Fiction by MONONA WALI

Love Thy Monster: A Novel in Six Short Chapters

Chapter One

Iqbal had a face of great beauty, that of a prince, I thought. A boatman, he asked for a story.

What man asks for a story? They always want to tell their own. I have heard so many of their stories, embroidered with lies. Still, I said, if he wanted one, I wanted one in return. Reciprocity.

What is that? he said. I don't know your fancy words.

I give you one, you give me one.

An eye for an eye.

A bit gentler.

He agreed.

We were traveling down a quiet part of the Indus River, away from commercial traffic. The banks were baked mud sculpted by water coursing down eroding mountains. I longed for even the sight of a tree. Our sail billowed in the breeze; the small waves played the wooden boat like a drum. I had come by myself to scout for a film about Mohenjo Daro, the great city of the Indus Valley civilization that had been buried for centuries under the sands of time. My crew would be arriving later. I was an Indian-born American documentary filmmaker on assignment for public television. All this I had explained to Iqbal, maybe to see if I could secure his business. He looked strong and seemed to know the river.

"Yes, Madam," he had said. I liked him. I cannot tell you why. Maybe his majestic red turban, or maybe the curious lilt in his voice.

Chapter Two

I told him the story of how my mother was born fierce, and had hitched a ride with my father, the great love of her life, and how he undid her sexual being with his philandering. This interested Iqbal; his scarred eyebrow rose in a pique of curiosity.

Do you want that story, or do you want the story of how I was born unwanted and survived a near abortion?

This time a direct gaze into me.

If you like, he said.

I started again.

So, one day, this was a long time ago, I was sitting with my mother in the backyard of my hilltop home; I was a new mother and she had come to help me. Between us, my baby was sleeping in a shaded bassinet. She told me she had gone to an ayurvedic doctor and he had given her a bitter tea to rid her of her third pregnancy in four years but it had not worked.

As I told Iqbal the story, I remembered the rustle of the wind in the palm trees, and the sun being a little too strong for March. By the time she told me this story, we had all had lived in America for many years.

She told me that she and my father were struggling to make ends meet. Even though they both had earned their Masters of Science degrees and my father had graduated top of his class and earned the Chancellor's Gold Medal in Physics, he could only find low-paying tutoring jobs. They were radicals and scholars, those two, who had fallen in love with each other and married out of caste. My older sister was born within the first year of their marriage, then another, my middle sister, just thirteen months after that. Finally, there was me, a third

pregnancy just four months after having given birth to her second child. Who can blame her for the bitter tea, hoping for an expulsion.

I loved imagining my parents at this time, so young and eager for life, so in love, and copulating with faulty diaphragmatic devices to prevent what became the inevitable penetration of sperm into egg, fertilizing a life they did not want. I wondered why my mother had told me this story of my unwanted beginning. Perhaps she was carrying long years of guilt and regret. The news had hit me softly, like a broom against my ankles, and it explained my long years of wanting to be wanted by these parents. A sweetness in untying that knot, if you believe in those things. I remember the baby woke and stretched her arms out spasmodically. Her mouth formed an "o" and her eyes blinked. My attention was drawn to her. We had named her Avantika, a name suggested by my mother, meaning Princess of Ujjain. Ujjain was where the poet Kalidasa was born, and my mother also, so even as a baby Avantika was carrying a story. Everyone is tethered to the past.

Is there more? Iqbal asked.

So, I continued. *I am not bitter, my mother said, referring not to the tea this time, but to my father and his betrayal of their marriage. Meaning other women. When I looked at her face, I saw pain in the deep frown and the downcast of her eyes.*

"One should not deny anyone their freedom," she told me. That is what she said.

"It's noble, but it's not right," I said, or something like that. I was unable to fathom how my mother had twisted herself to live with my father.

Women do all sorts of things, Iqbal said, as if he knew something about this.

I think my father was a monster, I told Iqbal.

Was it then that he said "Love thy monster" or was it later? I can no longer remember.

Do you know where you are? he asked.

I was confused by the question. The obvious answer was that we were in the great river delta of the Sindh.

You are in a blood-soaked land, he said. You want the story of my mother?

I said I did.

Her name was Kulsoom.

For a long while there was silence. I could see he was struggling between forming the words and zipping them up, and then, at last, he began.

At the time of my story, my mother was just seven years old. Her father took her and her mother and sister to the train station to send them north, from your country, India, to Lahore, because we are Muslim and were no longer welcome in your country. There were so many people at the rail junction that they had to step over dead bodies. You would not understand. Fires burned everywhere. She told me about the smoke, and other smells, too, that you don't want to know about. Her father promised to come in a few days. With one hand my mother held her little sister and with the other she held her mother's green sari. Until it was ripped from her. You wouldn't understand.

But I tried. I had been in packed train stations in India. I had held my own grandmother's hand in utter fear of losing her. In my mind I saw a young brown girl—I suppose myself—clutching the green sari.

Such a crowd, you cannot imagine. Banging into them with their bundles and straw baskets. My mother was confused by all the noise and people running this way and that. She saw four men come towards them with a mad look in their eyes. She could feel her mother become like a stone. This is what she told me. I am telling you everything she told me. My mother knew they should run, but her mother had never done anything for herself. The men grabbed her mother and they dragged her

away. They had steel in their hands, sharpened and hungry. She heard her mother screaming. I am telling you what she told me. The train came forward and everyone ran for it. She and her sister were swept up into the train.

Iqbal's eyes cut into me. You want to know about monsters? You want to know the stories of the women who were raped and sliced open like a papaya. My grandmother was just twenty-five years old, the fruit of a child still in her.

I sat quietly with his story and his anger. I felt it settle in the same womb where I had carried Avantika, my one and only darling child. Iqbal's face was turned from me. We were heading into the wind.

Yes, I said. I do want to know. Tell me more.

It was then he turned to me and untucked the end of his turban. I watched as he unraveled it off his head. Long, black hair cascaded down his back. Iqbal was a *she*, cleverly disguised in men's clothes. I saw everything in her face I had not noticed before. The lack of facial hair, the delicacy of her lips, the wisdom layered in lines on her forehead. I don't know how I earned her trust. We had travelled far down the river and the day was coming to a close. Pink light edged the sky.

Chapter Four

After I left Iqbal, I undertook to read about the partition of 1947. I was claiming a history that I should have known in more than hazy detail. I read words such as these: *Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered. Whole villages were set on fire, men and children and the aged were hacked to death. Young women were carried off to be raped. Some British soldiers and journalists who had witnessed the Nazi death camps claimed Partition's brutalities were worse: pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found roasted on spits.*

I read how Lord Mountbatten relished his role as kingmaker in the partition of 1947. He was known to have said, "For still a few minutes I am the most powerful man on Earth." I read how Nehru went to see him once India and Pakistan were official—how they toasted to India—and to King George VI. How Nehru, now prime minister, offered Mountbatten the position of Governor-General of India. I imagined a fan whirring above, the servants standing by, and how the newspapers recorded in wet black ink the momentous events of the day. And even as they were drinking the tawny port, the civil war had begun. How Nehru almost immediately regretted what he had been party to. Muslims killing Hindus. Hindus killing Muslims. These facts were recorded: *By 1948, between one and two million were dead.*

I saw a photograph of Nehru visiting the camps where hundreds of thousands of refugees fled for protection. This is what the caption said: *In the evenings, the government screened Disney films, which were watched by as many as 15,000 people at a time.*

Chapter Five

I often think of Iqbal and her story, of her mother, and her grandmother. But I didn't know the half of it.

I remember how, that day, she brought the boat expertly into the jetty, her red turban rewrapped, her mannish manner reclad. I invited her to a meal. She accepted reluctantly.

I felt we had made a connection, and it was important to keep it alive. She directed me to a small café run by a trusted friend. We were served curried spinach and coarse rice.

It is sad to me that you cannot be yourself, I said.

It is better to be a man, she said in a low voice.

But who will tell our mothers' stories if we don't?

What is the use? We cannot change what has happened. Her face was so hard and unforgiving. Do you want to know what

happened to my mother? Do you want to know what happened to me?

I had asked for more, and now I braced myself to listen.

She told me how her mother was raped by a man in her own family, and how she, Iqbal, was the daughter of that crime.

So, you see, she said, we were both unwanted. It was the first time, she told me, that she was telling this story. You are the only person who has asked, she said, her eyes darting away.

I will carry your story, I said. It is a monster of a story.

My own mother's story seemed so small now. So ordinary. As did my own.

Was it my imagination, or did I feel her soften after that? We ate our dinner in silence.

Chapter Six

Avantika asks me if there are any happy stories. She has just turned thirty-three and has grown just as I hope she might; a world traveler, a thinker, an activist, and a loving daughter. She is eating a melon, scooping out the sweet flesh spoon by spoon. We are in the same backyard where she was a baby in her bassinet. Now she watches the Earth burning in conflagration and drowning in flood. She tells me she cannot bring children into this world. I ask myself: How will she make a future? Is it a mistake to hold dreams for our daughters? I have prayed that no harm will come to her. To be specific, I have prayed she will never be raped, or mutilated, or tortured. I have also prayed that she will not have to witness any of that.

So, I tell her a story of my mother, her grandmother, the woman who named her.

One day your grandmother decided she did not want to wear the little red dot on her forehead—this was in old India, and she was just seven years old—but already, she had been infected with ideas of freedom. The year must have been 1932, and her teacher demanded she go home and apply the red dot,

telling her if she returned to school without it, he would get a knife and cut it into her forehead. She ran home to her uncle, a barrister. He walked her back to school and told the teacher in no uncertain terms that he could not force his niece to wear a red dot if she did not want to, and that if he did, he would bring a case to court. The teacher was cowed, and my mother had learned an important lesson.

What? Avantika jokes. To have a lawyer in the family?

The law is not always on our side, I say, but she learned to fight. Just as I was saying it, I traveled to Iqbal's grandmother, to her fear, to how she had frozen like a stone.

At any rate, I say, we must believe our actions matter.

Avantika looks dubious. Didn't you once make a film about the end of a civilization, she asks.

Yes, I tell her. We wanted to tell the story of how, after six hundred years of habitation in a city of remarkable sophistication with an advanced sewage system, a great bath, and no visible sign of religious oppression, the whole enterprise was abandoned. There had been no wars, no invading armies, just a river that had spilled over its banks too many times. At least, that is the prevailing theory.

Ha. Avantika says. The same thing is happening now, except it is our fault.

Yes, I suppose so, I say. It wasn't such a good film, I tell her, remembering the dry nature of the filmmaking style. But the most important thing is I met Iqbal.

Who is that?

So, I tell Avantika Iqbal's story. It is not a good thing to do. I feel the weight of it rest on her. Her shoulders tense, and she sets down the melon she has been eating. I feel her withdraw from me.

Wait, it has a happy ending, a Disney ending. I tell her the most important thing is that when I returned a few months after I first met her, I found Iqbal at the same jetty where I left her, and by then, she was a she, her long hair unwrapped and plaited

in a braid, her gold-green eyes like two jewels. We hugged each other, as if we had never parted.

Isn't that good, I ask Avantika. She nods, though I can tell she is not entirely satisfied. She rises up to go in the house, and I watch her slender body disappear into the settling darkness.

I remember that day on the Indus so clearly. Other boatmen ran up to me. They cried in their anxious, overeager voices, wanting my business. They spat on the ground next to Iqbal. She helped me onto her boat. They are such monsters, she said. What to do?

The wind was strong that day, and the sail billowed. The river was wild. The waves rocked us. I held on, and when Iqbal shouted, *We might drown,* I shouted back, *Daughter, don't worry. I am here with you.* It was the offer of a mother's love. At that moment it was all I had.