

## WHO LET THE MURDERER IN?

Baburam Desai was an extremely religious man. He woke up every day at 4:30 in the morning, bathed in cold water, prayed for an hour, got dressed, walked to work. His routine was fixed, any changes would always give Baburam palpitations. He reached every day, sharp at 7am, and never missed a day in the last 3 years. The only times that he had ever taken off work was due to a sudden onset of illness. Even then, he felt guilty, and would try to drag himself out of bed at the earliest sign of convalescence.

Baburam worked as the security guard of building 14 in Sunset View Apartment Complex. When he joined, some 15 years back, he started as a newspaper boy, going from apartment to apartment, delivering papers and collecting money. He graduated to assistant helper in the tea shop inside the complex. As he began to know the residents one by one, he discovered his hidden skill – communication. Working up the courage, Baburam had approached then Society President, Mr. Shanti Pratap Patnaik, to apply for the job of a security guard. Alas, Mr. Patnaik turned out to be a hard person to appease and Baburam was given the job of a gatekeeper.

Over the years, Baburam learned a lot from the Society Presidents, including Mr. Patnaik. After his tenure, Mrs. Aruna Dey succeeded the position. She took Baburam under her wing and taught him how to polish himself. She later appointed him as the assistant security guard of building 22, the smallest building at the rear of the complex. From there, Baburam became the head security guard of building 14, which if rumors are to be believed, housed the most affluent people of the whole complex.

Maybe because this job was hard to come by and that he had to earn his way there, Baburam never took his duties lightly. Even the society residents agreed that they felt safer knowing Baburam was on duty. He was hard on visitors who tried to skirt past the desk and especially unforgiving when it came to bending rules. Baburam maintained a register that he updated with information about everyone's whereabouts, including the residents. He would question delivery boys till they would be tempted to dump the food on his head, he would make the maids take off their scarves that covered their faces from extreme heat, to verify their identity, he would check any parcels with a handheld metal detector, and even went through the laundry to confirm that no illegal substances were being smuggled on his watch. However, he was never rebuked more than a slap on the wrist.

However, despite good intention and strict adherence to rules, unbeknownst to him, on the morning of April 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, Baburam allowed a murderer to enter Sunset View Apartment Complex, building 14, and it would end up turning his carefully curated world topsy turvy.

Patla on the other hand, was the opposite of Baburam. Born as Patang Kumar Laal, he was only 5 years old when his father dropped him off at the gates of the Sunset View Apartment Complex. Patla was told not to irritate Baburam – the gatekeeper, as his father completed a job nearby. Even now, after 12 years, Patla keeps glancing at the main gates, hoping for his father to show up.

Baburam and the society matrons raised Patla as their own. He was the common child of every resident who bore witness to the poor child abandoned at their gates. Patla never talked about his childhood, never mentioned his mother, or the sisters he had left behind in the now-forgotten village. Patla had a soft spot for the street dogs and cats, and he would try to foster as many of them as he could. He would collect extra food from the residents and feed it to the strays, collected baby clothes in the winter, lit a bonfire for them almost every night in the winter, and set up multiple beds for the strays in the semi-solid thatched roofed servant quarters. His house had a tiny kitchenette, a bed big enough for Patla, and that was his entire world.

Patla ran chores for anyone who would be willing to pay him. He would collect groceries, clean houses, help the landscaper, and run odd jobs for the residents. There was hardly anything that Patla refused to do. With a sunny smile and a propensity to talk someone's ear off, Patla was a good companion to have around the complex. Patla was literate enough to survive in the world as a lot of the residents had taken it upon themselves, to teach him as much as they could. He knew how to read and write Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Punjabi. He understood both Tamil and English and could construct broken sentences to get his point across. He knew basic Math, understood some aspects of rudimentary Science, knew enough about Geography from all the

conversations happening around him, and learnt enough about Hindu religion and customs from Baburam to last him a lifetime. Some of the older residents would ask Patla to read the newspaper aloud to them and that made Patla aware of the current affairs and the politics that ran the country.

What Patla never shared with anyone was his dream – his fascination with history. He loved sitting on his haunches, his eyes wide, a dreamy, faraway smile on his face, as listened to his favorite resident tell the tales of the glory of the Indian subcontinent from the Harrapan civilization to the Indian struggle for independence. Ms. Haarika Panicker was a postgraduate in history from Nizam College in Hyderabad and worked as a lecturer at the local University. She moved in just a year ago, to live with her aging uncle – Dashrath Panicker. To afford in-house round the clock medical care, Haarika took tuition classes. And Patla would sit right outside the doorjamb of her classroom, his head resting on the wall, listening to her teach the kids about the bygone eras. Haarika knew that Patla would be sitting outside, and she took care to use words and phrases that would be easier for him to understand.

Fate, however, had other plans for Patla. On the morning of April 4<sup>th</sup>, just as Patla was delivering groceries to the residents of building 11, something happened that change the course of his life. His world would vanish in front of his eyes and the dreams he nurtured would never be fulfilled. Because on that day, Patla came face to face with the murderer.

.....

The murderer knew what he was doing. When he entered the building 14 on that fateful day, he knew he would pass under the radar. Baburam would never recognize him for who he was, such was his skill. He smirked, hiding his face, as he gave Baburam the slip and entered the building. At that moment, he knew his disguise made him invisible to all. He knew what he had to do. This job, this plan was what fueled him to reach this destination.

However, he never knew where to start. Though he had left behind a trail of bodies, history would indicate, that he tends to lose his head by overthinking and that always managed to lead his plans awry. He started with the stairs. Never trusted elevators, he just never knew where to get the grip on. On his way up, he heard something that made him pause for a few seconds. One of the main doors to an apartment complex was open and the sound of the TV was wafting outside. He heard his name being announced clearly on the afternoon news.

The careful smirk that he was hiding up until then became a full-blown grin. So, he thought, they knew about him. Or rather they thought they knew about him. He was confident that though his name was being announced on the media, he had enough of a head start and anonymity to get his plans started. But then a thought made him pause.

What if, these people were on their guard? Should he change his plans? He lurked outside that door for a few more seconds, hoping to hear more. Then as voices approached and got louder, he ducked into the dark corridor, opposite to the door, making himself invisible once again. He saw Patla coming out the door, smiling and waving to the resident inside, and in a careless slip, forgetting to close the door behind him. He waited for the footsteps to dissipate and then approached the wide-open door. Maybe, this was a sign. This would be his starting point. He knew that right now; the local news has just caught a waft of him. But by the time he was done, he was sure every single person would know his name and it would echo on their lips. Smiling he whispered to himself, “And my name is COVID-19.”