

A Peculiar Neighbourhood

The fame of the neighbourhood echoed across the mountains and travelled along the whirling sea. Every now and then, this curious town and its awkward encounters would make the headlines of the national news. Quite a few scientists came over, aiming to comprehend the events that occurred here, whose reasoning could be acknowledged in neither a rational manner nor in a mystical way. Even the shamans and the witches would shrug and move on after visiting the neighbourhood. It was beyond their comprehension. There were fifty people living in the neighbourhood, and about one thousand people all together in the town of Sisyphus. The town was lying in an old Russian valley, the famous valley where wizards from all over the world settled two hundred years ago, and it was surrounded by majestic mountains and rivers, opulent forests and turquoise lakes. About one hundred years ago, the town's population has been decimated by cougars, but fortunately it has been steadily coming back ever since. Since then, the mountain lions have still remained the main threat of the town's very existence.

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Mill Street

Probably the most curious street in the whole neighbourhood was Mill street, the street I grew up and lived half of my life. I sailed many oceans and seas, wandered five continents and eighty seven countries, but I always came back to the neighbourhood - which inspired me like no other place in the world. It is because of its particular, peculiar people and their extraordinary gifts that I grew to become a writer. Without living among these fantastic people and wanting to tell their

stories to the generations to come, I wouldn't have discovered the magic of the written word. But let me tell you about those fascinating beings who lived on Mill Street and about their curious pursuits.

There was Hannah and Ruth - the famous Siamese sisters, Leopold and Lynn - the inbred siblings, the Brooms - with their versatile Sophia. Then Mr. Feuerstein - that wicked odd man, who fired daily the kids' imagination and Toto's shakiness. Finally, next door to Mr. Feuerstein lived a peculiar family, too peculiar to be described: There were plenty of them, by the time you added all the kids & pets: The ground floor was occupied by a very old white-haired lady, tall as a giraffe and slender as a willow. At the main floor lived her dwarf son with his dwarfish family. The old lady wore a purple fur coat every day of the year and always held onto a sparkly walking stick. She had seven cats, cats she would take for evening strolls in her own handmade feline-carriage.

The Baker Cats

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There was Mia, the Persian phlegmatic cat, never bothered by anything or anybody, Suny, the yellow naughty tomcat, Suria the stray lady, Oscar the Norwegian, Olga the Russian misanthrope lady cat, and finally, Tumbi and Hun, the twin Siamese tomcats. The cats were schooled at the Moscow Cat Theatre as the Old lady was originally from Russia. Her cats learned and performed in the Moscow Cat Theatre for five years, where they had big success. However, after the theatre caught fire in the summer of 1979, and over fifty cats died, the Lady decided they would quit the theatre and start their own journey. For a few years, they travelled the world and put on their shows on random street corners. They kept travelling like gypsies for a while, moving their tent from one town to another, until their nomadic journey brought them to the old Russian valley. They settled in here, in Sisyphus, and never left.

On Thursdays, the Old Lady and her feisty tigers would head off to Baker Street, where they'd put on their famous show. They were the "Baker Cats", a very popular gang in town, which enchanted weekly the citizens' thirsty spirits.

People would come from wide and far to our little curious mountain town, to meet these peculiar beings, watch their bizarre show and join the community meditation. Right there, on Baker Street, in front of Wait's, big crowds of people would gather and the Bakers Cats' ceremony would start unfolding at 8 pm. It was usually run by Olga, the Russian, who was contagiously defusing her Slavic spirit among the citizens of Sisyphus. The ceremony would usually begin with a collective meowing meditation, meant to quiet and calm the minds of people of Sisyphus. What a beautiful, powerful meditation! People of Sisyphus would form a vast circle and start chanting the Meow mantra for the first ten minutes. It was quite a memorable scene to see a wide circle of five hundred people sitting cross-legged on Baker Street and meowing from the top of their lungs. Hypnotic. Traffic had to be closed at that time as silence had to be respected by any means. The entire town would become quiet for the next fifteen minutes. One couldn't even hear the tic-tac of a clock or the cries of a baby. And that was the way it should have been. These people of Sisyphus and their cohabitant beings gained the wisdom and the magic of stopping time. And what a precious gift that was! Meanwhile, the cougars would rush to the top on the mountain, curl up on Pulpit Rock and watch greedily over their unattainable prey. For as long as people of Sisyphus kept doing the right things, the voracious predators couldn't get to them or to their little felines.

Once the meditation was over, the show followed its regular routine: the gimmicky, circus tricks and plays that lifted the spirits of the valley. Our fluffy artists would ride one-wheeled bikes, roll barrels, walk tightropes, climb poles, hula hooping, and of course do their famous white magic. Some citizens swore they saw the lady's cats dancing and flying in the air, with their furry wings

wide open. At the end of the evening, they would even offer their therapeutic services to the people of Sisyphus. But that was more of a private affair, and it had to be done in the cat clinics set up in the teepees at the end of Baker Street. Nobody really knew what was happening inside those tents, unless they required their services. But the rumours in the valley confirmed everybody's consensual intuition: those cats had indeed an incredible cathartic power.

The Dwarfs

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The Old Lady's son, Shalimar, was a strange dwarf and one of the most talented clowns in the whole valley. Sophia's dad had discovered his talent while he was still a teenager and used to join his mom's shows on Baker street. Since then, Shalimar has been travelling with the circus all over the world. To some, his endless and powerful expressions were overwhelming. There were still plenty of kids in the neighbourhood who were afraid of Shalimar the Clown. Perhaps his extreme emotional plasticity was too much to handle, especially for the impressionable little kids, whose very own emotions were running high. A curious thing, nobody has ever seen Shalimar the clown without makeup as he always wears black eyeliner under his eyes, red lipstick and bright blush on his cheeks. Also, in spite of his strong and lively demeanour, nobody in the neighbourhood has ever seen him smiling. Was he sad? Or just perpetuating a popular clown tradition or image? Nobody knew... When Shalimar was strolling the neighbourhood, most kids would simply run away. They wouldn't admit that they were scared of a clown, but yet, every time Shalimar would pass by, kids would run and hide. It was quite unfortunate watching those kids running away from a melancholic clown who was at least supposed to squeeze an innocent smile on their faces.

The dwarf's wife, Carmina, a dwarf as well, was the one ringing the church bells every Sunday. Carmina was a churchgoer and a devoted disciple of Jesus. Three days of the week she would be taking their three little dwarfies into the woods to pick up mushrooms and other healing plants, and the other three days she'd take them singing in the church choir. Their voices sounded as soft as thunder, but their love for singing was incommensurable. More than once the choir leader had to stop the entire choir from singing in order to temper the dwarf's enthusiasm.

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Leopold & Lynn

Leopold and Lynn, brother and sister: their parents, first cousins, had been married off by their families as teenagers. As a consequence of defying the basic laws of nature, the two siblings were born with lots of medical curiosities. Lynn had six fingers at each hand, and she was the fastest typewriter in the valley. Her typing services were required by all offices in town. Leopold was born with two extra chromosomes, which gave him a microcephalic head and a generous personality. Everybody loved him: his generosity and sensitivity were enormous. His kind and altruistic nature were entirely making up for the extra two chromosomes. He expressed his immense sensitivity through his unique and insightful portraits. He wasn't a particularly talented painter, but he had a unique gift for portraits - a gift that probably came from his genuine love for people. And that's what made his portraits stand out: On the canvas, he could bring out the deepest emotions of his model. If there was a hidden sorrow, an unconscious fear, or any other deep or buried emotion in somebody, Leo was the one who could bring that out and paint it on the canvas, waiting to be named and tamed. It was quite a challenge for some people to have their portrait done by Leo, as obviously not everybody was ready to face their deepest emotions

and fears. The least bold citizens weren't keen on it and refused having their portrait done. Of course, it was a personal choice, but on the other hand, in Sisyphus, there was an unspoken rule that all its citizens had their portraits done. This was just a way of making sure that the legacy of this unique town would survive over the ages.

It was indeed hard not to love Leo, for he contained the entire beauty of humanity. There was so much tenderness in their family, that one might ask themselves what brought and kept alive this beautiful feeling in their family bosom more so than in others? Could Leo be the answer? Do we need genetic accidents to be able to preserve and enhance such beautiful human features? Isn't it cynical that most normal kids would eventually lose their generosity, authenticity and selflessness once they grow up?

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The Siamese Sisters

Hannah and Ruth, the two Siamese sisters, shared the same pair of legs, two hearts, four arms and two brains. Hannah was becoming a pianist, Ruth a tailor. For four hours a day Hannah would practice piano, with Ruth getting dragged alongside, and in the next four hours, they would be in their mom's atelier, making doll clothes. The sisters cared for each other, but they'd also frequently lose their tempers and get pretty troubled. Every now and then, one could hear the famous Siamese curses and swearing echoing throughout the neighbourhood. Then their mother would come home, and things would mellow down. And if their Mother wasn't around, Sophia would step in and bring the usual closure to their fight.

There were little things that set them off, such as deciding on how the breakfast eggs should be cooked, or in which bed they will sleep that night. Ruth's doll clothes were famous not only in the

valley but all over the world. Puppet theatres from Europe and the Americas were her regular clients, and it was Sophia's dad who made that possible, thanks to his travelling circus. He set up a booth with Ruth's doll clothes and brought it along in every place the circus travelled. It didn't take long for the girls' clothes to become famous. People were intrigued by their eccentricity and peculiarity. They were finely and meticulously crafted, with middle eastern accents and patterns, in bright colours and bold curves & cuts.

Obviously, Ruth's success was another strong reason for the girls' quarrels. On the other hand, Hannah was hard-working and possessed immense grit, and she did a great job in handling her emotions on regular basis. Until one day, out of the blue, Hannah spirit would just catch on fire...

And then came the curses, and the swearing: so dark, gloomy and frightening, that the whole neighbourhood would freeze for a moment. Her unleashed anger was reaching the sky. Eventually, things would settle down with some external intervention, and they'd become again the loving Siamese sisters.

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Mr. Feuerstein

On the way back from Baker Street, the old Lady & her felines would always run into Mr. Feuerstein, who was completing his seven rounds of the neighbourhood. It usually took him about three hours, but he couldn't miss it once as he strongly believed that the entire town's well-being and righteousness would be thrown out of whack if he stopped doing "his blessing rounds". Mr. Feuerstein used to be a respected member of the community, a former chemistry teacher, who, after having experienced his first unfortunate Tourette episode at school, had been let go.

Mr. Feuerstein once had a beautiful family: a wife, a daughter and a son. One day, when he came

back from work, he found his house empty, his entire family vanished away. Since then, he hasn't heard anything about any of them. He was also hoping that Alchemy would bring him closer to an answer, have they been kidnapped and murdered, or have they just decided to start a new life??...those were the questions he was hoping to get some insights and answers to, though meanwhile he was diligently immersing himself in his daily routine. During his blessing rounds, he would often stop and say "Hi" to his close neighbours and check in with them: He'd have a brief chat with the old lady who'd update him about the weekly Baker Show, then he'd stop and check on Leopold and see his latest portraits. Leo always made his day with his kind smile and genuine words. Afterwards, he'd stop by the Siamese sisters and have a mint lemonade with them. Ruth would show him her last collection of clothes while Hannah would start playing piano the moment she'd spot his silhouette through the glass door. As these girls had never met their dad, they craved and fought for Mr. Feuerstein's fatherly affections ever since they were toddling around the neighbourhood. He would never complete his rounds without seeing Sophia. She was like a daughter to him, and her cheeky character made his life bearable after his family vanished away, and eventually helped him fall in love with life again. It was one of those rare transformative relationships that can save one's life; that kind of affair which, in spite of its lack of certain negotiation, can suddenly make you feel at home in life, and make you see happiness around.

However, Mr. Feuerstein had been growing anxious lately, as the neighbourhoods' yearly meet up was soon to come, and important decisions had to be made. They would gather again in the old grey building right after the sunset, and decide the town's new protector. It was a big decision as everyone knew that, given the wrong protector, this unique and gifted town could lose its magic, and, in worst case scenario, it could disappear from the face of the earth. But Mr. Feuerstein trusted that under Sophia's protection, the town of Sisyphus will survive and bloom even further.

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Sophia

All of those curious people had one thing in common: they all loved their little high spirited neighbour, Sophia, with her curly red hair, one blue and one brown eye. Not only her eyes were a mystery, but also her mind. This little red headed young lady had the versatility of a monkey, the magic of a wizard and the heart of a dolphin. Sophia's dad was seldom at home as he was away nine months of the year with his travelling circus. The girl was born and raised in the Circus, surrounded by love and affection from all those wonderful creatures that lived under the Cupola. While she was being raised and nurtured by all these affectionate animals, her Mother was travelling in Africa, teaching kids how to write and read. Eventually, her Mother came back and settled in with Sophia and her dad in the neighbourhood.

However, it was her particular upbringing that endowed her with all the wonderful gifts: She was the only one who could bring comfort to her Siamese neighbours when they were in pain, the only one allowed to join Mr. Feuerstein in his neighbourhood's blessing tours, the only one able to stop the old ladies cats' midnight frenetic meowing and Leo's crying spells. And she was the dwarf's family best friend, and perhaps the only one who might have seen or made Shalimar smile.

This young spirited lady, in spite of her tender age, possessed so much power and influence over her peers. And when those powers were being used wisely, she could nurture the most wounded creature on the planet and make them thrive. Her healing gift was immense, and there were rumours that one day she could heal the entire humanity if she was willing to do so.

And above all, she was the only one who could protect the town of Sisyphus from the mountain lions, those insatiable creatures who were waiting patiently for the right moment to take over the

town again. For her knowledge gained in the circus as well as her inner magic forces somehow allowed her to keep the cougars away.

Sophia was the one who, through her unseen mystery and magic, would keep this curious neighbourhood together and its rhythm alive. She was the new catalyst, the soul and the motion of this peculiar neighbourhood.

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The Return

It was midnight, the big night when citizens of Sisyphus were going to vote for their new protector.

A big golden moon was hanging heavily in the gloomy sky of Sisyphus.

At 12.00 o'clock, the first neighbours stepped outside their houses to head off to the grey building: First citizens to be seen were Hannah and Ruth, the Siamese sisters, dragging each other along. Their spirits were high and seemed discordant, as they must have been just debating over one of their favourite quirky topics. Their Mom was walking next to them, trying to talk them out of their argument. Not far behind were hopping joyfully Leo & Lynn, accompanied by their loving parents. Behind them, Shalimar the clown, wife Carmina and their three sons were walking in a brave silence. Sophia and Mr. Feuerstein were marching through the street, seeming to be counting their steps. On the opposite side-walk, quite far behind their neighbours, the Old lady was diligently steering her feline stroller, while her seven tigers were meowing hysterically. The distance didn't seem to help. Her feisty tigers kept on yowling and wailing. There was a certain apocalyptic resonance to their howling. The cats were getting more troubled by the minute. In vain the Old Lady and her son, Shalimar, tried to calm those unsettled souls, for the cats' yowling might have already woken up the Gods. And it was for a good reason they tried to quiet the cats:

Probably not more than twenty meters away, some vague silhouettes seem to be quietly following their footsteps. There were plenty of them, and they were coming in big groups: The greedy cougars, those insatiable and envious beasts, hungry for power, hoping and waiting for revenge. They've been waiting patiently for more than one hundred years to take back the neighbourhood. Nobody noticed them besides the old lady's cats, whose anxiety reached new debilitating heights. With their wide dilated pupils and raised hackles, the lady's cats were wailing from the top of their lungs. They were mourning as if apocalypse was there.

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It didn't take long. Those quiet big, sly cats waited until everybody got in the building and swiftly grasped the felines' carriage. By the time the Old Lady acknowledged the disappearance of her cats, the mountain lions and their prey were long gone.

One can not imagine the panic that took hold of the citizens of Sisyphus when they discovered that the cats have been kidnapped, and realized that the town might be under siege by cougars.

The Old Lady was running chaotically on the streets, shouting and calling each and one of her precious tigers. Wearing her purple fur, hopping on that sparkly walking stick as if she was riding a broom, with her big bulging eyes, her wrinkly horrified white face, and howling like a cat in heat, the old lady looked nothing less than a escaped lunatic. The neighbours were fearing that her unleashed madness will force them to lock her up. Carmina had to rush home and bring some herbs to cool down the Old Lady's nerves.

Hannah and Ruth were also having a tough time, with Hannah curling, slapping and cursing her sister, blaming her for bringing the cougars over thanks to her big dirty mouth.

The general panic triggered in Leo an unstoppable crying spell as his sensitive nature would

quickly sponge up any emotion floating in the environment. He was shaking from head to toe, and kept muttering some incomprehensible words.

First things first, it was a imperative that all of them found a way to calm down and balance their minds. What happened was unfortunate indeed, but without a clear mind, there was no way for them to prevail. Eventually, they gathered in the attic of the grey building and started brainstorming. First, they all agreed that the cats' kidnapping was just a statement, a public threat, and not a supper. Most likely, the cats were still alive, and the cougars were trying to negotiate their power in the old valley. As for the past hundred years, they might have felt defeated, dismissed and powerless. "Where could have they taken them? What do they want instead?", those were the questions the citizens of Sisyphus sought to answer.

"They might have taken them to the rail trail," said Carmina. "We sometimes see them around that old abandoned car", she added.

"But they need a place to lock them, it should be a confined space", added Shalimar. "We need to think of an old abandoned building or something. How about the old prison?", he added with sudden enlightenment.

The citizens of Sisyphus debated and brainstormed till dawn, carefully planning each step of their rescuing itinerary. In spite of their kind nature, they decided they might have no choice but to poison the cougars in order to save the cats. Carmina worked all night to come out with the right poisonous potion and they also gathered the necessary artillery they needed in case of a cougar attack. By dawn, everything was meticulously prepared for the big confrontation. Everything except one peculiar thing: the last night's events took a big toll on our citizens spirits, and when they finally put their heads down, they all fell into a long, heavy sleep. They might have slept for two days. Sure thing, Carmina's rescue tea they all had might have had something to do with that. And, as one peculiarity usually never comes alone, by the time they woke up, the Old lady's

feisty tigers were curling up on their chests, rubbing their heads against them, and purring happily.

How the cats made their way back, nobody knows, and it's still a mystery for everybody to this day. They showed up as if nothing happened, with their beauty and dignity unaltered. What have they gone through in order to escape, what negotiation they might have carried with those bigger cats, nobody knows... And if Sophia had something to do with that, we don't know that either.

But what we all know, is that from that day on, the cougars have never been seen in our town again. A week later, the Old Lady's cats were made honorary citizens of Sisyphus by the town's people, and they have proudly carried their title ever since.

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As for myself, the one telling you all about these curious encounters, you'll probably never see me around. Though I was the one who founded the town of Sisyphus and the neighbourhood, and I've been it's quiet voice throughout the years, I haven't seen the daylight in 25 years. I have been suffering from a fatal condition which doesn't allow me to be exposed to daylight. But I don't need to: I had my dear disciple, Mr. Feuerstein and Sophia, whose similar sensitivity and comprehension delivered me the right experience I needed to keep the neighbourhood together. And they did a wonderful job.

That was our Neighbourhood, and all those stories you might have heard or will hear about its curious people and beings, they happened indeed. And to this day, most of those people are still my dearest neighbours.

The End