

# Monique Castaneda

The first time I fell in love was during one of those periods when the isolation of being mixed race had me feeling like the captain of a sinking ship with no crew mates. But I mean *really* in love and not another silly infatuation. It was a hot day in April and I'd just come from the Memorial Union on campus with my good friend Ernest, and our bellies were full of pizza. We had nothing to do for a good three hours besides mill about around campus or go back to Ernest's and get high, which I think we both decided on before it was suggested. It was busy outside the MU as canopies lined the walkways. Students from various organizations handed out fliers in that bubbly polite sort of way. I didn't have much interest in joining a club, but I almost flipped when I discovered a club for multiracial students and interracial couples. It was the bright red cloth that caught my attention. The booth was empty and as I pocketed a pamphlet, she caught me off guard with an introduction.

"Hi, I'm Monique," she said and handed me a flier with all the information on how to become a bone marrow donor. There was a cautiousness to her approach as though it might anger me. Her eyes were big and brown and beautiful in that way renders me helpless. She wore her jet black hair in a bob with a navy blue bandanna tied over it, along with an army green tank top and faded jeans. She was light-skinned and ethnically ambiguous but I could tell she was all jumbled up like me. She wore the signature thick black rimmed glasses that I would forever associate with her. With or without them, she looked like a young Shannyn Sossamon.

Before I knew it, I was walking back to Ernest's place wondering when I'd ever talk to her again. While he busied himself in his room trying to unearth a copy of a Dashiell Hammett story he'd gone on about all morning, I remained fixated on the flier with a photo of Monique Castaneda at the top. The sympathetic portrait of her in a hospital gown, bald and misty-eyed,

bared a slight resemblance to the girl I met earlier.

There wasn't much that I would go far out of my way for besides women. So when I returned to campus later, I made sure to pop by the MU. Most of the booths were cleared or cleaning up and while the banner for marrow donors still hung from her table, there was no Monique in sight. Most people would have taken that as a signal to move on with their day but I liked a challenge. I had a bordering obsession with stories about awkward first encounters and the lead up to the relationships of couples I admired.

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*"Hi, my name's Ben. We met earlier at the booth for the multiracial club. I'm the guy with short curly hair and tan skin. I don't mean to be a creeper,"* which was dubious considering I looked her up and messaged her on MySpace, *"but I think you're really cute and I wanted to say something but I was too shy."* I cringed as I clicked send. Later that day she got back to me. She said she remembered me and was happy I reached out.

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Our first date was the first time I saw Rocky Horror Picture Show. Some friends gathered at mine earlier in the evening. We planned to go as a group to a theater in Mesa that did a weekly midnight showing. While they were out on my patio smoking cigarettes debating which was better, "There Will Be Blood" or "No Country for Old Men," I waited anxiously on the couch. When Monique arrived they swarmed her with introductions. She was soft-spoken and somewhat bashful but eager to meet the new faces. I noticed a darkness behind her smile that was for all intents and purposes, genuine. It quickly faded to a look of fatigue when she was quiet. Despite her condition or perhaps because of it, I'm not sure, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Around that time, I was so self-conscious about my curly hair which I'd grown out for the

first time, my unavoidably deep voice, and my skin tone which fell between the two shades I kept getting asked to choose between. I wanted her but approached with the same apprehension I do in pleasant dreams when I'm certain I'll wake up.

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“Have you seen Rocky Horror before?” Monique asked. We were wedged in next to each other in the backseat of my friend Megan's car. I enjoyed the warmth of her arm pressed against mine.

“First time,” I said.

“It's a lot of fun,” Monique assured me.

“You've been to a screening before?” Megan shouted over the music.

“Yeah, my friend Trevor and I used to go every Saturday night,” said Monique.

“Did you guys dress up and everything?” asked my friend Ellie from the passenger seat.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Monique laughed. “We did each other's make-up.”

“*Cool*,” Ellie admired.

“I like to dress up as transvestite, sometimes,” said Megan. “But I don't go to movies, I just roam around Old Town Scottsdale with lipstick smeared across my face, asking people for spare nickels and dimes.”

I laughed at Megan's off-kilter humor, her awkward way of breaking the ice.

“That's actually how Ben and I met,” Megan told the car. “I found him on a street corner wearing an old Burger King crown, holding a baby doll he found in the dumpster. He said the doll could read fortunes for two dollars but he'd just run away as soon as they handed him money.”

Monique seemed unsure of how to respond and laughed nervously.

“That's Ben for you,” said Ernest. “He'll do pretty much anything for some spare change.”

“Jesus!” I shouted and the car erupted in laughter.

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The auditorium was like a carnival and Halloween all at once with mascara and fishnet stockings as far as the eye could see. You couldn't reach for your phone without bumping into a Frank N. Furter or Riff Raff. The whole scene had me feeling like a square. There's nothing like the lack of others inhibitions to get me feeling self-conscious about my own. But that faded quickly as Monique and I started talking.

“So you're part German?” I asked.

“Yeah, I'm a quarter,” said Monique. “My grandmother, *my mom's mom*, is from Munich. We take a family trip there once every other year to see her side of the family.”

“Damn, that's really cool,” I said. “What other ethnicities are you?”

“My mom is half black and half German and my dad is Mexican,” said Monique.

“Are they still together?” I asked, assuming not.

“No, they got divorced when I was seven.”

“Mine too. They split up before I was born,” I said.

Monique nodded then changed topics, “Have you traveled abroad?”

“No, but I want to someday!” I said. “Have you been anywhere besides Germany?”

Monique hummed for a second, “Hawaii, a few times and some small trips around the States. Oh! I train-hopped for a few months when I was nineteen.”

“*No shit?* Where to?”

“Yeah, the first time I went from Phoenix to LA,” said Monique nonchalantly. “The

second time I made it all the way to Seattle.”

“Like, how did you do that?” I laughed.

“It's pretty easy. Just wait for a train that's leaving at night, that way it's harder for them to see you hopping on. You have to look for an unlocked car,” Monique instructed. “I brought a loaf of bread and my backpack and that was it.”

“For real? Like you didn't get hassled? *Was it dangerous?*” I asked.

“Sometimes,” said Monique with a nervous shrug. “Sometimes.”

I'd never wanted to kiss someone so badly.

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Sometime past “The Time Warp” but before the credits, Monique leaned in and whispered that she needed some fresh air. I found her some time later alone in her thoughts, outside in the warm night air. She sat on a dirt plot which was once home to a palm tree or some decorative agave from the time when the strip mall was really something.

“Didn't mean to sneak up on you,” I apologized.

“Hey!” Monique looked up. “You're fine. I was just spacing,” she said with a note of melancholy.

“Thanks for coming out,” I said taking the seat next to her.

“Yeah, thanks for asking me,” Monique smiled. “I like your friends. They're really funny, especially Megan.

“She's a *real* character,” I said.

For a moment it was silent all but for the tiny rocks I kicked around near my feet and the distance ambiance of the cars. I noticed her pinching the strap on her bag.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Like are you in pain?”

“Not right now,” she shook her head. “But I go back to the hospital in two weeks.”

“What's that like?”

“After the chemo, I'm pretty much a zombie,” she sighed. “It's really hard to do much for the week after. The spinal taps are even worse. It's the most painful thing I've ever felt.”

Listening to her detail the endless cycle of blood samples, screenings, and hospital visits that had consumed her life, I wanted desperately to offer something more than sympathy but her situation was out of my depth. Feeling ill-equipped, I decided not to dwell too long on the subject.

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A few days later we met for our second date at my favorite pizza place near the university. There was something badass about the way she came through in a simple white t-shirt and jeans. She wore different color bandanna over her hair with metallic spiral gauges in her ears and smelled like something citrusy and wonderful.

After lunch I took her on a tour of my university life, starting with my favorite bookstore and eventually to the buildings on campus I most adored. As we started walking she slipped her arm around mine so casually it felt like something we did all the time. I was so elated it felt like three coffees but I didn't want to ruin the moment by making a thing out of it. So as we walked down the brick sidewalks of Mill Avenue popping into head shops and vintage clothing stores, I felt for the first time that I was in a couple, or how my grandmother says it, I was with *my person*. Monique wasn't the first girl I'd dated but she was the first girl to reciprocate the infatuation I felt. It was effortless and free of the stress and falling over backwards I usually did with girls. For the first time I felt *claimed*.

Around that time I was obsessed with The Beats and Jack Kerouac in particular, so I

talked a lot about San Francisco. Monique said she had only stopped through briefly and didn't see much of the city but that it always made her think of her favorite book, *Go Tell Alice*. This was telling as the novel was written as journal entries from a young girl who descends into the darker side of the late sixties drug culture. By the end she's dosed multiple times against her will with harder substances, raped, and abandoned. Monique told me she was a recovering meth addict and had spent time in rehab. The book resonated with her in a way that I didn't give much weight to until later on.

Later that afternoon with my back against her red Celica, unable to fight the urge for even a minute longer, I asked her for a kiss. I get red in the cheeks just thinking about it. She leaned in with a smile that told me I was being silly and pressed her lips against mine. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her closer. After a few seconds she took a step back with a mile-wide grin she bashfully tried to conceal.

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Monique talked a lot about her outlets, photography and sky diving. Both were put on hold when she started chemo. She liked to show me the pictures from her trips to Germany and Hawaii but especially the ones of her grandmother. She was sweet to me when we met and besides her thick German accent, she was as regular as any grandmother I ever met. Through Monique's lens she was transformed. There was such elegance and dignity to the portraits she took. All the admiration and appreciation and love she felt really shined through. I still wish she had taken my picture. Just once, just to see myself through her eyes.

She urged me to go to sky diving with her when she was through with chemo and laughed when I got squeamish at the idea. Before long it was all planned out in her head. I would join her and her mother on their next trip to Hawaii and we would go sky diving to celebrate.

She's insane, I smiled to myself.

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The first time I went to visit her in the hospital I tried to stay the night. The nurses wouldn't allow it. Monique's room was on one of the higher floors full of large medical machines. It looked like a laboratory you would imagine on a space station. I brought her flowers and a quilt my grandmother miraculously threw together in a matter of a week. "I've got all the nuns praying for her," she insisted. Monique wasn't wearing her wig and I knew that made her uncomfortable around me. "I'm so unattractive without it," she told me once. She showed me the port in the middle of her chest where tubes were constantly being attached and removed. She told the nurses earlier that day she had a boyfriend and they made it expressly clear she was not to have sex. After her treatments, the introduction of foreign bacteria could potentially put her at risk. We made out a lot, though. They couldn't stop us from that. I squeezed myself into the hospital bed with her and watched the movie Hitch until she passed out from fatigue, which was regular when she was in the hospital.

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I hoped I'd get along with her mother, Tisha. Not because she was the mom and I wanted to make a good impression; that came easy. I wanted to get to know Tisha because she was mixed like me. At the time I was dealing with both internal and external questions of identity. What did it mean to be mixed? Was there even such a category or was I just the unfortunate consequence of race mixing? I was drawn to my mixed race elders hoping they could shed even a flash of light onto the path I walked. Looking back, I see a lot of myself in Tisha. No man, place, or interest could hold her for long. Since splitting with Monique's estranged father, she moved through the eighties and nineties like a chameleon. Monique showed me photo albums



and every few years there was Tisha standing next to a different man, wearing his style, his look, fading into the picture as though she were pasted in.

I can only remember Tisha and I talking about race once and it was quick. It was months after the fact that I realized Monique and I never talked about our experiences being mixed. The times I can remember were her talking about how difficult it is for people of color to find marrow donors, and how *less likely* the odds are when you are multiracial. I thought that was so fucked up, I submitted a request to be a donor the following day.

Nevertheless, we didn't talk about race and it seemed strange to me, like going to the store for one item, forgetting it, and returning home with a sack full of groceries. Years later, I'd be introduced to the concept of *safe spaces* where people of color could meet, interact, and bond with one another without having to put on a face and without all the self-consciousness of being the token. My white friends didn't get it, and I didn't either for some time, but when I look back on the moments spent in the company of Monique and Tisha, I know that just being in each other's company was enough. I didn't have to explain myself, I could relax. This meant the world to me; now as much as then.

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After Monique was discharged from the hospital we saw each other a couple times a week and texted ceaselessly. More often than not we met at mine. And if my roommate was away, we made out on the couch, grinding jean sealed crotch against jean sealed crotch until it felt like mild carpet burn, then we'd go outside. There was a tenderness to her that could vanish in an instant leaving only cold indifference in its place. It was infrequent but came on like a thunderstorm in the middle of an otherwise pleasant day, leaving you in the debris of broken tree limbs.

She met my mother and sister one afternoon for sushi. It was my first time introducing any girl to my family. I'd talk about Monique a lot with my mom and she took it upon herself to get involved. It wasn't me who called my grandmother. So when they met, she was sweet to Monique who was understandably shy. I don't think she expected much from me when we started dating. She was taken aback when I brought her flowers. Of all her exes, none of them had ever brought her flowers. "You're the sweetest guy I've ever dated," she told me one evening in the hospital.

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Around that time, my friends and I would throw monthly nights where a group of eight or so gathered and took ecstasy together. There were glow sticks and little clothing and we'd cover the floors with our softest blankets and pillows and trip out to music for hours. I suggested it to Monique on a whim, aware of both her condition and prior addiction. She was bold enough to ask her doctor who didn't consent to the idea but also let her know that MDMA wouldn't negatively affect her treatment. And in the days leading up to it she was as excited as me.

Things got underway in the same fashion we were used to. Forty minutes in, when the chemical jolt hit, the lights were dimmed and friends paired up in small groups to sing each others' praises. Periodically, I'd glance over and see her calm to the point of focused, entertaining a conversation with one of my friends. I remember Megan would slink up in her underwear and, like a cat, found a place in Monique's lap and Greg with eyelids so heavy he could barely keep them open, talking her head off about his poetry. She was kind and indulging but the drugs didn't hit her like they did us. There's a photograph I still have of her from that night. She's sitting on the couch with her head in her hand sinking into her own melancholy.

At one point the conversation switched to her wig and someone asked to see her without

it. They were as polite as a room full of uninhibited white folks on ecstasy could be. So, she went with a small group into the back bedroom but didn't invite me. I'd seen her bald before but this really hurt me. I was jealous. I wanted her to be vulnerable with me. I wanted everything. And while they were gone, my mind spun another web of insecure possibilities about what might be happening. I don't know what I was afraid of but I was certain there was something to fear. Like many things, I didn't realize until much later that she was afraid of what I might think. She didn't see herself as attractive anymore so why should I?

When she came back out into the living room she put her arms around me and ran her fingers through my hair. We sat together and talked and she soothed me through an anxious period later on when the effects began to wear and fatigue set in. I walked to her car around four in the morning. She kissed me and told me to call her when I woke up.

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Monique was almost unflinching in her optimism, so I'll always remember the day she called me in tears. I'd finished classes for the day was lying around my apartment when my phone rang.

"I can't do it anymore," she moaned.

This was a few days out from her next round of treatments.

"*You can*," I urged. "You're so strong, you're going to beat this."

"I can't take anymore," she pleaded. I had never heard someone sound so exhausted.

I continued on with the sorts of things you're supposed to say, pretending the mountain is really a molehill.

"I don't want it anymore," she said. I could tell she was crying. "I don't want to live anymore. I just wish it'd end quickly."

“You don't mean that,” I replied meekly.

“I do! I absolutely mean it,” her voice broke. “I can't do this anymore.”

It was the most honest thing I have ever heard. In that moment I was speechless. What do you say to someone who believes with all their heart that death is the only refuge from pain?

Monique returned to the hospital for her next round of treatments three days later.

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The last time we were together, *really together*, was the night I came over to her house. It was my first and only visit and I can still remember being rushed by the dogs as I came through the front door. Tisha shooed them away as she greeted me and walked me back to Monique's room where she was watching TV in bed. Her grandmother passed us in the hallway and introduced herself. She was shorter than I imagined her from the pictures and very sweet, though her accent made it difficult to understand her.

I laid in bed with Monique and we flipped through cable channels aimlessly. I was happy to finally see her room. I took notice of as much of my surrounding as possible from her wall of pictures pasted as a collage, to her tiny eclectic book collection to laundry overflowing from her closet. There's something intimate about simply entering a woman's bedroom. It felt like stepping inside her mind.

Before long we had our hands all over each. I was acutely aware that two weeks prior I told her I was in love with her. In the time between, the urge to repeat it grew ever stronger. On top of her, clothes started to disappear and soon my hand made its way south only for her to give me that familiar smirk and shake her head. She got quiet for a second while starring up at me with watery eyes. I thought I had upset her until she pulled me and she whispered in my ear. I could feel the heat from her breath. She said, “*I think I'm falling in love with you.*”

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If the night had ended there with us locked in mushy embrace, as I wished it did for so long after, it would have been perfect. But neither I, nor life is perfect, and as such I continued on with the conversation. We talked about sex and the topic of numbers came up. She asked how many sexual partners I had had and being a twenty-two year old I was very aware and at times a braggart about my experiences. So when I said a number and then she said one that dwarfed mine, the levee broke and I was flooded with insecurities and feelings of inadequacies. Despite my best attempts at concealing my worries, it was written all over my face and she saw it. I was scared and I wanted to run but not literally. I just wanted to bury my head somewhere. It didn't dawn on me that this was her at her most vulnerable. All I wanted was someone with whom I could open up to, someone who would embrace me for me. The irony of it all didn't dawn on me until much later.

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For three days she wouldn't respond to my text messages. She didn't take my calls either. My messages pleaded passively to know what was wrong but there was no mystery. When she finally called me back she was distant and sullen. With a tinge of pain in her voice she said that a relationship was too much for her, that with all the stress of her treatments should couldn't invest herself in anything. I knew this to be true but I fought it. Over the following three or four weeks, I invited her to several events and texted her frequently. In a last ditch effort, I showed up unannounced to her hospital room with another bouquet of flowers, and when we made eye contact as I came around the corner, I knew my coming was a mistake. She was a mess of tubes, needles, and exhaustion and it was apparent that even had she wanted to see me, it wouldn't have been in that condition.

Our conversation was tense and short and left me feeling low, lower than before. The rest of the summer was dull. It was like emerging into the parking lot after the best concert of your life and having the buzzing in your ears drown everything else out. I'd drag myself to mope at this get together or mope at that party. I deleted Monique from MySpace which was silly since I just used Tisha's page as a way of getting updates. I figured it would keep me from writing my third Hail-Mary message pleading her to change her mind.

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For a long time afterward, I struggled to forgive myself for how things ended. "If I could go back to that moment," was my secret mantra. I kept thinking about us in bed that night. I wanted it to be about my actions but I knew that was beside the point. I knew that the odds were stacked against us from the beginning but that something stronger than cancer kept us going.

The hospital visit was the last time I ever saw Monique. Some months later I saw a post from Tisha announcing that Monique found a potential match for a marrow transplant. I was happy but didn't try to contact her.