

# ENOUGH TO GO AROUND

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*For my dad, Michael, who would have loved it*



*God grant you many years!*

—OLD CHURCH SLAVONIC SONG

*God strike you dead with lightning!*

—OLD CZECHOSLOVAKIAN CURSE



## CHAPTER ONE

*If they make me go it will be the death of me.*

Anna Sopko hoisted herself up out of her sagging, old, floral print couch and hobbled over to switch off the as-old TV set. *Don't they realize that?*

She walked down the dim hallway toward her bedroom while straightening her baby-blue fleece robe. Her slippers shuffled across the parquet floor. She remembered picking it out as the three-bedroom house was being built in 1969, almost twenty years ago. And it was fine that so many years had passed and the flooring had not changed. Nothing that truly matters is affected by the passing of time, Anna thought. Not love. Not faith. Only the scratched-up floor and my old bones. And what did they matter?

She passed the hallway full of old framed photographs – her wedding, her three children's graduations – and stopped at the door to her room, trying to recall what it was she had been going in there for. The laundry. Anna had lately been plagued by episodes of forgetfulness – forgetting her phone number when asked, forgetting to turn off the oven, and sometimes, which deeply concerned her children, forgetting to eat. She passed it off as “just being old,” but it bothered her, too, more than she wanted to admit.

And the worst thing was the thought of going to live in a retirement home, as her children wanted her to do. “You'll be safer,” they kept saying. But she had always been safe! She crossed an ocean at seventeen and kept herself safe then. Her husband had died seven years ago, and she had been safe all this time since. A retirement home might keep her body safe, but not her spirit. She was too independent for that. Didn't her own children realize that?

Michael, her husband, would frequently forget things in the years before he died. He would go to the door and just stand there, not only forgetting what he had come for, but where he was. In the 1970s doctors told Anna that he was senile. Now, thinking of her recent forgetfulness, she wondered if she was going senile too. But she didn't go out for a walk around the block and tell the police officer who found her three hours later that she was going home to Czechoslovakia.

She could never understand why her husband had wanted to go back. That place was nothing but a blurry black and white photograph to her. She had come to America sixty-two years ago and never returned. Her memory of Czechoslovakia was like a dream lost upon awakening, and she liked it that way. Anna could easily remember her childhood when asked, even better than she could remember her last meal sometimes. But she preferred to let her past stay where it was, in elusive shades of gray, like a charcoal drawing, smudged and imperfect. Maybe Michael had wanted to go back because his past wasn't like hers. He didn't owe any explanations to anyone. He hadn't left a jilted lover (that she knew of). He hadn't watched a sibling die, knowing he was responsible. He hadn't felt that pain.

Anna sighed, more from exertion than emotion. She struggled with her cracked, white plastic laundry basket as she began walking to the garage. Recently her son Peter had again tried to convince her to let someone come in to do the housekeeping, and she again refused. Now, trudging down the

hallway, she began to realize that he was probably right. But it was happening so quickly! Wasn't it just a few months ago that she went camping in Yosemite with her daughter Anya and her family? Or was that the summer before?

She set the laundry basket down on the floor of the kitchen and opened the door to the garage. Anna braced herself against the cold darkness. With her foot she pushed the basket toward the washing machine, visible from the pale daylight streaming in through the ground-level wall vents. She glanced around the two-car garage as her eyes adjusted. They roamed over stacks of boxes filled with musty clothing, books, magazines, her husband's unfinished woodworking projects, children's and grandchildren's toys, once-used exercise equipment, and God knew what else. No car. That had been sold last year when she reluctantly admitted that her reflexes were probably no longer quick enough for driving. She hated that someone, usually her son, had to drive her to do her grocery shopping.

*I don't want to be like Michael's mother, bothersome, taking up space and time in my children's home. They finally get their children in college, and I come along so they can take care of me, when they want to go on a cruise. How bad will it get? How soon? Will they have to help bathe me like I had to do for Michael?*

A lump formed in her throat as she remembered caring for her husband before his death, watching him deteriorate more each day. She could feel the creaking of his bones as she helped him to get in and out of the tub. Sometimes, he was like a little boy as he sat there and whined when soap got in his eyes. Sometimes he cried, but not from the soap. And she cried with him.

She poured too much powdered soap into the washing machine, and then she realized that there was already a load of clothes in there, ready to be transferred to the dryer. *Damn it.* Since she could pull the clothes out easily, she figured they hadn't been sitting there too long. Piece by piece, she shook the soap off onto the cement floor, then put the clothes in the dryer.

Anna put in the new load to be washed, started both the washer and dryer, and went back into the house. She stood in the kitchen, deciding if she should eat something. Was it time? Did she need to?

A loud thump came from her bedroom, like something had been knocked over. A chill spread through her. She could hear rustling sounds; someone was definitely in her bedroom. She bit her lip as her mind raced.

Anna felt clammy as she realized it was not one of her children. Something drew her, almost hypnotically, down the hallway. She had to know; she had to see with her own eyes. She stood transfixed in front of her bedroom door, with no thought of what to do.

*God protect me!*

Anna never really looked at the young man. She felt herself go numb as his form appeared in front of her, toe to toe as he stopped short, startled for a second. He didn't seem very tall, but even someone shorter than herself would have alarmed her, terrified her as much.

He took a small step back, but Anna didn't notice. She couldn't yell, couldn't say anything with her tongue thick and cold, her entire body frozen, unaware of her heart thumping fanatically.

*Scream, why don't you?! Help! Oh, God!*

She managed a mere gasp as the young man in a low-brimmed baseball cap yelled, "Get out of the way!" He clamped his free hand on her shoulder and shoved her down to the floor. Her knees buckled and she crumpled to the carpet, coming down hard on her right hip. Pain shot through that side of her body, up to her shoulder, down, hitting her elbow, and then spread to the tips of her fingers.



Anna grimaced and moaned. Then she opened her eyes to see the back of the young man – his blue jeans and black T-shirt – as he opened the front door and slung a black canvas backpack over his shoulder. He ran out, leaving the door wide open. Sunlight poured in through it, almost reaching the hallway where Anna lay, her body heaving with sobs.

*Oh, God, he will come back!*

As she cried, she tried to keep herself from reaching hysteria. Willing her shaking arms and rubbery legs to move, she began to crawl out of the hallway. She wanted to close the front door – *bolt it* – her one protection from another attack, but the phone was closer.

She sat up a little with her legs bent under her, picked up the receiver, and punched the number four button on the memory-dial phone that her son had bought for her and shown her how to use. Her gasping had subsided somewhat, but her hands still shook.

“Peter...Peter...”

She needed his comforting voice, his stable presence. He would know what to do. He was a lawyer! Her loving, intelligent, accountable son would help her. “Ma? Ma! What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Hearing his voice brought an emotional swell to hers; she felt the consuming fear again as she stumbled over words. “Come quick! Someone robbed me...he - ”

“You were robbed! Are you *hurt*?”

Anna swallowed and took a breath before answering. She remembered the searing pain in her hip and leg but didn’t want Peter to worry. She hoped that the pain (and her fear) would eventually go away. “I’m okay, but I’m scared. I don’t know what to do. He was in the house -”

“He was in the house! Is he gone now?”

“Yes, but I’m scared, Peter. Will you come?”

Peter assured her that he was on his way, and she felt the sobs coming on again as she struggled to hang up the phone. The pain in her hip surged and she collapsed, slumping between the couch and the coffee table.

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Fifteen minutes later Anna jolted back to consciousness as her son lifted her and said, “Ma...Ma – it’s Peter. Are you all right? Let’s get you up here on the couch. Ma? Can you hear me?”

Anna opened her eyes, shocked to find herself on the floor, and then images of the robbery flooded her memory, as definite as a wave when it finally crashes on the shore. She glanced at the front door, which was now shut, and then rested her eyes on the familiar face of her middle-aged son. He lifted her from the floor to the couch and sat her upright. She winced from the pain in her hip.

“Why didn’t you go next door?” Peter coughed and loosened his necktie as he sat down next to her.

“I just...couldn’t...move, Peter. I was so scared!” Anna grimaced and put her face in her hands as she cried.

Peter reached over and took her hand in his. “I know, Ma. It’s okay now. It was a very scary thing to happen, but it’s over now, and you’re all right.”

Anna’s voice halted through her sobs. “We lived in Los Angeles for forty-seven years and nothing

like this happened before!”

“I know, Ma. We were very fortunate. But now, we’ll just install bars on the windows and some other type -”

“It doesn’t matter! It could happen anywhere! Not just in the house – on the street, in my own neighborhood!”

“Ma, tell me what happened. Just start with that and we’ll go from there.”

“It’s just, when I think of what could have happened...” she cried, filled with fear.

“But it didn’t, Ma, it didn’t. Just...take a deep breath. Come on, breathe with me now.” Peter took her hands, looked into her eyes, and guided her through a calming breath. Anna looked at the concerned face of her second child, round and smooth like her husband’s had been when he was younger. Peter had his father’s deep, soulful gray-blue eyes and bald head. In fact, he looked so much like Michael that she let herself believe for an instant that it was her husband holding her, soothing her. He was there and he was not senile; he was strong and he was looking into her brown eyes. Just for one cherished moment. *Yes, Michael, I feel better now.*

“I was in the garage doing laundry,” Anna said, “and when I came back into house I heard noises coming from bedroom.”

Anna closed her eyes and told him what she had heard, the thumps and rustling sounds. She could visualize so many things with her eyes closed – all the painful memories she tried so hard to forget. Her sister pitching head-first off the roof and Anna saying she didn’t know what happened. *Accidents and death, loss and loneliness.* She wanted to confess to the only one who needed to know the truth, someone she hadn’t seen in sixty-two years. *Guilt and shame. Fear.* The memories ran through her mind in quick succession, like the cars of a midnight train.

“Mm-hmm. Then what?”

“I started to walk down hall and then all of a sudden he was right in front of me, and...he -” Her voice halted. Anna realized that, although painful and frightening, the burglary paled in comparison to any other traumatic event in her life. This time, her father was not beaten by soldiers and taken away. This time, villages were not burned. Siblings didn’t die. Yes, she was afraid, but that was all. She didn’t want to lend any power to that lousy fool who had dared to break into her home and steal from her. He wasn’t worth it. He was nothing.

“It’s okay, Ma. Just tell me.”

“He said, ‘Get out of the way,’ and he pushed me down and ran out front door and left it open. And then I was in pain and scared, so I crawled to phone and called you.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Ma,” Peter said, embracing her. He asked about her injury and suggested going to the doctor, which Anna declined. She didn’t want to take up any more of his time. “Well, I’m going to go have a look in the room. You just sit here; I’ll get you something to drink.” Peter walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of water from a pitcher in the refrigerator. He took a sip as he walked back to his mother and handed her the glass. Then he headed down the hallway toward her bedroom.

*Oh, what did that worthless bum take?*

“Ma,” she heard Peter call out. “I’m trying not to touch anything, in case the police want to get fingerprints. But it looks like he went through your jewelry box, and some clothes are on the floor in

front of the closet. For some reason he must have taken your old mink stole because it's not where you usually keep it. He stole the stole - sorry. And it looks like he took some jewelry. I don't remember all that you had, but I don't see the ruby set - the ring, necklace, and earrings. Did you happen to see any-thing he took with him?"

"No, Peter; it happened so fast. He was wearing blue jeans and black T-shirt, I think. And that's all I remember..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered opening the presents Christmas morning in 1938. She had treasured her mink stole for fifty years. Michael had saved his paltry factory worker earnings to buy it for her. She had worn it every Christmas, every anniversary, including their fiftieth, eight years before he died. It soothed her every time she'd touched it in the seven years since. Every time her fingertips lingered on the silky brown fur. Every time she felt that divine connection, that link with the good life, the satisfaction of achieving shared goals, the remembrance of a determined love.

"He had no right to take it," she mumbled, tears pooling in her eyes.

Peter, standing by the phone, hadn't heard. "Okay, Ma, I'll call the police now." She heard him flip through the pages of the phonebook and pick up the receiver to dial out. He coughed and said, "Hello. I have a burglary to report..."

Anna leaned over to set her water glass on the coffee table. She began to wring her hands and bite the inside of her bottom lip. The buzzer went off inside the garage, signaling that the clothes were finished in the dryer. Anna glanced at the door leading to the garage as the buzzer stopped. In the space of fifty minutes since she had put the clothes in the dryer, she had gone from the strong, independent seventeen-year-old immigrant to a frail, vulnerable seventy-nine-year-old who needed to move to a retirement home to be safe. There was no escaping it now, the hopeless inevitability of complete dependency.

"He had no right to take it," she whispered.

\*

Peter Sopko figured his mid-life crisis had finally hit. He hadn't bought a red sports car, he hadn't had an affair with his secretary, nor had he quit his job to backpack around the world. He had no inclination for clichés. He was just a crazy fool who decided to take his sixteen-year-old daughter, nine-year-old son, two-year-old grandson, and their nineteen-year-old Czechoslovakian cousin to Disneyland for the day. His wife of twenty years was at home having a nervous breakdown. And after an hour at Disneyland alone with the kids, he was ready to join her.

"Leif!" he admonished the tow-headed toddler who had run after some pigeons. "Hold Grandpa's hand! You don't want to get lost!" Then Peter turned around and called, "Kat! Joseph! Danika!"

"We're right here, Dad," his daughter Kat, short for Katya, said in an exasperated tone. Her blue-lined eyes glowered at him from beneath her California Angels baseball cap, and he realized that she no longer had to look up at him when she made eye contact. "We followed you when you took off after Leif."

"Oh. Good," Peter said, feeling a headache coming on. He coughed a little, his "nervous" cough before speaking in an awkward situation or when under stress. "Okay," he continued, catching his

breath. "What would you guys like to do next?"

"Autopia!" Kat said at the same time that Joseph said, "Peter Pan!"

Peter had hoped, foolishly, he realized, that seven years would have been enough of an age difference between his two younger children for the older one to concede to the younger one, but in fact it was usually the other way around. Kat, the only athletic one in the family, was fiercely competitive. She did not see her younger brother, a Lego-building daydreamer, as one to be coddled but one to be conquered. And someone who would rather read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* did not bond well with someone who would rather be at the batting cage. Joseph was content to entertain himself in his room instead of fighting to watch a TV program that was on at the same time as one that Kat wanted to watch. At first it bothered Peter that his younger son was so compliant, his daughter so demanding. Was that sexist of him, or just concerned? And he certainly saw to it that Joseph got to choose occasionally and Kat couldn't override him. But would Joseph grow up to be subservient? Would Kat grow up to be self-absorbed?

Peter turned to his daughter while Leif pulled on his hand. He braced himself and wished that his older son, Leif's father, had been able to come. Crowd control with an active toddler was something he wished he had not taken on. "We're already in Fantasyland, Kat, so we might as well do Peter Pan first and then go over to Tomorrowland to do the Autopia and the Rockets -"

"- and the Submarine!" Joseph interjected with excitement. Peter noticed that his son's sandy blond hair needed a trim.

"Whatever," Kat scowled. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her puffy pink ski jacket and turned to her third cousin. Three years apart, they looked like sisters with their long, straight blond hair, gray-blue eyes, and slim physique. "Joseph always gets what he wants," Kat mumbled, rolling her eyes.

Peter opened his mouth to object when Danika stepped forward and gestured to Leif. "He is same as the little boy...I am nanny for," she said in her soft, accented voice, smiling. "You want I watch him? I bring cookies!" She gestured to her denim purse.

"Thank you, Danika," Peter answered, relieved. Danika had come to the United States four months earlier to visit family and find work to do during her six-month stay. She had studied English for three years in high school, and Peter could hear the improvement in her language skills every time he saw her since her arrival. She had been shy and reticent then, reluctant to speak for fear of saying the wrong thing. Now, she was still quiet, but she spoke more freely and showed a little confidence. She loved the two children, a three-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl, that she watched for a wealthy couple in Brentwood.

Danika squatted down to Leif's level and said, "Hi, Leif. You want to play with me now?"

"Want cookie!" Leif said. His little blond head bobbed up and down, answering *yes* to himself.

"Okay, Leif can have cookie, but Leif stay with Danika. Okay?" Danika pulled a plastic bag of vanilla wafers out of her shoulder bag, and Leif continued bobbing his head as he reached for the cookies.

*Thank God.* "Okay, let's go get in line for Peter Pan," Peter said as he put an arm around his children and began walking with them. He felt Kat recoil from his touch and decided to talk to her later. Now was not the time. One thing he had learned in his years of being a family mediation counselor and divorce lawyer was that timing was everything. Timing and attitude. And lately he couldn't stand his

daughter's attitude.

*Why do I come here every year? Why do I come at all? I loathe this place. This isn't the way to bond with the kids. I'm paying a small fortune to be a referee and give myself a migraine.*

Peter wished he could be home reading. His favorite spot in the house was his papasan chair with a beige twill cushioned seat in the small library he had set up on the stair landing. He loved to be splayed out in the chair, his feet propped up on the matching footstool, a good book in one hand and a glass of red wine in the other, with the sun streaming in through the vertical blinds behind him. He would much rather be there on a Saturday afternoon than standing in line for hours with a surly teen girl, a distractible boy, a rambunctious toddler, a foreigner learning to speak English, and a hundred thousand other people. It served no purpose for him, other than to get the kids out of the house so that his wife could rest.

Theresa. His wife of twenty years, with her honey blonde shoulder-length hair and willowy figure, her perfect picket fence of teeth that he rarely saw anymore, her startling green eyes that no longer captivated anyone, was not at the top of her game. She hadn't been for years, but it had recently gotten worse. He figured it was depression, but he couldn't figure out why or what to do. She had good days and bad days. The good days were manageable; she got up and made breakfast for Joseph, who was in fourth grade, and got him out the door in time for the school bus. She chatted with Peter about inconsequential things while he ate breakfast and got ready for work. Then she watched their grandson while their nineteen-year-old son and his wife, who lived in the first floor of the Sopko's tri-level home, went off to their respective jobs. On the bad days, she stayed in bed while Peter made sure that Joseph and Kat got up and ready for school. Then, according to their older son Mike, Theresa would drag herself around the house in a baby-blue fleece robe (by coincidence alarmingly similar to the one Peter's mother wore), curl up on the living room couch, and stare at the wall. Mike would venture in with Leif, set him up with the Disney channel on TV, and put a pile of toddler books and snacks near Theresa. He'd tell her that he was going to school (he took classes at a local community college), that Leif was going to watch TV, and he reminded her when and what to feed him. Could she function well enough to take care of a toddler for several hours? Her bad days, which used to only occur about once a month, were now occurring more frequently. Peter, with work and household duties, was too preoccupied to do anything, even though he knew that something needed to be done. Where was the witty, well-read paralegal he had fallen in love with? Theresa had quit work two weeks before Mike had been born and never went back. She said that she wanted to be a stay-at-home parent, that she felt strongly about doing it and claimed she never regretted it. But twenty years was a good chunk of time. Time enough for the first child to grow up and have a child of his own. And Theresa was helping to raise him.

It was the right thing to do, they felt, to allow their son and his then-girlfriend, Heather, to live with them after the baby was born. There was no way two seventeen-year-olds could make a home for themselves in Los Angeles County, continue to go to school and work, and take care of a baby. And they were good kids. Even good kids have sex when they're in love. Even good kids who were raised going to church, as Mike had been. Of course, when he turned eighteen, he stopped going. But Peter didn't hold it against him. In fact, he secretly wished that he could do the same. He'd gone to church nearly every Sunday of his life and questioned whether that made him a better person. He wished he could go on a "church sabbatical" for six months, just to see if he missed it, to see if it made

a difference in his life. He believed in God and appreciated how blessed he had been with his home, his family, and his ability to provide for them through his work. He was thankful for his health and that of his loved ones. But he saw so much hypocrisy in these religious people who sang at church and dropped their collection envelopes in the basket and then cursed each other when they cut each other off in the parking lot, trying to leave church as fast as they could. Peter, through his job, knew what they were like all week long – yelling at their spouses and kids, gossiping about the neighbors, telling racist jokes, having affairs, driving drunk. He thought about the cases of molestation and rape courtesy of the parish priests. Peter was reaching a point where he still believed in God but no longer wanted to be affiliated with the Catholic Church. But he couldn't stop going. How could he explain that to his mother? She wouldn't understand. For her, there was no separation between God and the Church. *God is the Church.*

Theresa would understand, probably, if he talked to her about it. But they didn't really talk anymore. They just went through the motions of their lives. Monday through Friday: get out of bed, get the kids off to school, go to work or stay home with a toddler and do housework, prepare dinner together, watch a little TV, go to bed and read, then sleep. Saturday: yard work and running errands, maybe a family outing, maybe sex before bed, if the outing hadn't made Theresa too tired. Sunday: church, then visiting family throughout the urban sprawl of Los Angeles County. Both Peter's mother and his older sister lived within twenty-five miles of them, as did Theresa's sister and their families, and their parents. Christmas was a mad scramble of church, coming home to open the rest of the presents (they allowed the kids to open two gifts before church), and then traversing no less than nine different freeways as they made the visiting rounds with their relatives. Every year they did that, every year they went on a family ski trip to Mammoth Mountain, and every year they went to Disneyland.

As Peter and his children boarded the Peter Pan ride, he thought how ironic it was that he should share the name of the fictitious boy who never wanted to grow up. That now, as he grasped at holding his marriage together and being a more involved father, all he wished for was to be a kid again, to only be concerned with getting his paper route done and doing his homework, to play with the dog and not have to worry about a depressed wife and an aging mother who was not taking very good care of herself. The thought had occurred to him that his mother really needed to go into a retirement home to be safe. And if she forgot to eat, there would be someone there to feed her. He was relieved she had not been severely harmed during the break-in.

The ride came to its jolting conclusion and the three hopped out to look for Danika and Leif, who would be waiting near the exit. Kat, much to Peter's relief, actually allowed a smile to cross her now brace-free teeth, and she walked next to him, weaved her arm through his, and in a sing-song voice reminded him about the Autopia being next.

"Yes, honey," he said and kissed the top of her head. And then he saw Danika. Her eyes were watery and red-rimmed. Her chin trembled.

*Oh, God, Peter thought. Where's Leif?*