

BORIS HILLEN

AGFA LEVERKUSEN

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“I know you don’t like stories, but maybe you don’t need any. Memories are shit, of course, but stories keep life intact. Sometimes, when you’re in deep, a good story is the only thing that can help.”

J. Fauser

“... one man’s mundane and desperate existence is another man’s Technicolor”

Strange Days

What Kishone loved most was the moment when the developer in the bath began to reveal the outlines of the photo-to-be. He leaned down, so as to see better in the dim light of the darkroom. He was now so close to the tray that the chemical fumes tickled his nose. The images were spectacular, the Ilford barite paper giving the day a radiance that mere reality could never have managed. Apart from that radiance, everything was just as he had remembered it: the bright red of the marquee, the sky’s deep blue, the yellow garlands, the tender pink blossoms hiding the groom’s face. The bride’s gown glittered, catching the sunlight in its gold and silver embroidery, so that Kishone was almost sure he could breathe in the smells of the celebration. There were the fragrant sandalwood and the heavy oils with which the women had scented themselves, contrasting with the sharp bite of the woodsmoke and the smells of the livestock in the streets. He could even smell the water in the lake, if he concentrated. And now the sounds joined in as well: the melodious mantras, the women’s laughter, the muted murmur of the men and yells of the children.

Kishone lifted the picture from the bath and rubbed his fingers along a particular spot to highlight the folds in the sari of one of the flower girls. Having done so, he marvelled once more at the image. A photograph, he thought, that no great Western photographer—with the possible exception of David Bailey—could have taken better. He dipped it into the fixer and gently began to move the tray, watching the liquid play around the paper in little waves. The fixer bath was the most important. The most beautiful moment might become spotty and cracked if one did not know how to use the fixer bath properly.

But Kishone’s moments would last decades. He was satisfied with himself and his work; he felt pride when he looked at the prints he had made. His clientele, however, was now faced with a drawback – one so significant that, if Kishone did not change something, and soon, would leave him without a single client, because as perfect as Kishone’s pictures were to him, to the obsessively forward-thinking backwaters of Rajasthan they were no more than black and white.

Up until a few months ago, his *Luckystudio*, the store he had set up a ways away from the bustle of the bazaar, had been running smoothly. If someone in Pushkar was holding a celebration—which

they did often—they would also want that celebration eternalised in photographs. And Kishone, ever since returning from Panjim, where he had learned the craft of photography from the bottom of Palmira Coutinho's *Hollywood Studio* up, was unsurpassed at making moments eternal. He was better, with his twin-lens Rolleiflex and used Canon F1, than the photographers in Ajmer, with their old Leica copies, the Reid I's and Reid III's from the time of the Raj. Word had got around quickly.

Up until a short while ago, they had travelled from Ajmer to his shop in person to request his services. They had called from Jaipur and Jodhpur. Kishone was photographer, salesman, developer and delivery person in one. He had been raised in the Hindu faith, but was—a rare thing in Rajasthan—an agnostic at heart. That substantially simplified certain business questions: Kishone had made a part of his humble fortune by photographing friends dressed up as gods or standing in religious poses. He framed these in gold and sold them, under the counter, as images of the Brahma, Jehova, Allah, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, and whatever else these gods and incarnations called themselves. It was a lucrative line of work in Pushkar, the city of four hundred temples, but trade virtually exploded once he added the elephant-headed Ganesha to his repertoire. The stricter the religious prohibition on images, the hungrier the faithful were for photographs—and the more they paid. It all went swimmingly, until one day the police had arrived and threatened to close down his business unless he ceased all such blasphemy and also made 50 large prints of the police squad, proudly posing behind their dilapidated emergency vehicle, an old Hindustan Ambassador.

Kishone did not resist. He was not a rebellious man. He had earned enough with his holy images, and who knew what future good it might do not to have taxed the gods' patience too much.

And then, about half a year ago, Kishone had encountered the first sign that the golden days might not last forever. A tourist had called his attention to a copy of *Time* magazine in which the editors offered the unfathomable sum of ten thousand dollars to anyone who managed to show photographic evidence of the traditional Indian rope trick. Kishone showed the clipping to Amitabh.

“They want the classic deal? Start to finish?”

“That is how I read it.”

Amitabh squatted back down to continue working on his motorcycle.

“With all the trimmings? A screaming mob, a fakir attractive like Amitabh Bachchan, assistant included, battle against the powers of darkness, rain of bloody limbs, that sort of thing?”

“That would be good.”

Amitabh scratched his beard.

“Where's the problem?”

The traditional Indian rope trick is an illusion. A fakir, accompanied by a boy, appears in a village square. Soon he is surrounded by onlookers, whom he keeps interested with harmless sleight of hand. Once he has warmed up his audience, he announces that they will now see the high point of his performance: the Indian rope trick. He takes a thick rope from a sack or basket and, with all sorts of magical to-do and grand gestures, throws it into the air, where, to the audience's astonishment, it stretches even into the clouds and remains standing, immobile. At his master's word, the boy climbs up the rope until he can no longer be seen. Since the boy ignores the calls to climb back down, his master grows angry, and climbs up the rope himself, knife between his teeth, until he too has disappeared. Not long, and the audience hears a dreadful scream, and the heavens begin to rain down bloody limbs: the boy's arms, legs, torso and finally his head. The people are aghast. Speechless, they watch the fakir climb back down, collect the scattered limbs and place them back in his basket.

This done, the fakir shuts the basket, crosses his legs and sits down next to it. He now enters a trance, out of which he begins to murmur enchantments and magic spells. Finally—now back on his

feet—he gives the basket a kick, and out of it crawls the boy, still somewhat disoriented, but otherwise in one piece, whole and healthy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the respected politician Seward H. Williams caused something of a stir in the US when he reported having personally witnessed such a performance. On 18 August 1890, the *Chicago Tribune* in turn reported that two men, among them one Fred S. Ellmore, had photographed the procedure, but that the developed pictures showed only the fakir's rope lying on the ground. The *Tribune* therefore concluded firstly that the fakir must have hypnotised his public and secondly that the entire business must be an illusion. Thus far the theory.

Kishone and Amitabh's first step was to get Robert Mulder in on their plans. Mulder was a retired colonel in the Royal Navy and had been running an art studio in Ajmer. They promised him three hundred dollars cash and a case of the best Scotch money could buy should they succeed—and he agreed. Then, they visited Hritik Kahn, an old fakir whose days of glory, it was said, had been during Gandhi's childhood, but who could now be booked for children's birthday parties and other family events. They agreed to meet the next morning at the great staircase at the lake into the waters of which the faithful would lunge for their ritual bath during the camel festival. The concrete platform directly next to the water was the perfect stage, they had decided, and the light would be ideal a little before midday.

That morning saw Amitabh slowly steering his heavily laden motorcycle through the bazaar, followed by Kishone, who was on foot and weighed down, in his turn, with flyers which beckoned "Come and see the miracle" in red marker. It did not need any more than that to cause the curious—mostly idlers and children—to join them. When they reached the lake, some hundred people had already gathered there, and soon the crowd had tripled, so that they paid several men twenty rupees each to keep the platform clear enough to give the fakir a place to work.

When, half an hour late, Hritik Kahn finally appeared, Kishone began to take pictures. He had fifteen rolls of film in his bag. First he recorded the doddering old man heaving the basket onto the platform, then he documented how the fakir unrolled his carpet and began to play the flute. In the minutes it took Amitabh to screw together the rusty poles on which Hritik Kahn would later hang the rope from his basket, Kishone took no photographs.

And then it was time. Hritik Kahn's rope reached up out of the heavy basket, and from a distance of more than twenty metres only a very observant person would have been able to tell that it was held up by poles. Hritik Kahn then began to climb the rope. As a young man, that might once have been an easy task for him, but now he groaned so loudly that Kishone feared the fakir's strength would leave him halfway up. But after three minutes, Hritik Kahn clung to the top of his swaying rope, with the heavy stand in the basket creaking dangerously, and actually managed to pull his weathered sword from his belt cloth and hack at the sky a few tired times. Kishone snapped shot after shot. From below, the veins on Hritik Kahn's thin legs shimmered like blue snakes; one could see his member dangling under the loincloth.

Then it was done. What did it matter that the audience felt cheated, that it was booing as loudly as its lungs would allow? Hritik Kahn had fulfilled his role, and, breathing heavily, he took his hard-earned fee of two hundred rupees. As he drank his lemonade in the shade, Kishone photographed a boy who had, for the price of two Coca-Cola bottles, agreed to climb up the rope as well.

A week later, Bob Mulder delivered his results, and however drunk the Englishman might be, the quality of his work was entrancing. From within his doctored photographs one could hear the sound of a flute as an astonishingly young Hritik Kahn, surrounded by an amazed crowd, caused the rope to grow up out of the basket until it stood, tall and straight as tree, unsupported. The next set of pictures showed the young Salman clambering up the rope—Mulder had changed nothing here—until he disappeared in the heavens. Now came Hritik Kahn's grand performance. The sabre at his hip bent in a terrifying arc, he set about investigating his helper's mysterious disappearance in airy heights. Unable to make sense of it, he grew angry. Some occult power must be involved, some

power of evil he could not simply ensnare with his flute, some power that must be destroyed. Gritting his teeth, Hritik Kahn held onto the rope with his left hand. His right drew the gleaming sabre from his belt and began to part the sky with broad strokes of the sword, until it was raining bloody limbs—arms, legs, torso, and finally Salman’s head, eyes wide in terror.

“Mulder has outdone himself”, Amitabh said when Kishone showed him the pictures in his workshop. “He even adjusted the shadows. I never would have thought to do that, but now that I see it...” He nodded his head from side to side admiringly. “We should add another bottle of Scotch. These are perfect. The Americans will have to agree. How are they going to give us the money? Will they send a cheque?”

Time magazine sent no cheque. Two months after he had brought the envelope to the post office, Kishone held the pictures in his hands again. One Rose Buttermaker, after first praising their quality, drew his attention to the fact that, unfortunately, the contest was limited exclusively and indeed explicitly to colour photographs. And in any case, she closed by saying, a lake does not seem to us a suitable background for the Indian Rope Trick.

“The *Time* magazine contest was only for colour photographs.”

“Yes.” Amitabh polished the silver tank of a motorcycle. From some distance away, a tourist was photographing the motorcycles arrayed outside Amitabh’s workshop.

“What do you mean, yes?”

“I was aware of that, it was in the article.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? You know I do not do any colour work.”

“I thought you had seen it.”

The tourist walked over to ask whether he could take some photos from closer up. Amitabh nodded.

“And even if I had read it! Not a single question about methods and techniques, no amazement at the authenticity of these pictures! Colour, colour, colour, that is all that interests them. They would prefer a picture of flies swarming around shit to my work, if the shit was brown enough.”

“These motorbikes are fantastic”, the tourist said and pointed to the closest one in the line. “This one, what is it?”

“A Royal Enfield Bullet 500”, Amitabh said.

“What is it about this colour world that people think is so worth capturing? The sun is yellow, the grass is green, the water is blue. Where is the room for imagination? Why do they need to prove to themselves what they already know or what they could come up with on their own just as well, if not better?”

Again, the tourist spoke up: “I mean, what year, how old is the machine?”

“It’s a 73”, said Amitabh.

“How seductive the veiled woman in a dance, and then how disillusioning the facts when the veil is dropped! All the senses, every opening in the body, every single sensitive pore with which an observer absorbs the black and white work of art, they are all plastered shut with colour!”

“I am not so sure about that part with the body openings”, Amitabh said.

The tourist gave a perplexed frown. “And, this one, what year is that?”

“A 68.”

“A colour photograph does not smell like sandalwood or rose oil. It does not have any smell at all! An absence of smell, like a hunting tiger, a piece of plastic, a piece of nothing! Colour is for the pricks in Bollywood.”

“The red is my favorite”, the tourist said.

“Probably colour was invented for films in the first place! For these lousy films in which the director beats the audience over the head with colour, kitsch, and sound until they do not know what to think anymore. The American films are not any better, just think of *Doctor Zhivago*. You remember when we saw that one? A dreadful creation, the worst kind of romantic trash, every role miscast. Dozy-looking Omar Sharif as Zhivago, and Geraldine Chapman, who is just living off her father’s fame, and Alec Guinness. He is making science fiction now, you know? But how good was *Our man in Havana*, and that one is black and white.”

“I think you are exaggerating”, said Amitabh.

“I have a bike at home too!”

“Good for you”, said Amitabh.

The tourist hesitated. “It’s a BMW.”

“Good for you”, said Amitabh.

“And look at this!” Kishone pulled the crumpled piece of *Time* magazine stationery from his pocket. “... *a lake does not seem to us a suitable background for the Indian Rope Trick*. The nerve of these people!”

Amitabh took the letter from Kishone’s hands and smoothed it. “But here they praise your photographs.”

“That is America, that does not mean anything. I could have sent them a blurred picture of a turtle taking a shit and they would have praised it.”

“But imagine Rose Buttermaker sitting there while she is writing rejection letters”, Amitabh said. “She is at least thirty-five, still unmarried, starting to wilt. Bland like American food, sexually frustrated, and outside it is raining and forty-five degrees. Considering what she has to live with, the letter is acceptable.”

Kishone gave a pained smile.

“You need a whisky”, Amitabh said. He pulled Kishone into his workshop and locked the gate in the face of the tourist who had made to follow them in. The two of them drank, while Kishone continued to bemoan his plight, into the late night. Eventually, Kishone slipped off his chair. Amitabh placed him on a blanket in the middle of the room. It would have been no more than a few minutes to Kishone’s house by foot, but, with such political upheaval in the air, there were better ideas than being out after curfew with a drunk person.

Today, six months later, Kishone saw himself at the lowest point yet in his career.

“Your photographs are in colour, of course”, Akbar Darshan, the bride’s father, had said after Kishone had spent the entire day in search of the best light, the best motif, the best vantage points; after he had sweated through three shirts, turned down an order for passport photos, and shot seventeen rolls of film. *In colour, of course*, as if it were a mere rhetorical observation. How arrogant could Darshan be? *Of course* his pictures were *not* in colour, there was no way for them to be *in colour, of course* because they transported more than a mere copy of the present. What great photographer, if he were not forced to, would work in colour? Manuel Alvarez Bravo? Edward Weston? Granted, perhaps David Bailey, but David Bailey was a god! The finger with which he depressed the shutter release of his camera was of gleaming gold! In this world, the most beautiful women of three generations threw their nude bodies at his feet, and it would be no different in the next world. A god had his own laws.

Naturally, Kishone could produce trash *in colour, of course* he could, but did his clients have any idea of what that cost? He paid ten rupees for a black-and-white film if he ordered from Bombay,

but a colour film would run him eighty, not to mention the developing. He would need to put down hundreds of rupees, and then there was the factor of time, because who around here was able to develop colour film? The negatives would need to be sent to Bombay or Delhi, and it was easy to imagine how long it would take for them to get back. Weeks, if not months—that was if they came back at all, what with the postal system eroded by mouldy bureaucracy. Let the colour fanatics rush to the criminals now offering their services with polaroid cameras. A pile of coloured muck at a sinfully high price, that was what they were able to produce.

Kishone switched on the lamp hanging off the ceiling of his darkroom. There they hung, his children, each unmistakably of his hands, containing his genes. He had poured his heart into them, these pictures, and now they might rot here, on this drying line, held up by these wooden clothes pins, because no one wanted them anymore. Kishone reached for the telephone. Once again, Bob Mulder would need to help.

“You are making jokes, you are making fun of me. This is supposed to be my daughter? I can hardly recognise her. What has happened to her face? She looks like she has organ damage! And my son-in-law also, the entire wedding party is one big collection of jaundiced liver failures! The flowers look like cheap plastic, and the three-hundred dollar wedding dress looks like I got it from the costume collection of a group of travelling actors! In America now they have three-dimensional films, in Dolby-Surround. Three dimensions, pow, now that is something! Dolby-Surround! And from you I get this trash. You are not getting even a single paisa!

Kishone thought back to how he had found Mulder this morning in his kitchen. His head had been on the table, he had not even made it to the cot which Kishone had prepared for him. In front of him, the sum total of his night: an overflowing ashtray, two crumpled-up packs of cigarettes, an empty bottle of Scotch whisky, a thermos, a coffee mug with the Glasgow Rangers logo, and two hundred and fifty hand-coloured black-and-white photos. Actually, two hundred and forty-nine, since Mulder had ruined the top one by writing *I hate you Kishone Kumar* on it. Two hundred and forty-nine photos in one night, that was spectacular work. More work probably than Darshan had done in his entire last month of diplomatic activity. And the photographs were in colour – that, after Mulder’s treatment, one could say with complete accuracy.

“No one said anything about colour *film*, Mister Darshan, and you know that in all of India there is no way to get colour film developed in a single day.”

“Wrong, Kishone, completely wrong. Come back this evening and I will show you what is possible in India.”

Darshan was bluffing. Within a thousand miles he would be unable to find anyone who could offer him that service. He wanted to lower the price, he thought he was clever. What should Kishone do? He had never expected the agreed-on price per picture in any case. “I do not care what is possible in India and what is not”, he replied. “I have worked the entire night. I am exhausted and would like to go to bed, Mister Darshan. We agreed on five rupees per picture, I will give them to you for four.”

“You have not been listening, Mister Kumar. I am not paying a single rupee, not for a picture and not for the set. Zero times zero is still zero.”

“Three fifty, we say three fifty. I need to pay my employees and support my parents. Three fifty is my last offer.”

“I will spell the word zero and I will explain it to you, Mister Kumar. Z-E-R-O. Zero. Imagine you are a fisher with no boat, no water and no net. How big will your catch be at the end of a normal work day?”

“Three rupees and five golden frames with mount, my very last offer.”

“Then listen to my offer now, Mister Kumar. It is my only and therefore also my last one. *Best*

price, you can say. Today we are holding a big celebration at my house, and at a day like that I do not want any trouble. I will pay for your expenses, fifty rupees will see you nicely. What is more, for half an hour I will offer you the opportunity to mingle with the wedding party on the roof and to help yourself from the buffet. While you are there, take a look at the guests there without looking through your camera. They are people, Mister Kumar, flesh-and-blood people, who do not value looking like cartoons in your photos. My son-in-law is well on his way to becoming ambassador in the United States of America. When his colleagues ask—and they certainly will ask—to see the photos of his wedding, how can he explain to them that his family did not come from a cabinet of horrors? I advise you to accept my proposition, the alternative is to be shown out by my staff.”

Kishone could not remember ever feeling so humiliated. The criticism of his pictures had hit him where it hurt. Photography was the only thing of which he had thought he truly understood something. On this ground he did not need to talk himself up, he was not dependent on tricks and gimmicks, and if he did occasionally make use of them to help reality along a little, it was all only in his clients’ interest.

As he overloaded his plate with prawns, bread and fruits, he looked around: wasteful spenders who had given away their pride in exchange for a bank account. What kind of a wedding was this? They seemed, unheeding of any tradition, to simply pick out what they considered best from each. They simply threw all religions in one pot and stirred. The groom wore the turban, dagger and *kara* of a Sikh, but no moustache. And he had short hair, it transpired as the evening progressed. These people were grotesque, new money. They pretended that the world belonged to them, with their fat sons, who were loud miniature copies of their fathers even at the age of seven or eight, and their even fatter wives who were distinguishable from the bought *hijras* only by their beard growth. All of them had put on too much perfume, so that by midday the entire celebration stank like a brothel. Yes, that fitted. At the latest since the State of Emergency had been declared, all of India had become a brothel. Everything was a question of price. In recent years morality had become something sold to rich people in the air-conditioned supermarkets. There it sat, packed into little tins, next to law, order, and prawns, waiting for buyers – and only the prawns sold.

So Darshan had another photographer. Who could it be? Why had Kishone not noticed him the day before? *Come by tonight, and I will show you what is possible in India.* Somehow, Darshan had managed to find a way of getting colour photos over night. Certainly, the man had connections, but Kishone could not imagine any connections which might convince the chaotic Indian photo developers to increase their efficiency hundredfold. He took a glass off a waiter’s tray and read the label on the bottle.

Red wine, and under the eyes of the mayor and the police commissioner, who had travelled from Jaipur for this very occasion. Kishone sniffed. He was not knowledgeable. He had not drunk more than ten glasses of wine in his entire life, but this one smelled excellent. Rich and spiced. When the liquid first touched his tongue, it tasted of the berries of a foreign land, with a hint of cinnamon.

Perhaps Darshan’s good choice had been an accident; perhaps he actually did have some competence in this for a change. These Darshans had nothing to do all day except swilling wine and eating until they had paunches: it was possible that under those circumstances even an otherwise sensually crippled man acquired some experience of things. But to get them to have any sense or experience of photography, of this Kishone was certain, a thousand times a thousand years would not be enough. He emptied his glass in one. He did not care that the wine spilling from the corners of his mouth dripped onto his last clean shirt.

Kishone liked the food as well, with the result that he stuffed himself with everything he could get his hands on. At the next available opportunity, he took a full two glasses of wine from the tray, even though he had not been offered even one. In under two minutes, he had emptied both, but when he reached again for another glass, someone standing behind him thrust a bottle of water into

his hands.

“You should try this for a little bit, I think that’d be better for everybody.”

The girl suddenly next to him had already caught his attention yesterday. He had not been able to place her properly, but thought in the end that she must be one of the groom’s colleagues, though in truth she was different from the other diplomats and diplomats’ wives. She looked like one of the foreign hippie girls who traipsed around the area and Goa in the hundreds. She wore loose black linen trousers and, stitched with floral patterns, an ecru top so short it showed her waist, around which a silver chain snaked.

“I interfered with your business, Mr. Kumar, I’m sorry. I excuse that by saying I’m American, we tend to stick our nose in other people’s business.”

“You know my name?”, Kishone asked.

She explained that she had asked about him, as she had thought she owed him an explanation.

“Owe me an explanation?” He did not understand: what could this girl with the golden hair need to explain to him? Even when she confessed that she had been the reason he had wasted so much of yesterday, Kishone was still convinced there was some misunderstanding. It was only when she told him that Darshan had asked her to take photographs of the celebration that Kishone understood.

“It was you?”, he said. “Are you the photographer? Where is your camera? How can that be, I did not see you with a camera yesterday either.”

“I’m a journalist. Last year I met Mr. Darshan briefly while I was reporting on the Shah of Persia. I think he found me attractive. He invited me to his daughter’s wedding. And what girl could pass up a real Indian wedding? I work for *Time*, by the way, it’s a big magazine, but I’m here privately. Darshan isn’t *that* important.”

“I know *Time* magazine”, Kishone said.

“The reason you didn’t see my camera is that it’s pretty small and unobtrusive.” She pulled a tiny box out of her pocket.

“That is supposed to be a camera?”, Kishone asked.

She explained that the little box was a Kodak Pocket, an American product. The quality of its pictures would not be anywhere near that of the photos he could take, she was sure, but it was astoundingly good nonetheless.

The trash they produced in America, thought Kishone. It almost seemed that all the trash in the world came from America. How could that go on? Would they simply not stop until the entire world was filled with trash, with their colour films, their magazines, their inventions? Had the Americans brought anything into the world in the last fifty years that the world actually needed? Okay, the Ford Mustang maybe, and the moon rocket as well, but who knew what insidious goals the moon rocket was ultimately made for? And other than that? The atomic bomb, Agent Orange, Dolby-Surround, *Time* magazine and the pocket camera.

“Can you show me what film it uses?”, Kishone asked. He had difficulty imagining a film which would be able to fit into this thing.

The girl dug through her bag. “The films work basically like the 6 × 6 rolls in a normal camera, but they have the perforations on just one side. That’s how come they can be made so small. And the negative is smaller, of course.” The girl dug through her handbag again and produced an orange box all too familiar to Kishone. A film like he himself used for his Canon, but this one could be used for colour photographs. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kishone, I just have this old roll on me right now, none of the Kodak ones. Old habit. I haven’t been using the Pocket long, yesterday was the first time, actually. You know what? Take this roll. Think of it as an apology for all the trouble I’ve caused you.”

Kishone took the film, looked at it and put in the breast pocket of his shirt. “I do have one more

question.”

“Sure.”

“How do you manage to get prints over night?”

“My editors have an office in Delhi, with a developing room. Yesterday Darshan sent one of my colleagues there by helicopter, today he’s coming back. He should be here in about two, three hours, do you want to wait for him?”

“That is a little much. I am tired. We can talk tomorrow more, if you would like. Join me as a guest for dinner, or at least visit for a cup of tea. I can show you the shop at the same time.”

“A charming idea. But tomorrow I have to go to Kabul early, and then to Europe a week later from there. The editors keep us busy. I fly out of Delhi. Two of my colleagues are sick, and my boss would be really angry if they’d had to change all the flights for nothing. Why don’t you wait here with me for my colleague? Like I said, it’s the first time I’m photographing with a Pocket, maybe the pictures didn’t come out.”

“I do not have much hope for that. I trust you be able to use a foolproof camera.”

“I’m pretty sure they aren’t going to be any good.”

“Why should they not be good?”

“I just know!”

Again, it took some time for Kishone to understand. “You would do that for me?”

“Why not? I like you, and Darshan is an asshole. It’s that simple. More wine?”

Kishone declined. He was not used to drink, and the three glasses had already gone to his head more than enough. He was worried that his only passable English was suffering from the alcohol, and he suddenly cared about the fact that his shirt was stained with red wine. He hoped that he could borrow a clean one from Amitabh. He had to tell Amitabh the entire story as quickly as possible in any case. With a heavy heart he made his excuses to the stranger but promised by everything that was holy to return in two hours’ time. On the stairs, the freshly chewed betel and the flies glistened, trying to outdo one another in oily repugnance.

A short time later, Kishone was telling Amitabh about the beautiful unknown woman, and it was only now that he realised that she had not told him her name. He must not forget to ask her when next they met! Somewhat sobered up, he returned to the wedding party in Amitabh’s best shirt. Darshan cornered him as soon as he had entered the roof garden, explaining that having considered the situation, he would now consent to pay three rupees for the pictures. Kishone answered that he too had had time to think, and named his price. In the end, they agreed to eight rupees per picture plus a total of five bottles of wine.

Kishone had come through again, but there could be no question that his days as a black-and-white photographer were not to last. There would not always be a beautiful American to save his neck. He met up with her again on the roof, after he had filled another plate at the buffet.

“The sunset is amazing. Look at the big monkeys jumping back and forth between the houses, and are those bats? They’re huge!”

“Yes, bats. The legend says that Pushkar was created when Brahma dropped a lotus flower into the desert. If you had to live here, you might find it less amazing. I have never experienced a celebration here like this one, one must make use of it.” Kishone bit into a chicken leg. “For religious reasons, people here normally do not eat meat. Alcohol is forbidden also.”

“Except for Darshan.”

“Except for Darshan and several others. Was he angry?”

“Yes.”

“Can he make trouble for you?”

“He could. But I still have a little document from back when I didn’t know that he had a wife and that his daughter would soon be married.”

“Oh. However. Thank you for everything.”

“It’s fine.”

“And will you tell me your name, at the end?”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I’m Joan.”

“Joan?”

“After Joan Vollmer, do you know her?”

“No.”

“She was a writer. She died just before I was born. My mother insisted on the name. I don’t think my father knew Joan Vollmer.”

“How did Joan Vollmer die?”

“Her husband shot her by accident, when they were trying to reenact Wilhelm Tell at a party”, Joan said, stealing the last prawn off Kishone’s plate and pulling off its head.

Kishone asked: “Who is Wilhelm Tell?”