

I'll begin by reading Mr. Kumar's email to you. In my fifteen years of teaching here I've never received anything like it. My student ratings are excellent as you know. Now this.

*Dr. Bryson. I am filing against you a charge of implicit racism. In seminars your comments have made me uncomfortable, and you unfairly targeted my final assignment.*

*I thought it polite to inform you before I contact the administration.*

*Rohan Kumar.*

I read it several times, trying to get past my shock. *Racism?* What had I ever said to make him uncomfortable? Of course *implicit* means not spoken, so maybe I didn't actually say anything. *Dog whistle* racism in other words. Or in no words at all. Obviously he took to heart my lessons on sub-text. In which case what was it I *didn't* say that offended him?

I was hired to teach creative writing, so I'm supposed to know about language. But his words made no sense.

And then I thought how it's possible for a person to be racist without realizing. Like cancer in the early stages. Systemic cancer. But I'm at a complete loss here.

I was surprised it was Rohan—Mr. Kumar, sorry—a committed and eager student, filing the complaint. He was always so attentive in my seminars. Too attentive, I'm thinking now. I remember him frowning at my example of a misplaced modifier (the old Groucho line—*This morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas*). I made a mental note right then to scrap it. It's not the Marx that appeals to undergrads now anyway, whatever their ethnicity.

He's a mature student who looks more my age than his classmates'. I know I'm not supposed to notice these things, but I want you to know everything as it happened and as I experienced it. Anyway, I have nothing to lose now. He's quite striking you know. Black hair

swept back, dark eyes like pools—Al Pacino eyes I thought when I first saw him. He speaks in a baritone with measured inflection. His writing voice is intense as well, especially in his final assignment, the one that blew up in my face. It was brutal, as I'm about to explain.

My comments on his story triggered the complaint. I had asked my students to choose a life-changing moment from their past and imagine it happening to someone else. I wanted them to distance themselves from the actual experience and explore its fictional possibilities, to imagine what *could* have happened beyond what *did* happen. It's a technique that's produced some remarkable stories in the past.

Rohan's story was an unrelenting dirge written in his sister's voice describing her sexual assault and its aftermath. He supplied a short preface to explain that her story needed telling *exactly* as it happened. "Without any frills," he wrote, a qualifier that irked me then and still does. Is that what I do? Teach *frills*? I told him he had ignored the prompt.

Beyond that, his story bothered me personally for reasons I couldn't quite fathom at the time. It wasn't the attack itself. I'm used to my students' horror stories and, as women, we're all too aware of assault.

Mr. Kumar's sister was date-raped, and the accused got off with a caution because his family's lawyer argued consensual sex—they'd had drinks at a pub before she accompanied him to his apartment.

Following her grueling experience on the witness stand, he wrote that she's become reclusive and depressed. I don't doubt that for a second. She suffered unspeakable trauma and he brought it all out.

But his narrative was itself an assault to the senses, a protracted, primordial scream, like Munch's painting. You're too close to it all, I told him. Page after page compacted with pain makes for a difficult read, I said.

Obviously, I had trouble reading him as well. Along with his email.

I replied to it right away, thinking he hadn't yet contacted you. I know you'd have called me if he had.

*Dear Mr. Kumar,*

*We should meet to discuss your complaint. I'd like to clear up any misunderstandings. Can you come to my office this afternoon at three? You may bring someone along if you'd be more comfortable. I hope to see you then. Dr. Bryson.*

He wants to be a writer. They all do. God knows why, I say to myself every day, even as I cling to the belief that writing, like playing an instrument, can bring joy and personal satisfaction. I want them to develop an ear for a sentence in tune, to hear the quiet eloquence of the right words in the right place.

Most of them would rather write a best seller. Teach us to write a best seller, they say. And I ask them, if I knew how to write a best seller would I be teaching at all? They want the clichéd formulas and killer plots, and you know how I feel about those.

Kumar is different. He's not interested in writing a best seller. He wants to write good sentences. Seated at the far end of the seminar table he cuts an imposing figure, his dark eyes like tunnels, and I feel sometimes I'm not looking into them but into him.

Normally, his characters aren't mainstream and they appeal to me because they're different. He inclines to visible minority twenty-somethings living compromised lives. A Korean

actress in a relationship with her manipulative director, a young Lebanese woman paying her college tuition by serving in a topless bar, a Somali teacher coming to terms with his transgendering.

I confess to have found some of his writing erotic. I mean it. There were even times when I wondered if he was writing *to* me, or if I was imagining it, or even wanting him to be. An unprofessional thought, I know, but his writing was that alluring, believe me.

Well, he's certainly written to me now, I thought.

At precisely three, he raps on my door and enters. After closing the door behind him he stands for a moment, like maybe he's rethinking everything, then marches across the room to the chair by my desk. He props his backpack on his knee, rummages inside it for a moment and takes out a folder—his story, graded and with my comments. He lays the backpack on the floor and sits upright, his face set, a study in granite, I think to myself. His eyes are black holes. Yet the whole performance seems rehearsed.

I smile. "Thank you for coming to see me, Rohan."

"I came only because you asked me, Dr. Bryson, and I ask in return that you address me as *Mister* Kumar."

The formality makes me wonder if he's recording our conversation. Did he switch on a device when he was rummaging in his backpack? More than one aggrieved student has used the tactic, as you're well aware. In anticipation, I switched on my own device the moment I heard him knock and slid it inside my desk drawer. Unethical, maybe, but these are tricky times. I have it here if you want to corroborate my story.

I smile again. "That's fine, Mr. Kumar. Perhaps you can begin by sharing with me the grounds for your complaint." I feel I'm already addressing an unseen third party here.

He clears his throat. “Our final assignment was to narrate a personal event that changed how we look at the world. I wrote as my sister because she cannot speak for herself. She is my story. But you give me a less than satisfactory grade and tell me her story is not enough.” He speaks like he’s reading from a script.

I shake my head. “Not quite, Mr. Kumar. Yes, your assignment was to begin with a personal moment in your life, but you were then to distance yourself from it and shape it into a literary fiction. To imagine what *could* have happened. Your only fiction was in transcribing what your sister might have said, and elaborating on it. You needed to do more than that. I think you weren’t ready to write this story. You’re too close to it and too angry.” He’s shaking his head and smiling, which annoys me. “Fiction writing isn’t meant to be self-therapy,” I tell him.

The smile disappears. “You commented only on the writing and said nothing about her tragedy. Were you unable to acknowledge it? Can you still not?”

“My personal feelings are irrelevant to my assessment of your writing. You must know that.”

“How can you assess anyone’s writing when you resist its emotion? Where is the humanity in that?”

Of course he’s right, to a degree, but the accusing look he gives me now makes me wonder if it’s his sister or himself he wants me to sympathize with. “It’s more complicated than that. You know what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Yes. To take myself out of the story. Have I not done that? Is my sister not someone other than myself? And do I not make clear her pain?”

“It’s *your* pain and *your* anger, Rohan—sorry—Mr. Kumar. For you the assault and the injustice are sufficient. But for the reader they aren’t.” He looks away. “Listen. It’s a terrible

indictment of our times that attacks on women are so frequent. But the challenge for you as a writer is to make this one different. What can you do to engage a reader already at risk of being desensitized by the familiarity of it all?" I try to keep my voice steady, but I can feel my frustration. And his.

"I wrote *her* story, the one she is unable to speak herself. How is that not enough?"

"Because what you wrote is unrelieved misery. It's a lump of agony. How can it be otherwise when you are yourself consumed by the pain of it? Readers want literature, not the raw pain of a victim. They need plot, contrast, texture, and room to breathe—irony, even humour, however dark. You can only find these things if you write outside of yourself. But you've made your sister you. Only the pronoun has changed."

He looks puzzled. "You want me to write humour in a story about rape? What is funny about rape?"

"In itself, nothing. But your story ties the reader in a straitjacket. You give them no time to reflect, no quiet place to find meaning or make sense of what happened."

"You instructed us to write about an incident, and to make it real. This is what I've done. But you, a woman yourself, are indifferent to her pain. To *my* pain." He pauses. "And I know why." He glares at me. "Because you don't see us."

And I get it now. My "implicit racism". How the horror stories of gang rape and child brides in his culture become reduced in mine by their *otherness*. That's all he heard when I told him his sister's ordeal wasn't enough. "What I'm saying, Mr. Kumar, is that the story is almost impossible for you to write except as some black hole of despair. How can it be anything else? But it *has* to be something else to engage the reader and not simply numb them."

"You have no right to censor me," he says. "To tell me what I can and cannot write."

"It's my job to advise you *how* to write. That's not censorship."

"No. You resist my metaphor because you don't like to think about it."

"Your metaphor?" I want to hear him explain it himself.

"The rape of our culture. How your imperialist forbears divided our land and us set against ourselves. Hindu against Sikh, Muslim against both. That is why my story makes you uncomfortable. So you try to appropriate it and make it yours." He leans forward. "Like you have taken our words and made them your own. *Nirvana. Jodhpur. Pyjama. Gymkhana. Even tickety-boo* to tell you all is fine and dandy." His mouth twitches.

I struggle to keep my voice calm. "So, you're saying I'm racist because I'm trying to help you become a better writer?"

"No. Because you want to take my story and make it yours. Because you presume to have that right."

My words are out before I can stop myself. "And what about you, Mr. Kumar?"

"What do you mean?" He sits back in his chair.

"Have you not taken your sister's story and tried to make it your own? Isn't it somehow *your* honour that matters to you more than her pain and humiliation?" Now am I being racist? I only feel relieved to have finally spoken what has made me uncomfortable about his story from the beginning.

There's silence now.

His body relaxes and he looks at me like he's about to deliver a knockout punch. He rests a hand on the wooden arm of the chair and observes his fingers casually stroke the polished curve at the end.

I watch them too and feel a flicker of something like fear, but not just fear, you understand, and I glance at the closed door behind him. Did he lock it after he entered?

Slowly he gets to his feet, so now I'm staring across the desk at his belt buckle. He lifts a hand and hooks his thumb inside the belt. His voice is calm. "Maybe after this is over, Dr. Bryson, you can write about your experience, distancing yourself of course. Describe our...encounter...like it happened to someone else. Be sure to include irony, and humour. Do you think you can do that? Make it all literary?"

A knot forms in my stomach and I hear the pulse pound in my ears. I stare at his belt buckle and tense myself for whatever is to happen now.

Under my blouse a cold drop of perspiration runs down my skin. I finger the top where I've left two buttons undone, and close the gap. We're in a silent film, facing each other across the desk. Something quick as a cue dot flashes in front of my eyes, a flicker of his ebony hard body pressing down on me, his black eyes penetrating me. I feel my breath quicken.

I said I'd tell you everything, did I not?

But the film ends, and, as if by design, he sits down again staring and smiling at me. "What is it you feel now, Dr. Bryson? Something—what is the word you like to use—*eviscerating*? A lump of fear? Maybe something else as well? Could you shape all this into literature?" The smile disappears. "It is not so easy, is it? To separate yourself from these complicated feelings so you can make someone else feel them? Is that what writers do? Make others feel what they don't anymore? Tell me where is the meaning in that?"

My mind's in a whirl and I can't find the words to tell him he's wrong. I just want him to leave.

As if reading my thoughts he reaches for his backpack and stands. “Only one thing more, Dr. Bryson.” He places a folder on my desk. “Would you read this again please? It is not about my grade anymore. As you explained, this is not your kind of writing. But this time will you do me the courtesy to read it for what it is and not what you want it to be?” He turns and walks to the door.

I stare at the pages I can’t possibly read again.

He turns. “There is no longer any need for me to file my complaint, I think.” He goes out, leaving the door ajar.

I rise out of my chair and walk across the room to close it, feeling unconnected from my own movements. Back at my desk I take a gulp of water and switch off my device. He’s said nothing incriminating, and a device can’t record subtext. He never touched me but I feel violated as I read the title page of his story again.

*Ravished* by Rohan Kumar.

So many meanings in a word. Ravished. Ravishing. Ravishment. How can the same word mean both ecstasy and rape? Itself and its opposite, a contronym like sanction and cleave and refrain. Like how I felt moments earlier, almost—and I mean almost—wanting him to do something while fearing the whole time that he might do it. How to find the right word to describe precisely what one feels? *Sanitary* means clean, but it makes me think *dirty*. And so I wonder what business I have telling Rohan Kumar, or anyone, how one word placed next to another word will produce some desired response in a reader.

I stare at my phone. I have to call you myself if I’m to explain why I wish to resign. It’s a conversation I’ve been having with myself for some time, as you’ve probably gathered. I’m sorry

to say this, but with all that's happened, teaching creative writing seems to me now little more than an exercise in self-delusion.

Anyway, you have it all exactly as it happened. And no frills.