

# My Ammu

By Rafia Tasmin

*Rabbana waj-'alna muslimaini laka wa min zurriyatina ummatan muslimatan laka wa-arina manasikana wa tub 'alaina innaka anta at-tawwabur-rahim.*

*Our Lord, keep our beloved children, our gifts from You, under Your perfect protection. Keep them safe from all harm: known and unknown, visible and invisible.*

Despite the dullness of the room, I could see the faint outline of wrinkles around her eyes-eyes that seemed to twinkle ever so faintly. The corners of her mouth fought against her normally stoic face, revealing how she truly felt. Each morning at 6 AM, my mother crept into my room, sat neatly on the side of my bed, and gazed deeply into my eyes reciting this prayer to keep me in God's protection. She would blow on my palm three times at the end of the prayer warding off any evil spirits.

After repeating this for each of my sisters, we scrambled excitedly to the breakfast table to find our carefully made fruit bowls. As we headed out the door, she gathered us and recited the prayer one more time. Looking from the bus window as we rumbled away, I felt comforted by the sight of my five foot tall mother with her faint smile, waving until we were out of sight.

My mother grew up in a small mud dwelling with a tin roof in the unbearable heat and humidity of the forest of Bangladesh. Each early morning she gathered water from a pond for her family and then rowed across to attend school. I wondered how she could have been happy in such a place? But as I often listened to her recall her memories, her voice was soft and full of love. Bangladesh was my mother's safe haven, her anchor. I began to visualize my mother as a

child as she described her experiences in Bangladesh. I imagined her waking up to the azan and preparing chai for her eight siblings. I saw her comb her rich black hair, putting on her salwar kameez, getting ready to walk in the waves of heat rising from the pavement. I saw her light brown eyes looking out on the horizon, listening to Shah Abdul Karim.

*Whoever Allah has given three daughters and he preserves through raising them, will have them as shield for him from the Hellfire. [Quran 42:49]*

I am the youngest of three girls. My ammu (mother) had her hands full, dealing with three different girls with different styles, personalities, and attitudes. Though having daughters was frowned upon and seen as a liability in the Muslim community, my mother's response never wavered. Although she got open-eyed looks of ridicule, she reminded us often that she had **three ranis (queens)** and her proud smile filled me with strength and happiness.

Tucked in my 24-year-old mother's suitcase when she entered the US, my older sister in hand, were her belongings from her life in Bangladesh, including photographs of women with eyes like mine whose resilience we carry with us, and a Bengali to English dictionary.

We loved tagging along to her English lessons at the local library as she would point and name the articles of clothing in the store windows along the way. In record time, she was proficient and confident enough to navigate doctor appointments, shopping, and enthusiastically attend soccer games, homecoming and report card nights.

Though she is small in stature, she stands up in front of giants. Though some may see her hijab and hear her broken English and try to dismiss her, she stands firm. Though she navigates this new country with clipped wings, she has inspired her daughters to soar. She has taught me

how to persevere in the face of adversity by cultivating inner strength and resilience. She has also taught me that people will criticize me because I am a woman, but it is my duty to use my voice and stand up for what is right.

*So how dare you mock your mother when she opens her mouth and broken English spills out. Her accent is thick like honey, hold it with your life, it's the only thing she has left from home.....Her life is brilliant and tragic. Kiss the side of her tender cheek. She already knows what it sounds like to have an entire nation laugh when she speaks. She's more than our punctuation and language. We might be able to take pictures and write stories, but she made an entire world for herself.*

*-Rupi Kaur*