

Parramatta Eyes

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Introduction

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Introduction

There are certain cities in this world that announce themselves with the deafening, unavoidable clamor of monuments. They are built of gleaming white marble and towering steel, places that demand your immediate attention with the harsh, blinding glare of neon and the relentless, percussive roar of unending traffic. But there are other cities, older and perhaps wiser in their quietude, that announce themselves entirely with silence. Parramatta, sitting heavy and settled in the geographic heart of Sydney's sprawling basin, belongs unequivocally to the second kind.

It is a place where history does not scream; it murmurs. Its dark, tidal river moves without hurry, a sluggish, muscular ribbon of

water that smells faintly of ancient, churned mud, drying salt, and the tangled, submerged roots of the mangrove trees lining its banks. In the humid heat of late spring, the city's grand, sprawling jacarandas erupt into a violent, breathtaking canopy of electric purple. For a few short weeks, the sky itself seems tinted with violet, casting cool, mauve shadows across the hot asphalt. But soon, the blossoms fall, dropping their vibrant, bruised currency onto the cracked, sun-baked footpaths. The fallen petals quickly rot in the afternoon humidity, giving off a sweet, faintly fermented scent that clings to the soles of shoes. The concrete remembers every heavy footstep for a fleeting moment, capturing the dust and the moisture, and then, with the absolute, baking indifference of the Australian sun, it dries white and completely forgets.

Yet, above the perfectly ordinary, heavy glass doors of the brick apartment complex on Cowper Street, there is something that absolutely refuses to forget. A small, domed security camera sits bolted to the rough masonry, housing a single, unblinking red light. The light is not a warm, inviting crimson; it is a sharp, piercing, laser-red pinpoint that cuts through the murky, charcoal-grey gloom of the foyer. It keeps its own quiet, mechanical counsel. It emits a barely perceptible, high-pitched electronic hum—a sound felt in the teeth more than heard by the ears. It is neither accusing the residents of their sins nor absolving them of their trespasses. It is merely present, recording the shifting light and the passing shadows, the way an indelible memory remains vividly, stubbornly present long after the actual, physical moment has dissolved into the past.

This is a story of ten couples who lived their lives beneath the steady, rhythmic pulse of that red light. They were a diverse patchwork of human experience, having arrived from vastly

different, heavily populated latitudes of the Indian subcontinent. They had crossed oceans, carrying tightly packed suitcases and heavy, invisible histories. They brought with them the vivid, searing sensory memories of a different world: the blinding, white-hot heat of a Delhi summer; the deafening, percussive roar of the monsoon rains hammering against tin roofs in Kerala; the suffocating, dusty sweetness of sugarcane fields in Gujarat; and the particular, crushing gravity of immense family expectations.

They had all fled the suffocating hyper-visibility of their homelands, where every aunt, uncle, and neighbor knew the exact timbre of their voices and the precise contents of their grocery bags. And they had settled, almost by a stroke of pure, geographic accident, into this exact same, unassuming red-brick building in Parramatta, with its scuffed linoleum lobby and its shared, unblinking camera.

Inside the building, the air was a constant, invisible battleground of competing histories. They cooked fiercely, wielding heavy iron pans and fragrant oils, filling the narrow, unventilated hallways with a rich, complex tapestry of aromas. The sharp, earthy bitterness of toasted cumin seeds fought for dominance with the sweet, floral warmth of green cardamom pods. The pungent, eye-watering smoke of frying red onions and sharp green chilies seeped under the heavy wooden doors, mixing awkwardly with the sterile, chemical scent of the strata manager's pine-scented floor cleaner.

Behind those closed doors, they lived lives of muted, careful volume. They argued softly, their voices hushed to urgent, hissing whispers so as not to bleed through the thin plasterboard walls. The building hummed with the domestic soundtrack of the diaspora: the sudden, high-pitched shriek of a stovetop pressure cooker releasing steam; the low, tinny murmur of Hindi news channels playing on flat-screen televisions; the soft, rhythmic slapping of wet dough

being rolled into chapatis on marble countertops. They watched one another in the elevators and the mailroom with a highly specific, complicated mixture of deep affection and sharp, evaluating vigilance. It was a climate of unspoken appraisal, the true, unspoken weather system of any diaspora street, where everyone is simultaneously a comforting piece of home and a potential judge of one's success in this new, alien country.

And one humid, breathless night, when the air was thick and tasted faintly of impending rain, that careful, quiet equilibrium was violently shattered. A single, swollen black garbage sack was left unceremoniously upon the kerb, deposited right beneath the harsh, unforgiving orange glare of the municipal streetlight. The plastic of the bag was stretched taut, reflecting the ambient light like an oily, dark mirror. It sat there on the rough grey concrete, smelling sharply of decay and sour neglect, as though the perpetrator actually believed the heavy, enveloping darkness of the hour might somehow forgive and swallow the gesture. But the camera, bathed in the cool wash of the foyer's fluorescent tubes, did exactly what cameras are designed to do: its red eye flared, its hard drive spun with a quiet, metallic *whir*, and it absolutely refused to look away.

What rapidly followed that quiet, midnight drop was neither a traditional crime nor a conventional punishment in any ordinary, legal sense. It was, instead, a slow, painful, and ultimately collective awakening of an entire building.

Within forty-eight hours, the street was no longer silent. High-definition photographs, smelling sharply of hot toner and fresh printer ink, suddenly appeared, taped aggressively to the cold metal of the lamppost. The thick, glossy paper caught the morning sunlight, flashing white and demanding attention. The violent, tearing sound of heavy-duty industrial tape echoing off the brick