



9-2013

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Stephenson, Sharon L. "All Skate." Connotation Press: An Online Artifact (September 2013) 5(1).

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Abstract

Let me go back. I am in sixth grade, I am eleven. It is a springtime afternoon, I am the only child still wandering the halls of Mary Ida Raines Elementary School. My stepfather and all the other teachers are required to stay until some designated time, hemmed in by state guidelines.

A friend has lent me roller skates. I must have told her that I had never roller skated, never gone to the skating rink for a birthday party on a Saturday afternoon or with my family on a Friday night for a dinner of greasy cheese pizza. And so, of course, I own no skates, nor do I know how to use them. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

creative non-fiction, roller skates, childhood

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Nonfiction

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by

Sharon Stephenson

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My friend lends me hers. White lace-up boots on a metal shank, wheels the color of ripe persimmons, thick magic plastic, stronger than any plastic I thought American ingenuity could produce. Beneath the toe of the skate, another persimmon-colored wheel-turned-brake, turned on its end and bolted onto the shank like a pig snout.

I cannot practice with these skates at the house, the house located forty-five minutes from any form of civilization, the house with a concrete driveway on enough of a grade to send me sprawling into grass or gravel. The driveway surface is too rough for these persimmon wheels; if I damage these skates, I am unable to pay the money necessary to replace them.

The hallways of Mary Ida Raines Elementary School are tiled in what might be asbestos tile, but the floors are wide, smooth, and seemingly deserted. The custodian has even gone so far as to turn off the lights. I have seen a roller skating rink from the outside. It has no windows, it must be dark like this hallway. Later, as a twelve- or thirteen-year-old, I will be invited inside and see the darkness firsthand, altered like a hallucination by the scattered colored lights off the disco ball.

This hallway is long, with walls on either side to support my clumsiness. I should say here that Mary Ida Raines Elementary School has more than one hallway. I choose this one to be far, far

away from my stepfather, sitting at his own desk in his own classroom in what I consider his own hallway. He would explode over my borrowing skates from another child. I believe, in his own childhood, no other child lent him anything. I believe, in his own childhood, he was often on the sidelines, watching but not capable of participating. I believe, now, in his adult life, that he has an axe to grind with the world and he finds it easy to grind that axe on the bones of the children at Mary Ida Raines Elementary School, or, easier still, the bones of his stepdaughter and stepson.

I push off from the wall. Mine is a wimpy push, a push of fear, lacking confidence. A bystander would be disgusted at this foray into roller skating. I am moored in the middle of the hallway. I scuff my feet like someone impersonating the elderly, the wheels make me dance back and forth. My arms circle, alternating, my hips counter the arms. I am not falling, but neither am I progressing. I sigh and lower my bottom over these impossible skates. My hands push me along the floor, a homeless amputee on a cart, and I am at the opposite wall. I plant my hands on the wall and creep, gecko-like, back to full height, a shaky phoenix risen. The next push is legitimate. The diagonal is without grace, but enough force is applied to require me to arrest my stop with my arms. Again. Again. The entire length of the hallway.

The return journey causes sweat to bead on my forehead. This seemingly flat hallway must have a slight grade. I push harder, I find success, I make one complete journey. I make another. Again. Again. I no longer push off the walls. Now I push against the smooth, tiled floor with my skate, leaning on the other, like an Olympic ice skater. I lean forward. I am speed. I am grace. I am roller skating. If memory serves, I laugh aloud.

I am roller skating, I probably swing one arm out and put the other behind my back, a champion. I live between confidence and fear. I have an overblown fear of falling. I fully attend.

And then a sudden noise, and I know that my time in this hallway, alone with these remarkable skate, has ended. I know it before I see; the sound carries a speed, an indignation, even though no word is spoken. I am being charged by Mrs. Nancy Slaughter, my former teacher. She had been in her classroom, perhaps with the lights off, enough afternoon sunlight for working at her large desk. Mrs. Nancy Slaughter, her white hair perched atop her long face, her upper and

lower jaws so angled toward each other by age as to render her lips invisible, her chin jutting out like a second hooked nose. She must have been at her desk, irritation rising over the repetitive noise in her hallway. *Is the janitor using a new broom? Is he waxing the floors?* I believe I laughed aloud that day because a child's laughter is just the thing to get Mrs. Nancy Slaughter worked into a full lather, just the thing to pop her out of her desk chair, hustle her across that classroom, to get her to rip the door off the hinges and accost the now-confirmed childish source of that unacceptable hallway noise.

Mrs. Nancy Slaughter scared me senseless when I was in her class as an eight-year-old, my first year at this new school, with new kids, new rules, all overseen by this woman who seemed to hate children, who preferred only dead silence in her classroom, tempered by the scratching of pencils on endless worksheets. One girl, Regina, lent me her cheap necklace on the playground, and said I could wear it the rest of the day. Back in my front-and-center desk (Mrs. Nancy Slaughter's wish to have me close) I had that necklace in my mouth while scratching on a worksheet. I was too rough with my spastic tongue, I broke the elastic, beads rattled away in every direction. I looked at Regina, my eyes wet from damaging her friendly gesture. Regina forgave. Mrs. Nancy Slaughter's sentence was swift. I crawled, picking up *every last bead*, my tears diving straight from my eyes to the tiled floor, my one hand fisted with captured beads and the other hand scattering more than retrieving. Mrs. Slaughter, satisfied, returned her eyes to her own task. The children seemed to be scratching away as well, but then a swift arm reaches down, one bead scooped here, a sneakered foot there, shooting a rogue bead my way.

Mrs. Nancy Slaughter now has me backed against a wall, telling me to take off *those ridiculous skates* and asking questions with no answers, questions about my common sense, my ability to discern appropriate behavior, to self-regulate, to control impulses. Her face is mere inches from mine. I do not remember her smell, though I am sure one was there.

But I am no longer eight. I am eleven. And while the past three years have kept me passive and beat down, events have taken place. In these three years my first stepmother, the one who loved me with breathtaking certainty, has been replaced. In these three years I have put up with more than any child should from the stepfather still sitting at his desk on his hallway, probably picking

his fingernails. Over the past three years I have been out of place in many places, and now I am in this place with having my moment with roller skates Mrs. Nancy Slaughter finds *ridiculous* but I find *magnificent*.

Of course, my three years of gathering grit, a burgeoning protoplanet of assertiveness, was no match for Mrs. Nancy Slaughter, a woman who had trampled the souls of children for decades. Against the wall in borrowed skates, her thin authority towering over me, I put my hands to my face and weep. *But, hey*, my inner voice says, despite my trembling, *why the hell not give it a go?* I lift my face to move closer to her yet I am not that strong. But steel does come; I ask Mrs. Nancy Slaughter why she hates me in particular.

Mrs. Nancy Slaughter's mouth closes, her head retreats a few inches. I had gained ground. My spine clicks its heels together.

And what does a woman like Mrs. Nancy Slaughter say when an eleven-year-old in roller skates hiccups accusatory questions through sobs? Perhaps she lies. She either grabbed an answer off the shelf or she told the truth.

On this day she admits that she does indeed take it upon herself to single me out, to judge, to snipe, to ridicule, to spank. She has her own ranking system, her own set of rules; this is her right as a teacher with her record, her seniority. She pulls herself to her full height and proclaims that she holds me to a higher standard because I have enough intelligence to go beyond the lower-middle-class neighborhood of my classmates. She tortures because she cares.

For days afterward I sat cross-legged on my Bambi bedspread and argued the case of Mrs. Nancy Slaughter to my pristine collection of Madame Alexander dolls. Tiny pairs of identical eyes gave full attention as I presented the evidence. Whether she was honest or not, guilty.

Now, as a parent, a professor, an adult, I revisit the imaginary trial of Mrs. Nancy Slaughter. The original sentence remains. A small jail cell, beads to pick up every day, the occasional smack on tender part of her wrist with the ruler — “a mule killing” as they called it back then — if she got a bit of sass. And for the child that was me, a reprieve, forgiveness for being just young, nothing more.



It is autumn, I am forty-four, and my daughter's invitation to a roller skating party brings opportunity. She is eight, my son is nine, my husband is away. My daughter wrings her hands and debates the invitation aloud — she has never roller skated. She should not worry, I tell her. She can sit a trot, score a soccer goal, shimmy up a flagpole, swim to the bottom of the pool, ski like a bat out of hell. But her handwringing and chattering do not stop. I offer to take her and her brother roller skating, a practice session a full week before the party. And so, on a day when my husband is out of town, my daughter, son, and I drive through spitty rain to Magic Elm Skateland in Hanover, Pennsylvania.

While driving our faithful minivan on two-lane roads, I let my son, my daughter know that I have skated just one time, down a hallway at my old school. I tell them I have been to a roller skating rink, once, and I even put on the skates. I tell them I watched my gangly classmates glide in an “all skate” around the rink, they circled each other, a herd of baby giraffes, grace and community. Back then I chose to relegate myself to the pinball machine, the air hockey table. If asked by my friends why I wasn't skating, I surely lied.

The weather mists our faces as we three walk from the parked minivan toward Magic Elm Skateland. We hurry through an entrance area of glass and brick, low round seats scattered with brochures, a holding bay for kids being picked up and dropped off. We file into a narrow hallway to face a tired woman behind a bank-teller window. I pay a remarkable sum of money for a humble afternoon of roller skating, pushing my debit card through a slot. We three move single file through a door plastered with warnings — once in, we cannot leave without financial penalty — into the skating rink proper. Carpet seems to grow like moss, covering every surface, even the chest-high walls, the huge mushroom-like, circular low disks meant to be our seats. Before I wait in the line for skates, I note the rink has no handrail around its inner diameter. My husband is out of town; if I fall hard, I will be a poor parent for the rest of the day. I go to the counter with my son, my daughter, and I help with sizes. I kneel and lace up their skates, I assist

them as they stand, their hands already sweaty from the carpet-enhanced humidity of this windowless place. I do not get skates for myself. My son and daughter wish me no harm.

A new invention since I was in a rink decades ago — a wheeled walker of sorts — helps the novice. Dubbed the ‘pizza slice,’ a PVC-pipe contraption, an oversized arrowhead. All are woefully too short for an adult. My children are wary. Instead of assistance from a device that might be as unstable as they now feel, they choose a different path. I will escort them.

In stable sneakers, I obey. One child at a time, I walk them to that surprising interface between carpet and smooth rink. I grip hands, arms. They are like cartoon cats on skates, uncontrolled, slapstick. The mass of seasoned skaters darts around us, we wobble with the shame of the inexperienced. One time around, each is exhausted.

My kids drape themselves on pinball machines. I ask for a pair of skates. They are not white but caramel, with dark blue wheels and chocolate brown laces. They are quite worn, but I love them anyway. I lace up, I stand. My memory of the afternoon in the hallways of Mary Ida Raines Elementary School is known only in my mind — my body does not recall ever skating before. I shuffle, Michael Jackson’s moonwalk gone wrong, I windmill my arms. The ample man who handed me my skates comes from behind the rental counter, skating so well that he moves like a ghost. He presents me with an extra-tall pizza slice. He floats away.

I am misplaced intentions — I want to move left, I roll right. Neither foot seems to know the other. I lurch on the carpet with the pizza slice, bumping into the living and the inanimate. Finally, the transition to the rink floor, a breathtaking lack of friction, I am a grotesque puppet. My children’s grim faces float over the top of the carpeted half-wall, witnesses to an execution. But the music has a big booty beat. I sing to myself, a habit from recent ski lessons. A straight path builds confidence, the curve a Herculean effort. Twice around, my shaking arms lead the pizza slice to a carpeted retreat. Battle weary, I surrender to sock feet. Skates returned, the three of us quietly put on shoes. We are spent. Total time at the rink, forty-five minutes.

And so the party approaches, riding that forward arrow of time like all dreaded events. My daughter and I again make the drive to Magic Elm Skateland, very little magic we expect to find.

She now knows a few of the other partygoers are also new to roller skating. She is less concerned about her own skating than mine. She would rather I stand and watch, an adult in control.

But she knows her mother. After she has skated and skated with her tiny girlfriends, falling on each other like drunks, rolling with laughter while hugging battered knees, she is too tired to put up a fight. I have her blessing to embarrass her. And so I put on the skates, I take up the pizza pie, my sword, my shield, and I shamble my way to the rink.

I am here again, rink. Me and my PVC-pipe pizza slice. Let me sing to myself and not blow out a knee. I push off with each foot, just as I did at Mary Ida Raines Elementary School. But I do not have the luxury of solitude and walls to arrest me on either side. The swarm of skaters loop me, one teenager with an LED-lit candy stick jutting from her mouth. Unsafe. Unsafe. Songs come, songs go, I am overheating in my fleece jacket. Sweat down my back, I skate. Parents staring, I skate. Taking one hand off the pizza slice causes dynamic instability, one wheel fishtails and the entire contraption threatens to flip. I finally move to the carpet. A thin man in jeans above his natural waist, he looks twice my age, lets loose the comment he has been perfecting in his mind as he watched me putz in my orbit. I respond, but I make no sense. He is an interruption. The pizza slice is abandoned.

I return to the rink.