

The Season

Roz Spafford

The girl tried to fold her legs under her, but she didn't fold up the way she used to. Instead, she put her feet on the ice chest and rested her chin on her knees. If we crash, she thought, my jaw will break. She imagined blood everywhere, bone sticking out at odd angles. They had always been able to fit her in the back of the jeep along with the guns and the rope, the blind, their coats, and their orange hats and vests. This year, though, she had started growing and she no longer fit anywhere.

From where she sat, she could see the line of her father's jaw. He was gritting his teeth again. Dan passed him a little flask from which he drank deeply without looking away from the sinewy ribbon, more rut than road.

She had not wanted to come this year and whispered as much to her mother. But when her mother broached it—"Don't you think she's getting a little old to go along?"—Dan slapped her on her back, as always a little too hard, and said, "What? Go without my right-hand man?" and so Nikki went.

She did not like Dan. Her father was thin and clean, but Dan always smelled a little fruity and he made her father tense. She didn't know why. Her mother said, "Your father doesn't like to be beholden," but she would not say what that meant.

Dan was loud in the jeep, silent in the woods. His godfather had been Hualapai and so Dan fancied himself a tracker like he had been, tiptoeing silently through the pine needles as if his gummy Sears workboots were moccasins. Nikki also did not understand why he did not track on their hunting trips, why he sat in the tree blind instead.

Nikki liked sitting in the ground blind; it was like a playhouse in which she could be invisible. Her job was to keep Dan in view with binoculars, then to blow the doe call when he signaled. Nikki thought it was cheating to pull in the buck by letting him think he was getting to mate and then to shoot him. Nikki started to wonder whether Dan's godfather, the tracker, needed a doe call, whether he had really carved it out of bone, as Dan said, or whether Dan had bought it in a curio shop—but she didn't ask. Her mind was full, these days, of things she didn't say.

As the jeep went over the ruts, she grunted.

"You ok back there, Nik?" said her dad.

"Just hit my head."

"Gettin' too big for the back seat," said Dan. "Next year you'll have to sit up front with me." He chuckled, patting his lap. Nikki's father glanced at Dan sideways but then turned back to the road.

Nikki liked the rituals of hunting: Retrieving everything from the back closet, watching her dad clean his gun with a steel rod, the white cloth disappearing down the barrel and emerging. She liked the smell of the solvent her father used, and how he sharpened his buck knife on a stone. And she liked being with her father, even if it meant putting up with Dan.

They drove till the cedar and creosote gave way to pine and manzanita, the trunks dark red as dried blood, and smooth.

"Don't hit none of my steers this year," her dad said. He had said this every year since Dan had shot a yearling by mistake, years ago. Dan had butchered it and paid her father for it; her father had never raised hell with him about it, just said this one thing every year.

"I reckon I'll make some different mistake," Dan said, the way he always answered. Nikki didn't remember that year. Maybe she had been there—she had gone every year since kindergarten—but she was starting not to remember things from when she was younger.

"When you gonna get Nikki here her own gun?" Dan looked back and winked at her.

"I can shoot the .238," she said. "I can hit a Jack Daniels bottle across the canyon." The canyon behind the house was really just a sand wash with rock walls angled up from it in a V. It flooded in the rain, and in summer glistened with broken glass.

"Deer don't always stand still for you," said Dan with a little laugh.

Nikki fell silent. She liked to shoot across the canyon, liked the whining crack of the gun and the waterfall sound of breaking glass. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to shoot deer.

"Bout time for your first kill," said Dan, and Nikki saw the vein in her father's forehead pulse. Nikki didn't answer.

They set up the blind with the little camp chair and a soda for her. "Don't drink too fast or you'll have to go," Dan said, and she glared at him. It was a production to go out here—she had to wait till Dan and her father were back at the same time, and then slip off to a remote tree with toilet paper in her pocket.

Resting her arms on a cross piece in the blind, she watched her father and Dan walk away. Dan pointed to the ground—clear spoor, she guessed—and her father nodded.

Dan picked a tall, wide tree and fastened his stand around it, heaving himself and the stand like a snail climbing—bracing his boots, releasing the stand and leveraging it up, bracing again, releasing and pushing until he was as high as three men would be, standing on each other's shoulders. Her father tied Dan's gun to the rope he held, and Dan hauled it up.



Roz Spafford grew up on a cattle ranch in northwestern Arizona. For a number of years, she taught writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she also served as chair of the Writing Program and coordinator of journalism; she now teaches writing at the University of Toronto. Her stories and poems have appeared in various literary journals; her first book of poetry, *Requiem*, published by Writers & Books, received the 2008 Gell Prize. A story, "Drought," received the 2010 David Nathan Meyerson prize for fiction from *Southwest Review* and also appeared in *Road to Nowhere and Other New Stories from the Southwest*, an anthology from the University of New Mexico Press (2013). Another story, "Watering Stones," recently won the short-short fiction award from *New Millennium Writings*. www.rozspafford.org



Read an interview with Roz where she talks about "The Season", her father and early influences on her writing.

Nikki's father spit into the dirt and rubbed it with his boot, then walked out of her line of vision. It was really her father who was the tracker. It was like this every year: Dan heaved himself up a tree, her father walked away, shrugging on his orange vest, and after a couple of itchy hours in the blind, Nikki would hear a shot—not from Dan's tree. Dan would leverage himself down and then run toward her father; they would hang the deer and gut it.

She watched Dan through the lenses, sometimes turning them around so he looked like a tiny toy person, but mostly watching as she had been told to—watching Dan through the branches as he scratched his crotch and settled himself, took a swig from his canteen. Sometimes—she never knew why—he would give her a little two-fingered wave and she would blow the doe call, softly, hoping the bucks wouldn't hear. It sounded like a person grunting; she had never heard a doe make that noise, but maybe they did.

Today Dan signaled and she blew; the bone tasted sweaty and she gagged, then blew again. She sat watching, without twitching, and she saw, perhaps 200 yards away, a buck and two does, then a spotted fawn.

The buck had antlers with five points on each side—so he was legal—and he was austere and vigilant, lifting his black nose into the breeze. Dan signaled her but she did not blow: he wouldn't know, she thought; he couldn't hear as well as the deer could. The buck arched his neck, looking from side to side while the does grazed and the fawn nursed. "Run," she thought. Run—and saw herself bursting out of the blind, her hands waving. But then she saw that Dan had raised his rifle, and she willed his hand to shake like it sometimes did when he came to pick up her father in the early morning.

She turned her gaze back to the buck. He seemed to know something was wrong, she thought, his mule ears sharply upright and his eyes rolling nervously like her horse's did when a stranger drove up. The binoculars made her feel as if he could see her, crouched in the blind, just as she could see him. It was stuffy and she had a stomach ache. She felt as if she were wearing the heavy canvas, the slit she looked out of her only source of air. Was he looking for the doe he thought had called him before? The does were stiffly graceful, the thin bones of their legs visible through their dusty hair.

Then the terrible whining crack and the buck crumpled, still graceful, blood pouring from his neck. The does and fawn sprang away in fast, four-legged hops, their legs folding under them and their embarrassing white tails flashing through the brush.

Nikki folded in on herself, sobbing, the doe call falling to her chest. Her father found her there when he came to take down the blind.

"You ok?" he said.

"My stomach hurts," she said. "I have to go."

"Go quickly, then."

She ran past Dan who was tying the deer to the hood of the jeep. "Hey sweetheart," he called. "Look what we did!"

She didn't turn around. Under the piñon pine it was cool; her brown shirt and her pants were sticky with sweat and she had trouble getting her jeans down. The blood in her underwear had pooled and dried, but it was still bright against the white fabric.

