

Parramatta Entertained

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Introduction

In the western reaches of Sydney, where the Parramatta River moves with the unhurried, heavy dignity of something far older than the sprawling concrete city that grew hastily beside it, nine marriages had begun to thin. It was not a thinning marked by the explosive, cinematic drama of slammed doors, shattering glass, or the sharp, echoing finality of departure. Rather, it was the quieter, far more insidious attrition of days that had simply stopped noticing one another.

Every evening, as the sky over the M4 motorway bruised into violent shades of deep violet and burnt orange, the husbands returned. They walked heavy-footed from the train stations and bus stops, carrying the invisible, crushing residual weight of sterile offices, dust-choked construction sites, and brightly lit hospital corridors. Their clothes smelled faintly of ozone from photocopiers, sharp diesel fumes, and the stale sweat of the daily grind. They entered their homes, casting long, exhausted shadows across the floorboards. Inside, the wives moved like silent ghosts through cramped kitchens, narrow, wind-battered balconies, and the small, overly familiar rooms of high-rise units that overlooked seas of

asphalt car parks, shaded side streets, or the distant, blinding, silver glint of the river catching the last light of the day.

Over the years, the vibrant, multi-colored spectrum of their conversations had faded into a dull, monochromatic grey, narrowed entirely to the dry logistics of living: the payment of electricity bills, the grocery lists, the rotation of the car tires. The physical language of touch had grown infrequent, reduced to accidental brushes in a narrow hallway. Entertainment—that soft, incredibly essential art of keeping another human being genuinely interested in the shared, breathing texture of living—had slipped almost completely unnoticed from the inventory of their daily lives.

Outside their heavily curtained windows, the suburb itself remained indifferent, loud, and generously alive at once. The trains still arrived at the platforms with their usual, punctual, metallic clatter, a heavy iron-on-iron screech that shot sparks into the twilight and reverberated through the very foundations of the apartment blocks. The air moving through the streets of Church Street and Harris Park was a thick, intoxicating perfume. The wind carried the sharp, eye-watering scent of tempered spices—the violent sizzle of black mustard seeds in hot oil, the earthy depth of roasted cumin, the sweet, heavy smoke of sandalwood incense, and the lingering, rich aroma of melting ghee drifting from open kitchen windows. The river continued its patient, muddy-green progress past the rough-hewn sandstone blocks of the old female factory ruins, the water reflecting the harsh, amber glare of the sodium streetlights and the neon flashes of passing traffic.

Yet, sealed securely within the private, air-conditioned geographies of these nine households, a completely different, freezing current had begun to assert itself. The air felt stale, smelling of trapped dust and the sterile, ozone tang of running electronics. It was then

that the wives finally spoke, each finding her own specific register of bone-deep weariness, sharp, brittle frustration, or quiet, heavy resignation. They refused to let the silence sit any longer. They named the terrifying, echoing emptiness of their rooms. They named the very real possibility of packing their bags and seeking elsewhere what had gone missing at home: color, sound, and the simple warmth of being seen.

What followed this unified breaking of the silence was neither grand nor cinematic. There were no sudden, dramatic journeys booked to distant European capitals; there were no theatrical, weeping declarations of love delivered under storm-lit skies to the swelling sound of an orchestra. Instead, there unfolded the much slower, infinitely more exacting, and deeply profound work of attention deliberately restored.

One husband learned again how to simply sit and listen, letting the vibrant colors of his wife's memories paint the room until memory itself became a shared, mapped country. Another rediscovered the damp, eucalyptus-scented river path and the particular, breathtaking, sapphire blue of late-afternoon light dancing on moving water. The rich, vibrating bass notes of a forgotten melody returned to a clinically white kitchen near Westmead, banishing the hum of the refrigerator. The complex, mouth-watering language of spice, heat, and patience reclaimed a neglected stove, filling the apartment with the scent of roasted coriander. The crisp, papery smell of books was unearthed, their pages opened and read aloud, the spoken words rearranging the stagnant air. Small, absurd rituals involving cups of tea and single jasmine flowers marked ordinary, grey Thursdays with brilliant splashes of color. Playfulness, long packed away in dusty boxes, was invited back into beige living rooms through the snapping sound of playing cards and

the chaotic building of fabric forts. Brief, breathless escapes were taken to the freezing, blue-hued mountains—not to flee the suffocating reality of the marriage, but to smell a different kind of air, just long enough to remember exactly why one might willingly choose to remain inside it. And in the quietest, most shadowy of the nine houses, a man simply stayed present, offering the radical, grounding gift of occupying the exact same breathing air without a single demand.

These were the true entertainments of Parramatta: deeply modest, entirely deliberate, and firmly rooted in the ordinary, unglamorous materials of suburban life. They required no bright stage lights, no glowing screens, and no audience beyond the two people who shared a lease, a complex history, and the fragile, vibrating hope that a marriage might still, miraculously, be capable of noticing itself. The chapters that follow record those nine distinct recoveries, each vibrating with its own specific texture, color, and sound, yet all joined by the exact same, underlying insistence—that to keep another person truly entertained is not a matter of flashy spectacle, but of the sustained, almost invisible, and deeply beautiful labor of seeing, and choosing to be seen.

Chapter One: Sumitri

In the soft, humid dusk of Parramatta, where the river moved past the old ferry wharf with the unhurried patience of something that had outlived every human plan, Sumitri stood at the kitchen window of the Macarthur Street unit and watched the light thin across the rooftops. The sky was bruising into shades of deep violet and burnt orange, casting long, melancholy shadows across the balcony tiles. The air carried the faint, sharp spice of a neighbour's tadka—the violent, mouth-watering sizzle of black mustard seeds, curry leaves,

and crushed garlic blooming in hot oil—mixed with the heavy, diesel sigh of buses turning toward the station.

That evening, the silence in the apartment had possessed a physical weight, thick and suffocating like a wool blanket in summer. She had spoken without raising her voice, the sound of her words barely rising above the steady, metallic drumming of water hitting the stainless-steel sink. "There is nothing left that feels like living," she said, her hands still wet, the soapy water catching the pale, fluorescent glare of the kitchen light. "You come home, you look at your phone, you sleep. I am here, but I am not. And if this continues, I will find someone who notices the space I occupy."

Rajesh, a systems analyst whose days were spent in a hyper-illuminated glass tower near the CBD surrounded by the aggressive clatter of keyboards and the low, constant hum of server racks, felt the sentence settle behind his ribs like a cold stone dropped into still, dark water. That night he did not reach for her. He sat on the edge of the mattress, the sheets rustling like dry leaves beneath his weight, after she had turned away. He stared into the darkness, lit only by the intermittent, sweeping amber glow of headlights from the street below. He understood then, with the late, terrifying clarity that arrives only after damage has already been done, that the body was the least of what had gone missing. The apartment itself seemed to hold its breath. The ceiling fan turned slowly overhead, a rhythmic tick-tick-tick that sounded like a countdown. Outside, a train rattled toward the platform, a heavy, iron-on-iron screech that reverberated through the floorboards before fading into the larger, swallowing quiet of the suburb.

The next evening, the sensory landscape of his return shifted. He came home earlier than usual, stepping out of the elevator into the hallway that always smelled faintly of floor polish and stale carpet.