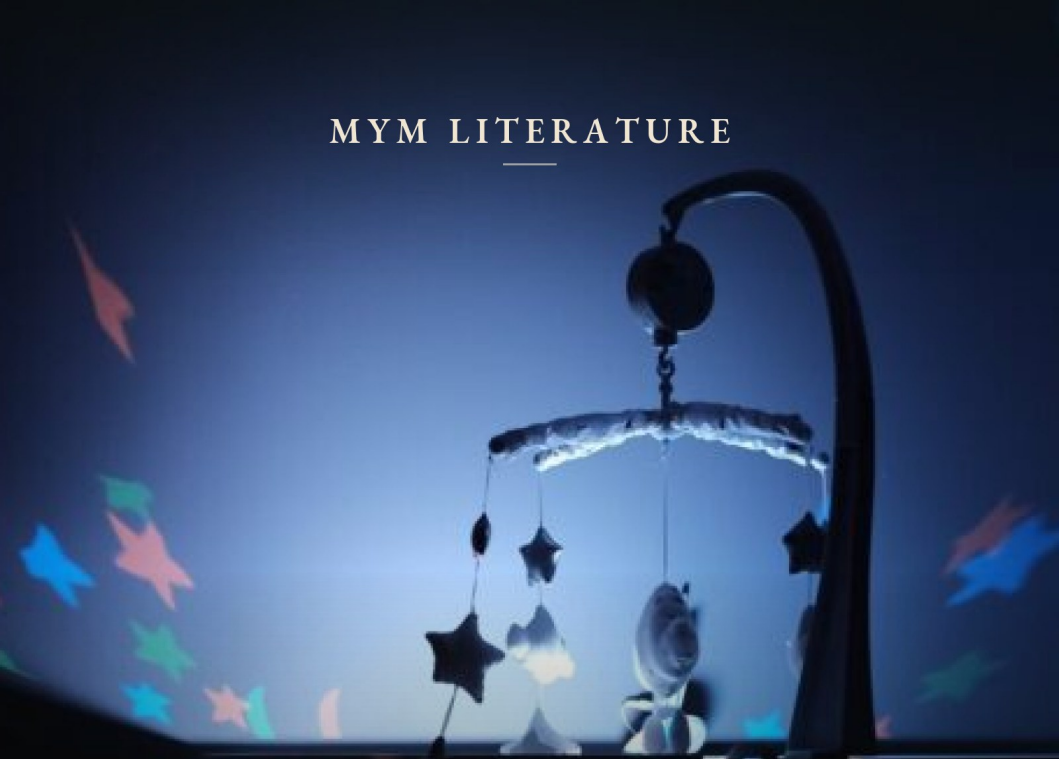
MYM LITERATURE



Ghost Babies

by I K

Where Muslims come home to reflect

Ghost Babies

By I K

February 22, 2022

This entry is part 2 of 3 in the series The Only Single on the Block

When I go out on my own, I am generally secure in how I appear to the world. A hijabi woman, going solo. Maybe I'm on my way to do some grocery shopping. Maybe I'm out for a walk to enjoy the sunshine. Maybe I'm on my way to work. All very generic assumptions that can be made about someone walking down the sidewalk. I never know what I appear to be to onlookers unless they tell me. Unfortunately, I never find out what the self-assured-looking passersby striding past during my afternoon walk think of me. I don't get the details from the barista at the coffee shop or the cashier at the grocery store either. I certainly don't know what other people occupying the halls of academia think. Everyone's there to study anyway, so it doesn't really matter.

The one place I know I will find out what people are assuming about me is in a gathering of Muslim women, where no matter the conversation, someone will find a way to stamp a label on my forehead. This has happened often enough that I've come to expect it. I look at my reflection in the mirror, trying to find signs of what strangers assume about me with so much confidence. I look at the dark circles under my eyes. I look at the extra weight I'm carrying. I look at the way I dress. I can't think of anything else I can be other than a stressed-out grad student, or someone who needs to go on a

diet. Which is why it completely mystifies me why I consistently get tagged with the same label: mother.

It's not even that people ask me whether or not I am a mother. It's straight down Assumption Street to the point where people will just interact with me mid-conversation as if I already have kids. Somehow, I'm supposed to know how that happened between my very childless morning and whatever o'clock I'm at this gathering, supposedly a mother of multiple children, another on the way, or both.

At a religious gathering for Muslim women, we were discussing how we could give back to our community. As our conversation came to a lull, the organizer turned to me and said, "You should come to our program for mothers." I was too shocked to react to this in a meaningful way, but she pressed on, "Really, you should come."

When neither of us had included our family details in our introductions, was it fair of her to assume that I was a mother? Was it because I was fat, and she assumed I was pregnant? This thought was especially mortifying. Did all of the people walking by on the sidewalk see a pregnant woman walking past, and if they did, did it matter? I ultimately decided that no, I was just fat, and did not look pregnant, but the confidence with which that organizer invited me to their mothers' meetings haunts me to this day.

On a phone call with an old college classmate, who I had agreed to explain the intricacies of studying abroad to, I was hit with the old one-two. The first punch came, "Is this a good time for you? Do you need to look after your baby?". Later in the conversation, it was "How's your husband?" These punches left me reeling. Suddenly, my bedroom, where I was taking the call, was no longer an arena of singlehood. There was the baby who I was supposed to schedule my phone calls around, and there was the man who fathered the child. Except I had neither the child nor its father with me in the room, so

the effect was more like waking up to the realization of ghosts appearing in my bedroom.

A baby ghost and a man ghost.

The baby ghost fills up assumption number one, that I surely must have a little one by this point after college, hence the direct question asking after the baby. The ghost man tells me that I should let more of my friends know about him, as only this particular acquaintance summoned him up from the deep.

The phone call ended. The ghosts remained. My life felt incomplete, incapable of holding family members through marriage and birth. This happens too often – college friends ask after my parents and brother, acquaintances ask about the people who they think they should be in my life: husbands and babies who haven't arrived yet.

I do other things to shake off the ghosts after the phone call and they dissipate, leaving behind a feeling of emptiness. Can something be empty if it were never occupied? I fall back on my singular solid self. I am one, and for now, I am enough.

I think at the end of the day it's just that once you've reached a certain age, people will assume that you must have kids. It's simple enough. What bothers me about this is that I actually want kids. I have wanted this for a while now. Obviously, in order to do that, I need a husband first, and in order to find a husband, I have to first deal with many different processes. The road from being childless to motherhood is going to take some time.

When people talk to me as if I'm already a mother, it hurts. I feel like there is some invisible expectation to be married and a mother by a certain age. It also just plain hurts because, on some level, I wish their assumptions were correct. These interactions leave me with a bad taste in my mouth and with a very simple wish: that people were more

considerate and bothered to ask questions instead of operating on assumption.

I know that I have spent more time and energy than I should have to react to well-intentioned unkindness. I know that these people never mean what they say in a bad way, and yet, what they say doesn't leave me feeling particularly good. It comes down to this: what you say to someone can affect them. After processing all the messy emotions these comments brought up for me, I've gained clarity about who I am when I step out of the house: I am a hijabi woman, going solo. I could be going to the park. I could be going to the mall. I could be going anywhere, and for the time being, I am going by myself.