Kavita

Jamey Gallagher
Kavita pedaled toward her aunt's house. Her legs ached from dance class, the only high school class she enjoyed. The sky was gnarled up. The woods beside the road were thick with young pine trees, but she could also smell ocean marsh. She stopped pedaling, removed her hands from the handlebars, let the weight of her backpack, the weight of her body, gravity and entropy, carry her forward. A body in motion. An equal and opposite force. Her feet dangled. She had a strong, dancer's body, thick at the hips and thighs, forceful. She was always aware of her center, just below the navel. She let go of the center. The thin bicycle tire jagged on dirt beside the road. She landed heavily on her side, her leg scraping across the ground, in tall dry grass, the trunks of pine trees sideways, as if growing out of a dim green wall.

A man came to her as she lay still. The gnarled sky unfurled, dropping hard black drops of rain. Her aunt would wonder where she was, would send police officers out to look for her. They would sweep the roadside with searchlights calling her name. Kavita. The man was a light-skinned black man wearing thick, black-framed glasses and a black suit. His white shirt glowed. Everything about him was immaculate. The man reached out to touch her leg, gripped her thigh in his palm. Her leg was muscular, tight, his grip strong.

"Come on, now, Kavita," he urged. "Get up."

The rain intensified, lifting the smell of swamps and sulfur from the earth. Hell. Her father was in Hell. The man regarded her with curiosity, distrust, disappointment, it was hard to tell which. She would stay on the ground forever. She would
let the rough grass grow over her. Her heart would sink into the black mud and beat there. She breathed because she did not know how to stop breathing. The man cradled her head against his chest, her wet hair dirtying his white shirt.

"Come on, now," the man said, his voice her father's calm deep voice. "It's okay."

Two lights from the road rippled across the grass. Gnats rose from the ground. She felt them biting her shoulders her face her legs and the depression where her neck met her chest. The car did not stop. Kavita blinked. There was no man, no man's footprints. She lifted herself, then the bicycle. She walked down the road, the rim of the front tire warped now, describing a wayward rhythm.

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"What happened to your leg?"

Her aunt was divorced. Her aunt's two children played in the scurfy grass behind the ranch house. The rain had ended. Kavita watched them through the window, wondered what game they were playing. The boy whipped a long thin branch through wet grass. The girl crouched, watching him. There was an intensity to their game, a seriousness.

"Nothing."

"Nothing, Kavita? Look at it. It looks like raw meat. You should wash it out."

"I will."

Her aunt had left Trinidad three years before her parents had. She had married a white man, an American. Her children were U.S. citizens. Outside, both children were now crouched before something Kavita could not see. A dead animal, she assumed. A brown and gray unidentifiable body.

She washed her leg in the white tub, rubbing off particles of dirt, road, and pebbles. The water ran pink down the ringed drain. The falling pebbles made small sounds like
insects chewing. This was real: The blood, her leg, the pain. Her body would heal itself. The water ran cold, then warm, then hot. Steam clouded the mirror. When she looked inside, her reflection ghosted. A man stood behind her wearing a black suit, a white shirt. She watched the rise and fall of her chest. He would grab her neck with both of his hands. Her neck was strong. It would not be easy for him. With her fingertip, she traced her outline in the mirror, her broad shoulders, her square head, her snaking hair, her waist. This is me. Kavita. You cannot kill me.

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Then:

Her life had been held up by a pillow of air. She moved through that life effortlessly. She knew that she was lucky, but not that she was privileged. Dance lessons, sleepovers, movies, her large home in Ridgewood. Her room, her television, her computer.

She sat down to dinner with her mother and father, laughing, explaining her life to them, showing them almost all of it. Petty trouble with friends, her first kiss. Her father was often tired, but he smiled as he listened.

None of this was real.

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To Kavita, dancing was joy, but not in an easy or simple way. Joy was possible in the world, but it had to be earned. Her body was the source of joy. Her legs were strong, her sense of rhythm very good, her weight centered. She felt movement in her muscles even without music. The dance teacher at the high school, Beth, was young, white, petite, her light blue eyes rimmed with thick black mascara. She was not always capable of controlling the class. On the dance team, power was contested. Kavita tried to stay in the background but was too good to remain invisible.
“Kavita, that’s beautiful,” Beth said. “Perfect.”

Dancing was hard work, yes, but every move was perfectable. Eventually any move could be repeated with precision.

Dancing was also grueling. It was sweat and exhaustion. Sometimes joy was not welcome. How can you feel this, now? She hid everything from her classmates. She smiled and laughed a lot. They were all strangers. She just needed to get through this year. Then: college. New life. Forgetting. People liked her. Teachers liked her, most of the other girls on the dance team liked her, boys liked her. It was not Ridgewood.

After school she did her homework at the kitchen table, or, if her aunt was not home from the hospital where she worked yet, played with the children. The boy was hard on the girl, pushing her down, smearing her face with dirt, but the girl was tough. Kavita danced with them in the back yard, gave them twirling ribbons on sticks. They ran through the grass laughing. Afterwards she would check them for ticks, carefully picking the insects out where they had rooted into the skin, sure to remove legs and teeth.

The man appeared only when she was alone, so Kavita tried to never be alone. He was always behind her, wearing a jackal’s smile. He sat beside her bed at night, touching her forehead.

“Come on, now, Kavita. It’s not so bad.”

When she slept, she often had nightmares, but they disappeared as soon as she woke. The man’s white shirt glowed in the dark room.

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“Kavita? What kind of name is that?”

“It’s Trini. I’m Trini.”

“You don’t look Trini.”

Gallagher
"That's what people tell me all the time, but I am." She smiled, her white teeth even after years of braces. Full lips. Be beautiful.

Tim leaned toward her. His skin was the color of hot chocolate, his cheeks angular. He wore his hair short but it seemed to grow quickly—he was always in need of a shape up. His arms were thin and smooth. Trouble, people said. What did people know?

"Man, I think it's just beautiful, though. Kavita." He tasted the name.

"Really? Thanks."

"Beautiful name, beautiful name." They were supposed to be translating Shakespeare into modern English. A sonnet. My lover's eyes are nothing like the sun. Wasn't that English already? She moved her fingers along the edge of the paper, watching her wrist. Strong forearm, thin wrist, smooth dark skin. Do you see my hand? Do you see me?

"I haven't seen you anywhere around. Parties. Don't you go to parties, girl? Don't you like parties?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes? You don't like to have a good time? I can tell you like to have a good time. Look at that smile. I'm right, right?"

She shrugged, smiled. Games. Coded dances.

"I'll pick you up nine o'clock, Friday."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." She nodded, smiled, turned away from him.

Then:

In many ways she was old enough to be a woman but was a child still. Her father had yelled before. He had thrown glasses across the room, sudden explosions. Shards. He had
complained about his economics students at the university, about how cold Americans were. He had brooded. It was what fathers did.

Every day she walked home from the high school, a few blocks, down safe, tree-lined streets, with friends. They laughed, made plans for the weekend. Every day she walked into her house, hugged her mother, drank a glass of orange juice.

She noticed blood on the tile floor. Her mind struggled to fit the blood into her schema of home. Someone had gotten hurt. Were they alright? Her mother's body was draped across the kitchen counter, a gash in her center, blood matting her black hair. Her father's body was slumped against the French doors, blood and brains spattered across the glass. None of this was real. All of this was real. She stood at the entrance to the kitchen, her backpack in her hand. She had Algebra homework. Algebra was difficult for her. She was hoping that her father would help her understand. The handgun her father had shown her once—"for protection," he had said—had fallen onto the tile floor, away from his clutched hand. His face was gone.

She answered the questions asked of her. She rode in the back of her aunt's car. She was alive. I am still alive, she wanted to tell them. Her father had worn black suits, pristine white shirts.

Kavita dressed in a tight black t-shirt which stretched across her chest, a bright yellow overshirt, a skirt, gladiator sandals. She didn't know how to dress. Her aunt looked at her.

"Going out tonight, Kavita?"
"Yes."
"Good for you."

Her aunt had taken her own grief and tucked it inside of her. A sachet. Her aunt was kind but she would not allow her soul dominion over her body. All life was risk. Didn't she see that?

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Gallagher
The party was loud and crowded, in a large house near a small pond. Tim held her hand, handed her a drink.

“I don’t drink,” she told him.

“What do you mean you don’t drink?” He smiled but was not happy.

“I don’t drink.”

“What do you do then? Do you smoke?”

“No. I dance.”

The music was loud, the bodies pressed close against each other. In Ridgewood she had gone to parties, danced with her girlfriends, flirted with boys, laughed. Here the music was loud, everyone drank, couples were already in corners kissing.

“Can we go outside?”

“Girl, I need to get a drink.”

Kavita walked out of the house. The pond had once been a cranberry bog, and just below the surface she could see overgrown cranberry bushes with red branches like hair.

She walked down long empty dark roads, pine trees on either side of her. The wind picked up, blowing her yellow shirt in different directions, a flag flapping. She was iron and wood. When the man in the black suit and white shirt made his appearance this time, she decided, she was going to talk to him. She was going to tell him that she was done with him. She didn’t want to see him ever again. He would not leave her—she knew he wouldn’t—but she could be done with him.