

Women Working Frozen Over

I am late. Always late. It's 8:52 when I leave the house and I start work at 9am. Running in the cold makes me salivate, frozen air stinging each breath. Why do I live somewhere where it hurts my face to be outside? I lingered in bed too long, paralyzed by comfort, dreading this hunched run-shuffle to the store. I hate myself the most in these perfectly preventable moments. I hear my own teasing voice in my head, "I'm sorry I was late, I didn't want to be here."

Today is minus 30 degrees, exposed flesh freezes in minutes, air condensing in your mouth. It's almost nine when I round the corner on main street, packed snow crunching under my boots. I squint against the mid-winter sun, still low in the sky, and the blinding reflection off the new snow.

This is my third year at the Salvation Army, which functions as the town's only food bank, used clothing store, and emergency aid society. I started because I needed some volunteer service hours for my church youth group. The old ladies put me to work carrying boxes of canned food up from the basement. They gave me candies and kept me in school clothes. I love their stories: dancing in the 40s with red lipstick on, saucy anecdotes about husbands, grown children, ridiculous customers over the years. They cluck out judgments of clients out of hearing. After a couple of years of volunteering I got hired for Saturday help, probably because none of the paid staff could carry more than a few cans at once and here I was, 14, foolishly over-eager and hanging on their every word.

They constantly tell me how lucky I am to be growing up today. "Back in my day it was thought to be improper to be a woman working outside the home. Nowadays you can do almost anything. Your generation is so lucky and don't you forget it or worse, waste it on getting pregnant like some of these girls you see here, coming in all torted up instead of going to school. It sets all women back when you fall like that. You have no idea, no idea I tell you." I know I am supposed to be grateful. Instead I think it might be nice not to have to work and get to stay in bed on cold mornings like this one. I have only vague notions of the meaning of "torted up" but I don't know what that has to do with women working.

I burst in the back, the donations and sorting room a heated relief, and dramatically start stomping off snow and heaving exaggeratedly to show how sorry I am for being late. The ladies are already elbow deep in bags and cluck at me disapprovingly. "Good morning sleepy head. Oh boy we sure need you out front today. Oh boy a big line you better go help Louise."

Warm weather brings in customers, foot traffic and sales. Cold weather brings in hungry families and those in need of free clothing. Today there is a line down the middle of the store. The front of the building is over 100 years old and has seen better days, the cavernous basement full of bats and dust. The back was constructed more recently, but cheaply so numerous overstuffed shelves sag to one side. If the snow melts the ceiling leaks, and today it looks like there are half a dozen people standing under the seams imperfectly connecting the old and the new structures overhead.

Almost every person waiting is a woman, every person is First Nations. This is a prairie church charity run by old white ladies and the Captain, who spends most of his time at the church. I see

a familiar couple drinking coffee and packing up groceries, some moms I've met once or twice, children wandering and swarming the toy section. One old woman wears a faded government pass on her jacket. Most families carry paperwork. Two women loudly discuss one child's persistent cold, another holds a dress up to her body, one woman is talking softly to my coworker, Louise.

The system is that Louise talks to each person and tells me what to grab from elsewhere in the store or in the cooler. Sometimes she has me work the till. Almost immediately, I run into a girl from my school I haven't seen her for months. She's carrying a baby, wrapped in blue fleece. She looks happy and waves to me. I love this part of my job, being out in the world, feeling important and professional. I nod hello at her from my spot at the front of the store.

The line moves quickly as I fetch dozens of bags and boxes. Once everyone has been through, we stop for tea as we do almost every day at 11:00. I am tasked with heating water and spreading cookies over a platter. We sit on sale couches and a few folding chairs. There always seems to be a self-congratulatory and formal air at these breaks. Louise has been clucking more emphatically over a few of our clients today.

"To think that's it for her. Such a shame - ruined, wasted. I tell you, these girls are doing it to themselves. And then to bring him out on a day like this one, no socks or shoes, no hat, just a blanket like that. Just a baby herself. And of course she won't go back to school, now she's got to do something, but she'll probably go on welfare."

She is talking about my classmate, I realize suddenly. She continues, almost conspiratorially.

"Of course what's her influence? Nobody in the family works, why would you if you get government money. Then to use it up having too many babies you can't feed. A shame for her, best thing for that baby would be to get it off-reserve, away from all those gangs."

My gut twists but I say nothing. Whenever Louise gets on one of these rants I feel confused. Everyone who came in today works in some way. If people get so much government money, why do they need to come here for stuff? Why take the baby off-reserve? What gangs would hurt a baby?

But I don't say anything. Louise continues, "And to think of how hard those women have to work for those babies. If they had decent men they wouldn't be in that position, but then again they are not working either." She turns to me, "Don't let that be you. You study hard - you got every opportunity. Not like some people."

I say nothing. I am 14, perpetually embarrassed, foolish, useless.

We work through the day, the winter sunset already in full colour for the walk home at 5:00. The overcast cold dulls the sounds of every footfall away from the store. I wonder how someone who wore red lipstick dancing came to be working at the shop for 40 years, how many young women she'd seen drop out of school, how frustrating that must be, how cold it might make you.

I am always late, even now realizing the hypocrisy of her words and the self-importance of her tone. To praise women in one breath and tear down the mother in front of you in the next. How many winters does it take for a heart to harden? How do I keep my own from freezing over?