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The poor, unfortunate woman who had puked was still there, repeatedly saying sorry. The floor manager responded with her best game face.

"It's okay, don't worry about it." She smiled. She looked stunning in her black dress. Her soft wavy hair was shining, her long French-manicured nails were gleaming. Today she smelled of an oriental fragrance. Warm, spicy, and intense. Rob would have been the happiest person on earth if he could slap her polished face right then.

It's okay? Cleaning this shit is okay?

The first week of January arrived and work resumed a more normal pace. At last, there was more time for Rob to catch up on sleep, and to surf the Internet. To his satisfaction, while searching for jobs one evening, he stumbled across an online dating site. Lonely, and in need of someone to warm his body and soul, he signed up then

and there. Flicking through women's profiles quickly became his favourite pastime; it was incredibly exciting that hundreds of them were seeking male company at any given time. Within two weeks he had hooked up with a white, English girl, Lauren, whose profile stated she was "interested in Asian guys."

Their first date took place at a Weatherspoon pub. It was a Wednesday evening, and the brunette sitting across from him appeared much older than him, average looking, and a little overweight. She was wearing a red, V-neck top that displayed her cleavage, light blue jeans, and kitten-heel shoes.

"So, how do you find London?" was her opening gambit.

"It's good," he said animatedly. "But life's harder here."

"I know. I've been made redundant. I feel it every day."

He caught the whiff of a familiar

immediately for her Surrey hometown. Meeting her had numbed a nagging doubt he'd had since his arrival in the country that he was somehow being taken advantage of. He had finally discovered someone with whom he could experience actual *Britishness*. With the exploratory enthusiasm of stepping forth into a fresh, new land, he strained to see England as the British had once viewed India through their English eyes. With Lauren, he'd briefly had a sense of having struck a rich seam of discovery.

A month later, Lauren returned. That weekend, they arranged to meet at the Weatherspoon pub of their first date, which was not far from her flat. They ate dinner, and split the bill. She invited him to her flat for a drink. He accepted.

Her two-bed flat in East London faced the local park. Orange streetlight dimly filled the drawing room from the big window behind the sofa, creating an illusory image. Rob watched her open a kitchen cupboard, take down a bottle of red wine, and pour two glasses. They sat on the floor with their backs against the sofa. The flat was simple and warm, and her easy-going company was pleasant.

That night, Rob stayed over. The next Sunday, he stayed again. And so began a weekly routine.

Rob liked it there. Just the two of them, drinking wine, smoking cigarettes, watching a film.

Eating dinner. Only one thing depressed Lauren, and it was that they rarely went out as a couple.

One day she asked, "Are you ashamed of me when we go out, Rob?"

"Oh no," he assured her. "What makes you think like that?"

"Sometimes, I feel far away, and I don't really see an attachment," she said, looking straight at him. "Is it the language barrier?"

He looked blankly at her.

Six months later, Rob and Lauren were having a serious conversation.

"I can't stand it anymore," Rob said. "The college is crap."

"What do you want to do then?" Her eyes were compassionate.

"I dunno. A university here costs a hell of a lot of money. I don't earn that much." He let out a sigh. "I wish I were not here. What have I got here? Crap job. Crap college. Crap life."

"Nope, you forgot the most precious thing," she blurted out. She fastened her eyes on Rob, waiting to hear something. "You got me." She laughed.

"Oh yes, sorry." He gave a quick smile. She picked up his hand. It was dry. Hers was soft and warm. "Hon, I don't know when I'll get a job again. I'm paying my mortgage, you know. But if you need it, I can lend you a small amount."

"Lauren, you're really something. You really are." Rob leaned forward and crossed one leg over the other. "But you know what, I feel I'm lost. Too many restrictions on foreign students. And at the end of the day, the idea of being a permanent resident seems out of the question."

"Sweetie, don't get disappointed. I'm here with you, okay? Look, if the worst comes to the worst, we can get married."

Rob stared at Lauren as if she were not the woman she was before.

"I'm serious. I mean it."

"I know," Rob said softly. He fell silent. After a while, he got up and moved towards the toilet.

In the sofa again, he sat by the window, crossed his legs, and observed her for a moment. He then said he'd forgotten to tell her that he had a job tomorrow morning. Someone had cancelled the shift, so he had been asked to cover. This simply implied he wouldn't spend the night, and that he should take his leave.

Her calm and fair face slowly changed. "This is ridiculous." Her nostrils flared.

She lit a cigarette, turning her face towards the window. Rob looked down at the floor, his hands in his lap. He didn't want her to feel abandoned.

He was home by 10:30 pm, but lay wakefully in bed until roughly three in the morning. It was late when he got up, almost lunchtime. He didn't have a job today. He had lied to Lauren, and didn't know why.

In the kitchen, Mahboob was having a late breakfast.

"Hey, whassup, bro?" Mahboob greeted him. "Why you here today?"

Rob opened the refrigerator door and closed it without taking anything out. "Umm," he gazed at Mahboob's half-eaten banana. "Bro, I made a big decision last night. I'm going back to Dhaka."

"What? Is everything alright?"

"Absolutely. Everything is fine in Dhaka and in London. It's just me only."

"Why then? You've not even been here for a year."

Rob took a long breath. "When I left Dhaka, I was confused. I was lost. But now I know what to do with my life."

"Are you serious?"

"I don't believe that wasting too much time and energy for years to live in this country can be someone's goal in life. It's not worth it." Rob then told Mahboob about Lauren saying she would be happy to marry him to change his immigration status.

Mahboob gaped at him for a moment. Then he cried, "You fool man. Just marry her, move into her flat, get the passport, and then throw her away. Who cares?"

"That's just wrong," Rob said.

"Man!" Mahboob banged his fist on the table. "The British have eaten us alive for two hundred years. You just eat one old chicken."

A familiar feeling tugged at Rob, and a restless smile spread across his face. That elusive thing he'd been searching for was at last defined. He knew where he belonged.

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ILLUSTRATION: NAHIA JAHAN MONNI

fragrance; Jasmine

and roses.

"Are you wearing Chanel?" he asked. She was flabbergasted. "How do you know?"

"Just guessing." The amazement in her almond eyes pleased him.

"I like Merlot," she said, gazing steadily at him.

"I like Tuborg," he said, taking a draft.

They stared at each other.

"You're so young," she hissed.

They smoked cigarettes, drank some more, and talked until the Victorian clock at the pub showed half past ten. They put their overcoats on, and side-by-side, made for the door. Outside, in the middle of the walkway, she gave him a hearty goodbye kiss.

Three days later, Lauren's father died and much to Rob's dismay, she left