



Footsteps

A NOVEL

Book Three in If I Should Speak trilogy

Special Edition

Umm Zakiyyah



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AL-WALAA
PUBLICATIONS

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By Umm Zakiyyah

Book Three in *If I Should Speak* trilogy

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All characters and events in this book are fictional.

Any resemblance to real persons or incidents is coincidental.



Preface to Special Edition

“If you had walked in my shoes, you’d feel this pain in my feet. And your legs too would be aching. So don’t say what you would do if you were me. Because if you were me, you’d be me; and you’d do nothing different, or better even. For no one can overcome what is written for them.”

—from the journal of Umm Zakiyyah



Dear reader,

As you may know, *Footsteps* focuses on the marital challenges of Sarah and Ismael, the parents of Aminah and Sulayman, as their daughter embarks upon marriage and their son has found his mate. Intertwined into their challenges is the prospect of polygyny—plural marriage—which is one of the most controversial topics about marriage in Islam. However, at the time that I wrote *Footsteps*, I didn’t think of plural marriage as controversial so much as I thought of it as challenging and difficult for those tested with the circumstance. So I wanted to use the fictional story of Sarah and Ismael as a means to humanize the topic in a context that neither glorified nor vilified any perspective.

At the time, I myself was a first wife with no intimate experience with plural marriage. But I was blessed to speak to many women who chose polygyny for themselves — amongst both first and second wives — who were gracious enough to open up their hearts and lives to me.

Nevertheless, I pray that the story *Footsteps* carries for you a meaning far beyond anyone’s personal marriage choices. To me, this book is the story of human souls trying to find their way through this confusing world. In my mind, this struggle reflects all of our stories, irrespective of our marriage challenges and decisions.

Sincerely,

Umm Zakiyyah





Dedication

For the wives.

May you enter Paradise by any door you choose.



Prologue

There are years, I've been told, that one simply skips when reflecting on memories of a long marriage together. For me, 1997 was one of those years. Although my preparations for the second weekend in May had preoccupied me, as could be expected, from life itself. Sulayman had just completed his second year of medical school, and although the weekend celebration had nothing to do with this accomplishment, I was proud of my son. It wasn't that I wasn't proud of his wife. How couldn't I be? She would be the first in her family to graduate from college. That was no small achievement. The party was really for her, for them. June eighth would mark their first anniversary, and what better way to commemorate both milestones than to have two celebrations in one?

Sulayman kept reminding me that they weren't celebrating their anniversary. They were simply having the *walimah* they never had. And throwing in an accolade for Tamika during the wedding party was just a bonus, added more to increase the chances of her family traveling to Atlanta for the event than to celebrate the achievement itself. Either way, the weekend was a momentous one, and if it hadn't been for Kate's emotional, not to mention financial, support, I don't know how I would have made it through the eight months it took to prepare. I had no time to focus on myself, let alone my husband and daughter.

My sister and I had our hands full, and that we were not in the same city didn't help any, but I can't complain. If nothing else, the *walimah* preparations brought us closer in a way we hadn't been since I accepted Islam. In retrospect, I do recall Ismael and Aminah spending a lot of time together during those months, or if not together, at least apart from me, so I should have been prepared. But I was too distracted. Besides, how do you prepare for your life to fall apart?

In all honesty, even if I hadn't been distracted, I would've seen nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to warn me that life as I knew it, however imperfect it already was, was on weakening, aching legs, and that I had little power to fortify it. For I had something more precious to tend to.

Part

I



“I looked at all friends and did not find a better friend than safeguarding the tongue. I thought of all garments, but did not find a better garment than piety. I thought of all types of wealth, but did not find better wealth than contentment in little. I thought of all types of sustenance, but did not find a better sustenance than patience.”

—Umar Ibn Al-Khattab



“Go with this life behind you, and go with the next life in front of you. Each life has its children, so be from the children of the Hereafter and be not from the children of this world. Today are deeds without reckoning and tomorrow is reckoning without deeds.”

—Ali bin Abi Talib



One

Sarah pulled another towel from the hamper and folded it, turning her back to her husband until she faced the window that overlooked their backyard. The sky was a dusty blue and the sun a dying glow that even in its dimness illuminated the expanse of grass in need of mowing. Frustrated that Ismael hadn't done it, she averted her gaze and focused her attention on the growing piles of neatly folded towels stacked on the futon before her. Had it been any other time, someone else would have been responsible for the yard. But just six weeks before, in the middle of the most hectic phase of her and Kate's planning for the *walimah*, her husband had suggested they save money by caring for the yard themselves. Of course, Ismael promised he'd be responsible, just as he'd promised his help during the wedding party planning.

"I really don't feel like talking about this right now," Sarah said.

"I don't either, sweetheart, but I think we should tell the family *something*."

"Then tell them no. She's not ready for marriage." She heard her husband laugh from where he sat behind her on the family room floor matching socks from a pile of laundry between them. This only irritated Sarah more, but she refused to give him the pleasure. He was trying to irritate her. He often said she was cute when she was upset and found it funny when he got to her.

"She's twenty years old, Sarah," Ismael said. "She's ready for marriage."

"Age doesn't equal readiness."

He sighed, and Sarah knew he'd paused his folding and was staring at her back. "You have to let go sometime."

"This isn't about me." She shook out a towel and quickly folded it before picking up another.

"This certainly isn't about Aminah. She was ready years ago."

She turned slightly and narrowed her eyes as she met his gaze. "Just because she *wanted* to marry someone at sixteen doesn't make her ready. She was a baby."

"Then what does?" He shook the black sock pair that he held in his hand and laid it next to the others, allowing him to avoid his wife's gaze momentarily.

"I'm her mother. That should be good enough."

"If this were Abdur-Rahman proposing—"

“This isn’t Abdur-Rahman, and our answer is no.” She abruptly pulled a T-shirt from the laundry basket and resumed folding with her back to her husband, but her mind was not on her chores.

“Our?”

“Yes, *our*.”

“Well, they’re having a meeting next Saturday.”

Halting her folding, Sarah slowly turned around and glared at Ismael. “This is not the time for a meeting. My sister will be here first thing in the morning, and Tamika’s family should be here tomorrow night.”

“That’s why I scheduled it for next weekend.”

“Where?” She could hear the exhaustion in her voice as if groping for reprieve, knowing she’d find none.

“Here.”

“Here?” She mentally scolded herself for raising her voice.

“Where else would we have it?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Sarah sat on the edge of the futon. She began rummaging through the socks and undergarments that remained in the laundry basket, but her mind was far from focusing on arranging them according to color. She really didn’t have the energy to argue with her husband. These past eight months had been exhausting, and she was looking forward to it all being over. She never imagined that Sulayman and Tamika’s wedding party would take so much from her.

She knew it wasn’t her husband’s fault that the planning had become more than she could bear. But that didn’t change the fact that it was inconsiderate of him to agree to meet with the family of the young man interested in marrying Aminah, and schedule it just one week after the *walimah*. Couldn’t he have waited a month? At least then she would have had time to catch her breath and remind herself that she had had a life before the weekend of May tenth.

“You’re doing too much,” Ismael said.

Sarah pulled a green undershirt from the basket and let it fall on the floor before she found the matching short pants and dropped it on the shirt to create a pile.

“I’m glad you noticed.”

“Look, Sarah, I’m sorry if this is bad timing, but—”

“It’s not just bad timing, Ismael, it’s selfish. You didn’t even ask me if next weekend was good.”

“If it was up to me, I’d cancel it completely.”

“Then cancel it.”

“I can’t. Aminah would be heartbroken.”

Sarah started to laugh, but it came out as a cough, making her sarcasm appear crueler than she intended. “Heartbroken? You make it sound like she’s losing the love of her life. She doesn’t even know this brother.”

“She knows of him.”

“Like that means anything.”

“Sarah, that means more than we’ll ever understand. It’s all she can go on.”

Sarah sighed and rubbed her forehead with her hand. She knew what her husband meant, but she didn’t want to think about her own life right then. They were talking about their daughter. They couldn’t be blamed for how they themselves had come to marry. They weren’t Muslim when they met. How were they supposed to know that setting limits was more valuable than testing, or crossing them? Besides, they didn’t have the luxury of parental support had they even known, or cared, that there was no way to really get to know someone before marriage. Marriage was marriage. And in the cruel irony of life, marriage was its own teacher. There was really little one could do to prepare for the union. Except to have faith. And they hadn’t even had that.

“Where’d you say this family’s from? India?”

“Pakistan.”

Sarah nodded, trying to appear as if she were unperturbed. “We know nothing about that country.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Of course we have to. If we don’t, we might as well just count down till her divorce.”

Ismael sighed. “I know there will be cultural differences, sweetheart. I thought about all that.”

“Cultural differences? You say that as if we’re talking about an international buffet. This isn’t an exotic dinner, Ismael. This is our life, our daughter’s life. Marriage is too serious to open our arms to any Joe who proposes.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“Maybe I am. And maybe you should be overreacting too. Do you really think she can handle someone who expects her to be in the house all day, serving him hand and foot?”

Ismael laughed. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit, uh,” he searched for a word, “stereotypical?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know just as well as I do that that’s what the women from those countries are expected to do.”

“Aminah’s not from *those countries*. She’s American.”

“That’s exactly my point.” Sarah shook her head. “Those marriages don’t work, Ismael. How many cross-cultural marriages do you know of that even lasted to their tenth anniversary?”

Ismael was silent as he smoothed the wrinkles from a pair of socks he was holding, allowing his gaze to fall there momentarily. “Ours.”

Sarah opened her mouth to respond but found no words. She reached into the basket but was able to only half-heartedly toss clothes

to and fro, the motion slowed as his words permeated her. Inadvertently, her gaze fell, and she studied the whiteness of her hand against the dark fabrics and the pale peach of her skin against the white. Loosened strands of blond hair fell in front of her face, and she tucked them behind her ear, letting her finger trace the soft of her ear with the motion, buying time, time she didn't know she needed.

She couldn't look at him. She didn't have to. Even if she closed her eyes, she could see his skin, a light brown the color of milk with a touch of coffee, and his emerald eyes that humbled themselves to reflect the color of his clothes or mood, which ever was lighter.

She often forgot. Then again, how could she be expected to remember? Twenty-six years of marriage did that to a person. Through their marriage, two lives had become one, and no longer was Sarah "White" and Ismael "Black," biracial. They were human. Two humans who loved each other. In their home, that was all that mattered, was all that could matter. With the demands of life, they weren't capable of much else. Only when they left home were they reminded that others perceived them differently. And how awkward it was to be perceived as odd when they were so much alike, so attached, and in need of one another. But even that, the stares and racist judgments, had stopped once Sarah wore Islamic garb. And then, she and her husband were as they saw themselves at home, Muslims, though strangers, outcasts, in their own world. And then the stares changed to disgust.

"With us, it was different." Even as she said it, she knew it was a weak point. But she needed to say something, to protest somehow.

"You know that's not true."

"It is," she said, beginning to convince herself. "We're both American. This boy is from another continent. There, you're not only battling different races. You're battling ways of life."

"We met in the 1960's, Sarah. In the South. If anyone is battling ways of life, it's us."

"Still, we came from the same country."

"But different worlds."

Sarah looked at the clock that hung on the wall. She didn't want to have this conversation. "You should go pray."

Instinctively, Ismael glanced at the clock too. He nodded and stood, running his hands over his slacks to remove the wrinkles.

"Come with me."

Sarah creased her forehead and stared at him. "Come with you?"

"Yeah. We can pray together in the *masjid* then go out to eat."

"I have too much to do."

"Tamika's family won't be here till late tomorrow night, at the earliest, since they're driving. And Kate's flight isn't coming in tonight. We have time."

"You have time. I don't." She gestured her hands to the laundry that was now taking up the futon, couch, and most of the floor.

"I miss you."

Sarah heard her husband's voice in all its gentleness and knew he was apologizing. But she wasn't in the mood for romantic make-ups. It would have been better if he hadn't given her reason to be upset, through making the offensive comment or agreeing to the meeting about Aminah. He knew this was a major weekend for them. Even her mother and brother were planning to come. And she hadn't seen her mother since she walked out during Sulayman's graduation lunch last year. And Justin, she hadn't seen him since she surprised him with a visit seven years before. And she would be meeting Tamika's family for the first time. This had been the most dreaded and anticipated event for her. The last thing she needed was a candlelight dinner. She just needed a break, and next weekend would have been her first opportunity for it.

"If you miss me, why did you give up our time together for some silly meeting? We could've spent time together next weekend."

"We still can."

She shook her head as she stood, turning to face the futon again to study her stacks of towels. She glanced at the basket and spotted a towel she hadn't seen. "Not anymore. I can't think straight when I know we're having guests, especially ones I didn't know we invited."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry." She heard his voice growing closer. Anticipating an embrace, she retrieved the towel from the hamper to discourage him.

"I just didn't want to burden you with anything else."

She raised her eyebrows and suppressed the frustration she felt rebuilding in her chest. She stiffened as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. "If you didn't want to burden me, you wouldn't agree to something like this without telling me."

"I know." Ismael's voice was soft and close as he touched his cheek against hers. "You had so much on your mind, I didn't think you'd want to arrange a time for them to meet."

In spite of herself, Sarah relaxed her shoulders and softened under his embrace. "But I deserve to know if my daughter's being given away in marriage."

She felt her husband's laughter against her back before it reached her ears. "No one's giving Aminah away. It's just a meeting, with Aminah, the brother, and myself."

"I thought you said the family was coming."

"No," he said, brushing her cheek with a kiss. "I said we have to tell the family something. They won't be at the meeting."

Sarah's gaze fell to the towel she still held in her hands. She attempted to fold it, but she couldn't move beneath her husband's arms.

She let the towel dangle from her hands as she realized that the meeting would not require elaborate preparations.

“I’ll starve him,” Ismael joked. “You won’t have to prepare any food. It’s a good start, see how he reacts under pressure.”

Sarah laughed in spite of herself. Her husband released her, and she turned to face him, still holding the towel that she now proceeded to fold.

“You need a break,” he said, gently lifting her chin to meet his gaze.

She nodded, looking at him for only a moment. “Yes, I do. But not tonight.”

“Especially tonight.”

“I have too much to do.”

“You’ve done more than enough already.”

She shook her head, but under her husband’s pleading gaze, a smile tugged at a corner of her mouth. “If only that were true.”

“You won’t enjoy any of it if you don’t relax.”

“Look at this place. How can I dine out with my house in shambles?”

“Sarah, the house is spotless. I’m sure the neighbors can smell the Pinesol and Pledge right now, if they can’t taste it in their food.”

She grinned and turned slightly to place the towel on a pile.

“All we have to do is put these clothes away,” her husband said.

“You say that like we’re not buried in them.”

“It’s time for *Maghrib*. Let’s pray, eat, and we’ll be back in time to finish this before eleven, *inshaAllaah*.”

“I wanted to vacuum the—”

“You vacuumed this morning.”

“But I should vacuum again.”

“Then do it in the morning.”

“I’ll be too tired then.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

She started to laugh. “You always say that. You know you don’t have time. You have to work in the morning.”

“Sarah,” Ismael said, gazing at her until their eyes met, “I’ll do it, *inshaAllaah*. In fact, I’ll put the rest of the clothes away. And I’ll stay up all night if I need to.”

Sarah wanted to tell him no, but she didn’t have the strength. She was too tired, and stressed.

“Go upstairs, shower, and pick out your nicest dress.”

“*Jilbaab*, you mean,” she said with a grin.

“No,” he said, taking her hands into his, “that would go over the nice dress.”

He released her hands, and she couldn’t keep from smiling as she felt him grinning and following her with his eyes as she went upstairs.



Tamika ran a hand over the packaging tape to smooth it against the roughness of the used cardboard box that sat on the desk next to her bed. She felt the tape gather beneath her palm in stubborn resistance to her efforts to prevent air pockets. She placed her hands on her hips and examined the top flaps of the box. Shrugging, she decided the package could survive unopened the forty minutes it would take Sulayman to drive from Streamsdale to Atlanta tomorrow night.

She glanced around the dorm room that appeared desolate now that she had finished packing her clothes and books. The few frames that she had brought herself to hang on the wall were now stacked on top of the suitcase she was using to put away the clothes she kept in the room. She knelt slightly as she reached for the top frame. She ran a finger along the crevices of the carved wood design as she read the quote that had been her reminder during her last year at Streamsdale. *I have never regretted anything as much as my regret over a day on which the sun sets and my life span decreases while my good deeds have not increased.*

She often stared at it wondering what a righteous man like Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud could have been thinking when he said it. He had been a companion of the last prophet and messenger of Allah, an honor in itself. He had been praised by Prophet Muhammad for his piety and striving for the Hereafter. What regrets could he possibly have had as the sun declined in the sky?

Tamika returned the frame to its place and glanced toward the window that seemed to have been an afterthought in interior design. In the small confines of the room, it seemed larger than the desk and bed, and placed there more for necessity than desire. It overlooked the foot of her bed like an intent watchman. Permanent, insistent, and still. She could access what was beyond only by perching herself in a huddle on the end of her bed and peering out. The only floor space below it was made too narrow by the protruding flat belly of the peeling wood dresser secured to the wall. The bed itself was immobile, not because it was stationary, but because there was really nowhere to move it. Its side was already pressed against the left wall, covering from view the only outlet in the room. Moved to the right, it would impede access to the dresser drawers and cabinets under the mirror and sink. The desk sat near its head and prevented the door from opening wide.

When she first saw the room, she wondered why the headboard was opposite the window and not under it. After her first night there, she understood the necessity of the position. Lying in bed, one was able to have the only comfortable view of outside, and it fostered the illusion of

capaciousness that the cramped room could not offer. Ever since her sophomore year, Tamika had dreamed of having a single. She had envied her then best friend Makisha for having the luxury of no roommate, and Tamika too wanted to relish in the solace of her own space. Now that she had it, she felt suffocated in her solitude and had to fight the heaviness she felt in her heart each Sunday night when Sulayman drove her back to Streamdale and walked her down the corridor to her room. Like one imprisoned, Tamika felt her husband was walking her to her cell, and she could only count the days until her sentence would be over. Then she could return home and once again enjoy the comfort of the home they shared.

Of course, she didn't want to live in the dorm now that she was married. But she and Sulayman agreed it was best for her to at least have a room to go to between classes or at night if he was unable to pick her up until late. Gradually, the room became less an escape than a solitary confinement when Sulayman's late nights at school became later and later, often approaching or reaching beyond midnight. It was too painful for him, he said, to pick her up from school and have to turn his attention to studies instead of her, so he completed all his work before making the drive. It was Tamika who suggested she come home only on weekends. She saw the physical and emotional strain it was for him to drive the distance late at night only to turn back around just after dawn to return her to school and then drive the forty minutes back to Atlanta to make it on time to his first class.

It was emotionally draining for Tamika too. It was torturous for her to wake up next to her husband only to be greeted with the reminder that, because of the drive, she could not linger in bed. There were times that she and Sulayman resisted, shutting their eyes and minds to the glowing red digits that stared at them impatiently, urging them to start the drive. Instead they held each other and relished the sweetness of the comfort they drew from each other's presence. And for a brief moment, the world disappeared and they had the one thing they cherished most—each other. But the sound of a phone, the falling of a book, or even an escaped sneeze, the slightest disruption reminded them of Sulayman's eight o'clock class and Tamika's distant campus that demanded she return to complete her final year.

Tamika walked over to the window and stood wedged between the dresser and bed to study the sky. Outside was a darkening blue and traces of the dying orange sun setting on the opposite side of the building. She remained there a moment more, taking in the way the trees created a silhouette, and knowing that somewhere far beyond was home.

A furtive grin creased one side of her mouth as she walked over to the sink. Already she felt ecstatic as she imagined how her life would be after this weekend. She and Sulayman could finally live together like a real

married couple, and they had an entire three months off from school before Sulayman had to return to medical school for the fall of his third year. The grin spread until she stifled laughter as she imagined the freedom she would enjoy after graduation. The day after tomorrow she would don the notorious cap and gown and walk across the stage holding a vinyl covered piece of paper enclosing her Bachelor of Arts in Religion, which had cost her four years of life and dues it would take a lifetime to account for. Undoubtedly, there were moments she rather not remember, but she held on to them because without them she would overlook the most harrowing and rewarding journey of her life.

Tamika turned the bulky plastic knobs until the faucet released a rush of water that beat against the metal sink with the persistence of one throbbing for release. The sudden noise was both awkward and reassuring in the stillness of the room and Tamika held both palms under the stream until the cool water calmed to tepidity. She adjusted the knobs until the water was a gentle stream and gave the appearance of a soft icicle. She filled her left hand with water and poured it over the right before rubbing the moisture over the front and back of her hand. She slipped the left hand fingers between the crevices of the right to complete this first step of ablution in preparation for *Maghrib*. She cupped her right hand to fill it and do for the left what it had done for the right.

There were moments like this when she loved *wudhoo'*. When she first became Muslim, it had been a task learning the steps from Sulayman's sister Aminah, who had been her roommate at the time. Although the ritual of cleansing oneself for prayer was intriguing, it had been confusing to Tamika, who as a Christian had prayed only before meals, when she wanted something badly enough, or on Sunday during church. And she certainly hadn't prefaced the recited words with any ritual cleansing. But even as a new Muslim it was refreshing to feel the water being generously massaged on her hands, face, and arms. Though including her feet in the ritual felt a bit awkward at first, especially when she performed ablution at a sink, it too became refreshing over time.

Prayer was her escape then, and at moments when she was not distracted by the minute hand on her watch, it remained her escape even now, two years after she converted to Islam. Sister Sarah, her mother-in-law, often joked that Tamika and Sulayman would be celebrating their first anniversary on Saturday night, the evening of Tamika's graduation. Sulayman said it was the *walimah* they hadn't had after their small, private wedding ceremony held in his home last June. And Tamika's family imagined they were coming to a double celebration, of Tamika's marriage and her being the first in their family to graduate from college. But to Tamika it was none of these, though their significance added to the magnitude of the momentous occasion.

For Tamika, it was a celebration of her Islam. And an announcement and invitation for her family to submit to the religion their Creator had enjoined on humans since Adam and his wife grazed the earth. Of course, there would be no explicit invitation or teaching at the event, but Tamika's prayer was that Allah would open their hearts to His religion on Saturday even if only through witnessing the beauty of Muslims gathered in one place. And witnessing Tamika among them.

With the moistened palm of her hand, Tamika completed her *wud-hoo'* by wiping over the tops of the thin socks she often wore in her dorm room to keep from soiling her feet against the bare tiled floor. Besides, the air conditioning in the dormitory was set at a lower temperature than usual, and her feet would have been freezing in the carpet-less room if she hadn't covered them. Given that the sink was higher than most sinks, most likely because of the cabinet space beneath them, she was grateful that she didn't have to remove her socks for *wudhoo'*, having put them on after showering and performing ablution that morning.

She turned off the water and immediately the room grew quiet. Tamika sighed as she slid open a closet door and removed the two-piece white prayer garment Sulayman had bought for her at the *masjid* near his parents' home. Sliding the closet door closed, Tamika was able to briefly distract herself from her thoughts with the noise. She felt the heaviness growing inside, and her efforts to fight it made her chest knot in longing for her husband. She fought the urge to call him just to hear his voice right then. She needed to pray, and there was no way she could hang up the phone and pray *Maghrib* before its time expired after hearing him on the other line. Even as she adjusted the waist-length *khi-maar* on her head and pulled the elastic-band skirt over her jeans, she knew that even her patience to wait until after prayer was a mental game she was playing with herself. She shouldn't call him even after she prayed. She had finished her last exam this morning, but Sulayman's last exam wasn't until tomorrow afternoon. And he needed the time to study. She had promised herself, though not him, to wait for him to call, as he always did, when he was done. Calling her was always the first thing he did when he closed his books for the night. On Fridays, he wouldn't waste time with a phone call. He would jump into his car and drive to Streamdale University to pick up his wife, who was always waiting with orchestrated patience for his knock at the door. She would not disturb him tonight. Besides, tomorrow evening would be her last Friday spent on campus, and Sulayman would pick her up for the final time. She couldn't wait. It felt like years until tomorrow.

After prayer Tamika sat in acceptance of her predicament. It wasn't bad really. This would be the last night she would sleep alone. But how cold and desolate the bed would feel compared to the one she shared with Sulayman. Tamika began to recite the Qur'an that was customary

for the Prophet to recite after prayer. She raised her voice to drown out her thoughts and mollify the yearning she felt for her husband. The miraculous words soothed her ears and calmed her heart, ensuring her that Allah would give her more than she imagined if she could just be patient through tonight.

Reciting God's words inspired relief and reflection. She was Muslim, a believer. And the affair of the believer was always good, she reminded herself. In times of ease, she was grateful. In times of hardship, she was patient. Immediately, she felt ashamed. She should be grateful. This trial was miniscule compared to what others faced around the world. And what was she upset about anyway? It was a blessing in itself that she had a husband, and not just any husband. Sulayman. That should be enough. But how could she blame herself for wanting to be near him right then? Oh God, she missed him so much. Her relief from the confines of this year was almost palpable right then as she thought of tomorrow night.

Continuing to recite from the Qur'an, she shut her eyes momentarily as she recalled the promises she had made to herself, and Allah, this year. If she could just get through this year of studying and writing about religions that she couldn't hope to comprehend, she would give the rest of her time to her own. Hugging her knees, she opened her eyes and stared at the aged wood of the door. It all felt so pointless, the weekly chapter readings, mid-term and term papers, exams, discussions, and philosophical debates during class. If it wasn't so time-consuming and overbearing, she would have laughed at the ridiculousness of it.

Her professors reigned in the classroom with an arrogant confidence that both irritated and depressed her. She imagined the sight of her Islamic dress was both repulsive and intimidating to them. The *khimaar* on her head that revealed only her face. The loose *abiya*, which she imagined appeared to them as it did to Tamika herself when she had first seen it on Aminah, as an oversized dress in need of tailoring. To them she wore the costume of the oppressed from distant lands and was the poster child of backwardness in a forward thinking world. To her, their faces bore the costume of the ignorant, and they were poster children for gross close-mindedness in an open-minded, ever changing world. Had she been Sulayman or Aminah, she would have vocalized her observation during class, but she spoke little and cursed herself for saying too much. She was best at questions because they were short, and protected her from the awkward awareness she felt at the sound of her voice. And that's how she won small battles throughout the year, although she wasn't naïve enough to imagine she had won them all.

She had imagined her last year of school would be the easiest, if for no other reason than it was her last. But the closure of it all did not ease the stress school provoked but stoked it. That she had to push through, *had* to make it, made it all the more suffocating, and she longed for

reprieve. It would be senseless to stop running when she was inches from the finish line, and yet that made it all the more difficult to reach it.

The professors in all their towering glory and pedagogic pride depressed her as they threw out historical facts and “groundbreaking” research statistics as if this knowledge had earned them the solitary key to the treasures of the earth. The teachers depressed her because she knew them too well, perhaps more than they knew themselves. And she felt ashamed, guilty because she should have said something, anything to let them know that they did in fact hold that solitary key, buried somewhere deep in their souls. If only they could uncover it.

Tamika bit her lower lip as she recalled moments she should have spoken but did not. She held onto the moments when she did speak, when she had felt in the lecture hall itself the sweltering revelation of the profound. At such moments, even the haughty professor was silenced, even humbled, if only for a moment. But in the roaring beast of pride he, or she, would reclaim the class with a vengeance so inappropriate that Tamika would know then, for sure, she had won.

Still, it all felt like a waste. On spare moments, or at least moments she made spare, she hungrily read the pages of an Islamic book from home, highlighting inspirational passages or poignant explanations she could not have thought of on her own. Often she found that she had highlighted an entire page. But most days her hunger for time to herself, her life, and soul were met with stacks of texts to read and lengthy papers to write. She would pause from her reading or writing in an effort to gather her thoughts only to be met with the stinging quote of Abdullah Ibn Mas’ud that hung as a weighty reminder on her wall. It was at such moments that she wondered what good deeds she had gained at the setting of the sun. And what was she gaining with such a sacrifice of moments from her life span that would only continue to decrease? It had never been her dream to go to college. Singing had been her love. Although she had chosen Islam over it, nothing had erased her disdain for the scripted pantomime required for a university degree. As a student, Tamika spoke, but used no words. At least not ones others could hear. She moved about, but only on a stage with other actors who filled a similar role. And when the curtain closed, and reopened to real life, what would the students do? Wait for the applause of an audience that would then be a lone reflection of one’s self?

A knock at the door brought Tamika to her feet and since she was already covered in the prayer garment, she didn’t bother to speak through the wood. Exhausted from knowledge of what was behind her, and dread of what was before her until her release from the room tomorrow night, she sighed and opened the door. In that brief moment she prepared the rehearsed smile she would wear to greet whatever classmate or friend was coming to visit or say goodbye.

Tamika brought a hand to her mouth in surprise in the moment it took her to realize who it was. A smile spread so broadly on her face that she couldn't have hidden the sincere pleasure and child-like joy she felt upon seeing her husband opposite her when he was supposed to be home. Immediately, she threw her arms around him, forgetting, and unable to care, that they were in public view. The fullness of his embrace told her he hadn't missed her any less. As she nestled against him, she inhaled the sweet scented musk that had come to define him. He was actually here. It felt like years since they had been this close.

"*As-salaamu'alaikum.*" Tamika could feel the guttural vibrations of his greeting from where she held her face against him and savored the sound of his deep voice.

"*Wa'alaiku-mus-salaam,*" she said more to the collar of his shirt than to him.

They released each other to allow him to enter, and he knelt to retrieve two full plastic grocery bags that he apparently had set on the floor before knocking. Raising her eyebrows, she grinned.

"What's this?"

"A surprise."

She could not contain herself after she closed the door and locked it. She immediately knelt next to the bags and peered in, smiling broadly. "Dinner."

He nodded. "But we won't eat it here."

Creasing her forehead, she looked at him.

"You're coming home early. I miss you."

Shy from the flattery, she returned her gaze to the bag. "But it'll be cold."

He shrugged. "I thought of that. But I miss the Chinese restaurant down the street from here, so I didn't want to miss the chance to eat from it one last time."

Tamika felt him staring at her, and she met his gaze with a grin. "What?"

"You're beautiful, *barakAllaahufeeek.*"

She shook her head as she stood. "You got me beat in that camp."

He laughed. "I wish."

She pulled the *khimaar* from her head and stepped out of the skirt before sliding the closet door open and removing an *abiya* and *khimaar* to wear home. "What about my things?"

"I'll load them while you get dressed." He surveyed the room. "Is this everything?"

She nodded. "I didn't bring much."

"Good." He lifted a box and started for the door, still grinning at his wife. Tamika unlocked it and opened it for him, a smirk on her face as she relished the attention.



Aminah rested her hand on the mouse as she brought the miniature arrow on the monitor to the send button and clicked. She didn't want to end the e-mail right then, but she heard her mother coming up the stairs and knew she would be coming into the guest room to tell her that they were going out. Aminah had not heard everything, but she heard enough to know that her parents had been arguing. She felt bad that she was the cause of the tension, but she found it difficult to avoid blaming her mother for being so difficult. What was so wrong with Aminah marrying Zaid? What was she supposed to do? Live with her parents for the rest of her life? It frustrated Aminah even more that her mother wouldn't give up her obsession with Aminah marrying Abdur-Rahman, or Teddy, as his mother called him.

Abdur-Rahman and his father had been Muslim for nearly three years now and his mother for a little over a year. Sarah had met the mother in a furniture store last year while she was shopping for Sulayman's apartment. Aminah still remembered the day her mother had come home, grinning and bursting with pride.

"You won't believe who I met today," she had told Aminah, who had graduated from Streamsdale just days before. Aminah was putting her clothes away after moving back home from the dorm room she had shared with Tamika. Sarah hadn't waited for a response. "Faith Anderson."

Aminah had stared blankly at her mother, pausing from where she held a drawer open, poised to place a folded T-shirt there. "Who?"

"We were in undergrad together. Same sorority."

"Oh." Aminah smiled, happy because her mother was, and laid the T-shirt on top of the others, gently pressing it to make room for others.

"And she's Muslim."

Aminah's eyes widened as she met her mother's. Now that was something. "No."

"Yes." Sarah began pulling clothes from Aminah's luggage and putting them away. "She lives in Dunwoody with her husband and son." She paused and grinned at Aminah. "Who are Muslim too?"

"What?" Aminah couldn't believe it.

"Her husband is a writer and travels a lot. Turns out he took a trip to Morocco three years ago as a part of some research he was doing for a book and took his son with him."

"That's where they became Muslim?"

Sarah shook her head. "Her husband became Muslim in Syria a year later. Then came home to find out his son had accepted Islam on his own while he was gone."

“What about Faith?”

She sighed and sat down on Aminah’s bed, smiling as she held a dress she had placed on a hanger. “She resisted at first. She’s a psychologist specializing in counseling abused women.”

Aminah frowned as she placed another shirt in the drawer, a bit offended that Islam always seemed to be misconstrued as a religion that mistreated women.

“And a self-proclaimed feminist. Once she read enough to learn what Islam was really about, she was fine.”

It would be a month later that Aminah would meet Faith and see Abdur-Rahman for the first time. They had been invited to dinner, and Sarah was a bit apprehensive because she was unsure if they would be expected to sit together and chat. Aminah’s mother also was unsure if the men would try to shake her and Aminah’s hands, and she didn’t want to offend Faith.

Aminah’s first impression of Abdur-Rahman was reflected in her bewilderment when he came into the living room carrying two animal cages, one holding a pair of birds and the other a hamster. He introduced himself as Abdur-Rahman, but during dinner (which, thankfully, ended up being separate from the men) Aminah learned from his mother that his real name was Theodore. He chose the Arabic name that meant servant of the Most Merciful because he liked the meaning and its implication of God’s mercy to all creatures. When he read that it was one of the two names most beloved to the Creator himself, he announced it would be his.

Abdur-Rahman had carried the two cages at his side with his arms out and elbows bent, making it easy for him to lift each cage as he included his pets in any conversation he was having.

“Did you hear that, Freddie? The young madam’s name is Aminah,” he said after holding a similar conversation with Ismael and Sarah. Sulayman hadn’t come, and right then Aminah envied him. “And she looks a bit scared,” he said to the hamster. “Go on, tell her you don’t bite.” He lowered his voice and whispered audibly, “And tell her I don’t either.”

Aminah heard Faith and her mother laugh, and when she looked up, she saw her father suppressing a grin. But she could tell he was as uncomfortable as she with the exchange. Thankfully, Abdur-Rahman didn’t attempt to shake her hand and instead sat on the couch next to her father, setting the cages on either side of him so that Ismael was sitting next to the birds. Abdur-Rahman ran a hand through his dirty-blond hair that hung just below his ears and smiled at no one in particular as he spread his arms on the back of the couch.

His brown eyes were two different hues, one a shade darker than his hair and the other hazel. For some reason, they seemed to fit him, and

Aminah found it difficult not to stare, not only because of his bizarre appearance but because he seemed so at ease and carefree in his peculiarity. She would have thought him oblivious to how he appeared to others, but there was an air of benevolence about him that made her suspect he was neither aware nor oblivious. He was who he was, and that was enough for him. Now with one foot resting with its ankle on a knee, he said, “So what brings you guys to our world?”

Aminah was not surprised to learn that he had skipped two grades and was prevented from skipping more only because of his parents’ concern about his socialization. In the middle of ninth grade, Faith told Sarah over the course of their budding friendship, she pulled Theodore out of school and home-schooled him. He frequently took trips with his father and sometimes read three books in a day throughout the course of his home education. He finished high school at fourteen and undergrad at seventeen, a philosophy major. He delayed his masters so he could travel and finally completed it at twenty-one, this time in political science. He would have gone on to get his PhD, but he was tired of school, he had told his mother, contending he learned more from books, travel, and people. It wasn’t a surprise to his parents when he followed his heart and opened up a pet store that was unique because it was the only one that offered pet entertainment and pampering on call. He even had a pet-sitting segment, which he operated from his office at the back of the store. Though it wasn’t what she envisioned for her son, Faith supported Teddy because it was what he loved.

“So what inspired you to finally accept Islam?” Ismael had asked Abdur-Rahman while they still sat on the couch with the animals.

“There was this prostitute,” Abdur-Rahman said, and Aminah winced. She glanced around the room, pretending to be undisturbed. She couldn’t look at her parents because she knew their eyes would reflect what she felt. “I read how she fed this thirsty dog. And just like that, all her sins were forgiven.”

Oh. Aminah exhaled, having not realized she was holding her breath. She had read the story. It was one of the famous stories told by the Prophet to demonstrate the vastness of Allah’s mercy, and to encourage kind treatment to His creatures.

Aminah closed the window on the computer screen and pulled a book from the stack next to the monitor so she wouldn’t have to explain to her mother what she had been doing. Of course, her father knew. Aminah and Zaid communicated through Ismael’s e-mail account so that he could stay abreast of their correspondence and prevent writing or talking for leisure.

Although Aminah had seen Zaid on occasion, she had never spoken to him, not even on the phone. She learned four months before that he was interested in her after her father told her Zaid had called to express

interest in marriage. Ismael had asked what she knew of him. Taken aback by the brother's interest, she told her father that she only knew that he was the cousin of one of Tamika's friends whose family was helping with the food preparation for the *walimah*.

After talking to her father, Aminah had wanted to call Zahra, Zaid's cousin, but she called Tamika instead. Surprised, Tamika said that Zahra had never mentioned him, and she openly wondered if Zahra knew. A week later Tamika called to tell Aminah that Zahra's entire family knew but was discouraging him because there was a distant cousin of his he was expected to marry.

"We're going out," Sarah said, and Aminah turned to see her mother peering through the door. "You need anything?"

Aminah shook her head. "I'm fine."

"We'll be back late, *inshaAllaah*." Sarah started to close the door. "If you don't mind, can you put the rest of the laundry away? It's in the family room."

Sarah was gone before Aminah could respond. Aminah wished she hadn't closed the e-mail window. Now she couldn't access the account. Her father had left Zaid's e-mail open for her so she could reply. But she didn't have the password to access the account herself. There was more she wanted to say in response to his explanation of his idea of establishing an Islamic household.

Aminah waited until she heard her parents leave before drafting the rest of her reply in text format. She saved the draft and planned to read over it after she finished putting away the clothes. She was a bit exhausted from cleaning the bathrooms and walls and helping her mother dust all the rooms, but she knew her mother wanted everything perfect before tomorrow, when guests would begin arriving.



About the Author

Umm Zakiyyah is the bestselling author of more than twenty books, including the novels *If I Should Speak* trilogy, *Muslim Girl*, and *His Other Wife*; and the self-help books *Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You*, *Prejudice Bones in My Body*, and *The Abuse of Forgiveness*. Her novel *His Other Wife* is now a short film.

She writes about the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians and the intercultural, spiritual, and moral struggles of Muslims in America. Her work has earned praise from writers, professors, and filmmakers and has been translated into multiple languages.

Umm Zakiyyah recently founded UZ University, where she teaches online courses to aspiring and struggling writers at **uzuniversity.com**.

To find out more about the author, visit her website at **uzauthor.com** or connect with her online:

Twitter & Instagram: @uzauthor

Facebook: ummzakiyyahpage

YouTube: uzreflections

Books By Umm Zakiyyah

Fiction

If I Should Speak (Book 1 in trilogy)

A Voice (Book 2 in trilogy)

Footsteps (Book 3 in trilogy)

Realities of Submission

Hearts We Lost

The Friendship Promise

Muslim Girl

His Other Wife

UZ Short Story Collection

The Test Paper (a children's book)

Non-Fiction

Pain. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah

*Broken yet Faithful. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah
(Adult Coloring Book)*

Faith. From the Journal of Umm Zakiyyah

*Let's Talk About Sex and Muslim Love: Essays on Intimacy
and Romantic Relationships in Islam*

*Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You: A Daughter of
Rape and Abuse Inspires Healing and Healthy Family*

*And Then I Gave Up: Essays About Faith and Spiritual
Crisis in Islam*

I Almost Left Islam: How I Reclaimed My Faith

*The Abuse of Forgiveness: Manipulation and Harm in the
Name of Emotional Healing*

even if.

souls.

*No One Taught Me the Human Side of Islam: The Muslim
Hippie's Story of Living with Bipolar Disorder*

*Prejudice Bones in My Body: Essays on Muslim Racism,
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