

## Finding East

### SHORT STORY

J.D. JAHANGIR

This island poses no significant problems. In this place, I never have trouble finding east. Have you seen this place -- this New York? Brother, the spires here are like the temples of Chidambaram in southern India, only a little taller. With that East River, you couldn't miss the direction of the Kaaba, that is to say, even if you wanted to. So there is no excuse here. And then the roads--mind it, the citizenry, they call them "streets." Kallol couldn't stop laughing when I said to him -- Baba, show me your 42nd Road. This was back when I first alighted here -- of course I get the joke now -- ho-ho, very funny. Indeed. But so many of them there are, these streets, laid across this city like the lines on your palm. And on top of that, they have that Broadway Street which runs like the lifeline -- top to bottom, like you will live forever around here.

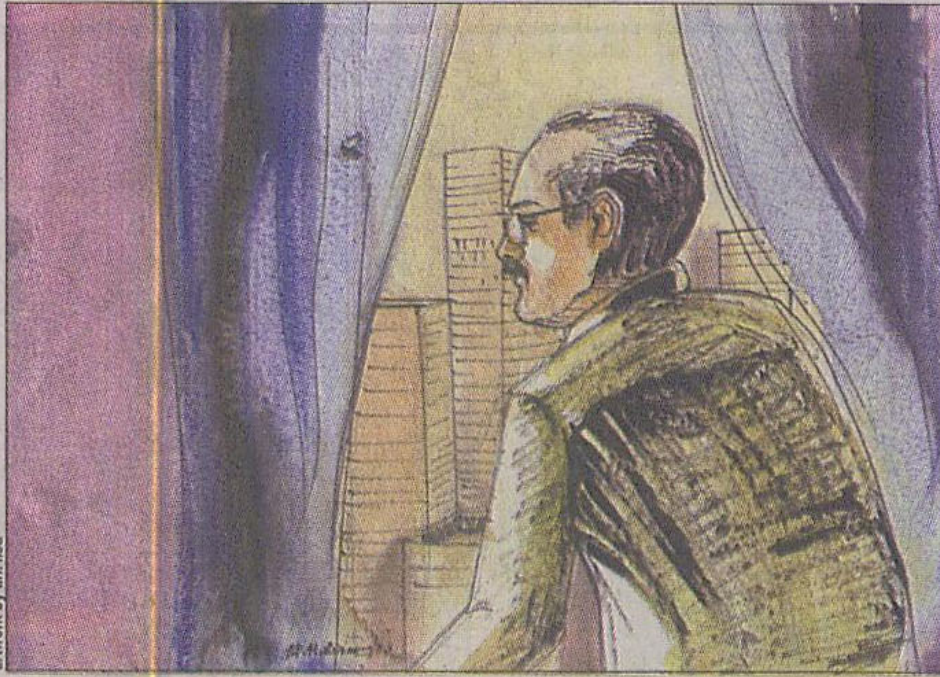
My days all start the same. First that Mrs. Kincaid -- and she is from Trinidad -- I wait for her to scream and shout like she is selling fresh vegetables. I imagine Mr. Kincaid -- a groggy man -- twisting and turning in bed, making mild protests like a schoolboy. Under Mrs. Kincaid's voice I can barely hear the sound of their front door's shutting and the sounds of steps into the long corridor. Walking, walking off to the bus stop for his number 76 for Flushing Meadows. Their whole routine is so thoroughly enjoyable, I admit that my tea often just sits in its cup and gets cold. My own Begum used to shout at me, too, when she was alive.

But after she lay down with the earth -- brother, what could I do but follow my Kallol to this strange world of New York. So I do what I do everyday that I have been here. After Kallol leaves, I wait for the day to begin. And it begins slowly.

When I got up today for the morning prayers, before Kallol got up to go to office-- that filthy newspaper press-- I hoped I would be up first. But he was up again before me; who knows if he even went to bed last night. He was sitting on the sofa, his head in his hands. What a lovely September day, father -- he says to me. I say -- Baba, September is supposed to be green still, not this rust color. Roofs, trees, houses, sky -- your New York makes me feel too old. What I don't tell him is New York makes me know

what it is like to live with your two feet on two boats -- a rent-controlled flat under one foot, and a dead world under another. One time we stood on the balcony and he showed me his office, pointing out the golden planet that sits above the building. Like a little boy he was, very proud, so happy he had become one of them. I told him -- Baba, we sent you here for what? This dirty newspaper business? Daily Planet? You could not have done this back in your own city? With Star News or Daily Ittefaq? I dreamed you would be a king in this place -- maybe a doctor, engineer or even pharmacist. Kallol--I say--relax, Baba, this is America -- land of brave, home of free, surely they can give a little free time? At my remarks, he usually smiles and hands me the newspaper. I read his newspaper every morning. When I first came here, the front pages were still in black-and-white ink -- of course, since that time they have had to print it in color to write about all the blood being shed in distant lands. But that Kallol, he laughs, laughs. He is so busy -- flying off here, flying off there. Their greatest defender, they say. Abba -- he says -- must save world! Must make world go round! he says. I think in my head -- what are you, bloody Charles Atlas? With Planet on your shoulders or what? Take care--I say--take care, those angels on your wide shoulders don't get all crushed up. What will they have to say on the Day of Judgment, eh? What will they say if they are crushed up? What will you do then? How will you plead before Him? With all of this good, the bad, and the American-type business? But he flew off anyway--there is no stopping that boy.

Kallol--a name that means "waves on the water." Even though I know it is not the name he is known by around here. But after we saw the gentle waves on his black hair, my missus said -- Kallol, this is his name, baas! No back chat. Like the crests and curls on his head. Even then we knew we would have to send him away. I said to her -- Begum, good he has that fair skin, easier to assimilate in America -- to conquer his new world, to make a better place us all. Now look at him, goes by such names -- Kent! Brother, what happened to Khan? A proper Shahib, he is! But she watched as we packed him off and watched as he left. Not long after the Begum knocked off too, and my world was finished -- Phatoosh! Gone! Now there is only Mrs. Kincaid for me to listen to from apartment 7C across the hallway. After



Artwork by J.D. Jahangir

the Fajr-prayers in the early morning, I sit on my prayer mat and it feels good to blink at the morning sun and it is not even seven o'clock yet. I put another pot of water to boil. These days, what to say, my regularity needs hot water and honey. I turn the knob and try to watch a little television to see if I can spot Kallol on any of the news shows -- nothing-doing, no flying about today--must not be much things happening today. Must be that people have forgotten about us over here -- must be that the faithful and faithless are coming together to join hands and pray -- I don't know. This television, it gives me such an ache in my backside! I bought it at the duty-free shop at John F. Kennedy Airport when I came here. What passes for fun here I could not tell you. Drunks and destitute men and women. Primitime, they call it. I wish I could hire an electrician to fix it. But at least in the daytime, things are a little quieter, a little more bearable. At night when I sit and wait for Kallol, I cannot watch any television at all. Impossible! It is as though night is when they pull out their Kalashnikovs and sticks and begin the beating of our brains. Dishoom! Dishoom! Of course I knew what America was when we sent our Kallol here; we had done our due study of the place, but that was a different time, and anyway, we

years -- Santa Claus, they call me on the streets, cheeky children -- yes, I am old but I still know how the machine works. That Mr. Kincaid, with his nine Trinidadian grandchildren -- when he finds me in the hallways he pulls me aside, and out comes his fat wallet and with his skinny fingers, he flips through the photos without even looking. I am Kallol's father and I see him for what he is.

I make tea for two hoping that Kallol will stop by. When he is in the area he will occasionally pass by to surprise me. He will walk in through those sliding doors and have a cup of tea with me. I watch television and eat the halvah -- it is the green pistachio halvah -- looks like you know what. It really startles Kallol -- makes him jump! Really puts a crinkle in that dimpled chin of his. But it is his old father's little joke and he will smile when he realizes it is not what he thinks it is. Ha-ho! Very funny! I say -- Listen Baba, just because those two in Kansas never fed you any halvah -- is it any reason to be scared of it? Must be discerning. It is maybe a little late for lesson, but he needs to know about where he is from -- about where he was born. Brother, how much forgetfulness does it take to take your own soil and make poison out of it? How strong do your muscles have to be to lift up your history about like it was a Greyhound Bus and beat it so hard that it becomes your nemesis? I am sure this is not what Kallol thinks about when he is flying about in his single bounds. When he is flexing for this country wrapped in his blues and reds.

There is excitement on the television show -- people running, smoke and dust billowing -- must be another of those idiot movies. I change the channel, and still it is the same program! This is one problem with this country; Kallol has approximately hundreds of stations, but mostly it is the same program everywhere, hands and feet, hands and feet selling rings and trinkets. The Imam at the mosque on 4th Street has been telling me that -- these trinket channels are all he permits his wife and daughters to watch -- suits his sense of modesty I suppose; but then he cries to me -- Brother -- he says -- if they keep purchasing ornaments at this speed, I will soon be bankrupt! I think in my head -- it is the price of modesty, no, Imam Shahib? It is the price of religion. Everything has a price.

I change channels and all stations are showing the same thing. Where are the

channels that show the ocean of sweat of foreigners? Staten Island? Of immigrants who iron this country's clothes, bus this country's tables, or pick caterpillars out of this country's tomatoes? A great shame is falling on this land like a rain. Today, across the television channels, a silence seeps, feces! Even though people are screaming and glass is falling, I can't even hear Mrs. Kincaid, who is quite loud even when Mr. Kincaid has gone to work. Up and down our hallway, people's prayers are forming an imaginary border -- and forever there will be this side and the that-side of that invisible border. This building, full of immigrant housewives and retirees, hums today in their private prayers. Nigerians, Castilians, Laotians, Cape Verdeans, Marwaris, Chittagongians, all like my son -- aliens pretending to be familiars, caught on a thin border, eyes focused on making sure that they catch their bus on time. They pray in their low voices to their own gods.

When Kallol came back that night, the cockle of hair that falls on his eyes hung like a dead bird. I noticed that even his suit was in tatters, there were little spots where the blue and red was still visible underneath his clothing. My eyes are not what they used to be, but I can see the dust on his fingers, the grime and soot under his fingernails from lifting steel girders and stone. He says -- Couldn't stop them Abba -- he was crying like a girl. I said -- Yes -- I say. It was late and I had seen it all on the television. I had seen the island close its fingers into a fist of rage. I said -- I knew that there was nothing you could do, my son. Your eyes are not all that can melt steel. Inequity and anger will do that, too.

We sat down and watched the news. It was too late, of course, because the fire had spread already, and the cracks in the stone that ran along the grain of the rock had grown, reaching out to far away places. Shifting tectonic plates had made places that were far off closer together and were already making nearer places a million miles away. We both felt the tremor, but didn't talk about it because we knew it was just in our hearts. It was all a matter of killing time. And watching the fate of this new world with forbearance. No, we do not have any problem finding that errant east.

J.D. Jahangir is a Bangladeshi born writer living in Somerville, Massachusetts. He is currently revising his novel 'Ghost Alley'.

### Letter from LONDON

David Sanderson

Londonstani starts with a punch. Then a kick, then a punch, then a kick. Then the violence really starts. But by then it's not a physical assault, it's a linguistic one.

"literary sensation" and as the "Asian Irvine Welsh" Malkani was reportedly given a £300,000 advance for the novel and has already, apparently, turned down television serialisation offers in order to wait for a big Hollywood payday.

underpinned by the moral code that never the twain shall meet. Hardjit, as the toughest kid in the neighbourhood, regularly sorts out Muslims who dare to date Hindus and vice versa, and whites who don't show enough respect.

The novel begins with an exposition of when Paki can be used. Hardjit explains, inbetween kicks and punches, the social nuances of the term to a white boy he has falsely accused of uttering it.

"It ain't necessary for u 2 b a Pakistani to call a Pakistani a Paki ... Or for u 2 call any Paki a Paki for dat matter. But u gots 2 b call'd a Paki yourself. U gots 2 b, like, an honorary Paki or someshit ... Us bredrens who don't come from Pakistan can still b call'd Paki by other bredrens if it means we can call dem Paki in return. But u people ain't allow'd 2 join in, u get me?" Is that clear?

The youths, who have a nice little earner resetting mobile phones, get drawn into a vortex of criminality once they are introduced to Sanjay, a former pupil at their school who made it in the City but has now turned to major league crime. Although as Hardjit explains: "We in't wannabe badass gangsters or someshit ... We're businessmen innit."

While this plot progresses Jas is embarking on a cross-faith romance with a Muslim girl, Samira, which could get him seriously beaten up by near enough anyone in racially-fragmented Hounslow. Into the mix are thrown the problems faced by Amit's brother getting his mother to accept his lower-caste fiancé and by the end Jas has to deal with death, blackmail and heartbreak.

To be frank, the plot is a farrago of nonsense and too often the characterisation is lazy and cartoonish while the dialogue -- if not submerged in swearing -- can be plodding. The constant dropping of cultural references also becomes tedious. On the plus side however, it is an interesting exploration of a place in London where the "lager louts had more to fear from us lot than us lot to fear from them" and where Asian youths are obsessed with the "bling" of modern life, like fast cars and jewellery, and

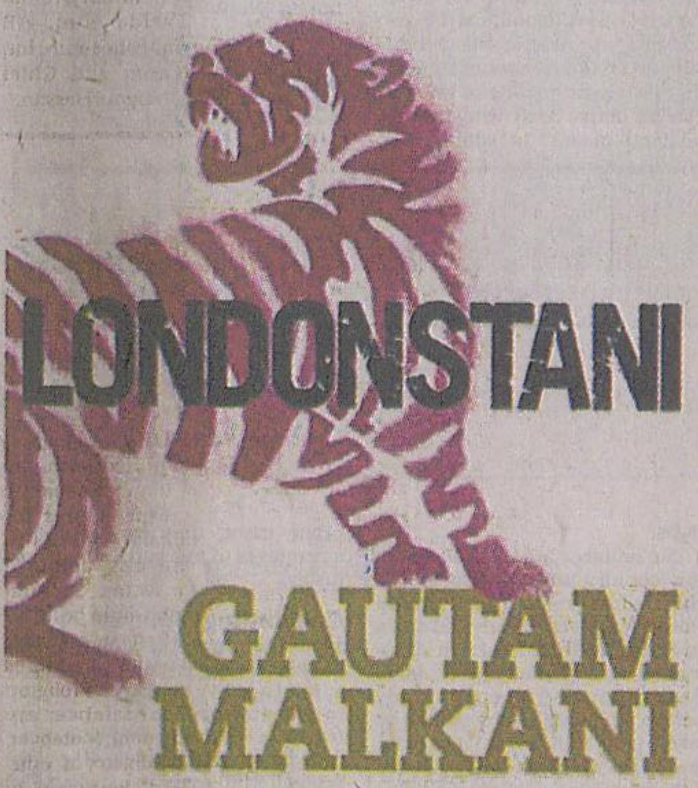
linguistic dexterity. It is also fascinating to learn about the social mores, or "rudeboy rules" of this generation. Jas narrates at one point: "I still can't attain the right level a rudeboy finesse. If I could I wouldn't be using poncey words like attain and finesse, innit. I'd be sayin' 'I couldn't keep it real or some shit.'"

It explores religious conflict and unity as when Jas explains Hardjit's philosophy: "He always used to go on bout how Sikhs an Hindus fought side by side in all them wars. Both got beef with Muslims. Both support India at cricket. Both be listenin to bhanga, even though Sikh bredren clearly dance better to it. He says Sikhs were the warriors a Hinduism one time. Like the SAS but in a religious way too, so more like Jedi Knights." There are also some near turns of phrase and even some interesting economic lessons about our informal economy.

Taken in the round it is also a perceptive analysis, on one level, of the fightback from Asian youths who have for too long been treated as second class citizens, and on another level a fascinating rite of passage tale which younger readers, whom one assumes the author is aiming for, will absorb. And, as mentioned earlier, it opens a window onto often invisible London communities.

Additionally there is an end-of-novel twist which certainly jolted me and forced a reassessment of all that has preceded. Overall, it is an enjoyable, engaging romp; a good first novel with flashes of brilliance. But because of the hype -- which is always impossible to live up to -- Malkani has been metaphorically elevated to heights he is not yet capable of reaching. He is no Tolstoy but one suspects his voice is going to be one that launches a thousand imitators. Let's just hope literary agents and publishers realise there is more to the lives of second generation Asians living in London than just bling. Let's hope a thousand flowers are allowed to bloom.

David Sanderson is a correspondent for The London Times.



This much-hyped novel by Gautam Malkani, centring on the adventures of a group of second generation Asians living in a grim London suburb, is narrated in a spicy expletive-heavy street slang cobbled together from gangsta' rap, text message speak, Cockney and Punjabi. It hurts the senses and pays scant attention to the rules and rigours of the English language. But as anyone living in London will appreciate, it does sound authentic.

"This is how dem bredren r speaking innit", as the protagonists might have put it. For this Mr Malkani should be praised: he has put on paper a fresh, vibrant vernacular voice and in the process chronicled the lives of communities that have so far been woefully under-represented on London's literary scene. But is this enough to justify the attention Mr Malkani has already received for his debut novel. Described as a

Not bad going for a Cambridge-educated Financial Times journalist who, one assumes, could scarcely have lived the life he writes about.

The novel -- set in the grim London suburb of Hounslow "the car park capital of the world" and adjacent to Heathrow airport -- centres on the adventures of a gang of second generation Asian teenagers: Hardjit, the thuggish, muscle-bound leader; Ravi, a sleazy wannabe hustler cruising the streets in his mum's lilac BMW; Amit, whose family are up in arms about his brother's impending wedding to a Hindu girl from a lower caste; and Jas, the once nerdy narrator with a speech defect who is desperately trying to fit in with his flyguy chums.

People are either desis, goras or coconuts -- black on the outside, white on the inside -- and life for Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and white youths is

## A Survey of the Performing Arts scene

MUSTAFA ZAMAN

Jamini, the journal of art that comes out once every three months, orients itself to a single theme in each issue. For the June issue the theme was performing arts. The opening article by Ziaul Karim takes the readers on a journey through the history of proscenium theatre in Dhaka. It charts the beginning and highlights the glorious moments of theatre in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

While Karim's article strives to give an objective account of what went on in the few "nerve centres" that became famous for theatre in Dhaka, Lubna Marium's "Bells on Our Feet" is a comparatively more subjective account--reading in places like a memoir--of how she as a dancer received training and grew up as a performer alongside other compatriots. But she then rescues it by peppering this narration with accounts of how her teachers made crucial contributions to the overall scene and how her peers made their forays into the dance world during those '60s years when the concept of Muslim girls growing up to be dancers was still seen as a form of social rebellion.

Unfortunately, with one more article, on Binodini, a scintillating new drama that recounts the life of Binodini, an actress of yesteryear, Jamini draws the curtain on the Bangladeshi performing arts scene. What remains unexcavated is a whole array of performances that constitute the vital cultural strands of the rural Bangladesh. From Jatra to Sang to Pata presentation, there is a definite spectrum of performances that are staged at different times of the year throughout Bangladesh. An article on this populist scene would have made a huge difference.

In fact, in the article titled "Picture and Performance" Suryanandini Sinha brings into view a number of art pieces that



record the performances like Chorak puja, or the hook-swinging festival, and Nautch Party, where a dancing girl is accompanied by musicians. Many believe that the Bengalis have renounced such pre-Vedic festivals, but a couple of books by Simon Zakaria, who continues to tirelessly document myriad such performances and events in rural Bangladesh, prove otherwise.

In this issue of Jamini, there are a couple of articles that opens windows on to our neighbouring countries. One particular piece by Sheema Kermani zooms in on a theatre group in Pakistan. They call themselves Tehrik-e-Niswan, which literally mean women's movement. Tehrik-e-Niswan marries theatrical performances with activism. In fact, the very first performance of this group was a Safdar Hashmi play called 'Aurat', a piece

Technically love is the raw material, not so much the finished product.

It must be only for the theoretically-inclined that love means monopoly--for everyone else love is free market.

And though Traditionally love means sharing--in the real world, you see love can only be a barter.

### Love

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN



Nuzhat Amin Mannan teacher english at Dhaka University