

Grave Misunderstanding

- Short Fiction by Dileep V. Reddy

Aunt Marianne was rotting away into oblivion.

She was beautiful once. Was voted prom queen. Even made cheerleader for a while. But that was a lifetime ago. She has changed since. Now she is old. Some would say, Ancient. And it shows. Her once babelicious figure has reduced to loose, sagging skin on crumbling bones. Half her joints give her trouble and the other half have long seized to function. Although still able to stand, she dares not try to move fast, as her already dragging left-leg is in real danger of falling off. Marianne doesn't clean herself anymore. Her cloths are host to several colonies of spores and spiders, and insects she didn't know can exist. Her head is balding. She can't see or hear too well. And her vocabulary has reduced to a handful of moans and groans. For all these reasons and more, she has finally begun to see the true face of humanity.

Marianne was a stunningly attractive woman, and she was treated like one. Even as a child, she was the envy of every parent in the neighborhood. Of all her cousins, she always got the most favours, the best birthday gifts, the most visits from family and friends. Everyone was eager to see how she'd mature. And mature she did. All her teachers loved her. Boys wanted her and girls wanted to be like her. She could get anything from anyone as long as she asked for it in person. No one dared cause dear Marianne to frown. Everyone pampered her, praised her, pleased her and entertained her to such an extent that she thought this was really the way the world behaved. That it was natural for people to smile when they looked at you. That it was customary for store owners to give away complimentary gifts to shoppers. That it was common practice for restaurant waiters to surprise their clients with an extra dish and omit it from the bill. That it was tradition for colleges to relax their credit requirements to aid a student in need, for cops to let citizens off after a tenth warning, for landlords to forgive a six-month delay in payment, and for the teenage boys from across the street to volunteer to do her household chores for her for free. Her view of the world was perpetually tinted with hot-pink. But now she knows better.

People no longer find Marianne attractive. In fact, to them she is down right repulsive. Men freak out and grab hold of weapons and pointed objects to shoo her away. Women scream and drag their children away from her. They call her names, and don't even wait to hear her out. Not that she can speak anything coherently anymore. Marianne has begun to learn the cold facts about people and life the hard way. She's had a rude awakening. And she isn't alone.

To her great surprise and relief, Marianne's soft, crunchy neck manages to allow her head to execute a slow sweeping turn one more time without breaking. It was dark, and through her misty, narrowing vision, she could barely make out the shapes of dozens of folk just like her. The gathering was one of moderate size. They'd barely qualify as a flash mob. But they certainly seemed have the effect of one. They moved like a slow swarm, flooding deserted streets. Nearly a hundred senile, near dying beings in need of serious medical and personal attention. Wandering drunkenly about. Wondering where everyone was, and why the city wore an abandoned look. She can almost hear all their moans and groans. In her mind, she could imagine what the ghastly gathering looked like. So this is where all the rejects end up? Everyone of them, shunned by society at large. Each person was probably beautiful once. Each, once loved and cared for by other people. Each with a story to tell, but no voice left to speak with. All they had left is each other for company. All they wanted, is for humanity to hear their plea. To be hugged. Marianne never believed in God. And now she was convinced.

At last, almost as if a sign from heaven, Marianne spots a big light source beyond the next street. She can feel the warmth of it. The others sensed it too. A gaint campfire. In the park. So thats where everyone was. Instinctively, the entire horde began gravitating towards the park. Slowly they advanced, Marianne in the forefront, wondering if her son Brian made it okay. The park came within line of sight, but seemed to have been walled off. As if someone had fortified themselves in. Marianne could see dark outlines of people perched atop the makeshift walls. The others saw them too. The crowd was elated. A new urgency possessed them, and they started making for the park, eager to be reunited with humanity.

The guards on the top opened fire. Marianne gasped. She thought she recognised one of the armed men when his face lit up from the muzzle flash. He looked a lot like Brian. Marianne was joyous. At last, someone who would accept her and love her again. She was afraid she wouldn't be allowed in because of her state of being. But now, if Brian is in command, they'd listen to him. Overjoyed, she made haste, through the cross-fire, as others fell all around her. She started calling out his name, "Vvrraraaaiinnnn....vrrarr....aaaiinnn", as best as she could. Brian picked her out from a distance as she dashed for the wall. He took aim, and blew Marianne to bits. It wasn't his fault. He wasn't immune to the grave misunderstanding all of mankind suffers from. To him, this was just another wave that needed to be defended against. It was his duty to keep the refugees in the park alive until help arrives from the government, if it arrives at all. The infection is suspected to be contagious, and one couldn't risk an outbreak inside the fortress.

Pieces of Marianne lay on the street, rotting into oblivion. Finally at peace.