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Newburgh

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Newburgh

Rachel Barber

Low, murmuring tones swept toward me from the corner computer. I glanced sideways, taking in again the gaunt form, the woman in the dirty overcoat with wiry, unkempt hair. Her mouth kept working, pushing out new syllables in a constant buzz, and her fingers leapt back and forth from the desktop keyboard to a fidgety grip—a two-handed clasp like a prayer, but gangly and desperate, her fingers tightly wound in and out. The woman's eyes held the Dell screen steadily, even as her lips hurried on, her mumbling revving up a decibel.

I turned back to my computer.

At SUNY Orange's library, as well as the Newburgh Free Library and, I imagine, any other library in the city of Newburgh, New York, you were likely to find at least one poor soul in a corner talking to herself, no matter the day. Sometimes, if nonthreatening, she would be allowed to stay inside the whole workday, shuffling between a desktop computer and a comfy armchair, the library her refuge. Other days, though, she'd be dragged out by security, screaming about the drugs she wasn't taking, or pouring out curses and death threats against the librarians and the guards. It all depended on the day and the person.

Not that any of it was really troubling, of course, at least not to a high school junior completing her AP History homework at the library. SUNY Orange had excellent security.

Newburgh, for as long as it's existed, has never quite decided how it feels about the marginalized—the poor, the minority, the mentally ill. As Newburghrevealed.org will tell the dilettante historian, the city flourished in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, stimulating industrial and commercial growth when it lined its old turnpikes with railway tracks (and, of course, the city's location on the Hudson River had already roused some trade in preceding decades). Businesses expanded so fully, in fact, that an influx of African Americans settled into the city in the early decades of the twentieth century, searching for jobs, and a further flood of Puerto Ricans hit the Newburgh streets in the fifties and sixties, similarly eager for employment in the booming Newburgh economy. The wealthier, whiter population, however, couldn't quite come to terms with these less affluent newcomers. As increasingly poorer families made their way to Newburgh, property values declined and well-off businesses and individuals abandoned the city, moving out into newer suburbs. During

the fifties and sixties as poor, minority migration burgeoned, the Hudson waterfront properties of Newburgh—once alive with trade and businesses—swiftly deteriorated, transformed from well-kept shop-windows and neat, tidy apartment buildings to smashed-in glass and crumbling walls.

Still, the city of Newburgh assured its poorest inhabitants of rebirth and renewal, tearing down the waterfront's dead buildings (and displacing poor African American and Hispanic families in the process) in the 1960s with the promise of safer houses and civic centers. Unfortunately, the sleek, shining housing developments of this “urban renewal” project never actually materialized, leaving the waterfront's displaced populations either homeless or in houses equally decrepit. When, in the 1990s, I first laid my own eyes on the riverside beyond Water Street, the waterfront stood nearly empty, the homes long torn down and replaced with barren air. The demolition did leave a beautiful view of the Hudson River—especially at sunset, when the sky's tangerine glow fired up the water's gloss. Nevertheless, it also left some the city's most marginalized people homeless.

My own family, in all of our encounters with Newburgh, would observe first-hand the unremitting tensions between promise and disappointment, between concern for the poor and acceptance of the city's dilapidation. My parents lived in nearby New Windsor—a wealthier and proudly separate white community—for eight years under a pastoral appointment, during which time my parents interacted nonstop with Newburgh, particularly in ministry to its poor and mentally ill inhabitants. Thanks to charities linked to my pastor-mother and thanks to my father's work as a librarian at SUNY Orange and the Newburgh Free Library (libraries are a common shelter for the poor), we were never able to forget about the city's disenfranchised. For years, I watched my mother and father support the charities and churches at work in the area, from Grace United Methodist Church to Project L.I.F.E. (a housing program) to Newburgh's branch of Habitat for Humanity. My family's experience of Newburgh was an ongoing glimpse of the city's distress amidst attempts at restoration. My parents actively participated in Newburgh's healthy and generally wholesome institutions—the libraries, charities, and churches—but that meant facing the poverty, crime, and inexorable brokenness of Newburgh up-close.

It was not uncommon, for example, for my mother to come across sketchy scenes while we lived in New Windsor. She made regular food deliveries to Newburgh, to broken down houses on graffiti-ridden streets, and once, as her red Ford Escort stopped at a corner, a skinny, poorly shaven stranger ran up to her side window, a small, plastic bag in his hand. The plastic was loaded down by a heap of white powder.

Taken aback, my mother stared, her brown eyes wide, at the stranger. As she leaned her head towards the window, she told him, “Oh no, I'm just doing a food delivery.”

“Ohh,” the coke-dealer mumbled, “sorry Ma’am.” He lifted his scrawny hands in apology and scurried back towards the dark outlines of the street’s rickety buildings.

Or again, on another food delivery, my mother drove by a tall, broad-shouldered young man standing in the center of the street, his eyes cast out, like a hunter’s, over the cracking asphalt and the boarded up windows. Like any other number of young men on the streets in Newburgh, he held a gun in his hand.¹

Never deterred, although a bit shaken up, my mother leaned out her window once more, timidly proclaiming her desire to deliver food. The man maintained his firm stance, keeping watch over the smashed and pot-holed concrete, but he waved my mother by permissively.

Or for instance, my father came into work one day at the Orange County Community College—Newburgh’s beacon of learning and societal improvement—to find that one of the college’s windows had been shattered in the middle of the night (someone had seen fit to shoot a bullet through it). My dad still works there, though, to this day. Aside from the occasional drug addicts and mentally unstable patrons, the library’s actually not that dangerous.

In spite of all of the drugs and violence in Newburgh, the city (according to City-Data.com) maintains a mediocre average of 1.6 police officers per thousand residents, about half of New York state’s average. Although a couple of wealthier neighborhoods, or better-secured properties like the Orange County Community College, can rely on some peace and protection, robbery and assault remain high problems throughout the area, problems that neither the local authorities nor the most concerned individuals seem quite capable of dealing with.

I myself would try, of course, to persevere in love and hope, to follow my parents’ lead—I believed and believe their assertion that we see Christ in every human, but especially in the poor. Still, I tended and tend to sidestep the mentally ill at the libraries, and I keep my head down when large, elderly folk with sharp body odors walk by. And I generally avoid walking the streets of Newburgh alone, even in daylight. I believe in helping the poor—I’ve gone on Habitat tours and volunteered at Project L.I.F.E. fundraisers—but I circumvent direct contact with Newburgh’s poorest and shadiest persons, burying my head in papers or a computer to reduce the chances of my eyes meeting the marginalized. I won’t walk away from a Newburgh citizen in need, but I never strike up a conversation either, or extend a firm, helping hand. I suppose, like the city of Newburgh itself, I’ve never quite decided how I feel about its needy.

I looked up from the pile of papers and books in front of me, scattered across the clean, gray tabletop in the Newburgh Free Library. As a

part of my senior thesis for college, I had been reading up on Christopher Smart's poem, "Jubilate Agno", before this middle-aged figure, leaning heavily on his wooden cane, limped over to my table. A wool cap clung to the top of his head, and a faded blue jacket draped his shoulders, a shield against the elements (even though it was still mid-summer). He glanced at me almost apologetically, his short, graying beard bowing towards the table as he asked, "Can I use the power outlet?"

"Of course," I replied automatically, already starting up from my seat, pouring my mess of thesis papers into my backpack, "and you can have the whole table too—I'm on my way out." That was actually true—it was time to meet my ride on the upper floor of the library. A former parishioner and I were headed to a United Methodist conference on poverty.

"Thanks," the stranger mumbled, laying out a black and white composition book on the table. As I hastily pushed my laptop into my bag, he continued, "I'm a poet, you know: a friend's setting me up with a publisher."

I nodded, forcing interest, and paused to remark, "Cool, I'm an English major myself, with a writing concentration."

And suddenly the marble notebook was open and he had pushed a pencil-marked page in front of me. For all of his limping and his out-of-place, autumnal clothing, the man's handwriting curved with an artist's flow, smoothly and delicately across the paper. I skimmed his short poem, nodding congenially and answering, my tone even, "It's pretty." It was okay.

"It had better be good enough," the man sighed, pulling the composition back in towards himself, his fingers hanging rigidly, almost pleadingly to his book and pencil. His eyes caught the poem in a dim, but hopeful gaze. "I need this."

I looked the man over, from the woolen cap holding fast to his head, to his dark blue jacket hugging his body closely, to his fingers glued determinedly—desperately—to his notebook. Apart from his clear emotional and monetary depression, he actually looked pretty normal (not everyone who frequents Newburgh's libraries is mentally unstable). As I pulled my backpack about my shoulders and pushed in my chair, I nodded again his way. "I hope that goes well for you—I really do."

Then I left him alone at the table. I had a poverty conference to attend.

¹In September of 2011, New York magazine would specifically identify the city of Newburgh as the "Murder Capital of New York," noting that Poughkeepsie—another city my family would make regular food deliveries to—was second only to Newburgh for its per capita violent crime rate (violent crime is defined legally as murder, forcible rape, robbery, or aggravated assault). Of course, the particular food deliveries mentioned here took place over a decade before 2011—back when Newburgh was safe.