

Roses, Foam and Petrol

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Introduction

There are streets that appear, at first glance, to contain nothing more dangerous than the ordinary commerce of living: rent transferred on the first of the month, lights switched off at a decent hour, kettles clicking themselves silent, the low sound of televisions behind closed blinds. Cowper Street in Parramatta was one such street—a short, unremarkable row of nine villas under the pale

winter sky. At dusk, porch lights came on one by one, amber squares against the blue-grey evening. The air carried the green smell of clipped grass, the peppery sweetness of rose petals, cooking onions, detergent, and the distant metallic breath of traffic.

The villas had been raised quickly by Mr. Chaddichandan's real-estate company. The residents had been grateful for affordable homes and had asked few questions. Between timber and plaster lay materials chosen for economy, including sheets of discarded foam pressed into cavities because the developer's project funding had fallen twenty percent short. No brochure mentioned the foam. No resident was told where some of the materials had come from, or why the walls sometimes carried a faint chemical sweetness on hot days.

Into this provisional architecture came nine couples who had crossed oceans with the usual mixture of calculation and hope. They brought brass containers, pressure cookers, framed photographs, old recipes, new passwords, careful budgets and the names of distant gods. Their windows glowed at different hours. One home smelled of cardamom; another of frying mustard seeds; another of coffee; another of sandalwood. They were neighbors by address long before they became neighbors by trust.

Among them moved a tenth presence: Nitin Borgi, a customer-support executive whose days were spent soothing strangers over telephone lines and whose evenings were given, with increasing desperation, to the unpaid service of one woman. For two years he swept floors, washed dishes, carried sacks of rice and bags of onions, believing each act of labour might eventually be converted into the intimacy he craved. The woman, Rashmi Bongi, never refused him outright. She simply allowed the debt of his longing to

accumulate while her rose garden—ordinary hybrid teas in crimson, cream and pale pink—flourished in the narrow strip of earth before her door.

The roses became the stage upon which several different accounts would eventually meet. But before that final night, there were days of ordinary life: school runs, office calls, grocery bags, television noise, unpaid balances, construction complaints, and the private stories people tell themselves to survive disappointment.

This is the account of those lives, told through the nine households and finally through the man who stood across the road when the consequences became impossible to ignore. It begins in quietness, because disasters rarely announce themselves in the language of disaster. They begin with smells dismissed, noises overlooked, colors taken for granted, and small choices repeated until a house, a friendship, or a life contains more pressure than anyone can see.

Chapter 1: Sumitri

In the hush that precedes the alteration of ordinary lives, Sumitri stood at the narrow window of the villa numbered among the nine at 69 Cowper Street, Parramatta, and watched the winter evening gather itself over the rooftops. The glass was cool beneath her fingertips. Outside, the sky had the bruised color of a plum left too long in the refrigerator, deepening from lavender at the horizon to navy above the power lines. A single streetlamp clicked on. Its cone of amber light caught drifting insects and made them seem, for a

few seconds, like tiny sparks of gold. Sumitri liked that hour. It was the hour in which the day's demands loosened their grip. The dishwasher hummed in the kitchen. Her pressure cooker had released its final sigh ten minutes earlier, leaving the air fragrant with cumin, turmeric and cooked lentils. Somewhere down the row a television audience laughed at a joke she could not hear. From the neighboring villa came the brief metallic clatter of a spoon dropped into a sink. The street was settling into itself. Her husband sat at the dining table with his calculator and a column of figures. He was an accountant by profession and, increasingly, an accountant by temperament. Even on evenings when there was nothing urgent to calculate, he calculated. Electricity. Groceries. Mortgage payments. Train fares. Insurance. The remaining balance on the loan.

The figures seemed to give him comfort because numbers, unlike people, did not pretend to mean one thing while doing another. Sumitri understood the habit. Migration had taught both of them to measure what could be measured. She cooked dals that remembered distant kitchens, ironed his shirts until their collars were crisp, and knew which supermarket sold coriander most cheaply after six in the evening. She had made their new country manageable by turning it into a sequence of small practical decisions. Sometimes, however, the house resisted being practical. On hot afternoons a faint chemical sweetness appeared near the western wall. It was not strong enough to alarm her. It reminded her vaguely of new plastic, glue, packing material and the synthetic smell of a freshly opened suitcase. She once asked her husband whether he noticed it. "New construction," he had said. The phrase closed the matter. Down the row, Rashmi Bongi kept roses.

Sumitri could see them from her kitchen window if she leaned slightly to the left. They were unusually healthy for such a narrow garden: hybrid teas with waxy leaves, red blooms dark as wine, yellow blooms like small suns, white ones edged in pink. In the late afternoon they held the last light of the day. At night Rashmi sometimes left a small garden lamp on, a low amber glow that made the leaves look lacquered. Nitin Borgi was often there. Sumitri knew him only as the cheerful man from Fofosys who worked in customer support and seemed to spend his private life in service to Rashmi. She saw him carrying grocery bags, coiling the garden hose, washing the veranda, lifting parcels from the boot of Rashmi's car. He moved quickly whenever she was watching, as though each task might be an examination he could still pass. One Saturday morning Sumitri watched from behind her curtain while Nitin struggled with a sack of onions. Rashmi stood beneath the veranda light wearing a pale blue dressing gown. Her arms were folded. She said something Sumitri could not hear. Nitin laughed, shifted the sack against his shoulder and carried it inside. Sumitri closed the curtain. There were things one should not become involved in, even when they were happening just a few doors down. She heard enough, however, to form an impression. Nitin was not merely helpful. He was hopeful. The hope had become visible, almost physical, like an extra person following him from task to task. The neighborhood itself encouraged such observations. There were only nine villas. Curtains opened and closed. Cars came and went. Children crossed lawns. Grocery deliveries paused at doors. Everyone knew roughly who worked nights, who prayed early, who received relatives from overseas, who argued loudly, who watered plants before sunrise. Yet familiarity did not produce intimacy. It produced a different kind of silence: the silence of people who know enough to avoid questions. One evening, as the temperature fell, Sumitri stepped outside to bring in the laundry. The air smelled of