



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

FICTION

MY LONDON: An immigrant story

RAHAD ABIR

A Room with No Deposit

1 You land in London with £210 in your pocket. It is the year 2009. You are able to pay the first month's rent for the room, but not the deposit. You have to share it with an acquaintance from Dhaka. He arrived a week prior.

It is a three-bedroom unit in a terraced housing in Forest Gate. With two large windows, the room upstairs is sunlit, spacious, and has two separate beds. The floor is carpeted and clean. Hassan and you will split the £320 monthly rent.

You notice three cans of Foster's under Hassan's bed; one is missing from the four-pack ring. He follows your gaze and smiles.

"I bought them the day I got here," he says, "to replenish the energy I lost on the plane journey."

"Didn't know beers work as energy boosters."

He laughs. "Beers are super cheap here. One pound each."

The reality is, coming from a Muslim-

Bangladesh. You call 999 and you will see a flashing police car outside your house within a minute. Housing is expensive around here. Most students live in shared arrangements."

Mahboob comes for an adda in the evening. He is Hassan's cousin and the lease holder of the flat. He lives with his girlfriend in the drawing room downstairs. Of course, both their families back home are unaware of this. Living together without marriage is against Islam, against Bengali tradition.

Over Foster's the conversation veers toward London life. Mahboob talks about the steps to take for Hassan and you to settle down in the UK.

You see a chance to open up and share your financial state. You are concerned about the rent. There is a friendly air about Mahboob. He understands your situation and says not to worry about the deposit now.

2 The following week Mahboob takes you to Stratford to open a bank account. After a five-minute wait, you hear your flatmate's name being called.

My-boob! A woman, a buxom brunette, smiles at both of you from her seat. You and Mahboob sink to the couch before her desk. She looks comfortable, and so does Mahboob. The Anglicisation of Mahboob turns the "h" silent. It should have been pronounced "Maah-boob."

In that moment, you, Mohammad Robiul, decide to Anglicise your name, shortening Robiul to Rob. In fact, if possible, you will legally change your entire name to Rob Ryan. Unlike home, where people are called by their last names, you learn that here in the English world they prefer being addressed by their first names.

"Call me Rob," you tell the bank clerk.

The woman smiles beautifully at you as if she knew you. She asks, "How are you today?" You feel you can almost ask her out on a date. Back home, you remember, when you visit a bank or any institution, the person behind the counter looks as if they pity you. Consider yourself lucky, the look says, for I am serving you—that is the impression the tellers wear on their faces there. They never smile. Never greet. Just the necessary talk in a sulky mood. And

they never say thank you. Besides, if you go to a state bank to cash your check, the teller asks for some cha money.

3 On your first day at college, you arrive in front of a two-story section of a multistory building in Aldgate. At orientation, you watch the other students and notice something: everyone is of Indian heritage. Teachers and school employees are no exceptions.

"Am I really in London?" you wonder. Being in this place, you can't help thinking to yourself, is like going back to pre-partitioned India. And the gathered souls here, "sitting at the table of brotherhood," right in the heart of Britain, tend to overlook the fact that it was the British who once colonised them and divided them.

Back home, you often pictured yourself attending a foreign school surrounded by students from all corners of the globe. Diversity of races, cultures, and languages has always thrilled you. Your eyes roam about as you wait expectantly for a flicker of excitement. Nothing. A skeletal girl from the other side stares back at you. She looks ordinary, worn, mundane. Brown. Just like you.

In a way, the environment is comforting for you, of course, because everyone in college is just like you. But for the same reason, this can also lead to discomfort. "What is the point of coming to London then?" you ask yourself.

Leaving the classroom later, you feel happy and relieved. Diverse faces pass around you on the frenetic streets outside. It is oddly uplifting. You sigh and realise where you have arrived. A "visa college"—as clandestinely called by some—is a cheap institution that sprouts up like weeds and targets international students to make money. And students from developing countries grab the opportunity as a gateway to the UK.

Rahad Abir is the author of the forthcoming novel Bengal Hound. He has an MFA in fiction from Boston University. Star Literature is currently publishing select sections from his novella My London: An Immigrant Story. Its first chapter was originally published in Witness magazine.

POETRY

Not everyone looks at the sky with the same weighted heart



PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

SHAILA FERZANA

Once, I believed there was a crown on my head. The heart was brimming with life and light. Brimming with boundless force to surpass any spread.

Among the crowd, I was always one. Always the one to judge you who sits alone. With my flying wings, I looked up at the sky. But looked down on your bone. Sculpted you as the unworthy one who lacks grace. Believed, you do not have what it takes. On one moonlit night, Life began to feed on my light. With melting wings, I became a part of your shed. In the court, the judge's head turned. Blamed me with her eyes burned. Sitting inside my stomach, she said— "You do not have what it takes."

Now I see why you are unseen. Now I see why your voice is so lean. And smiles rarely sheen. Now I see why you sit alone. Pretending to be busy with your phone. Now I see why you arrive late. And depart all too soon. Now I see why you gaze out the window with a sigh. Why your eyes seek solace in the sky. Now I see, Now the retired judge can see, before her depart. Not everyone looks at the sky with the same weighted heart. I cannot amend the past, nor can I throw it away. But now I see, It is okay not to feel okay.

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majority country such as Bangladesh where drinking is a taboo and restrictions are prevalent, people become overwhelmed when they see alcohol sold in stores just like cokes.

You have a next room neighbour—two girls, also students and Bangladeshi. You discover later that none of the room doors in this flat has any lock.

"How weird," you say to Hassan. "Aren't the girls scared to live here? What if a guy enters their room at night?"

"This is England, brother", he says, "not