



ROUGH SLEEPERS

By Neil Rathmell

EXCERPT

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ROUGH SLEEPERS

a play by

Neil Rathmell

There was a man who, as he walked through the cemetery, always recited the De profundis for the dead. Once, when he was running away through the cemetery with his enemies after him, the buried, each one armed with the tool proper to his craft, quickly rose and defended the fleeing man with might and main. His pursuers, terrified, retreated in haste.

From *The Golden Legend*, Jacobus de Voragine (1229-1298), translated into English and published by William Caxton in 1483.

CHARACTERS

JACK - a gentleman of the road

SYLVIA - a vicar

COL MEGGINSON - a retired army officer

MRS MEGGINSON - his wife

BRENDA - a young woman

CHARLIE - her husband

LUCY - the ghost of an eleven year old girl

THE DEAD - rising from their graves

ROUGH SLEEPERS

ACT 1

Scene 1

(An overgrown graveyard outside a disused chapel. Evening. Gravestones. A stone tomb. JACK enters, carrying a bundle. He stops, out of breath.)

JACK

Everything's a toil these days. I used to be able to *walk* up a hill, now I *toil* up it. I used to think nothing of walking twenty miles in a day. I still do some days, but it's a toil. Everything's a toil.

(Walking further in, looking round.)

You can't move for brambles.

(Tries the door of the chapel.)

Locked. They always are. They didn't used to be.

(Knocks on the door.)

Anybody in?

(Imitates the voice of a landlady.)

There's a sign in the window. No vacancies! Can't you read?

(In his own voice.)

Sorry, missis.

(Puts his bundle on the tomb.)

I'm used to sleeping out of doors. What about this one? Is it taken?

(Imitates landlady again.)

Last one did a moonlight flit.

(Lies down on the tomb, sits up again, looks round.)

They'll all do that one day. Dies irae. Judgement Day. What a sight that's going to be, eh?

(Getting off the tomb.)

Who have we got here then?

(Bends down to read the inscription on a tombstone.)

Can't read it for moss. It's been a long time since anyone left any flowers for this poor soul.

(Takes a penknife out of his pocket.)

Let's see if we can't make it out.

(Kneels down and scrapes the inscription with his penknife.)

Arnold... Megginson... born in the year of our Lord 1793... departed this vale of sorrows 1857. What's that come to? Seven and fifty-seven... Sixty four. Not a bad age in those days. Well, Mr Megginson, I'm thinking of moving in next door. You and me could be neighbours. What do you say to that?

(Stands up.)

Who else have we got?

(Looking at another gravestone.)

George, is it? George... Ernest... Whitwell... Good evening, Mr Whitwell. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Born... 1782... went to his everlasting rest... 1841. Fifty-nine. Fifty-nine in 1841, fifty-nine for ever.

(Goes to another gravestone.)

Now then, here's one that's been a bit better looked after. Not so old, that's why. Ellen Angela Byram, 1848 to 1942. That was a good life! Ninety-four! Wife of Joseph Byram, 1833-1882. Poor old Joe! Didn't even make it to fifty. And you were sixty years a widow, Mrs Byram. Never married again, faithful to the end. He was a good bit older than you, wasn't he? He could have been a widower when he married you. A man couldn't do without a wife in those days. He'd starve to death on his own. A cook, a cleaner and a bit of company. Something to warm his feet on in bed.

(Moving on.)

Who've we got here? Just look at that! Covered in moss.

(Kneels down and scrapes with his penknife.)

Let's see then. Starts with an L... Luke... No, Lucy... Wilks... Lucy Wilks... Born 1847... That makes her a year older than you, Mrs Byram. Did you know each other when you were children? Did you play together? Eh? On an evening like this, when the days were getting short, making the most of the daylight until your mothers called you in. Skipping, hopping, spinning a top, bowling a hoop down the road. Eh? Who went first then, you or Nelly Byram? Let's see... Born 1847... departed this life 18...

(Stops scraping suddenly and looks up, suddenly very moved.)

1858. Eleven. And there was your friend, Nelly, lived to be ninety-four! Oh, Lucy! How they must have grieved for you!

(Folds his penknife and puts it back in his pocket.)

Oh well! It was a long time ago and it's all over now. God rest your little soul, Lucy.

(Stands up and looks around.)

This is the most overgrown, neglected graveyard I've ever been in, and I've been in a few.

(Goes back to the tomb, sits down.)

It isn't right. They deserve better. It needs taking in hand. I could have it looking nice again if I could lay my hands on some tools. A sickle for the grass and the brambles. A pair of garden shears for that hedge. That's all it would take. It's a shame to see it like this. Must have been a nice little chapel in its day.

(Long pause.)

Right, missis. I'll take it.

(Makes himself comfortable on the tomb and lies down, using his bundle as a pillow.)

Goodnight, Mr Megginson. Goodnight, Mr Whitwell. Goodnight, Mrs Byram. Goodnight, Lucy. See you all in the morning.

Scene 2

(Primary school hall. Enter SYLVIA.)

SYLVIA

(Addressing the audience as if speaking to children in assembly.)

Good morning, children! It's lovely to see you all! I can see you're dying to go back to your classrooms and start work. You are, aren't you? Aren't you?

(Puts her hand to her ear as if waiting for them to answer.)

Of course you are! Well, I promise not to keep you long, but Mrs Byram has very kindly asked me to come and talk to you in assembly this morning. You know who I am, don't you? I know some of you do, because I've seen you in church. I've seen you, haven't I, Emma? Hello, Emma! But even if you haven't seen me in church, you still know who I am, don't you? How do you know?

(Short pause, waiting for someone to answer. Touches her collar to give them a clue.)

Ah, yes! Lots of hands going up now!

(Picks someone out.)

Yes? You. Yes?

(Waits a moment, then nods vigorously.)

That's right! Easy, wasn't it? I'm the vicar of St Mary's. The new vicar, which

is why some of you haven't seen me before. I'm sure you all knew the vicar before me, didn't you. Can you remember his name? Yes, of course! Mr Jenkins. The Reverend Gilbert Jenkins. Well, Mr Jenkins has retired now and I've taken his place. Mrs Byram told you my name when she introduced me, didn't she? Can you remember? That's right! Reverend Sylvia Collingwood. But I much prefer to be called by my first name. That's easier, isn't it? Shall we practise? Ready? Good morning, children.

(Puts her hand to her ear.)

Come on! I'm sure you can do better than that. Good morning, children.

(Puts her hand to her ear again.)

Good morning, Sylvia!

(Pause.)

Now, children, I wonder if anyone has noticed anything different about me? Different from Mr Jenkins, I mean. Anyone?

(Waits for an answer.)

That's right! I'm a woman. There was a time when only men could be vicars, wasn't there? But now anyone can be a vicar and there are quite a lot of other women in other parishes in this diocese, but I'm the first one to be vicar here. So I hope all you girls will make the most of your opportunities now and do whatever you want to do in life, just the same as the boys. Anything they can do, you can do... just as well!

(Short pause.)

Now, children, is there anything that's going to happen soon that you're all looking forward to and getting very excited about?

(Puts her hands over her ears.)

Hallowe'en! Yes! I thought so. Hallowe'en. And what is it you like about Hallowe'en? Trick or Treat! Putting on masks! Dressing up! Scaring people! Listening to ghost stories! Do you like to feel scared? Do you? Really? I wonder why. Perhaps another time we could talk about that, because it's a bit funny, isn't it, liking to be scared. But we'll save that for another time. All I want to do now is to tell you what Hallowe'en really means. Does anyone know? No? I'll tell you then. It's short for All Hallows Eve, which means the evening before All Hallows, and All Hallows is an old name for All Saints, and All Saints is the day in the church calendar when we celebrate the lives of all the saints, all the good people who were so good in their lives that when they died and went to heaven they became saints. So what has that got to do with feeling scared and putting on masks and dressing up as ghosts and ghouls and witches?

(Short pause.)

Well, what you have to remember is that a long time ago people really believed in ghosts and ghouls and witches and on All Hallows or All Saints

they prayed to the saints to keep them safe. They used to think that the night before All Saints Day was the devil's last chance to do his evil work, because the next day all the saints would be there and they would send the devil away with his tail between his legs. Go on, be off with you!

(Pause.)

So that's how Hallowe'en came about. We know now that it's just superstition and we have fun wearing masks and dressing up and pretending to be scared. We don't really believe in those things any more, do we? Of course not!

(Turns to address the headteacher.)

Thank you, Mrs Byram.

(Exit.)

Scene 3

(Graveyard. Early morning, JACK waking up.)

JACK

Where am I? Where...?

(Sits up, looks round.)

Oh, yes! I remember. Mr Megginson, Mrs Byram. Who was the other one? Whitwell. Mr Whitwell. George Ernest Whitwell. Sounds very important. Waistcoat and fob watch. Bowler hat. Town clerk maybe.

(Pause.)

And Lucy! Mustn't forget Lucy. Little Lucy Wilks. Only eleven. Eleven years old forever now. Eternal childhood! All eternity to play in! Don't cry for Lucy. Think what she avoided by dying when she did. The thousand shocks that flesh is heir to.

(Aside to Mr Megginson's grave.)

Hamlet.

(Pause.)

Soon, with the help of my trusty penknife, I will learn all your names. We are neighbours, after all. How should I greet you in the morning? I can't very well ask you if you slept well, can I? Or can I? Perhaps I can. Do you wake and sleep as you always did? Only more peacefully? Is that it? Always at peace?

(Pause.)

Yes, thank you, I slept well, very well. I would even go so far as to say that I slept peacefully. By mortal standards, that is. Not by yours. You who enjoy

a peace that passeth human understanding.

(Pause.)

One wakes sometimes from dreams of peace. But then, in the moment of waking, it's gone. Like Caliban. 'When I waked I cried to dream again.'

(Aside to Mr Megginson's grave.)

The Tempest.

(Pause.)

I often remember a dream I had as a child. I dreamed it only once, but I still remember it.

(Short pause.)

I was flying. Not in an aeroplane. More like a bird. But no, not even like a bird. There was no flapping of wings, no noise, no effort. I was just floating, gliding, like a leaf. I wasn't very high, just above the tree tops. I was floating over the trees and I was looking down, and all I could see below me was grass, green grass, long green grass that swayed in the breeze, like waves, the gentle swell of waves that went on forever in a sea of green.

(Pause.)

It was very beautiful. I've tried to write a poem about it many times, but the words elude me. I wish it had been a recurring dream, but it was not. I dreamed it only once, which makes me think that it might not have been a dream at all, but a vision.

(Pause.)

A child's vision of death. Floating away. Perfect peace.

(Addressing the graveyard.)

Was I right? Is that what it's like?

(Long pause.)

Now, where shall I go to get my breakfast? I'm hungry after my good night's sleep. Where shall I go? Any suggestions, Mrs Byram? What would you have said if I'd come to your door and asked if you could spare me a bite to eat? You wouldn't have turned me away, would you? People didn't then. I would have been expected to earn it of course, doing odd jobs. Odd jobs! Those were the days. The disappearance of odd jobs has changed the face of Britain. Take it from me, the women who used to open the door to you in those days had no end of jobs to do. They were always happy to give one to someone like me in exchange for a bacon sandwich.

(Pause.)

The odd jobs have all gone now, what with vacuum cleaners and automatic washing machines and tumble dryers and dish washers and ride-on lawn mowers and leaf blowers and hedge trimmers and what not. There's been

an odd job revolution. It began across the Atlantic, came here, then spread like a plague all over Europe and beyond.

(Short pause.)

Western Europe anyway. They probably still have odd jobs in Bulgaria.

(Pause.)

There was a time when feeding men like me was like feeding the birds. It was something the woman of the house did out of the kindness of her heart.

(Short pause.)

They don't even feed the birds now like they used to do. They used to feed them with scraps and left-overs. They have special bird food now that they buy from garden centres and put in bird feeders. Bird feeders! That's no good to me, is it? In the old days, the birds got the rind and I got the fat and a bit of the bacon. I can see the farmer's wife now, cutting up the rind with her scissors and throwing it out of the kitchen door. I can hear my bit of bacon sizzling in the pan and I'm outside sweeping up the leaves or washing the windows. Bird feeders!

(Pause. Gets off the tomb, walks about.)

No lack of odd jobs to do here. What do you think, Mrs Byram? Needs a bit of - what do they call it now? - TLC. Tender loving care. If that hedge was cut back... You can see what it was at one time, a proper hedge that someone planted a long time ago. Oak, hawthorn, blackthorn, holly, dog rose, honeysuckle, wild clematis. Traveller's Joy, we used to call it.

(Short pause.)

Hedges don't just grow, Lucy, any more than walls do. Someone has to plant them. Birds need hedges. I need walls, preferably four of them with a roof attached. A barn, a shed, a sheepfold, a byre. Is that where you get your name from, Mrs Byram? Something to do with cowsheds? I'd be happy in a cowshed. I often have been. Or a stable. Not so keen on pigsties, but beggars can't be choosers.

(Pause.)

I don't mean that literally, by the way, Nellie. Can I call you that? I do not and never will beg. I was speaking metaphorically.

(Pause.)

A bit of TLC, that's all it needs. I shall need some tools though. Can't do it with my bare hands. Garden shears. A sickle. People don't use things like that anymore. Everything's electric now. I'll have to see what I can find in the back of someone's shed.

(Pause.)

My tummy's making noises. I shall have to find something to put in it. I

won't be long.

(Exit.)

Scene 4

(A garden. Enter COL MEGGINSON holding a whisky glass and a sherry glass.)

COL MEGGINSON Here's your sherry, darling.

(Enter MRS MEGGINSON, carrying a gardening basket. She puts it down and takes off her gardening gloves. COL MEGGINSON holds out the sherry glass.)

Sorry. Charlie phoned. Kept me talking.

MRS MEGGINSON Just a moment, dear.

(She folds her gloves and drops them in the basket, then takes the sherry glass.)

What did Charlie want?

COL MEGGINSON Wanted to know if he could go a bit over budget on the fireworks. He said he wanted to end with one of those rockets that goes off in stages, you know, all different colours. Showers of stardust!

MRS MEGGINSON George, you're getting quite poetic!

COL MEGGINSON Oohs and aaahs all over the park. Grand finale.

MRS MEGGINSON Charlie's fireworks are legendary.

COL MEGGINSON I didn't really need persuading, but you know what Charlie's like. Honest as the day is long. He said, "George, if we spend a bit more on the fireworks, we'll make it back on the hog roast."

MRS MEGGINSON Is that true?

COL MEGGINSON Probably.

MRS MEGGINSON He's a very practical young man, isn't he? Very down to earth.

COL MEGGINSON Just the kind of man I'd have liked to have had serving under me. I'd have had him marked out for promotion from day one. NCO material. Built like a barn door as well.

MRS MEGGINSON Don't say it like that, dear!

COL MEGGINSON What?

MRS MEGGINSON He's tall and good looking. Nothing like a barn door.

COL MEGGINSON I was going to say he was built like a privy wall.

- MRS MEGGINSON Well, I'm glad you didn't.
(Short pause.)
It reminds me of the trouble Brenda had.
- COL MEGGINSON Trouble?
- MRS MEGGINSON Oh, you know. When she started going out with Charlie. Poor Brenda!
- COL MEGGINSON Her mother, wasn't it? Thought Charlie was beneath her.
- MRS MEGGINSON I love Brenda to pieces, but her mother...
- COL MEGGINSON Probably no better than she ought to be herself.
- MRS MEGGINSON Hmm, well...
- COL MEGGINSON All fur coat and no knickers if you ask me.
- MRS MEGGINSON George! You're not in the officers' mess now!
(Pause.)
And Charlie's such a nice boy. His family have lived here for generations, haven't they? They're like village aristocracy. It's sheer snobbery. There's no other word for it.
- COL MEGGINSON I can think of a few.
- MRS MEGGINSON I'm sure you can, dear, but I'd rather not hear them.
(Pause.)
Did you give him your permission?
- COL MEGGINSON What?
- MRS MEGGINSON Did you approve the extra expenditure?
- COL MEGGINSON Oh, yes. It wasn't a lot he wanted anyway.
- MRS MEGGINSON All the same, he has to get your approval, doesn't he? You are the chairman after all. Or do you have to consult the committee?
- COL MEGGINSON No, no. Executive decision. It's in the constitution.
(Short silence while they sip their drinks.)
- MRS MEGGINSON You won't forget the privet, will you?
- COL MEGGINSON What? Oh yes. I was meaning to say.
- MRS MEGGINSON What?
- COL MEGGINSON I was going to do it yesterday, when you were out for your Ladies' Lunch. I went to get the shears and I couldn't find them. I thought you must have moved them.
- MRS MEGGINSON Why on earth would I do that? Where did you look?

COL MEGGINSON In the shed.

MRS MEGGINSON If that's where you put them last time, that's where they'll be.

COL MEGGINSON That's where I always put them. There's a hook on the back wall of the shed.

MRS MEGGINSON I couldn't reach them even if I wanted to. I can't get my arm high enough.
(Raising one arm.)
This one.

COL MEGGINSON Gave up looking in the end. Went in and watched the rugby.

MRS MEGGINSON Arthritis, I suppose.

COL MEGGINSON I must have put them down somewhere last time and forgot to put them away.

MRS MEGGINSON In the garage?

COL MEGGINSON I'll have another look tomorrow.
(Pause.)
France won. Good match.
(Pause.)
How was your lunch?

MRS MEGGINSON It was lovely! Jennifer Byram's youngest has got engaged.

COL MEGGINSON Anyone we know?

MRS MEGGINSON Staveley-Wainwright. Reggie. Not from round here.

COL MEGGINSON I could always borrow Charlie's hedge trimmer.

MRS MEGGINSON I'm getting cold.

COL MEGGINSON Knowing Charlie, he'd probably offer to do it himself.

MRS MEGGINSON Why don't you ask him?
(Finishing her sherry.)
I'm going to go in now and have a wash and then you can pour me another.
(Exit.)

COL MEGGINSON Perhaps I will. Why not?
(Finishes his whisky.)
Chairman's privilege.
(Follows her out.)