

When Caterpillars Became Butterflies

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Introduction

There are physical and psychological thresholds that appear entirely ordinary, perfectly mundane, until they are crossed by something that fundamentally refuses to remain ordinary. At 69 Cowper Street, situated in a narrow, brick-faced terrace whose stark white walls had long and meticulously practised the art of exclusion, exactly such a threshold waited. The auditory landscape of the street was defined by the heavy, rhythmic clatter of the passenger trains—a metallic, vibrating *clack-clack* that shook the foundational brickwork every twelve minutes, leaving behind the faint, acrid scent of hot iron and electrical sparks in the humid Sydney air.

Chunmun Singh lived inside this house, a man who had engineered his environment to admit no soft, unquantifiable variables. By profession, he was a senior cloud and data solutions architect at Baba Bank; by temperament, he was the careful, relentless architect of his own absolute solitude. He measured his days not in sunrises or seasons, but in contingency plans, data pipeline optimizations, and failover protocols. His mind operated like a perfectly ordered Apache Kafka event stream, where every action had a predefined sequence, a timestamp, and an expected output. The interior of his home reflected this rigid internal schema. The visual palette was aggressively sterile: blinding white linoleum floors that reflected the harsh, 4000-Kelvin LED ceiling lights, matte-grey countertops, and walls devoid of a single photograph or painting. The olfactory profile of the apartment was equally controlled, smelling perpetually of lemon-scented industrial bleach, the sharp ozone of the overworked air conditioning unit, and the metallic tang of polished stainless steel.

The heart of his controlled environment was the kitchen, defined by the heavy, cast-iron grates of his gas cooking system. He had specifically chosen the property for this utility connection, rejecting electric coils for the immediate, controllable precision of raw combustion. Every evening, the sharp, rhythmic *click-click-click* of the piezoelectric igniter would be followed by the soft, rushing *hiss* of the gas, blooming into a perfect, uniform ring of bright blue flame. It was here, amidst the smell of roasted cumin, popping mustard seeds, and the metallic heat of the gas burner, that he felt in absolute control of his universe. The chaotic, organic world of leaves, damp earth, and larvae lay strictly outside his architectural design, locked away beyond the heavy oak door and the aluminium flyscreens.

Yet, despite the airtight logic of his existence, the caterpillars came.

They arrived not as a conquering army of invaders, but as players—nine small, segmented bodies that treated the bleached linoleum, the dusty aluminium track of the windowsill, the cold rim of the stainless-steel kettle, and the ringing, cool porcelain of the sink as vast, fascinating fields worthy of exploration. Their movements across his sterile surfaces held the absorbed, silent seriousness of creatures discovering an entirely new geometry of possibility. They brought with them the disruptive, organic scents of the outside world: crushed kikuyu grass, wet loam, bruised mango leaves, and the heavy, humid promise of incoming rain. These smells clashed violently with the sterile bleach, creating a cognitive dissonance that made Chunmun's pulse race.

Chunmun answered this biological intrusion with the only instrument in his meticulously ordered house that felt adequate to manage the interruption without direct, skin-to-skin contact: a long-handled stainless-steel ladle. It was the exact same heavy utensil reserved for stirring the evening dal, its metal bowl permanently carrying the faint, ghostly scent of turmeric and cooked garlic. The first time he used it, the cold metal handle felt slick with the sweat of his own sudden, inexplicable anxiety. Each morning, as a new caterpillar appeared, he scooped them up. He executed the motion with a rigid, trembling care that was, in itself, a form of sterile violence—a complete refusal to acknowledge their right to exist within his coordinates.

The daily extraction became a grueling sensory ritual. He would walk them out of the terrace, the morning sun hitting his eyes in a blinding glare, the air thick with the smell of car exhaust and damp Parramatta asphalt. He walked the length of Cowper Street, his leather shoes scraping loudly against the concrete, until he reached

the expansive green sanctuary of Parramatta Jubilee Park. The park smelled overwhelmingly of damp earth and blooming eucalyptus. He would kneel by the massive, twisting roots of the old Moreton Bay fig, hearing the harsh, tearing cries of the cockatoos overhead, and gently tip the ladle. The green or brown bodies would tumble softly onto the dirt. He would then turn his back and walk home, his heart rate slowly returning to its baseline, firmly believing that this physical exile was the ultimate, infallible solution to the anomaly.

He did not know, could not have calculated within his strict logical frameworks, that exile, when repeated with such meticulous, daily precision, ceases to be a banishment and becomes a formal invitation.

What follows is the complete architectural record of that invitation being answered. It is the story of how nine soft, crawling bodies, returned daily to the same damp, earthy roots, eventually learned the silent, sweeping language of wings, and the far quieter, more excruciatingly exacting language of systemic revision. It is the story of a man whose perfectly ordered rooms, whose very perception of light, sound, time, and space, were patiently unmade—dream by terrifying dream, silence by suffocating silence, hour by fractured hour. They dismantled his reality until the only structural architecture left standing was the one that could finally admit an apology. Between the cold, curved steel of the kitchen ladle and the warm, open threshold of the front door lies the entire, agonizing distance a human heart must travel when it finally discovers that the chaos it so desperately refused was never a system error, but only play.

Chapter 0

In the narrow, brick-faced terrace at 69 Cowper Street, where the afternoon light fell in long, reluctant, dust-moted bars across the off-white linoleum, Chunmun Singh lived inside a geometry of careful exclusions. The auditory landscape of his existence was defined by the distant, rhythmic clatter of the Parramatta train lines—a heavy, metallic *clack-clack* that arrived every twelve minutes like a half-remembered argument, shaking the single-pane windows just enough to produce a low, shivering hum. Chunmun was a man who had ordered his days with the precision of contingency tables and failover protocols. As a solution architect at Baba Bank, his private architecture admitted no soft, unquantifiable variables. His home smelled perpetually of lemon-scented bleach, ozone from the overworked air conditioning unit, and the sharp, sterile tang of freshly printed architectural diagrams. The apartment itself seemed to conspire with this preference: white walls that refused ornament and reflected the harsh, 4000-Kelvin fluorescent ceiling lights with a blinding, clinical purity. His kitchen surfaces gleamed with the severity of unused potential, smelling faintly of the stainless-steel polish he applied every Sunday. His single bedroom featured a window that looked not outward in invitation, but inward in quiet defence, masked by heavy, charcoal-grey blackout blinds that smelled of warm vinyl when the morning sun struck the glass.

Yet the caterpillars came.

They arrived first as a single green interruption on a Tuesday morning when the kettle had not yet boiled, the air still thick with the metallic scent of standing tap water and the hum of the refrigerator's compressor. Sumitri, slender as a blade of new grass, moved across the threshold with the unhurried confidence of a