

Lorraine Hanlon Comanor

In the Shadow of Parsenn

The wicked dance in which you are caught up will last many a little sinful year yet, and we would not wager much that you will come out whole.—The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann

MY FINAL YEAR OF SKATING I LIVED IN A SWISS VILLAGE AT THE BASE of Parsenn, Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain. The town became the hub of my existence, not only a geographical center from which I traveled to shows and competitions, but a place of self-reckoning. The day I was forced to leave, I took with me a Bavarian doll, a book of pressed wildflowers, a collection of German texts, and two black-and-white photographs: one of old folks streaming up the hill to the thirteenth-century Frauenkirche, the other of the Höhenweg, a path I used to take to Parsenn. Today the German texts sit in my bookcase behind the doll, waiting to be reread. The photos hang in my bedroom, the first thing I see in the morning and the last at night.



A last practice session in the London suburb of Richmond with my new Swiss trainer, Arnold Gerschwiler. Then a flight to Zürich, a cab to the Bahnhof, a train to Landquart, and a change to the narrow-gauge Rhätische Bahn to climb the fifteen hundred meters to Davos. A four-hour train ride in 1962. I brought along a German grammar.

Our first stop on arrival was the outdoor regulation rink surrounded by Alps in their full summer glory, cows grazing in the high pastures. The town had wanted an elite figure skater, and after the 1962 World Championships, the mayor had invited me to be its guest. At sixteen I had trouble believing that I was going to train in this alpine paradise. With the exception of two months' outdoor work in Cortina, a town in the Dolomites, I'd mostly practiced in buildings that resembled airplane hangars.

Mother watched from the sidelines as I completed a set of brackets, making sure I was taking full advantage of my recent lessons, incorporating all the changes Arnold had made to my school figures. This new trainer, she hoped, would help me make the leap from the second American girl to the US figure skating champion. Unlike in Cortina, there was no retractable curtain here to shade the ice from the alpine sun. I struggled to make out my tracing in the glare. After I'd completed a set of brackets, she beckoned me over to the boards. If I would carry my weight just a tad further back, my skate would run better.

What did she know about how to stand on a blade? She was a painter.

In a few days, she'd return to our Boston home, and I'd be completely on my own. I'd had the lecture on chastity and distractions, the former something to keep, the latter—presumably romantic involvement—something to avoid. I'd listened dutifully. I was used to her continual presence in the bleachers, her reiteration of my mistakes at dinner while she admonished me to sit up straight. After three hours of continuous pulling up, forcing my shoulders back, I liked nothing better than to slouch at the table.

But aside from my delight at the prospect of being on my own in a picture-book town, part of me was in a shadow, recovering from the previous year's disaster. The crash of Sabena Flight 548 in Brussels had killed all seventy-two on board and decimated the US Figure Skating Team. Of the thirty-four skaters, parents, coaches, and officials on the flight, nine were from Boston. But for a last minute ultimatum from Winsor, my elite private school, I would have been on board too. My name had not even been removed from the passenger list. From the patchwork quilt of days that followed, beginning with the 5 A.M. reporter's call to my father asking for an interview and at the same time informing him of his wife's and daughter's deaths, what I mostly remembered were the sleepless nights, reading novels of disaster like *Ethan Frome* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, trying to make sense of an event for which there was no explanation, trying to banish the image of a photograph I'd seen of the broken airplane wing with a pair of blades soldered to its tip, and flapping beneath it in the rubble the cover of *Sports Illustrated* featuring a smiling Laurence Owen, America's newest figure skating queen. Although here in the mountains I could escape the ghosts of my American friends, especially those who haunted my home club in Boston, I still felt their loss and the weight of the disaster's legacy. It was not just a matter of coming up to their standard. As one of the few elite American skaters left, I now had no excuse for not being the best.

A temporary diversion from troublesome thoughts: German skaters were coming for an exhibition. Seppi, whom I had taken up with at the last World Championships, should be among them. Would he still be interested in me?

When he arrived, I placed a camel spin center ice, with the blade of my free leg caught in my right hand and pulled up high over my head. A beautiful spin, but its position made it hard to generate much centripetal force, and hence, much speed. At its finish, Seppi was still intent on lacing his boots. What I needed was a blurring spin like those of Ronnie Robertson, the Olympic silver medalist. He'd been clocked spinning between seven and eight revolutions per second, faster than an electric fan, so fast that his eyes used to bleed. At seven, when I tried copying his marvelous spins, Mother would lean over the boards to comment, "I don't see any blood." Other parents would look at her quizzically, missing the impish grin. Despite the joke, spins that produced bleeding eyes became the gold standard.

Starting a scratch spin now, I pulled as hard as possible, completing maybe twenty revolutions before running my index finger over my eyelid. No blood. I

pushed back the sleeves of my dress. On my forearms, little blood vessels were bursting. The next best thing to bleeding eyes. Glancing at the bleachers again, I gave my skirt a little tug. Actually, it wasn't much of a skirt, just two ruffles set off the hips of a Viennese stretch wool leotard, the one I had had to pack away last fall when a Boston judge had inquired after the identity of the European tart on the ice. Maybe Seppi thought I was one of the locals. He finally finished lacing his boots but had still to look in my direction. In these few short months had he forgotten our evening in the stairwell of Prague's International Hotel? He took the ice and I watched him warm up, skating with such energy, a kind of Puck. His school figures weren't as good as mine, but he popped off a double Lutz, a jump I had not been able to do consistently, like it was a bunny hop. Perhaps if I put my show music on, he might take note of Frank Sinatra singing "Volare."

He was well into the practice before he smiled in my direction. A winning smile, but fleeting. He seemed determined not to be distracted. I smiled back, wondering if I should say something—*ciao, servus, salii, salii*—but, unable to decide which one might sound best, I did a double toe loop instead. At the end of practice, I joined him on the bench, unsure of how close I should sit.

"What are you doing here?" He didn't look up as he unlaced his boots.

"I live in Davos now." I was afraid if I said too much, I'd make a grammar mistake. "I'm going to the Mittelschule."

He nodded as if American girlfriends always ended up in Swiss towns. I could have brained him for his nonchalance. At dusk, we walked back together towards his hotel. Once we reached a quiet street, he took my hand, his fingertips pressing against my palm. He stopped, turned me to face him, and kissed me, first tentatively, then with the gusto he'd shown in Prague. The midsummer night's dream began.

The day after the exhibition, Seppi returned home and so did Mother. I don't remember introducing the two, but later he would tell me that she'd given him the distinct impression that he should stay away from her daughter. "It was worse than if she'd said, 'I don't like you,'" he'd told me. "It was as if I weren't even there."

The rink was quiet again, only a few of Arnold's skaters training. Shortly, they too would go back to the UK, and I would be left to practice on my own until the October school break when I was to return to Richmond.

Within a few weeks, I settled into my routine at the Mittelschule, a local high school housed in an old sanatorium that also had a dorm for out-of-town students. I struggled through the classes, spending too much time with my nose in a dictionary, and gradually changing my fractured Viennese dialect to a comical mixture of *Swizertütsch* and German.

Seppi and I had agreed to write. His first letter came to the rink, a recounting of our time in Prague and Davos, how he wished I would simply change schools and come to stay in Oberstdorf, how we would go swimming together on vacations, maybe stay in a little cabin in the woods he knew. In Prague I'd apparently asked him if he'd ever kissed a girl before, but he'd forgiven me and

signed off with a barrage of kisses. His letters usually arrived on Wednesday. When our weekly interval extended to ten days, I was frantic, checking the school desk every afternoon for the mail. I couldn't say for sure what it was about this boy I found so attractive—the Nordic coloring, the jaunty presentation, the attention to me, the step into freedom. Perhaps some combination of all of the above. Reading his letters fifty-two years later, I realize I'd also been snagged by the humor: between paragraphs about our exhibition schedules are hilarious descriptions of himself after our encounters—the squished tomato face sure to be noticed by the wife of the town mayor, the inside of his cheeks that felt like a pot of boiling bullion had been poured over them, the rough sandpaper tongue that hung like a limp cauliflower in his mouth.

At first our musings were mostly concerned with our school and skating week, what was going on in his family—gracefully skirting the topic of romance except for the sign-off of kisses and one hint: without telling me, he'd tried to return to Davos on his Vespa, but his parents had caught him some distance outside of Oberstdorf and brought him home.

Writing in German was a challenge. I needed a Teutonic Cyrano de Bergerac, someone to help me to be witty, charming, and grammatically correct. Often I spent more time on my weekly letter than I did on my homework, but was too embarrassed to ask my roommate for help. I didn't want to talk about my boyfriend in case he went away.



My American life faded into the distance. With no newspapers or TV at school, I lost track of current events. Occasionally I saw a paper in town, but for the most part I was content to leave American politics behind and to forget, as best I could, about the Brussels crash. One world event did grab my attention, though: the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the Swiss laughed at the incident—no one, not even the Russians, would be so stupid as to launch a missile at the US—my parents were truly alarmed. They wired a thousand dollars from the States in the event our country ceased to exist and I had to stay in Switzerland, which would have been fine with me.

As it happened, just following the Cuban crisis and within a week of the start of the October holiday, the Mittelschule staff discovered building repairs that needed immediate attention. Fall break would start early, four days before I was due in Richmond. Armed with a bit of extra cash, I telegraphed Seppi with a bold plan for my unaccounted-for days: instead of going to Richmond via Zürich, I could come via Oberstdorf. The rink had closed for the month, he telegraphed back. Would I come anyway? Of course, I would.

Over the following few days I was jumpy, sure someone would discover my altered reservation or that my parents would hear of the schedule change and let Arnold know I'd be arriving early in Richmond.

The train station was crowded the morning of the holiday start. When I looked for an empty car away from the other students, a Dutch classmate

followed me, suggesting we travel to the Zürich airport together. I nodded, not knowing what to say, how to lose him, my stomach doing flip-flops the entire two and a half hour ride to Landquart. As we pulled into the station, he offered to help me with my bag. I told him I could manage, as I headed to the next car, supposedly to find another classmate. “*Macht schnell,*” he called after me. The connection time was tight.

Thankfully, he’d gone when I returned, as I had less than five minutes to find the train to Oberstdorf. Trying to keep my distance from the throng of schoolmates heading to Zürich, I crossed the tracks illegally and reluctantly checked in with the conductor in hesitant Switzerdeutsch. “*Ufem andere Gleis.*” He nodded in the direction of the next track and before he could insist that I go around the other way, I bolted to the Oberstdorf train, choosing a seat where I couldn’t be seen from the platform. If Herr Doktor Magg, one of the Mittelschule’s Bavarian teachers, were to appear, I’d invent an invitation to a Bavarian exhibition. By the time the doors closed, Doktor Magg had yet to materialize, but my heart was beating loud enough to be heard in the next car. Surely by now someone had noticed I was not on the Zürich train.

As we approached the German border, I became increasingly anxious. What mix of experiences—listening to war stories, reading Anne Frank, or during a recent trip to Berlin hearing shots from the just-completed Wall—produced this reaction, I couldn’t quite say, but I’d never been completely comfortable in Germany. I told myself Seppi had nothing to do with these events. Still, suppose he changed his mind about the whole plan? Fretting away the hours, I watched the silver landscape turn gray. Eventually the train slowed, the wheels screeched, and the conductor announced the final station: Oberstdorf. First to reach the opened door, I bumped my suitcase down the metal steps, scanning the platform for a head of wheat-colored hair. He was not there. After three telegrams he hadn’t come? I’d just made a seven-and-a-half hour trip to a strange country for naught. The station house was out of focus. Wiping my eyes, I promised myself never to complain again about the English rain and fog, as I looked for the kiosk, where I could buy a return ticket. With luck, I’d get back to Zürich and off to London without anyone knowing just how foolish—or, more accurately, devastated—I’d been. Finally, I came to the end of the train where I could pick my way across the tracks, lugging my impossibly heavy bag behind me. I was wallowing in pity when I looked up and saw him at the gate, sporting a grin.

Celebrating my undetected escapade at the hotel, I ordered a glass of wine with dinner. It went straight to my head before I’d even finished it and could take myself unsteadily back to my room to entertain my fantasies in private.

During the next three mornings, I read patiently until Seppi was out of school and we could walk hand-in-hand through the town with its wooden chalets perched on stone, the Allgäu Alps in the background. The weather was perfect, just a hint of fall in the air. As we couldn’t train, he showed me around. We strolled by the rushing Trettach, finding a secluded bench where we resumed our favorite activity with wild abandon. All too soon, he had to go home to

dinner and I back to the hotel, as there was no extra room in his house for guests. I wasn't even sure he'd told his parents about my visit. The second day he took me to a boring sci-fi movie. He was enthralled and I couldn't wait until it was over, but I would have watched that film every afternoon if it could have prolonged my three-day visit. Afterwards we spent so much time on our bench that the following day his mother and his school friends asked him what was wrong with his mouth.

Reluctantly, I boarded the train back to Zürich, trying not to think of the dampness that awaited me in Richmond. I'd worked hard and Arnold was pleased with my progress, but outside the rink my mind was completely engrossed in an Oberstdorf reverie. Each day, I hurried back to my postage-stamp room, anticipating the letter that arrived several days later. "Author: slightly to definitely crazy, but not yet ready for the insane asylum. Condition bad, but no longer dangerous, as the danger source has gone to another location." I scanned it quickly for the magic four-letter word (actually five in German) that I had yet to hear from him and had been too shy to use myself. In the middle of page three, I stopped: he couldn't believe he had fallen in love with a girl who seemed to be in love with him too. I did a pirouette, bumping into the bed, before running off to buy some blue eye shadow. With my nose to the mirror, I first applied it just under the brow and then covered the whole eyelid, uncertain of the effect. The next day, Arnold looked at me askance and noted that I didn't usually wear eye makeup to practice. Already composing the return letter in my head, I had to force myself to concentrate on my figures. When I finally read the end of his letter, I learned that our plan for an Oberstdorf detour on my way back from the UK had been waylaid by his parents scheduling a trip to Heilbron. There would be other exhibitions, other chances for us to get together, he'd said. The rain streaked my windowpane. But then it was usually raining in the UK.



Back in Davos, the good fall weather continued for some time, but some days were unseasonably warm and I felt sluggish on the ice. The Föhn arriving, my schoolmates told me. It was said to be responsible for everything from headaches to madness.

And madness encroached on my world that November, despite my attempt to limit my time composing letters to Seppi and gazing at his picture. I began to wonder if Seppi's mother disapproved of us, as I knew my mother disapproved of Germans. Seppi assured me this was not the case. Still, I had my doubts, and little misunderstandings crept into our letters until at one point he said that he might not be able to feel a hundred percent comfortable with an American, just as the reverse seemed to be true. Wanting me to understand that every people had their good and bad sides, he chose to describe the bad behavior of some of the American soldiers stationed in Garmisch. Up until then, the War had never come up and I had not wanted to bring it up, sensing that in Europe the topic was off limits. He signed off as Sepp, his more serious self.

The last thing I wanted was to be associated with an occupying army. But as I reread these letters now, I see we were trying to understand what the relationship between our peoples would be in the postwar era. We weren't very skillful and we didn't get very far, but at least we had a stab at it, although the attempt may have been the beginning of our unraveling.



Each week the school doled out eight francs of spending money. Most students bought Lindt chocolate. Some went to the movies. Since Sepp and I seemed to have gotten past our uncomfortable political discussions—his last letter had begun with *Mein liebster Spatz*—I saved my allowance for a few weeks and bought a sweater pattern, knitting needles, and yarn—a light cornflower blue, which would look very good with his eyes. I hadn't knit anything for years but was confident the skill would come back.

Over holidays and breaks, when the school was closed, I was to stay with the family of one of the Mittelschule's German literature teachers. They lived in Friederichhaus in Davos Dorf, the next town to the Platz. Herr Doktor Brückmann was a philosopher. I didn't know any philosophers, and my schoolmates were afraid of this one. When I pressed them further, I learned nothing more than he sometimes chewed with his mouth open.

I hauled my suitcase and skates onto the bus and, after a short ride to the Dorf, knocked, with trepidation, on their door. Ruth Brückmann answered, smiling, with two little boys, Philipp and Ursi, in tow. The children looked at me wide-eyed, as if to ask what I was doing there. Artur, her husband—Herr Doktor Brückmann to me—would return in time for lunch, she said. A few minutes later a substantial man, dressed in bulky corduroy trousers and a loose-fitting sweater, opened the door, stamping the snow off his feet.

Ruth served rösti and sausage, probably not what I should have been eating, but I was hungry and it was good. Conversation was halting.

"How did you come to Davos?" Artur asked, between mouthfuls of rösti.

While the boys rocked in their chairs and Artur admonished them to be quiet, I explained that I was a skater, a guest of the town. From their puzzled expressions I could tell that the concept of traveling for a sport was foreign to them. We changed the subject. At the end of the meal I helped Ruth clear and wash the dishes. She served coffee in the living room beside the music stands. She sang; he played violin. Before calling his boys for story time, he put on a record—Bartók, I thought. This was a long midday break, and a different household than I expected. I was almost reluctant to go back to the rink.



Seppi and I had been working on a plan to get me back to Oberstdorf for Christmas, but we always seemed to be invited to different exhibitions. Mid-December he was scheduled to perform for the Queen Mother. As an excuse to go back to Germany, I told everyone I'd been invited, neglecting to mention

the exhibition dates—midweek, not during the holidays—and the location—London, not Oberstdorf.

This time I knew where to find Seppi at the station, even though it was dark by the time my train pulled in. He was standing behind the gate, arms akimbo, head slightly cocked to one side, with that amused expression that always made me a bit giddy. Reserved in public, he kept a respectable distance while walking me to the hotel, even bringing my suitcase up to my overheated room. As soon as the door closed, he tore my coat off. He was barely a couple of inches taller than I, so I felt the heat of every inch of his body pressing into mine, his hands working their way down from my waist. The next moment we were on the bed, still fully clothed, shoes flying, the unlit room swimming, the kisses coming harder as he fumbled with the buttons of my sweater. I was wearing enough layers that I had no immediate fear of getting down to skin, so I kissed him back, adhering to the full length of him as if we'd both been painted with Krazy Glue. But suddenly he stood up, backed away. Part of me was put off by the abruptness of his withdrawal, but, Mother's chastity lecture still in my ear, I was also a small part relieved as I pulled myself off the bed.

"You know what I want." His hands, now on my shoulders, anchoring me a foot away from him, as if I were contagious. "But I can't have it. German men marry late, not before thirty."

The authoritarian voice didn't belong to the Seppi I knew. We were supposed to wait twelve years? I didn't respond, but he must have read my puzzled expression by the streetlight that was coming through the blinds. He shrugged and we pulled ourselves together. He was expected home for dinner. He'd come by to take me to practice in the morning. Alone, I spent the evening peeking through the wrapping at his sweater, hoping he would like it.

The next day the temperature dropped to minus thirty Celsius. Practice was difficult, our lungs burning with any exertion. It was almost dark when we left the rink. I rode on the back of his Vespa, through the postcard-perfect village with its now barely visible red roofs, hanging on tight, as we bumped over the ruts in the snowy roads. My head against his broad back, I was now convinced the sweater would be too tight. My parents had forbidden me to ride on motorcycles, but, with the overhead riot of stars, I wouldn't have missed this jaunt for anything. I could almost hear Franz Gruber playing "Stille Nacht" in the little church.

There were no lights on at his house when we arrived. I followed him up the dark stairs. By custom, on Christmas Eve, the living room door was kept closed until after the Christ Child came. As he opened the door, I could just make out the silhouette of his mother lighting real white candles on the tree. When I told her how beautiful it was—the most beautiful tree I'd ever seen—she smiled. In his last letter Seppi had apologized in advance for their simple celebration, but I couldn't have imagined anything quite as lovely.

Following our supper of German cold cuts, Seppi handed me a package from beneath the tree. It was larger than I'd expected, irregular in shape, and

crinkly. I'd been hoping for something small, a piece of jewelry, a simple bracelet or necklace, something like the engraved four-leaf-clover charm Greg, my best skating friend, had given me a few Christmases ago. Thinking about how I used to take it out of the box to run my fingers over our initials, remembering the fun we had had before that plane had plummeted from the sky, I struggled not to tear Seppi's wrapping. My hand felt something like scratchy wool. Slowly I extracted a cloth doll. A doll? I worked to hide my disappointment.

"I wanted you to have something from this area," he explained.

I looked at the doll carefully. An old man with steel-rimmed glasses, a cigar in his mouth, in a white Loden coat, a brown Bavarian hat, a travel bag in one hand, an umbrella in the other. He had a certain charm, although I had no idea what I was going to do with him. Over the years, he's survived many moves, and today he sits on a bookcase shelf in my office.

"Süss," I said, realizing "cute" might be inadequate but not having another word come to mind. I sat the doll on my lap and handed him my odd-shaped present, which I wished now I'd put into a box.

He pulled back the Scotch tape, unfolded the end, and held up the sweater that was obviously short.

"Schön," he said and put it on, confirming my suspicions. But he didn't seem to mind. He said it would stretch.

Now his mother handed him her package. He tore the paper hastily and pulled out a walnut sweater with perfect cable and popcorn stitching. Why hadn't it occurred to me that his mother might be an expert knitter and might have made him a sweater too? I wanted to take mine back, give him something else.

"You know I hate brown," he said, meeting her eyes.

When I think about the moment that followed, I can almost hear an ornament falling from the tree, only there were no ornaments, just flickering candles. From the corner of my eye, I saw her face go slack, a front tooth coming over her lower lip. I looked down at my doll. The silence continued. I don't remember returning to the hotel.

Christmas morning found us back at the rink in the unisex changing room. Seppi stripped to his long, white underwear, two bulges in his crotch quite visible. I was not exactly sure what was what, but I was sure that both were definitely too big to fit inside me! Simultaneously aroused and scared—scared of what might have happened two nights ago if he hadn't had a sudden attack of propriety—I decided I had probably misbehaved enough. So I looked away and laced up my boots. Only as we were about to go out to the rink did I turn to him.

"*Wie konntest du so etwas sagen?* (How could you have said that?) Your mother must have spent hours making that sweater—all that exquisite popcorn stitching. I was embarrassed to put mine beside it."

He shrugged. I couldn't read his face.

"*Braun trage ich nicht* (I don't wear brown)," he said and took the ice.

The air was still too cold for lengthy exertion. Without a hat, my left ear was

all pins and needles, and I was doubly glad when practice ended early because I didn't want him to see that I was having trouble with my double flip. I should have asked him for help—he knocked them off so easily—but I stayed mum, still embarrassed by the events of the previous evening. I was unsure about Christmas dinner with Sepp's parents, but as I had no place else to go, I hopped on the back of his Vespa to head to his house.

His mother had spent the morning in the kitchen, now filled with the aroma of roast goose, red kraut, and apples. The table was nicely set. The burned-low candles on the tree were now extinguished, the presents gone. The tree looked undressed. I wished I could put the presents back under it and reopen them all with a different ending. "*Komm, Kinder,*" his mother said, serving dinner. She wasn't smiling. The goose was delicious, although my mouth was dry and swallowing a bit difficult. After a brief exchange, we ate in silence.

The following day Sepp walked me back to the station. Maybe the train would be late, giving him time to thaw, but German trains were always on time. I waited for him to kiss me goodbye before the engine car pulled in, but he just looked in the direction it was coming from. I could tell he couldn't wait until I was on board. There should have been something I could have said that would have eased the tension, but, not thinking of anything, I just nodded and smiled weakly when he said *Tschüss*, then bumped my bag up the metal steps. I couldn't see him from my seat, but I imagined him hightailing it back to the rink, breathing a sigh of relief.

As the train pulled out, I didn't take a last look at the picturesque village; I was imagining the Brückmanns' quiet Christmas, knowing that had I spent it with them, my romance might still be intact. Maybe I could have even had a lovely holiday here, had I not looked skeptical about waiting for his thirtieth birthday or questioned the manner in which he'd received his mother's gift. Surely, though, that last incident would pass. He'd apologize to his mother, make it up to her somehow. I told myself that things would go back as they were before, yet somehow I knew they wouldn't.

After an interminable ride, I was back at the Brückmanns's, going straight to my room to put Seppi's picture facedown in the back of the cupboard, the little Bavarian man safely on top. The Föhn had returned and with it the heavy air. Not hungry, I was reluctant to come to dinner. The bratwurst, which I usually loved, tasted like cardboard and stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"Would you like to learn more German?" Artur asked, after dinner, as Ruth brought coffee to the living room. "We could read some good books."

What I really would have liked was to have had my boyfriend back, but that hardly seemed like an acceptable answer. I nodded instead. From the bookshelf, he selected *Die Marchese von O*.



The regulation rink with artificial ice had now closed for the season, and we skated on a huge, hosed-over soccer field said to be a mile in perimeter. For the few

weeks Arnold was here with his Richmond entourage, he marked off a section of ice to approximate the 90 by 180-foot competition surface, subdividing it into smaller sections for figures. Although my improvement had slowed in the last two months, my figures were acceptable and Arnold was satisfied. The weather cooperated, at least to the extent that there were no blizzards.

At the end of the first week of January, Arnold returned to Richmond, taking his other skaters with him. The storms started. Alone on the expansive ice that merged into an endless blanket of snow, I lost my bearings, the visual cues for lining up school figures now absent.

Early mornings a thick frost covered the ice. Completing a figure was like trying to glide over the sticky side of Scotch tape. Eventually, though, the frost wore off, exposing an uneven, rough surface. I needed twice the usual push to get around a circle. Twenty minutes into the start of practice, my feet were numb and the plate of my blade was encased in a half inch of ice, which would take me fifteen minutes to chisel off at the end of the session.

Afternoons, as the pale sun dipped behind the peaks, the rush of the wind obliterated the music. I struggled to hear the opening strains of Smetana's "Má vlast," as I gathered speed into my program's first jump, the wind stinging my face with its invisible needles. What I enjoyed most on the ice was interpreting another skater's music, not confined to my own choreography. It was this free, unscripted skating that drew the least criticism from my mother. Often I could feel her presence in the bleachers, hear her voice, "Stand up taller. You're losing your line." But with Arnold's group gone, I had only my own music. Perhaps just as well, as I associated so many opera or ballet selections with the skaters who died in Brussels, and even hearing a bar or two of certain pieces could bring the phlegm up into my throat like glue.

When it was snowing hard and I couldn't see two feet in front of me, I regretted choosing to train here in a year I was expected to win Nationals. No one could work seriously in these conditions. But, as there were no indoor rinks anywhere nearby, I had to make this arrangement work. My focus, however, was shattered. Every day I checked the mail, hoping for a letter from Seppi saying he was sorry things were left on a bad note, that he'd like to patch them up, but there was nothing. Unsuccessfully, I tried to put him out of my mind. Concentrating on getting past the wind, my timing had gone to pot. I was sure my hand positions were a fright.

After watching a TV show in which the camera had caught my awkward hand position, Dick Button, the former Olympic champion, had written me a letter that started with "Dear Miss Grapefruit Clutch." I tried to laugh now, picturing my gloved hands grasping grapefruits. At the time, even Mother had found it funny, although she was disappointed that after all that instruction I could still have ended up in such a position. She'd invested so much in my music and ballet, music lessons having begun at seven and for my eighth birthday, the arrival of a refurbished Mason and Hamlin baby grand piano. And there were the hours with Miss Eleanor, a teacher from the Kirov who had defected through

Berlin. I thought about the movie *The Red Shoes*—the sacrifice of everything for dance—and about Mother nudging me at every Boston performance of the Sadler’s Wells Ballet, expecting me to study Margot Fonteyn’s precision and to adapt Balanchine’s choreography to the ice. How we’d argued about my doing a forward cabriole. She, regarding me as an impossibly stubborn child, I, regarding her as someone who should never have left her art studio.

Heading into the alpine wind on the town’s huge rink, I was lucky just to have been standing up, let alone to have resembled Margot Fonteyn or Moira Shearer. I stopped worrying about my hand positions, constructing instead an imaginary fence around a section of the ice, visualizing where the highlights of my program must emerge, with no idea if they fell within the prescribed space. Weeks later, I realized I’d made my imaginary rink too large. But then, my main concern was my jumps. I was still missing my double flip, falling or two-footing it. With no coach to tell me what I was doing wrong, I had no clue as to why I was at an angle after takeoff. When I tried a more conservative approach, I didn’t complete the two rotations, coming down forwards instead of backwards. I attempted it again and again, hoping to leave practice on a positive note. By the time darkness enveloped the rink, I was discouraged and famished. What was I thinking to have agreed to this isolated, arctic training program? The answer was simple: I was escaping Boston, escaping Mother’s grasp.

Fruits and vegetables were scarce that exceptionally cold winter and I’d gained weight eating Bircher muesli and potatoes. Switzerland was shy on scales and mirrors, and my mirror-gazing habit of checking for the first sign of a tummy bulge had gone by the wayside. At five-foot-six, I should have been no more than 118 pounds, but I was probably over 120. Mother was bound to be upset if my thighs looked heavy or there were any bulges in my tight dresses.

Sometimes by the weekend I just wanted to sit by the heater and read, but I often had a train ticket to some Swiss or German city where someone would meet me at the station and drive me to the rink for yet another exhibition, sometimes with other skaters, but often alone between periods of a hockey game.



That year’s extensive competition travel started mid-January with a flight home to Boston. The chartreuse Loden cape I wore, a gift from the Hannover exhibition, didn’t hide the extra pounds. My parents were waiting at Logan Airport, my father standing stiffly in his Homburg hat, watching for me to cross the tarmac. As I walked into the terminal, I heard Mother say to him, “She’s gained weight.”

When I first set foot again in the Skating Club of Boston, everything seemed wrong. Forgetting I was no longer fighting the wind over a bumpy surface, I pushed off much too hard. My circles were at least twenty feet in diameter, not the desired eighteen. My free skating program took up too much space: I continually hit the boards. Only two weeks to straighten out these problems.

My seventeenth birthday came and went. The only birthday party I could remember was my ninth, a twenty-minute affair in the Club’s lounge when

my trainer's mother had taken the cake knife out of my hand, proclaiming the birthday girl never cuts her own cake. I probably wouldn't have had much of a celebration if I were still in Davos either, but skating freely against the wind, rather than under the eyes of the Boston judges, would have been less stressful. A small consolation: at sea level with no headwind and on perfectly groomed Zamboni ice, I was much faster than anyone else. I just had to scale everything down to size.

It was seventy-five degrees when I arrived in Los Angeles. After freezing for months, I felt as sluggish as I did when the Föhn blew. An overwhelming feeling of sleepiness, accentuated in this almost tropical climate, was accompanied by my other reaction to stress—a constantly full bladder. I worried that when the time came to compete, I would either be yawning or stuck in the bathroom.

My spotty memory of that national championship began twenty minutes before the start, with the drawing from a hat of one of five possible groups of school figures to be performed. All included a representative bracket, rocker, counter, double-three, and loop, but the forward-change double-threes in this one was where Arnold's unique stance was highlighted, the hands falling to the back of the hips after each turn. No other American skater executed the figure in this manner. It was the last one of the group. I'd been doing well so far—surprisingly, the figures, so difficult to practice on the rough Davos ice, were coming together—but to assure first place I needed to put it on clean ice and nail it. At the completion of the first set, I could sense that the circles and the threes were in line, the center tight and perfectly closed. Now all I had to do was to retrace it twice more within a quarter of an inch.

For most people, watching figures is like watching the grass grow, a silent activity not accompanied by music, scraping stops, scratching toe picks, or muffled sounds from the bleachers. But after my completion of that change double-three, there was applause.

A torrential rainstorm hit the following day. After an early morning practice, Mother whisked me off to the hairdresser, giving detailed instructions on what to do with my unruly hair. I emerged with a bouffant Hollywood twist, not looking at all like myself, the new beehive covered with a plastic bag. Eager to get out of the deluge, I waded ankle-deep through the rink parking lot and had to change my tights once inside. Before me lay an expansive sheet of blank ice waiting to be filled with beautiful things.

Smoothest ice

A paradise

To him who is a dancer nice

Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*

Would I be a “dancer nice”? The moment that I dreaded most arrived: the playing of the national anthem. A not-so-subtle reminder that, after ten years of work, I had one four-minute shot at the gold. The sleepiness increased. Another trip to the bathroom. Mother picked off a loose sequin near my collarbone and then fussed with my sleeves. I wished she could have just left me be.

Almost fifty years later my kids forced me to watch the performance on YouTube. All these years, I'd safely hidden the box of my *Wide World of Sports* tapes in the basement, ghosts I did not wish to resurrect. I was taken back to the Long Beach arena, the tape fortunately cutting short the awful moment when I'm standing alone center stage, with that perfectly ridiculous hairdo, waiting for the music to start. Suddenly I'm underway, gathering speed in a series of backward threes, interrupted by skips in the film, for the opening split jumps, split flip, and a traveling camel into a layback spin. The leg extension on the split flip is just shy of the desired 180 degrees; the right knee is slightly bent. I hold my breath as the tape continues. The speed is there, but the elements seem tight. At the end of the layback, the music shifts from the Smetana to Carmen. The tape freezes again; a good double loop is lost. Footwork into the double toe loop. A back cabriole, the compromise with Mother. Actually it is quite pretty. A double layback spin that I'd forgotten about. Maybe it's not as bad as I remembered. The double flip is coming up. I'm telling my muscles not to tense, to take my time setting it up. I bring it off, but it's a close call—the free leg barely off the ice on the landing. The hard parts are behind me; I'm into the last section of *West Side Story*'s "Dance at the Gym" that, even today, I cannot hear without all my muscles constricting. The mistake is coming. I look away from the screen, ignoring the intricate footwork leading up to it. When the simple double Salchow finally arrives, I see that after the takeoff, the free leg is out too wide. Over the years, I've woken at night in the middle of that jump, trying to right myself in the air, to bring it down gently, still uncertain of what I did that made my foot slip away on the landing. I can still feel the shoulder dropping, the right hand going down, trying for a last-minute save. I'd always thought I'd just lost concentration, but now I see that the jump is higher than I remembered. At the time, I may have subconsciously realized that I'd gone for too much, because from then on, I would go for too little.

Back in the moment, the music shifts to Verdi's *Il trovatore*. I pick myself up, quickly pulling off a simple toe jump, followed by a precarious axle—my calves are burning now—a little more footwork into the final cross foot spin. It's a respectable finish, and I'm fairly certain that I've brought off enough to keep my first place. Out of breath, I come off the ice.

Mother was standing tight-faced at the entrance.

"You didn't do your best, did you?"

The joy of the anticipated win vanished. It seemed unfair that the previous year's second place finish came after a near-perfect program.

"You'll need to get it together for North Americans," she added.

I couldn't imagine repeating all this in a week. I just wanted to sit down, take my skates off, and have a glass of water. But when the marks appeared, her hazel eyes lit up. Her daughter was the new national champion, a necessary stepping-stone to being the best in the world, something she'd told me I could achieve, if I'd only work harder. Yet it never seemed like a realistic goal to me. Until last year, even a national title appeared unattainable. Half an hour later,

standing on top of the podium to accept the trophy, the medal, the skate pin with the diamond toe pick, and the dozen American Beauty roses, I forced a smile.

The following week, during practice in Vancouver, I spiked myself doing a double toe loop, the heel of my blade piercing the toe of my boot. When I took the boot off, I saw the giant blood blister, the big toenail a deep purple. Mother was slightly miffed over the accident—focused people didn't do this sort of thing—but she took me with my throbbing foot to the doctor. As he wedged the needle under the nail to draw out the blood, the two talked as if I were not present, the doctor wanting to put me on the pill so I would never have a period during competition—it hardly seemed necessary since I hadn't had a period in months anyway—my mother firmly against the idea, whether for medical reasons or for the impropriety of having a daughter on birth control, I never learned. Trying not to watch the syringe filling with blood, I dreamed of being back in the Brückmanns' living room, listening to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, perhaps tackling a passage from Dürrenmatt.

I took my decompressed toe back to the rink. Going into a combination jump that required springing from the toe pick on the blood-blistered foot, I told myself if I could get through last year's Worlds with a stress fracture, I could manage in Vancouver with a stabbed toe. But my practice was not encouraging.

"If you can't do better, you shouldn't bother to skate." Mother had come down from the third tier of the bleachers, leaning over the barrier in her lambskin coat. Usually, I could gauge her opinion of my practice by the way she sat, which was always more relaxed when she was with someone who might momentarily take her focus off of me. Up until the past year, she used to sit with Nathalie Kelley, Greg's much older sister, but Nathalie also died in Brussels, and Mother hadn't found a replacement bleacher mate. Alone now, listed to one side, her back obviously hurting, she was more critical. Years ago she'd missed a rocking chair sitting down to nurse me and had broken her back, an event my father frequently reminded me of.

I should have been more sympathetic, but I would have liked to have sent her back to the hotel. Perhaps alone I could have brought back the zip I had before Nationals. It didn't happen; I stumbled through North Americans.

The following day, I was on a plane again over the pole back to Amsterdam, followed by a day train ride to Davos for a short training stopover. No time for a snowy walk on the Höhenweg or an afternoon reading with Dr. Brückmann. Three days later, the long train ride to Cortina d'Ampezzo, the World Championships, then more train trips to several other countries for the exhibition tour, all in the space of a few weeks.



I hadn't heard from Seppi since Christmas and was anxious about finding myself on the same sheet of ice with him in Cortina. I'd been hoping his silence was just indicative of his inability to find the right words, that once he saw me again

in the land of Verdi and Puccini, we would patch things up.

The first day of practice at Worlds, the clouds drained the warmth from the coral tips of the mostly snow-covered Dolomites that surrounded the rink. Although the men's practice was scheduled later than ours, Seppi walked into the outdoor rink just ahead of me. I held my breath, waiting to see if he'd turn around, but he never made eye contact. I couldn't wait for my session to end. The new American champion, moving woodenly from one element to the next, trying to hide her devastation. The next day he walked in with the second Canadian girl who was skating much better than I. I'd never told my mother about Seppi, although I was sure she sensed there had been something between us. If I so much as mentioned him now, I knew I would get the lecture on focus.

I was relieved when the competition was over, so I could forget about my lackluster performance. Ready to stay put and make up schoolwork, I dreaded going on tour. The last place I wanted to be was in the rink or on another train, but the Olympics were next year and I was expected to keep training. I wished they were over. For me, the Olympics were just another World Championship with a bit more hype. But the real reason I wanted to skip the Olympics was that I dreaded another program captured on worldwide TV that came up short.

Back in Davos, I was grateful for the privacy to lick my wounds. I buried my head in Brecht's *Galileo*—now there was someone who certainly had it tougher than I had. By April, the artificial ice rink was open again, making practice easier, but it was lonely with no one else training. Some days a fine sleet fell; others, the conditions were almost blizzard-like. Eventually, the Föhn returned and the great melt started, and the snow in the valley was gradually replaced by white crocuses. As I forced myself to work on my school figures and free skating program, the first of the alpenrosen turned the slopes pink. In town, sewer work was underway. I pulled on pants before I left the rink, tottering across the trenches on rickety boards, the Italian workmen jeering underneath.

Away from the rink, I began to consider other things. I started writing a story about a girl on the Höhenweg, but then got stuck, unable to imagine what happened to her. Artur introduced me to more Baroque music, convinced skating had exposed me to an overdose of the Romantic era. Fortunately, I was never really taken with Seppi's music, *Glückliche Reise*, and it didn't keep running through my head, not like Greg's *Rigoletto*, which could instantly transport me back to the Boston club. Sometimes I took Seppi's Tyrolean man out of the closet, but I'd put his picture and letters neatly away in a drawer.

One morning, as I lay huddled under the down comforter, the gray light arrived through the gauze curtains, reminding me of the fog that had come to the rink the day of the Brussels crash. Instead of Sepp doodling in biology class, doing a double Lutz, waiting for the train to take me back to Davos, what I saw was the broken airplane wing with the blades soldered to its tip. A cold reminder of my obligation.

But with no pleasure in the process, one's body simply did not skate; it went through the motions. Often my gut was raw. The town doctor recommended

a *Rollkur*, a treatment that required the ingestion of some vile tasting liquid, followed by literally “rolling” for fifteen minutes on each side to coat the stomach.

What relaxed me was to sit with Artur as he ground the coffee that filled the apartment with a wonderful aroma and to listen to his stories—*Struwelpeter* and *Jogli* for his little boys, for me, how Thomas Mann’s niece wanted to start a clothing store in town after the war and how the townspeople, incensed over the easily identifiable Davos citizens cast as characters in *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*), drove her out.

From my earliest days training in Lake Placid, when, between sessions, I would disappear into the Adirondack woods with a book, reading had always been my escape. Temporarily, I’d forget the ice, block out the morning practice where I hadn’t come up to snuff, and lose myself in *The Yearling* or *Penrod*. That spring, in need of an advanced version of “See Spot Run” to master more of the language, I struggled long hours instead with Hans Castorp and his crowd. Impatient to get to the end of Mann’s interminable sentences, I probably missed many of the great writer’s messages. What was not lost on me, however, was the uncanniness of going to school in an old sanatorium and living under Castorp’s magic mountain in the home of a German philosopher.

I liked being in the shadow of Parsenn. Spring weekends we hiked up to the Höhenweg Mittelstation, looking across to Jakobshorn and down at the Dischma Valley. Other hikes too: Shatzalp, Strela Pass towards Arosa, Monstein-Wiesen, Brämabüel, the boys almost always running on ahead of us, throwing sticks. These outings did more for my sleeping and my stomach than the *Rollkur*. Once we went mushrooming—a big activity in a country that sports two hundred edible varieties and a hundred and fifty poisonous ones, Artur once told me. I left the selection to him. That evening, Ruth made porcini mushroom omelets. Laughing at my reluctance, the Brückmanns tasted first. Eventually I ate mine, surprised to find myself completely well the next morning, ready for the Sunday outing to gather wildflowers that bloomed in rainbow waves of loveliness over the mountainsides. A collection—campion, gentians, bellflowers, chamois ragwort, saxifrage—kept me from my other ragged thoughts. Ruth showed me how to press the individual blossoms into a book. More than fifty years later, they’ve still retained their colors.

One Saturday, high on Parsenn, I was watching the giant marmots scrambling up the boulders to sun themselves as Artur was building a fire to roast the bratwurst. Down in the valley, in the corner of my field of vision, was the ice rink, now the size of an anthill. Just the previous afternoon, working alone, the surface had seemed large but not overwhelming. Practice had been almost encouraging. I was beginning to get myself together again, skating with some conviction, landing jumps more solidly. Perhaps I just needed a little break from the competition circuit, a little more distance between Seppi and me. With time I might become my old self again. But that Saturday my stage was dwarfed by the Magic Mountain. When I tried to zoom in on it, I saw instead the Skating

Club of Boston, where Laurence and Greg were practicing. Strains of *Symphonie Fantastique* and *Rigoletto* playing in my mind's ear before eventually the image of the broken airplane wing above Laurence's picture in the rubble reappeared.

Years later, after Artur's death, when I returned to Davos to visit with Ruth, now in a retirement home, we took the Bahn up Schatzalp to walk together from the Höhenweg over to the more recently created Thomas Mann Weg. I looked down once again at the tiny ice rink, thinking of the day so many years ago when my gaze had been diverted from the romping marmots. As I read selections of *Zauberberg* carved in wood signs alongside the trail, I searched for something about the wicked dance, but didn't find it.

That spring the Brückmanns must have sensed my ambivalence about skating. Afraid of the discussion and knowing I'd make a poor philosopher, at first I dodged Artur's pointed questions. Certainly I didn't see the rink as some people saw a stage: a recreation of the universe. Kierkegaard had said something about discovering a second face behind the one you saw. Was there another face behind the skater me? Not clear. Only when Ruth asked: *Was gibt dir das Eislaufen wirklich?* (What do you really have from your skating?) did I sense I might reach an answer. To skate or not to skate? And if not to skate, then what? Something far from the gray-blue light of the spot. Would anything else be a comedown? It shouldn't take a philosopher to figure it out, but it might take a philosopher to determine if one had an identity over and above what one did. Hadn't Yeats written about separating the dancer from the dance? Could there be a me that did not wear a pair of skates? Over weeks, a possible "yes" emerged. But whoever that person was, I didn't see her returning to the US. I knew she could not live with my mother.

If I stayed in Switzerland, Artur told me, life wouldn't be easy. Eventually, it would come time for me to marry, and a boy from a good Swiss family wouldn't marry an outsider. Foreigners were distrusted here. He should know. A German ex-pat, he was a foreigner too, but far more assimilated than I could ever be, his native Konstanz dialect not so different from what was spoken in town.

Not that I viewed Switzerland as perfect. After a few months I'd seen some of the country's warts. On a school hike the previous fall, we were trekking single file in the high pastures when one of my classmates caught up to me and walked back to school by my side—not holding hands, just chatting. After tea, I was called to the headmaster's office. Most unwise, was how he'd put it. My classmate, he informed me, was Jewish, and my parents would be displeased to learn that I had talked to him one-on-one. Other issues: women still didn't vote. They didn't seem to have much of a say in anything. A month before, when Artur learned that the family would have to move, he went alone to find a new apartment, signing the lease before Ruth ever saw it. During that outing, he also went shopping, alone. "It's so pretty," she'd said, when he showed her his purchase of her one new skirt for the year.

Still, I was ready to take my chances. I was now used to a certain amount of freedom, coming and going from school to the ice, traveling on my own. The

thought of going back to the Skating Club of Boston was as unwelcome as the idea of shuttling directly from university class to the rink. Away from skating, I wouldn't be visiting so many novel places—no more summers in Vienna or Cortina, probably no more trips behind the Iron Curtain—nor would I be “making something of myself,” as my father had told me repeatedly I should do. But I could never be told again exactly what to practice, what to wear, what to eat.

Ignoring my year's university deferral, I decided to apply to the interpreter's school at the University of Zürich. “Bad idea,” Artur said, when I told him. “You should have your own thoughts, not spend the day in someone else's.” Perhaps I would do better to study literature, try my hand at writing, but at the time it seemed safer to live in someone else's head. The standard for interpreters at least was probably something shy of being the best in the world. After a couple of years in Zürich, I'd be employable without having to accept the thousand-plus dollars a week Ice Capades usually offered national champions to perform in their shows. The show contract meant sometimes two or three performances a day, rain or shine, living out of a suitcase from one city to the next. Not that my family ever wanted me to become a show skater. They'd always intended for me to get some higher degree. Still, even if I didn't feel the magic of lights and applause, it was hard to come to grips with the idea of not doing any more shows or competitions. For years, I'd been groomed to entertain.

Despite his reservations, Artur helped me prepare for the translation exam. Even with his shaky English, he listened patiently as I attempted an English rendition of the series of German texts—Kleist, Brecht, Dürrenmatt—that he set in front of me every evening after dinner. A big undertaking for someone who had barely begun to study the language and had previously spoken only a fractured dialect. Because I was a good mimic, picking up regional accents, people assumed I knew more than I did.

The test felt like a disaster. Artur wiped the tears when I told him I'd let him down, that I wrote an hour of drivel about some hunger artist—what in God's name was a hunger artist? He shook his head, laughed, pulling from the shelf a volume of Kafka stories.

Surprisingly, I passed and could move on to the next hurdle. Patiently, he guided me through the application forms for the University of Zürich and Geneva, coached me on probable questions for the phone interviews conducted in German and French. I remember stumbling on one of the French questions—my French, once reasonable, now limited to translating passages into German—and wondering if I had what it took to be an interpreter, especially since I'd be expected to pick up a Slavic language as well. But after a month, my acceptance to Zürich arrived.

Once I confirmed my acceptance, the die would be cast. Becoming proficient in three additional languages would be more than a full-time commitment. Sitting on my bed, behind the closed door of my room, I took my skates out of their bag and ran my fingers over the white leather of the boots. They were

not Moira Shearer's red shoes. When I hung them up, my feet would not keep skating. Was quitting a coward's choice? One made by someone too eager to rid her life of chronic anxiety? Would I be opting for a different life if I were skating well? No solace in the brilliance of yesterday's performance. Could someone put my head back together so I could skate again as I once had? What would it be like to be part of an audience rather than a performer? I had no idea. What I did know was that I was ready to explore more of the world outside the rink. The letter to my parents explaining my decision would be a tough one.

Artur helped with that too. Long after Ruth and the boys had gone to bed, we talked late into the nights, huddled around the small radiator that made spitting noises. I would write a sentence in both languages. He would offer a suggestion and I would write it again, wondering if the scathing tone was lost in translation, if he really understood how venomous the letter was. At least twenty times I rewrote that letter, trying to state facts and not to whine, all the while knowing it would not be well received. I was not sure what my parents would do when they read it. Most likely cut off my money. They'd invested a lot in my skating. Maybe complaining about school events and parties I couldn't attend, Christmas in a motel, and uncelebrated birthdays was even worse than Seppi telling his mother he didn't like brown, after she'd spent hours knitting that Christmas sweater. Mother, who had happily spent her childhood in the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts, would not see these missed occasions as sacrifices. Endeavors were always first priority. In the accomplishments department, my father often reminded me, I was not even a close second to Mother. At the office every day, he was not as directly involved in my skating, but it was still critical to him that I climb the ladder to the top. And he believed Mother knew the best route.

Today I cannot reconstruct a single sentence from that letter, although I know its overall scathing tone. A few years ago Mother mentioned it to my younger daughter, suggesting we would eventually find it among her effects. After her death, I went through every paper in her file cabinet, hoping to find that it was less harsh than she'd remembered it, but the letter was not there. At some point she must have destroyed it. Had she forgiven me over time? "My daughter, the wonderful skater—national champion, US Team," she'd repeatedly told her friends, bringing them into her apartment, a shrine of my skating years. I would always try to shut her up, because my skating wasn't wonderful then so it shouldn't be wonderful forty-five years later. Perhaps I should have let her ramble on about it without getting upset. Maybe she'd chosen to remember only my good performances.

Over time, I've thought about what I would say if I could rewrite the letter today. How I might still declare my independence but with a shorter list of grievances. I'd acknowledge what skating had brought to my life, as well as Mother's kindnesses: the Czech tutor before the Worlds in Prague, the numerous reptiles procured for an allergic child always in trouble for smuggling furry things, the long drive to the Bronx Zoo just to see the tuatara, the private

teas arranged with Professor Loveridge, where he schooled me in African gecko taxonomy after we sprinkled his office floor with strawberries for the pleasure of our gopher tortoises. I didn't allow those memories to surface as I wrote the letter. Recently I discovered Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* among my German texts. Artur must have grasped the tone of my writing more than I gave him credit for at the time, providing the example of a master to fortify the craft of my already devastating message. To this day I remember how my hand shook as I finally dropped the letter into the Davos post box.



Ten days later, Mother was at the Brückmanns' door. She'd closed my bank account and collected my passport from the police station where, as a foreigner, I'd been required to leave it. Seven months shy of my eighteenth birthday, I had no right by Swiss law to remain in the country against my parents' will. Perhaps I should have anticipated this outcome and left town, but with limited cash, how long could I have lived on my own?

She barely acknowledged the Brückmanns, who were standing stiffly in the front hallway, her appearance more than they'd bargained for. In her hand were two tickets for the noon train. I couldn't stay in the clutches of a German philosopher who did not appreciate the value of the Olympics, she said, figuring they couldn't understand what she was talking about. Turning my back on her, I translated part of her spiel, skipping the bit about my being in their clutches, but Artur and Ruth got the general picture. I took perverse pleasure in the fact that Mother could not understand our little exchange. She didn't belong in this apartment where I'd spent hours sorting out my feelings about skating and what I wanted to do with my life. I told her I didn't want to go. "You haven't got a choice. I'll be back in two hours," she answered. "You'd better have your things ready."

In the confines of my room, I packed my German texts between layers of clothing, my hands working in slow motion. Carefully I wrapped up Seppi's Bavarian doll, my book of pressed flowers, and the two black-and-white photographs of Davos. Heading towards Landquart, I wouldn't see the Frauenkirche with its little rooster on the spire, nor was there time for a last walk on the Höhenweg. Life under Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain had come to an abrupt end. As I packed, I tried to conjure up Parsenn, wondering if it would still hold its magic when, in my mind's eye, its shape began to blur. All too soon, the doorbell rang. In the front hall, Artur gave me a hug, pressing a book into my hand.

As I boarded the train, I thought of Moira Shearer in her role as Vicky Page, lying blood-splattered on the train tracks, with the red shoes still on her feet. But even at seventeen I knew I was being melodramatic. In real life, people did not throw themselves in front of trains. Not anyone I knew, at least. I was not being asked to choose between art and love. I was just not being allowed to give up my art.

“Where are we going?” I asked once we were seated. Two benches faced each other; she was on the aisle, I was turned away, as close to the window as possible, the glass flattening my forehead.

“Out of Switzerland. You can train in Chamonix.” She spoke highly of the coach of the French champion.

“I’ve had enough skating for a lifetime.”

“If you insist on wasting your talent, you can spend some time at the University of Nice while you think about it. They’re doing Proust this summer.”

I didn’t want to switch to French. My dreams of independence belonged in German, moot now, since I wouldn’t be going to interpreter’s school. With no money, I hadn’t quite figured out how I would manage there anyway. Many nights I’d lain awake, trying to visualize my life in a Zürich garret, wondering if I’d pass the exams the first time around, where the next meal would come from. Behind American ivy walls, I’d likely finish in a timely fashion and at least I’d have lunch. Or I could always come back in seven months, provided I could scrape together the cash. But underneath I knew once this train pulled out of the station, I wouldn’t be back for a long time.

From my bag, I pulled out Artur’s parting gift, Keller’s *Kleider Machen Leute* (*The Clothes Make the Man*), and looked at my mother in her prim New England suit. I was not sure why Artur chose a tale about a poor tailor in a fur-trimmed coat, but it would keep me occupied on the ten-hour ride across Switzerland, as I had nothing to say to my mother. My nose was still pressed against the glass as the train started up. After five minutes of silence, Mother tried to start a conversation. A state of siege was just beginning in Iran, she said; in England, John Profumo was resigning as Minister of War because of Christine Keeler. Could I imagine a British statesman brought down by a prostitute? Uninterested in Iran and British prostitutes, I ignored her, opening the first page of Keller so I wouldn’t have to see the Engadin Valley fade into the distance.