



The Power of Praeyer

By QuirkyStories

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An agnostic praying mantis embarks on a strange quest for the meaning of prayer.

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High up in a tree a large and important insect, known by all as the Grand Poopah, said in a deep voice: "Moses." "Yes, Most Honorable Grand Poopah, what is your bidding?" said a somewhat smaller insect. "Oh, and by the way, feel free to call me Moe." "Please lead us in prayers, Moses," said the Grand Poopah. "That's Moe, with an 'e' at the end," said Moe. "And do I have to lead?" "Yes, Moses." "O' Grandest of Grand Poopahs, I know we are praying mantises, and that this is a mantistery, but I'm not much into prayer..." "Not 'into prayer?' Explain yourself lest I think you blasphemous," said the Grand Poopah. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, O' Wise One, but I just don't see the point. Besides, what am I supposed to pray for?" said Moe. "Well, for beginners, you could pray to meet a mate and produce many offspring," said the leader. "Forgive me, All Knowing One, but the thought of meeting a nice mantis from a good family who will chew my head off during our most

intimate moment doesn't fill me with much hope. I think I'll go with the vow of celibacy." "That is enough, Moses. Now lead us in prayer," said the Grand Poopah. "Are you sure?" "Yes, Moses." "Don't say I didn't warn you," muttered Moe. Moe cleared his throat and recited, "Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub, yaaaay Mom!" "Heresy, Moses, heresy," reproached the Grand Poopah. "You dare call our Earthly Mother by a nickname? Have you no shame?" "Look, when's the last time any of us ever saw Mother Nature?" Moe asked. "When mother dearest shows her face, I'll call her by whatever name she commands." "So now you doubt the very existence of Mother Nature?" asked the Grand Poopah. "Earth, no!" cried Moe. "All I'm saying is that with big issues like pesticides and invasive species, she has more important things to do than listen to the collective kvetching of..." "Silence!" cried the Grand Poopah. The other mantises, who had never heard their master raise his voice, jumped in unison. The Grand Poopah took a deep breath and said, "Let us all meditate until we have cleansed our heads and souls of young Moses's heresy." Led by the Grand Poopah, the mantises began to sway and pray in an undertone, chanting the traditional "Wada mada wada mada wada mada..." To Moe it always sounded like, "Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon..." To pass some of the interminable time, Moe began to chant, "Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon..." But he grew bored. "Look, I think this is all a big mistake!" he announced. "Shhhhh!" was heard from several places. "No, really, we're supposed to be preying mantises with an 'e' not an 'a' – that's preying as in chomp-chomp," he continued. "Husshhhh!" "And eating is something that even an agnostic mantis like me can agree with. It's a fundamental, inalienable..." "Moses!" shouted the Grand Poopah. He approached the young mantis, rising to his full height. "Do you mean to say that generations of mantises have been devoting themselves to prayer all because of a spelling error?" "Well, I guess I do," Moe said in a little voice. The Grand Poopah grabbed Moe by the top of his thorax and dragged him forcibly to the leafy door of the mantistry. "I hereby banish you from this holy mantistry!" declared the Grand Poopah. "You are officially excommunicated and exiled. Insecta non grata! You may return if and only if you discover the true reason for prayer!" The Grand Poopah threw Moe out of the mantistry, and, just like that, Moe became a wandering mantis. Moe sat alone on the branch outside the mantistry, not knowing what to do or where to go. Then he remembered his wings. He lifted off cautiously into the air. It had been a while since he had flown. It was exhilarating! Why hadn't he left the stuffy mantistry earlier? He was free and alone. Well, almost alone. A colorful butterfly with the most annoying giggle insisted on flying next to him. With his rusty wings, he couldn't shake her. The bubbly butterfly kept motioning him to land, like she was some sort of air cop. Moe was exhausted from flying anyhow, so he landed on the ground, and she landed next to him. "I am Mademoiselle Butterfly. Am I not beautiful?" she said, batting her eyes. She was upon first glance beautiful. But upon closer inspection, Moe could see she benefited mostly from the afterglow of former beauty. The colors on her wings were faded – it had been many weeks since she could be properly called a "Mademoiselle." "But this is nothing compared to how I looked at my coming out party," she said. "Surely you were there. Everyone was. I was quite the debutante." "I must not have gotten the invitation. Can't trust snail mail," Moe said. "Anyhow, a belated congratulations." "Thank you, dear," she said, and then added mournfully, "But, alas, I will never be as pretty as the lass that

came out of the chrysalis. I fear I'm losing my looks forever. I'll wake up one day and be as drab as a moth." "How sad for you," said Moe, walking away. "Where are you going? You need to pray for me! You need to bring me back my youth," she said. "Me? Pray?" he said. "You've got it all wrong. I'm a preying mantis - that's preying with an 'e.' Just like my name, Moe, with an 'e' at the end. If anyone needs to pray, it's you. Pray that I don't eat you!" "Oh, Moey dear, you wouldn't eat someone as pretty as me, would you?" she asked. "Well, you don't have much meat on you." "Oh, you noticed," she said, admiring her own figure. "The aerobics are paying off." Moe continued to crawl away, but she fluttered above, peppering her giggles with an off-key song. "If I pray for you, will you leave me alone?" he pleaded. "Yes," she said. "Very well," he said. "But listen quietly. No giggling and no singing!" The mademoiselle put her wings to her mouth and nodded in agreement. Moe grasped his forelegs together and closed his eyes. "By the grace of Mother Nature, may the beautiful butterfly before me, Madame, er, Mademoiselle Butterfly, soon build a new chrysalis from which she will emerge younger and more beautiful than ever before. Amen." "Oh, I like that!" she said, clapping her wings. "I'll be sure to send you an invitation for my next coming out party." "But then, again," he said. "You might come out as a big, fat, ugly caterpillar." "Gasp!" she cried. "And if that happens, I'll be sure to eat you!" he said. He made a playful lunge at her, and she flew away, giggling coquettishly. Moe continued to crawl along the path, alone with his thoughts. But he had a sense he was being followed – call it a sixth sense, with some generous assistance from his second and third senses. For something making a crashing and tumbling noise, accompanied by a rank odor, was pursuing the mantis. Nearly overtaken, Moe saw it was a large, smelly ball of dung, being pushed by a large and equally smelly dung beetle. "Father! Oh, Father!!" called the beetle to Moe. He was trying to push the turd ball and catch up with Moe - clearly both were important to him. "I am not a priest!" Moe shouted back. "Oh, sorry... Rabbi! Rabbi!!" cried the beetle. "Not a rabbi, either!" called Moe. "Imam?" "No!" "Guru?" "No!!" Moe stopped and faced the beetle. "Listen, feces feaster, I am a preying mantis. That's 'preying' with an 'e. You eat poop for a living. I eat other bugs. So watch yourself!" The beetle seemed unconcerned. "Aren't you going to flee?" asked an exasperated Moe. "Nah. Nobody wants to eat a dung beetle," he said, adding, "On account of the smell." "No! You? Smell?" said Moe. The beetle lifted up one of his legs, smelled his legpit and shrugged. The conversation was going nowhere, so Moe began to crawl away, but the beetle and his meal followed him. "So, what do I need to do to get rid of you and your ball of nastiness?" asked Moe. "Hey, have some respect! This here ball can feed fifty seven hungry little mouths," said the beetle. "How lovely for you and yours," said Moe. "Now what do you want?!" "Say a prayer for me. Pray that one day I won't make all the other bugs sick to their stomachs," implored the beetle. "And then you'll scamper off with your meal on wheels?" "Yes." "Very well," he said, putting his forelegs together. "On this day I pray that Mr.... Mr...." "Mr. DiRosa, Malo DiRosa," said the beetle. "Right. That Mr. Malodorous will very soon find a colossal pile of dung that smells of the sweetest roses, and thenceforth he and his many off-spring will smell only of roses, and be loved by all. Amen." "Oh, that sounds delightful," said Mr. DiRosa. "And when that comes to pass, O' Holy Bug, will you then deign to eat me?" "Most certainly not," said Moe. "Now off with you!" The dung beetle shrugged and rolled away his meal that smelled of anything but roses, but had he been

wearing glasses, they would have certainly been rose colored. Moe continued crawling again, alone at last. But before long he came antennae to antennae with the one type of bug that gave him the creeps – a cockroach. Moe shuffled to the left to get around the roach, but the goon shuffled too, staying in front of him. Moe shuffled right, and so did the roach. “Get out of my way, you dumb roach!” yelled Moe. “Why don’ choo make me, cousin?” said the roach. “Cousin? You’re no cousin of mine,” shrieked Moe. “You’re... you’re... you’re hideous!” “Oh, that’s sweet,” said the roach. “I’d a thunk a bug of the cloth would be more charity-like with those less hoity-toity than him.” “I’m sorry, roach,” said Moe. “I have me a name, you know,” said the roach. “It’s Icka.” “Well Mr. Icka Roach, my name is Moe, as in Moses,” said Moe. “Now will you let me go?” “Holy Moses, no!” said the roach. “Not least till you tell me some nice-like prophecy. It’s the leastest you could do, seeing as we’s cousins and all. I mean me and you is from the same genus and everyone hates me, but you? You they thinks you walk on water, like you’s a Jesus bug.” “Alright, I’ll tell you a prophecy,” Moe said. “But then you have to let me go.” The roach nodded, and Moe continued: “It has been said by bugs no wiser than me, if not wiser, that in the days to come if we don’t change our ways there will be a terrible event called a nuclear war, which will destroy all life on earth...” “This you call nice?” asked Icka. “I’m not done,” said Moe, glaring at the roach. “The only creatures to survive this fiery, cataclysmic inconvenience will be you’s cockroaches, and you will inherit the earth in all its flaming glory.” “This I like,” said the roach. “I thought you would,” said Moe. “So, will you pray for a nuclear war?” “Absolutely not,” said Moe. “Then I ain’t gonna let you pass,” said the roach, blocking Moe’s way. “Have it your way,” said Moe. He stood up on his hind legs, towering over his roach cousin. He was actually hungry enough to eat a roach, family ties notwithstanding. But before Moe could lunge, the cockroach darted away with dreams of a nuclear war tickling his synapses. Moe sluggishly continued along the path. He had the feeling he was still being followed, but was too tired to care. Soon he could go no further. The entire path was blocked by a web, in the middle of which sat a shiny black spider with a striking red splotch on her belly. “You look tired, friend,” said the spider. “Why don’t you lay your head down on my nice comfy web? I’ll even weave you pillow.” As she spoke she was preparing a drink. “What are you brewing?” asked Moe as he moved toward the spider, his heavy head drawn toward the glistening web. “Oh, just a refreshing tonic to help you have nice sweet dreams,” she said, smiling cloyingly. Then his eyes were drawn upward on the web to the mummified remains of some sweet dreamer, and he came to his senses. “I think I’ll just sit me down on this here rock,” he said, lowering himself onto a stone that was close, but not too close to the web. “Oh, is it confession time?” cried the spider, clapping two of her legs. “I just love confessing my matrimonial crimes! Let’s see, where to begin? Why, of course, with Mr. Right Number One who was as...” But Moe was spared any further details, as the confession was interrupted by a tremendous commotion - the cacophonous sound of thousands of bugs converging upon the path. They came from all sides, on legs, wings, and slime. Within seconds Moe was surrounded from around and above by the largest horde of insects he had ever seen. They were all trying to get close to Moe, whose only escape route was blocked by a morally ambivalent spider. And what a motley and sad crew of bugs they were! There were battle worn army ants, lame centipedes and dethroned monarch butterflies.

push our heads good and hard.” So Moe yelled, “YOU’RE HEEEEEEYEELED!!!!!!” Moe pushed their heads so hard that Daddy No Legs fell off the dragonfly and rolled away. The dragonfly groped about until he found his vocal navigator, whom he re-positioned on top of his head. “IT’S A MIRACLE!” cried Daddy No Legs. “JUBILEE!! HALLELUJAH!! PRAISE THE MOTHER!!!!!!” The pair flew off, and what did it matter to the horde that the dragonfly flew straight into a tree, and that his fearless rider, who had fallen off again, was as legless as ever? As far as those bugs were concerned, they had witnessed a miracle, and it had whetted their appetites for more miracles and more healings. So they began to clamor and close in on Moe, and it would’ve been curtains for him had he not held up his foreleg and shouted: “QUIET!! I WILL PRAY FOR YOU, BUT YOU MUST BE STILL!!!!” The great horde fell so silent you could hear a flea scratch his backside. Moe waited for the flea to stop scratching. Then he stepped onto the stone that served him earlier as a seat. He genuflected, closed his eyes, put his forelegs together and began to softly chant, “Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon....” But he soon forgot about the watermelon and began, for the first time in his life, to pray. To really pray. He prayed fervently and with all his heart that all these bugs just go away, that he be left alone. He kept his eyes closed and prayed and prayed and prayed. Hours passed. The air grew chillier. He didn’t dare open his eyes, but he knew night was falling. The sounds of the bugs were gradually lessening. He could sense his flock thinning. But he decided to keep praying until he could be certain that every single bug had left and that he was truly alone. He opened his eyes only when he could no longer hear the sound of even one bug. By that time dawn was breaking and the clearing before him was absolutely, positively empty... except for a plump, glassy-eyed grasshopper. Moe might have been upset by this, but he wasn’t. Toward the end of the night, he had thrown in a brief prayer for a nice breakfast. Looking up the grasshopper smiled and said, “Sensei, I alone have stayed by your side.” “So you have, young grasshopper,” replied Moe. “So you have.” “Sensei, I wish to learn your ways,” said the grasshopper. “Patience, young grasshopper,” said Moe. “I will take you under my wing.” And with lightning speed Moe grabbed the grasshopper and began to feast on him, and the grasshopper, bless him, went out with a beatific smile. Moe finished breakfast to the sound of clapping. “Bravo!” called the spider. “Well done!” She was playing with rosary beads, no doubt taken from one of her many victims that night. “I mean, look at you,” she said. “No ensnaring webs, no lies, no treachery. Your food just crawls happily into your legs. How do you do it?” “I guess it’s what you’d call the power of praeyer,” answered Moe. “Is that with an ‘a’ or an ‘e’?” she asked. “Take your pick,” said Moe as turned to leave. “Hey, you can have one of your revival meetings here any ol’ time you want,” she said. “Just let me know in advance, and I’ll weave you a nice tent for your disciples.” “Nice and sticky, no doubt,” he said. As Moe crawled away, he heard her yell, “Just don’t go losing your head over some girl!” Moe journeyed back to the Mantistry. The Grand Poopah himself let him in. “Ah, the agnostic son returneth. What have you learned? Have you discovered the reason why we pray?” “Yes,” said Moe. “Then do enlighten us, Moses,” said the Grand Poopah. Moe nodded his head several times and said in a voice every bit as deep and solemn as the Grand Poopah’s: “We pray...” A hush descended upon the assembly. “We pray...” “Yes, brother,” said the Grand Poopah in his most encouraging voice. “We pray... to prey,” said Moe. Before anyone could ask for an

explanation, Moe genuflected, closed his eyes, put his forelegs together and began to softly chant, "Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon..." The Grand Poopah and his followers scratched their heads and then followed suit... sort of. And so intent were they on their prayers, they didn't notice Moe slip out the leafy door of the mantistery.