

CITIZENS OF THE RAMBLE

He refers to it as Walden Pond. From his vantage point on the north shore of Central Park's lake, Germaine watches from a distance the social activity of the Boathouse, the wedding parties snapping photos near the fountain, and tourists in rental boats rowing through the emerald water in bloom. He reminds himself again to stay on this side of the lake – his side – to preserve the emotional purity of his connection to his literary sanctuary.

The Poet, Lolita calls him, and he loves it. He keeps battered copies of Thoreau and London, even Poe, in his backpack with the pens and paper and various scribbled masterpieces. Unlikely he'll receive acclaim in his lifetime, but he knows his work will endure after he is gone. Through him, the citizens of the Ramble will emerge from the forest of anonymity and become immortal.

"Don't write about me." Lolita says. "Nothing to say. I'm invisible."

If she were invisible, she wouldn't be so obsessed with staying clean. She carries a heavy-duty plastic bag containing soap, shampoo, and a toothbrush that she never lets out of her sight. Her bathing rituals begin every morning when the first padlocks to the park bathrooms are unlocked, and end each evening after midnight, when the lake itself serves as a black cleansing pool. If you want to offend Lolita or scare her away, stare at her bag and she'll bolt. Her habit of disappearing on cue may explain in part why she considers herself invisible.

Lillian Gish, who is not a resident of the Ramble since she lives under one of the old pines due north of the Bandshell, is Lolita's self-appointed parent. A girl barely eighteen needs a mother, Lillian says. She takes a daily trek into the Ramble to find Lolita. Delighted to have a purpose that makes her survival imperative, Lillian talks about the day when she and Lolita will live in one of the high apartment buildings that surround the park.

Lolita wants nothing to do with the idea. She lived in such a building once – ages ago, she claims – and finds the Ramble a gentler environment. A child with education and cultural conditioning, Lolita feigns amnesia when asked anything personal. She offers opinions on any number of philosophic subjects but closes down if anyone digs in the ruins of her collapsed life.

Although she and Germaine discuss to infinity the fact they can't stay here forever, Lolita makes no plans beyond her sacred cleansing rituals. Even food is an afterthought, but Lillian brings her discarded delicacies from the Boathouse Café and begs her to eat.

Germaine refuses to eat garbage. He doesn't need to. Tucked deep inside his backpack is a debit card. Every few days he leaves the Park via Strawberry Fields to go to a bank on Columbus. There's always substantial money in the account, but he withdraws only what he needs for food, paper, pens, and a pint of Jack Daniels. He almost bought a laptop and spent several days searching for

an outlet where he could recharge the battery. No luck. He decided if paper was good enough for Thoreau, then paper it would be.

His fellow citizens never discuss where they get their survival goods. Some of it is general knowledge: Lolita's men pay for her services with toiletries, fresh T-shirts and panties. Some of it is myth. Lillian Gish is rumored to be a magician who is able to turn rocks into coins. But most of it's common sense. Tourists still throw coins into fountains for good luck. The Boathouse bins provide a bounty as long as you get there before vermin.

Intrusion is an everyday annoyance in the Ramble. Not only the tourists and locals hiking through by day, the nights are notorious for exploits from every quadrant of New York society. One citizen capitalizes on the market. He sells colored condoms for a dollar to men strolling the paths at twilight.

Dylan is a fixture in Ramble folklore. Word's out – if you buy a condom from him, you'll be protected from misfortune during your conjugal visits in the brush. On Wall Street, the code for a romp in the Ramble is *visit Dylan*.

Acknowledging his legendary status, Dylan modestly asserts he's simply an entrepreneur. He saw an open market and cornered it. He talks of manufacturing his own condoms printed with tiny maps of the Ramble trails.

Lolita spends the better part of each morning picking up the bright green, yellow, and red condoms strewn across the forest beds. "They kill the birds." She explains to anyone who might listen. "These men have no right to dirty a natural environment. They gotta take their rubbers home with them."

"I suppose your squeaky clean clients do," Lillian Gish mutters. Common knowledge she does not approve of Lolita's men. She worries about the girl, as any mother would.

"That's my rule." Lolita replies. "But gays don't give a damn."

Germaine, who's gay, doesn't bother to argue with her.

Lolita has other pet peeves. Like balloons. They kill the ducks. Squirrels could choke on candy wrappers. She sees danger everywhere for the hapless beasts and fowl. You can hear her singing as she scours the ground for litter.

Bless the beasts and the children. She sings in the sweetest soprano you'd ever hear.

Dylan doesn't care for the ducks or squirrels. He wants a dog. Once, he found a stray near Belvedere Castle. It was a half-grown shepherd-and-something mutt. Dylan was ecstatic that the Ramble had rewarded him with the one thing he desired. The pup followed him around for an afternoon, wooed by sweet morsels from a bag of caramel popcorn he uncovered in the trash outside the Delacorte theatre.

At sunset, his dreams were shattered. A woman, her face streaked with mascara, wandered about the Turtle pond calling *Rusty* in hoarse sobs. Dylan and his pup, napping above the pond on the hill, were startled awake. The dog

seemed confused. He glanced at Dylan and the bag of popcorn. His tail wagged in recognition of the woman's voice. He whined.

"Go, Rusty," he said. It broke his heart. The dog lopped down the hill to his hysterically relieved mistress. She reached in her pocket and retrieved a handsome rawhide chew. That dog deserved the best, he recounts sadly. He had to let him go.

"One of these days I'll adopt," he tells the group. "I'll go to the shelter and get my own."

"Damn if they'll give you one," Lillian Gish replies. They're all used to her cynicism by now. Years of misfortune have jaded her. "They'd sooner put a doggie down than release him to the likes of you."

"Fucking bureaucrats," says Germaine. Lolita nods.

"Reminds me of a show we did in Schenectady in the sixties," Lillian says. She slips into a graphic monologue that, while entertaining, refers to neither dogs nor bureaucrats.

October now, and talk of winter. Germaine assures them he can get coats and blankets for everybody. New ones. Lillian orders hers down-filled. Lolita accuses Lillian of being a duck killer.

"What happens when it snows?" Lolita asks. Her first winter in the Ramble. Spring and summer rains – even storms – purify her, but she admits she's afraid of the cold. She hates ice because you can't take a bath in it.

Dylan suggests the stone archway on the southwest path. It fits four or five on a stormy night. Lillian tells them that she has no intention of moving into the Ramble for the winter. Somebody has promised her a plastic tarp, and her tree – enormous – will shelter her.

"They'll kick you out of there," Germaine warns. "Fucking bureaucrats. You'll end up in a hell-hole shelter."

She reminds him again that she has survived five years here, thank you.

Dylan worries the condom business will be slow during the winter. He may need to find other sources of revenue. Lolita hopes the winter won't deter her clients.

"Be very hot." Germaine laughs.

Lolita's gray eyes twinkle as she grins knowingly. She's a pro.

Germaine climbs a thick pine tree just yards from the bridge on the shore of Walden Pond. His perch is twelve feet from the ground. He sits on one branch and stretches his feet on another. Scribbles his literary tome across the notebook on his lap. Intends to stay in the Ramble until he's written everything he intends to write. It could be months. Even years, but he's in no hurry. He's got friends and food. Jack Daniels at bedtime. Thoreau never had it better.