

Falling into Place

By Sol Peña

I have lived in five US States and three countries throughout my life due to my father's career in the military. It used to bother me, all the moving around. When you are a kid, saying goodbye to your friends feels like the end of the world. It never is.

We moved to Waynesville, Missouri, just after my 8th birthday. It's one of those towns along Route 66 that barely exists anymore, roughly 40 miles from anywhere. Waynesville might have ceased to exist entirely were it not for the presence of a prominent military base that keeps people flowing in and out. Dad spent most of his time at work, and I spent my time with my mother and Abuela (Abby). They were an unlikely parenting unit. Mom was an educated white American woman who only became a stay-at-home Mom after she became disabled due to the flare-up of a chronic illness. Abby, so dubbed from my infantile inability to fully pronounce the word "Abuela," spoke little English. She was an illiterate, hardworking woman who came to the United States seeking asylum in the wake of the El Salvadorian civil war. I was her translator through my young adulthood. My mothers were united in their love of me and my brother and their hatred of Waynesville. Something about having to drive 50 minutes to the nearest department store didn't sit well with them, but waiting for them to finish trying on clothes in J.C. Penney was one of my least favorite activities in the world. The distance suited me perfectly. At home, I had a river, woods to explore, and plenty of black-and-white fuzzy caterpillars to race up trees. I often dragged my little brother out on adventures. He was a more placid character than I, more inclined to pick flowers in the backyard than initiate unsanctioned trips to the local park or into the woods behind our house. Short on alternates in a new town, he became my second in command. After we wandered a little too far with too little permission once (or a half-dozen times), Mom and Abby had to find a new way to entertain us.

One muggy Missouri afternoon, they took us to the local library. The walls of the library were plastered with posters advertising the summer reading competition: Read 200 books, win the shiny red

bicycle on display!! I made my way to the children's section where I discovered walls and walls of mid-to late-90s scholastic serialized novels. Order didn't quite matter just yet. I picked up book 21 of the *Animorphs: The Threat* first. I'd seen similar covers at a million Goodwills over the course of my travels. Each cover featured a middle-school-aged kid (or a hawk or an alien) transforming frame by frame into an animal. I sat in one of the kid-sized chairs of the children's section and read until closing, while my brother played with the toys and my mothers attended to their adult business in the adult section. I read the whole book in one sitting, and I was immediately hooked. Super powers? Intergalactic war? What more could a kid ask for? Brimming with pride at having finished a chapter book in one day, I picked up 5 more and took them home to keep on reading. I was never able to read the series in order, but I scavenged every Goodwill and library for new *Animorphs* books for years. That series initiated a persistent love of reading that carried me through countless moves between the US and abroad. Eventually, I started to make up my own stories. At first, I followed the oral tradition. I told Abby stories while we sat in the car, waiting for my Mom to get out of whatever store she was in. She loved them. One in particular, a multilingual musical about a dragon hat thief, always made her laugh. She never forgot the words and quoted them back to me often: "Cuidado my Goro, Cuidado my goro, y el dragón Se fue. Se fue. Se fue." Her encouragement was enough to keep me going. I built and rebuilt entire worlds in my head and filled notebooks with superhero stories (some admittedly fanfiction; I really liked the X-men).

I knew I wanted to keep writing stories. But, somewhere in high school, a different obsession took over. Instead of prioritizing my own development as a storyteller, I started to compete with my peers at athletics and academics. I lost myself in the competition. I did pretty well for myself, maintaining my extracurriculars and hoisting my GPA well above a 4.0. I don't regret where I placed my priorities in high school. That version of me got me where I am, and I am grateful for that. It wasn't until I got to college that I took a step back and allowed myself to remember my priorities.

During my sophomore year, I applied to a scholarship/internship program based in Germany. By some miracle, I got in. I spent the next summer in Berlin working from 8-5pm at a sustainability start up. I hated it. All of the tasks I was assigned felt menial and my German was not good enough to

meaningfully interact with my colleagues. I struggled to adapt to the environment. In a last ditch effort to add some semblance of value to my day-to-day activities, I started writing again. I took one of the X-men stories I'd written in middle school and chipped away at the characters and the storyline until it became something entirely new. I got up at 4am every morning and wrote from 4:30-7:30. I dedicated the lulls in my work day to brainstorming and editing what I'd written that morning.

One day, as I watched the sun rise over Berlin, it occurred to me that I didn't want to give up writing when my engineering courses started back up. Between my desire to write and my excellent experiences working for Commlab, I decided to take on a Literature, Media, and Communications (LMC) major in addition to Mechanical Engineering. I got back to Tech that Fall and officially declared a double major. This decision has allowed me to continue developing my writing skills while simultaneously pursuing financial independence through my engineering degree. That was the point where things finally started to fall into place.

I transitioned to Georgia Tech from the German International School Sydney in the wake of the greatest loss of my life. During my senior year of high school, Abby died suddenly while on vacation visiting her sister in El Salvador. It was Dia de los Muertos, of all days, or "Dia de los defuntitos" as Abby called it. I was destroyed. Navigating the turbulence of grief and a cross-continent move, I struggled to reconcile the possibility of a positive college experience with the vast isolation I felt. I found community through the GT CommLab.

I applied for the peer-consultant position on a whim. I needed the job, but I never imagined they would hire a Mechanical Engineering major. The thought that I might be able to gain some exposure to different styles of writing (to mitigate the math-heavy Engineering degree I was exclusively pursuing at the time) sat in the back of my head. I never expected my work at the CommLab to become such a vital part of my college experience. When I started at CommLab in 2018, I dove right in without hesitation. My work quickly became a source of satisfaction and happiness that sustained me through the stress and challenges of being a student of Georgia Tech. I loved working with students, other engineers in

particular, many of whom were forced to practice their communication skills (in English & presentation heavy classes) against their will.

CommLab exposed me to the value of a diverse portfolio of skills, particularly through the connection between effective communication and STEM. It also brought the sheer number of English language learners at Georgia Tech into my field of view. Having the opportunity to support ELL students reminded me of the hours I spent translating for Abby and helping her study for her US Citizenship exam (that was conducted in English). I became involved in the CommLab's Conversation Hour and had the opportunity to present my experiences at the regional writing center conference.

The skills my Abby unknowingly imparted to me have made me cherish my experiences at CommLab. Some of my most memorable appointments have been with international students. I will never forget the student from South Korea with whom I spent our appointment analyzing the intricacies of American humor through memes or the international PhD student who met with me to practice for their Three Minute Thesis competition and ended up winning the competition.

Through my work at CommLab, I strive to impart the same support and encouragement I received from Abby to everyone I work with. With every appointment, I learn a little more about myself and rediscover my love of helping others express themselves a little bit better.