

# Loving Neil

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*December 5, 1979 -*

A blast of frigid air ripped through the parking lot whipping Janet's long, dark hair. She gripped the front of her coat, pulled it tight around her, and ran for the entry door of the banquet hall. Shaking her head to sluff the snow out of her hair, she opened the door and stepped inside to the warmth of the lobby. There, she removed her gloves, shoved them in her pockets, and made her way through the lounge to the reception hall.

She was an hour late and most of the one hundred or so guests for her brother's wedding were already there. Her gaze swept over the sea of white linen-covered tables and searched for her father. When she saw him, she took a deep breath and headed in his direction.

"Where've you been?" he said, getting up to greet her. He pulled her into a practiced hug as if they saw each other every day. But the fact was, he hadn't seen her in over six months.

"Traffic," she said. She flashed a smile toward his wife, Christine, and said, "Sorry I missed you at church. Love the gown." She took in Christine's long, black,

strapless formal and the necklace of gold winking back at her, wondering how much they set her father back.

“Thanks. How’ve you been?” Christine replied.

“Not bad. Nice place.”

“Nothing but the best for your brother,” Christine said, flashing a pretentious smile at her husband. When Janet saw her father frown, she wondered what was going on between the two of them.

Janet’s father said, “This is John and Sarah Barrett, friends of Christine’s. They’re loaning their beachfront house to Craig for his honeymoon. Isn’t that nice of them?”

“Yes, very,” Janet said.

“So, you’re Craig’s sister! The picture on your father’s mantel doesn’t do you justice,” Sarah said.

Janet took the compliment in stride, trying to figure out just what picture that might be.

“My daughter here is a freelance photographer for one of those nature magazines out west,” Janet’s father said. “Is that what they call them these days?”

“Close enough, Dad.”

“All very exciting, I’m sure,” Christine said.

“Ah, there’s my boy,” Janet’s father said, cutting in. His graveled voice stormed across the room. “Hey, Craig, come over here and tell your sister about that new job of yours.” To Janet, he winked and said, “He hooked himself up with a firm down in West Palm Beach.”

Craig looked up from talking with the band and started for them. “Hey, Janny,” he said, giving her a brotherly hug. “Damned weather. Sorry we missed you at the church. How was the flight?”

“It was.” Janet said eying her brother affectionately. She had long gotten over her envy of her father’s favoritism toward her brother. It wasn’t Craig’s fault

her father had always favored him over her. Craig was his shining star. A high school football legend and M.I.T. graduate, Craig had carved a place out in his father's heart long before she arrived on the scene and it was a place she could never fill.

At six-foot three, his sleek, muscular frame towered over her. "Yeah, I know, shitty," Craig said. "But you're here and that's all that counts."

Janet pulled away from him, straightened his tie, and patted the lapel of his tux. Even though he was eight years older than her, she'd always thought of him as a little brother who needed looking after. "So, Dad tells me you have a new job."

"Yeah, and I'm gonna need it 'cause Belinda has lots of plans."

"I bet," Janet said, knowing Belinda came from a large family.

"Say look, I gotta get back to her. Catch ya later?"

"Of course," Janet replied and gave him the thumbs-up.



The snow continued to fall throughout dinner, and with each glance out the window, Janet grew more wary of the drive back to her hotel. She nibbled at her dessert as the chatter flowed around the table, much of it about people she didn't know--high society friends of Christine's and their various exploits.

As she pulled her black sweater cape off the back of her chair and wrapped it around her shoulders, her father leaned toward her, and said, "So, how's things with June's estate?"

“It’s in probate. Shouldn’t be much longer, a couple more months maybe,” Janet said.

“Any idea what you’re going to do with another house and a rental cottage?”

“I haven’t thought about it, to tell you the truth.”

Her father finished the last of his cake and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Well, you’d better start. The sooner you get them on the market, the better.”

Janet frowned. “I’m not sure I want to sell.”

“Well, what are you gonna do with all that property?” her father asked, eyeing her pointedly.

Janet didn’t want to talk about it. It had only been five months since her beloved aunt passed away, and she missed her terribly. “Dad, can we change the subject please?”

“Yeah, sure.” He was quiet a moment then nodded toward the window. “Wow, it’s coming down pretty hard out there. You’re welcome to crash at our place.”

“Thanks, but no.”

Now it was his turn to frown. “What is it with you, Janny? Do you hate Christine that much?”

Janet set her fork down. “I don’t hate her, Dad. I just don’t like everything I do being judged.”

“Judged?”

“Yes.” Janet sighed. “I’m sorry, but it’s the way she makes me feel.”

“I see.” He turned and started for the bar.

Janet rose, collected her purse, and followed him. When she caught up next to him, she said, “Dad, I love you, you know that, right?”

Her father shot her a tight smile. “Right. Don’t worry about it, Skeeter, it’s okay.” He glanced toward the windows. “You’d better get a move on. Don’t forget to say goodbye to your brother.”

*Why does it always end like this?* Though, in truth, she knew the reason. It was her always slapping away his helping hand. But then, it was a little late for his helping hand. Where was he when she needed him? “Yeah, right. I’ll call you later. Maybe we can do something tomorrow.”

“Sure,” he said. “Sounds like a plan.”

Janet looked off, biting back the urge to say, forget it, then reached up and pecked him on the cheek. “I’m gonna go find Craig. Love you.”

He studied her a moment, as if he were trying to decide whether she meant it, then nodded. “Me, too.”



Twenty minutes later, Janet was driving down the snow packed highway trying to avoid the deep ruts that were running along the shoulder of the road. The car skated back and forth, drifting dangerously close to the snow packed shoulder of the road. She backed the wipers off as the exit ramp from I-80 neared. On it was a semi moving at a fair clip. As it merged onto County Route 82, she moved into the passing lane.

“Just what I need,” she growled. Her heart raced as she braced her hands on the wheel. The truck sprayed slush at her windshield. The road suddenly disappeared. Thunk! The wheel jerked loose in her hands and the car dove, knifing into the darkness until it jolted to a halt.

Janet sat shaking for several minutes. Her throat burned, and the taste of bile swam in her mouth. She swallowed, forced it down, and gulped a deep breath. The sound of her heart thumped in her ears. Her head ached. *Am I Okay?* Gingerly, she moved her legs and then her arms. Nothing hurt. That was good. She pulled

the key out of the ignition. Sat back. Tried to make sense of what had happened.

Truck--slush--windshield--can't see--steering wheel--ouch. Her wrist. It hurt. She rubbed it. The car? Shit! Was there a huge gash on the front end? A tire turned under like a broken ankle? She brought her hands to her head. Kneaded her aching neck.

She looked out the driver's side window. Snow was up to the rear-view mirror. Getting out that way was impossible. She crawled across to the passenger side and peered out, put her shoulder to the door and pushed it open.

Outside, the wind whipped across the median and icy grit slapped her face. She burrowed her head into the lapel of her coat and trudged through the knee-deep snow. *Think, Janet, think.* But the only thing that came to mind was to walk. But to where?

She ground her hands into her pockets and kicked at a chunk of hard packed snow. Tears collected in her eyes and slipped over her cheeks. "What am I gonna do? I'm so screwed," she muttered, plopping back against the rear of the car.

As she stood there, a pair of bright headlights came over the crest of the road. A moment later, a large pickup slowed down and pulled up behind her. The driver's side window slid down.

"You okay?" said a voice from inside.

She nodded as the door opened and a man got out. He was big, towering over her. In the dark of night, he looked like a monster out of a B-budget movie. She backed up keeping her distance.

He put up his hand. "It's okay. I'm here to help. You look like you're freezing. Why don't you get in my truck while I call a wrecker?"

"No, I'm okay, really."

He trudged closer and she saw a ruddy hard-bitten face. Mysterious, dark eyes stared back. A bushy mustache spilled out under a broad nose. A mop of short, curly hair tickled his ears. Add a beard and a red suit and she could easily imagine him being Santa Claus. But he wasn't Santa Claus, and he was there with her on a dark road in the middle of the night. There was nothing between them except the wind and her long distance running legs, which were one step away from being jelly.

"Alright," he said. "At least let me get you a blanket." He went back to his truck and brought her a thick woolen wrap reeking of smoke. He handed it to her with an outstretched hand. "So what happened?"

"I was run off the road by a semi," she said, pulling the blanket around her shoulders.

The man shook his head. "Damn cowboys!" He eyed her then the car, then back at her again. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." She backed up a step and turned around, sizing up the damage to her car. It didn't look like there were any dents or creases. It was buried. *If I could just get it out, no one would ever have to know. But doing it will need his help. That means . . .* She chewed her lip. "You think we could pull it out of there?"

"The car?"

"Yeah."

"Not without chains."

"You wouldn't happen to have any would you?"

The man's brow wrinkled. "I do, but I don't know. You're buried in there pretty good. I think it's best to call a wrecker."

"Cept it's a rental," Janet said.

He drummed his fingers on the hood of his truck. At last, he said, "We can try it, but I can't guarantee

anything.” He waded out into the snowy median and surveyed the car. After a once around, he came back. “I really think it’s better to call a wrecker. I could end up doing more harm than good.”

She looked up at the blackened sky and closed her eyes.

After a relenting sigh, she heard him say, “Okay, you go around and climb in while I see what I can do.” He stepped over to the back of his truck as she got in her rental, and two minutes later, she heard him pawing around underneath her car. It seemed like he was under there forever before he finally knocked on her passenger side window.

She rolled it down.

“Okay,” he said. “When you see me flash my lights, you give her the gas, alright? Don’t stop until you feel the wheels grip the road.”

She nodded and watched him trudge back through the snow. A moment later, the truck’s lights flashed in her rear-view mirror. She stepped on the pedal, pushing it to the floor. The car lurched backward as the tires spun, screaming into the night.

Suddenly, the tension between the two vehicles eased. The pickup’s lights flashed, and shortly afterward he was at her window again. “We made a little headway, but I just don’t have enough traction. One last time and if you’re not out, we call a wrecker.”

She nodded. *Please, please. Just once, give me a break.* The truck’s headlights flashed, and her foot slammed on the accelerator. The car shimmied and moved back inch-by-inch. She gripped the wheel, as if doing so would make the car try harder. *Don’t stop, please don’t stop!* The acrid smell of burning rubber drifted through the open window as the rear of the car shifted and came to a grinding halt.

The man got out of his truck and trudged back to her window. "You're half way out," he said, "but that's as far as you're gonna get."

"Just one more time . . . please?" she muttered.

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Okay, one last time."

He grabbed his shovel, dug more snow out around her tires, and got back into his truck. The lights flashed, and a moment later Janet's rental car lurched back, breaking free of the deep snow. Relieved, she sighed and got out as the man pulled his tow chain free.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said.

"Forget it. I have a daughter your age. I'd hope someone would do the same for her if she were in your shoes." He bent down and started clearing her snow-packed wheel wells. "You live around here?"

"I'm heading into the city."

"Alright. When I'm through, I'll follow you in. Make sure you get where you're going."

"That's alright, I'll be fine." She dug into her purse. Pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Here."

He looked up and frowned. "Put it away."

*Great, now I've insulted him.* "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He stood up and dusted the snow off his jeans.

"Thanks. I'm Janet."

He put his shovel in the back of his truck. "Neil, Neil Porter."

*Salem, Oregon, May 23, 1980 -*

The rolling fields of the Willamette Valley were awake with reds, yellows, and violets as Janet drove along County Route 22. In her knapsack on the back seat was a submission for the *Willamette Reporter*. Riding shotgun with her was her basset-beagle puppy, Barney. When she heard a whine, she glanced over to see him standing on his hind legs looking out the window. Turning his head back, he barked.

“You hungry, boy?” she said. “I feel like a bite myself.”

A mile down the road, she pulled off into the parking lot of a small deli where she ordered a couple of burgers, hers with the works, his plain: no pickle, no cheese, and no bun. Twenty minutes later, she was in Salem’s business district. The *Willamette Reporter* was a mile north of the city off River Road. She crawled along with traffic until she came to the old brick building. The public parking lot was across the street, but employees and consultants used the back entrance, so she turned down a narrow drive and parked in their private lot.

“Okay, Barney, let’s go see Megan,” she said, leashing him. The dog jumped out into the warm afternoon sun as she grabbed her bag from the backseat. Shutting the car door, she walked him to the service entrance where her good friend, Megan waited by the open door.

“Well, hullo, Barney,” Megan said. She squatted and let the dog put his paws on her knees. “You’re getting so big!”

“He’s an eating machine,” Janet said. “But I love him to pieces. Mick around?”

Megan nodded. “Yeah, and he’s in a mood, so watch it.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Come in. And Happy Birthday! It is your birthday, right?”

Janet grinned. “Yes, and thanks for reminding me!”

Megan threw back a perky smile, led her to her desk, and picked up the phone while Janet glanced at pictures of Megan’s son, Kyle, on the wall behind them.

After Megan hung up, Janet said, “How’s the little guy?”

“He’s great . . .” She bent down and rubbed Barney’s ears, then pointed a thumb toward Mick’s office. “The man’s waiting. See if you can cheer him up.”

“Right, and thanks for the warning,” Janet said then headed across the broad layout room to a suite of offices in the far corner. Mick’s was on the far right and his door was shut. A glass window beside it revealed Mick on the phone. His voice rattled the walls.

“I have a hole in my roof that needs fixing. You agreed to do it yesterday . . . No, listen . . . I don’t give a damn about your fucking truck. I want it done by tomorrow--understand?” He slammed the phone down and, raking his hand through his blond hair, stood up.

Janet had known Mick for about five years. Though she had never been a target of one of his legendary tirades, she knew enough to stay out of his way. She watched him rifle through the stack of files on his desk and pull one out. He was in his usual attire: jeans and khaki shirt. No suit and tie for Mick. He was a roll-up-your-sleeves-and-dig-in type of guy. Suddenly, he got up and before she knew it, was opening the door.

Fixing her with his slate gray eyes, he grumbled, "I need a Coke and a cigarette. You want one?"

She shook her head. "I don't smoke."

"I know that," he said. "I meant the Coke."

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

"Go in. I'll be back in ten." He turned on his heel, muttering and stalked across the open layout room. Even from where Janet stood, she heard him cursing under his breath. Tentatively, she took a seat in front of his desk amid a sea of banker's boxes, empty soda cans, and a haze of smoke. On his desk was a stack of files. Beside them was a small, oval framed picture of his daughter, Vicky. She was tall like her father and shared his facial features; narrow jaw, thin nose, hairline lip, and brown hair.

Mick came back and nudged the door shut with his hip. A copy of the *Reporter* was tucked under his arm. A soda was in each hand and a cigarette dangled from his lip. He set the paper and their sodas down on his desk, butted his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, and said, "How was the ride?"

"Not bad. Hit a little traffic near the city."

"As always." He grabbed the file she had seen him pull out earlier and leaned back in his chair. His scowl had retreated but his furrowed brow remained. "So, how's things?"

“Good.” She studied his expression, wondering what was going on behind his measured gaze.

“You know, we’re quite fond of your work here.”

“Thanks. Glad you like it.”

He pulled a letter out of the folder and held it out to her.

Janet’s heart jumped. “What’s this?” she said, having an ill feeling. She knew the drill all too well; ‘we like your work, but funds are low. We’re sorry, but blah, blah, blah.’

“An offer. The boys upstairs are looking to hire another full-time photographer and I think you’d be a perfect fit. So, how would you like a permanent gig?”

Janet widened her eyes as she looked down the page, trying to grasp what had happened. At last, she looked up, hardly knowing what to say. “This is . . . um, unexpected. You really want me?”

Mick crossed his arms. “Umm . . . yeah.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You could say, yes,” Mick said, lighting another cigarette. He took a drag, and added, “It’s a good offer. Thirty-nine ‘K’ to start and I got you three weeks of vakay with full med.”

Janet took a deep breath to calm her nerves and studied the letter again. At the bottom she saw a blank line waiting for her signature, but a voice deep inside her told her to wait.

“There a problem?” Mick said.

“No, it’s just so sudden and I’ve always been on my own. Used to my own schedule, you know.”

Mick nodded. “I can certainly understand. I thought the same thing when they came to me nine years back and stole me from the streets. But you know what; it was the best thing that ever happened to me. No more worrying about where my next gig was coming from,

whether or not I was going to make the mortgage payment and all that. And besides, you know we're not all that rigid around here. You can come and go pretty much as you please most of the time except for Mondays, Wednesdays, and alternate Fridays when we need you here at the office."

Janet scanned down the page, fighting the urge to give a quick answer. Mick wasn't a patient man. He liked people who could make sharp, snap decisions. She looked up at him. The last thing she wanted to do was burn a bridge. Her heart thumped. Thirty-nine 'K' was a lot of money, and full medical coverage was a luxury she had never been able to afford, say nothing of a paid vacation. But what if she was laid off? Finally, she said, "I'd like to think about it, if it's okay."

"Sure, but don't take too long. The boys up there are an impatient bunch."



The next morning, Janet lay in bed staring at her alarm clock thinking about Mick's offer. She put her arm under her pillow and snuggled her body around it. If she took the job, she'd have some modicum of security, but what about Barney? She wasn't keen on leaving him home all day alone in a crate, even for two days a week. Being her own boss she could take him along where ever she went.

She looked down at the dog lying on the foot of her bed. As she wrestled with the decision, the phone on her nightstand rang. She rolled over and picked it up.

"Skeeter, Dad! I missed calling you yesterday. Sorry 'bout that."

She sat up and plumped the pillow under her back. "It's okay. I figured something came up."

"No, just old age interfering with memory. Well, are we admitting to thirty?"

She shrugged. "Sure, why not? So . . . how are you?"

"I'm fine. You get my card?"

"I did." She picked it off her nightstand. The picture on the front was of an old lady in a ridiculous hat. A black flimsy dress was hiked up to her knees. Inside, he had signed it just, 'Dad.'

"I thought it was a hoot."

"Right." She grinned. She would have preferred a little more sentiment. But that was her father--always skimming the surface when it came to the mushy stuff.

"So, you spend the day at the beach?"

"No. Worked."

"On your birthday?"

"Yep. Creditors don't care about birthdays."

"I hear ya there."

Janet took a deep breath, and biting her lip, said, "Guess what? You remember the newspaper I consult with?"

"The *Weekly* or something like that?"

"It's the *Reporter*. Anyway, they offered me a full time job."

"Fantastic!" he said. "When do you start, and how much? It's a salaried position, right?"

"I haven't accepted it yet."

"What'd'ya mean?" She heard him sigh on the other end. "Janet, it's time to start living in the real world."

"I am living in the real world!"

"Freelancing is not living in the real world, sweetie. You need job security, not to mention health insurance and a retirement plan, especially now with your aunt having passed away."

Janet closed her eyes wondering why she'd brought it up. Tightening her grip on the receiver, she said, "I wasn't asking for an opinion, Dad! I was sharing."

"Well, this should be a slam dunk. But as usual you have to analyze everything to the 'Nth' degree. You know, by the time you make your mind up, this opportunity will be toast."

Janet's chest tightened as she gritted her teeth. "Why do you always have to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Never mind! I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I'm trying to help you."

"You're trying to run my life, Dad! Let's just drop it, okay?"

There was a long pause on the other end. Finally, he said, "Sure, whatever."

Her throat tightened. "So, have you heard from my brother yet?"

"Yeah. They're back," he said, brightening a bit. "Had a great time."

"It was nice seeing him. I wish I could get back east more often."

Her father was quiet again, then said, "So, why don't you? We have room."

"Unfortunately, my schedule is--"

"Yes, I know. Busy, busy."

"You could come out to me."

"You know, I don't like planes."

Janet looked up at the ceiling, gritting her teeth. "Yeah, right. Well, I don't want to keep you. Say Hi to Christine for me."

"Will do. Take care of yourself."

The phone went dead as Janet looked through the window stuffing yet another disappointment into her heart. *Well, what did you expect?*



Fifteen minutes later, a stream of hot water pelted her back as she leaned against the shower wall. She pushed her hair off her shoulders and allowed the water to run through it down her back. Reaching behind her, she turned the hot water up another notch, and replayed the conversation she had had with her father over in her head. Why couldn't he just listen for once? Why did he have run over her like a truck? Then again, he never listened to anyone, let alone her. The ironic thing was, the one time she really wanted him to stand up and say something; he didn't. He let her mother take her away from him without a single word.

Stepping out onto the tiled floor, she stared at the mist-streaked mirror throwing a distorted reflection back. Though she was used to her solitary life and her father's ambivalence, she felt lost. She grabbed a towel, bound her hair, and went to her closet to pull out a pair of jeans and a sweater. But when she slid the closet door back, her gaze was drawn to the top shelf where a large box sat. She stared at it a moment, then reached up and took it down.

Setting it on the bed, she pulled the lid off and looked inside. It had been a long time since she'd paged through the past, digging up memories, and she wasn't quite sure why she was doing it other than there was a compelling need to feel attached to something, someone, anything. She lifted out the cellophane-wrapped magazine on top and ran her finger over it. Peeling the wrapping away, she leafed through it until she came to a shot of Boiler Bay. It had been taken at high tide, and it was her first published photo.

She studied it for a moment then set it down. Soon after, she was going through faded photos of family taken at camp years ago. She smiled down at the photos of Craig and her eating s'mores by the campfire and the shots of her father at the grill flipping burgers. But the ones of her father and her standing on the dock looking out over Lake Erie at dusk were the ones that burrowed into her heart. Even now, she could feel his bony fingers on her shoulders. She closed her eyes, wondering how they had grown so far apart.

"I need to get out of here--get some air," she muttered as she set the photos back in the box. Looking down at Barney, who was sitting at her feet, she took a deep breath. "Come on, we're going for a ride!"



The fields of tall rangy grasses and hawthorn stretching alongside the two-lane highway were in full bloom. She glanced at them now and again during the fifty-minute drive to Lincoln City. There she would hook up with Route 101 that skirted the coastline and head for Boiler Bay.

The first forty miles passed quickly--the road straight and fairly level until it melted into the woods. There, it ran around winding curves with treacherous swales. She eased off the pedal as the ponderosa pine, hazelnut, and cypress marched past her window. The radio murmured. An hour later, she turned into the entrance of Fogarty State Park and parked in the tree lined deserted lot. Flipping the hood of her jacket over her head, she shut the car door, leashed Barney, and started

down a winding trail to a broad underpass running under the highway.

On the other side, she let the dog loose to run through the knots of windswept grasses lashing the sculpted, crescent dunes. Above her, gulls floated in the gray sky. A wafting scent of fish wrinkled her nose as she trudged out onto the hard-packed sand. Thirty yards ahead, the ocean pounded the beach, and its surging froth baited the barking dog. Janet watched the back and forth of the rushing water thinking of the job offer as Barney barked at the waves. As she watched him run back and forth, her father's face flashed before her. Why couldn't he let her talk instead of trying to fix her all the time?

She shook her head, and continuing down the beach, saw a black form lying on the wet sand some ways ahead. She stared at it a moment before calling Barney to her. Leashing the dog, she moved forward cautiously until she saw it was a seal. As she approached the animal, she expected it to dart into the water. When it didn't, she short-lined Barney and circled around it. Lifting its head, it opened its mouth and moved its flipper. The dog pulled on his leash, straining to get a sniff.

"Stop Barney!" she commanded. To the seal, she said, "You all right, little guy?"

The seal slapped the gritty sand with its tail, and as it did so, she saw a fresh gash on its flipper. It wasn't a deep wound, and it would more than likely heal. Still, a silent battle waged inside her, and though she knew the code of conduct around a wild animal, she couldn't help from wanting to put her arms around it.

The dog whined as she battled her nurturing instincts. "Barney, behave," she muttered as the seal closed its eyes and exhaled with a grunt. "Come, boy,

we need to leave him be.” But as she stepped away from the animal, she didn’t like how she felt. She knew what it was like to be abandoned.

