NANCY BOURNE

WHAT YOU MADE OF ME

Parachuting globs of jellyfish surrounded her, purple tentacles swaying. She shuddered. How like Johnny's law firm to throw their Christmas party in an aquarium. It was beautiful, she supposed. But the place was too dark; the corridors too narrow. It gave her the creeps.

"Hi, Kathryn." Startled, she whirled away from the glass wall and bumped headlong into a young man.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, laughing self-consciously. He was African-American, and something about his forehead and the way he narrowed his eyes when he looked at her struck her as familiar.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. My husband works here."

"In the aquarium?"

She smiled. "In the law firm."

"Oh. I didn't think you were a lawyer," he said.

"Are you?" She still couldn't place him. A new associate, perhaps? His white V-necked sweater and navy blazer suggested it.

The dark eyes searched her face. "Give me time," he said. "I've only been out six months."

She was too shocked to hide her surprise.

"Oh, my God," she said, grabbing his hand and shaking it forcefully. "Congratulations!"

"Rama," he said. "English 101."

"Of course," she said. "I know you. I just didn't . . ."

"Yeah, well here I am."

"That's wonderful. What are you doing…with yourself?"

"I'm in business," he said.

"Good. Business." Her mind was scrambling to make sense of it.

"Me and my uncle scout around for old cars, fix 'em. I learned to do that in prison. You know, rehab? Then we sell 'em." He surprised her with so much talk. It was not what she remembered.

"Well, that's just great," she said. "And college?"

He hesitated. "Yeah. I'm planning on it." But before she could probe further, a young woman in a turquoise dress swept him off into the crowd.

Later, as Kathryn was about to leave the party, Rama suddenly surfaced from out

of the dark corridor of fish tanks.

"Oh good," she said, offering him her hand. "I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance to say goodbye." She smiled up at him.

Without warning, he disengaged his hand and wrapped his arms around her.

She fought the impulse to pull away, to escape the strong hands gripping her back, the warmth of his breath. He was taller than she remembered, more massive. She told herself, *Hold on, he's just another man at a party, saying goodbye, being friendly.* She forced herself to relax, to respond as she would to any casual hug. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. But her arms remained limp at her sides.

Her husband saved her. "Hello," he said, holding out her raincoat, ready to leave. "I don't believe we've met."

Rama dropped his hands. For a second, his lips froze into a thin line and his eyes narrowed. Then he was smiling and reaching out to shake Johnny's hand.

"Johnny, this is Rama," Kathryn said. "A former student."

Johnny smiled and took his hand. "From…?"

She interrupted, "One of my very best students."

"Do you work here?" Johnny asked. Kathryn suddenly remembered she had never asked why he was at the party.

Rama laughed. "I wish I did. It's a cool place. But I'm with Lavonne."

And there she was beside him, the girl in the turquoise dress.

"Lucky you," Johnny said. "She's terrific."

THREE YEARS AGO, RAMA HAD TURNED up in her english composition class. By that time, she'd been teaching in the prison college program for a couple of years and knew more or less what to expect. A dark basement room with thickly painted white walls and bars on the dust-streaked, frosted windows. Thirty or so men, all ages, all races, dressed in blue jeans, blue work shirts, blue wool caps, seated at long tables arranged haphazardly on the cracked concrete floor. Not looking at each other, carefully spacing themselves so as to leave the seats between them empty as long as possible. Breathing room was a valuable commodity.

She had heard that many of them had "taken a life." Most had known violence. But she never asked how they had ended up in that dreary place, and few of them told her. She only knew that, decades earlier, they had failed in school, had poisoned their own lives and all but lost hope, but then had risked starting again, risked writing essays about their failures and poems about their dreams, had tackled algebra and geometry and the dictionary.

"But aren't you afraid?" friends would ask.

"Not really," she always answered. "The guards are vigilant. Besides, the men are just people, like anybody else, but maybe more intelligent than most." They were certainly as intelligent as the young students she taught in her regular job, at Bon Tempe

Community College, and more perceptive about the complexity of life. That realization still excited her.

Rama stood out from the beginning. He was younger than most, in his early twenties, with a scrubbed look about him. His blue shirt was tucked neatly into his jeans, not hanging in large folds as was customary; he never wore a cap; and his arms were clear of the tattoos that squirmed up and down the limbs of many inmates. In class, he kept to himself, even after the other men had loosened up and begun to chat with each other. He never initiated conversation, never volunteered in class discussions. She learned how bright he was from his first essay on the dark and light imagery in the James Baldwin story, "Sonny's Blues." His analysis was thoughtful, his sentences crisp, his grammar perfect, his vocabulary extensive. And he knew how to spell. She scrawled a note at the bottom of the last page: "This is just brilliant. Why don't you talk more in class?"

But he continued to sit stiffly silent in the classroom.

Then, about halfway through the semester, he just disappeared. She waited three weeks, no Rama. Finally, she sent him a note.

"Please come back to class," she wrote. "Your essays are an inspiration. You mustn't let yourself fail."

A week or so later, he reappeared. He didn't offer an explanation or acknowledge her note. He didn't ask for additional help. He just showed up and handed in all of his missing assignments, which were as thoughtful and skillfully written as the earlier ones. She felt triumphant. She had given him a future. It was why she continued to volunteer without pay in the prison program; even after she had obtained her PhD; even after she had landed a tenure-track position at the community college. She always left the prison feeling exuberant, excited by the lives she had touched.

But that's not the only reason Kathryn remembered Rama. It was the poem. At the end of the semester, she always gave the men a small collection of poems to read. At first they resisted. They claimed to hate poetry. But once they started reading Langston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, even Blake and Frost, their resistance melted. And when she asked them to write their own verse, they bent to it with unexpected vigor, mixing metaphors in jolting rhythm and rhyme. On the last day of class, they read their poems aloud to high fives and cheers. It was the climax of the semester and she loved it.

All but Rama. He refused to read his poem and Kathryn didn't question it. But at the end of the period, he suddenly stood up. The men were talking and laughing, relieved to have cleared this first hurdle of their college careers. So Rama just stood there, his head bowed over the paper he held in his hand, waiting. Suddenly everyone was watching him; the room was stone silent. And he began to read.

My life is not a metaphor or simile;
It's what you made of me
Behind closed doors
The cuts and bruises that I bore
The public smiles and secret sins
The scalding iron, the idle whim.
You know. You left your mark.
You think you left me in the dark
You think your secret's safe
You think I can't escape.

My life is not a metaphor or simile
It is the poem you made of me
Harsh lines and jangled melody
Shout out your secret and set me free.

For a minute there was complete silence. Then one by one, the men stood up and began to clap, louder and louder, without a word. Rama slowly raised his eyes from his poem and looked around the room. Kathryn thought he looked stunned. Then, while the men were still clapping, he handed the poem to Kathryn and left the room. She had not seen him since.

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE PARTY, Johnny pumped her about Rama. What had he done? He looked so clean cut.

She didn't know.

"You're clearly important to him."

"What do you mean?"

"The way he was hugging you."

"Oh, that wasn't personal," she said, hoping it was true. "There's a total taboo against inmates touching the teachers. We can shake hands. That's it. He was probably making some kind of statement with that hug."

"Like what?"

"He's like everyone else. Old friends hug each other. He can do that now."

It sounded right to her, but she remembered the way her body had stiffened when he had appeared out of nowhere, his hands on her back, holding her close. Too close. She hated herself for the feeling, but there it was.

"Who's Lavonne?" she asked.

"She's my new secretary. Quiet, unobtrusive, does her job. She's nothing like the dress," Johnny said. "I was glad to see her stepping out of herself tonight."

Kathryn tried to bring up a memory of the woman inside that shiny fabric. Dark

skinned, she thought, hair that fell to her shoulders in stiff lines. A little heavy. She couldn't remember the face.

"He's smart," she said and elaborated with obvious pleasure on her success in bringing Rama back to school. "I'm proud of him."

"No wonder he likes you," Johnny said.

"Yeah," she said.

ONE DAY TOWARD THE END of March, Johnny came home from work later than usual.

"Secretary problems," he said. "Lavonne came in this morning with a cut over her eye."

"You ask her about it?"

"Yeah. It looked nasty. She fed me the classic line about bumping into a car door."

"You didn't believe her."

"It's happened before. One time a swollen cheek. Another time a gash on her ear."

Kathryn guessed where this was headed.

"She'd been to the doctor and gotten stitches," he said. "It's delicate. I asked her if there was a problem at home, and she said no."

"She's not a child."

"Right. But she's my secretary, and I think someone's beating on her."

"I know what you're thinking." She could hear the defensive note in her voice.

"Yeah. That convict. What's his name? Krishna?"

"He's not a convict, and his name's Rama. Come on." She could feel herself getting angry. "You get out of prison, find a decent job and a girlfriend, and the first thing that goes wrong, you're the one they accuse."

"My wife, the bleeding-heart liberal," Johnny teased.

"I guess. But I happen to believe what I say." And yet, how did the poem go? *Behind closed doors / The cuts and bruises that I bore.* She didn't want to admit it, but she felt uneasy.

"Get off your high horse," Johnny said. "I'm not accusing your friend, but if he's abusing her, it's got to stop."

"So why not ask her directly?"

"I did. I didn't name him, but I asked if someone at home might be hitting her."

"And she said no."

"Right."

"That's it then."

"For now. I just hope to hell it doesn't happen again."

BUT OF COURSE IT DID HAPPEN AGAIN. Three months later Lavonne took a couple

of weeks of sick leave, and when she returned, her mouth was swollen and she was missing a tooth.

Once again Lavonne had an explanation. Her teenaged brother, Jamel, who lived with her, had run the car into a tree. She hadn't been wearing a seat belt. Johnny remembered Jamel from one of the firm picnics as a large, fleshy boy with outsized jeans belted low on his hips and dark eyes that shifted from person to person, looking more frightened than bored.

"When did this happen?" Johnny asked Lavonne.

"Last month some time. I forget the date."

"What happened to the car?"

"It was totaled."

"That's terrible. Did you report it to the police?"

"No."

"Did you go to the hospital?"

"No."

"You've been gone two weeks, Lavonne. Have you been at home?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see a doctor?"

"I saw a dentist. He's going to fix my tooth."

The extended leave got the partnership's attention. They were unfazed by cuts and bruises, but paying subs for an employee's undocumented sick leave affected the bottom line. They didn't want to fire Lavonne; they just wanted her to come to work. And so the focus turned to possible physical abuse. Johnny volunteered to talk informally to a policeman he knew, a neighbor, to see what he knew. Domestic violence calls were a matter of record.

"YOU CAN'T JUST DO THAT." Kathryn was furious. "Ask the police to check into someone's private life like that."

"I just had a little neighborhood chat with Tim. It wasn't official. He didn't have to do it. My motive's pure. The firm's worried about her."

"I bet. What did you tell him?"

"Just gave him the name and phone number and asked if there'd been any calls."

"You didn't mention Rama?"

He avoided her stare. "Not by name."

"You didn't! You told that law and order Nazi that Lavonne had an ex-con living with her?"

"Not in so many words. Look, they found nothing. No calls. Don't worry. It's OK."

A month later, when Lavonne once again missed a week of work without an explanation, Johnny had to let her go. She didn't contest it, but just packed up her

make-up kit and box of tissues, which she kept in the desk drawer, and left the office.

"I feel rotten," Johnny told Kathryn. "She's a first class secretary, but, bottom line, she has to come to work."

"You didn't ask her about Rama, did you?" Kathryn asked.

"No. She did tell me that Jamel was in trouble with the law. That could be why she missed work."

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, KATHRYN WAS at the prison helping a student with a rough draft of an essay, when he suddenly asked, "Is it true you snitched on Rama?"

She froze. "Of course not."

"It's what I heard."

"Heard where? He's not back in here, is he?"

"No, ma'am."

She realized she was holding her breath, steeling herself against news of Rama's return to prison. "What did you hear about him?"

"Just that you ratted on him."

"It's not true." Her voice was so loud, so emphatic, that several students looked up. "I saw him once, on the outside, that's all."

"Yeah. That's what I heard."

"Did you hear it from Rama?"

The student, Kevin, smiled. "No, ma'am."

It troubled her that she didn't believe him.

AND THEN ONE DAY IN EARLY NOVEMBER, Rama showed up at her house. Kathryn was bent over the computer in the small front room she used for an office, writing up lesson plans for her class at the community college, and there he was, at the front window, his hands cupped around his eyes, peering in. She involuntarily jumped back in her chair. Rama pointed to himself and then to the door. What was he doing here? She sent Johnny a quick text message. "call me. rama's here."

Dropping her phone and keys in the pocket of her cardigan, she stepped out onto the front porch, into the weak winter sunlight, and shut the door behind her.

"Hope I didn't scare you," he said. "I rang the bell, but you didn't seem to hear it."

"It's broken," she said. "How'd you know where I live?" She tried to keep her voice light.

"The law firm directory."

"You're still with Lavonne?"

"Sometimes."

Kathryn wrapped her arms around her waist. It was cold on the porch and she regretted not having picked up her coat.

"What can I do for you?" She smiled when she asked him, but her voice sounded cold.

Rama laughed. "I thought we might have some small talk before getting down to business. Maybe even a cup of coffee." He looked meaningfully toward the door, but Kathryn pretended she didn't understand.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound unfriendly, but this isn't a good time for a visit. I'm really busy."

"I didn't come for a visit," he said. "I came for a recommendation."

She smiled, this time more warmly. This was something she could do. "Recommendation for what?"

"A job. I had to quit the car business."

Had to quit? What was he doing here? "I can say you were a good student," she said. "I don't really know anything about your job qualifications."

"That's OK. Look, can't we go in? It's cold out here."

He was right. It was freezing on the porch. But all she could think about was how tall he was, taller than she remembered. He had looked up her address, had walked out to the suburbs in search of her; he was here on her doorstep.

"I'm sorry, but I'm really busy. Why don't you give me the information and I'll mail in a recommendation." It sounded so lame.

Beethoven's Fifth rang out from her pocket. She flipped open her phone and saw Johnny's private number on the screen. Thank God.

"You OK?"

"Hi. Guess who's here? Rama. He's leaving in a minute. I'll get back to you."

Rama laughed. "It's that husband of yours, isn't it? You emailed him."

"No," she lied. She felt shamed, but also relieved that Johnny had gotten her message.

"If I'm leaving in a minute," Rama's voice was mocking, "I better get on with it."

"Sure." She put her phone back in her pocket, but she didn't cut the connection.

"OK. The recommendation was an excuse. I came here to set the record straight. About Lavonne. That brother of hers, Jamel, beat her up. He does coke, gets mean when he's out of money. I had nothing to do with it. I wanted you to know that. I tried to protect her, but I had my own interests to consider. You know, I'm still on parole. I couldn't get caught fighting that stupid kid."

Whether or not it was the truth, it didn't matter. She wanted him to leave.

"I didn't think it was you," she said.

He narrowed his eyes. "Of course you did."

"Come on, Rama. Who do you think I am?"

He suddenly reached for her wrist and closed his fingers around it. She yanked her arm away, but he held fast. His face was close to hers; she could smell the cigarettes on his breath.

"I think you told that cop I was an ex-con."

"I did not," she said, pulling back from him. She could hear Johnny's voice, squeaking from the depths of her pocket. She reached into her pocket with her other hand.

Rama stood watching her, holding her arm, waiting. "He lives around here, that cop. I checked it out."

She closed her fingers around the cold lump of metal and slowly lifted it out of her pocket.

"Rama, let me go. Now!" It was her best school-teacher voice, loud enough for Johnny to hear.

He loosened his fingers. "It's just, that bastard almost busted me," Rama said. "I thought…"

She pulled her arm away from him and stepped back toward the door. It was over. "I know," she said, "but I never said a word to him. You have to believe me." It was true, but she felt like she was lying.

"OK," he said. He stood there on her front porch, his hair trimmed short, his face clean shaven, his khaki trousers pressed. He dressed up for me, she suddenly thought, amazed, ashamed. This young man, this college boy, was trying to impress me.

She said the first thing that came to mind. "Look, Rama. I've told you. I'm very proud of you. You're one of my successes." The minute she said it, she regretted it.

He laughed. "'My life is not a metaphor or simile. It is the poem *you* made of me'? Is that it?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm really sorry. I don't think I've done anything wrong, but I'm really sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"That you thought I talked to that policeman."

He laughed. "No. That's not it. You're sorry I'm not still inside, aren't you? Sorry I'm not still your star pupil."

"That's not true!" she snapped.

He stood there, not moving, watching her.

"Can I come in?" he finally said.

She wanted to say, *Yes. Come in.*

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I'm sorry."

"You said that before."

He turned and walked down her steps. She waited until he had turned the corner of her street before returning to the house. She never saw him again.

At the end of the semester, she stopped teaching at the prison.