

One Night At Parramatta: A Null State

© Chinmoy Mukherjee 2026–2046. No part of this document may be used without the author's express written permission.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are entirely fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

One Night At Parramatta: A Null State

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Introduction

Night settles over Parramatta with the slow, deliberate grace of a heavy velvet curtain drawn across a stage that has already endured too many exhausting performances. The transition is marked not by a sudden darkness, but by a gradual shift in the city's palette. The bruised-peach sky of twilight bleeds into a deep, impenetrable violet, and then finally into an absolute, starless black. Along the serpentine curve of the Parramatta River, the water turns from muddy brown to a sleek, oily obsidian, mirroring the sudden, harsh bloom of artificial light. Streetlamps flicker on, casting sharp cones of sodium-orange across the cooling asphalt, which still radiates the faint, baked scent of rubber and the day's trapped heat.

Along Cowper Street, the terraced houses and narrow apartment blocks stand in their modest, weary ranks. Windows glow with a soft, buttery yellow or remain dark, dictated entirely by the private, unsynchronized calendars of the people who inhabit them. At number 69—a fading brick building that seems to lean slightly under the weight of its own history—nine couples have arranged their lives around the stubborn, uncompromising arithmetic of shift work and paper-thin shared walls. The stairwells here smell perpetually of damp wool, strong cooking spices, and the sharp tang of industrial cleaning ammonia. The men return or depart according to their own erratic clocks; the women leave for the call centre just as the rest of the city begins to surrender to its quieter hours.

Inside the call centre, located three streets away in a tower of reflective glass and steel, the environment is aggressively manufactured. The air is heavily conditioned, maintained at a brisk, artificial chill that smells of ozone, sterilized dust, and the ghost of burnt instant coffee. The lighting is a uniform, sea-glass green cast by rows of identical dual monitors, washing the **colour** from the women's faces and painting their skin in the pallor of the graveyard shift. Here, voices are trained to a specific, frictionless register of professional calm—a velvet tone designed to absorb almost any human complaint without snapping. Keyboards clatter with the syncopated rhythm of falling rain. Headsets rest against temples, a permanent, plastic tether to the anxieties of the world. Outside, the river moves silently toward the distant harbour; inside, the night shift begins its familiar, uncelebrated labour.

On this particular night, a single call will move like a restless, frantic electric current through nine different stations. It arrives carrying the ordinary, terrifying urgency of a man whose digital identity has been deactivated without warning or reason. What follows across

the dark hours is neither a dramatic resolution nor explosive chaos, but something far quieter, colder, and deeply revealing: a succession of carefully constructed, perfectly logical impossibilities. Each absurdity will be offered by the women with the same measured, helpless courtesy; each will end in the same soft, electronic disconnection.

Yet, between the labyrinthine explanations of system errors and biometric failures, the women of 69 Cowper Street will continue their own profound, private reckonings. Beneath the scripts and the protocol, they are navigating the immense, silent distances within their own marriages, the heavy exhaustion in their bones, and the small, stubborn hopes that survive even the longest, darkest nights in a new country.

This is the record of that night. It is not a story of triumphant hacking, nor of spectacular collapse. It is a testament to the ordinary, breaking courage required to keep answering the line, to keep speaking into the dark, when the machine itself has already decided that the answer will never come.

Chapter 1

The Parramatta call centre at night possessed a peculiar, almost ecclesiastical quiet—an ordered, synthetic hush broken only by the syncopated click of fifty keyboards and the measured cadence of voices trained to soothe strangers across oceans. Sumitri sat at her station near the long glass wall that faced the dark sweep of the river. The window acted as a mirror, reflecting the cerulean glow of the monitors and the pale, exhausted faces of the women bathed in its cold light. The air in the room was aggressively conditioned, carrying the faint, acrid scent of ozone from overheating servers mixed with the stale ghost of spilled instant coffee. Her headset, a

weightless arc of black plastic and foam, settled against her temple with the familiarity of a second skin. Outside, the streets carried the sparse traffic of delivery vans and shift workers, their headlights cutting yellow swaths through the purple bruised-blue of the night. Inside, the air held the constant, faintly metallic coolness of machines that never slept, a low, subsonic hum that vibrated gently against the soles of Sumitri's sensible black shoes.

She and Arjun lived on the second floor of 69 Cowper Street, a narrow brick building that seemed to lean slightly toward the railway line, its mortar crumbling like dried bread. Arjun drove taxis through the same western suburbs she could glimpse from the upper windows of the centre. Their life together had settled into a careful choreography of arrivals and departures. She knew the exact acoustic signature of his return: the heavy crunch of tires on the gravel driveway, the metallic clatter of his keys, the heavy, tired thud of his boots on the linoleum stairs. He would return smelling of the city—a heavy musk of diesel exhaust, vinyl upholstery, and the sharp, minty artificiality of the pine tree air freshener dangling from his rearview mirror. The kettle boiled once for both, whistling a sharp, piercing note that briefly pierced the apartment's quiet. A few sentences were exchanged over the deep brown warmth of Assam tea about fares and difficult callers, and then the door closed again, the latch clicking with a finality that echoed in the narrow hall.

In the small courtyard behind the building, a single lemon tree struggled against the shade of neighbouring walls. Sumitri thought of it often. Its leaves were a deep, waxy emerald, and when she crushed one between her fingers, it released a sharp, bright burst of citrus that cut through the damp, mossy scent of the concrete yard. They watered it from a rusted green plastic can without speaking of