

Young Lions, Young Ladies

by Shea Stutler

Student Essay

Adolescents like to have a place they can call their own. In the fifties, teenagers hung out at the malt shop, sipping cherry cokes and rockin' with Elvis. Today, in a small town in Tennessee, they're jam skating to Montell Jordan. I was amazed to find a microcosm of life blooming on a 70 x 160-foot cement slab known as a roller skating rink.

As I entered the building which housed the rink, the warm, nostalgic scent of popcorn hit that part of my brain where dusty, cobwebbed memories live, memories of my own adolescence. I made my way past a group of exuberant teenagers at the snack bar until I reached the skating rink. Skinny, hard benches, made for small butts, lined one wall. I took a seat and scanned the rink. My eyes paused to read a sign; white, block letters on a black background warned, "Skate at Your Own Risk."

Two young men swaggered past me: confident, heads held high, eyes focused on their destination. I leaned over, looking down the long row of benches, curious to find out where they were going. Their confidence lagged a bit as they approached a large group of their peers, including several young ladies. All of them exhibited signs of discomfort as the girls crossed their arms over their nubile bodies and the boys tried hard not to stare.

Abruptly, a silent signal sent the entire assembly to the benches. Pairs of dexterous hands laced up skates as quickly as possible, while other hands aided in conversation that only the listener was allowed to hear. I was struck by the intimacy of this scene. They all knew each other well. They had come together in the freedom of this one place to share and explore without the encumbrance of parents, teachers, or any other meddling adult. I sat bolt upright, feeling very much like someone who had accidentally stumbled into a room full of naked people.

Attempting to recover from my embarrassment, I was suddenly startled by a cacophony . . . music, perhaps? It must have been music, because I glanced down to find my foot tapping away to a beat long forgotten. As if on cue, young people from every corner of the room flocked to the rink. The awkwardness their bodies had expressed off the rink had been replaced by a grace not unlike the albatross. They were clumsy in their approach to flight, but, once airborne, they were a soaring sight to behold.

I was mesmerized by the effortlessness of their movements, weaving in and out, endlessly circling. Skates became a blur of color: green, purple, blue, pink, red--speeding by fast and furious. I felt the rush of wind on my face as I caught the musky scent of cologne mixed with sweat. A swirl of communication was taking place, none of it involving speech. The tactile sense had kicked in: punching and shoving of young lions trying to impress their ladies of choice, bodies

brushing by each other, and the gentle touch of hand on arm. A statuesque blonde, six inches taller than her partner, slipped. "Catch me, I'm falling on purpose," her body language seemed to say. Eye contact was prevalent. Most skaters continually scanned the rink, found the one they were looking for, and BAM!! eyes quickly darted away. This testing of emotional waters went on for several hours; boys and girls trying on relationships of men and women like kids playing dress up in their parents' clothes.

I remembered the sign, "Skate at Your Own Risk." At the time, I had worried about broken arms and legs, but as I watched the dance unfold on that skating rink, I realized that these young people risk so much more. The pain of rejection, the fear of making fools of themselves, and the devastation they feel when they believe that they have, makes life for these adolescents a risky business. Perhaps that sign should have read, "LIVE at Your Own Risk."