

She Sees My Monsters Now by Robert Reed

Inspiration for Robert Reed's latest story came from a conversation he and his wife had with another married couple several years ago. "The woman was involved in all things good. She had an extraordinary love for animals and people down on their luck. Our talk turned to the ways in which one spouse changes the other, and her husband mentioned how his fears had migrated to her. One of us said, 'She sees my monsters now,' and as soon as the words were spoken, I knew that they would make a good title for a story." Mr. Reed's next novel, built from the "Sister Alice" stories, is scheduled to come out from Tor Books in early 2003.

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"Nervous?" I ask.

She lies. She says, "No," and then, "No," again. A smile emerges, faltering along its edges. Hands drop beneath the table, wrestling in her lap, and once again she lies, telling me, "I'm not particularly nervous, no."

Whatever I feel, I appear calm. I lean back, smiling a useful smile, but my expression is embarrassed with shadings of sadness. My elbows are propped on the armrests of my only chair, my hands turning, palms now turned up, emphasizing their emptiness and my own impotence. "No claws," I purr. Then I brighten my smile, adding, "And no fangs, either."

She gulps.

I laugh, gently and softly. "Hardly the image of a monster, am I?"

I have embarrassed her. A pretty enough woman, soft and small and sensitive and warm, she shrinks before me. This species of human being finds life and its pressures to be a great burden. I know her well; I have studied her peculiar ways. The occasional success always brings a stab of self-inflicted guilt. Her world is full of endless injustices and casual miseries. In response to the suffering, she wears only simple clothes derived from recycled plastics and other nonmortal sources. She embraces any ideology that promises to put things right. Because there is such a thing as right, just as some things are definitely wrong. The green copper ring on her left hand shows that she is a bride of Gaia. And at this moment, staring at me, she feels pity. Or more precisely, she pities what she envisions to be my awful life.

"You're not," she offers.

"Not what?"

"A monster," she whispers, disgusted even to say the word.

"But I am," I reply. "Diagnosed when I was five and placed into this program when I was nine." Then I hesitate, pretending to gather myself before I can admit, "After that first incident, they really didn't have much choice."

She flinches.

But her indigo eyes are enthralled.

"I don't blame anyone," I tell her. "I am what I am."

Women like her always hear something heroic in those words. "I am what I am." Admitting to its curse, the monster reveals its precious humanity.

She smiles again, her imagination engaged.

I nudge our conversation in a fresh direction. "Enough about me. Let's talk about you. My guess is that you've got a sweet little cat at home."

She says, "No," with relief. She is relieved to be changing subjects. "No, not a cat."

But I know that already. Brides of Gaia rarely settle for ordinary pets. When they enslave an animal, they want to accomplish something good and noble.

"Lemurs," she exclaims. "I have three of them."

"Fascinating," I exclaim.

"Genetically tweaked so they can coexist with humans. Of course." She will show me holos of her darlings. But no, she calls to them. To her children. She says, "Sally. Rhonda. Tara. Come here, dears!"

Animals disgust me. These bottom-rung primates have no more soul than a sack of bloody water. They are stupid creatures dressed in black and white pelts. Those implanted genes have rendered them obedient, and, we can hope, housebroken. They stare at me with shallow black eyes, and when I refuse to move, they look elsewhere. I'm not real. I am just an image at the far end of the table. Stupid as they are, the beasts understand that I mean nothing to them.

"They're extinct in their native Madagascar," says their owner.

I have never asked for her name.

"You're a noble soul," I purr. And then, for many fine reasons, I ask, "What do you suppose your Sally tastes like? Cooked over a hot smoky fire, say?"

Those indigo eyes are round and enormous.

She whimpers, "End link—"

I am sitting alone in my room. I have always been alone in this room. "Cold coffee and a Danish," I call out.

The room supplies both.

"And leave the line open," I command.

The room says, "She won't."

"Yes, she will," I promise.

I am allowed a single link with the world. As long as it remains open to one person, I can't speak to anyone else. The woman will understand that much. She'll watch the hours and days pass, knowing that my only portal is hers to do with as she wishes. And that's why I can say, with steely confidence, "She'll call back again. Within the week."

"How about a little wager?" the room suggests.

"Ten dollars," I offer.

"And if she doesn't return in seven days, I win."

“Except you don't think she's coming back,” I remark, laughing now. “That's what you implied.”

And the room laughs, reminding me, “But I know you. And if you think she can't help herself, then she can't.”

* * *

She cannot.

A soft tone announces her return. It's three days later. From the gray wall before me, a cautious voice suggests, “You should close the link.”

“Hello?” I call out, a perfect longing in my voice.

She hesitates. Then with a forced sturdiness, she asks, “May I see you again. Just for a moment, please.”

“Wait. I need clothes.” I'm dressed, but I want her to imagine me naked. Finally, with a booming voice, I tell the room, “Open the window.”

My solitary table extends to the far wall. She sits with her hands folded on her tabletop, her back erect and shoulders squared. Today's wardrobe looks stiff and formal. Aiming for disdain, she tells me, “That was cruel.”

“What was?”

“What you said. It was vicious and mean.”

I blink, pretending confusion. “Remind me. What did I say?”

“About Sally.” There isn't a lemur in sight. “I thought I should tell you. I don't appreciate that kind of talk.”

“It's talk,” I counter.

Her eyes narrow, betraying her own mild confusion.

“Words,” I say. “Just a string of words.”

But she believes in words. Language has a life and beauty, and she suspects, an almost magical force. Hasn't she been deeply influenced by the right words delivered at the proper time?

I say, “Madagascar.”

“Pardon?”

“What do you know about it?”

She takes a moment to wet her lips. Then, with an injured tone, she says, “It's a sad place. Deforested and eroded, and very poor.”

“Yet until a few thousand years ago,” I say, “it had a unique ecosystem. There were rain forests and a giant flightless bird—the likely source of the mythical roc—and there were dozens of species of lemurs, one or two of which were nearly as big as apes.”

A flicker shows in the staring eyes.

“Then humans arrived,” I say. “We landed on the shores and built villages, and we hunted the wild animals and chopped down their trees, and our crops grew where the forests had been, and we spread out until that little continent was jammed full of humans.”

Sadly, she says, “Yes.”

“I wasn't being cruel,” I remark.

She turns her head, as if a sideways glance will provide a more thorough appraisal. “You weren't?”

“I was making a simple point. You see, Madagascar isn't part of Africa. It's really a very different place.”

She doesn't speak.

“With the Mozambique Channel to help, its government was able to maintain its borders, and the occasional refugee who managed to slip through could be quarantined.” I sighed heavily, telling her, “Africa was lucky, in one awful sense. Two thirds of its people were killed relatively quickly. These new transcriptase viruses are brutal, but efficient. But Madagascar was spared. That's why nearly fifty-nine million people are subsisting today on a denuded landscape. That's why the next drought will bring a catastrophe. Famine and political carnage will join forces. There's going to be another Java, sad to say.”

I can see her soul, injured but stubborn. “What were you accusing me of? Do you think if I was a good person, I'd send my lemurs home to help feed those starving people?”

“God, no,” I exclaim.

Then I shake my head, adding, “That would be a horrific waste. The shipping costs. The care and feeding of three animals. Goodness, no. What's infinitely more productive is to send money. Make a donation to one of the local relief agencies. They know what's needed. They can buy food, or books, or even a universal window for one of the slums.”

She nods, accepting my simple logic.

“In fact,” I say, “I'll give you money. If you're going to do what I suggest, that is.”

I am a monster, but what kind of person would refuse a monster's charity? Quietly, warily, she asks, “How much?”

“Ten dollars.”

Perhaps she's surprised that I have cash. More likely, she's mystified that this ward of the state—a man who cannot leave his tiny home—has a firmer, broader grasp of the world than she has.

“I'll send another ten dollars,” she promises.

It's a pathetically small sum. But I show my widest smile, adding quietly, “You know, when I said those hard words, I was aiming for a very different message.”

She waits, holding her breath.

“What's worth more?” I ask. “Three docile lemurs, or one very difficult man?”

* * *

My room is far more than a room, and, by law, it is not mine.

Calmly but forcefully, the room cautions, "In at least three areas, you're skirting the edge of what's allowed."

"I never asked for Amy's name," I remark. "She volunteered it, and frankly, the name could be an out-and-out lie."

Silence.

I ask, "Have I solicited illegal or immoral help from that young woman?" Then I say, "No," with a genuine defiance. "And the Codes are very clear about this. An obvious breach and three federal judges are required to terminate all contact between a citizen and the individual in protective custody."

"The Codes are plain enough," the room agrees.

"Which leaves us with a third near-transgression," I continue. "What is it? Are my political views making you squirm?"

"No worse than usual," the room admits.

"But who cares?" I laugh. "Every sentient entity is free to believe whatever he or she, or it, wishes. Both the Bill of Rights and the Bill of Reason proclaim that unimpeachable freedom. For humans, and for thinking machines, too."

Silence.

"How can I live in a civilized world and not profess my personal views?"

Softly, the room reminds me, "This is an old topic."

"Does that make it taboo?"

"No." Then, with a glint of anger, the room adds, "Your third transgression lies elsewhere."

"Tell me," I urge.

"You know exactly what I mean," it says.

"I want you to say it. For the record."

"Don't worry about the record. It hears everything."

I laugh loudly.

"I like you," the room says abruptly. "I've always liked you. But the staff are worried. They've discovered some rather alarming trends in this new relationship of yours."

"What trends?" I blurt. "Did I wag my dick at her?"

That wins a disapproving silence. Then the room laughs back at me, reminding me, "I know you. Better than anyone, I know you. And dick-wagging is definitely not your style."

* * *

"Ask," I prompt.

“What?” she says.

“Anything,” I beg. “Ask me anything.”

Through her face, I can see her considering and then shying away from several ripe topics. Finally, Amy wonders aloud, “Why don't you ever drop our link?” She always closes her end when we're done. But even when I can't see her, I'm joined to one of her many windows—like the houseguest who refuses to leave. “You have only the one window, don't you?” she asks.

“Only this one. Yes.”

Pain tightens that nearly pretty face. “Isn't there anybody else to visit with?” And then, sensing that this might be a sore subject, Amy adds, “I'll visit again. Don't I always come back?”

“There isn't anyone else,” I answer. “And I know you'll return. It just took you three empty days, that first time.”

She feels a poke of shame.

I backpedal, smiling when I assure, “I'm good about keeping busy. I like to exercise. I have conversations with the doctors and with my AI overseer. But mostly, I read. I know this room doesn't look like much, but these walls contain all but a handful of the world's books. Literature. History. Politics, and comedy. Which are really the same topic, I think.”

She laughs weakly, and then asks, “What books are missing?”

I name some titles.

“Really? Did your doctors forbid them?”

“Oh, no. That was my doing.” I shake my head. “They're despicable works, and I don't want them in arm's reach.”

She opens her mouth, considering her response.

“Don't I have the right?” I interrupt. “Freedom to doubt, freedom to exclude. If you can't do either in your life, is it your life?”

Her mouth draws shut.

“And this is my life,” I promise. “Everything you see here ... is mine....”

Doubt lifts her eyebrows. She braces herself with a deep, full sigh. Then, shaking her head, she says, “What happened?”

“What happened when?”

She forces herself to stare at my eyes. “When you were five. When you were first diagnosed—”

“I failed the standardized test,” I confess. “On a thousand point scale, I was two points into the red.”

Amy nods soberly. Then she says, “No. I meant before that.”

She's been doing research, I presume. This isn't the kind of knowledge that people like her naturally carry around with them.

“There had to be other reasons, other grounds.” She embraces her fear for a moment, and, avoiding my eyes, says, “There have to be incidents of abuse. Or damage to the limbic system.”

“Yes,” I say, “and no.”

She blinks and looks up.

“My mother was a splinter addict. Plus, there were one or two nasty events with her boyfriends. At least, there were two incidents that could be legally confirmed.”

She shivers.

“But again,” I say, “on the scale of what's horrible and damning, I was barely inside the red zone. Based on the best available science, I was considered marginally at risk. Thousands are, but only three or four end up being truly dangerous.”

She nods, and waits.

“Yet then again,” I continue, “I wasn't placed into protective custody for another four and a half years. I hadn't yet proven myself, as it were.”

Her deep blue eyes are enormous. Fear and compassion stand in balance. Finally, with a weak voice, she asks, “What did you do?”

“I won't tell you.”

She's disappointed, and then, on second thought, relieved.

“At least not today,” I kid. Then, laughing gently, I say, “Besides, I need something to lure you back again.”

Amy says, “You don't.”

But really, she knows that I'm right.

* * *

“There are concerns,” I am told.

Sensing that this will take time, I blank my reader. “Concerns from where? The medical minds, or legal saints?”

“From everyone,” it says.

“Tell everyone to speak to me. Directly.”

“That's their intention.”

“Good.”

But the room has been asked to lay the groundwork. “Amy has strong feelings for you,” it announces. “What do you think of that?”

“They're her feelings,” I remark. “She can entertain them. She can deny them. But by law and by custom, they belong to her.”

“Agreed,” it says.

I let the silence work. Then, “How did they acquire this deeply personal knowledge? Did she confess it to them?”

“Again,” says the room. “Guess again.”

I have to laugh. “We're talking about surveillance, aren't we? What? Are they eavesdropping on her windows? Prying open her little pink diary? What?”

The room reminds me, “When the woman first volunteered her time—before she selected your image from everyone in protective custody—she willingly forfeited most of the current privacy laws.”

“How convenient,” I purr. “Convenient, and obscene.”

Silence.

“Does it bother you? A legally designated sociopath tsk-tsking the actions of health care professionals and badge-wielding law officers?”

Quietly, the room says, “Of course not.”

I know the room. Sometimes better than I know myself. And when I hear those three words, I recognize that the poor AI is trying to lie to me.

With my face, I show a mild disapproval. Nothing more. I return to my book, and, after another few pages of Napoleonic intrigues, a revelation finds me. Again, I blank my reader. I sit back, clasping my hands behind my head. And the room, being infinitely observant, asks, “What's funny now?”

“She's reading them,” I say.

“Reading what?” it asks.

“The books that appalled me!” I shout. And with both fists, I drum on the tabletop, laughing until I wheeze.

* * *

“Why me?”

She feigns confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I placed my name and face at that meeting nexus. The state added the warnings, for free. But you selected me anyway. Was it my age? My chiseled features? Did I look too innocent to be a monster?”

“No,” she admits. “You didn't look all that innocent.”

“So you wanted to meet a monster. Is that it?”

She hesitates.

I give her a harsh laugh that ends with a fond wink and lingering grin. “Are we back at the beginning? Shall I show you my claws and teeth?”

“Don't,” she warns.

And with the next breath, she admits, “I just read Malcom's text. Parts of it, at least.”

“And?”

“Sociopaths are terribly destructive. She claims. Between their criminal acts and the emotional harm they inflict, they could be the most destructive element in modern human society.” Perhaps she can accept that bleak assessment, yet the obvious rebuttal looms. “But when we convict them before they've become adults ... oftentimes before they do real harm ... well, that doesn't seem fair, or just, or even smart...”

“Oh, I think it is.”

I love to astonish her.

With a wave of the hand, I dismiss her objections. “Believe me, I've met enough of these people to know. They're genuine monsters. And the worst of them are far too shrewd to break any important law. To them, other people are tools. Nothing more. To feed their egos, they're drawn to politics. Or they become ministers and priests, and counselors. Any venue where they have control over other people's lives is a rich one.” I have to be exceptionally cautious here. Accusing no one, I admit, “This is one area where I strongly disagree with Dr. Malcom.”

“Okay,” Amy mutters.

“In all, there's about a dozen areas where she blundered. Her thousand-point empathy scale, for instance. The red zone is enormous, yet her net has far too large a mesh. The smart sociopath knows what to say and how to act. With emphasis on the word ‘act.’ Even as a child, he or she can easily fool interviewers and the machines. At-risk people are constantly passing through—”

“I've heard that,” she volunteers.

“Because the factors are badly ranked,” I continue. “I have my own scale, based on observations of others and myself. I have half a dozen suggestions that could lead to a more scrupulous methodology—”

“And you wouldn't be in the red zone,” she blurts. “Is that what you're saying?”

“God, no.”

Her surprise is abrupt, and delicious.

“I was definitely at risk,” I confess. “I haven't any doubts.” I can smile at this honest appraisal, repeating myself. “At risk. Worthy of a good long look by the agents of public health and criminal interdiction.”

Amy is at a loss for words.

“And remember,” I continue. “I wasn't placed into this room for another fifty-two months. The state saw no good reason to isolate me.”

She breathes.

Quietly, with a painful whisper, she asks, “What happened?”

“Before I tell you,” I begin, “I want you to consider this. Dr. Malcom made the easiest mistake. She was a happy person born into comfort and means, and it never occurred to her—not once—that some people genuinely deserve to be tortured.”

Amy breathes, and breathes.

“Tortured,” I repeat.

“What did you do?”

“My mother had a rare gift,” I mention. “Better than a thousand psychiatrists, she could find the monstrous men of the world. But instead of placing them inside secure facilities, she would simply coax them into her bed.”

“You were nine,” Amy whispers.

“Nearly ten,” I counter. “And I was big for my age, and angry. And the latest boyfriend was drunk and high, and he'd fallen down a set of stairs, breaking his ankle ... and I found him like that. Nobody else was home. And there I was, with a kitchen jammed full of knives....”

* * *

“Congratulations.”

I rise to the bait, asking, “For what?”

“She's hired a competent attorney. On your behalf, she's planning to contest your legal status.”

“It won't work,” is my assessment.

The room agrees with me. “And not only will she fail,” it says, “but she'll spend most of her savings in the effort.”

“Her savings,” I mention. “That's her right.”

“You don't care?”

“Funny,” I say. Then I glance at the soft pink ceiling, pointing out, “You're always watching me. You're a high-functioning machine born and trained to do nothing else. Your life has been spent counting my heartbeats, measuring my skin conductivity and respiration rate, and, by a hundred more elaborate means, assessing my soul. Yet for some reason, you feel the need to ask me if I care.”

I snort loudly, laughing at both of us.

“Why do you think that is?” I inquire.

Silence.

“What are you sensing here, old friend? Really, in your heart, what do you hope to find?”

* * *

“Thank you,” I begin.

A wide bright smile starts to bubble up.

“But it's not enough,” I caution. “Listen to me, Amy. You don't have the resources. You don't have nearly enough stamina. And honestly, you don't even have a legal leg beneath you.”

Yet the smile completes itself, and with a practiced certainty, Amy tells me, “I can raise money. And I do have plenty of stamina. And maybe it's time for the laws to be changed. Have you thought about that possibility?”

“Once in a while,” I admit.

Then I fold my hands together on the tabletop, wearing a begging expression when I tell her, “Stop this. Please. You're going to make things miserable for both of us, and nothing's going to be accomplished. I know that and I can accept it. So please, quit now.”

She dismisses me with a laugh. “How do you know?” she asks. Then a paranoid thought takes hold of her. “Wait,” she exclaims. “Have you been threatened? Is someone telling you to stop me?”

“Someone is,” I admit. Then I lie, saying, “I want you to quit.”

“I won't.” She has never looked prettier. Her golden hair covers her shoulders, and those wide indigo eyes shine at me. “You're a good person. Anyone can see that. What you did when you were nine—”

“Shut up,” I say.

The room and my keepers watch every portion of our conversation. One mistake on anyone's part, and I lose my link with her. Which would only make it worse, I understand. Unable to speak to me, Amy would turn into an avenging angel, impoverishing herself to save an increasingly remote memory.

“Shut up,” I repeat.

But she isn't talking now. Her lower jaw is thrust out in a very unattractive way, and with her body and face, and finally, her voice, she tells me, “I don't care. I want to help you.”

“But this won't help anyone,” I repeat.

“How do you know? Until you try, how can you know?”

I stare at those vivid eyes, and wait.

She manages a shallow sudden breath. “Oh, my.”

“You see?” I ask.

For the last time, I have surprised her. Quietly, and with a real pain, she says, “This has happened before.”

“Three times,” I allow.

Now she looks down at her hands, quietly wondering, “Who were they?” And then, “Women?”

“Sure.”

But she isn't defeated. A pathological idealist, she needs to tell me, “This time is going to be different. I'm going to set you free—”

“You aren't going to accomplish shit. You can't, so forget it.” An honest gasp rises up inside me, and years of exasperation boil out. “The system is the system. It can't be beaten. So just walk away.”

Somewhere in those words, she hears a possibility. With tears on the suddenly puffy cheeks, she asks, “What would be enough?”

I say nothing.

“To end the system,” she says. “What would prove that it's wrong?”

I say, “Nothing will,” in a certain way.

Then I grin for a moment—a grin that I have practiced and perfected, knowing and charming and capable of transporting volumes in an instant. And I say to her, “Think,” just as our link is permanently and irrevocably severed.

* * *

“You're evil,” I hear.

I am awake suddenly. My table makes into a soft bed, but I have always slept on the floor, using only my arms for pillows. It must be the middle of the night. Only the faint pink glow of the nightlight illuminates a realm that never seems large. The room is always tiny. “Why am I?” I ask the room. “Evil, you say?”

“She took your advice,” it tells me.

I sit up. “Took what?”

“No more games,” it warns. Then with horror and sadness, it says, “One of Amy's neighbors filed an official complaint, and by law, she had to be tested.”

The Malcom test, it means.

“She answered every question with the worst possible answer. And somehow, she managed to mimic some of the amoral physiological responses.”

“So what?” I ask. “She's an adult without a criminal history. What's the worst that can happen? She gets labeled and put under observation for the next two or three years, and then ... and then ... wait, there's something else, isn't there...?”

Silence.

“You wouldn't be pissed over some woman's bad diagnose,” I admit. Then after a few moments of feeling lost, I have to ask, “What else happened? What did she do?”

“Think,” the room urges.

“Cruelty to animals,” I realize. “What? Did she do something to her damned lemurs?”

“Something,” is all it will tell me. Then with a sorrowful voice, it says, “Amy is being processed now. For the next two years, she will live in protective custody. The laws are clear, and they can't be disobeyed—”

“The laws are wrong,” I say.

“And you're evil,” it growls. “You pushed her. Trained her. Suggested what books to read, seducing her altruistic nature.”

I say nothing.

“You are shit,” the room tells me.

“Am I?”

“Ruining a young woman's life,” it says. “And for what?”

With a calm, almost matter-of-fact voice, I admit, “I thought I was making a point. And I succeeded rather well, I think.”

“Do you?”

I have to laugh, bitterly and with an ocean of malice. Then I look at my own hands, asking, “Who was my audience, you stupid shit? Who was I appealing to here? A sweet, foolish girl who has absolutely no power, or the sentient and legally emancipated entity that stands guard over me ... that comprises my walls...that can open my door...?”