
STATUES

A Short Story

by Allen Morris Jones

I grew up in that town you've read about. Just south of Canada, with the mountains in the background. We were the ones beset by the contagion. *Statue*, we called it. He got statue, we said. Then the newspapers followed suit: "Statue Ravages Small Montana Town!" A disease, if disease it was, that turned us gradually to stone.

A Baptist minister, at his parish door, waving goodbye to his faithful, found himself instantly transformed to gray granite flecked with quartz. He was the first. Then a dairy farmer, to the eventual envy of all, turned to the purest Carrara marble as he sat on his stool, stripping a teat. A young mother with a stroller came to stand forever by the park pond in Crocs, a scarf knotted around her hair—grainy brown sandstone.

These were the first three. Was it miracle or curse? There was some debate. Regardless, every few days, another one of us froze. Doctors, councilmen, teachers. All were struck democratically, and in just the same fashion. Quick like a finger snap. By their expressions, the victims never realized what was happening. One nine-year-old boy saw his grandfather go. "It started at the feet," he said, "and then went super fast up his legs. Like fire. Swoosh."

The village came to be dotted through with statues. Works of art, one might think, a sculpture garden, albeit one without arrangement or pattern. They were snapshots, frozen moments in our otherwise unremarkable lives. No one knew who might be struck next, or why.

We were quarantined, of course, the army circling us within a ring of tanks, cannons pointed inward.

Helicopters flew endlessly overhead. We were on our own, and perhaps always had been. The living navigated their days through pillars of the dead.

What I want to write about now, however, is what came after the contagion. During the worst months, when we were falling one after the other, no one wanted to be struck down wearing a scowl or sneer. We were terrified of becoming like the young father caught shouting at his little boy, or the butcher pursing his lips as he sniffed at a sour piece of salmon. Rather, we tried to emulate the old woman who was struck as she watched her granddaughter run up the walk. Such subtle, unaffected delight!

And so we all began smiling as pleasantly as we could, as often as we could, falsely at first but then with genuine feeling, the smiles tugging our hearts smoothly along after them. Young lovers lingered in their embrace; aged husbands remembered to take their wives' hands as they strolled; friends playing Frisbee re-

frained from laughing meanly at errant throws. In this way, we each added our own small measure of grace to the larger beauty.

After the contagion passed, after the tanks rumbled back to their military base and the helicopters flew elsewhere, the kindness remained. For those of us who were spared, we came to know our fellow survivors at a glance. Scarred by grief, pockmarked by tenderness, we carried this new kindness with us everywhere. We held it as close to us as the keys in our pockets. We wore it like blossoms pinned lovingly to our lapels. And we touched, at every opportunity, the soft, soft flesh of our own faces. ∞

