

Babu Miyya

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By : **Juggernaut**

Babu Miyya, a character created out of my memories with my penny pinching aunt and always giving uncle weakness to corruption.



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By

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The name Babu Miyya brings back fond memories of my aunt, passed away some years ago. Babu Miyya rented a small storefront shop from my aunt and uncle. He was an old man always dressed in traditional Muslim garb-baggy white trousers and long loose shirt with white skullcap. His gray beard trimmed in shape of a narrow projectile away from his chin kept his right hand busy in constant motion of grooming. The dark rings around his deep eyes could be a sign of poor health or just tiredness from standing in his shop from early morning to late evenings.

Babu Miyy was a permanent fixture in his shop, always in standing position behind the greasy glass counters. He sold milk, yogurt, ghee or clarified butter, and lassi or sweet and sour buttermilk. It is the lassi that made Babu Miyya very popular in the area. People from various walks of life dropped by his shop at any time of day to get a glass of refreshing lassi. He was a man of few words; spoke very little with his customers, nothing more than what was needed to complete a transaction.

Every time I visited my aunt, Babu Miyya was there in his shop behind the glass counter glaring at the street traffic. He seldom made any gestures of recognition when we made eye contact. Once in a while, I stepped inside his shop to order a glass of lassi, while sipping I would secretly stare at him hoping that he would strike a conversation, but never he did. The rancid smells emanating from storage of milk products perpetually occupied the air space in the shop. There was a small doorway at the back of his shop that allowed Babu Miyya to enter my aunt's front yard to collect tap water and supply milk and butter milk to her.

My aunt, my mother's older sister, lived several hundred miles away from our town. I visited her only during summer vacation. I was very fond of her as she always had kind words for me. She was a short woman with very fair skin and fat abdomen, slept on her stomach while reading or listening to radio, perhaps her soft underbelly provided cushion like comfort to her. As a young boy, I was fascinated by a small hand held betel nut cracker my aunt used to chop betel nuts into fine flakes to chew all day long. Her teeth were turned brown from constant chewing of betel nuts. Once in a while I begged for few pieces of nuts to chew, she gave a few reluctantly, and made me to promise not to make a habit of it.

In her bathroom, I saw for the very first time a large galvanized steel tub with water in which she relaxed after regular shower.

“Can I use your tub,” I asked her one day as I felt like jumping into the tub filled with water.

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“You don’t have asthma and backaches like I have, only asthmatics like me need tub baths,” she said in a quiet voice.

In several visits I made to her house, never had I heard harsh words coming out of her mouth. She always spoke with a smile and yet she never gave any gift not even a candy. Later on in my adult life I realized that my aunt was a penny pincher. She was very fortunate to have a husband like my uncle. He treated her like a doll with utmost care, provided her with a maid and a cook so that she didn’t have to exert herself particularly with her asthma. Perhaps, she was too comfortable and with no household chores, became fat and helpless.

My uncle was a high-level civil servant in-charge of inspecting and issuing operating permits to various businesses. This led him to travel and collect gifts from the business owners. He accepted gifts in any shape or form, such as shoes, clothing, cooking utensils, construction materials, home decorative items and even cold cash sometimes.

In total contrast to my aunt, my uncle was tall, dark skinned and generous. Every time I visited their home, he gave me treats to eat but the only catch was that I ended up massaging his feet while he relaxed in an easy chair. His three children, my cousins always escaped the dreadful chore of massaging their father’s feet whereas I was the only one caught up doing the dreadful chore. The massaging part was bothersome but the treats more than compensated the dreadful chore.

My cousins, two boys and a girl were much older than I. Subhashini, the girl inherited her father’s traits particularly his genial personality and kindness. But the drawback with her was that she made me listen to her long meaningless stories for a glass of lassi, she purchased from Babu Miyya. The other two cousins were more like their mother, never spent a penny on anybody. All three of my cousins had trouble graduating from high school, somehow with their father’s pull and push, they went on to obtain post-graduate degrees-albeit paper diplomas to get meaningful employment.

The position of my uncle entitled him to a free car and a driver named Ishmael; a Muslim who lived in a shanty house at the outskirts of the city. The flip side of my uncle’s genial personality was the use of foul language.

Ishmael spent long hours chauffeuring my uncle on his trips. A traffic jam or a bad road or poor weather, all these beyond anybody’s control, irritated my uncle and the poor Ishmael received the brunt of my uncle’s frustration.

Ismael was a habitual user of jaradha paan, a mixture of areca nuts with a pinch of tobacco folded in betel leaves used as a mild stimulant. He constantly chewed the jaradha paan and would spit the reddish saliva onto the road while driving. This habit kept his mind off the constant barrage of cussing by my uncle sitting in the back seat. On reaching the destination, my uncle would pat Ismael’s shoulder for safe driving and reward him with some cash. The cussing and subsequent rewards by my uncle became a norm in Ishmael’s daily routine. At the end of the day, Ishmael would collect enough cash to buy gifts for his two wives, both lived with him in the same house.

In our family circle, my uncle was known for his extraordinary skills in manipulating situations to his own advantage no matter how it affected others. His priorities were his children’s future and amassing wealth. His prosperous career spanning over two decades came to a sudden halt when he was implicated on corruption charges.

It was a weekday during late evening hours, my uncle apparently had just returned home from work to encounter agents from Central Bureau of Intelligence (CBI), the agency in charge of probing corruption at

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high levels waiting in front of his house. My aunt, generally a slow moving person quickly sensed the danger of her husband being caught red-handed with large sums of cash and expensive jewelry at home, quietly slipped into Babu Miyya's shop with a briefcase stuffed with valuables for safekeeping.

The intelligence officers searched the entire house for valuable items that could be accounted as wealth accumulated beyond his legal income. Among the various items found in my uncle's home were; several sewing machines which the government intended to donate to poor widows for making a living, yards and yards of pure silk fabric, several idols made from either sterling silver or rare rose wood, scores of shoes, and spare doors and windows of all sizes made from rare forest teak wood stacked up in the garage. His home was like a warehouse with assorted items, big and small.

The incident became a headliner in the local newspapers. "High Level Official Home was raided by CBI," "From Shoes to Sewing Machines," "Gifts Galore in Official Manor," were headliners appeared in the newspapers on the following day. The episode embarrassed my uncle who was suspended from his job pending a thorough investigation.

I visited my aunt in that difficult period not knowing the seriousness of the situation. My cousin gave me a lengthy explanation for her father's debacle not knowing I had very little knowledge of what happened. I endured her grief hoping that at the end she would buy me a glass of lassi from Babu Miyya, but to my disappointment she continued her deliberations, and concluded that her father was totally innocent of all charges of corruption and it was a set up by his subordinate officers. With no lassi offering coming, I fully agreed with her conclusions and ended up sharing her grief. That was the last time I met my cousin, since then she married and migrated to a foreign land where nobody would know her family corruption scandal.

Babu Miyya, the poor Muslim who rented the storefront from my aunt, on the night of CBI raids became a savior of my uncle's undisclosed treasures. Ishmael who had the first-hand knowledge of my uncle's activities in collecting bribes during the tour of duty over the 20-year period refused to testify against my uncle, and thus saved my uncle going to prison.

It was ironic that Babu Miyya and Ishmael both humble and insignificant in my uncle and aunt's personal life, stood firmly on their side at the time of need. At the end of a decade long trial, my uncle was found not guilty on all the charges of corruption due to lack of evidence largely because of Ishmael's refusal to testify against my uncle.

My aunt and uncle sold their house declaring that the place was as bad omen and moved to a quiet suburb. With some financial help from my uncle, Ishmael improved his shanty house by replacing the roof with galvanized tin sheets. Babu Miyya vacated his milk shop since the new owners closed his shop for renovations. My uncle spent his free time on writing essays on human nature and assisting his wife in household chores.

My visits to my aunt and uncle became sparse, as I grew older. During my rare visits, my uncle still managed to make me rub his toes giving specific orders which direction to twist or turn his toes to suite his comfort while my aunt was sitting comfortably next to him operating the betel nut cracker. On one such occasion, while rubbing his feet, I wondered loudly what could have happened to Babu Miyya and Ishmael; my uncle unconsciously pulled back his feet from my gentle handgrip and my aunt suddenly stopped chopping the betel nuts looking at me as if I was too close to their comfort and that was the last time my uncle made me rub his feet.

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