

The background of the cover is a vibrant, abstract digital composition. It features a central point from which numerous glowing, translucent blue and purple lines radiate outwards, creating a sense of dynamic movement and energy. These lines are interspersed with smaller, bright particles and soft, ethereal light flares. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and magentas, with some lighter, almost white highlights where the lines and particles are most intense. The text is overlaid on this background, with the title in a large, white, serif font and the author's name in a smaller, white, sans-serif font at the bottom.

A Walk on the Wild Side

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Short story

By Marina Gerrard

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When his eyes cracked open, he found himself on the floor. Obviously at some point in the night he had rolled out of bed. Which was nothing unusual, considering what he had done the night before. Oddly though, this time he could not stop feeling that, actually, something had tipped him out. The feeling was weird, bizarre to say the least. He would gladly have denied it and returned to the comfort of his bed. Which he would normally have done. Except . . . Yes, there was an except. Believe it or not, there was one. The thing was: he was wide awake. Fresh as a daisy on a misty morning. Not jaded. Not bleary-eyed. Not hung-over. Which in itself was most unusual. Not to say weird. Yes, weird. Not only that. He should have been half-dead, apathetic, cynical. World-weary to say the least. Instead he was positively chipper. Tell the truth, he was energetic as hell. He pushed himself up and jumped to his feet. Jumped! Chipper! Energetic! Him!?! Unheard of! It did not bear thinking about it. So he did not. He took himself over to the window and opened it.

The day had not yet started. The sun had not yet risen. The garden was shrouded in shadows. He could just about make out the dewdrops on the grass, the delicate cobwebs wafting in the slight breeze. Nothing else moved. It was utterly still.

A breath of cool air drifted in. With it came a smell. Fresh, spicy, exhilarating with the promise of . . . something. Something mysterious. Something he could not define. He sniffed. The smell clung to his nostrils. It tickled. It lured. It evoked a sense of . . . something equally undefined. Oh well. He was inclined to leave it at that. No point bothering himself with things unknown, was there. They only caused havoc in the brain. They would make him think and he could very well do without that.

He did ask himself, though. What was he doing up at this ungodly hour? He wasn't exactly what they call an early bird. Was there a reason that he had to be awake? He could not see one. To him it was a day like any other, except for, yes, except for the fact that he was eager, not to say raring to go. What for, what at, he did not have a clue. So he stood by the window, miffed as hell.

There had indeed been nothing unusual about that day. Not when it started. The really unusual bit came just before sunrise. When the eastern sky developed an orange cast and the landscape began to glow in the morning twilight. Then somewhere in the northern hemisphere a wind blew up. An apple fell and it shook the earth. A hairline crack appeared in the fabric

of time. At that precise moment his day had gone topsy-turvy. Unknown to him a hand pushed its way out of the crack. It extended a single finger and pointed it in his direction. A bolt of energy shot out and touched him where he lay. Which made his body jump. Which made him fall out of bed. So far, so good. It explained the how but not the why. The why was a little more complicated. It was the why which made him wonder. Which he gave up on as soon as he realized. Wonder would only lead to ponder and ponder would lead to thinking. Totally undesirable. To be avoided at all cost.

Lucky for him, right there and then, a blackbird opened its beak and sent out the warble that started the dawn chorus. He could not remember ever having been awake early enough to hear it. So he forgot all about thinking and listened, mesmerized.

Little did he know that hidden in the birdsong there was a message. One specially designed for him. One that did not require thinking (God forbid he should be asked to do that!). One that just required him to close his eyes (which he was good at) and listen (as he was doing right now). It was designed to trick him into doing something he also preferred not to do. And that was feel. Feeling was another sore point with him. Also to be avoided. Very much so. It did not mean he went through life in a daze. Far from it. But his life tended to be devoid of highs and lows. More of a flat drift down a lazy river on a sunny day. It did not require any kind of effort. Just the way he liked it. Falling out of bed had also not required any effort on his part. It had just happened. As most things in his life did these days. That is how he looked upon it. Happenstance.

Which this certainly was not. It was a goad, designed to make him move. To be followed at the right time by a call to act, to get involved. Act! Involved! Anathema! Something he was vehemently against. Instead he leaned and depended on everyone and everything else. Things with him always went in one eye, one ear and out the other. And if they did not, he drowned them. As he had done the night before. That is how he got by. It worked. Amazingly enough.

That is why the call was cloaked as something else. Something that would not trigger his resistance. Which in this case would have been futile as it had already crept in under his defences and settled there, ready for action. The something else was a kind of buzzing, a humming that wove itself into the birdsong. It did grab his attention but he could not make out what it was. Without realising it he closed his eyes in order to concentrate. That was when the

call hit him, like a prodding finger, straight between the eyes. From there it travelled to the place where he stashed away all his feelings, safely out of sight, safely out of thinking. It poked itself with a vengeance into the lock that barred it all from escaping. Because really and truly, enough was enough, wasn't it! For crying out loud!

There was an audible click. The door unlocked and something flew out. A yearning.

His heart took a single leap and followed it. Without his consent, of course. Yearning was an absolute no-no! Strictly forbidden! He would have forbidden it, instantly, if he had realised. Which he did not. Which he would have, if he had been thinking or seeing. Or even feeling. Which he definitely was not. At that point in any case. And when he opened his eyes it was too late, of course. By then the fated thing had already happened. His heart had gone missing. Unapproved by him it was taking a stroll on the wild side.

And then a strange thing happened. Or rather a number of strange things.

The pre-dawn twilight became diffuse. For a moment the outline of everything smudged and blurred. Then everything started to dance. Colours, smells, sounds. Mixing and mingling. Nothing stayed in place. Even the light itself moved, flittering here and there, touching everything with a feather-light touch. It refused to stand still. Which made him feel quite dizzy. He blinked several times but it made no difference. He wondered, oh ever so briefly, if there was something wrong with his vision. He even doubted, equally briefly, if he was properly awake or still dreaming. And dismissed it. It would pass. He was fine. Absolutely. Never better.

And pass it did. Eventually. Much to his relief. He did not like being out of control. One never knew what could happen then.

What he noticed first, when everything settled, was the silence. It had an extra dimension. Like an echo. A kind of watching and waiting. Like a bated breath. Unable to make sense of it, he left it for what it was. For there was also something different about what he was seeing. That too had an extra dimension. It wasn't the what-ness of it. That was all the same. No, it was the fact that he could taste what he was seeing. Seeing is believing would have been his first thought, if he had been able to think. Which he was not. Maybe he would have been worried, if he had been able to feel the bizarreness of it all. Which, of course, he could not,

having short-circuited that sense as well. What reached him was the smell and with the smell came taste. In short, what he saw was so luscious it caused him to drool. It was most unusual but that did not bother him one little bit. He had always liked his food and now his garden looked like a giant plate of food to him. Tantalising. Titillating. Inviting him to partake.

It was an offer he could not refuse. Before he knew it his legs swung themselves over the window sill. They did not listen to his flabbergasted protests. They stepped out onto the grass and into the unknown. He had no choice but follow. Within seconds he was well away, even though some part of him was lagging behind. Though dragging was more to the point. That part could not believe what was happening. Disbelief soon turned into shock as he saw himself bend down and start sampling the grass. Flowers, leaves, anything in sight disappeared in his mouth. Before long he was chomping and chewing, swallowing and spitting and going for more. He looked at himself grazing. Disgust and disapproval followed dismay. What the heck did he think he was doing!

Enjoying himself, that's what he was doing. Which, of course, was a feeling but one he did not allow himself as such. So it just snuck in and settled somewhere in his bosom.

Stop acting like a fool, he wanted to scream. But who to? Himself? The idea was ludicrous to the extreme. He had to laugh. But he had given up on laughter. So all he managed was a somewhat sour sounding Hah! He soon nipped the urge to laugh in the bud. He was glad no one was about to see him being silly.

Stop kicking against the pricks, pal, a voice in his ear said. You'll only do yourself an injury. You know resistance is futile. Give in gracefully.

Gracefully? Graceful was not his thing. No way. Not at all. For crying out loud! It didn't even bear thinking about!

Oh, shut your trapkins, muttbutt. You're wearing me out. Here you are getting an experience of a lifetime and you're griping! No spark. No spunk, punk. Get a grip! Get a life!

The voice cut out. He dismissed it instantly as a figment of his imagination. Trapkins! Muttbutt! Grmff! What kind of language was that anyway! It wasn't as if he didn't have a life. Look at what he was doing right now! Filling his face. Snacking was too good a word for it. In fact he had no words for it. None at all. His brain had conked out.

The snack-party ended with him being gorged to the gills. He plonked himself down and feasted his eyes on whatever else he would have stuffed himself with if he could have. A long burp escaped. His eyes closed and he snoozed off. A feeling of extreme well-being stole over him. Something he was not aware of. Of course not. How could he, being fast asleep!

Silence reigned once more except for some loud snores and an occasional burp.

It was the twittering of birds that woke him to the world. When he opened his eyes, the all-overriding urge to eat had gone. A good thing too, because what he had eaten now sat heavy, very heavy in his stomach. In fact, the next urge that hit him was vomiting. It was an instant urge to which there was no denying. He rushed into the bushes. The relief that followed was huge.

He left the bushes somewhat bleary-eyed and sore in the stomach-region. The garden no longer looked tasty or enticing. Anything but in fact. He did not bother to wonder what had hit him. Fruitless and pointless, because he did not know and did not want to know. Instead he became aware again of the silence. His bout of vomiting had been noisy, not to say raucous, and the birds had fled to a safer place. It piqued a modicum of shame. Something fairly alien to him. So much so that he failed to recognise it as a feeling. Feelings, if not nipped in the bud, could lead to abysmal pondering. About everything amiss with his world. Himself included. In short, to depression. Another thing to be avoided at all cost. However, his interest was also piqued. Which made short shrift of the feeling of shame. In fact it was roused to such a point that it bypassed the nipping stage and shot straight into an avid desire to know the what, where, why and even how. Which was usually the precursor to a heavy bout of depression. Not so now. Far from it.

The desire to know overruled anything and everything he would normally do or not do. He had to find out what was going on. So he listened, eagerly, avidly, ears on fire.

As he listened, his eyes closed again and he forgot where he was. He was sure he heard something. Slowly, regularly, coming and going, like the in and out of a breath. Someone or something breathing. Nearby. But he could not detect another presence. He was on his own. No, it came from much further away. Somewhere in the distance. He slowly turned around. His ears nearly dropped off his head in their attempt to locate the sound. There! He poked his

finger in the direction of where he heard it. The sound had an upbeat rhythm. It roused. It lured. It called for action. His feet started moving again.

The sound never seemed to come any closer. He did not care, he just followed the call. The thought that he might be deliberately led astray never even arose.

Somewhere, in the northern hemisphere, a pair of hands clapped. A fist punched the air.

Got him! He's moving. At long last! Get on with it, chap! Forward! Onward!

For a moment he had the strange feeling that he was being cheered on. He instantly dismissed this as fanciful. It did put an extra spring in his step, though. He marched on, oblivious to anything but the beat. It moved into his feet. It slipped into his legs. From there it crept into his chest. He began to sing. Sing! He never sung. He marvelled. It was the first inkling he had of something strange happening. That he was actually enjoying himself was a fact that passed him by again. He overlooked it. It was not possible, let alone desirable. He marched on, blissfully unaware that he was happy to be doing just that. But marvelling, of course. Which in no way resembled wondering or pondering. No, no, of course not. It was something totally different. So he marvelled his way through the landscape, blind to his surroundings but in fact enjoying every bit of it. In his own bizarre, mindless way. Before long the beat reached his head and eventually his brain. There it connected a number of unused synapses and he began to dance. He did not even register the fact. Hopping and skipping he followed the beat, onward, forward, deeper and deeper into the unknown. Before long he was lost but who cared. *He didn't!* His joy was such that it effectively shut out the by now faint protestations with which he still tried to make himself stop. Instead yearning boomeranged back from its trek into the unknown and struck him like a hammer. It nearly beat a hole in his chest. It provoked an ardent wish. Cavort. That's what he wanted to do. Of all things! So before long that is what he found himself doing. Cavorting. He was jumping up and down, he was gyrating, he was running up the stem of trees, he was doing the splits. All to the sound of the beat he heard. He was loose in a way he had never been before.

It was fun, it was glorious, it was exhilarating.

Little did he know that his antics had attracted attention. Of course not, his sensible mind had been cut free from its moorings and, like the onlookers, it could only stand and stare. If it

had eyebrows they would have been up, steadily rising notch by notch. Unlike the onlookers it did not enjoy what it saw. It was simply not geared that way.

Somewhere on the northern hemisphere, though, there was glee, there was joy, there was plenty of hurrahing. There were high hopes and eager expectations. Surely there must be more to follow.

Indeed there was. His cavorting took its toll as he was not used to so much exercise. Before long he was flagged out but the beat carried on and so did the yearning. The urge to cavort was followed by an urge to yodel. Gorbimey, where on earth did that come from! He had not yodelled in his entire lifetime, let alone ever entertained such a weird notion. But it was not a notion, it was an urge and it could not be denied. So he opened his mouth. Unlike him his vocal chords seemed to know what they were doing. Out came a string of most unusual sounds, bouncing rapidly up and down in the air. He listened to himself in utter amazement. He didn't know he had it in him!

By now he had given up on trying to control himself. There was no point, was there.

That's right, pal! Just go with the flow. That's the ticket! You're getting there.

He yodelled happily on until that urge burned itself out as well. As it had to, because there was only so much air he could expend before losing his breath. Also because, while he was warbling on, his legs did not stop moving. He was getting somewhere even if he did not know where that was. The lack of purpose did not bother him in the least. As it normally would have. Why should it, as long as he was enjoying himself. And that he was. Hugely.

But yearning was not done with him. It had been cooped up for too long. It was footloose. It was fancy-free. Nothing was going to curb its freedom. No way! It was going to make the most of it.

He was busy trying to get a second breath when the next urge hit him. Tell someone, everyone about what had happened to him. About all his carefully hidden secrets, his heartaches, his losses, his unfulfilled dreams. Everything would be out in the open. Aired to the winds and everyone's ears to hear.

Oh no, no, no. It didn't bear thinking!

The feeling of embarrassment was so strong resistance flared up, even though it had been thoroughly squashed.

Told you resistance is futile, didn't! Sorry, I shouldn't gloat. So unbecoming.

The snigger came just as the urge to share overwhelmed him and he began to gabble. Word after word escaped his mouth. His mouth was on fire but the stream of words would not stop.

It was all gobbledygook, totally unintelligible. There was no head or tail to be made of it but it kept his audience captivated, riveted, mouths open, ears peeled. Their eyes followed his every move. His arms swung, first up and down, then opened wide, his fingers punctuated the air, his hands flapped. All to the beat that continued to spur him on. He paced, he ranted, he raved, he argued, he parleyed, he begged, he swore, he mocked. His face was a sight to behold. His eyes rolled, his mouth contorted. He spat and drooled around the tidal wave of verbal garbage he produced. Tears rolled down his face. There were occasional spasms of bitter laughter. The whole range of human emotion passed before the flabbergasted eyes. The performance kept them rooted to the spot. Until that urge too came to an end and he stood gasping.

There was a brief moment of disappointed silence then the crowd started to applaud. Which he did not hear because his legs still marched, up and down, answering to his distant drum. Which of course only he himself heard. After a while the crowd dispersed and he was on his own again. He felt strangely cleansed, empty. He took a deep breath and off he went, following wherever his legs led him. Not a single thought in his brain. No wonderings, no ponderings. Not a word of protest. What remained was a kind of woozy, pleasant, drowsy warmth. Yearning had had its fill. It had snoozed off and left him to his own devices. No urge to do anything. Which, of course, was nothing unusual for him. Except this time he was actually enjoying himself. Eyes fresh, ears clear, brain ready to be filled with new adventures. Pastures new. Destiny undefined. And nothing lazy or laissez-faire about it. On the contrary. It came with a strange sensation that he was hard put to define. It finally provoked a word that he had not used in a long time, if ever.

‘Whoopee!’

It shot out of his mouth with great force. It was so unusual for him that he looked over his shoulder to see if there was someone else marching behind him. But no. The realization that it had actually been he himself who had shouted provoked an instant heat. It fired him up. He marched on with renewed vigour. With a hop here and a skip there and the occasional kangaroo jump in between.

The sun rose and warmed his face. Birds warbled and cheered him on. He marched. Out of the past. Into the future. Into forever. Unthinking, unworried, un-everything. Happy as a lark.

Finally the vigorous marching took its toll. He was huffing and puffing. Sweat was rolling off his face. His breath was getting short. He had to stop. So he stopped and stood catching his breath. He noticed at the same time that everything had gone very silent. Birdsong had come and gone and so had the sound of the distant drum. He found himself standing on the edge of what looked like a small lake. That in itself was nothing special. It was the sight of a group of dolphins playing in the middle of it. They jumped, they dived, they twirled, they whirled, this way and that. One lot dropping back and others rising again. Together they made a fountain of delight, opening up like a bunch of flowers. Then, from the middle of the frolicking bunch, one jumped straight up. Like a finger it crooked and beckoned before diving back down. And up it came again. And again. Until it dawned on him. It was inviting him to join. He did not hesitate. He took a run and dived in. This was followed by a loud gasp.

A few stragglers from the earlier, mesmerized crowd had followed him at a distance, curious to see what else he would do. They had spread the word. So now another crowd had gathered. Waiting, wrapped in a hush of eager expectation. The gasp was theirs.

His dive ended with him knocking his head on something hard. Coughing and spluttering and somewhat dazed he rose from the water. The sight that met his eyes was not what he had expected. Instead of dolphins there were people. Lots of them. Looking at him.

Him. Standing in a fountain in the middle of a square. What the heck! For a moment there was a glazed look in his eyes.

Then, from deep inside him, another fountain rose. Laughter spurted upward, unstoppable and irresistible. He dropped to the ground and flapped about, spluttering with laughter. He did not care, if anybody saw him.

From the other side of the lake, unseen by him, something flew towards him. It was his flittering, fluttering heart. It had followed yearning but soon lost track of it. So it had wandered off on its own, doing what it had always wanted to do. Silly things. It returned from the wild side, refreshed. Now it was eager to get back to where it belonged.

There you are! Hearts don't get broken. They heal. If you let them.

Suddenly he heard the beat again. This time it sat in his chest. It tickled. Which made him laugh even more. He laughed so hard the tears rolled down his face.

A voice spoke to him.

Still laughing he looked up and found a policeman standing over him him. Someone had apparently reported his unusual behaviour.

'You do realise a fountain is not a swimming pool. Sir.'

Reigning in the laughter he pushed himself up and beamed at the policeman.

Cool, reproving eyes travelled over his dripping figure. Something twitched by the stern mouth, though. The beginning of a smile maybe.

It tickled his funny bone. A snigger itched its way to the surface. He began to snort.

'Truth be told, I don't know what came over me, officer. Most unusual. Can't promise it won't happen again.'

Hooting with by then uncontrollable laughter he stuck out his wrists to the policeman.

'I confess to being a fool. You may take me in.'

His laughter turned out to be infectious. The policeman could not keep a straight face and started as well. Before long all the onlookers had joined in. The noise they made was such that it attracted more and more people. Before long there was a laughing flash mob. People all over were holding their belly, rolling around on the ground. Some even jumped into the fountain.

Eventually the laughter subsided. People wandered off, alone or in little groups. Eventually there was only him left, with the policeman in attendance. When they were both done wiping their eyes, the policeman patted him on the shoulder.

'I suggest you move along, sir. You're causing a disturbance. I should take you in. But just for the record -or rather off the record- you made my day. And that of many others by the looks of it. Can't arrest you for that, can I? Now be off with you before I change my mind!'

As he wandered off, as requested, water dripped down his body and into his shoes. The slosh-slosh took on a rhythm and he started humming. A breath tickled his ear and made him smile.

Do you know where you are?

No he didn't. Did he care to know? No he didn't. Did it bother him not to know? Not one little bit!

Are you enjoying yourself?

Was he enjoying himself? Yes, yes he was!

When the path took him to a river he sat down and watched the world flow by.

Any wonderings or ponderings?

Yes, of course. He watched them come. And watched them go. They drifted down the river, like everything else.

Any feelings? Happy perhaps?

Feelings?! Happy?! The suggestion nearly blew him away. And then he realised.

Yes, he was! Happy! Very. He hadn't believed it possible. Not after he had buried the feeling so deep he thought he'd never find it again.

See? All it took was a walk on the wild side.

Wild side? He did not believe that that was what had happened to him. He just fell out of bed, didn't he? Must have knocked his head in the process.

Oh you silly man! Unbelievers, who'd have them!

At that his heart smiled and shut up. It just kept on beating the way it always had. Lustily.

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Thanks!

Marina Gerrard

A Walk on the Wild Side is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to incidents that may have occurred or actual people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The expression 'Resistance is futile' comes from the sf TV-series Star Trek. There it is part of the standard message used by the Borg when they encounter an alien race they intend to assimilate into their collective.

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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