

**THE BAPTISM
OF
RUDY KOWALSKI**

*by
Sue Lepoux*



From my book, *The Divine Meddler*:

“Bullied for stuttering as a child when they both attended St. Stanislaus School, Rudy had grown into a formidable reporter who could ferret out hidden details of any story. Lou feared whatever Rudy had discovered would not be good.

Yet he was ready to believe whatever Rudy had to say. They had become friends the day he finally pummeled the kid who had been making Rudy’s life miserable.”

The backstory

It didn't help the new kid in St. Stanislaus's sixth grade to have a first name like Rudolph. Lou Skalney figured the Christmas season would be especially rough for him.

He studied the newbie's face as Sister Ida introduced him to the class. It was clear he was scared stiff. When Tony Masters snickered and started a chain reaction of guffaws, Rudolph blushed like a girl. Lou shook his head. *This isn't good.*

He looked toward Sister Ida, and was not surprised she did nothing to stop the jeering. That was one of many reasons why Lou thought of her as a giant bully. With a face that could make a general salute, her size made even Father Briscomb, who had served as an Army chaplain, speak in rare low tones.

Sister Ida played favorites, and everyone knew Tony was her pet. When someone else cut up, they could expect a swift swat, but not him. Some days, Lou had all he could do to keep from decking him.

"You may take the first seat in the third row," Sister commanded.

Lou watched Rudolph settle in the hot spot—facing Sister's desk and right in front of Tony.

"Your nose light up at night?" Tony stage-whispered as Rudolph Kowalski slid into his place.

"Nnnnnno"

Lou cringed. *He's in for it now.*

"Tell me your address, Mister Kowalski." Sister never used first names. Her pen hovered over what looked to Lou like an official form.

"Ttttwwenty Ffive..."

"Never mind," the nun said with a sigh and moved the paper aside.

Her glare silenced a round of mocking.

"We do not laugh at another's afflictions," she said.

Lou snorted under his breath. *As if she didn't cause mocking in the first place.*

"Yes, Sister," the class responded in a monotone. Sister Ida sniffed and said, "Open your history books and turn to page thirty. We shall have an oral quiz."

Lou was too busy counting the questions to find which one he would get, to notice the quiz had progressed as far as Rudolph's place. Silence brought his nose out of his book.

“Do you mean to tell me you do not know the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Mister Rudolph Kowalski?” Sister’s tone was menacing.

Lou watched Rudolph slump behind his desk.

It’s gonna be miserable for him around here unless he calls himself Rudy. Anything other than Rudolph. Bad enough he stutters.

After outdoor recess, Lou noticed the new kid’s coat hung separated from all the others. Apparently, Rudy, as Lou now called him, had COOTIES. It was the plague inflicted on anyone who earned Tony’s disfavor. By dismissal, Rudolph knew he was untouchable.

Lou pulled him aside from the stampede out the door.

“Hey, Rudy. If you don’t want to be mocked forever, make sure they call you Rudy and not *Rudolph*. Know how to fight?” Lou sounded hopeful.

Rudy shook his head.

At a loss for more advice, Lou gave Rudy a friendly punch and said, “Don’t let ‘em give you grief.”

Rudy smiled for the first time that day. “Thhanks.

The next morning, a three-inch snowfall, and thoughts of sledding, drove Rudy Kowalski and his cooties out of Lou’s mind.

As he trudged to school, Lou thought about the rule he figured was out of Father Briscomb’s old army arctic training manual that said kids should freeze to death outside until the first bell rang. True enough, as he joined them, Lou saw clusters of students huddled together, switching from foot to foot to keep warm. He watched a few try to sneak into the church vestibule to keep warm, only to be flushed out by the eighth-grade storm troopers.

The minute Rudy set foot on school property, they started. “Rudolph Kowalski has cooties,” Tony shouted.

“Put a sock in it, Masters.” Lou gave Tony a shove. Tony shoved back. They squared off. The bell rang and Sister Ida stepped outside. In their fury, neither boy noticed the nun nor heard the bell. Lou landed the first jab on Tony’s jaw. Tony countered with a fist to Lou’s solar plexus. Soon, students formed a circle around the two and shouted encouragement. Tony and Lou managed a few more hits before Sister Ida broke through the circle and yanked them apart. As they both fought to regain their balance, she shouted, “If you want beatings, I can give each of you one you won’t forget. But I will leave that to your parents, who will be informed of this despicable display. Now get into your lines.”

Tony hissed. “This isn’t over, Skalney.”

“Hell no,” Lou snarled.

The students returned to their lines, one for the boys and one for the girls of each class. Sister moved forward, her hands tucked into the wide sleeves of her habit, muff style. Covered by her shawl, she looked like the Abominable Snowman in black.

Students shivered. She looked around. Absolute silence hung like the breath-mists encircling their heads.

“Straighten up!” she barked to the fourth-grade line. There was some shuffling and a long wait while she glared at the errant students. Her eyes roamed over the other formations. Lou noticed she said nothing about the huge space between Rudy and the boys ahead and behind him.

“Grade one, you may enter.”

The morning dragged on. No one could do anything right, except Tony. And even he came perilously close to boxed ears. Rudolph stood mute at each question the nun asked him. Lou wondered if he had been struck dumb, or maybe he was just plain dumb.

Rudy, looking like a human icicle, stood alone at recess when Tony approached him to join the guys in a gully near the end of the church property. It had a stream and a weeping willow tree, but best of all, a log that bridged the rivulet. It also had a great deal of danger because it was behind the rectory and “off limits.”

Lou noticed Father’s car was nowhere in sight. *A trap if ever there was one.*

“Hey Rudy!” Lou called. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

Tony snarled. “Stay outta this, Skalney. Thought you wanted us to make nice with *Rudolph*.”

“Don’t...” Lou called to Rudy’s back.

Lou did not see Rudy again until he was standing in the cloakroom, blue in the face and dripping water. Tony looked worried as he whispered to Mark, one of his minions, “Stupid jerk wasn’t supposed to fall into the water. Just supposed to get his feet wet.”

“You shoved him too hard, Tony,” Mark hissed. “We’re in for it now.”

Suddenly, Rudy rounded on them. His flying fist missed Tony and instead landed on Mark’s cheek. Lou grinned. *Go Rudy!* Mark lunged at Rudy who ducked, then thrust his body upward, throwing Mark’s body against the coat rack. *Guy’s got some moves after all*, Lou thought before he hissed at the combatants, “Want Sister in here?”

Everyone froze. With a last glare, Tony and Mark walked to their seats.

Lou turned to Rudy. “Put on my jacket and stay here.”

“Wwwwwhat about Ssssisttter?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll fix it.” *I have no idea how. I’d rather take on a wild tiger.*

She stood, towering behind her desk. Lou approached warily.

“Sister, could you help Rudy?”

“Rudy?”

“Rudolph. He’s dripping wet in the cloakroom.”

She swooped toward the cloakroom, Lou in her wake. The nun came to a sudden stop.

“God forgive us,” she said in the softest tones Lou had ever heard coming from her mouth. “Go to the rectory, Mr. Kowalski, and tell the housekeeper to let you in. Father will be back anytime with clothes from the Bishop’s Relief Fund. He should have something that will fit you.

An hour later, the sight of Father Briscoomb standing in the doorway brought Lou and his classmates to their feet, their collective breathing the only sound. The look on the priest’s face almost silenced that, too. Rudy was not with him. Father Briscoomb marched to Sister’s desk and stared at Tony Masters.

His voice boomed. “Rudy tells me he fell into the stream. I don’t buy it and do you know why? One of you pushed him in.” He let his eyes roam around the room. “I want that boy to come forward.”

The students stood like mannequins. Lou cleared his throat and ignored the eyes that turned to him. Instead of eyeing Tony, he stared at a spot over Father Briscoomb’s head. The priest waited for what Lou felt like was forever and then said, “Very well. Every boy will remain after school and write, ‘Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself’ five hundred times.”

A rush of whispering filled the priest’s wake. Lou looked at Tony, who sat and buried his face in a book. Lou barely hid a smirk. *He knows his rep took a nosedive.*

The rest of the afternoon was dismal. Rudy returned, wearing dry clothes, and sat scrunched in his seat. Sister did not holler at anyone, no one laughed, and the dismissal bell was a mercy. The girls filed out, casting smug glances over their shoulders.

“You do not have to remain, Mr. Kowalski,” Sister whispered in her new personality.

“Nnnnooo, Sister. I’m one of the gguys too.”

Lou turned steely eyes to Tony, who, after a few seconds, stood, nodded, and acknowledged in a whisper, “...Rudy.”

About the Author

Fueled by coffee and an overactive imagination, Sue LeDoux creates fiction that draws from her years as a nurse and wife of a CSI chemist. She blends her fascination about church history with a good dose of life's raw experiences. Her flawed characters navigate messy lives, just as we all do. She does not write for the spiritually comfortable. If you are looking for sweetness and sunshine you won't find them in her work.

When not home in Rochester, New York, her two favorite places are New England and Tennessee, with her son John and his wife, Deborah.