

John Sheirer
Into the Icebox

Wendy wasn't sure this was a good idea.

The room was cavernous and almost completely dark. Wendy's eyes were slow to adjust because the window at the far wall, maybe one hundred feet beyond the tiny entryway, was glowing brighter than the high beams on a tractor-trailer.

Wendy's life had seemed like a dark chamber during recent months. Grief and loss can give a person the sensation of being pulled into a deep, cold void, even someone as young and vibrant as Wendy always considered herself to be. Her mother had talked her into this trip, had convinced her that she could experience her grief and still keep her life moving forward. Wendy wasn't enthusiastic about a two-hour drive on snowy side roads to an out-of-the-way museum of contemporary art housed within a former brick and steel factory, but she took her mother's advice, and that's how she found herself in this dark room with its bright window.

As she staggered toward that window, Wendy kept her hands in front of her, zombie-like, to prevent colliding with the people she could hear talking quietly all around her. After an agonizing half minute, she made her way close enough to the window that she could make out the shadowy forms of several individual human bodies in the dark room, clustered nearly close enough to touch if she let herself reach. She stopped about ten feet from the bright window.

Wendy could see a man kneeling close beside a wheelchair directly in front of that window. "Good view from here, Jimmy," the man said.

The curled hands on both arms of the wheelchair lifted slightly. Wendy heard a high-pitched voice almost squeal, "Bright, daddy."

"It is," the father said. "Are we too close? Does this hurt your eyes?"

"No," Jimmy replied, deeper this time. "Like it here. Good view."

From behind her, near the door where she had entered the big room, Wendy heard a woman's voice called out, assertive and professional: "Excuse me, folks. We'll get started with the exhibition in just a few minutes. Our volunteer had second thoughts for a while there, but she's almost ready now."

Wendy turned to look at the voice and was surprised to see how young the woman was. Even in her official museum uniform, she looked like a teenager. Wendy wondered if she herself would have been able to speak to strangers so confidently more than a decade earlier when she was still in high school. She wasn't even sure she could do it now. Maybe. It would depend on the situation. With some strangers, avoidance was the wisest route. But others had surprised her just by crossing her path when she needed them but didn't expect the encounter.

After her announcement, the young woman ducked back through the small door and was gone. Wendy turned her eyes again to the glowing window.

This close, Wendy could see that the window's thick glass gave a clear view into a space roughly the size of a college classroom. At first, the room seemed completely white, but after another long moment, her eyes adjusted enough to make out the irregular surface of the floor, rough and textured like the view of Antarctica from a low-flying plane. The floor was covered with uneven waves of ice, not quite jagged, but also not smooth. The walls were flat and featureless, painted as white as the ice, making it hard to tell where the floor ended and the walls

began. Wendy craned her neck to look up at what she could see of the ceiling from her perspective. It was the same white as the walls, but with small openings for recessed lighting of pure white, giving the whole room its singularly appropriate name: “Icebox.”

The room’s only dark feature that broke the omnipresent whiteness was near the far wall. Something that looked like a square hole had been cut into the ice floor. The top of an aluminum ladder emerged from the side nearest the window. A small rim of ice had developed around the edges of this hole, making it look like something ice fishers had opened up on a secluded lake months ago after winter’s first deep freeze. Rising onto her tiptoes, Wendy could see over the edge and into the hole. Dark water sloshed inside, just close enough that she could make out the surface as it moved slightly and reflected the overhead lights.

“Is that ice fake?” one of the human shapes nearby whispered to a companion.

“It kinda looks fake, I guess,” the companion replied. “I don’t know. It could be real. But it could be, like, just white plastic that looks like ice, maybe?” Their voices had the round accents of the American upper-Midwest. Close in the dark, Wendy noticed that the smelled pleasantly of nightshades, like ripe red peppers grown in dark soil, a fertile contrast to the nearby frozen room.

Wendy sought out their faces as her eyes adjusted to the strange lighting. Both women were on the far end of middle age, their round, pink faces shining from within frames of dark hair. Their glasses reflected four bright rectangles of the window’s white light.

“We get cold in Minnesota, just like you do in Wisconsin,” the first woman said.

“You’d think we could tell the difference between real ice and fake,” the second said, chuckling.

“Well,” Minnesota went on, “I’ve never claimed to understand art.”

“Me, neither,” said Wisconsin, “especially this modern stuff. Just give me a picture of a nice barn at sunset, and I’m happy.

“Hang it over the couch if it’s a lengthwise rectangle,” Minnesota said.

“By the window if it’s an up-and-down one,” Wisconsin replied.

Minnesota ran her gaze around the window. “This glass is an over-the-couch shape, but I’m not sure it would work in my living room.”

“Depends on the frame,” Wisconsin observed.

“Good point,” Minnesota said.

The two women looked at each other, the window’s reflection giving way to human eyes making contact. They leaned close to each other, then rocked back to their original distance.

Wendy heard a man she could barely see off near the side of the room say in a low voice, “I just don’t know what to think right now.”

The woman standing near him replied in an equally soft but insistent tone, “I don’t either.”

Wendy noticed two young men walk too quickly behind her, stopping just as they nearly bumped into her.

“Sorry,” one of them said, not sounding sorry. “Dark as shit in here.”

“This is pretty lame,” the other said.

Wendy noticed that one of them wore a sweatshirt with three Greek letters. *Frat boys*, she thought, her eyes rolling so far back in her head that she could almost see her brow bones from the inside. *Great*.

“Thank Christ we’re getting extra credit for Art Appreciation,” the first frat boy said.

“Only reason I’m here. Just barely passing that fucking class,” the second one replied. “I should have taken dance for my fine arts requirement. No museum visits in dance class. Just a room full of sexy pieces of ass in tutus.”

From his wheelchair, Jimmy turned his head slightly toward the frat boys. Wendy could see that he wasn’t the adolescent she had assumed, but a full-grown man with deep-set eyes and beard stubble. He could have been twenty or forty. Wendy couldn’t be sure.

Jimmy’s father, also much older than Wendy had first thought, pushed himself to standing and faced the frat boys. “Fellas,” he said. “Can you tone it down, please?”

“Sorry,” they both said in unison, noticing Jimmy for the first time. Wendy sensed that they might actually mean this apology.

Jimmy’s dad nodded. “Thanks,” he said. When he knelt back down beside the wheelchair, Wendy noticed that he had to brace himself on the chair’s arm and lower himself slowly. She could almost hear his knees grinding.

The voices in the darkness stilled for a moment as if they all sensed a change in the air. Without warning, a muffled sound somewhere near the far right side of the window broke the silence. Every head turned as a woman appeared in the icy room. She must have emerged from a door just out of sight, but she almost seemed to have been teleported to the spot.

Everyone in the dark room leaned forward or took a tentative step toward the window. Wendy took five steps. Only Jimmy and his dad were closer, and Wendy could look right over them for an unobstructed view of the woman in the icebox.

The woman’s hair was almost impossibly blonde and smooth, falling just beyond her shoulders. If the people in the dark room looked closely enough, they might notice that Wendy’s hair fell the same way. Instead, everyone fixated on the woman beyond the window in the white room. She wore a black, one-piece bathing suit that, oddly, had long sleeves completely covering her arms. Her fingers curled around the ends of the sleeves so that half of her hands were inside the stretchy, black fabric.

With her face turned away from the window, her age was hard to guess. The bathing suit was cut squarely at the top of her legs, and her waist seemed straight and almost shapeless, giving the impression that she was either an adolescent or middle-aged.

“She’s kinda dumpy,” frat boy number one whispered.

“Milf. I’d still hit that,” frat boy number two replied, and they giggled. At least they kept their voices down this time. Wendy had to concentrate to keep ignoring their comments.

The woman walked slowly and carefully along the wall toward the hole in the ice. When she stepped, something that looked like white athletic tape was visible on the bottoms of her feet.

“Might really be ice in there,” Minnesota woman said. “Look at her feet.”

“I noticed that too,” Wisconsin said. “That’d keep her from slipping too. Very practical.”

The room fell silent again as the woman kept moving toward the far side of the ice room. Her pace was painstakingly slow, and she took what must have been a full minute to cover the distance to the far wall, which Wendy guessed was about thirty feet.

The indistinguishable woman in the shadows behind Wendy stage-whispered, “How would your wife find out?”

The man with her rasped louder than he probably intended, “Oh, you know her. She’d definitely find out!”

Wendy glanced toward the loud whisperers and saw that they weren't even looking at the woman on the other side of the window.

"Jesus, lady," Frat Boy Number Two said toward the glass. "Hurry up! Move that ass, will ya?"

"Stop staring at her ass," Frat Boy Number one hissed. "She's mine."

Wendy saw Wisconsin shoot a look at the frat boys. She seemed on the brink of saying something or at least shushing them, but she held back and returned her gaze to the window.

When the woman in the ice room reached the far wall, she turned, took a few steps until she was on the other side of the water hole, and then faced the window between her and Wendy. Her bare legs and face were visibly reddening, so the room must have been as cold as it looked. Her legs seemed steady and looked stronger from this view than they did during her slow walk. Wendy pictured the woman playing tennis with an enthusiastic partner in warmer weather and a greener setting.

Her face was placid, almost blank as she looked up from the floor to face ahead. Wendy wondered if she could see the group of people watching her through the window. But then she remembered that the ice room was much brighter than the dark observation room. The window would work as a mirror from the other side. The woman must be looking at herself standing in an icy, white room, wearing only that odd, black, long-sleeved bathing suit. Wendy wondered what she was thinking as she stared at herself for a few seconds.

The woman looked down again and carefully inched her feet forward toward the edge of the icy hole. Wendy hadn't noticed before, but there was a gap in the ice ridge around the hole that perfectly matched two shoulder-width, human feet. How many feet had stood in that spot before this woman? Enough to create a flat, smooth base that seemed almost like a launching pad.

The woman stood for a few seconds and stared into the water. None of the observers could tell how deep the hole was from outside the room. How far could the woman see into the dark water? Only she knew.

The woman bent at the waist and knees, bracing her left hand across her thighs as she crouched toward the water. She extended her right hand, reaching down. Wendy reached forward protectively as she noticed the woman teeter for an instant before they both made themselves still again. When the woman's fingers touched the water, she almost pulled back but seemed to force herself to keep contact for a full five seconds. As she stood again, she shook her right hand, and Wendy thought she could see tiny rainbows in the cold drops of water flicking from her fingers.

The woman's eyes searched ahead of her again as if she were trying to see through the dark window to the people she knew were on the other side, and her calm expression broke for the first time. She laughed silently, her smile making her face seem childlike for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply several times.

"Well," the shadowed man said to his companion, "how married are you?"

The hidden woman whispered back, "I'm really married. I mean, really, very, really married. I've never even considered something like this before."

"Me neither," the man replied, but Wendy didn't find him convincing.

"Chickenshit," Frat Boy Number One said toward the window.

"Jump, bitch!" Frat Boy Number Two snarled.

Wendy resisted the urge to send an elbow into one frat boy's throat and a knee to the other's groin.

Suddenly, with an almost imperceptible flex of her knees, the woman in the icebox seemed to hang in the air a few inches above the ice and water. Her eyes darted to the window, and she drew in a quick gasp through her mouth and sealed her lips. As she started to descend, she squeezed her eyes shut.

A small clicking sound spread through the dark room as every observer simultaneously gaped their wet mouths in surprise.

The woman dropped so quickly into the water hole that all Wendy could notice was her blond hair lifting from her shoulders like wings on each side of her motion-blurred face. A misty splash rose as her body sliced into the dark water. Then she was gone, completely submerged. Within a fraction of a second, a much larger splash launched balls and ribbons of water three feet above the ice that shattered in midair and fell like confetti, soon to freeze on the icy floor.

After a long instant, the woman's head bobbed into view as if removed from her body. She must have reached the bottom and reflexively kicked herself upward. She seemed to be either shouting in pain or moaning in pleasure as she arched her head back. And then she was gone again, slipping down into the water, almost gently this time.

A second later, her hands emerged, grasping the sides of the ladder. Then her face appeared again wearing a look of pure shock. Wendy's face mirrored the expression. The woman's eyebrows lifted nearly to her now water-slicked hairline, and her dripping mouth rounded as if she were holding the long note of a joyous solo. She laboriously made her way up the ladder, step by halting step, as the water seemed to suck on her body, trying to force her back down into its depths, not wanting to release her to the air.

"Wow!" the hidden woman said, moving quickly toward the window. "That was freaking intense!"

"I love how she just plunged in," the man replied as he followed the woman toward the window and put his hand on the small of her back. The two were older than Wendy had imagined, old enough to be her parents. The man continued, "she had to think about it, but, once she made up her mind, she just went for it! Gotta admire that!"

"Subtle," his companion deadpanned.

"I wish my daughter could see this," Minnesota said.

"I wish my daughter would *try* this," Wisconsin replied.

The woman emerged from the water and steadied herself by holding the top of the ladder. Wendy hadn't noticed before how slick the ice was on this side of the hole, but now she saw that it was as smooth as the glass that separated the two rooms, dividing dark from light, heat from cold. Speechless, Wendy wished she could offer the woman her own warm, strong hands to guide her as she slowly stepped away from the hole, moving directly toward the window for a few baby steps. Then she angled toward the door in the corner and strode more quickly. She brought her right hand up to her mouth for just an instant, perhaps wiping away water, perhaps holding back a gasp or even a scream.

Jimmy applauded by tapping his hands on the arms of his wheelchair. "Brave lady," he said.

"Yes, she is," his father replied. "Brave like you."

"Wish we could do that," Jimmy said, looking at his father.

“Me too,” his father said chuckling. “In another lifetime.”

As the woman moved toward the door, just before stepping out of view, she lifted her head and looked to her right. Wendy again had the distinct impression that the woman was searching for someone in the glass, trying to find a face that she might recognize. Just before the woman disappeared from Wendy’s line of vision, the two seemed to make eye contact. The woman smiled, and Wendy pulled a surge of breath into her lungs.

“I guess that was worth it for extra credit,” Frat Boy Number One said.

“Doubt it,” Frat Boy Number Two replied.

“Assholes,” Wendy murmured, loud enough to be sure that they heard her. Without waiting for their response, she spun and strode purposefully through the dark room toward the door at the other end. She could see just enough to know that her path was clear. Once in the bright hallway, she turned left and moved straight toward a door set in the blank wall just around a corner. The door would be hard to see if you didn’t know it was there.

Wendy grabbed the metal handle, pushed open the door, and entered what looked like a gym locker room. A short distance away, the woman in the black bathing suit sat on a bench with her back to Wendy. Her head was bowed, and she hugged herself. The young woman in the museum uniform wrapped a thick, fleecy robe around the woman’s shaking shoulders.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Nancy?” The museum attendant asked, and the woman nodded as she pulled the robe tight.

Wendy stepped quickly toward the woman, who turned at the sound of footsteps. She smiled and stood, water dripping from her hair onto the bulky robe and the bare floor.

“You did it, Mom!” Wendy said through the beginning of a sob.

Nancy stood and hugged her daughter. “I did,” she said through chattering teeth. “And, holy crap, one time is enough for a lifetime!”

“Dad would be really proud!” Wendy said, tears bursting from her eyes and mixing with the water still falling from her mother’s hair as they pulled back from the embrace and looked into each other’s eyes.

Nancy laughed. “He’d say I was a lunatic!”

“No!” Wendy said, and she laughed too, a carbon-copy of her mother. “Well, maybe. But he’d still be proud. And then he’d want to jump in, too!”

“Yes, he would have,” Nancy said. “Especially since I went first.”

“I wish he could have seen you,” Wendy said.

“Maybe he did,” Nancy replied, and she drew Wendy back into their hug and held her until they both finally stopped trembling.

Note: This story is fictional but was inspired by a visit to the exhibition “A Cold Hole” by Taryn Simon at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts, on March 15, 2019. Thanks to the artist and to the unnamed woman who bravely jumped into the freezing water that day.

John Sheirer (pronounced “shy-er”) lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wonderful wife Betsy and happy dog Libby. He has taught writing and communications for 28 years at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, where he also serves as editor and faculty advisor for *Freshwater Literary Journal* (submissions welcome). He writes a monthly column on current events for his hometown newspaper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, and his books include memoir, fiction, poetry, essays, political satire, and photography. His most recent book is *Fever Cabin*, a fictionalized journal of a man isolating himself during the current pandemic. (All proceeds from this book benefit pandemic-related charities.) Find him at JohnSheirer.com.