

Parramatta Alone

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Introduction

There are cities that announce their presence with a deafening, chaotic spectacle, demanding to be seen through a riot of neon, the shriek of sirens, and the heavy, suffocating scent of millions of bodies pressed together. And then there are cities that keep their darkest, most profound secrets hidden within the ordinary, unpolished grain of everyday life—in the rough texture of sun-baked brick, the muddy, olive-green current of a slow-moving river, and the vast, echoing geometry of suburban train stations.

Parramatta belongs entirely to the second kind. It is a city defined by its transit, a place of heavy steel train lines that carve through

the suburbs with a rhythmic, metallic *clack-clack, clack-clack*, and sprawling, air-conditioned shopping centres that hum with the blinding white light of commercial fluorescent tubes. It is a place of modest public parks where the sharp, medicinal scent of eucalyptus softens as the sky bruises into dusk, and of squat, brutalist apartment blocks that seem to hold their collective breath through the long, freezing stretches of suburban nights. Beneath the loud, brightly colored surface of Church Street's bustling restaurants and the glittering, glass-and-steel monoliths rising along the water, Parramatta is also a place where a child can disappear into a void of absolute silence without ever actually leaving the map.

This is the meticulous, quiet story of such a disappearance.

Ramesh Bongi was exactly nine years old on the afternoon the heavy wooden door of his flat clicked shut. When the brass latch engaged with a sharp, final *crack*, it sealed away his mother and did not open again in any way that mattered to the survival of a child. She relocated to a house only five kilometres away. It was a distance short enough that the exact same weather systems—the sudden, violent summer thunderstorms smelling of ozone, the creeping, damp winter fogs—touched both of their windows simultaneously. It was close enough that the same freight trains, rumbling over the Western Line viaduct, vibrated the floorboards beneath both of their beds.

Yet, the distance between them was absolute, a chasm measured not in kilometers, but in a profound, freezing absence.

Inside the small, beige-carpeted flat in North Parramatta, the atmosphere underwent a slow, terrifying calcification. The gas heater in the corner remained a dead, rusted block of iron, exhaling only the smell of old dust. The hot water pipes shuddered and

groaned behind the plasterboard, but flatly refused to deliver anything warmer than liquid ice. The refrigerator, glowing with a harsh, unblinking white interior light, slowly emptied of everything except a stale, plastic scent and the biting cold.

The boy who remained in the center of this sensory vacuum learned, through agonizing necessity, to measure the vast, echoing expanses of time not by clocks, but by physical, tactile actions. Time became the soft *scritch-scratch* of dark graphite pencil lines drawn on the pale wood of a pantry door. Time was measured in the careful, agonizingly slow rationing of dry, crumbly digestive biscuits, letting the sweet dust dissolve on his tongue to stave off the gnawing ache in his ribs. Time was the crushing, physical weight of three thin, floral-patterned duvets, smelling of trapped sweat and unwashed wool, pulled tight against a creeping winter that found every hairline crack in the window frames.

Despite the collapse of his private world, he went to school. He stepped out of the freezing shadows of the flat and into the blinding, chaotic sunlight of the public world. He arrived impeccably clean, his uniform smelling faintly of cheap detergent and cold air, and he left quietly when the bell released its mechanical shriek. He completed his mathematics worksheets with the fierce, unblinking concentration of someone who has realized that absolute, flawless competence can be forged into a perfect form of camouflage. Teachers, smelling of coffee and chalk dust, patted his shoulder and called him mature. Neighbors, living only inches away through the thin drywall, heard nothing but the occasional, soft, rhythmic thunder of a child jumping on a rusted spring bed—jumping just to generate a fleeting burst of body heat, or perhaps to remind himself, through the heavy thud of his own feet, that he still possessed a physical form.

The city continued its relentless, noisy machinery all around him. Bright yellow ferries churned the dark water of the river, smelling of diesel fumes and river mud. Traffic roared continuously down Church Street in a blur of red taillights. The massive, illuminated signs of the Westfield shopping center glowed against the night sky like a beacon from another, warmer planet. But in all that noise, in all that blinding light, no one stopped to ask the single, simple question that would have undone the heavy, suffocating silence of the flat.

What follows is not a cinematic tale of dramatic, screaming rescue or sudden, tearful revelation. It is the much quieter, infinitely heavier chronicle of a solitude so complete, so structurally sound, that it became a sovereign country. It was a country with its own unwritten laws of conservation, its own freezing interior weather, and its own fragile, terrifying borders. It is the meticulous record of a child who learned, bone-deep, that survival is sometimes physically indistinguishable from invisibility, and that the human heart, when left alone in the cold for long enough, will inevitably invent its own desperate forms of shelter.

The muddy river kept moving. The heavy trains kept running. And somewhere in the dark, empty space between a freezing apartment and the five kilometres that separated him from the only parent he had left, a boy named Ramesh learned the oldest, most brutal, and most difficult lesson of the natural world: how to remain.

This is his story. It does not begin with sirens or shattering glass. It begins in the ordinary, dusty light of an ordinary afternoon, when a door closed with a simple click, and a childhood, completely stripped of ceremony or warning, was abruptly required to continue on its own in the dark.

Chapter 1

The heavy wooden door of the flat clicked shut, the metallic *clack* of the brass latch echoing down the narrow, unlit hallway like a gunshot. The river, visible through the solitary frosted window at the end of the corridor, still held the bruised, violet light of late afternoon when Rashmi Bongi did not look back. Ramesh stood rooted to the peeling linoleum, nine years old and already practiced at the quiet, breathless art of waiting. He watched the rectangular space in the air where her shadow had just been, a phantom silhouette painted by the sickly yellow glow of the stairwell bulb seeping under the door crack. She had said she would return before dark. She always said that. The words had become a kind of auditory weather, predictable, rhythmic, and entirely empty.

Outside, the Parramatta River moved with its usual muddy indifference, an olive-green ribbon carrying the fragmented, shivering reflections of brutalist brick apartment blocks and the distant, diamond-hard glitter of the Westfield towers catching the sunset. The sky was bleeding from amber into a deep, bruised purple. Inside the flat, the air was already changing texture, cooling rapidly as the shadows lengthened across the worn carpet. The ambient light shifted from a dusty gold to a flat, clinical grey. The gas heater in the corner sat dead, smelling faintly of old iron and trapped dust. It had not worked for months. Rashmi had promised the landlord, the real-estate agent, and finally Ramesh himself that she would arrange a repair. Her promises, like the river water, flowed past without stopping, leaving only the damp chill behind.

She lived now with a man named Suresh in a rented house five kilometres away, near the crumbling sandstone ruins of the old Female Factory site, where the streets were lined with whispering paperbark trees and the evenings felt longer. Ramesh knew the