

Parramatta Firies

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Introduction

There are highly specific, stubborn arteries in every sprawling metropolis that violently refuse the clean, two-dimensional simplicity of municipal maps. Cowper Street, situated deep in the restless, beating heart of Parramatta, is one such thoroughfare. To the casual observer driving past with the windows rolled up, it is aggressively ordinary. It is a street defined by long, uneven stretches of rough red brick that radiate the baked-in thermal heat of the harsh Australian sun long after dusk. It is bordered by heavy, wrought-iron railings flaking layers of forest-green paint, and characterized by the ordinary, geometric planes of sharp afternoon light that slide slowly across nylon laundry lines and cracked

terracotta pots overflowing with vibrant, green curry-leaf plants. The ambient noise is the standard suburban symphony: the harsh, territorial shrieks of Indian myna birds, the rhythmic, heavy hydraulic hiss of the local buses kneeling at the curb, and the distant, oceanic, low-frequency roar of the M4 motorway.

Yet, concealed within the load-bearing walls of number 69—a completely unremarkable, brutalist walk-up block from the late seventies—nine couples of the Indian diaspora have painstakingly arranged a vastly quieter, infinitely more profound architecture of survival.

They are firefighters. They are *firies*, in the blunt, shortened, deeply affectionate vernacular of this sunburnt, flammable country. And every single day, they carry into their shared, echoing concrete stairwell the heavy, inescapable residual heat of their profession. It is a sensory weight that cannot be simply unbuckled and left in a locker. They bring home the bitter, acrid ghost of incinerated eucalyptus bushland, the toxic, clinging odor of molten polyurethane from suburban lounge rooms, and the sharp, metallic tang of vaporized copper wiring. But they also carry with them the sudden, bright, piercing sound of laughter that arrives entirely unbidden in the suffocating, blinding middle of thick black smoke.

Chunmun Singh, a senior solution architect employed by Baba Bank in the sterile, glass-and-steel district of Redfern, lives among them. He resides in a small flat on the middle floor by a sheer accident of lease availability and a quiet, personal necessity for anonymity. His sensory world is fundamentally different from theirs. Chunmun spends his days immersed in the freezing, hyper-conditioned air of server rooms, surrounded by the hypnotic, rhythmic blinking of blue and green LED status lights, listening to the high-pitched, steady whine of cooling fans. He designs intricate, invisible digital

systems—failovers, load balancers, redundant data pipelines—that absolutely must not fail. He deals in mathematical certainties.

His neighbors, however, enter physical systems that have already catastrophically failed. They step into buildings where the structural integrity has completely collapsed into glowing orange ruin, and they attempt, armed with nothing but heavy canvas hoses, pulsing water pressure, and sheer, bloody-minded human will, to restore a fragile, temporary order.

Between these two wildly divergent professions runs a deep, unspoken, foundational correspondence. Both Chunmun and the firies intimately understand the terrifying concept of latency. Both hold a profound, necessary respect for that precise, breathless moment when theoretical planning yields entirely to the stubborn, brutal, physical fact of a roaring flame or a cascading code failure.

The firefighter households of the building—including Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal, Pallavi, Priya Sharma (known affectionately to the wider city as Ms. Aussie), Priyanka, Khushboo, Rohini, and their operational partners—are the ones who answer the pager's piercing shriek. They move through the narrow, fluorescent-lit corridors of 69 Cowper Street with the highly particular, hyper-aware grace of those who have spent thousands of hours learning to walk smoothly in heavy, steel-toed, thick-soled leather boots. They possess the uncanny ability to navigate a pitch-black, smoke-filled hallway, yet they can still hear the absolute softest, most delicate domestic sounds: the gentle hiss of water just beginning to boil in a kettle, the microscopic shift of a sleeping husband's breathing in the next room, the subtle *clink* of a glass bangle against a ceramic teacup.

Their husbands move beside them in the building, equally marked by the grueling shift work, equally careful, moving with a deliberate gentleness that honors the small, fragile mercies of their shared home. When they pass each other in the stairwell, the air is briefly overwhelmed by a complex, warring olfactory tapestry: the beautiful, sharp bite of roasting cumin seeds, crushed garlic, and sweet jasmine oil battling desperately against the harsh, industrial stench of Nomex fabric that has been superheated and sweat-stained too many times.

The reader must understand from the outset: this is not a traditional chronicle of polished, cinematic heroism, at least not as the breathless six o'clock evening news prefers to package it. You will find no slow-motion walking away from explosions, no pristine faces entirely free of sweat and terror.

It is, rather, a meticulous accounting of the ordinary, grinding miracles that accumulate when people who routinely confront the absolute extremes of human ruin return, night after grueling night, to the exact same chipped stairwell tiles. It is about returning to the same whistling pressure cookers, the same flickering hallway lights, and the same heavy, shared silence that falls over the building when a nearby siren wails.

Within these pages, the reader will uncover dances performed desperately in heavy, ash-caked turnout gear beneath a bruising, smoke-choked purple sky. You will find heavy canvas hoses, smelling of river weed and brass polish, miraculously transformed into skipping ropes in the blinding heat of a tarmac yard. There are station noticeboards that speak to the city in razor-sharp puns, treacherous acronyms that betray their speakers under the glaring sun of an airbase, and a panicked Father Christmas administering violent, life-saving chest compressions while smelling of cheap

peppermint. You will read of animals that flatly refuse the dignity of glossy calendar poses, cats wedged stubbornly behind vibrating copper hot-water systems, and the dry, utterly necessary, ash-choked joke that underpants may sometimes, for the sake of psychological survival, be worn outside the trousers.

These are the lighter scars. They are the stories told over steaming cups of dark, cardamom-laced chai to keep the darkness at bay. They do not diminish, erase, or cheapen the darker, unspeakable scars—the memories that wake them in cold sweats, the smells that trigger sudden nausea, the faces of those who could not be pulled from the wreckage. These lighter moments simply, stubbornly insist that darkness is not the only weather permitted to exist.

Parramatta itself provides the sprawling, vibrating stage. It is a muddy, ancient river city, reflecting the silver and gold of the new glass towers. It is a migrant city, smelling of hundreds of different cuisines bleeding into the streets. It is a city of heavy double-decker trains that rattle endlessly homeward, their steel wheels shrieking against the tracks under the harsh, cold sodium light of the stations.

The fires of Cowper Street do not ever claim uniqueness. They reject the mantle of the extraordinary. They claim only the highly particular, sensory texture of their returning: the stubborn grey ash wedged permanently deep in their boot treads, the faint, bitter perfume of smoke that no brand of heavily scented floral washing powder will ever entirely erase, and the heavy, cold knowledge sitting in the pit of their stomachs that tomorrow, the shrill, heart-stopping tone of the pager may sound again.

What follows is their collective, breathing testimony. It is rendered not as sterile, bureaucratic reportage, but as the long, complex,