

Fall 12-1-2018

That Dirty Rat

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Recommended Citation

Bissonnette, Monalisa (2018) "That Dirty Rat," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 59.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol41/iss1/59>

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That Dirty Rat

Salvatore Romo was the kind of kid who was begging to be bullied. He was scrawny, effeminate, wore thick rimmed glasses, and had ears that were about three times too big for his head. The boys at school referred to him as “homo Romo” or “my gal Sal.” I hated the constant taunting he endured, but I didn’t dare say anything. Interfering would’ve meant painting a bullseye on my forehead. Like Sal, I was flawed. I had a lisp, was socially awkward, and could be easily brought to tears. I was also quite cowardly. Sal endured countless acts of cruelty over the years. Childhood is not always a time of innocence. For many, it’s brutal.

One incident I remember vividly was the day someone had put a live, filthy rat in Sal’s lunchbox. When he opened it he jumped out of his seat, squealed, and tossed his lunch against the cinder block wall across from him. The gymnasium roared with laughter as Sal ran out in tears, humiliated.

Sister Rita tasked me and my classmate, Wendy, with disposing of the rat that had landed lifeless on the wooden floor. I wasn’t keen on the idea. I had a dreadful fear of rats and the thought of being that close to one, even a dead one, made me slightly nauseous. Sister Rita shoved a dustpan and brush into my hands. I tentatively approached the rat and scooped it up. Having done my part, I quickly handed the dustpan and limp rat to Wendy. We walked outside past the playground fence to the curb, where Wendy dumped it out on the side of the road.

Suddenly, the rat sprang back to life and scampered down into the sewer grate. We both squealed and rushed back into the safety of the school. A couple of weeks later my best friend Trish and I squeezed ourselves between the wall and the confessional in the church. We eavesdropped on our classmates as they purged themselves of their sinful deeds (we did this regularly). We thought it was important to know what unholy acts our peers were committing. We heard Sal tearfully recounting how he had tossed the rat against the wall, killing it. I wanted desperately to interject and shout that he hadn’t, but for obvious reasons I couldn’t.

A couple of months later on a hot July morning, Sal set out on his bike to deliver some newspapers. The machismo boys from school spotted him on his Schwinn and began chasing him down. They were shouting at him while in pursuit, promising to make a man out of him. In his panic, Sal lost control of his bike and fell in front of our school. His head hit the sewer grate, killing him instantly. I never did get the chance to tell him that he hadn’t killed that dirty rat.