

ICE DANCER

ALEX COTTER

*nosy
crow*



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*To my sister, Lucy,
and to being made in Sheffield*



*"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players"*
As You Like It, William Shakespeare

"You were once wild here. Don't let them tame you."
Isadora Duncan

FALLING ON ICE





The Ice Song

I was running out of time to break my promise to Mum.
Hurry.



Gloves, coat, aviator hat. I opened the back door quietly, and gasped. Our garden was in disguise. Overnight, the lawn had donned a cloak of white velvet – the far wall, a thick stole of sparkle; bushes wore glittering brooches. The heavy snowfall had transformed the outside world into a dramatic stage set, a Wonderland.



I moved fast, lifting the old oil lamp higher to check the best route through the dawn's dusty-grey air. The only light I could find. Mum must've taken the torch with her. Ah, that satisfying crunch and sink under my



wellies; the snow was urging me to stay and play.

I can't – I have to hurry. I leapt like I was already skating, my white boots knotted around my neck and knocking against my chest. A spiral move next, gliding my right foot and lifting my left leg, through a shower of snowflakes that zipped like tiny moths in the glow of the swinging lamp. They mimicked the butterflies in my stomach; I couldn't wait to skate.

I paused only to open the garden gate, and cast a look back at our loaf-shaped cottage, its slate roof chalked with white. Aimed my best death stare at the criss-cross window where Stranger-Aunt was sleeping. Not the aunt I remembered. Not one bit. It was like she'd exited as fairy godmother four years ago, only to re-enter as the wicked witch yesterday. I roughly gathered the snow on top of the gate into a solid shape, my breath like steam-engine smoke.

I'd been so excited to see her. I'd had it all sketched out in my head, like a scene in a film: Aunt JJ arrives, her face creased with regret. *I've missed you all so much*, she says. *I wanted to visit sooner, I really did.* Arms wide for a long-lost auntie hug.

I karate-chopped the snow shape. Instead, she'd arrived grim-faced and thin-mouthed; awkward around Mum, uneasy near me and my brothers.

“*Ready for a few days in Sheffield?*” I mimicked the way JJ had said it. Count Dracula inviting his victims to Transylvania. Nothing – *nothing* – like the friendly, funny aunt I remembered from before we moved to north Wales. My stomach went hollow with renewed disappointment. And now she wanted to set off for Sheffield earlier. “In case more snow means we get stuck here,” she’d said. *Charming*.

I drew a wool-gloved hand under my wet nose. *Skate*.

Out through the gate, slamming it shut with a violent spray of snow. Only skating could smooth out my insides, all bobbly and gnarled like the limbs of the elm tree I was passing. I need ice beneath my feet like other people need sun on their face. It takes me into another world; a world free from problems; a world where Sasha is by my side.

I clenched my jaw at that last thought. A fiercer crunch through the white-blanketed field, my eyes fixed on the direction of Mill Pond, beyond the trees and below the mountains. We lived as far away from another house as you can get. Nowhere near an ice rink. Or a school. As if we’d enclosed ourselves in one of those snow globes Sasha used to collect. Though Mum’s right – it’s better that way: just us and the mountains. Nothing much changes here, except the seasons.

Mum. I mentally swatted the fly buzzing around in my brain, reminding me of the cross-my-heart I gave before she left. *I promise I will not go skating on Mill Pond without you.* The temperature had been plummeting all week, so she'd known it wouldn't be long before the pond became my own private ice rink. I rubbed snowflakes from my eyes. We'd both heard its song as the ice formed, like a siren's call; *Come skate, Dina!*

"I am – I'm coming!"

I pushed my arms out and prepared for a flip jump over a cattle feeder, taking off from my back foot, toe pointed. Pretending for a moment I was Great-Gran Kendra. A champion skater in the 1930s. She grew up not far from here, before she got married and moved to Sheffield.

I landed on the other side with a bow, imagining the crowd going wild with applause, flowers landing at my feet. A breathless lunge into the pine-scented wood beyond, to be greeted by a horde of snow-dusted skeletal trees: the audience queueing for my show in fancy white lace. I bowed again.

May I present Dina and the Greatest Show on Ice!

We've videos of my sister, Sasha, announcing me like that, on the ice rink near our old house by the sea. Back when we lived among people not mountains, back when

Mum and Dad still lived together; back when Sasha was—

I bit at the icy air and hurdled a fallen branch, oil lamp swaying, skates swinging, as the forest grew dark.

It was Sasha who first introduced me to skating, when I was six and she was eleven. She told me I had a natural talent. That I could become a champion skater like Great-Gran Kendra. Except competitions scare me. When I was nine, she made me promise to audition for our local rink's annual skating show, *Ice Stars*. She even wrote me a special haiku:

Courage, little bear.

Cast light where shadows linger.

Show them who you are.

That was Sasha's name for me: *little bear*. Because my full name, Bernadina, means brave as a bear. *I wish*. Put me near other people and I shrivel like rotten fruit. I'm shy and awkward and I trip over my words. I'm nothing like Sasha. I don't like attention; it turns my skin itchy and hot. It's only on the ice that I can be confident, and skilful, and brave.

I paused. I never did audition for the *Ice Stars* show.

After Sasha went, I broke my promise to her. I wasn't

brave enough to perform; I couldn't even return to the rink without my sister. Ice skating was something we always did together.

I took off my black leather aviator hat and stared at it, hard. It was Sasha's favourite hat; she used to wear lots of things that no one else would dare wear. My sister never gave a hoot what people thought of her. But then Sasha could make anyone love her.

I dusted snowflakes off the hat.

And I love her more than anyone.

I gazed back over my shoulder towards the sound of snow toppling from trees. I often sense Sasha following me when Mill Pond freezes in winter and I can skate again.

I pushed my hat back on. *So skate, Dina.*

Charging ahead, a furious zigzag around clawed, white-sleeved branches, until the wood's darkness bled into the frayed grey air of Mill Pond's clearing and – *yes!* – whereas yesterday the ice was patchy and thin, now it was a hard shell. I skidded to the edge, fizzing with excitement, butterflies wild: was it strong enough to skate on? I dropped to my knees, the oil lamp casting an orange circle in the snow like a tiny sun. I lowered my head and turned an ear to the sparkling surface to catch the ice song trapped beneath. When I first heard

its spectral tune travelling through the air, I wanted to believe it was Sasha, calling me. Until Mum explained it's just the sound of the ice thickening. By the end of our first winter in Wales, its song tempted me to unpack my boots again and I performed for the trees. *There*, I could hear it: a warbling, watery sound, like a whale's sonar. Or an underwater orchestra warming up for me.

May I present Dina and the Greatest Show on Ice!

I straightened, a push of one trainer toe against the surface. The ice gave off a *creak* but held.

"See, what were you fretting about?" I told Mum, somewhere in India by now. *It's perfectly safe.*

The butterflies swarmed my tummy as I unlooped the skates from around my neck and—

I froze.

Something was descending through the swirling mist.

I held my breath.

A cross of bright white floated angel-like on to the hard ice.

My hand reached for my hat again. Could it be ... *Sasha*? But then the figure rearranged itself into the perfectly sculpted shape of —

— a swan.

I exhaled but stayed statue-still. I didn't want to panic it; its orange webbed feet already looked precarious,

slipping and sliding around like paddles before skidding to a stop. Its long white neck formed a loop, sending its beak plunging out of sight –

– into the ice.

No! In a flash, my butterflies metamorphosed into slugs. The swan had spied what I hadn't: a hole. Ready to crack and splinter the moment I got on to skate. I slumped to the ground and pushed my hands through the damp snow like it was sand, ignoring the painful burn in my fingers. My first chance to skate in eight months: gone! I'd keep my promise to Mum after all.

I thumped the ground.

My last chance to skate before spending four days with Stranger-Aunt in a treeless city!

I drew my eyes back to the bird slurping from its water hole. Across the white ice, it cast a shadow that was bigger than the swan itself, misshapen and swaying. The swirling wet mist made it too easy to imagine arms and legs.

Most shadows make me imagine my sister. Because that's all she is now. A shadow.

I plunged my hands deeper into the snow, an icy throb travelling up both arms.

I never performed for her.

She never said goodbye.

“Dina!” Beau’s little voice echoed loudly through the damp air. “Derek’s missing!”

It set the swan panicking. Furious flapping, white feathers shaking the grey marbled air as if it were made of flimsy paper. It was going to crack the ice and drown! I was up off the ground, determined – *I’ll save you!* – when it drew out its delicate, strong wings and lifted off, dragging the shadow behind its tail back into the dark forest below the mountains.

“Goodbye!” I cried, as it left me there all alone.



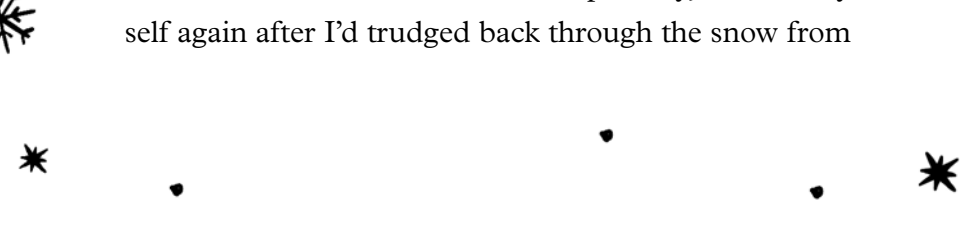
To Sheffield

“Does he have fleas?”

“The mouse or my brother?” I said.

Aunt JJ cast an iron look from Beau to Derek’s cage in the hallway. The aunt I remembered had a sense of humour.

“Derek might,” Beau pitched in unhelpfully, upending a pile of books as he fidgeted around us. You can’t move in our hallway without knocking over a pile of something or other, or getting prodded by a broolly, or tripping over a mound of wellies and walking boots. “But Mum says I’m nit-free at last!” Beau beamed proudly, his bouncy self again after I’d trudged back through the snow from



Mill Pond to make Sawyer “Find Derek!”: the dormouse Beau had recently discovered shivering in the wood store.

“He shouldn’t be caged; he’s a wild animal,” Sawyer growled behind us. Twice this week he’d *accidentally* left Derek’s door open after he and Beau fought. A regular occurrence since Mum started homeschooling Beau with us (and we realised our little brother was a certified genius).

Luckily, Derek never got far; he was still poorly. I poked a finger through the cage bars to stroke his round beige body. If Mum forgot to inform JJ about her extra guest, I supposed that was my problem too, as *The Eldest*. Not that I wanted to fill Sasha’s shoes; I much preferred *Younger Sister*.

“He’s Beau’s pet,” I said.

“Mum won’t get me a dog,” said Beau.

“Derek’s no trouble,” I added, and I made myself smile, even though I’m not a natural smiler. I’d decided on the trudge back, even though I’d failed to skate, that I had to try and make JJ like us again. If Sasha’s shadow could speak, she’d give me that mission.

Another hour later and we were caged ourselves, by Beau’s constant *did-you-knows* in Stranger-Aunt’s small blue car. The windscreen wipers squeaked away snow as

we curved along country roads. The air smelled strongly of agitated dormouse. I rubbed my stomach; I knew how Derek felt. And yet I was the one who'd told Mum not to cancel her mountain climb when my grandma in Spain, my poor Abuelita, had a bad fall, which meant that Dad couldn't come and look after us.

I was the one who'd suggested Aunt JJ. I wanted to see her again; she used to visit when we lived by the sea. Sasha got special trips to JJ's in Sheffield all the time. *You'll go too, when you're old enough*, Mum used to say as I watched my sister pack. Thirteen last week, wasn't *that* old enough?

"Maybe it's time," Mum had finally agreed, "for your aunt to see what she's missing with you three."

Oh, yeah, JJ saw what she was missing all right. I side-eyed Stranger-Aunt next to me in the driving seat. Straight-backed and silent, arms and legs at sharp right angles; long neck too stiff, brown fringe too short.

Derek's smells seemed to grow more pungent.

"Aunt JJ, *did-you-know* a mouse's heart beats six hundred times a minute?" Beau continued, his voice going up-and-down like a jig. "And *did-you-know* mice can see ghosts?"

"He's only six?" JJ frowned at me.

"Going on sixty," I repeated Dad's joke.

Nothing, tough crowd.

I could hear Sawyer say, “I’m ten now,” but he got drowned out by Beau, the limelight thief, pretending to be elderly. “Ach, my ancient neurons.”

I laughed and glanced at JJ to see if she found him funny too. (Beau can make Mrs Williams in the village shop crack a smile, and her skin’s made of concrete.) Nope, frostier than the weather. If you opened JJ up, you’d probably find a rock behind her ribcage. I started to wonder if it was *only* Sasha my aunt liked. Was that why we never saw her any more? I glared into the blizzard ahead.

“Anyway, ghosts don’t exist, stupid,” Sawyer snarled.

“Do!”

“Don’t!”

“I’m rather a nervous driver in snow.” Aunt JJ fidgeted her shoulders as if spectres were sliding under her neat grey cardigan. “Maybe some quiet?”

I threw a glance back at my brothers that said, *Shush*, because it’s another sort of thing *The Eldest* is supposed to do. Beau was bouncing in his seat, legs swamped by Derek’s cage, in his favourite Dangermouse T-shirt that had passed down all of us but started with Sasha. Sawyer was wearing his trademark scowl; his lap was covered with stuff from home, but mainly I clocked the

handlebars. I'd not seen him carry them around for ages. I touched Sasha's aviator hat. We'd all brought a bit of our sister away with us.

"Can I ask why you've got that?"

JJ's prickly voice made me flinch. Not my hat – she was pointing at the old oil lamp by my feet.

"In case I go out in the dark," I said. Obvious answer.

"We light it when we eat outside," Beau piped up, back to stealing the limelight. "And we dance round it after dinner, don't we, Dina!"

I nodded, as—

"Dance?" The spectres beneath JJ's cardigan made a little shudder. "In the city we've lights on all night long," she added primly. "And besides, it's a miner's lamp." As if, *naturally*, that meant no dancing.

"Your grandpa used to keep it with his canary cage and my gran's skates."

I drew my legs more tightly around it. Her tone suggested she might want it back.

"You've got a canary?" Beau shrieked from behind.

"Just the cage." JJ blinked uncertainly. "The oil lamp and the canary cage were passed down the miners in our family," she said reverently, as if they were the queen's jewels. "Along with the skates, they all feature in a family story."

Sawyer grunted, “What story?”

“A family story,” I repeated, enjoying the words like somehow they made our family bigger again.

Another side-eye at JJ. I wondered, with a flutter of hope, if I’d been wrong: maybe she just needed time to thaw around us. I tried a Sunday-best voice: “Erm, do you mean Great-Gran Kendra’s skates?” I knew that story; I sat up straighter. “The champion who tried to change the rules for girl skaters – by wearing a skirt above her ankle and performing Salchow jumps?” Sasha once said both were forbidden for girls when Kendra was younger; *unladylike*.

JJ threw me another of her frowning glances. “If I recall correctly, you’re a skater too, like your mum.” She said the word ‘skater’ a bit like you might say ‘poo-shoveller’. More knots formed in my chest: skating was my only talent.

“What family story?” Sawyer repeated louder.

“Actually, it’s a *ghost* story.” JJ raised an eyebrow at my brothers in the rear-view mirror but then clamped those thin lips of hers shut again as if, *The End*. “I really must concentrate,” she said to the gritted road.

The snow became lighter as we went through towns and over moors and along a puke-inducing road called the Snake Pass, dug out between ice-topped ridges like

dinosaur spines. It had disappeared altogether by the time we reached a sign beside a neat line of grey stone cottages that said, *Welcome to Sheffield, City of Steel*.

“If you’re interested in our family story –” JJ broke her silence – “this is where Kendra came to live when she left Wales, and where all the men in our family worked, at the mining colliery, over there, on the outskirts of the city.” She jabbed her finger towards a metal-black tripod on the near horizon; it looked like something from a science fiction story.

I said encouragingly, “It’s where you and Mum were born.”

“Then the mine shut and we had to move.” JJ exhaled heavily. “Close a pit, kill a community.” She made a face like she wanted to spit on the ground. The wind howled outside.

“The River Don,” she announced next as we trundled over a small stone bridge. “When it froze over in winter, Kendra would practise there.”

My chest unknotted with a bolt of excitement, to think of my great-gran skating outside – like me. “I heard she would’ve made it to the Olympics if she hadn’t broken the rules on purpose.”

“Kendra put principles before prizes.” Another weighty exhale. “Is it better to fight for change and lose,

or stay quiet and still have a chance to win?”

She shrugged like she didn't know the answer. Then nodded. “Skating rules eventually changed for girls, but too late for Gran. Instead, she helped run Sheffield's steel factories in the Second World War.”

I couldn't be sure, but was JJ – *almost* – smiling?

“She became one of the city's Women of Steel: there's a statue I can show you.”

I nodded eagerly and relaxed into my seat. Maybe family stories were the way to make this Ice Queen melt. Maybe this trip was going to be OK after all. I loosened my leg-grip on the oil lamp, and redrew the film scene in my head, where I spend the week getting to know my long-lost aunt and Sheffield, and hearing family stories Mum's never told us. And we light the lamp after dinner and dance round it like wild things, making plans for when I'll make my own special visit to see JJ, just like Sasha used to do.