

A photograph of a cave entrance leading to a forest with autumn foliage. The cave interior is dark, while the forest outside is brightly lit with trees in shades of yellow, orange, and red. A dirt path leads from the cave entrance into the forest. In the distance, a few people can be seen walking on the path. The overall scene is a mix of natural beauty and mystery.

# Before and After the Light

*SHORT STORY*

**MARINA GERRARD**

# **BEFORE AND AFTER THE LIGHT**

Short story

By Marina Gerrard

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Something happened just before sunrise. Or was it just after sunset?

He couldn't make out which. It wasn't completely dark. Definitely some kind of twilight. So it could be dusk. Or maybe just before dawn. No sun or light to be seen anymore or maybe not yet.

Right now he didn't know. He closed his eyes. Surely in a little while things would become clearer, wouldn't they? He sincerely hoped so, because right now he didn't know when he was or where he was. Right now he was in between, somewhere, some-when undefined. He didn't even know whether he was awake or asleep. He could be in the middle of a dream or maybe a nightmare. Which was disconcerting to say the least. But when he opened his eyes again nothing had changed. He was enveloped in the same obscure, inky-bluish light.

That's when panic struck. Well, maybe panic was a big word. Certainly not panic with a capital P. He hesitated to define what he was feeling. Even his feelings seemed to be lost somewhere in between. No, that wasn't true. He was p-off, annoyed to the hilt, to tell the truth. Peeved. In fact, he was peeved as hell. Yes. For sure. He absolutely hated being left in the dark. No pun intended.

A question rose. Or rather two. Or maybe three.

What had been happening to cause this strange, seemingly unending twilight? Where did the light go and why? More worryingly, was it because of something he did or had done? Or could it be hadn't done?

Something flitted by. It was gone before he could catch it. Whatever it was, it had been there. For a single instant. What the heck was it!?

A smell? A whiff of lingering aroma? He sniffed once, he sniffed twice. But no. Nothing like that.

A taste maybe? The residue of something he had eaten? He smacked his mouth but nothing came.

A sound then? Of a door after it had just been closed? Of footsteps that had already receded into the distance? The sound of one hand clapping perhaps? He snorted at the ridiculousness of that one. But no.

No, it had been more like a glimpse of something remembered. Like a footprint left in the snow.

The echo of an afterthought. Most likely a frumping figment of his frecking imagination!

Oh, it was so blooming annoying he could choke. Not himself of course. Preferably someone or something whose neck he could put his hands around. Not that he was a violent person. Of course not. It was just, oh never mind!

Just stick to the facts, pal, he admonished himself. Facts, however murky and few, were all he had. So he started gathering them as best he could.

He took a deep breath and let it out again. Fact: he must be alive, if not kicking. So far so good.

Next. Being in between meant he was right here, right now. He couldn't do much about 'now' but 'here' was another matter. Fact: he was sitting, not standing. He let a hand wander over the surface he sat on. Stone. Rough, uneven surface. As a matter of fact, his backside hurt from sitting on it. It was most uncomfortable. He shifted about. Not that it helped much.

He felt around some more and encountered something fat and furry. Eek! He quickly withdrew his hand. When the fat and furry thing did not attack or murmur he gingerly felt for it again but it was gone. Double eek! It left him none the wiser. A tiny niggles of worry entered his brain, though, about safety and all that. He nipped it in the bud. He couldn't afford to worry. Not until he knew more about his what and when and where and, of course, why. Grmff. What a blooming pain this was!

The next fact presented itself to him, free of charge: his eyes were beginning to adjust to the twilight. Big bonus! Hey ho! He could see silhouettes. Of what he could not determine. Yet.

Suddenly eager to find out more he stood up and knocked himself silly. He landed flat on his back. He could feel a big lump forming. It hurt like hell. Hot damn!

He stood up again, more gingerly this time. He encountered what must be some kind of ceiling.

Rubbing his head with one hand he felt around with the other. Stone as well. Was he in a cave? If so, what was he doing there?!

A whiff of something blew his way. A musty kind of smell came and went. He hoped it wasn't anything to do with fat and furry somethings. No sooner thought than a tiny scrabbling noise reached his ear. He jumped. Stupid thing to do, of course. Another lump grew on his head.

He fell down. On his backside this time. His 'now' was a royal pain in the head and his 'here' an even bigger pain. In the butt, which was already hurting. He held his head with both hands. Not only were there lumps burning on the outside. Inside his head his brain too was in turmoil. The question 'why' buzzed around like a tormented fly batting itself against a window that would not open. So far the facts he had gathered were not comforting and illumination (ha!) was not forthcoming. A feeling of pure hatred rose in him. He had never felt so helpless.

He was jolted into action by an unexpected occurrence. One of the silhouettes moved. Toward him, it seemed. With it came the same musty whiff. The fat, furry thingies were coming for him! He tried to burrow deeper into the twilight but encountered another wall of stone. There was nowhere to go. He was trapped. Oh my gosh, he was in for the chop! He was going to be eaten alive! Sweat poured down his face. His armpits pricked.

Then the movement stopped and the smell went. Everything went dead quiet again. The silhouettes had not changed place. False alarm. Fool! Nincompoop! Coward! He wiped the sweat off his face and hugged his knees close to his chest. Pondering the whats, whens and wherefores was a useless exercise. That much was clear to him. It wouldn't get him anywhere. He had to do something.

He unclasped his arms and gingerly crept forward. Towards the silhouettes. Which did not seem to get any nearer. Strange. He sat back for a moment, then crept on again.

He eventually encountered the mouth of what indeed turned out to be a cave. Fact. Hence the twilight. Fact. The silhouettes were those of trees and shrubs covering the entrance. Fact. Beyond them he could see light. Fact.

He was extremely happy about the facts but they still begged the question why. That remained a mystery still to be solved. Same as the what, when and where. As fear subsided, peeve took over once more. He crept out of the cave and stood up.

He found himself standing on a ledge. On a mountainside. Fairly high up. Steep drop in front of him. In the far distance he could see the outline of houses shimmering between the tree branches. Sunlight on the rooftops. As he took in all these unquestionable facts his eyes grew wider and wider. What the heck was he doing here?! He had fear of heights. For crying out loud! A scream built in his throat and he started to shiver. That was when he clocked something else. He was wearing pyjamas. His mouth dropped and the scream died. Pyjamas! Him! It didn't bear thinking about! He didn't even own a pair. He always slept in the nude.

Suddenly the whole situation struck him as bizarre. Instead of screaming he started to laugh. Hysterically, unstoppably. His laughter echoed back at him from the cave behind him. He laughed until he started to cry. Something else he never did. When the hysterics petered out and the tears dried he started to take stock.

He was in an impossible place, dressed in impossible clothes, doing impossible things. Three facts of which the sense totally escaped him. He was lost for words. Another hitherto impossible thing. What cheered him up no end, though, was the sunlight in the distance. It proved beyond doubt that light was still there, no matter what might have happened before or perhaps after it went in his case.

His case. Yes. What miffed him most about his case was that he didn't have a clue. Not even the sunlight could help him with that. It dimmed his cheer to a kind of twilight of the emotions. Not depression as such but certainly no glimmer of hope. Yet. Best to stick to facts. Such as they were.

Fact: he had to get off this mountainside. Preferably asap. Without dropping off it, of course. Once he'd reached ground level he'd try to get his bearings. Because fact: there were no mountains where he lived. This was territory unknown.

He looked left and right to see how he could get off the ledge. It appeared that the only way was up. Climbing was not one of his fortes but it appeared he had no choice. How he had even managed to get this far up was beyond him. What might have possessed him to then

clamber down to the cave? He nipped the question in the bud. It made his guts churn. Something he could well do without.

Taking a deep breath he started to climb. Lucky for him the ledge soon widened out. When it veered to the left he found himself on some kind of plateau. The vista it afforded was marvellous. Of course it was. It took him all of two seconds, however, to see what must have led him there. A meandering path along a very steep incline. With equally steep drops on either side. Impossible! Forget how he got himself up there. How to get himself down was a far more urgent question right now. One he could not afford to ignore. The very thought of going down that steep path took all the strength out of his legs. He sagged down and closed his eyes. He started hiccupping with the stress of it all. Oh lordy-lord! He rested his head wearily in his hands.

A little noise made him look up. A bird had flown down. It sat quietly, watching him with its head cocked to one side. Suddenly it cackled fiercely at him, flapped its wings and flew away.

‘What was that all about?’ he shouted after it. ‘A warning of some sorts? Don’t tell me. I know I’m not in a safe place. Or is it I’m in your place and you want me gone? Well, I’m sorry. I don’t want me to be here either. And right now I don’t know what to do about it!’

Of course there was no reply. What did he expect! He was sitting here on an unknown mountain, surrounding terrain lovely but equally unknown. Empty space all around him. Any thought of rescue from this predicament futile to the point of being ridiculous. It would take a heli-

Ding.

He sat up straight. Something clicked over in his tired brain. Like before something flitted by. He grabbed hold of it before it was gone. An image formed. Of something dropping from the sky.

Dropping. The word resonated. It related to a fact. That he was sure of. But what it related to eluded him. If he had been dropped from the sky, he’d be bruised all over, wouldn’t he? Bones broken. Concussed. But no, he was sitting here, unbruised, unbroken, not a scratch on him. In pyjamas, for goodness sake! Healthy, though not happy. Far from it.

And yet. Here he was, in this impossible situation. Indeed as if he had been dropped from the sky. And even if he had been, why on earth! Why!?! And by whom? Who would do such a thing? To him in particular?! Tucked him in pyjamas to show the rest of the world the laughable person that he was? Could it be something he did or had done or hadn't done? The question returned in all force. He bit his lip, worrying about it. He just couldn't fathom it.

Dropped. He silently moulded his lips around the word. Thrown away, discarded, like some piece of worthless rubbish, far away from the civilized world, to rot away, unknown by anyone. Except of course the person or persons unknown who had done this vile thing to him. Someone out there -he pointed an accusing finger- must be laughing his or her head off right now.

He continued to fret like this for a while longer. Until he realised he had landed in the realm of suppose this and suppose that. None of which could be classed as facts. He closed that line of thought as he faced the one thing that was real. Right there, right then. The very factual problem of him getting off the mountain. Preferably in one piece. Problem indeed.

His stomach rumbled. Which made him wonder how long it had been since he had had a bite to eat. Another thing he couldn't remember. Then he started to worry that he might die before he reached civilization. It made the necessity of climbing down from his lonely station all the more urgent. He didn't want to die. Unhappy and alone.

Clad just in pyjamas. The very fact of this continued to bother him. Unmeasurably. It was one thing to drop him off in this godforsaken place as possible punishment for his possible but unknown sins. But the pyjama thing was a tad -how to put it- dramatic. Yes, unnecessarily so, if he might be allowed to express an opinion, useless though that might be.

It pushed his thoughts in a new direction and off the problem of getting down. Maybe it wasn't the rest of the world that had to be shown how ridiculous he was. Maybe it was just himself. But for the life of him he couldn't think of a reason why. Maybe that was the crux of the whole matter. Maybe he had been dropped here solely for the purpose of self-discovery. That notion struck him as so utterly ridiculous a raucous laugh escaped him. It echoed back at him from all sides. Mockingly so. In between he thought he heard words. Which sounded remarkably like *Got you good, didn't I*. Followed by more mocking laughter.



This suspected taunt enraged him so much it made him forget all his fears. He stormed down the steep mountain pass without considering possible falls. He only stopped when he reached the spot where the path widened and branched into two. Which way? Did it even matter? As long as he arrived at some place where he might get answers, food and possibly, preferably proper clothing. He stood pondering his predicament for a moment. Who would do such a thing to him?

He racked his brain but no names came up, no faces, nothing. It was as if his entire memory had been erased. Did he even know his own name, he wondered forlornly. The answer came as a shock. No, he didn't. On top of not knowing where he was and why, he didn't even know who he was. And who cared? Apparently nobody. Oh, he was in a pickle, wasn't he? A sob escaped him. At this point he sat down, pitying himself profoundly. Pity? He stifled another laugh. A rather useless emotion, as far as he was concerned. One that had never bothered him before. Why here? Why now? What good could it do?

*Broaden your horizon perhaps?*

The thought came out of nowhere. It was so unusual he looked around to see where it was coming from. The unescapable fact being that it must have come from his own brain. Broaden his horizon. As if. It was a notion that went so much against the grain it stuck in his throat and caused him to retch. When he stopped retching he dusted that one right down. His horizon was wide enough, thank you very much. Besides, where he was right now there was no horizon, was there. There was only the choice between going left or right down a path into the unknown. A fact he felt vindicated by. A sour laugh escaped him.

*Aren't you a tough nut to crack!*

This one socked him in the gut. A nut to be cracked. Him!

An image flashed into his brain. Of a set of vicious looking nutcrackers. Him in its teeth. The gut-tearing sounds of him being cracked wide open. All his bits and pieces scattered all over the mountainside. Oh my god! The unutterable pain of it!

*Tut. Such a drama queen. One has to laugh.*

His mouth dropped at the unfairness of it all. What the heck was happening to him?! If this was meant by him broadening his horizon, he could very well do without it!

‘Get me off this mountain,’ he screamed in desperation.

*Help yourself, pal. Left or right. The choice is yours.*

This very dry statement of fact sufficed to get himself together again. He jumped to his feet and stood facing his choice. Dithering, dallying, twisting himself into knots with indecisiveness to the point where he got impatient with himself.

*Impatience isn't a virtue, you know.*

An already simmering impotent rage flared. He exploded into a full-blown tantrum. He stamped his feet, he shook his fists, he railed at the gods and at the misfortune of being born.

*Now who's a silly billy.*

This latest taunt made him storm off down a path without caring whether it was left or right and the disaster it might lead him to.

*Attaboy!*

He stopped in his tracks.

‘This is the pits,’ he screamed.

*It is rather, isn't it. Now what are you going to do about it?*

The silence that followed was deafening but it held a curious glow of expectation.

What indeed was he going to do? He could hardly stand there and do nothing. He didn't know where he was or where he was going. So far the path he had taken hadn't led him anywhere other than downhill. No pun intended. He snorted.

There was a smell in the air, though. One that hadn't been there before. He sniffed.

Wood smoke. It was a smell he loved.

Loved? What was that? Loved? Him? Of course not. What then?

It reminded him of ... things he couldn't remember. Yes, that was it!

His heart jumped a beat. He sniffed again but the smell had gone. Evaporated. Just like his memories. He didn't feel disheartened, though. No, rather the opposite. He felt, if anything, positive.

*Gorblimey! That's a first, isn't it?*

You may sneeze but I don't, he huffed. What at or who at, he didn't know but he held on to the freshly found glow of positivity. It spurred him back onto his path into the unknown. As he sauntered down at a more leisurely pace, a song rose in his heart. His lips puckered and before long a tiny whistle escaped. His legs accompanied it with a little skip. It took a while for him to realize that he was actually, unbelievably, enjoying himself. If he wasn't careful, he'd find himself frolicking. Frolicking?! Him! Of all things! He chortled at the sheer impossibility of it.

*Would that be so bad?*

What? Him frolicking? Of course it would.

*Why? Why would that be bad?*

Because, he began. Because.

There he stopped, confused.

Suddenly from deep down inside a flame of rage flared.

'Because there has to be a reason,' he shouted.

*Oh? And you have no reason? Nothing to tie it onto? No undeniable fact?*

No!

*Look around you.*

For the first time he started to take note of his surroundings. Really take note. As he did so his rage petered out. It was replaced by something he didn't recognize, never having experienced it before. A sense of wonder. When it finally came to him his mouth dropped. He looked at the dense woodland around him in total amazement. The colour, the detail, the lushness, the craftsmanship of it all. It was as if he had never seen it before. Well, he hadn't, had he, never having been here before. But still. He was flabbergasted and elated at the same time.

It suddenly dawned on him that on his trip downhill (ha!) his mood had risen the other way. He had progressed from down in the dumps to a sudden urge to skip and hop and be extremely silly. To frolic. Yes, frolic. Undeniable fact.

He gulped.

He'd been running the entire gamut of emotions. Fact. Equally undeniable.

*Not entire, though.*

Hunh?

*Not the entire gamut.*

Oh?

*No. Something is still missing.*

And what could that be?

*Think.*

No, thank you.

*Feel then.*

Even worse.

*Do I detect a teeny weeny tendency to kick against the pricks here?*

Grmff.

*Look at yourself.*

Hunh?

*Use your eyes, pal. Look. What do you see?*

He looked. At his arms. At his legs. At the rest of him in between. All there. All clad in the only other inescapable fact.

Pyjamas?

*Y-e-e-s? And?*

And what?

*Does it not remind you of something?*

Remind me? Of course not. I don't own a pair of pyjamas. Never have. Never will. Don't like them.

*Tut. Methinks the lad protests a tad too much.*

I just don't like them! What's wrong with that?!

*Nice pattern, though. Don't you think?*

Pattern?

*You used to like it, didn't you?*

Used to? But I never-

*Yes, you did.*

He looked at the animal print. He hadn't even noticed it before, being so busy doing what he was doing. Suddenly the smell of wood smoke rose around him. With it came the image himself as a boy sitting by a wood fire, toasting marshmallows. Bonfire night. A night of magic, long, long ago. He was wearing pyjamas, the same ones he was wearing now. The ones with the animal print he had loved so much he refused to take them off. He had been so happy.

*Happy?*

Yes, he sighed deeply. He had been happy. Then.

*And then?*

Somebody scoffed at the pyjamas. Called him a silly baby and all the magic went. Forever. Together with the memory. And the feeling. A deep sense of loss stole over him. A tear formed and rolled down his cheek.

Don't you want it back?

What?

*Don't you want it back? That feeling?*

'Not particularly,' he muttered, knowing at the same time that he was lying.

He let his hands run over the pyjamas, down the print he loved so much. The smell of wood smoke was all around him and he loved that too. So much. More tears formed but they were tears of happiness. The happiness brought laughter. With the laughter came an unknown feeling of freedom. And with that everything around him changed.

There was no mountain, no path up or down, no scenery. There was just himself standing in front of a shop window looking in and the memory of what happened then. The moment the light went out and he dropped through a hole in his memory to a place and time he had so desperately tried to forget. To the point where he had shut himself in and had forbidden himself to ever come out.

He looked at the pyjamas in the display, its wonderful animal print, and saw himself clad in happiness. On impulse he went in and bought the pyjamas. Who cared it was only child-size. He didn't. He asked the shopkeeper to parcel it up and put a large bow on it. Said it was a present.

For someone very special.

And it was.

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Thanks!

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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