

Plenty

By Christopher Barzak

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Although I hadn't seen my friend Gerith in years, I wasn't surprised to receive a letter from him, asking me to come home. Gerith had been sending me these requests every year or so after I left Youngstown, most of them chronicling the misfortunes of the old neighborhood where we grew up. From Gerith's descriptions, not much had changed for the better. Each day the city disintegrated a little further. People who had once been important to us disappeared without warning. Often he would ask about my life now that I no longer lived there. *Are you okay?* he wondered. *Are you happy?* And each time I would answer: *I have a secure job, I live in a great city, I have a girlfriend who loves me more than I love myself. I have plenty.*

No matter how I answered them, though, Gerith's letters filled me with a sense of guilt. Whenever one of his letters arrived in the mail, I'd put it in the pocket of my jacket for a while and forget about it. Then, after I got up the nerve to read it, I'd sit down and laugh or cry with nostalgia for the old neighborhood. Even though I'd spent most of my life trying to escape Youngstown, the place was still my home. Gerith's letters reminded me of that.

This time, as always, I hoped Gerith would allow me to finally make a clean escape. I wanted him to tell me that the South Side had received funding for rebeautification, that the shelter where he worked had enough food and beds, and that life in general was an eternal flame of mercy and generosity.

Instead, his news left me reeling: "Mrs. Burroway has died, David. The funeral is Saturday. I hope you'll come home for it."

Immediately I had a vision of houses, stripped and gutted, left behind by the dead.

I'd already made plans for the weekend, so I spent a few minutes unmaking them. There was the financiers' dinner on Friday, and on Saturday I'd promised to meet Karen for lunch. She'd been wanting to speak to me about our relationship. I called her answering machine and canceled our date. Then I phoned the office and explained that an old friend had died. The boss was generous, asked no questions, and told me to be careful if I planned to drive all that way. I packed an overnight bag and left Chicago for Youngstown.

There was another reason for going home as well. I'd been keeping a secret for

far too long, and now I needed to tell someone about it. The secret involved a small amount of magic, although these days magic is not something in which everyone can afford to believe. There is a suspicious absence of miracles. But sometimes impossible things happen when no one is looking.

It happened in Youngstown, during my last year of college. Fall arrived early that year and spattered the few trees on our street rust red and wax yellow, cinnamon brown and orange. The leaves were a welcome relief from the sight of our crumbling surroundings: boarded-up warehouses, empty storefronts with cardboard covering the windows, and walls tattooed with strange but banal graffiti. I remember the Market Street bridge in particular, and the words YOU HAVE CROSSED THE LINE scrawled on both sides of it in black spray paint. I passed under that banner each day, as I walked to and from school. It bothered me no end. I wanted to know what line. And who, exactly, had power over the geography of my life?

Gerith and I bought a house together that year. We'd finally decided to cut the umbilical cords that tied us to our parents. Both of us had grown up in that post-industrial shell of a former steel town, a place steeped in a depression that no one knew how to relieve. In the end, most people affected indifference to the situation. No one in our town wanted to be re-educated for alternative careers. Instead, they'd spend their unemployment checks on the lottery and whiskey. We felt the world owed us some obscure inheritance. This strange psychology had been passed down by our parents and grandparents, who actually did lose their jobs during the seventies. We were children of the dispossessed who wanted to be the dispossessed.

The house we bought was an old Victorian on Chalmers Street, and it cost us only six thousand dollars. Houses were cheap in Youngstown because most of the city was a ghetto. The only profitable business nearby was the university. Our house had two floors, a basement, an attic, and a front porch spread wide and deep as a cave. There was a turret that rose out of one corner of the roof -- we thought we had our very own castle.

After using what money we'd saved to buy the place, Gerith and I were broke. We'd both won grants and taken out loans to pay for college, so that left us with a little extra cash each quarter, but that money never seemed to arrive at the right times. For the first few months we had electricity and water but no telephone or heat. When the autumn chill grew strong and the wind rattled our windows, we wrapped ourselves in the afghans our mothers had crocheted for us.

Whatever other luxuries we did without, the one that hurt most was food. We ate peanut butter sandwiches and ramen, drank tap water that tasted of chlorine, and sometimes splurged on a packet of Kool-Aid. On our kitchen table we kept a wooden fruit bowl that was always empty. After a few months, my taste buds began to deteriorate.

We didn't know much about our neighbors. We knew that a black family lived on one side of us: a mother with two teenage girls, one of whom had a son of her own. On the other side was a Puerto Rican couple, Rosa and Manuel, who screamed at each other in Spanish until four in the morning sometimes. And across the street, in a Victorian like ours, lived Mrs. Burroway, a white-haired old lady who walked hunched over and carried a black cane with a silver horse head for a handle.

She seemed ancient to me even then, bone-thin, her skin hanging loose on her frame. She wore a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses that exaggerated her cloudy cataracts and the blue of her eyes. Almost every day she sat on her porch, alone, her cane laid across her lap. Sometimes I'd see her carrying a brown bag, overfull with groceries, to a neighbor's house. And this was how we finally met.

One morning, as I gathered my schoolbooks, I heard a thump outside the front door. Then the doorbell rang repeatedly, loud and annoying. I pulled my backpack over my shoulder and opened the door.

Outside, at my feet, was a bag of groceries. A stalk of celery juttred out of the top, and tin cans and a bunch of bananas were visible beneath it. I looked up and saw Mrs. Burroway crossing the street, hunched over as though several sacks of grain were piled on her back. I picked up the bag and ran off the porch to stop her.

I caught her on the other side of the street and said, "I'm sorry, but why did you leave these groceries on my porch?"

She turned those blue, cloud-ridden eyes on me as I spoke, looking a little startled, and licked her lips before she replied. "You boys are looking a bit slight," she said, uncovering her teeth to smile.

"But surely you can't afford to buy groceries for us," I said. I smiled and held the bag out for her to take.

"No, no." She waved her hands at the bag as if it were cursed. "Those are yours. Besides, I have plenty."

"Well," I said, and stood mute for a moment. "Well, thank you."

"My pleasure," she said. Then she turned around and continued on to her house.

Gerith and I spent that day at home instead of school. We opened cans of soup, stripped bananas out of their skins, ate stalks of celery with cream cheese

spread in the grooves. We drank a six-pack of grape soda we found at the bottom of the bag. We smoked marijuana, which Gerith supplied, and wondered aloud at what I had missed in my computer literacy class, what Gerith had missed in his philosophy of eco-feminism lecture. By evening, most of the food was gone. One banana lay curled on its side in the fruit bowl and two cans of clam chowder stocked our pantry shelves.

"So," said Gerith. We sat cross-legged on the braided rug in the living room. "Do you think Mrs. Burroway is crazy, or just very generous?"

I took a hit off the pipe and passed it to him, holding the smoke inside my lungs until it began to hurt. I took another gulp of air before exhaling. "Very generous," I answered. "Though that doesn't exclude the possibility of a mental disorder."

"Wow," Gerith shook his head. "That's pretty amazing."

I nodded, and chuckled a little at Gerith's astonishment.

"What?" he said, but I told him it was nothing, just the pot. I waved away his question with an expansive gesture and then we both laughed for several minutes.

Winter in Ohio that year filled the streets with snow and ice. The city became an audience for weather reports -- streets were slick, drifts grew large enough for children to play on, and temperatures dropped below zero. Winter that year, I had an International Finance class, Human Impacts on the Environment, and Ballroom Dancing. I couldn't write an essay on acid rain that made any sense, but I learned how to waltz. It didn't matter anyway; the finance course was where I directed all of my energy. It drained me, doing the work for that class, but I kept reminding myself that it would be worth it one day.

Gerith, on the other hand, dropped his courses that quarter. He said he'd finish them in the summer instead. He started volunteering at the shelter, and soon everything he did revolved around that.

One night in December, while I sat at my desk and studied the effects of chemical treatments on city water, Gerith appeared in my doorway, ringing a bell. He clanged it back and forth lazily several times, then smiled in a way that I knew meant he wanted something.

"I'm going to the grocery store to collect money for the Salvation Army," he said. "You should come."

"I have a final in two days," I said, tapping the book spread out in front of me.

"Come on," he said. "What are you going to learn tonight that you can't cram in tomorrow?" He moved into my room and put his hand on my desk, tapping his fingers near the edge of my book.

"I can't cram," I said. "You know that."

"Do something worthwhile for once," he said.

"I think I am. I'm trying to graduate."

He flipped my book closed and grabbed my leather jacket off the doorknob.

"No arguing," he said. "You're coming. This will be food for your soul."

We stood outside the grocery store fifteen minutes later, in a swirl of snow. Christmas lights lined the awning and filled the store's front window, blinking on and off in time to Christmas music -- "Jingle Bells," I think. The Salvation Army bucket stood propped between us, and Gerith rang his bell continuously. He clanged it louder whenever anyone approached from the parking lot, or whenever the electric doors behind us slid open. I had a bell, too, but I rang it reluctantly, until Gerith shot me a stern look.

"I should be studying," I said.

"You're going to do fine," Gerith assured me. "You can take that test without opening a book."

"Easy for you to say. You've already had this class, and I have a C going into the final."

The doors slid open behind us. A woman wearing a black wool coat and carrying two plastic bags of groceries exited the store. Gerith rang his bell in the air and looked intently at her. "Merry Christmas!" he said.

The woman nodded and returned the greeting. She moved one of her bags into her other hand and dug into her purse for money. She threw a handful of copper and silver into the bucket and walked away.

"Thank you," Gerith called after her. "See," he said. "You just have to call attention to the cause."

"Yeah," I said. I looked at my watch. "How long do I have to do this?"

"Three more hours," Gerith said. He raised his bell and rang it a few times to accent his answer.

"I'm going now," I said. I set my bell down on the bucket, heard the tongue choke inside it, and started to leave.

"You can't go now," Gerith yelled after me. "David, I mean--"

I turned back around, hands stuffed deep in my pockets, and yelled, "What? Just what do you mean?"

He rolled his eyes and stamped his feet on the snow-packed ground, pulled his hair away from his face.

"I mean, God, why don't you just care about something for once in your life? Something outside of yourself."

"You've got a lot of nerve," I told him. "You're just as selfish as I am. Don't think I buy into your Gerith-the-all-giving act. You do that for yourself as much as I study my ass off to graduate." I kicked at a drift of snow and a chunk broke off and burst into powder.

The doors behind Gerith slid open. Mrs. Burroway came toddling out, holding a bag of groceries in her arms. She looked at me and smiled, then looked at Gerith and asked, "When did you boys start ringing the bell? It was a nice old man when I went in."

"We just started half an hour ago," Gerith told her.

"Just missed you, then," said Mrs. Burroway. "Here, hold this for me." She handed Gerith her bag, opened her purse and took out a few bills. She stuffed them into the bucket, hand shaking as she pushed them in. "Were you leaving just now?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "I'm leaving."

"Good. I have some food at home to send home with you. Can you carry my bag for me?"

I nodded. By now, Gerith and I were accustomed to accepting food from Mrs.

Burroway. She brought us a sack every week. Sometimes two sacks. We never knew how she afforded it. She did the same for all of our neighbors, and Gerith mentioned that she brought food to the shelter several times a week as well. I had always assumed she was a well-off widow who lived modestly, but Rosa, the Puerto Rican woman next door, said Mrs. Burroway was as poor as anyone else on the street. "Mrs. Burroway," Rosa said, "she's a good woman, a saint. But you wouldn't catch me spending too much time on her porch." I'd asked Rosa to elaborate, but she'd only said, "No white woman can cook like that."

It was a strange and vague answer that puzzled me as much as some of the graffiti on the streets.

When I took hold of Mrs. Burroway's bag that night in December, I didn't notice any food in it. Mostly furniture polish and toiletries, soap and hair spray.

"Thank you, David," she told me. She swung a scarf around her neck with a little flourish, then put her horse-head cane out in front of her feet and propelled herself forward.

I didn't look back at Gerith as we left. I couldn't. If I did, I might succumb to guilt, and I had too much pride for that. I couldn't let him beat me down for wanting something for myself.

Mrs. Burroway chattered beside me about the winter cold she'd just gotten over, about how terrible the weather was this year. We walked the few blocks to our street, and as we walked and spoke in that lunar landscape, I thought I could hear Gerith, ringing his bell behind us.

Gerith and I didn't speak much after that. We moved around our home like ghosts or shadows, slipping out of the peripheries of each other's vision. I kept to my room, planted at my desk, and Gerith continued to work at the shelter. He started classes again, so he could finish his degree in social work. During the late hours of the night, I'd hear him come home from the shelter and try to ease the front door closed as soundlessly as possible. That never worked, though, because the front door always creaked no matter how much you oiled it. I'd hear him pace the hardwood floor outside my room. I made myself believe he was getting on fine without me.

In early April, I was notified about a job in Chicago. I could start after graduation if I liked. I was ecstatic. A real job, real money for once in my life. With the salary I'd be earning, I could pay back my school loans in two years. I called my parents to tell them the news, to show them that my schooling had paid off.

I had two months to tie up loose strings and to graduate. There were few problems, really. In fact, the only person in my life who could cause me grief at

that point was Gerith.

I couldn't tell him. All through April and halfway through May, I tried to gather the obstinacy I thought I'd need to counter his own. I knew he'd be angry with me for leaving, especially since half the house was mine.

The day I confronted him arrived in the last week of May, when I had only three weeks left before leaving. I waited for Gerith on our front porch, on an old rotten sofa we'd propped out there the summer before. A clay pot filled with dirt but no plant sat beside me, and I wondered if we had ever tried growing anything in it. It was Sunday, and Gerith had pulled an all-nighter at the shelter the night before. When I finally saw him turn onto our street, carrying his overnight bag, walking sluggishly, I entertained the idea of not telling him at all. Just leave and forget about him, I told myself. Forget about Youngstown. The future was my destination.

He greeted me as he approached the porch, a half salute that trailed off into a wave. His hair was bound behind his neck in a ponytail, and the skin beneath his eyes looked puffy and gray.

"Hey there," he said, climbing the porch steps. "How are things going?"

I shrugged.

"Something wrong?"

"I'm leaving," I said. There, it was out.

"Leaving?" Gerith arched his eyebrows and held one of his hands out, palm up. "What do you mean?"

"I have a job," I said. I looked over at the dirt-filled pot beside me, stuffed my fingers in it and played with the dirt. "It's in Chicago."

Gerith didn't say anything right off. I kept playing with the dirt so I wouldn't have to look at him. Finally, though, I looked up.

His head was lowered, his eyes fixed on the peeling floorboards of the porch. He'd let his carryall slip out from under his arm, and he clung to it by its strap. He looked a little bewildered.

"Well," he said. He looked up as he spoke. "Guess you'll want me to buy your

half of the house."

"No," I told him. "It's yours."

He nodded and stared at me and finally said, "I hope you don't like it. The job, I mean. You belong here, David. You'll always have a room here."

"Thanks," I said, "but I don't think I'll be coming back."

"It'll be here," he repeated. Then he went into the house.

I sat outside and wondered why he'd let me off so easy. It wasn't like Gerith to not put up a fight. Maybe I'd caught him when he was too tired. Maybe he'd realized that arguing about this would have been futile.

I didn't move from the sofa for hours. The sun moved across the sky like a hand on a watch, and a pale crescent moon rose up to replace it. I noticed that the Puerto Rican couple's house next door was for sale, although the prospect of it selling was low. Rosa and Manuel had moved out two weeks before, and within a week of their leaving, the neighborhood had picked their house clean. During the night, people had come -- neighbors and people from nearby streets -- and removed the aluminum siding, the copper pipes, brass doorknobs, leftover furniture, and anything else that could be turned over for money. The house sparkled in the twilight now, a house with silver insulation wrap exposed on all sides. It looked as though it had been covered in chewing gum wrappers. I'd seen this several times before, over the year on Chalmers Street. Houses people left behind, house of the recently dead, were veins to be mined.

Two days before I left, an ice storm hit Youngstown. It started as rain, but then the temperature dropped, and soon the city was encased in ice. I watched the whole affair from my bedroom window, until the storm glazed it over with a sheet of corrugated ice. My bags were packed; my room was empty. Anyone could have lived there, or no one.

The electricity shut off sometime during the evening, and I wandered through the house with a flashlight, sweeping through the dark with its swathe of light. The house creaked under the weight of the ice, and I wanted to be in Chicago already, as if in Chicago there would never be any ice. Gerith was at the shelter -- he'd called earlier to say he'd be spending the night there.

It wasn't until later that evening, after night gathered and the storm receded, that I thought to check on Mrs. Burroway. All alone in her ramshackle house, she could have fallen in the dark of the blackout. I put on my jacket and broke a seal of ice off the front door as I pushed out.

Immediately I slipped and fell. The porch was glazed with ice. So were the front lawn, the sidewalks, the streetlights. Tree limbs sagged under the extra weight, grazing the ground. The whole world sparkled under the white light of the moon and stars. A world made of blown glass.

I picked myself up and moved cautiously across the yard, across the street, onto Mrs. Burroway's porch. I couldn't see any light through the windowpane on her front door. No candles or lamps or flashlights. I knocked and ice slid away from where my knuckles hit. After a few moments, when no answer came, I knocked again. Still no answer.

I stepped back down to the lawn. The grass crunched beneath my shoes. I circled around to the side of the house and wiped some ice away from one of the windows, so I could peer in between cupped hands. With my face pressed against the chill of Mrs. Burroway's kitchen window, all I could see was darkness at first. Then, suddenly, light entered the room, a small candle flame that shuddered and winked in the dark, throwing shards of light around the room, breaking the shadows. Behind it was Mrs. Burroway. The flame spun and guttered because the hand she held it in shook. She set it down on her kitchen table, and I saw a feast there, spread across the surface.

The table was made of dark wood, mahogany maybe, and it shone in the candlelight. The food on the table seemed to radiate warmth. There were oranges that shone like globes of gold, a turkey that steamed and sweated glistening juice, pies with cherry gel and peach slices bursting out of their crusts, round chocolate cakes, cans of soup, jugs of milk, boxes of cereal.

Mrs. Burroway moved away from the table and disappeared into the shadows. A moment later she crept back into the light with a stack of brown paper bags in her hands. She set the bags down on a chair, unfolded one, and began to pack fruit, cans of soup, jars of peanut butter, and cartons of eggs into it. She sliced the turkey and slid generous cuts into baggies and included those in the grocery bags as well. My mouth watered at the sight of it all.

She continued to pack bag after bag full of food. When the table was clear, she set the bags on the floor around it. Then she wiped it down with a towel.

I realized I'd become enchanted by this almost religious ritual of hers. I was about to knock on the window when I saw something I have never told anyone about.

After Mrs. Burroway wiped down her table, the air shimmered faintly above the table's surface, and more food, other kinds of food, materialized on it.

Soon an abundance of grapes, Cornish hens, bags of rice, and jars of

golden-brown honey filled the space.

I fogged the window with my breath and wiped it away. But as I wiped at the window my hand squeaked against the glass and Mrs. Burroway turned her head and saw me. At first she looked frightened, her eyes wide and her jaw slack. Then she recognized me and, very slowly, lifted one gnarled finger to her pursed lips.

I nodded dumbly and her mouth bloomed into a smile. She waved at me, and then I turned and left, and went back to my house.

I left Youngstown still in possession of that secret image, of the table and the feast spread over it. Now the thought of Mrs. Burroway's house stripped to gleaming insulation wrap reminded me of what I needed to do. The neighborhood would take from her house what they could, but I had to make sure the table would survive.

I spent the night before the funeral with my parents, rather than go to the old house on Chalmers Street. I needed a night to myself before I could face Gerith. I called my answering machine back in Chicago; I had only one message, from Karen. She told me she was sorry to hear about my friend and to call as soon as I could.

In the morning I woke and dressed for the funeral. I drove to the cemetery in a downpour. Soon the caravan of mourners arrived. I waited in my car until everyone else got out of theirs and hurried under purses and umbrellas to the chapel. I saw Gerith, in the line of pallbearers, grab one handle of Mrs. Burroway's casket and lift it out of the hearse. His hair was combed back into a neat ponytail, and he wore a black suit. It was the first time I'd ever seen him wear one.

After the priest blessed Mrs. Burroway and delivered his sermon, we all left the chapel. Gerith stopped me at the door and put an arm around me. "It's good to see you," he said. I patted him on the back and nodded.

"I'm sorry," I said. I'm sure he thought I was talking about Mrs. Burroway's death. I wasn't, though, not really. It was an apology for not visiting earlier, and for leaving and not keeping in touch. For not telling him about the table. For that night in front of the grocery store.

"I found her," Gerith told me. "No one had seen her for a couple of days, so I went over. I'd been going over to talk to her every so often for the past few years. She was on her kitchen floor -- a stroke, the doctor says. There was all this food on her table. She'd been cooking enough for an army again."

"I have to show you something," I said. I led Gerith to my car and told him to get in. "Trust me," I said. "It's important."

We drove back to Chalmers Street. The old neighborhood had changed some, of course, but most things remained the same. The Puerto Rican couple's house had been torn down and now it was an empty lot. Our house, though, Gerith's and my house, looked the same.

"It's in Mrs. Burroway's house," I told Gerith. He looked at me and furrowed his brow.

"What are you talking about, David?" he said.

I opened the car door and ran through the sheets of rain to Mrs. Burroway's front porch. Luckily it seemed no one had touched it yet. I imagined this might be out of some obscure loyalty to Mrs. Burroway, although how long that loyalty would last was uncertain.

Gerith followed behind me, jingling keys in his hands. "What is it?" he asked again, as he opened her door.

I brought him through the front rooms of her house, which smelled of medicine and dust, and into her kitchen. It was still there -- the table, filled with a preserved feast. "This is it," I said. And I finally told Gerith what I'd witnessed.

After we cleared the table of food, Gerith and I lifted it at both ends and moved it awkwardly through her house, bumping into walls and lamps. Then we carried it across the street in the rain, to our house.

We moved Gerith's wobbly-legged table into a side room, and then I said, "Let's see what's what." We stood one on either side of Mrs. Burroway's table, which I now saw had been inlaid with a lighter stained wood as a border. Tiny runes of some sort were scrawled along the border, burned into the wood. I took a damp dish towel and said, "Here we go."

But as I wiped and wiped her shining table, nothing happened. There was no shimmering in the air just over the surface, no ghostly smells preceding the transported food. Gerith looked up at me skeptically. "It's okay, David," he said. "It's still a nice table."

"But--" I said. "But I know what I saw." Then I had an idea. I handed the damp towel over the table to Gerith. "You try," I said.

He must have been pitying me, because he began to wipe the table down with a sigh. "We can't do this forever," he said. "People are coming here for the memorial."

But even as he spoke, it was working. "Look, Gerith," I said, and he moved his hand from the table. Already the air danced with tiny blue sparks. Then the food began to take shape, first transparent as a film projection, then suddenly solid. The roasts, the fruit, the boxes of cereal and cans of soup. Gerith laughed, a little surprised sound, and looked at me with unbelieving eyes.

"It's how she did it," I said. "All those years."

We talked for the rest of the day, about old times, about Chalmers Street and the shelter. Neighbors came and we all shared stories about Mrs. Burroway, although I kept my story about her to myself. I decided to stay for a few more days so Gerith and I could catch up properly. I told Gerith about Karen, and called her to let her know everything was all right. And all of this time -- while the neighbors visited, while Gerith and I reacquainted ourselves -- we sat around the table and its feast. We sent bags of food home with everyone.

It was enough, I told myself. I knew the table would be in the best of hands with Gerith, the kind of hands that were like Mrs. Burroway's. Open from the start.

I left for Chicago a few days later. On the way out of the city, I passed under the Market Street bridge again. It still said, YOU HAVE CROSSED THE LINE.