

HANNAH GOLDSMITH

## Bruises are just Derby Kisses

**W***hy do I do this to myself?* Everything hurt. My shoulder blades crunched against the concrete, my thigh muscles seared with lactic acid, my fists grew numb as they held my tailbone off of the floor... but worst of all were the spasms in my abs. My wannabe six-pack twitched under my skin, straining to hold my legs in the air at a forty-five-degree angle. The whistle blew and I groaned as I lowered my skates to six inches off the ground.

*Oh yeah, because I'm a masochist... I secretly love the pain, and torturing myself is what I do for fun.*

I snorted at my own sarcasm, but the fires of hell in my abdomen reminded me that this was no time for jokes. I stared at the rafters waiting for the eternity of thirty seconds to end.

*"Buy aluminum skates," they said... "They're stronger than nylon and not THAT much heavier," they said. Not that heavy, my ass! Clearly none of those Internet forum idiots ever had to do leg lifts with them. Screw 'em all!*

The second whistle blew. A collective "hurmph" echoed as eleven girls simultaneously lifted their legs back to a forty-five-degree angle, instantly followed by a third whistle and the clatter of eighty-eight wheels hitting the ground.

But the pain wasn't over yet. We sprang to our feet with the momentum gained by our falling legs and sprinted across the gym floor, our roller skates making us human racecars. A few meters ahead of me, the faster skaters had already reached the back wall where they expertly twirled a 180, stopped on their toes, and zoomed past me in the opposite direction—to the wall where we had started. I, on the

other hand, was fresh meat. Less skilled than the rest, the only way I could manage not barreling head first into the brick wall was to force myself to topple on my kneepads, spin around on the floor, and hop back up. This took a few extra, precious seconds and I was the last one to slide back into the starting line.

Coach looked at his stopwatch. "Nineteen seconds. Not bad, ladies. But let's try to get that under eighteen. Reset!"

I groaned as I slumped back down on the concrete, still huffing and puffing from the dash across the gym. My lungs had joined the blaze.

*Why the hell do I do this?*

On an unusually cool day the previous summer, a high school friend stopped by my apartment on her way home from work. With no classes to occupy our time and the majority of our college friends staying back home for the break, we frequented each other's company to escape ourselves. We chose to spend this particular afternoon meandering up and down the roads surrounding my school.

"I finally picked a derby name!" she excitedly told me as we squeezed past a couple skateboarders.

"Oh nice!" I squinted up to see her face through the sun. "What is it?"

"Johnny Crash."

I let out an amused snort.

"Yeah..." she said, walking low to avoid a drooping mulberry branch. "I didn't really pick it, my mom did. I don't even like country music... I just can't think of something better."

"It's kinda punny though," I tried to reassure her. "What else is new?"

"Johnny" breathed an aggravated sigh. "We got in a fight the other day."

I nodded, acknowledging that I knew she was talking about her boyfriend. Quarrels between them weren't uncommon. I had been tempted before to suggest that maybe the relationship wasn't the right one for her. The frequency of their bickering and bruised egos made me question why she still bothered. But emotions are complicated creatures. So I held my tongue.

"It's just..." She paused to veer around a fire hydrant. Another sigh. "It's just that sometimes I don't understand him."

"How so?" I pried.

"He does these things and sometimes it's like he doesn't consider how I would feel! You know? It's just like... I don't know... it kinda hurts, you know?"

I cocked an eyebrow. I didn't know. Usually I was able to follow her train of thought but I must have fallen off somewhere. Before I

could ask her to clarify, she cut me off.

“But I still love him and everything... I just wish he didn’t act like a poophead sometimes... Hey! You should come to a practice with me next week!” She perked up as if suddenly forgetting her relationship problems. “It’d be super fun and I’m sure they’d love to have you come watch!”

“Ha. Sure, Em—I mean *Johnny*. I’ll come watch you wipe out.” I gave her a friendly booty bump to the hip.

“Hey!” She laughed as she sidestepped to compensate for the momentary loss of balance. “Cut me a break! I only fell once last time. I’m still learning, okay?”

I sat surrounded by smelly gym bags and half-empty Gatorade bottles. The roller derby team had just finished running a drill I failed to understand. Having not purchased skates yet, I was confined to the sidelines, failing to keep up with what was happening on the track.

“Alright. Take five!” Coach announced, glancing at his stopwatch.

The girls rolled over, crimson-faced and panting. One skater dropped to her knees and skidded to a duffle bag next to me, which she furiously began riffling through. The dew drops of perspiration balancing on her heat-blotched collarbone rolled into her tank top collar as she dug around with accelerated speed. Every breath sounded scratchy like her lungs had sandpaper walls. Frustrated by being unable to locate what she was looking for, she proceeded to dump the entire contents on the dusty floor. Various items clattered to the concrete, creating a heap of personal effects. Among them, an inhaler rested atop a box of Marlboros. She snatched it up and, pressing it between her lips, drew in an extended breath. She exhaled the puff with a sigh of rapture.

“God my lungs fucking suck,” she remarked as the medication settled into her respiratory system. “It felt like my chest was about to implode.”

“Dude, why don’t you quit smoking then?” another team member berated.

“Shut up! You’re not a doctor. I like it and I do what I want!” She took another long drag from the inhaler.

My mom suddenly stopped washing the dishes and stared dead out the window, assuming an expression as if I had punched her in the gut.

“It’s just roller derby, Mom. It’s not like I decided to join a cult or commit suicide.” But the look on her face made it seem as if I had done both. She drew a sharp breath and resumed her scrubbing—so vigorous now that I thought a plate would crack. Her eyes did not so

much as flicker in my direction. I shifted from foot to foot waiting for her to say something, but it was obvious I was being given the North Pole of cold shoulders.

“Okay then.” I started shuffling toward the kitchen door. If she wasn’t going to talk, I wasn’t going to stand and listen to her silence. I almost reached the door.

“You’re an adult. You can do whatever you want,” she said. The words fell sharply and pinned me to the kitchen entrance. I couldn’t tell if that was meant to make me feel guilty about playing a sport she disapproves of or to remind herself that I wasn’t a child anymore. Maybe it was both.

“I had just hoped you’d support me....” My bottom lids were turning hot as I stood at the edge of the kitchen and I pressed a thumb into the corner of my eye to discourage any leaks. It wasn’t quite working. I had saved the topic for weeks, waiting for a chance to excitedly share what I had thought would be exciting news. But similar to previous announcements—like the cats I adopted, my new job working late at the movie theater, or my first boyfriend—Mom wasn’t too keen. Instead of the proud reaction I had crossed my fingers for, I was crushed by disapproval. Moms can be good at that. It kinda hurt.

“You did ruin your knee skating before, remember?”

A noticeable pop of my joint proclaimed the result of my sixth grade accident. Of course I remembered.

“You could dislocate it again! Or you could break a bone, or get a concussion or... you’re so small and sweet and those derby girls I imagine are big and mean and... I worry about you...”

She paused. I stared at my socks, knowing there wasn’t a single counterargument that would change her mind.

“Just... be careful,” Mom said, softer now, right before I turned again to exit.

“I will.”

She peeked over her shoulder. I could see her eyes brimming too—maybe just from the hot water in the sink.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

The whistle blew and I internally screamed as I lowered my skates to six inches off the ground.

*Why do I do this to myself?*

I thought this again as I waited for another century of leg lifts to end. Second whistle—legs raised to forty-fives. Third whistle—sprint across the room. Crash land before picking a fight with the wall. Get up and sprint back, sliding baseball style into my slot between two other girls. A wheel caught under my thigh as I did so. It bit through

my leggings and I instantly knew my skin would look like a grape Kool-Aid stain by the morning.

“Eighteen on the dot! Nice work, ladies. Take five!”

I collapsed backwards in sweet relief. “I’m going to be so sore tomorrow!”

“I know! Isn’t it great?!” My teammate nudged my ribs with an elbow pad.

I smiled back at her.

*Yeah. It kinda is.*