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Gregory Hughes

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Chapter One

Marymount Manhattan is a small cosy college on the east side of New York. It was a women's college at one time. It's not now of course because I wouldn't be here. And I like being here. The girls are pretty and the teachers are pretty cool. And I tend to enjoy my classes now that I can choose what subjects I take. But they're finished for today and so I'm writing in the library. I'm writing a story in the greatest city in the world. But my story does not begin here. It begins in the wonderful city of Winnipeg, or rather the prairies of that city. A land so flat you can watch your dog run away for three days.

I was almost thirteen years old at the time. An unlucky number in some people's minds but I wouldn't have to wait until thirteen for bad luck. It was already on its way. I could sense it coming on that summer's evening standing outside our farmhouse. I was watching the Rat dribble a soccer ball in and out of the orange cones. When she came to the end of the cones she

would blast the ball into the goal my father had bought her from town. Then she would collect the ball from the back of the net and start over.

The Rat was happy when she played soccer, but I wasn't happy with the Rat. Only a few days to go before the summer vacation and she had spoiled it already. 'I think Dad's going to die soon.' That's what she had said on the way home from school, as calmly as if she had asked you to pass her the milk. So I suppose I never sensed there was bad luck coming, I was told.

You may think it was just the ramblings of a ten-year-old, but the Rat was strange. She said things that came true, like the time our dog ran away. I threw him a ball and he ran after it. 'You'll never see that dog again,' said the Rat. He ran past the ball and carried on going. He ran off into the sunset, a little trail of dust kicking up behind him. We watched until he was out of sight and I never saw him again. 'He wasn't happy here,' said the Rat. 'Don't take it personally.'

Or what about the time she woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me that something bad had happened to Felicia. Felicia was the Rat's best friend; they went everywhere together. But when her parents

split up Felicia moved back to Chicago. ‘You’ve had a bad dream,’ I told her. ‘Go back to bed.’ The Rat was always having dreams, good and bad, and although she had the biggest dream-catcher in Canada they still got through. But the next day at school we found out that Felicia had been murdered. A madman had strangled her to death. The Rat was devastated. Me too. She was a really nice kid. The Rat brooded over it for days. ‘Maybe the Windigo got her,’ she said.

The Windigo was a monster from Native legend. It was a giant that lived in the forest. It had blood-red eyes and claws for hands, and it preyed on little children to satisfy its insatiable lust for human flesh. And the Rat was very fond of it.

That’s when Dad sat her down and told her that there were monsters that hurt children, but these monsters were human and they were called paedophiles. The Rat developed an instant hatred for paedophiles and she searched for them in every nook and cranny of her life.

‘Hey Bob. You wanna play soccer?’ shouted the Rat.

I ignored her.

‘I’m going in then,’ she said.

That was the Rat for you: Dad’s going to die and

I'm going in.

I looked straight ahead and turned 360 degrees. All you could see was sky. Winnipeg really was flat, but there was beauty in the flatness, especially when the sun set. You could watch the whole thing sink into the horizon, which I did before following her inside. The mosquitoes would be out soon. Winnipeg mosquitoes are as vicious as they come. There's no need for mosquitoes to exist as far as I'm concerned and I'm always getting bit. Unlike the Rat who seemed to be immune.

When I entered the living room she was dancing in front of the television to the latest thing in rap: the Iceman. She had her baseball cap turned around and she was shaking her nonexistent butt in time to the music. The Iceman cursed and swore when he rapped, but the Rat never swore because Dad didn't like it. She beeped instead.

'I blew his beeping head off and beeped his beeping Ho,

*And all his beeping crew has no place to go,
Tomorrow I'll hunt them down and you will see,
That any mother-beeper that beeps with me,
Will be buried in the same beeping grave!*

The Rat beeped a lot when she listened to the

Iceman.

‘Supper’s ready,’ said Dad entering with a tray. He was already kind of soused. Normally he never started drinking until we were in bed, or close to it, but tonight he had started early. But he was a good dad; he’d do anything for us. And, drunk or sober, he was a great cook. I suppose he picked it up from Mom. She died in a car crash when I was a kid. I don’t remember much about her except she was French. Winnipeg has an old French community, but she wasn’t Winnipeg French, she was proper French from France. And her father was a famous Parisian chef. Whatever way it happened, Dad could cook, and tonight was his French onion soup and olive bread, which he baked himself. I looked at him as he handed me the bowl. There were no signs of death about him, no signs of sickness for that matter.

The Rat switched off the TV and dropped down on the couch. ‘Soup, my good man, when you are ready.’ she said speaking like an aristocrat.

‘Of course, my lady,’ said Dad, putting a napkin over his arm.

‘These days one must be careful whom one talks to,’ said the Rat. ‘The muck one meets at the mall are quite despicable.’

The Rat could do various accents. But this one, her

aristocratic English accent, was her best. She sounded like a snob with the BBC. She could do other accents too. Her Irish accent was quite good and so was her Southern drawl. But her Indian and Jamaican accents sounded the same, and her Russian accent sounded like Dracula with a cold.

‘Would my lady like bread?’

‘Bread, yes, one must have bread. Let the peasants eat cake.’

‘Anything else, my lady?’

‘That’s all, babe, take the rest of the night off.’

‘Marie Claire! You can’t call the help *babe!*’ Dad slumped down next to her. ‘A lady would never speak to her butler in that casual manner. How do you expect to make your fame and fortune on the silver screen with slip-ups like that?’

Oh yeah, the Rat wanted to be an actress.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ said the Rat.

‘So you should be. Now eat your soup, there’s a good girl.’

When she had finished the Rat walked up and down with a book on her head. ‘Ms Mountshaft said a book is good for balance. She said it helps posture as well.’

That’s all you got out of the Rat some days. Ms

Mountshaft said this and Ms Mountshaft said that. Ms Mountshaft was in charge of Drama and English, the Queen's English as she called it. And with the Rat wanting to be an actress they got on like beavers building a dam. Ms Mountshaft was from England and she spoke all hoity-toity like she had Prince Charles and the lads round on a regular basis. The Rat would mind her Ps and Qs when talking to old Fergy Mountshaft. She would even straighten her back and elevate her chin like a little English princess.

'Being Ms Mountshaft's protégée is very prestigious,' said the Rat in aristocracy. 'She could have chosen anyone to star in the school play, but she chose me. And I alone will go to the world-famous Winnipeg Ballet this summer. I could be on the brink of brilliance.'

'Well, Ms Mountshaft is a very intelligent woman,' said the Old Man.

'Well spoken, Father!' said the Rat. 'It's a matter of breeding, you see. And you played your part in my upbringing: good taste and what not.'

But then the Iceman came on MTV and the Rat's good taste went out the window. She dropped the book, turned up the sound, and started beeping all over the place.

‘Don’t let Ms Mountshaft catch you beeping like that,’ I told her. But she ignored me.

When the rap was over the Rat read to Dad from the paper. She was a good reader. She would read various articles and then they’d discuss them, commenting on the ongoing wars or famines or the names of the latest hurricanes and whether they liked them or not. Then the Rat pondered over the paper a while longer. ‘All these wars. Why don’t the people who want war go fight with each other and leave the rest of us to live in peace.’ The Rat was big on world events. ‘The world should be more like Winnipeg,’ said the Rat. ‘Winnipeg is the way the world is meant to be.’

She would often turn into little Miss Winnipeg when she read the paper. Although some of the kids in school said we weren’t real Winnipeggers and that we were just prairie kids. But I was born in the St Boniface General Hospital in downtown Winnipeg, so I was as much a Winnipegger as anyone. Unlike the Rat. She was born on the Broken Head Reservation. My mother was visiting her friend Mary White Cloud when she was caught off-guard. And, being born on First Nation’s land, the Rat was given a Native name. They meant to call her Wazhushk, which means Muskrat. But somehow things got turned around

and she ended up being called Wazhashnoons, which means Little Rat. And if that doesn't make her enough of a Rat she was born in the Chinese Year of the Rat. The Chinese are a clever people. She wouldn't have been born under that star sign if there was no Rat in her. And anyway, it's on her birth certificate. So, old Marie Claire Wazhashnoons DeBillier will be a little Rat for ever.

Although I have to admit she doesn't look like a Rat. She has blue eyes that are large and clear like a Japanese cartoon and her face, while being far from cute, has nothing rattish about it. But her ears are pointy and she does have mousy-blond hair, so there's definitely some Rat in her. And, as I've found out on more than one occasion, her teeth are as sharp as a rat's.

'Forget about it, Marie Claire,' said Dad pouring himself a drink. 'Guess what I've got for the evening's entertainment? Only the original *King Kong*.'

'Great,' said the Rat.

The Old Man and the Rat were regular movie buffs. They watched movies nearly every night of the week. They'd watch anything. They watched black and white movies and movies with subtitles. They even watched silent movies with slapstick comedy and a piano blazing away in the background.

I was into poetry myself. Someone had to have a little culture and that chore fell to me. I was just about to go up and get started on my new book when dramatic music blasted around the living room. Dad turned off the lights and as it felt cosy on the couch I decided to give *King Kong* ten minutes of my time, even if it was in black and white. Well, I ended up watching it right through to the end. And I don't mind saying I felt more than a little emotional when they shot him down.

Dad went outside when the movie had finished, and we followed him. He walked away from the house-lights and, taking a drink, he stared up at the starry sky. 'If you ever have trouble believing in heaven, kids, just look at the stars and you'll see it for yourself.'

Me and the Rat stared up at them.

'If people looked at the stars more often they'd see how big the universe is and how small we are in it, and then their troubles wouldn't seem so large . . . Anyway, it's getting late. You kids better hit the hay.'

'See you in the morning, Dad,' said the Rat.

'Good night, Dad,' I said. And, kissing him good night, we climbed the stairs.

'Twas beauty killed the beast,' said the Rat. 'The beast was killed by beauty. Beauty and the beast killed

Bob . . . Hey, Bob, you know what I don't understand? If they built a wall to keep King Kong out, how come they built a gate to let him in?

'You think too much,' I told her. I still wasn't speaking to her, not really.

I went in my room, got into bed, and opened my book. I hadn't been reading for more than ten minutes when the Rat knocked on my door. She sat on the bed waiting for me to put the book down. I never stopped reading but I could feel her eyes burrowing through the paperback. 'What?' I asked.

'Nothing.'

'You should be ashamed after what you said!'

'I don't want him to die. I just think he will.'

She could get on my nerves sometimes. 'You're just a dumb kid! What do you know?' But any time I shouted at her I felt guilty and then I felt sorry for her. The Rat could do that. She could get you feeling sorry for her. She was quite manipulative in that way. 'He's not even sixty,' I said. 'He's got years to go.'

'I'd do anything for my dear Papa,' she said in aristocracy. 'I love him dearly.'

'Stop talking like that,' I told her. But she did love him and she would do anything for him.