

Katey and the Rat-King

Katey wiz a lassie that bided in Stranraer. She had awfy bonny blond hair, aa curly-like, and she thocht very highly o hersel. Wan Setterday she's waulkin doon the main street, past the pizza placie and the tooer, when she hears someone caain oot her name. So she turns tae see wha it wiz, and wheech! she faas doon a manhole, so she does.

Now, she wisnae hurt but she wiz black affrontit; "Hope there wiz nae boys waatchin," she thocht. Then she sees this ring o beady wee eyes, aa starin at hur. They were rats! They were the biggest, meanest-lookin rats Katey had ever seen in her nelly puff, and she was sair fleggit.

"Come wi us," said wan o these rats, in a sneery, heich-pitchit voice, and she foond herself bein howked at and pushed through these tunnels aneath Stranraer. Meanwhile, the lassie that caad her, and caused aa this carfuffle, whas name wiz Jenny, rins ower tae the manhole to see if Katey was aaright. When she couldna see her, she draps doon hersel (they're nae feardies in Stranraer), and gangs in search o her best mate.

Meanwhile the rats huv squeezed Katey through this nasty wee hole intae this nasty big hole. It wiz aa daurk and drippin an stoury and mingin, and Katey near laughed oot loud when wan o these rats says, "Behold the throne room o the mighty and magnificent Rat-King!" But his voice echoed in sic an ugsome way, as if some ither rat wiz sayin it back anely mair sleekit. So she caas canny oan the giggles and peers intae the mirk. "I wish I'd eaten thae carrots at denner," she

thocht tae hersel, "then I might be able to see this stupid Rat-King."

Syne her eyes get yaised tae the gloamin and she maks oot this character spraaled oan a kinna throne. It looked like a stottin big thimble wi a slice of stale pan loaf fur a cushion. There were aa these matches stuck in the back of the breid for His Laziness tae lean against. This guy pu's wan o these oot o the breid and scrapes it agin the waa. There wiz this blast o licht, like when ye get yir photie tuke wi a flash, and Katey couldna see onythin at aa for a second.



Then she feels her chin gettin stroked by thin cauld fingers wi wee raspy hairs on them, and her sicht comes back, and here she's lookin richt intae the fiss o the Rat-King hissel! He wiz lang-shankit, taller than the ither rats; in fact he was taller than Katey, sae she hud tae look up at him, which didnae help. He hud greasy mattit black fur combed intae quiffs and curls, like yer da tryin tae impersonate Elvis the Pelvis, and that didnae help either. His fizz wiz lang and baaldy apart fae affy thick-lookin whiskers, like black knittin needles. His eyes were sma and arrogant. Perched on his heid wiz a peerie green croon that wiz fair bowfin; Katey realised it must be carved oot o mowdery auld cheese. He hud the langest tail Katey hud iver seen; it curled and flicked about the chaumir like a big black mamba. Katey smacked hiz

haund awa frae her chin, and he smiled, exposin twa colossal yella teeth that looked like auld piana keys.

"Whit a nice wee gurl it is," he hisses, affa quiet. The throne room echoed back his wee voice as though there wiz a wheen o rats, aa hissin at the same time. "Will it dae His Majesty a favour, the Rat-King wunners?"

"Are you this Rat-King aabody's oan aboot?" Katey asked, as though she wiz pure mental wi him (pittin oan a front tae keep hersel frae screamin).

"This is His Majesty," the Rat-King replies, very hoity-toit.

"Then why d'ye talk as though ye're somebody else?" Katey said. "The Rat-King this, His Majesty that," she went on, takin the micky oot o his quiet hissin voice.

"Wheesht!" the Rat-King exclaimed. "His Majesty is far too . . . " (here he paused, tryin tae think o the richt wurd) " . . . majestic tae say "I" or "me". He is the Rat-King, the richest and maist . . . regalicious rat unner aa Stranraer, and he disnae tak lip fae little gurls wha cannae get hame."

"How are *you* rich?" Katey says sarcastically, though she wisnae feelin affy brave now. She hadna liked whit the Rat-King said aboot no gettin hame.

"Well, the citizens above pay His Majesty a special tax which swalls his coaffers. It's caad the Five Pee Tax, or the F.P.T. for short. They're affy keen tae pay up, he must say, the dosh jist keeps rollin in!"

"You mean the coins people drop doon the drains? But that's lost property! You're stealin their money!" Katey cried.

"Oh, lissen til the wee losser greet! Well, little gurl, the Rat-King is the monarch o aa the finders, and sae he is the maist muckle o the keepers. Is it his fault if your coins are made that sma that humans cannae cairry them? D'you no think it's interestin that Five Pees are

made jist the richt size for rats' hungry haunds?"

Jist then there's a noise ahint Katey and the Rat-King blows his match oot. Then Katey heard anither lassie gettin pushed through the narra hole intae the Rat-King's throne room. Carefu-like the Rat-King struck anither match. There, to Katey's horror, blinking at the licht and lookin a bit tearful, wiz her best mate Jenny.

"Katey!" Jenny cried. "I'm that sorry I caad oot, so I am. I came efter ye tae see if you were okay, but these grotty rats grabbed me. Yuck, wha's the dosser wi the goudie cheese on his heid?"

"Och that's jist the stupit auld Rat-King. He says "he" aa the time when he jist means "me"."

"Wheesht!" hissed the Rat-King, not at all plaised. "His Majesty is no tae be tittle-tattlet aboot by little gurls wha micht or micht not find themsels oan the Rat-King's menu. Chef!"

This humungous fat rat wi a leather belt oan squeezed painfully through the entrance to the chaumer, gruntin and fartin and excusin himsel as he came. He hud a big butcher's knife stuck in his belt, which he pu'ed oot and sterted sharpenin as sune as maist o hum wiz in the room. Katey and Jenny got as far awa frae hum as they could, practically claain their way through the clammy waas.

"Aye, whit is it, yer Majesty?" wheezes the chef, still puffin awa eftir pushin himsel through sic a wee gap.

"How do I . . . em, how does the Rat-King like his little gurls?"

"Stuffed wi oatmeal, sire. Panged that fu thir fisses look like twae wee piggies, then biled in thir pairty frocks."

"Thank you chef. Huv my coaffers brocht in."

Katey and Jenny were affa relieved tae see the chef pit his knife awa and force himsel back oot through the hole. The Rat-King swaggert up and doon while he waited fur his "coaffers", waggin the

match aboot and ignorin them completely.

"Hoo are we goany get awa?" whispered Jenny, but afore Katey could answer, twa rats came in trauchlin black plastic bags that clinked and tinklet. They dumped them oan the flair sae they spilled open. The lassies gasped; there were hundreds and thoosans o five pence pieces!

"See?" the Rat-King said, triumphantly. "His Majesty is a rat o substance. Noo, decisions." He peered at them short-sighted-like and stroked his chin. "The furst little gurl that came wull go the Rat-King's messages," he decided. "The second wan wull stay here and get eaten if the messages are no got properly."

Katey and Jenny were really scared noo, but Katey forced hersel tae ask, "Whit's these messages ye waant me to go?"

"The Rat-King requires some comestibles fur a celebration he has got comin on. His maist beautiful dochter is hitchin up wi the Rat-Duke o Portpatrick and His Majesty waants aa the cheese in Stranraer fur the wedding feast."

"Aa the cheese in Stranraer?" the twae lassies cried thigither.

The Rat-King looked aroond him in mock surprise. "His Majesty really wull huv tae dae somethin aboot the echo in here. He could have sworn it soonded like twae whiny wee quinies." Suddenly he caught Jenny up wi wan cauld thin haund, and brandished the stub o the match at Katey. "If the furst little gurl disnae bring every bittie cheese in Stranraer, the Rat-King wull ken, and then the main dish oan ma menu will be . . . little gurl stuffed wi oatmeal!"

Katey wiz greetin noo, she couldna help it as she picked up wan o the sacks and sterted draggin it frae the throne room. "I'll be back," she tellt Jenny, "dinna worry. I'll get aa that cheese somehow."

Wance she wiz ootside the chaumer some rat helped her cairry the sack tae a manhole, and liftit her up and pushed the sack out efter her. Katey looked roond, near blindit by the sunlight. She was doon an

empty side street near the ferries. She couldna lift the sack sae she dragged it ower tae some bins and left it aside them. "Naebody'll look in a bin-bag fur onythin," she thocht. Then she ran to the cop shop as fast as she could.

"Hey you Polisman, come oan!" she yelled. "The Rat-King's goany eat ma mate and he's stole all the five pees!"

Sergeant McWhirter peered ower the coonter. There wiz a broukit-faced lassie wha'd been greetin hoppin up and doon. Her claes were a disgrace. Sergeant McWhirter's hert went oot to her mither (well it didna really, this is jist the way he thinks) . . . little gurls these days!

"Your mammy wull be furious wi you, look at the state of ye!" he exclaimed.

"You dinnae understand, mister!" says Katey. "He's eatin Jennie if I dinnae get aa the cheese in Stranraer!"

"Now whit's yir name?" Sergeant McWhirter sooned affy stern aa of a sudden.

"Katey. Noo come OAN!"

"Now Katey, I dinna huv time for silly stories from little gurls wha fell in a dub. You rin alang hame to your mammy and see if she can clean ye up."

Katey wiz too smart tae keep goin in the fiss o this level o stupidity, sae she gaes quietly oot o the Polis Station and sits doon tae think. "Mebbe the Cheeseman at the Sosh can help me get aa that cheese," she decided, and set aff fur the supermarket.

The mannie at the Cheese coonter wiz weird lookin, sma and skinny wi curly reid eyebrows hauf way up his pow. He wore a white coat and hat wi the brim of the hat affy low sae it near met his eyebrows, and the sleeves o his coat rolled up sae his bony wrists and lang clever fingers stuck oot. He aye hud a new cheese chapped up in wee cubes for fowk tae taste, and he niver telt the bairns aff even

though they cried him "Cheesy Joe," he jist kept smilin a lang cool smile. When Katey jumped the queue and sterted bletherin oan about rat-kings and five pee pieces he didna tell her aff or send her awa, he jist kept smilin coolly till she wiz done.

"Can you play the penny whustle?" he asked.

"Aye, ma uncle that's in a band taught us. Why?"

The Cheeseman produces this wee whustle fae beneath the coonter. It was black and worn and looked like an auld fountain pen. "Can you play this tune?" he asked, and pit it to his mooth. Syne the weirdest music Katey had ever heard came oot o thi whustle. She foond she wiz boabbin her heid frae side to side withoot even thinkin about it. Aa the wifies in the queue were boabbin their heids an aa, which was unca, cause a meenute afore they'd been mutterin about Katey shovin in front o them. They aa had smiles on their fisses like wee versions o the wan on the fiss o the Cheeseman. Even mair unco wiz the feelin Katey hud that she'd heard the tune somewhaur afore.

"But . . . do I no ken that tune?" she asked.

"Aa the bairns ken this tune," says the Cheeseman.

"Aye, right," Katey said, no sure o hersel, then she hud it in hur heid - the haill o the tune, aa at wance - and she shouted. "Sure I can play it!"

"Gang tae whaur ye first fell doon the manhole and play the tune," the Cheeseman said, and handit her the whustle.

"Whit happens then?" Katey asked, but he wiz servin the next wifie and behavin like ither grown-ups, treatin her as though she wisnae even there.

Katey scooted doon the main street of Stranraer, dodging atween the grannies and the hard lads and the tansads, till she got to the manhole. Then she pit the whustle to her mooth and . . .

"Katey! Whit in the name o Goad are you doin? Get awa frae thon manhole right now! I'm warnin you." It was Katey's mither, lookin seriously bathered (a typical expression). Katey hovered, then, mindin whit the music hud done tae the wifies in the queue, sterted to play. Instantly her mither stoapped lookin angry and sterted smilin (which wiz not at all typical), boabbin hur heid frae side tae side. No only hur, but aabody in the street - grannies and laddies and weans in their tansads - stoapped whaur they were and aa boabbed their heids in time to the tune.

No only aa the fowk in the street but aa the rats an aa; they sclimmed up slowly fae the manhole, boabbing their heids and gaitherin roond Katey. Aabody - her mither, the shoappers, and the rats - had sma versions o the Cheeseman's smile on their fisses. "Sae that's why ye say "Cheese!" when ye're takin a photie!" Katey thocht.

Finally the Rat-King himsel comes up oot of the man-hole, thigither wi his chef, wha nearly couldnae get oot at aa. The Rat-King's beady eyes were shut, and his bauld snitch twitched as he moved aboot in a dwaum. Then Katey kent whit she hud tae dae next. Doon the main street of Stranraer they went, on a Setterday efternoon, Katey and the rats wi the Rat-King at the rear, smilin and twitchin. Aa the fowk waatched them pass, smilin and boabbin their heids. And aa the time Katey played that dead familiar tune.

Sergeant McWhirter didna ken why he wiz daein it, but he wiz smilin and boabbin hiz heid gently frae side to side when intae his Polis Station mairched Katey and the biggest collection o despicable low-life rats he hud iver seen. He didna ken why he wiz takin the key to the jile aff its hook either, but aff it came, and aff he went with Katey, smilin and boabbin hiz heid, tae unsneck the cells and staund there like a numptie while aa the rats mairched in.

"Thon's a nasty lookin nyaff wi the goudie cheese on hiz heid," Sergeant McWhirter thocht tae hisselt, aye boabbin hiz ain heid and smilin. The Rat-King boabbed hiz back, and bared twae lang yella teeth. Then Sergeant McWhirter loackit the cell door, and Katey stoapped playin that tune.

Pandesperatedandemonium. Aa the rats hurled themsels at the bars and the sergeant shouted and yelled and rattlet his keys, and aa ower Stranraer aabody wunnered exactly whit they were daein whauriver they were and hoo they hud gote there. Katey ran aff tae get the Cheeseman.

When the Cheeseman came intae the Polis Station aa the rats went affa quiet and the Rat-King pushed his way tae the front o the cell. "You!" he exclaimed. "I micht huv guessed you'd try and spile ma feast."

"I'm nae tathert abaa about yir feastin," the Cheeseman replied, "except when it's lassies caad Katey and Jenny ye're plannin tae eat."

"Let me gae and ye can huv aa the five pees."

"And whit about yir loyal subjects, yir Majesty?"

"Ye can keep them fur yir cats tae play wi, but let me gae!"

The ither rats didna like the soond o this and drew awa frae the Rat-King. The Cheeseman said tae the fat rat-chef, "Gee's yir knife," and the chef handit him it through the bars. Then the Cheeseman did somethin that made the rats whine and Sergeant McWhirter sit doon and say "Whit the . . .?" Even Katey hud tae blink twice, and she wiz gettin pretty yaist tae ferlies.

He waulked up tae the bars, turned side oan, and jist stepped through them as though he wiz as thin as a straa. A cheese straa, that wid be. Then he went up tae the Rat-King and, withoot ony palaver, chapped aff his lang black whiskers and his tail. The tail made mair o a fuss about this than the Rat-King, and lashed at aa the ither rats for a meenute afore lyin quiet. The Rat-King jist stood there hunched up, lookin mair rat-sized, and Katey sterted feelin sorry fur him. Then she minded oan Jenny.

"Whit about ma pal, Mister Cheeseman?"

"I'll show ye whaur she is," says wan rat. "And I'll show you whaur

the coaffers are," says anither. "And I'll be gettin back tae ma coonter," says the Cheeseman. "I mean tae say, it *is* Setterday efternoon."

Sergeant McWhirter let the Cheeseman and the twae rats oot o the cell. Katey looked at the Rat-King. Aa the ither rats were ignorin him and he looked pure miserable. "Is he totally bad, Mr Cheeseman?" she asked.

"I dinnae think onyone's totally bad," the Cheeseman replied. "But some fowks get that puffed up wi their ain importance that they forget wha they really are. Then they can dae onything frae bad tae jist plain stupit," he said, glancin at the Rat-King.

Katey and Jenny were re-united in time for tea, which wiz cheese on toast at Jenny's hoose (Katey's mither didnae use processed cheese and so wiz shunned). Jenny's mither kept hummin tae hersel and sayin, "Whit *is* the name o thon tune? I cannae get it oot of ma heid."

Sergeant McWhirter wiz pit in chairge o the Rat Rehabilitation Centre (or RRC), whaur rats were trained tae recover five pence pieces for the guid o the community. The Rat-King's "coaffers" got distributit amang the auld fowk o Stranraer by the Cheeseman, wha still wurks ahint the coonter at the Sosh, and still gets cried "Cheesy Joe" by aa the bairns (except fur Katey and Jenny). And though the Rat-King's whiskers were soon lang and black like knittin needles, his tail niver did growe back, and he niver did get aa the cheese in Stranraer.

These days he taks tourists roond the tunnels unner the toon on guided tours by Matchlicht, and though he's usually dead oan time, Sergeant McWhirter huz received complaints fae the landladies of the B&B's o Stranraer, that some o the tourists huv niver come back tae pay their bills.

coaffers - money; *chaumir* - chamber; *comestibles* - foodstuffs;
dwaum - dream; *ferlies* - odd happenings; *gloamin* - dark;
lang-shankit - long-legged; *mirk* - dark; *quinies* - lassies;
syne - then; *ugsome* - horrible; *unco, unca* - unusual or odd;