



A Foolish Mystery

SHORT STORY

MARINA GERRARD

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By Marina Gerrard

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The morning was full of whispers. They tickled his ear and woke him up. He got up and looked out of his window. The whispers rose like mist and surrounded the trees and shrubs. They hung between them like a spider's web, glistening like dew in the subdued pre-dawn light.

Oh, it had happened before. Several times, in fact. The first time he had just thought the whispers came out of a dream he had had. He had dismissed them and they had dissolved into thin air. But they came back. Every so often he would wake and there they were again. Every time at the same ungodly hour. It peeved him. After a while he began to wonder. Only vaguely, though. If there was anything in it. If perhaps the whispers were a sign and he was supposed to do something about it. But if so the meaning escaped him and, truth be told, he could not really be bothered. Soon the whole thing became routine. He woke, got up, looked, then went back to bed, turned over and slept. Deplorable but there you had it. Not once had it occurred to him to listen. To hear if there actually was something in the whispers. It never even dawned on him that he could do so.

But this morning something had changed. Oh, the mist was there as per usual, so were the whispers. Nothing new there. He could not offhand point out what it was that made it feel different. He sniffed but could not detect anything peculiar in the air. It was when he closed his eyes to rub the sleep out of them that he finally realised he could hear voices. But when he opened his eyes to check, the voices had disappeared and there was no one there. When he closed his eyes again the whole thing repeated itself. That is when it occurred to him that the whispers and the voices might be one and the same. Intrigued he kept opening and closing his eyes until it dawned on him that he was being stupid.

How about that! was his first thought. Not about the being stupid, of course, for that was par for the course. No, about them being one and the same, the whispers and the voices. His second thought was a vague wondering about what to do with this strangeness that had apparently come into his life. Then there came a third prompt. A question this time. If an attempt to listen might not be in order. He slapped his forehead and said to himself 'Slow man, slow'. Half-heartedly he put this slowness down to being half asleep. Knowing full well that these days there was very little he could be bothered about. Sleeping yes. Drinking maybe. The mysteries of life no way. He'd given up on all that.

Even though they might turn out to be the most rewarding?

A most unwelcome thought. It niggled its way into his consciousness and, for the life of him, he could not get rid of it. As a matter of fact it kindled what he told himself was an unhealthy interest. An active curiosity. As well as a feeling of expectation that stirred his heart.

His heart! For crying out loud!

He berated himself. He should know better. Had he not learned enough from previous mistakes? Was he really prepared to put himself on the line again? And for what?! Morning mist? Whispers in the wind? Voices that might just be figments of his own imagination? Grmmff.

Then doubt set in. Maybe the time had come to restart his life? Maybe.

If there really were voices -big if- then couldn't there be something in what they were talking about? Couldn't there? Double grmmff. And be honest, wasn't there also a kind of excitement in the air that certainly was not his own?

Under the persistent pressure of these thoughts and queries he caved in and decided to put it to the test. He closed his eyes and listened.

At first it was all gobbledygook. A jumble of words and sounds that did not contain a shred of meaning. It fair wore him out. With his eyes still closed he inched back to his bed. There was no reason for him to stay awake, was there now. A yawn escaped him. Then a single sentence leapt out. Clear as a bell and understandable to boot.

Promise not to tell anyone.

Followed by a mixture of grumbles, wolf whistles, yeah-yeahs and sniggers.

It instantly jerked him wide awake and he raced back to the window. But as soon as he had opened his eyes the sounds had all disappeared. When he looked out so had the mist and the voices. This annoyed him hugely until he remembered to close his eyes and listen. The voices were receding into the distance. Were they going somewhere? If so, where and why? If he really wanted to know, he would have to go after them. Did he? Want to know? Really? Yes, he did. If so, he would have to move. It was going against the grain but there was no time for

iffing. Nor butting. The voices were nearly out of hearing. He grabbed his dressing gown and barefooted stumbled towards the front door and out of it into the front yard, all the while trying to keep his eyes closed. Which of course was an impossibility as he was bumping into garden furniture, stubbing his toes and getting himself tangled up in the meagre shrubbery. By now he was wide awake and the voices were lost. Cursing and swearing he went back inside. He sat down briefly to wipe the blood off his hand and knees and rub his sore toes. Peeved to the hilt he went back to bed and tried to catch up on lost sleep. Which of course eluded him. More cursing and swearing saw him at the breakfast table in the kitchen nursing an - admittedly- nice hot cup of coffee. He looked at the clock which showed him the ungodly hour he knew it to be. Five to five. For crying out loud! He vowed there and then never ever to allow himself to be lured into this kind of stupidity again. He grumbled himself all the way through showering and breakfast before he felt acceptably human.

Despite his decision never to be waylaid like this again, he found himself through the day closing his eyes and listening out for voices, whispers, anything. That morning he arrived at work at -for him- another ungodly hour. He immersed himself in assignments and other stuff. They provided distraction enough to take his mind off the idiotic escapade of that morning. So much so he actually forgot all about it. The next few mornings were uneventful. Which helped the forgetting. But blow me down if, right at the weekend, when work could offer no distraction, it didn't happen again!

At the first tickle and whisper he shot out of bed. This time he did not bother to check if the mist was there. He grabbed his dressing gown, put on his shoes and charged out of the front door. The mist hung thick between trees and shrubs, smudging every detail except the whispers. He did not close his eyes until he had safely avoided all possible obstacles and had reached the garden gate. Then he closed them and yes! The voices were there. Loud and clear. No gobbledygook this time but an argument. Quite a bitter one at that. It appeared tempers were flying. There was a lot of hissing and spitting going on. A hot debate. About pros and cons. Accusations of false claims. Equally hot denials of the same. Agreement there was not. He could make head nor tail of it. Nor was he entirely sure what it was all about. Some kind of secret he thought. That either had to stay secret or be unearthed. Which would be to someone's or something's benefit. Or not. He could not even make out which. Why they had to wake him up for this nonsense was beyond him. At the weekend. His weekend. His time to

lie in. His time to wallow in the misery of his broken heart and do nothing whatsoever about it. It certainly wasn't the time for botheration about somebody else's inanities. They should blooming well get on with it. And do so without him!

About to go back to bed, he caught the words 'him' and 'he'. The emphasis on which seemed to be a finger pointing at him. This spiked his interest enough to make him stop in his tracks. They couldn't be talking about him, could they? Hard to believe. He opened his eyes to check. Which of course was the precise moment the voices cut out. There was nothing to see. Of course not! Stupid idiot! He quickly closed his eyes again but now there was also nothing to hear. The voices had gone and so had the whispers and the mist. The whole thing left him fuming.

'I can really do without this,' he shouted into the silence.

There was no reply. Of course not. What did he think! Idiot. By now his Sunday lie-in had well and truly gone for a burton. He did not even bother to go back to bed. That too would be a waste of his time. He went for coffee instead. It helped to clear his head and soothe away his peeve. After a while, though, he had to admit he was intrigued. Slurping down his second cup of coffee he began to ponder. About this secret. About what it could possibly be to do with him. Because when all was said and done there must be a reason why it was him that was woken up like this every time and no one else. What on earth there could possibly be in it for him? He wasn't short for money. He had friends. He had family. He had a job, colleagues. Yes, he was a bit short in the love department right now but who cared. He didn't. Not really. After a while he gave up on it. If this thing kept returning, the reason might be revealed and the flipping secret with it. He wouldn't let it ruin the rest of his Sunday.

It did not. It ruined the rest of his week instead. Every morning now his sleep was disturbed. He did his best to get his finger behind what it was about but every attempt to make sense of what the voices were about left him more frustrated. Which made him turn up at work bleary-eyed and cranky. His colleagues were beginning to notice. Which led to no end of ribbing. Which in turn made him very sore in the heart department and thus even more cranky. His work began to slack. Noticeably so. It came to the point where the boss called him in and told him in no uncertain terms to 'up his game or he'd be out on his ear'. This piqued him to the core. It was so unfair it goaded him into telling his boss about his early

morning problem. The boss man, not being a bad guy really, looked at him in silence for a minute or two, then told him to take a week off to sort this problem good and proper. Or else. He thanked him profusely, promised to do his utmost, grabbed his stuff and skedaddled as quickly as possible.

Back at home he sank down on his settee with a fresh cup of steaming coffee and started to think. He needed to deal with the broken sleep and the reason why it happened. Just getting up and listening did not cop it. That much was clear. Abundantly so. What he needed was a strategy. Something sly and discreet. After several cups of coffee his brain started to function again and a plan hatched.

He was going to make sure he was

- A. already outside when it happened the next time
- B. dressed and ready to follow the receding voices into whichever distance they were going
- C. able to see where he was going while keeping one eye closed so as not to lose the voices

There was no D as yet. He would figure out D when he had had a chance to process the result of A to C.

The very idea of doing something about his ordeal energised him. He jumped up and retrieved his tent from the attic. He set it up as near to the front yard as possible. He did not want to alert the neighbours to any funny business, now, did he. Then he made sure the sleeping arrangement was in order and laid out a set of warm clothes at the ready. From a drawer in the kitchen he took his sunglasses and taped over one glass with duct tape. He went into the shed and carefully drilled a hole in the glass. Then he covered both glasses with plasters, leaving the hole uncovered. He checked what he could see and gave himself a thumbs-up when it worked. Thus prepared for A to C he decided to make the most of his unexpected time of leave. He went back to bed to make up for lost sleep. He woke up refreshed around noon.

Feeling bright-eyed and bushy-tailed once more he did some shopping. Then he spent the rest of the day reading, gaming and basically enjoying himself. He was quite proud of himself when he realised he had not thought of his problem for hours on end.

Of course by evening time it popped back to the fore. He watched tele for a while but could not concentrate on anything he saw. He decided to retire early. He changed into his warm clothes and collected his sunglasses. As he went inside his tent a glimmer of excitement fluttered. This was going to be a weird sort of night but he was ready for it. He just wondered if he would be able to sleep at all. No need to have worried about that. As soon as he was snug as a bug in his sleeping bag he was off, only to be woken by the usual tickle of whispers. He quickly put on his shoes and the coat he had brought. He unzipped the tent and donned his sunglasses. Instantly the whispers turned into voices and he could clearly hear them. Apparently the discussions from the day before had continued, causing serious aggro between participants. With fisticuffs to follow. Things were simmering down by now but there were wounds being licked and tempers being soothed. None of this shed any light on the cause of the mayhem and what on earth it could possibly have to do with him. He crept out of the tent making sure his sunglasses were perched in the right place. Now he could also see that the voices were actually attached to human-looking shapes. Some clearly the worse for wear.

The whole thing intrigued him no end. When the participants in the argument limped off the scene and their voices began to recede into the distance he decided to follow. There was no way he was going back to sleep now! He just had to know what it was all about. Had to.

Soon everyone disappeared from view and all he had left to guide him were their voices. They seemed to be going in the direction of the nearby park. The sunglasses were more of hindrance than a help to him now but he was afraid to take them off in case he lost the voices. Anybody see him now must think him a right lulu. What with his sunglasses and the sun not even risen above the horizon. Soon he found himself at a trot trying to keep up. The voices were fading faster than expected. But it was no good. When they were gone he took his sunglasses off. No point wearing them now, was there. He sighed and pocketed them.

He looked around to get his bearings only to realise he did not know where he was. In a park. That much was obvious but the surroundings did not look familiar at all. For a moment he panicked. Then he berated himself. Come off it, pal. Just do some recce and that will see you right. And it did. He was in the park he knew but in a location definitely off the beaten track.

He breathed a sigh of relief. No harm done. It just begged the question. Why had he ended up exactly there? Stupid question really, considering what had brought him here. Or rather who. On second thought, there must be another, more meaningful, reason behind it. One that eluded him as yet but he was more determined than ever to get his finger behind it.

Plan A to C had worked out as he had hoped. He was mightily pleased with the result of day One. He felt he was getting somewhere. Wherever that was but it was progress of some description. He returned home. To devise the follow-up of his plan. And to have his first coffee of the day, of course. To his surprise he found himself humming and doing the odd hop and a skip on the way.

As he entered his front garden he was glad he was properly dressed. The neighbours opposite were already up. Early birds they were, always. And nosy to boot. They would of course wonder why he, not normally such an early bird, had been out and about and not getting ready to go to work. They'd be on his doorstep later today, inquiring. Always ready to stick their runny noses into his private business. Especially after, well after. They called it 'caring' and 'looking out for him'.

Caring my foot. He'd have to dream up a good reason for having been out. Constitutional walk might do the trick. But then they might want to know what exactly was wrong with his health. Hmm, he'd have to think of something better than that. For now he just gave a friendly nod in their direction, then escaped indoors.

Somewhat later, fortified by coffee, he was busy devising plan D and further. A little later he had whittled and honed his plan into perfection. He went over it in his mind.

Make sure that

D. his outdoor clothes and sunglasses were laid out ready and his alarm was set for 4.30 am

E. he arrived at the exact place in the park where he had ended up the day before

F. he trained himself up so that he could follow the voices at a run if necessary

After that he would see what else was needed. He found himself whistling cheerfully.

Being creative like this had been a pleasurable exercise. He realised he had been enjoying himself for the first time in months. Well done, pal, he said to himself and patted himself on the shoulder. He set about putting part two of his plan in motion.

D was quickly dispatched of. He had also thought of taking a rucksack with some nibbles and a small cushion to sit on, if he had to wait a while. E had to be left of course. For F he took himself to the gym. He had not been there for yonks, lacking the oomph and the inclination. He was pleased to find he had not lost too much in muscle power. He treated himself to a protein-filled energizer afterwards and promised himself he would do a little jogging in the afternoon.

The next morning he woke up before the alarm, raring to go. He even jogged to the park and was in place in the nick of time. He donned the sunglasses and was rewarded by the sound of voices approaching. This time there was no altercation. The argument appeared to have been resolved and there was consensus on something. It remained a mystery what that might be. The only thing he could make out was that the unknown 'he' in the equation was earning brownie points for doing 'something'. The 'something' also unspecified. It appeared that the owners of the voices were cagey about revealing their hand to this mysterious 'he'. He wanted to shout at them to get on with it but he did not want to upset the applecart. Patience was a virtue he did not have but he felt it was wise to exercise it for the time being. He also wanted to find out where they were going and what they were up to. So he sat down on his little cushion and bided his time. In the meantime he listened in on the conversation. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to his presence. Which he found curious but then the whole thing was curious. The conversation did not enlighten. If anything it pulled him deeper into mystery. The talk had moved on from 'he', 'him' and brownie points to 'digging'. Digging up? Digging in? Digging why? Digging where? Digging when? It appeared there was some kind of a timeline. As in 'not now' and 'not yet'. It remained unclear to him who was supposed to do this digging. The mysterious 'he' or one of 'them'. Or even both. There was even a 'maybe', which had something to do with 'enough brownie points earned'. He sighed. All in all it meant that an amount of waiting was involved. Even the voices agreed on that. They decided unanimously to give it more time and to 'get on with it for now'. With that he sensed they were ready to disappear. He was correct. As the voices began to go he struggled up from his cushion, stiff as a brick. But by the time he was standing he had already lost them.

They had not so much moved away as melted away. It meant his plan to find out more had failed. For now. Disappointed he took his sunglasses off. Having nowhere to go he started to take in his surroundings. They were enchanting. He was surprised he had not noticed this before. But then he had been focused on other things, hadn't he. As always, really. Never had much time for the great outdoors. Now he had time aplenty. For a whole week! He took a deep breath and savoured the thought and the moment.

Dawn had arrived and the bushes and shrubs gave off a lovely aroma. He heard birds whistling and saw them flitting in and out of the leaves. Flowers opened towards the light and showed their splendour. He stood and watched entranced. A deep peace settled over him.

A light breeze moved the leaves on a clump of willow trees. A spider's web hung down from one of the branches and wafted calmly to and fro. Catching the local gossip, he thought and smiled.

What a frivolous notion! How unlike him. He sniggered.

Then he realised that it was not as frivolous as he had thought. The birds had stopped their early morning warble. In the quiet that followed he could hear whispering. Light, delicate, as insubstantial as air but there. He closed his eyes. Then he concentrated and listened. The gist of the whispers slowly revealed itself. Answers to questions that so far had only been hinted at and shrouded in mystery. And were to remain so, he gathered. For the time being. Little did the whisperers know that he had the ears to hear, even if he did not have the eyes to see. And he did hear. Oh yes.

He smirked. One up on them. Now he was getting somewhere.

It seemed the mysterious 'he' was the butt of some ridicule. 'He' had done what squirrels were known to do. Gather nuts, bury them and lose them. The notion raised a gale of laughter. Nuts galore, someone sniggered. And 'him' one of them, another said. When the laughter ceased the conversation continued on a more serious note. What 'he' had lost was a 'treasure' that no one was supposed to lose. 'He' had had it, buried it and lost it. Wasn't even looking for it, it seemed. Which the voices rated 'him' down for severely. Hence the brownie points that had to be earned, he gathered. Then 'he' would be pointed in the right direction so 'he' could do the digging.

And rightly so, he concurred. What kind of an idiot would bury something valuable and then forget where he had buried it or even that he had done so. This mysterious 'he' apparently. He had to laugh. What 'he' had buried remained a mystery too. Which only added to his ever-growing fascination with the whole thing.

When the whispers fell silent, he decided he had heard enough for one day. He picked up his rucksack and his cushion and returned home. With a well-deserved cup of coffee in hand he started processing what he had heard. It was fuel for part Three of his plan.

He just had to find out what this 'he' had buried. And he wanted to witness the digging up of this mysterious treasure. He had to see it with his own eyes. Had too. Otherwise he would never get back to work and normality. It would prey on his mind forever. Oh my gosh, it didn't bear thinking about. Of course he would also like to meet this idiot who had done the burying and give 'him' a piece of his mind. The stupid git! Because it was 'his' fault that his nights and his working life had been disturbed. And for what, pray?! For what indeed?!

He still had a few more days of his leave left, so that was okay. But there was that pressure of time as well. If he had to find out, it had to be done within that time slot.

So how to proceed?

It took several more cups of coffee for him to decide on the next course of action. Basically it was simple. He had to be in situ. And the most likely situ was the spot in the park where the voices seemed to reside. If not, he would have to be prepared to follow the action. D and E from day Two seemed to be the best place to start. So. The last step was a bit more of the 'wet your finger and stick it in the air to test the wind' kind of thing. So.

He would make sure that

G. his outdoor clothes and sunglasses were laid out ready and his alarm was set for 4.30 am

H. he arrived at the exact place in the park where he had ended up the day before

I. he brought a shovel to show himself willing to help 'him' get on with the digging

He hoped that I would speed up the proceedings. There was of course a J and that was make sure he found out what this hidden treasure was. He would not leave before he knew.

Then he would be able to get on with his life and leave 'him' to get on with 'his'. Provided of course this mysterious 'him' turned up. That was the uncertain factor in it all. The thought made him bite his nails to the quick. A nasty habit. One of many he was told. He shrugged. Each their own bad habits. One was entitled to them, he thought.

That all settled he made his preparations and enjoyed the rest of the day.

When the next morning came he shot upright, fairly bouncing out of the tent with expectation. This was going to be The Day. He felt it in his waters. He marched over to the park in double time, lustily swinging the shovel. The whisperers were not up yet but he knew where to find them. In the secluded place off the beaten track he donned his sunglasses and stood shovel in hand, ready to do his bit, if required. Soon he heard the voices approach.

They appeared to be mightily pleased. It turned out the mysterious 'he' had earned the full quota of brownie points required.

Bravo! He thought. Good for you, pal. Now let's get on with it. He looked around but there was no 'he' in view. Yet. He hoped the stupid git was not going to disappoint them all by not turning up! That would be the pits! Then he noticed a path that had opened between the trees. One that he had not seen before. It seemed to beckon at him. Oh, ah, he thought. This treasure must be buried in some other place, somewhere more secret than this open space in the park. That made sense.

As he followed the path deeper into some woods, the smell of flowers rose around him. Birds twittered, early morning sunlight filtered between the branches. He put the shovel on his shoulder and began to skip. It seemed he could hear singing. He whistled along with the tune. Then a voice spoke up and said 'He has arrived'.

'Hurrah,' he cried, so damn pleased that the fool had seen the light and turned up to retrieve what was his. He slammed the shovel down in the earth by his feet.

'I'm here,' he shouted. 'I'll help you.'

'Willing. And able,' the voice said appreciatively. 'Full of beans and right where he's needed. How absolutely wonderful! The time has finally come! Start digging!'

He grabbed the shovel and started digging, spurred on by a lot of cheering and clapping. He could not be bothered to wait and see if the mysterious 'he' was there to do his bit. It

might be 'his' treasure but he had invested nights and hours of his time in this caper. He would not be foiled by an idiot who might or might not want to pull his finger out retrieve it.

Soon his shovel hit something hard. He looked down in the hole and there it was, a sealed box. He reached in and took it out. With bated breath he opened it.

What he saw was something he had never expected to see. He gasped.

'There's a heart in this box and it's still beating!' he whispered. 'Who in their right mind would bury . . .?'

'Only one person would be so stupid,' a voice said.

'True,' he said, looking around. 'Where is he then, this stupid git?'

'You're standing in his shoes,' the voice chuckled.

'What?'

He looked down, not understanding what he saw.

'It's you, pal. It was always you. Just you.'

He turned around to see who was talking but there was no one there. Only himself.

A ray of sunlight shot through the trees and hit the box. Realisation dawned. 'He', 'himself', I.

'Bloody hell', he cried. 'Was I ever fooled!'

A roar of laughter freed his heart. It flew out of the box and returned to its rightful place in his chest.

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Thanks!

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About the author

Marina Gerrard graduated to writing novels after finishing a creative writing course and producing a few prize winning short stories. She is the author of Journeys into the Heartland, a mini series of three psychological thrillers that delve deeply into the world of relived traumatic experiences. After finishing this trilogy she decided it was time for something less intense. She then embarked on writing a series of light-hearted novels that can be best classed as 'dreamscapes'. In between she took to writing short stories. Her books and short stories are available in e book format, the short stories also in PDF.

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