

FOXFIRE

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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By Marina Gerrard

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He crept through the undergrowth, hoping to catch it, the light that shimmered in the distance.

Everything around him was dark. Except for the light that seemed to get further and further away. The soil underneath him was wet and soggy. There also was a voice, somewhere, whispering. It did not catch his attention. He was busy.

Vaguely he remembered something about slipping out of a warm place but he did not remember how he got to be here. Or even why he was doing what he was doing. Except for the light. Yes, that. And the experience of a slight pull. Yes, that as well. Following an urge. One that failed to explain itself. For now.

Not that he was bothered. No. Not in the least. Not at all. He was too busy tracking the light to realise he was sucked into something.

Around him everything was dead still. Nothing moved. Not a single leaf. The only thing that moved was himself, creeping, slithering through the wet undergrowth. For no particular reason. Except the light. Yes, that.

The smell of decaying timber crept in his nose. Musty, earthy, damp. With something else mingled in. Also earthy but mild. He sniffed. Mushrooms, he thought. Yes, definitely. But the light beckoned and he followed.

The soil underneath him squished and squelched but he did not notice. He had more important things to think of. The light. Yes, that. And the pull, which seemed to become stronger. As did the smell.

He crept on.

The light seemed to become diffuse, more like a glow. Intimate. At the same time the smell became rich and dense. The combination made him feel slightly drowsy but pleasantly so. The pull became magnetic. He let it lead him.

The light spread itself over the undergrowth, a blue-green glow that shifted from one place to the next and back again. There were mushrooms everywhere. A forest of mushrooms. He could smell them, musty, earthy, spicy, enticing. He slipped and slithered between them.

Little fingers trailed along his body as he moved. They tickled. He felt an unbearable urge to laugh. The laughter slipped from deep inside his belly, rose upward and roared out into the open. The sound mingled with the smell and made him dizzy.

The earth yawned. The pull was there, dropping him, pouring him, down a long, long chute. It told him to let go. He did. He felt himself beginning to slide. He did not know where he was going. But he didn't care, no sir, not in the least. The slide was pleasant. At one point he whooped with glee.

When he finally landed, the scenery around him had changed. The undergrowth shimmered. Little lights hung on every branch, winking at him. The smell was there too. It touched his face, softly. No longer musty but fragrant, still with that touch of spice. He breathed it in, deeply, right down to his midriff where it sat like a silent song. Darkness was all around him. Except it was not completely dark, was it now. No. Of course not.

There were those little lights that winked and blinked. And something else.

He peered into the darkness trying to see beyond the lights. Wait. There. Something that came and went, slipping in and out, coming and going, like a slow breath. In, then out again. It drew him, crooking a slow finger at him, then releasing him again, teasing him. He began to move towards it, unable not to. Tall plumes of grass hummed and sang to him, softly. A lullaby.

He felt so pleasantly, so gloriously relaxed that he did not care where he was going. He just wanted it to continue for ever and ever.

‘Hello stranger.’

A lovely fluting voice poured laughter into his ear. A tinkling, teasing laugh. Crisp as a biscuit. He turned his head but there was no one there. His ears burned as if they had been touched.

The fragrant smell suddenly became intense, sharp. It rippled and shimmered across his awareness. No longer pleasant. Laughter still dripped from every branch but it mocked him. Slagging him for being a slow coach, for not reaching his destination, the thing that pulled him. His mood evaporated into dust. He became narky, rattled. The thing that lured him was still there and so he moved, forward, onward, toward it but he was not happy. No sir, not a happy bunny. Not at all. He could do without this slow, slow progress towards nothing. Could very well do without it, thank you very much. He spat on the grass that hampered him now, slapping him in the face. He still saw it, on and off, when the plumes moved aside. The thing that hid behind the glow, between the little lights that danced around him now and tried to blind him.

They did not succeed for finally, finally, he saw it. A pool of water.

Something moved across the surface, slipping, and sliding. There, then not there. Coming, then going. He reached out for it but found he could not touch. Of course not. How could he. It was not there. Not in the pool but above it. Reflecting. Ah yes, reflecting. Of course. He lifted his head and there it was. The light. He stared at it for hours, mouth gaping. Until he finally grasped what it was. The moon.

‘Of course it is. You stupid bugger, what did you think it was? A limp biscuit? Floating there on the surface, ready to sink to the bottom? Like the ones you dunk in your tea and slurp? You are such a chronic little whippet. You know that, don’t you.’

The voice jeered and slapped him around the ears. He shrunk into himself, not knowing what he had done to deserve this.

The little lights on the branches shook with merriment. One moment they were twinkling, the next they spread and fused with their surroundings. Then they twinkled back again.

The smell assailed him, becoming dense and cloying, gripping him by the nose and invading his mouth. At the same time it closed around him and gripped him like a straight jacket. It squeezed all the air out of him. He gagged and tried to catch his breath at the same time.

Panic surged.

‘Gha, gha, gha,’ he managed.

‘Are you laughing now? Are you? How dare you! This is no laughing matter.’

He totally agreed. He was trying desperately to stay alive. Breath was in very short supply. He felt he was suffocating. Laughter was the very last thing he was thinking of.

‘Gro, gro, gro.’

‘You think you’re Father Christmas now, do you? The very cheek of it.’

The lights on the trees became bells that chimed but not in a cheery way. Ominous, more like.

He tried to move but found he could not. The smell became a single finger of ice that poked him in the chest like a spear and nailed him to the spot.

‘Tsk now. Don’t think you can escape. Don’t. Really don’t. It wouldn’t help you, you know. Only make it worse.’

The jeering voice turned conversational, almost caressing. Which he found even more frightening.

He could not think for the life of him how it could get any worse. This was already bad enough. Very, very bad. He looked at the moon in the water. Its face looked back at him. Then it winked. Its mouth stretched into a smile that was not really a smile. More of a crooked snarl. Briefly he wondered if he was seeing things. He was not surprised when the mouth opened and the jeering voice slipped out, slithering towards him.

He tried to pull back but he could not move. Of course he couldn’t. The smell still nailed him to the spot, its icy finger hurting him right where he heart sat. Or had sat, at one time. Something he vaguely remembered. Only vaguely, though. It was not something he liked to think about. Besides he had other things to think of right now, hadn’t he.

The lights, the smell, the voice that dripped sugar-coated venom into his ears.

All things that he could not escape. No matter how hard he tried.

He wiggled, trying to get comfortable but there was no reprieve. He was stuck and he knew it.

The moon face warped and snarled, making fun of him. He hated it.

Then the voice again, a whisper, barely audible. He tried not to listen but it was inescapable. It dripped into his ears, into his eyes, into his mouth and it slithered right down to where once upon a time a heart had sat. His heart. That loathsome, useless piece of meat.

‘Excuse me! What did you just say?!’

The voice shouted right through him. It gripped him like a vice and squeezed every ounce of breath out of him.

‘Nh, nh, nh,’ was all he could produce.

‘That’s not what you said, was it, you lying toe rag.’

Suddenly his voice was freed and words shot out like bullets.

‘I didn’t say a thing!’

‘But you thought it, didn’t you? You told me I was a loathsome, useless piece of meat. Smell this.’

The icy finger un-nailed his chest and moved to his nose where it forked and poked a stinking finger in both nostrils.

‘Do you smell it? That’s what lies smell like.’

The smell was vile and he gagged.

‘That’s right. Now what do you say?’

He could not for the life of him think of anything to say and so he remained silent.

‘Lost your filthy, lying tongue, have you now? How convenient.’

The smell unplugged from his nose but the voice beat like a heavy hammer from his chest.

‘Feel this, you louse? That’s me, your heart speaking to you.’

He shook his head from side to side, trying to erase what he heard and felt.

In the pool the moon face lost its shape and its mouth warped into a snarl, then it puckered into a mocking kiss before it returned to normal again. Suddenly it exploded and became a raging fire. He was caught in the burn. The fire crept inside his chest and rooted around.

He cried out in agony.

‘Hello stranger, remember this?’

There it was again, the fluting voice. Its laughter tinkling, teasing, relentless, as it turned a searing light onto something he had been desperately trying to forget. And had succeeded. Until now. He tried to ward it off.

‘Go away,’ he cried.

‘No.’

The denial was adamant. The refusal rock-hard. It hurt like hell.

He tried to rip the fire out of his chest and failed. It sped up his arteries, into his veins, burning everything on its way. Until it reached his brain where it blossomed into full, scalding awareness of something that would not be refused. A memory.

Tears fled from his eyes. They could not extinguish the fire. There was nothing that could. There was nothing that would stop the unrelenting reel of images that burned across his brain.

They ripped at scars. Ones that he had thought healed but which had festered instead. Scars that now opened and stank of denial.

Oh the havoc, the havoc.

He howled.

‘Tut, such a cry-baby,’ the voice mocked.

For a moment something else crossed his senses, the urge to vomit.

‘Oh go on then,’ the voice taunted. ‘Want to puke me out, do you? Be my guest, you worthless piece of shit. Try if you must. You can’t get rid of me that easily. The very thought!’

This was followed by a tremendous hoot of laughter. Which turned the urge to vomit into a heave and and a ho. The laughter became a vile stream of puke that ran towards the pool and drowned there. It took the fire and all the images with it. They sank and were instantly forgotten. The surface of the pool burbled and rippled and hissed for a moment then smoothed back into a seamless silver mirror. Once more it reflected the face of the moon, smiling its toothless smile. His muscles un-cramped and breathing became easy again.

Serenity returned. It stretched and yawned. With it came the smell of mushrooms, potent yet relaxing. The lights on the branches shimmered and sang, softly, seductively. He slipped into a fugue. Not for long though.

The next attack that came was short and brutal. It gripped his bones and cracked them into a thousand pieces. It left him in a heap of pain so intense he could not even cry loud enough to express it. His breath just fled into thin air and left him with the pieces of something that only a moment ago had been himself. Then the shattered pieces jumbled and reassembled in front of his eyes. Bit by bit a human skeleton emerged, but crooked and with several bones in the wrong places. Last but not least a skull was pasted together and placed on top, back to front. It lolled and hung off to the side, askew. Then it slowly twisted around until the empty sockets faced forward. The whole thing was an abomination. But his ordeal was not over. Out of nothing a pungent smell slipped from the

undergrowth. It clad the skeleton with a sickly blue-green film. It started glowing. It stank to high heavens. The moon face in the pool warped once more and turned into a wrinkle of utter disgust. He could not blame it but there was nothing he could do. If he had not already puked his guts out he would have gladly done so now. Besides, his guts were nowhere to be found. They should have sat inside his body but he no longer had a body. He had an empty, disgusting, stinking skeleton that was really nothing to do with him.

‘That’s where you’re wrong, pal. This is everything to do with you. Believe it or not, you’re nothing but an empty husk of nothing. There’s not an ounce of human anything inside of you. You threw it all in the wind when you denied me.’

He would have gaped if he had a mouth to do it with but he did manage to produce a sound.

‘Nhuuw.’

‘Na, na, ni ni, no, no, whatever. Denial is futile. I speak from first-hand experience.’

The face in the pool leered at him and winked lewdly. He just could not believe what was going on.

The blue-green film began to peel itself loose from the skeleton. It slunk back into the undergrowth, taking its terrible stink with it. The skeleton unassembled and tumbled to the ground in bits. There they disintegrated into ashes and disappeared into the soil. The accusing voice evaporated into a cloud of sound that clanged for a moment until it too died a dwindling death. Within seconds there was nothing left but himself, standing empty in the emptiness of what had been there a second before.

His head cleared.

He found himself once more staring at the face of the moon, in the stillness of the pool. Not a ripple in sight, himself motionless like a statue. He wondered why he could not move but he seemed fixed to the spot. There was a blue green hue over everything he could see. The smell of something musty and spicy wafted over him, the only thing that moved.

A faint whisper touched, then entered his ear.

‘Mushroom, vegetable, mindless, clueless, worthless, loser.’

All things that applied to him.

‘They do, don’t they?’

He admitted it. To himself. Things he would never ever say out loud.

The whisper started to move further in and up, toward his brain where it threatened to start a familiar reel. Images of things he would never admit, even to himself, as they would burn a path to the heart he no longer had. Still they unrolled, searing across the retina of eyes he could no longer close. That's when he understood he was not done. It was not done, the ordeal.

A slight breeze caused a ripple on the pool. The moon face contorted into a mouth that opened and whispered the same six words over and over again, softly, sadly.

‘Mushroom, vegetable, mindless, clueless, worthless, loser.’

A litany of sorrow. Coming from somewhere, going nowhere. Tears fell one by one from his non-existent eyes, slowly at first, then faster and faster, dripping all over him.

‘Mushroom, vegetable, mindless, clueless, worthless, loser.’

The words drove into him. He tried to cover his ears with hands he could not move but the litany went on and on. The images too kept coming, relentless, unforgiving, there.

He could not stand it. A scream fought its way out of the mouth he did not have. It faded into nothing, useless. No one there to listen but himself.

A sob gathered in the emptiness where his heart had sat, once, upon a time that no longer existed.

The moon face leered at him, its mouth repeating the same six words. Its eyes cried big, fat tears that were as useless as he was. They turned the pool into a lake of sorrow.

The images kept coming too, dripping acid on his soul. The one he had denied in the hope of oblivion.

‘Why don’t you drown yourself?’

The suggestion was a mocking one. With it came the pull that he had almost forgotten. The pool beckoned.

The suggestion was somehow repugnant to him. It lit a spark of defiance. Oh, just a small one but a spark all the same. It grew into a little piece of backbone that kept him anchored to the spot.

‘No?’

No.

‘Tut. We’ll see how long that lasts!’

The moon face winked.

The litany returned and with it the images. He looked at the images with eyes that could not un-see what they saw. They left him raw in places he did not remember he had. But he endured. Another piece of backbone grew. And another one. Before long he felt he could stand up for himself.

He looked the images in the eye. One by one they retreated into memory, where they got their place and faded. He felt better than he had for a long, long time. I’m fine, he thought.

‘Mushroom, vegetable, mindless, clueless, worthless, loser.’

The words would not leave him alone. He listened to them without trying to shut them out.

He could not un-hear what he heard but he could live with them. They bounced off the backbone he had grown. They reverberated but they did not hurt. He knew they had been true, once, upon a time he now remembered. But no more.

‘No?’

No.

A sob gathered in a place that was no longer empty, for it was full of memories. As he listened to the words they gained a steady rhythm.

‘Mushroom.’

Yes, there were mushrooms, but he was not one of them. They were outside him and he could smell them, spicy, musty, fragrant. The way he liked them. The word faded and was lost between them.

‘Vegetable.’

Yes, he had been limp and dozy, unable to shift, but that was due to, due to, well, the least said the better.

‘Mindless.’

Yes, yes, of course. Due to, due to . . . Bugger.

‘Bugger? Don’t you mean d-?’

Yes, yes, that. The least-

‘All right. We’ll leave that for now. Clueless then.’

Oh no, not that. Never. I knew what I was doing.

‘Oh right. You knew. You did and still you-’

Yes. Yes, I did. I admit.

‘Hence worthless. Totally. A loser. And a coward to boot. It really could not get any worse than that, could it? What *did* you do? Beyond the unmentionable, of course.’

Nothing.

‘Exactly. Nothing.’

He hung his head in shame. At least he had a head again to do it with. Even though he could have well done without it.

‘You drowned yourself in sorrow. Did I say drown? Tut, you cushioned it in the unmentionable, didn’t you? You rested it on a soft pillow of d-’

Don’t! Don’t say it!

He rested his head in his hands. Hands? Yes, his hands. With them he gripped his hair and tore at it. He knew he should never have done the unmentionable but he had a moment of weakness and-.

‘Loser.’

Yes, yes, he lost it, the plot, the wherewithal, the ability to cope and-.

‘Coward.’

Yes, yes, he ran away from it all, to save his life, his mind.

‘And a liar to boot!’

Okay, okay, he did it to save himself the bother of coping.

‘And then you hid. In the d-’

Don’t, don’t say it.

‘Admit it, you worthless, lying coward. Everyone around you could see what you were doing. They even warned you. Didn’t they. But did you listen? No, you didn’t. You were

too busy covering you yourselves in the fumes of the unmentionable. To *doped up* to see that you were baring it all to everyone, the heartbreak, the heart ache.'

No, no.

'Yes, yes, you pathetic shrimp of a man. You exposed yourself for the worthless shit that you were. Are.'

Oh my god! What have I done!

'Nothing. You did nothing that helped anyone. Least of all yourself. You doped yourself up and fled into the fumes of forgetfulness. That's what you did. Nothing more and nothing less.'

He covered his ears with his hands but it did not help. He still heard the words. Every single one of them. They drove into him, on and on and on, until they gained a staccato rhythm. Until he finally admitted.

Guilty. Of hurting the one he loved the most. Of running and leaving it all behind, the mess he had created.

Guilty.

Of trying to stay alive, not knowing he was slowly killing himself.

Suddenly his face got wet. His eyes were bleeding, big fat painful tears. His chest filled with sobs, big, fat painful sobs. He let them. There was nothing he could do to stop them. Nor did he want to. Not anymore.

He was covered by the mud he had crawled through, following the light. Unaware that it would reveal the things he had long refused to see.

He felt himself bend but he did not break. Not anymore.

He rose from the mud, vertebra by vertebra, until he stood tall.

In front of him the pool reflected the moonlight, silver, luminous, unmarred by any ripples.

There was no wind. There were no sounds. Yet he heard something, somewhere. Like a little heart beating. A sound he had not heard for a long time. Strangely comforting.

Beyond the pool the woods glowed blue and green. Foxfire. He could almost smell the mushrooms, fragrant, spicy, enticing but no. No more.

Beyond the woods the sky was clear. There was not a single cloud in sight. The moon stood high, its face a mask of serenity. Such a sucker for a full moon, he was. It always made him see things. Things that were not there. *And* things that were there. He wiped a lonely tear from his lonely face and turned away from the window. Unseen by him the blue-green light of the foxfire slowly faded.

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Thanks!

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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'. 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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