



Gazelle

READ THE FIRST-PLACE WINNER OF OUR “AFTER THE FALL”
SHORT STORY CONTEST.

BY SHANNON SKAFF

I wait for him in the corner. Sitting on the floor, behind the bed, under the single bulb. I wait there because it will take him three seconds longer to get to me. Three seconds less with his hands on me. I know the light makes the hollows under my eyes look darker but I don’t care.

He doesn’t expect much from me. He’s happy with the mounds and holes and angles of me. He comes regular and asks for me and it makes me look good to Ray so I don’t mind him so much. At least I know what to expect. Not like the ones who come in late on Saturdays. Straight from the airport or a strip club. Drunk and smelling like piss or cigarettes or worse and can barely get their belt off. (Ray makes us dress up in nighties or baby doll underwear for those creeps but they can barely get their belts off.) This one smells like Old Spice and French fries and I wonder if he works at a burger joint. A manager, in a mustard-colored polyester shirt, a bunch of teenage girls working for him. Teasing him with an extra button undone and laughing about it behind his back, just wanting to get let off early and collect their paychecks. I picture the McDonald’s on Hope where I used to hang with Carmen and Jeannie the summer before ninth grade. Standing under the street light and talking shit to the boys in their cars at the drive-thru. High school boys. We asked them for liquor and cigarettes and we smoked the cigarettes pushed up to the end of our second and third fingers because we thought it made us look cool. And I wonder if I hadn’t tried so hard to be cool, if I hadn’t tried so hard to seem like I didn’t give a fuck, if I wouldn’t have gotten in Ray’s car on a dare. Would I still be there with Jeannie and Carmen, drinking Diet Cokes and complaining about gym class and pre-algebra. But that kind of thinking is a dead-end street, so I stop, and I count the ceiling tiles

instead. 1234. Down and across. 5678. Diagonal. That’s the only math I need. I listen to the screech of the bed springs. Heeee-kwah. Heeee-kwah. If this one makes a sound I say “yes baby” because I know that’s what he wants. He gets back to his business and doesn’t want anything from me but the mounds and holes and angles of me and it’s better that way. Quicker.

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Dear Baby,

I hope you don’t mind me talking to you like this.

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Angie says she pictures Mary when she’s doing it and Mary gives her strength. I tell her that’s bullshit because Mary is dead. Where was Mary when she was getting dragged into a van in Tijuana. She calls me *puta* and shuts up about it. But if I’m being honest sometimes I picture her too. Not the Bible Mary or the Mexican Mary but the lady who came to the middle school on Wednesdays with state-funded milk for the poor kids – the ‘underserved,’ they called it. That was me, but I wouldn’t get the milk. I wouldn’t get the goddamn milk because I would have had to stand in that line with all the other washed up kids whose moms were out boozing or whose dads had run off with some slut and never come back and when I gave her my ticket she would have looked in my eyes and known that things were really bad. That lady with her chestnut hair pulled back so nice – how did she get it so there were no stray hairs at all? – and the diamond studs sparkling on her ears, I imagine her smiling at me as some guy is drilling me into the mattress, and saying to herself, that’s a pretty girl. That’s a good girl and she’s doing alright. She’ll be alright.

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I used to want to be a veterinarian.

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Dear Baby,
I hope you're not mad at me.

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I don't know where Ray gets these girls from. That's a lie I know where he got every one of them because it's all we talk about. Where we were, who we were with. Did he use ropes, or a bat. Alcohol, or a sock stuffed in the mouth. We talk about it so much we're sick of it. On Thursdays he brings us magazines, *OK* and *In Touch*, and we devour them page by page, arguing over who's the cutest. Who's washed up already. Who's probably a junky. Don't try to tear something out for yourself, though. I made that mistake once and Gigi, big Gigi who storms around the room like an ape when she's mad, ripped my entire area apart including stabbing a fork a few times in my mattress and pulling out handfuls of mildewed foam and when she finally discovered the folded page buried under my underwear at the bottom of the Adidas box she punched me in the face. Boom boom two times so quick I didn't even get my hands up. The room got all quiet and nobody said anything and Gigi laid the page on the concrete floor and pressed the folds out as best she could. It was Harry Styles, a paparazzi shot. Looking over his shoulder, kind of surprised, with his high cheekbones and his pompadour hair just flawless. And something about the way he was looking at the camera, those pale eyes, you couldn't help thinking he was looking at you, and that maybe he would like you back. It's stupid, but that's why I tore it out. And that's why Gigi smoothed out the creases on his face, so tender, like she was making love to him with her fat, dirty fingers. Later when Ray called for me and saw my busted lip I thought he was going to hit me too but he just looked away for a second, real quiet, and then he took my chin in his hand and said, "Be smart, sweetheart. I can't work you if you look like this and you know what happens if I can't work you." That was the last time I tore out a page.

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Ray tells us about how the lions hunt, scaring up the herd of gazelles, and the ones that lag behind, the ones that veer away, or stumble and fall – those are the ones that get taken down. The lions break their neck with their jaws, he says. We're lucky, he says, that we didn't get our necks broken.

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No drugs and no hitting. Those are his only rules. But sometimes the customers do it anyway. Hit us. And then they pay extra, because we're no good to Ray if our face is messed up. The bruises on the body nobody cares. Nobody even notices. But Ray doesn't tell them that, either. He gets them over a barrel for more cash. If your face is messed up and someone complains when he's finished with you, why'd you send me to that fucked up looking bitch, it hurts his reputation. Or worse, if they lose their nerve because all of a sudden you remind them of their cousin or their kid sister or whatever, if they get up off you and can't finish – then he has to make allowances. Then you owe him for the cash he's out. You do anything to try to keep those guys from leaving.

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Dear Baby,

I try to act like I wanted you out. I tried to act like I knew it was the best thing for both of us. But if I'm being honest I told myself a big story about you and me. Me working at a little grocery store where they'd let me put you in a clothes basket under the register and I'd look down at you, in between customers, and you'd be staring back up at me, wrapped in your fuzzy blanket, with your mouth curled like the pink ribbon on the best birthday present ever, and I would know everything was going to be alright, no matter what, because we had each other.

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Twenty or so of them come in one night. I say, under my breath, what did they, charter a tour bus? Because I do that, when I'm nervous, make a smart-ass comment to try to calm myself.

There's nine of us, and it doesn't take a math genius to understand what will happen next. They file in with their hands stuffed in their pockets because they're not sure how to start (but they get over that real quick) and Lita – Lita with her trout pout and the bruises on her arms, who will never get out from under the debt she owes Ray – *I need my fix, Papi* – juts her chin toward one of them, no different than the others except something I can't put my finger on, something about the way he holds his mouth, maybe. I say do you know him and she says, shhh, a sound like air leaking from a tire. But he's already coming over. The rest of them are shuffling out like a deck of cards and this guy comes right over and grabs me by the hair, real hard, so hard that for a second my head makes a crackling sound and the room lights up like a sparkler. He says, Ray told me you his bottom bitch. His teeth are filed sharp, like a dog. A reliable bitch. Someone comes in behind him, a shadow. The tattoo on his neck says *Faith*.

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Dear Baby,

I don't want to tell you the rest. I don't want you to worry if you would have gotten that one's hands or this one's eyes or if some part of you was like any of them, ever. All you need to know is I'm healing up. Ray made them pay extra, for what they did. He says it's good to have a credit, to draw against for my future bullshit. He even brought me pints of ice cream, since I couldn't chew so good, which made everyone jealous. I got up the nerve to ask him. Am I really your bottom bitch. And he said, sometimes in life you draw the short straw and you have to know how to suck it up. The girl who can bounce back the quickest after a fall, baby. That's the one who's his bottom bitch.

Shannon Skaff was born and raised in Hawaii. She writes about nature, culture, and the impress of social conditioning on our most intimately held beliefs. She likes driving fast cars and lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two cats.

Interview

SHANNON SKAFF ON "GAZELLE"

What inspired you to write "Gazelle?"

I find myself repeatedly drawn to the question of fate versus free will. How much influence does anyone really have on the circumstances of their lives? I am especially charged by characters who find themselves in precarious and dangerous positions through little fault of their own or as the result of a single reckless or uninformed decision.

How did you find your protagonist's unique voice on the page? When did you know when you had gotten it just right?

Writing adolescent protagonists is especially appealing to me for the mix of bravado and innocence, and the potential to have it shattered. I never know if I have a protagonist's voice just right! I try to get myself out of the way and let the character talk, and if it feels authentic, I trust (hope) it will resonate on the page.

What was your revision process like for this story? How many drafts did you go through in total?

I wrote the basic premise, via the protagonist's first-person narrative, a few months ago. I'd been tinkering with it occasionally, and when I decided to submit it to *The Writer* short story competition, I wrote multiple drafts, mostly cutting and shaving and tightening, to keep the stakes high but meet the word count requirement.

This story ventures into some pretty dark places, but it retains a sense of hope throughout the narrative. How did you strive to achieve balance on the page to keep things from becoming too bleak for the reader?

The novel I've just completed also centers on a young girl who's bound in sex slavery – but 600 years ago, at the fall of the Byzantine Empire, when it wasn't a crime (as it still isn't in some places) but simply part of the accepted social structure. So I have been thinking for a long time about freedom and what it means – is it a fundamental human right? Does it live in the world or in the heart? – and have been inspired by stories of



people who suffered tremendously and still found hope and love and moments of real joy, like Anne Frank, for example.

How does your process for writing short fiction differ from writing a book-length manuscript? How does one inform the other?

Writing short fiction is challenging in its requirement for brevity – I tend to be indulgent and verbose! – but I have found its demands to be surprisingly appealing. Writing a novel is a lavish multi-year love affair with wild ups and downs; a short story is a satisfying fling. It's a nice change-up from the slog of "novel-ing."

What's your best advice for fellow fiction writers?

Believe in yourself. Make some writer friends and support each other. Join workshops and be forced to read your stuff aloud. 📖