

Peter Svetina
My Neighbour Up There

The narrowest street

It wasn't the smallest street. Nor was it the shortest street. It was the narrowest street. Certainly the narrowest street in the world.

It ran between two three-storey houses in the centre of town. When you looked up, you could see between the roofs a sliver of sky through which a letter could fall if a post plane got lost. Of course, only the thinnest people could walk down this street. Those with thin legs, thin arms, thin bottoms, thin heads and thin hats.

Also the houses on either side of the street must be occupied only by thin people. If someone ate too much they had to exit through the window onto the main street. Such an event attracted a lot of tourists.

In the narrowest street, in the house on the left, lived Mr Reed. He was so thin you could see how a mouthful of tea travelled down his throat to his stomach.

One day Mr Reed was returning home from the market. He had bought some plums to make a plum cake. He had one plum that he wanted to eat in his hand. But in the middle of the street he met a beautiful thin lady.

Everything would have been alright if they had merely greeted each other: Good day! Good day! And so on. But Mr Reed had a hat on. And if you have a hat on, you have to doff it if you meet someone. And Mr Reed took his hat off. What bad luck. With the hat on one side and his elbow on the other he got stuck between the walls of the narrowest street and could no longer move.

“Whoops!” he said. “Whoops!”

“You seem to be stuck,” said the lady.

And Mr Reed gulped in agreement. You could see very nicely, very nicely indeed how his saliva travelled down his throat to his stomach.

“What can I say,” he said, “I really am stuck.”

The lady tried to free his arm.

“It won't go,” she said.

And Mr Reed gulped again.

“It won't go,” he agreed.

“What shall we do?” asked the lady.

One word led to another. Where do you live? Here? Me, too. I'm on that side. And you're on that one? Funny. And we've never met. My name is Rodney Reed. Francesca

Pokerthin. Fancy, living so close together and not knowing each other. Ah, ah. Sorry, I can only offer you my left hand. Never mind, never mind, it's nearer the heart. Ha ha. But it would be good to free my hand. Yes, yes, of course. What do you have in mind? Well, if we're almost neighbours... just a moment...

And Miss Pokerthin went into her apartment and from her kitchen, which was next to the narrowest street, she began to drill a hole. Plop! The hat began to poke into the kitchen.

"I can already see the hat!" she shouted.

And Mr Reed was able to put his hand into the kitchen and move it around. Miss Pokerthin put a glass of water in his hand.

"If you're thirsty," she said.

"Thank you," was heard from the street, "but I can't bring the glass to my mouth."

"Some other time, then!" replied Miss Pokerthin.

Mr Reed removed his hand from the hole, but when he tried to scratch his nose he got stuck between the walls again.

"You see," he said, when Miss Pokerthin came to assess the new situation.

"I see," she said.

Mr Reed was well and truly stuck. And it occurred to Miss Pokerthin that she should go and try from the other side.

She went into Mr Reed's apartment and began to drill a hole in his kitchen wall.

"Aha! Aha!" she cried in delight when his elbow appeared in the kitchen.

"Saved!" came Mr Reed's triumphant voice from the street, when he was finally able to free his arm.

And that was how the rescue of Mr Reed's arm ended on that day. And that was how Mr Reed and Miss Pokerthin met.

What happened then, I don't know exactly. What I do know is that the plum Mr Reed was holding in his hand to eat on the way fell on the ground. After some time a small tree began to grow from the sand. A tiny plum tree, which slowly grew into the narrowest plum tree in the world. It grew up between the gutters and its crown flourished above the roofs of the two houses.

At the end of summer Miss Pokerthin and Mr Reed pick plums and make plum cake. That has also become famous. They serve it to the many tourists who watch with curiosity as one of the residents lowers himself or herself to the city pavement.

The roly poly bakeress and the painter who wanted to paint the whole world

The roly poly bakeress worked in the bakery at the main railway station. Her job was to put doughnuts in hot oil and take them out again. With a large pipe she squirted apricot jam into the doughnuts. Then she took a small sieve and shook icing sugar over them, like snow. People came to the window and bought them, fresh and delicious. When there were no customers, the bakeress liked to climb into the doughnut and lick the jam. Then she climbed out and when anyone bought a doughnut without jam, they would exclaim “Shocking!” At that moment the bakeress would make herself busy rattling empty trays. The bakeress’s name was Margot.

Once a painter arrived by train. His name was Frederick. Frederick Breadbun, well-known painter, it said on his business card. He had no address since he moved from place to place, from hotel to hotel. His greatest wish was to paint the whole world. And so he carried with him a gigantic paper lantern that he hung from the ceiling of his hotel rooms. Every morning and every afternoon he stood at the railway station, asking people where they had come from and where they were going. He wrote this down in a notebook and in the evenings, he drew the places on the large lantern in the hotel room.

It so happened that the painter got hungry. All morning he had been walking around the platforms and writing down places in his notebook. That kind of thing is hungry work. He went to the bakery to buy a doughnut. Damn! He couldn’t buy one, because the bakeress, Miss Margot, had just climbed into a doughnut and was licking the jam. He waited and waited, but no one appeared. So he took a coin from his pocket, put it on the counter and helped himself to the nearest doughnut.

Humph! It was heavy!

'That'll be the jam!' he thought. And he took it to his hotel room.

Of course, we already know: he had taken the very doughnut that the roly poly bakeress had climbed into.

He took it to his room. First he circumvented the paper lantern hanging from the ceiling. He put the doughnut on a little plate. He sat down, crossed his legs, picked up the doughnut and took a big bite.

“Owww!” howled the bakeress from inside the doughnut. “Someone bit me!”

The painter let go of the doughnut in surprise and it fell into his lap.

The bakeress climbed out of the doughnut. Into the painter’s lap.

“What manners! Damn it!” complained the bakeress. “No one’s ever bitten me before.”

“Terribly sorry!” replied the painter, “I didn’t know you were jam.”

“You’re mistaken, sir” said the bakeress, “there’s no jam left.”

And it was true: the doughnut was empty. There was jam only on the bakeress’s white apron and on her index finger, which she hadn’t finished licking.

The bakeress got to her feet and stumbled around the room. But she was so plump that she accidentally knocked the lantern out of the window. For a moment it floated above the platform and then the wind carried it into the air.

“My lantern!” yelled the painter, rushing to the window. “It’s taken the world away!”

“Don’t be ridiculous” said the bakeress, “the world is still right here.”

“It isn’t” cried the painter, holding his head, “I painted the whole world on that lantern!”

“Don’t be silly!” said the bakeress again. “The whole world is apricot jam!”

The painter looked at her in surprise. She was so round standing in the middle of the hotel room, so covered with apricot jam. And Frederick the painter suddenly realised that the bakeress was right: the whole world was apricot jam. Look at the bakeress, as round as the world.

We don’t know what else the painter and the bakeress said to each other in the hotel room. A train went past and we couldn’t hear.

All we know is that there is less and less apricot jam in the fat bakeress’s doughnuts and that Frederick Breadbun’s paintings have become the sweetest paintings in the world.

Grandad, granny and the mixer

Once there was a grandad called Jan, who collected handles and fasteners and such things. The front door had a big handle. Granny's headscarf didn't need tying because it fastened with a clip. Grandad's trousers didn't have buttons but hooks.

And so on, without counting them all.

Grandad Jan lived in peace with his collection and with grandma. Grandma Marinka.

Grandma Marinka said to him one morning: "Grandad, your coffee's on the table, it's getting cold."

Grandad replied: "Just a minute." And he carried on cleaning the old brass handle he had bought at the flea market.

At midday, grandma said: "Grandad, come for lunch, the soup will get cold."

Grandad replied: "Just a minute." And he carried on putting the handle he had cleaned in the morning on the door of the henhouse.

In the afternoon, grandma said: "Grandad, can you mix some dough for me?"

Grandad replied: "Just a minute." And he carried on oiling the handle he had put on the door of the henhouse.

And then he was tired out. "Uf," he said "I've done a lot today." And he dozed off on the couch.

Meanwhile, grandma was using a mixer to make some dough for a walnut loaf.

And then grandad began to snore. Grandma, with the bowl of dough in one hand and the mixer in the other, went over to the couch to try and turn him onto his side.

But she couldn't.

And by accident she pressed on the fastener that grandad had on his shirt pocket instead of a button. The pocket came open and grandma fell into grandad's heart.

When grandad woke up there was no sign of grandma. Where was she, he wondered.

"I'll warm up the soup."

But when he had eaten it there was still no sign of grandma.

"Hm, I'll make some coffee." It smelled wonderful. Grandad sat at the table. He pressed the button on the coffee pot and poured grandma some coffee. Then he pressed the button again and poured himself some coffee.

Then the flap on grandad's shirt pocket lifted and grandma peeped out.

"Oh there you are," said grandad.

“Here I am,” said grandma. She climbed out and sweetened her coffee.

“Where’s the dough for the walnut loaf?”

“Oh yes,” said grandma and she climbed back in his pocket for the bowl with the dough.

But she forgot the mixer.

And from that time onwards, a mixer has been going inside grandad, brrr, brrrr. Grandad says: “How my heart beats so happily ever since grandma climbed out of it!”