



A Whiff of Something Else

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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By Marina Gerrard

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It was a strange smell and it woke him. It took him by the nose and he followed it. Down the stairs, through the living room, down into the basement, out the backdoor and into the street. As it turned out he was not the only one. There were several others and their ranks swelled as they all followed their noses. All of them freshly out of bed. Most of them in their pyjamas, like himself. Or half-naked or worse if they were not so lucky.

Oh yes, plenty of others. Some holding their nose as if the smell was a bad one. Others tapping the side. Some even put a finger up their nose as if that would do anything. He wondered about that but the thought was fleeting and it disappeared as he followed his own trail.

It wasn't a bad smell. Not at all. It wasn't unpleasant either. It was pungent. It was fragrant, somewhat spicy. The scent filled his eyes and his head. He could almost taste it. It made his mouth water. He licked his lips. Flavour elusive, origin unknown. He quickly gave up trying to determine what it was.

His nose twitched. The scent was everywhere. The taste of it on his tongue. He was aware of nothing else as he carried on putting one foot in front of the other, obeying the pull like everyone else. After a while, however, his mind and then his eyes started to wander. On top of that the morning was bright but chilly and the early morning dew had reached his skin and made him shiver. The sun was only just topping the horizon. He wrapped his arms around himself and waited for warmth to come.

He had been aware of the others, of course. Even though he had not paid them any attention. He looked at his fellow travellers. By now there was a whole host of them. Eyes trained forward. Totally focused. Deaf and blind to anything else. Even the ones that were buck-naked. Weren't they feeling the chill?! It appeared not. They just carried on moving, following the scent, oblivious to decency. He averted his eyes.

No one spoke. Even the birds were strangely silent. No dawn chorus, no tweet, no warble of any kind. He strained his ears but soon gave up. There was not a sound. Nothing. Not even a shuffle of feet or slipper. Silence was total, scent was all.

He appeared to be the only one whose concentration was breached. He wondered about that. Oh, only briefly, because something else caught his attention. A butterfly, newly released from its chrysalis, was unfolding its wings and drying them in the now fast warming sun.

He stopped to look. No one else did. The crowd just split and flowed around him. No one paid him any attention. They just carried on. Like lambs to the slaughter. Like lemmings marching to their doom. The thought was disturbing but fleeting and he dropped it instantly. The colours of the butterfly's wings grabbed his eye. He carefully moved up closer to see the butterfly getting itself ready for flight. Watched the little antennae twitch as they sensed the air for smells of food. When it finally left its perch, a little girl broke away from the ranks of the moving crowd.

'Oh,' she cried, a look of joy and wonderment in her eyes as she pointed after the butterfly.

She joined him and together they watched it flit off. Amazingly it seemed oblivious of the scent that hung in the air. It fluttered here and there in search of nectar. By agreement unspoken they joined hands and followed it, leaving the throng to its own devices. The scent became stronger, insistent in its attempt to make them stay with the herd. They ignored it.

The butterfly was a finger drawing scrolls of direction in front of their eyes, dazzling them with another purpose. Its wings were golden and unusual. They were flecked with black spots that winked at them. They could not get enough of its antics and their faces were alight with joy. They would have followed it to the end of the earth if they had had to but it soon found its feeding ground in a park with luscious flowery borders. They stopped and sat down on a bench. They watched the butterfly flutter from flower to flower and sample the nectar.

'I love butterflies,' the girl said happily.

'So do I,' he replied and gave her hand a squeeze.

They both turned and looked at one another for the first time.

'Hello', he said. 'What's your name then?'

'Mandy,' she supplied. 'Short for Amanda but I like Mandy better.'

'Mine's Alfredo. Fred for short. I don't like Alfredo either.'

The girl nodded sagely. 'It happens,' she said.

His eyebrows twitched.

‘That’s what my mother says anyway,’ Mandy added. ‘Amanda is my nana’s name. I’m named after her. I love my nana. She gives me hugs and sweeties. She smells nice.’

Mandy sighed in happy reminiscence.

‘Where’s your nana now? Is she?’ He pointed vaguely in the direction they had come from.

‘My nan’s in a wheelchair. She can’t leave her house. My grandad has to look after her.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. What about your mummy and daddy, where are they then?’

Mandy wrinkled her nose.

‘I don’t know really. They woke up and went for a walk. They didn’t tell me. They didn’t even leave me a note to say they’d gone,’ Mandy said in a sulky tone of voice and pouted. ‘There was no breakfast either. I’m hungry.’

Her eyes filled.

‘I’m hungry too,’ he said and squeezed her hand.

For a moment they watched the butterfly continuing its search for nectar.

‘Let’s go and look for something to eat,’ he said finally. ‘There must be somewhere we can go.’

They got up from the bench.

‘My feet hurt,’ Mandy said.

He looked down. Neither of them were wearing slippers. The only thing they had on were their pyjamas.

‘Oh dear,’ he said. ‘Then I think I’ll have to carry you.’

He picked Mandy up and put her on his shoulders. She was only a skimpy thing. He guessed she was only seven or eight years old. He silently cursed the parents for their negligent attitude towards the girl.

Mandy put her arms around his neck and rested her head on his.

‘I think I like you,’ she whispered.

‘I think I like you too,’ he answered and patted her on a dangling leg.

‘Now let me see if I can find out where we are.’

He turned around in a circle to see if he could find his bearings. The park where they were was not familiar to him. There were several paths he could take but he could not see where they led to.

‘Can you see a street anywhere?’ he asked Mandy. ‘You can see more than me.’

‘I think there’s one over there.’ Mandy pointed to the left of them.

‘Okay, we’ll try that.’

He took a path that veered to the left.

‘Lucky these paths are not covered in shells, he said. ‘Or I would have very sore feet too.’

Mandy patted him on the head.

‘Who’s a good horsey then,’ she replied in a childish voice.

He laughed and gave it a few horsey jumps. ‘That’s me alright!’

He carried on along the path and soon enough they reached the edge of the park. The street they came out on was bare of people. Not a soul in sight anywhere.

‘Cor-bloody-blimey,’ he whispered.

‘You’re not supposed to swear,’ Mandy voice said reprovngly above his head.

‘Tush, girl. I won’t do it again. I was just surprised. Now let’s see if we can find a road sign.’

They turned left on the empty street until they came to a crossing. As luck would have it, it had a road sign. He looked at the signpost. It told him they were several miles out from where they started. In fact they had walked all the way into the outskirts of town.

‘Co-o-o-r,’ he began, then coughed. ‘We’ll have a bit of a trek, Mandy lass. Let’s hope we come across a shop somewhere. Or a baker’s that’s open. We’ll have to beg for something, as we don’t have any money.’

‘I do,’ Mandy said proudly. ‘I have a piggy bank that’s full of coins. My nan gives me something for doing the shopping for her. I save it all up so I can buy something I really like.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘Don’t know yet.’

She gave his hair a tug and lightly kicked her heels against his chest.

‘Go go go!’ she cried.

‘Who’s hu-u-ungry,’ he whinnied and shook his head.

‘I am. Very hungry. I always have a lotta-lot of cornflakes with syrup but there was nothing on the kitchen table this morning.’

Mandy sniffed.

‘Maybe they just forgot to put it out,’ he said and patted her leg. ‘Does that happen a lot?’

‘Not really. Only when they are busy. But they usually leave me a note. They didn’t this morning. They went out without t-telling me,’ Mandy hiccupped.

He could hear tears were beginning to gather.

‘Why were you outside?’ he wanted to know. ‘Did you go and look for them?’

‘I did,’ Mandy said tearfully. ‘But there were all these people. I looked and looked but I didn’t see them anywhere. I asked but nobody said anything. They didn’t even answer me. They were all just walking. They were all acting really weird. Then I saw that lovely butterfly. You were the only one that stopped to look. Nobody else did.’

‘Did you -ehm- did you smell anything funny when you came outside?’

‘No. Why?’

‘I just wondered,’ he said. ‘Because I did. And I think everybody else did too. We were all following our noses. I think your parents must have done that too.’

‘I have a bit of a cold,’ Mandy added. ‘I don’t smell too much right now.’

She proceeded to sneeze healthily, right by the side of his face.

‘Hey,’ he cried. ‘You can leave that right off. I don’t want your cold. I can smell good enough right now. Thank you very much.’

‘So why are you now not following *your* nose like all those others are doing?’

‘I saw that butterfly and I stopped walking. Nobody else did.’

‘It was beautiful, wasn’t it? And then it flew away,’ Mandy said wistfully. ‘Maybe it too was following its nose. Do butterflies have noses?’ she asked changing tack.

‘I don’t know really. They must have something that helps them find food when they are hungry.’

Mandy sighed. ‘I’m hungry too,’ she added and gave him an admonishing kick with her heels.

‘Can’t you use your nose to find us some food?’

‘I can try,’ he smiled, ‘but it might be a better idea if I start walking, don’t you think?’

‘I think trotting would be quicker,’ Mandy suggested.

‘You may be right,’ he agreed. ‘Let’s go left. I’m sure we’ll get back to town centre that way. I know there’s a baker’s there.’

He started trotting but after a while Mandy became too heavy for him to carry. He stopped to put her down.

‘Can you try to walk for a while?’ he asked. ‘For a little girl you’re very heavy.’

‘I’m not little,’ Mandy huffed. ‘I’ll be nine in August and yes I can walk for a little bit. Until my feet start hurting again.’

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘Nine. Not so little then.’

He took her by the hand and together they walked in the direction of town. In the meantime the sun was warming the pavement and for a while the tiles were smooth to their feet. When their feet started hurting they decided to give them a rest before carrying on. They set their backsides down on a low wall. So far they had not met a soul. The streets were totally empty of life. They were still on the outskirts of town and there were no shops of any kind. He sniffed the air. The smell was still there but only faint. It had no power to lure him. He sniffed again and wrinkled his nose. There seemed to be a different, more unpleasant cast to it but it was too faint to make hay of. He shook his head to get rid of it.

‘Are we not there yet?’ Mandy asked plaintively. Her stomach rumbled.

He gauged the distance they yet had to go.

‘Soon,’ he said. ‘I think it’s another ten minutes from here. Then we should begin to see the shops. I think there’s a supermarket there and a baker’s too.’

Mandy sighed. She swung her legs and looked around.

‘Why are there no people?’ Mandy looked at him seriously.

He considered the question and took a while to answer it. He frowned as niggles of worry started in the pit of his stomach.

‘I don’t really know,’ he said truthfully in the end. ‘They all seemed to be going somewhere. Except I don’t know where that somewhere is.’

‘Following their noses,’ Mandy supplied.

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘So was I until I saw the butterfly.’

‘Was it a nice smell?’ Mandy wanted to know.

Again he took his time in answering.

‘It was and it wasn’t. It was . . . strange. It was as if it spoke to me and said ‘Follow me’ and then I did. I followed it.’

‘Until you saw the butterfly,’ Mandy concluded.

‘Yes. That sort of broke the, the spell. Yes, that’s it. The butterfly broke the spell.’

The thought was uncomfortable and he did not want to pursue it. He stood up, grabbed Mandy’s hand and pulled her off the wall.

‘Come on. Let’s go hunting for something to eat.’

‘Yeah!’ Mandy jumped up and down enthusiastically.

Off they trotted towards town and right enough after ten minutes or so they came to the high street. The shops and the supermarket and the baker’s were all there but everything was devoid of life. There were no people. The doors to all the houses in between the shops stood open. As if people had left and not bothered to close them behind them.

Or hadn’t had the time to do so.

The thought bothered him more than he wanted to admit. So he pulled Mandy along with him to the baker’s. The smell of freshly baked bread met them. The bakery’s was the only shop door that stood open.

‘We’re in luck,’ he said to Mandy. ‘Bakers are early birds and the baker people must have been busy making bread and rolls. Before the smell started,’ he trailed off.

‘Oh goody!’ Mandy said, unperturbed by disquieting thoughts.

They went inside. There were loaves and rolls on trays ready to go to the shop front. There were loaves sitting ready to go into the ovens. It was obvious the baker’s personnel had been disturbed in the middle of their daily process.

Mandy reached for a roll. Then she pulled her hand back.

‘Do you think we are allowed to take some?’ she asked dubiously.

She looked around. ‘Only there is no one we can ask.’

‘I don’t think they would mind,’ he assured her. ‘We’re not robbing them blind, are we?’

Mandy shook her head.

‘Let’s take a few with us. We can go and eat them outside. Maybe somebody’ll turn up and then we can explain, can’t we?’

Mandy nodded. She picked up two rolls. So did he.

There was a bench outside the bakery shop and they sat down. The sun had just reached that side of the street. It warmed their faces. They munched their rolls in comfortable silence.

He sniffed. The smell of freshly baked bread overruled any other kind. He hoped the other smell had gone by now. When they had finished eating they went back into the bakery and by mutual assent they each took another two rolls.

‘You never know when we might come across another bakery, eh?’

He noticed there was a door at the back of the shop. It opened onto a staircase. He assumed it led to the living quarters upstairs.

‘I know it’s not polite to go into somebody’s house uninvited but shall we look and see if we can find some shoes and socks for the two of us? My feet are getting rather sore.’

‘Mine too,’ Mandy agreed. ‘We can always leave a note, can’t we? And return them later.’

They took the stairs to the upstairs apartment. There he found a pair of running shoes that fitted him. They did stink a bit but beggars can’t be choosers, he thought. Mandy had

more of a problem finding something suitable. She rooted around in wardrobes and looked under several beds. Eventually she did find a pair of shoes that fitted her. Just.

‘They pinch a bit,’ she said, ‘but I think they’ll do. I also found a drawer full of socks,’ she said proudly. ‘Look, men’s socks and,’ she sniffed, ‘boy ones.’

She held up a pair with racing cars on it.

‘Your feet will love them,’ he said, as she put them on.

He wrote a note to the owners about borrowing their possessions. Then, rolls in hand, shoes on their feet, they left the baker shop.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Mandy asked. She took a nibble from one of her rolls.

He thought for a moment.

‘Maybe we should first go to my house. It’s only a few blocks from here. And then to your house. We can both get dressed and think about it some more.’

‘Maybe we could go and look for my parents,’ Mandy suggested as she took another nibble. ‘Maybe they went to a funfair.’

I doubt it, he thought. Disquiet wormed around in the pit of his stomach.

‘Maybe.’

He reached for Mandy’s hand. ‘Let’s go.’

Mandy took his hand and skipped alongside him, happy as a lark at having found a friend.

The street was quiet. The silence was deep. Even the drop of a pin would have sounded like a sonic boom. There was only the slap of their feet against the pavement, echoing against the houses. Loud enough to wake the dead.

He blinked the thought away. He caught a small whiff of the smell in the air. It was not as pleasant as it had been the first time. It had no power to lure him.

Neither the silence nor the smell bothered Mandy. She was humming a cheerful tune under her breath. She dragged him over to look at shop windows and peeked inside open doorways.

‘Nobody home,’ she announced. ‘Do you think they’ve all gone to the fair?’

She did not wait for an answer. He did not have one.

They finally reached his own house. Its door opened wide, as he too had left without thinking to close it behind him.

‘Home,’ he announced. ‘This is where I live.’

‘Oh,’ Mandy cried and she rushed indoors. She looked around, eyes eagerly taking everything in.

‘It’s very nice,’ was her verdict. With a loud sigh she dropped herself on the settee. He went to his bedroom and got dressed. He made them something to drink, after which they went back out. This time he made sure his door was closed behind him and safely locked against any intruders. Ten minutes later Mandy too was kitted out properly.

‘We’ll take the socks and shoes back to the baker’s later,’ he promised her.

When they went back out, the smell had become more noticeable. It seemed to cling to the buildings and it was distinctly unpleasant. He tried not to breathe it in.

Eventually it even penetrated Mandy’s cold. Her nose wrinkled.

‘What’s that smell? It stinks,’ she complained.

‘It does rather, doesn’t it,’ he said noncommittally.

‘A real pong-y-pong,’ Mandy added. ‘I think we should go and find out what causes it,’ she decided. ‘It would give us something to do.’

She looked up at the sky which was blue and surprisingly free of birds. It sparked a new thought in Mandy’s active brain.

‘Maybe all the birds dropped out of the sky and their bodies are now rotting in the sun,’ she announced cheerfully. ‘That would explain this awful smell, wouldn’t it?’

He nearly choked on the picture it called up.

‘Jeez, Mandy,’ he croaked. ‘Don’t you think you’re letting your imagination run away with you a bit?’

‘That’s what my nana says too. She says -Mandy took on an adult voice- ‘you have too much imagination for your own good, child’. Duh!’ Mandy giggled.

The stink sat in his nose like a burr. He could not get rid of it. He sneezed.

‘I rather think we should go and look for your parents, don’t you?’

Mandy's face fell. 'Boring,' she said. 'I'm sure they'll turn up some time. They always do.' She sniffed. 'When they remember I exist.'

She did a hop and a skip and ran a few steps ahead. 'Come on then. Let's go exploring.'

Reluctantly he followed. He could not think of anything better to do. So he let her take the lead.

Mandy stuck her nose in the air and flapped her arms. 'I'm a butterfly and I can smell you!' she cried.

He shook his head in quiet admiration at the indomitable spirit the girl displayed.

'Pong-y-pong-y-pong, where are you?' she wheedled as she flitted here, then there in her pursuit of the smell.

He followed her at a little distance. The stink sat in his nose and for the life of him he could not distinguish any direction in it. It was all the same to him. Mandy, however, seemed to be following a specific trail, nose up in the air, eyes half-closed.

Artwich Daily Mail

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GRUESOME MYSTERY

What happened in Newton? That's a question that will haunt us for many years to come.

Newton, once a thriving countryside town, overnight turned into a charnel-house. The bones of its former twenty thousand inhabitants were found haphazardly scattered in a nearby field. They were seen by a lorry driver who was going to deliver flour to the baker's. It appears that the place was swept clean of life in the early hours of the morning.

The bones that were found tell a grim story. Unfortunately it is one the police have not been able to decipher. The bones themselves gave away no clues of any kind. There were no survivors.

The news caused a storm of speculation, anxiety and, of course, grief and despair. Many people in the surrounding towns, indeed countryside, had lost loved ones, friends and colleagues who had disappeared off the face of the earth in the blink of an eye. All without

so much as saying goodbye. It took a long time for people to recover from the tragedy. Some of them never did.

But there had been witnesses. Two of them. A young man and a girl. They were found wandering hand in hand, empty-eyed, slack-mouthed, incomprehensible sounds drooling down their chins. Their pictures were shown in every single newspaper with a request to name them. They were eventually identified by family members. Then the whole world knew there had been survivors. Two of them. A twenty seven year old man named Fred and an eight year old girl named Mandy who for months upon months could not be separated. Who would only scream if someone tried to do so.

Only he and the girl knew what had happened. Only they had seen the giant flesh eating plant rise 20 feet above ground, beautiful and deadly, its gigantic stripy pitcher bulging. A golden yellow lip reached down and spread itself on the ground like a huge carpet, luring the steady stream of human beings up and in with its scent. Every one of them disappeared lock, stock and barrel. When it was finally done, the maw closed. It gave up a massive burp of stinking sulphur and spat out the remains. It rolled up and shrank into a single thick tendril, then sank back into the earth where it had come from. Within seconds all signs of its presence had been erased. The only evidence it left were the jumbled heaps of skeleton everywhere. Bones as clean as a whistle. No smell or trace on them of any kind.

The man and the girl had seen it all, their blood turned to ice, their eyes bulging and their mouths open and drooling. They had stood and stared blank-eyed for minutes, maybe even hours, until he finally picked the girl up, wrapped her in his arms and they had left.

Only the two of them knew but they would not tell. Not now. Not ever. Never.

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Thanks!

Marina Gerrard

A Whiff of Something Else 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.

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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