

Extract from Part 1, *And the Rat Laughed*

Patience, Child. Every storyteller has trouble finding the right words, and this particular storyteller is finding it especially hard, since her spikes and the sudden jabs have never before been translated into storytelling language.

That was an excellent pretext for not telling it to the girl's mother, whom the old woman also called "the girl", though it was a long time since she'd been young.

The old woman uses "girl" for all those who've been born to her, including those born to the ones who've been born to her.

How should she begin? Maybe with the beginning that came before it began.

Once upon a time, there was ... – that's the usual format, the proper way of starting a story. Well, once upon a time there was a man and a woman. They met. They fell in love. More or less. They had a daughter. A family. A neat and familiar pattern. How's that for a promising beginning?

Except that the story refuses to be told that way.

Why are they doing this to me?

What did I do wrong?

Why?

That's the whole story in a single word.

A story? The old woman protests. Why call it a story anyhow?

The very word implies something fictional, and may even allow the harsh details to be turned into anecdotes.

But the girl who is sitting across from her won't take no for an answer. It is a story. That was what she was taught. Not just any story, but a first-person account. She's even brought a notebook along, to take it all down. There's a sweet angel on the cover, a commercial print that you see everywhere. Its chin is resting on its hand. Its wings are colorful, and its eyes are looking upwards.

The girl sitting across from the old woman is her granddaughter. Knowing that she herself is going to be seen differently by her young listener as the story unfolds, the old woman holds back. She must not cause the child to age prematurely. She's afraid of changes.

What might have happened if ...

What if the girl sitting across from her had been there instead?

It would have been totally different.

Or maybe not.



A home. Her room. There's a window in the wall. A rose-patterned lace curtain. A doll with braids. She'd gone to sleep with the doll under her pillow. In the middle of the night she got up and pulled out the doll, worried that it might suffocate. She told the doll she was sorry.

Her mother laughed.

The granddaughter is disappointed. That wasn't the beginning she'd been hoping for. Some day, when she retells the story, she'll choose a different way to begin it. Her own way.

—
I loved them.

They loved me.

Those are the foundations.

No, this story cannot be begun with love.

—

If she'd been asked to give an account instead of telling a story, it would have been simpler. A pre-formatted questionnaire with a clear purpose. She could have given them the dry facts, without having to formulate an argument. The distinct, calculated questions could have helped her remain in control, and anything that she did not want to let out could have been blocked.

As soon as she gave in to her granddaughter's request, she realized that telling this story meant provoking it. She had no choice now. She'd set herself up.

Unable to break free, defeated, the old woman tries to start all over again.

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A big city. There are many like it in Europe. Heavy snow in winter. The river is frozen over. For her birthday, they gave her a pair of skates. In her blue cape she skates without going further than she's allowed, only where the ice is thick. They told her there were fish under the ice, but she didn't see any.

A five-year-old can't take in everything with her own senses.

Who was it that had held her hand to make sure she didn't fall in?

Father. Mother too. Was it the servant? Probably not. Always in uniform: dark blue with a white collar and long sleeves.

Oh yes. The servant. Now there's a beginning that looks promising. The granddaughter settles into her chair and opens the angel-covered notebook on her lap. That's just what she had in mind: everything it takes to make a story, even a servant.

She screamed. She kicked. She broke things.

Why are you giving me away to people I don't even know? I've been good, haven't I? I've done everything you told me. So why are you making me go? My room. My doll with the braids. The window with the lace curtains. The rose-patterned ones. Mother made them.

I love you. How come you don't love me back?

I won't go. I don't want to. I won't.

You're a bad father and mother.

In the end she hit them.

Now she really was a bad girl. She had it coming.

That's how the story really begins.

Her granddaughter cringes. Still, she's determined to go ahead. A poor beginning doesn't necessarily mean a bad ending. As far as the young girl is concerned, the story has a happy ending anyway. The old woman is her grandmother after all.

"And it will end with death." The granddaughter does not record that familiar sentence in her notebook,

because that's not how the story ended. At least not this story.

But the threat of untimely death was passed on from birth-givers to those who were born, and turned into a hereditary deficiency. A challenge to scientists struggling for a breakthrough in genetic engineering. The old woman nods, resigned to the inevitability of hereditary defects. She will not play a part in this rewrite.



Extract from Part 3, *And the Rat Laughed*

Skin

A hole-child
Is running out of skin

Tail

I have a friend with a tail
And he has four legs
The Stefan also has a tail
It's between his two legs

Head

When The Stefan climbs down
This is what I do:
I bang my head and hope
There's a child on the other side
With a rat-pet too

Extract from Part 4, *And the Rat Laughed*

Since the second decade of this century, *Girl & Rat* has been an icon of alternative religious movements, mostly non-mainstream ones. The poems became cult texts: they've been carved on tombstones, quoted in eulogies and virtual condolence books, and sung at wakes and cremations. *Girl & Rat* shrines have been built all over, first just at sites dedicated to extinct species, and later at rest-and-recreation sites and online shopping centres. The most popular shrine ornament is an electronic figurine of a dark, eyeless little girl with seven rat tails wrapped around her arm. It was later converted into a popular slot machine: figure out the right tail to pull – and win the jackpot.

The legend that went with the poems played an important role in the development of the *Girl & Rat* myth. It probably began with a rumor – an incredibly effective way of transmitting information – and soon cropped up on the ancient internet. The legend provided the narrative context in which the poems could be interpreted. New details were added from time to time, such as the tradition that identified the little girl as the daughter of a father from India and a Native American mother.

No sooner did the phenomenon take hold than an opposition formed, especially in North America and Western Asia. Almost every religious leadership took part in the effort to boycott the new fashion and to campaign against it. Politicians, educators and parents' organizations joined the bandwagon. Some of them tried to

prove that the poems and the legend were connected to the Cult of the Devil, and made them out to be a despicable incitement to killing, suicide, extreme violence and child abuse. The accusations gained widespread support initially, and I'm sure they had their effect on you, too.

But ultimately, *Girl & Rat* defied all its critics and assumed its place as a cultural tradition. By 2020 it was here to stay, thanks to the dramatic decision of the Board at PanEuroDisney Productions to replace Mickey Mouse with Mickey Rat and to give it wings: the black wing cast an artificial darkness, and the other one was a transparent screen through which the beamer could see his or her own reflection recast as a little girl.

I'm beaming a sequence of visuals into your dream right now, even though my implachip is already picking up your revulsion.

Extract from Part 5, *And the Rat Laughed*

16 September 1943

I try everything. Water, bread, a blanket, but she will not let me near her. All night long I watch her, contorted in her strange position – half lying, half sitting. Protecting

every part of her body, trying to keep from being noticed. Whenever I approach her, she shrinks into the little niche in the wall adjoining my quarters. I yearn to tell the huddled soul: There is a place for you in this world. If only I could promise her a place in the next world.

I kneel before the little girl who was violated in the dark. My Father, did You not see what was happening underneath the soil, or did You turn your back?

My entire life was devoted to You, drawing on my deep belief that Yours is the compassion and the goodness that I preach. It would have been better had You not separated light from darkness. If only You had left the *Tohu* and the *Bohu* – the Chaos – as they were, and not separated darkness from light, because the order you created is nothing but a delusion, luring us to believe that justice will be meted out at some other time and place. But if You do not love Your creatures, how dare You demand of us that we love one another? The true Hell is not in the world beyond this one, on the Judgment Day that I rant about from the pulpit. It is here on earth. Hell is a legend that I trade, so we can deny the Inferno we create right here with our own hands.

Empty words, spat onto a piece of paper. If I had the courage, I would demolish the church in the heart of this beautiful village. I would stand on the ruins and proclaim, for all the world to hear: Father, You have failed, and because of You we are beyond repair! You know that I have spent my entire life in awe of You. I have submitted to You at all times, accepting Your authority without question. The distance from a fear of God to a fear of men is not great, after all. Acquiescing to You or acqui-

escing to them – it's all the same. Perhaps I was more eager to acquiesce to them than to You. Now, despair consumes whatever fear remains within me, and sin sets me free. Tonight, and on the nights to come, You and I will conduct our reckoning.

Show me a sign, Father. Even from my abyss of despair, I have no other Father but You.

You are tarrying. Night proceeds along its tracks, dragging the wagonloads of darkness, while the little girl sprawls here, hovering between life and death.

17 September 1943

Her eyelids are shut tight. She shies away from my touch. Let her not die in my care. I pour water on her head and prod a few drops into her mouth. She hunkers in her niche like a clump of mud, but it is I who wallow. Where shall I lead despair? I who thought that suffering was not beyond my ken. In my sermons, do I not dwell on the sufferings of the Son, and insist that my flock share in them? But tonight, I confess my ignorance. Even Your Son was not a little child when He was made to suffer.

As You led Him down the Via Dolorosa, You provided for Him. A mother to console him, an embracing father. The arms of Mary Magdalene were etched in his memory. Not a five-year-old child, but a man of thirty-three, His years as numerous as the buttons on my habit. Even then, on His final journey, He was not alone. Veronica emerged from her house and wiped His brow with a handkerchief, and Simon of Cyrene bore the cross

for Him when He stumbled. His own mother fell at His feet, and mothers that He did not know lamented. “Do not weep for me, Daughter of Jerusalem,” He told them, “but for your own children.”

So many times I have tried to envisage the scene, always seeing myself as a Daughter of Jerusalem.

Fortunate was Your son with so great a crowd to comfort Him in his last hour. But the little girl whom You sent to the pit is a hostage of her own loneliness. If it was not You who created this suffering, perhaps the Antichrist has prevailed, and it is his kingdom rather than Your own.

I am afraid to find out.