Flash Fiction Competition 2012

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"To learn to skate is a dangerous thing" by Iona Macall

My knees shook as I took my first tentative step onto the frosty surface. My ice skate gently slid across the surface of the frozen lake and I held my posture as I floated slowly over the ice. My cold hands fist ed into the material of my fluffy red muff as I tried to orientate myself around the dozens of skating people; their bodies twisting and twirling effortlessly over the lake.

I could tell what she was thinking as she looked at her feet: ‘How am I supposed to balance on these things?!’ She looked highly doubtful as she stepped onto the lake, her reddened cheeks beaming bright against her porcelain face and dark hair.

I shifted my left foot and felt a jolting fear as my leg slid away without me and before I knew it I was lying on my back; piercing cold chilling my skin and my dress hitched up to my chest. I frantically patted and pulled at my skirt as I tried to recover what was left of my dignity before I was showered by a chilly cloud of ice shavings.

I skated over quickly as soon as I saw a flurry of skirt and legs. The poor girl was desperately trying to pull her skirt down from her bosom and her rosy cheeks were an even more profound shade than before. I skidded to a stop before her, showering her with flakes of ice my skates shredded from the lake. I held out my hand to her.

“May I help you”, he said as he extended his hand to me. I took it silently and he pulled me to my feet, one hand wrapped around my waist.

“Thank you, sir” I said graciously, before attempting to turn and skate off. My legs wobbled and I swayed uncertainly and before I could fall again the gentleman caught my hand and pulled me close to his side.

She looked up at me with her wide eyes and rosy cheeks. “All my sisters can skate, I thought I would give it a go but it turns out I am not blessed with the talent as they are.” Her eyes twinkled as she laughed at herself and I tightened my hand on hers.

“Come on” I said, “Let’s move away from all these people and find somewhere where you have lots of room.”

We reached an open expanse of ice where no one was nearing and began to skate. He pulled me effortlessly across the ice and I felt more and more at ease as he taught me how to move my feet and hold my body. I stood for a while and watched him as he twirled and danced in front of me, clapping enthusiastically. It wasn’t until the ice cracked underneath his feet that I noticed the ‘Dangerous’ sign only a few metres away from him.
Rubbish by Paraskevi Papagianni

“I said to them... don't buy me any more books. I'm finally done with them- da me la vuelta al mundo” sang newly graduated Patricia as she struggled with her skates, too full with pure un-diluted spirit to apply her usual haste and rigour, the haste and rigour, the severity and anxious sensibility that had gotten her through her academic years unscathed. But there was in fact a perplexing little something behind her moderate, contained demeanour which made her cringe comically and sourly at the sun or anything bright and beautiful. Something akin to a pebble in one’s shoe. Patricia regarded her successes at all different levels as a kind of accident, a misunderstanding in the distribution waiting to be discovered; then with all due courtesy and irrevocable effectiveness the awards of her strenuous but insincere efforts would be withdrawn and returned to the intended recipient: someone much smoother, more docile and clever. Someone perhaps who would not be studying philosophy in spite of having a mysterious condition which resulted in her feeling dizzied to the extent of suffocation by black writing against white paper and would not be baffled by the cruel elusive subtleties of effective charm; someone who would not secretly long for the loud savage dance or wear the heavy anklets, the bang, jangle and thud, the pull and friction of a nameless dread, a fault that could not be mended or even named.

Nonetheless to the external observer that evening Patricia was just slightly (renaissance or maybe 50’s retro style) plump, extremely euphoric and obviously astute- albeit with an alcohol induced pompous idealism. A ‘new soul’ keen on ‘making every possible mistake’- as a popular tune went. The external observer was James, James the Moustache, or James Rubbish as he was called throughout his career as a serial dance refuser. No-one took it pleasantly, but not dancing ask-me’s was not mere etiquette or pretentiousness. It had to do with keeping one’s toenails their natural colour and one’s forehead smooth while engaging in improvised partner dancing.

James knew Patricia by face, but not by name. And despite the fact that a young women singing on the phone in Spanish about liking to play the guitar, eat cinnamon and urinate, while failing to put on her skates with one hand, was not the epitome of eligibility for the privilege of dance, the unexpected mention of the map of the roads leading to and from Moscow, that many branched star of human highways induced bittersweet dreamy shivers in him. Was it Moscow Anna Karenina was set in? He could not remember, but for a moment he imagined himself skating with this unlikely candidate in spite of the danger. And there was a heart-warming finesse –light hearted French cinema style- about the clumsy starry-eyed miss. But before he could muster the courage Patricia had rolled her head in the snow and hiccupped loudly, before bursting into marginally idiotic, deeply musical laughter. Oh, rubbish!!!!! She was too happy to be bothered.
**Murder on ice** by Gavin Brown

On the surface, Mr and Mrs McDonald appeared to have a happy marriage. Whenever visitors called upon them, they would be impressed by the warmth and hospitality they had on offer. Whenever fundraising was needed at the church, they would be at the forefront, raising the most, their gargantuan efforts shaming the meagre contributions of the other members. They were pillars of the community, respected and envied in equal measure. But it was all a front. In reality, they loathed each other with a passion. As soon as any visitors had departed, harsh words would be exchanged, threats of murder issued, and crockery flung back and forth. It was just as well their house was isolated; otherwise, tongues would wag at the din they made.

It was after one heated exchange about prowess in the bedroom, that Mr McDonald had enough. He wanted a divorce, but the divorce he had in mind meant literally cutting the cord between them. Of course he wasn’t to know that Mrs McDonald also had murder in mind.

It was when they were both out on a winter’s walk that the idea came to both of them at the same time. The nearby lake had frozen over, and warning signs had been posted.

In between flashing false smiles at passers-by, and trying to outdo each other in the who can grip the other’s hand the tightest contest, they both glanced at the thin ice, and wondered how they could persuade the other to skate over it…

Mrs McDonald hit upon the idea first. They would go skating, but it would all end in tragedy. All it would take is one good push. After all, people die falling through thin ice every year…

Then Mr McDonald hit upon his plan. A few well-placed rocks would be enough to break the ice. Of course, he wouldn’t do it himself. A few coins in the palm of a local ruffian would be enough to get the job done.

So it was that the day came to pass. The McDonalds skating on the ice, trying to persuade the other to go just that little bit closer. After you my dear, no after you my dear, I insist.

When push came to shove, Mrs McDonald shoved first, her husband comically falling over and crashing through the ice. His cold hands struggling for purchase met with the heel of her boot. She smiled as her husband slipped under the water – free at last.

It was then that the ruffian came along. And just like he had been told, the woman was alone on the ice. Getting to work, he lobbed his stones.

A hail of rock flashed pass Mrs McDonald. She was sinking. She cried out for help, but the only reply was more rocks. She slipped under the water to join her husband – they were together for all eternity. Satisfied, the ruffian departed and went to collect his reward.

The End
First Class by David McVey

'It makes a mockery of the whole university!' said Tam Clark, the Senior Lecturer. He was a bit Old Labour, so this kind of reaction wasn’t unexpected.

'Oh, no,' said Jeannie McKay, one of the bright, younger lecturers, 'it’s an innovative approach that engages the awards process with the discourse of modern culture and will really enthuse our graduands.'

'Say all that again in English.' said Tam

'Well, ha, ha, I knew I could trust you all to discuss this in a lively and passionate manner!' broke in Aberfeldy, our Head of Department. ‘But you must let me point out, Tam, that while we rightly regard our First Class Honours students as our best and brightest, we must recognise that there are good years and bad years…’

‘Aye, and this is a bad year,’ said Tam.

‘…yet every year, without fail, two of our students are awarded First Class Honours. There is no level playing field across the years. Therefore this innovation is just as valid, will attract new students and media publicity and be a lot of fun, too!’

We voted. There wasn’t really any point. The commercial and PR departments had the University by the throat and were determined to push the new scheme through, for the very reasons Aberfeldy had suggested. But there was only a narrow majority in favour.

‘Excellent, excellent!’ said Aberfeldy, cupping his hands in triumph. ‘And the splendid news is that our event will only be the third to take place! All the teething troubles will have been eliminated and we, our department and our graduands, will shine!’

In late June, a week before the graduations, we convened in the town’s ice rink. The main spectator gallery was restricted to academic staff, administrators and relatives but the rest of the place was packed, every member of the audience equipped with a small keypad.

The first skater emerged; Sam Ryan, a slender, elegant American girl and brilliant scholar. Under the old system she probably would have been guaranteed a First. Her routine was one of the best, too, intricate and with a couple of remarkable spins. Fifteen skating graduands later, the last to go collided with the perimeter wall. The graduands were lined up on the ice and the audience voted. The announcer called out the losing names one by one and each graduand skated disconsolately off. Then they were down to the last three. ‘And a First Class Honours degree goes to SAM RYAN!’

Sam punched the air and screamed, and when she settled down, there was a hushed pause before the second First was read out – Jackson Ohari, another fine student, happily. The third figure on the ice skated tearfully off.

‘What splendid publicity!’ said Aberfeldy to me on our way out, ‘and next year it may be televised!’

‘This is the future of Higher Education!’ beamed Jeannie Mackay. I think Tam was already in the bar.
Esmé and Gerald by Marka Rifat

Esmé’s spirits soared. She was engaged, graduation with flying colours was on the horizon, and best of all, Papa was happy. From her earliest years, Esmé had struggled valiantly to please her Papa. Esmé’s five younger sisters breezily ignored his exhortations for them to play cricket, climb trees, collect stamps, sail boats, and not cry when they fell, and especially not when dolls, hats and other fripperies came to grief. Esmé alone toiled at sports and manly skills and would be found clutching a sextant in chafed hands as she fell asleep, while her siblings’ pale fingers rested lightly on their golden curls.

When she showed even the hint of promise in a topic, Papa would bully one of his students to tutor her until promise was hammered into ability. All the vigorous mental and physical exercise took its toll and Esmé developed into a very strong, slim young woman. In their motherless household, she humbly took the advice of her little sisters, on how to create curves, hide muscles, and simper. This dissembling helped greatly in Academe, for Esmé had already acquired the mind of several calculating engines and constantly had to flutter a fan of modesty in front of her achievements.

Without the regular company of Papa and the torrent of tutors, Esmé was a lone explorer on a sea of possibilities, but took solace in her studies, theories and experiments. Then Gerald happened.

Gerald gazed fondly at his skating companion. What a find, just when his family were muttering about his allowance, settling down and The Future. His curved moustaches echoed his warm smile, as he waved adieu in his mind’s eye to all his ‘pashes’, the parade of those dear fellows he was so sure were the love of his life, at the time. From Grandfather’s boot boy to Mama’s colourful friends, from his soft-cheeked school chums to Gordon, who only last week had asked him to the family estate for an intimate Hogmanay and whose brown eyes misted when Gerald revealed his new status.

Gordon had held him in a firm, wood-scented embrace for a very long time, then gravely wished him all the luck in the world. Gerald had absolutely no idea what marriage would involve, but decided it was probably like endless evenings of cheroots and brandy, surrounded by chums, or like his club, or jolly school outings, except with a girl.

Esmé gazed ahead, forgetting her slippery, ribbon-wrapped, new approach to life which meant dress patterns, gentle gestures and acquiescence, and instead mused cheerfully on the properties of frictionless ice, the relationship of cape size to aerodynamics, and the formation of storm clouds. As the fiancés glided, hand in gloved hand, their thoughts travelled in very different directions.

Neither noticed that they were heading for thin ice.
The Moustache of Hubert MacDastardly by Ryan Cryle

Hubert MacDastardly was a spontaneous individual of some repute around the Kings College. A dandy of worldly knowledge, it was only natural that a young graduate Doloris, would consent, to becoming his mistress. Doll, as he would whisper, struggled to contain the assortment of trinkets that he showered upon her inside of her stuffy quarters. MacDastardly had honed his capacity for discretion and many a serving girl, but never a graduate, had been seduced by the lustre of his black moustache. It had been decided that they would skate on the frozen pond near to his stately manor and he insisted upon them wearing matching red overcoats. As a grin spread across his swarthy complexion he sneered that no harm would become them.

Beneath a clear night sky of the darkest blue, its only feature, the distant spires of the College, they carved their boots across the expanse of ice that rendered the water motionless. On the bank, a sign read 'DANGEROUS!' in blood red lettering but Doll could only think of the danger that the seasoned predator with handlebar moustache posed her, cracks in the surface of the ice where inconsequential. They moved in tandem, spraying crystalline dust as they turned, a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

As the night wore on the couple began to grow tired of exercise and instead rested on the other side of the river, where snow covered trees formed a protective shield from the night's chill. MacDastardly began to preen himself, using a comb to remove small flakes of snow from his hair. Lighting another cigarette, he turned to his mistress and began to advance upon her. Doll, in a sudden realisation as to the inappropriateness of the situation pushed him away but he came on stronger. He began to smile, a hideous grin plastered across his face, he pulled a penknife from his jacket pocket in an attempt to threaten the emancipated woman to submit to his will. She eluded him by rolling down the embankment and on to the ice. She struggled to get to her feet on the translucent surface and as he attempted to dive after her the skate upon her foot slipped and sliced unintentionally up towards his head. There was a tremendous crash, as if two tectonic plates had smashed together beneath her. Turning around, the young woman saw only a hole in the surface of the ice. MacDastardly, had plummeted to icy death, swept away by the repressed river as he had tried to claim the woman.

Doloris stumbled home through the night, still wearing the attire she had acquired from the late Professor. She reached her bed with frozen tears like diamonds glued to her cheeks. As she settled her beating heart and began to remove her skates her fingers became tangled in a greasy, warm mass. There, stuck upon the side of the skate’s sharp blade was the black moustache of Hubert MacDastardly, a final trinket to remind her of the dangers posed by worldly men.
While there is something very fine about a moustache that curls up at the edges he looked absolutely ridiculous skating about in a waistcoat, flaring his massive red graduation gown out behind him. The pack of boy-men that were strapping blades to the bottoms of their boots were at best able to propel themselves forward in a straight line, but he sprightly twisted about with a smirk that provoked her to hope that someone would use his solid frame for support, accidentally forcing him down smartly. His over-confident glances in her direction were as obnoxious as his fashionable little moustache and monocle.  

He lit the end of his hand-rolled cigarette and jammed his gloved hands back into his warm wool tweed pockets. He smirked at the crush of girls wrapped in red robes, each with a streaming red tassel down her cheek. He was searching for her brilliantly red muff and lovely soft eyes. 

Boys were attempting races, but no one sliced through the air and ice as well as him. The girls were pretending they didn’t notice what the boys were about, and began teasing, flouncing, and making daisy-chains with their arms. She would much rather be racing, and beating him would be far more satisfying than watching him fall. Their eyes met across the crowds and she nodded towards the opposite side of the frozen river, where the ice was not as thick and was lined with danger signs. The archness of her manner issued a challenge. Technically she reached the far side moments before he did.  

“Drowning or hypothermia are not exactly how I wish to begin the next chapter of my life!” He called out to the girl with the impossibly stubborn glint in her fine eyes. 

“That is a pathetic excuse for being bested by a girl.” She replied. 

He threw off his left-hand glove and reached out towards her without skating any closer. “Not wishing to be overly dramatic would you please give me your hand?” She laughed incredulously, “You are being very dramatic, indeed.” “We will never share a strawberry phosphate if you die here.” “When did strawberry phosphates enter the conversation?” “Since I am saving your life you are obliged to accompany me to the Candy Kitchen to toast my gallantry.” His face betrayed mounting alarm. 

“Are you asking me out on a date?” She glanced down and about at the ice under her skates apprehensively. 

His voice grew very soft, “Take three small strides and everything will be fine.” She firmly grasped his fingers which had remained stretched out to her for the duration of the conversation. They skated slowly away from the danger signs; neither relinquishing the hand of the other. 

Many years later when they told the story to their children’s children she never admitted to them that she intentionally had gone to the dangerous bit of ice just to flirt with him; and he never admitted to her that it had never been dangerous in the first place.
On Thin Ice by Finlay McRobert

I met my first love at the age of nineteen. Daisy was a beautiful specimen with a heart as gold as that of her floral namesake and a complexion as pale as its petals, not to mention a lineage of admirable reputation. As convention dictates we were utterly in love and, inevitably, were soon married.

As a wedding present my parents purchased a private estate near the coast where I and my beloved could happily spend our days, and for a while it was fun. Over time, though, the roses in her cheeks began to fade and our marriage reached a dry patch.

Hungry to fill the void made by my first wife’s untimely death, on that disastrous boating trip I organised, I became a frequenter of the gambling ring and an enthusiast of alcohol. Owing to the expense of my new hobby I was financially amputated from my family. In my drunken stupor I fear I may have staggered down that most undignified lane of misogynistic recreational pursuits had I not met my second wife Valentine.

Holding a well paid position at the local post office, Valentine supported and resuscitated me until I was respectable enough to find work. Very soon I gained a post at the boy’s school in town, a career that suited me as I have small liking for children and a strong ally in the cane.

So Valentine and I lived in what seemed to be quiet happiness. Then came the day when my dear darling wife revealed that I was no longer the only man in her life. This was not happy news, and the fact that the other man was the repugnant headmaster, did not ease the sting.

It was so sad the next day when Valentine lost her footing as we walked by the cliffs, and that the headmaster would follow suit in an attempt to rejoin her. Still, a silver lining presented itself as I ascended the educational ladder to take his now vacant position.

Three months later, grieving done, I hired a new school nurse, Enid. Her being a young woman of ample proportions, we promptly found ourselves in a passionate love affair and, after public exposure, married.

I could not have predicted that my new bride would have so little understanding of social convention. She seems to be under the delusion that she is in charge of our marriage, failing completely to understand that the man always leads.

It is, however, very difficult to sway her. Indeed my residence scarcely bears any resemblance to what it was before we shared it. To Enid’s credit though she is the luckiest person I’ve ever known. I was amazed when she survived the rat poison which that waiter foolishly spilled in her soup and escaped that particularly expensive fire at the school infirmary unscathed.

As the Christmas holidays have begun and my beloved’s birthday approaches I deem it time for celebration. Today we are going skating.

On thin ice.
The Ba’s on the Tiles by Alexander Inglis

Crashing against the doorstop the front door rebounded closed with a house shaking thud, staying open only long enough to allow a boy, face flushed with excitement, exertion and the cold, into the house. He was a tall seven years old whose jeans hung low on his slim hips. Without thinking he grabbed them and rucked them higher round his waist.

“Da, Da the ba’s on the tiles.”

Aye son, the ba’s on the tiles right enough.

He stood up and with his foot pushed the half packed suitcase behind the bedroom door.

“Da far are ye, did ye hear mi, the ba’s on the tiles.”

“Ah’m up here,” he shouted.

With a thunder of pounding feet that belied his size the boy bounded up the stairs in search of his father.

“Da, Ah need a new ba’, we winna manage tae get that ean back, it’s stuck on the roof,” he cried, uncertainty and tears hovering behind his large dark eyes.

“But Ah thought that was yer best ba’, you got it fae yer granda.”

“Aye, but Ah kin aye get a new ean, can’t Ah?” Then, with bravado that did not reach his eyes he continued. “Ah’ve bin getting’ fed up wi that ean so if we canna get it back, maybe Ah could get anither ean.”

That’s probably how your ma thinks about me. It’s bin thin ice for a while now.

He sat on the edge of the bed and looked the boy directly in the eyes, “No, we canna just forget about it, it’s your favourite. You canna just walk away as if it disnae mean anything. How long have you had it now?”

The boy face adopted the most serious expression he could muster. “Oh, wwwwwwweeeekks an’ wwwwwweeeekks,” he said, then, still maintaining the serious face, “you ken fit Da, you’re right, it is ma best ba’, and Ah really div like it, so we hiv to dae something tae save it, ye canna jist walk awa fae something ye really like, now can ye?”

Past his son’s shoulder he could see the corner of his suitcase poking out from behind the door.

No, ye canna jist walk awa fae something ye really like, now can ye?

Aloud he said, “C’mon, I’ll borrow Bill’s ladder from next door.

*****
Red by Samira N'Dow

Mistress, adulteress, self-centered, hardhearted, malicious: all words that are commonly used to describe a person in my position. However, is there a word for an unaware mistress? Someone who has been unfairly, selfishly lied to and tragically caught out? I was in love…or so I had thought. Therefore, I did not see the facts. He claimed he still loved me; however, he still loved her. Is it possible to truly love two people at once? I don’t think so. And however hard I strive, I cannot erase the memories of our beautiful time together.

Perfection. A crisp, cold winter’s day with a clear sky and the air brimming with Christmas cheer. He was taking me ice-skating, a hobby which we had both enjoyed since childhood. He arrived at 12:15, impeccably timed and to my surprise, with a gift in hand. He handed me the faultlessly wrapped box, with a bright red ribbon securing the scarlet gift-wrap. ‘Merry Christmas,’ he said, and I carefully unlaced the delicate ribbon and unclasped the intricately designed box that held my gift. It was a ruby red, heart shaped pendant with the words “true love” engraved on the back. I was overjoyed, deeply in love with the gift and with him.

We arrived at the unexpectedly empty outdoor skating rink; it was decorated with gold, green and red decorations suiting the festive theme entirely. As we skated in harmony with one another, I was content. However, I then felt his handgrip tighten slightly, just past my zone of comfort. As I looked towards him, his face was pointed downward and his cheeks began to blush a furious red. I looked around for anything that might have caused his anxiety but could not find an evident source. It was then. That one word. ‘Daddy!’ the young boy of no more than three yelled as he ran towards us. The ice below my feet seemed to shatter, along with my heart. Yet, it was the woman’s solemn face, not angry nor hurt, more numb, that caused me the most pain. It is that face that stays with me, every day reminding me of what I have done to that family.

Red: a festive colour; the colour of happiness and true love. It was that day of pain that taught me about true love. It exists, but it does not always bring happiness, it can cause pain, regret, hatred. For those who have sustainable true love: I envy you but I truly wish you well. However, now, and forever, I will view red not as a symbol of love but as a warning: a colour of danger and heartbreak- because in my eyes, true love can never be certain again.
The Sense of This by B Robertson

With only his repetitively refreshed breath-cloud to impede his view of the rink, Alan watched as the newly acquired boyfriend was increasingly tormented by his girlfriend’s skill. Where she showed confident edges, his progress was fitful and beset by trouser-wetting trips to the ice floor.

Such raw emotion was just the reason Alan was here, though. His show started in around two hours, and this captive warm-up arena was his manna from heaven.

Where had they met? Maybe the internet? Everyone in the audience could relate to that. Her friends had made her, because her last boyfriend had been such a loser. His was the first profile picture she viewed that looked kind.

But who was this, speeding in to view? With an ice hockey player’s speed and aggression, why did he feel the need to come skating here, at a Christmas market? Who was he trying to impress? Things became clearer as an elegant elfin prince came gliding into view. The line of his thigh spoke of controlled power, where the untrammelled tearing of the larger man’s skating was raw and brutal, like he was used to dragging forty pounds on his back around the rink.

Were they show skaters, getting used to the ice before the big performance? The swan prince and an ugly sister, perhaps?

Alan’s attention switched back to the exploratory daters. The laser sights of the boyfriend had picked up these experts. They had fired him to further fuming frustration.

"She never mentioned this on her profile," he thought, as the rage continued to well within him.

He mustered his meagre crumbs of skill, and focussed them on one triumphant rite of destruction. One high speed collision would crystallise his place as alpha ice-king, he spuriously reasoned.

"Watch this," he proclaimed, with steaming exuberance. Her mind drifted to her friends, so eager to see her happy and so sure the internet held the key. A smugly self-satisfied "I told you so," would soon be transmitted from mind to thumb to text to friends.

She beheld the agony, as he stumbled his way across the ice, gathering pace like a boulder bouncing its rough edges down a rugged crag, aimed at the giant show skater, who was all too aware of what was occurring.

With a deft sidestep, he evaded the thundering juggernaut, and was able to gaze as the primal challenge was rendered impotent.

Casting aside the crumpled dignity of his attacker, like yesterday’s news, he calmly delivered the knockout blow: "this is what comes of cross-dressing, princess."
And there it was: Alan had the spark for his opening heckler put-down. It was the only ignition he needed in place to set his confidence levels alight for the evening's performance.

With his task completed, he walked off into the enveloping darkness, leaving the rink’s icy tableau of furious fists to his fellow voyeurs’ gaze, his cruel senses sharpened for the show ahead.
Ice Always Cracks In Spring by Magnus Kermack

She used the words ‘loyal’ and ‘forgiving’. Days were lost while he wondered why she had to top it off with ‘needy’. She left with dog. “It was my dog!” Eric exclaimed, “She didn’t clean up after it once. She said I was in too much of a state to even look after myself. Whatever that means.” He grumbled on.

His friends, all wilting away, looked youthful compared to Eric smothered in his typical grumpy attitude. Donald, the eldest of the group stood, thumped his fist down on the table and punched through a social barrier, grunting, “Take a look at yourself! Early spring, every year, you plunge yourself onto that chair with the same story, leading to the same outcome: you buy her jewellery, she sulks her way back into the driver’s seat of your life and wallet, and you get treated like dirt. Wipe the slate clean!”

Eric explained how he’d met Linda when he was seventeen. That was fifty one years ago. He knew nothing of meeting another woman or of living by himself. Donald knew. He and the rest of them had planned it all out in advance.

“Mark, MARK!” Donald became impatient. Mark carefully slid a business card around the backgammon boards. It didn’t matter. There was no chance now of the game being continued. Eric squinted at the small font on the card. Therapy. He stood up and stormed out but with card nestled in his right hand.

He stared at it for a while before phoning the number on the card. Her name was Angela. She offered him a free half-hour session. Eric was able to open up. He booked another appointment. It then happened every fortnight, every week, every four days. Linda started to become concerned about when she would return. Eric’s mantelpiece began to tower with Linda’s unopened letters slyly requesting gifts.

Within three months of therapy, Linda became curious. She followed him everywhere until she found the source of the issue. She slammed the door into the wall then screamed. Eric coughed, his lips breaking free from Angela’s. His face was pale; breaths stuttered; nowhere to hide.

The papers came through two weeks later. He was finally free. They flowed through the letterbox with Angela’s angry letters complaining that he has not
contacted her since the incident but mainly that she relied on his appointments to make money. But what now?

A couple of days later, Angela agreed to meet Eric. “You don’t deserve me,” she sulked, dropping her head. The shiny diamonds sparked in the sunlight as they swung from her ears.
He believed in love, maybe too much. He’d stare at me as if I was an angel. How wrong he was. He wore his heart on his sleeve but one day, everything changed.

Christmas Eve. Lights shone, reflecting in eyes. Wintry winds found the smallest gaps in clothing, causing crisp, frosty air to send chills through bodies. The ice sparkled, coated with a thin dusting of snow which was falling in twists and turns around us. He grasped my hand, veering off to the side of the pond as others skated by.

He knelt, slowly and carefully before reaching into his pocket, pulling out a dark blue velvet ring box and asking the one question I had tried to avoid for so long:

“Amelia, I love you. Before you I was barely breathing but you brought me back to life. I don’t want to live without you ever again. Will you do me the honour of being my wife?”

I shuddered. A marriage of convenience. That is all it could ever be. Our fathers were business partners. I had not wanted to be a part of this world, I still did not, yet my parents never understood. They kept pushing us together, my whole life. Yet my whole life, I knew it would never work.

I cannot live that life if the love is a lie.

I glanced down at the oval-cut diamond secured on its white gold band before tilting my head up at the falling snowflakes. The snowflakes glistened like a million diamonds. White. Innocent, naive, inexperienced. That was me, but I wanted change. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to experience it. I wanted to glow. I wanted to be envied for my travels, for reaching out and choosing my own path in life. I wanted to rebel against the life set out for me. I wanted to be red, tempting, like an apple hanging from the Tree of Knowledge; full of passion and excitement. Full of knowledge; fit to burst.

“Henry. You know how I feel. I do love you: just not enough. Not enough to make me change my dreams, my goals. Not enough to make me live the same life I have been for the last twenty years. Not enough for me to deserve even a fraction of your love. Not enough for me to deserve you. Find someone who is sweet, kind and, most of all, who loves you with all of her heart. That girl isn’t me. I’m so sorry, but I can’t.” Salt tears sprung to my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. My vision blurred for just a moment, alongside my belief that what I had done was right.

Red. The only thing my eyes could see. That was the last night I saw him.
On Thinnest Ice  by  Anna Cormack

Dong! Dong! Dong! The church bells toll mournfully as I push open the heavy, oak doors. There are a lot of people inside. Rows upon rows of people. Children too. Lots of children.

There were lots of children the day we met; do you remember? They were so excited. Everyone gets excited the day the pond freezes over.

“Be careful!” their mothers cried, “Don’t go out into the middle. The ice is too thin; it might break.” For the most part, they obeyed. Some pushed their luck, edging out as far as possible, seeing how far they could get before being called back and scolded. But nobody went right into the middle, where the ice was thinnest.

Nobody except you. I spotted you almost immediately. How could I fail to, when you skated so far out, a lone figure? Your gaze met mine, and your eyes dared me to join you. I don’t take risks normally, but I didn’t think twice. I knew the ice might break, and that you might fall. I knew too that if you did fall, I would go down with you. Somehow, I didn’t really care.

Everyone looks very sombre and serious, with their black clothes and sorrowful expressions. You would have laughed, if you’d been here, and told them to cheer up. You were often laughing.

You laughed the day I first saw your scars, and told me it was nothing. I didn’t believe you. Lines zigzagged up and down your arms, like skate marks on ice; some so old they were merely shiny scars, some startlingly red. The red ones scared me most: the fresh ones.

This minister is very dull, not like the one who married us. He drones on and on and on, until I almost want to get up and leave.

Being married to you was like spending my life skating out where the ice was thinnest. It was fun – exhilaratingly so – but I lived in constant fear that the ice beneath you would crack, sending you hurtling down. I never took a moment for granted, and I suppose that was good. Your mood changed so quickly. Sometimes you seemed happy, and then a switch was flicked and I couldn’t reach you.

“She seemed like such a lovely girl,” people keep saying to me, “Who could have possibly expected this?” Their hushed voices accuse you of some terrible crime, and I want to defend you, to tell them that you were a lovely girl, and that you didn’t do anything wrong. The ice was just too thin, and one day it cracked. But I can’t find the right words, so I let them think what they like. Who cares?

Do I regret joining you on the ice? I always knew that if you fell, I’d go down with you, and I was right. Leaving me, you destroyed me, but somehow I know I wouldn’t take back a moment spent skating with you, out on thinnest ice.
A silent embrace by Nafisah Scott-Paul

I came to meet you on the ice, just as you had said. The ice was safe. Our words drowned out by the screams of children, the nervous, embarrassed laughs of adults and the sound of the blades, scraping along the winter ice. The silence of the snow. You stood, silently, gazing upwards into the falling white flakes. Your eyes hopeful yet somehow troubled. Perhaps by what you were about to do. What we were about to do. It troubled me sometimes too, but my concern was mainly for you. I never knew what was right for you, but it was not him. That I knew. He was breaking you. Every time I looked into your eyes I saw new cracks underneath. Underneath the urgency, the desire, the need, the love. It was love. A perfect love, but tainted by the world. That is what made it perfect, knowing that it could survive away from the world and all its icy depths. That is what I wanted for you, all I wanted for you. What I knew was right. Love. It was love.

I saw you on the ice. Your dress, flowing like blood in the wind, over the cold, hard ice. Your hair was tied but a loose curl was trying to break free. To escape. It reached into the cold air, swirling around you like the snow. Dark against the white. You stood. Still. Beautiful. Silent. The river, too, was silent beneath your feet. Underneath the screaming and scraping scarring the ice. Cold. Still. Dark. Dead. The fish had all migrated, fleeing the cold icy water to find the warm sun. If they stayed they would die. Like us. We were fish. Struggling to breathe, suffocated by everything, but soon, we would be free. Free to swim. Free to breathe. We longed to breathe. To be away from this cold, dark place.

The church bells knelled in the distance. Three long chimes, breaking through the cold air. I stepped onto the ice towards you, the blades on my feet cutting through the surface of the cracked ice. Scarring my path.

I watched you on the ice. You turned then, your dress sweeping over the ice. Children screamed and adults laughed. Your eyes met mine and you smiled, inviting me forwards into your embrace. Then, silence. I heard it first. A deafening crack, a child’s scream. Then I saw you. Your eyes frantic, loving yet filled with urgency. Your arms reached for mine one last time and mine for yours. Not fast enough. The final crack. Then, silence.

I held you on the ice. Your body wet, cold, still. Silent. A silent embrace.
Rosa’s stomach lurched as it does when you go over a bump in a car. She frowned, trying to make sense of the sensation, while her body fell. Shattering, sharp knives punctured her skin, and drew the breath from her lungs while she watched the small bubbles rise upwards, tickling her face. Tendrils of golden hair enveloped her face, and beams of sunlight kissed her marble cheeks. Her wide panicky eyes searched the blue and green patterns of above and she tried to scream out to the willowy shadow watching, but the cold cement stole her words and filled her mouth. The even colder diamonds on her wrist seemed to become lead weights, guilt pulling her further and further down. Rosa’s brain desperate for oxygen entered euphoria, and her last thoughts reached back to what brought her to her watery grave.

“You’re on thin ice my girl!” Rosa’s mum warned her. Rosa giggled and rolled her eyes. She strolled out the front door towards the waiting gentleman leaning against the gate. She fluttered her doe-eyes and handed her coat to the man while he opened the car door. Rosa White regarded her mother’s words as she kissed the man on the cheek before they set off, but dismissed them. She knew it was improper for a young lady such as herself to be courting so many men, but she also knew she was a very attractive woman. She flashed a dazzling smile at the man in the driver’s seat. His name was Laurence, he was the newest to her collection, and she had heard that he had a young wife with a child on the way. Laurence returned the smile, and handed her a gift bag. Rosa shrieked with delight, and pulled out an expensive looking diamond bracelet. She shivered at the extravagance of the jewels; he was most definitely a keeper, she thought smugly to herself. They pulled up beside a frozen lake. The couple teased and flirted their way towards the ice, pulling on ice-skates and took their first steps onto the glassy surface. They glided for some distance before Rosa realised they were far from the other skaters, and for the first time she felt uneasy for Laurence’s mood seemed to have changed to something more dangerous. She tried to guide Laurence back towards them, but he held her arm firmly. The sound of splintering ice caught Rosa’s attention.

“I think we should turn back…” She tried to pull away from him. Laurence cupped her chin aggressively, and then placed both hands on her cheeks. His eyes were as cold as the ice beneath their feet. Rosa whimpered. Laurence sharply moved backwards as the ice beneath Rosa’s feet started to move, and she lurched forwards, her arms flailing in attempt to steady herself, as she shouted at Laurence, screaming for help. Laurence chuckled as he watched the ice break around her.

“You should have listened to your mother Rosa. You’re on thin ice.”
Strangers in Fiction by Hannah Mitchell

19:26. The train was due at 19:28. My eyes frantically searched for the platform number—.—. In its stead were two horizontal dashes. 19:27. My hands were sweating. A plane, a bus, and a train later, but had I been stopped at the last hurdle? If I missed this train it was over. All in the name of the favourite pastime of France, ‘la grève’ (striking). I would be stuck in Lyon all alone on New Year’s Day. Thoughts plagued my mind of trying to find somewhere to stay. Nearest hotel? Shit. 19:28. No platform. Time to go find some help. The French woman talking to her colleagues was in no rush to help me. 19:35. Bitch. My request was like I was asking for a back rub and a cigarette. She slowly lifted a phone and pressed 2. The train was late and now on… platform H.

19:45 on the train. I was nervous getting on the train. Public transportation has never been reliable to me. Furthermore, French public transportation has been even less reliable and I still had a bus to catch. I had no assigned seat so I placed myself on a square seating area near the door. A couple got on with a baby and sat next to me. They were quickly followed by a girl wearing a floor-length fur coat. Then he got on. Young, matted hair, army boots, and a strange glare. I could see the white all the way around his eyes. It was disconcerting. Yet, there was something soft behind the glare that made me feel sorry for him. Drugs? Alcohol? Mad? Something wasn’t right. He assessed which seats were left and then sat directly opposite me.

I pulled my book from my bag and tried to distract myself with reading.

19.55. It was impossible. It was one of the situations in life that warrant me to adhere to my British roots of politeness. However, in this circumstance where I should have pretended that the commotion occurring in front of me was nothing, I could not. I was transfixed on watching this stranger.

Something about him made me nervous and inquisitive at the same time. It seemed he could not sit still for a second. Every action seemed to carry so much concentration that, if broken would cause him to combust into a million little pieces. He stood up to adjust his jeans. Sat down. Crossed his legs. Uncrossed his legs. Crossed legs. Legs uncrossed. He then took at a little postage-stamp size photo of a woman. As a tear fell down his face he ripped it up into pieces. Threw the pieces on
the floor. 20:05. He scrambled around the floor picking them up.

It reminded me of the moments where as a child where my parents would be driving me somewhere and we would pass an accident with drama and chaos everywhere. My mother telling me, ‘Close your eyes darling until I say you can open them’.

I never did.
**Comfort Eating** by Margaret McGrath

Are you eating comfortably? Then I’ll begin… Comfort eating is its popular name. There’s nothing comfortable about it. Take it from one who knows.

She gazed longingly at the exercise bike in the corner. On her shoe-rack nestled state-of-the-art trainers and a second-hand pair of winter skates. I mean, how did Matty get from a size sixteen to a size twenty? Poof! Magic! It certainly couldn’t have had anything to do with eating comfortably.

The words dangled in the air like a child’s mobile – heart failure, breathing compromised, diabetes – gently spinning above her head.

Mulling over a second hot chocolate, realising it was absolutely now or never, she dragged the bike to the middle of the room. Diet and exercise ringing in her head, mounting the bike, she jammed i-pod earphones into resisting ears. To the strains of ‘He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother’, the first day of the rest of Matty’s life had begun.

This sedentary journey wound its way down memory lane when trainers and skates were everyday wear, accompanying size sixteen as nature intended. Walking with purpose, skating to Bolero, imagination fired, perspiration running down the back of an old, bleach-marked t-shirt. How to go back to those days, she wondered. Indeed was it possible?

Membership of the Fat Ladies’ Club was not enough to embarrass her. Friday’s visit to the Infirmary loomed. In the special unit with the oversized chairs to which her posterior had become accustomed, she would sit, hoping that her guilt, like the hot chocolate, had left no telltale evidence.

She would take memorabilia with her – the skates and size sixteen sweats – items of encouragement for this week. A trip down memory lane. Matty on Huggenfield Loch, fleet of foot, wind in her hair.

“Last chance saloon”, Prof Brown would say, looking at the skates. “Perhaps it’s time to sit up and take notice before the ice breaks beneath your feet and you drown in the frozen water of good intentions.”

Piped music playing gently in the background: ‘If I knew you were comin’, I’d have baked a cake’ – a song close to Matty’s heart!

Eight good men and true brought you here today, Matty, and you have centre stage.

Before we close the curtains on our proceedings, a gentle word of warning to the wise. Although smiling indulgently is quite in order, it is the eating indulgently that brings us together today.

Please stand for the final hymn!
Robin and Mary by Kirsty Kernohan

The late, watery sun sides with the wooden sign in its warning. The ice is too thin. Robin, however, does not wish to heed it and so glides with eyes turned on Mary in nervous anticipation. His gaze is skewed by his monocle into what could be perceived as a leer so perhaps it is well that Mary does not return it. She is looking up to the weak sky, listening to the rhythmic cutting of her blades. Revelling in the cold rush of energy which hits her face and tugs at her scarf with each stroke; an exhilaration above the muted trudge of the snowy college where students stamp purposefully with heads bowed and hands thrust in pockets. Her own hand is clasped in Robin’s glove, uncomfortably, and chills where there are gaps in their intertwined fingers. She would have liked to bury it deep in her muff and skate faster, in a figure of eight or race in circles with only a handful of disgruntled mallards for competition, but Robin’s possessive grasp is an obligation of shared fantasy and so she times her strokes with his and they appear a perfect image of companionship.

Robin’s other hand is deep in his pocket as though to shield it from the cold. Mary was curious earlier, because it is not his custom to slouch, but she was easily distracted by the prospect of skating and little argument was had. There is a ring, of course, of which he will not let go until it is safely installed on Mary’s finger for it was bought at great expense. He hopes the glint of diamond in snow will be perfect. What is going on behind Mary’s apparent rapture he does not know, but he allows himself to hope that she might be thinking of him, their future discussed at great length although she mostly listens.

Mary knows there is a tension, although she has not voiced it. The warmth of a shared future discussed by an evening fire, shoes comfortably kicked off by the door, used to beguile her but an emerging sense of immediacy had been worrying in past weeks. Her mother’s letters are testimony to his good character: ‘You will not find a better man than Robert. He is good and kind and steady and strong.’

Steady and strong, the blades swish in time with Robin’s perfections. There is a sudden breeze, stronger and colder than the rest and Mary pulls her hand from Robin’s as the cold bites. She is too sharp and he stumbles, the tip of a skate strikes the pond’s surface and there is a crack. He cannot catch himself and falls to all fours, the ice remains mercifully intact but a glimmer falls from his pocket and spins to the bank where there is a glint of diamond in snow. Mary helps him up and pretends not to see the ring. She makes her apologies; suddenly she remembers something she has forgotten to do.
The embers of the fire produced a myriad of colours. Crimson, tangerine and buttercup yellows produced a burning glow. There was also ebony. The inky blackness gave this roaring wild animal a cool edge, as it spat at me with animosity.

Although enveloped in sweltering blankets, I still felt the cold seeping through every crack: chilling my very heart.

A clear and joyful laugh drew my attention to the window. Outside a young couple glided across the ice, cheeks flushed with the biting wind, but twined hands kept warm by each other’s warmth. Fools. Didn’t they know how thin the ice was? Look, there was even a sign saying so! I gulped my tea; the boiling elixir swamped my parched mouth. Though I tried to ignore their whooping shouts and hilarity, their impertinent noise pierced my ears like shards of glass.

Then I heard her call him- Duncan.

The mug slipped from my grasp and shattered on the tiled floor. Numbness stole over me and flashes of our life came and went. I pulled myself up, grasping the sides of the armchair with claw-like hands. With much effort, I swept up the cadaver of the cup whilst my heart remained in newly wrenched pieces…

Duncan. My eyes settled on the photograph on the mantle piece, in the monotonous sepia colour of the period. Just a simple beach holiday, we couldn’t afford anything fancier; that was where we had our honeymoon. My Duncan.

His smiling eyes looked at me. Always sanguine, always finding something to laugh at. His boyish and youthful reflection, blazoning his love of life, keeping optimistic when times were arduous. However, it wasn’t enough to keep him with me.
Nothing was. Not the doctors; the medicine; his cheerfulness; and my smiles that held back tears I hid.

He knew they were there. He knew how hard his illness was on me. To see him, my rock, slowly being chipped away at... nothing I could do to stop it. One day he decided to make it easier for me. He died...

I tasted the bitter, salty tears that trickled down my face, each one pricking a long forgotten, recollected memory. My nose began running. I stood gripping my handkerchief blubbering for who knows how long. What if someone came to the door? I didn’t care. I was drowning, again, in choking grief. If death had knocked at the door I would have pulled him fiercely in...

A crack of splintering ice. A scream of despair. I hobbled over to the window. The girl was howling. She hung to the yellowing ice, wild eyed, bestial. A black gush in the ice revealed nothing but a few feeble, chilling splashes.

I turned away and stared at the past.
Closing her eyes, she took his hand and they slid out onto the frozen lake. *Trust,* that’s what this was, she thought. That morning, before going out, dressing sensibly for the season had slipped her mind, now her fingers were numbing, but the heat from his gloved hands was a comfort, a great comfort indeed. He spoke so softly to her as they moved, as they glided through the seamless winter day. But it was not the words that Mable was listening to, rather, she was so fixated on his voice, as gentle as the sunset that dawned on them, yet sincere like the sunrise that had come before. *Perfect.*

As the day’s ending drew near, she felt her chances narrow. Yet, as a final impulse she stopped. She halted on her skates, bringing him back with a jerk.

“Why, Mable, whatever is the…”

“I like you.” She stuttered. “I always have. Ever since we were little, and you were really popular, and I was…” She blurted out. But he did not give her time to finish.

“My, oh my.” He chuckled. “What a perfect cliché.” He mused. “Beyond stereotypical.” His blue eyes sparkled, with all the stars that had begun to show, those stars that had thrown themselves into the night his eyes shone the brightest. She turned away.

“This is a cliché, isn’t it?” She murmured. “No matter which way it ends.”

“Well, how do you think it will end?” He smirked. He was teasing, definitely teasing. He wanted to rip her heart out.

“I’ve never been, and I never will be beautiful.” She admitted. “I could lose weight, but that wouldn’t make me beautiful. You could get any girl you wanted.” And he had. Countless times Mable had seen it, crouched behind a pillar at school, some ten years ago, watching him suck and slurp the faces off many girls, not one as hideous in complexion as she.

“You think it’s all about looks?” He said. Those dream words that filled her up, gave her hope, elated her spirit. Is that what this was? *Hope.*

He pushed his blonde hair back, and once more took her hand. It felt as though her chest might explode.

“Shall we continue?” She nodded in response. The words momentarily lost from her lips. So entranced was she, in these moments of romantic limbo, that she failed to take note of a small but prominent sign that stuck out of the ice like a sore thumb.
The word “Danger” was all that was left to warn her, for the boy had no intention himself.

“You lead.” He smiled. Then he stopped. “No, actually, you go on ahead, I’ll catch up.” Mable felt like she could fly, within a couple of seconds, the ice around her had cracked.

“Help!” She screamed. “Help me!” But the boy’s smile had evolved into a callously evil grin.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “But I’m afraid I’ll have to leave it here.”
Three Weeks in August by Douglas Morgan

The train slowed as it pulled into the station, ferrying its inhabitants into a world of colour and delight. Daniel felt a great throbbing from beyond the demure station walls, an all-consuming vibration that caressed its way through his flesh and muscle to reach his yearning heart. The breath caught in his throat as the doors leapt apart, for he stood on the cusp; he could turn from the edge right now, return home as if nothing had happened, or he could strike through that almost intangible beam of light and change his world forever. The grey seats dotting the coach glared at him, urging strongly against wantonness and hedonism. He paused, torn between the familiar and the terrifyingly unknown. But then the music began to stroke his inner ear, the music that possessed the city at this time of year. Daniel knew that this was his only chance; and so, thrusting his chin resolutely forth, he strode out onto the platform, ready to meet his destiny.

Having drifted through the station, guided by the wonderment as it gently took his hand, the young man found himself standing on a bridge, where he stopped dead in his tracks. Before him now lay…well, the world really. Spires that captured and reflected the sun’s heartening rays rose majestically from the mass of buildings before him, and he could see a vast expanse of laughing grass upon which hundreds of demi-angels lay, all as entranced as he by the strange yet embracing music. And then there were the crowds. Glancing to his right, Daniel saw a shoal of humanity whirling along Princes Street, each following their own rhythm whilst remaining eternally entwined with the music’s pace. All those bodies in such close proximity created friction that sparked a fire, burning with an enticing fierceness and searing the hearts of those who fuelled it with a crazy hope: a hope that the world could remain forever like this, that they could be lotus eaters until time itself stood still, preserving that frenzied love for the universe to marvel at. Ah, but this was life, this was the core of life, and yet this paradise could hold all for three brilliant weeks in August; lord and pauper could come together and drink at the White Hart Inn as brothers. Ideas whizzed through Daniel’s mind, ingenious ideas, so many that he thought his head might explode with the un-distilled joy; but he had no need of innovations and inventions now. He wanted to dance ‘til the sun bowed out, then dance ‘til its encore; he wanted to devour the cake marked ‘eat me’ and tower over the city, embracing it with his gigantic arms for the glory it had wrought. Beaming ecstatically, like a lover at his muse, like a father at his new-born, Daniel strode slowly towards the bustling crowd, feeling its welcoming warmth and muttering to himself, “the joy, the delicious ecstasy. Oh, the beauty, the beauty, the beauty!”
Sylvia by Yuhan Ong

She ghosts down the corridor on padded feet. On her left, the master bedroom with their half-made bed. Her side rumpled and unmade; his prim, clean, unslept in.

On the right, the children’s room. She walks in, casting a shadow on their warm bodies. She presses cool kisses to their foreheads and tucks them in tight, against the winter chill. The girl smells of apples and warm milk. The boy, no more than a baby really, stirs ever so slightly in his sleep and clutches at her skirt.

Her heart aches, a little.

Gently, she wrenches herself free.

The floorboards creak as she hurries past. She winces, afraid to wake the children, although she does not look back. The cracks in the foundation are starting to show.

Downstairs, she bustles about the kitchen, cleaning the oven, wetting cloths and towels, setting them aside. Looking all for the world like a suburban housewife.

Some days, she no longer recognizes the stranger in the mirror, with her red-rimmed eyes and mousy hair. Once, he had called her Ariel, fiery ethereal elemental of Shakespeare’s Tempest.

She was so ordinary now.

Where had the years slipped to?

A wintry draught catches her attention. She looks out of the half-open window, catching sight of the first snowfall, transfixed. It was so much like that first winter, yet so different. Hope lodges in her throat as she waits, unconsciously, for the familiar waft of cigar smoke that will not come now.

He had loved her, once, then, she was sure. Loved the girl in the red coat, the one he said set off her dark eyes perfectly. She had laughed girlishly at his clumsy words. His strong callused hands on hers, solid and warm, not yet a distant memory. He had stood outside, a little ways beyond her window, waiting in the falling snow.

She had seen him through the finger-smudged glass, swinging his skating shoes, and had put on her red coat and flown into his arms. Her thrilled laughter the only sound for miles around as they skated into the horizon. It had been the winter of her graduation, when the world was infinite, a myriad futures unfurling at her feet.

It had been the perfect day, the perfect moment; sunlight in her hair, sincerity in his smile. Before secrets burst from what had seemed to be solid, dependable ground. Before tendrils of ice shot along her spine and wrapped like icy fingers around her heart. Before she sank into a morass of the blackest despair.

It was only later, swaddled in thick blankets and in his strong, sure embrace, that the horror would slowly fade.

It washes over her now, the memory. His sharp, sudden cry; drowned out. The all-consuming cold. The sudden sinking sensation – that they had been skating on thin ice all along. And – only now does she admit – for a brief moment, perhaps, some respite.

She closes her eyes to blot out the stain of the memory and pulls at the oven door.
**Soul Gatherers** by David Morrison

As private investigator Justin Phelps searched Priory Woods, looking for clues as to why twenty six year old Ruby Murray suddenly disappeared while enjoying an alfresco meal with her boyfriend Fred Dinage. Fred had left Ruby laying out the picnic while he popped back to the car to fetch a bottle of champagne. Within the two minutes this took, Ruby had vanished without trace. Police were summoned and they concluded as nothing obvious could be found and as Ruby was an adult that could only advise Fred to go home and wait till she came home. After twenty four hours Fred hired Justin to find Ruby as this was so out of character something must have happened. As Justin searched the surrounding bushes at the scene he found what appeared to be an old card with the image of two ice skaters dressed in Victorian costume skating on thin ice, he thought this odd and placed the card in his pocket and finished searching the area, but found nothing else of any consequence. The next day in his office while reviewing the case he remembered the card which he had put in his pocket, and examined it more closely using a magnifying glass spotting a name in the corner. He looked up the name in the phone book and the internet but found nothing. He the rang an old family friend who is a professional photographer and after explaining the situation he was told back in 1956 their used to be two elderly men who ran an old photographers shop called Thomson and Duncan’s in Elvin Lane but he did not know if it still existed or even if they were still alive.

Three hours later Justin was standing in Elvin Lane; a cobbled road with narrow pavement and old fashioned run down shops which all but one was shut down. Sure enough it was the photographer’s shop the family friend alluded to. Entering the shop Justin found two old men, surrounded by myriad of old camera equipment, all of which looked like it should be in a museum. Handing the card over to the nearest old man. Justin asked

“Do you recognise this card and what can you tell me about it?”

“Why young man we have been searching everywhere for it. Where did you find it?”He answered.

“At the scene where a young woman vanished two days ago, and I want to know how your card got there” stated Justin.

“We have been found out, obviously we dropped it while rescuing the girl” said the old man.

“Smile young man” said the other man as he suddenly took his picture and Justin’s spirit was sucked inside the camera in an instant.

Next thing Justin knew he was frozen in time trapped inside an old card, with the words down the bottom Thomson and Duncan, and if you look closely at the eyes on the card you can see the spirit of the captured soul inside.
"Now that we have completed our degrees, I must confess, Dulcinea, how much I admire your pluck."
"My pluck, Bevis? Have I grown feathers and become a Gallus domesticus?"
"Such droll wit from my little scientist! You know perfectly well – try not to skate over the cracks in the ice, dear; they are not so harmless as they seem – from the moment our eyes met in the chemistry lab, I was struck by your...."
"My ability to set my hair on fire?"
"You must admit it was dramatic. Speaking of fire, would you like a cigarette?"
"Thank you, but the smoke from your own provides adequate tobacco for my needs. I wonder the odour does not make your moustaches stink."
"I coat my moustaches with wax, and thus render them impervious to rude smells. I will never forget the charming way you tripped over your bench as if performing a vaudeville pratfall, and ended up destroying the entire lab in a blaze of fire! Yet you maintained sufficient presence of mind to hack off your flaming locks with a dissection scalpel. You earned an impressive reputation!"
"Indeed, the college shall never forget me. How many other lady students create such an inflagration, yet go on to graduate in the top 85% of their class? At least I learned from my mistake, and now fasten my hair securely with grips when I am proximate to naked flames."
"Now, Dulcie – if I may be so bold? – given that we have cast off the shackles of scientific study, and wear the crimson gowns which signify we shall bear student debt until we die, I feel it is necessary to speak about important matters."
"What can be so important? The adiabatic flame temperature of kerosene? The hydrological cycle?"
"Do be careful, you clumsy thing! You nearly steered us into a puddle."
"I believe it is you who are steering, but never mind. I am sure my future husband will attend more closely to my well-being."
"You know perfectly well I desire to become that husband. It is cruel of you to tease me so."
"It is cruel of you to drag me out onto melting ice for a private conversation. Now I have dropped my muff, and it is all soggy and spoilt. And you have the audacity to accuse me of clumsiness when your only skill is polishing your dilettantish little moustaches."
"Dulcie! I am not certain I can ever forgive you for such an insult."
"I am sure I do not care – "
"Watch out! The ice is cracking!"
"Let go my hand!"
"Ah! In my last moments of life, I make a scientific breakthrough. Though I sink beneath the ice, my face bursts into flame and melts like a candle! Publish my discovery, Dulcie...."
"Bevis, you numbskull, your cigarette set fire to your waxed moustaches. Such a shame that a scholarly life did not teach you how to protect your hair from flames!"
Why don’t the Don River freeze? by Mark Hamill

Why don’t the Don River freeze?
Tell me, tell me, tell me if you please.
The weather here is freezin’,
People are coughin’ and sneezin’,
So, why don’t the Don River freeze?

Mike Macdonald, Canadian singer

‘Oh dear! How did you manage that?’
‘It’s nothing, just a nick darling.’ Lefty carried on strapping up his laces as tiny pellets fell on the glazed blades below.
‘I said leave it!’ She shuffled back the way she had come, allowing his sharp tongue to glide over the coldness of the day. It was, after all, his year to be like this, just like it had been hers so many times in the past. Times when he had been the one to carry them, to come searching for her as the late autumnal evenings took on their chill for the winter to come.
It’d been past a decade since the Don last took its stage but Margaret could feel him coming as she walked down the serenely lit college bounds, the Crown Tower of the chapel, the red gown strewn across the fresh felled powder, pressed deeper into her brow as the nights drew longer.
She had known from the moment he opened his door to find her there on his threshold, tattered box in tow, that it was her year to be strong, although she didn’t feel like it at all. In fact she quite wanted to behave as petulantly as the embittered spirit which intoxicated her breath and sight, her thorax and lungs.
Yet she had done her job and here they sat at the water’s frozen edge, for better or for worse, for one last time or for many more to come. Hand in hand, they stepped cautiously on to the Don.
Gliding gracefully James’ face swept in and around them as they became more comfortable on the melting surface. Settling into a rhythm, turning this way and that, going back over their already lined out paths, creating patterns as delicate and intricate as the skin forms on a closely looked at hand. She did all she could to picture him as he was on that morning, on just that morning, and yet, and yet…
Lefty’s foot stopped lifting and they gradually came to a halt as Margaret followed suit. Lighting a cigarette, Lefty blew out a plume of smoke which hung lazily in the cold air. Then they skated on.
The phoenix soared high above him, gracefully axeling on walley tipped lutz. It carried him in its slip, the stream of motion a catalyst for the change of nothing to something.
Amy G Dala by Lynne Williams

‘Amygdala, that’s a strange name, where’s that from?’ he said as he wrapped the brass paperweight in the finely patterned decorative paper. Amy found herself someplace between pleasure and fear. She was somewhat undone by his familiarity and flirtatiousness. It was entirely unexpected. She smiled as response which is what she always did when unsure. True she was not bad looking for her age. She cast a glance in the Tiffany mirror to confirm. And although she found him a bit forward, that did not stop her lingering at his face and the single eyebrow hair which had strayed towards his forehead giving the appearance of a question mark. As he passed the weight over to her, she momentarily felt the warmth of his hand. She imagined the conversation they might have whilst sipping Darjeeling tea.

Of course Amygdala isn’t my real name. I am Amy Gertrude Taylor. Yes I know! When my sister used to get angry with me it sounded like “I’m telling on you Amy G Dala.” After that it sort of stuck.

The nickname was like the Teasel that had stuck to her long green school socks when she and George had walked home from school through the fields. She had chosen security over excitement when she chose George and now she wondered if that had been the right decision.

She found herself in the shop again, this time looking for a small gift for her sister to celebrate yet another successful business venture. She picked up a snow globe and gave it a gentle shake. The picture inside was of two figures skating.

I love this music what’s it called? Ah yes the ‘Skaters Waltz.’ Be careful the ice is quite thin here.

Thankfully she came to a halt before the chasm appeared from out of nowhere. Inspecting her hands the brown age spot seemed more noticeable. Why would a young man like him be interested in her?

‘Looking for something special?’ The voice came from the small room at the back of the shop. It wasn’t him. She was surprised by her disappointment.

Still she returned to the shop of treasures. This time she had applied the newly bought lipstick, a shade richer than she’d ever worn. Not that she had worn any for a long time. As she pulled her red velvet jacket across her shoulders she pretended she wasn’t bothered about seeing him again. She just wanted to browse. But she felt a delight when he appeared from behind an ornate standard lamp. He had grown a wonderful moustache which made him look more mature.

Hello. You look lovely today! How is your paper, wait … don’t go. What I mean is would you like to meet me later for a latte?

The meetings continued like this for many years as her many items of bric a brac grew into a collection.

‘What did you say you were looking for?’
Melinda likes to check herself in other people’s mirrors before she goes out for the night. A wing-mirror, the blacked-out window of a shop, the glass of a table top or a cabinet, and sometimes she sits at my vanity table examining her face and stretching a pair of my tights over her size eight feet.

Tonight, while she rolls her nose between her fingers checking her pores, she tells me about Dan. She says she likes to be with boys who are the same height as her, the same weight as her, to feel equal to them, physically matched.

“You’re pretty tall,” I say, looking at her long arms as she twists her hair around itself creating a swirl at the nape of her neck, “you might be missing out on a lot of wonderful, average-sized men,”

“How tall are you?” she asks.

Melinda doesn’t wait for an answer. She fills the 5’ 5” sized gap I left in the conversation as I try to convert inches with her own ideas.

“Dan is so tall. It isn’t right. It feels odd. So I walk ahead of him. Always.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll walk a few paces in front of him. I won’t let him hold my hand.”

She stands up to check the line of her skirt, runs her hand down the tights she’s borrowed to feel the smooth, new polyester then picks up my tweezers to fine the point of her eyebrows.

“So on the street, when you’re out, you’re separate, you don’t speak?”

“That’s right. It’s all about balance.”

I wonder if he knows this. If she’s bothered to explain. Probably not. With her, it should be obvious.

When Dan comes round to pick her up she disappears into the bathroom, makes him wait for thirty minutes so I sit with him, share a drink with him.

“I like your shoes,” I say, because I suddenly feel sorry for him.

“Thanks,” he says, wiggling the leather-pointed brogues, “they’re Melinda’s.”

“Oh that’s nice, you’re sharing.”

“She doesn’t like it so much, but I like to feel like we’re a couple. It’s fun to be matching when we go out.”

It’s her scarf that’s tangled around his neck, her grey peacoat in a larger size draped over the back of the sofa. Christmas is just round the corner so perhaps he’ll
buy matching t-shirts, a queen of hearts and a king of hearts, in the hopes they'll be like those young Asian couples he’s seen on the television in Tokyo and Taipei wearing matching his and hers jackets and trainers. I wonder if Melinda's into compromise, if she’d be happy to see herself in him while she remains suspicious of her mirrors.

Dan rubs his hands together then rests his warmed palms on his russet cheeks, pinked by the cold outside.

“This weather makes my skin so dry, could I borrow some moisturiser?” It's not until later that I realise he must have known that she’d borrowed some too.
On Thin Ice by Ellen Lyons

Poor Celia! Poor naïve and trusting Celia! We all knew it wouldn’t end well, we just didn’t expect it would end quite so soon.

Just three days into their married life together, three days, and both so newly graduated. Celia with a frivolous degree, and Xavier with some new-fangled Land qualification – a glorified farmer, was our opinion. But Celia was always rather taken in with the appearance of things, and Xavier was rather dashing. At least at first, at least in those early days when he’d come here with his black looks, his curling moustaches, his thick black hair, and the lisping language of some godforsaken corner of Southern Spain. But, he always seemed more Moro than Mediterranean, eternally and mysteriously shrouded in a cloud of black smoke from those filthy cigarettes.

And he was mysterious. We really didn’t know much about him, nothing of his family connections and upbringing, and Celia quite refused to say. Protecting him, of course, that’s what Celia was doing, protecting him from any sensible suggestions her friends might make, so smitten she was, and she from such a good family.

Of course he was after Celia’s (imagined?) money, how could it have been otherwise? Celia wasn’t pretty after all. Oh, pretty in a sweet way, with her plump hands and round, rather guileless face framed with her nondescript hair that had always been thin, and not as young as she once was (then who is?). But Celia knew how to make the most of herself and her situation, and who would have guessed that not so long ago, when her family lost everything and her stricken father imprisoned (embezzlement, they said), that her prospects had looked quite dire.

All a lie and mistake of the worse sort, of course, which Celia had managed to keep under wraps, but for some time she’d looked very discouraged. But, on that last fateful day, she was carefree and innocent and we were so happy for her.

But, even credulous Celia must have known about the ice and surely must have seen the warning signs, the danger signs, and when Xavier had taken tight hold of her hand and manoeuvred her towards that part of the loch, she must have had misgivings. For Celia knew the loch well, had skated on it countless times, while the world of ice and skating was such a novelty to the cunning Xavier.

And she’s so beside herself, crying and moaning and refusing to eat and telling everyone… everyone that it’s all her fault, but she couldn’t have known that Xavier wasn’t a swimmer… that he’d attempted to save her… that she’s lost everything. She’s lost her mind, that’s what Celia’s lost, for she’s havering about leaving for Spain and taking over the Castillo; managing the vineyard; breeding stallions; and…this, the most bizarre, accepting the title of Duquesa …and so she goes on in her fantasy and grief.

But, the doctors have said she’ll be safe where they’ll send her. Poor Celia!
The Graduate by Lara-Jo Taylor

I sat in a soft pink dressing gown as the house around me swirled in madness. It was the most important day of our daughter’s life and excitement rippled to every corner, washing over us all. Our young son pretended not to care, but he cared about wearing smart shoes and a suit. On the edge of my memory I see him strangling the dog with his new tie. My husband was lost in a torrent of wires, batteries and gadgets. He had spent weeks telling me about a camera which would film, film in 3D and then break it all down into stills. He had been very impressed, until excitement had made him forget all he’d read in the manual. I remember thinking I was in charge of hair and make-up and I thought she was going to make us late. But when I saw her in the kitchen doorway I realised I was only responsible for my own hair and make-up and I wasn’t in charge at all. She was all ready to go. I was falling apart with each advert for baby milk and wiping my snotty nose on the sleeve of my pink dressing gown. The absolute antithesis, she stood poised in swathes of black wearing my lipstick much better than I ever did. She shook her head at me, not disappointed and then helped me pin up my hair.

Have you ever seen a mother duck take her ducklings to water for the first time? Taking a confident step into strange depths she knows they won’t hit the rocky bed. Looking back at her brood on the bank a few tentatively hop in, bouncing along beside her. One is over-zealous and takes a running jump, going under before bobbing to the surface and finding balance. Three, more stubborn. Fluttering along the edge trying to nudge one another off. One finds his badge of courage and tries to dip a webbed-foot. He slips and goes under. When the final two see him bob to the surface they follow; one with reckless abandon the other with imagined self-assurance. The mother duck is not surprised when all her ducklings make it.

The next morning I plunge my hands deep into terry towelling pockets, looking for warmth but finding only used tissues with hard edges. My fingers find a thread which they have been pulling on for years. I am only vaguely aware until the thread finally gives way and I smile. I am glad of the pressure I applied for so long, it wasn’t easy to break. I know that what will start as a little hole will grow into a gaping cavity as my fingers mindlessly search for that thread to pull in comfort. My skin feels cold beneath fluffy fabric and my middle finger draws figures of eight on my leg. Perhaps now that Lucy is gone, it is my time for a new robe.
‘When the loch freezes’ by Katie Fraser

The other members of her family always reacted differently than Rhona. Her sister gloried in the beauty of the crystals she could scoop up and clasp temporarily in her hands. Her brothers exulted in the rosy glow that brushed their cheeks each day. Her mother was indifferent. Yes the cold pained her brittle joints but the heat of the summer months were equally as frustrating to her. All Rhona would feel is the sense of paralysis. She lived for the days that she could gaze out and in her mind’s eye she could compose dreams that were all the more powerful for the fact that they could never be realised. Rhona invented fiction for herself that could never be reality in order to avoid unnecessary disappointment. She had long observed the pain this had caused her mother who still slept with romances under her pillow, hoping that they could warm her waking moments.

When winter overpowered the loch however, Rhona was invaded and her imaginings were trespassed. All manner of people would come out and traverse across the water. She saw families playing together and she ground her teeth. As they skated so smugly they shattered her illusions. She could see so clearly a way to cross the loch. The ice was so thick she could walk on it with no fear. There was such a miniscule chance of her falling through that she never even brushed her hand against the frozen water. Her father and brothers dragged great trees from one side of the lake reaching their house on the other side.

Tradition demanded that she and her mother be the ones to decorate the tree. In time this tradition had come to realise itself through Rhona’s mother dressing the tree in glass ornaments before adorning it with a star on the top bough. The branch was never strong enough to support it and the tree would bend slightly. The family always tilted their heads when marvelling at the tree’s appearance. Rhona despained for the tainted tree which had been ripped from its home. Her role had evolved to consist of wrapping a strand of the tinsel around the globe. She spun this with a mournful air whilst her mother pretended that the continual stooping for baubles did not hurt her back.

Each Christmas Rhona spun the globe and rested her finger to stop it at random. She found it increasingly difficult to picture the country she landed on. When the surface of the loch once more rolled and rocked she found it easier to lose herself. With no one else crossing it she could picture herself sailing out in a boat by herself. In her imaginings there was not a tale of romance but a book of maps by her side. In the meantime she turned from the globe with a sigh. Her mother was holding the tarnished star for Rhona to crown the tree with. Rhona took it - she knew her mother could no longer reach.
On Thin Ice by Tara Quinn

I asked him, but he said No. He always said no, and as we skated farther out, red robes flowing behind us and the sky darkening like thin ice, I asked him why that was. I asked him so we could keep going, so he wouldn't notice it was too far, that we would be missed, that the day was done.

He just shook his head and took a pull on the cigarette; but he kept striding out farther and farther and I held onto his hand.

What I wanted to ask him was whether I had any power left. We both studied medicine, but he had met with a career that seemed to lift off the moment he stepped into it, like a waiting bus. I had gone home to nurse Mother and two years had passed. My bus careened a little, but I told him I would right it.

I'm sorry, he said. We glided on.

That's not the power I meant. I wanted to know about how I used to be, how we walked at night after the library closed round the same quadrangle like livestock around an enclosure. There was a large oak overhead, and I used to stop sometimes and plant myself beneath it. He'd take my hand and turn it over like a leaf. The detailing, just here, he might say. I'd barely breathe. The power I had then.

I'm sorry about your mother, he said.

Yes, I said. Because it was right for him to be. Yes, thank you, I said more clearly.

He kept his left hand in his pocket, but I gave him mine freely. There was nothing I meant to hide. My right hand held the muff and its pelt was a comfort. I tried to remember what it had once been. A rabbit? It was my mother's. What did I want with this power? Two years had passed and if you looked at our stories slant-wise you might say I was just starting out, I had everything before me, and he was finished. A steady ascent and no way to step off the bus and stay intact.

Anything could happen to me, but I wanted us both to be free: I wanted an evening back under the oak and a cigarette passed between us and the look that said I'd follow you anywhere before the look clouded into this. This day was grey, and all I wanted was red red red red red and that is why I charged out ahead and he was not able to yell, he was busy inhaling, and so he dashed after me and we both went in.

I opened my mouth to ask him one last time. His grin was frozen blue; my veins ran with black ink. His eyes never left my face.
SEVEN DEVILS by Margarita Onuoha

Joe Dean looked at his bloody hands.
He could taste Lucy’s fear on his finger tips. There were so many things he could
taste tonight.
Betrayal
Jealousy
and Lucy’s inability to love him.
Lucy looked up to Joe, her fragile fingers locked on the crown of his finger. ‘Joe ...
you don’t need to this’ Lucy’s begging was disgusting.
How dare she touch him, she always touched him unnecessarily. Like their first
(unofficial) date at the bar, Joe was talking to her about Prime numbers and
Probability, he didn’t estimate the probability that Lucy would stand up and kiss him
on his trembling lips.
NO!
He couldn’t think. He had to drown her; Joe had already made a mistake by stabbing
her. He had to kill her clean.
A flash of memories invaded his head unwillingly. He was thirteen; that girl Tatiana
had chosen another boy over him. Joe. His father told him ‘Son, women are always
going to leave you, like that bitch you call mum.
Tatiana was his first victim
Joe pushed Tatiana over a bridge at night.
Lucy’s hand wrapped around Joe’s ankle.
‘I love you Joe, I swear..... to God I do’ Lucy pleaded with Joe. Joe’s green eyes
were already lacing with tears.
‘I don’t want to be loved’ Joe calmly said as he finished tying her up with ropes.
Joe’s eyes betrayed him as an oval drop of tear fell on Lucy’s lips
Lucy licked it off her lips.
Lucy had gotten to him like a disease.
‘Joe please... don’t kill me’ Lucy said as her chest rose up, her curly hair was in her
mouth.
God how could she make him so weak.
He could still remember the social-worker’s grating voice telling his father ‘Your son
is not stable enough, he needs a mother’ My father chased her with a knife and no
social-worker came again.
Joe had finished tying Lucy’s hand and feet.
Joe carried Lucy up as her feet dragged across the ground inflicting pain.
‘Joe please I beg you... please we can be together. I won’t tell anyone you stabbed
me’ Lucy held Joe’s waist.
Seven devils flashed across Joe’s eyes.
Isolation, Hate, Greed, Pain, Hope, Vanity and Death.
Joe walked through the thick hands of the forest. Lucy screamed at Joe, with specks
of saliva spraying all over his back.
Joe reached the river. He had Lucy in his hands.
Lucy saw the pain in Joe eyes
‘Joe just because you have been hurt doesn’t mean I would hurt you’ Lucy quietly
said ‘I would never betray you’
Joe hesitated for a minute which he had never done. That cost Joe the rest of his
life.
Flashes of light and shouts came from nowhere all of sudden.
‘Put her down now’
A police officer came to take Lucy away from the ground where he had dropped her.
Joe saw her mouth the same words his mother did when she left him for another man.
I am sorry.
Steam billows out of the kettle in thick white clouds, settling in puddles on the greasy tiles that line the kitchen wall. Sunday morning and quiet outside. Car screen windows thickly glazed with frosted feathers reflecting light in a thousand directions.

I study the two mugs before me before grudgingly adding two heaped spoons of sugar to the one that is least clean. Catalina walks in, grubby dressing gown pulled tight across her small frame, pyjamas tucked into a pair of boot like Fair Isle slippers.

Her hair is wrapped in a henna stained towel, yet she still manages to look glamorous as she draws on a rollie, head tilting back on a long thin neck as she blows out the smoke. I lean over the sink and un-catch the window, pushing it open to make the point, but just an inch because it’s bloody freezing.

Catalina sits down at the table without saying a word and taps the rollie into a crowded ashtray. I push the sweetened mug towards her. She looks tough, sitting there. Skin stretched tight across her face, a small sharp nose sitting neatly where it should be, thin lips holding the cigarette in place and an angular jaw jutting out beneath. Her eyes, though, are a melting deep brown, long black lashes rest softly on her skin each time she inhales. I watch the smoke being drawn in through both nostrils as well as her mouth and I think how she gets everything she wants.

“You shouldn’t have brought him here,” I say.

She turns to look at me.

“You disapprove?”

“You could get into trouble if anyone found out.”
Catalina focusses on the thin cigarette in her hand, rolling it gently between her finger and thumb. Twisting and turning. Twisting and turning.

I try again. “He could get into trouble. Never mind he’s got a wife.”

“She won’t ever know.”

“How do you know that? And he’s got kids…”

“It’s just a little fun. It won’t last.”

“That’s worse! What is the point in risking everything if you don’t even love him?”

I know I sound sanctimonious, talking about love and family, really all I’m thinking about is the grades. I don’t doubt for a minute she’ll do well out of the arrangement.

I watch her exhale, long and slow, a straight stream of smoke rushing through the cold air before curling back on itself and drifting upwards. She shrugs, stubs her rollie dead in the ashtray.

“It’s not important,” she says, leaving her mug untouched on the kitchen table.
On Thin Ice by Ian McLoughlin

Everything is blue. Even the hiss of the blades, those silver flashing scalpels scoring the map of our progress, scars of sky blue criss-crossing the seemingly solid surface, is tinged with a sense of the colour; totally unlike the lazy sounds of summer when this would be a sheet of shimmering water dappled by the concentric rings of feeding fishes, this is the cold-blooded, serpentine sibilance of an ageless, eternal blue-eyed coldness whose breath makes no mark on the frigid, crackling air.

Our shadows, though weak from the already disappearing winter sun, still seem to bruise the ice in passing; feeble followers in the wake of our skeletal ploughshares in which no flowers will ever grow; trying in vain to catch us up, to gain some warmth, some vitality, always failing, always falling behinds us, slipping towards the banks where the willows basket the shadows of the other skaters, storing them in readiness for the night yet to come.

My hand in his is blue for, despite his warmth and my gloves, the cold is rising, seeping up from my legs which are surely now no longer mine but belong to that other existence, that other lifeless, suspended time that can only flourish in such conditions. His mouth moves and his breath forms clouds through which we turn and wheel; we smash his words until they fall like the lightest of snows, powdering our clothes, entering my lungs; his words are in my lungs becoming me; they are eating my silence with their insistence; they are polluting my landscape with their footsteps, deep and stained. I want to scream but instead glide in silence like a sculpted swan of ice which is, I suppose, what I am to him.

He arrives each week, throughout the year; talks to me, walks with me, sits with me and moves me through his life; takes my hand and places it on the cup, the book, the door handle but I know, behind his actions and his kindness, he's really waiting to catch me out, waiting for me to speak and break the spell, but I won't, I can't. The coldness within will freeze the fire of his love, will fracture the flame of his concern and all will slowly turn back into the silent snow-carpeted landscape where I live alone and long for no-one. For that is how it has to be; there is an ice in my heart that I alone can feel and cherish for, of everything, it alone is mine.

Life is the thinnest of ice and I skate alone.
A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH by Mary Mowat

My thoughts return now, as they always do when it snows, to the steps of King’s College Chapel five years and fourteen days ago.

You’d sidled up through the Christmas throng to where I stood with father; me elated, still hearing the soaring, perfect, voices. Him bored; cold; looking around for a masculine conversation.

You new.

‘What is the nature of the human mind, and what is its relation to the body?’, you’d whispered in my ear, so close, your waxed moustache touching my skin. Your breath on my neck.

Who would ask such a question of a stranger? Of a woman? I’d pulled back to see a grave stare, waiting.

I concentrated on the plaid of your winter jacket. My voice thin but determined: ‘Every faculty of the mind, body and soul reflects the Creator’s glory.’

You’d thrown your head back, laughing, all seriousness gone, and turned to father, grasping his arm. ‘Well, well, Professor! Like father like daughter, and no mistake!’

Now, today, you hold my arm tight as we step out onto the ice.

Father had mentioned you in passing before that day; a new chap, clever. You quickly discovered a mutual love of conversation, debate. Father the theologian, you the philosopher.

Soon you were dining with us every Saturday. A trio; me caught happily in the crossfire as each week’s topic was pronounced and interrogated. ‘What is a good human life, and what makes it good?’ your first offering. Then, ‘what do we mean by ‘truth’?’ Father encouraged my timid contributions. You teased me in my defense of the Lord; suggesting instead that humanity is at the mercy of its own flawed nature. But you were always gentle, kind.

The house came alive with sound. Only Anne, the maid, turned resentful at the change.

Six months later, you and I were married.

I glance at you now, your nose red and veined in the cold. Your thick fingers clinging to mine. The ice creaks in protest as our blades scratch across its surface. My head down, watching the tiny cracks.

‘What’s on your mind?’ you ask casually, wobbling as you light a cigarette, knowing I will steady you. I am agile, confident, out here.

‘Are human beings ever really to blame for what they do?’ I reply, my face still.

You shake your head, irritated. You know the dinner I refer to. Poor father left talking alone at the table. Me stepping quietly out to find you. You and Anne in the hallway. Your hands in her hair. Gentle.

I swing my arm, skating harder, faster. The cracks grow bigger, the ice wetter. You begin to speak but I put a finger to my lip.

‘You taught me we are weak creatures, with little self control,’ I say, pushing ever faster now, my nails deep in your palm.

‘Well.’

‘Therefore there can be no blame.’

‘That’s not.’

‘And no forgiveness.’

A sign pokes out from broken ice, ‘DANGEROUS’.

‘Indeed,’ I say, pulling you closer still.
“Jay, skating is supposed to be fun,” Dawn exclaimed, twirling on the iced lake that some teenagers and children were skating on.

“Does it look fun like I’m having fun?” he called back, stumbling, thanking his gloves for their protection to the cold. Dawn hooked her arm through his, pulling him up, and helped him skate. Jay got the hang of it and they got a little quicker. Dawn still held him, but they flew up the lake and were soon gliding along effortlessly. They got further and further away from the other kids, and in between some pine trees.

Dawn smiled and then smoothed out the creases in her scarlet velvet coat and black leggings, balancing on Jay. Jay stood steadily staring up at the clouds, watching them floating by

Dawn stared at him, giggling.

He laughed heartily himself. They started skating again. They suddenly looked up into each others eyes. Dawn rested her head on Jay’s shoulder and they were in a fever of new love. They were so unaware of the world around them for their new love for each other, that they didn’t notice as they soared past a ‘Danger’ sign. The snow was rested on top of it, but the warning was still visible. They kept on skating, though, but under their feet, they didn’t know, there was ice that was getting thinner and thinner.

Dawn smiled again at her new loved-one, and then suddenly……disappeared!!!

There was a hole in the ice were she had plummeted through! She was in the icy water, drowning! Jay pushed his arms under, trying hard to heave her out. But he couldn’t. She was sucked down deep by her heavy coat and ice skates. Then suddenly, Jay tore off his jacket, gloves and boots and dived in after her! He swam with all of his energy, trying to reach Dawn. He saw her garish coat and reached out. Jay was running out of breath and the cold was turning his skin blue. But he loved Dawn more than anything now, and he couldn’t bear to lose her.

Love made Jay desperate. He made a sudden grab and caught the edge of her coat. He pulled and then swam for all he was worth to reach the surface, hanging onto to Dawn. Jay reached the surface and pushed Dawn up, pulling himself up after.

They lay on the ice, freezing and navy, Dawn unconscious and Jay near it. But he picked up Dawn’s head and tried to make her breath. She suddenly jerked up, spluttering. She opened her eyes wide while Jay smiled broadly.

“Jay!” she exclaimed, flinging her arms round his neck.

He hugged her tightly, like he couldn’t let go. But he did and Jay wriggled his arm round Dawn’s shoulders and helped her skate to the edge of the pond. They hobbled to Dawn’s house and became warm in the comfort of her family.

There may have been broken ice, but there were NO………Broken Hearts