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October 15, 2009

## **LEARNING TO STOP**

### **In Loving Memory of my father: William R. Rutledge**

When I was a girl of twelve, about 1956, we lived in rural Pennsylvania north of Pittsburg outside a small town called Coraopolis. It was wintertime and the doldrums had arrived. On one particularly gray day, my father suggested that I learn how to roller skate. Most everyone knows what winter in Pennsylvania can be. Even the encouraging slosh of spring discourages outdoor activities. "I know how to roller skate Dad," I said.

"Not in a roller rink," he said. "Not to music."

"Oh. Okay." The indoor recreation sport of roller skating was an excellent idea. Besides, I'd heard the stories about my parent's first meeting at the skating rink, and I was already curious.

I'd envisioned the twirls to the music and the romantic waltzes, the hugging close, the turning around and kicking legs. I could wear tight tops and little short skirts that flipped up over a tight-clad behind just like the magical girls in the Olympic ice skating competition, only warmer. I'd heard about the pipe organ where a man played waltzes for the couples on the floor. I couldn't wait.

Wearing jeans, at my father's insistence, skates all laced up, the sound of plastic wheels rolling across hard-wood floor, the continuous murmur of kids whizzing by, I stood up, ready to go. I'd skated on sidewalks but never on a smooth wooden floor. If

you've ever tried skating indoors the first thing you find out is that you can go a whole lot faster than you can on any sidewalk.

That wasn't what my father had in mind and as he skated smoothly up beside me, he touched my elbow and said, "You have to learn how to stop before you learn how to go fast. Inside the rails—over there." He nodded back toward the protection the skating rink had installed to keep beginners away from those who knew what they were doing.

"But I know how to skate," I protested.

"Skating on wood is different. You have stoppers on the ends of your skates to stop yourself. If you don't learn how to stop correctly, either you or someone else could get hurt. After that, I'll teach you how to turn around and we'll do a couples waltz."

Okay, so . . . I practiced stopping inside the protection of the sideline rails. I found out that my dad was an excellent teacher. I stopped by using the little rubber gizmos on my skate shoes and I stopped by doing a nifty side drag with my foot. I thought I got good fast. He even showed me how to turn around backwards and stop using both feet at the same time. That was really cool because I knew that someday, when I was really was good, I could get one of those short skating skirts and the nifty matching tights.

Out on the smooth wood floor, pandemonium prevailed. Kids whirled and speeded and crashed. I soon learned that knowing how to stop was also a good defensive move.

"See what I mean, Billie Kay?" my father nodded after we narrowly missed colliding with a speed-crazed boy.

At the far end of the rink I noticed a man climbing up into a glass enclosure and sitting down on a bench in front of the huge pipe organ. Over a loud speaker he

announced, "Couples only dance." And he began to play 'Unchained Melody'. Organ music sent young kids scurrying off the floor. Soft lights from above came on and whirled slowly round and round the huge room. "This is our dance, kiddo," my father said and gathered me up into strong arms that kept me steady and secure. He said, "Just follow me," and winked down at me.

I did follow, too. There were many times that I could've fallen, but he was steady and easy to follow and we waltzed just like the couples in the Olympics. Well . . . I thought so anyway.

Remembering back over the years I realized it wasn't until much later in my life that I learned just how smart my father was. My parents lived their lives in the way described above. They learned to stop before going fast. Conservative before the word became a political misnomer, the simple lesson that my father taught me is one that I've strived to pass on to my children.

THE END