

Iqbal and the Fisherman

The Moon, pale and rocky and beautiful, sat moping on the courtyard's granite steps for days with her head buried in her cratered arms. She would not eat, nor would she smile, regardless of how much others tried to cheer her up.

Mother Earth, deciding enough was enough, attempted and failed in finding out the cause of her daughter's sorrow. Through kind French poetry, interwoven with a medley of smooth calypso music and richest of Italian pasta, she tried in vain to cheer up her daughter. However, it began to seem only Time would be able ease the Moon's sorrow.

A week passed, with still no change in the Moon's spirit. With only so much time to spare, the Earth carried on about her own daily concerns while maintaining a watchful eye on her daughter. At length, a day with showers arrived, and the Sun returned home for a visit. He radiated the courtyard as he walked in, stopping briefly to tilt his head sideways and drink from the reverse waterfall- a focal point of his monument to his wife. She was watching the Moon across the courtyard with her back to the Sun and pretended not to notice his arrival as she sipped her tea.

The Sun quietly walked up to his wife and rested his hands on the shoulders of her floral summer dress, kissing her on the back of her head. A loose wisp of her hair caused him to smile as it tickled his face.

"How is my queen, and how is my princess?" he asked.

Mother Earth had to squint from his added presence.

“I am fine, but your daughter’s heart and mind is in despair, reasons for which I do not know. She’s been melancholy for days. Weeks even. I have tried words, music and food with no favorable response. I am resigned to believe only Time can heal her heartache.”

As bright as the Sun was, he could not feign a smile.

Father Time was the only entity more senior in years to the Sun. As much knowledge and presence as the Sun had, he would always remain junior in wisdom to Father Time. Time had been here since before the beginning, before celestial considerations were even considered to be considered. Genesis stated the Sun was created on the First Day, but the First Day couldn’t even begin with Father Time being on hand to commence it.

Father Time was like a shooting star every time he came up in conversation. Mother Earth’s smile would grow, her eyes would sparkle with constellations even more than normal. Father Time had introduced to Mother Earth to the Sun, and, in retrospect, the Sun had as many questions as answers about their previous relationship. For all his bright disposition, the Sun gritted his teeth every time Mother Earth suggested Father Time was a solution to their problems.

Father Time maintained an air of modesty and coyness about his station in life, but the Sun knew he revelled in the prestige of being senior to all others.

“Before we approach Father Time, perhaps I can connect with the Moon. Hmmm?” He plucked a grape from the hanging garden and ate it. Then another.

“Apologies. Yet I have seen you in action with this kind of thing. But, please, if you-” The Sun was already traversing the courtyard towards his daughter.

“Hello, my angel. Why so glum?” the Sun tried to shine as bright as he could.

The Moon remained silent with her head in her arms, not looking up.

The Sun then did a handstand for three hours, trying to take the Moon’s thoughts to a place where she would be willing to communicate.

The Moon still would not be swayed.

“Well, let me tell you about work. We are in no rush, with all this rain about us.

“I was shining a good early morning light over a fisherman in Jakarta. This fisherman, in his small wooden skiff, sat nearly motionless with his head down, large hat providing just enough shade to cover his body. He would cast his rod periodically, and throw bits of crab into the water. He was a slender man, old in years. Not old for a Sun or Moon, but old for man. The light breeze billowed his shirt. This man and his skiff resembled the many other fishermen with skiffs around him, save for one distinct feature.

Off his skiff, angled into the water, was a plank. On this plank were perpendicular slats, as if one wanted traction walking up and down the plank into the water. (As if that’s where one would ever want to go unless they were Neptune himself.)

Every five to ten minutes, the fisherman would throw bits of crab into the water. Eventually, a fish, a yellow tail scad whose name was Iqbal, came. He was on the hunt

for gifts of food to take back to an expat he was sweet on, a girl fish by the name of Sally Looter. After examining the situation, he took a daring nibble of the crab. The crab bits were so delicious Iqbal forgot all about Sally, something he had previously thought impossible. Still seeing no danger, Iqbal took all the crab in the water and left. An hour later Iqbal came back.

By now, the fisherman had thrown more crab bits of crab closer to the boat. Iqbal was less cautious than he had been in the first hour, and once again took all the floating bait and left. The third hour when Iqbal returned, the fisherman's bait was yet much closer to the edge of the plank going into the water. By now Iqbal was barely taking a glance at his surroundings, so excited was he for an easy meal.

At the fourth return on the fourth hour, the fisherman had thrown half of his crab bait in the water, and half of the crab bait on the lowest of the rungs on the plank. Iqbal readily took the bait in the water, but was not so keen to climb onto the rung of the plank for the final bits of crab. He watched the fisherman cast and reel for several minutes and eventually decided to make his move on the crab bits. Iqbal flipped himself up to the bottom rung, quickly gulped the crab bits, and flipped himself back into the water.

The fifth return, in the fifth hour, Iqbal came to find all of the crab bits on the bottom rung. With the caution one applies only to a pre-conquered danger, Iqbal quickly flipped to the bottom rung to attain his crab bits.

Over the next nine hours Iqbal would each hour return to the skiff. He would find and retrieve the crab bits consecutively up the next rung, to the edge of the boat where

the gunnels are, and then down the other side where an equal board with slats ran, into the boat's bottom.

The next part I know only because of Neptune. Whereas I only knew it later in the story, I shall tell you now, to give you the added insight not even I, the Sun, had at the time.

A day to a yellow tail scad is the same amount of time as an hour to a man or woman. Strange, I know, but consider this- to a man or woman a day is twenty four hours. To you, my dearest Moon, a day is thirty of your mothers. A month in man's time. You don't even want to know how long my day is in comparison. So all things are relative. Or not. (Between us, I find it confusing. But don't tell anyone I admitted to that.) But I digress.

Eleven hours into the ordeal, after the fisherman first cast his rod at the crack of my dawn, little Iqbal was not only comfortable enough to flip his way up one plank and down the other into the boat for crab bits, he had decided he need not rush in leaving the boat as the fisherman quite obviously had meant him no harm.

Iqbal now leisurely would partake in activities such as reading the fisherman's newspaper and trying to paint with the fisherman's watercolors. He became so emboldened in each of his day's antics he decided that with each passing of the fisherman's hour Iqbal didn't have to just hang out with other fish at school. There was a group of boys, real humans. Iqbal started to take up with them, which went against the old order of the sea. He told them about his friend the old fisherman, and the group of boys humored him even if they didn't fully believe his tales. Iqbal became one of the

followers in the group, but he was okay with that as he wasn't the only one. He even started wearing the same style of bandana as the rest of the boys. Iqbal's old friends, while envious, celebrated their friend in his increased social status. The last fish to do this recently was a free spirit by the name of Jaslene Tala, but she had recently gone missing. Social interaction with humans, while exciting, was extremely dangerous. Yet Iqbal's friends refused to rat him out to his parents.

In the later visits, Iqbal at times would simply stay with the fisherman for extended lengths instead of going home. Missing for days on end in fish time and not eating at home because he was always so full from the fisherman's crab bits, Iqbal's parents were convinced their son was into heavy drugs. He had to assure them he wasn't.

All this went on for the entire old fisherman's day, and into the evening. Up to this point, the fisherman and Iqbal still had not spoken a word to each other. At most had shared some chewing tobacco which made Iqbal's head spin.

By now Iqbal had attained superstar status with the other fish at school and now Sally Looter was glancing in his direction more than Iqbal was glancing in hers. He was on his way to meet the human boys one day while skipping math class when Sally stopped him in the corridor of the reef.

"Hi Iqbal. I got my braces off," as she flashed her perfectly aligned pearly whites at him.

"Very nice gnashers!" Iqbal exclaimed, giving her a high fin.

“Thanks! Like, this huge party, well, kind of, I’m having this huge party and was wondering if you would maybe come?” As she preened her scales.

“Yeah, sure, where is it and when?” Iqbal asked while starting to continue on his way.

“Well, we are thinking my house if my parents leave like they are supposed to,” Sally began, “But we may have to go somewhere else if they stay home. Maybe even the sunken galleon. I hear the grouper fish have moved on.”

“Sure,” Iqbal answered as he continued down the reef while Sally and her friends shrieked their delight. He stopped mid swim and turned around. “You guys wanna have the party at the old fisherman’s boat? He won’t care.”

It didn’t take Sally and her friends long to get over their concerns of going into a fisherman’s boat and scream a yes to Iqbal’s question. They had heard all about the fisherman and how safe and cool Iqbal now was.

They made plans that the next day after school Iqbal would take everybody to the boat.

It was starting to get dark, and the fisherman knew he didn’t have much longer before he would have to lift the anchor for shore.

He waited just a bit.

As fate would have it, (the fisherman felt luck is a tool for the unprepared), Iqbal showed up one last time to the ramp and into the boat. This time, he had friends. Forty other yellow tail scad flopped up the ramp and into the boat with him. The fisherman merely glanced at the group and slowly reeled his rod in for the last time that day.

A small ukelele in the group of fish began to play. For the first time since Iqbal and the fishermen met, the fisherman lifted up the inner ramp, storing it in the seat beneath him. The fisherman was deceptively fast and fluid in his motions. He then did the same with the outer ramp.

The music stopped as the fish looked at each other with wide eyes, motioning Iqbal for an explanation. Unfortunately, Iqbal didn't have an answer for this. One of the fish in Sally's group picked up a small little fish backpack with the name J.Tala.

"Oh my god," Sally wasn't concerned about her party anymore. None of them were. The fish huddled together, shivering and scared and unsure of their future. But they had a pretty good idea. It was only now they understood the words of their parents.

The fisherman started the boat's little motor and began to trawl back to shore. The campfires of family and neighbors awaiting supper were already lit, and easy to follow."

The Sun didn't say anything for a few minutes.

The Moon looked up at her father, momentarily forgetting her mood. "Did that really happen today?"

The Sun looked at her and shrugged. "I'm sure it did somewhere. Mother Earth is a very large lady. Now, let's go find an apple and talk about your day."

"Hopefully we can find a Honeycrisp for Mom too," the Moon added hopefully as she stood up. She stretched for the first time in a long while, and walked with her father.

Despite himself, the Sun answered, "Only Father Time will tell."