

Rats

by CL Bledsoe

The pet store was across from Planned Parenthood. Rob and June wandered over because they didn't want to go home. They were allergic to dogs and cats, and June pointed out that hamsters bite. Beside the hamsters, there was a cage with a bunch of rats. The fronts of the rats were one color, and down past the shoulders was another, like a hood. Fancy rats, the sign called them. A little white one came up to the glass and looked at them.

"Look at that," Rob said. "How smart." He noticed June smiling for the first time in months. They wandered over to the cages but they were all flimsy wire things.

On the ride home they talked about the little white one. They stopped at Wal-Mart for some milk and found themselves in the pet department. Back home, June found a cage on eBay that was a little bigger than some of the ones in the store. It was all they could talk about so they ordered it.

When the cage came in, they went back to the pet store. June smiled the whole way there.

"We'd like to see the hooded rats," June said to a salesperson. "The little white one."

The salesperson opened the back of the rat cage. "There isn't one," she said.

"That one," Rob said, quickly. "The brown one."

The salesperson handed him the rat and it crawled up his arm and peed in his shirt pocket.

"It likes you," June said. She was smiling again.

"But shouldn't we get two? Didn't you say they get lonely? You pick one," he said. She got a little grey and white one. When they got them home, it jumped out of the box and hid behind the bookshelves.

Rob had to go work an evening shift at the second job he'd picked up because she wasn't working. He tried to call on his break but she didn't answer. He imagined her on the floor, sobbing, like

she'd been the other day. The grey rat would have chewed through a plug-in or some wires and started a fire. She would be ashes, a blackened corpse, reeking of burnt meat when he got home. The apartment would have burned down, all of his things would be gone and he'd have to buy a suit for the funeral. He thought about going home early, but couldn't afford to lose the hours.

After work, the apartment was dark. She was in bed. The rats were in their cage, running around, playing. He stood in the livingroom, watching them for a little while.

He liked the way it added something to the darkness, or maybe took something away from it.

From the kitchen, he could smell chicken. There was a plate in the microwave. She hadn't made dinner for him when he worked late in weeks. Something dropped inside his stomach like a stone into water and he stood over the plate, microwave open, light spilling onto the floor; just staring, trying to take it in. There were sweet peas, his favorite, and mashed potatoes from a box. It was too much, he knew, to ever understand. All he could do was take it to the table, eat it, and be thankful.

