

# mother TONGUE

by Joanne Strasser

and fellow students, and she would laugh and I would laugh, and I was happy.

On the ice, strict discipline blended with the gentle tones of Tchaikovsky. She was stern, but loving, as she would often smooth the hair out of my face and fix the collar on my turtleneck. Her affection was something I counted on and knew that it would always await me at the end of a hard day at school or a bad practice session.

When I received a “C” on my Civics assignment, I knew I could fall into her bright, woolen embrace.

The intensity of our relationship paid off. At age 14, I moved beyond the ranks of promising young skaters into the elite circle of rising stars. I also moved in with Sveta and her family. I took my turn setting the table, washing the dishes, and picking

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the Blockbuster video for Saturday night. At ten p.m., I was tucked into bed with a kiss planted on my forehead. This kind of family life was foreign to me: in my American home, I determined my own bedtime and went to bed self-tucked.

The first time I saw her I was afraid. Not only was she Russian, but also intimidating with her seemingly harsh accent and her overwhelming presence. As I got to know her, I became intrigued - her jet-black hair, pale face and big saucer-shaped eyes accented with a little beauty mark near the outer left corner. Her touch was soft, and her words melodic in their mispronunciation. I adored her.

We would meet on the ice for two hours everyday, before school and after. Just us and no one else. The world outside was absent and all that mattered were double axels and triple salchows. There was an intensity to our relationship: her dark brown eyes pouring into mine; her voice guiding me, instructing me and sometimes scolding me; her hands molding my body into the correct positions. I adored her.

My days were identical - skate, school, skate, sleep. Svetlana would drive me from the rink to school and from school to the rink. I cherished the time we spent together in the car, soaking in the conversation and admiring her perfectly manicured nails lightly gripping the steering wheel. Over the sound of heat blowing from the vents and Janet Jackson playing quietly on the radio, she would ask me about my day at school. I would amuse her with humorous anecdotes about teachers

