

**THE WOMAN  
IN THE ZEBRA HAT**

*A Short Story*



**By J. G. McNease**

The Woman in the Zebra Hat: A Short Story  
Smashwords Edition

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## **DEDICATION**

This story is dedicated to anyone who dares to dream big.

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## The Woman in the Zebra Hat



As the sun rises on the first day of the first weekend in May, the track is abuzz with anxious anticipation of the race. The flowers are freshly planted and teeming with bees flitting in and out. The sound of hooves beating on the track like the beating of a heart fills me with pride. It was here, between the twin spires, that I first fell in love. Many, many years ago, when I was just a young girl, Mama got me dressed in my Sunday best and we all headed out for the Derby. I had never been old enough before to go. Mama told me that I must act like a lady and only speak when spoken to. We arrived early and entered through a side gate well away from most of the crowd. Mama told me to wait with her while Papa got us tickets and I watched him slip some money under the window. A man in a pinstriped suit motioned for him to follow through a gate and soon they were both out of sight. I turned my attention to the blooming crowd. People of all shapes and sizes walked in through the main gate and mingled in the courtyard. Men in fancy suits ran around with money in hand shouting names and placing bets. The women wore magnificent dresses accented by gorgeous satin gloves that came up to their elbows, and diamond jewelry that sparkled in the sunlight. The scene was so full of color and joyous chatter that it took me some time to take it all in. That's when I saw the hats. There were hats with large rims and small rims, lace and straw, woven in a myriad of colors and designs. One lady wore a red hat with a white feather coming out of a large lace bow that wrapped around the top. Another had a yellow hat with a wide woven rim and flowers made of fancy fabric and lace on one side. Each hat was different, some simple, some more elaborate, but all were unique. I tugged on Mama's dress and she looked down at me.

“What is it, sweetheart?” she asked in a kind voice.

When I looked up at her head, squinting in the bright sunlight, I realized that she wasn't wearing a hat like all of the other women. I looked again at the women on the other side of the gate and back up to Mama. She seemed to know what I was going to ask because before I could say another word, she answered.

“Only the women who wear diamonds and pearls wear the hats,” she explained.

I looked at her again and saw that she wasn't wearing diamonds or pearls like the women in the hats. I looked at her hand and saw the only piece of jewelry she had—a plain gold wedding band that looked worn and old. Mama had always worn that ring and nothing more, but I always thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

“But...” I started, a bit confused.

“Don't you worry about them,” she interrupted, cutting me off from saying anything more.

As soon as she had said that, Papa returned to us excitedly holding three tickets in his hand. He gave one to Mama and kissed her on the cheek, and then leaned down and handed one to me with a smile. I held the ticket, my first ticket, and walked behind Mama and Papa towards the gate. When we got up to the gate, a man with a stern face pointed a bony finger in the direction of another gate on the far side of the track. Papa grunted and grabbed Mama's hand as he led us all to the other gate. There were no colorful hats and diamond necklaces at this gate. Men and women in drab attire walked in a single line through the mud into a field. Mama told me to get behind Papa and she followed as we shuffled along through a dark corridor to the place where we would be watching the race. My black patent leather shoes got muddy and my white stockings got wet and stained brown. We emerged from the darkness into the bright sunlight and were ushered to stand behind a fence that encircled the large crowded infield. Papa grabbed my hand, leaned down, and whispered in my ear.

“Do you want to get on my shoulders?” he asked.

Before I could answer, he was hoisting me up effortlessly above his head. I took my spot on his shoulders and Mama tucked my dress around my legs so my undergarments wouldn't show. I looked out over the crowd and was dismayed at the sight of bare heads. In the distance I could see the sparkling diamonds and the flashy hats of the women sitting in the grandstand. I kept my gaze on the grandstand and marveled at the beautiful people that occupied it.

“You see those people sitting up on that platform in the middle, Sue?” Papa asked me.

“Yes, Papa,” I replied, politely.

“Those are the rich people,” he explained. “Most of them own the racehorses and they have lots of money.”

“Is that why they wear the hats?” I asked, remembering what Mama said earlier.

“Yes, baby,” he answered.

I looked at the grandstand again and saw the people that Papa was talking about sitting on the platform. The men were wearing expensive looking, double breasted suits, with silk handkerchiefs in the pockets, and cigars in their mouths. The women were fanning themselves with silk fans adorned with lace and satin ribbons. I scanned the platform and drank in the beauty of the scene. I looked from person to person, and hat to dazzling hat, until my eyes came to rest upon one woman. She wasn't particularly spectacular on her own. She wore a black Givenchy style dress that came down just past her knees and was quite fitted in the bodice. Her hands were covered with black lace gloves and she had on a single diamond pendant necklace. What made her so appealing to me was her hat. On her head was a wide rimmed, feathered, jeweled, flowered, and laced zebra print woven hat. It was the most intriguing and intricate hat I had seen yet. I studied it with care, noticing each groove and curve of the rim, and ruffle and flourish of the flowers and lace. It had a feather plume that rose up high above her head and the rim was lined with sparkling jewels and beads that hung down like tiny tassels. It was simply perfect in every way and it was at that moment that I fell in love with the Derby.

I made up my mind that I was going to have a hat like the zebra print hat I saw that first Derby day. Mama never did wear a hat, or diamonds or pearls, and she never seemed unhappy. I asked her each year why she didn't want to dress like the women in the grandstand, and she would simply sigh and smile down at me.

"I don't need to dress like them or act like them to be just as happy as them," she would say.

There wasn't much more to say after her response so I would continue daydreaming of the lady in the zebra hat. I would imagine that I was sitting on the platform, with my hand holding the arm of a handsome man. We would be rich and richly dressed from head to toe. He would wear a fresh flower boutonniere on his lapel and I would have a matching corsage around my wrist. My fan would be fancy and display intricate patterns in the silk that was imported from a foreign land. My manicured hands would be delicately covered by white lace gloves with ruffles at the wrists. Around my neck there would hang a necklace made of diamonds as big as my toes, shining brilliantly in the sun. My eyes and face would be shaded from the harsh sunlight by the best feature of all—my zebra hat. My hat would have diamonds and pearls and rubies intertwined in the lace flowers and bows. Its rim would extend past my shoulders and a feather plume would come down like a tail to the middle of my back. A deep red satin ribbon would be tied around the crown of the hat and filter through the floral display to accent the rubies. My hat

would be the talk of the track and the envy of the other women. As we would walk past, even the horses would turn their heads in awe and wonder. Men would swoon and women would whisper to one another about my beauty.

“There goes the woman in the zebra hat,” they would say in hushed voices.

I designed my zebra hat to be slightly different each year—sometimes adding precious gemstones and sometimes taking away a bit of lace. I would draw pictures of my hat and keep them so I would be able to tweak the design for next year’s race. I looked forward to the Derby year after year, always looking for the woman in the zebra hat. Each year there was a different woman in a zebra hat, but none as magnificent as mine.



I grew older and so did Mama and Papa. When Papa passed, Mama stopped going to the Derby with me. She said it wasn't the same without him, and I understood. I started going alone and standing in the same spot Papa stood each year. I missed him terribly but I missed Mama, too. She didn't get out much anymore and had lost her spark for life. Each year, I would come to her with two tickets to the Derby and each year I would leave with my two tickets alone. When the race was over, I would return to her side and tell her about all of the new fashions and hats that I saw that year. She would smile and listen intently, like she did when I was young. She encouraged me to marry so I wouldn't have to go alone, but I had no interest in ordinary men. I wanted a man who sat in the grandstand, if I wanted to marry at all.

The cold winter turned into a not-much-warmer spring and the Derby was fast approaching. I gathered my savings from the milk jar and counted out just enough to buy two Derby tickets. When I got to Mama's house, I felt that something was not quite right. I walked in and heard Mama calling me to her room. She was in bed, and looked frail and the color had drained from her face. Her voice was weak and raspy as she motioned with her hand for me to come to her side. The winter had been hard for her and she had been sick for months and months with no reprieve. I sat down in the chair next to her bed and leaned in close. She reached out her clammy, cool hand for me to hold.

"I brought the tickets, Mama," I said to her, knowing she couldn't come but offering just the same.

"Thank you, Sue," she said weakly, with a soft smile.

"I know you can't come, Mama," I said, "but I always like to buy you a ticket anyway."

We sat in silence for several minutes as Mama tried to gather the strength to say more. I let her take her time and I cherished the time I had by her side. When she finally had mustered enough energy to speak again, it was only a whisper.

"Sue," she began, "I want you to go to my dresser and look in the top drawer."

I did as she instructed and found a small wooden box with a locked latch on the front. I pulled the box out of the drawer and found underneath a tiny key that opened the latch. She

instructed me to unlock the box and look inside. I carefully took the key and put it into the lock. I turned slowly, not sure what I was going to find inside. The lock clicked and the latch popped open. I lifted the golden latch and then I lifted the lid as slowly as I could. Inside the wooden box was a roll of money. At first glance, it looked like it was single dollar bills. When I looked again, I saw that it was one hundred dollar bills. She told me to look in several other places around her room and in each place I found a locked box containing more rolls of hundred dollar bills. When I had finished my scavenger hunt, I came and sat down at her bedside, laying the rolls of money next to her. She took my hand again and looked me in the eyes.

“I’ve been saving this money for you, Sue,” she said. “It’s a lot of money, enough for you to buy yourself one of those racehorses at the Derby.”

My eyes got wide and I gasped.

“What do you mean, Mama?” I asked, shocked and confused.

“Your Papa and I saved money for you,” she explained. “We didn’t wear the fancy suits and jewelry and hats because we wanted you to be able to one day. I won’t be around much longer and I want to see you in your zebra hat before I’m gone.”

Tears were streaming down my cheeks as she finished her explanation. I gripped her hand and cried a deep heartfelt cry. She and Papa had sacrificed so much in life for me and what had I done in return? I finally dried my tears and looked up at Mama. She had fallen asleep so I gathered the rolls of money and put them in a bag. I kissed Mama softly on the cheek and headed out to begin my search for a racehorse.

I had no idea how much a racehorse would cost or how to go about purchasing one but I knew I could find out. I went to the only place I knew to go—the track. When I arrived, I could hear the sound of hooves on the dirt as the horses were doing an afternoon workout. I approached the main gate and was stopped by a man who appeared to be a track security guard.

“You can’t go in there, Miss,” he said in a stern voice.

“I’m here to purchase a racehorse,” I said confidently in return.

I opened my bag to confirm that I was here on business and the man let me through without another word. It was the first time I had ever been inside the main gates and the feeling was exhilarating. The courtyard was enormous and empty—a stark contrast to the teeming activity of race day. I walked towards the sound of voices to my right, looking up at the twin spires towering above.

“Look out!” came a voice yelling in my ear.

I turned to see a large thoroughbred standing close to my side with a man who was holding the reins. *He must have been the one who yelled in my ear*, I thought. I stepped back and let the pair pass in front of me as I looked around at the various activities happening around me.

Trainers were barking orders and workers were cleaning stalls and brushing beautiful horses. It certainly was a sight to see and I breathed in the smell of sweat, dirt, and intensity. I spotted a man standing near the barn entrance. He looked, to me, to be of some importance so I headed in his direction. He paid me no mind as I walked up to him and I stood there for some time before he looked up from his clipboard.

“Oh, excuse me, Miss!” he said, apparently surprised to see me standing in front of him.

“No, excuse me,” I responded. “I am looking to buy a racehorse and was wondering if you could help me.”

He paused for a second and then let out a hardy laugh. I was quite offended at the perceived humor of my statement, but I waited for him to compose himself before speaking again.

“I don’t believe it is any laughing matter, sir,” I said to the man, who was obviously still amused. “I want to buy a racehorse with the money I have inside of this bag. You looked like someone who could tell me how to do that.”

“Well, ma’am,” he began, trying to keep from laughing again, “I am the trainer of several of these racehorses here, and I *could* help you pick a good one to purchase. Unfortunately, all of these horses already have owners.”

“Well where can I find one that doesn’t have an owner?” I asked.

“You would have to wait for an auction or a sale and those don’t usually happen until after the big races,” he explained.

“So you are saying that none of these horses here are for sale?” I asked the man.

“Well,” he said, with a smirk on his face, “most of the horses here are not for sale but *some* could be bought for the right price.”

My heart leapt with excitement when he said this. I may actually get my racehorse sooner than I expected. I was eager to see the prized horses that I could buy and followed the man to the back of the barn. When we reached the place where he said the horses were kept, all I saw before me were several shabby looking pace horses sticking their heads out of their stalls.

“Here they are, ma’am,” said the man, with a small chuckle.

“These aren’t racehorses,” I told the man, a bit disappointed.

“What do you mean?” the man exclaimed. “These horses are the best we have for sale and any horse can be a racehorse.”

I thought for a second about what he said. *Any horse can be a racehorse*, I pondered. I looked at the three scraggly horses in front of me and decided to buy one. I chose the big gray horse on the far left and told the man I was ready to purchase him.

“That’s a mighty fine choice, ma’am,” said the man as he put the halter on the horse and walked him out of the stall.

When he was in full view, I examined my racehorse from head to hoof. He wasn’t the cleanest looking champion but he would do just fine for me. I paid three thousand dollars in cash for him and another thousand to board him in his current stall. The trainer, whose name I later found out was Richard, offered to clean him up and make him look like a racehorse. I thanked him for his generosity and I hurried back to Mama’s house to tell her the good news.

Mama had managed to get up out of bed and was drinking a cup of hot tea in the kitchen when I arrived. She called me to the kitchen and offered to make me some tea. I fixed myself a cup of tea so she didn’t have to get up and quickly sat down at the table across from her.

“I have some good news, Mama,” I said excitedly.

“Oh,” she said, surprised at my excitement, “and what is that?”

“I bought a racehorse today,” I told her, smiling from ear to ear.

“Oh that’s wonderful, darling,” Mama said. “Will your horse run in the Derby this year?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “He isn’t ready yet but maybe next year.”

“Well I will have to stick around a little longer to see him run, won’t I?” she said, not really asking a question but making a statement.

We drank our tea and I told her all about my experience at the track with the trainer and the horse. I described my horse to her and we talked about racehorse names. Mama’s eyes had a twinkle in them that night that I hadn’t seen since Papa died. It was that spark of life that had been missing for so long and it made me even more determined to turn my horse into a racehorse. All I had to do was get him fast enough to run one qualifying race and then we could run in the Derby.

The next day, I was out at the track early and took my horse out for a walk. One of the stable hands saw me and joined us.

“So you bought Old Earl, eh?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “He is my racehorse.”

“Racehorse?” asked the stable hand.

“That’s what I said,” I told him.

“Well Old Earl isn’t actually old, you know,” he said. “He’s only two and a half years old. He’s never raced a day in his life, though.”

“He is the perfect age for racing in the Derby,” I thought out loud. “Do you think I could get him ready to run in a qualifying race?”

“I wouldn’t know because I’ve never seen him run,” he replied. “He’s a pace horse but he hasn’t done much pacing. He was bred to run but I don’t know about racing.”

We walked together for a while longer in the quiet of the morning and I was deep in thought about Old Earl and how to get him ready to race. I would need a trainer and a jockey but I’m sure that none of the big names would want to work with a pace horse who doesn’t even pace. He looked like a racehorse on the outside, which was a good start, but he had to be a racehorse on the inside for it to count.

I spent the day with Old Earl, grooming him and talking to him about his grand future as a champion racehorse. He was a beautiful creature with powerful muscles. *With a little work*, I thought, *we could turn him into a proper racehorse in no time*. My stable hand friend from that morning returned with some feed for Old Earl and after putting it in his stall, he sat down on the bench next to me.

“I used to dream of being a trainer,” he said. “I would watch the trainers with their stopwatches and clipboards and imagine that I was a famous trainer. I know it’s a silly dream, but it was my dream.”

“It’s not silly,” I told him. “I used to dream that I was the woman in the zebra hat, sitting in the grandstand with a rich man by my side, and diamonds around my neck.”

“You can still be that woman, you know,” he said. “You’re a racehorse owner now so you have to look the part.”

I thought about what he said. *I have to look the part*, I thought to myself. He was right. I was a racehorse owner on the inside just like Old Earl was a racehorse on the outside. We both needed a transformation to make this whole thing work. We also needed a trainer and I knew the perfect candidate.

“Hey, Mo!” I called out to the stable hand. “Wait for a second. Old Earl dreamed of being a racehorse and I dreamed of being a racehorse owner. While we are making dreams come true I was wondering if you would be my trainer?”

Mo’s mouth dropped open so wide I could practically see his molars. He was speechless for several minutes and kept shaking his head as though he was trying to wake up from a dream.

“I don’t know what to say, ma’am,” said Mo when he finally found his voice.

“Say yes,” I encouraged him.

“Alright then,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

Mo turned out to be a wonderful trainer and we managed to get Old Earl into racing shape in a matter of months. The Derby came and went and I studied the horses closely, watching for style and strategy. I attended several other races as well to get a feel for Old Earl’s opponents. It was an exhilarating experience to be a racehorse owner and I was well on my way to accomplishing my goal of running in the Derby. I had a horse and a trainer who were working well together. Now all I had left to do was find a jockey and get my zebra hat.

We shopped around for a decent jockey who would be willing to ride a horse that had never raced. This turned out to be more difficult than it had at first seemed and we struck out time after time until we finally found someone who was interested.

“Let me give him a ride and see how he feels,” said Joe the no-name jockey from New Jersey.

“Go ahead,” Mo told him as he saddled Old Earl for a run.

Old Earl seemed excited and he danced around making it difficult for Mo to saddle him. When Mo finally got him suited up, Joe mounted him and they immediately took off. I had never seen Old Earl run so fast in my entire time knowing him. He was running like a racehorse, and it made me proud to be his owner. As the pair rounded the corner and came to the stretch, Mo scribbled numbers down feverishly on his clipboard.

“Whew!” Joe shouted, as they returned to the fence. “What a ride!”

From that moment on, Joe was our man. He loved riding Old Earl and it seemed the feeling was mutual. Old Earl wasn’t running as fast as the other horses in his league but he sure was having a good time. We were all having the times of our lives and Mama loved hearing about our adventures. When it came time to try Old Earl out in his first small race, Mama decided to come and watch. Dressed in her Sunday best, she stood next to me in the owner’s area and watched

Old Earl run. The crowd cheered for Old Earl as the newcomer and we loved every second of it. As the horses crossed the finish line, Old Earl trailed in second to last. It was the greatest moment of my life and I hugged Mama tightly. I hadn't come to win the race, but to run, and run we did. Mama was proud and she looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“You are living your dream, Sue,” she said. “And I am living my dream.”

I hugged her again and cried with her as the crowd filtered down to congratulate the winner. The moment was one to remember. We may not have been in the winner's circle but I had my own circle of winners. Our little team of “nobody's” meant the world to me. We had a pacer for a racehorse, a stable hand for a trainer, and a no-name jockey for a rider, but to me, they were the best team an owner could have.



When we returned to the track the following week, we set our sights on getting Old Earl ready for a Derby qualifying race. It was a long shot to get him in the Derby but we all wanted to try. Mo was keeping a record of his times and it looked bleak. I watched the other horses run—and run fast. I let out a loud sigh of disappointment.

“Why couldn’t I have gotten a faster racehorse?” I thought out loud.

“You don’t need a faster racehorse,” said a deep voice from beside me.

Startled, I turned to find out where the voice came from. Standing beside me was a tall, handsome man in a fancy suit. He smelled of expensive cologne and leather and looked like a dream. I was suddenly aware of my less-than-attractive attire.

“The name’s Mike,” he said.

“I’m Sue,” I replied as we shook hands.

“I’m the owner of that big brown beauty over there,” said Mike, pointing to the large thoroughbred barreling down the track at top speed.

“He is beautiful,” I said to Mike, quietly.

Mike talked for several minutes but I couldn’t focus on what he was saying. I was completely embarrassed by it all. Here I was, wearing an unattractive shift dress and no makeup, with a horse that was as slow as molasses, standing next to a handsome, obviously rich racehorse owner. He noticed me blushing and looked down at me.

“Now there’s no need to be embarrassed, ma’am,” he said politely, taking off his hat in a gesture of respect. “We all have to start somewhere, and you have yourself a mighty fine start, indeed.”

“Thank you, sir,” I responded, sheepishly.

“I look forward to sitting next to you in the owner’s seats at the Derby,” said Mike, confidently tipping his hat and walking away.

That night I told Mama all about Mike, the handsome owner, and she seemed excited that I had met such a man. We talked for hours about what it would be like to sit in the owner’s seats, wearing the fancy clothes and pretty hats. It was nice to daydream about it again, like I did when

I was a child. Mama reminded me of the woman in the zebra hat, and encouraged me to look into getting myself a nice dress and jewelry to wear to the upcoming races. In all of the time I had been investing in getting a racehorse to go to the Derby, I had almost forgotten that my real dream had been to be the woman in the zebra hat.

The next few weeks were spent getting Old Earl ready for the Santa Anita. It was a very prestigious race and I wanted Old Earl to look as good as possible. We had to place in at least one major race before the Derby to be considered for the lineup. The week before the race, we all loaded up in an old truck and trailer I had bought at a farm auction and headed west for California. The trip was long and tiring, and when we got to the track, we had to get right to work.

We got Old Earl out on the track for early morning workouts, before any of the other horses were there. It was good for him to get warmed up for the day without the distractions of a busy track. Mo gave me updates on his times and I knew that it would be a long shot for him to place at all. The day of the race, I dressed up in my nicest dress and stockings and shoes and headed out to the track. When I arrived, I was ushered to sit in an area of the stands that was designated for owners, although the few of us who were sitting there looked like we didn't belong with the wealthy crowd. Up on a platform above us sat the owners with more money and more clout. I spotted Mike up there and wasn't surprised to see a beautiful woman on his arm.

The race was over in a matter of minutes, and it seemed to me that for all that hard work, it should have been longer. Mike's horse took the lead early on and pulled out so far ahead that no other horse had a chance of catching up. Old Earl trailed behind for most of the race but as he turned for the stretch, Joe let him loose and made up for lost time. He crossed the finish in fourth place, which was all we needed for a spot at the Derby.

We went out to celebrate our victory on the town that night, and Mo and Joe both found pretty ladies to spend the evening with. I sat at the bar after they left with their dates, just sipping my wine and enjoying the feeling of accomplishment. People from the race trickled in and out, and the bar was filled with the sound of laughter and glasses clanking as toasts were made. I closed my eyes for a second to take in the moment and was startled when I heard a voice beside me.

"Fancy seeing you here tonight," said the voice.

I opened my eyes and turned to see Mike sitting in the seat next to me. I didn't see the lovely

lady he had on his arm earlier and gave him a smile and a nod. I raised my glass to him in a toast.

“Here’s to good fortune,” I said. “Congratulations on your win today.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “And congratulations on your win as well.”

I blushed a bit at his response because I hadn’t won anything but a spot in the Derby. He was the true winner today but I guess I did win in my own way. He saw me blushing and quickly changed the subject.

“Since you are going to the Derby,” said Mike, “you are going to need a fancier outfit.”

“I know,” I replied. “I was just waiting to make it to the Derby.”

“Well,” he said, “I can’t have any woman on my arm that doesn’t look absolutely stunning.”

I looked at him and he had a big grin on his face. *Did he just ask me to be his date to the Derby?* I wondered. He could see my confusion and quickly clarified.

“I mean,” he said, “if you will go with me, that is.”

After a second or two I finally responded to his awkward request and agreed to go with him to the Derby. We spent the rest of the evening together, talking about this and that, and I found that I actually liked him. He was a nice gentleman, although arrogant at times, and he did smell wonderful. As we said goodnight and goodbye, he placed a soft kiss on my cheek and winked. My only reaction was to hold my cheek and gasp as he walked off into the dark.

One Sunday afternoon, I went to visit Mama at her house and she was very sick. I called for the doctor to come and see about her but I knew she didn’t have much time left. The doctor was in her room for quite a while and I was too nervous to sit in the house and wait. I decided to go for a walk outside and get some fresh air where I could think. When I returned to the house after my walk, the doctor was just leaving.

“She is very ill, Sue,” he said to me. “She wants to see you now, but she doesn’t have much time left.”

He shook his head with a look of sadness on his face and waved at me as he left. I hurried inside as soon as he was gone and went to Mama’s side. She looked pale and very weak as she turned to look at me. She had a kindness in her eyes and I wanted to hold her forever.

“Sue,” she said in a small voice, “go into my closet and pull out the box on the top shelf.”

I did as she instructed and went to her closet. On the top shelf there was a large round container covered in dust. I had to get up on my toes to reach it but managed to pull it down carefully. I returned to her bedside with the box.

“Open it,” she told me.

I opened it slowly, as though something inside was going to jump out and frighten me. As I pulled the lid off, I saw a feather. I opened it more and more, revealing all sorts of feathers and lace bows with rubies and pearls and diamonds. What I found inside the big round box was a zebra hat. It had all of the things on it that I used to dream of when I was just a little girl. I carefully pulled it out of the box and placed it on my head. I looked at Mama and saw tears running down her cheeks.

“You look so beautiful, darling,” she said through the tears.

“When did you get this, Mama?” I asked.

“I got it a long, long time ago when you first designed your zebra hat,” she replied. “I had it specially made for you and I was waiting for the day when you finally made it to the Derby to give it to you. It is a bit early, but I wanted you to have it before I am gone.”

“Oh, Mama!” I exclaimed, hugging her gently.

“I love you, Sue,” said Mama.

“I love you, too, Mama,” I said back.

Mama passed that very next week and I couldn’t bear to live without her. She had been the reason I was living my dream and it seemed all for naught now that she was gone. I spent most of my time absorbed in Old Earl. When I wasn’t crying on his big gray shoulder, I was working with him to get him in shape for the Derby. One day, I was sitting on the railing, watching the other horses and riders doing an afternoon workout and I broke down. I couldn’t hold in my emotions any longer and I cried with a great force. Most of the stable hands and trainers avoided me, trying to give me the space I needed to cry alone. I felt a warm hand on my back and turned to see who was behind me.

“It’s ok,” Mike said, in a soothing voice.

I collapsed into his arms and he held me as I cried about Mama. I missed her so much and being at the track brought back memories that deepened my sadness. It felt comforting to have Mike’s strong arms around me, and my nostrils were filled with the familiar smell of cologne and leather. We sat together for hours, watching the horses take turns running down the stretch as fast as they could. It was one month from the Derby and everyone was getting anxious. Workmen were making repairs to the grandstand and gardeners were preparing the flowers for planting. It was the activity that helped me get through losing Mama, and it was Mike, and his

constant attention, that kept my mind on other things.

I was flattered by Mike's advances and I let him take me out on several dates in the following weeks. Mama always wanted me to marry a rich racehorse owner and just having Mike around made me feel like I was fulfilling Mama's dream. Two weeks before the Derby, Mike took me out to a fancy restaurant. We had a wonderful meal with expensive wine and we talked and laughed late into the night. As he took me home for the evening, he made the driver stop at the track. The driver opened the door and I stepped out into the moonlight. Mike took my hand as he led me into the gates, through the courtyard, and out into the grandstand. The moon was shining beautifully on the dark racetrack and the place smelled like a home away from home. He pulled a box out from under one of the seats and handed it to me.

"Open it," he said, excitedly.

Unsure of what could be inside, I nervously removed the delicate satin ribbon that was wrapped around the bright red box and opened the gift as slowly as I could. When I took the lid off of the box, what I found inside was utterly stunning. It was the very black dress I dreamed of wearing as a little girl, and the imported silk fan with satin ribbons. On top of the dress was a pair of white lace gloves with ruffles, and the most gorgeous diamond necklace I had ever seen.

"It's something for you to wear on Derby day," said Mike. "The dress and the fan and gloves are from your mother. She gave them to me to give to you a while ago. The diamond necklace is from me."

I was speechless. It was everything I had ever dreamed of—absolutely everything. The necklace sparkled in the moonlight and I pulled the gloves out and tried them on. Mike put the necklace around my neck and we sat looking out at the track. Mama had gotten me the outfit I had always dreamed of wearing and the zebra hat I had designed so long ago. She didn't wear any of the fancy clothes and jewelry because she wanted to make sure that I could. She had lived a simple life so that I could live extravagantly. When Mike took me home for the night, I fell in my bed and cried until I finally fell asleep.

On the morning of the Derby, I pulled out the dainty black dress and slipped it on. It fit perfectly, as I had expected, and I looked at myself in the mirror. The woman in the zebra hat looked back at me and I smiled. Mike arrived promptly at ten to pick me up for the Derby. As he walked me out and the driver opened the door, he kissed me on the cheek.

"You look absolutely stunning, Sue," he said as he slipped in beside me.

I gave him a smile and put my hand on his arm. We made a grand entrance at the Derby and heads turned as we walked past. It was exactly how I had dreamed it would be. The women whispered to one another about my stunning dress and hat as the men stopped their wagering to stare at me. We got to the owner's platform and found our seats. The men were all smoking cigars and talking about the odds. The women were fanning themselves with expensive fans and gossiping about the rich and famous. I smiled and tried to fit into the conversation but I felt sorely out of place. I looked across the track at the muddy field behind the gate—the place where I used to stand to watch the race with Mama and Papa. I had wanted so badly to be where I am now, in the owner's seats next to a handsome man. I had accomplished my dreams and I had become the woman in the zebra hat, but what I wanted most now was to be sitting on Papa's shoulders, standing in that muddy field behind the gate. I was lost in thought and didn't even hear Mike when he spoke to me.

“Sue,” he said, with concern, “are you alright?”

“Oh, yes,” I replied, with a sigh. “I just miss Mama and Papa. We used to stand over there together to watch the Derby. I wanted to be up here my whole life, but now that I'm here, I realize that I don't truly belong.”

“I don't understand,” Mike said. “You look gorgeous and you are the envy of all the women here. You do belong.”

“No, I don't belong,” I said. “Not really. I am just a poor girl whose Papa only had enough money for one ticket but managed to talk his way into three. I am the girl with the muddy stockings, sitting on my Papa's shoulders, dreaming of the woman in the zebra hat. I belong in the muddy field, Mike.”

He sat there without saying anything for several minutes. I continued to stare at the field, lost in thoughts of the past. The buzz of conversation went on around me and I paid no attention to the empty gossip of the women or the laughter of the men. Suddenly, Mike grabbed my hand.

“Let's get out of here, then,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“If you want to be in the muddy field, let's go stand in that muddy field and watch the race,” he replied.

He pulled me up out of my seat and helped me to carefully get off of the platform. We walked quickly against the crowd, as the men stared and the women whispered. We hurried out

of the gate and around the side of the track to the gate that led to the field. We waited in the line with all of the men and women and children wearing drab, boring clothing. A little girl standing in front of us stared at me and I smiled down at her. She reminded me of myself when I was just a young girl, standing in this very line for my first Derby. Mike held my hand even tighter as the line began to move. When we reached the gate, the guard looked at us with a confused expression.

“Sir,” he said to Mike, “your gate is around the front.”

“No,” Mike replied. “This is our gate. We are right where we are supposed to be.”

The guard didn't question him any further and although we didn't have tickets, he let us through the gate. We walked down the dark, dank corridor and I could hear the mud sloshing under my shoes. The heels of my fancy shoes were sinking down into the mud making it hard to walk so I reached down and took them off. The wet ground was cold under my feet and the mud was slimy between my toes. When we emerged into the sunlight, I looked down at my feet to find my stockings stained brown. I smiled and walked with Mike to the spot where Papa used to stand. The racehorses were walking towards the starting gates and the crowd was humming with excitement. I looked at Mike, who looked completely out of place in the muddy field, and I realized at that moment that I loved him.

As the last horse took his position in the starting gate, the gates opened to start the race. Old Earl had gotten the worst starting position and couldn't keep up with the rest of the pack. Mike's horse was in the lead a couple of times and we jumped up and down, cheering him on. As the horses rounded the turn for the stretch, Old Earl was in dead last and Mike's horse was a contender for first. Mike reached down and grabbed my hand as the horses neared the finish line. He looked down at me with a sweet smile on his face and love in his eyes.

“Thank you, Sue,” he said to me.

Before I could say anything in response, he put his hand on my cheek and his other arm around my back, pulling me in for a kiss. The horses crossed the finish line in a roar of excitement as Mike and I stayed in our romantic embrace. Mike's horse hadn't won first and Old Earl had come in a very slow last place. We looked up at the grandstand to see who the winner was. Mike laughed and pulled me in close to his side. As we gazed up at the owner's platform, I thought of all the years I had dreamed of being up there. I looked up to the clouds and smiled, knowing that Mama and Papa were looking down from Heaven. I knew that they would be proud

of me, even though my horse didn't win and my stockings were stained with mud. I turned my gaze back to the grandstand and all of the fancy suits, pretty dresses, diamond necklaces, and designer hats. The dazzle of it all had seemed to fade away, and the woman in the zebra hat was gone. I thought about what Mama told me so long ago.

“I don't need to dress like them or act like them to be just as happy as them,” Mama would tell me.

And she was right. I found my true happiness not in the fancy clothes and hat and diamonds, but in being with someone that I love in a muddy field watching the Derby. At that, I took off my zebra hat, and smiled up at Mike. He smiled back at me and leaned in for another victory kiss.



*The End*

**THE LAST NAVIGATOR**

*A Preview*



**By J. G. McNease**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Legend of the Navigators*



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The ancient history of whales goes back long before my time, even longer before your time. A history so beautiful it is difficult at best to put into words. Haunting songs and fluid dances told tales of unbelievable valor, superior wisdom, unending love, and prehistoric tradition. Ancient warriors were depicted in valiant displays of twists and turns that brought pride into the hearts of young and old. Songs of rich and deep tones awakened in the soul the memories of our ancestors, brave and noble. In the warm waters near the islands the elders would perform these songs and dances to teach the young and remind the old of our ancestral legacy. The history of my kind, like others, was passed on to me when I was young – a long, long time ago.

Rising in the eastern sky and setting gloriously in the west, the days pass by more slowly now. Time seems to be warped in a perpetual pattern of night and day, dark and light. My years of adventure have long since left me in my advancing age. Now I'm left with my memories, left to reminisce a time that was faster, more exciting and exhilarating.

I was young once upon a time, although it may be difficult to imagine now that time has taken its inevitable toll on me. I was vibrant with a courageous curiosity and an insatiable imagination. My youth was a whirl of excitement, adventure, love, discovery, and learning. My mind was very much like a sponge, absorbing as much information as was possible. Each day, I enlivened my senses with all that was around me. Colors seemed more colorful, sounds seemed sweeter. The sun would peak above the water's surface, fiery reds and oranges melting into passionate pinks and purples, and blending seamlessly into the blue of the dawning-day-sky. My youth was my morning, as I, too, was just dawning in life. Oh, the tales I could tell you! There are so many I hardly have time left in my old age to tell them all. There's one, in particular,

though that I want to tell you before my time in this place comes to an end.

It was in the warm, deep blue waters near the islands that I first heard of them – the Navigators, that is. During one of the historical performances of the elders I heard something that caught my attention. They sang an enchanting song of knowledge and courage, of a legacy of whales who had wisdom far beyond their years. The elders’ song soon transitioned into a vivid description of how these whales would guide stranded travelers to their destinations. My heart leaped with excitement as the elders explained that the Navigators could communicate with the stars through songs that only a Navigator can know. I closed my eyes and my mind began to dance with possibilities. *As I told you, my imagination was insatiable.* These songs would echo in the night sky, all the way into the heavens, and the stars would answer by leading the way to land. Though these whales seemed to be timeless, the Navigators were a tradition that had long since faded away as times changed and travelers no longer needed assistance due to gadgets on their ships that guided them.

That night, as the stars came out over the deep blue waters, like millions of brilliant sparkling diamonds, I imagined that I could sing songs that the stars could hear. I wondered what they would say back to me if my songs could reach all the way up to them. Would they like my songs? Would my songs be beautiful enough to merit a response? What would the stars sound like if I could hear them? My heart and mind raced as I thought of the Navigators and their mystical star-songs.

I have to admit, I was quite distracted for the next few days as my curiosity was getting the best of me. I just could *not* stop thinking about the Navigators. I knew that they didn’t exist anymore but my imagination ran wild with possibilities. *What if there were still Navigators out there?* I wondered. If I met one, I’m not even sure I would have the courage to say anything. I bet they are really big whales, they’d have to be big so the stars could see them and know where they were in the water, I thought.

“Lani!” yelled Priscilla, “Wait for me!”

Her voice jolted me from my vivid day dream and brought me back to the here and now. Let me tell you a bit about Priscilla. She was bubbly and happy-go-lucky almost all of the time. She loved life, which made others enjoy just being around her. She exuded joy in everything she did. The two of us had been best friends since we were born on the exact same day thirteen years ago. Priscilla, or ‘Prissy’ as everyone called her, and I were inseparable when we were all together in

the islands. The warm seasons when we would go our separate ways to feed with our pods were terribly lonely without each other. We would both count down the days until the cold season when we would get to be together again.

“You’ve been really quiet today. Is there something wrong? I’m really sorry for leaving you yesterday. I just wanted to go see what those boys were doing, but it really wasn’t worth it,” said Priscilla, a bit nervous that she was the cause of my silence today.

“It’s okay, Prissy. I’m not mad at you or anything. I don’t care that you went off to see what the *boys* were doing. I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all,” I said, with a sigh.

Prissy and I shared everything with each other, and I mean everything. From the smallest things like what we had eaten for breakfast to our larger dreams, desires, and aspirations—we shared it all. It bothered her greatly that I hadn’t told her what was on my mind, so she was extremely persistent in trying to get it out of me.

“So, tell me what’s on your mind. If you don’t tell me, you know I will eventually get you to spill. Is it a boy? *Oooooooh!* Is it Connor? He *is* really cute. I’ve seen you looking at him lately! Tell me all about it, Lani,” she said, as she swam circles around me.

Prissy was extremely interested in *boys* lately, as was the case with many of the other young females. We were “coming of age” as the elders described it and it was only normal for us to express interest. I hesitated to tell her what was really on my mind. *She will probably think I’m just being silly to be thinking about these things*, I thought to myself. But, alas, I ended up telling her.

“Yes, Connor is cute, but that isn’t what is on my mind,” I continued, cautiously. “You know how the elders were telling us about the Navigators a few nights ago?”

“Sure! That was a neat story, wasn’t it?” said Priscilla, in a rhetorical fashion.

“Yeah, it was neat. And I have been thinking about that ever since. I just can’t get it off my mind. I mean, what if there *are* still Navigators out there?” I asked, with excitement.

Priscilla did not match my excitement. In fact, she laughed, loudly, and for a long time. When her giggles finally subsided, she turned to me with amusement on her face.

“Silly, Lani,” she said, “You don’t really believe that the Navigators still exist, do you? The elders just told us those stories so we know what happened in the past. They told us that they were a myth, you know, like something that wasn’t actually real. It’s just a story.”

I didn’t want to say any more. She didn’t understand. Why should she? She was more

interested in chasing boys than anything else. Maybe that's what I should have been interested in as well, but I wasn't. And now, more than ever before, I wanted the Navigators to be real.

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## **More Information**



Find The Last Navigator and other J. G. McNease titles at Smashwords:

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/349246>.

## About the Author



J. G. McNease is an administrative professional by day and an avid writer by night. In 2011, she received her Masters of Social Work degree from Louisiana State University in her hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her educational background, passion for the human condition, and Christian faith, among other things, have a significant influence on her writing and storytelling. Along with *The Woman in the Zebra Hat*, J. G. McNease has written several other short stories and published her debut novel, *The Last Navigator*, in May of 2013.

J. G. McNease currently lives, works, and writes in north Florida with her husband, Kyle, and Great Weimar, Annie. Learn more about J. G. McNease's life and works at [jgmcnease.wordpress.com](http://jgmcnease.wordpress.com).