

## The Talented Miss Ripley

One lazy Sunday afternoon, in a fifth floor Manhattan apartment, one simple act of appeasement unleashed a literary nightmare so harsh to the ear that many New Yorkers still recoil in anguish at its memory. The incident occurred at the home of Martha and Louis Ripley on the sixth anniversary of the birth of their daughter, Marianna. Family and close friends had gathered in the spacious living room to bask in the afterglow of a glorious birthday dinner when, quite unexpectedly, little Marianna marched through the doorway and announced her intention to read from her first poem.

The captive audience listened in horror as she recited words that would cause dockworkers to blush. Out they came, in no apparent order and with no reverence to any grammatical rule, stinging the audience's ears with out-of-place and mispronounced vulgarities. Aunts crinkled their noses and looked away. Uncles lowered their heads and rubbed their temples. Louis and Martha stood open-jawed, gazing at their little angel spouting the words of Lucifer Himself.

When she finished, Marianna lifted her chin to the crowd, and her eyes lit as random accolades pierced a dense forest of silence. *My, what vocabulary. Precocious girl, isn't she?* These big words spoken through forced smiles sparked such a fire in her heart that she decided her destiny lay in spoken verse. Marianna's gift to the world would be her poetry, and said world would remember her long after her days were complete.

Growing up, Marianna found several opportunities to share her gift with the masses. First at family gatherings, where mothers would excuse themselves just before her performance, their young clutched close to their breasts. In crowded subways she stood on her seat and screamed her lines, eliciting abhorrent stares from businessman and vagrant alike. At the Macy's parades

she would shout her inspired phrases to passing dignitaries, who would each grimace and look in her direction as if sniper fire had riddled the air. From each incident Marianna took their reactions as gestures of profound respect for her talent, encouraging her to search harder for more gems of literary excellence to include in her next masterpiece.

Her contemporaries in school possessed neither the intelligence nor the sophistication to adequately appreciate Marianna's gift. When teachers chided her for misplaced modifiers, dangling participles, and obtuse onomatopoeias (terms Marianna decided had been conjured in an attempt to undermine her confidence), she protested, insisting any substitution would tarnish the artistic quality of the piece. Rebuked, she would retire to her bedroom at night and concoct venomous poems of literary revenge, after which she felt a deep sense of relief.

When she reached the age of twenty Marianna realized her writing had transcended the English language, and she was forced to invent new words—as well as their meanings—in order to maintain the skyrocketing quality of her work. She sent a letter cataloguing her creations to Webster's and asked their inclusion in the next edition—a letter for which they thanked her profusely, saying it was the best laugh they'd ever received via mail. Marianna remembered listing only a few humorous words, but assumed their impact to have overshadowed that of the other literary pearls she'd created. It was further proof her abilities were now beyond description by anyone but herself.

Marianna mused each day on the terrace of her East Side apartment, having been spared the burden of toiling at some meaningless vocation. Her benevolent parents, who were always lovingly referred to in her poems, provided a generous allowance that afforded the lifestyle of a blossoming artist.

Others might have spent their time studying the craft of writing, but because of the divine nature of her talent, Marianna had no need to research other successful poets and their creations. Although she *had* once read the work of Edgar Allan Poe and found it lacking, so she perfected his prose and sent it in a letter to his descendants. As expected, the non-response confirmed their inability to describe her act of kindness.

Sadly, artists before her time had missed the point of their calling. True art affected more than just the heart; it contorted the face, churned the intestines, strained the kidneys, contracted the bowels. By these criteria, Marianna had no equal.

At a formal evening gathering at the Waldorf, Marianna cornered a group of priests and recited her improved version of The Lord's Prayer. Ultimately gracious, the fathers reddened and excused themselves one-by-one, until only an elderly gentleman remained. Marianna continued with an encore performance, this time sharing her poetic recreation of The Last Supper complete with roasted pig's brains and Jack Daniels chasers. In her version Christ not only marked Judas as his betrayer, He rode him like a bull around the table and shoved him out the window to his death. After her last words, she smiled and folded her arms in triumph.

Veins swelling in his forehead, his hands shaking, the priest offered a rebuttal. "Miss Ripley, have you given any thought to the consequences of such displays?"

Marianna stood silent, puzzled.

"More precisely, when you're gone, what memory will people have of you? What will they say at your funeral?"

Her smile returned. "Oh, I'm prepared for that, Father. I've written my own eulogy, obituary, and even inscribed my own tombstone."

And so, to this day anyone who dares to search for a large marble tombstone in a secluded Long Island cemetery can read the last words of the Talented Miss Ripley, with misplaced modifiers, dangling participles, obtuse onomatopoeias chiseled in stone—and every word displayed exactly the way she intended.