

VIDA DE PERRO / A DOG'S LIFE

Norma Cantú

En el barrio han cambiado las cosas. Things change as they must. It used to be that dogs could come and go and be independent, if they so chose. Or they could attach themselves to homes where they were treated well. Fed. Bathed. Sometimes even given the required shots and vaccines. But not now. Now, a dog has to have a home. A leash. A plan.

Y así le tocó a Oreó, an independent and self-sufficient dog that loved to roam all over the barrio. Al principio, she was a bit shy and hesitant to just go right into people's yards and lie there in the morning sun after having been fed in another home. Pero con el tiempo it became easier. Especially después del incidente con la perrera. No one remembers who it was—or perhaps no one knew—but someone called animal control on her. Must've been la gorda de enfrente, people would whisper when the question came up in midmorning pláticas over a cafecito.

Because she roamed as she pleased, Oreó knew what happened in every single home in a five-block area. She was a kind of sentinel, watchful and alert. She knew the secrets and recognized each and every household's idiosyncrasies. The way the Valdez kids were so dumb they would even obey their mother when she called them to spank them. The other kids would just run off and could not be caught if their mother called threateningly, chancla in hand. Oreó knew about the couple that didn't have kids and enjoyed their afternoon siesta while they watched Jeopardy. She sensed that she should stay away from the Pérez

house when the father came in drunk from the cantina demanding supper. Knew not to stay away too long from the old woman who lived alone and was always out in the garden with her pruning shears or watering the numerous plants in her garden—herbs and flowers. Yes, Oreó roamed the streets alone and came and went everywhere as she pleased.

But Oreó was not always alone. She had other dogs who were part of her pack. But I am telling you the story about Oreó, and not the other dogs—although they, too, had a history and a life. For a while Oreó found a home; she stuck by the same family for almost three years. It had been almost by accident that she found a home. Oreó barely remembered how one of the Soliz children, Lichita, rescued her as some other kids were teasing and torturing her and her siblings. She became Lichita's dog—that had lasted until the Soliz family moved and left her in the care of the Paredes family. But they were not as attached, and she didn't care to stay with them, so she didn't. She loved the freedom. She did as she pleased. Bark, jump, beg—whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Of course, there were drawbacks: no sure feeding time, no indoor mat to sleep on, no nice warm spot at night when it was dark. But back to the story of the perrera that taught her a lesson she didn't soon forget.

That afternoon, llegaron en el van con la jaula to haul her off to the place where strays are taken. A veces even the legal dogs, those that have been duly registered and vaccinated, even they end up en ese lugar, esperando against hope to be rescued. Pero la pobre Oreó didn't expect anyone to come rescue her. Lo más seguro es que nadie los rescata, and off they go to certain death. Oreó didn't know all this, claro está. She was actually excited cuando los dos hombre se acercaron a acariciarla, and with her tail wagging and her ears droopy so they would not be scared, she went along with them to enjoy

the ride. Pero al llegar al shelter she realized that it had been a mistake; she should have bared her teeth and run away. ¡Si hubiera sabido!

How the neighborhood missed her! So much so that two of the barrio women Pati and Chole pooled their money and asked for contributions to go retrieve her. My mother put in her five dollars, expressing disgust at how someone had dared do this heinous thing. Everyone contributed, even the Anglo woman who was married to a Mejicano and rarely left her double-wide, and la comadre Tencha, who had so many kids it was a miracle she had any money to contribute to the cause. Everyone gave, even the woman who lived alone. Even the Paredes family—although they kept insisting that Oreo was not technically their dog, lest someone expect them to foot the bill for the release: ¡Eso se saca por andar sola, de andariego! They claimed that her family had moved away and she was alone again. No one argued. They all felt that Oreo belonged to them collectively.

Oreo had been alone before. Once. A long time ago in Chicago before the move, as a young pup. Her family, los Sendejo, had picked her out from a litter that a neighbor's dog owned. So, when they moved to Texas, Oreo moved too—they brought her with them. De vez en cuando she would have dreams about the long road trip and about the whole family nervous and excited and scared. She too was nervous and excited and scared. That was how it had been. And after a very long trip, finally they arrived in Laredo and rented the old house en el barrio Las Cruces; Oreo scoped it out and made friends with the other dogs in the neighborhood. The family settled in and Oreo liked to lie out under the nogal in the shade on hot afternoons. She missed the crisp cool Midwest weather. But she soon adjusted to the new world that was Laredo. Pero, it didn't last.

The father started drinking. The children were not doing well in school and the mother had two jobs trying to keep it all together. Finally the mother had had enough and had taken the children and gone back to Chicago to be with her mother. And there was no way Oreó could come with them. So the kids cried and the mother's heart broke yet again as they left Laredo on the van with other passengers all heading to Chicago; hardly anyone traveled by bus anymore. Vans were safer and way faster. And if you got a good driver, it was a pleasant trip.

But you know what? Oreó is now a respectable member of the Solís family. They took her in. Gave her her shots, put a leash on her and she even goes on rides—her head out the window, she bares her teeth to the wind, her ears caressed by the wind, What a life!

Even dogs have a life story. And this one isn't too bad. La pobre Oreó, people used to say. Now they say ¡Mirala! Parece reina, la Oreó. And so it is she is like a queen; her subjects, her family. She cherishes her memories of being homeless but happy. Of having children who loved her. Of old viejitas who shared their meager meals with her. Of the cars roaring by and how in her youth she would chase them—not quite knowing what she would do if she ever caught one. Pero así es la vida. ¡Una vida de perro!