Making My Mark



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1. MANY PATHS

Most kids like dressing up. Not me. I *loved* it. I adore everything about clothes; that excitement when you make a new purchase, how powerful you become when you find something that fits *just* right, how you can feel like a whole new person just from changing your outfit.

When I was little, I used to flip through fashion magazines for hours, marvelling at the colours and accessories, from huge hats with floppy brims to high-heeled boots and long-flowing jackets. Some were flashy, while some were simple and elegant. I longed to be the one to provide those clothes and to help those people look so great.

Sometimes I got so addicted to rifling through the magazines that I would casually sidle up to where my mum or dad had left their wallet and ease out one or two credit cards from their leather pouches, using them to illicitly buy all the fashion mags I could lay my hands on!

Eventually, I got caught and told off. But it was worth it. For a few hours each week, I would escape our cramped family home and live among the gods and goddesses of Gucci and the Met Gala.

My Early Life

For most of my childhood, we lived in a house in Islington that contained ten children born to two Bangladeshi ex-pats. Having nine siblings meant everyone around me was busy and distracted, so I had to make my own fun — which probably explains my obsession with magazines.

It was a loving household for the most part, even if my Dad wasn't there much. He worked long hours as a chef in a restaurant while my Mum focused on raising us. We grew up speaking English at school and Bengali at home, my parents' first language; this wasn't that common in Islington, the north London borough where I started, but when I went to East London, I soon found myself surrounded by culturally similar people. I attended the high school in Alexandra Park before moving to an all-girls school further east.

Apart from fashion, my other main interest was in children. My family always told me that I was good with the little ones, so primary school teaching seemed like an obvious choice. After finishing my GCSEs, I attended a nearby college to study for a Level 3 NVQ in Childcare.

Around this time, my family announced that my days of expecting pocket money from them were over. Perhaps this was for the best, given how many magazines I'd had the audacity to charge them for. Yet it meant that I faced the daunting prospect of getting a part-time job while completing my studies at college. The clothing retailer Primark was the

one to offer me that job, starting as a weekend worker; I intended for it to be temporary.

In the meantime, my thoughts were on university and what I would do long-term. After finishing college, I read for a BA in Education Studies at a university in East London. I then did six months of supply teaching, juggling this with my weekend work at Primark.

Teaching had its moments for me. I still love how creative and enthusiastic children can be and how sweet and caring they are, even though I could never entirely avoid those who acted out in the classroom. Yet my love for fashion lingered, and I dreamed of working somewhere glamorous like Harrods or Selfridges.

I also found large parts of supply teaching uninspiring and dull. I realised I may have only pursued tutoring because everyone around me had told me I should.

When I graduated, I wasn't quite sure what to do next. I knew I didn't want to use my degree, which seemed a waste in my family's eyes.

In the meantime, I worked as a receptionist at an NHS doctor's surgery. I had initially planned to leave Primark and immediately teach. Instead, I worked in the NHS during the week and Primark at the weekends.

It was an intense period; I liked being a receptionist but disliked the politicking coupled with working in such a big institution. 'Office politics' has been the bane of my working life. It's seemed to be inescapable wherever I have gone.

On my first day in the NHS, my employers instructed me to take two phone calls concurrently; this was an example of

being put in the deep end and told to 'swim' – God help you if you sank.

It was a scary place to be. My job was to book appointments for people who were often frightened and emotional, and there was pressure not to get things wrong. I would get told off by the GPs for giving appointments to people who could go to the pharmacy, even if it meant patients would swear and scream abuse at me. All we could do was refer them to mental health specialists.

It was a moment of awakening for me in terms of the mental health issues that people face – and it made me realise how much I had to be responsible for my emotional well-being.

On one particularly harrowing occasion, I had to email the practice director when a bed-bound woman rang asking for an appointment when none were available. Thankfully, on this occasion, the doctor did go out to her – but that didn't prevent her from dying a week later.

It was an event that had a massive impact on me. I had never been around death, and it made me question myself. What if I could not accommodate the request and secure the appointment – could she have passed away even earlier? I felt scared and realised that such emotional pressure would affect my mental health, and therefore it was better and more my style to work with fashion.

My time at Primark had many similarities to the challenging clients at the NHS, but it was a different story in many ways. My brother was the one who pointed out that I couldn't do two jobs at once. Primark won out.

I should have known that my first day there would define the rest of my life.

2. IN THE DEEP END

For many years I was a bit of a 'wild child.' Whenever I wasn't studying or working, I would be out with my friends, drinking, partying and travelling. I valued them and always treasured those moments with them, even if they often complained about how my endless work schedule meant I wasn't as free as I would like.

Life could be intense, and it often felt like all I was doing was working, studying or partying, with no downtime for relaxation. I had a reputation for being a bit of a 'cheeky' party-goer and someone who didn't take life very seriously, even though I was careful to guard my heart. I didn't want to be with a man just for the sake of it. I often got told I was pretty, but even then, I realised it meant people got the wrong impression, thinking I was dumb and easily led.

I never thought this would spill over into my work life. I was wrong.

Despite being busy, I was still a bit of a dreamer. As social media became prevalent, I fantasised about being an 'influencer.' I had so much to say about fashion, and I still nursed dreams of being a personal assistant at Harrods, helping people buy the right clothes, but with hopes of becoming an influencer on YouTube and Instagram. I was thrilled by the idea of using my love for fashion to help people decide what was right for them and what might suit them.

The way to get there wasn't clear, however. Being from a working-class family and trying to make a life in London meant that I needed money, and if I wanted to support my lifestyle, then the pressure was on me to get a job that would eventually lead to a solid career. I still love the idea of being an influencer, but fashion is a challenging industry to get into if you are not from a wealthy background, and so much seems to depend on whom you know rather than what you know.

I haven't given up on the dream, but it has had to take a back seat. Sometimes life gets in the way.

I'll never forget my early experiences at Primark. Being a student teacher meant that I could only do weekend shifts. I had never really wanted to work there. Like many, I thought Primark wasn't a high-class brand and didn't particularly admire its clothing lines. I loved places like Zara, TopShop and H&M. But it was work, and I needed the money, and they were prepared to take me.

My job was to be a retail assistant at the Wood Green branch in north London. I would work on the tills, dealing with 'dumps' (the baskets of items customers didn't want) and sorting items like shoes and jewellery into baskets separate from the clothes.

I made many mistakes during those early shifts when on the tills. The store managers rarely spoke to the more lowly colleagues on the shop floor; if they did, it was to shout at us. That didn't feel great, and, to begin with, it wasn't very motivating. I was just a teenager, and my confidence took quite a knock.

Eventually, the more senior staff shifted me to department six, where the men's items were on display; this kept me on the shop floor, but instead of scanning and processing customer payments, I was learning to fold the clothes properly, group items on the correct tables, and learn about the different styles and their proper place in the store.

It was hard work for a long time, and the only thing that got me through each shift was the knowledge of my wage at the end of it. Retail is not a kind world and can often attract cruel people. I couldn't avoid the managers who used to shout at me as they monitored those of us on the shop floor.

Perhaps one of the most challenging parts was how people viewed the place I worked. I was often embarrassed to work in Primark as I knew people regarded it as 'cheap;' this was true even for those who shopped there. Customers would hide their purchases in other bags to avoid the shame of people knowing. It was strange to watch and didn't make me feel great.

Moving Up

Eventually, I got promoted to retail supervisor, which meant I had to supervise the fitting rooms and process customer returns. I often argued with the store managers as they kept taking away and relocating the staff that I needed. I got so frustrated by it that, for a while, I had to have counselling.

Things did start to improve after that. I made more friends and formed better relationships with the managers. Even

then, my ambition was to leave Primark eventually and pursue teaching. When I realised I no longer wanted to teach, my family were furious. They were upset that I had not chosen to pursue what they saw as a steady career path. My parents told me I was stupid for wasting my studies and wondered where working in retail would lead. They still make comments now.

They were immigrants and wanted their children to embrace the opportunities they never had, but I found it unhelpful. I still do. Sometimes I take it, while at other times, I push back.

Staying in the NHS was increasingly not an option, and I accepted that I was enjoying Primark more and that it would make more sense to prioritise my time there and work my way up. I'd no breaks for a year. Something had to change.

My brother, a store manager in another branch of Primark, gave me some tough love. He said I was getting too frustrated at the smallest of things and needed to improve working within a team. I knew he was right. I decided to focus on improving my people skills at work and getting promoted.

With the approval of my line manager, I approached one of the store managers, a man I had to work hard to impress, at Wood Green about a senior vacancy that had come up. I decided to apply for it.

I thought that would be the hard part. Little did I know, the real work was only beginning.

3. ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

When I decided to try and become a trainee manager, I faced opposition throughout the process; for starters, as a weekend worker, I knew I was competing with at least two full-time weekday staff who would resent me for even thinking I could do the job. Other senior staff told me I was 'too nice' to be a manager. The four other people I was competing with were not just from within Primark but from more high-level brands like Zara. Other more senior staff members had also confusingly told me that because I was outspoken at work, I was too confident to be a manager. It seemed crazy that such a personality trait was something negative and would almost certainly not have been seen like that if I was a man. I would probably receive praise for having good leadership skills. I decided to ignore them and plough ahead.

There were some encouraging points during the interviews and group activities. One of the candidates from Zara was getting too involved when we had to work together and did not let other people speak, which I knew wouldn't get seen in a favourable light. Thank God my brother had already stressed the importance of teamwork and playing well with others.

Still, I felt very down after the interview. I had tried to put my best foot forward, but I still felt the competition was too

high. I also knew I would have to wait six months before reapplying. Those were the rules.

When I got the job, I increased my hours and officially became a full-time employee at Primark; I officially left both teaching and the NHS behind.

I was thrilled as it meant a lot more perks and financial security. For one thing, trainee managers received a salary, whereas supervisors were on an hourly rate. My pay went up to £25,000 a year, and it should increase to £27,000 after six months, even if it would mean completing lots of tasks and assessments and undergoing loads of validations in between. If I got through then, I had a brilliant trajectory ahead of me; promotions were six to eight months apart and could mean eventually becoming a department manager, where the pay was £31,000 annually.

Yet no one seemed happy for me. Other staff whispered that I had only become a trainee manager because of my looks and because I had somehow charmed the manager.

Sadly, it wasn't the first time I realised that having a 'pretty face' would mean people would think I only got things by giving sleazy favours. It was a world where you had to get tough fast.

Training?

There was a lot that I had to do once I was in a position as a trainee manager. Despite the word 'trainee' being in my job title, back then, there wasn't any structured training on offer,

and just like when I was in the NHS, you were thrown in the deep end and told not to drown; almost immediately, I received a warning for not reading my emails fast enough from a line manager who terrified everybody. I also got told off for not getting the orders right, despite how little administrative training I'd received. This manager was a stickler for detail, and she had oversight of the entire shop floor in the ladieswear department where I was working, so it was in my interest to try and impress her. I knew she didn't give a damn about how no one had told me what to do on my first day.

I realised I would have to teach myself everything. I arrived between five and six am each day to get things done so that the customers would know every time there was a massive change in the displays.

In my own time, I read the reports, mapped out my movements and workflow and learned how to put together the correct clothing plans, learning how to avoid things like putting leggings with knitwear. I organised my emails and learned how to place orders to replenish any stocks running low.

I also made an effort to show that I knew how to manage the queues of customers waiting at the tills and would do my best to communicate with the managers, highlighting how I was solving problems myself rather than just flagging them to my superiors. I knew I had more to prove than anyone else, and I must overturn people's negative impressions of me, so I pulled out all the stops. I didn't have much work-life balance, as I would often properly start work at 10:30 a.m. and not

finish until 8:30 in the evening. Days off were sporadic and sometimes hard to predict. My job became my whole world.

Even then, I would still get snapped at for minor mistakes, such as not completing my paperwork on time, even when I hadn't received the correct folder of tasks.

During the calmer periods in the afternoons, I would fill in my validation sheets; there were multiple competency questions in each section, and I couldn't skip any of them. The various managers would hassle me about how long I was taking. I tried not to let it make me rush things, as I knew how important it was that it was all done right. Given how little training I received, when I finally got some validation from the other managers, it increased my confidence.

Even when I knew it was clear to them that I was working hard, I still felt it was better to make sure they knew what I was doing rather than for me to assume they knew. I wanted people to know I was responsible, hard-working and, above all, capable.

Tough Times

The Christmas shift I worked in 2017 was formative but one of the most challenging times in my life. When I woke up on Christmas Day, I was already feeling drained from the mad hustle and bustle of the days before, given that in retail, the Christmas period seems to start as early as September. I knew what I was going in for – or at least, I thought I did. My happy band of 15 pre-Christmas 'elves' had been recruited the day

before, and we were all aware that this would be no ordinary shift. They were due to work with me on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and we knew each day would be as hectic as the other.

One of my fellow department managers had also received the delightful Christmas treat of gift-wrapping the whole shop for our charming Boxing Day customers, with 15 elves per 'grotto.' The day had to begin early, as duties included sorting through returns, putting stock out and replenishing the clothing rails, replete with adding festive glitter everywhere by plastering the store with red discount stickers. The discounts were, after all, the main draw for the stampeding horde we were expecting the day after Christmas.

It was so cold I could almost feel my bones rattling as I stood at the store entrance, caressing my orange and nutmeg Christmas coffee in the doomed hope that it would warm me up. I was there to welcome my dear elves as they came in individually. I ticked them off my list: one…two…three...14...15. I paused. There were no more, even though they had promised me 30 elves, including the 15 my fellow manager assigned to him (he took the day off).

I fumbled with my phone, worrying I was in the lurch. My manager replied to my panicked text about what to do with minimal instructions: 'Clear the returns first and then crack on with the rest of the tasks.'

I felt like I was driving a car that had run into a snow drift. There wasn't much time to think about it. I just had to dig myself and my team out.

Yet even with numbers low, the team was in a festive mood. We all smiled, sang and danced as we worked our way through the returns, and eventually, I had to divide the 16 of us across two floors, with eight elves on each floor. We worked solidly until midday when with our hands and calves chafing and our stomachs rumbling, we made our way towards the free lunch Primark had provided.

Alas, there was no turkey with all the trimmings. Instead, we had pizza and chicken, which, while not strictly traditional, was still much appreciated by everyone present. Afterwards, we carried on with the rest of our tasks until 5:30, when I waved the elves goodbye and let them go home to their waiting families.

That was when things got challenging. Looking out onto the shop floor, I realised there was no way I could leave it as it was. It was a mess, and I knew as a trainee manager that I couldn't abandon my post. It needed to look good for the desperate shoppers who would descend on it before long for the Boxing Day sales.

I thought longingly about what my family was doing. I wished to be with them but knew I couldn't cut and run; years in retail taught me that failure was never an option.

I began cutting boxes and frantically gift-wrapping, convinced that my present-making skills, which I had always assumed were good, would see me through.

I was wrong. I persevered and told myself to work harder, praying I might go home in a few hours. Yet the hours continued to flow by, and it felt like the pile in front of me had barely reduced in size. 8 p.m. came and went, my hands were

slashed and bleeding from hacking into too much cardboard, and blisters were throbbing everywhere. At 11 p.m., I got a phone call from Idris, my best friend at work. He was calling to wish me a Merry Christmas.

To his horror, I burst into tears down the phone. He assumed I had gone home hours ago.

Between my sobs, I managed to tell him I was still there. At that moment, he demonstrated why we were friends. He told me to hang on and that he would come in two hours. It was like a sudden jolt of electricity to the heart. The pain and strain of working so hard overwhelmed me, and the feeling that it had all been in vain made it worse. My family had also left me a voice note to say my dinner was in the oven. I longed so much to see them and regretted not Facetiming them on Christmas Day. Not that I could now, even if I'd had time; there had been no chance to plug my phone in all day, and now the battery was on red alert.

When Idris arrived, I did feel like Rudolph had come to my rescue. We toiled away between the two of us, and the box mountain reduced much more quickly. It still took us until 7 a.m., but we had cheesy Christmas music blasting out and a sense of camaraderie due to our many years spent working at Primark together; 24 hours later, I was finally done and free to go.

I trudged home in the freezing weather, exhausted and almost fainting with relief but sad that I had missed Christmas. At least I could leave knowing the store was wrapped and prepped to perfection and that I could look back on a job well done. It was time for me to escape back to

the North Pole, just as the Boxing Day elves were filtering into the store. My head and body ached, my hands throbbed, and I had bruises all over – but I was free. I could finally see my family, who, if they weren't still asleep, might wonder if I was still alive.

I learned a lot that day. For one thing, I should have gotten better at delegating, making sure I wasn't stuck with everything at the end of the day, and having called someone like Idris before he called me! I also should have known when to say 'no' and to know that the day was over. While I know I have a good work ethic, I needed to learn when work had ended and that what mattered the most was to be with my loved ones; it was a learning curve, as always, and I hope I came out of it stronger.

Primark had a policy of giving gift cards to employees who worked hard, and I was awarded one during my time as a trainee manager. Yet the culture around me was toxic, far from supportive and affirming. The mutters and whispers had become more pronounced, with some of my colleagues telling me to my face that I had only got an award because I had slept with one of the male managers. It was pretty disappointing, as I felt like no matter how hard I worked, people assumed any rewards for my efforts were just because of favouritism due to my looks.

I was well aware of the rules around sexual harassment, not least because my promotion meant having to be very familiar with the paperwork on Primark's disciplinary matters. Yet, despite my youth, I was becoming less naïve by the day. I knew that an unkind remark from someone wasn't enough to

see them get suspended, and I would not be able to gather enough evidence. If I complained about the bullying, I would almost certainly be labelled a troublemaker, which was the last thing I needed. Leaving teaching made me think I was through with the immaturity in a primary school environment, yet they still surrounded me in retail. It was a steep learning curve to realise how petty and immature grown men and women could be.

The sexism I faced had other sides to it. My colleagues would complain to my superiors that I had shouted at them, even when I certainly had not, and I quickly got painted as someone ruthless, which I knew came with being a strong woman; if I was a man who told people what to do, my colleagues would probably have been more ready to accept it. Even though they had lied, their bad behaviour and attempt to tarnish me went unpunished. It shouldn't have been a surprise to me. That was often the way at Wood Green.

Still, I became a full-time manager at 26 years old. It was good enough for me, even if it wasn't for anyone else. That would have to do.

I was determined to prove myself. I was learning a lot, and I knew I couldn't just take life easy anymore and that my days of travel and hard partying were at an end, even if only for a while. It was a tough road to travel, but I knew I had to overturn my colleagues' negative views of me and prove to people that I was more than just a pretty face. I hope that makes sense to whoever reads this. Above all, I want people to learn from my experience.

Work hard, and don't let others hold you back.

4. REFUSING TO BE SILENCED

Before long, I flourished as a trainee manager, so much so that I soon became a fully-fledged department manager. I also knew that my time at Wood Green was concluding. I had been there for seven years, having learned a massive amount. I had grown and changed so much as a person. But I knew that I would need to move on if I would ever progress. So in 2017, I became a department manager in Tooting, at the other end of London. I wanted to learn more about the administrative side of the job and be in a smaller store where I would get more support from colleagues and senior staff.

Life outside of work was still limited. Whenever I got a day off, I tried to make the most of it, hanging out with my friends and going to bars, restaurants and the cinema. I tried to pack a lot into these short days and evenings, ensuring I saw three friends concurrently.

Yet as time passed, I started to feel more distant from them. They had pursued very different careers from me. One was a teacher, another worked in the headquarters of Lloyds bank, while another worked in government for one of the local authorities. They complained that they never saw me.

They were right, but it wasn't just that. None of them was thrilled when I said I was joining Primark full-time. They knew full well that every woman had to eat and pay the bills

and that their partners and children needed feeding if they had them, but they couldn't respect someone who made a career somewhere like Primark. To them, it was the McDonalds of the retail world, and it was bewildering to them why anyone would turn a job designed to earn a bit of cash to see them through their student days into a full-time job, a career even. They felt what Primark sold was cheap, and they told me so. They couldn't understand why I worked there, given that I had a degree. Never mind that many of the senior staff in Primark had degrees and that it offered the best retail management salaries, higher than any of the more upmarket brands.

We were also at different stages in life. My friends had left university and had generally started their careers around the age of 24. My route through had been more complicated due to having changed my mind about teaching. I was only beginning to find my feet, which meant I'd had to start from the bottom and work my way up, proving myself to secure each promotion when they were already a few years in and more settled. I loved them and still do, but they were snobby about my choices and didn't seem to understand what good prospects Primark could offer.

At least my family were pleased about my promotion, not least because I was starting to pay back my student loan. They similarly complained that they hardly ever saw me. Perhaps they had a point. I was living with them, but we had all grown up with my dad's unsociable hours working as a chef, so they should have been used to it. Thankfully they

could see that I wasn't drifting and that I was starting to sense what I wanted from the future.

Rising High

After four years in Tooting, my confidence improved hugely. I was getting many things done on time, and I realised I was worth more than what I had. I knew I had potential and could succeed.

A vacancy came up for a senior department manager. It was in Kingston, southwest London, which would mean a much further commute from my home in east London. But I wanted to learn more and keep progressing, so I applied.

Like the interview for the trainee manager position, I was extremely nervous when I went for the job in Kingston – even more so, as I knew the stakes were higher. Yet I got it.

The senior manager in Tooting, a colleague I had often had a challenging relationship with, was shocked. However, I initially thought he didn't know, so when I got the news, I decided to be the more grown-up one out of the two of us. I went to knock on his door and tell him. It turned out he already knew.

His reaction wasn't quite what I had hoped for. He told me I got angry too quickly and that my attitude needed to change, or I wouldn't get far. I knew he would not have said that to me if I was a man. I decided not to let it get to me.

I also shouldn't have been surprised. It's always been hard for female employees at Primark to become store managers,

which is still the case, even though it's changed a bit. Attitudes can be hard to shift, and many senior staff members don't want to promote women lest they go off and have kids. They don't say it quite like that, but everyone knows that's what they think.

HQ policy has admittedly become a lot more focused on diversity and inclusion. They talk a lot about equal rights and about needing to recruit more women and have been open about that. The two chief directors at Primark are now a woman and a man when ten years ago, the managers and area directors were all men; this inspires me and gives me hope.

Yet there are still some considerable attitude problems among the men at Primark, and they go deep. It's not enough to make a few announcements about equality and inclusion. It won't change the sorts of things I experienced.

Wherever I've worked in Primark, men have made me feel like I'm not strong enough to get the job done, especially when I've been in a leadership position. One man even told me that a guy never likes being told what to do by a woman! One woman at his level used to mutter that everything always had to be his way, not theirs. It's remarkable to hear such things in the 21st century, but I did.

I've never doubted that if I was a man, I wouldn't have to put up with half the nonsense that I do, particularly around being seen just as pretty and dumb. It's a challenging culture there, and any abuse or harassment has to be kept to yourself most of the time. No one told me, but I knew I had to put up with it to progress. So I did.

Life at Kingston was different, but it contained many of the same challenges as life in Wood Green and Tooting. Fairly soon after I arrived, I had to try and de-escalate a situation where a customer complained about one of my colleagues. By that point, the Covid-19 pandemic had hit, and the customer in question had mistakenly thought that our extended refund policy had been so for a much longer time than she thought. I had to deal with it, as my colleague found the customer too hard to handle, given that they wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Long story short, she responded to my intervention by calling me a dog and bitch.

Moments like that were some of the lowest of my career. Putting up with customer abuse was one thing, but dealing with it from colleagues was something else entirely. I often encountered colleagues with mental health problems and suicidal tendencies, and Primark's had a limited way of dealing with them. There were, and still are, policies and procedures for dealing with incidents. Colleagues can get slapped with a misconduct charge and offered counselling. They can receive discipline if there is no progress, but people are challenging to sack, no matter how badly they behave. It was one of the reasons I knew a sexual harassment allegation from me wouldn't go anywhere. It's also hard to discuss incidents with line managers, as such meetings should be confidential, but no one is naïve enough to think they are. If it gets out that you 'gossiped,' then it can end up ruining your relationship with your colleagues. It hardly matters if you have every right to complain.

I should probably stress that 90% of the people working in the more junior roles at Primark are loyal and dedicated and bring everything they have to their jobs. It's only a minority that comes in with attitude problems and thinks their managers want to undermine them rather than support them. It's not just Primark. I'm confident this is a phenomenon across the retail industry.

Regardless, I felt very positive about moving to Kingston. I already knew I wanted to become an area manager or a director in retail within the next ten years, and my passion for retail had only increased since I had decided to make a career in Primark the focus of my ambitions. Kingston was often considered one of the best Primark stores in south London, and I wanted to keep it that way, ensuring we provided a brilliant service for those who walked through our doors while staying within our budget.

Before long, the director at Kingston praised my floor, telling me he was happy with my work. After years of working three times as hard to get noticed, I felt shocked, I tell you! He even suggested I eventually move to another store where I could find space to progress to assistant manager; this happened in my first week. It was bewildering that it came after another colleague called me a dog and a bitch.

The good times resumed for a while; I continued to get a lot of 'well done's from my boss, which kept me going whenever I had a difficult day. I was also on brilliant money, with my pay now £37,000 annually.

That said, I knew it was important to stay modest. I never wanted the salary increase to go to my head and lead me to

treat my friends and family differently. Seeing everyone as an equal, no matter their job or gender or background, is crucial to me, as I didn't always get treated with such fairness.

Yet the promotion has also taught me that sometimes I should be selfish. People expect women to be subservient and modest, never telling the world about their ambitions. I knew there were times when I had to focus on myself and not be naïve enough to assume that my dreams would come true from people recognising me without my forcing them to. I had to earn and prove them, and that's what I did.

There have been lots of highs and lows on this unfinished journey. It took a lot to get here, and sometimes I wasn't sure if I would make it through. I don't just want my friends and family to know that. I want people who walk into every branch of Primark to know.

5. A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

Customers complain every single day in every branch I've worked in. All customers and their concerns are equal, but some complaints are 'more equal' than others!

There have been some real perks to regularly dealing with difficult people. It's certainly made me grow as a person. I value the confidence I've gained from my experiences, as they are the sorts of things you wouldn't find in other places of work. My skills at de-escalating violent situations have even come in handy outside of work. Recently I was at a tube station and saw two people getting into a fight. I managed to jump in and stop it. I feel that the ability to speak out and manage challenging relationships has made me what I am, and that wouldn't have happened if I didn't work at Primark.

However, some customer interactions have been so awful that I know they should never have happened.

Days Like These

A memorable one came about very recently. I had to deal with someone who wanted a refund, as many do; however, the customer's clothing tag didn't have a receipt with it, and the

lack of a 'Kimble' number meant that she couldn't claim it. Initially, she kept getting angry with my colleague, but when I intervened, she called me a bitch. Thankfully other customers backed me up when I called in the security guard.

I've had customers throw underwear in my face after I've explained that such items can't come back to us for hygiene reasons. It's common to get people flailing their hands at me when they're angry and talking to me as though I'm one of their servants. People seem to assume that retail workers receive crap salaries and that earning more than us gives them the right to treat us with contempt. It made me vow never to consider myself superior to anyone else, even if I think or know that they receive worse wages than me.

Strangely women tend to be worse customers than men. Most of the verbal abuse I've received has been from women, and in the process, they often mess up the display tables whenever they look for items, throwing things on the floor as they try and grab from the piles in the middle, believing that's where the cleanest clothes are.

The men can be pretty bad in their way. We get many fights in Primark, and some managers get punched trying to break them up. I got threatened once by a man who told me to 'come outside' and settle things with fists. He wouldn't leave and repeatedly tried to headbutt me and swing his trolley at me. I started to get even more scared that he might try and follow me home. Another man grabbed a clothes bar and hit one of the security guards with it.

There's not much choice. As managers, it's our job to deal with such incidents. If kids begin videoing them on their

phones, we have to report it, and if the circumstance becomes life-threatening, we can call the police. I've been in situations where I could press charges and take people to court. I've tended to opt against it, as I know the process for getting justice will take too long.

It has varied from branch to branch. In Wood Green, I saw violence in the store every day. Now that I'm in Kingston, a more affluent area, I only witness a punch-up about twice a month. It's telling that the police in Wood Green used to arrive within five to 10 minutes whenever we called. In Kingston, it can take up to two hours.

We don't get much support. In Wood Green, it used to feel like I was living in a combat zone, but people never did much beyond asking me if I was all right. If an incident took place, I would take a 15-minute break to calm down and get the anger and fear out of my system, away from the shop floor. There's a retail hub that provides counselling, and the staff there are helpful.

Things are different now that I'm not just a supervisor. If the more junior staff members get emotional, it's the manager's job to take them upstairs and calm them down. I often try to teach strategies and techniques to help them cope. Challenging customers can tell if supervisors aren't confident, and a situation can get out of control if they panic and call in a manager. My job is to help them be confident and to threaten to call a security guard immediately if a customer is rude without getting emotional in front of them. If they escalate a complaint against a customer, the buck must stop

with senior managers, not going all the way up to senior department managers.

Things can get just as unpleasant between colleagues, and it's my job to mediate when they do. Recently one colleague told another to go and work on the tills, but she refused the instruction, claiming she had chest pains that meant the employee couldn't scan things as quickly as she needed to. My solution was to show her that she needed to follow her supervisor's instructions, but she needed to balance being efficient with taking the time she needed. Eventually, everyone was on the same page. I've learned that if you don't nip things in the bud, they go further up the chain of command, which is when things get complicated. Nobody wants that.

It's been hard, but it's a career path that has taught me a lot. I get angry very quickly, but I've had to learn how to manage and process that, learning with time how to 'work myself through.' Even in my personal life, I've succeeded at getting both sides of an argument to be mutual. An example from not long ago was when one of my friends got angry with me. We had arranged to meet up on one of my rare days off. I had completely forgotten that I'd agreed to do that. When it turned out I had blanked, my friend got very angry.

I was frustrated at her impatience and felt she was wrong to be so upset with me. However, I reasoned that it was better to avoid a row. Instead, I decided to try and be mature and apologised, which was the right decision. Massive arguments never get you anywhere, even if you're right. I used to be the first to argue, but I'm far less confrontational now. It's definitely for the best.

In many ways, I shouldn't have needed to learn these skills. The general public doesn't seem to know what it's like if you work in retail. Indeed, you do not know most of the reality unless you work in this world – but it still staggers me how some people lack basic decency.

My friends have sometimes been rude to staff working in retail, and they have sheepishly admitted this to me. We all come from similar backgrounds, and the problem is that they don't realise that a branch of Primark isn't like a shop run by their dad. Staff are bound to follow company policy, so it's rarely their fault if customers disagree with what they're told.

No one ever seems to speak publicly about this. There's never been an expose in the media that I know of, perhaps because we all know in any retail store that we need customers to come, or else we'll be out of a job! But I want more customers to understand our feelings and be more empathetic. We get emotional when we have to take with abuse, just like anyone else would. That's one of the reasons I wanted to do this book.

Despite my strong nature, some of the worst times with customers have overwhelmed me. One customer stooped so low as to curse me and tell me they hoped I would never have kids. Others would say they wished I had a bad day, while someone else said that they hoped I would drop dead. Both hurt and made me feel very down, especially as I know people who wish to get pregnant but can't.

No matter how tempted I am to push back, I know I can't. It would just make things worse. I have to be polite and

professional and learn how to deal with the abuse in stages so it doesn't escalate.

I know my experiences will resonate with many working in retail – yet I think there is something different about Primark. I don't want to sound derogatory, but our stores tend to attract people from largely working-class backgrounds.

It's the world I come from, and I don't want to run it into the ground. But it's clear that many people who come to Primark live on benefits and are used to being aggressive with everyone to get their way. They think the staff are the same. It's not like that in a place like Zara. If people wait 25 minutes in a queue at a branch of Zara, you will never hear anyone call for more staff on the tills. In Primark, they will outright demand it and get angry if it doesn't happen.

I've sometimes toyed with applying for a management position somewhere like Zara, but the pay is lower. Whichever way you look at it, Primark offers the best retail management salaries – possibly as compensation for all the shit we have to put up with.

I don't just want this to sound negative. Despite the bullying from customers and colleagues, I've kept a pure heart and not let it make me bitter. It's also made me even more dedicated to letting women know they can face liberation. My story should show that.

6. LOVE AND LOSS

Whenever I faced hardships in my career, I became stronger. My personal life was a different story. I was 28 before I entered my first relationship. I was unusual in my peer group, as most of my friends had been in various relationships since they had hit puberty. Men who had asked me out before would often leave disappointed, as I often couldn't see a future with them and didn't want to lead them on. Guys would curse me if I rejected them, with one claiming he could make me happy because he had money!

So many of them wanted to know me, but I always said no. That was until my heart said yes.

The One

This guy wasn't just attractive to me, although being six foot tall with dark hair certainly helped. He could make me laugh and make me feel safe. I was still reserved during our talking and flirting phase as I had been used to friends rejecting me and still wanted to guard my heart. Gradually, he was able to get me to open up.

There were some differences between us. For instance, I've always liked listening to country music, whereas this man

prefers heavy metal. Although he played me some, I found it too loud and aggressive. Whenever I saw his home, I would be struck by how tidy he was and how much he liked things to be dimly lit. I far preferred being messy and having bright lights on all the time.

I'm also quite talkative, whereas he was reserved. When we went out, I was the one who tended to socialise, and he would leave me to do the talking. Whenever we did things just the two of us, we would go out to the pub on Ealing Broadway near where he lived and visit the zoo, principally so that I could indulge my love of giraffes. We saw each other about once or twice a week, so it didn't impact my working life too much.

There were some surprising aspects to him, given that he was six years older than me – such as how he got insecure whenever I spoke to other men. I thought he was beyond that. Thankfully that was the only time he seemed jealous. Mostly, he was encouraging, non-judgmental and a good listener. Although we argued like any other couple, we had much love to give each other, and that was our foundation.

After four years together, I was feeling content. We didn't live together, but I was keen to get married, and he was willing. Yet we had problems, primarily due to his insecurities worsening. He kept saying how much other people fancied me, which was true, but it wasn't like I ever led them on.

The day after we had bickered a lot, I suddenly got a text. He said he no longer wanted to be with me. He had dumped me. The last time I heard from him was in December 2021.

I was utterly heartbroken. It had been a significant step for me to trust, as I often find it hard to trust anyone; one person I used to regard as a friend lied to me about having cancer. I hated it, as I wished she had just been honest with me. It gave me trust issues. When I got a boyfriend, I thought that it was a sign from God that my days of having to keep people at arm's length were over. If we had stayed together, I would have wanted to get married and have kids, two things I knew I wanted. I would even have wanted to move out of London if it came to it – something I would typically have never considered.

My family have never commented on my love life or how I dress. However, they have always wanted me to get married. Growing up, I loved how nice the white wedding dresses of brides-to-be looked, and I would imagine myself wearing one as I played with my dolls. I nursed a desire to get married on a beautiful Greek island. I realised later that my ex-boyfriend had never shared that ambition. Perhaps we were never destined to be a good match, no matter how right it felt, to begin with.

Things were pretty bleak afterwards. The day after he dumped me, I called in sick to work for the first time ever. I became anxious, sleep-deprived and unable to eat. I lost weight, causing my friends and family to become very worried. My sister and brother were hugely supportive, but I learnt how crippling heartbreak could be. The relationship had 'red flags' from the beginning, but it's always far easier to spot that with other people.

Having Faith

I've rebuilt myself, which has given me time and space to reflect on what's important to me. My faith is a big deal to me. My ex was an atheist, and although I never forced my views on him, I would have liked to share religious beliefs. Although I'm from a Muslim family, I don't go to the mosque, having only been once my whole life. I also don't do Friday prayers. I wouldn't necessarily say I'm 'religious,' but I believe in Allah and His goodness.

I've learned to trust my judgment a lot more. As I've found it hard to trust people, I've tended to limit my circle of friends, which means I've become more self-reliant. I was a lot louder and more outgoing when I was younger, spending money on stupid, materialistic things and clubbing all the time. Now I'm more inclined to save my money, given that I want to buy a home one day; it's even at the point where my family are trying to get me to go out more!

I like to think we're all pretty close-knit. I have nine siblings, who all have kids, so I at least get to spoil my ten nieces and nephews. I get to be the 'cool aunt' who buys them all the best clothes and toys. My siblings always struck the right balance between encouraging and supporting me and not being too protective. They always gave me the confidence to play with their children, which I think is what made me try out teaching in the first place; even if that wasn't the path I ultimately took, I still learned good life skills.

My parents were just as relaxed with how they raised me. My mother was religious, but my father wasn't. I had freedom and could wear what I wanted. Many of my other friends had more devout upbringings, which I sometimes think, in moderation, might have been good for me. I always felt like they had a bit more guidance in their lives than I did.

My dad's demanding job as a chef in a French restaurant meant he wasn't around much. He tried to be there when he could be, but I always wanted more attention from him. He came to significant events like university graduations, and with time I felt like I got to know him more and accepted him for who he was. I didn't have a relationship with him for a long time. As the youngest, I relied on my two middle brothers for that. They always knew how to bring me out of myself and get me to open up even when I was keeping my feelings in.

I have a great relationship with my mum. She's always been a housewife, and her English is limited, so I've often talked to her in broken Bengali. She doesn't know how the world works, but she's always wanted to learn more. We share secrets and bits of advice.

Given that both my parents are from Bangladesh, it's crucial to know where I came from, although it doesn't interest me hugely beyond that. I want my kids to learn about their grandparents and the world they left behind.

The last 12 months have been a very testing time. My ex was my first partner, and he made many promises I had trusted he would follow through with. I believed them, and it still hurts me that he wasn't mine forever. Despite this, and

going around daily with a broken heart, I have continued to be involved by focusing on my career. Again, I'd like people to know that success and recovery are possible, even after a loss.

7. A LIFE IN FASHION

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant uncertain times for employees at Primark. The company has been making people redundant and, as a result, making some supervisors become senior managers before they are ready. Managers keen to avoid redundancy get asked to work more flexible, often longer, hours without additional pay. Many people don't want the extra responsibility.

'Restructuring' has become a word of doom for lots of us. Primark is reordering the hierarchies in its stores and cutting back on senior managers. Depending on the outcome of my yearly review, I know that I may lose my job or get demoted. There are unions involved in negotiations, but it may not be enough to stop me from at least being demoted, with my pay going from £37,000 a year to £28,000. I know I've scored well in all my evaluations, but everyone around me is on edge. It's hard for me to stomach the genuine possibility that all my hard work might soon be for nothing – especially as I've seen plenty of people get good scores even when they're crap. It's difficult to avoid becoming angry and frustrated.

The question of what I would do if made redundant is daunting, but I know there could be upsides; there's the safer option of applying for a job in a retail head office. But I could also try and do what I've always wanted.

I still think about the dream I've had for a long time about being a personal assistant at Harrods or Selfridges, becoming a social media influencer and having a clothing line. I may have become used to the everyday grind, but deep down, I'm still that kid that loves fashion and dressing up more than anything. At university, I enjoyed dressing up, and whenever I posted anything on my Instagram feed, I got lots of positive comments about my style. Since working in Primark, I realised I had a knack for giving colleagues advice about what to wear – which I like to think was no small achievement in the style-conscious world of retail. It wasn't even me offering it – I would often get asked, which made me feel good.

I tend to go shopping with friends and family now and advise them about what they can wear that will bring out their best qualities. It's important to me that everyone has a style that suits them. It's not clear how I would achieve these dreams; I know I would need more experience to get a job somewhere like Harrods, as it means dressing up as a millionaire! It might sound strange, given how I'm only in my 30s, but I often worry that I'm too old to chase such a dream; I know some of my Instagram heroes, like Carly B, have started younger, and youngsters on social media look up to people like that.

I also know I want to save to buy a place and that making an Instagram career take-off would be challenging and tiring. Whenever I have any downtime, I want to relax and not think about how I will make a side hustle become a career. Yet people keep telling me I have a brilliant dress sense, and even

one of my managers at work said it was worth pursuing my dream. So it hasn't died.

Being working class is a challenge. I know I could continue being an assistant manager while building a presence on Instagram and YouTube, but that's no guarantee of success, and I'm worried all the hard work might not lead anywhere. Everyone in the fashion industry should have a chance, regardless of background, and there should be less nepotism and favouritism. It feels as though influencers like Stacy Solomon from *Love Island* get picked for everything because of already have a profile. It doesn't seem like there's space for any new faces. That, and there's the fact I've had people tell me I would get too much hate if I became a professional Youtuber.

Still, I often imagine the kind of clothing line I would have. It would be simple and elegant, taking after brands like Zara and including alternate styles like satin dresses, bodycon dresses, and clothes that can be tight-fitting for skinny and curvy people. Above all, I want women to wear clothes that make them like themselves and feel empowered, rather than just wearing baggy things and helping them cover themselves up. Clothes can make everyone look beautiful, whoever they are, and I want a line that can do that. Thinking about it makes me feel as though I'm pursuing something just for myself, which was something I wish I had learned a lot sooner.

If I Only Knew Then

If I could go back and tell my younger self to do things differently, I would say to not listen to other people so much and to go for something if I desired or needed to. Too often, people try to hold me back, and I want the key message of my story for anyone reading this book to be that you know yourself more than anyone else. Only you know what you want, so don't let other people drag you down, but at the same time, don't always blame others if you don't get ahead. If your mindset needs to change to get ahead, then change it.

Whatever the future holds, the things I've learned will stay with me. Primark is far from perfect but empowers me in many ways, such as allowing me to mix with people of different backgrounds and age groups with whom I had no prior experience. My school was mostly made up of kids from black and Asian backgrounds, with a few that were white. I never got to spend much time around people from Eastern Europe.

At Primark, many of my colleagues have come from places like Poland and Hungary. Whenever I go for drinks with them after work, I enjoy hearing about their experiences and realise how hard-working they are. Many have told stories about arriving in London with little English and working up to where they can save money and buy properties. They are the people who have made Primark worth being in. They inspire me.

My non-Primark friends challenge me; they sometimes make remarks about Primark being unethical and using modern slavery in their supply chains. I try to rebut this, pointing out that the organisation does a lot for charity and that many videos show the training courses and sustainable cotton projects they do with colleagues in Bangladesh. They have also sponsored initiatives in Ukraine since the war with Russia began. I know the company tries to update the staff on the ethical side of things because of the criticism. Certain Primark branches get £2,000 annually to give to a local charity, and the other staff members know what happens to the money.

That said, I do see protesters outside Primark sometimes. I don't always know enough to counter what they say or what my friends say. Yet I know things are never as simple as people believe. There is always more going on below the surface. I want people to think that about me, so I try to extend that thought to everything I see – including where I work.

Life after work is just as important. Whenever things feel too negative, I try to focus on how there is always something exciting to do with people I care about. There is bowling, bars and restaurants. There is gin, pasta and country music. I see the good things around me and know I made it happen.

You can, too. That's my gift to you.

StoryTerrace