

Snickerdoodles
By Jeffery Greb

We moved into that Craftsman home shortly after my promotion. The neighborhood, naturally, was situated on a hill, and our street was near the crest. Because it was established long ago, houses in the neighborhood generally did not have garages, so residents parked on the narrow streets. Due to their age, the streets were wide enough to accommodate parking only on one side. Consequently, parking was restricted to residents, except for brief blocks of time, and we were required to purchase and display neighborhood parking passes. I remember feeling like we had finally “made it.” The neighborhood had always been fashionable, even given the ebb and flow of the vicissitudes of popular opinion, and stubbornly weathering the increasing demands for larger and larger homes, the original homes remained intact on their small lots. The neighborhood lacked a specific architectural character, which I suppose could be argued *was* its character. Our Craftsman lay between a Queen Anne and a Tudor, while directly across the street was a boxy Georgian or Federal. Though the neighborhood did not quite qualify for official historical status, the residents generally worked hard to maintain their homes in the grandeur of their heyday, so despite some inconveniences, homes in the neighborhood went for one and a half to two million dollars, which was a lot of money then. Location, location, location, I suppose.

That boxy house across the street was an exception. It loomed above us, situated as it was a little higher up the hill, and appeared quite unkempt. Its lack of care started at street-level. Both sides of the street had sidewalks recessed away from the curb. While I suppose this was technically a right-of-way easement owned by the city, the residents treated these strips as their own property and maintained them as such. Trees dotted this mostly grass landscape, although a few residents planted flower beds. (One even had a raised vegetable garden!) Directly across the

street, however, the grass was literally waist-high, like a crazy wheat field, and it bent over both the street and the sidewalk. Unlike most of the houses, it had a garage. Built on the hillside, the single car garage was under the house, on the west side or to the left as we faced it. The cement block foundation was interrupted by a brown, rolling metal door with a gravel strip, demarcated by cement blocks supporting terracing, leading to it. This strip was roughly the width of the door, or about the width of a car, and in fact remained occupied by a car the entire time we lived there. The car was a silver – albeit filthy – Mercedes sedan from back when they were boxy, boxy like the house. It sat surrounded by grass likewise grown high, and clearly had not been moved in many years.

Steps, replete with a switchback, led to the door. This stairway featured a metal handrail and was bordered by what were once flower gardens on three terraces formed by whitewashed concrete walls. The gardens were completely overrun by invasive weeds, and the terraced walls were dingy and noticeably cracked in several places. Drab closed curtains filled the front windows. Although from the street it was clear the house needed painting, it looked to be in relatively good shape. The roof looked sound, and although the dark brown paint was faded, the wood siding seemed undamaged.

A vine climbed from the last terrace to the porch and up the support to the awning over the front door. A single rose blossomed from the vine on the support. It seemed so anomalous that I wondered if it might be plastic, an attempt to capture some beauty by someone too incapacitated to do anything else. It was the one mark of charm in an otherwise bleak vision.

After an initial period of settling in, we agreed it was time to take a break from unpacking and meet some of our new neighbors. We discussed inviting the couple next door in the Tudor over for dinner but decided that was perhaps too presumptuous a first foray and chose a less

intrusive path. We decided to drop by with a gift of food to introduce and ingratiate ourselves. If the neighbors were occupied, we could leave the plate and go; if they invited us in, we could stay longer and chat. Excited to use her new oven, Nichole offered to bake something – you know how Nikki loves to bake – and so we set out on an early Saturday afternoon to their front door.

When the door opened, I introduced us to Nate, and he called Kari to join him at the door.

Whatja got there? Nate asked about the plate Nikki held.

Snickerdoodles, she replied, proffering it.

At the word, Kari barked a laugh and quickly covered her mouth. She and Nate shared a knowing glance.

Is there something wrong? I asked.

No, no, no, Nate said as he smiled and took the plate. Just an inside thing between us. Please come in.

They led us to their lovely living space with a large window framing the view of an immaculate back yard. Kari made us some delicious crema with a high-pressured machine, and we chatted while sipping coffee and nibbling cookies. After the odd response at the door, we watched their reactions to the cookies carefully, but nothing seemed amiss, so it was soon forgotten. Nate and Kari shared what they knew about some secret gems of the neighborhood, the best places for things like baked goods, as well as some mild gossip about the previous owner of our house. We complimented them on their home and praised their yard. I asked about which landscaping service they used, and Nate named a couple of reliable ones used by most people on the block, even ballparking prices.

The prices seem quite reasonable, I commented. I wonder why the house across from us doesn't use one. Does anyone know why?

Nate and Kari shared a quick glance reminiscent of the one at the door. That place has been a mess since we moved here, oh five, six years ago, he answered.

Why? Has the owner fallen on hard times or something? You know, for the prices you mentioned, if we took up a collection, the neighborhood could easily pick-up the tab to help them out. The place is kind of an eyesore.

Kari barked again. Nate looked at Kari once more before edging forward in his chair and speaking conspiratorially. We felt exactly the same way. Maybe the person who lives there is old and infirm, we thought. Or maybe they've kind of lost it mentally. Or just fallen on hard times, like you said. We learned Andrew Martell lives there. The last of the old guard, now that Martha's gone, now that you bought her house. We actually went so far as to get commitments from a few neighbors to kick in some cash. Then we talked to Martha. She just laughed and said, Andy's got plenty of money. Then why does he let his home look like that? She laughed again and suggested we go ask him. So we did. Kari baked a batch of Snickerdoodles, and we went across the street and up those stairs.

You see, that's why we reacted that way to you bringing us Snickerdoodles, Kari added. We did the same thing.

So we rang the bell and waited, Nate continued. We knocked and waited some more. Finally, the door jerked open. Martell faced us in his pajamas and a pair of leather slippers – it was about three in the afternoon – and glared without saying a word.

What does he look like? Nikki whispered.

He's wiry. His white hair is thin and looks like a rat's nest, and several days' worth of white whiskers stubble his cheeks. His eyes, though – man, oh man – his eyes are intense. Like an animal's.

His eyes are electric blue, Kari added. On anyone else they'd be striking, but on that face they're just scary.

He finally said, Yeah? Mr. Martell, I said, my name's Nate and this is my wife Kari, and we live –

Whatcha got there? he interrupted.

Snickerdoodles, Kari said, and he said, Snicker what? Snickerdoodles, she said again, they're a cookie made with – I don't give a fuck what they're made with. Take your snicker shits and your asses off my porch.

I started to say, Listen, sir, there's no reason to get nasty, and he just growled and slapped the plate out of Kari's hands.

The plate went spinning through the air, Kari said. Snickerdoodles flew everywhere and the plate shattered on the cement wall below. It ruined the set. I had to donate the rest of the plates to Goodwill and buy new ones.

What did you do? I asked.

Nothing, Nate replied. I was dumbfounded by his sudden attack – it was violent – and before I could even speak, he slammed the door. We thought about calling the police. If he had hit Kari instead of the plate, she could have been hurt. But in the end, we decided we were on his property and there wasn't much point in pursuing it. So after a few seconds – seconds that felt like minutes – we just kind of left.

I was nervous the whole time walking down those steps, Kari added. I didn't feel safe again until we were back in our own house. She shook her head. Just ruined that set of dishes.

Who doesn't like Snickerdoodles? Nikki asked. I know, right? Kari replied with a smile. They're, like, a pretty safe bet.

Wow, I said, wow oh wow. What's his deal?

Nate shrugged. I dunno. Then he smiled. Maybe you should go ask him.

The entire time we lived across the street, I never even saw Martell, and nothing about that house changed. Every once in a while, I would look at the house and through the weeds at the vine rose that always seemed to be in bloom and think about Martell. What had life dealt him for him to end up so angry? Was he mad at the entire world, or just those of us populating his corner of it? Maybe he was hurting in some way. Maybe he just needed some patience, some kindness. Maybe that wouldn't have mattered. I suppose I'll never know. I guess it was just too difficult to find out.