

Tasha LeClair

ICE FISHING

photo by Barbara Michelman

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(All names have been changed)

I. The Center

It's Christmas Eve. I drive to the river to think about the person who left blood smeared along the walls of the Center and pooled in the hallway. Who was it that broke in sometime on the night of the 23rd, ate some food, and closed the side door behind him when he left? He, if it was a he, used his fist to smash out a tiny, high window, and then pulled his body through. He left the lights off, and the blood—smudged here and there and running in long syrupy threads along the doorway where he'd stopped, I think, to let his eyes adjust—mapped his fumbling path to the kitchen. He took nothing. The mat on the kitchen floor was bunched up. There were crackers out on the counter.

In the woods the sun is going down. The trees and cattails are gold, and I stump along through the deep snow, following animal tracks to the river. There's a particular clearing in the middle of the trees that feels far enough. There was a lot of blood. In places, it ran thick and dark.

In the clearing, I stop and look at the branches against the sky. Something artificial at work here: yellow trees vibrating against an indigo backdrop; something I don't quite believe. We're moving, my husband and I; we're leaving Billings, Montana—our home of ten years—and heading 350 miles north and west, to Missoula. I don't have a job yet, but I've been in this position before.

It's like walking across a frozen lake in early winter, watching dark shapes churn below the surface—you're always just a few shivering inches from joining them.

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Only a few of us were scheduled to work the day following the break-in. I'd planned to use the time to catch up on paperwork. Instead, here I was, along with everyone else, standing around waiting for the police to finish their report so we could start cleaning.

Even with all the lights blazing, the Center had fallen into an unsettling twilight. During the night, something, some ghost, had crept through the busted-out window and infiltrated every corner of the building. The person who'd broken in had been tailed by this force; it had followed him through the garage, along our narrow hallway, into the kitchen. It left no blood, no stains. When the person left, it settled in the bones of the building, this crouching, unwholesome presence.

Days later, I would walk down the hallway for the last time and find myself confronted with rows of lockers, each compartment occupied by a familiar coat or backpack or bundle of knotted grocery sacks: cans of spray paint, baby clothes, sketchbooks, social security cards. I would never open these lockers again. I would never see the youth again. We would never play basketball, we would never paint pictures, we would never cook dinner. I'd never have to remind Aiden to please put his cereal bowl in the dishwasher as soon as he finished, only to watch him, moments later, cheerfully scrub milk from the carpet where he'd dumped his bowl in a spike of rage. I'd never again break up fights; I'd never sit with someone while he cried secretly in my office. A few weeks ago a boy I knew well came in with jaundiced eyes and skin, and said, "It doesn't matter, don't ask me," and left without another word, clutching the bag of canned food he'd come for. He never came back. I will never know what happened to him.

After the officers left, we gathered rags and set to work scrubbing the walls. We found flecks of blood in unlikely places; we threw out tainted food and ruined Kleenex boxes. When this was over there was glass to sweep, a window to board up. I'd heard that one of our girls, Susan, had gotten in a fight in jail and had been transferred to Deer Lodge; I was writing her a letter. I needed to gather notes from her friends and a picture of her brother.

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Our Executive Director, Gretchen, took the stance that one of our youth, hungry and desperate, had been forced to break into our offices just before Christmas, of all times: "My heart is breaking." Pitying blue eyes. Bones standing out from her skin. I had to look at the floor. Something false in her display.

Days later a youth told me, as he squeezed some paint onto one of the squares of cardboard I'd set aside to serve as pallets, that an older guy whose name I didn't recognize had broken in for some reason or another, sustained minor injuries, wandered off into the night. The youth who told me, Emory, was approaching his mid-twenties, due to age out of the program in a year.

I regarded his painting, a surreal, delicately textured tsunami roaring out of a flat, spray-painted nightscape. It was good. He was a natural, better than most of the kids I'd taken art classes with years ago in college, but I focused my praise on his work ethic, his risk-taking. Soon there'd be one less place he could go for help. One less place that cared whether he painted or not, kept his apartment or not.

The Center drew a number of art-kids—boys, mainly, with stolen sketchbooks and no parents, slouching in after drunken nights or curled back-to-back on the cement in the middle of the skate-park like wild dogs. Sometimes I'd catch them staring at a colorful mural that spelled "HOPE" in blocky letters on the Center wall, bordered with



outstretched arms held high and spread-fingered, like the arms of a cheering crowd. It was painted by a former outreach worker who had never returned to finish it. “When’s David coming back?” they’d ask, back when I started. “I miss David.” “Did you ever meet David?” I didn’t take it personally. They didn’t like people disappearing on them. They knew from experience that a person couldn’t be replaced so easily. They also knew, as I did, that the Center’s “Hope” rhetoric ran thin. There are things deeper than hope. Anger. Grit. Rebellion. The refusal to be smudged out. The animal drive to breathe and eat and love.

The piercing conviction that one has a right to exist—a knowledge so ancient, so deep-down, it rings in our heads in times of darkness: You belong here.

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Ashia was around my age, tall and bulky, with the voice of a slightly raunchy cartoon bunny rabbit. Her eyes were a stunning blue-green—though they often looked glassy and pinched—and it was this, as well as her bloodless face and the sweet-and-sour odor drifting from her body, that made me wonder if she might be an unsuccessfully recovered addict. Ashia was my boss.

When I joined the Center for Homeless and Runaway Youth in June, Ashia and I were the sole members of the formal street outreach team, though a tough and capable work-study student, Danika, joined us most drop-in days.

I wondered what happened to the people I saw in pictures on the wall, the ones whose names were scattered everywhere I looked—long-dead stars beaming down from a lost galaxy—and I wondered why the last employees had left more or less at the same time, without even cleaning their office, which now belonged to me: grime-caked keyboards, unwiped computers, files arranged, it seemed, by frustration or intuition.

Natural history tells us that mass-extinctions are thought to be the result of long-term problems compounded by cataclysmic events. I knew this. But it was part-time work, physically active like I’d wanted. I was able to write during my off-hours (I was working on a novel), and see my husband, a freight pilot, on Mondays and every other weekend.

In the end, I hung on for the same reason everyone else did. The youth. So many people came and went through the swinging saloon-doors of their lives, it was the least I could do to be a person who defied previous experience, a person who stayed.

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Drop-in hours were held three days a week, starting around lunchtime, once the youth had clawed themselves from their nests—bat-infested caves on the rims, the floors of much older strangers they’d met the night before, stairwells and abandoned houses—and had a chance to find their way to us. Youth ages ten to twenty-four passed through the sunny lobby up front, placed backpacks and weapons in lockers, and wound their way to the back of the building, to the humid, cave-like drop-in center, where the blinds stayed shut and an endless cast of Disney characters paraded across the big-screen TV.

Some days, everyone was enveloped in a warm, generous light; we talked and cooked and everyone had a place. Other times, particularly once the cold set in and resources (including weed) grew scarce, drop-in was an exposed wire. The youth bounced around like rogue electrons, restless, pacing, shattering against one another in wrecks that weren’t so unpredictable once you learned to pay attention. If you got to know the youth well and stayed alert, even in the winter you had a good chance of heading things off before they happened.

In all that time I received little in the way of training, and my relationship with the youth—who I was supposed to be to them—was never clarified. All I’d been told, regarding my role as a street outreach worker, was what members of SOP were not: we weren’t friends, we weren’t therapists, we weren’t parents. Over time—fumbling, making mistakes, researching other street outreach programs—I developed my own sense of the relationship I wanted to have with the youth.

Maybe we weren’t parents, but we did occupy a familial role—something close, I think, to uncharacteristically caring older siblings. We were responsible for what happened to the youth while they were in our care. We played basketball with them and talked them down from anxiety attacks. We cleaned their cuts and spider bites and told them as tactfully as possible, “You need a shower.” We helped them pick out interview attire from our “clothing pantry” (the sewage-smelling garage), drove them to appointments, and, in short, ran sprinting with them toward the smallest opening of possibility in the endless black tunnel of their lives, doing our best to keep that silent, heavy stone from rolling over the mouth of the cave with white knuckles and ragged nails.

There were no formal rules, so I made some up and hung them on the wall (“Blades and sharp objects must be checked into a locker,” etc.). I organized a manageable chunk of the filing system and started doing paperwork. I did my best, under the circumstances. I made mistakes. I sometimes used swear words in ordinary conversation. I was among the staff members working the day that five laptops walked out of the building. I oversaw a fry bread cook-off in the Center’s youth kitchen, a facility which was in no way up to code and soon filled with a toxic white smoke.

There were other mistakes—more subtle, more damaging: the wrong tone at a key moment, words and gestures that communicated rejection—things I wouldn’t notice, or learn to control, until I’d been working with the youth for months. Taking my cue from Danika, our work-study student, I learned the importance of staying relaxed, of offering the same persona no matter what. I tried to remain utterly predictable. I was there every day. I was calm. I listened. What the youth told me was hard to hear, every time. I responded truthfully. I said things like, “I can’t imagine,” and, “I’m sorry,” and “You’re so strong.”

“You’re like a real adult, aren’t you?” one of the older youth asked me. His name was Donovan; he was a nineteen-year-old living under a bridge and working at a fast-food restaurant. “You’re like an adult adult.” Donovan came in to shower every day before his shift at the restaurant. Sometimes he asked me questions about my life. Not all at once; he worked them into conversation over the course of an afternoon. Did I live in an apartment or a house? How much was my rent? Did I do the cooking or did my husband? How old was I? What did I do in my spare time? He listened attentively to my answers, nodding. He asked the same questions more than once.

“Fuck,” he’d moan, rubbing a bony hand over his face. “I need a place of my own.” One morning a snake slithered across his sleeping bag. Then, not long after, someone set fire to the adjacent hillside while he slept. I asked him about his future apartment whenever I could. I wanted him to keep thinking about it.

That fall, Donovan would walk in late one evening, covered in dried blood and staring wide-eyed at something invisible above my head, talking about God and demons, and I would learn he’d just been released from jail for allegedly stabbing one or both of his parents, who’d been fighting—I’d never gotten the straight story, and anyway, the charges were apparently dropped, because he never went back to jail. The counselors said he’d probably suffered a psychotic break but Donovan claimed he’d just smoked some weed, and he never talked about what had really happened that night; I’d heard the little I had from other youth. Before long we went back to talking about his apartment.

Eventually, Donovan got a place with some friends and last I heard he was looking at buying a car and going to college. He’d been asked to stop talking about God at work.

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The problem was, Ashia stayed in her office, believing she could “sense” things from there; she was also prone to going on long smoke breaks or disappearing completely for hours at a time. It was maddening, and though I complained to Gretchen, then Brent in H.R., nothing happened. Sometimes Ashia would stop speaking to me altogether and sit sulkily at a table in the middle of drop-in, and I would know someone had spoken with her. But sooner or later, she’d head back to her office and everything would return to normal.

I didn’t know this, but by January, I’d be gone, having quit after six bitterly frustrating months, and Ashia, despite everything, would still be there. I have to give her that. Months before, in late November, she had her title of SOP Lead stripped, though it was never announced to the rest of the staff, and for two months she sat all day, despondent and uncommunicative, in her office, or skulk around in the garage rearranging piles of clothing, pulling forty hours a week (though suffering a reduction in wage), with no responsibilities and no reason to pretend to try, and something close to a death-wish for me. Eventually she would be fired—two weeks after I quit. But only after it was impossible for our Executive Director, Gretchen, to make any more excuses for her.

“She’s traumatized,” Gretchen would say when I complained. “She was demoted.” I didn’t know what to say. If anything, Ashia had been lucky. It was also hard to believe Gretchen’s claims that she regarded all staff with complete objectivity. Ashia used to babysit Gretchen’s kids. And, six months before I started, when the position of SOP Lead opened up, Gretchen asked Ashia to apply, changing the hiring requirements to accommodate her. Ashia and Gretchen were both people of considerable faith, casually discussing sermons, for instance, at the Holiday Party (“Will people who commit suicide be redeemed in the eyes of the Lord?”).

Ashia, like any of us at the Center, employees and clients alike, was desperate for solid ground to stand on; I couldn’t fault her for that. I think Ashia loved the kids. Once in a while she made them root beer floats and gave them hugs before retreating to her office—“like her dad did to her,” someone told me: presenting gifts and walking away.

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“You have a lot to offer this world. Thank you for sharing your heart with our youth,” Gretchen concluded, near the end of a particularly shrill series of emails (“I truly wish I could understand how ‘management’ (aka me!) could have better met your needs”; “If you feel up to enlightening me—”). This was the last time we communicated, aside from exchanging pleasantries the few times she came downstairs into the Center proper.

I wrote, "Thank you for honoring my decision to move on."

Two days after Christmas, I notified the staff that Danika and I would be using the van for outreach that afternoon, which we'd begun once a week on Fridays—not quite the fifteen or so hours Gretchen and my recently-demoted supervisor, Ashia, were logging in our grant reports, but a good start after outreach had been deemed the lowest of priorities for nearly a year. It had become clear that outreach would never be a priority as long as Gretchen was director. What we actually did mattered far less than what Gretchen said we did, barely mattered at all, beyond appearances (there is a van; it goes out). Drop-in days—chronically understaffed—were becoming dangerously out-of-control, but in the end, I left because I couldn't stand what Gretchen's lies meant for us: she had created a fantasy version of our program and left the real one to limp along out of sight of donors. The good the Center did was undeniable, but we were working in the dark, in an environment that felt increasingly like some forsaken lower realm; what stars we used as guides, we'd made ourselves, and we were often too busy to look for them. Shoved out of sight and neglected, we did our best, but on a good day we were running in place. I'd started crossing myself in my office between calamities—at first as a joke, but with growing sincerity. It was obvious that help wasn't coming.

This was unspoken: The Center didn't need outreach—it had numbers.

That summer, Gretchen had discovered a camp of fifty youth on the outskirts of town—a camp the outreach team was forbidden to visit and that no one saw, before or after; its only record, the surveys Gretchen had partially filled out. Though she never assisted us, Gretchen seemed to know more about the youth than we did: how many were sleeping outside on a winter night, or who among them had sold their bodies for food. Anyone working alongside us would have perceived two outreach programs: the one Gretchen cultivated for the public, and the shadowland at the back of the building, where we kept precious volumes of hard-won information detailing the lives of homeless youth—information that was of no consequence in the hologram Gretchen was busy projecting upstairs. The youth, already virtually invisible, became further obscured by her fantasy.

It was against policy to contact the board. "This stops at Gretchen," Brent told me in a rehearsed voice, as if we were in a bad movie, and refused to give me an exit interview. It was unbelievable. This was part of the disease of the Center—its general atmosphere of unreality, as a journalist later described it. In the end I reported the Center to our program's grantor, seeing no other option. The reality was, the Center had been falling far below grant requirements for at least a year, probably longer, while programs we claimed to outperform lost funding and were forced to close down; it was hard to get past this fact. (To my knowledge, nothing came of the report.)

We weren't in a movie. The youth were real; the things they went through were real. They were more than a series of numbers in a database or the subjects of shocking anecdotes to be waved triumphantly at donors; they were bigger than that, and more complicated. They deserved better.

Gretchen doesn't work at the Center anymore. Looking back, it seems impossible that her luck could have held out forever, but at the time, Gretchen was untouchable. I wasn't the first who'd tried to contact the board; a few who had managed to do so were labeled "disgruntled employees" and sharply dismissed. In the year after I left, two women who had worked closely with Gretchen as development directors would send the board long letters describing instances in which Gretchen had appeared to misrepresent key facts about the Center and the youth it served. Initially, their complaints were dismissed, as well—but when the media became involved, the board was finally forced to conduct an investigation. Their conclusion was predictable: they found no evidence of wrongdoing, Gretchen had their full support going forward.

Back then, in my last days at the Center, I told myself I couldn't hang on for anything; the only thing I wanted was to hang on.

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It's May of the following year. I live in a college town surrounded by towering green mountains.

Missoula's homeless set up camps along the river and, in winter, stand in staggering lines outside the rather unfortunately-named Poverello Center downtown, their warm breaths fogging the air as if they were one person, living one life.

All spring I've looked for work in nonprofits but haven't found anything promising. Lately, reading job descriptions, my eyes glaze over. Why are these requirements so low? Are they rehiring for this position again—already? Shouldn't a person have some kind of certification to be able to deem a household unfit for children?

On an impulse, I pull up the detention center site belonging to my old county, type Donovan's name into the inmate search engine. I'm at a coffee shop downtown; the connection's sluggish. I look out the window. A boy with a backpack wanders by—not a student, I think, but of course I can't be sure. Donovan's name doesn't come up. A few names, older relatives of his, do. I run a few more searches. Sometimes I'm relieved, sometimes not. If not here, where?

Sometimes a youth doesn't make it. There are stories. In a filing cabinet somewhere, names of the dead.

It happens quietly, naturally.

A hole opens up.

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Toward the end, a former AmeriCorp volunteer named Mila came to work with us, and things improved. But Mila moved to another program a few months later, and Ashia did all but give up, focusing her efforts, when she did work, in the clothing pantry or planning the Holiday Party. Above all, she avoided me. It was obvious I'd been one of the parties who'd come forward with allegations against her that not even Gretchen could ignore. Ashia is sexually inappropriate. Ashia is openly hostile. Ashia likes to reminisce fondly about her former cocaine-use in front of the youth. And this time my complaints were backed up by witnesses.

Gretchen talked about Ashia with a pitying tenderness, as though she were speaking about one of our youth—someone incapable of understand the gravity of the situation. A victim. But I remembered the times Gretchen lost her temper in front of the rest of the team, driving Ashia to tears. I remembered the sounds of her berating Ashia from the office next to mine—her closing the door and shouting over the sounds of Ashia trying to apologize, trying to explain.

Gretchen's desk held a large, illustrated book about the human brain for visitors to peruse, and I found myself looking at the cover while she talked. I imagined our brains without bodies, hanging in the air, regarding one another. In the lobby below our feet, youth began pouring in from the cold. What a waste, I thought.

It was well into winter, and drop-in had taken a turn. Youth were growing increasingly agitated, sneaking in weapons, smashing their fists against walls and threatening to kill each other. Grown adults, including drug dealers, were walking freely in and out of the building. Things were unmanageable. And Ashia wasn't speaking to me. I needed help. Something bad was going to happen. It was only a matter of time.

"What I'm hearing is you're asking for more supervision," Gretchen said in her business voice. "Tasha, I can't keep holding your hand. When I worked at Wendy's—"

When Gretchen worked at Wendy's, she'd had very little supervision. In fact, most people were able to do their jobs just fine without the interference of a higher-up; that's how ninety percent of the world worked; I needed to protect my heart. That's what she told me.

We were sitting in my office with the door closed, heat building in the airless room. We sat facing each other, almost knee to knee, due to space constraints, on a pair of wobbly computer chairs. The floor in my office wasn't level; at the beginning of our conversation I had planted my feet to keep from rolling away. I eased my heels off the ground and waited for gravity to take over. But I didn't move. Nothing happened.

So instead I simply looked at the wall, through a window that wasn't there. It was probably snowing outside; I loved snow. I could hear voices in the hallway, youth calling to each other, and I got up to go greet them.

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On my last day, Brent came down to my office. "I'll need your keys," he said. Then, standing in the door: "I want you to know, we appreciated you." I stared at him. "I mean, the kids appreciated you."

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I wish I could tell you how it was. With the youth.

How those afternoons with them—languid or fraught, cheerful or dreary—expanded to contain something unnamed, the shape of which pressed against us all. A tender wave rising out of a flat dark ocean.

I could write about the sleepy Saturday when a group of laughing skater girls came pushing a stroller that bore, not an infant, but an unusually tranquil cat wrapped in a blanket, how they told me they kept the key to the place they were staying attached to its collar and how the cat knew to hide from everyone but them.

I could write about the boy, just out of jail, with an underage girlfriend, who worked so hard, harder than he should have had to, to get a job, to be good (throwing himself into chores at the Center, reaching out to other youth), and, months later, exhausted from living on the street all that time and visiting his mentally ill father in the hospital, got back on meth and drug his girlfriend into it as well. They were 18 and 15.

I could write about boys and girls who'd lost everyone who cared about them, who'd never been cared about. Who'd experienced the very worst of life from the time they were babies.

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Blood on the wall. Broken glass. Somewhere, a cat with a key around its neck, waiting for the girls to come back.

II. Three Dreams

The Center has expanded and youth churn chaotically in every room, supervised by myself and an apathetic trio of college girls and their boyfriends. I run from room to room, breathless with dread; I've lost everyone. This is the first dream.

The second dream is a happy dream. Two art-kids and I print off some designs they want at the library. My aunt Penny meets us in the alley and walks us home.

In the last dream, many people have gathered at the canal by my parents' house in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. The crowd has the air of lipsticked women waving handkerchiefs at a departing ship; they are celebrating and saying goodbye at the same time. On one side of the spillway, people are dumping things in the high, dark water. The stuff swirls around with bits of driftwood and garbage and snakes and dirty foam before being sucked underground. I realize the things are suitcases.

I walk to the other side, where a second crowd has gathered. The canal on this side is dry and the suitcases are being spat out of the spillway and thumping on the sandy bottom of the canal. One of the kids from the Center, a girl I haven't seen in a long time, appears with a pink umbrella. She picks up a heavy brown suitcase from the pile and starts gliding down the canal with it, as if skating on ice, the umbrella held over her head. Everyone applauds. Someone says to me, "Last year she was so good."

III. Ice Fishing

Yesterday I went with my dad and grandpa to set lines on Dinwoody Lake. We shuffled out onto the ice together, pulling sleds that contained our tools: sticks with line and hooks attached, an auger, an ice-bar, a minnow bucket, a dented metal pan to scoop ice from the holes. The ice was smooth as glass and the wind blew our sleds sideways. My grandpa went ahead of us with the auger, drilling holes. The ice wasn't nearly as thick as my dad had said it would be; tiny cracks sprang between our feet.

On the drive home Dad told me about the time he went out to check lines on the upper lake, by the picture-rocks with the glaring white petroglyphs of elk and bighorn sheep and humanlike figures, and looked down through the ice to see a set of antlers. The antlers were attached to a mule deer. The buck had fallen through the ice and the hole had closed back up. The tips of his antlers were sticking through the ice. The water there was deep and he had kept striving for the surface until he froze and my dad came along and found him there. This was before I was born.

Today, when we return to the lake, the ice will be shifting. It will coo like the pigeons that nest on top of my air conditioning unit in Billings. It will moan and crack and pop. Sometimes the opposite ends of the lake will speak to one another. We'll be able to see bottom today. We'll see weeds and rocks and minnows. We'll see the fish we've caught. Seven ling, some bigger than others, but all eating-size, save two we throw back.

Though the ice cracks and wobbles below our feet, Dad and Grandpa will take every opportunity to stomp on it, to stab it with the ice-bar for no reason. The ice will wail like a woman, and something will tap and then knock against the ice below my sled, where the fish lay belly-up, mostly dead but some pulsing still. Their blood streaking the surface of the lake.

I'll keep my eyes on the ice today, looking beyond the millions of tiny bubbles, into the green core of the lake, for whatever might be locked inside.