

SPEAKING *DESHI* WHEN IN *BIDESH*

MONEESHA R KALAMDER

Language was such a core part of my being that I was barely thinking about it when I stepped foot in a cold, snowy, faraway land. I did not miss Bangla much in the beginning because I was still conversing with family and friends back home in it. However, over time, especially on days when I was experiencing something emotional, I wished to have a conversation with someone in Bangla. Not only is it easier to express yourself in your native language when you're emotionally strained, the language is associated with childhood and comfort. Terms of endearment in Bangla feel so much more loving and intimate.

Another thing that my Bengali friends overseas agree with me is we all miss the use of Bangla slang. *Hanging out* just does not have the same vibes as *adda mara*. I have started to teach my closest non-Bengali friend Bangla phrases – I'm sure he'll be fluent by 2070.

One great thing about growing up speaking Bangla is the distinction of the formal pronouns. When you can switch from *tumi* to *tui* with a person, you know you've become friends. If I'm not speaking to someone in Bangla, how am I supposed to figure out what friendship level we're on? Generally, Bangla feels a lot more personal than English. I wonder if that is why we have a culture where nosiness is acceptable. Yes, I'm talking about you, next-door-auntie.

Even in Bangladesh, we use many English words while



conversing in Bangla. For example, the word "practice". Has anyone ever used the Bangla word for it? A non-Bengali friend commented that trying to figure out what my sister and I are saying is like playing a video game on hard mode.

We speak a completely different language, yet we use the occasional English word and if they're paying enough attention, they can figure out what the conversation is about.

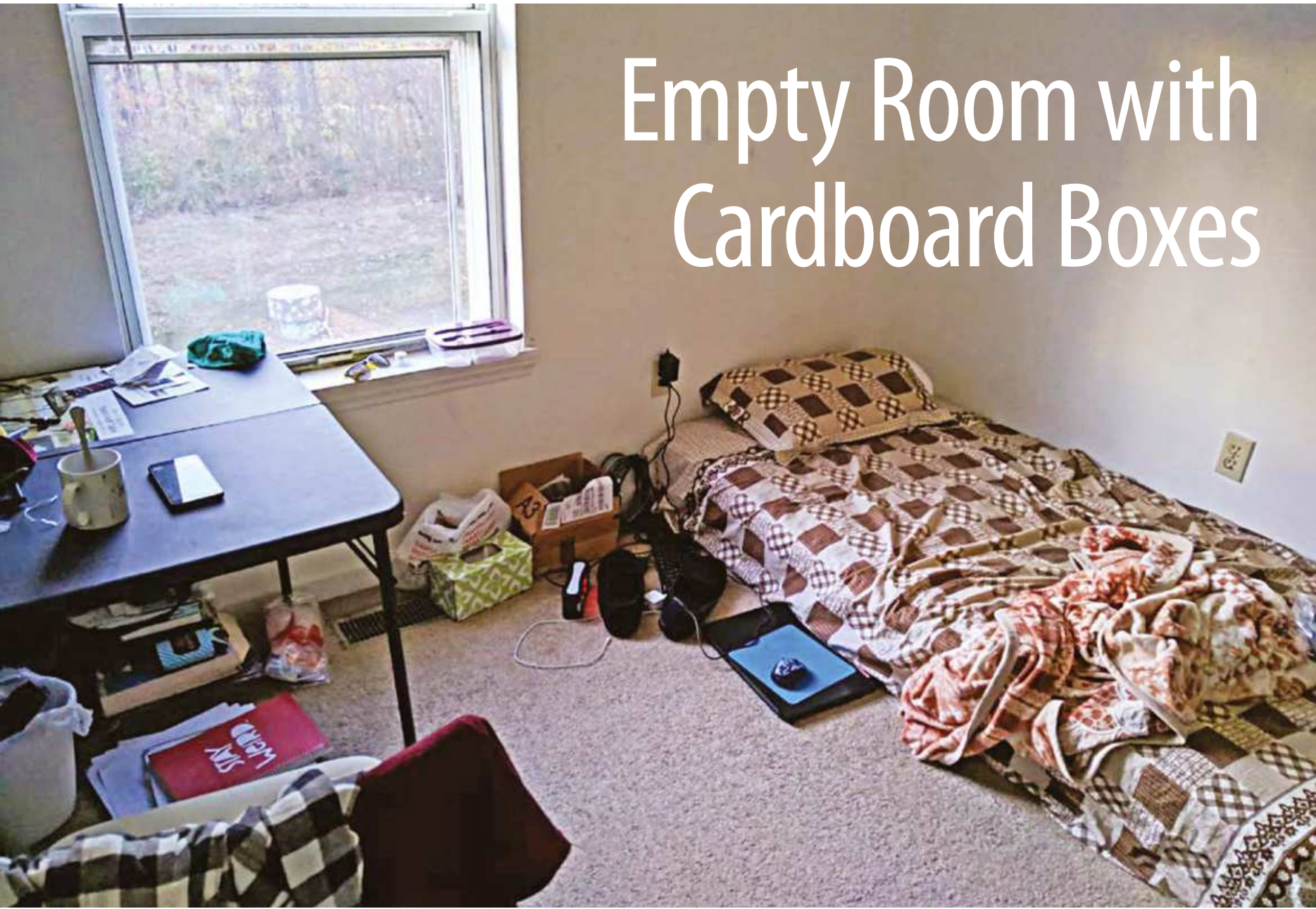
Partly due to this habit, and partly because my default mode has to be English anytime I'm dealing with school or work, my Bangla got rusty. The worst bit is forgetting words and phrases in both languages and having expressions that just cannot be translated. *Obhimaan*, anyone?

Sometimes when I speak, I switch languages without realising it. Once I became aware of this, I tried to be more conscious of my words. However, this attempt has given birth to some truly horrifying moments in my life.

Two summers ago, I had to share a room with my sister and she always left the room without making the bed. What I wanted to say is, "Who's supposed to make the bed every day?" Halfway through, I forgot the Bangla for making the bed, but near the end of the sentence, I realised I was beginning to use another English word, and desperately wanted to end the sentence in Bangla, so the atrocity that came out of my mouth was this: "*Bichhana ta ke make korbe, every-din?*"

I will never live this down. My family knows. My friends know. And now you know too.

Moneesha R Kalamder is a University of Waterloo graduate. Write to her at mkalamder9.75@gmail.com



Empty Room with Cardboard Boxes

THE DEFINITIVE YOUTH MAGAZINE

NUREN IFTEKHAR

The first night I fell asleep in the small, empty room that would be my "home" for the foreseeable future, I woke up in a fit of panic. My brain couldn't comprehend why the room I lived in for the last 20 years looked so different.

Cardboard boxes all around, my bare essentials clumped up together in a corner, a mattress without a bed sheet – the clues were all there to help me solve the mystery, but it didn't stop me from waking up every single time feeling lost. Over the following months, I made little improvements to that tiny room some 8,000 miles away. The cardboard boxes went away, a Star Wars poster went up and a table made its way (just barely) in the other corner. And one day I wasn't waking up in utter confusion anymore. I finally saw that tiny room as home without trying to piece the clues together.

The reason why I wanted to start with that tiny room some 8,000 miles away is that I find it analogous to getting accustomed to this life abroad, whether culturally or just plain emotionally. When I thought about writing this piece I thought the focus would be on "fitting in". But it has been more than that and I think it is fair to assume that is the case for many.

The first major reality check I was presented with was that I have been taking the minor details of day-to-day life for granted for way too long. Coming from a person who has lived his life in privilege, I never really paid attention to the simple yet crucial things that kept my life in motion for so long. I found myself stranded in a sea of

minute chores and tasks that I never bothered to pay attention to before. Coming home after a tiring day of work and classes didn't initiate an uninterrupted period of relaxation and tomfoolery anymore unless I wanted to starve that day or watch the dirty laundry in my room pile up into a daunting figure. I still remember the day I nervously asked my American roommate how to use the washing machine. It might have felt embarrassing but I learned an important lesson, even if it was 15 years too late. The fantastic thing about living in a college town is perhaps that I was never the only one stumbling through life and learning from it.

Being a part of a community is probably the most efficient way of incorporating yourself into a new life. And yet getting over the inertia to make yourself a part of one can still be challenging. I have found the international and local communities in my city to be exceptionally kind and welcoming. As soon as the semester started, I was introduced to a plethora of communities focusing on things such as politics to table-top games. If I got to start this journey over, this is one thing that I would have changed. In spite of finding these enthusiast communities, I withheld myself from being a part of one because of a crippling impostor syndrome and social anxiety I didn't even know I have. But the only thing this does is make the solitude more unbearable.

Luckily I had the Bangladeshi community to turn to who made me a part of their group when I was too shy to approach them. While I didn't join the writer's club,

or the Dungeons and Dragons enthusiast club, I was lucky enough to find people in the Bangladeshi community who I could talk to about writing and who I could play Dungeons and Dragons with. I found reassurance in the fact that these people suffered through the same feeling of isolation and anxiety while habituating to this new life. Before I knew it, my weekends were not a lull anymore as I found myself sharing a laugh with other people over coffee.

The cultural difference of a new country is something that many people have trouble getting used to. This has been less of an issue over time due to globalisation and how exposed we are to the culture abroad now. This is something I have truly appreciated about my life here – the amalgamation of the Bengali culture we grew up in with the customs of America. People in my college town foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation. For example, whenever they go out to eat with a multicultural group they make sure that everyone there could have an option to choose from that doesn't go against their cultural norms and restrictions.

My American colleague in the lab drops by every now and then to let me know what new Spanish word he learned and then asks me to teach him a Bangla one. Within a month I picked up the habit of holding the door every single time I enter a building for the person a few steps back, a very small etiquette I never had before but learned from the people around me. The cultural shift is such a noticeable thing that my few examples don't come close to doing it justice. But it's in the little things that I

see in myself that the confused person in that empty room did not have, and I'm all the more glad for it.

I wanted to share a little story to finish things. Within the first few months I arrived in America, there was an Eid, a time for celebration back home but now just an occasion to reminisce about a life left behind, or so I thought.

I was invited to a *dawat* in the Bangladeshi community and I put on the only *panjabi* I had brought with me. When I arrived at the bus stop wearing my *panjabi*, I felt a crippling sense of self-doubt. "Are people staring at me?", "What will they think of this alien attire?", "Isn't this a bit too much?" I kept wondering. I didn't get on the bus that day. I went back to my home and wallowed in my bed. I was wrong to do so, I was so very wrong. It's easy for me to know that now, but not for the person in that empty room with cardboard boxes.

In spite of the many hardships, breakdowns and heartaches I have been enduring since, I have found a new home 8,000 miles away from Bangladesh, to the point that I can go to the coffee shop in a *panjabi* now and talk about culture with another person from another country. To the many people who would find themselves in another empty room with cardboard boxes in the future, the room can start feeling awfully a lot like home once you give it a chance.

Nuren Iftekhar is a PhD student at Virginia Tech. You can find him at n.iftkhar18@gmail.com

How I Miss My Family



NUHAN B. ABID

One and a half years.

That's how long it's last been since I went back to Dhaka and saw my family. It's not a new thing for me, though, to have gone so long without seeing them. I left for university in the United States of America in August of 2018 and initially spent my entire year there, finally coming back in the summer of 2019 — and I've remained here since.

I knew going in that there'd be these long stretches of time where I'd be separated from

my loved ones. I just wasn't prepared for how lonely it'd feel. The beauty of technology is that you can keep in touch with them. If I see flowers I know my mom would've excitedly pointed out on a walk together, I'll send her a picture to know I'm thinking of her. I'll see a funny meme that reminds me of my sister, I'll tag her.

But then again, it's not easy. An 11-hour time difference isn't always easy to navigate. A real part of being a university student abroad is knowing you will inevitably be busy for a phone call when the other side is free. Call at Bangladesh night when it's US morning and you have classes, or call at US night when you're doing homework or with friends and your family is free? The scheduling dilemma makes it difficult if you have someone with similar timing problems, like my sister will have school when I'm free and we end up not being able to call for an extended time unless it's a weekend. It gets even harder when you con-

sider other people like aunts, uncles and cousins you might need to keep in touch with. But even no amount of video calls replaces actually being able to spend time with your family in person, to just be able to spend time in the same place, eat a meal together or hug each other.

In all honesty, I might've considered going back this winter holiday because it does get exhausting to be away from everything you've known for so long. And I might've too, had it not been for a pandemic. Flying is never cheap and easy, doing it while risking your health and knowing you'd be unable to see most of the people you care about even if you came back made it a tougher decision.

At the time I'm writing this, I'm alone on campus, looking out my window and watching a raging snowstorm. I'm homesick and lonely, I want a hot home cooked meal and to not be this cold. I want to be able to hear my family talking in the same room instead of unmet silence in an apartment by myself. I just want to be home.

Ultimately the sacrifice is worth it, because you know they're doing this for you as much as you are for them. Being apart isn't easy for them either, but they know their support and confidence in you will be repaid in the form of your success. It's what keeps me going honestly, knowing my mom and sister will be proud of me for what I accomplish here. Until then, we'll have to settle for video calls till we get to make up for it later.

Nuhan B. Abid is an undergraduate student at Dickinson College, Pennsylvania, USA. Write to him at abidn@dickinson.edu

DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD