

# PRAYING FOR SLEEP



JEFFERY DEAVER



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**VIKING**

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# ***Praying for Sleep***

*And can you, by no drift of conference,  
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,  
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet  
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?*

*Hamlet*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE





# 1

Like a cradle, the hearse rocked him gently.

The old vehicle creaked along a country road, the asphalt cracked and root-humped. He believed the journey had so far taken several hours though he wouldn't have been surprised to find that they'd been on the road for days or weeks. At last he heard the squeal of bad brakes and was jostled by an abrupt turn. Then they were on a good road, a state road, and accelerating quickly.

He rubbed his face across a satiny label sewn inside the bag. He couldn't see the label in the darkness but he remembered the words elegantly stitched in black thread on yellow cloth.

*Union Rubber Products*  
*Trenton, NJ 08606*  
*MADE IN USA*

He caressed this label with his ample cheek and sucked air through the minuscule opening where the zipper hadn't completely seated. The smoothness of the hearse's transit suddenly troubled him. He felt he was falling straight down to hell, or maybe into a well where he'd be wedged immobile, head down, forever. . . .

This thought aroused a piercing fear of confinement and when it grew unbearable he craned his neck and drew back his thick lips. He gripped the inside of the zipper with lengthy teeth, yellow and gray as cat's claws, and with them he struggled to work the mechanism open. One inch, two, then several more. Cold, exhaust-scented air filled the bag. He inhaled greedily. The air diminished



the bristle of claustrophobia. The men who took away the dead, he knew, called what he now lay in a "crash bag." But he couldn't recall these men ever taking away anyone dead from a crash. The dead ones died by leaping from the top of the stairwell in E Ward. They died from severed veins in their fat forearms. They died face down in toilets and they died like the man this afternoon—a strip of cloth wound round and round and round his neck.

But he couldn't recall a single crash.

His teeth rose from his lips again and he worked the zipper open further, eight inches, ten. His round shaved head emerged from the jagged opening. With his snarling lips and thick face he had the appearance of a bear—though one that was not only hairless but blue, for much of his head was dyed that color.

Finally able to look about he was disappointed to find that this wasn't a real hearse at all but merely a station wagon and it wasn't even black but tan. The back windows weren't shaded and he could see ghostly forms of trees, signs, power towers and barns as the wagon sped past—his view distorted by the misty darkness of the autumn evening.

In five minutes he began on the zipper again, angry that his arms were pinioned helpless by, he muttered in frustration, "damn good New Jersey rubber." He opened the crash bag another four inches.

He frowned. What was that *noise*?

Music! It came from the front seat, separated from the back by a black fiberboard divider. He generally liked music but certain melodies upset him greatly. The one he now heard, a country-western tune, for some reason set off within him bursts of uneasiness.

I hate this bag! he thought. It's too damn *tight*.

Then it occurred to him that he wasn't alone. That's it—the bag was filled with the souls of crashed and shattered bodies. The jumpers and the drowners and the wrist slitters.

He believed that these souls hated him, that they knew he was

an impostor. They wanted to seal him up alive, forever, in this tight rubber bag. And with these thoughts came the evening's first burst of real panic—raw, liquid, cold. He tried to relax by using the breathing exercises he'd been taught but it was too late. Sweat popped out on his skin, tears formed in his eyes. He shoved his head viciously into the opening of the bag. He wrenched his hands up as far as they'd go and beat the thick rubber. He kicked with his bare feet. He slammed the bridge of his nose into the zipper, which snapped out of track and froze.

Michael Hrubek began to scream.

The music stopped, replaced by a mumble of confused voices. The hearse rippled sideways like an airplane in a crosswind.

Hrubek slammed his torso upward then fell back, again and again, trying to force his way out of the small opening, his massive neck muscles knotting into thick cables, his eyes bulging. He screamed and wept and screamed again. A tiny door in the black partition flew open and two wide eyes stared into the back of the vehicle. Surrendering to the fear Hrubek neither saw the attendant nor heard the man's hysterical shout, "Stop! Stop the car. Christ, stop!"

The station wagon careened onto the shoulder amid a staccato clatter of pebbles. A cloud of dust surrounded it, and the two attendants, wearing pastel green jumpsuits, leapt out and ran to the back of the hearse. One tore open the door. A small yellow light above Hrubek's face popped on, frightening him further and starting another jag of screaming.

"Shit, he's not dead," said the younger of the attendants.

"*Shit he's not dead?* It's an escape! Get back."

Hrubek screamed again and convulsed forward. His veins rose in deep clusters from his blue skull and neck, and straps of tendon quivered. Flecks of foam and blood filled the corner of his mouth. The belief, and hope, that he was having a stroke occurred simultaneously to each attendant.

"Settle down, you!" shouted the youthful one.

"You're just going to get in more trouble!" his partner said shrilly, and added with no threat or conviction whatsoever, "We've caught you now so just settle down. We're going to take you back."

Hrubek let go a huge scream. As if under the power of this sound alone the zipper gave way and metal teeth fired from the crash bag like shotgun pellets. Sobbing and gasping for air Hrubek leapt forward and rolled over the tailgate, crouching on the ground, naked except for his white boxer shorts. He ignored the attendants, who danced away from him, and rested his head against his own distorted reflection in the pitted chrome bumper of the hearse.

"All right, that's enough of that!" the younger attendant growled. When Hrubek said nothing but merely rubbed his cheek against the bumper and wept, the attendant lifted an oak branch twice the length of a baseball bat and waved it at him with some menace.

"No," the other attendant said to his partner, who nonetheless swung at the massive naked shoulders, as if taking on a fastball. The wood bounced off with hardly a sound and Hrubek seemed not to notice the blow. The attendant refreshed his grip. "Son of a bitch."

His partner's hand snagged the weapon. "No. That's not our job."

Hrubek stood, his chest heaving, and faced the attendants. They stepped back. But the huge man didn't advance. Exhausted, he studied the two men curiously for a moment and sank once more to the ground then scrabbled away, rolling into the grass by the road, oblivious to the cold autumn dew that lacquered his body. A whimper came from his fleshy throat.

The attendants eased toward the hearse. Without closing the back door they leapt inside and the wagon shot away, spraying Hrubek with stones and dirt. Numb, he didn't feel this pummeling and merely lay immobile on his side, gulping down cold air that smelled of dirt and shit and blood and grease. He watched the hearse vanish through a blue cloud of tire smoke, grateful that the

men were gone and that they'd taken with them the terrible bag of New Jersey rubber filled with its ghostly occupants.

After a few minutes the panic became a stinging memory then a dark thought and then was nearly forgotten. Hrubek rose to his full six-foot, four-inch height and stood bald and blue as a Druid. He snatched up a handful of grass and wiped his mouth and chin. He studied the geography around him. The road was in the middle of a deep valley; bony ridges of rock rose up on either side of the wide asphalt. Behind him in the west—where the hearse had come from—the hospital was lost in darkness many miles away. Ahead lay the distant lights of houses.

Like an animal released from his captors, he circled in an awkward, cautious lope, uncertain of which direction to take.

Then, like an animal finding a scent, he turned toward the lights in the east and began to run, with an ominous grace and at a great speed.

## 2

Above them the sky had gone from resonant gunmetal to black.

"What's that? There?" The woman pointed to a cluster of stars above the distant line of alder and oak and occasional white birch that marked the end of their property.

The man sitting beside her stirred, setting his glass on the table. "I'm not sure."

"Cassiopeia, I'll bet." Her eyes lowered from the constellation to gaze into the large state park that was separated from their yard by the inky void of a dim New England lake.

"Could be."

They'd sat on this flagstone patio for an hour, warmed by a bottle of wine and by unusually congenial November air. A single candle in a blue fishnet holder lit their faces, and the scent of leaf decay, ripe and too sweet, floated about them. No neighbors lived within a half mile but they spoke in near whispers.

"Don't you sometimes," she asked slowly, "feel something of Mother around here still?"

He laughed. "You know what I always thought about ghosts? They'd have to be naked, wouldn't they? Clothes don't have souls."

She glanced toward him. His gray hair and tan slacks were the only aspects of him visible in the deepening night (and made him, she reflected, if anything, ghostlike). "I know there're no ghosts. That's not what I mean." She lifted the bottle of California's finest Chardonnay and poured herself more. She misjudged and the neck of the bottle rang loudly on her glass, startling them both.

Her husband's eyes remained on the stars as he asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing at all."

With long, ruddy and wrinkled hands Lisbonne Atcheson absently combed her short blond hair, shaping the strands but leaving them as unruly as before. She stretched her limber, forty-year-old body luxuriously and looked momentarily at the three-story colonial house rising behind them. After a moment she continued, "What I mean about Mother . . . It's tough to explain." But as a teacher of the Queen's language Lis was bound by the rule that difficulty of expression is no excuse for not expressing, and so she tried once more. "A 'presence.' *That's* what I mean."

On cue, the candle flickered in its cerulean holder.

"I rest my case." She nodded at the flame and they laughed. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine."

Lis slouched down into the lawn chair and pulled her knees up, tucking her long denim skirt around her legs. The tips of brown cowboy boots, tooled with gold vines, protruded from the hem. She gazed again at the stars and reflected that her mother would in fact have been a good candidate for ghosthood. She'd died just eight months ago, sitting in an antique rocking chair as she looked out over the patio where Lis and Owen now sat. The elderly woman had leaned forward suddenly as if recognizing a landmark and said, "Oh, of course," then died in a very peaceful second.

This house too would have been a good site for a haunting. The dark boxy structure contained more square footage than even a fertile eighteenth-century family might comfortably fill. It was sided with weather-stained cedar shakes, brown, scalish, rough. The trim was dark green. Once a Revolutionary War tavern, the house was divided into many small rooms connected by narrow hallways. Beams dotted with powder-post-beetle holes crisscrossed the ceilings, and Lis's father had claimed that several finger-size perfora-

tions in the walls and posts were from musket balls fired by rebel militia as they fought the British from room to room.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars had been sunk into the interior design of the house over the past fifty years but for some reason her parents had never properly wired the place; lamps with low-wattage bulbs were all that the circuits could bear. From the patio tonight these lights shone through the small squares of rippled panes like jaundiced eyes.

Lis, still thinking of her mother, said, "It was like the time near the end when she said, 'I just talked to your father and he said he was coming home soon.'" That conversation would have been a tricky one; the old man had been dead for two years at that point. "She *imagined* it, of course. But the feeling was real to her."

And their father? Lis wondered momentarily. No, L'Auberget père was probably not present in spirit. He'd dropped dead in a men's room in Heathrow Airport as he tugged angrily at a reluctant paper-towel dispenser.

"Superstition," Owen said.

"Well, in a way he *did* come home to her. She died a couple days later."

"Still."

"I guess I'm talking about what you feel when people are together again, people who knew someone who's gone."

Owen was tired of speaking about the spirits of the dead. He sipped his wine and told his wife he'd scheduled a business trip for Wednesday. He wondered if he could get a suit cleaned in time for his departure. "I'll be staying through Sunday, so if—"

"Wait. Did you hear something?" Lis turned quickly and looked at the dense mesh of lilacs that cut off their view of the back door of the house.

"No, I don't think I . . ." His voice faded and he held up a finger. He nodded. She couldn't see his expression but his posture seemed suddenly tense.

“There,” she said. “There it was again.”

It seemed like the snap of footsteps approaching the house from the driveway.

“That dog again?” Lis looked at Owen.

“The Busches”? No, he’s penned in. I saw him when I went for my run. Deer probably.”

Lis sighed. The local herd had feasted on over two hundred dollars in flower bulbs over the course of the summer, and just last week had stripped bare and killed a beautiful Japanese-maple sapling. She rose. “I’ll give it a good scare.”

“You want me to?”

“No. I want to call again anyway. Maybe I’ll make some tea. Anything for you?”

“No.”

She picked up the empty wine bottle and walked to the house, a fifty-foot trip along a path that wound through topiary, pungent boxwood and the bare, black lilac bushes. She passed a small reflecting pond in which floated several lily pads. Glancing down, she saw herself reflected, her face illuminated by the yellow lights from the first floor of the house. Lis had occasionally heard herself described as “plain” but had never taken this in a bad way. The word suggested a simplicity and resilience that were, to her, aspects of beauty. Looking into the water tonight she once again prodded her hair into place. Then a sharp gust of wind distorted her image in the water and she continued toward the house.

She heard nothing more of the mysterious noise and she relaxed. Ridgeton was among the safest towns in the state, a beautiful hamlet surrounded by wooded hills and fields that were filled with kelly-green grass, huge boulders, horses bred for running, picturesque sheep and cows. The town had been incorporated even before the thirteen states considered unionizing, and Ridgeton’s evolution in the past three hundred years had been more in the ways of earthly convenience than economics or attitude. You could buy pizza by



the slice and frozen yogurt, and you could rent Rototillers and videos but when all was said and done this was a walled village where the men were tied to the earth—they built on it, sold it and loaned against it—and the women marshaled children and food.

Ridgeton was a town that tragedy rarely touched and premeditated violence, never.

So tonight when Lis found that the kitchen door, latticed with squares of turquoise bottle glass, was wide open, she was more irritated than uneasy. She paused, the wine bottle in her hand slowly swinging to a stop. A faint trapezoid of amber light spread onto the lawn at Lis's feet.

She stepped around the thicket of lilacs and glanced into the driveway. No cars.

The wind, she concluded.

Stepping inside, she set the bottle on the butcher-block island and made a perfunctory search of the downstairs. No evidence of fat raccoons or curious skunks. She stood still for a moment listening for sounds within the house. Hearing nothing, Lis put the kettle on the stove then crouched to forage through the cabinet that contained the tea and coffee. Just as she placed her hand on the box of rose-hip tea, a shadow fell over her. She stood, gasping, and found herself looking into a pair of cautious hazel eyes.

The woman was about thirty-five. She had a black jacket over her arm and wore a loose-fitting white satin blouse, a short, shimmering skirt, and lace-up boots with short heels. Over her shoulder was a backpack.

Lis swallowed and found her hand quivering. The two women faced each other for a moment, silent. It was Lis who leaned forward quickly and embraced the younger woman. "Portia."

The woman unslung the backpack and dropped it on the island, next to the wine bottle.

"Hello, Lis."