

Flying Parramatta

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Introduction: The River and the Rust

Parramatta does not loudly announce its wounds; it is a city of relentless, shimmering forward momentum, a place that buries its fractures beneath the ordinary, blinding surfaces of river light and sandstone façades. In this sprawling, heat-baked western reach of Sydney, the atmosphere is a heavy, complex tapestry of contradictory elements. The air here carries the residual, suffocating heat of the vast inland plains—a dry, gritty warmth that tastes of eucalyptus dust and hot asphalt—while simultaneously holding the faint, briny salt memory of the distant eastern harbour. It is a sensory collision. As the bruised purple twilight descends, the

streets exhale the rich, intoxicating scent of roasting cardamom, popping mustard seeds, and sweet, heavy jasmine drifting from the open windows of cramped kitchens. This organic perfume constantly battles the sharp, industrial tang of diesel exhaust and the low, bone-rattling murmur of double-decker trains dragging their heavy steel wheels across the rusted iron bridge.

For decades, Indian families have planted themselves in this soil with the fierce, deliberate hope of those who measure geographic distance in generations rather than kilometres. They have aggressively terraformed the suburb into a reflection of their ambitions. They have opened brilliantly lit shops that smell of ammonia glass cleaner and heavy, 22-carat gold; they have filled sterile, air-conditioned offices with the rapid-fire, plastic clicking of keyboards and the faint scent of sandalwood soap; they have raised children who effortlessly code-switch, their voices a melodic, syncopated rhythm bouncing between the hard vowels of broad Australian English and the soft, rolling cadences of Gujarati, Punjabi, and Hindi.

Yet, beneath this immaculate, carefully constructed architecture of immigrant aspiration, a slower, far more insidious corrosion has taken root in the damp, unseen corners.

The nine women whose lives form the substance of this chronicle—Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal Gupta, Pallavi, Priya Sharma aka Ms. Aussie, Priyanka, Khushboo, and Rohini—did not set out to become cautionary figures. They were not drawn from the fringes. Each woman arrived in this sweltering basin carrying the ordinary, heavy freight of duty, ambition, and the private, gnawing hunger for relief from a psychological or physical pain that ordinary, respectable life so rarely satisfies.

The white powder that eventually filtered into their days arrived without the screeching sirens or dark alleyways of cinematic tragedy. It was handed over in sunlit parks that smelled of cut grass, in pristine suburban bathrooms smelling of bleach, and in the bustling, neon-lit corridors of family weddings. It was offered as a temporary ease, a soft, chemical rearrangement of frayed nerves, a private, velvet-lined door leading out of the crushing weight of chronic discomfort or the relentless, exhausting performance of perpetual competence.

To the exhausted, the powder tasted at first like salvation. It smelled faintly of bitter almonds and ozone, and upon entering the bloodstream, it possessed a miraculous, paradoxical chemistry. For some, it possessed the ability to turn down the deafening volume of the world, softening the harsh glare of the Australian sun. For others, it ignited an electric, superhuman clarity, replacing crushing exhaustion with a frictionless, buzzing energy. It made the crushing weight of mortgages, cultural expectations, and crying children feel weightless, transforming the rigid, sharp-edged reality of their lives into a liquid, golden hour of absolute peace.

But what began as an occasional, stolen escape soon lengthened, hardening into a brutal biological necessity. This necessity violently rearranged their internal clocks. It eroded the small, daily fidelities and sensory rituals that hold a household together—the smell of a hot meal on the table, the sound of a bedtime story, the warm, physical touch of a partner in the dark. It hollowed out the brightly lit rooms in which love and work had once seemed as durable as the colonial brickwork of the city.

This is not a story of sudden, explosive catastrophe. It is a chronicle of incremental, suffocating vanishing. It is the sound of a missed appointment echoing in an empty clinic. It is the sight of a once-

immaculate woman arriving late, her clothes smelling sourly of unwashed cotton and chemical sweat. It is the agonizing evolution of a vibrant conversation left unfinished, decaying into a heavy, toxic silence that no longer seeks repair. Husbands who once proudly shared the physical labor of building a new life found themselves sleeping beside shivering strangers, occupying the same mattresses yet inhabiting entirely different, hostile weathers of the mind. Children, acting as hyper-sensitive barometers, learned to lower their voices, their high-pitched laughter vanishing from the backyards. Friends from the temple committees and the bustling weekend markets began to avert their eyes and cross the street, their colorful saris flashing away from the epicenter of the collapse.

Through it all, the Parramatta River continues its thick, brown, indifferent flow past the ferry wharf and the rustling ghost gums of the parkland, carrying the city's ordinary, noisy commerce, while these nine vibrant lives contracted into narrower, darker, and ever more isolated orbits.

What follows is not an inventory of dosages, a sterile medical chart, or a catalogue of chemical mechanisms. It is a desperate attempt to trace the human weather that gathers when a substance promising temporary, brilliant transcendence exacts a permanent, devastating toll. Parramatta, with its jarring mixture of flashing new glass money and old colonial longing, its incense-clouded temples and fluorescent-lit takeaway shops, its muddy riverside paths walked by people still anxiously calculating the cost of belonging, provides the stage. The women themselves provide the weather. Their stories do not instruct. They simply record the slow, silent avalanche of ruin as it settles, house by house, into the ordinary, sensory fabric of a suburb that vastly prefers not to look too closely at what it cannot easily repair.

Chapter 1: Sumitri

In the narrow, two-story terrace house near the edge of Harris Park, where the humid wind carried the damp, algae-scented breath of the distant Parramatta River against the windowpanes each evening, Sumitri kept the heavy linen blinds half-drawn even at the blinding apex of midday. The light that managed to filter through the weave was the exact, melancholic colour of old, tarnished brass. It fell in rigid geometric slats across the polished mahogany of the dining table, illuminating floating motes of dust and casting long shadows over the unpaid bills that lay in careful, overlapping stacks. Sumitri arranged them by due date, as if the sheer tactile ritual of ordering the paper—feeling the crisp edges of the final notices, smelling the faint, sterile scent of laser-printer ink—could summon a financial stability that had long since evaporated.

She had come from Chandigarh twelve years earlier, carrying a degree in accountancy and a husband whose booming, baritone optimism had once seemed larger, brighter, and more expansive than the city of Sydney itself. In those early years, the air had smelled of raw potential: of roasting cumin from their first tiny kitchen, of freshly cut eucalyptus after a summer storm, of the sweet, synthetic new-car smell of their first Corolla. Now, the optimism had thinned to a brittle, translucent film, and the city had grown sharp, metallic teeth.

The first time the powder entered her life, it arrived masquerading as an angel of mercy. Chronic pain from a slipped disc—an injury sustained while lifting a heavy crate of archival files at work—had