

**Molodietz (Молодец): A Family Story**

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Words and phrases I learned in Russian as a kid:

Привет (hello)

Спасибо (thank you)

до свидания (goodbye)

Пока! (Bye!)

меня зовут (my name is \_)

как вас зовут? (what is your name?)

как твои дела? (how are you?)

Еще раз (again)

хорошо (good)

не хорошо (no good)

Иди, кататься! (go, skate!)

Слева (left)

Правильно (right)

раз два три (one, two, three)

Давай! (let's go!)

сука (bitch)

дурак (stupid/fool)

Блядь (fuck)

Я тебя люблю (I love you)

честь получишь (you're going to get it)

Молодец (attaboy/girl/well done)

**I.  
Show Pony**



## Blinders



My mom drives me to Junior Nationals in Salt Lake City, Utah. I am lucky this year it is held in a scenic city. When we were in the plane, my mom pointed out Salt Lake. From the sky, I couldn't see Spiral Jetty. But that wouldn't matter much to me until I was older. In the car, the mountains peak out beyond the skyline.

My competition dress hangs on the handle above the passenger seat window. It is blue and white like the Greek flag. I am skating to a riff on Zorba the Greek, the song that plays at every Greek restaurant as they bring out the saganaki. This variation is appropriately called *Opa!* My coaches chose it to highlight my heritage. My choreographer, Oleg wanted to attach handkerchiefs to mesh sleeves so I could

wave them around like in traditional Greek folk dance. My new coach, Cindy Watson Caprel— owner of a small, tearstained, and trembling white dog named Korbella after her favorite midrange \$13 champagne, Korbel— thought the idea was a bit too gaudy. Instead, my dress designer Patricia added puffy sleeves, rhinestone evil eye clusters and jewel fringe encrusting the tear-dropped bodice and skirt that sort of mimicked Greek folk costumes.

During the car trip, the rhinestones reflect off the light like a disco ball or a kaleidoscope. This moment of beauty is always a sort of meditation before competition. I raise my arm up to see how the sparkles look warped on my small, manicured hand. We went to the local nail salon yesterday to make sure I looked presentable to the judges. It's a nice French manicure, with a flower and its own rhinestone on the ring finger. Yet as I meditate of the glittering shadows, I ground myself back into my body, which reminds myself how nervous I am.

When we get to the ice rink on the day of the competition, my coach Cindy sees my nervous eyes jumping around the lobby. "Put your blinders on, Celia," she says. This is a saying she made up for me because I'm her racehorse with unquenchable energy, but I have a wandering mind. She says, "put your blinders on" at the ice boards holding my hands before sending me off to do a triple loop. She says "put your blinders on" when someone at the ice rink keeps getting in my way and is really pissing me off. She says "put your blinders on" when I am still thinking about school when I get to the rink. She says "put your blinders on" when my Vyvanse has worn off. She says, "put your blinders on" when I am hungry on the ice.

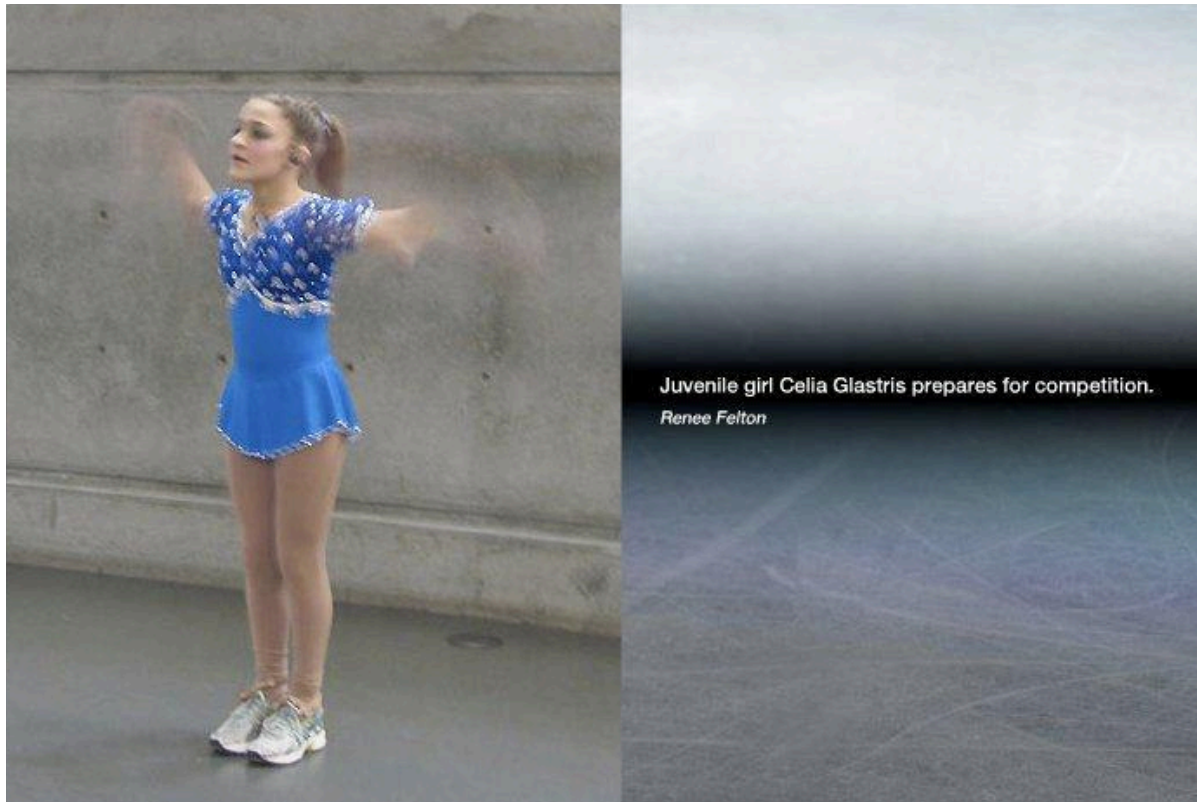
However, my whole time at Junior Nationals, I haven't had my blinders on. My father has gotten in my head. He is a private equity businessman that plays the game of life through numbers. Before he set me off to Salt Lake City, he sat me down with a printed piece of paper from *unseenskaters.net* and showed me every single girl's high score in the competition. I protested and said I didn't want to see the sheet, but he swore that it was good for me because it was good news. I had the third best score (well, among ties). I was behind my training partner, Lizzy. She had a different coach than me, but we challenged each other to be better skaters training at the same rink. Our highest scores came from a

competition where she placed first and I placed second. We were both behind Karen Chen, who would later go to the Olympics twice. I guess it should have made me feel confident, but it terrified me. Numbers may be useful in business, but they had no place in grounding the mindset of an athlete who could barely keep their mind on the task at hand. Besides, he was no elite athlete, he had no idea what it was like to be me.

I am nervous in every way you can be. I have been ever since I was training to place into this competition at Regionals. I haven't eaten Cheez-Its in a year. I am convinced they are bad luck for Junior Nationals. It might seem like a simple obstacle, but they are one of the only sensible snacks in the vending machine at ice rinks, where I spend most of my downtime. Everything else is candy or chips. If the food my mom packed me for the day isn't enough, which it usually isn't, I stand in front of the vending machine when no one is looking, trying to decide how many calories I will allow myself to indulge in that day. I have also started touching everything twice (I haven't stopped doing this twelve years later), something my mother has noticed. My left hand presses up at the elevator lobby and my right hand repeats the gesture. She looks at me with the eyes of a concerned mother. She knows there's nothing she can do. She has waited for this day to come. Everyone in her family has struggled with mental illness. I will continue to struggle.

I don't just touch everything twice, I also hit my legs repeatedly, stretch my wrists out before starting run throughs, and fix my dress before jumps compulsively, I know I am going to get points off for it but I can't not do it. My coaches constantly chastise me about these movements and make me do exercises where I am not by any means allowed to do any of these gestures. When we try these exercises, I usually pop the jump. Popping a jump means when you take off you shut down and don't rotate at all or not all the way. You begin the jump then unconsciously make the decision to abort mission and to eject yourself out of the element your body has deemed too dangerous. I've seen figure skating careers crumble over popping problems— one could even call them addictions. People who can't get out of their head lose all ability to train. It's heartbreaking. It's sort of like the twisties in gymnastics, where the gymnast suddenly doesn't know where they are and decides to stop the trick. This is the condition that Simone

Byles explained was part of her decision not to compete in the 2020 Olympics.



When I first got to practices at Junior Nationals, my eyes fixated on the name tags of everyone I walked by. My high score was 52.53. This competitor is from the Central Pacific Region and scored 47 point something. This one is from New England and scored 48 point something. Over there warming up is someone from the Northwest Pacific. No need to worry about her. Their scores don't even count because no one skates there, so they're all inflated. There's Heidi Han. She scored just about the same number as me. I do math in my head. I barter with myself, ok what would my score be if I fell just once. What would my odds be of placing on the podium? All week I did everything but what I was supposed to.

After my warmup I lace my skates up and get on the ice. I have been training for this moment for an entire year. I have completed so many clean programs, double run throughs, triple run throughs, drills, ballet classes, Pilates sessions, workouts, sprints, countless injuries, physical therapy appointments. I have learned new jumps, perfected choreography, fallen thousands of times, obeyed my strict coaches and parents, eaten my mother's diet, skipped school for practice, competed at several competitions, and given

up a social life. All for this moment. And all I can think about are the points that my dad told me about before the flight to Salt Lake City. When I get on the ice to perform my program, I totally bomb. I pop my most difficult jump, a double axel, and fall twice. My score is 44.32. 8.21 points less than my personal best. I came in a favorite for the podium and almost finished dead last.

My father couldn't help himself, he thought he was helping his daughter.



## Horse Girl

My mother braids my hair before competition. She does so with care, brushing out my knots. When she finishes the braid, she wraps the hair around itself and ties it up into a bun with a velvet scrunchie. She sprays sparkly hairspray all over my head and inserts glittery rhinestone clips. Next, she does my makeup. Shimmery shadow, eyeliner, lots of blush and red lipstick to make my teeth look white. This is one of my favorite parts of competing. When I look at myself in the mirror, I am beautiful. None of my other friends get to wear makeup.



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My mother loved riding horses growing up in Fargo, North Dakota. When she was fourteen, her family got her a quarter horse named Scoot.

My mother wasn't just a horseback rider. She was very athletic. She was a gymnast, figure skater, a hockey and acrobatic cheerleader, a diver, and a water skier. But my mother's favorite thing is raising

animals for show. She knows how much to feed them, how to find the best coaches to train them, how to make them look pretty for the judges, and mostly, how to rear them.

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Every day, my mother made a schedule of where in the Chicagoland region each one of her children would be. She packed us meals that were calculated for our bodyweight and made sure we were up on time at 5:30 am for our practices across the city. We were shuttled from home to the ice rink daily in a Honda Odyssey to learn to be stronger and more athletic. We were her new show ponies. Something to control, modify, and obey.



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After we all quit figure skating and I went off to college, my mother returned to horses. She found a barn out in Wisconsin. When I visit her, she is brushing her horse, Lucie. Lucie's skin is so silky. She lets me brush her mane. I ask her if she ever braids her tail. She says they sometimes do it for shows. She's had several horses because they are a delicate creature. Horses can kill you in an instant (recall how

many people died from horse related injuries before there were cars), and at the same time they can give themselves a death sentence just as quickly if they get injured. My mother loves her horses fiercely, and it's hard for her to see them go. At the end of the day, if they can't train, she can't keep them. She has had to say goodbye to three different horses since she started back again in 2016. Six if she's counting my sisters and me.

## **Scary Stories to Tell in the Practice**

EMDR was first designed by Francine Shapiro in 1974. Shapiro went on a walk to think. She was mesmerized by the nature and found that she could process her thoughts better. EMDR works the same way, engaging part of your brain so that the more difficult thoughts can be processed through a filter. There are many ways to create this filter. Some psychologists liken the practice to hypnotism for the way it aims to distract to uncover information otherwise kept on guard. Sometimes people use visual stimulation, such as moving a finger or a pen from left to right across the patient's field of vision. Others tap their hands left, right over and over while they process information.

EMDR is like watching scary movies with your friend in a fort. You bring together the softest blankets and stuffed animals. Clinically, this is the comfortable foundation the clinician builds with their patient and the friendship is the trust that must be created. Before a scary movie is watched you rate on a scale of 1-10 how scary the movie is. And then you watch it, but because you have such a soft fort, are surrounded by stuffed animals and a close friend, over time the movie is less scary. You may take breaks if it gets too scary, and you may do soothing things to get back to a positive state of mind like pet your cat. Clinically, these are visualizations of positive memories or certain body exercises such as breathing meditations. At the end of the movie, you rate how scary it was, and hopefully it's lower than it was before.

## **Breathless**

In my EMDR sessions, Sue tells me to watch over my memories as if they are happening in a movie.

I tap my hands on the table, left, right, left, right, to initiate the meditative like trance.

And we begin. And there I am, thirteen years old.

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She is sitting on a yoga mat in the middle of the physical therapy practice. Her leg has been carefully taken out of a brand-new cast that she is getting used to, exposing the tape around her hip and hamstring. They saran wrap an ice pack to her leg as she waits. The crutches are laid out next to her for easy access. The pain in her leg is constant.

After they find out about the diagnosis, it is time to start the recovery. A torn hamstring, a stress fracture in her femur, tendinopathy in her growth plate, and neuropathy in her sciatica nerve. She waits in the practice as they deliberate in their office about what to do with her. Occasionally they look over their shoulder, only enough for her to see their concerned faces. When they see her looking at them, they quickly look away.

Stephanie brings her into one of the massage rooms to speak privately.

“I have to ask you a serious question, Celia,” she says. “Are you being fed enough? This injury is very severe. If you were eating enough, it shouldn’t happen.”

Celia forgets to breathe. She looks around to see if anyone is watching, twisting a hairband around her wrist.

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“It’s too much,” I say to Sue. “I need to take a break.”

“Ok that’s fine, let’s do some breath work,” they say.

A deep breath in and my hands float above my chest. A deep breath out and they float to my stomach. Repeat.

“Ok, I’m ready.”

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Suddenly she is crying, recalling her mother’s pursed lips at the dinner table when she serves herself too much rice or reaches for seconds. She eats perfectly portioned meals in the minivan on the way to practice. All organized in neat, Tupperware containers. She explains the Tupperware. A tiny dollop of peanut butter and apples cut into small pieces. Or a red bell pepper with hummus. A piece of meat for pure protein. Each calorie is counted. It’s too perfect, though. For the amount of energy she exerts daily— two hours on ice plus ballet, physical therapy, and off ice training— it’s not enough.

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I am bawling as I conjure up these memories. We have to pause again.

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Then the door opens and in comes her mother. The mother sees her crying, puffy red face. The young figure skater tells her, pleading that she listens. The mother is livid. The mother says that this is ridiculous and storms out of the room waiting for her daughter to follow along on her crutches. The mother fires the physical therapy practice. The daughter spends so much time there it feels like home. And in a moment, she is stripped of the adults that protect her. The adults that show her care.

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The walls blur as I speak. And then sound does too. Until there's nothing around me. My ears ring from the lack of air coming to my brain.

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On the car ride home, she is devastated. Her mother looks straight ahead, not interested in conversation. The figure skater cries quietly, knowing she is trapped. This is the last time she ever truly trusts her mother.

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"That's all for today," says Sue. We practice breathing techniques and then the session is over. I am left flooded by this memory, emotionally wrecked. It is as painful today as it was ten years ago. I am still crying in the massage room. I am still in that car with my mother.

## II.

### An Inquiry into Child Abuse in Figure Skating

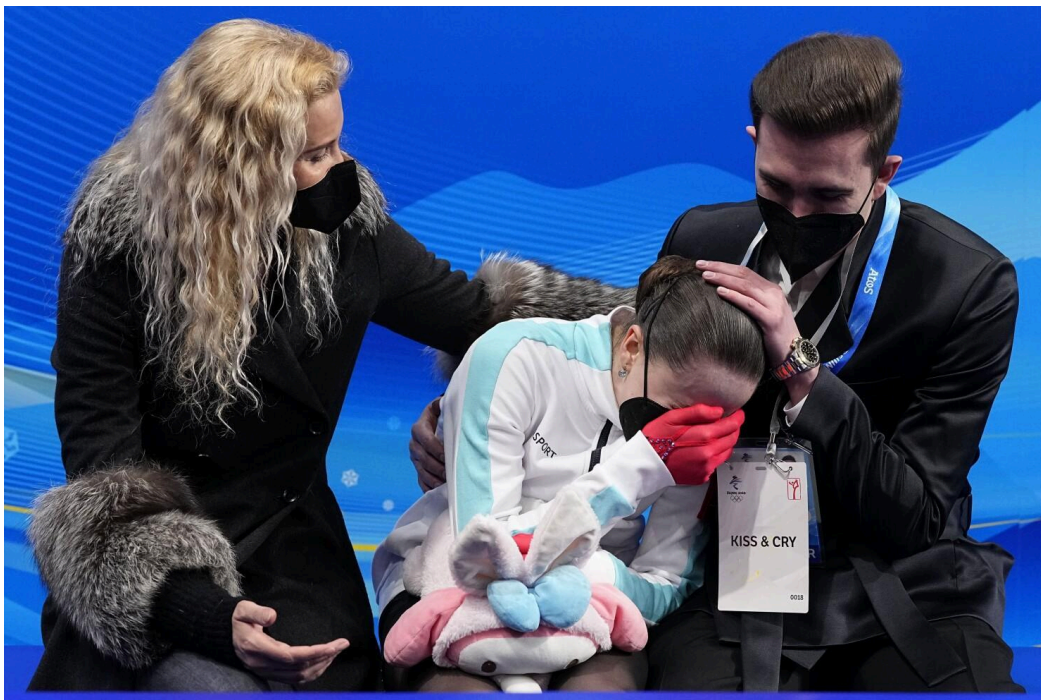




### **Team Tutberidze Meltdown**

“Why did you let it go?” coach Eteri Tutberidze says to fifteen-year-old Kamila Valieva as she gets off the ice following her Free Skate performance. “Why did you stop fighting? You let it go after the axel.”

In an uncharacteristic performance, Valieva fell twice. She heads to the kiss and cry where the athlete along with Tutberidze and choreographer Daniil Gleikhengauz sat to hear her score. Results show up on the screen: Kamila Valieva, 4<sup>th</sup> place. Valieva laughed in a self-deprecating kind of way, remarking that at least the ceremony would continue, then fell into the arms of Gleikhengauz as Tutberidze tried to hug her, covering her face with her red gloved hand.



The biggest story of the 2022 Olympics was the drama of Valieva testing positive for a banned performance enhancing drug and still being allowed to compete in the Women's Event. The drug found was trimetazidine, also known as TMZ, which increases blood flow to the heart. It is mostly prescribed to elderly patients and is not advised to be taken by anyone under the age of 18. In the United States, it is illegal. The news only came out after Valieva gave two stunning performances in the Team Event, scoring a whopping thirty points ahead of her competitors. The sample was collected by the Russian anti-doping officials in December who said they only learned of the positive test that week. Valieva was immediately suspended from competing, but her lawyers were able to undo the decision. They claimed that the drug was her grandfather's medication and that she must have unknowingly ingested it. They said it would cause her 'irreparable harm' if she was not allowed to compete. Adam Rippon, 2018 US Olympian Tweeted: "If they are truly worried about the irreparable harm, set her up with proper counseling to deal with the incredibly sad situation she finds herself in and SEND HER HOME. The irreparable harm that will be done is to the entire Olympic Games. She shouldn't be allowed to compete." Rippon's tweets did not change the Court for Arbitration for Sport who also decided that if Valieva placed on the podium there would be no medal ceremony, explaining Valieva's comment when she heard of her fourth placement.

"Thank God," said NBC correspondent and two-time Olympian, Johnny Weir as he commentated live on Valieva ending up in fourth place. Before, Weir and co-host, Olympic champion Tara Lipinski had been silent throughout Valieva's performance in an act of protest.

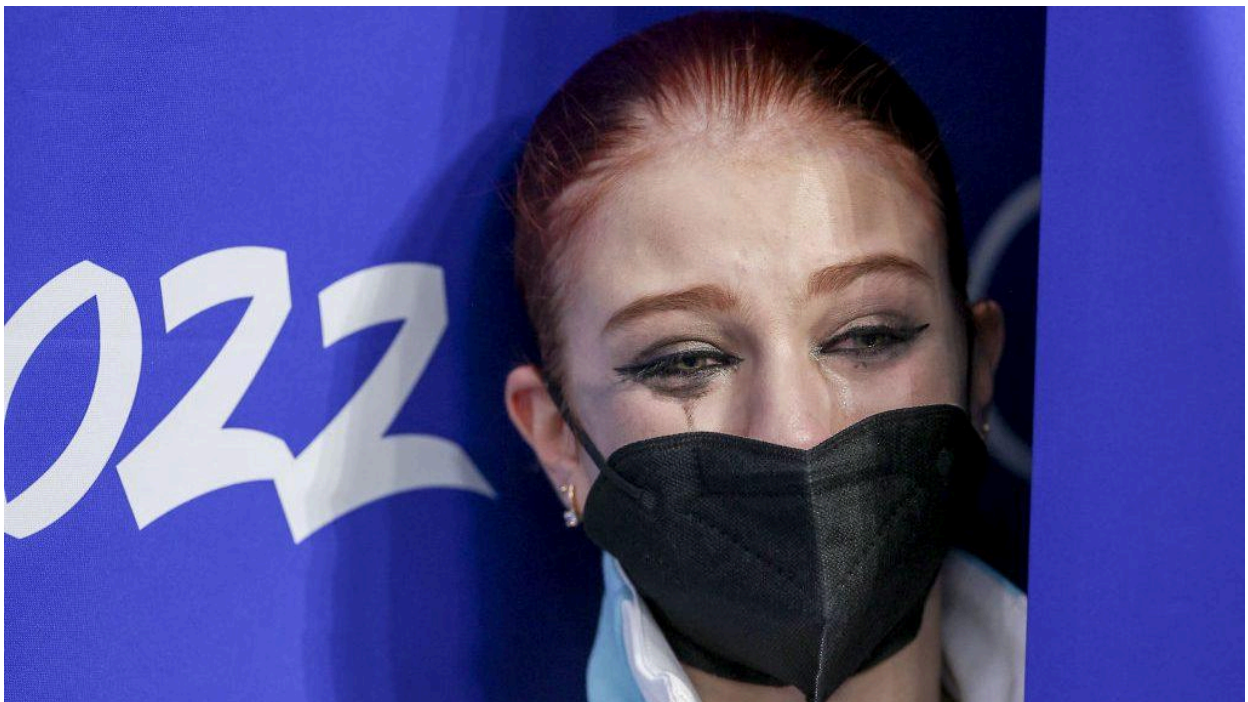
Valieva was the last to skate. Before, Tutberidze's two other athletes, Alexandra Trusova and Anna Shcherbakova, both seventeen, had competed. Trusova did a record number of quad jumps— five total— something that was unimaginable in figure skating just four years ago, and

still ended up in second place. While Trusova's elements overall were higher than Shcherbakova's, she lacked elegance and complex skating skills between jumps and spins.

After hearing Valieva's results, Trusova, who had previously left Tutberidze's training school and had returned this year, started crying and yelling. At first, people thought Trusova was sad for her friend not placing on the podium. This was until Johnny Weir, who is fluent in Russian, started to translate what she was saying.

"Everyone has a gold medal," she yelled to her team. It was true. Kamila Valieva had won the Team Event with the rest of her Russian Olympic Committee teammates and Shcherbakova had just won the Women's event. "Everyone but me. I hate skating. I hate this sport. I will never skate again. Never. It's impossible."

"You knew!" said Trusova to Tutberidze. Trusova had been told that if she did all five quads, she was destined for gold. Regardless of her quads, Trusova has not won a major event



since her debut into the Senior circuit. She has always been overshadowed by her teammates.

"There is no happiness," said Trusova to the press.

Consoling the two other skaters, no coach was with Shcherbakova, as she learned that she won the Olympics. Cameras aired the seventeen-year-old alone in the skater's lounge with her stuffed animal tissue box holder, showing no emotion. Lipinski explained how the moments right after she found out she won, surrounded by her team were some of the happiest moments of her life. It was not the same for Shcherbakova.

"I was feeling a lot of pleasure because I happened to be in the right time and the right place and did the right things," Shcherbakova said, "On the other hand, I feel this emptiness



inside.”

Trusova almost didn't partake in the medals ceremony. When she was cajoled into participating, she took off her blade guards and threw her jacket across the boards of the rink in frustration. Shcherbakova climbed onto the top of the podium and raised her hands in triumph. Makeup smudged, Trusova posed for a picture with the three skaters, including Kaori Sakamoto



of Japan. Holding her golden wreath and the Beijing Olympics mascot panda, Bing Dwen Dwen, she casually and ever so slightly gave the middle finger.



### One Story Told Three Ways

Following the catastrophic Women's event at the Olympics, my sisters and I talked about our own experiences in a group chat. We discussed how the Russian Olympic Committee should be treated globally. Ban Tutberidze. No banning Tutberidze won't change the system. Ban the nation. They should be banned already. Doping allegations have been going on now for eight years. *Dad tried talking to me about skating yesterday and I asked him not to because I couldn't talk about it and now I'm getting like one-word answers from mom*, texted Georgia. Georgia had gone to Instagram to express how our Russian coaches affected her as well, telling all about how we were weighed, sent away to skating camp every year as children in the summer, and called lazy when we couldn't meet the number on the scale that our coaches demanded. It had gotten the attention of our parents. "We were following your lead!" My mom pleaded. "We thought you wanted to go to those camps!"

This was one of the few times that my sisters and I spoke about figure skating. Which is a shame really, because we're the only ones who know what the three of us have gone through. Other figure skaters had different relationships with their parents and coaches. This should have brought us closer but instead it caused a rift between us as a trio. Years have gone by and each one of us has tried to process what has happened on our own. What useless loneliness.

When my sister, Georgia, who is six years older than me, was young she decided to figure skate at a local ice rink. My mother has a long lineage of figure skating in her family. Her aunt and uncle went to Worlds for Ice Dance, and that uncle was a world-renowned judge who was once the president of U.S. Figure Skating. So, it may or may not have been a coincidence

that their young child began training with the Polish Pairs Champion, Maria Jezak-Athey, who is also known as the first coach of 2010 Olympic Champion, Evan Lysacek.

At first a fun after school diversion, things changed when Maria decided to open her own school, International Skating Club, 45 minutes away from our home. My family decided to keep training with her, a decision that would affect us beyond the writing of this book due to her methods of training. Maria hired coaches from around the world to instruct about fifty students. It was an intense program with strict rules. If you did not meet these rules, you were either verbally insulted in words you would come to understand, likely until you cried, or you were kicked off the ice, out of the ballet studio, or out of workout class. Because our skating school was so far away, we had to wake up at 5:30 to skate before school. We also skated in between school and afterwards, depending on the day. I remember my mom convincing me to sign out of elementary school early with the reason “appointment” multiple times. As I grew up, I got a special schedule so I could miss half of school, cutting out all extracurriculars and lunch.

Following Georgia’s interest in figure skating, I am not sure if Carina, three years younger, or me, three years younger than Carina, ever had a choice to skate or not. How can you look back at a time that doesn’t retain memories? I’m sure we wanted to be like each other. I remember skating with a helmet on and a walker, my two sisters smiling back at me. There’s a picture of the moment on my mother’s desk. It must have been one of my first skates. And I was doing exactly that, being one of the sisters on the ice. That must have been the allure, to be a part of the family.

When my father was 45, he obtained dual citizenship to Greece for himself and his three children. He waited until that age because he did not want to serve in the military. What this meant was that his children could now skate for the small country of islands, not well known for

its accolades in winter sports. Georgia is well known as the Glagolitsa that figure skated for Greece. A statement that still particularly gets me happened one Thanksgiving when we visited family friends and as a few of the kids were talking, they said Georgia was the only one of us that “went pro.” Sure, it’s true. She skated all around the world for Greece: Italy, Austria, Spain, England, Latvia, the Netherlands, France, Bulgaria, Russia, Mexico, Germany, and Switzerland— to name a few. I think behind the eating disorders, complicated relationships with our parents, and unreasonable amount of work ethic the sport demands, Georgia actually loved figure skating. She even skated into her college years at the University of Michigan. All of Georgia’s best friends are Olympians, and she is still very much wired into what’s happening in the world of figure skating.

In high school, Carina switched from singles skating to ice dancing. I was a total asshole about it. I would corner her at the boards of the ice rink, saying, “which do you think is harder, singles skating or ice dancing?” There’s this whole taboo that ice dancing isn’t as hard as singles figure skating. But ice dancing is a meticulous and intense sport that cannot be compared to singles skating. You have to be connected to your blades and how they interact with the ice (while also maintaining connection with your partner!) in a way that singles skaters take for granted. Nathan Chen, Men’s Olympic Champion seen as one of the greatest of all times, barely scratches the surface with his blades on the ice. I would like to see him try some ice dance patterns. Anyways, Carina had a few partners until she matched with Nick, a nice Canadian boy, and she moved to Toronto during high school. She commuted back and forth between Canada and the United States, making special arrangements with her professors on how she would do her homework. Honestly it amazes me what my parents could pull with the school administration to allow us to skate. They always said, “school comes first!” but their actions tend to speak otherwise. When Carina graduated, she took a year off to compete for Greece. Her hair was



bleach blonde, she had a spray tan like all the other ice dancers, intricate acrylic nails, and revealing ice dance dresses that showed off her exposed ribs from anorexia. After the year was over, she was transported from Toronto to the University of Southern California. There was never any sort of resolution made between her and our parents. She recovered to the best of her abilities on her own. Carina doesn't leave California much anymore. She doesn't want to.

Carina didn't love skating and tried to quit multiple times. When she was in middle school, she would draw different outfits and dream of going to fashion school. I believe then she said she wanted to pursue fashion over skating and my parents wouldn't let her. Then there was music. She wanted to learn how to play the guitar and in fact my parents did give her guitar lessons. At sixteen she tried to quit skating again, but my parents wouldn't let her. Here's where the question lies: was it ever really a choice?

My mom always assured me there was. "You can quit whenever you want," she would say. "And if you did, we wouldn't watch over what you eat so much. It's just about getting off the ground. You have to be tiny to get off the ground." I always dreamt of what my life would be like if I quit and became a dancer or something. But I knew the truth. The surveillance over what we ate wouldn't stop. It was always lies.

As for my story, a linear timeline is hard to piece together. My memories are all scattered and distorted. I've spent so much of my life reliving certain memories that won't escape me, inflating them into these colossal moments that I can remember crisply in the car with my hand out the window, feeling the cold familiar breeze, or when I can't breathe at the physical therapy office. And other memories are marks on the ice Zambonied over never to be remembered again. Unless perhaps with proper guidance, because I want those memories back. I want to map out

my story, so it makes sense, and so I can have agency over it. I don't believe in linear time, but I believe it is helpful. I want to be helped.

Here's what I can tell you: I got injured at thirteen, the same time my bipolar began to manifest and the same time I went through puberty. Not to mention the injury was a result of being malnourished. It was hard to find a reason to love the sport again after I felt betrayed by the adults in my life. Returning was next to impossible. Everything was different.

Before the injury, I wanted to compete for the USA, not Greece, and I was already proving I could do so. I went to Junior Nationals twice at twelve and thirteen. I did better my second Junior Nationals, but not by much. What I really needed to work on was my nerves. If things hadn't gotten in the way, that's what my coaches and I would have focused on.

Chronologically, after my injury, I almost moved to Michigan to train with Georgia's coach she had switched to during college, which would have effectively split my family up as my mother would have moved with me.

My high school years are where the timeline starts to become unclear. I spent so much of high school yelling at my parents, trying to get them to understand how shitty the way they raised us was. It wasn't just about me. I did it for Georgia and Carina too. They weren't there to see me through high school and to see what I was doing. I had heard my mother call my sister a pig in the car for gaining weight too many times and had watched Carina show up at the ice rink with nothing left in her day after day. I wanted to give back to them by showing it to my parents. Now the two of them are trying to make sense of their relationship with my parents while I did it in high school. I suppose I can't say that I made sense of my relationship with my parents in high school though, otherwise I wouldn't be writing this book.

The beginning of the end came when my parents noticed I wasn't getting enough time with Cindy and Kristen, the coaches I switched to after Maria, Sergei, and Trish (of the International Skating Club 45 minutes away from my house). Cindy and Kristen were the ones that took me to Junior Nationals and who I liked and respected. My parents made me switch coaches. There was a coach I was interested in working with, but Kristen was not a fan of hers (I think she was jealous), so I felt I would be betraying her if I switched to her. Instead, I chose a kooky, older coach with a PhD from Yale thinking we would have things in common considering I was already an academic type. She would cry at about any story I told, and most of our lessons turned into us talking about the climate crisis, or her telling me to always get enough sleep because a night of no sleep is like doing cocaine. I wasn't skating at all. If I wasn't getting attention from Kristen and Cindy, with my new coach I was just being distracted. Plus, the motive of all our practices by the request of my parents was to complete tests administered by the International Skating Union. I was to gain pieces of papers signed off by judges that indicated I had completed all the jumps, spins, and step sequences necessary to move on to the next level. I never passed on to the senior level, not because I couldn't (I could've done it five times over only a year before) but because by the end of my career, I was heartbroken and could not continue, and was barely training. I have had this part of the memory strictly locked away, one of those Zamboni marks. I only realized it a few months ago and a huge weight lifted off of me. In its place before was this untouchable absense. Something I knew was missing but that I was too afraid to investigate. Overall though, I imagine my younger self would be very disappointed in me.

When I was sixteen my dad convinced me to go to Greek Nationals, where I won the Junior title. If I competed against Georgia in the senior title, I probably would have won. I quit

when I was about eighteen. Even though I had the shortest run, we always said I was the best skater. Things just went really wrong, right? I need to believe that.

I was ten when I was first diagnosed with ADHD. I had to fill out a sheet that asked me a bunch of questions, one of them being if I was experiencing abuse from adults, something like that. I marked it yes. Afterwards, the psychologist and my mother came into the room very concerned. I explained myself, what Sergei and Maria would say. They were relieved, I can remember their sighs. The psychologist erased the mark and they both left the room. I may have been the only one who took that test, but Georgia and Carina also know what that felt like.

I am four. I crawl into my mother's side of the bed, and she brings me under the covers. We make a tent, it's tinted pink from the sunlight peeking through and our body heat becomes one. We giggle as if this is our little secret. "You're my favorite," says my mom.

I tell this story to my sisters years later, thinking she said the same to them throughout the years. They both look at each other and laugh. "No, she did not tell us that," says Carina.

Perhaps there's merit to why we grieve alone.

## Docile Bodies

In figure skating, an example of an operation that requires learning gestures is a jump. A jump pass is the spot in a person's program where they intend to complete the element of a jump. If there are any incorrect gestures within the jump, the jump pass has the possibility of being underrotated, downgraded, or to get a deduction on the total score of 1.0 if the figure skater falls. They can also earn extra points if the jump was performed well. This is called the grade of execution (GOE). Foucault argues, in *Discipline and Punish*, that an operation, or act of intention, is comprised of several small gestures. These gestures are used to optimize control of bodies and are taught with strict precision, like the jump pass.



*Mao Asada at the Sochi Olympics 2014, Photo: New York Times.*

Let's break down a double axel into small gestures. Or rather for the drama: a triple axel (which I never landed). Above is Mao Asada of Japan at Sochi in 2014, one of the only women in the world to complete the jump at the Olympics. One triple axel typically has an airtime of about .6 seconds, which means that each gesture must be done in strict precision otherwise the jump pass will not be completed. From the perspective of a right-handed figure skater: First the skater must bend their left knee at a right angle, bringing their arms behind their back. Next, they

must find their toe pick and vault their body weight up into the air. This action is like stepping up on an invisible stair. A good axel will find the skater's right knee slightly bent inward as they take off, like they are dancing the Charleston (like Asada's leg in gesture four). Next the quick-twitch muscles will transfer their center of balance from their left foot to their right. The skater creates a figure four with their left leg over their right, from here they swiftly wrap their left leg around the right leg and propel it down to the left skate for proper rotation position. Alongside this position, it is critical that the figure skater gets their arms in as tightly as possible so as not to lose speed, and from there they rotate. Next is the landing. They begin by bending their top portion of their body over their hips and bending at a 45° angle at their knees. They start to unwind from their rotation position, with the body torqued to the right over their wrapped leg to fight gravity, left arm 25° away from center to control the air. When they hit the ground the figure skater completely unwinds their legs and propels it backwards, opens up their arms, and looks to the right to center their balance. Nothing in the world compares to the feeling of rotating in the air. From the moment you take off you are flying, cold wind whizzing around you. You are defying gravity. It's a feeling of solitude, just you and the air for less than a second. And when you land correctly your blade makes the most beautiful sound, carving into the ice.



*Kamila Valieva at the 2022 Olympics in Beijing, Photo: New York Times.*

Here is an image of Kamila Valieva (from a different angle) attempting a triple axel (with a harder component attached of putting her hands in the air) but failing to complete the gestures necessary in the .6 seconds. As one can see the gestures vary from Mao Asada's. In the eighth gesture (from right to left), she is still in the air but beginning to disengage. She did not land with her bodyweight firmly over her right leg and her left leg safely wrapped around her right, instead she started to lean to the left. She began to fall but caught herself, keeping her from receiving a one-point deduction, but instead the jump pass received a negative grade of execution.

## **Body Scans**

“Okay, Celia, let’s do a body scan,” says my dance movement therapist. Fuck. I tense up. A body scan is a guided meditation where each part of your body is focused on from head to toe. They’re supposed to be grounding, but they bring me back to specific memories, reminding me that my body is not a safe space.

“Alright now close your eyes, let’s start at the top of our bodies.”

Head: I am nine at Wilmette Ice Rink. I leave middle school early to train as I always do. I miss my toe pick on a double toe and fall flat onto my face. I lay on the ice staring up at the ceiling. The rink is spinning. The lights are bright and everything is red. My coach, Maria, carries me off the rink into the lobby. I feel the pressure of my eyes in my skull. Others who witnessed the event crowd around me. All I can see are faces. One is my mother’s. I think she looks concerned, and I think she is saying something, but I can’t hear her. I am alone, and it is beautiful. I want to stay here forever.

“Let’s move from our head down to our necks.”

Neck: Or shall I say throat. I am fifteen at North Shore Ice Arena. I rush off the rink to the women’s bathroom and wretch out my lunch. My friend Jenna catches me, and I deny that I have a problem. “I ate too late in my break, and I got sick on the ice,” I say.

“Let the weight in your neck drop down into your shoulders.”

Shoulders: I am twenty and dreaming in Somerville, Massachusetts. I have decided to pick up skating again, and I am at a competition. My music starts, and I begin my program. I take off for a double axel and my head instinctually turns to the right in a jolt. My shoulders are sore for the rest of the day.



“Now to your upper extremities.”

Arms: I am twelve at Junior Nationals in Salt Lake City, Utah. “Next from DuPage Figure Skating Club, Celia Glastris!” I am staring at my new coaches Cindy and Kristen, terrified. With my arms I mimic a jump rotation. In, out, in, out.

“Focus on your breath. Three deep breaths in, three deep breaths out.”

Chest: I am fourteen at Buffalo Grove Ice Rink. “You’re shaping out nicely,” comments my video footage coach Patrick on my puberty development. “Not too much, that’s good, you’ll keep your jumps.” I feel violated.

“Feel your breath in your diaphragm.”

Stomach: I am twenty-three in Hyde Park, Illinois. I have been working with a dietitian for several months who has been making me eat three meals a day and I haven’t purged in three months. My belly is soft and alien to me.

“Feel the light travel down your spine.”

Back: I am ten at Northwestern Medical Hospital in Evanston, Illinois. The radiologist handles me roughly as she positions me in front of the x-ray machine. She walks out of the room and takes a picture. An hour later I am waiting for the results. The doctor walks into the room. As she speaks, she makes eye contact with my mother, not me. “The results show two stress fractures in the spine in L4 and L5.” Too many Biellmans: a teardrop shaped spin that folds your back in half. I am off the ice for four months and return with a cool back brace.

“Focus on feeling your body sitting in the chair.”

Tailbone: I am twelve at North Shore Ice Arena training my triples before Junior Nationals. I must’ve done forty or more that practice. I keep falling in the same way. I’m letting my hip fall out and not staying tight during rotation. No one is telling me to stop. Why didn’t anyone tell me

to stop? The next day a blue and purple welt appears on my tailbone, a bone bruise, something I am very familiar with. At school, I sit on a yellow donut cushion for two weeks. Schoolmates sign it.

“Now down to the lower section of our bodies.”

Left leg: I am thirteen at a hospital whose location I do not remember. The nurse injects my hip with contrast. I still have the scar from where the needle went. “The machine is rather loud, so we have a selection of music for you to listen to. We have classical, pop hits, hip hop, whatever you want.” I choose classical. What child chooses classical? The technician places my injured body onto the bed and the MRI glides me into the claustrophobic machine. They’re right, it is loud. The whole time, my stomach looks like corn kernels popping and it scares me. I get out of the machine and am taken to the radiologist who takes x-rays of my hip and leg. Later I wait in a hospital room. I stare numbly at the wall, waiting for someone to tell me my fate. The doctor comes in and speaks yet again to my mother who is feverishly taking notes, rather than to me. I want to scream, “Hello! I am the patient, not her!” The results show a stress fracture in the femur, a torn hamstring, tendinopathy in the growth plate, and a damaged sciatica nerve. I am on crutches for six months and sentenced to daily visits to the physical therapist. I am bewildered. A part of me is excited that I am so injured, and relieved I am off the ice.

“Move your attention from your left leg to your right.”

Right leg: I am twenty in Vail, Colorado skiing down the mountain with my mother. My feet hurt in my boots, and I unbuckle the tops of them. This is my downfall; the skis aren’t protecting my feet. I turn my skis around a mogul and lose control. My body plummets down the mountain in an unnatural, disfigured position. I am taken down to the town in a stretcher pulled by skiers. I feel like I’m in virtual reality, watching in a daze at the aspen trees that are

whizzing by me. I am placed into an ambulance and exclaim, “That was awesome!” News comes out that it’s an ACL tear. Now both my legs have been injured. I receive an operation and return with a ghastly scar down the center of my knee. I keep falling over in physical therapy, losing my breath, and ultimately fainting. They do a brain scan to check for seizures and find nothing. This is when I am diagnosed with PTSD.

“And down to the feet.”

Feet: “Do you still skate anymore?” is a common question people ask me with curiosity, not knowing that it’s like a punch to the gut. “I can’t fit my feet into skates anymore,” I routinely say, my voice cracking as I hold back tears. By the end of my career, I could last fifteen minutes without having to get off the ice and retie my skates. One summer while I was working in New York I visited five doctors to try and discern what was wrong, because by that point it wasn’t just affecting me in my boots but my regular shoes as well (the reason I got injured skiing). One doctor said it was a severe case of plantar fasciitis. He looked at my feet with an ultrasound and showed me pockets of air. Another said it’s neuropathy, probably from tying my skates too tight. In that case it’s nerve damage and it will slowly get worse. I think it’s a combination of both. Whatever it is, it’s cruel. Whenever I feel the pain in my feet it’s a reminder of my unfinished story.

### III.

#### Rock Bottom



## Crossovers

Winnetka Ice Arena is a joke of an establishment, I thought. The best skaters here aren't even committed. They don't participate in real, International Skating Union affiliated competitions. Instead, they dedicate their entire year to preparing for one tacky balloons-and-curtains-on-the-ice show. I put on my work jacket. The zipper wouldn't go. I squeezed it together at the bottom hoping it would catch. Finally, it did. How many people before me have worn this? How many of those Winnetka figure skaters, proud to have a job at their home rink, cheered on their little elementary school devils as they learned to do a stupid crossover in this hand-me-down coat?

I started to lace up my skates. I pull them tight letting my anger out with every pull. I remembered getting picked up at lunchtime to drive for thirty seconds across the road for lessons with my coaches who had driven an hour and a half away to coach me. The Winnetka coaches allowed us to use the ice for private lessons. Now here I am. I finished lacing and put my guards over my blades. In the coach room there was a bulletin board with pictures of past skaters who made it out of this shithole, photos of the past exhibitions, timetables, and a mirror. I saw myself in the oversized coat. How did I fall from grace so hard, so fast?

This time in my day after school has always been allotted to training, but recently things have been weird. I can't lie to myself, it's not just recently, it's been most of high school. I'm falling out of love with the sport, and I don't know who I am without it. My parents told me if I'm not going to train all week then on some days I should coach. Train or coach, there is no other option.

I walk out of the work room into the main lobby. By the entrance is the ticket booth and where you can rent skates. To the left is a little café and seating. I always wanted to get things from the café. Hot chocolate, a donut, popcorn, candy, anything. But it wasn't allowed.

About fifty little kids are sprawled out getting their skates tied by their moms and nannies, eating things from the café. One nanny is tying up a pair of Jacksons. Damn, for the amount that kid skates, which I surmise is about once a week, she doesn't deserve those. Though at her age I had a make much nicer: a pair of high-tech Edea *Ice Flys*, the brand that promises that their lightweight boots will allow you to jump higher.

"Alright everyone it's time to head into the rink," says Nancy, my boss.

I open the doors to the ice rink. All the kids line up in their respective divisions.

I scan the hoard of kids that I am employed to teach. None of them will move on with the sport. This hour is for the kids to socialize and maybe build some memories. And for their moms to have some rest before dinner. These types of programs breed the conversations starter, "hey I used to skate!" when I tell people I am a figure skater.

"Celia's group, line up behind me!" I say.

I'm in charge of a group of eight. They are around the ages seven to ten and are just above brand new to the sport. As we all get onto the ice, one girl Addison forgot to take off her guards and falls face forward onto the ice. Her friends giggle and she immediately looks back at me as her face turns red.

"It's totally ok," I say. "I can't tell you the number of times I have done that," I know she looks up to me, so this is the warmest thing I have said or felt all afternoon.

She pats the snow off herself and smiles. I smile back at her.

“Everyone, line up across the boards. We are going to start on a figure eight, doing crossovers.”

I demonstrate a figure eight and note the important features to pay attention to. Straight legs and arms. Keep your torso upright and a deep knee bend.

“Crossovers are the key to figure skating,” I say, as I circle around. “Skaters at every level start their day by exercising their crossovers.”

I stop my demonstration and stand in front of the troupe to tell them a story.

“I remember when I started, all that my coaches made me do was crossovers. I would cry and cry and say, ‘I want to do more!’ My coach said to me, ‘Michelle Kwan practices her crossovers every single day,’ and so I practiced them, and they got better.”

No one reacts. Of course none of these girls know who Michelle Kwan is, they weren’t even born when she competed at the Olympics. As I speak, Addison is talking to her two friends. When I look over at them, she quickly stops. Another student randomly falls down. I resist the temptation to shake my head and instead take a deep breath of the cold air.

“Now you all try.”

My little group of eight circles around with wobbly arms that they can barely keep up and wimpy, bent legs. I pay attention to them one by one. Each is excited for their own turn for attention from me. “Elongate your arms. Be like a duck in water. Calm up top,” I shift the child’s body position upright, “and swift underneath.” I show her a deep bend and cross that she tries to mimic very poorly. As the girls do their crossovers around the circle, Addison and the other girls continue to talk. If I had been talking during my warm-up, I probably would’ve been kicked off the ice.

“Hey! Stop that. Do your crossovers,” I say.

I line the kids up again at the boards for another lesson.

“Next we will do swizzles.”

Addison is whispering to her friends again and I’m growing impatient.

What am I doing here? What am I doing with my life? I’m staring at the whispering girls who are having a completely different experience with the sport than I had.

“By the time I was your age I could do a double lutz. You have a lot of catching up to do, Addison. Quit talking, you’re making your friends not pay attention. They have less to learn than you do!”

Addison starts to cry. Her friends console her.

Oh my God, I’ve made a child cry on the ice. I get a glimpse of myself in the glass and how terrifying did I look. I could see the faces of all the other coaches that had made me cry before. I never meant to be this person. All I could think is that I wanted a donut.



**write it and burn it**

*Dear Celia,*

*Things did not turn out as we planned. I didn't win any sort of competition you would be proud of. Your second Junior Nationals was your last, and you had fire in you. There were no indicators that it was going to end. But you got injured and you lost trust in your family. Every day I grieve for thirteen-year-old you. I'm so sorry. Skating really hurts us. I wish I could prepare you.*

*I wish I could tell you to have more fun. Skip practice when you feel like it. Find a coach who you really want to skate with, and who will treat you with compassion and respect. And skate if you want to, not because Mom and Dad or anyone else tells you to. You are an exceptional person without being a skater. You don't need figure skating to stand out. In fact, you don't even need to stand out. You can just be a kid. And trust your sisters more, you have each other.*

*I know all you've heard is that I've failed to do the one thing you wanted most in life, and that you were on the way to doing. Somehow, we both are going to need to find peace with this failure or else we will spend our lives in regret. If you could forgive me, I could start to find that peace. But I know you can't write back.*

*Love,*

*Celia*