

A man with dark hair and a slight smile is leaning against the trunk of a palm tree. He is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, red chinos, and white sneakers. He is holding a light-colored hat in his hands. The background shows a clear blue sky and a body of water. The scene is reflected in a pool of water in the foreground.

BORN TO RIDE

WITH SEVEN MAJOR FILM RELEASES IN TWO YEARS — HIGHWAY, KICK, RANG RASIYA, UNGLI, MAIN AUR CHARLES, BEEBA BOYS AND SHOOTER — BOLLYWOOD'S ONLY HORSE WHISPERER, RANDEEP HOODA, IS BACK FROM THE WILDERNESS.

BY EKTA MOHTA

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• LOCATION COURTESY NOVOTEL, MUMBAI

White full-sleeve T-shirt, Rs 4,999; Red chinos
Rs 4,599; Blue and brown canvas belt, Rs 3,999;
White shoes, Rs 4,999, all by Nautica

Randeep Hooda's first autograph was on an Italian woman's breast. He may become "the most painted actor" thanks to a dedicated bunch of women on Twitter who post portraits of him regularly. When I tell a close gay friend I saw Hooda in his underwear, he lustily tells me, "You're the luckiest person in the world." I like Hooda. Not because of his caramelised body or mannequin muscles, but because he isn't some plastic, pleasant peach of a man. You make a mistake with his horses, you get an earful. You disrupt his timetable, you earn a scowl. Hooda is a proud, self-made actor, who has lived through the bad and the ugly of Bollywood to reach the mid-levels of stardom. That he makes men and women equally horny is a bonus.

Hooda's entourage is usually four-legged — he is in the habit of doing interviews either in or on the way to Mahalakshmi Race Course, in front of his six horses and dog. Hooda's love for the outdoors can be traced to the sports school he attended, MNS Rai, in Sonapat, Haryana. "It was a formative influence because that's where I started acting and riding horses. And, many, many years later, I'm doing the same things," he says. He moved on to Delhi Public School, RK Puram, "a poultry farm with so many children in such little space", and finally, Melbourne, Australia. What was he doing in Australia? Following Mel Gibson.

"Everybody thought I was going there to study or do masti," says Hooda. "The only guy I told was my best friend [and current manager], Sandeep Punia. I asked him, 'Do you know Mel Gibson? He came from Australia. It'd probably be very hard to crack straight into Hollywood. So, I'll go to Australia.'" He did apply to the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, where Cate Blanchett studied, but didn't get past the third round of the admission process. Even though he started (but didn't finish) studying human resource management and marketing, he got too involved with "the Indian fascination for white women and living a westerner's life". In fact, Hooda may not have had a film career if not for a model, a thespian and an Oscar nominee.

While working the ramp in Delhi, Hooda told fellow model Joey Mathews he wanted to act. Like gossip on legs, Mathews recommended his name to play director Sunit Tandon, who, in turn, mentioned it to Mira Nair. Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) was "a foot in the door" for Hooda, as well as the reason he met his future mentor, Naseeruddin Shah. "I remember feeling very inadequate [on set]," says Hooda. "I felt I needed to learn more, experience more as an actor before exposing myself to a larger medium and audience through films."

Hooda shadowed Shah for four years and became part of Shah's Motley theatre group. "I was lost — looking for approval and really trying to apply what I'd learnt. I was very earnest, going to all these workshops with Naseer bhai across the country," he says. Hooda, who can rattle off Beckett as easily as Manto, also adapted a Lee Blessing play, *A Walk in the Woods*, "for which Naseer bhai has been very generously giving me credit in public and very reluctantly in person".

Concurrent with his low-profile time with Motley was his high-profile relationship with actor Sushmita Sen. "When I was seeing Sush, I never talked about it. She did. I talk about her now because this was so long ago. I did feel it was delaying my own recognition

in some way and taking a lot of energy and focus away from my own career. But, in hindsight, it happens only when it has to happen."

Hooda's horses create the illusion that his life is like Gatsby or the Poonawallas'. Yes, he was often bullied in school because his surgeon father could afford better clothes for him than the ones his classmates wore. But, when work dried up, Hooda became like the duchess who would swallow dirt before parting with the family silver. "I was going to sell Ranji [Hooda's one-eyed horse, named after Maharaja Ranjit Singh]. He was fetching me a good amount of lakhs. But, when they came by and loaded him on the truck, I just couldn't do it. I felt like I was selling a part of me. They said I was going back on my word. I said, 'If I fucking see you again, I'll break your face. You tempted me to do something I shouldn't.' So, I sold everything I had from my television to cars to fridges."

Hooda continues, "When you're not from the industry and you're not an ass-licking gentle cow, and when you run out of work, they spit you out like anything else. I got spat out. And, [when that happens] the first thing that goes is your dignity. The second is self-respect. And, the third is the charm that got you the job the first time around. I think my horses have contributed to keeping all three intact for me."

Hooda would have faded into the night if not for solid melodramas such as *Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai* (2010) and *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster* (2011) and erotic thrillers such as *Jism 2* (2012) and *Murder 3* (2013). "When I went only one way, my career got over," he says. "I don't feel that one kind of movie is lesser than the other at all. Something being popular does not make it a less cool thing. Of course, there's the art part of it. But, who gives a fuck about art? It's a business proposition at the end of the day. You can keep the purist intact within your heart. But, you can't force it down other people's throats."

Hooda's candour is much like an American rock star's. He has a fondness for the provocative, media be damned. His recently acquired polo team is called Royal Roosters because he "couldn't find a better synonym for cocks"; his six horses are all geldings, which means "they don't have balls"; and his personal style is non-existent because "I think I look best naked". If he thinks he's being too difficult, he'll even save everyone the trouble and call himself a cunt.

Hooda's choice of roles is interesting. If he's a closet gay man in Karan Johar's segment of *Bombay Talkies* and a surly kidnapper in Imtiaz Ali's *Highway*, he's also a beautiful bystander in the Salman Khan-starrer *Kick*. "My characters in *Bombay Talkies* and *Highway*



Light blue T-shirt with white and blue stripes, Rs 2,599; Olive green chinos Rs 4599; Metallic silver watch, Rs 19,999, all by Nautica

"NOBODY REALLY LOOKS AT YOU UNLESS YOU'VE GOT BIG SUPPORTIVE HANDS FROM WITHIN THE INDUSTRY POINTING IT OUT TO THE MEDIA — IN FACT, SELLING THE MEDIA YOUR ABILITY TO TRANSCEND CHARACTERS."

our films, our religion. Dadasaheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, was Raja Ravi Verma's apprentice. Verma was the first guy to give a face to the gods in our country, so that those paintings could be prayed to by everybody and not just the Brahmins and the ruling class. He was the first guy to have a public exhibition; he brought art out of the durbars and to the people. He was the first marketing genius. He made prints of his own paintings and put them on matchboxes."

Main aur Charles, "a story about probably the biggest breach in our country's highest security prison", shows Sobhraj walking out of Tihar jail after drugging 175 people. What chuffs Hooda, though, is that "if you google Charles Sobhraj, my pictures show up first. So, the movie might make people forget the real Charles".

Apart from *Monsoon Wedding* and *Rang De Basanti*, Hooda has auditioned for only one other film in his life: Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. It was for the chemist's role, eventually played by Dileep Rao. In response to another question, he says, "I'm sick of watching Indians play scientists, cooks, taxi drivers and shopkeepers in foreign films." It's a good thing, then, that Deepa Mehta's *Beeba Boys*, a film about the Indo-Canadian mafia, came his way. "Deepa's mother read the script and said there's only one actor who can play your protagonist. Deepa and I took an instant liking to each other because she's also quite no-nonsense and straightforward. *Beeba Boys* is about Indians being motherfuckers. They really were like behen de takke, chak de phatte, robust, in-your-face, loud, stylish, pompous gangsters."

The better part of an hour over, we finally reach the expensive grass of Mahalakshmi Race Course. Hooda has changed into his riding gear in the car: black helmet, grey collared T-shirt, pants that fit like stockings and leather boots that reach his shins. His trainer brings his horse around, a Dutch import whose skin is the shade of soot disappearing in snow. The grounds are as quiet as a mountain. And, Hooda, finally in a place he belongs, has taken off into the sunset. ☺

were like chalk and cheese, and I did them one after the other. I don't really know what kind of appreciation I got for them. But, nobody really looks at you unless you've got big supportive hands from within the industry pointing it out to the media — in fact, selling the media your versatility and ability to transcend characters." If Hooda gets roles because of his looks, he also responds well to physical transformation. Oil his hair and burn his shirts, and he becomes painter Raja Ravi Verma in Ketan Mehta's *Rang Rasiya*. Truss him up in flannel, a beret and amber-shaded spectacles, and he becomes serial killer (and the best-dressed man of the 1970s) Charles Sobhraj in Pravaal Raman's soon-to-be-released *Main aur Charles*.

On *Rang Rasiya*, which was shot six years ago but releases in India this November, Hooda says, "I don't like the biopics we make at all. I asked Ketan Mehta, 'Who the fuck is this guy?' Then, he showed me two paintings. One was of Lakshmi and one was of Saraswati. *Rang Rasiya* is one biopic that just had to be made because people don't understand the contribution of Raja Ravi Verma to our culture,



Red zipper jacket, Rs 5,999;
White crew neck T-shirt,
Rs 1,799, all by Nautica



RANDEEP HOODA ON HIS PERSONAL STYLE

* My personal style is very basic, but I am quite choosy.

* Three things a man should have in his wardrobe are a good pair of jeans, a nice pair of shoes and decent underwear.

* I don't like to have many clothes, shoes or watches. I've got too much shit in my wardrobe I want to throw out. I've got so many things, but I'll wear the same jeans and T-shirts. Many times, I get caught when someone remarks, "Arre, you were wearing this yesterday."

* To tell you the truth, my sister and brother-in-law will get me stuff. It's very hard for me to go and buy something for myself. I think I look best naked.

* I have one watch, a Panerai. I love it. And, Salman [Khan] gifted me one watch, which is a bit loose on its chain, so I haven't worn it. It comes in the way when I'm riding.

* My riding boots are specially made in Jaipur, though I can't remember the name of the store.

* I hate shaving; it's just a pain. So, I like a bit of stubble.

Light blue T-shirt with white
and blue stripes, Rs 2,599;
Olive green chinos, Rs 4,599;
Blue deck shoes, Rs 3,999;
Metallic silver watch,
Rs 19,999, all by Nautica

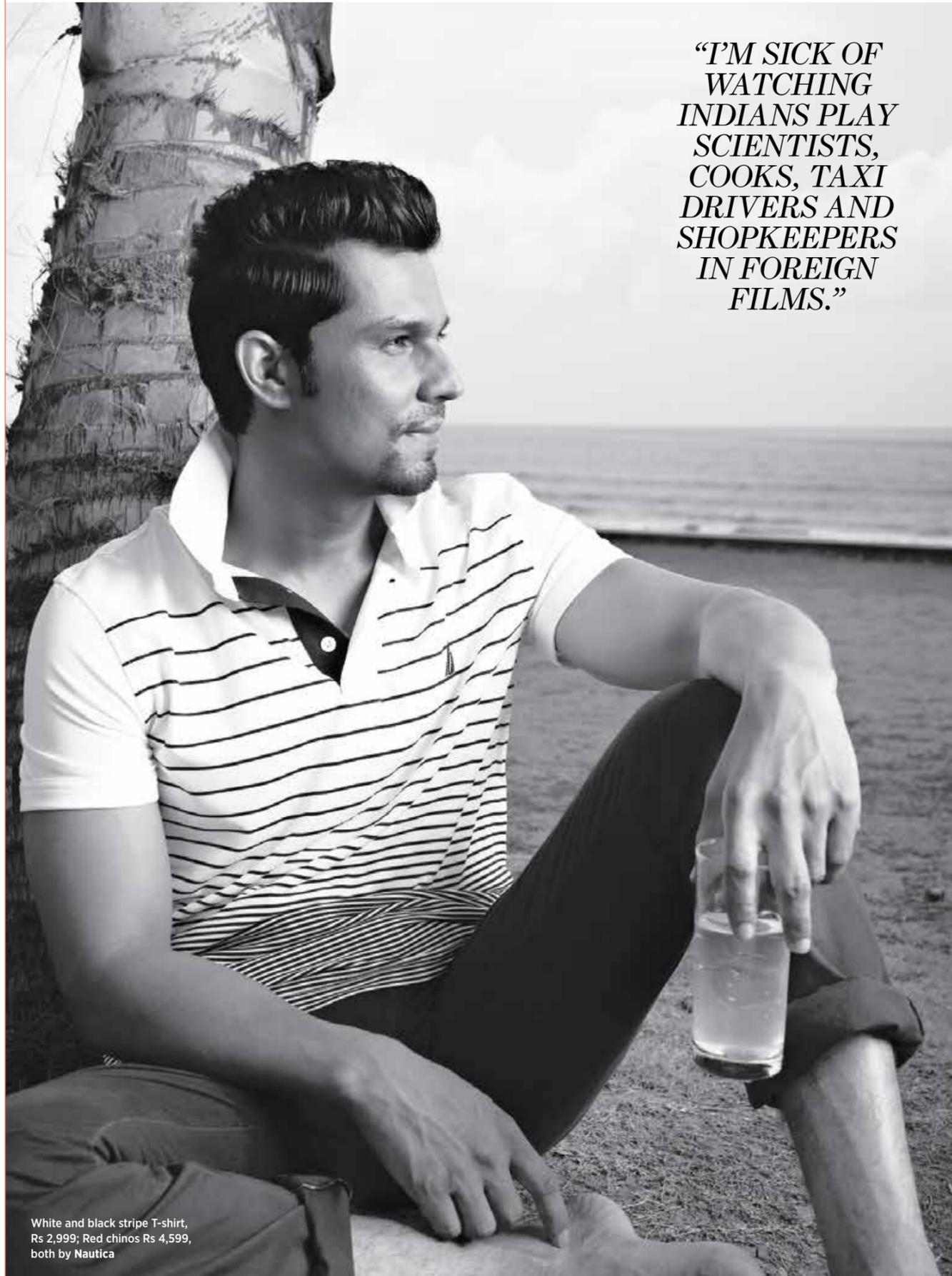
“WHEN YOU’RE NOT FROM THE INDUSTRY AND YOU’RE NOT AN ASS-LICKING GENTLE COW, AND WHEN YOU RUN OUT OF WORK, THEY SPIT YOU OUT.”

Light blue printed shirt, Rs 3,999;
White round-neck T-shirt, Rs 1,299;
Blue chinos, Rs 4,599; Grey deck shoes
with red sole, Rs 3,999, all by Nautica



Black and white knit with zipper, Rs 3,999;
Beige chinos, Rs 4,599, both by Nautica

*“I’M SICK OF
WATCHING
INDIANS PLAY
SCIENTISTS,
COOKS, TAXI
DRIVERS AND
SHOPKEEPERS
IN FOREIGN
FILMS.”*



White and black stripe T-shirt,
Rs 2,999; Red chinos Rs 4,599,
both by Nautica



Orange and white stripe knit
jumper, Rs 3,999; Beige chinos,
Rs 4,599, all by Nautica