

The background of the cover is a composite image. On the left side, there is a close-up of a human skull, showing the eye sockets, nasal cavity, and teeth. The skull is rendered in a dark, almost black color with some reddish-brown highlights. On the right side, there is a close-up of the moon's surface, showing its characteristic brown and tan tones, numerous small craters, and a textured, cratered surface. The two images are blended together, with the skull appearing to be superimposed on or emerging from the moon's surface.

# Whistling at the Moon

*short story*

**BY MARINA GERRARD**

# **WHISTLING AT THE MOON**

By Marina Gerrard

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He had been hearing it for a while now. At first he had not taken too much note of it. It was not there all the time. But after a while it seeped into his consciousness. It started pecking at his awareness. It became a distraction. To the point where he was thinking about it day and night. That is when he actively started listening out for it. Training his ear to catch what it was that was distracting his attention.

There were times when it was more present than at others. He soon realised that the best time to catch it was in the evening, the later the better. When the noises of day-to-day living had died down. When everything had gone quiet. Then he listened into the silence, indoors and outdoors. That is when he knew he heard something. A sound, of course. Definitely. But for a long time he was not able to determine what kind of a sound it was or where it was coming from. And no, it wasn't coming from inside his brain because when he put his fingers in his ears it wasn't there. So it wasn't a case of tinnitus. No. It was a sound and it came from somewhere out there because it was louder outdoors than indoors.

It annoyed him that he could not be more definite than that. No, that wasn't true. It intrigued him and he wanted desperately to find out the what and the where. And the why of course, but that went without saying. Because by now the whole thing was keeping him awake.

He gave it some thought. The first thing he had to do, he decided, was to pinpoint the place where the sound was loudest. Because he already knew the when. So he took to walking at night, tracking and tracing. He went down roads and lanes, climbed over fences, ventured into gardens, pastures, farm land, woods and fields. Everywhere he could think of. Listening. Back at home he made a map of where he had been, cross-referencing the volume and the location of the sound.

It soon became clear to him that his findings pointed him in one specific direction. The pond in the woods about half a mile away from where he lived. Which surprised him. He had been there multiple times and seen nothing that would explain the sound. He knew then he would have to dig deeper, listen deeper.

So one night he took himself into the woods, to the secluded spot left of the pond near some majestic willow trees where the sound had been loudest. He had brought a foldaway chair and a cushion and he settled himself comfortably, wrapped up warm against the night chill. He closed his eyes and relaxed. He would not be disturbed. No one ever came this way at night.

To start with there were some night sounds but they soon dwindled away into silence. When the wind died even the lapping of the water in the nearby pond stilled. Behind him the woods and the trees were quiet. There was not a leaf that rustled. All he could hear was the sound of his breathing and the beating of his heart. Soon even they were lost against the silence.

He listened. He knew the sound would be there but he did not hear it. Not yet. It would come. It always did. He breathed in deeply. The air was fragrant. It was filled with expectancy. It folded around him like a second blanket. He knew the night was going to bring answers to his questions. He felt it in his waters. Perseverance was all.

After a while his feet went numb. He tried to move them but found he could not. Then he felt a strange tingling. It started in the soles of his feet and slowly crept upward. He tried to bend over to rub some life back into his feet. He could not do that either. It was as if he had somehow stiffened from the waist down. He put it down to the chill in the night air and shrugged it off.

The strange tingling stopped.

He listened into the night. All was silent and remained so.

Then the tingling returned. It moved from his waist upward. It crept up his chest, into his arms and hands, into his shoulders and neck. There it stopped. Just below his chin, leaving his mouth free to open and close and breath to flow in and out.

‘Help,’ he managed to croak. Or rather that was his intention. The cry for help came out feeble and distorted as his voice box too was affected.

There was a slight rustle. Something landed on his shoulder and rested there. A leaf he thought at first. But no, more like a hand touching him. Lightly. It seemed to tell him not to worry. He tried to move his head to see but discovered that his neck too was frozen into place. He was immobilized from top to bottom. Panic struck. He struggled to get up. Which, of course, he could not. The pressure on his shoulder increased slightly, reminding him it was there. It also kept him in place. Strangely enough, though, its presence was a comfort. He gave up struggling and the panic subsided. He slipped into the moment.

It was then he became aware of the sound. He had not heard it coming but suddenly it was there. He strained his ears. He listened and listened but listening made him none the wiser. He simply could not figure out what was producing the sound. He tried open his

eyes to look for the cause but they felt as if they were glued shut. He could not even roll them or move them from side to side.

All the time the pressure on his shoulder was there, not allowing him to panic. Instead it urged him to focus downwards, through his feet, into the earth beneath. That is where he heard it. The sound.

Loud. Louder than anywhere else he had heard it above ground.

Down there it took on a different texture, more earthy. It solidified. He still could not determine what it was what he was hearing. It was just . . . there. Although, hearing wasn't the right word for it, was it now. He was just calling it that for lack of a better word.

If he could have pushed his eyebrows together he would have frowned. He sighed inwardly and hoped the mystery would solve itself. Sooner rather than later, preferably. He wasn't good at this kind of thing. Whatever the thing was. For now he sat, immobilized, rooted, just like a blooming tree, he thought. For all he knew he might even be growing roots! He listened, downward into the earth, as seemed to be suggested. It was all he could do.

The sound was there.

Of course it was! That's why he was here, wasn't he?!

It was almost like a voice and yet not. There were no words that he could make out.

It took him a long time to realise that the sound was not something he was hearing. It was something he *sensed*. It entered his awareness through the soles of his feet. From there it vibrated and rumbled upward, through his legs, through his upper body. It travelled upward, until it hit his brain. There it translated itself into sound. A process that miffed him but the thought he was hearing through his feet tickled him pink. He nearly laughed, ready to dismiss the notion as ridiculous. There must be some machinery nearby that produced the vibrations he felt. That would be the most logical explanation, he thought. He tried to remember if there was a production plant of some sort in the vicinity but failed. The countryside around him was rural. There was no planning permission given to any kind of industrial works, factories or otherwise. Yet. He should know. He was the council's chief planning officer, wasn't he.

There were plans, though. Of course there were! Projects to be. Nice development projects. He was working on them. Of course he was! He wasn't appointed planner just to

sit on his backside, dozing away in an office, was he now. Definitely not! And didn't he have a good one in the pipeline right now! Oh yes! This one would really show them what he was made of.

He knew his plans weren't always to everyone's liking. Hardly ever, in fact. There was always opposition but he knew how to overcome opposition. He had his little ways.

Admittedly they were not always strictly ethical but to his mind people should not stand in the way of progress. People soon came to see things from his perspective.

He was inclined to laugh but the pressure on his shoulder suddenly became a weight. Unpleasantly so. The urge to laugh died in its tracks.

He forced his attention back down into the earth below his feet and concentrated. As for now the countryside around him was unmarred by industrial sound of any kind. So that couldn't be it. There had to be something else.

So all right, the sound was something he sensed.

Having settled that, he knew he had to go about this differently. He gave up on listening and started feeling his way into the sound. It was not long before he began to sense it had a peculiar quality all its own. It had a tone, a colour and even a smell. It made him think of mould. Yes, definitely something fungal. It reminded him of the woods in autumn. It had a location, of course. Somewhere below his feet. If he could have wriggled his toes he would have. By now he could not even feel them. The only thing he could feel was the pressure bearing down upon him from above. It pushed him down and down, into the earth below.

Suddenly the strange tingling started up again. It rose from under his chin, crept into his mouth and nose and ears, then across his forehead and all the way to the top of his head, leaving only his brain free. Free to panic. Which he did.

At first panic was a thought, then it became an urge, something to express but he had no mouth to open, no tongue to move, no throat to scream. He had no voice, no way of protesting against what was happening to him. No way to breathe.

All the while the pressure was there, bearing down on him, compressing him, forcing him downward until his head disappeared underneath the surface. The earth closed above him. He knew then he was going to die.

Except he did not. Contrary to his expectation, he was not suffocating. Instead he now seemed to be breathing through his pores. Also he started to sprout, sideways and

downwards. The sensation of it somehow painted an image on the back of his eyelids. A spatial map, a landscape of sorts. He was looking at an underground network of roots. His.

To say he was baffled is to put it mildly. He was flabbergasted.

His panic subsided but the pressure on him did not. It kept pushing him and pushing him. It made him spread in all directions. There was no let up on the sound either. It was there, all around him. Suddenly, however, it took focus. It reached out like a thin finger and it touched him.

The connection was brutal. A jolt of excruciating pain shot from top to bottom and back again. All his extremities wriggled and convulsed. His roots joined and tangled with other ones. His underground network expanded exponentially. For a moment he went numb. Then feeling came back.

He soon became aware something had changed. The sound had gone. Or rather it had split up and crystallized into many separate sounds, all mingling and separating, shifting from here to there, going backwards and forwards. It finally came to him that what he sensed was the sound of voices. Dark, guttural, mouldy voices that came to him through the network of roots. The realization that the voices belonged to the trees attached to these roots was slow to sink in. If his mouth could have dropped it would have.

Trees with voices! How weird was that! He must be hallucinating!

When he managed to collect himself enough to concentrate he also realized that each voice had a distinct signature. An individual smell and tone. A different temperature. Not only that. There was an argument going on and it was not a friendly one. At times it even became heated and brutal. There definitely was a kind of tit for tat, a slamming and slapping that reverberated right through his own roots and into his brain. Eventually two distinct sides to the argument emerged from the barrage. Two camps that consolidated their opposition and heaved at one another. He tried to follow it but it was like trying to follow the rally in a game of tennis. The shifting from side to side wore his brain out. It made him feel cross-eyed.

The argument rose and fell. It annoyed him hugely that he did not understand what it was about. It somehow reminded him of the many committee meetings where he had laid out his plans and waited for the fallout to settle. After which he would move in for the kill. He smirked as he remembered the swinging of heads as they followed the arguments, the faces first angry, then baffled, then finally blank and defeated.

He forgot about reminiscing when he became aware of whispers, a rumble of something remarkably like laughter. A hoot and a tremble. It tickled his roots. It was infectious. He wanted to laugh too. Only he did not know what he was laughing at or for or about. A joke perhaps except the quality of the laughter was not exactly pleasant. It was distinctly vindictive.

The whole thing set his curiosity ablaze. Something was going on and he wanted to be in on it. Oh yes. He wanted to know what it was and he would not give up until he knew. Definitely not. Giving up wasn't his style. Never had been. Never would be.

He strained his brain until he felt it was growing tentacles. He tweaked and twisted, trimmed and adjusted until bit by bit he managed to tune in to what was being said.

- *damage that is already done!* The voice of anger. He knew it well. The fury in it was unmistakable.

*I agree but think about the damage that can be prevented!* The voice of principle. This too he recognized it instantly.

His own strategy: let them all argue until they were dog-tired, then provide the capping argument and kill all opposition stone-dead in the process. Paw! The glory moment. Usually his. Oh yes.

The argument went on a little bit longer. The vindictive versus the preventive. It was all so, so recognizable. In spite of not knowing what it was about he wanted to chip in, put his little oar in and stir the pot but he was too late. The voices had already reached the point of tiredness. A point he happily recognised. The point of reaching consensus, the winding up.

To be followed by the voice of reason and the giving in.

And he was right.

The voice of reason spoke and he listened avidly, hoping to understand what it was all about.

*It appears we are all agreed on one thing. This destruction has gone on too long. It has gone too far. But this last idea really takes the biscuit (rumbling and a kind of hissing). Something now needs to be done (a vindictive slapping sound). We need to take action, make a stand (yeah! yeah!). On that too we are fully agreed. There is no point, however, in being vindictive about it (a grumble from one side). There is a point for erring on the side*



*of safety and prevent worse (a har, har from the other side). Whether it's punishment or prevention, that's irrelevant really. Something just needs to be done to stop it from going further (a burst of har-har's from all sides).*

He found himself nodding in agreement. Reason always won through. In his experience at least. Belatedly he began to wonder what kind of destruction they had been conferring about and why he was sitting in on this. Before he came to a conclusion, however, the voice of reason continued, somewhat pensively.

*The question is, what are we actually going to do about it. To be more precise, about him.*

At that point he felt the attention of the entire congregation shift focus. It was then he realised that the finger of accusation was actually squarely pointing at him. The realization hit him like a sledgehammer. It slammed every ounce of breath out through his pores. Then anger struck.

They were pointing at him! *Him!* The injustice of it! What had *he* done to deserve this?! It was not only unjust but it was also unfair!

Under normal circumstances he would have ranted and raged, much like his defeated opponents in meetings were inclined to do, but in this instance he could not. He tried to slam his roots, send signals of denial through his pores, anything to attract attention to what he had to say. All to no avail. He had no hand to raise, no fist to make. The pressure from above immobilized him, his mouth was sealed and his power to voice opposition squashed to pulp. It was a totally new experience. One that drove him to distraction. He almost bled tears of frustration.

The voice continued.

*We would all like to see him have his comeuppance. However, this might not be enough to stop him. So . . .*

New voices spoke up. Violent ones.

*Eradicate! Eliminate! Exterminate!*

They were definitely coming from the vindictive side but it raised sounds of approval from the other side as well. It appeared that the whole lot of them were ready to gang up on him.

The thought of it was not only galling it was also frightening. Never had he felt so vulnerable and alone. This too was a new experience. One that made him sweat. Profusely. He could feel the sweat ooze like tiny drops of sap from his pores. A fact that was noted with glee.

*Doesn't he stink, a voice gloated. Phoa! Me thinks he smells of ... yes, yes, I think it's . . . fear!*

This raised a wave of laughter that spread through the surrounding soil and shook him to the core. He could actually smell the fear on himself and there was nothing he could do to stop it from oozing out. He was mortally afraid. There was no denying the fact. Never in his life had he felt so utterly powerless. If he had been in one of his meetings, he would have enjoyed the pale face of his opponent, watching the sweat beads trickling down. He would have chuckled inwardly and thought 'you're pissing in your pants, pal. You know it and I know it.' Now he was on the receiving end and he did not like it. Not one little bit. He still didn't know why he was being tried like this. And convicted by the sounds of it.

The laughter turned into a slow rumble and gradually died down.

*So what is it we are going to do,* the voice of reason asked when it could finally be heard again. *We have few resources.* Always a good argument, he thought. Often used it himself, same as 'too little time'. *And too little time.* There you are, he thought. Too right. So recognizable. *There are so many things we can't do, rooted as we are.* Yes, well, tough titties, he smirked. *We need to get help.* Duh, he thought. Whatever next.

Voices from all sides fell pell-mell over one another, suggestions flew backwards and forwards, hot mouldy air was blown everywhere. The argument fairly churned up the soil in which he stood rooted. He tried to follow it all. None of the suggestions were kind to him, that much he could gather.

When there was a bit of a lull a new voice piped up. *I think we should whistle at the moon.*

Oh, it was such a tiny, quiet, gentle voice but its suggestion brought the heated discussion to an instant halt. A hush fell as the trees pondered.

Whistling at the moon! What kind of a suggestion was that! Could it be sarcasm? He had used sarcasm on occasion to great effect. But the hush continued. If anything the silence deepened. It definitely smelled of agreement. He knew the smell. Intimately. They

were going to whistle at the moon, for crying out loud! Whatever that was. He'd never heard of trees whistling. It didn't bode well. That was for sure.

An ominous feeling stole over him. Anxiety gnawed at his innards. He wished he knew what the reason behind it all was. To his mind nothing he had ever done had merited this kind of treatment. He had always only done his job and lived as virtuous a life as could be.

*Wouldn't that be fair? Considering all the murder and mayhem he caused?*

This caused a rumble of slow mouldering anger that spread and spread. He could feel the consensus building around him. The silent majority was being swayed against him. He had never paid much attention to the silent majority in his meetings. To his mind they were not there. In the end they always sided with him anyway. Not so now. He could feel it. The mood was turning ugly.

Murder? Mayhem? Him? He just couldn't fathom it. He wanted to protest with all the fibres of his being. If only he could. He would give them a real lashing. Now his guts just churned. There was nothing he could do.

Another, tentative voice rose from the rumble.

*Should we not allow him a voice?*

*No!*

The denial was rock solid and unanimous.

*Did he ever allow us to speak? Did he ever listen to us? Did we ever get a fair trial? No, he did not and no we didn't. That is all there is to be said about that. Bring on the whistle.*

The voice that spoke was stark and forbidding. There was no opposition, only outrage. With that he knew his fate was sealed.

He began to shake. The pressure on him did not let up. If anything it became stronger. For a fleeting moment he wondered if this might have been how his board members felt when he had squashed every ounce opposition and protest of of them. Belatedly it dawned on him that all this could be punishment for the way he had run his meetings. A bit of overkill, wasn't it?

Oh, he admitted he could be a bit overly forceful. He instantly promised to better his life or to be exact his office life in that respect. He flapped his roots weakly to show he was

prepared to surrender. On this point in any case. I mean, board meetings, what the heck! They were run of the mill. Well, to be fair, they were the spice of his office life but he could be flexible. For once. Mind you, only once, only now, under the circumstances. He hoped, no he fully expected this would be enough. As it was only a minor point. Surely. Board meetings! For crying out loud!

But there he was wrong. So, so wrong. He had totally underestimated the true impact of his board meetings and the plans he presented there on the community he was now facing. This he would find out to his detriment. Oh yes. For when it came down to it this lot was not vindictive -except for some- but the majority, silent or not, erred on the side of safety. This lot was determined, very very determined to prevent further damage, caused by him. It therefore brooked not opposition. None. Certainly not from him. No way.

And so the preparation started. First one voice, then another and another dwindled and thinned. They joined and knitted and twisted until the many became one.

An eerie, whistling sound emerged. It rose upward, reaching higher and higher until it touched something cold and forbidding high up in the sky. He felt the shock of connection. An ice cold beam instantly shafted downward. It rammed the earth close by and shattered. It sent out a shock wave. This led to another response. A dense mist rose from the earth below. It was filled with weird noises. A mix of snuffling, grunting, chattering, tittering, snickering, cackling, even the clicking of teeth. It was was the sound of an army of creatures on the move. It was in no way uplifting. It was down right scary. And this army had a direction. Him. His heart slammed in his chest, his breath caught. He tried to escape even though he knew it was futile. The pressure on him never changed. It pinned him in place, remorselessly.

It was not long before the creatures reached him and the snarling began. When the snarling finally stopped, a sigh of relief and then a breath of jubilation spread in the woods around the pond. Leaves rustled and branches high fived. Something he never witnessed as he no longer had the ears to hear or the roots to sense. The only witnesses to it all were those that had whistled up the execution and made the punishment fit the crime. By them he was not missed. Not one little bit.

The missing was done elsewhere. There, though, the word was only mentioned in the sense that his absence was noted. First one colleague had said 'His coat is not there'. Then another 'His coffee cup is untouched'. Then a female one 'I don't smell his aftershave'.

Eventually eyebrows were raised as in, surprise, surprise, who is not sitting at his desk this morning. No one really wondered where he was or even wanted to know. Instead everyone went to their desk, bent down their heads and got on with business as usual. In this other world there were voices too, human ones, babbling, arguing, cheering, chuckling, snorting. No, he was not missed there either.

They had left his office alone. No one dared to check whether he was there after all, dead or alive. It was an at all times forbidden domain. However, at the end of the day, when he still had not popped his head out, his colleagues had gathered by the door. Curious as hell. Everyone knew that he had been working on something. Rumour had it that it was something to do with draining. Another of his far-fetched, idiotic plans, no doubt.

They knocked tentatively, then opened the door and peeped. On the desk there were piles and piles of paperwork but there was no one behind it. They heaved a collective sigh of relief. The female colleague stuck her nose in and sniffed ‘Do I detect a smell of mould?’

No one answered her as they all trooped in and gathered around the desk. In the centre sat a drawing of an industrial plant with a tower block behind it. Next to the drawing was a piece of paper with writing on it.

‘That must be the plan!’ someone whispered. Another, more daring chap grabbed the two papers, jumped on the desk and looked at them. His mouth dropped, then he laughed out loud.

‘What is it this time?’ the others wanted to know.

‘You won’t believe this!’ their colleague cried, as he jumped down and waved the papers above his head.

‘Draining the village pond in favour of a nuclear plant! Cutting down those gorgeous willow trees to make room for a tower block! Right on top of a nuclear disaster waiting to happen! The thought alone!’

Everybody snorted and scoffed. Another one of those hare-brained plans of his that had done so much damage to the countryside elsewhere already! The nerve of it! They were flabbergasted but then they should have expected no less. After all, his reputation had gone

before him. Thank heaven he was still in his probation time! He was lucky to have gotten in with as much as that. No one else would have him.

They threw his plan in the bin and cheered.

‘No more board meetings.’

‘No more woodland destroyed.’

‘No more protest marches.’

‘No more road blocks.’

‘No more threats to the workers or their families.’

They left the office, closed the door behind them and had coffee. Together.

Finally the female colleague sighed contentedly and said ‘No more him.’

‘Amen to that,’ they said in unison.

The following morning the cleaning lady came and opened the door to his office. A strong smell of mould hit her.

‘Phewee,’ she said, holding her nose while she threw the window wide.

All the paper on the desk had crumbled into dust as the ideas in them had been consumed together with their creator.

Opening the window blew dust off the desk. It landed in a corner where it rested until the cleaning lady took out her Hoover and sucked it up. With it went all that remained of his plans and his sad reputation.

Several days after the event a lone walker found what else was left of him. His jacket, his shoes, the chair he had sat on. It had been a night to remember. Except he was not there to do the remembering. Only the woods and the willow trees. They, however, had long since returned to their business, basking in the rural sunshine, enjoying life to the full. Undisturbed. Saved until the next idiot tried to destroy their habitat.

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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'. 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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