

Acts of God

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Introduction

Number 69 Cowper Street stands on a modest rise above the dark, serpentine coil of the Parramatta River, its heavy sandstone façade softened by over a century of unrelenting weather and the slow, invisible accumulation of salt carried on the wind from the distant, shimmering harbour. In the late afternoon, when the sun dips low, the porous stone catches the light, glowing with a deep, honeyed ochre that momentarily hides the grey watermarks of rising damp at its base. The terrace is neither grand nor insignificant; it is simply one of many that line the sloping street, their intricate, flaking iron lacework and **deep, communal** wrought-iron balconies

holding the ordinary, crushing weight of lives lived in suffocatingly close proximity.

Behind its single, heavy front door—painted a fading, high-gloss black that reflects the amber glow of the streetlamps—the building divides into nine separate dwellings. They are stacked and folded against one another with the practical, ruthless intimacy of houses built long before privacy became an absolute, commodified right. The walls here are paper-thin, constructed of lath and brittle plaster that seems to absorb and transmit the very frequency of human existence. The air in the narrow, communal stairwell is a living archive, carrying the muted, overlapping evidence of other lives: the low, urgent murmur of a late-night financial conversation vibrating through the floorboards, the brief, sharp cry of a child long since grown, the clatter of a dropped ceramic plate, and the sudden, heavy, suffocating silence that immediately follows an argument too carefully contained. To walk these halls is to wade through the phantom scents of nine different kitchens—a fleeting trace of roasted coriander seeds giving way to the chemical sterility of lemon-scented floor polish, the sharp tang of hot cooking oil blending seamlessly with the heavy, masking sweetness of vanilla room diffusers.

Here live nine couples who arrived at different times, flying across oceans from different, sun-baked latitudes of the subcontinent. They arrived at the heavy black door of number 69 carrying the same quiet, heavy ambition: to forge a life that would feel both continuous with the warm, chaotic past they had left behind, and entirely free of its heavier, more suffocating obligations. They brought with them deep, resonant languages that still surface in rare moments of bone-deep fatigue or sudden tenderness—the rolling, percussive consonants and stretched vowels that echo softly

against the cool glass windows. They brought fiercely guarded recipes that have been stubbornly adjusted to local, plastic-wrapped supermarket ingredients, their kitchens once fragrant with the sharp, green bite of fresh curry leaves and the deep, earthy smoke of black cardamom. And they brought a hyper-vigilance about security, a nervous, glancing energy that this sprawling, sun-drenched new country has not entirely dispelled.

But over the years, the sharp edges of that vibrant arrival dulled. The vigilance, once a matter of survival, settled into a rigid, bloodless habit. The sensory richness of their lives was slowly overwritten by the cold, frictionless demands of their new ascendance. Screens multiplied, spreading like a luminous, digital fungus across every flat surface. The warm, yellow incandescent bulbs were unscrewed, replaced by the clinical, shadow-banishing glare of LED halos and blue-light monitors that bleached the color from their skin and cast a sickly, perpetual twilight across their faces. Calendars thickened until there was no white space left to breathe. Conversations, once sprawling and loud, shortened into clipped, efficient logistics transmitted via text message, announced by the sterile, identical *ping* of notifications. Love, once a spacious, unhurried room filled with the scent of jasmine and the sound of shared laughter, learned to anxiously occupy the tiny, scheduled margins of more urgent, profitable projects. Outside, the Parramatta River continued its dark, unhurried passage below the concrete retaining wall, smelling intensely of crushed reeds and ancient mud, entirely indifferent to the frantic, careful architectures of success rising above it.

No one on Cowper Street ever spoke of a crisis. The strains were much quieter than that—small, granular erosions, almost polite in their execution. A marriage could narrow by agonizing degrees until

the two people inside it moved through their spotless kitchens with the practiced, terrifying caution of those who no longer trust the floor beneath their feet. Ambition, once a warm, shared current that had carried them across the world, became a volatile, private weather system that each partner was forced to navigate alone. The city outside offered its own relentless, brightly lit distractions: the abrasive, neon commerce of the mega-malls, the measured, manicured green of the urban parks, the endless, doom-laden scroll of news from a world permanently on fire. Inside the terrace, the emotional air grew suffocatingly thin, devoid of the scent of human warmth, though not a single resident dared to name the change.

What finally arrived at their doorsteps was not drama of the human sort. It was weather, and earth, and the slow, terrifying insistence of water. It came with the deafening, mechanical roar of wind tearing the sky apart. It came as a fire carried on a searing western breeze that smelled violently of burning eucalyptus and absolute endings. It arrived as fists of jagged ice that shattered the flawless geometry of careful rooms, filling the air with the metallic tang of ozone. It descended as a suffocating heatwave that baked the oxygen from the air and rendered human efficiency absurd. It swelled as a king tide that remembered older, deeper maps of the riverbed, bringing the foul, mineral stench of mud into immaculate living rooms. It struck as lightning that detonated with a blinding flash of magenta and white, instantly erasing the blue light of their digital validation. It fell as endless rain that rose silently through the floorboards. It rumbled from the deep as a tectonic tremor, a deep bass note felt in the teeth, that emptied the trembling building into the cold street at three in the morning.

Each event was massive, impersonal, and almost courteous in its brutal indifference. None of them knocked. None of them asked

permission. Each of them, in its own unique, devastating register, reached out and switched off the intricate, glowing systems by which these couples had learned to postpone the present.

The chapters that follow do not claim that catastrophe is inherently redemptive. Trauma is not a neatly packaged lesson. These pages record only what became visible when the customary, deafening noise of the modern world abruptly fell silent. They record the subtle, sensory truths that emerged from the wreckage: the continuous, rushing sound of a river finally heard, the comforting, heavy weight and spicy scent of a chipped cup of chai held fiercely in both hands, and the ordinary, breathtaking miracle of listening to another person's unhurried breathing in the pitch black. The sandstone house at 69 Cowper Street remains standing. The dark river continues its flow. What changed was infinitely smaller and vastly more durable than architecture—the sudden, unplanned, visceral rediscovery that two people can still inhabit the exact same hour, breathing the same air, without an agenda larger than the hour itself.

Chapter 1: Pallavi

At number 69 Cowper Street, the air itself seemed measured and partitioned, chopped into square metres of future profit and calculated yields. The apartment that Pallavi and Sameer shared on the upper floor had once held the ordinary, unscripted music of two people learning the contours of a new city. In those early days, the scent of crushed cardamom and roasting cumin would rise from the small, cramped kitchen, weaving through the damp Sydney air. There had been the low, resonant laughter that followed their imperfect, stumbling attempts at Australian slang, and the