



Fear

A Short Story by Guy de Maupassant

Translated from the French by Min Straussman
PARIS 2022

Translator's Note

In 2019, I stumbled upon a small collection of short stories by the brilliant, insane Frenchman Guy de Maupassant that had been translated by the doyenne of Southern local color fiction herself, Kate Chopin, author of *The Awakening*. My impression of Maupassant at the time was that he was stuffy, boring, pedantic, a sort of French Ibsen or something. But the collection of stories selected by Chopin were something altogether different—they were truly wild and grotesque, brimming with perverted sexual energy. Even the structures of the short stories themselves were peculiar. Not only were they often teeming with 19th-century bric-a-brac (newspaper headlines, legal proceedings, picture postcards), many seemed to reject any coherent narrative altogether.¹

I realized I had the wrong idea about Maupassant. I decided to dig deeper into his writings, to learn more about this man whose œuvre sparked debates about the difference between genius and madness on both sides of the Atlantic. Guy de Maupassant is probably best known for his short story “Le Horla” and the novel *Bel-Ami*, both of which are about the bourgeoisie having troubles related to affairs, inheritances, colonialism, and the like. But the bizarre, disjointed, half-baked short stories are where his best writing can be found, I think. “Fear” is one of those stories.

“Fear” is a story told in fragments. The different elements do not really entail. For all of that, we can say this much: the story is about two men on a train having a conversation. Although, really, it could just be one man because the reader gets the impression that the narrator is Guy de Maupassant and the other man is simply an aged Guy de Maupassant. After all, the story begins “I found myself alone,” but continues “across from an elderly gentleman who looked out the window.” How can one be alone if there is someone with you? Unless the other man is also you . . .

The more I read “Fear,” the more I wonder if it is really a short story at all. I think it is more like a combination of a travelogue, a reflection on history and emotion, a commentary on medicine and myth, and a sparkling cocktail party anecdote about the author’s fancy friends. In other words, I wonder if “Fear” is really more like a proto-essay, in the modern sense of the form. Like any good modern essayist, Maupassant eschews any systematic analysis of his central query, choosing instead to meander from first-person storytelling to retellings of *faits divers* to analysis of literary tropes (and literary beefs). Part of my fascination with this story is how much it feels like the beginning of a new form.

This story is also about a past that feels strangely concordant with our own time. The story opens with the smell of disinfectant in the train car where the two men find themselves, a reminder of the cholera epidemic raging in the background of the story. Within this context, the discussion of the nature of fear had by the two men seems as freighted as such talk does in our own time. What do we fear? Why do we fear it? And what if that thing we fear is a microorganism?

In a sort of mimetic exercise, I tried to translate this story in the same way that Kate Chopin did her translations of Maupassant: in a single sitting or two, not worrying overmuch about the sound of the text but more so its meaning, playing fast and loose with the punctuation. I think this workaday approach is appropriate to a text that itself, while not without merit, feels a bit dashed-off and incomplete. Much like a good essay, come to think of it—

Min Straussman
Paris
April 2022

¹ Take “Suicides,” for example, first published in August 1880 in *Le Gaulois* and later translated by Chopin, which exemplifies both of these traits well.

Fear

A Short Story by
Guy de Maupassant
Paris
1884

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The train raced along full steam ahead through the darkness.

I found myself alone, across from an elderly gentleman who looked out the window. There was the strong smell of disinfectant in this PLM car², which had no doubt had arrived from Marseille.

It was a night without moonlight, without air, scorching. You couldn't see the stars, and the puffing smoke of the rushing train hit us like something hot, listless, oppressive, unbreathable.

Having left Paris three hours ago, we were headed towards the center of France without seeing anything of the countryside we were passing.

It happened all of a sudden, like a ghostly apparition. Around a large fire in the forest, two men were standing.

We saw it for a split second: there were, it seemed to us, two wretches dressed in rags, reddened in the blazing light of a campfire, with their bearded faces turned towards us, and around them, like a stage set, green trees, glowing light-green, their trunks lapped by the lively reflection of the flame, the leaves covered, penetrated, soaked by the light that ran through the scene.

Then everything became dark once again.

This was certainly a very strange vision! What were they doing in this forest, these two prowlers? Why light a fire on such a stiflingly hot evening?

My fellow traveler took out his watch and said to me:

—It's midnight exactly, sir. We just saw something extraordinary.

I was convinced of this, and we set about chatting, seeking to determine who these people could have been—villains who were burning the evidence of their crimes or sorcerers who were preparing a potion? One does not make a fire like that at midnight in the middle of summer in a forest to make soup. What were they doing, then? We couldn't think of any likely scenarios.

And my companion set himself to talking ... He was an elderly man, though I could not figure out what his profession might have been. He was certainly original, highly educated, and perhaps a bit unhinged.

² The Compagnie des chemins de fer de Paris à Lyon et à la Méditerranée, or PLM, ran trains from Paris to the French Riviera by way of Dijon, Lyon, and Marseille from 1857 to 1938.

But how do we know who is wise and who is mad, in this life where reason presents itself as nonsense and madness presents itself as genius?

He said:

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I am happy to have seen all that. I felt, for a few minutes, a lost sensation!

How the world must have been unsettling in the past, when it was still so mysterious!

To the extent that we lift the veils of the unknown, we empty out the imaginations of men. Don't you find, sir, that the night is empty and of a vulgar black color ever since there were no longer ghosts?

It is said: "No more fantasy, no more strange beliefs, everything unexplained is explainable. The supernatural is drying up like a lake that a canal siphons off; science, day after day, pushes back the limits of magic."

Ah well, myself, sir, I belong to an older generation, which liked to believe. I belong to the old, naïve generation accustomed to not understanding, to not seeking, to not knowing, used to the mysteries surrounding us, refusing the clear and simple truth.

Yes, sir, we have emptied out the imagination in suppressing the invisible. Our world today seems to me like an abandoned world, empty and naked. Beliefs were what made it poetic.

When I go out at night, how I long to shiver with the dread that makes old ladies make the sign of the cross when passing cemetery walls and the last of the superstitious flee before the strange mists of the swamps and the fantastic will-o'-the-wisps! How I long to believe in the vague and terrifying things that one imagines move in the shadows.

How the darkness of night used to be somber, terrible, when it was full of fantastic beings, unknown creatures, evil prowlers, whose forms could not be made out, apprehension of whom froze one's blood, whose occult power went beyond the boundaries of our thought, whose ravages were inevitable.

With the supernatural, fear of the real vanished from the earth, since we only fear what we don't understand. Visible dangers can upset, trouble, scare! What is that compared to the soul's upheaval caused by the thought that we are going to meet a wandering specter, that we are going to endure the embrace of a dead man, that we are going to see one of the terrifying beasts that spurred the terror of men? Darkness has seemed light to me ever since it was no longer haunted.

And the proof of all this, it's that if we were to find ourselves all of the sudden in this forest, we would be haunted by the image of those two unusual figures that just appeared to us in the light of their campfire, rather than by the fear of an ordinary and real danger.

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He repeated: "We only fear what we don't understand."

And all of the sudden, a memory came back to me, the memory of a story told to us by Turgenev, one Sunday, at Gustave Flaubert's house.

Maybe he wrote it down somewhere, I don't know.

No one knew better than the great Russian novelist how to make the soul shiver before the veiled unknown and, in the half-light of a strange story, hint at a whole world of unsettling, vague, menacing things.

With Turgenev, one feels it keenly—the fear of the Invisible, the fear of the unknown which is behind the door, behind life as it appears to be. With Turgenev, we are struck rudely by uncertain lights which illuminate only enough to increase our dread.

Sometimes, he seems to show us the meaning of bizarre coincidences, of unexpected meetings of circumstances that seem fortuitous, but which would lead to a hidden and insidious desire. With him, it is as if you can feel the imperceptible thread which guides us in a mysterious fashion through life, as if through a nebulous dream whose meaning continuously escapes us.

He doesn't recklessly get into the supernatural, like Edgar Allen Poe or E.T.A. Hoffmann; he tells simple stories that are mixed with something a little vague and a little distressing.

He told us the same, on that day, "We only fear what we don't understand."

He was seated, or more precisely collapsed, on a large armchair, arms dangling, legs stretched out and limp, white face drowned in a flood of a beard and silver hair which made him look like the Heavenly Father or Neptune.

He spoke slowly, with a certain laziness (which made his sentences charming), and with a certain hesitation of his slightly heavy tongue which emphasized the vibrant truth of his words. His wide-open pale eyes, like the eyes of a child, showed all of the emotions in his thoughts.

He told us the following tale:

As a young man, he had been hunting in a forest in Russia. He had walked all day and he arrived, towards the end of the afternoon, on the banks of a calm river.

The river ran through the trees, amongst the trees, full of floating grasses, deep, cold, and clear.

The hunter was seized by the pressing desire to throw himself into the transparent water. He took off his clothes and threw himself into the current. He was a very tall and very strong young man, a strong and self-assured swimmer.

He let himself gently float, his soul tranquil, brushed by the grass and their roots, happy to feel against his flesh the light touch of vines.

All the of the sudden a hand touched his shoulder.

He turned around with a jolt and he saw a terrifying being avidly watching him.

It resembled a hag or a monkey. She had a large face, wrinkled, grimacing, and she was laughing. Two unidentifiable things, two breasts no doubt, floated in front of her, and her excessive hair, wild, reddened by the sun, encircled her face and ran down her back.

Turgenev felt penetrated by a hideous fear, the glacial fear of supernatural things. Without reflection, without thinking, without understanding, he set himself to swimming desperately towards the riverbank. But the monster swam even faster and it touched his neck, his back, his legs with tiny snickers of joy. The young man, mad with fear, finally reached the embankment and hurled himself at full speed across the forest, without even thinking of collecting his clothes and his rifle.

The terrifying creature followed him, running as fast as him and snarling the whole time.

The fugitive, at the end of his rope and crippled with terror, was about to collapse, when a child who looked after goats came rushing over, armed with a whip; he set about whipping the dreadful human beast, who ran off with cries of pain. And Turgenev saw it disappear into the foliage like a female gorilla.

It was a madwoman who had lived for more than thirty years in the forest, off the charity of the shepherds, and who spent most of her days swimming in the river.

The great Russian writer added: "I had never been so scared in my life, because I didn't understand what this monster could be."

My companion, to whom I had recounted this adventure, continued:

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Yes, we only fear what we don't understand. We only truly experience the terrifying upheaval of the soul, that which we call horror, when it is mixed with a bit of the superstitious terror of centuries past. Myself, I have felt this fear in all its terror because of something so simple, so stupid, that I barely dare to say.

I was traveling in Brittany, alone, on foot. I had wandered throughout Finistère, the desolate moors, the bare earth where nothing grew but gorse bushes, past large sacred stones, haunted stones. The day before, I had visited the sinister Pointe du Raz, at the edge of the old world, where two seas eternally fight one another: the Atlantic and the Channel; my mind was full of legends, of stories read or told in this land of beliefs and superstitions.

And I went to Penmarch in Pont-l'Abbé that night. Do you know Penmarch? It's a flat shoreline, very flat, very low—lower than the ocean, it seems. One sees it everywhere, menacing and gray, this sea full of slimy reefs like raging beasts.

I had dined in a fisherman's cabaret, and I walked now on the straight road, between two moors. It was very dark.

From time to time, a druidic stone, like a sentinel ghost, seemed to watch me pass, and little by little I began to feel a vague apprehension—of what? I didn't have any idea. It was one of those nights where you believe yourself to be brushed by passing spirits, where the soul shivers without reason, where the heart beats with the confused fear of something invisible that you lament.

It seemed long to me, this road, long and interminably empty.

No sound except for the rumble of waves, over there, behind me, though sometimes the monotone and menacing noise seemed quite close, so close that I believed the waves were under my heels, running across the flats with their face of foam that I wanted to save myself from, to flee as fast as I could from them.

The wind, a low wind blowing in gusts, whistled through the gorse bushes around me. And, although I was going very fast, my legs and arms were cold: a dreadful, anxious cold.

Oh, how I would have liked to run into someone, to talk to someone! It was so dark now that I could barely see the road.

And all of the sudden, I heard up ahead, very far away, the sound of wheels turning. I thought, "Ah, here's a carriage." Then I didn't hear anything.

A minute later, I distinctly heard the same sound, closer this time. I didn't see any light, however; but I told myself, "They don't have a lantern. No surprise in this wild country."

The sound stopped again, and then recommenced. It was too thin for it to be a cart, and I didn't hear the sound of a horse, which surprised me, because the night was calm.

I wondered, "What is that?" It continued to approach; and a confused, stupid, incomprehensible fear quickly came over me—what *is* that?

It approached very fast, *very* fast! To be sure, I didn't hear anything but wheels—no beating of horseshoes or feet—nothing. What was it?

It was so close, *so* close. I threw myself into a ditch with a movement of instinctive fear, and I saw pass in front of me a wheelbarrow ... all alone, no one was pushing it ... Yes, a wheelbarrow ... all alone ...

My heart starting beating so violently that I collapsed onto the grass and I heard the rolling wheels move away; if had it come back, if it had chased me, I would have died of terror.

It took me a long time to pull myself together, a really long time. And I continued down the road with such fear in my soul that the smallest sound took my breath away.

Was it silly, hm? But how scary!

And in thinking about it later, I understood; it was no doubt a barefoot child who pushed this wheelbarrow, whereas I had looked for the head of a man of ordinary height.

Understand this ... when you have in mind a shiver of the supernatural ... a wheelbarrow which moves ... all on its own ... how scary!

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He was quiet for a second, and then continued:

"See here, sir, we are witness to a curious and terrible spectacle: this invasion of *cholera!*

You smell the disinfectant these train cars are poisoned with, that's because It is here somewhere.

You must see Toulon right now. Go, one feels keenly that It is there. And it's not the fear of illness that drives these people mad. Cholera is something else, it is the Invisible, it is an ancient plague

of past times, a kind of evil Spirit that has returned and that shocks us because it horrifies us, because it seems like it belongs to eras long past.

The doctors make me laugh with their microbes. It not an insect which terrifies men to the point of making them jump out windows; it's *cholera*, the indescribable and terrible being from the depths of the Orient.

Go through Toulon—they are dancing in the streets. Why dance during these days of death? They set off fireworks throughout the countryside around the town; they light joyful fires; orchestras play happy tunes on the public promenades.

Why such madness? It's because It is there, that is what they are braving, not the Microbe, but the Cholera, and they want to show off in front of it, like one does in front of a hidden enemy that you are taunting. It's for it that one dances, that one laughs, that one cries, that one lights these fires, that one plays these waltzes, for it, the Spirit that kills, and that one feels is present everywhere, invisible, menacing, like one of those ancient evil genies that barbaric priests conjure..."

25 July 1884