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*Dramatic Publishing*

# JUST BEFORE SLEEP

by

**JAMES STILL**



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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*“Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma!”*  
(“No man will sleep! No man will sleep!”)

— from Puccini’s “Turandot”

**For Will Swift**

***JUST BEFORE SLEEP*** premiered at George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, N.J., in September 1992. Direction was by Susan Kerner, scenic design by Deb Jaisen, costume design by Sue Ellen Rohrer, sound design by Jay Venzke, and stage management by Britton Payne. The cast was:

Sonia . . . . . Kirsten Allen  
Justin . . . . . Mark Ellmore  
Tara . . . . . Karyn Lee  
Karl / Verb . . . . . Len Duckman  
Gomez / Mr. Cordon / Hospital Worker . . Keith E. Wright

In a revised draft, the play was subsequently produced at the University Theatre of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 1994. The direction was by Rita Beier and Brian Edmiston, scenic design by Christine Quigley and the Ensemble, costume design by Julie Detvan and the Ensemble, lighting design by Penny Jacobus, sound design by Gwyn Hervochon, David Weller and the Ensemble, dramaturgy by Ann Gilles Linden, and stage management by Christine Quigley and Nicole Brendel. The cast was:

Sonia . . . . . Rebecca Rosenak  
Justin . . . . . David Weller  
Tara . . . . . Susan Shunk  
Karl . . . . . Katie Riley  
Mrs. Gomez. . . . . Hillary Gray  
Verb. . . . . Emmie Vandervort  
Mr. Cordon / Hospital Worker . . . . . Mark Hohm

***JUST BEFORE SLEEP*** was a winner of the American Alliance for Theatre & Education's Unpublished Play Contest.

# **JUST BEFORE SLEEP**

A Full-Length Play

For 11 actors, doubling possible, genders can vary

## CHARACTERS

SONIA, mid 30s

JUSTIN, 14

TARA, 10

KARL

MR. GOMEZ

VERB, in his teens

MR. CORDON

HOSPITAL WORKER

and...

FIREMAN, SANTA, PIGEON

TIME: Now and last year.

PLACE: An American city.



# JUST BEFORE SLEEP

## SCENE ONE

**SCENE:** *The sound of sirens; an argument between a man and woman in the distance; from someplace else the sound of a bottle breaking against concrete. A radio begins to play an opera aria that soars passionately over the other sounds. Laughter. Car alarm goes off. Screeching brakes. Quiet that is replaced by the low “buzz” of city night sounds.*

**AT RISE:** *The present, early evening, late October. A cold wind blows. In the distance, offstage, COFFEE CUP KARL sings “(This Little Light of Mine) I’m Gonna Let It Shine.” It is raw, intense, loose. SONIA, JUSTIN, and TARA are selling cheap jewelry on a street corner. TARA wears a ribbon in her hair and a coat that is too small for her. She is sitting on the ground reading a magazine. JUSTIN has unkempt hair and wears a coat that is too big for him. He is holding a pair of earrings to his eye looking at the sky through the fake jewels. SONIA acknowledges potential customers as they walk by.*

**SONIA** *(to customer).* Three dollars a pair, two pairs for five dollars. Check it out. Earrings... check it out. *(The customer walks off.)* Check it out! *(To herself.)* If we sell a couple more things maybe we won’t go to the soup kitchen tonight. We can buy some dinner.

JUSTIN. We didn't sell anything today.

SONIA. Business'll pick up.

JUSTIN. What if it doesn't?

SONIA. It will. Tomorrow's Sunday.

JUSTIN. We didn't sell anything LAST Sunday.

SONIA. That was LAST Sunday.

JUSTIN. Oh. *(Pause.)*

SONIA. I have a good feeling about tomorrow.

JUSTIN. Nobody wants to buy this JUNK.

SONIA *(ignoring JUSTIN)*. Check it out!

JUSTIN *(picking up a handful of jewelry, yelling)*. JUNK  
FOR THREE THOUSAND DOLLARS!

SONIA. Justin! *(They look at one another)*. Stop it! *(JUSTIN tosses the earrings onto the display table and walks away. SONIA watches him, starts to say something but lets it pass. JUSTIN moves several feet away as if to distance himself from his family. SONIA turns to TARA who is engrossed in a magazine.)* Tara? What are you doing?

TARA. Reading.

SONIA. Reading what?

TARA. This magazine that has toys and clothes and stuff in it.

SONIA. Where did you get it?

TARA *(avoiding SONIA's question without skipping a beat)*. Look at these cute bathing suits.

SONIA. Where did you get it?

TARA. How many days 'til summer?

SONIA *(irrational)*. Did you get it out of the trash? *(TARA doesn't answer, continues to look at the magazine.)*

JUSTIN *(calling out)*.

Hey, Mom—can I have some  
gum?

SONIA.

Tara? Did you dig that maga-  
zine out of the trash?

TARA. It was on top, it was clean.

SONIA. It was in the trash, wasn't it? I don't EVER want to see you digging in the trash. Do you understand? People see you digging in the trash—they think YOU'RE trash. We're not trash!

TARA. It was clean.

SONIA. Do you understand? (*No answer. SONIA grabs the magazine.*) Tara?

TARA (*snapping*). Yes! (*SONIA drops the magazine on the ground; TARA quietly picks it up and hides it in her coat.*) When are we going to eat?

SONIA. We just have to sell a couple more things. You want to go over some spelling words? How about—

TARA (*cutting her off*). Why can't we go to the soup kitchen? I like that one woman who always remembers my name. What's her name again? (*SONIA doesn't answer. JUSTIN says a few words that sound made up, spontaneous, a burst of invention.*)

JUSTIN. Rabby-moosha crow-me sobbo. (*SONIA and TARA hear him but don't acknowledge him.*)

SONIA. Earrings here—check it out!

TARA. My stomach hurts.

JUSTIN. Calinga-o trom-prom.

SONIA (*thinking aloud*). Maybe we should move to Florida.

JUSTIN (*cynical*). Sure. We could walk.

TARA. Can we go to Disney World?

SONIA (*transporting herself*). Your father and I went to Florida.

TARA. How come you didn't take us?

JUSTIN (*annoyed*). Because we weren't born yet.

SONIA. It was so warm there. They had pretty beaches with white sand. And orange juice POURED out of all the

faucets. (*JUSTIN looks at TARA and rolls his eyes.*)  
Florida. That's where your father got his tattoo. (*She laughs.*) Then he fainted.

TARA (*laughing*). Daddy fainted?

SONIA. "Heat exhaustion" he called it. (*To customer walking by.*) Three dollars a pair, two pairs for five dollars.

(*COFFEE CUP KARL enters dressed in plastic garbage bags shredded to look like a grass skirt. He wears a stocking cap with a feather in it and carries a golf club which he uses for a walking stick. He shakes a paper coffee cup with coins at people who pass by. He is strung-out, his movements unsteady.*)

KARL. Flap-flap-flap! Damn pigeons! Flap! (*He charges a few pigeons that are in his path.*) Flap-FLAP!

JUSTIN. Hey, Coffee Cup Karl. (*SONIA looks at JUSTIN. KARL looks up and notices the trio for the first time. He does a little hula which makes TARA laugh.*)

KARL. Aloha.

TARA (*curious*). Hi.

KARL (*to TARA*). Aloha. In another life I was the Queen of Hawaii. (*TARA laughs.*) But someone stole my diamond crown—stole it right off my lovely HEAD. FLAP-FLAP-FLAP! (*To SONIA.*) You seen it?

SONIA (*uncomfortable, shaking her head*). I don't think so.

KARL (*mournful*). My diamond crown. (*Erupts.*) FLAP-FLAP-FLAP. Dirty pigeons.

TARA (*laughing*). Flap-flap-flap! (*SONIA instinctively holds on to TARA.*)

KARL (*secretive, to TARA*). Can you keep a secret?

SONIA (*over-reacting, pulls TARA away from KARL*). Stay away from her! (*KARL looks at SONIA, confused. JUSTIN tries to calm SONIA.*)

JUSTIN. It's okay, Mom. (*SONIA looks at JUSTIN.*) I know him.

SONIA (*private*). What do you mean you KNOW him? (*JUSTIN looks out at the street. TARA looks at SONIA for permission. To KARL:*) Just—don't touch her.

KARL (*to TARA*). It's the pigeons that stole my diamond crown.

JUSTIN (*laughing*). You are such a liar.

KARL. You don't believe me? (*To TARA who clearly enjoys him.*) I saw a whole flock of 'em singing the national anthem. (*He shakes his cup of coins at SONIA and exits whistling the theme from "Hawaii 5-0."*)

TARA (*calling after him*). Aloha!

SONIA (*to passing customer*). Three dollars a pair, two pairs for five dollars ... Earrings here! Check it out ...

*(JUSTIN follows KARL who sits in a doorway. JUSTIN looks back once to see SONIA watching him. He doesn't make a show of it but makes the decision to defy his mother and joins KARL in the doorway. They look out at the street.)*

KARL. When it's dark, man, you can hear people dream. (*The buzz of the city cranks up and JUSTIN and KARL stare out at the street.*)

*(The following action takes place simultaneously with TARA and SONIA's next speeches: KARL lights a match*

*and JUSTIN blows it out quickly, without thinking. KARL lights another, JUSTIN blows it out again.)*

TARA.

SONIA.

Mom, how do you spell “aloha”? Three dollars a pair ...

*(KARL starts to strike a third match and suddenly looks squarely at JUSTIN.)*

KARL *(even, true)*. Don't do that again. *(KARL lights the match and his cigarette, blows out the flame. JUSTIN takes the match and stares at the smoke.)*

JUSTIN. Just before you sleep, you dream. Hear it? *(KARL nods.)* Sometimes your dreams sound like ... *(KARL blows smoke rings in JUSTIN's face.)* smoke. *(KARL offers JUSTIN a drag from his cigarette but JUSTIN waves it away, fascinated only by the cigarette smoke.)* It's like you know you're about to start dreaming. And you can't move and you can't open your eyes and you can't wait to find out what's going to happen next.

*(The sound of faint sirens in the distance as JUSTIN's memory begins to play out: SONIA and TARA have remained onstage selling earrings. At this point, however, they assume their roles in JUSTIN's memory. Though their costumes don't change, they may take off their coats and there is a different spirit, less weary, more playful.)*

SONIA *(calling to offstage)*. Justin? You awake? *(She begins brushing TARA's hair.)*

JUSTIN *(to KARL as he watches SONIA and TARA)*. The last thing you think about is waking up.

SONIA. Justin?

KARL. Maybe you're afraid to wake up, afraid everything'll be the same. (*The sirens get very loud.*)

JUSTIN. Or afraid everything'll be different.

*(KARL coughs. JUSTIN doesn't move. He watches SONIA and TARA. Ten months ago, early December, their old apartment. We need to have the feeling that JUSTIN is an active audience for his own memories and that he is unseen by SONIA and TARA.)*

## SCENE TWO

*(SONIA is struggling to brush TARA's hair. TARA is disinterested and completely uncooperative.)*

TARA. Ow!

SONIA. If you'd stop moving around so much it wouldn't hurt. (*TARA tries to walk away but SONIA grabs her hair.*) Where do you think you're going?

TARA (*rubbing her head*). To call 911. (*She wiggles away from her mother's grip.*)

SONIA. Tara—get over here.

TARA. I think you pulled out some of my brains.

SONIA (*brushing TARA's hair again*). Let's hope it's not the brains you need for school to—

TARA. OW!

SONIA. Shhh! You'll wake your father.

TARA. I hope so.

SONIA. If you had to wear that fat suit and fake beard and listen to kids complain about all the things they didn't get from Santa last year—you'd need to sleep too.

TARA. Santa Claus never sleeps.

SONIA. Santa Claus doesn't have two other jobs like your father.

TARA. Then can I stay home until Daddy wakes up?

SONIA (*resumes brushing TARA's hair*). And what about school?

TARA (*sincere*). I already know everything.

SONIA (*finishing TARA's hair*). There. (*She turns TARA toward her.*) You want to review your spelling words again?

TARA (*walking away, spelling*). N-O.

SONIA. Tara—

TARA. It's Daddy's turn. Last time I taught him how to spell "Mississippi." (*Watching his memory, JUSTIN spells the word quickly with TARA.*)

TARA & JUSTIN. M-I- double S -I- double S -I- double P -I.

SONIA (*holds out a glass*). Don't forget your orange juice.

TARA (*looking out the window, drinking her juice*). O-R-A-N-G-E J-U-I-C-E.

SONIA. You want to fix my hair?

TARA. Fine! I'll never see Daddy again in my whole life.

SONIA. Yes, you will. In a few weeks even Santa Claus will be unemployed. (*TARA doesn't look at her.*) Come on. You can put a pretty ribbon in it. Tara? How about you make me beautiful? (*She holds out the brush which TARA takes. They face the audience as TARA begins to brush SONIA's hair. SONIA pretends that it hurts.*) OW! (*TARA smiles in revenge, SONIA smiles too.*)



TARA. If you'd stop moving around so much it wouldn't hurt.

SONIA (*calling offstage while TARA brushes her hair*).  
Justin? You awake?

(*MR. GOMEZ enters and watches the end of the TARA/SONIA scene. He drops a coin in KARL's coffee cup and KARL walks off.*)

KARL. God bless.

(*JUSTIN looks at GOMEZ and then walks over to SONIA and TARA as they begin to set up for the next scene. GOMEZ watches them, addresses the audience.*)

MR. GOMEZ. The LaPorte family was like a lot of families I work with. They were nice people who had some bad luck. (*He stops and looks at the audience.*) I hate it when people say stuff like that. But it's true. You never think it'll happen to you. So after their apartment burned down, they lived with friends and relatives for a while—  
SONIA (*addressing unseen family, dropping their bags*).

Just until we get our feet back on the ground.

MR. GOMEZ. ...but that never lasts.

SONIA (*to unseen family, picking up their bags*). Don't worry about us. We'll get by.

TARA. Where are we going to live, Mommy?

SONIA. I don't know. We'll figure out something. The insurance money will come soon.

MR. GOMEZ (*addressing audience*). The insurance money never came. Pretty soon they were living in their car.

JUSTIN (*to SONIA, in the car*). Can we listen to the radio?

SONIA. Only five minutes.

MR. GOMEZ. It was the only thing they had left. (*JUSTIN tunes in opera music on the car radio. The family sits quietly for a moment in the car, exhausted, music playing.*)

TARA. It's hot. I want to turn on the air conditioner.

SONIA. We don't want to run down the battery. (*SONIA fans TARA, JUSTIN closes his eyes and listens to music.*)

MR. GOMEZ. They slept in their car until their money ran out.

SONIA (*to audience*). And then we didn't have enough money to buy gas so we couldn't keep moving it and eventually I hid across the street and watched them tow it away. The kids were at school. I knew I didn't have enough money to get it back. I told the kids somebody stole it but Justin didn't believe me. It was a '73 Mercury Bobcat. When my husband bought it, the salesman told him it was the Cadillac of compact cars. (*Laughs.*) And he believed him. But for us, it was. And then it was gone. (*Looking out at the street.*) Three dollars a pair... check it out!

TARA. My stomach hurts.

JUSTIN. Arank-bim-bom-pee low.

TARA. When are we going to eat?

MR. GOMEZ (*to audience*). It shouldn't happen, it shouldn't make sense. "This happened, then this happened, which made this happen..."

*(A young MAN dribbles a basketball through the space and disappears. The other characters do not acknowledge him. The family is now in Gomez's city office. SONIA rubs her forehead as if she has a headache.*