It had gotten cold all of the sudden and winter began to set. The automatic watering systems in the orchards of Cashmere, Washington had not been turned off before the cold had come and the trees shimmered with ice before the day began. A little boy awoke early and, watching through his bedroom window, confirmed his belief that trees were the most patient things he had ever encountered. They stayed rooted in the same position for their entire lives and then stoically stand, clung to by pesky frozen water atoms. He imagined himself as if he were a tree in this predicament. He pictured, with terse lips, his branches wrapped around his body and he imitated this position as the icicles began to fall when the wind picked up and the sun began to rise.

School had not been cancelled and mothers wrapped their children with scarves and insisted mittens were worn before they left for the school bus. The school bus driver wore a ridiculous stocking hat in the morning and some of the children played tic-tac-toe on the fog of the school bus windows. Others wrote secret notes, wiping the window sweat on each other’s faces, thus erasing their secret from the annals of history.

The windows of every car in town had frozen over and one man used his ice-scaper to remove the morning freeze from his neighbors’ automobiles. He enjoyed this task very much and imagined how refreshed he would feel in the human spirit if, when leaving for work and dreading the ice-scaping task which lay ahead, he found no crystals remained to be removed. A clandestine ice-scraper had accomplished the job and requested no recognition for said toil. He whistled while he scraped and wondered, with the freezing temperatures and all, if his breath would fall downward as it left his lips. He checked continually and it did not.

Older brothers dared younger brothers to lick tin mailboxes but none did as they had heard tales from grandparents of losing one’s tongue and being stung by a bee on the inside of the mouth. However, a dog with a tin bowl for a water dish had not known its grandparents and, despite not having been dared, licked its tin bowl. “Well, how do you like that?” thought the dog. Upon waking from the calamity and recognizing the hilarity of the situation, the dog’s owner grabbed her camcorder and committed her dog’s image to celluloid. “Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch,” said the dog’s owner repeatedly. “Real clever,” thought the dog as it shook its head from side to side. It was at this point that the dog decided it would defecate in her slippers while she was at work that day.
Despite the deep freeze no snow had fallen and the ice on the trees melted before noon. The air was cold but the sun shone brilliantly. A little spider trounced across the foliage of a tree enjoying immensely the contrast of the cold air on its little spider body with the solar warmth of the leaves on the bottoms of its little spider feet. It lay its little spider belly down and wished it could spin a little spider web. It knew however, if it stuck around for much longer, what with the cold and all, that it would be a dead little spider. It then shot out a webbed parachute and hitched a ride on the next prevailing breeze.

A water main had burst in the schoolyard and created a large bog. The conglomerated mud developed a layer of freeze on its top by the time school let out and a little boy was trying to break the frozen mud with rocks thrown high into the air. He had no luck. The small boy left as a group of children gathered at the edge of the freeze in front of them. They dared a small girl to cross the tundra and she did so with no fear. “Pussies,” she thought, as she took her first few steps.

When she had gotten half way, she stopped and saw the school bus in the distance, pulling in to pick up the children. As she started back, the layer of freeze gave way and the little girl sank into the frozen mud up to her armpits. “Fuck,” she thought, “I’ve had it up to here with this shit.” She then made a motion with her hand at her chest where the mud reached, as if to indicate that was the level she’d had it up to. She laughed at this and thought it a very good joke.

The pussies looked in awe, not knowing what to do. Many screamed as they turned and ran for the bus. The little girl watched while the pussies boarded and the door to the school bus closed. She saw the exhaust of the bus billow from the tailpipe and follow its yellow origins down the street. She thought of the bus driver’s “crazy-ass” stocking hat and wondered if he would notice she had not boarded and return to help. If he did, she would buy him a new, “boss-ass” stocking hat and write him a thank you note which she would put in a box filled with candy, a toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste. The bus driver did not come to help and she soon forgot her promise. As she looked around the vast expanse of the schoolyard, she realized she was alone.

The little girl stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits enjoyed the silence. She noticed things she never had before. The mountains to her left took on a quality all their own and were no longer just a background. She thought of how long they must have been around and of all the things they must have seen. She tried to imagine her town as it looked before any people had arrived. Before houses and roads and planted grass. Before gas stations and schools and trees in a row. She imagined a completely free-from-human landscape and was happy to now be a part of it.

The earth comforted her and held her close. It surrounded her and protected her. She had not fallen into a hole in the ground; rather, the earth she had walked on countless times
before had pulled her down and hugged her tightly as if to give her some sort of present. Her light-brown hair drifted into and out of her face.

She sat, or stood as it were, listening to the wind blow through the trees allowing them to wave hello. She listened to the wind whistle through the fence allowing it to thank the frozen mud for holding her still. The fence rested for a moment until the boy who had been trying to break the frozen mud with rocks thrown high into the air meandered his way to the edge of the tundra.

“So, I should have been throwing little girls,” thought the little boy. He laughed at this as he put down his backpack and made a paper airplane with a message reading, “Going to go get help. Don’t go anywhere. Hardee-har-har.” He then threw the airplane, watched it land and skid across the freeze until it reached the little girl. He saw her read the note and make a motion with her hand. He reciprocated the middle finger before leaving to get help.

The only help the little boy could find was the new secretary who dawdled while putting on her puffy purple parka. “Jesus,” said the little boy. “Sure are taking your sweet-ass time with that coat.” The new secretary was shocked at this and, thinking only of the boys who made fun of her when she was in school, snapped back with, “Aren’t you a little small to be such a big asshole?” The secretary then covered her mouth and, impressed, the little boy clapped making deep thumping bursts with his mitten-laden hands.

When the little boy returned with the new secretary she would not allow him to walk out to the little girl and instead told him to run to the office and call 911. It was still light out, though the sun had set. As he walked back to the office, the secretary motioned to the little girl with a thumbs up, to let her know everything was going to be all right. The little girl flipped off the secretary and, misinterpreting the message, the secretary held her thumb up even higher. “Things are going to be this OK (up, up, up),” the secretary tried to communicate as she smiled.

“Pussy,” thought the little girl. “They’re all a bunch of sappy pussies.”

When 911 arrived, they were free to walk out to the little girl who was stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits. 911 gathered some extension chords and placed several heaters around the small girl. They hoped, before long, that the mud would soften up and they would be able to get home for Monday Night Football. The heaters, however, began to melt the little girl’s jacket and they had to move them back thus causing one 911 to call home and have his wife tape the game for a later viewing. They tried shovels and axes, hot water and welding torches but the frozen earth would not let go of the little girl.

When her parents arrived they wept and she consoled them. She told them they had nothing to worry about and that she would be out soon enough. 911 approached and said they had made a call and that some specialists would be there within the next couple of hours. When 911 told them this, the little girl skeptically thought, “Frozen mud specialists?” Her father’s tears froze as they slowed in the tangle of his beard.
A news crew came that night and, as she knelt down, the big city reporter in the red jacket asked the little girl who was stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits what she felt about her present situation.

“I tell ya,” replied the little girl. “It’s the pits.”

“Fuckin’ smart-ass,” thought the big city reporter in the red jacket. She thanked the parents and wished the little girl good luck as she got into her news-mobile and drove back to the big city. “Fuckin’ smart-ass,” thought the little girl as the big city reporter in the red jacket got into her Civic and headed back to Wenatchee.

When the frozen mud specialists arrived, they looked very concerned. This, however, was only because they had been trained to look so upon arriving at a “scene.” They had also been told to refer to immediate action concern situations as “scenes” (a government study found the American population recognizes that this is how specialists refer to them in movies). After elaborate gauging and testing (elaborate gauges and tests which were performed merely to comfort those involved and make the government look like it knew what was going on. The frozen mud specialists tried to scratch the frozen mud with a penny, a nail, and a piece of glass, with the following results: a scratched penny, a bent nail, and a chipped piece of glass), when the glass chipped and the surface of the tundra had no inkling of a mark on it, they determined the little girl was going to be stuck until the ground thawed. They suggested someone (they didn’t know who), built a tent around her as to guard her from the wind and they packed their things to leave. As they walked to their van one of the specialists tossed the chipped piece of glass over his shoulder and it shattered upon meeting the frozen ground.

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The cold did not let up and before school started the next day, children gathered around the orange tent, which now housed the little girl who was stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits. She had become a sort of small town overnight sensation and was disturbed by her instant celebrity. Children were allowed to go in small groups and talk with her. The new secretary was assigned “little girl stuck in frozen mud duty” and was told that everyday she would be there until the little girl’s parents, or someone with parental approval or someone with genetic affiliation, arrived. She was to give the little girl her meals and read her school lessons as long as she was stuck in the frozen mud. The principal of the school was quoted in the local paper as saying, “I’ll be damned if she’s not going to get her state granted education on my shift.”

During first recess, a group of four girls, claiming to be the little girl’s friends, entered the tent to get a look at the hype. They didn’t see what the big deal was and why she was getting all this attention. She isn’t that pretty, they thought. They were surprised, upon entering the orange tent, to find a gigantic purple parka, housing a mediocre 30-something, sitting in a folding chair reading Social Studies to one-fourth of a girl (head, neck, shoulders and arms) who was the same age as them. She had looked small before, but now...
The secretary asked the girls if they would stay while she went to the bathroom and “freshened up.”

“Cigarette,” they thought.

“Aren’t you like, supposed to stay out here the whole time unless like, her grandparents come or something?” asked one of the girls. Technically she was, but she explained to the girls that she’d had to use the bathroom all morning and, surely, they could stay with their friend for five minutes. The small group of girls agreed they would stay until the secretary returned and they all moved to the side while the secretary headed for the flap of the tent. The chatter of the schoolyard stopped as the purple parka exited the orange tent and trotted toward the restroom.

The small group of girls circled around the little girl stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits much as hyenas do around an injured baby lion. They looked at the pictures taped to the walls of the tent (a personal touch the secretary thought might help the little girl feel more comfortable), flipped through her textbooks and read the school assignments she had worked on that morning. Before realizing they were fake, one of the girls sniffed the white flowers which sat on a table in a vase depicting a herd of buffalo. Everything took on an orange hue as the light came in through the cover of the tent. Finally, all at once, as if rehearsed beforehand, the small group of girls turned to the little girl stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits and informed her that, even though she was the talk of the school now, she was still a nothing and would never be anything, much less more popular than they, so she might as well just fucking freeze out here and do them all a favor.

“You know I’m shitting right now, don’t you?” asked the little girl.

With a scoff and a flip of the hair, the group of girls ripped up the school work, tore the pictures off the wall, tipped the table over and smashed the buffalo vase on the frozen ground. They unplugged the heater, cut a hole in the tent, with a large knife produced seemingly out of nowhere, and spit on the little girl as they left.

When the secretary returned the little girl’s teeth were chattering and her arms were wrapped tight around her shoulders. Her nose was red and running. This annoyed her and though she had always prided herself on her personal hygiene she thought, “Fuck it. If people can’t sympathize with me now, then I don’t care if my nose is running.”

The secretary plugged the heater back in and asked the little girl if she was all right while she wiped the spit from her face. The little girl said that, yes, she was fine. The boy who had been trying to break the frozen mud with rocks thrown high into the air walked into the tent through the cut in its side and asked if they knew there was a large hole in the orange tent. He then grabbed the duct tape off the ground, which the secretary had used to hang up the pictures, and began reconstituting the side of the tent. The secretary asked the little girl if she wanted her to talk to the principal about what the girls had done. The little girl said no and that she didn’t want the secretary getting in trouble.
The earth let go of its bear hug in early spring during the middle of the night. The secretary was now spending all her time with the little girl along with the boy who was trying to break the frozen mud with rocks thrown high into the air. The little girl stuck in frozen mud up to her armpits had been kicking her feet and wriggling her hips more and more the past few days and she pulled herself up out of the ground quietly without waking either the little boy or the secretary.

She walked out of the tent and into the moonlight, surprising herself; she thought for sure her legs would not be strong enough to walk this soon. The little girl noticed the mountains she had not seen in three months shine in the radiance of the moonlight. The moon had a ring around it and the Milky Way bound around the sky like a ribbon.

As she stood there, the secretary exited the tent smoking a cigarette. “I thought you had been swallowed whole when I first woke up,” said the secretary. The little boy then joined them and said the little girl smelled like shit. The secretary grabbed the little girl’s bag of clothes, which had been prepared for this occasion, and the little girl went into the school’s bathroom to clean off the mud and the filth.

When she returned, she saw the little boy and the secretary sitting in folding chairs looking at the sky. The little girl said she had something to show them and she rolled up her right pant leg. Beneath, sparkling, shining in the moonlight, was the little girl’s crystalline shin.