

I, Monster

Lisa Gaines

In the middle of all the concrete and pavement and downright busy-ness that calls itself Manhattan sits a place of refuge where city people can come and experience a little bit of countryside. Where dogs and children run and play. Where weather is predicted from a castle tower. Where even a monster can find a slice of serenity.

A container of chicken stares up at me from a can behind the Tavern. Baked, not fried. Stomach growls as I close the lid, glance around. This is not my territory, but no one watches. No faces filled with suspicion. No eyes filled with envy. I tuck the box beneath my oversized coat and scuttle back to the tree shadows.

It isn't often I find such a treasure. Less often that the meal inside is untouched as this one is. Usually I feed on bits and scraps, sucking marrow from bones, grinding gristle beneath my teeth. Sometimes, when the wind blows and rain falls sideways from the sky, I sit beneath the trees and watch the people beyond the glass. They talk and eat and watch the rain. But they don't see me. People from beyond the glass never see me.

Today I don't linger. The sun is drifting down, down. Soon it will be dark. Dark brings out other kinds of people. Bigger, stronger. They kick, they beat, they steal.

The sun slides toward the horizon of concrete and steel as I slip through shadows grown long with the day. I follow a favorite path past the Carousel, empty now of laughing children. Past Alice and her Wonderland friends, their slick bronze forms slowly cooling as the sun starts to disappear. I breathe deep the sweet scent of late blooming roses. Climb to the top of Summit Rock and look around the place I now call home.

Central Park.

Soft rising hills and swooping vales, turtle ponds and grottoes of sweet smelling flowers. Groves of oak and hickory, maple and elm. Dogwood stands and chokeberry thickets. Wildflowers in their seasons like a poem written in petals. There's even a six-foot high purple flower called Joe Pye's weed and something that smells sweet like honeysuckle only I never can remember its name.

I move down the bridle path, slip through trees, past a slender woman in khaki pants and yellow sweater with binoculars pressed to her eyes. Lots of people watch birds here, and more birds watch people. Woodpeckers, hawks, owls with pointy ears. Whip-poor-wills huddle on rough-barked branches, so still, so perfect, until evening when they swoop down upon unsuspecting moths and insects, bursting forth with their haunting song: *Whip poor will, whip poor will, whip poor will*.

I feel sorry for Will then, whoever and wherever he might be.

Around the Reservoir, I slide silently through the thinning crowd, keeping my overcoat drawn high around my neck and slouchy hat pulled low over my ears. No cars now; only people. People walking, jogging, biking, skating. Past tennis courts and ball fields – baseball, softball, football, paddle ball . . . Sometimes I get tired just watching.

In the summer, when things get hot or just need to slow down, there are lakes and ponds and the streams connecting them all. Fish, swim, rest in the shade.

Jazz.

Shakespeare.

Picnics and sunshine. It makes me hungry just thinking about the smells of hot dogs, onions, mustard mingling with fragrant flowers tinged with a hint of city.

In winter, skaters slide across rinks and ponds, ice crystals drift like shimmering diamonds on the air, children throw snowballs and ride sleds, whooping and hollering and screaming at the top of their lungs. Snow's crisp scent mingles with the acrid smell of roasting chestnuts.

Now it's fall. The in-between time. Days still warm, nights growing cold. Chrysanthemums, roses, asters explode in a last gasp of color. Leaves burnish yellow, gold, red. Monarch butterflies lay an orange and black blanket over the trees during their migration south.

I've made it around the entire Park today and my legs complain. There are days I can't make it past the cans at North Meadow. Cold eases into my knees and elbows and wrists during the night, makes it hard to move. Those days I mostly sit and watch. Deep in shadows—behind bushes, between rocks. Never meet another's gaze, not even the man with the magic bell. Just watch.

One of my favorite watching places is a thicket not far from my home in the Loch. It is not yet dark so I scramble inside, curl my aching legs, and let them rest. Through tangled branches and leaves I can see the corner of a playground. Most of the children have gone, but as I peek

through the yellow-green, changing-to-fall leaves and dangling fire-red berries, I'm startled to find a pair of eyes peering back. Angel eyes. Twin star sapphires colored deep with innocence. Reality fades and we're the only two beings left in the world.

Glorious girl-child, radiant as an angel, picturesque as a Dresden doll.

And I, hideous monster, twisted by nature, warped by society.

Her dress wraps about her tiny legs in perfect folds, the same deep blue as the cerulean sky. The pale blue bow around her waist matches the ribbon in her golden hair. And her eyes, those glorious angel eyes, stare at me without malice. Without hate. Without fear.

A movement above the girl-child catches my attention. I duck my head low beneath concealing branches as her mother reaches down and pulls the child's finger from her lips.

"Now, Rachel. You're too big to suck on your thumb."

It wasn't her thumb, I want to say. It was only a finger.

But I keep silent. Hold my breath as Rachel reaches out and points her still-wet finger my way. Her mother takes her hand and walks down the path. Rachel walks backward. Smiles again.

Waves.

I stick my finger in my mouth. Wonder at the taste of salt and dirt and a touch of something sweet. Not a thumb, I mumble. A finger.