



## Balcony Stories

By Charukesi Ramadurai

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A few weeks ago, right in the middle of peak pandemic time, when the entire world seemed to be under lockdown, BBC Travel had carried [this lovely article](#) on the significance of balconies in our cultures – the role it has played through history and what it means in today’s world of being shut inside our own homes.

Of course, it starts with a mention of the Italians singing and cheering from their balconies. And then it says, “Yet, despite balconies’ seemingly newfound cultural importance, these ancient platforms have long been used to captivate, unify and inspire the masses. After all, one of the most famous and romantic scenes in Western literature, from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, is played out on a balcony. It was on a balcony in Cape Town where a newly-freed Nelson Mandela looked out upon the masses and promised a new chapter in South African history. And it is from a balcony in the Vatican where the Pope still blesses millions of believers each Sunday.”

This made me think of how my balcony had served as my only connection to the outside world in the last eight weeks, and maybe even before that. We have been in

lockdown in Kuala Lumpur since mid-March, exactly one month after I moved from my home country India. Fresh off the metaphorical boat, I have used the balcony as a place to glimpse into the neighborhood – an ex-pat bubble, I confess – and the city from the first day.

Initially, I used to see a constant line of cars impatiently waiting at the traffic light around the corner. I would see mothers and nannies rushing their children to school, holding tight as the little ones stopped to fiddle with their shoelaces or strain to run towards a friend coming from the other side. A few walkers, usually with a dog on a leash, the handful of perspiring joggers with their headphones, out to get their daily endorphins to fix before the heat and humidity of the day became unbearable. The “roti man” would come by once in a while, carrying fresh fruit and popcorn packets, fluffy pav, and white bread all wrapped carefully in plastic covers tied to his bicycle. Small groups of Nepalese men, working as security guards in the towering condominiums of the ’hood would zip by on bikes, to and from their duty of screening visitors to these ivory towers.

During the long days of the lockdown, all I could see from the balcony of my 18th-floor apartment was an empty road down below. An occasional car would drive past, perhaps on its way to a supermarket or an unmissable medical appointment. The silence would be punctuated only by the alarm bell of an ambulance on its way to pick up a new patient or a police car on routine patrol.

But in the midst of this deafening quiet, I learned to delight in the new sounds I heard: the chirp-chirp of starlings and sparrows, the mournful yet melodious drawl of the common koel; the gleeful screams of kids in the condo, playing the endless games of childhood (that rarely make sense to an adult watching from the outside) in their own balconies; the rumble of thunder in the distance and the fierce pitter-patter of evening rains that lash Kuala Lumpur through the year.

For me, growing up in a two stories house in a sleepy neighborhood in Chennai (then Madras), the balcony was a place to escape to in the evenings, especially when friends came over and we had important secrets to discuss. We had a jasmine creeper trailing over the balcony rails, filling the air with sudden bursts of heady *jaadi malli* fragrance. Even then, it was a place from where I could people-watch on the familiar road below, without being watched in turn.

In the last few years, the balcony was where I learned to slowly, painfully, trust my green thumb, and create a small garden with succulents and flowering plants. And in the past couple of months, it has been not just my window to the world, but also my morning coffee lounge with my husband, and my evening escape from the four walls of the house, or any time I just need some open space. Most importantly, it has also been my refuge from the everyday anxieties of these strange times, this small green garden

that I created, where the bougainvillea blooms and the philodendron moves its head in the rhythm of the evening breeze.

