

A LAUGH A MINUTE



***SHORT STORY BY
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By Marina Gerrard

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‘Oh my god,’ he said. ‘That’s about the funniest thing I’ve ever heard.’

And he roared. For a full minute. He just couldn’t stop.

‘It wasn’t meant to be funny,’ the voice berated him.

The face that came with it made him roar again.

‘You should check your impulses.’

‘I just can’t help it,’ he hiccupped.

‘There’s a place for those who can’t help it.’

A comment so unnecessary, so superfluous, so pom-pom-pompous in a way that it set him off again. He roared until his midriff hurt. He doubled over, holding his belly.

‘If I were you, I’d beware!’

The tone of voice was stern. It tickled, which threatened to start him off again. He waved the comment away with a warning hand, while he gulped for breath.

‘Just, just give me a minute, will you. I’ll be all right again.’

‘A minute, eh? Careful what you wish for.’

As if he would wish for this! How stupid! How hilarious! How unbearably funny! He snorted.

‘This sort of thing could lead to serious trouble.’

‘Trouble? Seriously? All because I’m laughing?!’

And off he was again.

‘Right, that’s it. That Is It. Now you’ve done it.’

He couldn’t believe the idiocy of this. Trouble. All because he was laughing. He howled.

‘There is a time for everything.’

‘Don’t tell me there’s a time for laughing?!’ he hiccupped.

‘Yes. A time to laugh. And a time not to. It pays to know the difference. You apparently don’t. I warned you. Now it will cost you. Dearly. A laugh a minute. You’ll pay. I hope that’ll teach you.’

Tears of laughter ran down his face and obscured his vision. The other's face contorted, then went hazy.

'You're having me on, aren't you?'

There was no reply.

He stopped laughing. He looked but the other seemed to have gone.

'You aren't serious?' he whispered. 'Are you?'

The silence was somehow more ominous than the voice had been. It made it obvious that someone had had the last word and it wasn't him. He could feel something fundamental had changed. And it was going to affect him. For sure.

He looked around. For a moment he didn't know where he was. His head hurt. He only knew he had been laughing his head off, for some reason he could not remember. Only that the occasion was not a good one. Laughter inappropriate somehow. If only he could remember. Or maybe best not. He tucked his head in his shoulders and continued his walk in a bit of a fugue.

And that's how it all started.

For that moment proved to be a turning point indeed. It wasn't until much, much later that he, on reflection, realised it to be so. After all the onslaught, the wild adventure, the ride, the whatever you might want to call it. Someone might even be inclined to call it the lesson but that person wasn't him. No. Because, when all was said and done, he enjoyed it. Crazy as that might seem. On reflection.

He had been walking in the woods when he met him, the oddball. The memory still raised a smile. A faint one, though, for when all was said and done, well, never you mind. The woods, Ah yes, the woods. And he was there again. On that fateful day.

Early morning. The woods were quiet and the only sounds he could hear were those of birds and the buzzing of bees. Sunlight filtered through the trees. The air was warming and flowers raised their petals and released their scents. Everything smelled of spring. He breathed in deeply. The smells were exhilarating, the various scents intoxicating. There was something so enticing about them that it made him want to, want to, well, eat them. He just couldn't get enough of them. It made him feel happy, so very happy. So he laughed.

And he wasn't the only one. Or the only thing. Everything was laughing. The grass, the trees, the ducks. Out loud, freely, no holds barred. He laughed with them. And chuckles, they were there too. He heard giggles and guffaws, even covert snickers. The lot. Oh the joy of it! So he laughed, and laughed. He laughed so much he began to feel somewhat unhinged. As if he was coming away from his moorings. When he stopped for a moment to catch his breath he sensed something behind him. He turned around, the next batch of laughter already thick in his throat, ready to be released.

There actually was something there. Or was it someone? A person looking like a bird? A bird looking like a person? He couldn't make it out. Whatever it was, it was so weird the laughter fairly exploded out of him. Great blobs of sound sprayed outward into the bushes and upward into the trees. There they hung as colourful balloons, swaying in the wind and reflecting the sunlight. It made him feel extremely proud.

'Look at that!' he crowed and raised his arms in the air.

'What *I'm* looking at is an idiot.'

The voice was mild. The comment so incongruous, considering where it was coming from, that he had to laugh.

'You're talking to me? You?'

He pointed a shaking finger at the figure and gasped with the irony of it all. The beak that opened and closed, the feathers that flew, the face that was neither bird nor human, or maybe both. And then telling him that he looked like an idiot. Him?!

'Oh my god, that's about the funniest thing I've ever heard. It shows you have no sense of self-reflection,' he spluttered and roared. Completely unaware that his laughter was going to cost him. Dearly.

If only he had known. If only. Ah well.

The sudden silence made him realise he was on his own. He felt somewhat deflated and the urge to laugh had petered out. The woods around him were quiet. The sun still peeped through the foliage. The scents were still there. The birds and the bees still went about their business. So did the ducks. But nothing and no one was laughing as they had done. Only smiling as if reminiscing about something that had gone on before. Oh peacefully, nothing smug or gleeful about it. He stood for a moment, trying to recall what he was doing there. Eventually he continued his walk, a vague smile on his face.

When he came home he did what he always did. He did his exercises, made his breakfast, made his coffee, enjoyed them to the full, in the peace and quiet that surrounded him. His morning routine. And yet. Something felt different. He couldn't put his finger on it but still. It caused a little niggle of unrest. Somewhere, in his belly region. After a while he dismissed it. He had things to do and places to go. So he washed up, grabbed the shopping list, the shopping bag and his purse and went to the supermarket. That's where the the niggle of unrest in his belly became a tickle looking for a reason. And found it. His eye fastened on the item of interest and followed it. All the while the tickle grew, to the very point where he could no longer control it. That's when it exploded into laughter. Most inappropriately, as there was nothing to laugh at. And yet he laughed until he doubled over. In that position he saw legs turning, feet moving away and stopping at distance, forming a circle. He could imagine the people they belonged to. Staring at him, eyebrows raised, whispering, bemused. It bothered him but he couldn't stop. He laughed until it hurt. That's when the urge petered out and he could straighten up again. Then the legs and feet moved and the people they belonged to turned away, heads shaking. He felt the colour rising in his face. He grabbed his shopping bag and wondered briefly if he should go elsewhere to do his shopping. But no, one was entitled to laugh, wasn't one. Even if it wasn't called for, inappropriate maybe but still. Wasn't one?

The question went unanswered. It hung in the air and it followed him, down every aisle, right down to the till. That's where it finally left him.

Over the days that followed it happened again and again. It always started with a tickle in his belly. Then followed an impulse that he could not control. Oh my god, he would think. And then off he was again. There was one time . . . Oh, no, it really didn't bear thinking about. It was too frigging embarrassing. But the memory of it would not leave him alone.

It had happened in the supermarket. Yes, that supermarket again. There was something about that supermarket that set him off again and again. Every time his eye would find something that was not particularly hilarious in itself. It would trigger the tickle that seemed to lay dormant in his belly, waiting for just such a moment. This time it appeared he had met his match.

He had seen her walking down the aisle. She hummed a tuneless tune as she pushed her trolley. She swung it slightly in time with the tune. Her backside swung lustily from left to right and back again. His eye fastened on the movement and followed it. Left to right and

right to left. Before he knew it his body followed and he swayed with her. The movement woke the tickle in his belly and within seconds he was off. Laughter exploded so forcefully he doubled over and lost his balance. He grabbed the first thing he came across and tried to right himself by it. Stupid move. The display went down with him and covered him with tiny bottles of whatever it was. Some of the bottles broke and splashed their content all over his face.

It made the woman turned around. When she saw him lying there, like a human display of stupidity, her face broke into a smile. First a snigger came, then an guffaw followed. He could see her belly heave with laughter. She tried to stop it from coming out but failed. Laughter exploded out of her in the same way his had done. She pointed a finger at him. It shook slightly, which in its turn rekindled the tickle in his own belly. It appeared neither of them could stop.

It raised quite a crowd, some gaping, some frowning, others giggling covertly. It also brought the manager and some of his staff. None of them were laughing. Their faces were stern, their mouths straight and forbidding. It did not stop him, or the woman, from laughing. Not until they were shoved out and told not to come back again. That's when the laughter ended in embarrassment. Neither of them could look at the other as they parted ways.

Why, he thought, why, why, why, why? What had he done to deserve this?!

'Inappropriate laughter, that's why. You need to learn to control your impulses. I told you so.

Haven't you learned that by now? Apparently not. Well, I'll leave you to it, until you do.'

That's when he remembered. The voice, the face, the birdman. Or was it manbird?

And so it started all over again.

This time there was a difference, though. He was more aware of laughter and its possible consequences. Since he was banned from the supermarket. Which was a royal pain because it was the only one within walking distance. When he went into the one further away he made sure to keep his eyes glued to the floor. Only raising them briefly to check his shopping list and the whereabouts of the wanted items. Then he made his way to the exit as fast as possible.

All of which made him look suspicious. The fourth time he did his shopping there they stopped him on the way out. Two of them, young blokes to judge by their footwear, on which he kept his eyes safely glued. They made him open his shopping bag in front of everybody there. Highly embarrassing, so uncalled for, so unnecessary it was positively ridiculous. The tickle stirred but he kept his eyes glued to the floor, trying not to provoke it.

The staff guys checked every item against the receipt. They just grunted when they found everything in order. Then they turned away without another word, leaving him to repack everything by himself. That's when he finally looked up. He watched their retreat. The hunched shoulders, the sheepish swagger, disappointment dripping from every pore. The tickle jumped awake, uncontrollably so. Within seconds laughter exploded out of him. Inappropriate maybe but so had the checking of his purchase been. In any case that's how it seemed to him. So this time he felt his laughter was appropriate, justified even.

'Not so, pal, a shrug of the shoulders would have been enough. Now look what you've done.'

That voice again. He could imagine the face. He did not bother to check. Hearing the laughter the two young men had turned around. They began to walk towards him with an air of menace. The urge to laugh died there and then. He hastily stuffed the last item into his shopping bag and escaped.

'Hmm, maybe you will learn faster when the boot is on the other foot. We'll see.'

The voice was faint and he did not hear it. Too focused on getting away safely.

At a safe distance from the supermarket he slowed down and considered his predicament.

That was supermarket number two he couldn't go back to. Which was a royal pain and it thoroughly pissed him off. His only other option for shopping was going to the next town up. Which meant taking the bus, paying bus fare, lumbering his shopping on and off. The very thought depressed him. His shoulders hunched, his gait turned into a shuffle and the shopping bag weighed a ton. He gave it all a deep, depressed sigh. That's when he heard the snigger, subdued but unmistakable. He recognised it and knew that laughter was soon to follow. He set his shopping bag down and turned to look at the culprit. A young chappie.

Anger exploded.

‘What’s so blooming funny?’ he shouted.

The chappie just pointed a finger at him and doubled up.

‘How dare you! If you don’t stop I’ll make you feel my fist.’

He waved his fist menacingly, futilely, uselessly. The culprit still laughed his head off, only more so.

‘Stop doing that! You look like an idiot.’

There was another snigger, now in his ear. It was followed by a whisper. Something he couldn’t quite catch. Something about a boot. It stopped him short. His futile rage suddenly felt inappropriate. He looked at himself standing there with his shopping bag by his feet, stupidly waving his fist in the air. All because his laughter too had been inappropriate, all those times when *he* had felt the urge.

‘You can stop laughing now,’ he said at the chappie in a tired voice. ‘I get it. There are times to laugh and times not to. This is one of them.’

The chappie looked up from where he was rolling about. Face unbelieving, eyebrows raised, mouth twisted with wry humour. Which unexpectedly triggered the tickle in his own belly. Before he knew it he was off too.

They laughed until the urge left them. He helped the chappie get up and noticed the bystanders that had gathered around them.

‘Sorry, folks, this show is over,’ he said.

The crowd quickly dispersed, muttering and shaking their heads.

‘I’d like to know what was so funny,’ he heard one person say. The other just shrugged.

‘Indeed,’ he muttered. ‘That’s what I want to know too.’

He turned to ask the chappie but found he was no longer there.

Oh well.

He picked up his shopping bag and returned home.

Once there he locked the door, closed the curtains and withdrew to his bedroom. He closed the curtains there too and lay on his bed, in the dark, eyes closed, on his own, all triggers evaded. A time-out to review his situation from a distance. Hoping that it would

give him a perspective on things, his predicament. Because by now he realised that's what it was. A predicament.

He didn't know what to do about it and he felt stuck. He didn't dare go out anymore. He couldn't afford the consequences. Laughter had a price and he didn't think he was willing to pay it. And for what, a laugh here and a laugh there? He played back all the situations that had triggered his unasked-for merriment. Had they even been funny? No, actually he didn't think so. In hindsight. There was never any fun in it. No, it was physical. Like an allergic reaction but what to he didn't know. Oh, it was annoying, infuriating even. Now he didn't dare laugh at anything anymore. It had felt so liberating, the laughter. He wished he could do something about it, though.

'How about controlling the impulse, like I told you? It might help.'

'You snotty so and so! What would help, really help, is understanding what triggers the impulse. How about shedding some light on that, eh?! Maybe there is something seriously wrong with me. If I knew what, then, maybe then, this would stop. This, this, oh bugger.'

There must be something wrong with his focus. Ego-centric perhaps?

There was no reply. Of course not. There never was.

He lay on his bed, fuming, for a while longer. Eventually he got up, opened the curtains, let in the light of day, hoping it would help to shed some light on his predicament too.

It didn't. Of course not. Vain hope.

He put his shopping away, grumbling and muttering under his breath.

Blooming birdman, or was it manbird. Who was *he* to talk about impulses?

He stopped in his tracks.

Manbird, birdman? What? Where did that come from?

There was a click in his brain as a memory box popped open and he saw him. The oddball. That's when he remembered.

He had been walking in the woods when he met him. The memory still raised a smile. A faint one, though, for when all was said and done, well, never you mind. But he also remembered something else. Something that came before. Euphoria. A sense of happiness. Now where had that come from? He was not normally a happy person. Not super happy. Not a laugh-out-loud kind of guy. Just OK-ish, you know. So why had he been laughing?

Uncontrollably so even. Spewing his laughter all over the oddball and causing umbrage. Who then told him there was a time to laugh and a time not to. Warning him that there would be consequences if he didn't control his impulses. Yes, positively warning him. The arrogant so and so.

But wait, stop right there! It hadn't been his fault that he was laughing, had it. There had been a trigger. He was sure of it. Not the oddball. No, not him. Something before he met him.

He stood by the kitchen counter, eyes closed, trying to go back in his memory to where it had begun.

Walking down memory lane. Early morning. His usual route. No, no quite. There had been this gorgeous, glorious smell. A scent sent from heaven, he had thought. He had followed his nose and branched off, down a little track. Beautiful flowers everywhere. The scent, oh the scent. He could smell it and a smile appeared on his face. With it had come the tickle. And the urge to laugh. Then the whole chorus of laughter surrounding him.

He felt the tickle and the urge building inside him right there and then.

There! Stop right there! That was it. That Was It, wasn't it! The trigger. It hadn't been his fault that he was laughing, had it! He hadn't asked for that stupid bird thing to stand behind him when he did so. Getting the full splash of his laughter. No reason to punish him for it, was there?! No sir.

Why couldn't he have looked like any normal thing anyway. I mean, looking like an idiot with all those feathers all over the shop? Eyes flashing, beak pointing? The snotty bird. Anyone would have laughed. Not just him, right? Besides, he hadn't been laughing at him. Not as such. Not specifically, no. He had just been in the way. Of his laughter, he meant. Nothing personal, nothing birdy, nothing whatever.

On second thoughts, why did he even think that what he saw was strange? For crying out loud. It had just been a bird. A bird! Not a birdman or a manbird. What had he been thinking?!

But he hadn't been thinking, had he. He had been following his nose, down a path he never went. Following that glorious scent. Inhaling it, deeply, feeling it go down into his lungs, into his stomach where it woke the tickle.

Stop right there. There was your culprit! See, it hadn't been his fault! Just a figment of an overtickled imagination. Stupid idiot that he was!

He nearly laughed at himself. Instead he controlled the impulse and breathed a sigh of relief. There was no tickle in that. There. Over and done with. Now-

'You happy now you have shifted the blame? Pah! Don't think you can get rid of me that easily.'

The voice came from somewhere behind him. He turned and there it was. The birdman, the manbird, whatever. The shock he felt went deeper than his core. It nearly blew him away.

'Gor blooming blimey!' he gasped.

The thing, it, whatever it was blinked at him. Its eyes were baleful. Its feathers fluttered up and down in a parody of anger and disgust. It did not come any nearer, though. For which he was grateful. Just think if it had decided to open that beak and peck at him. No, it didn't bear thinking! So don't. Just don't.

He waved his hands to ward it off, the very thought, it, the apparition. The figment of-No, don't go there.

The bird-thingy just stood and watched with apparent interest.

'Getting antsy, are you?' it wanted to know.

'Yes. No.'

He checked himself.

'Who am I talking to anyway? I must be losing my marbles.'

'Now there's a true word, if ever I heard one.'

He flew into a rage, feathers ruffled, eyes flashing.

'Who do you think you are?! You're not supposed to agree with me. You're supposed to contradict me and tell me I'm wonderful, intelligent, on top of my game. That sort of thing.'

The silence that followed on his rant said more than words could have done.

His rage deflated into a bubble of pathetic protest. He felt strangely bereft.

‘Let me tell you a secret. Well, not really a secret, since everyone I know agrees with me.’

The voice had turned into a whisper and he strained to hear it. Just when he had done so it went full blast, right in his ears.

‘You’ve been laughing in the wrong direction, pal! You should have directed it at yourself! Everyone around you knows that. You pom-pom-pompous prick!’

‘What, what?! How dare you call me that! There was always a trigger! Something that set me off. And it wasn’t me.’

‘No, it’s never you, is it? That’s what’s so remarkable but it’s always you that’s laughing. Inappropriately, uncalled for, un-everything-under-the sun. I’d cry if it wasn’t so laughable, really. If only you could see yourself doing it. Then you’d know.’

‘Know what?’ he stammered, bewildered about the injustice of it all.

His question was met with another silence.

Once again it threw him back on himself. He didn’t know how he felt. Bereft wasn’t the word. Diminished more like. Flat as a pancake. How ridiculous was that?!

‘Do you know what that means? Ridiculous?’

‘Hunh, what?’

‘Something so foolish, so unreasonable, so absurd that it deserves to be laughed at. Hear that? Deserves To Be Laughed At. And since there is no other butt of ridicule in sight, here and now that means *you*, you flat pancake. You just said it yourself. Now you’ll just have to laugh at yourself, don’t you,’ the voice mocked. ‘That’s one impulse I wouldn’t ask you to check.’

His mouth dropped.

Himself. An object of mirth!

A thought so bizarre, so absurd, he couldn’t help himself. He had to laugh.

‘Oh my god,’ he snorted. ‘That’s about the funniest, most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard.’

And he roared. For a full minute. He just couldn’t stop.

After a long while he dried his eyes and looked up. He thought he’d see the birdman, manbird, it, whatever it was. Instead met another, recognisable face. His own.

That's when he finally understood.

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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 two other novels. 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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