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### Alone In the Crowd

Mrs. Curtis was not only an English teacher, but also the director of speech and debate club. She had a booming voice and raging red hair. Many compared her to a dragon, not only because of her wild hair but because she had a snappy do-as-I-say attitude for those freshmen who slacked off. Because of Mrs. Curtis' student eating reputation, I was intimidated entering her classroom the first day of high school. However unlike other teachers, she opened my eyes to the influence a book can have on its reader, though its threaded theme.

I never was a fan of reading. English is not my strongest subject. I have the vocabulary and spelling of a fourth grader, not to mention my fear of reading out loud. But I was maintaining a solid B, which I was very proud of, in my freshman English class first semester. However, Mrs. Curtis' next challenge for our class was *Of Mice and Men*. But after how long and torturous the *Odyssey* was, the feeling of holding the small bindings of our new read with one hand was wonderful. The novel, *Of Mice and Men*, similar to life, illustrates true friendship through the characters' actions. The main characters Lenny and George travel together during the Great Depression in search of money to better their lives. Although Lenny has a mental disability, George stays loyal to his friend. George does not keep this friendship because he is obligated to, out of pity for Lenny and his disability, but because George himself needs a friend and Lenny loved George unconditionally like true friends do. I had a couple of these "true friends" going into high school but I had no clue I would form countless more throughout my journey.

I am not going to lie. High school was different. Clicky and humungous. Unlike my middle school, everyone was not friendly. I was thankful I had a group early on to hang out with, eat lunch by, and complain about homework to. Without those initial friends I know I would have felt lost and lonely.

"What are you doing after class?" my friend Maddie asked.

“I don’t know, the usually. Probably just sit outside the dome with Lacy and eat lunch. Why? Do we have something due next period we should be working on?”

“No! You stress yourself out too easily,” she laughed. “I was wondering if you’d come to the Ban the R-Word Assembly with me. I don’t want to go alone. There will be free Pat & Oscar breadsticks?”

I pondered, “Of course! It’s in the New Gym right? I think I’ve seen signs around campus. I’ll go and maybe Lacy will come too!”

Lacy did not come. Maddie and I took a breadstick on our way in and sat down. Only the bottom middle section was occupied, which made the gym feel extra empty. Homemade square posters hung around the walls. I was glad I came to support because Maddie had been talking about joining Best Buddies during class nonstop. She was very passionate about the club and constantly chatted about the friendships she was making with mentally challenged students during Best Buddies meetings. We were introduced to the student club president Natasha and many other active members at the start of the assembly. Speeches were prepared, to inform the audience of the emotions felt by the use of derogatory phrases such as “you’re gay” and “you’re retarded.” I was very moved and found myself remembering when I would joke around calling a friend retarded. I had to think, was I really replacing the word retarded for stupid. Did that mean I was insinuating that a “retarded” human was also stupid? As defined, stupidity comes from the lack of intelligence or common sense, not from a disability someone was born with. I compared the R-word to someone calling me blonde. Yes, I am blonde but by using this stereotype, they are trying to hurt my feelings by calling me stupid. I needed to stop this wild fire of hurtful words. I needed to stick up for my peers and new friends in Best Buddies club.

At the end of the assembly, right before the obnoxious lunch bell was about to ring, Natasha and a few Best Buddies students held up a paper banner with the words “BAN THE R-WORD” bolded in black paint. They were asking students to sign the banner and promise to pledge to eliminate the use of derogatory words. I signed.

A couple weeks later I attended my first homecoming dance. The gym was painted with bright lights. My ears echoed with popular pop music and awkward conversations. I felt like I was in a sea of fish with

older unfamiliar faces taking pictures to my left, munching on sugar cookies and lemonade to my right, and straight in front of me a DJ surrounded by mobs of dancing shadows in tight sparkly dresses and button down shirts paired with matching ties. My friends scattered with their dates as I stood hand in hand with mine.

“Hey Meg wanna dance?” Usher’s voice filled the gym. I did not hesitate because I loved the song.

“I’d love too!”

We pushed our way into the crowd not too far from the membrane of the mob. An hour passed, many songs had been played and I was pooped. Heels can tire a dancing diva out. I gathered up the strength to ask Garth if we should get some water, when out of the corner of my eye I spotted Manuel. Manuel stood at six feet; one inch taller than myself in heels. He looked pretty spiffy, taking formal attire to the extreme with a full on black and white prom costume. His roots were in Mexico City, Mexico therefore his accent was thick in Spanglish. He was an autistic student I had met through Maddie during the Ban the R-Word Assembly. He was throwing his body all over the place, in time to the music, in a circle with other members and adults from Best Buddies club. I waved and he ran over to me. Garth looked threatened when Manuel forcefully asked me to dance. I waved Garth off to get something to drink and let Manuel jump around me a few times. His face grew brighter as I eventually mimicked his awkward jumping.

“Are you having fun at the dance Manuel?” I asked.

“Ya, si! I like dancing with you!” he replied breathing hard still jumping up and down.

“Are you having fun with your friends Manuel?” I questioned him again, louder this time, trying to get my voice over the music.

He ignored me, threw his head back and continued jumping but added to his dance moves—hand clapping. An adult from the Best Buddies circle calmly walked over to us. She placed her hand on his shoulder and pointed over back to his group. In that moment he opened his arms and bear hugged me. He followed the woman back to his friends with a fat smile painted all over his face.

I was alone now and I felt uncomfortable, hoping Garth would return soon or maybe I would run into a friend. Consciously I was wondering, were those really Manuel’s “friends” dancing in that circle?

The group only consisted of mentally challenged students and adults. Sure, some of the group must have been his friends, but they were more likely forced friendships because of their similar situations. If I felt alone in a gym, full of people who were my fellow classmates, then Manuel must have felt alone in his secluded circle. Just because someone is surrounded by peers does not mean they are getting the love and friendship they need to be happy.

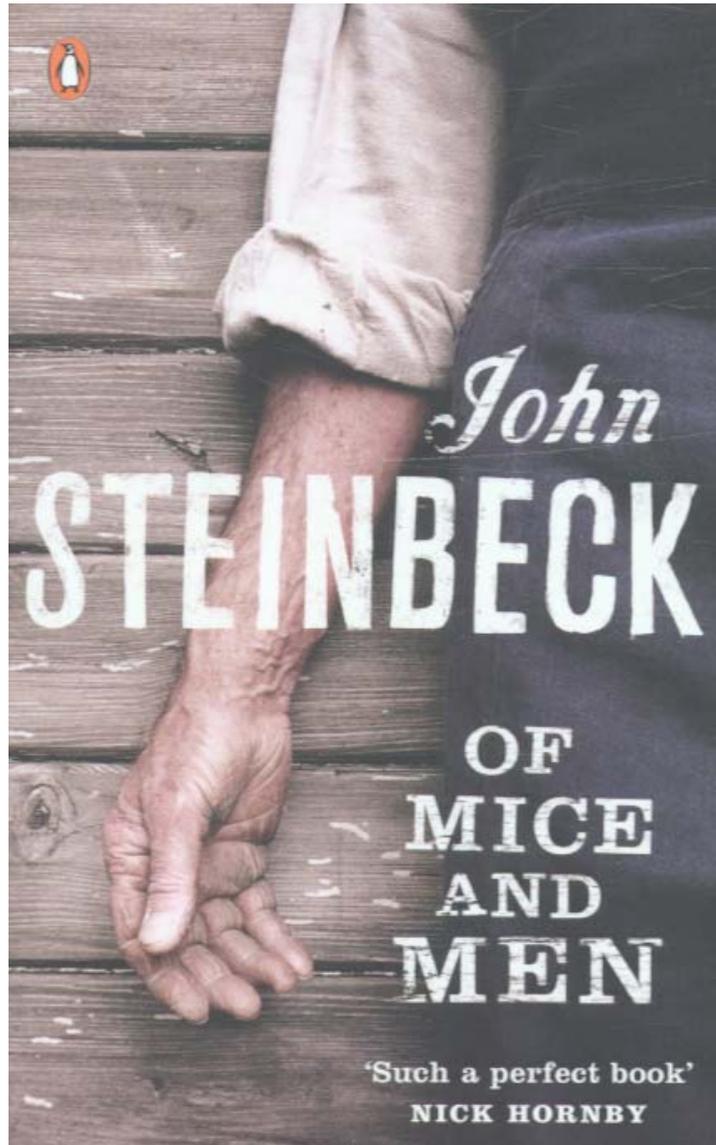
Garth finally returned. He was jealous and I was tired from constant jumping, so we took a 20-minute break. After the dance I forgot about Manuel and only played over my remembrance of Garth and my romantic night like a digital camera to my girlfriends. I did not realize then how significant my role in Manuel's happiness was until I found myself back in Mrs. Curtis' classroom discussing the theme of, *Of Mice and Men*.

“Children, what is John Steinbeck's message in this novel?”

The heated discussion began—students flung their hands in the air and supported their ideas with Steinbeck's words. Our class settled down with the theme of loneliness/friendship. Lenny and George built a loyal friendship throughout the novel. George stood up for Lenny and loved him despite his disability. George treated Lenny equally. They both strived for the same goal of living the American Dream, and George believed Lenny could get there just as much as he thought he himself could. However, the typical rancher life is lonely. And most mentally challenged humans are outcasts, looked down to, and picked on. This is much like the cliques at my high school. But, George and Lenny's relationship was true—selfless and honest.

I found a correlation between the book and my current life. A true relationship is produced by continuous love, honesty, and loyalty. Friendship does not discriminate by differences. Manuel does not make up his stereotype of a retard—he is a human being just like me, who also feels loneliness. He gave to me the same happiness I gave to him that night at the dance. We both felt lonely and secluded but together we felt at ease and enjoyed a fun night. This message I plan on carrying with me for as long as I live. And just like *Of Mice and Men*, you've always got a friend in me because “a guy needs somebody-to

be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya, I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" (80).



Work Cited

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.