

RESILIENCE

I have often watched others summon the strength to overcome tragedies, and wondered “how do they do it?” This question lingered in my mind each time I learned about another school shooting, read about a hurricane in the news, or witnessed a plane crash on TV. But these tragedies always seemed so distant, so different from my own life. I, like many others, subconsciously conditioned myself to believe that tragedy was something which only happened to others.

On January 29th, 2025, my world turned upside down. I am writing this letter in the wake of the crash of American Airlines Flight 5342, which collided with an army helicopter en route to Washington DC. The calamity struck at my core because I have always been a skater. When I was six years old, I took my first steps on the ice. I do not remember how I skated that day, but what I do know is that it was the beginning of the most important chapters of my life. Only a few years later, the rink had become my second home and the place I felt the most alive. I would get up at 5 a.m. to squeeze in a practice before school, and I would leave school early so that I could head straight back to practice after school. The training was grueling, but satisfying. The ice became a sanctuary for me—stress and worry melted away the moment I stepped on the ice.

Besides helping me to grow personally, skating has also introduced me to a loving, compassionate, and tight-knit community. My coaches and friends allowed me to get through my lowest lows, and through the process of training and competing and finally succeeding after numerous failures, they have helped me to achieve my highest highs. There have been times after bad practices when I have wanted to slam the boards and walk straight out of the rink, leaving everything behind. But the negative experiences have been outweighed by moments of unbridled joy and camaraderie—I will never forget how it feels to be standing on the podium next to two

other skaters, sheepishly grinning with a medal in hand, my coaches and parents grinning proudly.

When I first hear the news, I refuse to believe it. Then my mom shows me the video. *Are those not shooting stars, or fireworks, or drones?* As the two balls of light get closer and closer and I understand the enormity of what is about to happen, time freezes. Aboard that plane are some of the most hardworking, most talented, skaters in the world, and their lives are about to vanish into thin air. How could they suffer such an unfair death?

I exhale and shut my eyes tightly.

I think that my mom sees something desperate in my expression. I excuse myself from dinner and walk slowly to my room. All I can think about are the 14 skaters on that plane. Their parents and coaches and grandparents and aunts and uncles will never watch them take the ice again. I imagine their souls escaping in wisps of flame, their bodies tumbling and turning and breaking and finally plunging into the dark, icy Potomac.

I cannot imagine what it felt like to be on that plane, to feel the weight impending doom as the lights of the helicopter drew nearer and nearer. Would they have known that they were about to die, that their stories were ending far too soon?

The victims were young, some barely into their teens, and their futures were full of promise. These skaters had just finished attending the US Figure Skating National Development Camp, a program in which only the top four skaters in the US at each level are invited to train. I had hopes of attending the same camp in 2023 and 2024, when I finished 13th and 11th at the 2023 and 2024 US Figure Skating Midwestern Sectionals competitions, respectively; the thought that I could have been on that same plane made this loss even more personal.

A part of me still cannot fathom that they left this world so suddenly. Could the same people who had cheered passionately for me at competitions, who I had admired and drawn inspiration from, really have been in that plane? After seeing their names on score sheets, it is too cruel to comprehend that those same names are now on an obituary. Jinna Han, whose journey I followed, watching her land her first triple jumps and progress to the national level. Spencer Lane, who I followed on Instagram, had advanced so quickly and possessed a graceful yet powerful jumping technique. Maxim Naumov, who I had watched earn the pewter medal at the US National Championship only days before, has lost both of his parents. They were among the best in skill but also in spirit. And in an instant, they were gone.

I hope that the skaters on American Airlines Flight 5342 who left this world too soon will go on to inspire the next generation of figure skaters through their passion and excellence.