

Escapes

Author(s): Katherine Frank

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Escapes

Katherine Frank

This was me then: walking to my car after class at night, watching over my shoulder. My shadow is long under the streetlights and I am waiting. Waiting for that man to emerge from between two parked cars, for that blow to fall heavy on my back, for that hand to close fast around my ankle. Didn't that just happen to a woman, somewhere in the midwest, in a parking lot? A man grabbed her from underneath a car, I think, and slashed her Achilles tendon so that she couldn't walk. I can imagine the slash, the blood, the way that she fell to the ground amidst her tumbling groceries.

The slash, the blood. The tomatoes rolling under a nearby Honda.

When I work as Devon, I lie and tell the men that I am younger than I actually am. Men like students, the woman I work for says, especially if you are an undergraduate. I tell the customers that I study religion at a nearby college, even though I am really working as a receptionist and still saving up the money to attend classes next fall. Devon wears more make-up than I do – she likes to line her eyes with black kohl, to use bright red lipstick, and to stroke too much blush on her cheeks. She is tough, and when she walks in a room for a booking she is efficient and thorough. She looks in the closets of his bedroom and under his bed, to make sure no one is hiding there. She counts the money he hands her, and makes sure that he does not try to cheat her by slipping a 10 in among the 20s. She assesses his size, his possible weak points, in case he tries to attack her. She makes sure that he is not a policeman who is trying to catch her doing something illegal. She feels that she can handle anything.

Just last week, Devon let a man pay her an extra 50 dollars so that he could cum on her nylons. After he finished, she just threw them in his trash can and put the money in her shoe. After all, fifty bucks is fifty bucks, and nylons are just nylons. On top of the 150 dollars an hour that she makes as a base rate, nylons are disposable.

Thank you, he said, fishing the tangled black hose out of the trash can as she moved to leave. Thank you so much.

The night air, as she walked out to her car, was cold on her bare legs.

Often, the men ask her questions. They want to know what her dreams are, if Devon is her real name, how she likes to be touched, if she has a boyfriend. If she will see them outside of the agency. She tells them whatever she thinks they want to hear – except that she always answers the last question with a no.

Her goal, when all is said and done, is to be invisible.

There is a quotation from Shunryu Suzuki, from a book on Zen, taped to my refrigerator that reads: ‘If someone is watching you, you can escape from him, but if no one is watching, you cannot escape from yourself.’ I repeat it sometimes to myself: If someone is watching you, you can escape from him. You can escape from him. From him.

For as long as I can remember, I was scared of men. Scared of that inevitable man who is going to jump out of the bushes and rape me while I’m jogging. Scared of that man who is going to try to touch me as I pass him in an alley. I will jog an extra mile to avoid a construction site or a garbage truck, scared for some reason even of their catcalls and their gaze. Devon, though, has made me different.

When I went on my first job, it was difficult because I thought he was looking at *me*. He was overweight, with a lazy eye and a slow, deliberate way of talking. He worked in a warehouse and met me there, among the sleeping machines. Delia promised me it would be okay, that she had sent girls there before. Still, I felt tense, ready.

Raped and killed, I thought as he shut the heavy doors behind us. He could kill me now. Easily.

So kill me then. I’m waiting.

But he did not kill me. He gave me the money, and told me that I was very beautiful. The bills were smooth and pampered, fresh. They felt strange and dangerous in my hand.

It was easier, then, to let Devon take over. Let Devon unzip her dress, snap her garter belt, ease her bra straps down off her shoulders and step out into the fetid air. Let Devon say the things that he asked her to. Let Devon slip off her lingerie and prance naked under the suspended fluorescents of the warehouse, the space where, in the daylight, men walked with clipboards and tool belts and cardboard boxes. A night space filled with ghost memories of striking metal and male voices, phantom-whirring engines.

It did not take me long to realize that he could not see me, despite the fact that his eyes never left the surface of my body. It was strange – somehow,

in the middle of that penetrating gaze, I realized that I was not singular, I was not special. I might be the object of desire, the one being called beautiful, being wanted. And that gaze, that desire, threatened to shoot right to the core of me; I could feel its aim. But when it hit that core there was only mist and particles already. Always, always, I was a moment ahead.

Is this how it is, then, I wondered as I walked on his grateful back in my high heels, steadying myself on a cardboard box underneath a row of naked light bulbs. Is this what it is to escape?

This was me then: jogging in the after-dusk, listening to the sound of my own panting, my thumping feet on the pavement. A few spectral cars pass with their headlights on. Only a half-mile to go, I think. Can I run a bit faster and get home before dark? I reach up and brush the hair out of my face. There are moths flirting with the streetlamps and minuscule bugs trying to fly into my mouth. Fireflies, now here, now there, light intermittently among the bushes. I wish that I had a dog, that I didn't have to run past any more bushes, any more dark spaces. Why do I let myself get caught in the darkness? Wasn't a girl just abducted at night a few weeks ago in Atlanta while she was jogging? A university student, I think, raped and killed.

Raped and killed.

I have been working for almost four months, but it seems like so much longer.

When I first moved into a new apartment complex, there were a few strippers and escorts living in my new building. They intrigued me and on weekends I would join them at the pool, as they sat around tanning themselves in bright thong bikinis.

I let a man shave my pussy today for 300 dollars, Sue said to us one afternoon as she arrived at the pool. She waved three bills at us. Sue always carried all of her money around all of the time because she worried that someone would break into her apartment looking for her cash.

I'd never let a crazy man with a blade near *my* pussy, Alyssa answered, then, turning to me, Would you?

What are you going to do when the hair starts to grow back? Stephanie asked. You won't be able to work for a month.

Sue shrugged her shoulders, laughing. I guess I didn't think of that, she said. Hey, Shelley, do you want to take my place for a few weeks? I'll sit here and drink pina colodas by the pool while you see those clients who can't handle the prepubescent look.

I thought for a moment. Could it be worse than being a receptionist? I asked.

Hardly, she said with a laugh.

Sue stretched out on a towel and adjusted her bathing suit around her tan lines. Her bikini area was red and bumpy and she frowned slightly when she looked down at it. Do you think the sun will make this worse, Alyssa? she asked.

If you could see those men you'd do it Shelley, Stephanie laughed. Nothing to be scared of.

There is nothing stupider, Sue said seriously, than a man with a penis in his hand. They know it, too, and that's why they want to give you the money.

Maybe I'll do it, I said. Maybe.

Sue flipped over onto her stomach and waved the bills at me again before stuffing them in her bag.

And then later, I did. I called up the woman who ran the agency they worked for and told her that I would like to work. She took down my measurements, and then asked me to her apartment for an interview. Her home was peaceful and beautiful, a single room with a canopy bed draped in white muslin at the center of the space, a jukebox, a home gym in one corner, and fresh pastel wildflowers on the table. The woman was petite, tan and blonde, wearing glasses and a tight red dress. She told me her name was Delia, but I knew that it wasn't.

She looked at me for a long moment. You're wearing white hose, she said. Never wear white hose, always black. Black is for fantasy. But you have nice skin.

I don't tan very well, I said.

She nodded and waved her hand. It won't matter, she said. What would you like to be called?

My name is Shelley, I told her and she shook her head.

Devon, she said.

We split the fee fifty-fifty, Devon, she continued. You keep all of your tips. If you don't want to do something, I am behind you 100 per cent. I will always take your side over that of a man. Always.

But carry mace, she said, and keep it in your handbag. Always survey the room, always act like you are the one in charge. You *are* the one in charge, here. And remember not to put the money in your purse, because that is what he'll grab for first if he wants his money back for some reason. I've fought for my pocketbook before. I've fought my way out of a room full of men at a bachelor party. One of them punched me in the face, and if you don't know what a fist feels like, it feels like someone is hitting you in the face with a coffee mug, it's that hard. It doesn't happen often but you know, it can happen if you let it. If there's a problem, get your money and leave. Call me.

I decided to do outcalls only. It is easy, really. I call Delia when I get to a job, and then she calls me back 1 hour later if I haven't called her first. Usually, though, I can get in and out in 20 minutes. No one has tried to grab my pocketbook, but I keep the money in my shoe, just in case.

Can I cum on your legs? a man asks me. You have such great legs. No, I say. Then, after he places a 50 on the table: OK, I don't care. Just below the knees.

Do I care? Sometimes I'm not sure.

What is 50 bucks anyway?

But his face, he looked so stupid with his face all screwed up like that, tense, waiting to cum, needing me and my legs to be there for 200 bucks. His hand on his dick, pumping up and down. He looked so dumb that I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. It worked out – he took my expression as passion.

This is me now: Fumbling with my keys in the cold, trying to fit them into the lock on my car door. Not looking around now, just focusing, pulling off my gloves to get a better grip. Is the damn lock frozen again? And suddenly, there he is, standing right by my car and I can see the glint of metal down there by his hands. He has a knife in his hand. God, he's here. Finally, the man in the bushes. Finally, the man in the parking lot.

I turn, keys in my hand like a weapon.

You stupid fool, I say, put that thing away.

I can see my breath on the cold night air and I feel strong and calm.

Put that silly thing away, I say again, starting to laugh.

I prepare carefully for each booking. Devon has her own clothes, her own purse, her own shoes. When I have an appointment, I turn off the ringer on my phone, turn up the stereo loud and put on music that makes me feel wild. There is some music that has always made me feel like I can do anything. Some nights, though, I put on Billie Holiday and practice her profound sadness with my eyes as I stand in front of the mirror. I haven't quite gotten it right.

I put rollers in my hair, which is quite long, and then I do my make-up very carefully. I always use lots of dark eye make-up – I don't want to be looking at someone in the supermarket with the same eyes that looked at him in his bedroom. I shave very carefully, so that I don't have any nicks or cuts on my legs. I trim my pubic hair with small scissors so that it is short and neat. I paint my toenails red. Details – when it is only the two of you alone in a room, details become very important. I even put make-up on my legs, my bikini line. Your skin is the largest, most sensitive organ in the body. I don't want to expose too much of me when I undress and I

know that the more perfect I am, the less distinct I am. It is the imperfections that make you recognizable.

Next, I put on my working lingerie – a black strapless bra, black thong underwear, a lacy garter belt and black thigh-hi stockings. Black is for fantasy, Delia says. I always wear high heels; 3 inches, or 4. Five-inch heels, like the dancers wear in strip clubs, attract too much attention in the hotel lobby or on the street in front of a client's house. I wear a black choker necklace with a heart-shaped crystal, a black sundress with a zipper in the back, and a white crochet sweater. I always wear crystal earrings too, because crystal has this way of making me feel powerful, centered.

I drink half of a beer in the kitchen before I leave for the appointment, but never more. I don't like to ever be drunk, because I need to be very aware of what is going on around me. I need to be able to gauge my surroundings, just in case. And I never drink anything that the man has waiting at his home, office, or hotel room in case it is drugged – Persephone, as I remember, secured her own prison.

Then, on the way home, I turn up the radio loud, peel off my stockings at stop lights, wipe the red wax from my lips. I use baby wipes on my skin where he touched me, if I let him. I count out the money that I keep for myself, the money that I give to the agency. But it isn't the money that keeps me going. It's that moment, each time, when I expose myself, look into his eyes and know that he doesn't see me at all.

If someone is watching you . . .

Then I go home, hang up the dress, and crawl into my pajamas. Here I am, I think, burrowing deep under my down comforter. Here I am.

This is me now: I see a man looking at me – in the grocery store, at a gas station, at an office meeting – and I see him as Devon would. It doesn't matter if he has a ring on his finger or a wife and children at his side. He is wondering what I'd look like naked. He is wondering what I would be like in bed. I try to figure out what he would ask me to do, what he would offer me in return.

Tonight, I have driven almost an hour to an appointment in the city. I come here often, on Friday nights, and I already know the sprawl of this half-empty house. I know that there will be a glass of wine on the table for me, already poured, which I will leave untouched. I know that his wife has been gone for a year, that he does not need to worry about her suddenly returning, does not have the erotic tension of a possible surprise to edge him on. The evening, then, will be slow. I know this man will eventually ask me to turn around, and that I will watch a silent television while he jerks off on the couch.

This man – I have him all figured out.

He is standing near the door as I arrive, a glass of wine in his hand. His house is shockingly warm, because I have complained before that it was too cold. He searches my eyes to see if I notice that he has turned up the heat, but I do not give him anything yet. We talk for a few minutes. How is school? he asks, and I lie, telling him that my classes are difficult this term. He glances toward the money already on the end table and I count it, making small talk. The wine is tempting red next to the bills but I ignore it. When I have counted the money twice, I slip it in my shoe. How is the Dobson-Hardaway case? I ask him, and he talks animatedly for a few moments about his work. Soon, I tire of listening. I unzip my dress, stepping easily out of it. He looks at me for a long moment. It's warm in here tonight, I say. He smiles.

Put your dress on the chair so that it doesn't get wrinkled, he says. I ask if he wants music, but he shakes his head no. He pushes the mute button on the remote control.

Tell me that you want me, he says, sliding an extra 20 in my garter belt. Pretend that we are lovers.

I put my hands on his shoulders, moving my hips in a leftward, then rightward, circle. I smile at him and tell him. The room is very quiet. He touches my underwear with a cautious, deliberate hand, looking.

Tell me that you've been waiting all day for this, for me, he says. Pretend. I do.

Looking down at him, I see a small man, a lawyer with thinning hair and trendy eyeglasses, sitting in his boxer shorts on a surprisingly threadbare couch. His stomach is not flat, and I can see him eating alone at the kitchen counter, or at his desk at work. Maybe, once in a while, sitting across from a woman in a deli. I see him pushing an ephemeral young child on a swing, higher, higher, on a third custody Saturday in January. I see him in the courtroom making money, making news, pacing, acting, armpits sweating inside of a suit. I see him taking out his wallet just before I arrive each Friday, counting out the money that dignifies me, setting it on end table, waiting for me to count it, to smile. Wishing maybe, that I wouldn't need to count it one day, that I would just slip it quietly in my shoe and pretend it didn't exist. I see what he is asking me for.

You are a very beautiful woman, he says, passing a hand over my stomach. Suddenly, I wonder what it is that he sees. Me, somewhat pale, young and fit but certainly not beautiful. Small breasts. Freckles and moles and thighs that always seem too womanly, too strong. Not perfect, no matter how hard I try. I look down at my body in the black lingerie, seeing the small blue veins that twist across my thigh, noticing how the make-up sits too

formally, mockingly, on top of them, refusing to conceal, waiting for the baby wipes that I will attack with in the car.

So beautiful, he says. I feel his warm hands on my waist, and he turns me cautiously, deliberately around so that I am facing away from him. I hear the sound of his slippery hand, his low breathing.

I rotate my hips slowly, tightening the muscles in my butt and watching a voiceless weatherman point and dance about on the screen. Devon, the lawyer says softly, but he is not hailing me.

Sartre wrote once: God is dead. We have no witness now. Look at me, don't stop looking at me for one moment: the world has been struck blind; if you turned away your head, I should be afraid of annihilation.

Oh, what Sartre didn't know.

This is me, then: in the darkness of the parking lot, Devon's laughter has startled him. It has startled me. Don't move, he says, but I can tell that he is disconcerted. The knife is still held low, near his groin. What is your fantasy? Devon thinks. What are you afraid to say? To do?

He is watching me, but Devon is used to being watched. She is used to moving, slipping in and out of view. I can feel the hard edges of money in my shoe, the cold ridges of the car keys in my bare hand. I keep looking at his eyes, thinking about the location of the knife, how far away it is from me. I am pressed up against the car, but he is still several feet away from me. Stop, he says, as I reach behind my back to feel for the cold lock of the car door. I keep looking at him, carefully, quietly, feeling for the correct key in my other hand.

I'm going home, I say. My voice is as if he had asked me to stay for tea, and the night is silent, unreal. Suddenly, I hear the sound of a car toward the far end of the parking lot. As the headlights splash on the side of the building, the man breaks from my gaze. The driver doesn't notice us, but the man has become even more uneasy and this makes me laugh again. Slowly, calmly, I slide my key into the lock of the car door. I keep my eyes on him and he begins to move off into the darkness.

Only as the warmth of my car envelopes me do I recognize my heavy fear. Remember, Devon thinks, they just always need to be doing something with their hands.

I glance back. The man on the couch has his eyes closed; his hand is fast moving on his lap. I have a few moments of privacy and I stop to tighten the strap on one of my garters, smooth my hair.

He moans softly and I turn back around. See, I think to myself, smiling. There is no reason to be afraid.

Tomorrow, the man on the television tells me wordlessly with his pointed cue and colorful graphs, it will be sunny and 70 degrees. Low humidity. A perfect day for a jog.

Notes

Katherine Frank is a Professor of Anthropology at the College of the Atlantic and a former exotic dancer. Her research focuses on sexuality, gender, intimacy, and commodification in the contemporary United States. She is currently working on a comparative ethnography of five different strip clubs that explores the motivations and experiences of their regular male customers. In addition to her academic writing, she also writes and publishes short fiction.