

When Parramatta Went Dark

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Introduction

Before the silence, there was the hum.

It was the subliminal, unending vibration of Parramatta in the twenty-first century—a nervous system of vibrating copper wire, glowing fiber optics, and invisible radio frequencies that bound the city together. From the soaring, glass-fronted commercial towers on Church Street to the dense, low-rise brick apartment blocks bleeding out toward the highway, the city breathed an electric breath. The air smelled of hot exhaust, roasting coffee beans, and the sterile, metallic chill escaping from sliding glass storefronts.

Down on Cowper Street, the four-story brick block at Number 69 stood as a microcosm of this illuminated isolation. Inside its twelve flats, the modern current dictated every rhythm. Routers blinked their steady, comforting green LEDs in dark hallways. Air-conditioning units rattled aggressively against the windowpanes, fighting back the suffocating, swampy heat of the Australian summer and filling the rooms with artificially cooled, filtered air. Refrigerators hummed their heavy, grounding C-sharp. Inside these glowing, climate-controlled boxes, the residents lived side by side, separated only by thin layers of plasterboard and brick, yet entirely isolated. Their minds were tethered outward—to distant server farms, digital ledgers, glowing screens, and distant continents. They possessed the arrogant, unconscious certainty that the light would always obey the flick of a switch, and that the water would always run cold and clear from the chrome taps.

But by late afternoon, the sky above the Great Western Highway began to curdle. The barometric pressure dropped rapidly, pressing down on the city like a physical weight, making the air feel thick and woolly in the lungs. The horizon turned a sickly, chemical yellow, which rapidly bruised into a deep, violent violet. The wind arrived, stripping the dead leaves from the ancient eucalypts, carrying the sharp, stinging scent of ozone and the dry, dusty odor of baking asphalt about to shatter under rain.

The storm did not simply arrive; it descended as an act of violence. The wind howled through the narrow concrete canyons of the city, testing the fragile architecture of the grid. And then, at the edge of the block, a massive electrical transformer surrendered. It detonated with a blinding, cobalt-blue flash that seared the retinas, followed instantly by a percussive crack that vibrated deep in the teeth.

The humming died. The green lights vanished. The fans spun down to a heavy, dead halt. In a single, violently quiet second, the modern illusion of independence was stripped away, leaving the twelve flats of Cowper Street adrift in a suffocating, ancient dark.

Chapter One: Sumitri and Rajesh

The wind arrived first, not as a sudden gust, but as a low, continuous pressure against the thick glass of the apartment windows. It carried the bruised, purple scent of an electrical storm, heavy with ozone and the metallic tang of cooling asphalt. Then came the sounds: a series of sharp, violent cracks that travelled along the street below like the breaking of massive, ancient bones. When the final transformer failed at the end of the block, the explosion was a brilliant, blinding flash of cobalt blue that seared the retinas, followed instantly by a darkness so complete, so suffocating, that it felt like a physical weight pressing against the chest. The silence that rushed in to fill the void was profound. Sumitri stood barefoot on the kitchen tiles, the cold ceramic biting into her soles, and listened to the soft, rhythmic *tick-tick-tick* of cooling metal deep inside the walls.

She reached out, her fingers brushing the smooth chrome of the tap. She turned it once, twice, three times. Each rotation produced the same dry, metallic squeak of refusal. A hollow groan echoed from the pipes, smelling faintly of rust and dry earth, but no water flowed. Behind her, Rajesh moved through the pitch-black living room with the careful, sliding steps of a man whose thoughts were still tangled in the complex, glowing server diagrams he designed for Baba Bank in Redfern. Neither spoke. The dark had its own absolute authority, and they waited in the suffocating stillness until their eyes adjusted to the faint, slate-grey ambient light filtering through the rain-streaked glass.

Sumitri began with the balcony. The residual rain was still falling, sliding in thin, freezing sheets from the broken plastic guttering above. The air outside was shockingly cold, a stark contrast to the stagnant warmth of the flat, and it smelled of wet concrete and crushed eucalyptus leaves. Together, moving as silent shadows, they carried every vessel they owned into the open air. There was the heavy aluminium pressure cooker that had travelled with them from India, its surface dull and scratched; the large, gleaming festival *dekchi*; two plastic laundry buckets stained pale blue from years of detergent use; and a row of thick glass jars that still carried the faint, sharp ghost-scent of mustard oil and mango pickle.

They arranged the vessels with deliberate, painstaking precision beneath the edge where the water still ran in a steady, silver rope. The sound of the rain striking the different materials created a chaotic, resonant music in the night: the sharp, ringing *ping* of water on glass, the hollow, drumming thud against the plastic buckets, the deep, bell-like chime of the steel *dekchi*. Each time a container filled, their hands numb and stinging from the icy water, they carefully lifted it and emptied it into the large steel pot kept inside, covering it immediately with a clean, white porcelain plate to keep out the dust. The work was agonizingly slow and repetitive. The muscles in their shoulders began to burn with a dull, throbbing ache. Yet, the rhythmic sound of water splashing into metal became their anchor, the only reliable proof that something dynamic still moved in an otherwise paralyzed world.

By morning, the grey light revealed Rajesh constructing a rudimentary stove on the balcony. He used four broken, red clay bricks scavenged from the courtyard and a square of rusted sheet metal torn from a discarded air-conditioning unit in the stairwell. His