

JEZELLE THE GAZELLE

A Short Play
By Dominique Morisseau

(Created for the 10x10 Festival at American Theatre Company – Chicago
in response to the Michael Brown shooting and protests in Ferguson, MS)

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Character Description

JEZELLE - Black girl, 12-13 years old. Spunky. Sassy. Full of energy and wit. A sprint runner. The only girl in an all-guy crew.

Setting: An inner city neighborhood. Fashioned after NYC but not necessarily NYC.

Lights up on JEZELLE.

JEZELLE

We was runnin' like the wind.

Me, Rasheed, and Spider

Reason why we call him that don't match. Cuz he thin and wiry and we was gonna call him Skinny but it's already another Skinny J on the block and you can't do repeats. So we went from Skinny to Spider cuz they both start with the letter "S"? I don't know. Rasheed say it's bad luck to kill a Spider so it's actually increasing his life expectancy for us to call him that so he liked it and it's cool.

We be racin'. Everyday on the block. Spider be third place always, but me and Rasheed be neck and neck. Last race was a tie if you ask me, but Rasheed swear he beat me. That's complete bull but wasn't no witnesses. "*Get some witnesses!*" I told him. So he did. Rematch. This Friday. In front of Skinny J. Rocky. Burnt Skin Ernie. Spider. And that boy from the foster home that nobody knows his name. I'll be the only girl. It's cool, I'm used to it. I'm always the only girl.

Five dollar admission for the big race. That was Spider's idea. I tried to tell him you can't charge people for getting onto their own block. That's like what they did to the Indians and the Africans and whatever. But he say people willin' to pay. And if they willin', then it's stupid not to take it. *If people wanna give you they money, it's like immoral or anti-American not to take it or whatever.* Spider got a uncle on Wall Street, he say. I don't ask nothin' more about it.

The whole block start buzzin'. Race this Friday. Best runners in the 'hood. Come put yo' money down. Winner gets half of the pot. That was Spider's idea too. He say he get to keep the other half cuz chargin' people was his idea. I tell Spider he need to stop talkin' to his uncle or we may have to stop hangin'. For reals.

I'm gettin' that short sprint perfected cuz one day I'ma do Olympics. Gold medal baby. That's the long term. Short term I just wanna beat Rasheed cuz he be crazy shit talkin' all day on some "I'm a girl and can't keep up" ol' skool cave man philosophy. Sometimes you just gotta shut dudes down. I practice at the track after school on my own. He don't be seein' that. He think all he see is all I got. Always gotta keep your opponents under-estimating you. Always.

I be tactical with mines. I be stretchin' so I don't pull no muscle. No DQ's. No unforced victories. I'm gettin' mines by pure honor and craft.

Rasheed and me was out for blood. This was him against her. Pre-teen man against pre-teen woman. This is for Equal rights and Democracy. All women and men created equal. I'm like a Civil Rights runner.

Spider was in the middle. Always between me and Rasheed. Always tryin' to get us to stop beasin' on each other. 'Sheed call me "*Just chest Jezelle*" cuz I'm flatchested or whatever. I don't care. I tell him "*If I had big breasts like his older sister Tawnee then I wouldn't be able to run as fast and I wouldn't be able to leave him chokin' on my dust when I run circles around him in the race on Friday!*"

Spider just be sittin' between us. Always between us. Like, "*Chill ya'll. We all family at the end of the day. This block belongs to us. It's home. It's our turf. And we gonna get paid together.*" Spider always tryin' to get us to be all PG and cartoon movie and bff actin'. We'd do it. For Spider. We was crew cuz of Spider. Cuz you couldn't say no to Spider. He just so skinny and funny and even though it sound weird to say it out loud (cuz ain't none of us into the mushy and the soft).... You kinda love Spider. Like also maybe fall in love with him. Like maybe. A little. But I'm too young to know what love is. So maybe not. And anyway, love is corny. Love will make you lose a race. Game on.

My mama starts callin' Spider Don King Jr. No adults invited to the race, but we all got feelin's that they'll be watchin' from the windows. My mama offers to make me a "Jezelle the Gazelle" t-shirt. I tell her I don't do rhymes. That's corny. But she makes me one anyway. I wear it cuz I don't want her to feel wack. But I hate every bit of wearin' it. She's makin' me like her runnin' baby doll. I got a feelin' she's not takin' this race seriously. This is life or death. This is for Democracy and Equal rights for the only girls on every block. This is for neighborhood pride and respect. This is for real. This is not a game. But Mama makes the shirt magenta. I love magenta. I wear it but I'm not smiling for pictures. A woman's gotta have her boundaries.

Race day comes. It's a weird day. We in school just waitin' for the bell to ring cuz now other folks in class done heard and the \$5 pot is up to like \$100. I start thinkin' of all the stuff I can buy with \$50. I'ma invest it wisely. Won't spend it all in one place. Half will go under the mattress for a rainy day. The other half on a down payment for this new 10 speed I've been eyein' at Greg's Bike Shop up the street. It's magenta with yellow stripes. It's got Jezelle's name all over it. I'ma be rollin' that baby up the block right past Rasheed, like "Whassup yo! Need a lift???"

I tell Spider my bike buyin' plans. He asks me if I'm ready. I tell him I was born ready. My mama said I used to kick her in the belly so hard she thought I was tryin' to break through. She said she knew I had lightenin' in my feet even then. I got this race.

Spider wasn't feelin' good this day. He kept walkin' slow and dragging his feet. He looked like something was type heavy on his mind. I asked him what was up. He wouldn't say nothin'. Just kept lookin' away from me. Playin' it cool. Sayin' he was good as ever. But he wasn't. Somethin' was up. I pinched his neck real hard til' he pushed me. "*Aight aight yo!*" He said. (BEAT) "*We gotta move.*"

All shit stopped. I thought my heart fell out of my body. I looked around on the ground to make sure.

What? Movin' where?

To Cali, he said.

What for? What's in Cali?

My aunt's house.

Why you gotta go?

My brother's in trouble. Some cops came by the house last night lookin' for him.

He do somethin'?

Nah. But he got these friends and... maybe they did somethin'. My mama said they the wrong influence. She can't take it no more. Said we gotta get out before they take us all under.

Why don't she just send your brother to Cali? Why you gotta go???

Family stick together.

That was all he said. But it sounded like he said a lot more. It sounded like he was saying goodbye forever. I didn't know what to do. I just looked at him for a second. A really long second. Then I just kiss him. Right out the blue. Ain't even sure what came over me. I'm not the kissin' type. I was totally another Jezelle.

Spider kissed me back though. He didn't even act weird about it or nothin'. He just kissed me back and it was soft but not mushy. It was just... I don't even know what it was.

He whispered in my ear, *"You ready for the race?"*

I said *"Yep."*

He said, *"Low key—I want you to win."*

I said *"Good"*

Then I asked him how he was gonna spend his \$50. He said if I win, he's gonna put it toward my bike fund... since he's movin' and what not. Like a goin' away present. I started to feel my eyes itch like they wanted to cry. But I didn't. Cuz I never cry. Not even when my heart is breakin'. I had a race to win.

Ready. Set. We was on the startin' line at the front of the block. Rasheed had gotten his hair cut. He looked fresh and clean. But so what. I had my magenta baby doll runner Jezelle the Gazelle t-shirt. My mama was lookin' through the window and wavin' --- CORNY.

Another mama, one uncle, Skinny J's father, and Ms. Jefferson with the blind dog--- they was all lookin' out their windows. Ms. Jefferson was on the stoop. But everybody was there. And almost 20 kids from school. This had turned into the biggest race of my life. I stretched my calves. Rotated my ankles. Grabbed my elbow behind my back. No mistakes.

Spider was gonna run too. Just for kicks. Everybody knew he was no match for me and Sheed. But he was just runnin' behind us, for ol' times sake.

Burnt Skin Ernie was holdin' the banner at the other end of the block. I was keepin' my eyes on the prize.

Skinny J called it.

On your march.

We corrected him.

*On your **marks**.*

Get set.

I was sweatin' now.

GO!!!!!!

We was runnin' like the wind! I could feel myself like elevatin' almost. My lungs was on fire. I could see Rasheed in my peripheral. He was close, but I was pullin' in ahead. All sound disappeared. All I could hear was my own heartrate. My own feet bouncin' against the street.

I got close to the banner. Didn't see Rasheed in sight. It was me! I was in the lead! I pulled in closer. Closer! BANG!

My body tore through the sheet that said WINNER. I looked back to see the crowd cheering. I could hear their voices like sirens.

(PAUSE)

But that wasn't cheers. That was screaming. And it wasn't a sound effect. It was real sirens. And Rasheed wasn't on my heels. He was behind me. Far far behind me. On the ground. Not moving. Not moving. Not moving.

And Spider.... Spider....wasn't in third place. He wasn't running either. He was on the ground. Not moving. Not moving. Not moving.

And the screams were sirens. And the sirens were screams. And there was a police on foot. And he had a gun. And I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even breathe. And I just sat on the ground. Not a winner. Not anything anymore. Just a runner gasping for air...gasping gasping for air.

(LONG BEAT)

I never liked DQ's. DQ's are stupid. No one likes winning by default.

(BEAT)

My mama cried and I didn't. She kept shaking her fists in the air...All I could make out was fragments. It sounded like she forgot how to speak in real sentences.

"Those boys didn't do" and "Just running a race." and "Ain't all running from crime" and "Didn't nobody hear" and "Had the wrong boys!" and "Weren't even the same age!"

I stopped listening and closed my ears. But sirens kept going. All night. All through my dreams. And I couldn't stop running.

(BEAT)

Two weeks after the big race, I went back to school. It was strange without 'Sheed and Spider. Everybody kept askin' me if I was ok. All the teachers kept askin' me if I needed to talk. I didn't say nothin'. I don't know if I'll ever say nothin' again.

My mama came to pick me up. She didn't want me walkin' by myself. Not while things are still so fragile, she said. Not while people are out there upset and confused. They killed Spider and Sheed. They were chasin' those boys that hang with Spider's brother. They said they went running around our block. They said they had just robbed a store. Nobody has seen those boys. They must be hiding good. But Rasheed and Spider...everybody saw. And the officers said they yelled *STOP*. Said they yelled it three times. But nobody heard nothin'. We were runnin' a race. Nobody heard nothin'. But everybody saw.

My mama and me walked past Greg's Bike Shop. I saw the magenta 10 speed with the yellow stripes. It was talkin' to me. But I didn't feel like talkin' back.

Mama said – *The students are giving money to Spider and Rasheed's families. Did you want to give anything?*

I said, *Spider raised \$100 for the race. I don't want my share. Can that go to the families?*

Mama smiled.

You wanna race me home, Mama asked? I told her I didn't wanna race no more. Mama said, One day you're gonna have to get back on the track. You can't let this knock the wind outta you forever. You just can't.

I told her, *Didn't that officer know it's bad luck to kill a Spider?*

Mama didn't answer. She just took a deep long breath, and we kept walkin'.

(beat)

I still go to the track. I still perfect my stride. One day I'ma do Olympics. Gold metal. One day I'ma be able to run without bein' afraid. But somedays still, when my feet are movin' fast and I can hear the wind in my ears, I look back to see who's runnin' after me. I look back to see who's left behind. I look back to wipe a tear from my eyes... even though I never cry...and then I look ahead and keep runnin'. For Rasheed. For Spider. For Equal rights. For Democracy. For the only girl on every block. For Civil Rights. And for everybody still in the race.

*On your **march**... get set....*

Blackout.

End of Play.