

Neighbors by Danni Eden

The cup of tea in my hands has gone cold now. I've squeezed myself into the small corner of our breakfast nook, my feet nestled underneath me. My father's sweatshirt covers me like a blanket, being three sizes too big, but I don't mind. Winter mornings tend to make me miss those who are gone a bit more than when the sun is shining. The snow covers the ground in a cold blanket. Strange how something so cold and deadly can look so inviting. The neighbor kids are sledding across the street while their dog runs down the hill after them.

I get up, reluctant to start my day. My foot is asleep after sitting for merely an hour. I head to my small kitchen to start on the soup. My wooden floors creak with each step as my wool socks try to keep my feet warm. I grab the wooden cutting board from the cupboard and place it on my counter with a sign. The silent sound of chopping fills the room. I remember my mother's words growing up, "nothing better than a cup of soup on a cold winter's day." A smile curls on my lips.

My phone buzzes on the counter. Work. Just another reminder of my busy week ahead. I ignore it. I continue chopping. My sweatpants bunch up on my ankles as my cat rubs against my leg. I lean down, giving her a soft pet before grabbing the large pot under the counter. I fill the pot with chicken stock, placing it on the hot stove to begin boiling. My phone buzzes again. Work. Again. I ignore it. Placing my vegetables in the pot, placing the lid and allowing it to sit for a few hours.

I reheat my tea and walk to the office, passing family pictures on the wall as I walk. While allowing the mug to warm my hands, I have a seat at my desk. I'm quickly reminded of the multiple emails I have yet to answer and all the sticky notes scattered around, making sure I never forget. I lean back with a loud sigh.

Outside my large window sits a small bird. Its blue feathers sparkle against the white world that surrounds it. It flies off and lands on my neighbor's porch, landing directly next to Miss Linda. A sweet old woman who lives alone in the biggest house on the block. There she sits in a wooden rocking chair. An empty chair sits beside her. Her long gray hair rests on her shoulders as she holds a small piece of bread out to the small bird. It's hesitant but slowly grabs the bread and flies off. She smiles. I can see her breath in the air. She realizes this too and, with a shiver, gets up and heads inside.

Miss Linda is one of my oldest neighbors. She's not someone I talk to often; I tend to keep to myself. Work tends to consume my life these days. Though she seems sad. My little brother used to be friends with one of her boys. Life's funny in that way. You can live across the street from someone and know someone who knows them, but live your entire life never

knowing each other's story. Royal, my cat, hops on my lap, curling up in a ball to take a nap. I join her, falling asleep next to the quiet sound of snow falling and soup boiling in the distance.

A shiver wakes me. Slowly opening my eyes, my breath becomes fog as I breathe out. The fire must have gone out because it's about as cold as outside. Royal is still asleep on my lap. I quickly walk to the fireplace, building up a small pile and starting a small fire. While that grows a bit, I check on my soup, warming my hands by the burner. The smell of spices and vegetables fills the small home. My body tenses up as goosebumps cover my skin. The clock on the oven reads "4:45." The soup's been on for a few hours now. I grab a small bowl and pour some for myself and walk toward the couch. The hot soup warms me from the inside as the fire warms me from the outside.

I glimpse out my window and see Miss Linda through her dining room window, sitting alone. I look down at my soup. I sigh. I walk back to the kitchen and pour a second bowl. Placing both bowls down on the counter, I grab my snow boots, then pick the bowls back up. The bowls have handles, making holding them much easier. I head out my back door and start to walk to Miss Linda's front door.

Knock knock Miss Linda opens the door. "Hi..." I'm nervous. "I made soup. It... it's my mother's recipe. Anyway, I was just wondering if you wanted some?" She doesn't say anything. There's a long pause. "Sorry, I'll... I'll just go."

"No, no, come in. I'd love some," she says, opening the door more. Her voice is soft. I stomp the snow off my boots before stepping inside. We walk to the dining room, passing her large grand piano on the way. I place the bowls on the table and take a seat. She heads to the kitchen to get a spoon before having a seat. I look across the table and see a cribbage board and a single deck of cards. I ask if she plays. She tells me about how she and her husband used to play, and she hasn't found anyone who knows how to play since. She tells me how she tried to teach her caregiver how to play. She makes a face showing that teaching her didn't go so well. I laugh.

I tell Linda I know how to play. Her eyes light up at my comment. I reach over and grab the board. We play a few games. I lost. All of them. But we laughed. I ask about the grand piano. She tells me she wanted to be a pianist as a child but ended up just being a mom, and that was enough for her. I ask her to play.

She gets up, walks to the piano, and takes a seat. I followed and sat on one of the many chairs. Then she started to play something I'd never heard before. My grandmother used to play. Linda reminded me of her. I listened for a while, looking out the window at my small house covered in snow. And my father's words this time pop in my head, "for winter comes not as an ending but to show—how beauty burns brightest when we learn to let go." At this moment I realized calm days tend to have a way of leading you to people you didn't know you needed.

