

*CHRYS ROMEO*



*THE SKATING RINK*

# The Skating Rink

**by Chrys Romeo**

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I met River at the skating rink.

It was just another day of the weekend and I was still in school that year.

I was going to the skating rink for the first time. I had never been to a skating rink before - ever. I could hardly recall a distant memory of putting on some white ice skates when I had been about five, but it was very blurry, lost in time and irrelevant... and I wasn't even sure I could keep my balance on ice, let alone skate confidently. However, trying something new was definitely attractive and thrilling. So I decided to do it.

That's why I was really enthusiastic about the idea of going to the skating rink. As we headed towards it, in the warm spring air, while the sun was gently softening its afternoon rays, I was wondering how I would learn the new skill, but I had no idea what to expect – of myself or the activity.

When I got there with my colleagues, I was very eager to get on with it. Even if I knew the other boys in the group might laugh at me for being awkward, I didn't mind. I was focused on the novelty of the action... waiting for my turn to get the skates at the reception desk, oblivious of the noise and chaotic chit-chat going on around me, from happy kids that couldn't wait any longer to rush to the rink, I grabbed my pair of skates like some valuable acquisition. They were a bit heavy and blue – intensely blue, which was somehow a reassuring color. Something like a guarantee of getting it done right. The sharp blades and rich nuance breathed achievement. I was more than glad to see they were so right on my feet; they seemed to have been meant especially for me.

Getting up with the heavy blue skates on was practically an easy task. Getting in the rink was a bit tricky though. I leaned on the wooden ledge and stepped ahead. The air was chilly and I could almost smell the ice. There weren't many kids on the ring. I watched the area for a moment. The scratched surface of artificial ice made the few kids that were sliding in chaotic directions seem bold experts. I decided to try my luck and I let go, dashing ahead. I felt

instantly taller – and I’m not very tall compared to other boys, which makes me lack advantage, when it comes to girls who choose other taller guys most of the time. But at that moment, as I was amazingly sliding on the ice, I felt taller, braver, stronger and definitely better than I had ever been. It was a great feeling... such a smooth movement. As heavy as the ice skates were on my feet, it was equally easier to advance in the ring. It was definitely way easier than walking. It was like riding a kite... like flying over the ground. I felt powerful and confident. I started to enjoy crossing the length of the oval skating zone, adjusting the direction to turn... as I got more and more confident, I increased my speed... and then, I saw her, very closely, glancing at me with a smile – something about that smile was instantly appealing. There was a certain trust and admiration in her eyes that made me feel appreciated even if I didn’t know why... and it made me want to show off a little, to prove that I was worth it.

As her image went by me in a flash, that second was enough for my thoughts to get caught in the moment: I turned and suddenly, something unexpected occurred: I didn’t notice that the front rim of the skates was shaped like a saw, probably to help with artistic ballet schemes, when necessary. But it worked like an abrupt brake. Making a quick move to speed up, the tip of the skate got stuck in the ice, so I tripped over and rolled down in less than a flash of a second. Everything seemed upside down. The ice became the ceiling and the noise around disappeared. I rolled back over and recovered my view of the entire zone. At that moment, I felt a bit dizzy and cold. And then I noticed her again: standing there, next to me.

“Are you okay? Do you need any help?” she asked.

She seemed slightly concerned and serious, as she was glancing at me. Brown dark eyes, like silent lakes, deep oceans were staring beyond the carefully arranged locks of long hair. I could feel the cold frozen ice beneath my jeans and the first image that came to my mind was a cup of hot chocolate. Then I realized a girl was looking at me as I was down on the skating rink surface. *How embarrassing*, I thought and I frowned a little.

„Thanks. I’m fine”, I mumbled and got up shaking off the snowy dust I had gathered on my clothes while tumbling down.

She smiled.

„I’m also new at this, but if you want to keep your balance you have to avoid gaining too much speed. Just take it one step at a time. No complicated figures. Watch!”

And she went ahead, sliding gently on the ice, her arms stretched like wings to the sides, following an invisible line. I went after her, quickly adjusting my speed to catch up with her. She reached the end of the skating rink and hit the wooden ledge, leaning on it joyfully.

„I can do this, but I’m not going to make any risky moves”, she said a bit amused.

„So I noticed”.

I smiled. Her style of skating was calm and steady, unlike mine... I wanted speed and adrenaline. I wanted to prove myself... to myself. And yet, leaning on the wooden ledge, next to her, I was beginning to forget the reason why I wanted to get good at skating. It suddenly seemed more important to stand by her side and simply enjoy the company of that unexpected girl. I noticed she was a bit taller than me but I didn’t let that ruin my mood. *Great*, I thought. *Another teen girl that won’t give me the time of day*. But I cast the thought aside. It didn’t seem to matter anymore, in the ring, who was what. And not even the noisy kids, falling one on top of the other in laughter, didn’t get my attention anymore. I felt good just being there. She was looking around, her cheeks rosy with enthusiasm. We were getting warmer from the fast motion. Something seemed just right for me, being there with her.

”What’s your name anyway?” I asked her.

”I’m River. My name is River Flow.”

”No way! Really? Like a river flow?”... I said amazed, in disbelief.

„Don’t make fun of me.”

“I won’t... you have a really nice name. What shall I call you? River or Flow?”

“Whatever you prefer. What about you?” she turned to look at me attentively.

For some reason, her eyes had a deep intensity, like a determination that went beyond my power to resist her.

„My name is Will.”

„Ok Will. Let’s see if we can get this skating thing right.”

„I’ll race you!” I challenged her and we started toward the other end of the oval arena.

I was careful not to fall down anymore. For some reason, even if I wasn’t an expert at skating, I could get more speed than she would, with her calm, cautious sliding... so I got ahead of her.

„I win!” I said joyfully, when I hit the wooden ledge that was the finish line.

„Not fair! You skate too fast...” she protested, but she smiled, breathing deeply. „Do you want to get to the other side?”

When she said *the other side*, I thought it meant the end of the skating rink.

„Yeah, sure”, I said.

„Let’s go together”.

I was bewildered when I saw her extending a hand to me. The palm was covered in a woolen, fingerless glove. I took her hand and my head went blank for a few seconds, while my heart was racing with unexpected emotion. We started skating together. I could feel the soft woolen texture of the glove on my skin, but also the firm grip of her fingers, holding my hand in a delicate yet steady touch. I realized she was the first girl I was skating with... and holding hands. We had met for only a few minutes, and yet she had already given me so much more than my recent unsuccessful attempts of girlfriends at school. Without many words and without any doubts, she had taken in a minute the courage to be more than the long list of virtual acquaintances, brief encounters in the hallways, pointless conversations and refused connections that I had experienced before. She was real... and she was holding my hand... and we were skating together. I couldn’t believe it.

After a while, she let go of my hand as we arrived on the other side. I felt an unexplained shade of sorrow, letting her go. Looking around, the skating rink was suddenly a different landscape. It was flooded by a translucent light in many colors and the ice seemed grey and sandy, like the surface of the moon. The edges of the skating rink were disappearing in thin clouds of swirling mist.

„What is this? The twilight zone?” I asked her.

There wasn't anyone on the skating rink anymore: just us. And I could see the sunlight appearing from the melting ceiling, the top of a mountain, green branches, birds flying over our heads, the clear blue sky... I looked at my feet and saw grass: patches of fluffy grass.

„Is this an illusion?” I asked her again, because she was silent.

She didn't appear surprised by anything that was around us.

„It's not an illusion. It's a skating rink”.

And she smiled. I looked at her, forgetting about the meaning of what she had said. The pure innocence of her smile was making me surrender my mind to a state of amazed contemplation. It was as if I was beginning to notice how beautiful she was – not a blinding sparkling beauty, but a deeper, a more overwhelming irresistible kind that glowed from inside out. Like a rising tidal wave, an undeniable truth.

„Is this what you were hoping for?” she asked, watching me with observant eyes.

„What do you mean?”

„I mean when you came here this afternoon. Did you think you would find so much on this skating rink?”

„I was really hoping to get good at skating. I certainly didn't expect to find you... or this...”

“Well, you should be careful what you hope for.”

Her mysterious words intrigued me.

“Why?”

“Because you might get it”, she smiled.

And she started sliding towards the other end, where I could see sunlight and blossomed trees and birds... She was sliding on ice, through fluffy patches of green grass... I watched her go, swaying smoothly and calmly like a determined ship, knowing and keeping direction. She seemed not in the least worried or surprised by the mirage around us. She might have witnessed it before. I was still wondering if it was a projection of the skating rink, like a hologram or something. I started to wonder if she was a part of it. But she felt very real. I could still remember the touch of her hand. It had been very real to me. I started to skate after her, moving quickly to catch up. If anything, she was the miracle... I didn't care if it was real or not. I could have been just as unreal myself... who knew and what did it matter? We were there together. And that was the only thing that meant anything to me, at that moment.

While we were going round and round the skating rink, the elusive images started to dissipate. The skating area returned to its usual aspect. I saw the noisy kids again, swarming around and showing off, falling on piles, one after the other. The people behind the glass screen stopped the music and asked everyone to leave because it was closing time.

I left with River Flow. My colleagues had already gone home, before I could notice.

It was a warm day and the sunset colors filled the streets with random traffic. The light had a nostalgic feeling to it, or maybe it was our own wish for the day to never end. I could sense that she was just as happy and just as lost in thoughts as I was. I knew, only by looking in her eyes: they were glistening with joy and a bit of regret because it was evening and the day was coming to an end. We stopped for a few seconds, waiting for traffic lights to change. As we glanced around, she sighed:

“It was a great day! I really enjoyed the skating rink!”

“Me too! We've got to come again soon.”

She looked at me. I wondered what she was thinking. The radiating smile on her face was hinting to a state of mind when you're feeling very much alive and you're ready for anything... to explore the world, to do something crazy...

that kind of exhilarating mood when you feel you're invincible and immeasurably happy about the wonderful unpredictability of life.

"Look", she said.

I stared at the parking space where I saw many motorbikes.

"I want one of those someday", she said.

"No! Really?? Me too!"

I couldn't believe we liked the same things. It was one of my dreams, to get a motorbike one day and run away to the end of the world. Across the black metal fence of the parking lot we could see the bay and the light spreading like orange shiny tin on water. I could almost ask if the ocean had always been there. It felt as if I was looking at it for the first time.

"Let's get one and run away", she said.

I knew she was just daydreaming about it, but I joined her game. I knew we weren't going to do that right then and there, but just the thought of it seemed as if the real thing was about to happen. It was more than enough – it seemed it was everything that would ever matter at that moment. Pretending we would do that for real made us believe we were seriously going to. I liked the idea of running away together. It implied total complicity in sharing our lives, our dream, getting lost in the adventure of a promising tomorrow. I could instantly see myself driving, while she would have her arms around me, holding me... like a perfect vacation picture. A total adventure...

I looked at the parked bikes. We were free to think about it... absolutely free to dream it could be real. Life was at our feet...

"Ok... which one should it be? Do we pick the black one? The black one, or the black and white?"

"The black and white. That's better."

"Agreed. And where shall we go?"

"We'll go to Africa first."

"Our parents won't know where to look for us."

"We'll send them postcards".

She leaned on the street light and stared dreamily down the alley. That was how I liked to remember her, in the years to come: hopefully staring ahead, towards some adventurous, free and unpredictable future where we would go round the world together, forever... It was something so enticing, like a never-ending story, like the light across the bay, swaying in the horizon... a perspective of infinite opportunities, an idea of an open road, a certainty that anything was possible as long as we were together... and it captured my soul entirely.

I wondered if I was already and possibly irreversibly in love with her. But I didn't ask myself too many questions: enjoying the evening was like the immensity of the universe before us... a moment like that when you only want to live, to feel, and not worry about anything... not even about another tomorrow.

We crossed the street.

The peaceful spring night was already falling around us.

"Will I see you again?" I asked her when we separated.

"Yes, Will... you will".

And I could feel her smiling through the darkness, her eyes glistening with sweetness, depth and something intense that was fixed on me, almost intimidating in its determination...

"Am I going to see you at the skating rink next time?"

"For sure", she answered.

"Well then... good night."

"Good night!"

And she disappeared.

I returned home beginning to feel anxious, worried and alone. I had to tell myself I would find her again the next day, just to discard the shroud of doubt that was clouding my mind.

However, I didn't find her the next day. And not the day after that either...

Ten years passed by and I didn't get to see her again. Not even once.

I couldn't forget about her. I kept going to the skating rink, weekend after weekend, year after year, but no sign of her anywhere... Nothing unusual like that happened again either: the surreal landscape, with fluffy grass on ice and a clear blue sky ceiling, sunshine and birds... it seemed to have been more like a dream. But I still believed it had been true. It must have been real. Nothing could erase the memory of the touch of her hand with woolen glove, holding mine as we were skating together. Sometimes, I remembered our plan to go around the world on a motorbike... I was so determined to meet her again, that I kept visiting the skating rink very often. So often, it became an addiction.

In time, I became a skating trainer... a trainer for kids, but still a good trainer. And the skating rink became my playing field: my territory. The memory of River Flow became a flashing brief moment from another life. Sometimes I wondered where she was in the world. Sometimes, I wondered if she actually *was* in the world. Sometimes I wondered if she was only in my mind – and I had invented her. She had been too good to be true, I often thought to myself. I must have created her - made her up from thoughts and wishes of my mind. Dreamed about her existence... Otherwise, how would I understand or justify her inexplicable absence?...

I got used to the idea that life did not give us more than a glimpse of what we wanted.

And then, one day, it happened. The moment I had been waiting for, along the course of ten years in a row – that sometimes felt like ten centuries – had arrived.

As I was helping some kids tie the laces of their skates, I noticed someone standing next to me.

“Can you give me a hand with my skates too?” she asked me.

I looked up... and there she was. Just like that, out of nowhere. I didn't have any problem recognizing her because she looked just the same. She was the same teenager from ten years ago. She hadn't changed a bit. She even had the woolen fingerless gloves on.

“River?...” I asked in disbelief, while I almost couldn’t breathe from the shock of recognizing her appearance. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, it’s me...”

She smiled.

“But how is it possible? Where have you been for so many years?”

She looked down, as if feeling a bit guilty.

“Well, I know it’s been a long time to you... But time is not the same for me. And it was for the better, you’ll understand. Look at you now: a real skate ring trainer...”

“Don’t change the subject. Why did you leave? Why did you disappear?”

The feeling of bewilderment was replaced by anger. I could feel the years of frustration going to my head. I wanted to ask her, to shout at her: *how could you leave me alone for so long??* But I swallowed my words. I was breathing fast, too angry to even speak.

“I can see that you’re upset”, she continued diplomatically. “Come on, I’ll show you”.

She skated ahead, crossing the rink. Looking at her as she was gaining distance, I wondered how we would deal with the difference between us. To me, ten years had gone by. To her, time seemed to just begin.

“I’m not a teenager anymore”, I said, and she replied, without turning around:

“That’s where you’re wrong”.

She paused at the end of the rink. I followed her to the glass window where the people who supervised the skating area stood watching.

“Look”, she said.

I glanced beyond the glass window. Instead of people, I saw a bed, in a room. It looked like a white hospital room. Someone was in there, tied to a breathing machine, unconscious. I froze, recognizing my own image from ten years ago.

“What is that? Another illusion?”

“Don’t let it scare you. And it’s not an illusion... it’s you. It’s the real you.”

I stared at her, not willing to understand. I felt very real as I was. But what she was trying to say was scaring me, even if I didn't know the meaning of it. I had a feeling I didn't want to know the meaning of it anyway. Something from her deep reassuring eyes gave me confidence. Something gentle and sweet, like a total acceptance, made me feel better. I took a breath.

“Tell me”, I said. “Tell me the truth.”

I was ready to hear it. At least it would come from her. It couldn't be that bad: she had been my focus for ten years. She had been my long time invisible companion. I trusted her.

“The truth is that you are over there... and you are right here too.”

“What, like in a parallel world?”

“Maybe. You can see it that way if you want. In that room, you're still a teenager. You're not a trainer and you're not ten years older. Do you remember your first day here? Only a few weeks have actually passed since your first visit to the skating rink. When you tripped, you hit your head and went into a coma. You've been in that state ever since.”

“But my life... it means I haven't actually lived these last ten years? How can that be? Was I just unconscious? I remember it like a movie: ten years of my life, becoming a trainer... do you mean it was just a dream?”

“You can take it both ways: it could be only a dream and it could be that you actually stepped into a parallel universe and became a trainer. But you are timeless, somehow. And so am I.”

I looked at her. She seemed seriously and deeply thoughtful.

“What about you? Who are you, River Flow? How do you appear and disappear – and then appear again?”

Her intense eyes glistened with a smile.

“I am like the flow of life, the endless river that runs free. You can come along with me, or you can remain in that room forever. It's your choice. But Will – you must find the will to decide... soon, before the breathing machine stops.”

“Is the machine going to do that? Is it going to shut down?”

“If you don’t wake up very soon, it will.”

“Do I have a choice between waking up and remaining here? Is that what you’re saying?”

I didn’t want to choose. I wanted to be with her.

“Will I find you in the other world if I wake up?”

She stared deeply into my eyes, as if she didn’t want to reveal the answer. There was a veil of mystery in her glance.

“I can’t guarantee you that I’ll meet you in the other time – or the other world, as you wish to consider it. But I can promise you I’ll never abandon you.”

“Are you some sort of an angel?”

She shrugged and looked away.

”People believe what they want to believe...”

I continued guessing:

“Are you a metaphor? Are you going to tell me that life is a skating rink and we mustn’t go too fast?”

“Life is like a skating rink, that’s true. You go round and round... but you never go back. You must take the moment as you find it – and live it as it comes. Because it never returns.”

“Are you the energy of life?”

“You shouldn’t wait any longer.”

“So how do I wake up? How do I go along with you?”

“You must decide”, she said, avoiding my questions. “You must really want it. If you really want it, you will wake up. And you will live.”

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I woke up and I saw light flooding the room. My eyes hurt at the intensity of it and my head hurt too. I couldn’t remember anything from my dream. I could only remember the skating rink. I couldn’t move too well, but I started to recover in the coming days. My colleagues at school said I had lost weight

during the time I was in a coma. It seemed to me I had missed so much of life and something was missing still.

One year after that, on a sunny day, as I was returning home on my bike, I saw a girl on roller skates. She was casually rolling by in the spring air filled with the scent of blossoming trees. Something from her appearance seemed to get my attention. She saw me looking at her, though I had sunglasses on. She felt it. And as I passed her by, while we were approaching a bridge, I heard her ask me something:

“Can you take me along with you across the bridge?”

I stopped the bike and looked back. She seemed to have a hard time advancing on the roller skates and the road was rough. I turned my bike and got near her, until she could grab the steel edge of it.

“Come on, I’ll get you across”, I said.

And I pedaled forward.

“Am I too heavy?” she asked me a bit concerned, because carrying her along was modifying my speed.

“No. You’re not heavy. Would you like me to go faster?”

And I pedaled faster.

“Wow, slow down!” she giggled, obviously enjoying the ride.

It was such a good feeling to be able to do that for a girl – just take her along the ride. The way she was relying on me and my strength to move ahead, the way she was asking me to slow down and meanwhile enjoying it, made it absolutely worth it. It was a moment I felt I was becoming more alive than I had recently been – or ever been, for that matter. It was a new experience for me that I never thought I would encounter just like that, on the road, on a random spring afternoon... When we were going across the bridge, where the asphalt was scattered with pebbles, and as I could feel her hanging on my bike, rolling along behind me, something about that realization made me so very happy. I felt very good and I knew it was what I had been missing: having a real girlfriend. Her presence like a miracle attached to my bike reminded me of something I had

long forgotten... It was such a beautiful spring day, with birds flying in the clear blue sky and fluffy grass by the side of the road...

We got beyond the bridge and I stopped the bike. I got off, while she let go of the metal bar. She attempted to take a step ahead, but the roller skates made her unstable. She staggered uneasily. I offered her my hand.

“Here... let me help you.”

She hesitated for a second, but then she took my hand without any doubts, without any questions. And in a flash, as her fingers touched mine, I realized it was something I had encountered before. The feeling of her hand holding mine, her acceptance and silent complicity, the certainty of it was beyond my memory: it was more than real. It was destined to happen. I didn't know how I was so sure that she had appeared on my way to bring me something I had been missing or never had... even though it was something I hadn't experienced and lived before, I knew it was something definitely meant to be mine to hold onto. I just knew the moment was absolutely special for me.

“What's your name?” I asked her attentively.

“I'm River”, she said and smiled innocently. “And you're Will, right?”

“How do you know?”

“I heard the boys talking about you. They said you were in a coma for many weeks. Is it true?”

I nodded.

“Yes, it's true.”

”You look okay now...”

”Yeah.”

I still felt as if I had been missing a lot from life, but I had an unexplained certainty that I was going to get it right eventually. Whatever I had lost... it would be mine one day.

“It's been a long time”, I said, staring ahead at the empty road stretching before us, in the sunlight. “Time goes by... and it doesn't come back. You can only go forward... by the way – where are you going?”

Her eyes seemed to have a mysterious veil when she answered, watching me observantly:

“I don’t know yet... I usually go with the flow... but we can go together for a while. Are you going that way?”

“Yes, that way.”

At that moment we were both looking in the same direction. There was only one road ahead, anyhow... but it seemed like we actually had a choice. And we were choosing it willingly.

“Well then... let’s get going.”

## 2

It’s easy for us to think we’re immortal. We look around, we see the ancient mountains, the eternal sky with planets, the entire universe that seems infinite and we think we are the same way... when we are born, we struggle to understand the world, then we think the world is at our feet, with as much time as we need to make our dreams come true and it’s a lot more difficult for us to imagine time is not endless - we’re not endless. We know we’re insignificant creatures compared to the immensity of the universe, but the notion doesn’t get too much attention in our head. We don’t want to believe our days are in some way unlimited. We like to see ourselves as invincible, eternal, powerful and timeless... And the notion of numbered minutes is absent from our minds... most of the time.

Only when we’ve got something to lose, that’s when the realization of time starts to take shape among our wishes.

The truth is, I honestly haven’t thought too often about my time – or time in general - being limited and running out. I wondered how long I would live, what I would do – but it didn’t matter to me very much. Not before I met River,

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