



That Thing With His Hands

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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By Marina Gerrard

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‘That thing with his hands, did you ever find out what it was all about?’

‘Hunh?’

‘What you were asking Dewi about the other day, you know? That thing with his hands?’

He encased the latter in inverted comma’s.

‘When did it start? And had he always been doing it? Didn’t anyone else notice? Why was he doing it? What did it mean? I know something? I should not forget something? Or was he reminding himself perhaps? I need to lock something? Did he do it all the time? Or was it triggered by something? Was it just the one gesture? Or a combination of more to follow?’

My colleague looked at me earnestly, waiting for an answer to this barrage of questions.

It brought it all back to me.

I had asked myself the same questions over and over again. I too wanted an answer, desperately. So I went looking and I found it. Eventually. Yes, I did. It wasn’t easy, let me tell you that. It took me here, there and everywhere. But let me start at the beginning.

When I first noticed this chap doing it, that thing with his hands, I must admit I was intrigued. It was mysterious. Was it some kind of sign language, I wondered. I’d never seen it before. He kept doing it. First with right hand, then with his left. On and on.

He never did it in company. Always when he went outside, walking somewhere. Never inside a building.

Oh, I followed him you know, I was that much intrigued. Obsessed even, you might say.

One thing or another, I had to know.

I even confronted him at one point. I asked him outright.

‘Why are you doing this?’ and I showed him.

He looked at me as if I was deranged.

I must admit, I felt like a lulu doing it but then I was only copying him, wasn’t I?

Other people were looking at me too. Then they did this thing by their temple what you and I know as ‘nutcase’.

I did feel like one standing there doing this odd thing with *my* hands. It never seemed to embarrass him, though. But, well, confronting him outright was no success. Didn't do that again.

Maybe he didn't know he was doing it?

But, as I said, I did follow him, on the sly. I made sure he didn't see me. Just in case.

It didn't help.

I kept looking for an answer.

Then one day I was on the internet, randomly checking out symbolic or ritual gestures. That's when I happened to come across something called mudras. They are hand positions, some of which are supposed to be beneficial to one's health.

There's one for knowledge. Then there's water, air, sun, heart. Some of them are to do with health benefits. You can do them anytime, anyplace – in the bus, train, car, office or at home.

Nothing to say that it couldn't be done on or by the forehead, if one were so inclined.

It's some kind of zen or Buddhist thing, I gather. Something Indian in any case. Religious in nature. Now I happen to have a colleague, a lovely Indian girl. She's a practising Hindu. I thought I'll put it to her and see if she can shed any light on it.

To me it looked a lot like what they call the mudra of Knowledge. So I showed her what this chap did and asked if she recognised it but she shook her head.

'If it's the mudra of Knowledge,' she said, 'it should look like this.'

And she did this thing with her hand. I could see right off it was different.

'It's also used in Indian dance,' she said, and she made a dance movement with it, so gracefully.

'When done properly it's supposed to make your brain work better. It can even cure mental disorders or some such like.'

Maybe this chap was suffering from some mental disorder, I thought. Then I suppose he could do with something like that. Maybe we all could, when all is said and done.

I must say I was baffled. And not a little disappointed. I had had high hopes of my colleague confirming what I thought but no.

So it wasn't this particular mudra thing. I was back to square one, racking my brain to find something else to try. I couldn't for the life of me think what.

The internet was no help to me. Didn't have a clue what to check for.

It wasn't in any way rational or logical, was it now? The internet was. To my mind in any case. This gesture thing was more, like, bizarre, weird. Definitely off the normal.

I then had a moment of enlightenment.

I knew this chap who was into all kinds of weirdness, didn't I? Alfie. Alfie lives in the dungeons of what he calls his den. Rarely comes out. I met him at an IT conference, where he stuck out like a sore thumb. He looked a mess and everyone took a wide berth around him for no good reason that I could see. I'm not one of the tidiest persons either. So I went over to him and we started talking. He was a most agreeable chappie and we became friends, sort of. He wasn't particularly sociable but good enough for a chat once in a while.

I thought it might be a good idea to look him up. Maybe he could shed some light on my mystery.

When I rang his doorbell it took a while for him to come to the door. Which was nothing unusual. So I rang again. With him persistence is a virtue.

'Oh it's you,' he said, when he finally opened the door. He looked more dishevelled than ever.

'This is not a good time. I have a glitch and you know what that's like.'

He was about to close door on me. I held out my arm to stop him from doing so.

'Hang on, man. Just for a second. I have a single question for you. Just answer it and I'll let you get on with it. Which, we know, will take you from now to whenever. And a second spared for a friend will make no difference.'

'Yes, it will, he said grumpily. 'It might be just that one second that-'

'Stop blethering and just tell me this. Do you recognise this sign?'

I showed him.

'And do you know what it means?'

'That's two questions and it's 'no' to both.'

With that he closed the door on me. I quickly retracted my arm. As he went in I could hear him muttering ‘That was two whole seconds lost. Damn him to hell.’

I shouted after him ‘Thanks, pal!’ To which I received no answer. Of course not. Him being the kind of guy he is.

Oh well, it was worth a try. Where to now? I was really stumped for answers. And for weird types that might know the answers to weird questions. I sighed deeply and decided to buy myself a coffee and a bite to eat in one of the neighbourhood’s caffs. It turned out to be a rather good idea.

I don’t know about you but the whole world and its buddy meets up in a caff. There’s always a motley crew and this time it was no different. It’s easy to strike up a conversation and that’s what I did. Or at least I tried to.

I was sharing a table with a chap who was looking morosely at his coffee. He kept stirring it and chewing on the remains of whatever he’d had on his plate.

‘You look like the whole world is on your shoulder, mate.’

‘It is,’ he said, while he stirred and chewed, not once looking up.

‘It happens,’ I said, not committing myself to anything.

He stirred and chewed, and stirred and chewed. It fair put me off my own coffee and sarnie.

I put out a hand to stop him from stirring. It was driving me nuts.

‘Best tell me, pal, and get it off your chest.’

At which he finally looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed. He reached out a hand and grabbed my sarnie.

‘Hey!’ I said, but I was too late.

‘I’m hungry,’ he said, his eyes were tearing up. One hand was already going for my coffee.

‘I can see that. You’re eating *my* sarnie.’

‘Not just any old hungry,’ he continued. ‘Hungry for love.’

I was about to protect my coffee from also being confiscated but that stopped me in my tracks. Instead I pushed my coffee over to him.

‘Tell me all about it,’ I said resignedly, putting my own problem on the backburner.

There are people who need the attention more. And he was obviously one of them.

He did not need much nudging. It all spilled out in seconds. How he had met this goddess of a girl, how it had been hunky dory for a good little while, how she had then dumped him out of the blue and disappeared. Without a word. Not a dicky bird. No forwarding address. No reason why. No nothing. Tears were streaming by then. I signalled for another two coffees and a fresh sarnie for myself, making sure I got to eat it.

‘I’m Gifford, by the way,’ I said between two bites.

‘Hmph,’ he hiccupped.

‘Hmph? That your name of what?’

He blew his nose and dried his eyes, while making good of the fresh coffee.

‘Sorry. It’s Humphrey, actually.’

‘Well, Humphrey Actually, that’s truly a sad story. You have my sympathy but we all have our woes in this world. You’re not the only one. Let that be a consolation to you.’

At that point I suddenly felt somewhat overcome by my own predicament. Here I was with a burning desire to solve my mystery but not a sausage of a solution in sight. My own eyes teared up with sheer desperation.

My tablemate clearly understood that we were kindred spirits. He showed an interest.

‘What’s your problem then, pal? Your lady left you in the lurch, went off with another man, your employer sacked you for no good reason?’

I shook my head.

‘No, no, none of that. I’ve just, well, I’ve become obsessed, yes obsessed is the word, with this thing I’ve seen.’

I explained it to him, about the man, and the sign, and the following him about and all that.

‘Gosh,’ he said. ‘That’s fierce. Mind boggling.’

I nodded.

‘And I can’t let go until I know what it’s all about. Why is he doing it? It’s been torturing me day and night.’

‘Maybe I can help,’ he said.

I could not believe he said that so I ignored it but then he repeated it.

‘Maybe I can help.’

‘Help? How?!’

‘My sister’s into tarot cards and that sort of stuff.’

‘Don’t think what this guy does has anything to do with tarot cards!’

‘No, of course not. Hold your horses! What I was going to say is that I’m taking her to Occultaria this weekend.’

‘I don’t-’

He held up a hand to stop me.

‘I know what you’re going to say but it’s not like that. It’s a fair for anyone who’s into the mystical, the supernatural, magical practices, that sort of thing. Anything spiritual really. Some things are airy fairy, true, others are not. It’s actually quite interesting. Believe me, I’ve been there before with her. I’m inviting you to come with us this weekend. You get to meet all sorts of odd people. Who knows, one of them might know exactly what you’re looking for. Apart from that, it’s a fair. Lots of stalls with drinks and goodies and all kinds of odds and sods. You wouldn’t get bored, or go hungry, that’s for sure.’

I must say I was intrigued. Of course, he had me the moment he talked about the food and drink stalls. But the oddness of the fair had me going too. As he said, it might just do the trick. Besides I really had no other clues to follow. So we made arrangements for us to meet up.

I tell you it was an eye-opener, this fair. It had everything weird and wonderful under the sun. And the people! They surely made a sight for sore eyes. Lots of wide flowing gowns, colourful scarfs, weird head dresses, the like. Black djellabas, face-covering masks. Humphrey’s sister Alicia was dressed up too. She fitted right in. We lost her at the tarot stall, of course, while him and me went to get a bite to eat and a fizzy drink. He then took me around the other stalls. There were quite a few where I thought I could ask my question.

Which I did. I got a bit hoarse explaining myself. I must say the stall owners all looked interested instead of taking me for a lulu. Some referred me to others. After a while I was flagging. It was a huge fair. Half way through Humphrey and I sat down for chips and beer. So far I had had no luck. I was getting a bit disheartened with it.

‘Don’t give up,’ Humphrey said. ‘You’ve come this far and the day is yet young. And you must admit it’s interesting, if nothing else.’

I had to agree. I’d received a fair bit of enlightenment about things I knew nothing of. But my own quest remained open for answers. The chips and beer helped to revive me. So after a while we sauntered on to visit the rest of the stalls. I’m sure we’d been walking for miles! It wasn’t until almost the end that I encountered a weird little stall manned by a minute little woman in an outfit I hesitate to describe. Her face was as wrinkled as an old apple.

‘Afternoon, young man,’ she croaked. ‘I can see there’s a question burning inside you. Spit it out.’

Young man! That alone brought a smile to my face. I’m well into my forties! But considering her possible age, in her eyes I might be a young’un. She looked like a witch and she sounded like one. It almost put me off from asking my question but her eyes were shrewd and twinkled at me. So I did and blow me down if she didn’t have something useful to say!

I explained my quest and she nodded as if it meant something to her. That alone perked me up no end. So far all I’d had were heads shaking and dubious looks but none of that with her.

‘You know,’ she said. ‘It does look familiar. Not that I can tell you right away what it is.’

At that my heart sank a little again and my face dropped.

‘Tut,’ she said and shook a rebuking finger in my face.

‘But I *can* find out. I just have to look it up. Not here, of course, but at home. So don’t be disheartened. You young people are so, well, never mind.’

That ‘young’ again. It really warmed my heart. Maybe I’m vain but it did.

‘Sorry,’ I muttered, ‘but I feel like I’ve been looking for an answer forever.’

‘Yes, well, a little more patience won’t go amiss then. Seeing as it didn’t get you anywhere so far. You might as well give me the chance to find out. It’s not as if it’s going to take forever for me to find what I’m looking for.’

Humphrey poked an elbow into my ribs.

‘Go for it, pal. Told you this fair would be useful for you.’

That remained to be seen, of course, but this sounded the most promising so far. So I nodded assent.

‘What are you proposing?’ I inquired.

‘I’m going to be at the fair in Gunsthorpe next Saturday,’ she replied.

‘That gives me a week to look through my stuff at home. Come to me then and you’ll have your answer. Have a good day, gentlemen.’

With that we were clearly dismissed so we went on our way. It was obvious that the fair was coming to an end by then. Stall holders were packing up. I looked back towards the old lady’s stall but I couldn’t see her. She must have gone already. Not that she had much to pack up but still. It made me wonder if . . .

We looked for Humphrey’s sister and found her waiting for us by the coffee stand. We all had a last coffee and returned to the car. On the way back I listened to Humphrey’s sister explaining to him what a weird and wonderful day she had had. She was rabbiting on ten to a dozen. He couldn’t get a word in edgeways. Neither could I, but then I didn’t feel like trying. When we got back, I thanked Humphrey profusely for inviting me. I promised I’d keep in touch about the result of next week’s visit to Gunsthorpe.

‘I’m at the caff most days,’ he said, ‘but you might even come across me at Gunsthorpe.’

He winked at me and left it at that.

So there I was a week later, the fair at Gunsthorpe. Which was a more modest affair than the other one. It took one look to see it had nothing to do with the occult or anything. It was mostly fruit and vegetable, a lot of bric-a-brac and a bandstand in one corner with three musicians playing folk music. Oh, it was colourful and jolly all right but -surprise, surprise- the old lady’s stall wasn’t there. I did feel let down but then what had I expected? Miracles? Yes, I had, but well. I’m easily fooled, aren’t I. Luckily I spotted an ice cream

van and beside it a coffee bar. That's where I went and who would be there but Humphrey, staring disconsolately in his coffee. I joined him with mine.

'Fancy seeing you here,' I said.

'Ah, there you are,' he replied. 'I'd almost given up on you.'

'Not a giver-upper,' I said, sipping my coffee.

'She played you, us, for fools didn't she?'

'Looks like it, pal.'

We drank our coffee in silence, then ordered another. And something nice to go with it.

'My treat,' I said.

'Thanks. Now what?'

'Not a clue,' I said. 'I had my last hopes set on this old woman and then she left me in the lurch.'

'Us,' Humphrey said, 'us'. I'm with you in this.'

I nodded gratefully.

We finished our coffees and little something. We then both heaved a deep sigh and got up.

'I suppose it's back home now?' Humphrey asked.

'Yep, suppose so. How did you get here by the way? Car?'

'Public transport,' Humphrey said.

'Hop in with me then, since we're both going the same way.'

We both looked and sounded equally depressed. Which we were in spite of the coffee and you know what. We gave the fair another glance. It had become slightly more lively with the band marching through the crowd. I say crowd, that's quite a big word for a few groups of people here and there. They were happy, Humph and me were not. That is, until I spied with my little eye a wizened little old lady, sauntering past the stalls. I poked Humphrey with a sharp elbow.

'Hey!' he protested. 'That hurts!'

'Look! Over there!'

I pointed him in the direction where I'd seen her.

'She's here!'

'Who is?'

'The old lady, you sap. I saw her!'

'Are you sure? You're not imagining it, are you? Hope springs eternal, that sort of thing?'

'No, no!'

I dragged him to the place where I'd seen her. Of course, she'd moved on but I saw her wend her way towards the coffee bar.

'She's going to have a coffee,' I said, excited now, all depression forgotten.

'You don't say so.'

Humphrey still hadn't spotted her but I had and I refused to let him spoil my excitement.

'Come on!'

So we re-entered the coffee bar and there she was, chatting to the lass behind the counter.

'Your usual, Alice? I'll bring it to you.'

The old lady turned around and sat down at the nearest table. That's when she spotted us, looking at her.

She raised her eyebrows.

'Am I wearing something of yours?'

'You don't remember us?'

'Should I?'

'You had a stall at the Occultaria fair last week,' I said, totally disheartened.

'Yes, I did and there's no need to sound so glum about it, young man.'

'I talked to you about something I saw and you said you'd have to look it up at home. That'd you'd be here this week.'

‘Well, I am here, aren’t I? What was this ‘something’ you’re talking about? Refresh my memory, if you will. I’m not as young as I used to be.’

She blew on her coffee before taking a sip.

I looked at Humphrey and he shrugged. It was obvious to him that this was a waste of time but I persevered. I explained once more to her about this chap and his weird gesture and that I was looking for an explanation. I didn’t hold out much hope of her saying anything worth our while but we were here now.

‘Ah yes. Of course, I do remember. I’m not good with faces, you know. And I did see so many people at the fair. But I did remember what you told me and I did look through my stuff. And I did come across something interesting. Something that might be of use to you.’

A tiny spark of hope lit in my heart.

‘I found this booklet by someone called Dr Fromer. Now what was the title again?’

She searched her memory bank.

‘Sl-, st-, sm-, no, spurious. That’s it. Spurious gestures. I knew I’d seen it before.’

‘Now that’s an odd title,’ I said. ‘What does it mean?’

‘If I understand it correctly, it’s basically anything, any gesture that looks meaningful but isn’t.’

‘But why make it, if it doesn’t have any meaning!?’

‘To deceive someone, for example. Or it could just be something someone tries to remember by copying it. There are a number of examples of such gestures in the booklet.’

‘Did you see this particular gesture of mine in there?’

‘Well no, I didn’t as such. But, the way he explains it, this Dr Fromer, it might just mean something to the person who gestures but not to anyone else.’

‘But I asked this chap outright what it meant and he looked as if he didn’t even know he was making it!’

‘There you are then. It’s most probably something that’s playing in his subconscious. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to do my shopping. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.’

And off she went, leaving me and Humphrey as much in the dark as we were before.

‘So apart from opening up this chap’s brainbox we’ll never find out what it’s all about.’

‘You hit it on the nail there, Humph.’

We returned to the car and drove home in silence. I didn’t see Humphrey for a long while after that. I felt I had no reason to look him up. That changed, though. For in that intermission something happened. I found the answer to my mystery. Yes, I did, and it happened in the most ridiculous of ways. Ridiculous, yes, even if I say so myself. So that’s when I went back to the café in the hopes of seeing him there and sharing the news. His eyes lit up when he saw me. He got up and embraced me. I was flabbergasted to tell you the truth. But there you are.

‘I’ve missed you, mate,’ he shouted over his shoulder while rushing over to the bar to get me a coffee.

‘What happened!? Where’ve you been!? Did you-?’

I nodded, while blowing into my coffee. It was blooming hot.

‘You did!? Tell me, for crying out loud! The suspense is killing me.’

He plonked himself down.

‘Remember what the old lady said about the subconscious maybe playing a role?’

‘Ye-e-es, uh, no, not really.’

‘Well, anyway. It was that that triggered it. I had been thinking all week ‘Suppose this chap is copying out with his hands something he’s seen in his mind, unwittingly like. Not really consciously remembering it but intrigued by it all the same. Like I was when I saw him doing it?’

‘Y-e-e-s?’

‘Well, to cut a long story short-’

‘Yes, please!’

I glared at him and continued.

‘-I was on my way to the shops one morning when people started staring at me strangely. Some of them making that ‘lulu’ sign and shaking their heads before moving on. That’s when I realised I was was doing it too. That thing with my hands. And no, it wasn’t the same thing. Not what that chap had been doing. No, something else. And blow me

down, if someone had asked me right there and then what it meant I couldn't have said. Because I didn't know. I honestly didn't.'

'But you do now?' he said with desperation in his voice.

'Yes, I do. I slept on it several nights and then last night it came to me. In a dream. It was my mother, you see.'

'What you were doing with your hands, that was your mother?'

His eyebrows reached the sky. I could see him resisting the urge to make the 'lulu' sign.

'No, of course not!' I said with some exasperation.

'It was what *she* used to do. She was making her shopping list. She'd be on her way to the shops writing it all down on her mental list. The list she had in her left hand and she was writing everything down with her right. And I was doing it too. Unwittingly like. The way she did. I was copying *her*. You see it now?'

That's when he did make the 'lulu' sign. He got up and shoved his chair back in place with unnecessary force.

'Pal,' he said, pointing a finger at me accusingly.

'You're a real flake. Wasting your time -*my* time- on something like that! You really had me going, you know. I hope you've now put that other chap and *his* idiotic copy-catting to rest.'

And off he stomped, leaving me sitting there with my mouth open.

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Marina Gerrard

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About the author

Marina Gerrard graduated to writing novels after finishing a creative writing course and producing a few prize winning short stories. She is the author of Journeys into the Heartland, a mini series of three psychological thrillers that delve deeply into the world of relived traumatic experiences. After finishing this trilogy she decided it was time for something less intense. She then embarked on writing a series of light-hearted novels that can be best classed as 'dreamscapes'. After that she became intrigued by the theme of memory. Which led to another novel. In between she took to writing short stories. Her books and short stories are available in e book format, the short stories also in PDF.

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