

Make Us Proud:
The Meek, The Bold, And The Undefined

Cynthia Thomas

“Make Us Proud” was my father’s statement as we left our bustling, colorful home in India. This house was my home, it was my sanctuary, this is where everything began and this is all I know. My appachan (grandfather) and my ammachi (grandmother) played and laughed with me until I couldn’t breathe, it’s still one of the best memories I have. My little cousins and I would play on our carrom boards, a huge game board with different colored checkers sprawled all across it, with everyone trying to get in each other's goals and boast their winnings. We used to dress up in our little lehengas and have make-believe weddings. My aunts and uncles hosted grand, beautiful parties, and we all felt whole and connected. The neighborhood kids always played badminton and had water fights with us. The chai man across the street always greeted us lovingly and ensured we were okay. An oasis of tall jackfruit trees and lush green meadows surrounded us. “This is to ensure your future” was the last thing I heard when we left my home.

I have warm brown skin, that my ammachi would always embrace and say was the color of deep amber, almost like rich honey. Coming here, the stares were immediate, as if I was an alien or had a tail on my back. I was the only “me” I saw. I was the only person with brown skin around. That feeling of being a shadow in a crowd of people is something you don’t forget when all you ask for is respect for who you are. My silence was deafening, and my presence was almost non-existent if it wasn’t for the name tag on my desk. “Go back to your country” was a phrase that was often said to me. People would ask if I ate cow or pig, if I prayed to an elephant, why I have such a weird accent, or If I knew Osama Bin Laden. People placed bets on whether I was Hindu or Muslim and

then placed stereotypes about me on me, when they never spoke a single word to me. I was raised as a Christian, but it doesn't matter, they stuck to what they assumed and these rumors were simply unbearable. Does seeing a brown person automatically scream "I'm Hindu!" or "I'm Muslim!" to people? How does my skin tell you who I am? I realized my skin was the only thing I was here. It wasn't my brains, it wasn't my hobbies, it wasn't what type of music I liked or who I was whatsoever, they saw brown and that's all they needed to know. The weird stares became laughs, then shoves, kicks, and eventually bruises. My parents said, "It's just a phase, just keep pushing through. Don't care about them, you have a future ahead of you that you need to focus on.". I was a voice in the wilderness, no echo, no callback, just the sprawling wilderness.

Days turned into weeks, months, and years of feeling confined in my skin. My ammach's embrace seems so far away now, I try to find her warmth but it feels cold here. Is my skin as beautiful as she said it was? Her words seem like a far-off echo. "I want the strength to make a difference" is all I could think of. I wanted the power to defend myself without scars and bruises piercing my brown skin, to be able to speak without being slapped for my truth, to be able to fly without my wings getting clipped by my persecutors. I used to stay up and watch late-night cop shows, they always seemed to have such a strong presence of authority. In my eyes, having this title meant having a sense of power. I thought maybe if I was a cop, I'd be strong enough to make an actual difference out there. Maybe then it would be worth my parent's struggles that we moved here for a better life.

I have the honor and praise that this badge holds now, but this

doesn't seem like how it was on TV. I have this guilt that comes in waves. Guilt toward my community, my country, and my people. I have the authority, I have the respect I wanted, but what makes me so different from them? "You're one of the good ones" was a term a lot of my coworkers used to joke about. In my department, we had a few other brown-skinned people like me as well, but I always seemed to have a different perspective on things from them. When situations came up where a person who looked just like us was apprehended, they seemed to lack sympathy toward them. As if they weren't a person, just another statistic or quota to fulfill. It was as if they were turning this motive to protect into a discreet abuse of power. I saw my people, but I didn't feel like I was with my people. How is it that I'm working with people who look like me, but we have polar opposite mindsets on what justice, equality, and rights are? Does this uniform mask my heritage? Does it strip me of who I am as a person?

"You're not one of us" was something that pierced my ears one day on a run. I see myself in the people we take in. It's looking into a child's eyes every day and seeing just how much hope and pain they carry simultaneously. These are people who just wanted power, who just wanted safety. Who just wanted a figure to understand their needs, to protect their families, children, and elderly. Yet, we discriminate and use force against our blood just to prove a quota. To continuously be ignorant and blind to the voices of minorities, yet attentive towards the wealthy.

I am becoming the oppressor that always oppressed me. The overuse of excessive force as well as obvious abuses of power and authority, makes me no different. These minuscule tasks make

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them uncomfortable, my people uncomfortable. Seeing the ones I'm supposed to protect view me as the enemy leaves me feeling gutted.

The only difference between us is the badge I hold. How did I go from wanting justice to persecuting my people? I came here for a better life. For a chance to strive for change, and to make an impact with my presence. What kind of impact would it have if all my presence does is incite fear? Is that really the change we need, more fear? Is this what the dream was? To make my people fear me? To not be seen as a person of color but just as another racist in a uniform? All of these trials and tribulations just to “Make Us Proud”.