

EL Puente

By Jack Browne

No sign announces the presence of El Puente High School on Gutierrez Street in Santa Barbara. It looks like what it used to be, an automotive shop on a block full of them. A barbed wire fence is unlocked and rolled back each morning as the school day begins. A long handicap ramp funnels the students arriving from Gutierrez through the unmarked front door. Conversation is muted and the pace is brisk as stony faced monitors keep things moving.

Once inside, the students are frisked with security wands to make sure they're not carrying weapons. The process is slow, and the reception area becomes crowded. If a student isn't wearing regulation colors, he or she is issued an orange or a purple t-shirt for the day. The shirts don't always get washed, and there is a mild but persistent body odor about the place.

Miss Morales is the principal. She stands erect outside her office watching everything. Every so often a teacher whispers something in her ear, to which she replies with a word or two. She holds a walkie talkie that is connected to the teachers in the street. Brief statements and bursts of static punctuate the hubbub around her. Morales stands still as a dog sniffing danger.

Once the students are checked for weapons and given proper apparel, they make their way down the hall to one of four classrooms. El Puente is an alternative school and enrollment never exceeds two hundred pupils. The students are there because they have been expelled from their regular high schools, usually for fighting, drugs, or chronic truancy. After a year at El Puente, they can re-apply to their home school. About half of the students make it back and about half drop out. You can also graduate from El Puente.

Many of the students are affiliated with the Eastside or the Westside gangs. This informs everything the school does, from classroom assignments, to outlawing certain color t-shirts, to guarding the students as they arrive and leave. The kids grow up with these gangs and in many cases their fathers and grandfathers pass down an allegiance to the East or West side. They don't talk about gangs much. In the beginning, I would ask fairly direct questions about gangs, but they would change the subject.

I am a volunteer at El Puente through Americorps. Americorps provides reading tutors to the schools and pays a small stipend for the work. I have no prior experience teaching high school students and end up working there for two years.

Miss Morales treats the tutors as auxiliary teaching assistants. We had been warned about this by Americorps. They forbade us from engaging in any classroom activities not related to reading. This went out the window at El Puente. Morales asks us to assist in all the classroom activities, and I decide early on that I will help in any way I can.

I am assigned to Mr. Alvarez's class for home room. Eddie Alvarez has been at El Puente the longest, and is given the most difficult students. Alvarez, his teaching assistant, and I get the kids settled down and in their desks every morning. We occupy three corners of the classroom as the students file in. Greetings are discouraged and we scan them for anything unusual. If the boys are using street voices, we quiet them down. If a student is high, they are escorted to Miss Morales and get suspended for the day. Mr. Alvarez has an assignment on the screen and they are expected to get busy with it. I hand out pencils as they are prohibited from carrying their own.

After homeroom, the students get ready to go to their core classes. They are allowed to visit with each other for about five minutes, during which time I stand up and say, "Who wants to go reading?" About three quarters of them shoot their hands up and beg, "choose me, choose me!" I'm flattered, but come to realize that they would do anything to get out of their regular classes. I choose four or five students on a rotating basis. We grab our stuff and head to an unused classroom and my daily teaching begins.

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It's Friday afternoon and I'm meeting with the Big Boys. They call themselves the Big Boys and I have no problem with that. They are the rowdiest guys in the rowdiest class in school. Alvarez needs to get them out of the classroom on Friday afternoons.

First, there's Ruben. He's a big guy, heavier than me, always stirring things up, and usually laughing. He's an overgrown manchild with a genuine air of menace. Then there's Mario, who introduces himself, "My name Mario," a sensitive kid with the soul of a wild animal that shines through his face when he laughs. Freddy is an artist and spends part of his time painting—he made an impressive mural at the Community Center—and the rest of his time spraying graffiti and running from the cops. Manny is a younger kid who's thrilled to be hanging out with the Big Boys.

We're reading *The House On Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. That is, we each have a copy of the book. I can't be sure we're on the same page. It's all I can do to get them to ease up on the wisecracking and wrestling long enough to read a couple sentences.

"Girls!", I shout above the chaos. This gets their attention. They aren't sure if I'm joking, and have to take a second to decide if their manhood is being challenged.

"Can anyone tell me what the chapter 'A House Of My Own' is about?"

Ruben grabs the back of Freddy's chair and tries to push him to the floor. Mario cracks up and helps him. Freddy braces the table with his knees.

Manny says, "Does Esperanza want to live alone?"

Bingo. Someone is paying attention.

Ruben says, "Where do you live, Browne?"

I tell them to behave themselves. They simmer down for a split second and I tell them I live up the hill from Santa Barbara High. They don't get to that part of town often, and make no comment.

"Open question: Where do you guys want to live when you get older? Do you want to stay in Santa Barbara?"

The question puts a slight damper on their horseplay. Mario says he wants to live with his aunt in a small town up the coast, but is expected to work and contribute to his family's finances until he gets married. Ruben looks at me like he's sizing me up and says nothing. Manny tries to think of something cool to say.

"That's what the story is about. Esperanza wants to see the world. She feels like she's being controlled by the men around her. She dreams of living in a house of her own."

Freddy finishes a drawing and hands it to me. It's a house, with a fence, and what looks like an Escalade parked in front. He smiles and says nothing, then turns and punches Manny in the arm. Manny smiles and wonders what to do. Ruben gets out of his chair and heads for Mario, who is taunting him in Spanish. Great. And this is in front of the cameras that may or may not be on.

I decide that our lesson for the day is over. I fold up a piece of paper and show them how to play paper football. They are fascinated by this and spend the rest of the session quietly and intensely playing.

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Between classes, Morales stands at the end of the hall like a statue. A head sticks out of each classroom and watches her. At her signal, the students are released, one classroom at a time. They are prohibited from speaking to the students in the other classes.

When the students clear the hall, I walk to Adam Conley's first period literature class. Conley is in his late twenties or early thirties and is new to teaching. He's an ex-jock and holds his body like he wants everyone to think about it as much as he does. I walk through the door, say hello, and he, as usual, says nothing.

I sit next to the teacher's desk. I am a teaching assistant, which means I hand out pencils, escort students to the bathroom, and try to answer the occasional question that Conley throws my way. In the moments before class, I usually chat with a kid named Steve.

"How about those Broncos?"

"Good so far. They should beat the Chiefs."

"Yeah, I only watched part of the game."

Conley points at me, which means it's time to hand out pencils. The students take their sweet time picking the perfect pencil, and it takes longer than it should. When a kid named Destiny finally makes her choice, I say to the pencil, "Go to your destiny."

Conley watches every move I make. He's from the old school: one person is in charge and one is not. The person in charge leads with fear and intimidation and the other person waits for a scrap of approval that never comes. It's a management style that is leaving this world, though the news is slow to reach El Puente.

The class begins. We're looking at "Kubla Kahn," a dreamy English poem from the early 1800's. It's a great poem, but these kids have no idea what Conley is talking about. To be fair, it's a difficult poem to teach when you can't mention the opium that inspires and permeates it. Conley tries, but they just can't relate.

Kubla drinks the milk of paradise and the kids talk to each other for a minute before their next class. I look across the classroom, and see Steve looking at me. I glance down at my foot and then up at Steve and grab my pant leg and slowly pull it up. I'm wearing my green "fuck you" socks today, which feature little white hands around the ankle that defiantly raise their middle fingers to the world. I hold the pant leg up for a second so he can see them, and then quickly let it down again. I glance at Steve, whose eyes are bugged out as he's sputtering, "Br..Bro....Browne!" By the end of the day, my socks are legendary.

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It's Tuesday afternoon and I'm meeting with one of my girl groups. They will not stop talking. When I can get them to pay attention, we read "La Llorona," a Mexican ghost story. "Ooooo, my grandmother told me about la Llorona. She's the weeping woman."

They talk among themselves. I can't make out what they're saying.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Alicia?"

They go quiet. Alicia looks at me with her big brown eyes for a second and then says, "boo!" They fall out laughing and I have to smile.

Gabriella says, "La Llorona drowns little kids. When we were in the mountains, my mom said we better stay in at night or we would get killed." She punctuates the word "killed" by slicing at my neck with her hand. This busts them up again.

I'm not sure how to deal with it. I ask the youngest and quietest girl, Lola, if she has ever seen a ghost.

She says, "Mr. Browne, have you ever considered shaving your arms?" They laugh again.

I say, "Okay, we're going to tell a story. Lola, you say 'Once upon a time', and then whoever has an idea, raise your hand and you'll tell the next part of the story. Then we'll go on from there. Everybody got it?"

We make up and follow the adventures of an imaginary teen-aged girl for the next fifteen minutes. She buys a car, smokes some pot, fights with her mom, and goes on a date with her boyfriend. When they're done, I re-tell the story in terms of plot, setting, conflict, and resolution.

"What would you all say is the conflict in 'La Llorona'?"

Gabriella shouts, "Murder!" and they laugh again.

"I need a little more than that."

"I know," says Alicia, "the conflict is the boyfriend."

“You’re getting warmer. The conflict is going to be a situation or an action, not a person. What does the boyfriend do?”

The word *boyfriend* casts a spell. They think.

Lola says, “La Llorona kills her children so she can be with her man, but he won’t have her. Is that the conflict?”

“That’s really good, Lola.”

We talk about the story. They use the terms I’ve given them, and when they aren’t laughing, seem to grasp what I’m trying to get across. We decide that regardless of what La Llorona has done, being trapped in the spirit world is a harsh resolution.

We wrap up our discussion and I feel pretty good about the groups’ progress. I couldn’t even get them to open their books the first couple weeks.

As we’re getting ready to go, Gabriella turns to me and says, “I know who you are. You’re one of those movie stars that comes to work with poor kids, aren’t you?”

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On the way to work each morning, I drive by a field where the homeless gather. I call it “Homeless High” because you can see the exact same groups that the kids form in high school. Here, the cool guys, gesticulating and looking about, assuring themselves that they are being watched. There, the soul sisters alone, whispering their secrets. Some flit from group to group, the natural politicians garnering votes. I’m touched that even though their life is very difficult, they fit in a world, and their world is just like the one I work in every day.

On Fridays, Mr. Conley and I take his literature class to the same field. Most of the street folk have moved along by then. We play football with the boys, and the girls confabulate by the jungle gym. Conley is an ex-high school football player like me, and it gets pretty competitive.

One sunny Friday we leave the school and walk to the park. There’s a group of four homeless people by the entrance as we arrive. Among these is a man that turns to look at us as we pass. I can see that he’s in a crisis: he glows with it. Our eyes lock and I get the message: we are here, hello. I keep moving, and the kids move with me. The women with the man seem to be ministering to him.

We play football and Conley hits some long bombs and they win. I tire of the game, and go over to the jungle gym, moving from group to group like a politician. The man at the end of the field is laying down and some of the kids ask me if he’s all right. I say that I don’t know. Gabriella and her brother whisper to each other as I walk by and she says, “I know who you are!” Freddy puts his hand up and we high five and he goes back to his drawing without saying anything.

It is time to go and we get in line to walk back to the school. As we pass the stricken man, I reach in my pocket and give some change to the woman beside him. He reaches up and tries to shake my hand, but I’m moving and can’t stop. I look back and see Ruben, of all people, reach down and gently slap the guy five, and then see more of the angels in that line reach down and do the same. When I get to the stoplight, I see Mr. Conley pull his wallet out and give the man a bill.

The light changes. Conley looks up and waves and I turn and march across the street and we walk back to El Puente. When we get back to the classroom, Conley and I look at each other, smile, and return to our impossible task.

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There was a stabbing in front of Macy's the year before I started with Americorps. It involved two high school kids, and the child that was stabbed died. It was all over the news for a while. The politicians and the civic leaders vowed to eradicate gangs, and the citizenry was up in arms. The kids were from El Puente, and many of my students knew them.

I never saw an act of violence at El Puente, but it was all around us. I asked where Manny was one day and another student said, "Oh, he was stabbed." Apparently, he'd gotten in a fight and landed in the hospital for a week. The kids would giggle when they talked about fights and weapons. Violence was an accepted part of their lives.

One great perk of working at El Puente was that I was able to go home for lunch. I lived five minutes away and benefitted greatly from unwinding in my living room for an hour. One day, I was coming back from lunch and walked down the hall and looked in the lunch room and saw bright red blood all over. The janitor was mopping up and I asked, "What happened?" He told me that a fight broke out and that the kids were hitting each other over the head with tables and chairs. The next morning the tables and chairs were bolted to the floor.

Another day, a great hubbub broke out when I was walking toward Conley's class. All of a sudden teachers came running from every direction into Conley's room. By the time I got there, they were dragging a kid out into the hall. Inside the classroom, another kid was on the ground. I was able to see the video footage later. One kid walked into class and walked right up to the other kid and slugged him, knocking him out cold. There was no warning. We were told that it was gang business, and the assailant was expelled from school.

It was hard to realize that this was going on all the time. On the surface, they were normal, exuberant teenagers. They had their secrets, like all teenagers, but it gave me pause to realize how much violence they lived with. I came to understand why Conley was so intense between classes, and why Morales ran such a tight ship.

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Sophia and Maria would usually come in the door singing. It might not be the same song, but they were singing. As soon as they got settled in their chairs, their heads would go down on the table. It was right after lunch and they had trouble staying awake. Sometimes I would let them rest, but I usually rapped the table or said something to keep them awake. They were in a group with Linda, who was a few years younger.

It was time for a new book, and I passed out copies of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Maria immediately broke the spine and bent the pages back and forth. I don't know who taught her to do that, but she did it with every book. Linda started reading, and the other two put their heads on the table.

I had been told that Linda was having trouble at home with her father, and to expect friction toward males. I never experienced this. She was extremely self contained for a sophomore. She would blush each time you asked her a question, as if she couldn't believe that someone wanted to know her opinion. Like a lot of the students, she pronounced her y's as j's, so the word 'you' sounded like 'jew'. All this, and she was as cute as a button.

"Wake up!"

It was time for someone else to read. Sophia and Maria groaned and Maria said, "This is boring." We squabbled for a bit and I got Sophia to take a turn. Maria's head went down on the table.

After a few paragraphs, Sophia said "we're bored." I asked why. She said, "It's so old-fashioned." I asked her how old she was.

"Fifteen"

"Do you know that S.E. Hinton was fifteen when she started writing this book?"

"She? I thought it was he."

"She used her initials because she thought no one would take her story seriously if they knew a girl wrote it. She published the book when she was eighteen."

That got their attention.

"The book is about two gangs of high school kids growing up. Mistakes get made and they learn about the consequences of their choices."

"Now *you're* sounding old-fashioned, Browne."

"But seriously, it's a great book. Give it a chance, I bet you'll like it."

We read fairly steadily for the rest of the session. The girls laughed at the names Sodapop and Ponyboy and seemed to get into the story. When we finished, Linda borrowed my *Outsiders* DVD so she could see how it turned out.

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Miss Morales had me help her set up and serve lunch. I would leave Alvarez's class about fifteen minutes early and meet her in the lunch room. We would set milks and lunches on a table and chat a bit.

Morales was a thin redhead with bright bleached teeth. She didn't smoke and she stood very still. Her main vibe was discipline. When we put the milks on the table, she would grab four in each hand and place them in a perfect line. Her movements were so consistent you could set a watch to them. She was intense about every task and it could be unnerving.

We'd get the lunches set up and the students would come in. Morales stood perfectly still in the corner and watched each student carefully. For the most part, her presence kept a lid on things.

Alvarez, his assistant, and I would hand out lunches. The students would come up one by one when their names were called. If they had been well behaved, they could choose chocolate milk instead of white. This was a status thing and the kids were like anyone—they drank it up. Everyone would eat a school lunch, and sometimes there would be an apple or an orange donated by a grocery store or restaurant.

The food was terrible. School lunches are notoriously bad, but these were worse. Who eats bologna sandwiches? With one piece of wilted lettuce? Even the peanut butter was unpalatable. But these kids ate it and didn't complain. They were glad to have something.

After lunch, the kids would visit among themselves for a few minutes. There was no gym time or exercise tied to lunch. The teachers would talk and I would try to join in. For some reason, each time I came over, they would kind of shut down. Torres' assistant was named Eric, and he just didn't like me. Everything he said to me was a challenge. I tried to play along for a while, but came to see that he wasn't playing. I would usually keep to myself in a corner, or sit down at a table where there were just a few kids.

One day, I brought a new notebook with me to lunch. I didn't think much of it; I had it to jot down notes during the day. Sophia saw it and said, "nice pink notebook, Browne." I suppose it was a little pink. It looked more red to me. But then Ruben got up and came over and said, "What's this?" and to be cool in front of Sophia, swept it off the table on to the floor. Everyone froze.

"That's my property, Ruben. Pick it up."

I could hear the other guys repeat, "That's my property" around the room. Nobody moved. Mr. Alvarez might have done something since he was more directly in charge. Morales stood in the corner, watching. I said, "Ruben," but he just stood there grinning. I could see that he wasn't going to pick it up.

As the confrontation stretched to the breaking point, all of a sudden, Manny dashed from his seat, picked up the notebook, and put it back on the table. Finally, Alvarez said, "Lunch is over. Pick up your trash, clean your table, and get in line." The incident was never mentioned, not by Morales, the teachers in the room, or any of the students—including Ruben. Just another day at El Puente.

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When I walked in the room, my Thursday afternoon group was already there. These were the guys I called the Crack Ups. Eric, Reynaldo, Maury, and Don were the class clowns, the type of guys that are always going for the laugh. Eric was holding forth.

"And the bitch starts giving me dome. I'm like no way, but my dick is saying way. Hey Browne, how 'bout those Broncos?"

"Eric."

"Then she..."

"Eric."

Eric Carter was about 5'8", 235 pounds. His mind moved so fast, I got dizzy listening to him. He was living proof that there are vastly different kinds of intelligence. He was brilliant, yet nearly illiterate.

We were reading *Little Black, a Pony* by Walter Farley. It's a children's book. English was their second language and these guys read on about a third grade level. It's amazing they made it to high school.

"Maury, would you start."

"Maury wanna read?"

"Eric."

Maury put his index finger on the page. His voice trembled and he looked at me after he read each word. Eric sprayed the room with vulgarity. I stopped Maury every two or three sentences to make sure everyone was following the story.

“Browne, are you down? Is it sunny down in Browne town?”

“Eric, stop.”

We turned back to the book and Don took over. I’d done some phonics with these guys and we spent a lot of time sounding the words out. I asked someone to summarize the story thus far.

Eric jumped up and started rapping.

“Little Black is acting wack and the boy goes with Big Red. The Black one frowns and puts it down that he wants Big Red dead. The boy and Red they go ahead and Big Red jumps a tree. Little Black he got no jumps and can’t follow them to see. The Black one runs to get a gun and..”

“Eric. That wasn’t bad actually”

Like Big Red, our time was about up. We put the books away and I asked how life was treating them. Reynaldo said he’d started working on a commercial fishing boat after school.

I said, “Righteous. That’s what my brother does.”

For some reason this cracked them the hell up. It was like I made up a word and they couldn’t stop saying it. As they left the room, each of the Crack Ups said “Righteous” and laid a fist bump on me. For about a month afterward, they said “Righteous” every time they saw me in the hall until it began to drive Morales crazy and I had to put a stop to it.

“Righteous!”

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I arrived at El Puente to find that no one was there. Not in the back classroom, not in Conley’s room. I went to the front of the building and Emily was at her desk.

“Emily, where is everyone?”

“Field trip”

Morales came out of her office and told me that everyone had gone to the community center a few blocks away. She gave me directions and I headed out.

As usual, it was a beautiful day in Santa Barbara. I was in the Funk Zone, an area I didn’t walk around very often. I figured I made a wrong turn because I didn’t see any community center. I went around the block and came upon a large gray concrete building with “Community Center” written on it in big block letters.

I entered into a large empty room with a stage at the end of it. This had been a strange morning. What next? I wandered through the halls and finally found two classes of our kids in the back. They were sitting around the room, looking sullen.

I slipped in the door and stood against a wall, awaiting instructions. None of the teachers approached me, so I went over to Mr. Conley.

“Hey, so what’s going on today?”

He doesn’t reply, but keeps looking around the room.

“Is there something I should be doing?”

“Just join in, Mr. Browne”

I look around the room. Join in what? There was a ping-pong table against one wall. I walked over and picked up a paddle and looked for a ball. Manny jumped up and came over and found a paddle and ball. We started playing and everyone just sat and watched us. Good old Manny and I silently and methodically played three games without stopping.

I told him I was ready for a break and handed my paddle off to a kid I didn't know. They started wacking the ball as hard as they could, trying to nail each other. I walked around the room.

“Downtown Browne,” said Eric Carter in the way of a greeting. Maury said, “Righteous!” Sophia and Maria smiled and turned back to their conversation. Conley had gotten a game of dodgeball going outside so I went there.

They were in an area about twenty feet across and about forty or fifty feet long. A chain link fence stood at one end, and the tall concrete walls of the buildings boxed us in. Two teams were playing dodgeball in this not large area, whipping the ball at each other as hard as they could.

I was invited to play and found myself on a team opposite Eric and Conley. We took turns whipping the ball at each other. It was deadly serious, and fun. Eric got me in the head and I had to sit down. We played a couple more games and I knocked Conley out in the last one. He immediately ended the game and we went inside to eat.

Morales had arrived with lunch. She beckoned me over and we set out the meals. The food was better than usual, and I think everyone enjoyed doing something out of the ordinary. After lunch, we went into the auditorium and the two classes split up and played games. Then we spent an hour or so talking about school business and then it was time to go back to El Puente, and home.

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I could tell that something was different as soon as I walked in the room. It was solemn and hushed in Mr. Alvarez's homeroom. There were four or five county people, and Miss Morales was there. I'd come in a little late and took my spot at my desk.

One of the county officials started talking. He said things like “talking to your friends” in “these situations.” I turned to Eric and gave the palms up “what's going on” gesture. He grabbed a pen and a slip of paper and wrote, “Billy Lopez killed himself last Friday.” I looked around the room. Mario was crying and nodding and talking to Miss Morales. Some of the girls looked at me with sad eyes and I just nodded my head.

Miss Morales started talking. She was direct and matter-of-fact. She looked at everyone in the room, one by one. She said that the El Puente family had suffered a great loss, but that we would come back stronger. Another county employee said many of the same things and then they left the room.

Mr. Alvarez sat at his desk in silence. The kids looked at him and whispered to each other. Alvarez said that Billy was a good kid and that if anyone else was having problems, to please come to him and talk it over. Then he said the kids could do anything they wanted during first period.

Alvarez, myself, and three or four of the boys played poker. I tried to joke a little and keep it light. It was a balancing act. We played poker and other kids played Battleship or just talked.

We did pretty much the same in the other classes. During math I played tic-tack-toe with Maria and Sophia. I was touched by their soulfulness.

I ran into Morales in the hall. I asked her how she was doing and she said okay. Then she looked me in the eyes and asked how I was doing and I said yeah, okay. When we got to the end of the hall, she touched my elbow before turning in to her office.

I met with the Big Boys just before the end of the day. It wasn't our usual time, but one of the guys had asked Alvarez if we could meet and he said yes. We went off to our room and played paper football and three penny soccer for an hour.

The guys roughoused a little, but were more subdued than usual. Ruben made a joke about guns and gore. Mario alternated between laughing and being quiet. Manny mostly kept to himself. We were just putting in time, but we were glad to do it with each other. The school day ended and most of the students hugged a teacher or staff member as they left the building. Life goes on, and in a week or so, El Puente was itself again.

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Linda and I heard Sophia and Maria coming down the hall, singing. I looked out the door and saw that they had dance steps too. They took two steps forward and then one back. Sophia had her arm around Maria's waist.

I waved my arm to show them where we were. They didn't pay much attention, but did make their way into the room.

"Browne, why you always busting our fun?"

"Not trying to, Sophia. I love to hear you girls sing. I'm a musician too."

"What do you play Browne, flute?"

"Maracas?"

The girls giggled and I waited until they settled into their chairs. I had a special treat. We weren't going to read, but were going to watch parts of the movie *Man On Wire* instead.

"I play bass and guitar. We have a band going. Were you just singing 'Blackbird'?"

"What are you talking about, Browne?"

"The song you were singing. Wasn't it 'Blackbird' by The Beatles?"

The girls looked at each other. I could tell they had no idea what I was talking about.

"You know, The Beatles. 'Hey Jude,' 'Let It Be,' 'I Want To Hold Your Hand.'" I sang little snatches of the songs.

Linda looked at me and said, "I've never heard those songs, Mr. Browne."

I looked around the table and they honestly had not heard those songs before.

"This shall not stand." I opened my computer and scrolled down to The Beatles. We listened to 'Let It Be' and 'Hey Jude.' By the end of 'Hey Jude,' Maria and Sophia were swaying side by side, singing the "na na na" part. They really had not heard The Beatles before.

"Ladies, I am going to make you a CD of Beatles tunes. Miss Morales won't let me give them to you in class, so say something to Emily at the desk when you're leaving today and she'll have something for you."

Who hasn't heard of the Beatles? Mind blowing. I started the film and they were thrilled by Phillippe Petite, the tight-rope-walking maniac from France, who stretched a rope between the

twin towers and crossed it a couple years before they got knocked down. We discussed visions and dreams, and the rare people that follow them. I told them that The Beatles started out playing small clubs in Germany, working six—or eight?—days a week, to very small crowds. I tried to explain what the Beatles became. They swore they had never heard of them.

I dismissed the girls and flew home to grab some Beatles albums. I made a CD of classic tunes, leaning on the early love songs a bit. I drew a picture of a man on a tight rope on the cover and called the CD “The Beatles From Me To You.”

At the end of the day, I stood in my corner and watched the girls get stopped by Emily, who handed them each a CD. Maria and Sophia said, “Thanks, Browne,” and skipped out the door. Linda stopped and read the names of the songs, then looked over at me and smiled sweetly. It was easy to see what she would be doing that afternoon.

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I had been reading *The Old Man And The Sea* by Hemingway with the Big Boys group for a couple of months. They were much better behaved than they had been at first. I think they looked forward to the story as much as the paper football games.

Like a lot of literature teachers, I could not resist reading aloud to them from time to time. *The Old Man And The Sea* was the first piece of literature I had ever read, given to me by my grandmother. I could still remember where I sat in her living room as I read it, and how it made me feel.

We were nearly finished. The old man was trying in vain to fight off the sharks that were stripping his great fish of its meat. I let them kick back as I read to them.

“Come on, galano,” the old man said. “Come in again.”

“Come on, come on,” said Ruben, raising his arms in the air. We had been reading these fight scenes for weeks, and they were into it.

“The shark came in a rush and the old man hit him as he shut his jaws. He hit him solidly and from as high up as he could raise the club. This time he felt the bone at the base of the brain and he hit him again in the same place while the shark tore the meat loose sluggishly and slid down from the fish.”

“Bam!” Ruben got up and mimicked the old man. Manny stared steadily at me and Freddy drew furiously in his notebook.

I read the rest of the story. The Big Boys yelled and cheered when Santiago beat off the sharks, and grew quiet as it became apparent that there would be no meat left when he came ashore.

We finished up and I let the end of the story hang in the air for a moment.

“Ruben, what do you think that was all about?”

He smiled and stretched his hands out on the table and leaned forward. “I don’t know Browne, you tell me.”

“Manny?”

“You can’t win. That’s what it’s about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even though he caught the greatest fish of all time, he can’t get him back to the shore.”

“Do you think he would have made it with the little boy’s help?”

“Probably.”

We talk about the way you do something, as opposed to what you accomplish. I tell them Hemingway’s definition of “guts”—grace under pressure. We talk about how this applies to the story.

“Yeah,” said Freddy, “He always did things the right way even though he was tired, or felt hopeless. He was ready to die out there.”

“Do you think that is what it is to be a man?”

They think on that one for a bit. We go back over the story. They agree that Santiago is one tough son of a bitch.

“What about the little boy?”

“No homo,” says Ruben.

“What are you talking about?”

“No homo, man.” They all crack up.

“That’s not what it’s about. The boy respects the old man. He knows how brave and strong he is, no matter what the others think. The old man taught the boy everything he knows about fishing. The little boy loves him because the old man is a great guy, and he sees that.”

We talk about it some more. Our session is coming to an end. I tell them that I think Santiago displays grace under pressure in the face of impossible odds, and by doing so, wins the love and loyalty of the little boy, and fame as a great fisherman.

“It looks like it comes down to love and respect, fellas. He earned that with grace under pressure —doing the right thing—even though he probably couldn’t win.”

We played paper football for a couple minutes. Ruben kicked the winning field goal and then it was time to go back to the classroom.

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Like almost everything else there, the last day at El Puente took me by surprise. I arrived at the usual time on the last day of school and reported to Mr. Alvarez’s home room. Everyone was talking and spirits were high. I walked around the room and wished everyone a happy summer. Ah, youth. They were made beautiful by the joy they took in the possibilities of freedom.

At the end of home room, everyone grabbed their stuff and made to leave. What about the rest of the day? I was told that the last day was only a half day, and really, only half of that. Surprised, I took my position in the front of the school and watched everyone go out the door. Many of my favorites came over and fist bumped or gave me a hug.

I realized it was time to go. I wondered if I should go back to Mr. Conley’s room and say so long, but decided against it. I raised my hand to the people standing there and said, “Goodbye everyone. It’s been fun working with you.” As I headed for the door, my clumsy right foot caught on the rug and folded it over. Miss Morales came up and hugged me and said, “Thank you for everything, Jack,” and then went and fixed the rug. I took one last look around, smiled, and left.

Epilogue

My two-year contract with Americorps ended just as I was getting itchy to leave El Puente. I heard through the grapevine that there was an insurrection the year after I left. Miss Morales became a teacher, and one of the teachers became principal. The next year, El Puente closed from lack of students.

I saw El Puente kids everywhere. Sophia sat two seats down from me with her uncle at the DMV. We caught up for a while, and then went about our business. I saw Freddy on his bike one afternoon. He was uncharacteristically shy, but we talked and laughed and it was good to see him. I saw Ruben at Taco Bell as I was picking up lunch one day. He was back at Santa Barbara High. He still had that vibe of mystery and danger, while being at the same time just a big goofy kid.

On a layover in St. Louis, a young boy approached my wife and me and said that he had been at El Puente at the same time I was, though he hadn't been in one of my reading groups. I said thanks for saying hi and asked him where he was going. He was going back to Santa Barbara. Each of the kids seemed happy to see me and in this I was honored.

One day, about a year after I left El Puente, I stopped in a neighborhood convenience store to pick up a newspaper. As I approached the counter, there was my guy with the animal that would show in his face when he laughed. I said, "Hey man, how're you doing?" I was having one of those moments when you completely blank on someone's name. He was standing next to his manager, who was obviously training him to be a cashier. He said, "Doing good, Mr. Browne." You could see that he wasn't going to say any more because he was working. I couldn't leave it at that and said, "I'm sorry bro. I just can't remember your name." His eyes twinkled and he smiled that great smile of his and said, "My name Mario."