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Loretta Ramkissoon

Which Floor?

No one ever tells you that, however you die in our tower block, you will leave this world upright. It's impossible to fit a stretcher horizontally in the lift. When the paramedics come to transport the body down, they have to take the lift, just like everyone else. They wait at the door and when the lift's trusty ping signals its arrival, the stretcher is carried across. Then they stand in the lift with the dead body. When unlucky enough to not be able to put the lift out of service, you run the risk of the door opening on another floor, the bemused faces of the people on the landing staring until the penny drops and all eyes fall to the floor out of respect and awkwardness. The CCTV¹ captures the entire ritual. There's no dignity in dying in a tower block. My grandfather always tells me that when he dies, he doesn't want to die upright. He wants to be carried out lying down, preferably out of a house. "Always have your own front door," he says.

The two lifts are situated in the middle of the building. They are our root and our core. They bring people down when they die and up when they're born. If the block is the tree, then the flats are the branches. When a diagnosis is made and a funeral booked, we all mourn the tree's loss. When one floor hurts, we all hurt; when one branch falls, we all feel the pain.

Braithwaite Tower began construction in 1965 and was completed in 1967. It mainly consists of concrete, steel, glass and bricks. It has twenty-two floors, twenty of which are habitable. The original lift shafts are still in place, though the lifts themselves have been upgraded once. In the last fifty-one years, the lifts have carried people up and down an estimated 13,292,640 times.

My grandparents were thirty years old when they moved in in April 1967. For the first time in their lives, after ten years of living in one room with two small children, they had their own place to call home. My mum and uncle were ten and nine years old respectively, and for the first time in their lives they had a room each to sleep in. In fact, I still sleep in my mum's old room. It was her childhood bedroom and then it became mine. I wonder if we used to lie in bed at night dreaming of the same things growing up; of best friends and passing exams, travelling far and wide, first loves and finding jobs, home ownership and lasting marriages. [...]

My family has seen many people pass into the afterlife over the years and we have been to countless funerals of people in our block, covering almost every religion, or none at all. We become known by our floor numbers, our personal identification numbers, as if we were all different regiments within the same army. Mrs Poole on our floor, Mrs Miah on the seventh, Mr Girgis on the fourth, Mr Jiménez on the nineteenth, the drugs overdose on the twelfth, the cardiac arrest on the second. We have visited Muslim burial areas; we have eaten hummus and kebabs with the Coptic² Egyptians; we have been to Spanish churches, Filipino masses, Jewish synagogues, Greek Orthodox parishes, Hindu temples, Christian cremations and have attended many wakes in Irish pubs on the way back from Kensal Green³ Cemetery. The cuisines we've sampled have all varied, but there is one constant... Grief brings people together. Whoever we are in Braithwaite Tower, we all take the same vessel to our resting place and we all go to meet our makers when the lift reaches the ground floor.

The lifts themselves are small, silver, mirrorless rectangles, cold and uninviting. In a way they are coffins in themselves and sometimes even they die. There are a few rare occasions where both lifts

¹ surveillance cameras

² Christian

³ *Kensal Green*: an area in central London

break down at the same time. A mass panic ensues. People crawl out of their flats like woodworm; everyone congregates on the landing to discuss how terrible it is. It makes us appreciate the value of the lifts in our lives. Our community comes together when this happens. We meet people en route as they race up and down the twenty flights of stairs. Children are sent out to carry the *Tesco* shopping bags upstairs for the elderly. People stop to catch their breath and are overtaken by others. The groups of youths smoking weed on the stairs have their habits disrupted. (The stairs are usually forbidden territory, only used to do something illegal, or when one doesn't want to encounter anyone. The lifts are too transparent for anything like that.)

Newborns, too, get their first taste of tower life via the lifts. Babies are carried over the communal threshold and welcomed into their new home. For the young, the lift is a fun plaything. It was for me too. A vehicle that generated envy, as few other school friends had to use one to get home. Children grasp no concept of wealth. [...]

When my mum's illness took over, Braithwaite Tower became my permanent home. I slowly went from child to adolescent and my feelings evolved in parallel. I started to hate it. My eyes were opened to a world of wealth as I went from school to university. Houses with gardens worthy of bringing friends over, huge double beds perfect for sleepovers, living rooms capable of hosting movie nights. When I lived at home throughout university, one of only two students with a state education in my entire course, I omitted Braithwaite Tower when talking about my life, and I'm ashamed of that now.

I saw country manors with *Land Rovers* in the drive, horses in stables and riding boots in conservatories. This new world became my focus, and I resented where I was from and what I had to compete against in order to survive in my surroundings. My generation in Braithwaite Tower is almost all still living at home, still in our box rooms, in our single beds at thirty. We age both slowly and rapidly here. Our lives are fragmented, told in brief glimpses up and down in lifts. The encounters here leave no room for hiding. The lift traps you. We meet, we greet, we depart, we repeat. I have seen people grow up through snapshots in the lift. From being a seed in the womb, a bump in the stomach, a baby in a pram, to a schoolchild coming home in their sports kit who now leaves the house every morning in a suit and shirt, ready for office life. Then some disappear... to university, to go abroad, to get married, to have children of their own. But they usually all come back. Some to bring their children to visit grandparents, some when romances abroad end or marriages disintegrate. Sometimes when someone dies upright. They come back for another snippet of their story. Other factors may change: grey tiles on the walls, new carpet in the reception, new stickers on the bin chutes, new placards outside warning people not to feed the pigeons or to play ball games (usually knocked down and replaced after a heavy football match).

On average you will see the same person in the lift twice a year. It's quite possible to only see someone once a year. [...] Ours is a community that builds relationships in a silver vessel, a community that develops attachments when we pile into the lift and ask each other: "Which floor?" [...]

We have a bond in the tower. We know what it's like to be the Rapunzels⁴ and the princes of our own fate. No princes or princesses come to rescue us here; we can only save ourselves. There's nothing in life like having your own front door, my grandfather says. I still have hope that maybe one day I'll have that, but for now I appreciate Braithwaite Tower more than ever. The shame I felt is now pride. [...]

Our winning feature was that we stood above the rest of the world, gazing down at the worker ants, cars stuck in traffic, aeroplanes disappearing into the horizon, umbrellas blossoming in the rain. We used to be one of a kind. We used to watch the world from above. No one wanted to live in such an ugly construction. "Who would want to live in a place like that?" they chanted.

But they don't see the sky ablaze with fireworks on Bonfire Night⁵. They don't see the sunset turn London peachy pink and reveal its kinder, more empathetic side. They don't see the double

⁴ a princess who lives in a tower

⁵ *Bonfire Night*: the fifth of November every year

rainbows that dissolve through the clouds. When people remark at how high up we live – “Sixteenth floor, please” – my grandmother always responds with a smile and says, “Closer to the angels.” Until now... They are even blocking us from getting to them.

90 With every day that passes there are glossy constructions rising above us in droves. A new range of vocabulary: thirty floors, forty floors, sixty floors, luxury apartments, Mannhattans⁶ starting from £750,000, first phase sold out off plan⁷. We watch as the towers no one wanted to live in become the most desirable properties on the market. Yet we remain strong, even though the new towers’ lifts may be classier, their look glossier, mirrors of fame and glory, we know we were the originals. I
95 now stand on my balcony and watch the cranes and skyscrapers scrape past us. We may be neighbours, but their starting prices are four times the worth of ours.

With each year that passes, our views decrease. Now our sunsets are slowly disappearing, our views blocked, but we do have the privilege of looking across into the curtainless, characterless Tupperware boxes that house those who have made it in society. These flats aren’t affordable and they aren’t social. They are investment pieces, bringing alien currencies into our boroughs. These
100 blocks look at mine and say: “No, we don’t really want you here; you don’t really fit in here any more. You’re old-fashioned, out of date. Can’t you see? This is what we look like now, these are the people we house now...”

But in reality they’re no different from us. They still stand upright in their silver coffins. [...]

105 The council spews words ending in -tion: innovation, demolition, regeneration, which can all be translated into G E N T R I F I C A T I O N. But we hold strong; this tree will not fall. My grandparents always tell me: “Have your own front door; there is nothing more valuable than that.” Here we all enter through the same door, we don’t own it. We don’t own the building that holds our homes any more than the birds own the tree they choose to nest on. Only we aren’t as free as those birds. In a
110 land where money talks, we are rendered speechless. But like the others, something will always bring me back to Braithwaite Tower. We were here before these glasshouses that dodge all the stones thrown up at them.

I used to think we died wrong, unnaturally. But now I see that maybe we die stronger. Standing, ready to walk out of this world and into the next on our feet. The same way we walked into
115 Braithwaite Tower when it became our home. I wonder if, when my time comes, I too will stand in the lift as I prepare to meet my maker. We may live tall and straight, we may be elevated and fall, but when the wind blows we don’t sway, because when us tower people die, we rest in peace upright.

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⁶ New York-style apartments

⁷ *sold out off plan*: apartments sold before they are built