

Skating before anatomy class

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When we were students the ice kept us warm.

In December, as the Kingston air grew colder, a thick blue-grey cloud would hover over the lake. The ice would begin to form in small crystal veins, fanning out from the rocks, joining other veins, gathering stillness. Eventually the lake from Kingston Harbour to Wolfe Island would be frozen solid. We knew it was safe to skate on when we saw trucks driving from the city to the island and back. The trucks drove very fast and grew very small, and we watched and waited for one to drop into the water. But they never did — at least, not when we were looking.

Every year, trucks and cars sank under the ice and were lost until spring. In medical school, we didn't worry much about falling through the cracks. There were four of us — Jenny, Peter, Frank and me — and we often skated on the lake. We never really worried about dying, though we often thought of death.

There were many fine places along the lake to skate. You could skate off King Street, by Morris Hall, where you

climbed over icy boulders to get to the lake, and there was a good place west of the laundry building at Kingston General Hospital. Then there was the foot of MacDonald Park by the lions and the gazebo: that was the best of all.

The one place you did not skate was near the city docks, by town hall, where the *Wolfe Islander* went back and forth, churning up the thick blue-white ice and making cracks that went out treacherously on all sides in her wake.

Once you were on ice you could get to wherever you wanted. You could skate from MacDonald Park to downtown and see the spires of St. Mary's and St. George's, and hear cars humming over LaSalle Causeway and see the ice-boats flying over the lake. Morning was a beautiful time; the sun would be rising over the limestone of the east city and the ice was clearest then. We would meet at Murney Tower, skate to the island, come back for breakfast and then go to anatomy class.

Skating before anatomy was a great way to clear your mind. But the best time for skating was at night, when you

could skate away from the city and look at the stars and see the cold white light of the universe.

It was on one of those nights that Frank asked me, "What kind of doctor do you want to be?"

We were standing at the dead centre of the lake. Peter and Jenny were on their backs, staring at the sky.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think I'll know until I start seeing patients."

"Did you hear that?" Frank said. "Did you?"

It was a shudder like thunder moving under the ice.

"This isn't dangerous?" Frank said. "You're sure?"

"Nothing to it," Jenny said. "The ice is rock hard."

Frank relaxed. "I plan to do ER," he said. "ER's the best."

"I want to take a year off and study in France." I said.

There was another rumble. Shifting ice, Peter said. Lake ice shifted all the time and it twisted and groaned a lot.

"Like tectonic plates? Bet it's a huge ice-crack," Frank said. "It's going to crack up and we'll have to swim back."

"A crack doesn't always make that sound," Peter said.

"Oh really?" Frank said. "I want that in writing."

"It's ice," Jenny said. "Get used to it. *Ice*."

Four was a safe number to cross the lake, Jenny said. If one of us fell in, another would skate for help, and the remaining two would form a human ladder. Jenny and Peter had grown up in the north and they knew a lot about these things. Frank and I were from Toronto. We knew nothing about lake ice. We knew about hockey rinks and skating outdoors but we had never skated a lake until medical school.

There were a lot of things we didn't know until we came to medical school. Frank worried about the things he didn't know. He always went to class and he took detailed notes; if you wanted to know word for word what had happened in class, you asked Frank for his notes. I worried too, but I often skipped anatomy class because I never found answers there. I hated the smell of formaldehyde, and the way the air burned your eyes.

Sometimes I went skating early in the morning and decided that I wouldn't go to any classes for the entire day. Instead, I would look for answers by reading philosophy and novels all afternoon. Then I'd go skating again in the evening. Sometimes the next morning I'd stay home and read some more. Pretty soon I heard the anatomy profs were looking for me.

One night when Jenny and I were skating across the lake, she warned me about the body-snatchers. "They've got it in for you. You better show up on Thursday. They're out to get you."

"Who *exactly* is after me?"

"All of them. All the body-snatchers."

It was a frightful thought. The anatomy tutors with their smelly white coats, steely eyes, blotchy faces and sharp scalpels, after me. Soon they would stuff me in a bottle too. The anatomy museum was beautiful in a cold, serene, dead way. But I didn't want to join the heads, abdomens, fetuses floating in clear liquid.

And I couldn't figure out what we learned from dead bodies. Anatomy taught us names. Places. How to cut up flesh, to pull apart nerves, muscles and bones; how to saw skulls and look at brains. Things I didn't want to get used to doing. But it taught us nothing about death.

"Jenny," I said. "Something's wrong about anatomy. It creeps up, and you don't even realize it's happening."

"Take my notes," Jenny said. "Study hard tonight. Don't let the body-snatchers get you."

We started back. It was windy but the sky was clear.

"You okay?" Jenny asked.

"It's just that you stop seeing. You go numb. It's hard enough to know who you are. You turn to ice."

We skated by the residences. All the lights were on; everyone was studying for exams. I looked up at the stars. It seemed to me that this would be a good time of the night to study.

We skated to shore, took off our skates, and walked home.

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