

Ammu's Kitchen (Mum's Kitchen)

While boxing her gifts last Eid, there was one critical detail that I hadn't noticed:

The onions caramelize with the ghee, filling the room with the familiar warmth of ammu's cooking. I add two cinnamon sticks and three cardamom pods, as well as two heaped teaspoons of garlic and ginger paste. Then I add the chicken, each piece cut as close to two inches long and two inches wide as I could estimate. Grabbing a spoon from the drawer, I carefully measure out each spice: One teaspoon of salt, turmeric, chilli, garam masala and cumin. I level the spices on the spoon, sweat beading on my forehead from the steam in the pot as I think about what unknown bitterness might emerge if I accidentally put in a heaped teaspoon instead of a normal teaspoon, or how the flavours might amalgamate if the garam masala is slightly more than the cumin. I add half a teaspoon of black pepper, paprika and coriander powder, hearing ammu's laugh all the way from Sydney and remembering the way she would dump her estimate of a teaspoon straight from the jar into the pot. She rarely added in the half-teaspoon ingredients; they aren't what they had in her village in Bangladesh, and therefore not authentic. Neither is the tub of cream that I add.

Rayyan pretends to like it. He distracts me from his full review with his close analysis of the new knives he had bought that I had chucked into the sink, leftover dry chicken debris now stuck to it. I try to quickly wash it, but the vigorous scrubbing causes a small cut on my finger. We never had sharp knives growing up. Ammu had always bought hers from the dollar store and resharpened them when they got blunt. She would have to press a little harder to dice up an onion, but cuts from a knife were extremely rare. And the knives were always left in the sink until the evening.

I turn my face away from him, embarrassed that I don't know how to take care of a knife. I focus my eyes on the empty corners around the living area, corners where there would normally be furniture; here there are only boxes and luggage bags, cramped up with bits and pieces from Sydney and some new clothes ammu had gotten tailor-made for me as a wedding gift.

Over the following days, I feel more shame as the pot of chicken remains full. When Rayyan is at work, I place six two-inch pieces onto my plate instead of my usual four, eager to quickly finish the pot and retry another dish. There is a packet of biryani seasoning mix in the cupboard, but the instructions do not correspond to the way ammu used to dump all the spices onto the chicken, add water, add rice, feed a family of six. I stare at the packet for an hour trying to visualise the whole process, before deciding on pasta. Rayyan tries it and says it is delicious and then never eats it again. I try again. Most Bengali recipes use four main ingredients: turmeric, chilli, garam masala, cumin. Don't forget the salt - *if the salt is right, the other spices don't matter as much*. I try again. The sharp knives help cut things quickly, but my arm and neck cramp in pain from all the stirring and the extra hoping.

Rayyan tastes the curry once and then never touches it again. In the morning he has cereal; at night eggs and store-bought roti. I feel confused. Hurt flows out of my night prayers onto the prayer mat in the middle of Ramadan. Afterwards, I drag my feet through the footpath in the dark, not wanting to go home. I stop at a bench and remember Ramadans in Sydney. How ammu would make piyajju, beguni and chana. *Shekho*, she had said, insisting that I need to learn how to cook a bit of everything. I would get mad at her and watch as she overcooked and we overate and she would go to bed with pain up her arms that she would wrap in a forearm splint.

I enter into our small Perth granny flat. Its floor shivers beneath my feet; its bland air stifles my thoughts. Rayyan is sleeping, his stomach moving up and down in a rhythm that churns the absence of traditional Bengali Ramadan food in this house and a feeling of guilt inside me.

When I call ammu the next day, she tells me what she had made for iftaar: aloo'r chop, biryani and raita. A simple meal, easy for me to try, too.

And how is your body pain? I ask.

Same as always. Yesterday it was my back. Today my arms. It's like poison running through my veins.

I understand. A coldness has been shuddering through my back and arms, jolting me awake when I am asleep, jolting me awake when I am awake. I stumble to work where two students fling chairs at each other; I scream out all the panic in the car. I melt into the blankets when I

get home, stirring back and forth until Rayyyan comes home and cuts through the blankets into my arms.

Rayyan recommends physiotherapy. The physiotherapist presses into my left rhomboid where the pain sits. It moves, like a snake, to the right rhomboid and daintily bites into the muscle. She presses again; it stirs the snake more.

What triggers the pain? she asks.

Cooking. Standing. Stress.

Ammu tells me over the phone to clasp my fingers together, stretch my arms forward and hold it for thirty seconds; it helps her. I ask if it is helping her now.

The pain is always there. Sometimes more, sometimes less.

I tell her I'll buy her a massage gun.

How much is it? \$250? That's too much.

She tells me she is resting after cooking prawns and cauliflower and tuna cutlets. She teaches me over the phone how to make them in the traditional ways. One teaspoon of salt, turmeric, chilli, garam masala and cumin. Leave out the last two for veggies. Add some frozen veggies to make the meal bigger.

I try to lump together energy to go into the kitchen and attempt to make this home a home. The snake rattles against my shoulder blade.

The physiotherapist gives me resistant band exercises to make my muscles stronger than the snake. The stronger they are, the less the bites will hurt.

Ammu talks to me on video call as she stirs a pot for hours, making sweets for Eid. She tells me you must stir the milk constantly without break. Add vinegar to make the cheese and make a syrup with just water and sugar; easy. I multiply time with energy to the power of body pain

and deduce that it is not worth it. I ask her to teach me how to make daal next time. She tells me it is so easy that there is nothing to teach. Just make sure to add more water to make it last longer, feed a family of six.

We're just a family of two, ammu.

Thinner gravy is more delicious anyway, she says, then cuts the phone to lull the pain in her arm with her forearm splint and deep sleep.

Rayyan and I secretly buy plane tickets to Sydney, back to the home I had grown up in for twenty-two years. Even though it has only been three months since we got married and I left, each part of the house unfolds before my eyes like a distant dream. The floors seem uneven and the walls are like paper. Ammu appears to have gotten shorter, but her hug still smells like cinnamon sticks and turmeric. A nervousness steals into her hands as she realises she hasn't prepared anything for the new family groom. She quickly goes to the kitchen, takes out two pots, four onions, some garlic and tomatoes. I offer to cut them.

These knives are blunt!

They're fine. Just use them.

No wonder your hands hurt all the time!

No, no, that's just because of my age.

Eid comes by quickly. I wrap everyone's gifts, except for ammu's. Her gifts are in a large box: A wireless vacuum (to replace the \$20 one with loose parts that she had bought second-hand from the Saturday markets), a stainless-steel cooking pot set (no more pots with toxic chemicals cemented into them), a massage gun (for her body pain), and finally a carbon steel Japanese knife set with a knife sharpener. Ammu is thrilled, but we all know that she will put her gifts in the cupboard and never use them. Rayyan sets it all up, shows her how to use each item, and I make her promise me to use them instead of the old ones. She agrees, but guilt sits at the creases around her eyes as she contemplates throwing away the items she had used for the last ten years, items she had saved up for dollar by dollar.

We give her time and leave to settle back into our granny flat in the middle of Perth.

Just before our first anniversary approaches, Rayyan scores a new job and we make a quick decision to move up north to the Kimberley, to the farthest place I could possibly be from Sydney. Rayyan moves first, taking all of our spices and ghee, and I a few months later. I take with me eight outfits and pages of traditional recipes ammu had taught me; this time I had made sure to write down each step meticulously. Upon landing in Broome, intense heat crawls between the hairs tangled beneath my hijab. Sweat drips from my forehead down to my chest as I sit in the car for hours in an oven baking termite mounds with red clay, baking the shell of my body. Cows graze at the edges of the road on the way and Rayyan tells me about them, adding how difficult it is to get halal beef here.

When we arrive at our new home, a frog jumps out of the toilet bowl and into the phobia drawer of my brain. I call ammu to tell her I won't be able to survive out here in the outback. My shoulder blades jolt and dread shakes through my body. The old, sleeping snake stirs beneath my shoulder blade.

Ammu and abbu come up with solutions: Nets, expert treatment, acceptance. We go with the first one and find a net to put over one of the pipes outside. It seems to work.

When the fears settle and the snake goes back to sleep, I call ammu to clarify some of the steps in her recipes: *If I double the recipe, do I double the cornflour, too? If I freeze this, do I need to defrost it fully before putting it in the oven? Wait, I think I wrote this wrong - shouldn't I fry the onions first? Why does this recipe need one teaspoon turmeric but the other one needs half, even though they are the same weight?*

Ammu explains patiently, tells me to try making the biryani she had taught me in Sydney. *Two items in one, less stress.*

I laugh. *There's no halal beef here. I mean, there's one place that can order some for us, but it's kind of questionable.*

Just see what you can find. You never know.

We find some halal beef on a trip to Broome. When we get home, Rayyan quickly cuts it up and washes it, and I attempt a beef biryani for our trip to Windjana Gorge. The spices: Very spicy. The flavour: Extra flavoursome. The salt: Perfect. The views: Breathtaking. We are eating traditional Bengali biryani on an ancient coral reef in the remote outback, two crocodiles not several metres away. Thoughts: Mind-blowing.

The problem: The beef is lean meat. No fat. No juice. No melting in your mouth. It is close, but not close enough to ammu's. Nets, expert treatment, acceptance - we choose the third solution this time; Rayyan says we have no choice as that is all they sell here. The spices linger in my mouth as we drive home.

Did you do a lot of walking on your trip?

A little. My legs are hurting more from the long car ride. How is your body pain?

I tried to clean the house and now I can barely walk.

Just leave it; it's not the end of the world if the house is a little unclean.

Who will do it then? Work has to be done.

Do you use the massage gun I got you?

I do, but there's no one here to do my back. Your dad is always at work. How was the biryani you made?

It was good. Not like yours, though. What did you eat today?

Seem beans and gourd from my garden. Why don't you try making them? It's very easy.

There's no gourd here. Or seem beans. There are some shrivelled-up-looking snow peas that look similar to seem but they're \$25 a kilo and I'm sure they won't taste the same!

She laughs. No, that's definitely not seem. Just do your best with what you have.

Do you use the knives we got you?

I did once, but I can barely stay standing or use my arms too much. Your sister-in-law came over today to cook the vegetables for me. She used them and said they were good.

Okay. Take rest.

I buy a packet of frozen green beans and look at ammu's recipe for *seem* beans. I fry one roughly sliced onion in five tablespoons of oil. Add four cloves of garlic, one teaspoon of black cumin seeds, two potatoes, and five hundred grams of green beans instead of the thirty *seem* beans mum had used when she taught me this recipe. Five hundred gram recipes usually require half a teaspoon of turmeric, but I add one whole teaspoon since there are potatoes too. I add one teaspoon of salt (ammu said to start with that and adjust), then stir. I wash some of the dishes in the sink to save time, just like ammu would do. After a few minutes, I hear the vegetables searing against the base of the pot. I read the next step in the recipe: "Add water as needed, especially if you think it's burning." *Shit*. I remember Rayyan telling me to always use very hot water, otherwise the spices separate, or something like that. I put the heat down, add a little cold water quickly, turn the kettle on and stir and scrape the bottom of the pot vigorously.

By the time Rayyan comes home from work, the meal is almost ready. I check the salt and adjust, then turn off the stove and glance at my recipe notes. I had forgotten to smash the potatoes a little with the wooden spoon, so I do that while Rayyan freshens up and comes to the dining table for dinner. The microwave beeps yesterday's chicken curry ready. I place the two items onto a plate and add rice. He apologises for not being able to help with the cooking today, but tells me the vegetable stir fry reminds him of his ammu's cooking. My heart beams with warmth.

I send a photo of the stir fry to ammu and she sends back a heart emoji.

When I call her the next day, she tells me that her disc slipped last night and she has been in bed all day. My heart drops.

Should I come back to Sydney?

No, no, I'll be fine.

She knows it will cost at least fifteen hundred (*That's more than a ticket to Bangladesh!* she had said) and will take eighteen hours, but I do not care.

I'm coming anyway.

No, don't. Rayyan will be all alone without you. Your life is over there now. I'll be fine here.

At least let me buy -

No. I don't need anything. I'll be fine after some rest.

Did you eat?

Yes, our neighbour brought over a lot of food for me. Don't worry.

I think about what I can do. What I could buy to make her life easier, now that I have the money to. I think back to the things I had gotten her. While boxing her gifts last Eid, there was one critical detail that I hadn't noticed: While I had overworked and saved all my money, gotten married and moved to the other side of the country, set up the bricks to build my own home and create my own family, ammu had quickly gotten older and weaker. Her kitchen is now almost no more. Pieces of it had quietly followed me on my flight to Perth, through the red sands of the Kimberley, crept between the remnants of the ancient reef of Windjana Gorge, into my home, into my kitchen.

Nets, expert treatment, acceptance. I choose the middle one.

I'll help you find a specialist. Don't worry about the cost.

I look around at this kitchen that is in the middle our house in the middle of the vast outback. There is a jar of rich, golden ghee. A box of different coloured spices. Packets of black cumin seeds, mustard seeds, bay leaves, cinnamon sticks and cardamom pods. Recipe notes streaked with turmeric. A sweet husband cutting up salmon for today's coconut fish curry. And me with a hand over my womb, cradling the miracle blossoming inside. All the ingredients that make this home a home, this kitchen a kitchen, a piece of ammu's kitchen.

And when Rayyan's term here is over, I'll come back to you. I'll cook for you all the dishes you like. I'll show you what I could make with the pieces of your kitchen.