

“Gliders of Magic”

A Distance-Remembering Narrative by Jen Streisand, May 2017

It was Christmastime and Chanukah, time for the family vacation to the Catskills, a popular destination for New York families for winter fun and recreation.

Everything was “all inclusive,” and by that I mean that one didn’t have to leave the premises to do anything: All the fun was right there. One night, we trailed into the rink, a small oval-shaped, gleaming ice rink. It was cold, and I had other things on my mind.

Then the holiday music cascaded from the loudspeakers, and the gliders of magic appeared, all dressed in perfect red. They skated fast, and with exquisite precision. Their blades hit the ice with a sense of prowess. They twirled and twisted.

Instantly I was engaged, transfixed.

“ I must be like them,” I said to myself. “I must try. This is for me.”

Persevering

Figure skating time is the early morning, before school, and before the sun even rises. Serious figure skaters in my region arrived late to elementary school with special permission for the artistic and athletic endeavor.

“It’s time to get up,” I said to my mother, as I nudged her shoulder several times. She was sleeping so peacefully. “ It’s time to go.”

It was cold, and one morning we had to use a string to tie the door of our long station wagon together because everything was frozen hard. We rattled on to the rink in our town, in time for the early-morning patch, back when figure eights were still part of the competitive sport.

I concentrated-drawing the eights first with a large scribe, and then tracing over them. I concentrated.

After the eights there was the “free skate,” which was a lot more fun, and much faster. The Ina Bauer—a long stretch across the ice—and the layback spin, became my specialties.

Every day when skating time was complete, my mother would be waiting for me to drive me to school. I developed attachment issues with my mother, although I don’t think she ever knew it.

The Coaches

The coaches, the teachers of skating, were the gliders who made the magic exist for others. Lesson after lesson they taught their students, skating their edges with their ski coats on, and their decorated skates.

“Bend the knee, shoulders back, and hands straight in a graceful pose,” said my first coach, Rainna Havern. “Smile now, smile. You look wonderful Jen, keep doing what you are doing.” My second coach, Bailey Shiner said, “Again. ‘Do it again,’” she pressed, as she strode on the ice with her long, below-the knee parka, and her tan skates. “One more try. Very good.” And that was it for the day. I looked up to them, and I was listening.

Figure Skating Clubs

Figure skaters had to have their “ice time,” away from the crowds, and public sessions of ordinary skaters. The only way to have ice time is to join a figure skating club. It was preferred to join the club at the rink where you skated most frequently, or one that was close to where you live, in your hometown.

“Oh say can you see,” my mother’s melodious voice sang from the loudspeaker, “by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming...”

It was the annual show at the Great Neck Figure Skating Club.

“Thank you to my wife, Gloria Streisand,” for that beautiful rendition of The Star Spangled Banner,” said my father. “I am Max Streisand, President of the Great Neck Figure Skating Club. Welcome to our show!”

We pushed out on to the ice-all together at first, in a long line, shoulder to shoulder, like the Rockettes for our precision skate, slowly...then picking up speed, reveling in the skate. It was night, and the lights were bright. The wind blew on our skin, and the feeling was elation.

Then some of us were called to do our solos. Shows were the best because they were a chance to practice difficult jimps and spins in front of a cheering audience, without the pressure of a competition.

Alone on the ice, I pushed backwards on my crossovers, gaining speed. I was going to do a “Lutz” jump, and land it steadily. My toe pick-the top end of the skate blade with the jagged edges- dug in, and my other foot in front for the revolution. Steady edges, arms placed one in front, and one in back. Yes, it was done.

Music

The right music for an occasion makes you want to get up and dance, clap your hands, stomp your feet. And so it was with figure skating. One had to have accompanying music to skate a solo “[program.” For competitions, one had to have the music an exact length, depending on the level of competition. No lyrics were allowed.

The studio was brand new. The carpets blanketed the spacious rooms and the doors swiveled. My mother and I sat patiently as the record man did his cutting and splicing.

“Bum, ba ba da da, bum bum bum ba” -- so the melody went, when I first heard it on the radio in our kitchen, as my mother did her conducting, her hands moving with direct precision and knowledge.

On the ice it went turn, turn, footwork, sit spin. This music made me want to get up and dance, or rather, skate.

“Now are you sure this is the selection that you want,” the record man asked, as he went back and forth behind the swiveling door to make the recording the correct length and pacing I wanted.

“Oh yes,” I said. “It is good for the jumps you know.”

He spoke to us from his loudspeaker behind the swiveling door.

“How is this? We cut it right here, and then transition to the slower part. Take a listen” ... Smooth, splice, smooth, splice.

After several hours, my mother and I drove out of the studio parking lot.

My customized music would take only a few weeks to produce the final product, but I would forever go back to the tune of Franz Schubert’s “Marche Militaire” in my mind, and how it motivated me with much excitement to skate my program.

Competitions

The figure skate is a sturdy shoe: boot and blade made for hardy wear, week after week, year after year. A figure skater can go through many pairs, depending on how many years one is involved with figure skating, especially competitive figure skating.

The skating boot, and the skating blade come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, varieties, including different colors, laces, amount of support for the ankles and so on.

One gets to a certain point in the skating life, and custom-made boots are seriously considered, as they are easier on the foot, and the skater is better able to endure the rigors of long hours of training. Observers in the sport often say the extra expense of custom boots is a worthwhile investment, as the boots may last a long time.

We sat in the skate shop at the spacious Sky rink in Manhattan—home of the esteemed Figure Skating Club of New York—which stood in contrast to our much smaller, and homespun Great Neck Figure Skating Club, just 25 miles away in Great Neck, Long Island at the Parkwood Ice Rink.

However spectacular the rink though, skate shops were usually the same: cramped and cluttered spaces, but they were indispensable to the skater for they sold and maintained the equipment a skater needed.

Bzzzz...bzzzz...bzzzz.....the loud sound of blades being sharpened was ever present in a skate shop.

Before us was Mr. Stanzione, a renowned figure skating bootmaker, or more accurately, a bootmaker of champions. It was decided that for my 13th birthday, I would receive a custom pair of boots, and we were fortunate to be in close proximity to Mr. Stanzione.

He was an expert craftsman, humble, and quiet, meticulously going about his work.

I extended my foot, and he measured in several different areas. I pointed my toe, I relaxed my toes, and so on. He took careful notes, and I think he made drawings of my feet for the boots.

His humility was contagious, as I felt humble and grateful, although I was lacking in sufficient expression at that moment. We were very quiet, and all that could be heard was the familiar sound of the blades being sharpened.

In the skating world, Mr. Stanzione's boots were known as "Stanzie's," (pronounced Stan-zees), and I would wear my Stanzie's forever.

The recently resurfaced ice at the Commack Ice Arena felt smooth, and daunting, as just four of us were warming up for our solo programs in the Long Island Icompetitions. That is how it was for competitions-just four or five skaters for the warm up before each skater took the ice for her solo program. I was wearing my festive bright blue dress with silver sparkles on the edges, and my fancy skating tights, which were lighter than the ordinary, everyday stockings we wore for practice. As it was frowned upon to wear even a sweater over your dress for the warm up, competitions were the only time you really felt the chill, literally and figuratively. My lovely blue dress was made for me by Mrs. Keena,

who made all the skating dresses for the Long Island figure skaters. My mother saw to it, however, that I had a fashionable and quite good-looking wardrobe of skating dresses for practice and shows and competitions.

“I see the way they do it,” my mother said, as she moved her hand in the air across our dining room table, which was covered in sewing patterns. “You pick out a fabric that you like, plus the accent trim, and then I can put the patterns together, and it will be a dress.” And she made many skating dresses for me steadfastly using the sewing machine on the dining room table.

“Representing the Great Neck Figure Skating Club,” the loudspeaker said, “Jennifer Streisand.” Some hint of clapping in the audience, one last bit of instruction from my coach, and then just silence. All that could be heard were my edges skating to the center of the ice, swoosh, swoosh. I stop, skate in a small circle briefly, until I am ready to start the program. Stand in the position, and wait for the music to begin.

The first jump is a critical factor: If that goes well, then you feel buoyed, or more confident, but if the first jump does not go well, then it is a struggle for the rest of the program.

I am getting ready for the first jump, a flip jump, and it’s landed with a smooth steady edge! I am spinning with delight...

The score sheets were posted, but it was impossible for a nine-yearpold girl to see them, as men and women with their bulky parkas and fur coats crowded around the posting, like a herd of polar bears. Every time it was like that.

The goal in a competition was to “place.” That means, come in first, second, or third. The three skaters who placed, were then eligible to go on to the next level of difficulty in competition.

In the Long Island competitions, for example, there were perhaps six to twelve groups of about 20 skaters each. Each group of 20 skaters had three places at their top. Those who placed in the Long Island competitions, say about 12

skaters, could then go on to the regional competition—a larger region of the country—where they would compete against other groups of “placed” skaters, also striving to come in first, second, or third again, so they could move up in difficulty until finally reaching the United States Figure Skating Championships, or “Nationals,” as it is known in the skating world.

The three skaters who place in Nationals (in Ladies, Men’s, Pairs, and Dance) go on to the World Figure Skating Championships, and if it is an Olympic year, the winter Olympics.

Skaters are judged on two basic components of their program: 1) the technical aspects, that is the execution of jumps and overall speed and strength of the skater, and 2) the artistic elements, that is the form, style, and grace of the skater and the program. Most figure skaters were obviously better at either the technical parts or the artistry. But the champions—the ones who made Nationals—were equally strong in both.

“Jennifer Streisand came in ninth?” said one of the women huddled around the score sheet. That time, I thought I had skated better than ninth, but who I am I to interfere with the judges’ assessment?

One time, I did place third, and it was a thrill, to be sure...

I spun my closing scratch spin really fast, one leg bent neatly across my standing leg, and I did not “travel,” a skating term for a spin that does not stay fixed in one place. Hands gathered at my waist, I stopped with my toe pick, put my arms high in the air in a gesture of achievement, and I smiled.

Sacred Time

“Come on,” I screamed across the rink, “Let’s do it!” Dana and Rachael—my skating friends and confidants, and I—were in a horizontal line across the rink. Just the three of us. No one else was on the ice at Parkwood. It was early morning, but the figure skating club session was over. The bonus was that there was no school, it was the first day of February vacation. The Zamboni man—the man who drove

the large and clunking machine that resurfaced the ice-was giving us some extra time before the machine grinded its way on the ice.

“What do you want to do?” Dana said. We all said, “Shoot the duck. Shoot the duck!” Shoot the duck has nothing to do with hunting. Rather, it is a skating term for a very fast move that involves great strength and speed, going from one side of the rink to the other, getting in a squatting position, sticking one leg straight out, as in the shape of a rifle, and going, going, going, for as long as you can on the edge.

“Okay, we’re doing it. Let’s go.” It can only be done with one, two, or maybe three people on the ice, even in a big rink.

“Whew, done. Was fun,” we said. It was not a very refined move, and that’s why it was rarely seen in a competition. Just something friends did together in their sacred time on the ice.

Dana, Rachael, and I were a trio. Always skating together. Going to Lake Placid together for summer training, a figure skater’s paradise.

Jeannie Weintraub, who I skated with at the Commack rink on Long Island, had a refined, yet daring style on the ice. Her striking red hair and her angular style drew your eyes toward her on the ice.

We twirled together on and off the ice, on the streets of Manhattan, into Godiva Chocolatier, the actual bricks and mortar store.

Again...

It was 1972, and I was wearing Huckapoo. Junior high was big and loud and competitive too.

Our family was back in the Catskills for Christmas vacation. We had not been back for many years. An oval shaped, gleaming rink was there, looking smaller than the one I remembered, but still magical.

“Just hear those sleigh bells jingling, ringting, tingling, too, Come on, it’s lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you...” The song blared from the

loudspeaker, as throngs of vacationers were trying their hands-and feet-at skating.

I joined the throngs of skaters in the public session at the small, gleaming rink. Occasionally, I would go skating at a public session, when there was no figure skating club that I knew of, or when I just wanted to have a relaxing skating experience.

“Outside, the snow is falling, and friends are calling, you too! Come on, it’s lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you...,” the music blared.

I skated my forward crossovers, deftly weaving in and out of the crowd. At a public session, you could not do any jumps, or go backwards because there were too many people on the ice, and the possibility of collisions existed. So, forward skating, edges, and the occasional spin. It was, I suppose, always a chance to “show off” a little.

I was resting by the boards-the short wall that encircles every rink, indoor or outdoor, and a very nice man approached me.

“I see you are a great skater,” he said. “How long have you been skating?”

“Oh, about six years, but I have been training seriously about four years,” I said.

“Would you skate a solo program in our ice show tonight? We would love to have you!”

“Really? Yes, I will do it. I have my music with me. Perhaps you could shorten it a little, play just half of it because it would be hard to do the whole program in a different rink (and I wanted to say smaller, but didn’t) like this.

“Sure,” he said. “Definitely. We can do that. 7 p.m. then. See you then, and thank you!” he said.

7 p.m. came. I was nervous, but very excited. No one had ever asked me to skate in their ice show, spur of the moment before. I was wearing a yellow skating dress with a chiffon skirt. The ice was newly resurfaced, and really was gleaming.

The crowd-the spectators in the stands-were getting louder, starting to clap their hands to my music. I managed an Ina Bauer, making it last the length of the rink, and the crowd kept cheering, louder and louder. I did a jump or two, and landed everything “cleanly,” a skating term for no mistakes. I was rock-and-rolling, and the crowd kept cheering.

I closed the program with a layback spin, trying to give it lots of grace.I stopped with the toe pic, crowd very loud, and I did a skating curtsy, making it last what seemed like a very long time.

end



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