

Heidi Parker

Prof. Aton

ENGL 2010-12

8 Oct 2014

Birds of a Feather

I walked past the room that used to be mine, intentionally keeping my breathing shallow. However, try as I might to hurry past the opening, the waft of air was too highly diluted with stench to avoid; I had to smell it. The room that no longer belonged to me was being cohabited by Digger and Dumbo, and their equally disgusting counterparts, my new stepbrothers Brian and Ethan. Digger and Dumbo were two of the ugliest looking rats that I had ever seen, bought by my dad and step-mom to “bring our family together.” What a joke that was; I hated those rats. Not only were they ugly, but they squeaked every night and they smelled like they lived in feces. They probably did, knowing the amount of time the boys put into taking care of them.

Digger was a toilet-colored rat, about six inches long (although his tail made him almost double that), and he was the noisiest of the two. His incessant squeaking could silence the devil itself, but brought it out in all of the kids. His companion, Dumbo, was larger than Digger, about eight inches long. He was a musty brown color, his fur always coated in the paper shreds that were meant to cover the floor, due to his constant lack of motion. This laziness may have, in part, been attributable to the behavior exemplified by that of the humans sharing a room with him.

Brian and Ethan did nothing all day aside from eat, sleep, and smell bad. Having boys in the house was a new experience altogether; I grew up with just four sisters, aside from my parents. The two boys that I was supposed to welcome into my life were lazy and needy, and I

thought that having the rats live with Brian and Ethan was fitting; after all, birds of a feather flock together.

Several months later, I joined my siblings in the living room to play with the rodents. I allowed Dumbo to crawl up my arm and lace its long tail around my neck, cradling me in its strong grip. I felt his soft fur tickle my ear, and I laughed. After it was out of its cage, it really didn't smell all that bad. I looked over to my brothers; Digger was just crossing to Ethan's arm from Brian's outstretched one. They were really becoming a part of the family—the rats, that is. Just as this thought crossed my mind, Dumbo ran down my arm, leaving inch-long scratches all down it.

I still hated them.

With a huff, I stormed off to my room. All I wanted, as a naïve twelve-year-old girl, was a normal family with normal pets in a normal-smelling house. These rodents living in our house were just signs of our dysfunction; they weren't meant to be there. I sat in my room and thought for a while. I thought about how different my family was from all of the others in my conservative, suburban neighborhood. I thought about how “life wasn't fair” and other adult aphorisms. Lastly, I thought about those filthy rats.

If I was asked now why I hated those rats, I don't think I would be able to answer. Yet in *that* room, on *that* day, I felt nothing but disgust and loathing for those harmless creatures. In my mind, these four-legged monsters were doing more damage to our already-broken family than reparation, when my own stubbornness was doing just that. I distanced myself, both physically and emotionally, from my family by refusing to become close to Digger and Dumbo. The two rats that, in my mind, were, in habit, synonymous with my two new stepbrothers came to metaphorically resemble my own insecurities about my family. I refused to accept change,

whether it be with the pets we owned or the structure of our family. As it turned out, change was for the better.

The three months that followed did so in a blur. I was learning to not only live with changes, but to embrace them as well. While the rats and I were still at odds, I learned to tolerate and even welcome their presence in times of leisure. I remember a time when all of us eight kids were once again sitting on the lush carpet in the living room. I was laying down, minding my own business, when I came nose to nose with Dumbo. His beady eyes stared into my blue ones as I recognized, for the first time, that I had no connection with him. It saddened me to realize that all the months I spent avoiding I could have spent learning about this other living being.

I often think upon this and all of the things that I could have learned were it not for my pride. We gave the rats away just weeks after my encounter with Dumbo, and in the words of William Shakespeare, *parting [was] such sweet sorrow*. I regretted living with two living creatures and knowing nothing about them. Along my path to understanding the rats, I also opened up to my new family. Over the years, Brian would become one of my closest confidantes.

I eventually realized that my problem wasn't the smell of the rats, the noises they made, or even the marks they left on my arms; it was the change they signified. I may not have been ready for an adjustment to be made in my life, but I certainly needed it. I was meant to mature at that time, and the rats (as much as I would have hated to admit it) helped me to realize that. I have grown up thinking that "living is learning", but I have come to know that living is growing up through changes encountered.

While I may have learned this same lesson without the help of Digger and Dumbo, the impact of it came with more force because it was learned through understanding other forms of

life. Although my time spent with them was short, that lack of acceptance that I gave them affected me more than if I would have loved them from the beginning. I had to learn from what I missed out on to realize what I could have gained.

Heidi Parker