

## **Our Neighbours**

By Neluka Silva (Sri Lanka)

They had never been good neighbours so my parents said to me. I remember how it had all started over the cricket ball a few years ago. Everytime our cricket ball went into their garden the old man came out and shouted at us for disturbing him. We tried to ask him for the ball nicely but he still shouted. My mother said she was fed up of these rows so one day she decided to get the ball herself.

She tried to explain that we didn't deliberately throw the ball over his wall and, anyway, it only happened once every couple of months, and it wasn't a huge effort to give it back. He wasn't satisfied. He gritted his teeth and called us a "nuisance".

It was one when one of their friends had parked his car outside our gate that I saw my mother's vengeful side.

"Damn good, I've been waiting for a chance to give those Tamils a good blasting," She said as she strode across and banged on their gate.

"Yes, Mrs. Seneviratne?" he asked.

"Please ask your friends not to park in front of my gate, it's against the law and the next time I will report you to the police." She looked smug. He stared back. Both of them stood glowering at each other.

Within a couple of years it had turned into a full scale war between us. Cricket balls, parking cars, accusing each other of dumping garbage in front of each other's gate, and so it went on.

I didn't understand the conversations about "those Tamils" that my parents had in relation to our neighbours until much later.

It had started off as another Saturday afternoon's cricket when my father called us all inside. "Better not play on the road today, putha. There is some trouble in some parts of Colombo." he said.

"What kind of trouble, thaththa?" We asked him curiously.

"Racial riots. Some Sinhalese mobs are attacking the Tamils."

We didn't get many answers to our questions but there were many telephone calls between my parents and their friends. The phone rang non-stop. That night there were whispered conversations between my parents.

"You better go and find out how they are, Upali." I heard my mother tell my father.

"But they'll throw me out, men."

"What to do? At least we've tried, that's all we can do."

Early the next morning, my mother told us to tidy up our rooms. We were still in our pyjamas. As I grumbled and made my way to the bathroom, I heard the back door open. My father was there with the couple from next door. They had a small bag with them. I stared at my father, he nodded and took them to my room. I had to share with my sister. They stayed in my room for nine days during the July riots. We listened to the news and played cricket during the curfew while parts of the city was burnt down and people went to refugee camps. There was no school for about three weeks. They never came out of my room. No one knew that there were there. We didn't tell anyone. The mobs didn't come down our road but they never went back to their house. It was empty for a long time. They kept in touch with my parents for a while after they went to live with their son in Canada. I used to go to get the ball and look at the desolate house and think about our neighbours.