a picture under the Mediterranean

winter sun of the girl from Bridgeport, fifty-something and skating above the Bay of Naples. But I would see only an absence of grace.

I do, however, buy a piece of equipment for skating back in Baltimore. We stop in a little hatshop run by an old couple and their young son, who tells us that his older brother is “the one who got to go to America.” There, I buy a black “*caputo*.” Its yarn is soft and its brim is reinforced with elastic to keep it snug so my head will be protected if I fall.

Ice isn’t alive, but it is dynamic and can change to accommodate its surroundings. Back in Baltimore, one Saturday morning I am wearing my black cap and doing patch, while Bill waits in the lobby, but something has gone awry with the rink’s thermostat and the ice is expanding, pushing against the walls. I am nearest the exit and Risa, the doctor who diagnosed Bill’s Lyme’s Disease, is on the patch between myself and Bob, a Hopkins professor. Suddenly the dense quiet is rent by an unnerving boom. Constrained by the walls and finding nowhere to go, the ice has heaved itself up and split open like a chapped lip. More roars will follow until the surface is webbed with cracks. But the three of us continue practicing our figures, because just as a tire can cross a crack in a roadway, a blade can pass over a crack in ice. Unless the crack has aligned itself perfectly with the blade. And what are the chances of that? In the half a minute it takes me to trace a circle with my right outside edge, then my left, and then, at the tangent of my circles, switch feet again, it does exactly that. It opens a crack in the exact pattern my scribe has traced. The fit between my blade and the crack it slips into proves to be much better than the one between my head and my new black *caputo*. My cap flies off and lands like a black foreshadow a millisecond before the back of my skull hits the ice

What were the chances of that perfect alignment of crack and blade? Yes, the ice that morning was splitting, but those splits were just a fraction of the total surface area. And still, my blade slid into that crack as if it and the crack had been magnetized so attract each other. As if my falling were inevitable. As if *Fortuna*, with her right hand on the rudder as the goddess is typically depicted, had steered me into it.

Whatever I buy when we travel has to fit in my suitcase, but one evening on that Naples trip we happen upon a street vendor selling hammered-copper pots and I buy a frying pan. It will be a tight fit in my bag, and I know it will mean extra weight, but I think it will look perfect hanging from the mantle over the large stone fireplace by our kitchen.

Another afternoon I buy two sets of Della Robbia-style candlesticks, one for Kurt's wife, Amy, and one for us. They're from the gift shop of the Santa Chiara Monastery, a large complex that had been nearly destroyed during World War II. Naples is a noisy city blasted by motor scooters, and late one afternoon we duck into the monastery's astounding cloister garden. Yes, there are plants, but the most amazing plants haven't grown in centuries. They are the lemons, figs, vines and oranges painted onto the earthenware tiles that decorate the pillars demarking the garden's geometric design. Such exuberance! Such abundance! Such desire for permanence made manifest. And, of course, Bill takes pictures, which he will carefully label and put in albums when we get home.

And I take some pictures of him.

A short break by a tired Bill in the cloister courtyard he labels one.

But he looks more than tired: he looks spent. His lips are pursed, as if he's short of breath, and can't muster the energy to smile. And his shoulders are slumped. It's been four years since his laryngeal cancer, but its aftereffects, which I didn't really notice at the time,

are evident in that picture. To his left, against a blue background, a lush garland of leaves and fruit and flowers twines up a six-sided column. And that tin-glazed centuries-old flora looks more alive than my husband.

We do spend a day hunting through the ruins of Pompeii on that trip, but some of Pompeii's most astounding art are the artifacts displayed in the archaeology museum in Naples, a short hike from our hotel. Here are some of Pompeii's remarkable pottery, mosaics and frescos. The museum — I think we visited it twice — is vast and quiet and somehow has an atomized atmosphere of golden dust. Bill takes many pictures. There's the mosaic whose two cocks have been fighting for nearly two thousand years. And the bust of the middle-aged actor whose knowing expression is so natural he'd look at home today on Facebook. And then there's the fresco of Bacchus, the god of wine.

But Bacchus represents more than wine's intoxicating powers. He represents its social influences as well, its ability to promote a sense of commonality and shared identity. And for that reason Bacchus is also regarded as a promoter of civilization and peace. Despite wearing a ridiculous garment of grapes, the young god looks alert and virile and stands beneath a garland, possibly of his symbol, ivy, that drapes from one edge of the fresco to another. In the center is a mountain, possibly Vesuvius. The fresco is two thousand years old and I can't tell if the smudges at the mountain's crest are the discoloration of the ages or the artist's rendering of pre-cataclysm exhalations, just as I can't tell if the indentations spiraling up its sides are roads. Since Bacchus stands to the mountain's right, and it is in the fresco's center, it would be easy to assume that the mountain is the composition's primary object. But no.

In the foreground, moving through a bed of thin ferns is a snake. Black and gold and beautiful, the serpent undulates toward something beyond the fresco's frame. As if to say, what is the young god with his frail powers of wine and common spirit to me and mine? And as for the mountain, her destructive display lasted an afternoon, and what is that if not a scant second in the timeless realm where I reign?

And so the serpent, its head lifted off the ground and its mouth open, coils away. Perhaps to another garden wall. Perhaps to the sound of chattering innocence about to fall.