

Home

Notes For A Novella

Welcome to Bella Vista. The Good Life. These are dream apartments. Notice the spacious three and four bedroom suites. There is a view from each angle. That's the Arabian sea on the left, the racecourse on the East, over there you can catch a glimpse of Antilla with its sixty floors and designer helipad. Ignore the slum on the bottom right. That will disappear as soon as the surrounding construction is complete. Please, just draw the curtains. See? There are no unpleasant sounds or smells, from there or anywhere, because in this complex, we have piped music 24/7 and Alpine oxygen tanks in all the common areas. Look at the Italian marble in the kitchen. The Jacuzzi in the bathroom? It's of the Masuki brand, especially imported from Japan. In keeping with the Japanese aesthetic, notice our landscaped lawns. Just like you have in Kyoto. One more thing – no strays allowed, no littering, no paan stains. You are not in India. You are not in the heart of a traffic-jammed, sewage-spilling Third World urban nightmare. You are in Bella Vista. Dreamland.

You say you grew up around here? Yes, it's a pity that we had to demolish most of this area. I'm sure you have the odd pang of nostalgia, but let's face it, isn't having money a lot better? You grew up next to shaking railway tracks, with monsoon water-logged bylanes, a swampy mosquito breeding ground amidst sweaty, kerosene lamp-lit huts, despair and desperation clogging every pore of your being. Aren't you glad you escaped? Look at you now, a California-returned software millionaire who can afford the Bella Vista Penthouse Deluxe.

I must explain some Ground Rules. These Rules apply to all the residents. Don't be resistant. It's important to get along with others, especially with the people who live here. They are all important and influential. Who knows when you might need one of them to help you, to bail you out of a messy situation? Last year, one of the construction site workers from across the building claimed he'd been a victim of a hit and run, caused by the jeweller's son. The jewellers are the Parekhs, by the way, they are big in diamonds and own the terrace penthouse on the eighth floor, Wing B. You know, the kid was out one night, exams finally over, racing his Dad's Ferrari, the whole rush of freedom, that kind of thing. No problem, except this construction worker chap he rammed into belonged to a union. Turns out the union head owed a favour to the Kondji shipping family in Wing A. Dadi Kondji and Prem Parekh are business acquaintances, but at the building society picnic last year, they really bonded over golf. So when this problem arose with Parekh junior, Kondji made sure the union backed off. Get my drift, Sir? Don't miss building socials. We have a picnic twice a year, on the front lawns. There's a formal dinner-and-dance weekend once every three months. And of course, a Diwali card party and Christmas celebrations every season. So festive. Everyone attends. You must too. Consider it compulsory. Someday, you'll be glad you did.

On the first Saturday of every month, Mrs. Bhatia from Wing D presides over the Building Committee meeting. These meetings are important events. Never, ever miss a meeting. If you have to, then you must submit a note to Mrs. Bhatia 48 hours in advance stating the exact nature of your emergency. These meetings review the goings-on in and around the building, and address the grievances, if any, that come up. There are always grievances. But it's important to share these grievances and live honestly and transparently as neighbours. That's our motto. For instance, when

the Mehtas in Wing C complained about Mr. Samir Sami's driver smuggling in high-priced hookers at night, the Building Committee took it very seriously. Don't get me wrong, Sami Sir is a star, Bollywood's top playback singer, and obviously we didn't want to offend him. A man of his talent is entitled to his fun, who are we to interfere? After all, we are proud of our glamorous residents. But when Mrs. Bhatia heard that Sami was dealing in cocaine, she drew the line. The Zonal Inspector is a good friend of hers, and one look at his police uniform, and Sami saab broke down. Moved out the next day without a word. I believe his last album flopped, and that he's now renting in the outer suburbs. Life is strange, no? You never know what will hit you next and bring you crashing down to reality.

Here on the left lower ground floor, is the common cafeteria. It's open 24 hours. If you bring a guest, you must sign for him or her and ID must always be presented. Ladies and gentlemen must dress appropriately, and smoking is forbidden. In fact, smoking is forbidden in the whole complex. We have smoke detectors installed everywhere, imported from Denmark. You don't want to get caught with a cigarette. Believe me, it's very humiliating.

Ignore that fellow lounging outside the Sports Centre. It's only Kishorebhai. Some say he is Mrs. Bhatia's spy, others say he is a private contractor hired by the Boss in Dubai. More about the Boss later. Anyway, with Kishorebhai, be polite at all times. Befriend him, but don't get too friendly, if you know what I mean. Kishorebhai is a smart cookie. Stay on his good side. He's very resourceful with getting papers signed, a new passport issued, a driving license renewed, and so on. He knows the ins and outs of this city, he grew up on the streets, but now, as our Chief of Security, Kishorebhai enjoys a whole new level of respect in the outside world. Good for him.

Remember – be friendly, but not too friendly. He is a bit complicated. And you don't want complications.

That airy hall Kishorebhai just entered? That's the annexe to the Sports Centre, where we will soon be starting special meditation classes for residents. The Boss's spiritual mentor, Babaji, was just here to lay the foundation stone. I know there have been rumours about Babaji. Ignore them. Babaji is doing God's work and helping people who are in distress. Three hundred residents have already signed up for his satsang next Friday. You must too. It will change your life. I promise you.

A word of caution. When you see the tall, slim lady from Wing E, greet her respectfully and move on. She wears a veil, so it's easy to spot her from a distance. Never stop to chat, not even if she initiates a conversation. Madam is disturbed. But don't worry. She stays locked in her apartment all day and only comes down to take a walk between 1 and 2 am. She doesn't bother anyone, so we let her be. The Boss knew her from his early days in Abu Dhabi. You know the Boss owns the Mirage Luxury chain of hotels there, and when Madam's husband jumped from the nineteenth floor of the Glass Mirage, the Boss took pity on Madam and had her moved to a duplex here. The Boss is generous that way. Some say Madam is clairvoyant. You know, she gets visions. When that happens, we sometimes hear wailing sounds from her apartment. A year ago, there was one such incident and a lot of people connected it to the fire that broke out in the basement garage the very same day. Apparently Madam had experienced a vision of the whole complex being burnt down, but as it turned out, that was all bogus. The garage fire occurred due to a short circuit and Kishorebhai's team was on hand to put it out immediately. No damage done. Relax. Don't look alarmed. These days, Madam is medicated and well looked after. Do you know, we have a very eminent doctor on call at all hours? He

used to treat the former President of our great nation. Isn't that something? But again, it is our duty to look after our residents. Boss's orders.

You look tired, so I'll give you your keys and let you rest. This is your set of keys; a spare set is kept by me. That's also in the Rules book. Here is my personal number and over there, next to Maintenance, is my office, where I sit from 9 am to 10 pm daily. So, if you need anything, you know where I am.

A final word of advice. Don't be anxious and don't avert your eyes when the temp labourers give you dirty looks. I'm talking about the lawn landscaping crew who are just here for another week. They'll be gone soon. They are a strange lot, and no one likes the look of them, but not to worry, Kishorebhai has his eagle eye on all their activities. Really, these guys should be grateful they have jobs and daily wages. If they had any enterprise, they wouldn't be boiling under the sun, digging and scraping and doing whatever it is they do. That's their lot, their destiny, don't bother too much about it. You are a big man. And don't worry about crime; like I said, we have virtually Z-level security here. Come this way now, and let me show you our Olympic model electric blue-tiled swimming pool.

Selina Sheth