

The Old Apartment by Senumika Udandi from Sri Lanka (Age 16)

I used to be the tallest in town. It allowed me to see very far, beyond the bridge and until the ridge of mountains in the distance. Then my neighbour grew taller than me. And the one across the street. Then another one, a few meters off, that one grew the tallest. Perhaps there are taller ones now, it has been so long since I saw more than my neighbours' faces.

I came to be in this world, somewhere around eighty years ago. Mind you, that's a heavy amount of time. And heavier yet are the memories. The latest of the memories is all the little men in bright clothes clattering about with their tools, and the big yellow monster who keeps hitting me with a ball. Oddly enough, inside the monster, sits another little man.

Well, now that I think about it, this little man looks a lot like Mr. Dawson. He lived in the apartment on the far left; the one with red wallpaper. He had his issues; alcoholism, drugs and so on. But he was a nice chap. Always helped the old lady next door with her groceries up the steps. Cried while leaning on my outer wall when he got the unfortunate call that his mother died. Then his lawyer handed the apartment over to his nephew after he died. The nephew never came by.

Then, the yellow one, two floors above. That's where Miss Linda lived with her daughter Stacy. Bright duo, they were. I loved to hear their laughter on 'Movie Fridays', as they called it. The television running off about some princess or the other, while Linda and Stacy made cookie dough and cakes and milkshakes in the kitchen. Then Stacy grew up and got a lot of friends. Linda watched television by herself after that.

Now, the one with brown wallpaper (most of it is gone now) is where Mr. and Mrs. McCartney lived. They were the first people to live here. Lovely elderly couple. He would read the newspaper every morning and narrate some bits and pieces to his wife. Around Christmas, she would knit sweaters and mail them to the grandchildren I've never seen. They spent hours talking by the window, about the weather and the neighbours and their faraway youths. The night she passed, he sat beside her and sang to her.

*'Oh sweet angels,
Please here my whisper,
Tell my darling that,
I'll come soon to her'*

It was the most delightful thing uttered between these walls. Two months later, he passed on the chair by the window. Two men in suits came and packed up all the beautiful photographs and furniture. I only caught the words 'no family, apparently'.

A family of three and a young woman lived in it later. The former put a large closet where Mrs. McCartney had died. The other never even stood by the window.

"How much more do you reckon?"

One of the little men stands beside the yellow monster.

“I’d say one hour, max,” says the little man sitting inside.

The big ball comes at me again. The window is shattered.

Behind that, though, you can see a pink little room. That belonged to the Andersons’ apartment. First it was just the couple. They would laugh deep into the night; he would help her bake the most sweet-smelling pastries and she would help him build two cozy little cots. Then came two babies, together, who wailed into the night. There were family dinners and family quarrels. She stopped baking and he stopped crafting. The twins grew up, though. Such alike. Then they went to a place called ‘university’. A while later, after a lawyer and later a ‘counsellor’ came by few times, she started baking again. And he helped. He then made a rack for all her ingredients. They went away for days sometimes, to somewhere ‘across the sea’. That, I believe, is the first time I saw the thing these little people called ‘hope’.

It was, incidentally, also the name of the young woman who lived in it later. She didn’t have that, though. She would spend days curled up and crying in the bathroom. Sometimes, she threw things at my walls; the objects never hurt me but her pained cries as she threw them did. A person called a ‘therapist’ came by. His words were gentle, and they soothed my mind. But they didn’t hers. One time, she shattered my window and used a shard of glass to cut her arms. I never understood the purpose of it, but she never came by after she was taken to the ‘hospital’. Her sister came and took her things. The rack for ingredients went with her.

Oh now, now, here’s one. The bright orange one. I loved the young man who lived in it; he had the brightest smile on the street. He had all sorts of fabulous garments: fringy trousers and sparkly dresses and shining shoes. His mother came by often, looking anxious and taut, nothing like her son. The father never showed his face. He was apparently angered at his son for ‘coming out’. Out of what? I didn’t know. But he was a jolly young man. Had friends over all the time, all dressed in magnificent attire. They’d party and laugh and drink. Then came a night where he came back, injured and bloodied and crying. Then his place was filled with banners and posters and pamphlets. His group of friends came around often, except for one. I often heard the word ‘equality’ being thrown about. I never saw his father, though.

When he left a couple of years later, an elderly couple moved in and although they took little liking to the ghastly colour of the wallpaper, they didn’t change it. They hung many crosses on the walls and put-up images of a man with long hair with his arms spread wide. She sat in a cozy chair and read the same book everyday and he typed away on a type writer and sometimes they’d slow dance in the middle of the living room, hugging each other tightly and trapped in their own little world.

“Come one man, it’s getting late, hurry up!” another little man yells at the yellow monster.

“Three more swings, that’s all it’ll take,” the little man inside insists.

Another hit from the ball, the funky orange wallpaper crumbles to the ground.

Oh, this reminds me! The man who lived on the ground floor. He was as old as I. It was on a sun-lit afternoon like this that I was first brought to be. There were balloons and ribbons and a small crowd of little people in front of me. One of them cut the ribbon. The others cheered. And so, the man on the ground floor moved in. And lived here until last week. He cleaned me up, redid my paint, unclogged my pipes and fixed my stairs. He wasn't the happiest to live here but I felt a soul-bond with him. A little boy late for school would've fallen down the stairs had he not fixed them even in the dead of night. A man would've refused to buy an apartment had he not fixed a hole in the wall just the evening prior. He was, in many ways, my only family. He took care of me even as his hands grew wrinkled and his hair grew white. His backaches and sore feet didn't stop him from looking after me.

As the big ball smashes an entire section of me, including his set of rooms, I hope that there's someone there to care for him as well, wherever he may be.

It always pains me to not know where the people who left me are. Are they close by? Did they find a better place? Or was it worse? Do they remember the time they laughed at so and so? Do they recall when they said this or that? I remember them all, every single one. Their laughs and conversations and thoughts have been engraved into my bricks that are scattered across the ground.

Oh, hang on now, look. You can see where the Smiths lived. They were a big bunch. The mother, the father, three sons and three daughters. What a happy commotion they were. There were always petty quarrels among the sisters. Pranks and games among the brothers. Tender moments between the parents. But not a second was left silent in that apartment. Then, one son went to the place called 'university'. Another daughter followed. Another son wrote a book and moved out. One daughter married and left. The last son went to do 'charity'. But the last daughter, she stayed.

"You need to live your own life, Nina. Don't worry about us."

"You two are my life."

I always admired the way she grew into a kind woman who stayed at home and brought her mother honeyed bagels and her father his favourite books. She laughed and talked and lived her life with them. A few years later, when the family of eight had become a family of six, she shed the least tears. Instead, she smiled ruefully and kept muttering 'Thank you for everything. I'm glad I repaid you'.

And – oh, no – I was just about to show you where her mother ate the bagels and her father read his books, but the ball just smashed into it. Oh, well, let's see what else is there.

Two apartments left. Now, see, the one with the floral wallpaper had the two sweetest friends: a girl and boy. They were young and boisterous but always all smiles and playfulness. Two months after they moved in, she went beyond their playful jabs and gave him a shy kiss on the

cheek. Three weeks later, he brought her red roses. The following Christmas, the pair went to her mother's house. Come Easter, he gave her a shiny ring in the living room, by the big window that looked out onto the street, the lights low, candles burning, soft music flowing through the air. A few months later, she brought home a big white dress. Two years more, and there was a little baby waddling around with delightful giggles.

Now the spot he gave her the ring on was amongst the rubble and one of the little men in bright colours was pulling it away to another big yellow bucket on wheels. Delusionally, I think that I still feel the tears she shed at the sight of the ring upon the pieces of wood being carried away.

"Yeah, come on man! One more swing!" someone shouts nearby.

"Here we go!" the little man in the yellow monster yells triumphantly.

The big ball is being reeled back and it's about to swing at the last apartment left.

But wait, listen! Listen! This one had a little girl and boy. They played with the big houseplants and their mother stared fondly at them. She often took calls to their father who was somewhere called 'abroad'. She would say that she missed him, and she'd pass the phone to her kids so that they could say the same. Then their father came home, hands overflowing with gifts for the three of them. And then they—