

# PRAY, SERPENT'S PREY

**Nicholas Grabowsky**

writing as

*Nicholas Randers*

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# PROLOGUE

Glavatchog, Rumania

Fall, 1987 -- Sunday

There had been a slight drizzle of rain in the section of the village which held the dismal four acres of cemetery property, and Jim Barrett thought it would be a typical Hollywood monster movie night had there been a storm. There was an overabundance of trees which blocked the overcast midnight sky virtually from view, conceding little light to trespass through the inner darkness. Translucent moonbeams trickled downward between the branches of the large oak tree overlooking the northwest corner of the yard, resembling, in many ways, the foreboding protector of its children below.

Barrett's flashlight flickered on and off not far from the tree, and he struck it firmly with his palm and it resumed shining. He walked across a row of graves, shining the light upon each tombstone as he passed. The cold dampness of his surroundings brought to him a bitter chill. He stuck the flashlight under his arm and zipped up his leather jacket, struggling with it at first as it caught a brown thread, then succeeding.

Barrett was a high school World History teacher who had flown in from the States early the prior morning after discovering the postcard within his mailbox and the dreadful news written in nearly unreadable felt pen that his mother had passed away. He was invited to a funeral that was two days passed, though he'd been disappointedly unaware of this until not long after his arrival. Now that he was there, all he could do was pay his respects.

But at this hour?

Damn, he thought, why couldn't he be back in his warm bed getting the much-needed sleep he had yearned for since last night?

His father had first denied he ever sent such a postcard, and the things his father told him seemed to make no sense at all. For a moment he felt his head spinning in all the confusion. The whole situation was very strange to him. In fact, it was so incredibly strange that he found himself insisting on staying at a nearby motel rather than his father's cottage. Frankly, something was scaring him. Something he couldn't quite touch upon.

It was only twenty minutes ago when he had been in his bed at the motel. He had finished reading an interesting book about ancient legends he had swiped from his father's library as an amusing distraction for being in a country which lacked

anything of the sort for an American gorged on amusement, even though he was a World History teacher and was supposed to be interested in countries of the world rich in history like this one. The book was a small piece of nonfiction, about eighty pages in length, including tales of fifteenth century rituals conducted by villagers long ago to keep their deceased loved ones from rising out of their graves to say hello again to the world; a hearty hello only the dead could give.

The tales were quite consuming, including one in particular pertaining to a bird—like monster who seized small children, picked out their bowls with their sharp beaks, and fed on their mother-given milk, and their blood. He shrugged away the chilling thought, told himself it was nothing more than folklore. He wasn't a small child, anyway. Why should he worry? He dismissed the book as nothing more than accumulated pieces of traditional townsfolk imagination.

He had no sooner set the book aside when he suddenly felt compelled to see his mother's grave, and he could not wait until morning. If there were cupids, Rumania's cupids probably went around shooting arrows which caused the innocent to visit their mother's graves at unheard-of hours of the night. This was a desperate urge, and it made him terribly uneasy. Although it wasn't exactly an urge. It was more of an impulse or a craving to fulfill a sudden need, like the way one gets when he wakes up in the middle of the night and discovers he has a migraine and the only thing to do was to go into the kitchen for a Tylenol.

But in this case the Tylenol was at his mother's grave.

It was as if someone or something was manipulating him. Controlling him. Forcing him to visit the silent village of the dead against his own common sense.

Nevertheless, he was here.

He shined the light upon the next tombstone.

## MARIAN JANE BARRETT

1919- 1987

There it was; the object of what he had been compelled to see. The inscription had been chiseled into the stone with professional quality, although it was Barrett's opinion that someone should have seen to the inclusion of a memorandum or a fittingly inscribed prayer.

In front of the tombstone was the mound of near-fresh soil, neatly and firmly packed and rounded, under which rested the soulless remains of Marian Barrett, beloved mother whose long-begotten glory days had waned into the role of a lonely and unpretentious housewife, now encased in a cedar box lunch for the ravenous earth.

He was filled with a moment's grief at the sight while at the same time satisfied that he could now return to the motel room and get a decent night's sleep.

As he proceeded to return he felt a cold breeze against his back, blowing against his jacket and poplin trousers. The leaves around him began to scatter, leaving room for more as they descended from the trees.

As Barrett walked, his flashlight began to flicker once more. He halted and struck it against his palm. It went out. He struck it twice more, then shook it. Still no light.

“For damn’s sake.....”

He realized he would roam in the dark from there on out. He remembered the village cobblestone streets and walkways and the dim lights he would walk beneath, and this somewhat relieved him. It wasn’t exactly the most relaxing thing to do, to be strolling in a cemetery in the dead of night in a country so far from home. Particularly after reading that book about vampiric legends. What a goddamn mood-setter.

He was suddenly overcome by the thoughts of bloodless corpses moving about in the darkness, their frigid, lifeless bodies waiting to pounce on him from behind a tree or the branches above him.

His pace quickened as he drew closer to the cemetery’s front gate. He noticed the wind blowing all the more harshly now, the fallen leaves whirling and twisting as if they were frenzied dogs chasing each other’s tails like his neighbor’s back home.

Dammit, how he wished he were back home.

He was more than halfway to the gate when he suddenly beheld a huge, darkened figure nearly a yard ahead swooping past him. He jolted backwards, out of its way, dropping the deadened flashlight. Startled, he gazed into the center of the two trees where it had disappeared into the darkness. He didn’t waste another precious minute when his impulses made him dart towards the gate.

No sooner had he started to run when he halted in his tracks. He had looked up and spotted something ahead of him. He stood for a second, at first thinking his eyes were fooling him, and he was about to continue his mad dash. But fear had made him motionless as he slowly began to make out what it was he was seeing.

Perched on one of the branches was what appeared to be a tremendously large, darkened figure swaying in the wind. At first glance, it looked like an over-sized crow. A crow.....too big and bulky to be a crow. It was more like a very large vulture or an owl, the largest goddamn owl he’d ever seen. But there was something about its long neck and head that made it seem somewhat serpentine. He caught its eerie orange, illuminating eyes and realized to his fear that it was watching him, scrutinizing him.

He nervously wiped the sweat now streaming from his forehead, fumbling his way backwards as he kept his eyes on the strange shape. He glanced behind him as his left foot hit a stone, nearly causing him to stumble backwards. He looked up again at the creature, feeling beads of perspiration dripping over his eyelids. He began to feel nauseous, the sickness beginning to rise up to his stomach and to his mouth.

The shape began to move.

Barrett left his sanity behind and forgotten as he turned and sprawled through the trees.

The creature leaped from its perch and took to the air, hidden within the blackness of the night and the thick branches.

Terrified to say the least, Barrett looked behind him as he ran. He expected to view his pursuer directly behind him but saw nothing. Still, he ran. He thought of jumping the back fence and considered it to be the best if not the only way out, the gate he so fervently sought far behind but not forgotten. He would quickly race through the next yard, then back on the cobblestone street again, safe under the light posts.

In the midst of his fear and confusion, he saw the bulging tree root protruding halfway out of the ground ahead of him. He lunged over it and into the soft soil on the other side. The soil was too soft, and his feet sunk in, causing him to lose his balance. The fall sent him tumbling down, knocking his body into various roots and bushes, past the large oak tree and a glare of moonlight, and he finally halted face down in a mound of loose dirt.

He waited for more than a minute to catch his breath, then looked anxiously around. The fall had momentarily stunned him, and he tried to make out where he landed. He noticed he had fallen upon what he supposed the next moment to be a yawning crevice in the ground, a grave being prepared for a burial perhaps the next day. It was to him immediately obvious that the soil he'd fallen upon was recently shoveled soil.....but upon further debate, he waited. He crawled over the mound to peer into the grave. A coffin was half buried and seemed in the darkness to be opened but not entirely, splintered at the hinges. In one corner he could see part of the silky pink makeshift lining of its interior against the moonlight. His heart began to pound in his chest like the bass of a stereo amplifier, as if it was ready to suddenly burst or implode. He studied the tombstone. He began to make out what it read.

## MARIAN JANE BARRETT

1919-1987

The shock of the realization paralyzed him. His breathing became heavier. His heart rate intensified. The experience seemed like a nightmare, and it was.....living, breathing, and real.

Grave robbers?

In so little time, that was ridiculous.

What of the creature he'd seen?

(Picked out their bowls with their sharp beaks.)

He had been running from something.

(Fed on their blood.)

He was deathly afraid to look behind him.

He looked ahead and saw the rear wooden fence a short distance away. He wanted desperately to move, to run once more, and finally.

And then there came a hand, wrinkled and aged, and it rested upon his shoulder. Barrett jumped.

What creature chased him, found him, was upon him.

There was silence, save for the wispy currents of icy breeze.

He turned.

The history teacher found himself gazing up at his dead, though now living, mother. She looked down at him, her enlarged pupils resembling two globules of orange penlight orbs.

Suddenly, as if a switch were pulled somewhere behind that penetrating gaze, her eyes brightened, radiated the entirety of her face. She spoke as she pulled her hand away from his shoulder.

“My son,” she whispered solemnly.

Silence.

“Mom,” Barrett was losing his sense of reality. No; he had lost it moments before. It had drained out of his system like all reasonable sanity.

“You’ve come for me, my son.”

Barrett tried to keep himself from shaking, but found it was beyond his control.

His mother was garbed in a burial gown of flowing crimson that blew in the wind. Her skin was dry, wrinkled, pale. Barrett felt an unexplainable but otherwise unpleasant attraction towards her, like the attraction he had to her grave.

“Come to me.” She held out her beckoning hand.

Barrett stared into her eyes, uncontrollably, becoming magnets to his. He opened his mouth to speak but all he could force out was “Mom.....Mom.....”

“Come to me.”

He slowly and thoughtlessly raised a hand and placed it in hers, and he ceased to quiver. He rose to his feet.

She drew closer to his body, staring hypnotically into his eyes. She smiled at him. Her long, slender fingers in one hand moved briskly through his hair, the other hand now holding his shoulder firmly.

Barrett felt her hand glide across his face to his jaw. She lifted, exposing his neck and bending his head backwards, also losing her eye contact.

His thoughts were collecting once again, slowly reorganizing, but it was all too late now. A cold shudder flashed over his body as though a bucket of ice water drenched him. The last sensation he felt was the pain of sharp rows of incisors and canines piercing his skin, sinking into his throat around the hard epiglottis and breaking through the larynx and vital artery. His thick blood burst out and upwards like a stream in and around her mouth. Barrett went limp as she began to feed.

The wind subsided gradually and soon the cemetery was still and silent again, the only movement being a single moth fluttering within the moonlight under the oak tree.