

Finding My Footing

Riley Oshiro

The weird thing is, I see skating everywhere. I see it in the way people walk: the extension of the leg and the transfer of weight is like the takeoff of any jump. I see it when I watch someone raise her hand in class: a clean, swift movement, extending delicately all the way to the tips of the fingers. I watch steam swirl and rise off a hot cup of tea and see the tantalizing first movements in a program. I see it inside my head while listening to any piece of music, hip hop or classical, it doesn't matter; I can feel my body moving, see the choreography, hear the ferociously satisfying tear of blade on ice underneath my feet. For twelve years, skating was my world. Injuries, sparkles, smiles, spins, jumps, falls, joy, and tears. I literally cannot remember not knowing how to skate. It was my identity. My source of both passionate love and hate.

I was six when I fell in love for the first time. It was the real deal. I was enamored. Skating is unlike any other feeling in the world. I and I alone am in control of everything I do and somehow landing on a piece of steel less than a centimeter wide makes perfect sense. It is graceful and beautiful and terrifying all at once. It is absolutely euphoric, an addiction and a high like no other. And, as it often goes with love, skating and the choices I made were all part of a balancing act. Mistakes and complications occurred and for twelve years I pushed through them all, until now.

I didn't think the last day I skated would be my last. I knew plenty of girls who stopped once they got to college and plenty of girls who continued. I was sure I would continue. I was in love, and you don't just *give up* on love.

I often think back to my last season competing. It was the one right before I left for college. I had never hated skating as much as I did that summer. The practices were long and hard. The fact that I was leaving soon caused me to be anxious and jumpy on the ice, and my coaches got frustrated.

“Choreography!” I can hear Lou Anne’s voice yelling at me from the side of the rink. “When you focus too much on the jumps you lose the flow and the program goes flat,” she says.

I stare up at her, thinking, “And if I fall on every single jump, think about all the points I lose. Isn't it better to have a flat program?” I've been on the ice for nearly two hours. I am cold, frustrated, sore, angry, and on the verge of tears. Instead of voicing these thoughts, I just try again, skating out of the axel at one end of the rink to the double salchow double loop at the other: a section I perform nearly twenty times a day, six days a week. This time, I fall.

“Better, but you lost your focus. Keep your shoulders level on the second jump.”

In figure skating it's remarkable that you can get praise for falling, that sometimes failing at what you're supposed to do provides a breakthrough. This time my focus is just on the shoulders as I skate down the ice and into the jump.

Legs tight, shoulders level, chin up. It's perfect.

When I remember moments like these I feel an inescapable sense of loss. I remember who I was, and who I am now, and the two just don't fit together. It's like I have two puzzle pieces inside of me; they have similar patterns but no matter how hard I try, they won't click. I miss hating something so much it makes me cry. I miss someone yelling at me across an ice rink, not because she hates me, but because she loves me so much that all she wants is for me to succeed. I miss falling over and over and over. I miss the moment of magic that comes when I finally get it right.

"She comes to us from the Rocky Mountain Figure Skating Club in Westminster, Colorado, please welcome Riley Oshiro." Clapping and indistinguishable cheers from friends punctuated by the occasional "smile!" fill my ears.

Lou Anne grabs my hands and squeezes, "Take out the loop, you're stressing over it, so stop. Speed, don't stop pushing the whole time. Breathe, two deep ones before you start. Trust your body and stay in the moment, no rushing, you don't need to. Okay, good luck. You've got this."

Quick high five and I turn and smile. Crossovers around the corner as I glide and present, judges first, always judges first. I stop and roll my neck and ankles, shake out my arms, two deep breaths and find my starting pose. The first notes of Brian Tyler's "Summon the Worms" from *Children of Dune* rumble through my ears and I'm off.

This is all me.

There is a picture of me from that last competition where, when I look at it, I can't recognize myself in that girl's eyes. In the photo I'm in a position called a Biellmann: my arm is pulling my foot up over my head and I'm perfectly balanced on one foot, flying down the ice. In the photo the girl's chin is up. Her lips appear to be blowing a kiss, but really they're just exhaling a long breath out. Her body is muscle: lithe and powerful. I see confidence, someone who knows exactly who she is. If you do something for long enough, it becomes you. I wasn't "Riley the girl who figure skates," I was "Riley the figure skater." Now I'm just "Riley." I can't remember what it feels like to have my foot stretched over my head and the cold air tearing and biting at my cheeks and lungs as I skate. I see the beautiful girl in the red dress made especially for her, and I know it isn't me.

I have never written about skating. I've never had the guts; I always thought it would be too painful. How do you relate twelve years of love, hard work, and undying dedication through words? How do I describe flying to a person who has never flown? Never felt a blade cutting through butter under her feet. Never let the movement of her body tell her story. Skating is a part of me. It's part of my core and part of my soul. I know I haven't forgotten how to skate, but I'm not sure I have the gumption to just get back out there.

The last day I skated was September 16, 2013. I had a tryout for a team based out of the Ballston Ice Center in Maryland. I remember performing for the coach: nothing special, just basic footwork, spins, and jumps. She offered me a place on the team, and I almost accepted on the spot. A week after I had moved into school I got the official offer.

"Practice from 6am to 1pm on Saturday and Sunday. Three private lessons a week plus 15 hours outside of that. Where am I going to find the time?" I asked my parents over Skype. "Plus it takes over an hour to get there on the Metro. I don't know if I can do it."

"If you want to, you'll find a way," my mother responded. "It's up to you Ri, we support you no matter what."

I sat thinking about my life before I left home and my life now. Did I really want to continue waking up at 4:30am to get on the ice? Was I okay not being able to go out with friends on the weekend? Did I still have the drive to skate this much?

Ultimately the decision to stop skating was all mine. No one influenced me, and I was completely in control. The decision eats at me. There are times when every fiber of my being wishes I were on the ice. Maybe that's why I see skating everywhere; it's a part of me I can never lose, something that flows through my body that was once as vital to me as blood. I don't know if I am better off without skating and I know I am still searching for my new identity, waiting to fall in love again. I look at myself and I'm not the beautiful girl who could fly, who could turn ice into fire, and music into life.
