

Christopher Kloeble
Home Made in India
A love story between Delhi and
Berlin
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Prologue: An Unlikely Love Story

New Delhi, December 2012. In the garden, there's the hustle and bustle of two-hundred wedding guests. Only the groom is missing: Me. My excited fidgeting doesn't exactly help Jaswant—our driver—as he ties my turban. To curb my nervousness, he offers me his charismatic smile. He puts it on during most of our conversations. Sometimes it means "I'll wait in the car." Sometimes: "I have no idea what you're trying to say." (My Hindi vocabulary is limited to anything food-related.) And right now: "Hold still, or the turban will be askew."

When Jaswant is done, I step in front of the mirror: The man in the bright white sherwani made from raw silk is barely reminiscent of the chubby-cheeked Bavarian boy, a Bub, who used to ride his bike down the main street in Königsdorf on his way to the Reindl bakery every day, where he would trade some pfennigs—Deutsche Mark change—for some candy.

I'm not sure if the Bub and the man are the same person. All I know is that India and a daughter of Delhi have a lot to do with the fact that the first became the latter. Outside, one of those foggy mornings awaits me of which you never know whether you're going to not only feel, but also see the sun that day.

The turban is a remarkably tight fit. My heart is pounding between my temples. I'm looking around to spot my future wife, but can't seem to find her. Instead of falling into her arms, relatives and friends embrace me. Most of them I've not met before. So far, I have barely spent two months in India. Women are tugging at my scarf, men pat me on the shoulder, and everyone compliments me on my ceremonial clothing. I prefer it to lederhosen. When I was a Tölzer Sängerknabe—a member of this internationally renowned Bavarian boys' choir—I had ample opportunity to wear traditional clothing at German folklore concerts. It taught me well how persistently scratchy wool socks are, and how much they cut into the back of your knees.

Suddenly, everyone's attention shifts to a new arrival. That gives me a chance to loosen the turban without being watched. Only after I'm done do I notice that the guest is wearing a wedding sari. For a minute, all of my nervousness vanishes; because I can't wait to get married to Saskya.

"Chalo, Christopher!" Surendrabhai is calling me. He's an uncle, not related by blood. He leads me to the rest of the family. With a wink, he reassures me that he knows I'm going to be fine.

So I take off my shoes and sit down next to my bride, who smells of jasmine, at the far end of the mandap, a pavilion made from wood and flowers. That's where the ceremony is going to take place. The pandit says hello to the family, and so it begins. I don't feel the turban anymore. What I do feel is how firmly Saskya is holding my hand.

We are the preliminary result of a meandering family history. Saskya's Austrian grandfather was a botanist in Afghanistan. That's why Saskya's mother grew up in Kabul—among other places—in an era when the women there were riding bicycles, in miniskirts. During her studies in Heidelberg, she met an ambitious Doctor of Art History from Bombay. Saskya's father is of humble origins. Today, he is considered one of the country's most distinguished professors and intellectuals. He has founded famous museums and institutions, and welcomed state guests from all over the world. He knows the Gandhis personally. He is widely respected, even by Japan's imperial family. And yet he lives an unpretentious life.

Now, his daughter is going to marry the great-grandson of Munich's Löwenbräukeller beer hall's crafty lessee—who had to relocate to Leipzig due to a beer foam scandal. There, he ran the Hotel Fürstenhof for several decades. Lola, his second child, turned out to be a determined theater person—not just on stage—who seduced a sensitive actor from Karlsruhe who—among others—played Mack the Knife in the world premiere of the Three-Penny Opera. As a result of this dramatic connection, their older son—my father—couldn't resist theater either. The actor sowed his wild oats on stage and in women's bedrooms, until he started a family, as well as a movie production company (he always remained an actor at heart, however). He performed these two roles with generosity, passion, vexation, and humor—until his heart let him down: He almost had a heart attack. He retired and moved into a Berlin apartment—with his third and fourth wife: my mother. After forty years as a homemaker, she was employed for the first time in her life—as the popular, albeit dreaded head waitress at a boutique hotel.

The two family strings have so little in common that only an unlikely love story could connect them.

This book, however, is about more than just one love. Before I met Saskya, I wasn't even sure whether I wanted to visit this country called India. Today, as I write these words, I can't imagine a life without India anymore. Although it comes at me like a juggernaut every single time, I love this country. I spend one half of the year there, and the other in Germany. We commute between Saskya's home and mine. That's difficult, at times scary, and wonderful. It doesn't only open my eyes for an entire continent, but also for a complicated, conflicting, and exotic country: Germany. I learn how to appreciate a lot of things that I have taken for granted so far. At the same time, there are a number of things that bother me now, and which I never even noticed before.

I don't believe that I will ever fully be able to make Saskya's home feel like my own. In the same vein, she is never going to feel at home in Berlin in the way she does in Delhi. Our home is not in one place. It's not a geographical region. Rather, we create this third, important home wherever we are together.

At least, that's what I hope. Only time will tell whether or not we can make it work.

Part I: How We Got Here

1

A Bavarian Bub and one of Delhi's daughters

Zug'roaster

The Singing Klössle

As Long As I Can Write

First Encounter and Last Goodbye

One-Hundred Pages of Emails

Where Kissing Is Better

Zug'roaster

In its prenatal stage, this book was entitled "A Bavarian of Indian Origin". There were other options too. Each one of them highlighted the contrast between India and Bavaria. In terms of fashion: "Turban and Lederhosen"; cinema: "From Bavaria to Bollywood"; or haute cuisine: "Between Curry and Wurst".

I discarded all of these titles. Not to mention the simplification, what mostly bothered me was the focus on Bavaria. I'm not quite sure if that's where I belong. Many a Bavarian would object: I was born in Munich and spent the formative years of my life in the Alpine foothills. How could I not be Bavarian?

Let me go back a few years. Let me introduce to you a chubby, high-voiced Bub; the color of his eyes—gray-blue green—just as undecided as his relationship with Bavaria.

In the summer of 1983, my parents dare to take a radical step. In the first year of my life still, we move from Munich to the Alpine foothills: to Königsdorf in Upper Bavaria. My parents don't want their son to grow up in the city. The countryside—they believe—would be better for me. "People know each other there, children can play outside, and the school is just a short walk away!"

But my parents underestimate how Bavarian that countryside is.

Weekly meetings at the local pub, marksmen's club marches, strict Catholicism, alpine panorama, soccer devotion, pork roast aroma, maypoles wrapped in white-blue decoration.

All of these clichés are true and come to life in Königsdorf.

That's where I grow up, a child of a mother from Hesse and a father from Baden. I might as well be from abroad. Which makes me a Zug'roaster: Someone from elsewhere.

When I'm barely three years old, a nail sticking out of the living room wall tears a hole into my cheek and perfect world. I don't remember the pain. (Us Kloebles, we're experts of suppression.) The doctor who fixes my wound promises my parents that it's going to heal without leaving a trace.

He's wrong. A scar remains. It marks my life's first injury. The next one follows quick: The other kids call me Preiß, "Prussian". They do so before I even know what a Prussian is. However, my instinct tells me what the Bavarians are trying to say: I'm not from here. People from here go to church every Sunday, they speak in the local dialect, and they have a last name that can be found on at least one street sign in the area.

A much more loving experience is bestowed on me by a blonde girl named Christina when she agrees to marry me. We're almost six years old and attend the Königsdorf kindergarten under the strict regime of Catholic nuns. They call Coca Cola the Devil's beverage and condemn us to drinking unsweetened chamomile tea even in the height of summer. And Sister Alfonsa, the dictator, doesn't even let us leave until we're done tying our own shoelaces. (I only wear Velcro shoes.) Christina and I promise each other to walk down the aisle right after school. And to have at least three kids!

Unfortunately, it doesn't come that far. One week after our vow, she informs me that she has chosen Stefan instead—the boy she shares a table with. He's better at handling a pair of scissors than me (a.k.a. Fat Finger) in Arts & Crafts, she says. My only chance of true love—lost. For days, I refuse to go to kindergarten. After all, I can't possibly know that about 3,700 miles south-east of me, my future wife is growing up.

Saskya is born in Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat where Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are from as well. During the second year of her life, she and her family move to Delhi.

1984, of all years. Right before a TV interview with Peter Ustinov, the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is shot by her Sikh bodyguards which she kept in her service despite the Sikh separatist movement. There are curfews. And still, vindictive mobs roam the streets. The police and politicians of the ruling Indian National Congress turn a blind eye. Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's son, justifies the riots using the words: "When a big tree falls, the earth shakes." At the time, Saskya, her brother, and her parents live in Jangpura. It is a predominantly Sikh neighborhood, inhabited mostly by refugee families who fled Pakistan during Partition. Scared of assaults, the Jains spend days inside their barricaded home. At night, Saskya's father gathers bricks so that in an emergency, they'd have something to throw at their attackers from up on the roof. There are rumors



that the mob has poisoned the groundwater. During the days following the assassination, over three-thousand Sikhs are murdered.

At the same time, in Upper Bavaria, I'm playing snake games with the neighbors' daughter: We take pleasure in sliding ropes over our bare skin and hissing softly.

Back then my world is limited to the radius within which I can hear the church bells ring every fifteen minutes. The center of my existence is called Königsdorf. I have adventures here every day, most of them are of an idyllic nature. I give our dog a makeover using my mom's Cartier lipstick. I release the emergency brake of our car that's parked on a hill. I almost suffocate in a snow cave I built myself. I find a four-leaf clover. I steal stickers from a gumball machine that's been welded open (and put them back when my father points out to me the possibility that undercover agents may have watched me taking them). I slip at the farm next door, ending up in a steamy cowpat, and my mom has to hose me off in the yard.

I also make an effort to integrate. I'm a Zug'roaster with noble intentions! But my attempts to speak Bavarian make the locals laugh at best. All I'm capable of is convincing people who don't know Bavarian that I'm fluent in Bavarian.

One time, our neighbor Anni, a farmer who looks twice her age at forty, gives my mom and me advice: She tells us to put an ear ("Ohr" in German) into our garage to keep martens from gnawing at our car's rubber tubes. My mom and I are surprised. Where are we supposed to get an ear from? Anni couldn't possibly mean a human ear, could she? A pig's ear perhaps? When we ask, Anni clarifies: "A chicken ear." – "A chicken ear?" my mom asks. "Do chickens have ears?" – "Naa!" Anni yells across the fence as if talking to deaf-mutes. "An OA! A frisch g'legt's!" ("an OA, one that's just been laid!").

That's when we understand what she means: An egg, "Ei," which in Standard German happens to sound just like ear, "Ohr," in Bavarian.

But it's not only pronunciation that poses a challenge to my parents, and mostly me. Even if I understand every single word, I'm often at a loss. Bavarians communicate differently than Non-Bavarians do.

One afternoon, I'm walking across a farm in the neighborhood with a group of kids when the farmer comes out of the barn, scolding us and telling us to leave his property. I think he's being ironic. "No," I banter, "we're not leaving!" I have a wide grin on my face. I think that I'm being pretty funny. I have a feeling of approval as I hear my companions' giggling—yet I watch them retreat. A moment later, I understand why. The farmer chases me away with a pitchfork.

Another one of my efforts to be perceived as a local: playing soccer. After all, "soccer connects" is what they say. Bavarian boys know how to dribble before they learn how to babble. Sceptically, I observe their feet's intimate relationship to the ball. It's incredible how they run at full speed and let the ball hover in front of their feet at the same time, seemingly without effort. So far, each and every ball has escaped my feet. Yet, I try hard, I practice; because I'm convinced I can make an impression on them this way. I'm utterly talentless when it comes to dribbling. As I shoot kicks from the penalty mark in our own yard, however, I turn almost each shot into a goal—my father never catches the ball.

Unfortunately, it turns out very soon that this success isn't proof of my talent, but rather of my father's. For his son's sake, and with a convincing display of his acting skills, he throws his body into the wrong corner each time. I only see through his ruse when I can't score a single goal in gym class. I'm not surprised when Michi, my team's captain, later asks me not to interfere with the game if possible, so as not to weaken us unnecessarily. My task is to wait—in the back line—for one of the other team's forwards to get close to our goal. I'm not supposed to snatch the ball from him. No. How would I, the soccer antichrist, even go about that? Instead, I'm asked to concentrate on stopping the opponent—by knocking him over. I can't possibly

miss an entire person. At least I measure up to that task. Literally. I'm "healthy" (my mother), "strong" (my father), "fat" (me).

The Singing Klössle

As I get older, I begin to develop a sense of my bulky appearance. I get sick during swimming class because—as long as we're outside the pool—I'm sucking in my stomach the entire time in order to assimilate with my skin-and-bones peers in chameleon-like fashion. With moderate success. Genuinely interested, one of them asks me: "How come are you so fat?" He's not trying to be mean. Each rib is visible on his skinny chest, which I envy him for. A scrawny little boy like him just can't comprehend how I managed to add that much of a load to my ribs this early on in life. I have a pair of boobs, real little-boy boobs, drearily pointing downward like two rotten pieces of fruit, competing with those girls in my class who developed early. When we get split up into teams during gym class on hot days, I always make sure that there are enough jersey vests available, which serve to distinguish the opponents from your own team members. If there are no vests, our teacher goes for a pragmatic solution: one team has to play topless. Under no circumstances do I want to present my wobbling boobs and belly to the world. I hate that feeling when I run: My fat shakes, it tugs at my body, turns into a constantly shape-shifting mass that doesn't follow any rules, but draws attention. And so, I'm often attacked by dramatic migraines, dizziness, or terrible toothaches in just those very moments.

When we hike up mountains during excursions, I'm always the last one to reach the top. At the annual medical examination at the beginning of the new school year, the doctor advises me to spend more time outside, to get more fresh air. The frustration about the way I look stimulates my appetite—for even more chocolate bars, cookies dunked in hot milk, sour gummy bears, or Sahnetorten (whipped cream cakes). At the Tölzer Knabenchor—the boys' choir I sing in—I'm soon bestowed with a nickname. While a good fit, it's not particularly creative: Klössle, a nod to my last name and round Bavarian dumplings. Since elementary school, I'm a member of the choir. After singing for him in music class, a friendly gentleman had handed me a letter for my parents. At the entrance exam that followed, he said that my singing had been "quite decent".

More than once, I ask my parents to pick a new last name for us.

Saskya's last name would certainly have been more to my liking: Jain, which sounds just like Tarzan's girlfriend's name. Not only does it sound so much more elegant, it also refers to a faith that is older and more appealing than most religions. There are no gods in Jainism, only so-called spiritual leaders, similar to Buddhism. The highest tenet is to not hurt living beings. Which means that strict Jains don't just abstain from eating meat, fish, and eggs, but even from onions, potatoes, or garlic, as these are harvested with their roots attached. Saskya's parents are neither religious themselves, nor do they bring up their children like that. But still, because of the tradition associated with her last name, Saskya develops a deeply rooted sensibility for life. And for food.

I, on the other hand, passionately gorge on Weißwurst, Leberkäse, and pork schnitzel back in Bavaria. I meet the result of that diet every day, in the mirror.

My parents console me and promise to sort out those who dare torture their healthy, strong Bub. But I don't divulge a single name. Their interference would only make it worse.

Still, it gets worse.

During the weeks before Christmas, us choir boys travel from one town to the next. A letter from the Bavarian

State Ministry for Education, Science and the Arts excuses us from school for all of December. That way, we can warble “Germany’s most beautiful Christmas songs” in front of hoary audiences. At least once a day, somebody calls us “little angels”. During the bus rides between two concert stops, we practice our songs. Or, the teachers randomly test us for the verses that we had to learn by heart—and Christmas songs have a whole damn lot of verses. If it turns out that one of the boys doesn’t know a song word by word, he’s punished with a scolding—and a pay deduction. Yes, a pay deduction. Us choir boys, we do in fact receive a small fee.

...]

During one of these bus rides, The Boss—that’s what everyone calls the choirmaster—is in such a good mood that he doesn’t just meet my being overweight with a mean comment. No, he lets his creativity run wild. The Boss alters the lyrics of a folk song that we are learning together so that they now apply to me: Das Fass von Königsdorf (“The Königsdorf Barrel”). Full of joy, and at the top of their voices, all boys repeat the lines in song. Only the occasional giggle or laughter can temporarily keep them from doing so. Some watch me with Schadenfreude. The bad conscience of others forces them to stare at the floor. I look out the window. On the glass, there’s a reflection of a fat boy unable to suppress his tears. The more I keep telling myself that I don’t care, the harder I cry.

Afterwards, when we arrive at the hotel and we’re told to unpack within five minutes, to shower and be ready for bed because otherwise—you guessed right—there would be a pay deduction, none of the boys want to share a room with me. Everyone is worried that my victimhood might be contagious. Eventually, The Boss assigns me a roommate, who doesn’t seem to be very pleased about that. In less than five minutes, I’m ready and lying in bed. I stare into the darkness and make a resolution. Nobody is going to wear me down like that ever again. This was the last time.

It’s not the last time. I’m a choirboy for six years.

In Delhi, Saskya learns an Indian style of dancing called Kathak. In Bavaria, I learn how to fend off ridicule. I discover an effective antidote: humor. People like to side with the person that makes them laugh. If I make a good joke—ideally about myself, but sometimes also about fresh boys who are even below me in the choir’s pecking order—it lets others’ jokes about me fade away. A successful strategy for survival. And in this case, survival means making it until your voice breaks. Luckily, this happens when I’m still only eleven years old. I leave the choir. It confirmed my early suspicion: Even though I never knew a home other than Bavaria, I’m not from there.

As Long As I Can Write

By now, I’ve already found a place where I’m much more at home. Every time I visit, it looks different, but it’s always exactly like I want it to be. I can enter it anywhere. All I need is a pen and a sheet of paper. In Leipzig—so I hear—there’s a Creative Writing program. I get the Abitur—the German high school diploma—over with, submit an application at the Deutsches Literaturinstitut, and after I pass the entry exam, I relocate, bound for Saxony. Three and a half years later, I have the questionable privilege of calling myself a graduated author.

Unfortunately, I can’t impress anyone with that designation. I compose a novel, send it to numerous agents and editors, and urge my hopes to be patient.

After a while, a lonely rejection letter arrives. Then another. And another one. The folder in which I keep the countless “Neins” gets thicker and thicker.



Because my girlfriend at the time is enrolled at the Free University in Berlin, I move to the capital with her. My first impression of the city: awful. I had spent most of my life in a village so small that, no matter where you are, you can leave the entire place behind within thirty minutes. Berlin, however, weaves a net of endless streets around me. There's never a lack of people and always a lack of peace. My roommates' everyday life is entwined with my own: Every ringing of the doorbell, each toilet flush, every hammering noise reminds me of the presence of other people—and most of all, it reminds me of the fact that now, whether I want it or not, I'm part of their lives as well. Since I barely have any money, I live in a cluttered, drafty room in a WG. Soon, I begin to smell just as musty as my laundry, which just won't dry. I avoid taking the subway to save the money for a ticket. The flat soles on my shoes can tell a thing or two about that. I volunteer to take the WG's bottles and cans back to the supermarket so I can keep the deposit, which isn't more than change. My most important rule when I go grocery shopping is not to spend more than five Euros. I eat a lot of pasta with tomato sauce. Luckily, that's hard to tell from just looking at me. Because of my height—six foot three—my baby fat stretched and is now evenly spread across my body. That contributes to the illusion that I am skinny. I go running almost every day. I leave a fatter version of myself behind—and my girlfriend leaves me. She's met someone else. He drove his motorcycle across Iraq, all by himself. I can't compete with that. I didn't even manage to drive a scooter across Königsdorf. A fine hour for my trusty self-pity. I'm all alone in Berlin now. As alone as you can only feel in a place with lots of people. But: I have writing to keep me company. As long as I can write, it's not all that bad. I write another novel. And that one actually finds a home. My second book becomes my first book, and it's published in the fall of 2008. So I'm an author now. People give me money for my writing. Something unfathomable, if you ask me: I'm being paid for lying. I don't mean the fiction. No. I mean that all I do is claim to be an author. I don't really know what I'm doing. I string sentences together, without even the slightest clue where it'll take me, and when I have a sufficient number of sentences at some point, I call the whole thing a novel, a newspaper article, a script. I have absolutely nothing in common with real authors. Real authors are thinkers. They command the words. To me, it seems like the words are commanding me. I follow them, and rarely do I get where I want to go. And for that, I'm being paid, of all things! Basically, I'm a con artist. It's just a matter of time. Soon, somebody is going to get wise to me.

Until then, all I want to do is write; just write as much as I can.

First Encounter and Last Goodbye

In March 2011, I receive a message from Anderson Literary Management, a New York agency that represents authors. A certain Saskya Iris Jain writes: "I was very excited by your work which I believe stands out in the landscape of writing coming out of Germany today." I read the sentence multiple times. As an author, you're rarely ever served a sentence like that. I like this Saskya Iris Jain right away. In her email, she feeds me with further delicious little bites of flattery and offers to represent me for my English language rights, in cooperation with her boss Kathleen Anderson. Less than three percent of US book publications are translations. Since English is the key to many readers around the globe, many authors are struggling for a spot among those three percent.

I grew up combing through some Barnes & Nobles with my father anytime we visited the United States and not leaving until we had hunted down our prey, i.e., at least a dozen books. Never had I dared surrender to the hope that one day, pages filled with my words would be found on one of these tables full of books. What did I have to tell someone from New York, San Francisco, Chicago? After all, I was just The Königsdorf Barrel. A Manhattan literary agent's willingness to represent me would significantly increase my chances to make it



to one of those tables. Despite the high number of agencies in the US, each agency picks its authors. As a foreign author, it's even harder to get hold of a spot. All the more excited am I, as a consequence of this Saskya Iris Jain's message—even if I try to hide that fact from her. After all, she's my new business partner, so to speak.

I respond that I could perhaps imagine to be represented by a US agency. A few emails later, we arrange a meeting.

A sunny day. Surrounded by the scents of Curry 36 and Mustafas Vegetable Kebab, I'm waiting at Mehringdamm, where we agreed to meet. Saskya is in Berlin for work. It's much easier to talk about the manuscript in person. The novel is scheduled to appear in Germany during the next year, and Anderson Literary Management wants to represent it in the United States.

I'm not sure if I should mention that Gottfried Benn had his practice right next door—show off with some local trivia—when I say hello to Saskya. My email conversation with her has demonstrated that I'm dealing with an educated, accomplished, reliable woman with a keen sense of humor. That's why I think that she can't be particularly attractive. This questionable conclusion is rooted in my limited experience. I imagine Saskya to be a girl with a large frame who spends her time online rather in clubs and who snacks on scores of candy bars because she's so lonely. I didn't even google her. That's how convinced I am that she's homely.

She's everything but. We take a walk to the typical Kreuzberg version of an Italian restaurant, with pierced waiters and folding chairs. I can't keep myself from scrutinizing her extensively. It's hard, not looking at a beautiful person. Her liveliness and her quick wit, accompanied by her simply perfect politeness, immediately make me envy all of those people Saskya deems her friends. And that's considering that she just escaped a gas oven attack. A jet of flame singed her hair. I don't notice it, though: she has dark hair.

All of Saskya's critical remarks about my novel are wise and illuminating. They're going to improve the book significantly—I'm sure of that. Our conversation flows so comfortably as if we'd known each other for a long time. A little later, I check my watch. Three hours have passed.

I don't allow myself to think about what it would be like to see her again on a date. We live so far apart from one another. Plus, I have absolutely no idea what she thinks of me. And not least of all, we both indicated that we're seeing somebody.

Are we using this Anglicism—jemanden sehen means to perceive them visually in German —on purpose? In order to imply that we're not in a serious relationship?

[...]

One-Hundred Pages of Emails

On the evening of my 29th birthday, I break up with my American girlfriend in New York. And I have an appointment at a bar in Brooklyn. Saskya Jain, my new agent, wants to introduce me to Aaron Kerner, a potential translator for my new novel. They met when they both studied Creative Writing at Boston University.

Aaron is a skinny six-foot giant with a nervous, friendly laugh, sensitive eyes, and a tumbling quality in his voice as if it had only just broken. He acquired the German language because a few years ago, he wanted to read a Walter Benjamin essay that hadn't been translated into English yet. So Aaron just went ahead and did it himself on the spot. Word for word. I'm extremely impressed by his linguistic talent. Even in German,



Benjamin's essay would demand a lot of effort from me.

We're sitting in the shade of a backyard bar in Williamsburg. The air is filled with the smell of cannabis and the howl of a hundred ambulance sirens. Beer and my wounded heart cause me to talk too much. The two don't know what hit them. I'm racing from one anecdote to the next, and I feel reassured that I should continue, because of their laughter and untainted attention. Chipper, I babble without pausing and take advantage of the fact that—sitting across the table—I have two people who are that interested and polite. Not in their wildest dreams would they even consider interrupting me or pointing out the time. As so often when there is a lot of talking, I'm not saying much. When the evening ends, I feel a distinct desire: If only I could stay here longer, sipping mediocre beer in these fusty comfy chairs, and spend further hours with Saskya and Aaron. But at some point, even I have to shut up. The airport is calling.

A few days later at Königsdorf City Hall, I attend my parents' second wedding as their best man. Afterwards, I sleep one last time in the three-hundred and fifty-year old farmhouse—almost thirty of which we lived alongside with it—before my parents hand over the keys to the buyers, and we turn our backs to this Upper Bavarian village. It's a radical change for my family. My parents and my sister Anna—who just finished high school—move to Berlin. An important chapter of our lives comes to an end.

I'm not quite aware of the fact that a new one has already begun.

Saskya and I, we're writing to each other. In the beginning, they're short messages; concerning the work with the novel. Sometimes, they are accompanied by slight banter that I would never have the guts for in a conversation we're having in person. In these messages that I send across the Pond—to a woman I may never see again—in these messages, I'm far more adventurous when it comes to my choice of words. And it's not just me. Again and again, Saskya takes me by surprise with her provocative, ambiguous innuendos that I wouldn't have thought this woman was capable of.

We only write each other in English. Saskya might write in German just as well, though. Or in Hindi. French. Or Farsi. Saskya's linguistic talent makes me doubt my own skills. I can't even master Bavarian! Why do we choose English? I think it's because it's the language we started with. Our connection is fragile. We don't want to unnecessarily burden it with German. In German, we would communicate differently. I would find refuge in a bigger vocabulary. My limited knowledge of English makes me express my thoughts more clearly. In English, it's easier for me to reinvent myself. Sometimes, I even think that I'm funnier in English. And more polite. Rude, inappropriate, hurtful statements creep into my German much more often.

However: Maybe it's not at all my language that matters, but rather the person I'm talking to. There's a good chance that anglophone people are better at defusing my problematic comments with a laugh. Whereas, on the other hand, a single frown from one of my fellow Germans suffices as a reminder that I just put my foot in my mouth.

Saskya tells me that she's an author too; that she's writing her first novel right now. As time goes by, our messages are getting considerably longer. Every once in a while, a romantic seriousness sneaks into a sentence. There's a rise in frequency too. Soon, we compose long letters each day. Those always take me a few hours; the reason probably being my English—and the fact that I instill casualness in myself with the help of whiskey. At some point, I mention that to Saskya. In her next message, she confesses to sipping from a glass of Jameson when she writes as well. This woman, who I find more interesting than all other women in my life, baffles me time and time again. Even though we're about the same age, she has experienced a lot more than I have. Grown up in Delhi, with sporadic visits to her grandparents in Germany. Graduated from two programs in Berlin, New York, and Boston with flying colors. Works as an academic editor for the Free

University, as literary agent, and as a babysitter so she can lead an independent, autonomous life far away from home. And pretty much on the side, she's writing her first novel—as well as hundreds of charismatic emails to some guy from Bavaria, who doesn't stand a chance of holding a candle to her.

Where Kissing Is Better

I catch myself in the pipe dream of seeing Saskya again. Emails do not suffice any longer. I wonder if Saskya feels the same way. We haven't once spoken on the phone yet—or even mentioned this option. Not because we're too guarded. Rather, because we're authors. A long-distance call would never allow for the things we put into our lines and hide between them. Our correspondence could feature in a 21st century Jane Austen novel: Without hearing or seeing each other, we get closer to one another in the following months.

But just in one way. We haven't even held hands; yet we have walked down the paths of each other's lives together, and we know the other's most intimate secrets. Concerning everything physical, kisses, scents, and so on, all we can do is hope. The creepy gurgling of my neighbor when she's having sex feeds my imagination with uncomfortable scenarios.

What we need is to see each other again! Thanks to an invitation to Columbia University, I'm going to visit New York soon. I suggest adding a few days to my schedule. She responds: Why not add three weeks? So I pack my things and call my parents to let them know why I'm leaving town for such a long time. When I mention Saskya's home country, my mother interrupts me: "Indian men are the most beautiful of them all!" On the plane, I numb my growing nervousness with cognac. We made plans to see each other that evening. Saskya is supposed to pick me up from Harlem. The university has arranged for a room for me there. But what if our meeting becomes a fiasco? If that happens, I'll have to survive in New York for twenty days without a hotel room. This time, we're going to see each other in a way that we didn't during our first two meetings. Hopefully, Saskya won't notice right away how little I know about India. When we were writing emails, hiding my nescience was simple. I barely know the clichés: more colors than the rainbow has, Gandhi (Ben Kingsley's smiling face), elephants, the East India Company, the monkey brain scene of the second Indiana Jones movie, the Taj Mahal (which I wrongly believe to be Hindu architecture). I decide not to mention any of this when I talk to Saskya. I don't want her to think of me as one of those white boys whose ignorance has kept them from paying attention to the majority of the globe so far. Even if I'm exactly that. What I'm not expecting: By now, Kathleen Anderson, Saskya's boss, got wind of the amorous nature of our relationship. But instead of objecting, Kathleen takes Saskya aside. Kathleen is a stocky woman in her late fifties with dyed, blonde hair, crystal-clear blue eyes, and a warm, enthusiastic aura that tends towards the hysterical. Her hugs are also a threat that she's never going to let go. Her agency is located inside her apartment not far from Union Square. That's where she resides with a shedding Golden Retriever. She treats him better than her assistants that change once a month. She has a preference for wearing cowboy boots and a penchant for superlatives. "You're going to be a star!" she writes me in an email one time. I'm surprised that there are still people who use sentences like that. After all, we both know that I'm never going to be a "star". It's too late for that already. I'm an author, mind you.

Kathleen's advice to Saskya: remember how Kate got Prince William—with a transparent dress.

When Saskya picks me up inside the hotel lobby, she's not wearing a transparent dress. The one she's wearing obscures and reveals exactly the right parts of her body. We laugh nervously, we hug, we hurry outside. I take her hand. That feels unfamiliar and nice and scary. Later that evening, after dinner, we take a walk to the Hudson River. We're seeking an atmospheric place by the water. We're cut off from it by a highway, though. Still, that's where we kiss for the first time. Since then, I can highly recommend highways.

Kissing is so much better there.

[...]

We spend the rest of my time in New York together. We sleep on a mattress on the floor in front of a window that won't quite shut in Saskya's room in a WG in Bushwick. Every time one of the metro busses stops with a powerful hiss, I jump up from sleep. But even though I don't sleep at all that well, I don't mind. I'm happy. And this happiness makes me sleep as well as never before.

2

My First Time

The Subtle Difference between "Writer" and "Author"

India Begins

Good Morning, Delhi

A Walk in The Future

Weddings

The Glitter of Relief

Almost Everything Very Fast

The Subtle Difference between "Writer" and "Author"

After New York, Saskya and I want to meet again soon. In India.

There's nothing standing in our way—except for my visa. I have my first Indian experience while I'm still on German soil. At Cox & Kings—an agency for Indian visas with a name that makes you think of medieval-themed porn—I dutifully fill in the form for a tourist visa and declare myself as a "writer". The lady at the counter wants to know what kind of writer. I mention my prose and my screenplays. Her conclusion: "So you work in the media?" I shouldn't have nodded. She demands a confirmation issued by my employer stating that I'm not going to take on any journalistic activities while in India. I don't even mention that as a freelance author, I don't really have one particular employer. Instead, I turn to Günther, my always trusty editor, and I send the lady the respective letter.

Soon thereafter, I receive an email: "Congratulations! You can now apply for a journalist visa!" I'm not as happy about this message as the exclamation marks suggest. Entering the country as a journalist would brand me as one for life. That results not only in higher fees, but also in a complicated registration process each time I enter the country. I go back to see the lady, and I insist that I'm not a journalist. "Either you come as a journalist," she responds, "or you don't come at all." In despair, I call Saskya. She promises to take care of the matter the Indian way. Thanks to a family contact, I can make an appointment with the Indian embassy's cultural attaché.

Professor H. S. Shiva Prakash is a massive man with funny eyes and thinning hair. He has the aura of a friendly walrus. From his embassy office, he enjoys a vast view of Berlin's giant Tiergarten city park. When we meet, he tells me that he isn't much of a diplomat, but rather an academic—most of all, a poet and a playwright. In fact, as I find out later, in his home state of Karnataka, he is a quite well-respected poet. He listens intently as I state my case. He gives a laugh and says, "So they're trying to give you a new identity? That's just like in a Kafka novel!" He makes a few phone calls in Hindi. Then, he recommends that I go see a

Mister G., who is with Cox & Kings. Which is what I promptly do. Inside Mister G.'s office, I sit flanked by an oversized Taj Mahal print to one side and a Cologne Cathedral print on the other, while Mister G. talks animatedly on the phone. Eventually, he puts on a victorious smile. He announces that the matter is taken care of. I can now go to India as a tourist. The misunderstanding is based on wrong information provided by me, he says. He advises me that next time, I shouldn't check "writer", but "author".

India Begins

In early January of 2012, my journey begins. And so does India, as early as in Munich, where I have a connecting flight. At the gate, there's an atmosphere untypical of German airports: No sounds of rustling newspapers or people clearing their throats to cover up the awkward silence. People are leading lively discussions. Strangers sit next to each other, even though they could have three seats to themselves, and they start conversations almost immediately. Even if I don't understand a word of Hindi, my impression is that these chats are casual. If it were Germans communicating at this volume, you would have to assume it was a fight. Vivid gestures are an essential part of the dialogue: palms, stretched index fingers, or the world-famous headshake that foreigners often misunderstand, for it isn't really a headshake. Rather, it's a gesture signaling attentiveness; a head bob.

Following the boarding call, the crowd starts moving. A German couple cuts in line in that typically German way: Timid, they push themselves in front of me, as if there was nothing they can do about it; as if they hadn't seen me. The South Asian version of standing in line is more direct: hardly anybody is afraid of physical contact. One man positions himself behind me so closely that his potbelly—the Indian version of a German beer belly—warms my back like a heating pad. Every time I step forward, he moves up; just as if I had asked him to follow me. We continue our dance, deeper and deeper into the crowd. The Germans in front of me are absorbed by the crowd. There's pushing from behind and left and right. But everyone pushes with more or less the same amount of force. I give in to the stream, and it carries me onto the plane.

How embarrassingly little I am prepared for a trip to India, a visit to Saskya's homeland! I should've at least pored over some books, bought a Lonely Planet, and memorized some statistics. In a few hours, I'm going to meet Saskya's family. They're going to expose me as some country bumpkin. Her parents are academics, art historians. My knowledge is limited to what I learned in school in Germany. Which means: basically nothing. Regarding the Asian world, my educational horizon hasn't broadened much since my childhood—back when I revered *The Jungle Book*, laughed at Baloo and feared Shere Khan. (Saskya, meanwhile, briefed me that "bhalu" means "bear" in Hindi and that "sher khan" means "tiger king".)

The only preparations I've made for India are of a neurotic nature: I'm carrying tons of worries. My family and friends slipped me generous warnings. That's why, for the first time in twenty years, I got vaccinated. Even rabid dogs can't do me any harm. The worriers cautioned me: Whatever you do, be careful. Particularly if you ingest anything. Indian water isn't exactly pure, they said. The bacteria were just waiting for German boys with a modest immune system.

That's why I enjoy my last unsuspecting meal on the plane. Lufthansa is making an effort to imitate Indian food, though the greenish-gray mush covered with aluminum foil has little to do with either Indian or food. As we cross Afghanistan, a portly woman in the row next to me produces a bag of Haldiram's snacks and noshes so many of them that the snack soon becomes her main meal.

There's an almost euphoric mood among the travelers. Is it anticipation? They're laughing and shouting, and they chatter like Germans on a flight to a holiday destination.

I study the in-flight entertainment. Half of it is Bollywood flicks. I've never seen one before, I'm not a big fan

of performance numbers. That's probably because I can barely dance three steps without stumbling. I click around the extravagant productions. My first impression: The female leads are distinctly more attractive than their male counterparts, particularly in the slightly dated Hindi movies. Many a hero's stomach bulges against his shirt's fabric, his chin indicates doubling, or his hair is thinning. The women, on the other hand, are captivating beauties.

The crew prepares for landing. It's after midnight and below us Delhi is a complicated constellation of orange lights. After the plane has touched down, some passengers get up and start opening the overhead bins to retrieve their bags. Flight attendants are asking them to take their seats again. They don't. Instead, they start a discussion that lasts until the seatbelt signs come off.

Inside the airport, I hurry down one hallway after the next. The colorful pattern of the carpet under my feet is the perfect camouflage for the international dirt stuck to the travelers' soles. I wonder if I'm going to arrive in Delhi many more times. Or never again. My visit comes with great expectations for Saskya and me. She made it clear how much Delhi means to her. She cannot imagine being in a relationship with a man unwilling to spend at least part of his life in the place she calls home. If she had to decide between me and Delhi... I don't want to think about that. That's why—despite all warnings—I have made a resolution to keep an open mind. I want to try not to pass quick judgement. I know that my success is going to be limited. I'm a traveler, and as such, I will hardly be able to resist that impulse. What I'm absolutely sure I won't be able to keep myself from doing: looking closer. At the same time, I would like to perceive what I see as normal. As in: "I'm used to that. I know that already." Wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't that make so many things much easier? If India were already a part of my life, my home.

A miniature car passes me. The driver is visibly enjoying his job. His freight is back-to-back with him: the portly snack lady from the plane sits stiffly with a stoic expression on her face.

I arrive at passport control. There's a striking resemblance among the officers and not just because of their uniforms. Each one of them comes with a mustache and a potbelly.

I receive the necessary stamps and they wave me on. In order to get to baggage claim, I have to make my way across a duty free shop. Sapphire Gin, Teacher's, Chivas Regal—many travelers stock up on booze here before they leave the airport. I have to wait a while for my suitcase to plop onto the conveyor belt. A skinny young man skillfully leaps around the luggage pile, putting it in order.

Luckily, I'm not stopped at customs. My suitcase contains Bavarian sausages, pretzels, and sweet mustard. A small gift for the Jain family. I've never brought anyone Weißwürste, pretzels, and sweet mustard. I feel more at home in Berlin than I do in Bavaria. But not in culinary terms, apparently. Besides, Berliner Currywurst would be a bold gift in India.

Saskya is waiting for me in the arrival hall. To be granted access, she had to pay a fee. Officially, it's meant to increase security. Less officially, it serves the purpose of keeping a lot of people out—especially those who can't afford it. Most people are waiting in front of the building.

I'm glad to be greeted by her. It makes everything new feel more familiar: the smell of the smog when we step out into the night. The cacophony of squealing car horns. The asphalt covered in fine-grained sand. The cab drivers' offers, efficiently rejected by Saskya: "Nahin, driver hai". No, we have a driver. Holding my hand, she pulls me towards her parents' white Maruti. Jaswant emerges from it. He scrutinizes me for a second and greets me with a smile before helping me with my luggage. Saskya and I jump into the backseat. The three of us roar off.

We are chatting during the ride but we will have to repeat everything we say later. There is so much to see for me here that I've never seen before.



Saskya looks happy. I have finally arrived in the place where she comes from. I can tell from her face how much she looks forward to showing me everything. May I introduce you? This is Christopher, and this is my home. I hope you'll get along.

I hope so, too.

Saskya radiates confidence. She knows this place better than any other. Delhi doesn't scare her. I can't say the same for me. The city is growing around us like a massive, imperturbable creature with no natural enemies.

There's something to arriving at a foreign place at night. Like meeting someone for the first time in an intimate situation. Despite the darkness, you can see as much of the city as you can during the day. We drive east through the diffuse light of the streetlamps. Fog lies over the city. The air is thick and cool. Rickshaws, small cars, trucks, and people on bicycles flow along a narrow street bordering a high concrete wall on the right and a row of houses on the left. Mobile phone shops, convenience stores, copy shops, a barber, a dry cleaner. All of them closed. In an alley, somebody is selling samosas to rickshaw drivers. Then there are darker sections with almost no streetlights. Here, the Maruti's headlights give us the only warning of pedestrians scurrying across the street at unexpected moments. Densely planted trees throng by the side of the road, followed by ten-story glass buildings. A church. Jumped traffic lights. Very tall pavement borders. Jaswant snakes his way through the traffic like the most agile member of a herd.

After less than thirty minutes, we turn right and pass a sign: Vasant Kunj. Saskya's parents live in this part of the city predominantly inhabited by the growing middle class. A little south-west of the city center. If you consider Connaught Place, which was established by the British, as the center of the city.

Jaswant accelerates one more time before he slows down in front of a barrier, and honks. A guard sluggishly gets out of a plastic chair outside his booth and opens the barrier. Unlike other visitors, we don't have to state where we're going. He knows the Jains' Maruti. Carefully, Jaswant steers the car over gigantic speed bumps. Two more turns. We're here. Finally. Saskya and I get out of the car. The air is cold, not warmer than a fall night in Germany. It smells of fire. Another driver is warming his hands over a burning pile of foliage. A stately Banyan tree rises next to the parking lot. Dogs are sleeping on the roofs of parked cars. And the moon! I'm confused. It's lying on its side. The sickle isn't in the shape of a mirrored C, but that of a U. Like the grin of the Cheshire Cat. Saskya says that's normal. What's normal and what isn't will be the topic of many future discussions between us.

Jaswant insists on carrying my suitcase. We walk up the stairs to the second floor and ring the bell—a tropical bird's panicked cry follows. Back then, when the doorbell was to be selected and installed, the Jains unfortunately weren't home. Thus one of the electricians made the—as he thought—perfect choice.

Saskya's parents welcome me warmly. Their cautious questions about my first impressions, their caring, courteous manner, and their critical comments about the bad air quality, traffic, or trash imply guests have been overwhelmed by their arrival here in the past. I sense their concern. They want me to feel at ease, and this conveys their love for Saskya. I mean something to her. And therefore, I mean something to them. We sit down in the living room, drink ginger tea, and laugh about the fact that I was served my first "Indian" meal by Lufthansa. I have never seen Saskya so carefree. Her family is important to her. Seeing me engage in lively conversation with her parents makes her happy.

Next to us is the dining room, from which all the other rooms extend, similar to a Berliner Zimmer, a "Berlin room". Stone floors. Sturdy shelves filled with books. Dark wood colors combined with specks of color: drapes, covers, carpet. Windows and balcony doors are fitted with mosquito nets. The works of artists, whom I'm going to learn a lot about in the upcoming months, embellish the walls and side tables. Each work tells

two stories: its own and that of the Jains' relationship with the artist.

Jutta, Saskya's mother, is wearing a knee-length gown (a kurta, as I learn later) over a pair of pants, and her long hair down. When she talks, a smile plays about her lips. Her parents were from Austria. That's why she raised her children speaking mostly German. It's the family's intimate language, while the everyday business outside the house is carried out in English and Hindi. The different languages suggest that Jutta—like many women—pursues more than one career.

Thanks to Jutta, I feel at home. She radiates motherly affection. She has a talent for detecting the wrinkles in any given moment and smoothing these out: Glancing around the room trying to spot a napkin, Jutta passes me one before I can even ask for it. Never would she think of spreading discord. Actually, I'm convinced that she's unable to do so. Jutta knows exactly what needs to be said to defuse a situation. Perhaps she knows even better what need not be said. This is not her only skill that comes in handy as an employee of the German Embassy's Cultural Section. She has more and better contacts than any ambassador. Her warmth makes her the perfect hostess. She connects people. In her presence everyone feels taken care of and relaxes. She never brags about her accomplishments—a rare trait among the intellectuals of Delhi society. It's not like Jutta doesn't have any reasons to boast: With her PhD in art history, she was a pioneer in her field, Indian water architecture. For years, she taught art history at the National Museum in Delhi. She has published essays and books on miniature painting, on silver in India, and on the Indian iconography of feet and footwear. Since she's fluent in Sanskrit, Gujarati, and Hindi, she's able to analyze original documents without having to rely on the few and at times sloppy English translations. At the moment, she's focusing her research on nineteenth century German travelers to the subcontinent, thereby contributing to the discourse on Orientalism in Germany. In short: When it comes to Indian art history, no one can hold a candle to her. Except for one man perhaps.

An elegant aura surrounds Saskya's father Jyotindra. His neat hair and plain clothes in subdued colors—sweater, shirt, pants—suggest that he's the kind of person who checks himself in the mirror before leaving the house. When he sits, he crosses his legs and taps his foot. In Saskya's opinion, this means that he's comfortable. He chooses his words carefully. He can think of a felicitous return to every one of my jokes. Or he laughs. I believe that sometimes he laughs even when he doesn't think my jokes are all that funny.

Jutta sets down small clay bowls on the table in front of us. They're filled with almonds, cashews, pistachios, and other crunchy snacks, namkeens. Both of them ask me to help myself. Only then does Jyotindra lean forward, carefully considering what to pick and eventually choosing a single almond, making it disappear inside his mouth with a deft flick of the wrist and a mischievous smile. His self-irony immediately wins me over. What's more, I've never seen anybody eat a snack with such dexterity.

Meticulousness and precision are a top priority in Jyotindra's life. When he was a boy growing up in Bombay it's what kept him alive when he crawled through the space between the wheels of a moving train. With their help, he also acquired a deep knowledge of classical, popular, and folk art, which bestows his academic publications with their brilliance. And without these, he wouldn't have been able to run the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in Delhi for so many years.

It's a deviation from the norm that a professional art historian took over. More often than not, technocrats claim such positions. Even if they know very little about the subject matter. They scramble for such jobs because they come with prestige and certain perks: spacious accommodations, as well as a car with driver. Jyotindra doesn't care much about these things. Once, when he asked a museum guard why he didn't dispose of an empty pack of cigarettes right next to his feet, the guard replied that it wasn't his job but rather that of the cleaning staff. Jyotindra then grabbed a broom and began sweeping the entrance area, followed by the embarrassed guard telling him to please stop for it was beneath a director's dignity to take on such

menial tasks!

Another time, an employee insinuated that Jyotindra thought he was better than them. Jyotindra's reaction was to step out of his car, hop on his bicycle to go to work, and leave behind the stunned employee. The driver followed Jyotindra in the Ambassador car, imploring him to return to the vehicle. What were people going to think? Soon, other employees who had the same route joined him on their bicycles. None of them dared to overtake the Director. Thus the bicycle convoy slowly approached the museum—including the Ambassador. After that, he was known as the director who doesn't think he's better than anyone.

Jyotindra's position meant countless hours of lost sleep for him—and glamorous days for the Crafts Museum. Many still remember his exhibition "Other Masters" to this day: five contemporary folk and tribal artists that negotiate the modern in their works. Perhaps the most prominent of them: Ganga Devi. The women in the tradition she emerged from painted and drew motifs that had been passed down for generations: symbols of fertility, for example snakes, birds, tortoises. Ganga Devi explored new realms: scenes from her own life, rollercoasters and state flags, and not least the ceiling fan of a hospital room (she had to stare at one of these for a long time after she was diagnosed with cancer).

A wave of excitement went through the art world. Which was quite a surprise, but not due to the quality of the exhibition. The astonishing part was that suddenly, many of the capital's art connoisseurs showed genuine appreciation for Indian folk art, which they usually dismissed as inferior.

Jyotindra's accomplishments drew the attention of the powerful. Sonia and Rajiv Gandhi, Hillary Clinton, the German politician Joschka Fischer, or Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito visited the museum.

The glamorous days came to an abrupt end when Jyotindra moved on to set up the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi.

Today, the technocrats are once again in charge of the Crafts Museum. Exhibition halls are closed, or they are in a pathetic condition: Cracked walls. Plaster coming off the ceiling. Makeshift isolation of electric wires. Ganga Devi's wall painting was destroyed beyond repair. Many museum visitors take a beeline for one spot: the restaurant.

By now, Jyotindra focusses more on his research. He gives talks in Los Angeles, Berlin, Cape Town, and, of course, in India. More than ever, artists and art collectors seek his company and ask for his expertise. Despite all of this, his reputation didn't rob him of his modesty. The man sitting across from me, savouring an almond, doesn't advertise his accomplishments. Though he does attend the odd state dinner hosted by the Prime Minister, happiness for him is something else: Homemade dal. Going for a walk. Coming across a treasure at a flea market. And not least: Evenings spent with his family.

Time to sleep. Saskya makes sure that our mosquito net is neatly folded over the edge of our bed. There has been an increasing number of cases of dengue fever lately.

We lie down on the comfortably hard mattress. I'm still surprised about the cool air. It takes three woolen blankets to keep me warm. Stiff and heavy, they lie on my chest. I must not move. Otherwise, a gap forms and a draft of cold air sweeps in underneath the blanket. Hoping for sympathy, I explain to Saskya that I'm spoiled when it comes to my sleeping arrangements. "Indeed," she says.

Outside, a clacking noise grows louder. Followed by the trill of a whistle. "That's the guard making his rounds," Saskya clarifies. He wanders the street, announcing himself by rhythmically hitting his cane against the asphalt. Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack. Just like the metronome to which I once played the piano.

After three beats, I fall asleep before I can think: I'm here.

Good Morning, Delhi

Somebody's shouting. Or sneezing, loudly. Again and again. I wake up; look over to Saskya. "That's just the vegetable seller," she says. "What's he saying?" I ask. "Saaaaabzi!" she says. "Sabzi means vegetable." Shortly after, we hear a bell ringing outside. I point at the window. "Is that him again?" – "No," she says with a grin, "that's the ting-ting-wala." – "Ting-ting? Is that Hindi?" – "That's our made-up word for the bread-and-egg seller. He always has a little bell, you know?" He's not the last one. Countless sellers traverse the neighborhood advertising goods with their calls and sounds. All you have to do is step up to your window or balcony and call the respective person to come to your house. That saves you a trip to the market.

The kabadiwala collects recyclables. He's wearing a Panama hat and his buoyant gait is that of a person listening to an enthusiastic melody that no one else can hear.

The sabziwala offers a selection of green chilies, big and small bananas, tomatoes, red carrots, green beans, cucumbers, eggplants, cauliflower, broccoli, tiny cloves of garlic, red onions, fresh coriander, and ginger. Besides that, of course, albeit seasonally: papaya, sitaphal (custard apples—Saskya's favorite fruit that tastes like a juicy version of marzipan), guava, apples the size of a child's fist, tangerines.

My personal favorite, however, is the jhaaduwala. He advertises his presence with a soft sound of strings, perched on his bicycle furnished with dozens of brooms, big and small, like a South Asian Don Quixote jousting against dirt.

I have lunch for breakfast. I overslept. My jetlag is four and a half hours. The mysterious half hour partly serves the purpose of distinguishing the country from Pakistan—which meant that in 2008, when Pakistan conducted experiments with daylight savings time, the country, though located to the west of India, was half an hour ahead of its neighbor.

I meet the soul of the house: Urmila. At first glance, she might seem a tame, harmless creature. But Urmila isn't just a mother, a homemaker, her family's primary breadwinner, and the Jain's house help. She also brightens the lives of everyone around her. Hardly ever have I met somebody who leads their life in such a relentlessly friendly way. She's Christian, her husband is Hindu. He doesn't have a steady job; doesn't contribute much to their household. Unless you consider his mother a contribution. Urmila has a tense relationship with her. Her husband's family doesn't think much of Urmila's religion. For her husband's sake, she observes the Hindu fast, even during record temperatures. She appears to take these exertions in stride just as effortlessly as she faces Delhi's heavy traffic every day so she can make it to Vasant Kunj on time. Once she's there, she prepares up to four meals a day, goes shopping for groceries, fights a permanent battle against Delhi's dust, sweeping and scrubbing, receives guests at the door, makes sure that there's enough water in the tanks each morning, does the laundry, waters the plants, and yet finds time to treat the family to tea. Since she doesn't speak English, our communication is limited to looks and gestures—except for a few chunks of Hindi that Saskya teaches me after lunch so I can praise Urmila's cooking. She laughs happily. "Thank you, bhaiyya!" So far only my sister has addressed me as brother with such warmth. Urmila's bangles and anklets jingle, a charming melody. When Saskya and I leave the apartment, she calls "Bye!" which such enthusiasm that I am tempted to go back and exit once more.

A Walk through the Future

Saskya shows me around Vasant Kunj. Even more than that: She shows me the place she calls home. She holds my hand and leads me along. She's bubbly with anecdotes and explanations, protecting me from asking stupid questions. She wants me to understand, really understand. Even if she doesn't waste a word about it, I can feel how much she wants me to like it here. This is a walk through her life, her memories, worries, her desires. Maybe even a walk through our future. After all, one thing is certain: She's going to

leave New York soon. It's too far away. If she were to accept it as her new home, she would have to distance herself from her old one. Saskya is not willing to do that. Her plan is to return to Delhi. That's where her family lives, and that's where she feels at home. If what we have is to continue, I need to keep an open mind towards a life in Delhi.

In front of the house there is a walled garden with a lawn that has seen better days. Each year during winter it's reclaimed by sand—and, according to the neighbors, the gardener is less invested than he could be. The adjacent parking lot is full, not to say packed. In the seventies, when the colony was built, nobody anticipated that one day, middle-class households would define themselves by the number and size of their vehicles.

Drivers slap dust off their employer's cars with rags. Sparrows take a bath in sand puddles. Next to them, blossoms of night jasmine. The air doesn't smell as new as it does on a morning in Königsdorf, when people hang their bedding over the window sill; rather, it has an opulent fragrance and a lot to say.

An ironing man runs his business from the center of the parking lot. Each morning, his wife and children knock on the doors of Vasant Kunj's residents to collect their laundry. In the evening, they return it freshly ironed. The istrywala heats up his iron with hot chunks of coal. After his treatment, shirts, kurtas and pants have a slight—but not unpleasant—smell of soot.

There are stray dogs everywhere. They're huddled up in corners with an innocent look on their face. But they can't fool us. If a car passes the main street's garbage dump, they snarl and bark and chase it. More than twenty-thousand people die each year from rabies, Saskya says. We keep our distance.

The ubiquitous white noise of city traffic reaches us from afar, blending with the shrill cries of the green parrots barely visible in the trees. They're competing with pigeons, crows, and birds of prey for supreme reign over Delhi's airspace.

A monkey leisurely strolls across the parking lot, ignoring a fast approaching Honda. The driver has to slam the brakes. But he doesn't get out of the car to shoo the monkey away. For good reason, Saskya explains. You better not mess with the macaques. When a whole gang attacks a neighborhood, nothing and nobody is safe from them. When they last descended on Vasant Kunj, they entered apartments and bit residents. They too can carry rabies. Saskya witnessed one of the monkeys inflating a bright red balloon. "If he now ties a knot," she thought, "we're going to have a real problem."

The only solution against the plague: the monkeywala. He brought a grey-white langur. This bigger monkey scared the macaques off through his mere presence. The residents rewarded him with bananas and vegetables.

By now, however, an animal-friendly court has decreed that langurs may not be used for such purposes anymore. That's why the new monkey wallahs now wear langur masks reminiscent of Mardi Gras, scaring off the macaques by imitating the more dominant monkeys' call. Rumor has it that not just one, but three of them work to keep the prime minister's residence safe.

The Delhi Development Authority, a government agency, built many of the buildings in Vasant Kunj among which we take our walk. Plain, sharp-edged concrete constructions, some of them with a fresh coat of paint, others scarred by the dirt the last monsoon washed off of them. The properties have a good reputation. Despite high prices—a 1,600 square feet apartment in a condominium is easily priced at US\$235,000—the demand is higher than ever. There is one reason in particular for that: first and foremost, the so-called DDA flats are legal. That's special in India's capital, where seventy to eighty percent of the population live in illegal dwellings. And "illegal" doesn't just mean "slums" by any means.

Bhawani Kunj is right next to Vasant Kunj. Here, you find one four-story house after the next, all of them built by individual clients. Balconies, terraces, courtyards and embellished driveways—as long as the owners bribe

the right officials, they can build whatever they like. Although they do take the risk of having a bulldozer show up anytime with a government order to tear down their home. But they take a bet on a bureaucracy that is sluggish, as well as a popular campaign promise that many politicians make: legalization of illegal buildings. Most of the time, it works out.

Meanwhile, the population of Delhi's metropolitan area grows immeasurably. It's estimated to be twenty-five million.

25,000,000.

Königsdorf has a population of 2,909. That's basically three Bavarian families, more or less. If you were to scatter them across Delhi, you'd never find them again.

With such Moloch numbers in mind, there's a lot of construction at all times. As cheap as possible. Meaning: too cheap. Many of the workers are from rural areas. They want a piece of the cake that is the economic boom—and they receive nothing more but a pittance. That's despite the fact that they build with their bare hands, seven days a week, at one-hundred and ten degrees in the shade and all night, in the beams of floodlights. Women often earn less than men. Even if they work harder. Balancing a basket filled with rocks on their hands, they hold their children's hands.

The flourishing market of illegal housing creates absurd conflicts: A friend of Saskya's family sublet his house while he was abroad for a while. When he returned to India and entered the street he lived on, he was unable to find his home. It took him a while to realize that he was standing right in front of it. The reason he hadn't recognized it: Somebody had added a story. To top it off, a family he didn't know was living inside. As it turned out, the employee who was supposed to take care of the property in his absence had sold it and then made off with the money. Since the house had been built illegally, the duped man didn't possess any official paperwork that identified him as the owner. He had no other choice but to buy back his own house. For quite a sum, it goes without saying.

However, Delhi realty's true problems don't start until after you have moved in. Many illegal households don't have access to the public water supply. That's why, several times a week, fresh water is brought to the houses on trucks and pumped into the apartments' tanks. A lot of effort for a lot of money.

What's more, countless streets where these dwellings appear aren't actual streets, but rather paths flattened by vehicles. The government doesn't care about the infrastructure of illegal neighborhoods. That's why the residents of Bhawani Kunj, for example, pooled their money to have asphalt put on their road. Which is an exception. It seems like the sand's texture serves as a scale for a neighborhood's prosperity: the richer its residents, the more gigantic their rides, and the finer the sand on which they drive every day.

Even in the legal neighborhood Vasant Kunj—where there are more strict regulations concerning the changes residents can make to their property—there are not only law-abiding citizens. From the facades of many buildings alone you can tell which owner has a tendency for special treatment: There are balconies that were turned into sunrooms and entrances that were replaced by kitschy palatial portals, and parts of the sidewalk with tiles in unusual patterns.

Many invest in such "improvements". After all, you have to get rid of your illegal income somehow.

Saskya and I leave the gated community and follow the main road. We're never alone. Even when I think that no one's around, I spot a person here and there. A rickshaw driver urinating against a cracked wall. Kids in school uniforms getting on a bus. Two men walking next to each other, loosely holding hands—which, as Saskya explains to me, I mistake for more than what it is: a gesture of friendship.

My friend Chandrahas—an author as well and the only other person from South Asia whom I had the good fortune to meet before my visit to India—once said: "Where I come from, there are so many people that I see



them even with my eyes closed.”

I get it now. That feeling of never being all by yourself, and of always being part of a larger machinery. I don't feel like that when I'm in Germany. I can succumb to the illusion of being an independent individual there.

We arrive at Anand Store. A kind of mom-and-pop store. Fluorescent lights illuminate it. With artistic skill, two skinny boys are sorting and piling goods.

On the shelves you can find several remaining products from the planned economy of the past. Saskya shows me a green dish soap called Vim Bar (not to be confused with the common shorthand for “Vintage Military Bolt-Action Rifle”). Mr. Anand also sells toilet paper, which is more expensive than the rolls you would buy in a Berlin supermarket. Probably because most people in India take care of their personal hygiene with water—and not with a few layers of semi-soft paper.

Also to be found on the shelves: eggs, snacks, white bread, as well as butter, cheese slices, and delicious milk ice cream produced by Amul, which contributed to a great extent to the “White Revolution” during the seventies, turning a nation of modest milk production into the country with the largest worldwide.

Imported products such as lasagna sheets, strawberries, sausages, or other brands of cheese are scarce in Anand Store. Those are available at one of the shopping centers, which are almost exclusively frequented by the upper class and foreigners. Employees sell products they can't afford themselves. Because of the poor amount of customers, many products are past the expiration date. Women bedecked in jewelry have their drivers take them to malls in their SUVs, where they spend six US Dollars on an avocado. Why? Because they can. For the same reason, there are customers in a Walmart in the satellite city Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon) or a McDonald's at Connaught Place—where they of course don't offer beef but other meats and a variety of vegetarian creations like the “McAloo Tikki”. The customers revel in acquiring international, often Western products. Even if those are poorly made and cost several times as much as local products: the price of a “Maharaja Mac” is equal to an entire lunch at a regular Delhi sidewalk restaurant. That's how deeply rooted many people's longing from all classes is: They want to be part of this new, aspiring India. No matter the cost.

Since the economy was opened in the early nineties, the country increasingly allows foreign investors to enter its market. The government only keeps the international companies' aggressive strategies at bay because it's afraid of losing votes: Millions of Indians make their living as small business owners—just like Mr. Anand.

Yet many streets are adorned with a Burger King or a Domino's. Mercedes sedans cut you off in traffic. You come across Siemens dishwashers in private households. In a few days, the Bavarian soccer team FC Bayern is going to challenge the Indian national soccer team in Delhi: Less so as a sign of sportsmanship, but rather because of an interest in millions of potential FC Bayern fans who will then purchase jerseys, scarfs, and coffee mugs in red and white.

All big malls in Delhi sell brand-name products by Gucci, Boss, Prada. The price tag of a Louis Vuitton handbag boasts so many zeroes that you have to concentrate pretty hard to ascertain the correct number. The rupee price corresponds to the bag's price at the Champs Élysées or on Fifth Avenue. I wonder if the mall cleaning staff ever pauses to read the price tags inside the classy stores. It's more than just the pane of a shop window that separates them from these products. Even if they could save their entire life's daily wages, they still would not be able to afford the sum for such a tiny handbag.

Saskya and I leave Anand Store behind. The sun has changed to a bright orange. Traffic is getting increasingly dense. We dodge motorcycles dodging a rickshaw dodging a car dodging a cow.

Saskya takes me to the nearby Sports Complex. A peaceful park with a meandering path, plus a playground and a climate-controlled fitness center equipped with treadmills, weight benches, and mirrored walls. A giant

high-voltage power pole rises in the middle of the big lawn. It hums menacingly. Kids on “Hero” bikes race past portly women pushing their bodies along the path in sneakers and kurtas with swaying hip movements and at a moderate pace, so that they have enough breath left for gossiping. It takes four minutes to circle the grounds at that speed. When the first beads of sweat make an appearance on their foreheads, they abort their mission, get into their cars, and drive back to their houses inside the colony, a few minutes away. We return to the apartment via back roads. We pass numbered water tanks and stop in a backyard with two badminton courts.

While the nation loves cricket, badminton is the growing middle class’s unofficial leisure sport. You can play it in many places, and just for fun when the mood strikes. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to strain your body too much either: a particularly attractive aspect for a society with little athletic ambition. This is where I should have grown up! I wouldn’t have fallen victim to a nostalgic love of nature. Climbing mountains, skiing, playing soccer, always to the point of complete exhaustion, even if it hurts, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”: Delhi would’ve spared me from all that. By the way, this philosophy doesn’t have anything to do with laziness (except for those cases in which it does). The subcontinent stipulates a different biorhythm. Those who don’t obey will soon physically experience what that means. Just like me.

Saskya and I play a match. I don’t stand a chance against the former badminton champion of Kaka Nagar. As a tennis layman, I didn’t expect how difficult it would be to score even one point against somebody who is smaller and weaker than me. The petite woman makes me race across the court. The courtside conversations held by maids fall silent as they start to notice my clumsy movements. I’m defeated immediately. I use my jetlag as an excuse for being in bad shape. Ten minutes of playing make me feel as exhausted as a ninety-minute run.

Daylight wanes, the temperatures drop noticeably. Somebody at the nearby barracks sounds a bugle. He’s in competition with the muezzin’s call at the neighborhood’s mosque. All of a sudden, the sun is gone.

We return to the apartment. In the bathroom, I wash the sweat off my skin. I regain my strength with the help of grilled cheese toast prepared for me by Urmila. The modest culinary heritage of the former colonial power. I watch the news. Arnab Goswami, a famous host, sporting the look of a spoiled favorite son with his meticulously parted hair and fancy glasses, is yelling on “Times Now”. He echoes himself. Rounds of verbal bullets leave his mouth, aimed at his guests, along the lines of “You did? Did you not? Did you? Or did you not? You didn’t? Ah! You did! Didn’t you?” My heart rate goes up, higher than it did when I was playing badminton. I switch the channel. On “NDTV”, the screen is divided into eight sections. Each one shows a politician or a journalist, live from a different part of the country. One of them, it seems, is plopped down in his living room, grinning dreamily. Another one is sitting at his desk, almost asleep. Two others are having a screaming match of epic proportions. It’s less the content of those debates but rather their presentation that reminds me of Germany: Everyone’s an expert, and all of them have an opinion on everything.

When the guard outside plays metronome again, Saskya asks me what my first impressions are. She looks at me with keen eyes. I know what she has in mind. She hopes that our exploration of Vasant Kunj was a walk in the future, and not just for her.

I think for a minute before I answer. I tell her that it feels like I’m not in India for the first time. As foreign as this new environment may be, I don’t feel like a foreigner—thanks to her.

There’s a smile of relief on Saskya’s face. That was a good answer.

Even if it’s not true. In fact, I actually do feel like a stranger. But how am I supposed to tell her that I’m having a hard time seeing myself haggling over the price of a mango with the sabziwala in Hindi one day, or fighting macaques for a parking space, or jogging at the Sports Complex in ninety percent humidity?

I love this woman. I don’t want to lose her.

Weddings

The next day, we're invited to a wedding. A Punjabi wedding. Saskya warns me that this is going to be a traumatic experience. Punjabis are considered the irrefutable masters of pomp. Mostly, you can find them in their home state Punjab (of which there is one in Pakistan and one in India). However, due to their notorious self-confidence in combination with their entrepreneurial spirit, you run into them everywhere else as well: on the subcontinent, in a Canadian cab, on a milk farm in Tuscany, or at a bar by the Baltic Sea.

I pretend I'm not worried. How bad can it be? After all, I grew up among the Punjabis of Germany: Bavarians. When the daughter of my mother's friend got married in Königsdorf, she had no choice but to invite us, the unpopular Zug'roaste, as well. For the wedding ceremony, my family had to set foot in the local church on a Saturday morning. For me, the child of Atheist parents, it was an exotic place. I only found myself in church when my school class attended mass at the beginning of each year. (Yet I was not once permitted to eat the Body of Christ.)

The minister's voice during the sermon had a sinister echo. Someone suppressed a cough. Church benches struggled audibly under overweight Bavarian men. There wasn't much of a difference between this atmosphere of reverence and that of a funeral. The bride's wedding dress looked like any other: a rustling tuft the color of a dandelion puff. The minister pointed out to the couple that, from now on, it would never just be the two of them. "You can't tell that she's pregnant," I thought. The minister's explanation highlighted my impious upbringing: "Man, wife, and God." I imagined a man with a white beard in the couple's bed. Every once in a while, the wedding party had to get up and say "AMEN!" in a loud voice. Unlike my heathen family, most people seemed to know when. Or was there a secret signal? I imitated others. One time, I exclaimed "AMEN!" at the wrong time. No one looked at me. The turned backs were enough of a punishment. The organ began to play. As festive as the melodies were, they had something ominous about them. A grain of rice got into the groom's eye as the couple left the church, and he had to be treated with eye drops. On the stone steps, happy pigeons cleaned up the rice. The party walked down to the pub, where a brass band welcomed us. Next to each musician stood a half-empty glass of beer. Dozens of pigs had given their lives for this day. The waitresses served oversized plates of dumplings, gravy, and meat. The groom's friends had set up a slide projector and showed personal pictures from his pubescent past: a Heavy Metal shirt, brittle long hair, tight black leather pants (not Lederhosen), a faint mustache. Particularly singles and unhappily married people chimed into the laughter. Shortly after, the bride disappeared. Somebody had witnessed her sneaking out of the hall with a few male friends. Brautklau (stealing the bride)! The groom left to go look for her. One or two hours later, he found her at a bar, drinking with the men. The husband had to foot the bill. That's how he won his bride back. A funny tradition. For everyone except the groom.

In Delhi, the night of the wedding starts just where every night in Delhi starts: inside a car. Rush hour traffic? No. Traffic jams are a permanent condition in this city. Countless documentaries about "colorful, chaotic India" on German television have prepared me for their dimensions. During our... well, "journey" to the wedding, I pursue a pastime: In Delhi, no place is better suited for watching all social classes than the street. Traffic is a just instance. It treats everyone the same way. Ferraris move at the same speed as mules dragging carts filled with gravel. Rarely does anyone obey the traffic rules. The general principle is: If it keeps us moving, it's allowed. Referring to the hustle and bustle as chaos, however, would be wrong. The stream of vehicles moves organically: Rickshaws featuring Bollywood stars smiling seductively from pictures attached to rearview mirrors. A BMW with tinted windows, one of which is rolled down when the owner discards a can of Red Bull. Boys on motorcycles deliver McDonald's. The only exception: a suicidal bicyclist from the urban

middle-class wearing his knee pads and aerodynamic helmet on his sparkling-clean mountain bike. Ornatly embellished trucks, painted by hand, all of which chime into the cacophony of car horns with their individual melodies as everyone honks at each maneuver. Many traffic lights remain red for five minutes. It's the perfect time slot for children to knock on car windows and enthusiastically offer cotton candy, Angry Bird balloons, or USB car chargers for your phone.

At a checkpoint, the Delhi police stops us. A force made up of mustaches and potbellies, the cloned brothers of airport security officers. Their roadblocks read:

TRUE WE SLOW YOU DOWN.

BUT WE TRY NOT TO LET CRIMINALS SLIP BY.

They check if the drivers and passengers have fastened their seatbelts. A rather novel law. At an intersection, a man sells white t-shirts with a black strip printed on it so people can look like they're wearing their seatbelt.

After almost two hours, we arrive at our destination. Saskya gives Jaswant money so he can have a warm dinner. The event takes place a mile away from the parking lot. All guests are brought there on golf carts. Saskya is allowed to take a seat next to the driver so her sari doesn't shift. I, being a real man, am told to stand in the back where the golf bags usually go. I clench my fingers into the roof as hard as I can. We race down an illuminated avenue of hedges and stop in front of a fountain with phallic spouts shooting water. Two men wearing turbans bow and open the entrance to the festive tent. Inside, more than a thousand guests are gathered around patio heaters. It's fifty degrees Fahrenheit outside. None of the Punjabi ladies let that show. Granted, with the winter weight they're carrying, some of them are well-insulated. There's more golden jewelry on them than sparkling ornaments on any Christmas tree. Mehndi adorns their hands, and dozens of bracelets shield their forearms. Waiters serve us whiskey, Black Label, and spicy, delicious chicken tikka. From a stage at the other end of the tent, music blares from speakers several feet tall. Multi-colored spotlights. The bride and groom ring in dance numbers: "My Heart Will Go On" is followed by a song from the current blockbuster "The Dirty Picture". How is it possible that the bride can whirl around like that without stumbling over her lehenga? Their perfect choreography reminds me of Michael Jackson's music videos. The guests are ecstatic. Conversations are held in the shouting style you know from nightclubs. Hours later, the buffet is opened. Three dozen steaming meals await the guests. South Asia and the West unite in a vegetarian curry burger the size of a golf ball. Everyone eats their fill—and leaves. Not because they're rude, but because food marks the culmination, and the end, of the night.

During the ride home, I'm quiet. My stomach is as full as my head. It was all a bit much.

Saskya asks: "Was it all a bit much?" She sounds concerned.

I do my most convincing headshake.

Outside, the city is flying by. Jaswant accelerates. The streets are empty and he wants to get home.

"Not every wedding is like that," Saskya says. Rarely ever has someone seen right through me so easily.

"Do you want to get married some day?" I ask her.

"I never thought I did."

"Thought?"

She suppresses a grin.

"You're right," I confess, "it was a bit much. Who were all those people?"

“Business partners, old high school teachers, friends of friends of friends,” she says. “One of them: You.”

“How can anyone possibly know that many people?”

“You sound jealous.”

“I am jealous,” I say.

“There’s no need for that. The bride and groom probably didn’t even know half of the guests. But these weddings aren’t about the couple anyway. They’re about their families. They display social status. Size and quantity are meant to send clear signals.”

“For my wedding,” I say, “I could barely come up with a hundred people. So much for my signal.”

“Do you want to get married some day?” Her grin tells me that she’s teasing. Her eyes tell a different story.

“I never thought I did.”

The Glitter of Relief

January 2012: Saskya and I are making arrangements for a trip to Jaipur, where Asia’s largest literary festival is held. No one knows that I am secretly making arrangements for a much bolder journey: I want to marry Saskya.

There are lots of reasons why we shouldn’t get married. The likelihood of us still being happily, nay, just married in five, in nine, thirty years, is somewhere near zero. My own father got married four times. Almost all of my friends’ and acquaintances’ parents are divorced or lead a marriage in the trenches. Some of them at least have God. As an atheist, I can’t even count on Him. My decision doesn’t have anything to do with belief, at least not with religious belief. I know that I want to live with Saskya. Even if I’ve barely spent two months by her side, I know one thing for sure: Someone like Saskya ought to be impossible to find. In my experience, you need to compromise in a relationship all the time. Either you bond with a person who is life-affirming and exciting, and equally unreliable. Or you get involved with a loyal soul and pay the price of weariness settling in all too soon.

Saskya is a woman of no compromise. If she’s not The One, then no one is.

Sure, I get it. I’m blinded by love; way too much of a romantic. Nobody is expecting me to get married at all. Neither Saskya’s family nor mine. I should wait and see, let some time pass, see how things go—before making epochal decisions. In a few weeks, I might see all of this in a different light.

But I don’t want to wait. I love her. There’s no better time to propose than now.

There’s only one question: When exactly is now?

Thick fog drifts through the streets of Delhi. There’s no telling whether the sun has come up yet. Our train to Jaipur leaves in thirty minutes. Jaswant takes Saskya and me to the station. Where exactly it’s located, none of us really knows. The billowing fog is just like the special effects of an eighties’ music video. Walking speed would be appropriate. Would be. Jaswant stretches his neck, blinking into the milky-gray air, he honks constantly—but doesn’t slow down. At intersections, cars appear from all directions. We swerve them with little room to spare. “I’m too young to die,” I tell Saskya, whereupon she asks Jaswant to slow down. He takes his foot off the gas—and accelerates again. People with their faces wrapped-up in blankets and towels hike to work by the side of the street. Some of them are shivering. The thermometer reads forty-four degrees Fahrenheit; the wet, cold air penetrates deeply. We stop again and again, asking for directions. No one says that they don’t know. Some point into the distance, others remain silent. We hardly make any progress, inching from intersection to intersection. A scavenger hunt.

Jaswant’s driving is rewarded: We get there on time. The train carries us out of the city under siege by the

fog. We find our seats and fall asleep almost immediately. No energy for proposals.

At Jaipur Station, we're attacked by hordes of cab drivers. I practice my first few words of Hindi: "Nahin, driver hai." That makes them hesitate. They say something. When they understand that I don't understand, the spiel begins anew.

We're not alone in our hotel room on the eighth floor. Bamboo scaffolding wraps around the glass building scheduled for renovation. Workers walk on it without a care at dizzy heights as if trying to keep their balance on the edge of a sidewalk. They notice us, but don't look away. I glance back at them. They look away. And look at us again a moment later. We close the drapes. I've already had a number of staring contests in Delhi traffic. Whoever looks away first loses. I've lost many times. By now, my victories have become more frequent. For that to happen, I have to persevere for countless seconds. It's mostly men I have these contests with. Women observe more discreetly. The curious looks are obtrusive, but rarely blatantly aggressive. They remind me of the fact that I'm not from here. Which is perfectly fine. Because I'm not from here.

Off to Diggi Palace. That's where the "Litfest" takes place.

In India, no one talks about the decline of the book industry. On the contrary: Readership, particularly English-speaking readership, is growing rapidly. The print run increases, one large foreign press after the other opens an office in Delhi. By now, there are more than sixty literary festivals nationwide. Jaipur, however, is their uncontested flagship. What author doesn't want to shine in front of hundreds of people? Not a problem in Jaipur. Even humdrum topics find an audience here. Thanks to free admission, thousands gather at Diggi Palace, clogging the roads leading there. Lectures, discussions, readings in colorful settings, named after their sponsors: "Google Mughal Tent" or "British Airways Baithak". The question is whether these sponsors have a say in the guest lists and topics discussed. They don't—according to the festival's organizers. Smart and not so smart thinkers give talks on stage, wrapped in a breeze of desert air and the certainty that a well-attended event always means a successful event. Even people who rarely pick up a book don't miss out on catching a glimpse of a celebrity: Rushdie, Naipaul, Franzen. The usual aristocrats. This year, Oprah Winfrey is among them. She made a thoughtless comment during a dinner in Mumbai recently: "I heard some Indian people eat with their hands still."

It didn't hurt her popularity among those people who eat with their hands still. After a short while, nobody is allowed inside the tent where her event is held. Overcrowding.

Even more desirable than the festival events are the exclusive dinner parties. On the first night, Penguin Press is hosting. The publisher rented the courtyard of the Taj Rambagh Palace, the former residence of Jaipur's royal family, run by the hotel chain Taj now. Where members of the nobility once strolled down marble halls, today lobster-red orient tourists shuffle their Birkenstocks, practicing their namaste at every encounter. Petals on the ground lead the way to the party. Torches are burning, stuck into the lawn. Hotel staff wearing traditional livery quickly moves among bistro tables. Always smile and bow, they were told. They serve whiskey and gin tonics on silver platters. They only drop the desired number of ice cubes into glasses. And they say thank you when we take one. "Thank you" for what exactly?

At first glance, the scene is reminiscent of receptions of the former colonial masters. Which isn't fair. But still: There's a glimmer of the past every here and there. In the dialogues of grandiose gentlemen with British parlance. Or in the eyes of a waiter when a Bollywood star gives them a piece of their mind. When you look closer, the sparkle that surrounds the guests is nothing but the glitter of relief. They are part of the inner circle. They are those who get served; who can stay up all night and drink because they don't have to go to work in the morning; who can pass hotel security even if the metal detector beeps.

The easiest way to watch this high society is by looking over the edge of a glass. “Be bold! Be colorful!” could be the theme of the evening. Women wear silk saris that hover just a few millimeters above the ground. Painted toenails. Fiery-red bindis: dots on the forehead, the size of which is directly related to the feminist effort of those who sport them. Men in linen suit jackets with azure-blue pocket squares. Cuff links. Kohl black eyes. Among them: A foreign guest in wrinkled appearance who wasn’t told by anyone that he should bring his blazer. Famous authors demonstrate Newton’s Law of Universal Gravitation: As literary heavyweights, they are surrounded by aspiring authors. Our friend Chandrahas is impossible to spot in the crowd—his gale of laughter, however, leads us right to him.

How skillfully everyone at this party converses! I envy them. They introduce each other with charming words. Everyone always laughs at the perfect moment. A conversation among strangers flows as elegantly as if they were old friends. Insults are disguised as compliments: “It’s impressive how you’re not using any make-up at all! You look so natural!” And the worst of all crimes, to be avoided at all cost: silence.

Most helpful in accomplishing this is a piece of current news: porn at the Parliament. There is footage of two ministers belonging to the conservative party ruling the state of Karnataka studying several sex acts on another minister’s phone during a parliamentary session. Among them was the women’s affairs minister and the “minister of cooperation” (no kidding) who claimed that they were only doing research on the horrible things that are done to women in other countries.

The Argentinian author Pola Oloixarac joins us. I became acquainted—and fearful—when I attended the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. She lived in the room next door, where she practiced the Queen of the Night’s aria from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* after nightfall. Pola’s laugh has a challenging quality. She hides her intellect. Probably due to experience; that men are intimidated if she doesn’t.

Pola congratulates me on Saskya. As the night goes on, she urges me repeatedly, and in Saskya’s presence, to propose to my girlfriend. Her brashness reminds me of a Thanksgiving meal in Iowa. Back then, Pola asked a woman handing out flyers for her local church if she thought Jews went to Heaven, too.

I suppress a mutter and thank Pola for her excellent advice.

So now my future wife is going to think that a South American diva put me up to this. I decide to postpone my proposal until the next evening.

But this time, chicken tikka intervenes. A waiter offers me some in the twilight of another party. My hunger tempts me to have some. Even as I’m still chewing, I begin to think: “That’s not how it should taste.” I swallow anyway. Big mistake.

That night, I’m confined to the bathroom: a rite of passage that all visitors to South Asia have to go through sooner or later, and which is commonly known as Delhi belly. Unfortunately, you can also suffer from it in Jaipur. My stomach discards of its entire content. I can’t even eat a piece of banana. My bowels react immediately, transporting the undigested mass back outside. Sure, I knew I had a sensitive stomach. But I have never experienced anything like this. I lose two pounds in a matter of hours. Saskya takes loving care of me. She buys me electrolyte powder to compensate the loss of salt, and rice with yoghurt, which everyone swears by.

But not even rice with yoghurt can soothe my stomach. There are phone calls with the family. My diarrhea and me are the number one topic (well, number two, technically). Everyone but me seems to know exactly what’s going on inside of me. I ask Saskya to stay away from the bathroom. It’s for her own good I say. She ignores that. We spend the night together, between the sink and the toilet bowl. Not a good place for a proposal.

Almost Everything Very Fast

A week later, we're back in Vasant Kunj. I feel much better. It took a while, but I feel better. I made a promise to myself that from now on, I'm going to consume non-homemade food only after a rigorous screening process. I owe that to my stomach. After all, there's a reason why Jyotindra doesn't like to dine out. You never know who washed what with what kind of water. I'm not the first tourist overestimating their digestive skills, that's for sure.

On my last day in Delhi, I'm supposed to appear next to Urs Widmer and Ilija Trojanow. An evening of German literature at the acclaimed IIC. The India International Centre is one of Delhi's most important cultural institutions. Every week, there are lectures, performances, premieres inside its halls. You find the intellectual elite's gray-haired Who's Who in the lounge area. They sip Old Monk rum, discussing the future of the country and their own waning health. A club membership is particularly sought after. Without it, there's no access to the restaurant and Delhi's cheapest bar. But the waiting lists are long. Unless you have access to powerful contacts. Or celebrity status.

On stage, I'm in conversation with Chandrahas. The room is crowded. I'm nervous. Saskya's parents have front-row seats. What do they think of this guy their daughter fell in love with?

Chandrahas hosts the event in a relaxed and incisive manner. His questions make my answers interesting. I hear Saskya's parents laugh. And not just them.

Afterwards, one of the younger women in charge of the event approaches me: "You are very handsome." I'm dumbstruck. I look for the right words.

She's smiling, nervously tugging at her sari.

I'm not much better at handling these situations than I am at handling a soccer ball. Not much has changed about that since my first romantic experience. A few months before I met Saskya, an acquaintance nestled up to me after our lunch date, presenting me with pictures of herself—half-naked—on her phone, practicing her new hobby: pole dancing.

To which I reacted by thanking her. What for exactly? I wasn't quite sure. She flipped her phone shut and immediately asked for the check.

Before I can make a mistake, Saskya joins us. The young woman takes off.

Later that evening, Saskya and I are meeting her parents at the Oriental Octopus. A restaurant with the charm of a James Bond movie from the seventies: dimmed lights and purple plush sofas with wavy backs. The waiters wear a revolver under their jackets, presumably.

Thus, I drink a Dirty Martini. I watch Saskya's parents. They seem relaxed. No signs of them being disappointed in their potential son-in-law.

During dinner, I make an effort not to let anything show, although I do keep thinking of "Almost Everything Very Fast", my new novel. The first copy arrived from Germany today. Saskya hasn't seen it yet. I wonder what she's going to say. A few weeks ago, when I presented her with the galleys, she pointed out that she came fifth in the acknowledgements. She made it clear that she was not happy about that position. (After all, she had helped edit the book.) Since then, she had kept reminding me of that. I promised to ameliorate. We wouldn't have met without the book, after all.

We're back in Vasant Kunj. Saskya is unfurling the mosquito net in our bedroom. I ask her to take a seat. She wants to know why. Saskya doesn't like surprises.

"I want to show you something," I say.

She sits down on the edge of the bed, reluctantly.

I give her the novel and ask her not to flip to the acknowledgements in the back. "Because I didn't change



them.”

She scrutinizes me. Her reluctance is turning into annoyance.

“Before you say anything,” I continue, “take a closer look at the beginning.”

Saskya opens the book.

“Oh,” she says.

The first page reads: FOR SASKYA.

She jumps.

“Oh!”

Louder this time.

She looks up, and notices only now that I went down on one knee.

Under the dedication, there’s my handwriting: Will you marry me?