



# The Waiting Hour

*short story*

**MARINA GERRARD**

# **THE WAITING HOUR**

By Marina Gerrard

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It was the thirteenth hour. The waiting hour. And he was waiting. Oh yes. No way was he going to pass up a chance to find out what it was he was waiting for. Not even after all the unsuccessful, uneventful attempts when nothing of note had come his way. No sirree. Not after all the effort he had put into it. This time he was sure. He felt it in his waters. After all, everything comes to he who waits, doesn't it? So that was what he was doing. Waiting. Again.

He let his eye idly wander over his surroundings. He had been very careful this time to pick a spot where nothing and no one would disturb his waiting. The first few times there had always been something that either upset him or drew his attention elsewhere. Nothing of note, of course. Nothing worth waiting for anyway. Here was peaceful. Not a soul in sight. Not a bird in the sky. Not a sound to be heard. It was his secret hide-away on the moors. Perfect for this waiting business.

The first few times he had also been restless and distracted, hasty even to get it over and done with. But that wasn't really waiting, was it? That was just going through the motions. This was different. This was it, the real thing. He took a sip from the hip flask he had brought, settled himself comfortably on the blanket he had brought and waited. Moment after moment slipped past. Nothing happened. Nothing but the peace and the quiet. Nothing but his breath going in and out.

As his eye wandered, so did his mind. There was nothing to be seen, nothing but his inner thoughts.

After a few goes at it with nothing happening he had wondered if there might be a special way to do the waiting. That maybe he should dress for the occasion but he had not thought that was relevant. Not really. And yet here he was sitting in his Sunday best, hair freshly washed and slicked back with a pomade specially bought for the occasion. Even a squirt of perfume in the armpits to top it all off. So far it had not seemed to make a donkey's difference. Nothing had happened. So that really couldn't be it. It just showed he was serious about it, didn't it? He thought so anyway. Perhaps even worthy of some reward by now? He quickly nipped the thought in the bud. He did not want to ruin his chances by being deemed presumptuous.

Oh, it wasn't that he didn't enjoy himself. He loved it out here. It was this waiting business. It was gradually taking over his life. Waiting for the hour, waiting during the hour, then back to waiting for it again. Then the waiting itself again. Like now. All to

seemingly to no purpose. And yet, and yet. He had really thought this time was going to be the time when all would be revealed. Felt it in his waters. But apparently not. The hour was almost up and nothing. Another uneventful session. Again.

He sighed deeply with disappointment. He closed his eyes and laid down to wait out the last few minutes. Why even do it? Why wait? Why not be done with it? He wanted desperately to be done with it but he could not stop himself. It was both an urge and a compulsion.

Why the hour, why this hour and why not any other hour? How did he know when the hour was there and when it was up? He did not know. He just felt it coming on, felt he had to get ready and that was what he did. And then he sat down and waited.

He had not brought a watch. No point. He had tried that one with the clock at home but it appeared the clock just stopped when the hour started and started when the hour stopped.

Strange but that was just the way it was. Strange. The whole thing was strange. He gave it a mental shrug. No point thinking about it even. There were no answers. None.

When had it actually started, this waiting lark? Was there something perhaps that had brought it on? Now there was a question he could actually get his teeth in while the last waiting seconds ticked away. But he did not know. He just could not remember. It seemed to him he had been waiting forever. There must be rules to this game, though. A way to go about it. A meaning. Something that would make the waiting worthwhile. He just could not think of anything.

He felt the hour tapering to an end when something flicked his cheek. He opened his eyes to the gloaming of early evening. He found himself in the company of the weirdest creature he had ever set eyes on. It was hard to determine what he was looking at. His mouth dropped as he took in the shaggy auburn hair that drooped over eyes the size of saucers, the mouth that was a rosebud button and the lizard-like tongue that flicked in and out. The body was scaled and tapered. It ended in two spindly legs with feet the size of platters. The arms were twig-like. Where the hands were supposed to be they sprouted a small tuft of hairy leaves that wafted in the evening breeze. The creature did have a very human nose, though. And its ears were those of a human too.

He was looking at what appeared to be a cross between a human being, a tree and a reptile on two legs. He could only stare, speechless and dumfounded.

‘It’s unbecoming to stare at someone, you know. Did your mama not teach you any manners?’

The voice was a surprise, to say the least. It was soft and polished, its vowels rounded, the r’s rolling smooth as pearls out of the pursed little mouth.

He gaped.

‘Tut,’ the creature said and smirked. ‘I suspect you don’t come across someone of my ilk every day.’

Bushy auburn eyebrows raised above the huge eyes. The eyes themselves rolled heavenward, spinning around like crazy. The tongue slithered in and out adding a hiss and a spit.

‘Grup,’ he managed.

‘Doesn’t sound you’re endowed with the gift of the gab either,’ the creature said disparaging. ‘Double tut. But then it takes all sorts, doesn’t it? We can’t all be sprucious.’

‘Sprucious?’

‘Did I say sprucious? Slip of the tongue. Oh, well. What I meant to say was ‘there’s them and there’s us’. You’re clearly one of ‘them’.’

The creature looked him up and down.

‘You do look like a ‘them’ too. Bald, small eyes, big mouth, appendages all over the shop. And the nose, well the least said about that the better. In short, ugly.’

The creature spat out a cross between a hiss and a bark, which may or may not have been laughter.

He found his tongue.

‘Did I not hear you say something about manners earlier on? I find yours rather lacking, if I may say so. Your mama perhaps not teach you any?’

‘Oh so snide. How delicipus.’

‘Delicipus?’

‘Stop repeating what I say. It’s not nice, you know.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I guess your mama would have something to say about that too.’

'She would at that. Your guess is good. Now, would you care to enlighten me as to who you are and why you are here? It's not exactly everyday we come across one of 'them'.'

'I beg your pardon,' he said offended. 'I might ask you the very same thing. This is my turf and I can safely say I've never ever seen anything that looks like you. Let alone class you as one of 'us', 'them' or anything else but perhaps the inhabitant of a very weird zoo!'

'Stop right there,' the creature cried. 'No need to bandy insults. And as for turf, this isn't anybody's turf. Look at it for crying out loud! Isn't it screeping awful?!'

This was followed by a wide sweep of the twig-like arms.

He looked. Then he turned and turned and everywhere he looked the view was the same. He had to agree. Screeping was the exact word to describe what he saw. A single ring of rugged, jagged stones rising out of an otherwise empty desert.

'Where am I?!' he cried.

'Here, of course.' The creature sniggered. 'Bit of a surprise, is it?'

'Wha-, wha-'

'My exact words when I first laid eyes on that,' the creature nodded. 'But let's finalise the niceties first, shall we? After all, we *were* bought up to be civilised.'

He looked at the creature with somewhat bleary eyes.

'I'm Sholanus.'

A twig was presented. He looked at it distrustfully, then realised he was supposed to shake it. They shook, upon which Sholanus sneezed and said 'Howdo?'

'Howdo?'

Sholanus sighed and waved it away.

'So?' he said instead, looking at him expectantly.

'So what?'

'So who are you and why are you here?' Sholanus repeated with a sigh of utterly tried patience.

'Rufus. I don't know why I'm here. I was waiting.'

'Waiting! What for?!'

'I don't know. Something. Anything.'

'Well,' Sholanus said, preening himself. 'Must have been me then. You were waiting for me. Howdo!'

'Nothing howdo about it,' he said. 'And I certainly wasn't waiting for *you*! How could I!? You're nothing like what I expected.'

'What were you expecting then? The queen's jewels!?' Sholanus barked.

'I wasn't expecting anything in particular. I was just waiting. I thought that whatever turned up would make sense, make the waiting worth doing. Can't say you fit the part.' He sniffed morosely.

Sholanus broke into a fit of hiss-bark laughter. Tears were rolling down his face. The tongue flicked and slithered in and out. Finally the laughter and the tears dried up.

'And there you are. You got me.' Sholanus gave it a final hoot. 'And I got you, babe,' he guffawed. 'But I must admit I too am a tad surprised. I was waiting myself,' he confided. 'And no, I didn't know what I was waiting for either. It certainly wasn't you. Now we're here, stuck with one another. What a grebsy to-do.'

Sholanus gave it a philosophical shrug.

'Oh well. And you can stop looking so sour-faced about it. It doesn't become you. If it was meant to be, it was meant to be. Let's just get acquainted and find out exactly why we're lumbered with one another in this manner. And in this gruff-forsaken place of all places.'

Intrigued in spite of himself, he re-arranged the look on his face into something more pleasant.

'How come *you* were waiting then, if I may ask?'

Sholanus' auburn hair rose, together with his bushy eyebrows. His eyes rolled heavenward and his ears twitched.

'That, my friend, is a very good question, the answer to which I don't know. One moment I was digging around for something to eat and the next I was up and running.'

'Running?! Where to?'

‘To my quarters. I had to sit down. It was the appointed time and I knew I had to sit down and wait. From beginning to end. I couldn’t get up until the sand in the glass had run its course.’

Sholanus sighed deeply. ‘It’s been going on for a while now. Nothing ever happens while I’m waiting but there you are. I just have to do it.’

‘Yes!’ he cried and grabbed one of Sholanus’ twigs. ‘That is just how it is! The waiting hour. Everything stops until it’s done.’

‘Yes!’ Sholanus grabbed his other hand and together they danced around for a moment in total agreement of their odd plight. Then the absurdity of what they were doing took hold. They sagged and sat down together in the sand. They looked at the huge stones that surrounded them in silence.

‘And now we are here,’ he said after a while, stating the obvious.

‘So we are,’ Sholanus agreed.

‘Together.’

‘Indeed.’ Sholanus looked at his big platters and compared them with the other’s shoe-clad feet. Then he turned his head and looked him up and down.

‘Why are you covered in wraps?’

‘Wraps? What wraps?’

Sholanus pointed at his stylish outfit. He moved to a safe distance away and looked at him distrustfully. ‘You don’t have scale-disease, do you?’

‘They’re my clothes! Where I come from nobody has scales. Only animals do. We dress because it’s proper.’

‘Proper!’ Sholanus sniffed. ‘Well, I’m not an animal that’s for sure and where I come from only sick people lose their scales.’

‘Tough titty. *We* are sick when we have them. And very proper without them.’

‘*We* don’t need to dress,’ Sholanus snarled. ‘*We*’re very proper the way we are.’

He shook his head, giving up on that line of conversation. He got up to have a look at the stones. They were so tall they blocked out the light in places. He got a crick in his neck from looking up.



'I wonder if these stones have anything to do with why the two of us are here,' he muttered, while rubbing his neck.

Sholanus joined him.

'There must be a reason, don't you think? For it all.'

Sholanus shrugged. 'Does there have to be a reason?'

'Of course there has to be!' he exploded. 'The whole thing would be pointless otherwise!'

'What thing?' Sholanus rolled his eyes and took a flat-footed stroll along the stones.

'You, me, us, this place. The waiting!'

'I'm not waiting,' Sholanus said. 'Been there, done that. And now I'm here, in this place, with you. No more waiting. What more do you want?'

'A point!' he cried. 'I want a point. Why you, why me? Why not somebody else? Why not somewhere else!? Why the waiting? Why any of it!? Don't you want to know?'

'No,' Sholanus stated baldly. 'Where I come from we don't do curiosity. We accept. We don't query. We don't question. It's not-' Sholanus looked for a word.

'Proper?' he suggested snidely.

'That's right. It's not proper. It is what it is and that's all I want to say about it.'

Sholanus completed his stroll and gave the last stone a testing kick. It gave a resounding thunk.

'Nice stones,' he commented. 'Huge, sturdy. Plenty of shade. Do the job. Very proper for the circumstances.'

'Well, I for one could do with a change in scenery,' he snarled. 'And what job? What circumstances? Proper how?'

Sholanus gave him a pitying look.

'It hasn't dawned on you yet, has it?'

'What dawned on me,' he snarled, 'is the fact that for someone who 'doesn't do curious' (he gave it the hooked fingers) you are asking a hell of a lot of questions!'

Sholanus just looked at him with raised bushy eyebrows. The huge eyes spun. The button mouth quirked.

‘Say something!’

‘I suggest you take a little dekko at those stones,’ Sholanus finally said. ‘Let me know what you think.’

He did as requested. He went over to the nearest stone. He looked at the base, he looked the top, he looked at everything in between. Then he shrugged.

‘A stone. That’s what I think.’

‘You’re so right. Now look at the other side.’

He took a step to the left of the stone but found his passage was blocked by something unseen. He tried the same to the right of the stone but encountered another no-go area.

‘Hey!’ he cried. ‘What’s this?!’

He ran around the circle, trying each stone in turn but finally gave up.

‘We can’t get out,’ he panted.

‘I was going to tell you that before you flew off the handle,’ Sholanus muttered. His tongue slithered in and out.

‘Can you stop doing that,’ he cried.

‘Do what?’

‘That, that thing with your tongue,’ he pointed. ‘I find it most off-putting. It looks like you’re getting ready to eat me.’

‘Well,’ Sholanus looked him up and down, the tongue licking his mouth. ‘Now there’s a thought. It doesn’t look like we’re going to have much to eat while we’re here, does it?’

He instantly backed a good distance away from Sholanus.

Sholanus sighed. ‘No offence meant but you don’t look tasty to me. However, beggars can’t be choosers, I suppose. If it comes to the crunch I may have to unwrap you and eat you. Or you me.’

‘I don’t eat meat,’ he cried hotly. ‘I’m a vegetarian!’

Sholanus shrugged philosophically. ‘Depends on how the cookie crumbles, doesn’t it? See how you feel about it when you get really, really hungry. You can’t eat principles, you know.’

He gave Sholanus a disgusted look.

‘My principle right now,’ he snarled, ‘is that we have to find a way out. I’m not going to sit here and wait until we rot. I’ve had it up to here with waiting.’

His hands waved high above his head to indicate the extent of his being done with it.

‘Tut,’ Sholanus said and shrugged.

‘You may tut and shrug all you like. That’s not going to help us get out, is it? I suggest you give me a leg up so I can get a look over the stones and see what’s on the other side.’

‘Leg up?’

He sighed deeply.

‘Put your hands together and let me step into them, then hoist me up so I-’

‘Yeah, yeah, I get the drift. I’m not stupid, you know!’

He sucked his teeth. ‘I do wonder,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘I heard that,’ Sholanus barked. ‘Well, mister Uppity Woo. I can’t help you there. I don’t have hands.’

Sholanus smirked and waved his twigs.

‘Grmf. Put your grebsy twigs together and make sure you don’t drop me.’

‘Now why would I do that?!’ Sholanus hiss-barked loudly. His weird laughter ricocheted back from the stones and seemed to slap him around the ears.

‘Oy,’ he cried. ‘Leave off, will you!’

‘What did I do?’ Sholanus asked innocently.

‘Give me a frooping leg up!’

Sholanus complied. He rose with a speed that made him dizzy.

‘Not so fast,’ he cried.

‘I don’t know what you expect to see,’ Sholanus muttered. ‘It’s desert from here to Frenturti.’

‘Frenturti?’ There was no reply.

He tried to grab a hold on the very smooth surface of the stone as he rose to its top. He failed and just allowed himself to be slid upward.

‘Hold it right there,’ he shouted down when he reached the top.

Sholanus stopped with outstretched arms. ‘Don’t take too long,’ he shouted back up. ‘My twigs are getting frostbite up there.’

‘Groomff,’ he muttered as he finally managed to take a peek over the stone’s top. It afforded a deeply disappointing view of endless desert unmarred by any living thing, be it plant, beast or human.

‘Take me down,’ he snarled.

Sholanus opened his twigs and gave him the fast track down but grabbed him just in time before he crashed.

‘Sand, sand and more sand,’ he cried, ignoring the uncouth come down he just had.

‘Of course it’s sand. It’s a desert out there, for crying out loud! I already told you that.’ Sholanus hiss-barked and sat down. ‘But no you had to go and see for yourself, didn’t you? Well, now you know. It’s a desert and it’s full of sand. There you are. All you can do is sit down and accept the lot that’s given you. But you won’t, will you?’

‘You must be joking,’ he cried. ‘I don’t take this kind of thing lying down.’

‘You’re standing,’ Sholanus pointed out.

‘Standing, sitting, lying. What ever. I do not accept! Never did, never will.’

‘Exactly my point,’ Sholanus nodded. ‘And there’s the rub.’

‘What do you mean?!’

‘I’ll give you an example. Take the waiting.’

‘Yeah,’ he snarked. ‘Do take it. By all means. That didn’t get me anywhere, did it now? And not for the want of trying, I may add. And what did I get for my efforts? This.’ He gave it a broad arm sweep. ‘And you.’

He waved a disgusted finger at Sholanus. ‘All so not what I wanted.’

‘You’re so right there,’ Sholanus conceded. ‘And you know why?’

He took a deep breath and opened his mouth to let rip but Sholanus gave him a very, very forbidding look. He closed his mouth with a snap.

‘Because you couldn’t even accept the waiting. No, you had to go and force it. Nothing at face value for you, isn’t it? No. You gave it the capital W and you worked at it. Oh, boy did you work at it. Time after time, day after day. And still you weren’t satisfied. No. The waiting had to have a point. A point! I beg you!’

The disk eyes raised heavenward and spun crazily. Then they speared him fiercely.

‘There has to be a reason, a meaning for everything for you, doesn’t it?’

A twig slapped his face.

‘You’re not satisfied with life, are you?!’ Slap. ‘Not satisfied much with anything, we gather!’ Another slap. Sholanus gave it a spat of disgust.

His mouth hung open as this tirade washed over him. He was so flabbergasted he could not even duck to avoid the slapping twig.

‘We saw it coming a mile away,’ Sholanus continued. ‘So they sent *me*. Froop forbid. Me! And you know why? Because *I* don’t have patience. Well, I tell you my non-patience is sorely tried.’

Sholanus’ auburn hair rose to ten spiky points while he stopped to catch his breath.

‘Who’s we, who are they?’ he asked bewildered in the sudden silence.

Sholanus just gave a broad weep of his twigs by way of answer.

The spaces between the stones began to shimmer. Then before his eyes Sholanus appeared to double, then treble, then multiply until there was a whole host of Sholanus look-alikes pouring out into the open.

He gasped.

‘Oh my god,’ he cried. ‘Not more of you. I can just about cope with one!’

Sholanus smirked.

‘Accept the unacceptable,’ he said and gave him another slap with his twig.

‘Oh no, no, no,’ he shouted as he backed away.

It was a fruitless move as the other Sholanuses began to crowd in, all of them with twigs at the ready. Their eyes spun wildly and their flat platter feet made horrible sucking noises as they advanced on him.

‘Accept the unacceptable,’ they chorused.

He desperately looked for a route of escape but there was none.

He sagged to his knees.

The Sholanuses carried on chanting, their voices raising to a screech.

He put his hands over his ears but he could not drown out the noise.

‘Accept the unacceptable,’ the Sholanuses shrieked.

‘Your waiting time is over,’ a mocking voice whispered in his ear. ‘Accept it. It is what it is. Nothing to wait for. No point.’

He grabbed his head in both his hands and started to bang it on the ground. Then he suddenly looked up to find all the Sholanuses had disappeared bar one.

‘You,’ he cried as he sat up. ‘You said you had been waiting too.’

He shook an accusing finger in Sholanus’ face.

‘So I did,’ the other agreed.

‘And it wasn’t for me.’

‘Nope.’

‘So why are we here?! You and me. What for?!’

Well,’ Sholanus said, as he sat down beside him. ‘I think I know the answer now.’

‘You do?!’

‘Yep.’

Sholanus fell silent. He stretched his legs and twirled his big platters.

‘So are you going to tell me why?!’

‘Of course,’ Sholanus nodded. ‘In time.’

‘What time?!’

Sholanus raised his bushy eyebrows.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘that patience is a virtue. Which I don’t possess,’ he admitted.

‘So I was sent here to learn patience. I was waiting for the waiting to end. Impatiently. Same as you are here to learn to accept that everything comes naturally to he who waits. Unaccepting. You’re no more patient than I am able to accept the inevitable. That’s why we’re here. You and me. Together. We’re one and the same.’

‘Gor bloody blimey,’ he muttered. ‘A nutcase.’

‘Look in the mirror,’ Sholanus smiled, ‘and speak for yourself.’

Sholanus reached inside his scaly bosom and pulled out a mirror, which he stuck in his face.

‘Look,’ he whispered. ‘Look.’

He looked. To his utter horror he saw that his own eyebrows and hair were now as auburn as Sholanus’ and that his eyes had grown huge as disks. His hair stood up in unseemly spikes. Sholanus big face appeared beside his own.

‘Your time is up. Your hour is spent.’ Sholanus whispered in his ear. ‘Accept the unacceptable. I’m waiting. Patiently.’

Sholanus’ face contorted in a grimace. So did his own. A wild shriek reached his ears, which he soon realised came from his own mouth. He knew there was no way out but one. He closed his eyes in despair. The words slipped out, almost inaudibly but still.

‘I accept.’

A heavy burden slid off him. There would be no more waiting. It was a huge relief. When he opened his eyes he was where he had parked himself earlier that day. His secret hide-away on the moors. The sun was high. There was not a soul in sight. Not a bird in the sky. Not a sound to be heard. Then a quiet voice slid seamlessly into the peace without causing a single ripple.

‘Enjoy,’ it whispered.

He knew where it came from. And he accepted it. Fully. Totally. Peacefully.

‘Thank you,’ he replied and knew he was heard.

###

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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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