

ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

exceptions, not even the teachers and school employees.

Am I really in London?

Back home, he had often imagined himself in a foreign school, surrounded by students from every corner of the globe. Different races, languages and cultures – the idea had always thrilled him. His eyes roamed the faces in the room as he waited expectantly for a flicker of excitement. Nothing. A skeletal girl of indeterminate age stared back at him. She looked ordinary, worn, mundane. Rob sighed.

Relief was overwhelming when he later left the classroom. Diverse faces passed around him on the frenetic streets outside. It was oddly comforting.

Whitechapel and

on the table, the tray tilted; one by one the Kingfishers slid off, saturating the girl's top and puckering her pale skin. He was invited to leave.

Feeling miserable, he slunk to Soho, where Mahboob worked at a small book shop.

"It's hard to get a job these days," Mahboob tried to soothe him. "Keep trying, bro. You never know."

Rob gazed intently at some of the books. Due to the shop's location, it shelved a wide range of adult reading. His eyes fell on one title: *The Big Book of Pussy*. It reminded him of the words of a fellow student, a Pakistani, who had warned him to stay away from white women, because they apparently used their pets for erotic pleasure. He ached to clarify this point with Mahboob, who was by then serving a customer. Instead, Rob found himself hating the dogs that received repeated sweet kisses from adorable, full-lipped women.

When he had finished, Mahboob sighed. "This is London life," he said, "look at me; it's been six years I'm here, and still I'm effing studying."

"Why is that?"

"Well, I have to. I don't wanna go back to that country. Just four more years, bro. I'll get my residency and no more effing school then."

A month passed. Rob landed a cleaning job in central London through an English job-seeking agency. In the interview, the Latvian cleaning manager – a bone-thin, blonde, freckled woman, in her mid-thirties – asked a single question in a strange accent, "Do you have cleaning job experience?"

He was candid. "Not exactly," was his reply, "but at home, I clean my own toilet."

He woke up at 5:20 am to start work at 6 am at the largest department store on Oxford Street.

The job mainly involved sweeping, mopping, and vacuuming. The morning shift lasted three hours and his second shift began at 3 pm. Most of his co-workers were Filipino, who spoke broken English. Four Bangladeshis were among them, newcomers like him. Soon, he found himself chatting to a young Bangladeshi man with a thoughtful face, who was assumed to be a well-brought-up city boy. On their way home, the city boy, hands in his pockets, stopped in the middle of the pavement. His eyes widened when Rob spoke of his education and qualification.

"You got a master's from the best university back home; why the hell have you come here? To do this shit job?"

"I wanted a change, and I love to travel." Rob did his best to sound convincing.

"I was doing my bachelor's from a no-good university," the city boy said. "And I know I won't get a good job there. So, I came to London to make my fortune." He paused to inspect one of Oxford Street's Christmas decorations, and added, "But I

get your point."

Rob gave a tight smile.

College was a bore after two weeks. There were three courses and three teachers; a Bangladeshi, an Indian, and a Ghanaian. Staying interested in their classes was a struggle, and their ever-changing accents would at times irk Rob. At the British Council back home, he had come across what he'd considered to be "proper" British instructors. A longing to get under the skin of this cold and foreign land gnawed at him.

It was with relief that the college closed for the Christmas holidays. The department store had become busier by the minute and he was offered plenty of hours, often from 6 am to 9 pm, which he grabbed. This meant Rob only had time to be either on his feet at work, or at home in bed. The department store became his second home. At night, when he arrived at the flat and found his bed, he crawled under the covers and slept like the dead.

On his days off, Rob called his parents back home. Conversations were short and more or less same.

"It's too busy here. I'm good, working hard. I'll send some money next week. Don't worry about my loan."

"Do you like working in the restaurant?" they asked. When it came to his employment situation, Rob was sketchy.

"It's okay. You get free food at the end of the shift."

He yawned and stretched for a while. Finally, from the warmth of the quilt, he rose to his feet. He cooked, washed, and cleaned the flat that he shared with four other guys. His balding roommate joked, "Today our kitchen and toilet will be super clean."

After taking his meal, Rob returned to his den, curling up under the quilt.

Calling Rob, over.

Yes, Rob speaking, over.

Rob, can you go to Godiva now? A customer threw up on the floor. Over.

OK, I'm on my way.

Thank you, Rob.

His eyes shot open and he weakly flailed about, before realising he wasn't at work. Had he taken a walkie-talkie home by mistake? He was resting in his best cosy place on earth. Where had these instructions come from? Would he not have the pleasure to enjoy his day off? Working in a huge six-storey department store with more than twenty other cleaners, who were constantly scurrying around with non-stop talking radios, was making his entire world seem as if it were under walkie-talkie range. Rob sighed and closed his eyes. He needed sleep.

It must've been a miracle. The next day when he was assigned to the ground floor, an instruction crackled over the radio.

"Rob, please make your way to the beauty section," the voice said.

"On my way. Over," Rob answered.

It was a vomit mess by the Jo Malone till. The shop manager and the floor manager encircled the spot to alert other customers.

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For someone fresh off the boat, the British accent was tough. Most certainly, Sylheti-Cockney was no exception, if not the worst of all accents to understand. But, there had been something needling about the shopkeeper's manner.

What exactly did he mean? Rob pondered as he walked the grimy footpath. Understanding dawned. He stopped. "Bloody asshole," he spat on the concrete.

The first day of college arrived in a two-floor section of a multi-story building located at Holborn. In orientation class it occurred to Rob that he might well have travelled in time to 1947, when Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan were all part of the same country.

He watched the other students. He noticed something: everyone was of Indian heritage. There were no

its surrounding areas had the biggest Bengali community in London. There, Rob visited a few agencies he'd heard could help him find a job. The small stuffy rooms, always heaving, were damp and dirty. In almost every office, the person in charge was chewing betel nut, against a backdrop of peeling walls. They never missed an opportunity to take advantage of hapless jobseekers, preferably by skimming hefty commissions in return for "services." Rob soon gave up on them.

One evening, on a friend's recommendation, he landed a work trial at an Indian restaurant in central London. While he confidently balanced a tray of bottled Kingfisher beer in one hand, he had, for a fleeting moment, imagined himself as a real waiter. Placing the drinks

