

The Architect's Lullaby

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Introduction
Chapter One: Sumitri
Chapter Two: Paju
Chapter Three: Rashmi Bongi
Chapter Four: Komal Gupta
Chapter Five: Pallavi
Chapter Six: Priya Sharma
Chapter Seven: Priyanka
Chapter Eight: Khushboo
Chapter Nine: Rohini
Conclusion

Introduction

In the weathered, soot-stained brick heart of Parramatta, where the sluggish river slides past the crumbling foundations of old warehouses like a long, unhurried confession of muddy water and silt, stood the formidable bulk of 69 Cowper Street. The air here was forever thick, a heavy, humid blanket that carried the distinct, metallic tang of the nearby railway tracks mixed with the sweet, rotting scent of overripe figs dropping from the street trees. The building itself was a relic of a slightly more optimistic architectural era, its facade a patchwork of deep, bruised reds and fading, sun-bleached terracottas. Its walls, thin as the patience of those who

lived inside them, had once known the ordinary, predictable quiet of ordinary, predictable evenings. Back then, the corridors smelled faintly of garlic, roasting cumin, and the damp wool of coats hung out to dry. The ambient noise had been a gentle, domestic hum: the low, flickering blue light of televisions bleeding from under doors, the occasional, sharp burst of laughter from neighbors returning late from Church Street, and the distant, rhythmic sigh of traffic tires peeling against wet asphalt.

Then, in a single, almost conspiratorial, violently humid month, nine infants drew their very first, ragged breaths beneath this exact same sagging roof. It was as though the brick-and-mortar skeleton of the building itself had consciously decided to host a collective, overwhelming arrival, a simultaneous, chaotic beginning that instantly bound the entire ninth floor into one continuous, vibrating architecture of new, screaming life. By day, the children slept with the terrifying, heavy thoroughness of creatures who trusted the harsh, golden sun completely. Their small, fragile bodies lay perfectly still, bathed in the blinding, white-hot glare of Parramatta afternoons that baked the dust motes dancing in the window frames. The apartments during these hours smelled of crisp, unused cotton and the sharp, chemical tang of expensive sterilization fluids.

But by night, the exact moment the bruised, violet twilight surrendered to the inky, smog-choked dark, a terrifying transformation occurred. As the amber streetlights flickered to life with an audible, electric buzz, their voices rose. It began as a solitary, tentative whimper, a pale blue note in the dark, but it was quickly answered, amplified, and multiplied. The cries formed overlapping, crashing waves of sound—a cacophony of jagged reds, blinding whites, and deep, mournful purples. It was a symphony of pure, unanswerable, desperate claim that moved through the

cheap, plasterboard partitions like a physical, vibrating force. The drywall could not hold it. Every single room on the ninth floor became an involuntary auditorium, a captive theater where sleep was rapidly reduced to a fleeting, mocking rumor that belonged only to other people, in other, vastly quieter buildings across the river.

Among those forced to reside inside this newly, violently orchestrated structure was Chunmun Singh, a senior solution architect at Baba Bank in Redfern. Before the invasion of the infants, he had occupied a modest, impeccably clean flat whose ordered, absolute quiet had once been the ultimate measure of his solitary, highly compensated competence. His life was governed by the flawless, silent logic of the digital realm. Day after day, bathed in the crisp, sterile, blue-white light of his monitors, surrounded by the faint scent of ozone and polished glass, he designed massive, complex systems. He mapped intricate risk models, drew elegant, cascading data flow diagrams, and constructed the invisible, flawless logic of financial architectures that explicitly promised absolute predictability in a chaotic world.

Yet, no digital system, no perfectly coded algorithm he had ever conceived could possibly account for the raw, bleeding, nightly performance that now completely claimed the ninth floor of his home.

The mothers—nine exhausted women of the diaspora whose names (Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal Gupta, Pallavi, Priya Sharma, Priyanka, Khushboo, Rohini) had quickly become as deeply familiar to him as the specific, grating pitch of their individual children's distress—moved through the daylight hours like hollowed-out ghosts. They were women who had been violently stripped of their former selves by the sudden, brutal reversal of their bodies' primary purpose. They had prepared for the labyrinth of motherhood with

the frantic, terrified diligence of top-tier university students who still desperately, naively believed that accumulated knowledge could serve as an impenetrable armor against biological chaos.

They had paid thousands of dollars for costly, boutique courses in modern infant management. They had spent their weekends sitting in pristine, climate-controlled seminar rooms in the city, spaces that smelled aggressively of crushed eucalyptus, artificial vanilla, and the stiff, gluey scent of freshly laid carpet. In those sterile rooms, beneath flattering recessed lighting, perfectly groomed consultants had offered them beautifully printed diagrams of circadian alignment, laminated scripts of responsive, gentle speech, and sleek, glowing electronic devices that promised to measure every single inhale and guarantee mastery over an infant's wildly unpredictable temperament. Elaborate, calligraphic certificates of completion were proudly framed in brushed steel and hung directly above expensively assembled changing tables.

But when the Parramatta sun set, plunging the apartments into shadows illuminated only by the frantic, flashing LEDs of useless white-noise machines, the theories crumbled into dust. Techniques were rehearsed, gentle phrases were whispered in the dark, but the words felt hollow, foolish, and dry as ash even to the speakers. And still, the nights remained violently, catastrophically unbroken. The overlapping cries rose with the terrifying, mechanical regularity of a civic clock tower that no human being possessed the authority to switch off. The air in the hallway grew thick, smelling of sour milk, stale sweat, and the palpable, heavy pheromones of sheer panic.

Chunmun, who had never once asked to share the private, intense heat of creation that had produced these nine fragile lives, found himself bearing an agonizingly unequal, crushing portion of the public cost. The thin, vibrating walls transmitted every single

private grief, every exhausted sob of a mother, and every piercing shriek of a child, as though the building itself had maliciously decided that absolutely no sorrow should be allowed to remain solitary. Night after night, the architect lay wide awake, staring at the shifting, orange patterns of the streetlamp on his ceiling. He listened to the ascending, brightly colored threads of sound that actively sought one another across the dark corridors and found them, always, eagerly waiting.

A deep, bone-aching frustration settled into his muscles like a second, vastly more oppressive climate. The nine couples had known the intimate, sweaty, purposeful labor of creation; he alone seemed required to endure the agonizing, crumbling architecture of its aftermath. He was completely sleepless, forced to realize that the beautifully ordered, multi-million-dollar systems of his banking profession were entirely, laughably powerless against the far simpler, far more ancient, and vastly more powerful system of raw infant demand. He began to move through his evenings with the particular, hollow-eyed fatigue of a man who is literally paid to design flawless solutions, yet absolutely cannot silence the one glaring error that now defined his every hour after dark.

Outside his window, the Parramatta River continued its dark, indifferent, liquid confession beneath the concrete pylons of the bridges. The heavy freight trains still called out across the humid, cicada-loud night, their metal wheels screeching against the steel tracks. And inside the suffocating brick oven of 69 Cowper Street, the chaotic symphony assembled itself once more. Nine distinct, furious voices bound the ninth floor into a single, continuous, vibrating structure of deep distress—a monstrous, acoustic monument that no framed certificate, no carefully timed feeding routine, and no softly modulated adult voice had yet managed to