

Flat Mated

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Introduction: The Cost of Living and Loving

To understand the modern Sydney romantic relationship, one must first understand the modern Sydney real estate market. They are inextricably linked, bound together by the terrifying, invisible chains of compound interest, strata levies, and median rent prices that require the sacrifice of one's firstborn just to secure a viewing.

We are a generation squeezed. The Australian dream of a quarter-acre block has evaporated, replaced by the grim reality of the "heritage-listed shoebox" or the "open-plan warehouse conversion."

To survive this brutal economic landscape, couples have been forced into an unnatural compromise: the third wheel.

The housemate.

In theory, the housemate is a purely financial asset—a flesh-and-blood subsidy that keeps the electricity on and the eviction notices at bay. But what happens when that subsidy is infuriatingly charming? What happens when the person subsidizing your mortgage is a ridiculously fit personal trainer, an underground DJ, or a sun-bleached Bondi lifeguard who treats life like an endless summer vacation?

What follows is an exploration of the psychological breaking point. These are the chronicles of twelve everyday couples pushed to the absolute brink. Driven mad by the suffocating proximity of shared bathrooms, paper-thin walls, and the relentless, creeping paranoia that their partners are falling for the laid-back gods and goddesses renting their spare rooms.

Yet, in every instance, the fiery passion of jealousy is ultimately doused by something much stronger: the terrifying, sobering reality of the household budget. In Sydney, love may be blind, but paranoia comes with a calculator. Welcome to the share-house war zone.

Chapter 1: Parramatta Agni Pariksha

The fluorescent lights of the Sydney CBD office hummed with a sterile, flickering blue hue, but to Surya Sen, the cubicle felt as suffocating as a trench on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. It was exactly 2:15 PM. The digital clock in the bottom right corner of his

monitor mocked him, the numbers flipping with a sharp, pixelated *click*. According to his meticulously synchronized internal timer, it was time.

Surya's palm, slick with a cold, clammy sweat, grasped his smartphone. The screen illuminated his face with a harsh white glow, casting deep, paranoid shadows under his eyes. He dialed. One ring. A high-pitched trill echoing in his ear. Two rings. The scent of his own nervous perspiration—a sharp, acrid blend of cheap instant coffee and generic roll-on deodorant—began to rise from his collar. Three rings.

"Hello? Puja? Pujaaa?!" Surya hissed into the receiver, his voice tight, his knuckles turning porcelain white. "Why aren't you picking up? Are you busy with that *gora*?!"

Silence. Just the dead, electronic static of a missed call.

Surya's vision blurred at the edges, tinting the dull grey walls of his office with a furious, crimson haze. In his mind's eye, the cramped 2-bedroom Parramatta apartment transformed into a den of betrayal. He could almost smell the intoxicating, maddening blend of Lachlan's expensive, coconut-scented surfboard wax mingling with the earthy, warm aroma of Puja's roasted cumin and turmeric. It was a sensory cocktail of domestic treason.

He didn't hesitate. Abandoning a half-finished pivot table and ignoring the bewildered squawk of his project manager, Surya bolted.

The T1 Western Line train was a rattling tin can of sensory overload. The metallic screech of the wheels against the tracks at Strathfield pierced his eardrums, a high-frequency squeal that mirrored the panic vibrating in his skull. The carriage smelled of damp wool and

stale breath, illuminated by the harsh, strobing afternoon sun that sliced through the scratched windows. Surya tapped his foot—*thwack, thwack, thwack*—against the sticky linoleum floor, tracking his journey in agonizing increments.

When he finally reached the apartment building, the heavy glass doors hissed open, releasing the stale, recycled air of the lobby. Surya bypassed the elevator—too slow, too loud—and sprinted up three flights of concrete stairs, the heavy thud of his leather oxfords echoing like war drums. He had deliberately left the main door unlocked, a tactical trap.

He threw the door open with a dramatic, explosive *CRACK* against the hallway wall.

The apartment was bathed in the soft, golden, innocent light of late afternoon. The air was thick with the comforting, starchy scent of freshly laundered cotton. There, standing by the ironing board, was Puja, her silhouette outlined by the sun, calmly folding a set of floral pillowcases. Down the hall, the rhythmic, muffled thumping of a digital soccer crowd—*boom, boom, cheer*—leaked from Lachlan's bedroom, accompanied by the bright, chaotic flashing of neon stadium lights on his TV screen. The Australian was wearing noise-canceling headphones, entirely oblivious.

"What are you doing?!" Surya bellowed, the sound tearing through the quiet domesticity.

Puja dropped a pillowcase, her eyes wide with shock, reflecting the manic gleam in her husband's gaze. "I am folding laundry, Surya! What is wrong with you? Did you lose your job?!"

"Don't play innocent!" Surya stormed into the living room, his chest heaving, the sour smell of his panicked sweat now overpowering the

clean linen scent. He dropped to his knees, his hands trembling as he furiously yanked open a plastic bag of earthen *diyas* left over from Diwali. "I demand an Agni Pariksha! Right here! Right now!"

He began lining up the small clay lamps on the faux-hardwood floor, the rough terracotta scraping loudly against the varnish. With a frantic flick of a lighter—*snick, fwoosh*—he ignited them. The small, orange flames danced wildly, casting long, flickering shadows against the beige walls, releasing the heavy, greasy scent of burning cotton wicks and clarified butter.

"Walk over the flames, Puja! Prove your purity!" he commanded, pointing a trembling, accusatory finger at the line of fire.

Puja stared at the tiny, smoking line of lamps, the warm orange light reflecting in her furious dark eyes. The sheer absurdity of the moment hung in the air, heavy and thick, broken only by the muffled *GOOOAAAL!* from Lachlan's room.

Then, Puja erupted. Her voice, a terrifying, shrill mix of Bengali and English, shattered the remaining quiet. "*Agni Pariksha?! Are you out of your mind?! If you can't afford a full apartment in Sydney without a housemate, then send me back to Kolkata! At least there I can live with some dignity instead of this madhouse, breathing in ghee smoke and your insanity!*"

The word "afford" hit Surya like a bucket of ice water, extinguishing his mythological fury with cold, hard economics. The red haze vanished, replaced by the crisp, neon-green glow of a mental spreadsheet.

He whipped out his phone, his thumbs flying across the screen, tapping the glass with frantic, clicking sounds. "Send you back?! Do you know the logistics?!" he yelled, reading the numbers aloud as if

delivering a sermon. "If I eat outside every day... thirty dollars per meal, times three, is ninety dollars daily! But right now, we are spending only eighteen dollars per day on groceries for *both* of us! Sending you back will cost me an extra seventy-two dollars every single day! Impossible! It is financially unviable!"

The fiery glow of the *diyas* slowly sputtered out, leaving behind trails of bitter, acrid grey smoke that stung their eyes. The silence that followed was suffocating.

By sunset, the apartment had cooled, cast in the muted, melancholic blues of twilight. Surya, armed with a roll of bright yellow masking tape, was on his hands and knees. The harsh, ripping sound of the adhesive unspooling echoed through the living room. *Riiiiip*. He measured exactly seven feet from the kitchen entrance, pressing the tape down onto the floorboards with obsessive precision, creating a vivid, neon border.

"A seven-foot radius," Surya declared to the empty room, the tape smelling sharply of synthetic rubber. "No crossing the line."

But the tape was merely the overture. The true madness blossomed in the dark. Days later, the scent of lavender mothballs and dusty cedarwood became Surya's new reality. He was crammed inside the master bedroom's towering wooden wardrobe, his knees pulled to his chest, his suit jacket pressing uncomfortably against a row of Puja's silk sarees.

It was pitch black. The darkness was absolute, save for the thin, razor-sharp sliver of golden light slicing through the crack in the wardrobe doors. The air was hot, stale, and tasted of dust motes. Surya sat, dripping with sweat, his breathing shallow and rapid, his phone glowing faintly on his lap, set to silent.

From the kitchen, a horrifying sound drifted through the crack: laughter.

Ha ha ha. Surya's heart hammered against his ribs—*thud, thud, thud*—a deafening drumbeat in his ears. He pressed his face closer to the wooden slats, straining to hear.

"No, seriously," Lachlan's laid-back, resonant voice floated down the hall, accompanied by the bright, metallic *clink* of a spoon against a ceramic bowl. "You just mash the avocado, add a squeeze of lemon, and maybe some feta. It's brilliant."

"But it lacks heat," Puja's voice replied, followed by the sputtering, sizzling sound of mustard seeds popping in hot oil—*crack-pop-hiss*—releasing a pungent, mouth-watering aroma of spices that wafted all the way into the bedroom. "You must temper the dal with cumin and red chilies, Lachlan. Avocado is just... green butter."

Lachlan laughed again, a rich, booming sound. Surya clamped a hand over his mouth, swallowing a gasp, his eyes wide in the suffocating darkness of the closet. *Green butter? Was this code? What did it mean?* He sat there, marinating in his own paranoid sweat and the scent of mothballs, a budget-conscious king reigning over a dark, dusty kingdom of silk and delusion, waiting for a war that would never come.
