

The Parramatta Prophet

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Introduction

In the late, bruised-amber light of Parramatta, the jacarandas do not fall so much as they deliberately, gracefully surrender. It is a season of localized, beautiful decay. The air in the Sydney basin grows thick, trapping the humidity against the sandstone of the Great Dividing Range, pressing down on the flat plains of the west. When the hot northerly winds finally scour through the valley, the trees release their burden. Their purple confetti drifts downward with the chilling, magnificent indifference of a biological system that has already completed its grand, automated work. The blossoms settle everywhere, a soft, suffocating blanket of color. They pile up on the cracked, sun-baked concrete of Cowper Street, resting on

the scorching metal roofs of parked sedans, and gathering in the corners of the narrow, abrasive brick steps of the nine identical townhouses that share the enclosed, rectangular courtyard at number 69.

The sensory reality of this neighborhood is a heavy, inescapable thing. The air here is perpetually thick, laden with the slow, muddy, mineral scent of the Parramatta River—a smell of damp earth, old submerged timber, and churning silt that rises when the tide pulls back. Layered over the river's breath is the sharp, acrid tang of hot asphalt and the faint, perpetual, rattling vibration of nine separate air-conditioning compressor units. These machines labor endlessly, whining and shuddering against a radiant heat that never fully leaves the brickwork, even in the dead of night.

Behind the uniform facades of number 69—each sporting the same charcoal-grey trim and the same frosted glass front doors—nine husbands sit entombed in a different kind of atmosphere. They exist entirely within the harsh, shadowless, clinical cyan wash of dual thirty-two-inch monitors. The air in their home offices is scrubbed, cooled to a precise twenty-one degrees, and devoid of any organic scent. Their fingers move across heavy mechanical keyboards in a frantic, percussive language. *Clack-clack-clack*. It is the chaotic, desperate rhythm of massive database migrations, cloud infrastructure deployments, and critical hotfixes. These are men who have, over years of corporate conditioning and late-night pager alerts, come to genuinely believe that every human difficulty is simply a matter of network latency. They believe that every agonizing silence across a dinner table is merely a support ticket waiting to be assigned and closed. To them, every marriage is a complex database schema that can, with sufficient monitoring and aggressive optimization, be rendered entirely free of residual error.

While the husbands inhabit their glowing, frictionless digital vacuums, the wives move through the physical spaces of the same townhouses like careful, ghost-like exceptions. They navigate the sensory world. They stand in kitchens filled with the eye-watering, sharp smoke of hot mustard oil and the deep, earthy perfume of roasting cumin, cooking meals that will inevitably grow cold on the dining tables. They wait. They stand at the front windows, the glass hot against their foreheads, watching the street, counting the agonizingly slow intervals between the fall of one purple blossom and the next.

Some of these women keep private, deeply buried ledgers of absence—a mental accounting of missed dinners, canceled weekends, and vacant stares. Others have begun to actively dream of chaos, of untidy clutter, of rooms filled with useless, beautiful objects. They dream of sprawling, messy conversations that wander without a predefined agenda or a targeted resolution. They yearn for time that is allowed to simply pass, to pool on the floor and evaporate without being logged in a timesheet. Between the wives and the humming, blue-lit screens of their husbands stands a vast, echoing distance—a void of silence that no metric of sprint velocity, no bandwidth upgrade, and no agile methodology can ever measure or cross.

It is precisely into this echoing, highly optimized distance that Chunmun Singh arrives.

He appears on Cowper Street quiet and unhurried, moving with a physical grace that entirely rejects the frantic pace of the tech sector. He carries with him an alteration in the air pressure, a strange, grounding gravity. Sometimes he brings the deep, ancient, resinous scent of raw sandalwood, a smell that cuts through the sterile air-conditioning and the smog of the street like a blade.

Sometimes he brings nothing at all, only a profound, terrifying stillness.

The neighbors, peering through their blinds, call him the Silicon Prophet. It is a title bestowed half in nervous jest, half in desperate, quiet recognition of the power he seems to wield over the code-addled minds of their spouses. But Chunmun does not preach. He does not stand in the courtyard and offer loud, sweeping sermons. He does not console the crying wives in the ordinary, comforting sense.

He speaks, when he chooses to speak at all, in the cold, exact, unyielding syntax the husbands already understand. He uses their vocabulary—metrics, inputs, variables, and intervals—until that very syntax begins to bend, crack, and ultimately fail under the weight of human reality. He is a master of the tactile disruption. He inspires a wife to place a single, fragile, bruising white frangipani directly onto the clattering black keys of a laptop, forcing a system failure. He commands a senior architect to physically measure the unpredictable, chaotic fall of a jacaranda petal against his own sweating skin. He leaves a scarred, dust-covered vinyl record that skips violently in three separate places and explicitly forbids anyone from correcting the audio file. He teaches a grueling, silent form of listening that forces a man to entirely abandon his problem-solving toolkit. And slowly, agonizingly, one by one, the glowing cyan lights in the windows of number 69 begin to dim.

This is not a story of sudden, cinematic conversions or dramatic, tear-soaked reconciliations. The damage of the digital age is too deep for that. This is a story of remainders—those soft, wet, entirely unoptimizable fragments of human presence that every perfect system inevitably tries, and inevitably fails, to erase. It is the story of nine marriages learning, slowly, painfully, and at vastly

different speeds, that some dark intervals of pain are simply not meant to be reduced. They are learning that some wounds do not require an architectural patch, but only a silent, breathing witness who is willing to stay in the room. They are discovering that breathtaking beauty sometimes lives most fully in the static, the error, and the skip that cannot be cleaned.

Through it all, Parramatta itself breathes as a living, sprawling character. The river's slow, muddy insistence against its banks. The deafening, chaotic noise of the lorikeets fighting in the canopy at dusk. The specific, sickly-sweet way the orange sodium streetlamp on Cowper Street filters through leaves that are yellowing long after the last freight train has sighed its metallic breath into the night. And above it all, above the servers and the sorrow, the jacarandas continue their quiet, magnificent work. They release what they no longer need, dropping their color onto the concrete, keeping nothing that can be counted, entirely indifferent to the machines humming below.

Chapter 1: Sumitri

Sumitri had come to understand that silence in a marriage is never truly empty. It accumulates, layer upon layer, like the fine red dust that settled on the windowsills of Cowper Street after every dry northerly wind tore through the Sydney basin. In the late afternoons, when the heat of the day began to curdle into a heavy, humid dusk, the jacarandas released their purple confetti. They did so with the quiet, chilling indifference of systems that have long since finished their automated work. Sumitri would stand at the edge of the shared concrete courtyard, her bare feet registering the lingering, baked-in warmth of the pavers, and she would count the seconds between the fall of one blossom and the next. The air here always tasted faintly of hot asphalt, crushed eucalyptus, and the