

Maridula Sharma

## The Secret Treasure

Forced to attend the strange place where I couldn't understand anyone nor talk to them, I loathed school with a passion. When I moved to the U.S. In fourth grade, I could barely speak a sentence in English. However, even though I couldn't understand much, I still had to suffer through hours of trying to comprehend the nonsensical blabber of my new environment. To me there was no point in it. I couldn't really learn English if I couldn't understand it and unfortunately, there was no translator that could help me. For weeks, I was just a weird kid who seriously lacked skills that others had already mastered. I stood out in ways that no one really knew what to do with me. However, by trying to figure out how to teach me, Mrs. Horseky, my fourth grade teacher, changed how I perceived the world.

I didn't really have any skills when I transferred, except for maybe art. I was able to draw better than most of the kids in my class, and that's all I did most of the class time. I drew. Everything I saw, my teachers, my classmates, the class pet, I drew. My teacher, who had often tried to approach me before but always left after failed attempts to communicate, quickly noticed the drawings I hid underneath my notebooks. One day she sneaked behind me and looked over my shoulder to see my drawing of her and my classmates playing. Before I knew it, she grabbed a colored pen and started labeling all the people in the picture. At first, I was terrified that I was in trouble, but she quickly smiled and pointed to herself and said, "Horseky." Then she pointed at the word she had written next to my drawing of her. Horseky. I looked at the strange word and immediately recognized the horse part. Puzzled, I asked "You horse?" "No, no, my name Horseky," she chuckled. From then on, she encouraged me to keep on drawing and would label all of my artwork with little bits of information. That was how I learned words in English.

However, even though I was learning more and more English, I was still doing poorly in the class. That's when Mrs. Horseky introduced me to one of the greatest pieces of treasure in my life: books. Now, until then I grew up in a society where there were only two types of books: school textbooks and religious books. As far as I knew, books were created for the sole purpose of studying core subjects such as math, science, and religion. So when Mrs. Horseky brought me a thin, colorful little book, I was shocked that a textbook could be so small. When I peeked inside, there were so many strange images and almost no words! Baffled, I looked toward Mrs. Horseky and, perhaps understanding the look on my face, she compared the book to my drawings. I understood. She wanted me to learn the words with the pictures. However, more than the words it was the the strange little pictures that caught my attention. I quickly tried to replicate them and learn more about them. As soon as I was done, I begged for another book. However, Mrs. Horseky, seeing that I only drew pictures and didn't really learn any words, refused. She was stubborn that way. She was very kind, but if you didn't do as you were told, she wouldn't budge and let you do anything else until you finished. So, in the strange combination of body language and some words that we used to communicate, she told me I had to learn the words that went with the pictures first. Desperate to get another book, I poured over the words. At first they were just an odd combination of the alphabet that I couldn't pronounce, but soon those words became more: pictures, drawings, visual monuments.

Before long, I became obsessed with books. I encountered so many strange worlds and things that I couldn't believe that someone actually wrote about them. Dr. Seuss was not an actual doctor, but a madman who created the oddest creatures. Although I was learning so much, I eventually hit a stoplight. Mrs. Horseky ran out of pictured books. Now, there were only those books left that were more like novels than pictures. I got a sense of dread again. Those books

were big. But by now, Mrs. Horseky had figured out that I was a competitive person. She told me about the monthly reading goal, in which the more words you read, the more prizes you got. I loved prizes, especially when they included coloring books. So, I grabbed a book and entered the battle of the words. Now, this was a slow process because the English language did not come easy to me. Mrs. Horseky, seeing my struggle, tried to have me draw the plot of the book as I read it. Before I knew it, I had finished an entire book. Excited, I reached for another one and another one after that. Give or take a month, and I had finished all the books in the classroom.

Proud of my achievement, and the fact that I had won all of the coloring books, Mrs. Horseky took me out to lunch, along with a few other kids. We went to McDonalds and my classmates found out that I was vegetarian. Now, while I was learning to read and write, my classmates were silently watching. Early on they had figured out that I wasn't like them. Mrs. Horseky had tried to integrate me into the class, but communication was my least developed skill. So, I was a weird kid that no one could figure out and the fact that I was a vegetarian made me an immediate outcast. If I wasn't already abnormal enough, I was also a racial oddity: an Indian. No, not the Indians you commonly refer to, who are actually called Native Americans to be more accurate, but an actual Indian, from the mystical land of India. One that Columbus strived to reach in his grand quest for riches. "She's an Indian," whispered one kid. "Oh, the ones that live on reservations!" replied another. Not fully understanding, I answered with my broken English, "Yes! I from India." "India? Where's that?" someone asked. I didn't have an answer. I didn't exactly know where it was either. I only knew that I took a plane to come to the U.S. "Wow, she doesn't even know where she's from!" exclaimed another. Laughter bounced off the walls. Ashamed, I retreated to the back of the classroom where my desk of solitude lay. After a while, Mrs. Horseky brought me a book she borrowed from another teacher. She turned to the

page with the world map and explained where India and the U.S. were. “Maridula,” she said, “there’s a saying that ‘Knowledge is Power’ and the best way to get knowledge, for now, is to learn how to read and write. Then no one will make fun of you and you can even make friends!” Although at the time I didn’t exactly understand what she was saying, I understood the gist of it: continue to learn and you’ll reach their level.

The more I read and wrote, the more I realized the power of language. Mrs. Horseky helped me understand that. If she hadn’t brought me that picture book and forced me to learn the words in them, I imagine I would be quite a different person now. She saw what I liked and used my interests to help me learn what was important. Thanks to her I don’t read words anymore, I imagine them. This helped me do well in my studies as I strived to become fluent in English. Because of my new-found love for books, and even English, I studied harder and soon found myself in advanced English classes. As my studies got harder, this way of learning helped me grasp the concepts I was taught more easily. I didn’t just do well with reading; I also became better at writing. As I observed how professional writers wrote and their styles, I mimicked them and developed my own, unique style. By watching how characters in books interacted with each other, I also learned social cues and overcame my lack of ability to communicate well with others. Through the common love of books, I made many life-long friendships. So, to this day, I continue to draw what I read because to me words and books are the never-ending plot of life and I cherish them because they are knowledge, power, and the greatest treasure of all.