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Word count: 1519

Frozen Timelines

When I cross from the dirty rubber mats to the pristine sheet of ice, I feel like I'm stepping into a whole different world. As I begin to move, I see intricate tracings etched by my blades on the clean ice. The air rushing past plays with little pieces of my hair, pulling them gently from my ponytail. I hear the sharp rip of my edges and the muffled click of my toe pick as I sink it in the smooth surface. Every spin leaves behind a fuzzy mess of concentric circles. After a while, the ice is like a timeline of my practice. If you follow the tracing my blade is leaving now back far enough, you'd be able to find the exact place I'd started, each moment represented in this simple two dimensional mural.

I see a blur of grey walls, scuffed glass, and dim lights as I spin faster and faster. I see my own reflection move into space, leave space behind, stretch endless towards what comes next. I don't see textbooks, illuminated notifications, schedules, bills, or assignments. Not here.

Skating takes a lot: dedication, nearly all my free time, money. But it also gives a lot: goals to work towards, escape from stress, even a scholarship awarded specifically to skaters donated by a generous woman named Phyllis Braun.

I've been through this portal before. It looked different when I was three and the rink was a little rectangle my dad had shoveled on the lake in front of our house. Back then I saw mom and dad and mittens shaped like turtles, but the captivating sense of complete freedom and perfect security was there even then.

I'm twenty years old now, and on this particular Friday in July, I am sharing the ice with only three other people. One is a little girl, maybe eleven years old, wearing a sparkly purple

dress and a slicked bun. Her mother is sitting in the stands watching, our only spectator. I remember coming to this place when I was that age, seeing my mom up in the stands.

Sometimes I wonder if I've gotten too old for this. I wonder if I need to move on from skating and focus my energy on grown-up things like so many of my friends already have. Maybe if I'd traded my tights in for a pair of slacks, I could've had a fancy downtown internship or at least a lot less bruises on my legs from falling.

Lately, when I've come to the rink I've been the oldest one skating; almost everyone in the Lakeland Figure Skating Club is under the age of eighteen. Not today. The younger of the other two skaters looks old enough to be my mother and the other looks like she has been collecting social security checks for as long as I have been alive. Wispy silver hair covers her head and she looks familiar, but I can't remember her name.

These two women seem to know each other and they stick close together as they move around the rink. As I continue practicing, I notice the older one stop to compliment the little girl on her dress.

"Are you competing this weekend?" the woman asks.

The little girl diverts her gaze to the ice at the woman's feet and answers shyly, "Yes, it's my first time."

"Well, I'd love to see your program, would you skate it for me now?"

The little girl performs a sequence jumps, spins, and turns in time to lighthearted music. The woman with the silver hair stands by, erupting in vigorous applause when she finishes. "You'll do great this weekend," she says.

As I continue to practice, I think back to my first competition when I was eight years old. Back then, competition day was the only time I ever wore make-up. All day long, the extra-tight

pull of my ponytail against my scalp and the mascara-coated tips of my eyelashes at the edges of my field of vision reminded me that it was a special day. The crisp, chemical smell of hair gel still makes me feel excited, even twelve years later.

I snap out of my moment of nostalgia when the silver-haired woman approaches me.

“You aren’t competing this weekend, are you?”

“No,” I say “I’m just working on some skills.”

“Ah, I didn’t think so. Do you like skating in college?”

I peek at the clock over the woman’s shoulder, a little annoyed that she is trying to start a full conversation with me while I’m skating—how does she even know I’m in college? An hour of ice time costs more than I make in an hour at my summer job, so I don’t like to waste it, but I also don’t want to be rude.

“I love it,” I say. “The rink on campus is beautiful and the school pays for me to skate, so I can’t complain.”

“Yeah I know it can be hard to come up with the money to go to school and skate, but I just love to see you girls keep skating after high school.”

I let air fill with silence, hoping to end the conversation, but she proceeds.

“That’s why I made the scholarship. I don’t know if you know who I am, but I’m Phyllis Braun; I started the Phyllis Braun Scholarship.”

I pull my eyes away from the clock and refocus my gaze on the woman standing before me. Up close, her slight frame looks stronger than I expected from a woman her age. Her head is turned in my direction but I feel none of the energy that comes with eye contact: it’s as if she is looking right through me. That’s why she looks so familiar, I think to myself, she’s Phyllis Braun.

“I won that scholarship two years ago,” I say. “Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. I don’t even pick the winner—didn’t think it would be right to have it all up to me. There is a whole committee, but they always read me the essay submissions—I can’t read them myself anymore.”

She interprets my muteness as confusion and goes on to explain, “I’m 95 percent blind. I can just barely make out your outline right now. That’s why I like to skate with someone else. I can follow them and I can follow the boards—hopefully stay out of your way until I know your patterns well enough.” She shifts her weight from foot to foot, feeling her blades glide playfully as she talks.

The implications of what she has just said wash over me gradually: waves of varying sizes on the shores of my mind. Phyllis can’t see the blur of grey walls, scuffed glass, and dim lights when she spins. She can’t even see the ice she is standing on or me right in front of her. There’s no way she could have seen anything that little girl just did in her program, but Phyllis had clapped anyway. I wondered how she even knew to compliment the girl’s dress—maybe the other woman told her what it looked like.

I imagine skating blindfolded and the thought terrifies me. There are so many unknowns. From this perspective, the rink seems to indicate gripping fear instead of freedom and dangerous obstacles instead of security. Suddenly, I feel guilty. Guilty for having been anxious to end this conversation and guiltier still for making a blind woman feel like she had to get out of my way.

“Don’t worry about watching out for me,” I say, “It will be much easier for me to watch out for you.”

As I try to determine whether what I just said is offensive or not, Phyllis drives the conversation forward.

“I took my first skating lesson when I was 68. I wanted to try something new after we moved to Michigan from Florida. I just loved it.”

Disconnected as they are, her eyes light up with a passion I have seen only on the rarest occasions before. “I couldn’t stop when I lost my eye sight. I’m 75 now. I can’t jump anymore, I just love how it feels to go fast.”

When I was younger, some of my friends’ parents made them skate. Now that I’m in college, all of my teammates are skating because they want to, but very few of them truly love to skate every single practice. They like skating and they sacrifice a lot for it, but not many could honestly say that they’ve never regretted these sacrifices. I can tell that Phyllis loves to skate and I like to think my own eyes light up with that same passion.

She might not be able to see the tracings her blade leaves, but if she wanted to, she could place her finger in the rut cut by her edge and follow the continuous line back to where she had started, feeling her way through each familiar movement. And I bet, if she and I followed our tracings back far enough, we would see that we came from the same place.