

Parramatta Mentals

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Introduction

At 69 Cowper St, Parramatta, the sheer density of human existence was something you could taste in the air before you even opened the heavy, sun-blistered oak front door. The house was a sprawling, architectural anomaly, a two-story beast of faded red brick and peeling white timber trim that seemed to groan and expand under the baking heat of the relentless Australian sun. Inside, nine Desi couples had discovered that sharing a single, massive residential footprint could be marginally easier than sharing a unified, workable definition of sanity.

To cross the threshold was to step into a sensory hurricane. The entryway was a chaotic mosaic of footwear: thirty-eight individual shoes ranging from scuffed leather oxfords to bright pink slippers, creating a rubbery, earthy smell that mingled with the pervasive scent of blooming jasmine from the overgrown front garden. But it was the kitchens—all nine distinct cooking spaces hastily retrofitted into the belly of the house—that dictated the atmosphere.

Depending on the hour, the air was a thick, suffocating tapestry woven from the sharp, eye-watering tang of smoking mustard oil, the rich, nutty fragrance of melting ghee, the bitter bite of burnt garlic, and the sweet, milky steam of cardamom tea boiling over the rim of an aluminum pot.

Visually, the house was a kaleidoscope of conflicting lives. The harsh, buzzing fluorescent tubes of the communal hallways cast a sickly, shadowless pallor over the residents, contrasting violently with the warm, amber glow of the bedside lamps leaking from under bedroom doors, or the icy, piercing blue-white light of laptops and smartphones illuminating exhausted faces in the dead of night.

In this pressure cooker of smells, sounds, and lights, the inhabitants were slowly unraveling.

There was Sumitri, whose towering, theatrical tantrums could transform the mundane absence of a vibrant green coriander bunch into a full-scale domestic crisis for her husband, Naren, sucking the oxygen from the room and replacing it with the sharp, acidic scent of adrenaline. Puju could only watch, her heart breaking, as her husband, Arvind, struggled to leave his office behind, his retinas permanently dilated to absorb the sterile glare of spreadsheets, his fingers twitching with the phantom sensation of a keyboard long after the sun had set. Rashmi Bongi's husband, Suman, became entangled in the endless, bureaucratic wars of a strata committee,

his side of the bed constantly smelling of dusty bylaws and fresh printer toner, his voice taking on the high, reedy pitch of perpetual outrage.

Down the hall, Komal Gupta's husband, Rakesh, became increasingly, feverishly convinced that every slick-haired real-estate agent in a tailored suit held the secret to financial immortality, his anxiety manifesting in a constant, restless pacing that made the wooden floorboards shriek. Pallavi watched her husband, Mohan, transform abstract inflation into a daily, terrifying financial emergency, his eyes darting frantically over yellow supermarket discount tags beneath blinding halogen lights as though they were ticking bombs. Priya Sharma, known to the house as Ms. Aussie, wielded her suspicion like a blinding police flashlight, investigating even the smallest household mystery until the air around her smelled of clinical citrus wipes, and her husband, Sameer, began to feel the cold, metallic weight of being a permanent suspect.

On the second floor, Priyanka's husband, Vijay, became trapped in the exhausting, saturated comparison game of modern life, his self-worth eroding with every colorful, perfectly filtered photograph he scrolled past in the pitch-black silence of his bedroom. Khushboo's husband, Devraj, discovered that the bone-rattling vibration and acrid diesel smoke of a construction drill could occupy a man's mind, echoing in his skull long after the heavy machinery had been switched off for the day. And Rohini's husband, Anil, took responsibility for almost everybody else's problems, his hands constantly smelling of copper wire, plumbing grease, and cleaning chemicals, until being relentlessly useful became its own form of suffocating exhaustion.

Presiding over this peculiar, vibrating ecosystem was Chunmun Singh, a solution architect at Baba Bank in Redfern. Chunmun was a

man of precise habits, smelling consistently of mild peppermint soap and freshly pressed cotton. He was not part of any of the nine couples, an isolation that provided him with a sanctuary of silence and may have been the only reason he remained capable of observing the madness objectively. At work, bathed in the soothing, climate-controlled silence of corporate architecture, he was accustomed to complicated systems, conflicting software requirements, and unexpected server failures. But at home, leaning against the doorframe with a steaming mug of tea, he discovered that the residents of 69 Cowper St were a far more unpredictable, volatile architecture.

One by one, under the flickering lights of the hallway, he watched the nine husbands begin to crack. They were breaking under pressures that were ordinary enough on their own but utterly overwhelming when combined in the tight confines of modern life: the sharp sting of domestic arguments, the relentless pinging of workplace demands, the suffocating paperwork of strata disputes, the blinding gold-rush obsession with property, the creeping dread of rising prices, the cold chill of relentless investigations, the hollow ache of social comparison, the physical assault of construction noise, and the heavy, crushing expectation that one person should have the tools to solve everybody's problems.

None of these pressures was extraordinary. What made them dangerous was the insidious way they followed the men home. They seeped through the cracks in the doors like noxious gas, occupying their thoughts, stealing the colors from their weekends, and slowly turning everyday frustrations into sprawling, personal catastrophes.

Chunmun decided to study the phenomenon. His unofficial project, *Project Sanity*, began as an attempt to understand why seemingly ordinary men, living in a house that smelled of good food and

familial warmth, were becoming increasingly, dangerously irrational. What he discovered, meticulously documented in his leather-bound notebook with the scratch of a fountain pen, was less a collection of isolated mysteries than a sprawling, high-definition portrait of modern married life. It was a study of people desperately trying to maintain fragile, beautiful relationships while treading water in a sea of money panics, work notifications, housing bubbles, glowing screens, impossible expectations, and their own tragic inability to locate the psychological off-switch.

Each couple provided Chunmun with a different, vibrantly colored case study. For Naren, the problem was learning the physical sensation of silence—realizing that every argument with Sumitri, no matter how loud the kitchen became, did not have to end in a breathless victory. For Arvind, it was learning that a career could not be allowed to project its icy blue light into every waking hour of his marriage. For Suman, it was learning that not every aggressively worded strata email deserved the immediate, blood-pumping response of his keyboard. For Rakesh, it was learning that a glossy real-estate brochure was not a treasure map, and a housing opportunity was not necessarily a life opportunity.

For Mohan, it was learning that financial planning should provide the clarity of a clean window, rather than consuming his life with the suffocating fog of fear over a grocery bill. For Sameer, it was learning that living under the glaring spotlight of investigation could leave a man as exhausted and hollow as the detective holding the flashlight. For Vijay, it was learning that another person's carefully saturated, sunlit life on a glass screen was a counterfeit measure of his own quiet reality. For Devraj, it was learning that a problem could remain loudly, physically real just outside the window without being allowed to echo endlessly inside his own mind. And for Anil, it

was learning the profound, physical relief of saying no—that being helpful did not require his hands to be permanently stained with the grease of everyone else's emergencies.

At 69 Cowper St, Chunmun realized, sanity was rarely lost in one dramatic, cinematic explosion of shouting and shattered glass. It leaked away. It drained slowly into the floorboards, usually over something surprisingly, comically small.

A wilted coriander bunch. A glowing red notification on an email app. A stuffy, echoing strata meeting. A bright yellow property listing. A brightly colored supermarket discount sticker. A missing square of dark chocolate. A sun-drenched social-media post. The high-pitched whine of a construction drill. A leaking, rhythmic tap in the dead of night.

And sometimes, Chunmun noted as he watched the dust motes dance in the shaft of morning light, the most profound, healing, and genuinely funniest thing two people could do when the sensory overload of the world started going entirely wrong, was simply to stop, breathe in the chaotic scent of the house, laugh at the absurdity of it all, and admit that they had finally had enough.

Chapter One: Sumitri and the Tantrum Economy

At 69 Cowper St, Parramatta, the mornings began not with the gentle chirp of birds, but with a sensory assault of nine kitchens competing for dominance. The air was a thick, suffocating tapestry of conflicting aromas. By 6:00 a.m., the sharp, pungent scent of mustard oil sizzling in one pan would collide with the burnt-sugar smell of an over-toasted crumpet in another. The heavy, warm fragrance of cardamom tea fought a losing battle against the acrid