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Dating game with billionaires as contestants

SISTERS, FROM PAGE 1

cious gossip website, stints in Nigerian and Italian custody and a battle to clear their names with Interpol, the global police organization.

"IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST"

The Matharoo sisters never intended to become a cautionary tale about the perils of social media influence. They were born and raised in Toronto by middle-class parents who had immigrated from India. The sisters' lives changed abruptly 10 years ago, when Jyoti, fresh out of college, met a Nigerian petroleum magnate.

"He's not a rapper with expensive watches," said Jyoti. "It's generations and generations of money."

He flew both sisters on private jets to France and Greece and eventually to Nigeria, a destination they did not disclose to their strict parents. When they landed, a convoy of Mercedes-Benz G-Class S.U.V.s drove them to his home, a heavily marbled mansion with a pool and a litany of servants. Kiran lazed away poolside while Jyoti accompanied her lover to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to play polo with a prince.

"It all happened so fast," Jyoti said. "There wasn't even a moment for us to be like, 'Is this really happening?'"

Within a few months, she said, he had bought her a condominium in Toronto and begun giving her a monthly \$10,000 stipend so she would not have to work.

This affair was not to be a forever love, though. Over the years, the sisters globe-trotted with a succession of paramours. In particular, both sisters traveled frequently to Nigeria and said that dating wealthy men there was easy. "Once they find out you have a sister, it's over," Kiran said. "We don't find them. They find us."

They also began to document their lavish adventures on social media: yachting in the Bahamas, shopping sprees in Paris and Dubai, flying on private jets and sunbathing in Saint-Tropez and Spain. In the photos, they are invariably adorned in swag — Hermès handbags, shoes by Alaïa, watches by Audemars Piguet.

Neither would say exactly how many billionaires they had dated. "If you say more than one, you're automatically considered a gold digger," said Jyoti, though she acknowledged that the number was higher than one. "I'm attracted by the power of who they are, what they do and what position they are on the Forbes billionaire list."

Kiran described herself as an old-fashioned girl who simply likes to be courted.

"If you want to date me, you have to spoil me," she said.

In branding this high-end brand of pampered independence, the sisters seemed to delight in rejecting society's expectations of women's roles. "Marriage and alimony are acceptable, but being single and letting a guy give you things is not," Jyoti said. "You have to own it. I don't feel like I'm a piece of property."

The Matharoos' growing notoriety, fueled largely by Instagram, made them particular favorites of Nigeria's gossip blogs, which tracked their rumored relationships with the sort of savage coverage normally reserved for troubled royals. "Indian twin-menace: Nigeria's most promiscuous sisters," one headline declared in 2016. "Why billionaire housewives dread them."

The sisters received more scorn from social media commenters.

"The road to Hell is paved with Birkin bags, promiscuity, sloth, Instagram photos, and vanity," a commenter posted on a gossip blog thread titled "High Paid Escorts/Prostitutes: Jyoti & Kiran Matharoo." This thread runs for 220 pages — "more than some celebrities," Kiran said, with pride.



Clockwise from top: Jyoti, foreground, and Kiran Matharoo in Toronto walking their groceries back to their car in March after one of their more modest shopping trips; a sampling of the designer shoes in the sisters' walk-in closet, which resembles a luxury boutique; and Kiran with a personalized choker from one of several jewelry drawers they share at their Toronto home.

THE SISTERS GET ARRESTED

When the dark side of the fantasy arrived — this was in Lagos, Nigeria, in December 2016 — it was as sudden as it was severe.

A few days after the Matharoos had returned to Nigeria, they were awakened by a loud knocking at their hotel room door. A group of men burst in and told the women they had to come to the police station. Some of the men, who turned out to be plainclothes police officers, took photos of the sisters in their bathrobes. These soon appeared online.

The sisters asked to see a warrant and a badge but got no response. "I told them I'm going to call my embassy, but when I started dialing, one guy grabbed the phone out of my hand," Jyoti said. "They said if we don't get dressed, they were going to carry us out just like that."

"We thought we were being kidnapped," Kiran said.

At the police station, the officers kept asking if the sisters owned a gossip website that had been spreading scandalous rumors about Nigerian elites — and about the sisters themselves. This site was among the blogs that had described them as prostitutes. "We couldn't help but laugh, because the whole thing was so ridiculous," Jyoti said.

From there, the sisters said they were

driven in a van to another police station, this one belonging to Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a branch of the police notorious for corruption and using torture to extract confessions, according to a 2016 report by Amnesty International. They were taken to a dimly lit office where an officer, seated behind a wooden desk, demanded they write statements admitting that they owned the gossip website.

"The site was in Nigerian pidgin," Jyoti said. "We can't speak pidgin, so of course we refused."

After hours of arguing, officers pushed the tearful sisters into what they described as a rat-infested jail cell filled with a dozen women, a few pieces of foam for beds and a hole in the floor for a toilet. The next day, they said, officers brought them back to their hotel room, and took their passports, electronics and Nigerian currency worth more than \$11,000 from the safe.

The women were then locked in a hotel by the airport and driven to a room with bars on the windows and guards outside the door. They said some of the men demanded bribes. "It was like we were held hostage," Kiran said.

All told, the sisters were detained for 18 days.

They were accused of cyberstalking and threatening to kidnap wealthy Ni-

gerians, including one of Kiran's ex-boyfriends, Femi Otedola, a politically powerful oil tycoon whose net worth was \$1.8 billion in 2016, according to Forbes magazine.

While they were in detention, the sisters said the police brought them to the home of Mr. Otedola, who warned that he could have them imprisoned for 10 years — or worse — if they refused to cooperate.

Desperate to leave Nigeria, and getting no help from the Canadian Embassy, the Matharoos feared they were running out of options. Then, they said, an associate of Mr. Otedola's arrived at their makeshift jail cell with an offer: If they apologized to Mr. Otedola on video, they could get their passports back and fly home to Canada.

"I felt this was our only chance," Jyoti said. Standing against a wall in their room as the man's assistant filmed, Jyoti read a confession off her phone, admitting that the pair ran the website and apologizing to Mr. Otedola and his family. The man never returned with their passports.

The video was posted online the next day and swiftly attracted international media coverage, destroying the sisters' carefully crafted reputations as fashion-obsessed ingénues.

"We got everything we wanted by

asking nicely," Kiran said, dismissing the confession video. "Why would we ruin that?"

Kiran said Mr. Otedola was furious that she had spurned his entreaties to rekindle their relationship, and used them as scapegoats to deflect attention from the website's embarrassing rumors. Mr. Otedola did not respond to interview requests.

About a week after they posted bail, the sisters flew to Toronto with emergency travel documents that Canadian officials issued after they determined the women faced no travel restrictions and that "there was a significant risk to their physical safety," an immigration official said in an email. The sisters said Canadian diplomats walked them to the plane.

Back home, the Matharoos initially stayed off social media. But fed up with the public humiliation, they began speaking out to Canadian media and posting information about their detention on their lifestyle blog. "I couldn't take it anymore," Jyoti said. "We had to set things straight."

Going public had devastating consequences. A few months later, in September 2017, American customs officials based at Toronto Pearson International Airport told Jyoti she could not travel to the United States because there was an outstanding warrant for her arrest.

A week later, Kiran flew to Venice, Italy, to go furniture shopping. She was waiting for her luggage at the airport when Italian customs officers locked her in a room with no food, water or explanation. "I was crying and crying," she said. Eight hours later, officials told her that she was under provisional arrest. "They said, 'There's a flag on your passport from Interpol,'" she said.

She spent the next 40 days in jail, awaiting extradition to Nigeria, according to Italian court documents. European Union laws prohibit extradition to countries with poor human-rights records, so it's likely she shouldn't have been held at all.

But Nigeria never filed the extradition paperwork, and Kiran was allowed to fly home to Canada. (Italy's Interior Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.)

Philip Adebawole, the Nigerian police official who detained the sisters in Lagos and issued the warrant that resulted in Kiran's arrest, said that he had not colluded with Mr. Otedola and had not demanded bribes. Asked why Nigeria failed to request Kiran's extradition, he first said the Italian police "allowed these girls to dupe them," and then blamed bureaucratic errors. "If I sent them my boys, we would have cleared everything up," Mr. Adebawole said.

Once Kiran returned to Canada, the sisters began pleading with Interpol to purge their names from its database of red notices (alerts akin to international arrest warrants) issued at the request of its 190 member countries.

In 2017, the agency said it issued more than 13,000 red notices, up from 1,277 in 2002. Only a small fraction of the notices are made public.

Normally, Interpol goes after murderers and drug traffickers, not women fond of posting cleavage shots on Instagram. "You can't trust countries like Nigeria or Belarus not to misuse the criminal justice system and Interpol to advance corruption," said Jago Russell, the head of Fair Trials International, a rights group based in London that has pushed Interpol to implement stronger safeguards.

DRESSING WELL IS BEST REVENGE

While they waited for Interpol to review their cases, the Matharoos tried to keep out of the spotlight. "We mostly just moped around lonely and depressed," Jyoti said. "I couldn't get myself to focus on anything until they dropped it."

Even then, the sisters sought to capitalize on their notoriety. On some days, they would grab a camera and drive to a deserted warehouse with just enough industrial grit to be edgy.

On Instagram, Jyoti hawked sponsored high heels, hair extensions and spray tans. Kiran developed an online food consulting brand.

Their work paid off. In June, an American man living in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and who followed Jyoti on Instagram contacted her about starting a fashion line. He planned to visit them in Canada. Then, in August, the sisters received a package from Interpol's independent appeals commission.

Inside was a letter informing them that Interpol had deleted their names from its database. The Matharoos had won.

Jyoti had him book her a plane ticket to Dubai in September. "I was like, 'Screw Toronto, I need to get out of here,'" she said.

What began as a business trip swiftly grew into a romance, with a stay on a private island and fashion brainstorming sessions over candlelight dinners. One evening, Jyoti wore a tight orange dress she had asked Kiran — a talented seamstress — to make for the trip. Impressed, the man, whom the sisters declined to identify to protect his privacy,

"I told them I'm going to call my embassy, but when I started dialing, one guy grabbed the phone out of my hand."

sent the sisters to immediately find manufacturers in Los Angeles. There, the Matharoos rekindled their love affairs with private jets and pools in Beverly Hills. Jyoti modeled on her Instagram in a neon bikini and other outfits her sister made. Direct messages started pouring into her Instagram with requests for the clothes. They are now in the midst of setting up their fashion line, SPCTRMstudio.

"I'm so relieved we can get back to our normal life," Jyoti said. But they haven't, quite. Recently Jyoti arrived at the Toronto airport with a plane ticket to Houston, only to find herself interrogated by United States customs officials.

"They were grilling me, like, 'So, are you a prostitute? When was the last time you had a boyfriend?'" she said. "I said, 'I didn't know being single was a crime.' I was so mad. Then I started crying."

The Matharoos also said they have been inundated with messages from women asking for guidance on finding a billionaire sugar daddy. "Surely you can shed some tips on how to become a kept woman who is still doing her thing," read a typical message sent to Kiran's Snapchat. For those wondering, they have some advice.

Don't be greedy. "When he asks what kind of car you want, don't ask for a Rolls-Royce," Jyoti said.

Second, observe proper "jetiquette" by dressing conservatively on his Cessna. "You don't want to look like some guy hired a hooker for a weekend," Kiran said.

And, obviously, when he hands you thousands of dollars for a luxury shopping spree, bring him back some change.

But if their brushes with incarceration have taught the sisters any new lessons, it's that they shouldn't bother. Men and their money are not worth the trouble. "There's always going to be a guy saying, 'Let me spoil you,' who wants to fly us somewhere," Jyoti said. "For once we want to just focus on ourselves."

Emmanuel Akinwotu contributed reporting from Abuja, Nigeria, and Elisabetta Povoledo from Rome.

Soviet-era painter known for defying the authorities

OSKAR RABIN
1928-2018

BY NEIL GENZLINGER

Oskar Rabin, a painter who was at the center of a group of dissident artists that defied the Soviet authorities in the 1960s and '70s, died on Wednesday in Florence, Italy. He was 90.

Alexander Smoljanski, a filmmaker who with Evgeny Tsybmal had just completed a documentary about Mr. Rabin, announced the death on Facebook.

Mr. Rabin had been in Florence for an exhibition of his work at the Florentine branch of the I. Repin St. Petersburg Art Academy. It opened the day after his death.

RIA Novosti, the Russian state news agency, said the cause was a heart attack. Mr. Smoljanski's Facebook post said Mr. Rabin had been under treatment at a Florentine clinic for a hip injury.

Mr. Rabin painted still lifes and landscapes, often imbuing them with wry critiques of Soviet life, but his fame rested as much on his defiance as on his artistic ability.

In 1974 he was among the organizers of an outdoor exhibition in Moscow by so-called nonconforming artists — those who were denied exhibitions in recognized galleries and museums because they refused to limit themselves to the officially sanctioned style of the day, Socialist realism, which emphasized hero-

ic scenes and sculptures and left no room for impressionism or abstraction or unpleasant subjects. The artists met an unforgiving resistance.

"When they gathered in an open lot on September 15," Hedrick Smith, who was then a reporter in Moscow for The New York Times, wrote in his 1976 book "The Russians," "they were brutally dispersed by plainclothes police dressed as workers and operating bulldozers and dump trucks."

By some accounts, the police plucked Mr. Rabin from the upper reaches of a bulldozer he had clung to as it advanced on him. The aborted art show has ever since been known as the Bulldozer Exhibition.

The international reaction was so strong that a few months later the Soviets allowed another show by the nonconforming artists, but the tensions remained. Mr. Rabin continued to incur official wrath and endure the occasional arrest.

In 1978 officials encouraged him to take a trip to Paris; while he was there they stripped him of his citizenship. He lived in Paris the rest of his life, even though he became celebrated in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union.

"The Russia-themed pictures that I sometimes paint even now are not nostalgic," he wrote in "Three Lives," a 1986 memoir. "These are pictures-cum-recollections — just a memory about the past. For no matter what sort of past it was, you cannot erase it from your heart."

Oskar Yakovlevich Rabin (whose

name is, variously, also given as "Oscar" and "Rabine") was born on Jan. 2, 1928, in Moscow. His parents were both doctors, and both died of illnesses when he was a boy; an orphan, he spent the years of World War II living in children's dorms.

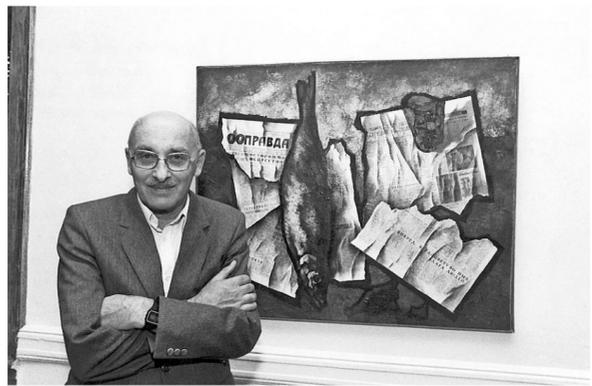
In 1944 he was sent to live with an aunt in the Latvian city of Riga. He trained at an art academy there, then studied at, but was expelled from, the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow.

It was in the mid-1950s that he fell in with a group of artists and intellectuals that was creating artworks and writings outside the sanctioned parameters. By 1958 he and his wife, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, also an artist, were living in a camp barracks in the Lianozovo District near Moscow, their home a frequent gathering spot for the renegades, who became known as the Lianozovo Group.

"Its participants were united, not by some common artistic ideology," the art collector Alexander Glezer wrote in 1995, "but rather by their uncompromising stand in the fight for freedom of expression and the right to display their works to their compatriots."

Mr. Rabin's paintings tended toward the expressionistic and were decidedly unheroic, putting him at odds with the official definition of art.

"Rabin depicted dreary everyday reality," Natalia Kolodzei, executive director of the Kolodzei Art Foundation and an expert in the art of Russia and the former Soviet Union, said by email. "Dilapi-



Oskar Rabin, a dissident artist who defied Soviet rejection of impressionism and abstraction, at a museum exhibition of some of his paintings in New Jersey in 1984.

dated hovels, suburban slums, neglected cemeteries, religious symbols, street signs, and newspapers full of personal and narrative significance."

One work from 1968, "Still Life With Fish and Pravda," featured a glass and a dead fish atop crumpled pages of Pravda, the official Communist Party newspaper, a provocatively ambiguous fragment of a headline showing.

In his book, he expressed mock indignation that such a painting was deemed not to fit the sanctioned realism of the

time. "I was reproached for my still lifes, for vodka bottles and for a herring sitting on a newspaper," he wrote. "But haven't you ever drunk vodka with a herring? At all the feasts, including the official ones, one drinks vodka."

Such cheeky works, and his outspokenness, made Mr. Rabin a prominent figure among the nonconforming artists.

"Middle-aged and essentially hairless, Rabin developed the incongruous status of a bald rock star," John McPhee

wrote in his book "The Ransom of Russian Art" (1994).

In 1990, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev restored Mr. Rabin's citizenship. His work has since been exhibited many times in Russia, as well as in the West. His work is in numerous museums and has been sold at leading auction houses.

Mr. Rabin's wife died in 2008. A son, Alexander, died in 1994.

Ms. Kolodzei said that though Mr. Rabin's paintings could be grim, many had a subtle ray of hope. "Light, which plays an important spiritual role in much of Rabin's work, can be seen as symbolizing the warmth of the cultural gatherings in the Rabins' home," she wrote.

The light ultimately prevailed. "Artists like Oskar Rabin can be said to have contributed to the ideological erosion and ultimate failure of the Soviet system," she wrote. "In a system where everything was defined as political, it was impossible to escape politics even in art; thus some nonconformist art movements became imbued with political meaning from their very inception no matter what the artist(s) may have intended."

Mr. Smoljanski, who worked on his documentary for eight years, said Mr. Rabin led by example. "He showed us all — without any pathos or heroics — how to stay free in a country not designed for freedom," he wrote on Facebook. "He never compromised with his persecutors. Never betrayed his ideals."