

The Biryani Bandit

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Introduction

Parramatta, as the sun begins to dip below the jagged skyline of glass office towers and brutalist apartment blocks, is a city where deeply ordinary routines can suddenly produce extraordinary, baffling mysteries.

At dusk, the sky over the city turns a bruised, vivid violet, streaked with veins of fiery orange. The Great Western Highway transforms into a crawling river of glowing red taillights and blinding white headlights. The ambient sound of the city is a heavy, industrial symphony: the rhythmic, metallic screech of the trains pulling into

the station, the low, throbbing hum of thousands of car engines, and the sharp, echoing wail of distant sirens. It is a place of constant, grinding motion.

But inside the sprawling, climate-controlled, artificially illuminated labyrinth of Eastfield Mall, a different kind of ecosystem exists. It is an ecosystem built entirely on sensory overload.

Here, beneath a ceiling mapped with glaring white fluorescent tubes and buzzing neon signs that cast harsh pink and electric-blue shadows against the polished tiled floors, nine Desi restaurant owners have built their livelihoods. Their businesses are anchored around food that brings people together, food that demands attention, and most importantly, food that people can recognize by scent long before they ever see a menu.

The air in this wing of the food court is thick, heavy, and intoxicating. It is a physical wall of fragrance. There is the sharp, eye-watering tang of raw garlic and crushed ginger hitting smoking-hot mustard oil. There is the earthy, dark aroma of toasted cumin and black cardamom. There is the sweet, floral drift of rosewater and the heavy, comforting blanket of melting ghee. They sell fiery curries, char-grilled kebabs dripping with fat, syrupy sweets that glow like amber, and blistered, buttery naan bread.

But above all else, towering over the culinary hierarchy of the mall, there is the biryani.

For these nine women—Sumitri, Paju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal Gupta, Pallavi, Priya Sharma (known to everyone as Ms. Aussie), Priyanka, Khushboo, and Rohini—biryani is not simply another casual item printed on a glossy menu board. It is an institution. Every single steaming packet stacked behind their counters represents a massive investment of physical labor and razor-thin profit margins.

It represents sacks of imported, aged basmati rice that must be washed until the water runs crystal clear. It represents expensive, blood-red strands of pure saffron steeped in warm milk. It represents hours of standing over roaring blue gas flames in forty-degree kitchens, sweating through chef's coats while heavy aluminum *deghs* bubble and hiss. It represents the cost of heavy plastic packaging, the rising price of commercial cooking gas, and the relentless, exhausting effort of their staff.

So, when the biryani suddenly begins disappearing into thin air, nobody finds it remotely amusing.

At first, the missing packets appear to be completely ordinary, mundane mistakes. The environment is chaotic. The noise is deafening—the clatter of heavy steel woks, the shouting of orders in three different languages, the shrill ringing of landline phones, and the electronic chirping of delivery tablets. In this blinding, deafening rush, under the harsh orange glare of the thermal heat lamps, a missing packet is easily chalked up to human error. A distracted cashier. A delivery driver grabbing the wrong bag. A misplaced ticket.

Then, the pattern grows. The anomaly refuses to correct itself.

Steaming, heavy packets of food begin to vanish from different restaurants across the food court. The losses multiply, week after week. Again and again, the thefts follow a series of remarkably, terrifyingly similar circumstances.

The packet placed at the very top of the precarious takeaway stack always vanishes. It happens precisely while the restaurant staff are violently busy, blinded by the glare of the registers and deafened by the roar of the industrial exhaust fans. The physical space is untouched. There are no broken locks, no shattered glass display

cases, no forced doors. The cash registers, filled with colorful polymer banknotes and heavy coins, are completely ignored. The expensive jars of spices sit undisturbed. Nothing else in the entire restaurant seems to be taken. There are no obvious intruders caught on the grainy, color-saturated security cameras, and no logical, convincing explanation for how hot food can simply evaporate from a brightly lit counter.

Soon, the financial and psychological toll mounts, and the question echoing through the kitchens becomes unavoidable:

Who on earth is taking the biryani?

The nine women at the center of the investigation decide that guessing in the dark is no longer enough. The mystery is bleeding their ledgers dry. The air in their kitchens, normally filled with the joyous, chaotic sounds of cooking, becomes thick with paranoia, suspicion, and exhausting hyper-vigilance.

They need hard, undeniable evidence.

That is where Chunmun Singh enters the case.

By day, Chunmun is a senior solution architect at Baba Bank in Redfern. His world is one of freezing, silent server rooms, glowing monitors displaying thousands of lines of green code, and the absolute, unyielding logic of digital architecture. He is a man accustomed to studying incredibly complicated systems, identifying invisible repeated patterns, testing structural assumptions, and ruthlessly separating random coincidence from hard, actionable evidence.

A missing twenty-dollar packet of chicken biryani from a noisy suburban mall is hardly a conventional technical problem. It lacks IP addresses, firewalls, and encryption keys.

But as Chunmun stands in the deafening food court, smelling the roasting lamb and listening to the cacophony of the dinner rush, he soon discovers that the restaurants' daily routines are, in fact, themselves a kind of complex, organic system. The food court is a machine made of meat, rice, heat, and human movement.

And like any machine, it has exploitable flaws.

He watches the glowing orange heat lamps. He sees that the top packet is always the easiest to physically reach, requiring the least amount of extension. He observes that the exhausted, sweating staff become visually and auditorily distracted at highly predictable moments—when the phone shrills, when a wok flares up, when a massive order is shouted from the back. He notes how tall customers in thick winter coats unconsciously create temporary, moving blind spots, eclipsing the ceiling-mounted security cameras.

The exact same human habits repeat, evening after evening, like a looping line of code.

And somewhere out there in the sprawling concrete maze of Parramatta, someone has learned exactly how to exploit those habits. Someone has mapped the blind spots.

The investigation that follows will not rely on magic, though the crime itself feels supernatural.

The first crucial clue will be an ordinary, pristine white Apple AirPods, hidden silently on the bottom of a greasy takeaway container, emitting a faint digital pulse into the cold night air.

Then comes a series of completely harmless, invisible external marks—fluorescent liquids that glow a brilliant, electric blue only when struck by the heavy, metallic beam of an ultraviolet torch. These marks are designed to trace the stolen packets through the dark, rain-slicked alleys of the city without ever interfering with the food inside.

What begins as a strange, frustrating mystery gradually transforms into a rigorous, scientific exercise in extreme observation, meticulous documentation, agonizing patience, and flawless deduction.

The apparent miracle of the vanishing food is not supernatural. The thief is not a ghost moving invisibly through the mall's plaster walls.

And Chunmun Singh will discover, and prove to nine exhausted women, that sometimes the absolute simplest way to solve an impossible-looking, terrifying mystery is to stop looking for extraordinary, magical explanations, and start looking for the mundane, repetitive pattern hiding quietly in plain sight.

The hunt for the Parramatta Biryani Bandit begins here, under the buzzing neon lights, amidst the smell of toasted cumin and the roar of the evening rush.

Chapter 1 — Sumitri and the Missing Packet

At 69 Cowper Street in Parramatta, the evening usually arrived carrying three things: the low, rumbling traffic noise from the Great Western Highway, the heavy, mouth-watering smell of fried onions and toasted cumin, and the faint, inevitable promise that somebody, somewhere in the neighborhood, was about to argue passionately about biryani.

The building itself was a brutalist block of faded brick and gray concrete, large enough to contain several multi-generational families, a handful of struggling home businesses, and more quiet secrets than the average resident would ever care to investigate. Its hallways perpetually smelled of damp carpet and stale incense. Nitin Borgi lived on the third floor, though nobody in the neighborhood knew much about him. He was a shadow moving through the stairwells, a man whose footsteps barely made a sound against the linoleum.

A few blocks away, inside the sprawling, climate-controlled labyrinth of Eastfield Mall, nine Desi restaurant owners had built their livelihoods around food that people could recognize by scent long before they could see the storefronts. Their menus differed wildly. Their dining room decorations ranged from minimalist modern wood to lavish velvet booths under faux-crystal chandeliers. Their cooking styles differed—some favoring the fiery, chili-laden profiles of Andhra Pradesh, others the delicate, fragrant saffron notes of Lucknow. But they all agreed on one absolute, unshakeable truth.

Biryani had to be treated seriously. It was not just rice and meat; it was an institution.

Sumitri's restaurant, *The Royal Dum*, specialized in a fragrant, golden-hued chicken biryani. Her kitchen was a symphony of sensory overload. Every afternoon, the air grew thick with the sharp, eye-watering tang of raw ginger and garlic hitting smoking hot mustard oil. The massive aluminum *deghs* (pots) sat on roaring blue gas flames, hissing and bubbling. The scent of kewra water, green cardamom, and bruised mint leaves wrapped around the cooks as they worked. During the evening rush, the finished packets—steaming hot, sealed tight in thick plastic containers, and emitting a faint, irresistible aroma of saffron and slow-cooked

chicken fat—were stacked neatly behind the brightly lit takeaway counter. The heat lamps cast a warm, orange glow over the tower of food, reflecting off the shiny plastic lids.

The trouble began on a surprisingly cool Wednesday evening, right as the sky outside turned a bruised violet and the mall's fluorescent lights buzzed to full intensity.

Sumitri wiped her hands on her flour-dusted apron, opened the glass door of the heated holding cabinet, and frowned. The harsh white LED strip inside illuminated the stacks of orders.

"Where is the top packet?" she asked, her voice cutting through the clatter of stainless steel pans in the background.

Her husband, currently punching numbers into the glowing touchscreen of the cash register, didn't even look up. The machine beeped sharply with every touch. "Which top packet?"

"The biryani. Order forty-two. Extra raita. It was right here, on top of the pile."

He laughed, a dry, dismissive sound that was instantly drowned out by the hiss of a pressure cooker releasing steam in the kitchen. "We sell biryani, Sumi. People buy biryani. That is generally how the system works."

"I know that," Sumitri said, her voice dropping to a serious, hushed tone. "But I didn't sell this one. And nobody came to collect it."

She cross-checked the thermal receipts hanging from the silver rail. The white paper curled under the heat lamps. There was no matching sale for the gap in the stack. She checked the counter, her eyes scanning the speckled granite surface. Nothing. She marched into the kitchen, her non-slip shoes squeaking against the

wet tiles, interrogating the cooks over the roar of the exhaust fans. Nothing.

Finally, she retreated to the tiny back office and pulled up the security footage on her monitor. The screen glowed with grainy, color-saturated footage. She watched the time-lapse of the last twenty minutes. The camera showed a chaotic blur of colors and motion: customers in bright jackets moving in and out, the neon pink and green helmets of delivery drivers bobbing near the entrance, staff in black uniforms passing in front of the counter. But there was no clear image of anyone deliberately reaching over the high glass partition and taking the packet. It was simply there in one frame, and a few seconds later, it was gone.

The next evening, beneath the same orange heat lamps, another packet disappeared.

Then another on Friday.

The scent of the lost biryani lingered like a ghost, leaving only empty space and confusion in its wake. Soon, the same bewildered complaint began arriving from the other restaurants in the mall. A packet would be prepared, steaming and fragrant, placed at the very top of a stack, and vanish into thin air. There were no broken locks. No forced doors. No shattered glass. No missing cash from the registers. No obvious employee theft. And nobody could explain why the thief seemed interested in one thing and one thing only.

Biryani.

By the end of the week, the nine restaurant owners held an emergency meeting in the back room of Sumitri's restaurant. The room was cramped, smelling strongly of roasted coriander and

industrial bleach. The hum of the walk-in freezer provided a constant, droning soundtrack.

Puju arrived first, her heavy silver bangles clinking against the table as she slammed down a thick, leather-bound notebook. Rashmi Bongi followed, bringing a stack of thermal sales records that smelled of fresh ink and warm paper. Komal Gupta brought glossy printed photographs of her empty counters. Pallavi brought a large, pastel-colored box of tissues because, as she explained while dabbing her eyes, "Every mystery eventually causes someone emotional damage, and I refuse to be caught unprepared."

Priya Sharma, better known around the mall as Ms. Aussie, arrived wearing a sharp business suit and brought a comically large, brass-rimmed magnifying glass. She placed it on the table with a heavy thud. Nobody knew why she brought it, and nobody asked. Priyanka arrived with a massive, multi-colored flowchart so complicated, filled with red arrows and blue circles, that even she had to trace her finger over it twice to explain her own logic. Khushboo and Rohini arrived together, their clothes carrying the deep, smoky scent of charcoal-grilled kebabs, and listened quietly while everyone described their mounting financial losses.

Sumitri finally put both hands flat on the cold steel prep table. "We are being robbed by someone who only steals biryani. It is precise. It is insulting."

"That makes no economic sense," Komal said, tapping her manicured nail against her photographs. "If they are going to steal, why not the cash tip jar? Why not the expensive saffron boxes we keep by the register?"