

Dash

I was in hospital last week with an asthma attack that knocked me around. It's triggered sometimes by dust storms and allergies, and winter is always the worst. Usually I'm not bothered by my asthma. It's been with me as long as my winning sense of humour (mum's expression not mine). But this time it meant I missed out on a winter solstice bonfire night at Sammy's grandad's farm.

I'm a regular in the ward and sometimes the nurses make sure I have the window seat; the bed with the view. They also sneak me little things, like extra afternoon tea and paper and pens. Drawing isn't usually my thing but last week I did use the rainbow connector pens to make a cheesy card for Fred.

It's her birthday today. We bonded back in Grade 3 when we were the last to be picked for the soccer teams in our weekly PE class. I was used to being picked last but she was picked last because she was new. Once everyone saw her play, she became the first one picked because she's the fastest kid in the school. I'm still picked last unless she's captain and then I'm the first name called, even though my most useful skills are collecting the equipment and then returning it.

Fred's having a roller-skating party this afternoon. Mum wasn't going to let me go because it's so close to me coming out of hospital, but Dad convinced her it would be okay. He laughed at the idea of me on skates and said he didn't really think I was about to speed skate my way to an asthma attack. Even Dad doubts my physical abilities.

It's always a bit odd when I come home from hospital. Even if I'm only away a couple of nights there are always little changes. New flowers in the vase, an orange turning mouldy in the bowl, the carpet in my room freshly vacuumed and the Toy Story sheet set on my bed. Mum changes my sheets as soon as I'm gone. She always picks the Buzz and Woody ones which have been washed so many times they feel like skin. I've pointed out that maybe it's time to buy a more teenage-approaching set but she doesn't hear the words. She likes them because they remind her of when I was little. I let her because if I'm honest I still quite like Buzz and Woody.

My sister Elle used to make a fuss when I came home and lend me one of her special things, but that stopped a while back. Now I might be lucky enough to be grunted at. Once I would have asked her opinion on a roller-skating party, but she's in her room and her door is closed which is a clear signal for "enter and die."

So, I clean my teeth until my breath smells minty, smile at myself in the mirror, grab Fred's present and head out to the car where Dad's waiting. If Mum's not with us worrying about loud music affecting my long-term hearing, then Dad and I prefer punk music to conversation when we drive.

Today we sing along, out-of-tune and yelling, until he pulls in to the carpark and checks I have my Ventolin before letting me out of the car. There are a couple of instructions about taking it easy and having fun, but I see Fred arriving too so I nod, slam the door and head for my friend.

She's wearing so many different colours and patterns that my eyes hurt to look at her. 'Skates not blades, promise?' She has been chanting this mantra for weeks now.

'Happy birthday,' I tell her.

'Thanks ... skates?' One thing I've always enjoyed about Fred is her lack of small-talk.

'Are they the ones with all the wheels?'

She rolls her eyes at me and snatches the present from my hand, ripping off the paper.

'Manners! Card first!' I tell her.

'Yep, sorry ...' but she keeps opening the present. She tips the paper up and a small harmonica on a silver chain drops out into her hand.

'Does it work?'

'Yeah ... course,' I tell her, enjoying the smile that's flooding her face as she holds it up to her mouth and blows. Another thing I've always enjoyed about Fred is how excited she becomes about things like miniature harmonicas.

'Best present ever, Dash!' She spins around holding up her long black hair, directing me to help her fasten it at the back. My fingers feel too big for the job, and they keep brushing against the warm of her skin. Finally, I clip it in and she runs ahead to show her Mum. I dawdle behind, breathing in all the outside air I can.

I'm not entirely new to roller-skating. Elle has a pair at home that I used to wear with two pairs of Dad's socks. Clinging to the wall of our house, I'd roll up and down the hallway, until I was confident enough to let go. I liked the sound of the wheels rolling on the wooden floorboards, and the slight fear of what would happen if I fell.

But I am new to the disco lights and blaring music of this place. As Fred's mum pays for skates and birthday food, our other friends arrive. There's state-champion butterfly swimmer Sammy who is so tall I have to shout sometimes so he can hear me. And JJ who can shoot a hoop from twenty metres away. And Mila who lives on her skateboard and is small like me. Of the five of us, I'm the one who spends the most time in Sick Bay, and the least time running.

Sammy is already lacing up his skates as Fred and I stand with our socked feet on the sticky carpet outline on the ground, trying to work out what size will fit.

'You're a six,' says Fred, bending down to check my toes.

I do the same for her. 'Yours are four.'

Laughing, she kicks her foot out at me. 'As if!' Her feet are huge. Like skis plonked onto ankles.

Behind us, as Sammy stands up one foot slides out from under him and then the other and he's down, his long legs bent and crumpled like a foal learning to walk. Fred laughs and helps him up. This time he doesn't move, just stands really still, clutching the wall, pretending to be waiting for us, but looking terrified. 'Maybe I'll watch,' he says.

'No way,' says Fred. 'If Dash is skating, so are you!'

I'm the litmus test for not being able to do something. I know it's true but it's not always easy to hear. Running is mostly out. I'm okay on a bike until I have to pedal fast. And

playing chasey used to end in all sorts of visits to the Sick Bay. I carry a Ventolin puffer just in case, sometimes even two. I'm not sporty, but I am prepared. I make a great camper. Extra matches in a waterproof bag? That's me.

I lace my skates as tight as I can, and my ankles feel like they're in irons. Mila and JJ both refuse to wear skates so they're wearing blades. Fred tells them it's cheating.

'Lean forward and keep your knees bent,' says Fred. 'If you're going to fall, go front not back. Don't want to hit your head.'

Little kids on blades that look bigger than their bodies scream past us as we all make our way onto the rink. Mila takes off, with JJ trying to catch her.

Sammy is gripping onto the wall, and Fred is trying to help him. I decide to push off, and go slow until my feet can understand what they are supposed to be doing. The rink is crowded with skaters. Most are clumsy and wobbly but some are already speeding through the middle, taking corners without effort and dodging the crashes.

I hum along to the song, wishing I knew the words. Elle would know them, but I like pretending current music is a bit below me. A boy teeters right in front of me and brings down two others, as I turn sharply to avoid them. My feet seem happy skating, like they are surprised that the rest of me is actually managing to keep up.

So far, I haven't needed to pull out either of the Ventolin inhalers that wait quietly in my pockets. I've just glided from foot to foot, without any effort. Some of the better skaters lean right down with their hands clasped behind their backs like they are proving to the world how easy it is.

I try this. My left hand clasping my right, touching the plastic of the hospital band that is still around my wrist. Sometimes I snip them off when I first get home, and other times I leave them as a reminder to the world my asthma is real.

I think I left this one on just in case skating was hard.

Mila speeds past me with a grin. I power up and take off after her, determined not to be the last pick for once. After another couple of laps, my feet have started relaxing and the rhythm of skating is worming itself into my body, but I still can't catch Mila. This may actually be the longest time I've ever moved fast without feeling short of breath.

I skate towards Fred and Sammy. They haven't moved far. I slam into the wall behind them, not knowing how to stop.

'You can actually skate,' says Sammy, sounding surprised.

I shrug. 'Yeah, for once, I'm better than you!'

'I haven't left the wall,' he says laughing.

Sammy is always in the newsletter at school for sporting achievements. We joke that he has so many trophies at home his parents had to boot out his older brother so they could store them in his room. I have one white ribbon from the only athletics day I've ever competed at. It was last year and I didn't tell my parents that I was planning to run. I came fourth in the 400 metre and had an asthma attack as I crossed the line. The teacher on duty called Dad and he came to collect me with a frown and a reasonably-detailed lecture. I had to rest across three chairs but Fred made sure that my white ribbon was pinned onto my t-

shirt in the same spot as her twelve blue ones. I still have it at home. Stuck onto my wall with Bluetack. I wrote the date on the back of it just in case I was ever tempted to forget.

Fred's Dad calls out from the tables. He has his camera ready and tells us to smile. Sammy tries to let go of the wall but his feet shoot out in different directions and he clutches it again.

'I'm going to see if your Mum needs help with the chips,' he says.

'You mean you're giving up?' Fred says.

'Temporarily!' he says, inching back towards the exit, against the stream of skaters.

'You can't go that way,' I tell him.

But Fred shrugs like it doesn't matter and heads out onto the rink. I skate after her. Mila and JJ blade up behind us. Mila and JJ want to race, and as the two of them take off, I wait for Fred to skate off and leave me at the back of the pack like always. But she doesn't. Instead we just skate. Round and around, weaving and dodging.

Another song starts as we glide around the corner and Fred sings her own version of the lyrics loud and out of tune. I laugh at her until we see a cluster of bodies on the rink and Mila crouched down looking on.

An attendant in a fluoro top is trying to help some of the skaters up, and as he does, I spy JJ lying on the rink at the bottom of the pack. I speed up, managing to turn sharply and stop just before I reach him.

'A little kid skated out in front of him and he went over the top of her,' says Mila.

I bend down. 'You right, JJ?'

'Yeah, just my knee.' He tries to get up, but then he stops. 'Nah, it hurts.'

Fred's Dad has rushed over as well and he and the attendant lift JJ up and carry him off the rink.

'I need a break,' says Mila. 'You coming?'

I follow after her, but as I reach the exit, I see JJ sitting on a chair with Fred and Sammy and Fred's parents all crowding round him and Mila on her way, and I stop. I know I should check on my friend but JJ looks okay. They don't need me too.

I push off from the wall and into the tide of skaters. I'm two laps in when I realise that right now, I'm the last one standing. I'm the blue ribbon. I grin to myself as I speed up down the straight, feeling the thump of my heart and the burn in my legs.

And I know that soon someone is going to call me away to eat cake and watch Fred blow out candles but right now, I could keep going all day.

As I pass the rink entrance, Fred skates into my path and reaches for my hand. She's not usually a hand-holder. The last time was when we were paired up on a school excursion in Grade 3 and made to pair up before getting on the bus so that nobody was lost. She'd been eating chocolate cake and her fingers were all sticky with icing. Now they are smooth and cool and holding on like she doesn't want to let go.

A little kid skates right in front of us and Fred drops my hand so that we can avoid collecting him. I expect her to skate past and show me that she's faster, but instead she glides closer and reaches across and slides her hand back into mine and swings our arms

high up in the air, like we are the champions. Then she looks over and grins at me, and I yell *Happy Birthday* over all the noise as we speed up to take the corner.