

Popcorn Apocalypse

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Introduction

There are many ways a civilization can collapse.

It can be destroyed by the deafening, ground-shaking roar of war, the hollow, cramping ache of widespread famine, the invisible, suffocating weight of financial catastrophe, the violent, chaotic tearing of natural disaster, or a particularly determined, loud-voiced group of politicians in a brightly lit room.

Nobody had predicted that it would happen because of artificial intelligence. It did not arrive with explosions or the screeching of sirens. It arrived in absolute, terrifying silence. It was a creeping

coldness, a sudden dimming of fluorescent office lights, the final *ping* of an email server, and the quiet, collective realization that human hands were no longer required to turn the heavy gears of the world.

And certainly, nobody had predicted that, once millions of jobs had disappeared into the sterile, blue-lit void of server farms, people in Parramatta would survive by catching popcorn falling from helicopters.

But that was precisely the bizarre, fragrant, chaotic situation facing Chunmun Singh, his wife Sumitri, and the eight other desi couples living together in the sprawling, red-brick house at 69 Cowper St, Parramatta, Sydney.

Before the AI Advent, life had been ordinary in the exhausting, sensory-overloaded way that modern life is ordinary. The air smelled of burnt espresso, sharp exhaust fumes from the M4 motorway, and the ozone tang of approaching summer storms. People woke to the jarring, high-pitched shrieks of smartphone alarms. They fought their way onto freezing, violently rocking commuter trains. They sat under the harsh, buzzing white glare of office lights, staring at monitors until their eyes burned and watered. They paid bills, attended mind-numbing meetings where the air felt stale and recycled, complained about managers in hushed whispers by the humming water cooler, argued loudly over the sharp *thwack* of a cricket ball on weekends, made deeply spiced, boiling hot tea, and wondered why everything seemed to cost more every single month.

Chunmun worked as a solution architect at Baba Bank in Redfern. His world was one of glass towers, the sharp clicking of leather shoes on marble floors, and the bitter taste of anxiety. Around him

at Cowper St lived Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal Gupta, Pallavi, Priya Sharma—better known by her booming voice as Ms. Aussie—Priyanka, Khushboo, and Rohini, along with their husbands.

Their home was a loud, vibrant collision of eighteen lives. The mornings were a cacophony of banging pots, the sharp sizzle of mustard seeds in hot oil, the smell of damp towels, and overlapping voices arguing over the single bathroom, all underscored by the rhythmic, mechanical heartbeat of a washing machine that was always, eternally running.

They were busy people with demanding jobs, rigid routines, burning ambitions, and fiercely loud opinions.

Then, artificial intelligence arrived everywhere at once, sweeping across the globe like a silent, invisible frost.

Jobs disappeared overnight. The bustling, noisy departments where they had spent their days vanished into the quiet hum of automated algorithms. Endless, droning meetings were replaced by the millisecond flash of data processing. Customer service became conversational—a perfectly modulated, terrifyingly pleasant synthetic voice echoing from a plastic speaker. Reports, once the product of sweat and bitter coffee, wrote themselves perfectly in the dark. Software, complex and sprawling, began designing its own software, an endless, silent loop of creation.

Companies proudly announced that they had become “AI-first” with glossy, brightly colored presentations, usually moments before hundreds of human employees received a stark, black-and-white termination email and became “former employees.”

Eventually, very few conventional jobs remained. The screeching trains ran empty. The glass towers stood dark and hollow against

the blazing Australian sky. The heavy, rushing noise of the daily grind stopped.

What followed was not quite the violent, fiery end of civilization depicted in movies. It was something far stranger, far quieter, and deeply absurd.

Governments and panicked private organizations improvised emergency food distribution while complex, global supply chains struggled to reboot. The solution was blunt, loud, and bizarrely fragrant. Massive, heavy transport helicopters began flying low over Parramatta Park at exactly noon and again as the sky bruised into evening. The sound was apocalyptic—a deafening, chest-rattling *thwump-thwump-thwump* that shook the dust from the ceiling beams of 69 Cowper St.

They dropped vast, blindingly golden quantities of popcorn for anyone willing to run out into the blistering heat or the cool twilight to catch it.

It was never supposed to be a complete diet. It was simply cheap, shelf-stable emergency food, pumped full of synthetic vitamins. But the sensory impact was overwhelming. The entire suburb of Parramatta began to smell like the lobby of a massive cinema—a thick, cloying, inescapable blanket of artificial butter, sharp salt, burnt sugar, and roasted corn that clung to hair, clothes, and skin.

Nobody had designed a comprehensive survival system for this. Nobody had written a manual explaining how to maintain human dignity while diving into a bush for a handful of caramel-coated carbohydrates. Nobody had created a neatly color-coded spreadsheet explaining what to do when your six-figure salary disappeared, but snacks started aggressively falling out of the sky.

Fortunately, the residents of 69 Cowper St had something far more useful than a manual.

They had one another.

They also had extraordinarily strong opinions. Very, very strong opinions that echoed off the hallway walls from dawn until dusk.

Each person approached the bizarre new world differently. Some tried to organise the chaos with markers and ledgers. Some tried to understand the aerodynamics of falling corn. Some tried to profit by mixing it with fiery red chilies. Some tried to predict the drop times by staring into the blinding sun. Some tried to regulate the use of a single, battered orange bucket. Some tried to celebrate the absurdity with loud music and bright banners.

And at least one person, surrounded by red string and the smell of permanent markers, suspected that the popcorn was part of a massive, shadowy conspiracy.

What followed was a strange, loud, aggressively fragrant experiment in human survival.

With no ordinary economy to rely on, the popcorn became everything. It was food that squeaked against their teeth. It was currency traded for bruised apples and foil packets of tea. It was opportunity, entertainment, and, occasionally, the source of violent domestic conflict that ended in shouting matches and slammed doors.

The people of 69 Cowper St discovered that surviving a bloodless, silent technological apocalypse was considerably more complicated, and significantly more annoying, than surviving a long, droning technological meeting in a freezing boardroom.