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The Gazelle

My favorite childhood bedtime story was about a clever gazelle who outsmarted the lion by using his fierceness and his willingness to kill against him. My father would tuck me warmly into bed and tell me about how the gazelle, small and seemingly vulnerable, was drinking by a watering hole one day. Her mother had always warned her against going there alone, but the young gazelle could not control when she got thirsty. If she were thirsty and the rest of the herd was sleeping, what else could the little gazelle do?

One morning, as the sun was peaking up over the horizon, the little gazelle followed her thirst to the watering hole.

"Little Gazelle," a large lion said as he approached, "Don't you know you shouldn't be here alone?" He circled her slowly, playing with her, confident in his sharp teeth and large stature. Fear understandably filled the gazelle, but she knew something about the lion that he did not yet know about himself. His desire to kill would result in his own demise.

"Mr. Lion," the gazelle said, the sweetness in her voice causing him to lick his lips. "Wouldn't you rather have a larger meal? Look how small I am. I'm not even full-grown."

At this point in the story, my father used to tickle my ribs, causing uncontrolled giggles to spew from me.

"Mr. Lion, have you ever heard of the Silver Antelope?" she cooed. "Legends say it's the fastest and most elusive creature in the savannah, a challenge that even the mightiest predators have failed to conquer. They say whoever catches it can feast on its meat forever."

"That's just a myth. And you are just a silly gazelle."

"But, it isn't! We gazelles know where to find it." Being called "silly" sent an angry fire through the little gazelle, but she did not show it.

"Do tell." The lion circled her.

"It's in the water. That's why no predator has ever caught it. They've all been too afraid."

"Afraid! I am not afraid of anything. Have you seen how sharp my teeth are?"

"Oh yes," the gazelle agreed, her eyes on a dark spot in the water. "You do have very sharp teeth. They will certainly help you catch the silver antelope. Its home is just below the surface over here."

The lion, a bit skeptical, looked over and saw movement below the surface of the water.

"Ah, yes, I see it just there." He stuck his head and upper body into the watering hole, and the gazelle knew she had won.

The crocodile, which also had sharp teeth and was also very hungry, closed its large jaws over the lion, chomping him in half. The lion's lower half fell by the side of the watering hole, limp and lifeless." My father

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would usually slide off the side of my bed, falling to the floor dramatically, causing another laughing fit from me.

The gazelle snuck home just as everyone in her herd was waking up, no one the wiser of the gazelle's brave actions. When the herd woke up and found half a lion next to their drinking water, they rejoiced, knowing they did not have to worry about the crocodile making a meal of them that day. He was probably taking a nap after such a big meal.

I check my phone, hoping miraculously for an email or text from my co-worker, Perry. It's almost 2:30 in the morning in Paris, and if I know him, he will still be up prepping for the meeting at 9 AM. I huff and sit back, feeling completely useless in more ways than one. I could die here tonight, and I'm thinking about work. Steven, my husband of over twenty-five years, is also probably hiding somewhere, fearing for his life, and I'm hoping for an email from a co-worker. *What does that say about me?*

My forty-something-year-old legs ache from crouching behind the cafeteria serving line in stilettos.

It's been five minutes. Maybe ten? The hands of the clock in the cafeteria haven't moved and are stuck at 3:20. Whether that is meant to be A.M. or P.M., I have no idea. At first glance, the floor is clean enough, but in the cracks and crevices between the floor and the serving station, there is dirt, pen caps, and bits of food. I also found a pair of latex gloves. They are dusty and forgotten, shoved underneath a counter, but I use them to amuse myself while I hide. I pull on the fingers and wrist band, snapping them playfully, the pain reminding me I'm still alive. Thwack!

A yawn, and then another, escapes my lips. A stress response. Like the gazelle, I am alone. Instead of a sleeping herd, I had snuck away from the party, my husband's 50th reunion, to look for vegan-friendly sustenance in the empty cafeteria. Tears stream down my face as I pull an apple out of a box on the floor. The apple tastes waxy and bland, but I am grateful for it. The movement in my jaw, along with the crunching sound as I chew, is meditative. The movement of my jaw, the sturdy metal behind my back, and the stillness of being alone take over my thoughts, and my shoulders loosen in a way I haven't felt in years.

Those gunshot sounds blurred my vision, but they also brought me clarity. When faced with the realization that the world would have thousands upon thousands more moments and I might not be in any of them, I didn't think about my husband. I didn't think about my business or clothes or fashion shows or champagne or celebrities or private planes. I thought about home--not the one Steven and I share. Of my father and mother. Of my siblings. Of safety.

As I eat and wait for rescue or death, I relax into my position on the floor. There has been some shouting in the hallway, and suddenly, more gunshots. 5? 10? 15? It's hard to say. Gunshots in the woods during hunting season signal the coming of meat for dinner, but gunshots inside a school are at a minimum a threat. I stay where I am and continue chewing to block out the horrible noises.

No one knows you're here, I tell myself. Stay calm.

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My head is filled with the sounds of my own chewing, me nourishing myself in a way that feels good and right.

"Motherfuckers!" A man shouts as he comes into the cafeteria.

"God damn it!" Another one shouts.

Shit, they're here.

I clutch the giant kitchen knife that I had instinctively grabbed "just in case" when the first shots were fired. From my hiding spot behind the serving counter, I can see two men, both holding guns in each of their hands. Recognizing the Keep Your Hands Off My Guns shirt from earlier in the evening, I realize these men were attendees of the reunion.

"Did you shoot someone?" One asks the other.

"Shut the fuck up! It was an accident."

"What are we gonna do? Call someone? Still get to the truck? I think we're out of ammo for these." He sets two guns down on the table and pulls another from the back of his pants.

"Didn't I have another gun?"

How many weapons do they have?

He sets the two in his hands, and then pulls another from his pants as his friend did.

"I dunno man. Didn't we both have three?"

"Shit. I don't know."

"The AKs are in the truck. There's a door to the back in the kitchen. C'mon."

I shove myself into a corner the best I can, knowing they must walk right past me to get to the kitchen. I clutch the knife to my chest and recite a lullaby my mother used to sing in my head. The sound of their stomps mimics a herd of angry animals.

"Hey man, look at this."

Their rushed footsteps stop, and then they slowly turn in my direction. The apple core and nibbled carrots sit on the counter, out of place amongst the clean, shiny steel of an unused high school kitchen in the summer. They stand right in front of me, blocking me under the counter, whispering to one another. The pungent smell of dirt on their boots stings my nostrils. The barrel of a gun is now pointed at me in my not-so-hidden spot under the counter.

"You better show your fucking face right now."

Shaking, I crawl out from under the counter and look up at them from my crouched position.

"Well, look at what we've got here," the shorter man sneers. They look at me with a mixture of hate, confusion, and desire. As their eyes work their way up my exposed legs, I feel their disgusting thoughts wrap around me, suffocating me. My stomach turns violently, and I vomit on the floor right in front of them.

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"Fucking disgusting," the thinner one says, backing up as if a little stomach acid will destroy the shit-stink already on his boots.

"May I have a towel?" I ask, keeping my eyes on the floor. They ignore me.

"Knife on the counter," one of them demands. I comply, then spread my hands wide open in front of them. The short one raises his arm, the black circle of his gun pointed directly at my face. The sharp sulfur stench burns my nose, but I refuse to break eye contact with this killer.

"Man, let's leave her. She ain't part of this. She's just Steven's wife."

Just Steven's wife.

Just a gazelle.

Pure, fiery rage takes me over. I shriek. As if I had practiced the move a thousand times, I reach behind me, armed once again. I slash. The man jerks his arm away. The barrel of the gun that was pointed at me moments ago disappears in a jungle of long beard hair. A sudden spray of red splashes the white cinder block wall behind him. The body, with a head that partly resembles ground beef, drops to the floor with a thud. The tile floor turns from off-white to red, and the tangy scent of metal fills the room.

"You stupid bitch!" The tall man yells and lunges at me. We end up on the ground, wrestling in the warm pool of blood that covers the tile floor. The man is heavy, using his weight against me; however, his old age is my advantage. As we struggle to pin one another to the floor, the brittleness in his arm bones makes me feel powerful. I find myself on top of him, but he hits me in the face and sends me reeling to the floor in pain. He straddles my lower back, pinning me down with his heaviness as I try to scramble away, reaching my arms out in front of me. He's breathing heavily, using this moment to catch his breath.

With my still-gloved hands, I grab the gun that just killed his friend. My finger finds the trigger, and I squeeze. The man slumps over next to his friend, a deep red hole shines above his glazed-over eyes. The men's blood soaks my dress, weighing my body down. The blood pumping through my heart pulls me down from the inside.

I run to the sink and drink greedily from the faucet, letting the cool water ease the burns from the bile that lines my throat. Switching the fresh water through my teeth removes the icky vomit taste, too. I shake my head, stomp my feet, and ball up my fists, yet my body does not feel like mine. More than a pinch, I dig my nails hard into the back of my hand, hoping not only to erase the last twenty-five minutes, but also the last twenty-five years. What I wouldn't give to wake up in the comfort of my parents' house, the smell of freshly fried eggs inviting me to breakfast, my father greeting me with a warm smile and a gentle, "Good Morning, my little gazelle."