

Excerpt from *How to Cope with Suburban Stress*

At 3:50, Ted found a lovely parking space right near the entrance of the Derby Roller Rink. He killed the engine and sat there for a while, idly flipping through an issue of *Disaster Recovery Management*. “Reaching Out to Your Support System,” read the title of one article, with a smiling woman’s face on which Ted mentally superimposed Don Feinstein’s features. From time to time, he wondered about Don, but the two e-mails he’d sent had gone unanswered. Still, he remained interested in contingency planning, and his boss at Modesto had hinted that the company could use that kind of assistance. Today he had called in sick, so the company would just have to do without him. “What’s Your Preparedness Factor?” asked another piece, but Ted shut the magazine. Children were arriving. They slammed car doors and trudged toward the rink entrance, a green-rimmed set of double doors with “IN” and “OUT” marked in faded gold. The building itself looked like a collapsed cake, its flat roof frosted in red and white.

Ted waited until eight boys had entered, by which time it was 4:03. He recognized many of the faces from having studied the class photo. At least 60% of them were cute, with the bumbling, puppyish look that would soon disappear as muscles hardened and bodies grew taller. In most cases, the boys were accompanied by their mothers, though an awkward-looking father or two were also part of the crowd. Spotting a Bobby type slamming the door of a Chevy Tahoe, Ted felt a tightening in his groin. He got out of his Sentra and walked catlike to the entrance.

Inside was a double railing separating the entrance from the exit. Halfway down the corridor was a ticket booth in which a fat man sat, chewing an unlit cigar. Loud canned rock music came from beyond the booth. Ted hadn’t been to a roller-skating rink since he was a child, if then—maybe he’d just absorbed the experience from photos and TV. All he really recalled was a rusty pair of skates that adjusted with a metal key. You trundled up and down the block in them, moving even slower than walking. Then Daddy came home, and he put them in the hallway. Then came a scene after dinner, Daddy tripping on a skate, then no more skates. So many parts of his childhood had ended that way. He felt a familiar black haze hovering at the edges of his vision and shook his head to clear it.

But now he was in front of the booth. The fat man looked at him without interest. Adults were six dollars, stated a sign behind the man’s head, so Ted dug into his wallet and paid up. He hadn’t thought much about how he’d explain himself—the father of an absent boy? a guy out to relive his youth?—but the fat man didn’t ask. He stamped Ted’s hand with a red derby logo and waved him inside. The music grew louder the closer he got.

The first sight that hit him was a row of video games, all lit up but mostly unused. Alongside the games was a cheap refreshment stand, including popcorn and cotton-candy machines. The sign in back listed sodas and slush puppies. The children were mostly near the side, sitting on molded plastic benches in cafeteria colors while putting on their skates. The parents were milling around a trestle table as one woman sailed a tablecloth over it and started setting out paper plates and napkins. What was the name of the birthday boy again? Billy Something.

Luckily, Billy's party wasn't the only activity in the place. Other children were out on the rink, a huge painted concrete oval enclosed by a waist-high railing. A few looked like young adolescents, and one torpedo-shaped girl in particular skated damn fast. The rock music chugged from two giant overhead speakers in the low ceiling. As Ted's eyes adjusted to the dim interior lighting, he noticed that another party was taking place on the other side of the refreshment stand, a younger set of kids halfway through a gooey sheet cake.

But Ted was after the second-grade boys, so he approached the benches obliquely. He pretended he was observing Torpedo Girl in the rink. In fact, she glanced at him more than once as she skated circles around a few slowpokes. She must have been about twelve, blonde and determined, and it struck him that he could have been her father. Such a thought had never occurred to him before, and it made him feel weak in the knees. He had to sit down for a moment on one of the plastic benches. By the time he got up and made his way to the boys, the light panels in the ceiling had shifted from dull yellow to red, green, and blue, and the speakers had changed to something from the Bee Gees.

Like a flock of starlings, the boys all took off as Ted arrived. They crowded onto the rink, bumping up against one another and giggling. They made it hard for real performers to navigate, reducing Torpedo Girl to short, frustrated bursts of speed. Once the kids had evacuated the table area, most of the parents sat down to chat, shouting over the swell of the music. But a few wandered over to the railing to watch, and Ted joined them. Boys glided by, their arms held out for balance. Ted yearned to step out onto the rink and blissfully collide with all those bodies. Any moment now.

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We got to the party late—because of Alex, naturally. When I picked him up at the Y, his knapsack was nowhere to be found. One of the staffers finally found it under a bench. Then we were all set to go when Alex had one of his scenes, in this case about his after-school snack. “Not today,” I told him, “because you're going to eat a lot of junk at the party.”

“That doesn't count. I want my pretzel sticks.”

To make a long tantrum short, he finally got into the car, but not before we'd hashed out a few rules for special occasions. He muttered that I was evil, and I said not half as much as I could be, and that shut him up for most of the ride. Neither of us was in the best of moods when we arrived. Alex, who had his own pair of roller-blades, ran to the entrance without waiting for me to get out of the car. By the time I passed through the green doors, he was already inside. A seedy gentleman mouthing a stogie looked up briefly when I passed. When I said I was with the McCabe party, he nodded and stamped my hand. It was noisy, and I could feel an incipient headache as I entered the main area.

The kids were already in the rink, some zooming, others coasting to a puzzled standstill. Too bad James couldn't make it. I'd heard he was back from the hospital but languishing at home. Leukemia, which I hadn't mentioned to my son. Alex was hunched over on a red plastic bench, trying to get his skates on. A herd of parents milled around nearby—mostly stay-at-home

moms, I couldn't help thinking. They were nice, and always happy to talk with a man, but their main topic was child-rearing, like a bunch of lawyers who can't stop talking shop. One of the mothers, a short, wide woman in comfortable jeans, was spreading a paper cloth decorated with race cars over a long table. Then came paper plates with the same design, obviously Billy's choice. She looked up and smiled in automatic greeting as I neared the table.

"Hi. You must be Alex's dad."

I nodded. "Hello, Billy's mom." I placed the present I'd brought—Alex had left it in the back seat—alongside a small mountain of other gifts rising from a blue plastic bench. It was fortuitously a model car kit, picked out from Fairchester's Toy Boutique earlier in the day. The wrapping job alone, featuring gold cars chasing each other over mountains and deserts, was probably worth five dollars, but I hadn't had time to visit one of the huge discount warehouses outside our town limits.

"I'm done!" Alex stood up, almost slid out, but managed to hold on to the bench.

"Careful..." I warned parentally.

"Leave me alone. I can skate." To prove it, he pushed hard away from the bench, gliding toward one of the breaks in the low wall enclosing the rink. A short line of parents leaned against the railing like bettors at a horse race. Only a few were men, and one of them wore gray pants with mismatched green socks. He looked familiar, but the overhead light panels had started flashing in multicolor, so it was hard to make out more details. I tried to join the spectators' line, but when Alex saw me on his first circuit, he waved me away. Some sendoff. A tall woman in heels who I recognized as Juan's mother leaned forward to take a picture with a disposable camera. I trudged back to the table, where Billy's mom was removing a three-foot-long cake from its flimsy white cardboard box. Flanking her, three tired-looking women were discussing family vacations, or at least that's what it sounded like. The noise level had risen with the latest amplified song, something else from the golden era of disco. I knew one or two of the women from school events, and we helloed each other. Over in the corner, by an out-of-order video game, another mother shouted into a cell phone.

Meanwhile, Alex was rolling around during one of our last afternoons together. So much for father-son bonding. Jane apparently skated with him during these parties, but I hadn't been on skates since I was Alex's age. At the end of the video-machine corridor was an equipment rental booth, marked by an orange light overhead glowing like a guilty reminder. The three mothers had moved on from vacations to clothing outlets. I could have joined in. Or I could have sulked like Alex. My son, all too much like me in uncomfortably recognizable ways. All right, damn it. As the sound system started playing "Saturday Night Fever," I headed toward the rental counter for a set of wheels.

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After waiting for the right interval, Ted took a squeaky-shoed step onto the rink. A chunky boy wearing knee pads had just pushed by, opening a gap between him and a clump of

three other boys elbowing each other as they advanced. They saw Ted in time and swerved. Two veered toward the inside while the other headed for the rink wall and collided with a dull thud.

“Sorry,” offered Ted and reached out a helping hand to the boy. The kid was red-haired and freckled, gawky without being tall. He wore a goofy grin even when splayed out on the rink floor. But he grabbed the hand Ted extended and was upright before Ted even had a chance to be pulled down. With a brief thanks, he pushed off the wall and zoomed ahead to join the two other boys. Ted watched the whirl of kids, pondering what to do next. Beyond encountering a lot of little boys, he hadn’t thought much about a plan. His methodical manner deserted him in these situations, his mind filling haphazardly with soft flesh and a tangle of limbs.

Another try. Swiveling his head as if looking for a stray child, he advanced into a lane on direct collision course with a flying wedge of approaching boys. Torpedo Girl came around the pack as if propelled from behind, scowled at him, and skated right by with an inch to spare on the right. A second later, the wedge of boys split magically into two, though not quite all of them. One of the last kids sailed right into him. Ted loved the fleshy impact, the windmill arms out to greet him. “Sorry, *whoops!*” he cried, executing a half turn so that the two of them were almost dancing together. When he pressed himself against the boy’s body, he could feel a gentle squirming that was nearly too much to bear. After a slight squeeze that he hoped would go undetected, he sent the boy on his way with a heavy pat on the rear. The lighting was dim, the noise high—what the hell. This was heaven.

He had done this two more times, almost straddling his last boy, when a woman coasted by and shouted something at him. Ted shook his head to indicate that he couldn’t hear.

“I said, you’re not supposed to be here without skates!” She pointed accusingly at his sneakers as she passed. He was inclined to ignore her, but she looked darkly back at him—and knocked into a boy stubbornly skating clockwise. The way they clutched each other for support gave Ted an idea: he could collide even more accidentally on purpose if he were rolling. That way, he’d have a good motive. Brushing by one last eight-year-old, he exited the rink with a sigh. He’d be back soon, though—rolling along.

*

I remember the few times my mother took me ice-skating at a rink with a changing room that smelled of wet wool. She used a metal hook to pull the laces tight, grimacing as she did. The rink from bygone days featured organ music, not disco, while people glided around. Sometimes they slid, like me. I had weak ankles or something. At least these new rental roller-blades didn’t require a hook. Like ski boots, they closed with three adjustable plastic latches. One two, buckle my skates.

Still, when I stood upright, I felt the tremor of youth. The slightest motion sent me forward as I scrambled to regain my balance. I grabbed onto the railing and watched the bodies skim by. “*Are you ready...? Now, one-two-three!*” boomed the rock music from the giant ceiling-amplifiers, perched as if they might fall on my head. My reason for embarking on such foolishness was to be with Alex, to show him I wasn’t such a drip. A few other adults were

whizzing around, though one woman in black stretch pants was emitting little shrieks every ten feet. An adolescent girl with big thighs moved down the straightaway like a guided missile. *I can do this*, I told myself, echoing a phrase from the one psychiatric support group I'd ever led. *Prove it*, sniped Snoggs. I entered the arena just after a rush of children and gamely pushed off the railing. Not so bad—except when I tried to turn and my blades began to cross. I managed not to fall by spreading my arms outward as if trying to fly. I slid to a stop, becalmed in the middle of the rink. I shuffled my blades and got going again, this time with more assurance. Others were passing me, perilously close to cutting me off, but I hadn't fallen yet. "*Now pick it up!*" taunted the rock song electrically. "*Four-five-six!*"

I moved on with the latest clump of kids, though slowly drifting behind. The lights flashed green and yellow as I looked for Alex.

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Ted was surprised at how comfortable he felt, gliding by with the slightest of kicks. The metal skates he remembered had been far clunkier, and he'd had to trundle along. Maybe it was all the walking he'd been doing recently—more in control of his body or something. Slipping in at the far entry, he joined the stream of skaters and at first concentrated on simply keeping up speed. The rhythm of the disco music, "*I want to find someplace to be...I want to find someone like me,*" matched his stride. Right push...glide...left push...skim along.... After a few laps, he found himself gaining on a throng of boys, their legs straddling the air as if they were riding sawhorses. He fantasized bending backwards in a limbo move and gliding under their groined arch. Or sliding right through their bodies and emerging fulfilled on the other side. As he slowly passed them, individual identities began to emerge: the goofy red-haired kid, a blond pudge-belly, a wiry kid whose arms were furiously in motion. He tried to inhale their essence, but instead breathed in the stale popcorn smell from the refreshment stand. "*NO STOPPING,*" cautioned a poster on the far wall. As he skated about with increasing confidence, the painted cinder-block walls began to blur.

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Since I can't skate well, let alone fast, I decide to let Alex pass me rather than try catching up to him. The colored lights make for poor visibility, but I think that's him in the gray shirt on the other side of the rink. He's not a smooth skater like some of the other boys, but he's making steady progress. I wish I could say the same for me. Every time I push off from one skate, I lurch in the other direction. The damned music isn't helping matters—"*Falling, falling, I think I'm falling...in love!*" The kids instinctively know to skate around me.

I can't look back and keep my balance, so all I register is a gray blur from behind. "Hey, Alex!" I call out. When he's abreast of me, I reach out to tap him on the shoulder. I end up leaning on him as he tries to shrug me off.

"You're gonna make me fall." He moves faster, my hand now trailing from his body like a tail. One of the other boys looks back and grins.

"I thought I'd skate with you." I feel pathetic. When he pushes away, I'm still holding on. But his burst of speed pulls me off balance. I grab out for something, which happens to be my

son. *Falling, falling*—down we go, in a confusion of arms and legs, with Alex somehow pinned beneath me. I’ve bashed my knee. That concrete floor is hard as concrete. I slither away, favoring the other leg. I could be a snake on skates. The girl like a missile shoots right between us, scowling.

Alex scrambles to his feet (how can he do that on skates?). He doesn’t seem hurt, just terribly annoyed. “Are you okay?” I ask, like concerned parents everywhere.

“Leave me alone.” Without waiting for me to right myself, he skates away. “*It’s nothing, nothing at all,*” the speakers overhead reassure me. “*Nothing to say or do....*”

“Wait!” But he won’t, so instead I’m the one who waits, coasting slower and slower until I’m almost at a standstill by the railing. He’ll come by soon—that’s the great thing about circularity. Unless he decides to skate in some new direction, which would be just like him, wouldn’t it? My son defines the term *idiosyncratic*. In fact, I miss him the next time around, probably because he’s flanked on both sides by other boys. So I half-skate, half-hobble, to just after one of the long stretches, where the oval starts to curve. An electric sign on the wall grabs my attention:

ALL SKATE, REVERSE, GAME
ADVANCE, COUPLES, TRIOS
WALTZ, SPECIAL, BACKWARDS

“ALL SKATE” is lit right now. I try to imagine waltzing on skates and come up with collision after collision.

Now comes my second chance: Alex is coming into the stretch, pushed by centrifugal force toward the outside. The truth is, he can’t turn that well—he’s only eight, after all. And he’s not that well-coordinated. A red-haired kid from his class and some fat blond boy are handling themselves as if they’ve taken a class. It’s just like on the soccer field, when I see someone Alex’s age execute a perfect goal and wish I were the kind of father who kicked the old pigskin (or is it thrown?) in the backyard with his boy. Anyway, I figure I’ll slide alongside and do a lap or two with him. As he glides toward me, I push off to build up some speed.

But the flashing of the pink-yellow-green lights throws me off. What I thought was an open space turns out to be a boy wearing a green shirt, and he plows into my legs. I manage to stay upright, but the boy falls. I can’t stay to help him up—I have to be with my son. “Sorry...” I tell the boy on the floor and push off to merge with Alex. Here I am, trailing parallel to him as we go into the first curve. I wave in an arc wide as a windshield wiper, but he doesn’t wave back.

“C’mon.” I reach out for him. No response. I grit my teeth, longing for what all fathers desire. I want to give him a hug, I want to smack him, *I want him to heed me*. But when I get to within a breath of him, he takes a turn toward the middle of the rink. “Hey!” I reach out for him,

but he's too far away already.

Just before he rejoins the circle on the other side, he looks back. "Go away!" he shouts over his shoulder. "You're not my daddy, anyway!"

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As Ted skates about with increasing confidence, he begins to take greater notice of his surroundings. On the far wall is an old sign that reads, "HOCKEY PLAYED HERE," with a game board listing "PLAYER, PENALTY, ROTATION STATION, HOME, PERIOD, GUEST." Hockey is a sport he never tried. It was for real bruisers who didn't mind losing half their teeth. Will some of these boys turn out that way? It's hard to tell, though one of them, a husky, mop-haired kid with a scowl, already dives ahead as if he held a stick in his hand. Another skates as if reading a book in front of him, always unprepared for the turns. Occasionally he realizes how far behind he's fallen and veers across the oval to catch up. He's wearing a gray shirt and looks familiar, but only after Ted has passed him twice does he recognize him as the strange boy from the bakery.

On skates, Ted has managed to bump only a few boys satisfyingly. At speed, seemingly accidental groping is too difficult, and outright collisions are too unpredictable. "*Only the lonely...*" wail the speakers above. When he encounters the bakery boy for the third time—Alex, isn't it?—he decides to keep pace with him. It isn't easy, since the boy's erratic, but Ted manages. Alex really doesn't seem focused on what he's doing, as if replaying a different scene entirely in his head. But the kid is undeniably cute, with chipmunk cheeks and that groin-stiffening pout. After one and a half circuits paralleling him, Ted's thinking of drifting off to shadow another boy. Then around the next curve, Alex's skates keep straight instead of turning. He tries to veer too quickly and is about to skid out when Ted steadies him around the waist.

"There you go." He lets go after a pause and pats the boy on the head. Nothing to misconstrue there.

"Thanks." Alex skates straight for a moment before looking over at his helper. "Hey, aren't you the man from the bakery?"

Ted nods. *Yeah*, he doesn't say, *and you're the boy who licked me*. Instead, he waits for something to distract Alex, to draw him in another direction, though of course they're circling the same way. But something about the boy is troubling, if alluring, like poisoned fruit. "*Only the lonely...can play...*" the music whines overhead. The lights flash purple and rose.

Alex breaks the noisy silence. "Do you come here often?"

The question is so unexpected that Ted laughs, then quickly stifles himself when he sees how serious the boy is. "Me? Here?" He decides to pose a question himself. "Why do you ask?"

"Because..." Alex executes a faulty turn and nearly collides into Ted's waiting arms

“...you skate really well.”

Ted dismisses the compliment with a wave of his hand, incidentally brushing Alex on the shoulder. “Nah. I learned when I was a kid, but I haven’t skated since. I guess it just comes back to you.” The shoulder is warm to the touch, the boy overheated from exercise.

Alex takes in this news gratefully. “I hope it’ll be that way with me. When I get it, I mean.” He skates another ten yards before he asks, “Are you here alone?”

Ted almost loses his balance at that. “Yes,” he finally replies. “I’m not—” *I’m not a daddy*, he thinks—“I’m not with any other boy.”

“That’s good.” Alex seems to be narrowing the half-foot between them. “I’m here alone, too.”

“Really?” Ted takes a quick look around, not that anyone can see much. He supposes it’s possible: kids car-pooling or something. “So where are your parents?”

“They’re in Arabia.”

“What?” The sound system has just shifted into high gear, with a new song that seems twice as loud as the previous one. “*Woo hoo hoo...!*” echoes in Ted’s ears. Meanwhile the lights have started to strobe, which makes him feel as if he’s skating through a series of stop-time photos. Each moment is colored yellow, red, or blue. Torpedo Girl whizzes by, looking like three people.

Alex repeats what he said, shouting this time. He explains that his family has abandoned him, but he’s still going to school. Ted catches most of it and expresses loud sympathy. He isn’t sure what to make of Alex’s story, and anyway, it’s hard to think with the light-and-sound band playing in his brain. The fuzzy edges of a blackout flirt with his vision.

By now, Alex is quite close to Ted, so when he hollers, “I want to go now!,” Ted hears every word. Since Ted doesn’t react, Alex repeats his sentence and reaches out a hand. After a moment’s consideration, Ted takes it.

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Just because my son has disavowed his parentage doesn’t mean I’ve forsaken him, though it’s tempting. I wonder how many people heard Alex yell that I’m not his father. I should have shouted right back, “So find a ride with someone else!” I should have hauled him back by his shirt and made him eat those words. I should have worked on his sense of guilt, if he has one, and I’m sure he must. I shouldn’t be skating—or fumbling—around this rink, trying to relocate the boy. It’s as if he’s hiding again, only this time in the open. The blinking colored lights don’t help. For some reason, the music’s grown louder, too. Goblin rock or something, with a refrain that sounds like “*Hoo hoo hoo!*”

Damn it, if I'm not his father, who am I? And why would I be going to all this trouble? I tell myself I'll miss him and try to believe it.

After a few prat falls, I realize that my best bet is to anchor myself somewhere and wait for him to pass. But when I reach out for support at the far end, it's just a trompe l'oeuil railing painted on the high cinder-block wall, and I fall again. A pink-red captioned sign, "NO STOPPING," reprimands me three yards ahead. The hell with that. I stumble over to where the real railing ends and post myself there.

Is that him coming along the inside? I'm about to make what the police call a positive ID when the overhead panels become strobe lights. Everything gets reduced to flickers, and I almost lose my balance again. By the time I've got both hands on the railing again, the gray shirt is gone.

"Not me or you...hoo hoo hoo...!"

Next time, I'll get him for sure. By blinking rapidly, I can sort of see in synch with the strobe lights. Waiting...waiting...coming around the bend...but who's that with him? Looks like an adult.

"Alex!" I shout, but the music blocks my voice. I yell out his name again.

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Threading his way through the thick skein of skaters, Ted leads Alex toward the break in the railing near the restrooms. Or maybe Alex is leading him—it's hard to tell. The small hand in his tugs at him, but which way? As they emerge at the far end, a mirrored ball in the center of the rink starts to turn, casting giant orange Cheerios on the floor and walls. But outside the rink, all the colors flatten out, and the two of them are left standing between a karate video game and an out-of-order pinball machine.

"Do you have a car?" asks Alex, disengaging his hand.

"Um, yeah." Ted is still trying to gauge how far to take this. It seems too good to be true. Not to mention dangerous. He thinks briefly of urging Alex toward the men's room.

Alex plants his hands on his hips. "Can we go now?"

Ted gestures downwards. "What about your skates?"

"Oh, yeah..." Alex looks sheepish. He bends down and starts to unbuckle them, but then looks up. "Wait, can't we just skate out of here? That would be so neat."

"Maybe." A vision of them both skating out the exit floats into Ted's mind, replaced by a cigar-chewing fat man chasing after them. "But these aren't my skates." He places both hands on Alex's shoulders, gently massaging. "Look, I've got to return them at the booth and get my

shoes. Where are yours?”

“Never mind. I want to skate to the car.”

“Suit yourself.” He pats Alex on the back. “But stay here till I get back. I’ll be quick, okay?”

“O...kay.”

Ted glides over to the rental booth and unlaces his skates. The kid behind the counter is reading a hot rod magazine and doesn’t even look up for the transfer of shoes and skates. His face is briefly obscured by a floating orange halo reflected from the mirrored ball. The sound system’s pounding out a heavy bass line with a lyric that sounds like “*Gimme gimme gimme.*” Grabbing his loafers as they change from orange to green, Ted doesn’t even take the time to put them on but pads right over to where he’s left Alex. Time to get new socks, he thinks, as a hole in the right big toe snags on something.

The boy’s right where he left him, impatient to leave. “What took you so long?”

“Nothing.” Ted checks his watch as he slips on his shoes. “One minute and thirty-three seconds, that’s all.”

“It seemed like ages.” Alex gets to his feet and rolls gently toward him. He sticks out his small hand against Ted’s waist to stop himself. “Let’s go.”

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This music feels like it’s boring a hole in my ear. And these colored lights—the more they flash, the less I can see. The rink operator must’ve decided the kids weren’t having enough fun or something. I wait three whole circuits, and I still don’t see him. I can’t locate that gray shirt anywhere, not when everything’s suddenly green or pink. When I shout out “Alex!,” the sound system bats back “*Ally-ally-ally-ooop!*” Now I’m getting worried. I know he’s out there, but I also know Alex. My annoying son, who likes to hide.

The bathroom. I’ll bet that’s where he is. Little brat, does he know how frantic this makes me? Probably standing stock-still by the toilet stall, daring me to find him. The sign for the men’s room glares in fluorescent orange near the exit, untinted by the light show. I skate over there, nearly running over that man in mismatched green socks—odder now because he’s not wearing any shoes. We’re both in a hurry, but I swerve, skidding out the last ten feet. “Alex!” I yell, clack-clacking sideways into the bathroom. “I see where you’re hiding, so come on out!”

A pair of skates sticks out from the bottom of the cubicle divider. I bang heavily on the side. The toilet flushes rapidly. “My name’s not Alex, it’s Jimmy,” squeaks an indignant voice.

Shit. I should’ve known—those aren’t even Alex’s skates, anyway. I apologize and lumber out. *So where is he?* I skate over to the birthday table, where Billy McCabe’s mother has

just set out the drinks. I steady myself by reaching out for the table.

“Have you seen Alex?”

“No,” she replies brightly, “but the food’s ready. I’m going to call them all in now.”

I slide-glide-skid over to the railing to watch the kids troop in. First comes the birthday boy, Billy McCabe, a mop-haired chunky kid already acting like a world-weary eight-year-old. A dirty blond kid wearing a “SKOOL DAZE” shirt follows so close on his heels that he almost trips. Then come seven more kids, a few of whom I know from afternoons in the park. Not one of them is Alex. I ask the last one off the rink, a shrimp of a kid with purple Magic Marker on his hands, if he’s seen Alex. He shrugs purplely.

The music has risen a level in noxiousness. “*Be me, be me, be...yeah!*” Plenty of other kids are still skating around, but I can’t see a goddamned thing with all those lights flashing in my eyes. The only way is to get out there and pass through them all. I take a deep breath, shove off from the railing, and turn to where I’m facing an onslaught of kids. Five or six at the most, but they keep changing colors, and none of them is my son. “Alex!” I shout, waving my arms like a mad windmill.

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Ted takes Alex’s hand and starts to lead him down the entry ramp like a mannequin on castors. As they pass the booth, the fat man looks up, notes the kid is wearing his own skates, and shifts his attention back to the TV set by his stool. Outside the exit, the sudden absence of music and colored lights clap them in the face.

“I can hear again,” marvels Alex.

“Yeah. It was kind of loud.” Hand in hand, half skating, half walking, they emerge in the parking lot. Ted looks four or five ways as if waiting to cross an impossibly complex intersection. No one around. “C’mon.” He hustles Alex toward the Sentra and unlocks the passenger’s side for him. “Get in.”

“But my skates—”

“They’ll fit.”

With a little push from Ted, Alex reluctantly gets in and automatically fastens his seatbelt. His skates make short runs on the carpeted interior. “Where are we going?”

Ted looks curiously at his prize. “Home.”

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The only way to rake through this crowd is to skate backwards. But I can’t see much. It feels like the mirrored ball in the center of the rink is spotlighting my forehead. I grope a few boy bodies. No Alex, no Alex—God damn it, where *are* you? If you show up now, I’ll forgive

you till next week. If you show up later, I'll make you sorry you were born. I'm halfway around the oval by now, dizzy and seeing stars on the wall in blue and gold. No, those *are* stars painted there, floating above an American flag. The music bops my ears: "*Want to find someone like you, wish that I could fly, too....*"

More boys, and some cries of "Hey!" and "Watch it!" Alex has gone, he's skating home just to spite me, he's left for the moon. I've got to get out of here. Red-blue-pink and back again. I sway leftwards, heading for the railing. I'm just about to leave the rink when *whoompf*—that girl shoots right into me. We go down in a tangle of limbs, and I get a mouthful of thick thigh.

"Why'ncha watch where you're going?" she barks, levering herself up.

"I'm trying to find someone."

She jerks a thumb toward the exit. "Ask Al in the booth." She skates off.

Okay, I'm out of the rink, and the booth is right ahead of me. As I skate by, the fat man leans out the window and yells at me. "Hey, pal, the skates!"

I skid to a stop an inch from his nose. "Have you seen a little boy...blue skates...gray shirt?"

The man nods, pointing with his unlit cigar. "Yeah, he left a few minutes ago. With someone else."

"With who?" I practically grab the guy by his shirt. "Where'd they go?"

"Just a man. Look, I can't keep track of who comes in here with who. You want me to call the cops?"

"No. Yes! What did the guy look like?"

He scratches his head maddeningly slowly. "I dunno...I think he was wearing green socks."

The rink starts spinning, and my skates slide out from under me. I end up clutching the fat guy's shirt as he reaches for the telephone. I want to stop the planet, reverse time, make it so it never happened, but I settle for 911. The police will be right here, any day now.

When the cops come, I'm back at the party asking questions, but no one knows a damn thing. All I have left are Alex's empty shoes.