

## The Skating Program

Lisa C. Peterson

Intermediate Ladies Free Skate: *2 minutes 30 seconds (a lifetime in two-and-a-half minutes)*

*00 minutes, 00 seconds (1966)*

The space feels hollow and dark as I wait for cues of light and sound, the first beats of my program. Soon others will judge me. But for now, I'm cocooned by my own obscurity. Eager to break free, I squirm, flip-flops inside a nervous belly. Echoes of my coach's voice calm me. She's the one who orchestrated my grand entrance, nurtured me in anticipation of this day. Her planned routine is still viable, and she's filled with optimism. Yet once the music begins, success or failure will be mine to earn or squander, depending on how I perform.

Trumpets blare the theme song from Rocky, "Gonna Fly Now." As if pushed by a force greater than myself, I glide into view of those already gathered in the rotunda-esque space. Sliding through this openness creates a breeze on my skin, a blush of color rising to its surface. Veins throb; muscles twitch. My first arm movements are overly dramatic, as if I'm swimming, into a cold world created from water.

For a moment, I struggle to breathe, attempt a deep inhale in order to fill my lungs. Brisk air enters my throat as I continue to spread my limbs. And I feel... alive.

*00 min, 05 sec (1967-1970)*

Observers scrutinize me, first by appearance — height, weight, color; considerations of athleticism, grace, and artistry come almost as afterthoughts. I'm not concerned about their gawking, at least not yet. Later, their opinions will sting, and I'll adjust my routine, trying to please them. But at this early stage, my gaze is inward, imagining my own possibilities.

So it's only appropriate that my first move is a flying camel — its very name a physical anomaly — a spin that begins by jumping from one leg to the other as the rotation starts. It's an awkward element, if executed incorrectly — arms and legs flailing around in midair, a toddler temper-tantrum in flight. A snapshot taken at just the right moment would look like a face-plant

about to happen — extremities sprawled horizontally above the ice. Critics expect a belly-flop, but I don't grant them that. I merely try to avoid looking like an actual camel, my butt sticking up, unceremoniously, as if ready for a diaper change.

My airborne ungulate barely makes it off the ground, but my belly and backside stay dry. Apathetic eyes wander. Mouths yawn. I am an unknown, a new arrival on the scene — definitely not considered a "favorite;" although Mom and Dad are certainly fans.

*00 min, 20 sec (1971-1975)*

As the revolutions of my spin slow, I stretch my free leg, curve backwards, regain my equilibrium. Stepping forward, I transition through preschool crossovers before jumping into more elementary moves — with strict categories and points awarded for difficulty and grade of execution. Experts view my performance through their own hypocritical lenses; then they prepare report cards, suggest my readiness for more advanced levels. I'm bolstered by their belief in me, unaware of the grooves that will catch my blade later.

The next element increases the difficulty as I attempt my first jump — an axel — one-and-a-half revolutions and a mid-air transfer of weight. Bending my knees, I hurl myself into the air, stepping up and out as I rise. But I haven't really mastered this move, and I freak out before completing the rotation. Down I go, fast and hard — like when I swung from the monkey bars, landing on my back in the school playground; the other kids laughing instead of helping me up. This sharp introduction to humiliation crushes my self-esteem. Spectators glare as I scramble onto blade-clad feet — trying to regain my timing, confidence, and social status after the fall.

*00 min, 30 sec (1976-1978)*

Another transition, this time to a move requiring advanced limberness, the spread eagle, held through time and space — a celebration of soaring flight. I extend my hands and feet, like Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, but with toes and hips turned out — unveiled, an eager flower, unaware that I've bloomed too early to weather ultraviolet rays. Trying to hold this delicate posture, I glide on the arch formed by my feet, stretching the limits of my flexibility as I strain to keep my chest raised.

Like that day in fourth grade, a boy pointing his finger at my budding breasts, his accusation covered with glee. "Look, she's growing!" Moving across a slippery surface, open, vulnerable. I slide into sixth grade, boys waiting behind doors, pushing invasive hands between my legs — laughter from them, shame on me.

I can't hold this stance any longer, the spotlight's intensity wilting my petals. Ill prepared for the intimate science of bodily proportions, I pull my legs together and hunch my shoulders, to disguise my chest, hide private places, not caring whether I'm marked down for failing to maintain that revealing pose. Uninvited hands and eyes and judgment shunned by a body not yet ready for that level of exposure.

*00 min, 45 sec (1979)*

Skating backwards, I distance myself, temporarily, at the far end of the rink. There I begin a footwork sequence — so many changes in shape and form. As I gain momentum, confidence builds. My eyes have adjusted to the strange light, and I'm more aware of the audience. So I add decorative flourishes — embellishments using my arms, accented by emotional head tilts. Attention turns to my attire, or at least I think it does, florescent multi-colored flow-ers on a form-fitting leotard; its skimpy skirt fluttering and flipping with each step. My presentation mimics the façade I attempt as I backcomb my bangs, curl my hair, and strive to conform with the latest junior high trends. Everything is appearance at this stage, nothing really of substance yet.

The music transitions, clumsily, from trumpets to flutes. I was told there should be a change in tempo, so I'd selected a slower song from my instru-mental album of movie themes and mixed the tape myself, lifting the needle between tracks, trying to minimize the scratch. "Evergreen," from *A Star is Born*, creates a dramatic and startling change that makes me think of Ricky. He works at this rink, my first big crush, and my love for him is all-consum-ing. I've memorized everything about him — the gait of his walk, the brand of his shoes, the way the light catches his braces like starlight. I think of the words to the song and fantasize about how the two of us will embody this love story, join together in an endless evergreen romance. Reaching my hands above my head, I create a circle and explode it open, celebrating the profound lyrics. This will be our song, Ricky and mine, once he notices me, once I'm brave enough to say hello.

But I'm 13 years old. What do I know about love?

I enter a layback spin and sense the dizzying disorientation of what romance will eventually feel like — watching the ceiling rotate, seeing the sky from a new angle.

*01 min, 00 sec (1980–2012)*

Pushing out from the spin, I prepare for my double-jump combination. Not wanting to repeat past mistakes, I strain against the edge of my blade, catapult myself into the air, and pull my arms in. The rotation tightens, turning through high school, rotating through college. When I land, I only have a moment to glide before placing my toepick to launch myself again, completing two revolu-tions of graduate school, M.S., M.A., collecting letters for my own alphabet. This time I don't fall, like I did in elementary school, this time I come down on a right back outside edge — a smooth landing after self-powered flight.

Despite the technical success of these jumps, I question myself. While I continue to feel the music inside — the beat, the hum — so much has hap-pened since I chose these sound bites, and I wonder if they still represent me.

Should I have selected something different? Signature songs that allowed for more growth as my program progressed?

Critical eyes watch. Yet now, instead of trying to conform, I challenge the competitive aspects of this artistic endeavor. I've witnessed other programs, ones with fewer mistakes and falls, and I ponder whether those routines define the objectives I'm striving towards, the score I'm aiming to beat. Perhaps I should forget the judges and focus on my own perceptions instead — building speed, defying gravity, matching motion to mood as the seconds of my program tick by.

*01 min, 30 sec (May 23, 2015)*

Stepping forward with one leg, I lift the other behind me. In dance it's called an arabesque and the goal is to hold the position while still. In skating it's called a spiral and the challenge is to maintain that posture while moving. That's what it feels like when my mom dies, so many things in motion and me trying to hold that precarious pose — balancing on a thin blade, traversing a glacial geogra-phy, my other skate held aloft, counterbalancing the heavy weight in my chest. I begin executing this maneuver before her fatal fall, smiling into the breeze cre-ated by all my movement. But Mom's death is like catching my toepick, falling face first into the coldness, and not wanting to get up. Without her ever-present coaching, her unconditional cheering from just behind the hockey boards, I don't know how to continue with this superficial routine, all the planned chore-ography suddenly shattered.

I bring my hands to my heart, bow my head. The needle scratches and the music changes, back to *Rocky*. The transition is abrupt, and I'm not ready for the tempo to accelerate. I yearn to lie down, embrace jagged edges of frost, melt into them. But the beat is relentless, forcing me to rise, its throbbing pulse encouraging me to complete my program before allowing myself to rest.

Reluctantly, my hands relax their heart-hold and I leave the adagio of Mom's death to continue the fight.

*01 min, 45 sec (June 13, 2015)*

Preparing for another big move, I inhale, extend my arms, and marry Doug. If I were the jumper in our pair skating routine, Doug would be the spinner. Winding up, he would already be anticipating the excitement. The scratch spin would be his specialty. It starts slowly, just like the manic phase of his bipolar disorder, usually entered from a back inside edge. Then a bold step forward, curving in a wide arc before pulling everything in — arms, free leg, breath — increasing the speed and adrenalin. It feels out of control when everything blurs; but he likes that, the dizzying ferocity of mania. A centrifugal force tugs his atoms outward even as he pulls in; opposite energies working together to

accelerate the whorl, until finally, resistance wanes, the spin slows, and he pushes out. Vision still blurred, he must rely on instinct until the gyroscope inside his head wobbles back to normal.

It can be addicting though, and as soon as he completes one spin, he's contemplating a re-entry into the heady blur of motion and light.

I reach out to steady him and the gesture reminds me of our limitations; how we can't always rescue each other from falls. Although it feels exhilarating to come together from time to time in lifts and jumps and spins, we're only periodically pair skating. Doug has his own individual program, with a different musical montage. In the end it's just me under this spotlight, flailing around on thin blades, turning round the slippery surface that defines the parameters of my program.

*02 min, 00 sec (2016 – 20--?)*

My legs shake. Keeping my shoulders back requires increasing effort. So I engage the muscles in my core to keep the rest of my body supported. Extra points are awarded for difficult moves in the latter part of the program, but I just want to rest; I don't want to be judged anymore.

The final footwork sequence should be easy, but I catch an edge and go down. No one is laughing this time. I hear a crack, my body more fragile than it was in the beginning.

Rising is difficult, and I struggle to recall why I fell in love with this sport, why I chose this particular program. Then my mind flashes to earlier moments — the thrill of jumps, the blur of spins, the positions I eventually learned to hold — even the bittersweet humility of rising after a fall. How all those various elements tied into my joy and sorrow — miscellaneous career changes, complicated and painful and beautiful relationships, love and loss and getting up; gliding forward, sometimes back, while attempting to balance on thin blades with two edges.

The edges.

A subtle feature that's key to skating's physics and metaphysics — that hollow space between the inner and outer edges of a blade. A small gap, the hint of an arch, curving up over and down. A beginning that reaches, tilts, then slants towards its own end — like a rainbow, a breath, a moment, a story, a life. It's that curve of space that lends the edges their strength, that grants the skater her power. My power. My strength. My space. The many reasons I love this sport live on the various angles of that arch, allowing me to rise and fall and curve and glide — expressing love as my body and mind merge with music to create emotion and meaning and song.

Glancing into the stands, I see rough outlines of people here to share in my experience, but not to judge — my parents, husband, step-children,

friends. My vision is blurrier now, and it's unclear which ones are still present, and which had to leave early. I'm starting to anticipate my ending and wonder who will console or congratulate me afterwards. Did we agree on a meeting point? Where we will reunite after I exchange this temporary stage for an amorphous otherness?

I long for a return to the slow music. Instead, "Gonna Fly Now" crescendos. One final push on trembling legs.

*02 min, 30 sec (20--?)*

The sharp, sweet smell of ice fills my head, enticing me to lie down, merge with its gentle coldness, transition back to water as sound and motion fade. Striking a final pose along with the last beat of music I wait, trying to remain still until the lights dim away into nothingness.

Those gathered in the rotunda-esque space reflect, confer, and make their final judgments — now that my program has ended.

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**Lisa C. Peterson** holds an MFA from Sierra Nevada University, where she served on the editorial staff of the *Sierra Nevada Review*. Her other degrees include a BA and an MA from Stanford University as well as an MS from UNC Chapel Hill. In her teens, she was a competitive ice skater. In her twenties, she toured five continents while skating with Disney on Ice. Now, Lisa lives in the Colorado Rockies with her husband, Doug, and a dog who looks like a cross between a cat, a dog, and a fox. She is currently seeking representation for her debut memoir, *Rogue Waves: Love in the Context of Bipolar Disorder*.