

Of Mice and Oreos: Finding Understanding in Community

By Rocio Soto

Horror-stricken I ran screaming in disbelief to my mom, a tangle of brown cassette tape in hand. She didn't even bother to look up as she continued methodically cutting a rinsed onion into iridescent slivers on the cutting board, and the charred smell of *chiles poblanos* roasting on *el comal* consumed my young lungs. Unfazed by my now frequent, cassette tape-induced melodramatic outbursts, she offhandedly cooed me to peace, "*Aye, Rocio. Calmada, mi nena. Ahorita te lo arreglo,*" and after what would feel like several millennia later, she did. Calmly walking to the sink after mincing the onion, she washed her hands, briskly dried them on *la toalla* and called me over, "*Aver. Damelo.*" *Obediente*, I immediately handed it to her and watched as she slowly, patiently began to weave her thin, worn fingers through the coils of tangled cassette tape I had created in my panic.

This had become my routine. Every day I would arrive home from school, eat a quick snack of whatever sweet pantry delicacy (i.e. oreos) I could lay my hands on before my mom discovered my villainous pursuits, and rush to the comfort of my room to partake in my greatest afternoon pleasure: my read-along cassette of *Aesop's Fables'* "The Lion and The Mouse ." I would sit for what felt like hours every day and peruse through the colorful pages of the threadbare read-along paperback while the soothing Morgan Freeman-esque monument of a narrator's voice (in my mind anyways) would take me on a journey of compassion and friendship- in a language I could barely understand, let alone read. My fingertips, tense with anticipation, would graze over every letter on the page shaking tenderly as if possessed by the

soul of some long forgotten adventurer recounting the memory of their first deciphering. I was enamored by the hieroglyphs before me, something I knew I didn't understand but could feel so perfectly. It was an experience I wanted to feel over and over again. I wanted to understand and make everyone else understand with me.

Once I finally did begin reading on my own, I immediately began *fastidiando* my *hermanita*, who—two years my junior—was a whopping three years old, to let me read to her. I once asked her, after a particularly inciting episode of *Arthur*, if she would let me pull her from the trenches of her unbecoming illiteracy. Her response? An affirmative, baby-babbled, “*No quiero*,” and a sharp bite into my forearm. As one could imagine, further endeavors proved wildly unsuccessful. “*The Lion and the Mouse*,” *Peter Rabbit*, *The Rainbow Fish*, *A Bad Case of the Stripes*, several of the Seusses. I tried all of the greats to no avail. The child was insatiable. Seleste couldn't care less about reading. She was much more interested in our weekly bugscapades in the front yard, displacing helpless earthworms and grasshoppers.

Undeterred though once I started school, in a similar fashion I attempted to engage my peers regarding such literary antics. However, of the few who engaged in the realm of literature there seemed even fewer who engaged in wonder. More interested in the unmoving facts of cars, animals, and anatomy, no one was interested in the fanciful melodramas I couldn't get enough of. No one wanted to read the dense, cryptic musings of a Lemony Snicket or the quick-witted mind of a Nancy Springer. They wanted facts, world records, statistics, and most importantly easy AR points. So, I would continue for the next five or six years, solitary in my literary pursuits...or so I thought.

At ten years old, I discovered my first public library. My mom, needing to fill out a job application in the computer lab and unable to arrange *una niñera* for the day (or really any day for that matter), had decided to bring us along with her on this newfound excursion. If I'm being honest, I hadn't expected *ninguna novedad*. I had been in a library before. However, as soon as I saw the borderline decrepit, musty brown building falling in upon itself, I was mesmerized. The faded, bile-colored walls of this enfeebled creature were jammed from head to toe with shelves and books in every direction. Having only ever known the confines of grade-level restricted reading requirements and the neat, militia-like rows of dainty picture books perfectly displayed for young readers in my own school's library, I was taken aback by the paper jungle before me. Books everywhere of every size, material, and color fighting for my attention, luring me with mystery, vivacity, humility, I wanted to run through the aisles with the pulps of my fingertips caressing every spine on every shelf of the intricate ecosystem. I was in love. With no one to tell me what books I could or could not read and no once a month, fifteen-minute time limit to discover my next literary affair, in these shelves I had finally found the community I was searching for.

In the public library, books spoke for themselves. They were individuals. Some tall and proud, others small and meek. Each carrying their own thoughts and wisdoms. Bright, youthful books screaming for me to pick them up and read them in a single night. Sage, patient books who held my hand as I stumbled along their intricate phrases and fumbled their carefully gifted adages. After that day, I would spend hours every trip uncovering their mysteries, talking, discussing, pondering along with my newfound friends. We would tell each other our secrets and

worries, bonding over the shared traumas of our theatrical lives. We sojourned through histories, created cinemas, and sang symphonies. It was a love like none I had ever experienced before.

However, over time as my family moved farther and farther away and our library visits became fewer and farther in between, the *telenovela amor* that I shared with the stacks dissipated. With the growing distance I could feel my community of knowledge and friendship become small and restricted once more. It broke my heart. My middle school's library did not have any of Jane Austen's romantic masterpieces or Alexandre Dumas's epic adventures, and no one my age could quite understand the quips and musing of my "slightly" outdated vocabulary. Words like "gay," that I thought meant joyous and used with liberty to describe my favorite pursuits, they used with disdain and internalized homophobia. I just couldn't quite understand, and in turn neither could they. So, I returned to the reclused mouse within myself once more.

Until one day, noticing my lack of literary engagement with the school library and general disengagement with others, my English teacher, Mr. Noble, introduced me to Dr. Hickman, the literature teacher next door to his classroom. Now, I had heard about Dr. Hickman. While all of her students loved her, her reputed gaze was said to send *chanclazos* zinging into the very pits of one's soul and her quick-witted retorts were known to demolish any and all students who dared *una groseria* or outburst. In fewer words, Dr. Hickman was the coolest teacher alive, and consequently she terrified me.

Nevertheless, once Mr. Noble sent me to her classroom, I was ecstatic. In her room Dr. Hickman had a single-columned bookshelf where there sat a whole new set of literary classics foreign to me. No one was allowed to touch that bookshelf, and yet almost immediately after a

brief conversation about my reading interests, that's the bookshelf she brought me to. She began to hand me tomes of every genre and thought from the bookcase. Autobiographies of Henry the VIII's many wives, short stories by Edgar Allen Poe, poetry by Langston Hughes, gut-wrenching tragedies by the Brontë sisters. By the end of our exchange, I could barely carry the books before me. Like the nerdy comic relief in a Disney Original, the stack towered just above my head as I bashfully shuffled back to Mr. Noble's; everyone's eyes stuck to me like *miel* on a cold spoon as I sat back down at my desk hastily shoving my new collection within the tattered confines of my neon green Jansport.

That day Dr. Hickman told me I could come back to the bookcase anytime I wanted to retrieve new books, and only had one request of me in return: that I bring her back all her books in good condition once I had read them. I took meticulous care of her gifts, never wanting to disappoint. She might not have known this, but Dr. Hickman had become a lion in the mouse-like narrative of my life. Her *regalo*, the opportunity to build community amongst my beloved friends once more, access, is something I will never forget.

As I grew up and parted ways from Dr. Hickman and Mr. Noble, I found myself entangled in literary pursuits still, often despite having other intentions. I could never help but be drawn to a good story, and I quickly realized that while I loved problem-solving and innovation like many of my peers at Georgia Tech, I could find opportunities to problem solve and innovate outside of integral calculus or computer science. Working in the Georgia Tech Communication Center (the Naugle CommLab as some of you may know it) for the past four years, I have found myself once again face to face with trying to build community. When I first came to college, I

struggled to assimilate to our campus. I found it was difficult for my peers and I to understand each other. My background, my family, my responsibilities, my Spanglish; it was a language foreign to them. I was so incredibly frustrated by this. I felt mouse-like; people did not see the worth that I saw in things. They did not see the value in mice. During this time the CommLab became my lion, my advocate, my friend. My peers in the center didn't always understand me. They didn't share my lived experiences and perspectives, but they felt for me and supported me as I learned to build a vernacular of understanding in a world not built to understand minorities. My mentor my first year, Natalie Zuckermen, taught me how to write my first professional email and my first resume. Our previous center director, Dr. Brandy Blake, let me cry in her office as I scheduled my first meeting for assistance with a Dean of Students after a family emergency. Dr. Jeff Howard, our assistant director, encouraged me to publish my first poem. Each and every one of the individuals I have worked and interacted with in the center have become a thread in my life's narrative.

Attending one of the biggest engineering schools in the Southeast, I found my community in the CommLab helping some of the brightest, most inventive students in the nation communicate and dictate their brilliant ideas and projects, and it's here where I strive to repay Dr. Hickman's and so many others' lion-like kindnesses, by creating an inclusive and inviting community for others. I know what it's like to not feel heard, understood. Something so many of our students face here at Tech—because English is not their first language, they have a learning disability, suffer from performance anxiety, or just really hate writing. During every session I consult in and with every student I work with, I strive to create space for them and understand

them in their own language. I recognize that there is value in our differences and that effective communication can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Whether it be playing Scrabble with new coworkers in the center or helping a lonely international student virtually practice their English during a pandemic, I want to give people space to be themselves and to create the way I learned to create, in community.