

The Dhaba Owner

By Arpan Banerjee (India)

Just my luck. I had remembered to bring plates, hand towels, mineral water, paper soap, even a goddamn corkscrew, but no glasses!

‘What do you mean we can drink it straight from the bottle? This is scotch!’ Neeta was scandalised at my proposal.

‘Look darling, I’m sorry about the whole thing, but try and be reasonable.’

It was then that Ram Lal — our chauffeur for the journey — pointed towards a dhaba and suggested that we could purchase a couple of earthen tumblers from there and utilise them as surrogate scotch glasses. We grudgingly accepted the idea.

The dhaba was like any other roadside eatery — shabby, unclean and truck driver-infested. Intriguingly, the joint was called ‘Rajesh Khanna Hotel’. We soon discovered why. The walls of the dhaba were plastered with pictures and drawings of the Bollywood star of yesteryear. If that wasn’t enough, the chap who owned the place dressed like Rajesh Khanna. But what really had Neeta and I in splits was the fact that this guy TALKED like Rajesh Khanna! You know, the whole effeminate smile and bobbing of the head. Priceless! ‘My name is Rajesh Khanna,’ he said to us with a straight face. He then whipped out to his voter ID card to prove that he wasn’t lying. ‘What can I bring you?’ Suppressing a giggle, I told about our intended purchase. I then casually remarked that we were tourists from Bombay.

‘Oh, how wonderful! I am honoured that you have come to my humble eatery,’ he said with a warm grin. His tone of voice now sounded completely normal.

Neetu decided to humour him. ‘You seem to be a big Rajesh Khanna fan.’

Well, that was just the opportunity he needed. For the next ten minutes, he narrated his life story to us, completely oblivious when we twice hinted him to stop and give us the blasted tumblers. He told us that his real name was Mehboob Khan —he was a Muslim, obviously. For the first fifteen years of his life, he had worshipped Amitabh Bachchan. But he changed loyalties — and his name — during a visit to Bombay, after fortuitously encountering Rajesh Khanna during a film shoot. The actor had apparently obliged him with an autograph and patted him on the shoulder. The autograph had been preserved in cellophane and was safely ensconced in Mehboob’s house. Mehboob showed us a scrapbook containing newspaper clippings about his idol, dating back to the 1970s. He

proudly displayed the only English article in his collection — a 2007 Mumbai Mirror report alleging that Khanna had shamelessly wolf-whistled at a lady half his age at a cocktail party. Mehboob urged us to translate the article, but we both smiled uncomfortably and tried our best to evade the request.

‘You know, I have a cousin who’s a famous film producer,’ Neetu blurted out.

‘Really?’ Mehboob’s eyes were wide with awe.

‘Oh, yes. You know, I’ll ask him to give you a role in his next film.’

Mehboob was in a trance. He bent down and touched our feet. ‘Oh, thank you! Thank you! Did you hear that everybody! I’m going to act in a movie!’

I quickly grabbed Neetu and headed out of the place. ‘Wait, you forgot this,’ said Mehboob, handing us a plastic bag containing some twenty tumblers. He staunchly refused any money and insisted on escorting us back to the car. As we set off, he chased us for a few yards, smiling and waving. Meanwhile, Neeta took a sip of the scotch — straight from the bottle.