

# I AM IN LONDON

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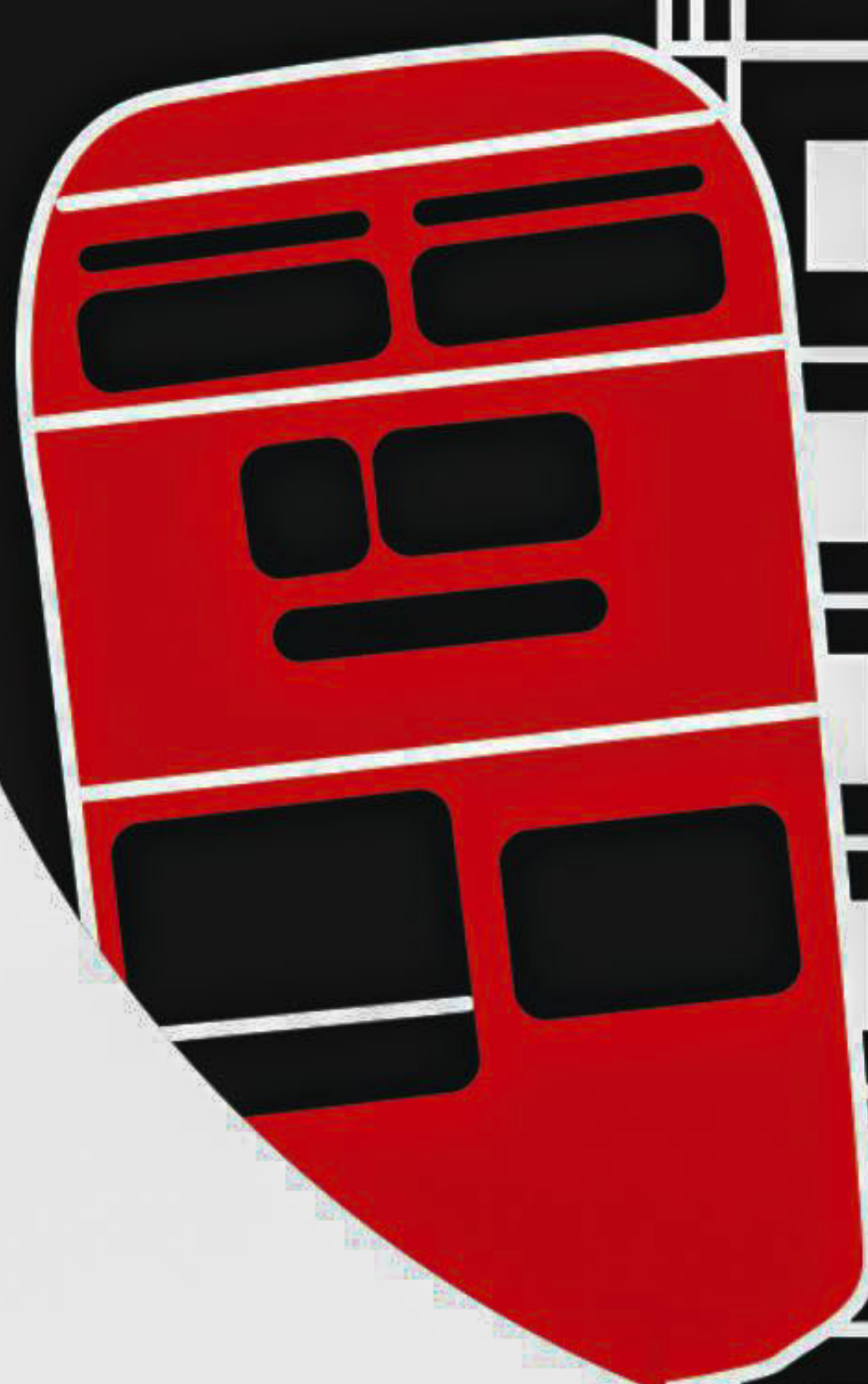


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

Arriving at Heathrow Airport made Robiul fidgety. He'd been waiting over an hour to pass the immigration desk. Back home, he'd heard a few unpleasant stories, where immigration officers would refuse entry to anyone they were not satisfied with, even if that passenger had a visa.

Robiul had graduated with a degree in English and could speak the language just fine, or so he thought. He hoped it would be an advantage right now. In the first-time visitor queue, he tried being cool, but it was with damp palms he clutched the necessary papers.

Why are you taking this course?

If I achieve this diploma that's leading to MBA, I'd get a very good job and salary when I'm back in my country. A British degree is highly...

But you've studied English, so what good is an MBA?

Well...

He wondered if he would come across that last question. It was tricky, but his

answers were prepared.

Finally, his turn came. The officer was forty-ish; a red-faced man with thinning blond hair. Robiul handed over his passport and tuberculosis certificate.

"Where did you get the money for your course?" The officer looked him over.

"I worked as a teacher, I saved the money," Robiul answered confidently.

The officer stamped his passport, handed it back with his right hand, and held the little entry gate open with his left.

Was that all? Robiul looked at the officer, then at the gate.

"Thank you," he said after a moment. He clenched his fist and quietly punched the air. "Yes, I am in London."

It was the name. He had to do it. He was, after all, in London. His flatmate had taken him to Stratford to open a bank account. When their turn came, he heard his flatmate's name being called.

"My-boob." A red-haired young woman with plump breasts smiled at them from her seat.

They sank onto the sofa before her

desk. She looked comfortable, and so did his flatmate, Mahboob. Robiul's face flamed red. Because of the "Britishisation" of Mahboob, the "h" had become silent. It should have been pronounced "Maahh-boob." He gazed determinedly at the freckles on her forehead.

In that moment, he decided to "Britishise" his name, shortening Robiul to Rob. In fact, if possible, he would legally change his entire name, Mohammed Robiul, to Rob Ryan. The religious group he was born into had a particular fondness for naming their male children either Abdul or Mohammed. And, quite unlike his home country, where people were called by their last names, the British preferred being addressed by their first names.

Later, when he figured out how long the legal name-changing procedure would take and the effort involved, he was horrified. Still, he didn't wish to run the risk of the Home Office pushing him into a darkened room for a prolonged interrogation as a suspected Islami terrorist.

"Call me Rob," he introduced himself.

The first few weeks brought unexpected challenges. Rob found his eyes drifting helplessly to women's cleavages and their near-naked thighs. It took months for him to get used to the many and varied displays of female flesh. Still, he would strip off his newcomer outfit sooner than most. He had to.

One afternoon, he popped into a small Bangladeshi store on Brick Lane to top up his travel card. When he was done, Rob pointed to the yoghurt in the refrigerator and asked, "How much is it?"

The shopkeeper, a young lad with a skin fade haircut and a chinstrap beard—very common in Sylheti folk—replied, "Ten quid." With a bit of a condescending smile he added, "Can you afford it?"

"I'll come back later," Rob abruptly left the shop. He hadn't quite grasped the shopkeeper's last question.

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