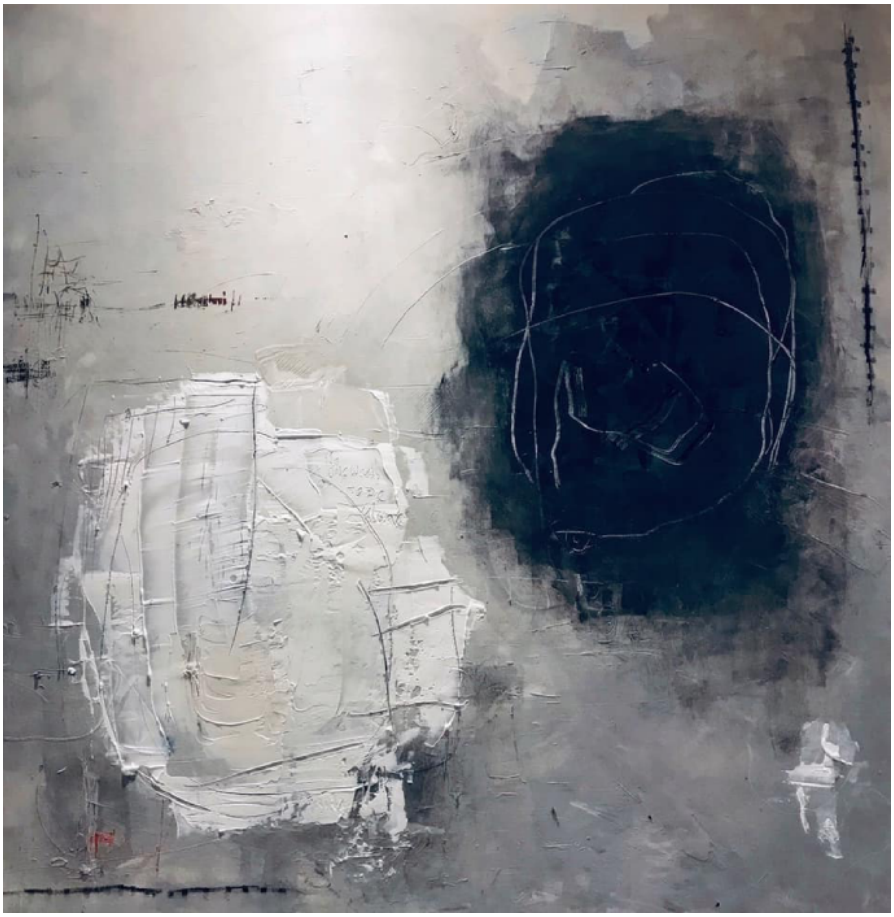
SHORT STORY

The Skating Rink

by Caroline Siebbeles



"Ma mère, mon père et moi" by Alexiane Montpetit-Meilleur

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My friendship with Eileen became really serious the day her mother took her up to our apartment to stay with us on a more or less permanent basis. When the doorbell rang, I decided to open it in spite of my mother's warning that I should not when I was home alone. Eileen was there holding her mother's hand, her favourite teddy bear peering out from the Mickey Mouse backpack strapped onto her shoulder. Before Eileen's mother pushed her inside, she wriggled Eileen's hand into mine and kissed her daughter on the head, thus sealing the fate of our friendship. Then she steadied herself on the stairs, leaving a sour smell behind.

Eileen had stayed over before, but this time would be different. Stepping into my room, she looked around it as if she were an army officer inspecting the barracks. She threw her backpack on my chair, her stuffed bear bobbing its woolly head, then sniffed at a piece of chocolate on my desk and stroked the long blonde hair of my Barbie doll. Eileen's own hair was closely cropped, discharging her mother from wasting time on combing and braiding. Then she climbed onto my bed and started jumping up and down, the bed spirals creaking, her face a triumphant smile.

Eileen had always given me this feeling of excitement and fear competing inside my stomach. I remember the first time she was allowed to play in my room, she told me to sit cross-legged and very still on my bed, eyes closed, hands over my ears. Then wrestling herself behind my back, she put her strong arms around me, holding me fixed in a judo hold. Panicky, I wanted to escape from her strong grasp, but I also enjoyed not being able to.

My mother has this memory of how once she kissed us goodnight, Eileen in her sleep having stretched out her left hand to touch my right cheek, though I have always wondered if this was true or a truth my mum preferred to remember.

It was only three months before Eileen came to stay with us that my mother, down with the winter flu and too tired for her motherly role, had asked my father to organize the party for my eighth birthday. I still have the black-and-white photograph showing all of us sitting around the table, me in a white lace dress, a huge bow ribbon in my hair, pursed lips blowing out eight cake candles, Eileen sprinkling confetti over five-odd kids from our block of flats and my dad with a party hat, smiling his advertisement smile. When Eileen's party was due a month later — our dates of birth were also close — her mother, often too tipsy for her motherly role, thought she could copy the format. Or at least she tried. Eileen's father did not rise to the occasion, judging from the shouting arguments coming from their flat downstairs. There is no picture of Eileen's birthday party, no Dad blowing a party horn. He left the apartment in a fury and never came home again. His car crashed into a huge poplar tree just a few blocks down our street.

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Perhaps it was the months of lonely sherry drinking or having her daughter's best interests at heart that made Eileen's mother take her daughter up the stairs, but our lives began to spin. After my mum had tucked us both in, my bed large enough for big Eileen and small me, and left the room, Eileen sat up straight, and eyes glittering with excitement, she cried "Let's go out!" It must have been the resolute tone of her voice that made me reply without any hesitation, "Yes, there are snow-boots in the hall."

Through the snowflaked window of my room, the mid-winter's darkness broken up into tiny patches, we could see the string of yellow and orange lightbulbs of the skating rink, hear the megaphones bellow their waltzy music, and we knew where to go. From the hat stand we wrapped ourselves in scarves, woollen hats and gloves, my mother's favourite fur jacket like a long coat on Eileen. With the boots in our hands, we opened the apartment door and then let it slip ever so gently back into the lock. We were tiptoeing our way down the stairs when a loud bang came from behind one of the apartment doors. We froze, our eyes locked, as seconds ticked by. I can't remember who first dared to move, but together we pushed open the heavy door to the street. In the dark Eileen took my hand as we crossed the street and followed the path that led to the ticket booth of the skating rink. The man inside, his fleshy face a ball of dough, his slit eyes pressed in there like two glowing lumps of charcoal, would surely never let us pass. Eileen squeezed my hand before she let it go and, with a slight nod of her head, beckoned me to follow her. There was a track along the fenced off ice rink, where people used to walk their dogs. We crawled along, Eileen trailing her hand over the grid of the barrier to find a hole to squeeze ourselves through. But we couldn't find any opening, and the fence was too high for us to climb over. When we came round full circle, the dancing music suddenly stopped, and we could hear the ticket man's megaphone voice summoning all skaters to leave.

"They can't close now!" Eileen cried, stamping her boots on the icy ground.

From behind the hedge lining the path, she scooped up some hard-packed snow into a ball and flung it at the window of the booth. Quickly I pulled her down, the ticket man's bloated face on the verge of exploding, his charcoal eyes turned a fiery red. Hiding behind the shrubbery, sitting on our knees, we listened to the bustle of men and women going through the gate. And then it dawned on me. The rink was closing for the recreational skaters to let the professionals in. This was our chance. I put my finger on my lips and took Eileen's hand as we stepped away from the entrance light and waited till we heard them coming, laughing and talking, in stretchy skinsuits, speed skates hanging loosely over shoulders, waving tickets in their hands for a smooth entrance. I whispered to Eileen and drew her close as I steered us into the packed queue and, gliding with it, we passed the man in the booth.

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We crouched behind the wooden stands, saw the skaters racing past, lap after lap, their torsos bent forward, leaning to the side, crossing over their steel skate blades to take the bends at a dazzling speed. After some time it started to snow, our mittens, scarves, coats all covered in thick white flakes. I remember Eileen saying she wanted to go inside, that she was feeling cold, her face, under a white pointy hat, an orange glow from the overhanging bulbs. Then there was a dull thump. A skater had slipped sliding hard into the barrier lining the ice, another skater toppling over him. When I turned around, Eileen had disappeared.

For the next ten years we would simply be allies in our defiance of authorities, whether parents or teachers or the bullies in our class. When a snotty ratboy in music class started chanting in front of Eileen *What shall we do with a drunken mu'um, what shall we do with drunken mu'um,* I emptied the wastepaper basket over his head. When I had a fight with my younger brother and my mother grabbed us both saying a cold shower would set us straight, Eileen ran to the bathroom and locked it from the inside. She stayed there till after dinner, refused the meal my mum had saved for her, warming her hands over the radiator.

It was not until we were eighteen that we spoke of what had happened at the skating rink. It wasn't a proper conversation, more like a staccato of hidden words of fear and hurt, that opened up our memories. We were sitting on the balcony of our flat overlooking the ice-rink, now closed for the summer. Eileen offered me the cigarette she had just rolled, which she knew I would decline. Together we had packed her modest au-pair suitcase. *"A bathing suit and my Italian dictionary is what I'll mostly need,*" she had said. Across the street, through the dancing leaves of the poplar trees, I could see the gate and the adjacent canteen, the ice floor of the rink now a concrete grey.

"That night. You were suddenly gone," I said.

Eileen didn't reply, just sat there smoking till she held nothing but the cigarette end between her fingers. She flipped the butt over the railing of the balcony.

"That night," Eileen said.

"I was scared on my own," I said. "Where did you go?"

"Inside. I went inside. It was the men's changing-room." Her voice dropped. "I didn't know it was."

I remembered the air so cold, the flakes of snow so thick. Eileen coming back, shivering, shaking, her face, her hair a wet smudge. I stared at my friend, surmising a truth I didn't

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want to know.

“You said,” Eileen continued, “*Why did you tear the sleeve of my mother’s coat*?”

Had I been too young to know? Had I sensed what happened? Had worrying about my mother’s coat saved me from a knowledge too big to handle?

“I am so sorry,” I said. “So sorry. I was only eight.”

“So was I.”

Our shared silence broken. The fragments too sharp to mend.

Eileen left the following morning. I saw her off at the station, walked along the train on the platform till I saw her find her seat. We looked at each other through the steamy window, our eyes darting away, returning, waiting for the train to set into motion. With the image of the train becoming smaller and smaller in the distance, I felt my friend was disappearing from my life.

The first three years we wrote letters. Hers full of Italian experiences, *the food, oh the food I love risotto Napolitana, I jumped into the Trevi fountain, I hired a red Vespa.* Mine filled with less exciting stuff about passing literature exams, writing poor romantic poems, teaching secondary school pupils. Never did we mention the unspoken. When Eileen’s letters stopped coming in, my mother, sensing my disappointment, said that it was just the way it goes, friendships can’t be forced.

I never heard from Eileen again. Or so I thought. There was another letter, but it never reached me. When my mother was emptying the mail box at the entrance of our block of flats, a dizziness overtook her, and reaching out to steady herself, the mail fell from her hand. A mild heart attack, though she was too young for that. After she returned from the hospital, she had a vague recollection of getting out some letters. Maybe it was the cleaning lady or some neighbour who had thrown them away. *If only I’d known.*

Twelve years after she left I saw her on the metro, the new line connecting the poor north of the city to the rich south. When I looked up from the paper I was reading, I was staring directly into her eyes.

“You haven’t changed much,” Eileen said. “Though I haven’t seen you wearing reading glasses before.”

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She looked different. Not just aged but in an outdoor way, henna hair with roots outgrown, an army jacket and working boots. Not the fashionable Italian lady I had pictured over the years. Our childhood memories had faded, like the chalk-written words I erased on the blackboard to make space for new sentences to come.

“Eileen. It’s really you.”

She looked at me, amused, waiting for me to strike up a conversation.

“Have you come back or are you just visiting?” I asked.

“I came back years ago. I inherited a nice house-boat across the city lake.”

Years ago. Inherited. So many questions to ask.

She lashed out at once. “I wrote to you when she died though. Found in the bathtub, a whiskey bottle floating next to her. But you didn’t feel the need to reply.”

But I hadn’t known. Nor had my mother or she would surely have told me. When the train pulled into Central Station, my stop, I didn’t get up. The doors opened. Slid shut again. I explained what had happened but she just shrugged. When the intercom voice announced Northlake station, she rose from her seat.

“I’ve missed you,” I said. “Let’s meet again.”

“Maybe,” she said, “but it’s not up to you.” She walked down the aisle, waited at the door for the train to halt.

Was I the more loyal friend or was she the more hurt? Yesterday was Eileen’s birthday, her thirtieth; we have turned the same age again. I found out where she lived and drove up to her boat. From the snowflaked window of my car, I could see smoke coming from the chimney, a faint light from one of the portholes making its presence felt in the surrounding darkness. *Maybe, but it’s not up to you.* Before I drove off, I left a note in her mailbox on the jetty.

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