

MY YEAR IN CLASS D

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A Story

H U M B E R T O B O C A N E G R A

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PERHAPS it was a scheduling error and perhaps it wasn't. All I knew was that my schedule said I was to report to Mrs. Bridge's class beyond the far end of the open walkway - the infamous island portable. Mrs. Bridge was around 65 years of age - way beyond the retirement age of any teacher especially one that worked with the rowdies that lived around the low-income neighborhood that our elementary school was supposed to serve. I had heard both good stories about her and terrifying stories about her. It had always been difficult to verify the stories that came from that "room from beyond." It was as they used to say back then, "el cuarto de los locos." I was about to find out the truth because I knew the truth - was out there.

I knocked and without waiting for a response opened the door to find that Mrs. Bridge's class did not sit in neat rows like all the other classes but instead, the students sat in metallic folding chairs around five or six round tables haphazardly spaced about in the room. It seemed as if everyone was talking at the same time while Mrs. Bridge was giving some "one on one" instruction to a boy at her desk immediately to my right near the entrance.

A little girl named Marisol who was standing in front of the teacher's desk, saw me and began waving a pencil in front of Mrs. Bridge's nose to get her attention from the boy.

"Eh, Miss, mira!" the little girl said as she waved the pencil in front of Mrs. Bridge's face and then pointed it at me.

The heavy-set lady with hair as white as snow and neat bifocals looked up and saw me.

"Oh, hi, come on in,"

She took my paper.

"Let's see, Alberto, you were in the top-class last year with Mrs. Coffman. How did you go from being with the top group in Class A to my group in Class D?"

I shrugged my shoulders and was about to say something when Salvador, a heavy-set kid I knew from the previous year, stepped in between me and Mrs. Bridge.

"Hey, man, are you gonna be with us or what?"

His intrusive manner got Mrs. Bridge's attention, and she immediately reprimanded him.

"Hey, buttinski, why don't you mind your own business and let me handle this?"

"Ah, Miss, I just wanna know," countered a stubborn Salvador.

Marisol, the other little girl that had shaken the pencil in front of Mrs. Bridge's nose, shared her opinion of Salvador as well.

"Yeah, Salvador, you're a real buttinski. Let the Miss talk to him first, man."

"That's enough from both of you. Now go sit down - both of you," Mrs. Bridge commanded.

Turning to me, Mrs. Bridge smiled and wrote my name in her grade book.

"These kids are not like the ones you were with last year, Alberto. So just do your best and we'll see what happens," she concluded.

I smiled and went to sit down on a table where Jesus, a 15-year-old 5th grade student was sitting. He had come from Mexico the year before and he and my brother Rudy had become good friends the school year before.

He was reading a book about how some knight needed to slay a dragon to rescue a princess. The book was full of illustrations and when the knight slays the dragon with his sword, Jesus wondered aloud if dragons ever existed.

"Eh, tu crees en dragons?" he asked me.

"No, they never existed," I told him. "It's all make believe."

"Yo miro muchos dragons en stories," he said, "how can they not exist?"

"It's all a myth," I said.

He smiled as if he understood but I wasn't so sure he really had.

"Que quiere decir, eslay?" he asked as he pointed to the word slay.

"That means to kill something," I answered.

"Oh, orale," was all he said as he went back to reading.

I got the set of books that Mrs. Bridge had issued to me and began to write my name in the appropriate space. I really didn't do much for the rest of the morning and neither did anyone else in class.

All things considered, my first week went by smoothly and at a fast pace. I soon learned that what was routine and rigid instruction in class A with high-ranking students was nearly impossible in class D with students that had low attention spans.

In the higher classes I recall having to write individual book reports in a nice, neat fashion. In class D just keeping a student's interest long enough to finish reading a book as a class project was a challenge. Many of my classmates went home immediately after school to view telenovelas or popular comedies such as "El Chavo del Ocho", or "Chapulin Colorado" from the Mexican Television channels that were so prevalent in the air waves along the US-Mexican border.

I, however, watched reruns of "Gilligan's Island" plus such shows as "The Price Is Right" and "Family Feud".

My adjustment in Class D was not as difficult as it may have been for another student who didn't come from the surrounding low-income neighborhood. I had seen my new classmates at different times in different places around the neighborhood. I just hadn't had them for class in the previous years.

There was a chubby little girl named Consuelo whom I had seen in the summer picking tomatoes in Rio Grande City. Soon after school had ended the year before I had gone with my two older brothers to pick tomatoes with a neighborhood troquero. I climbed into the back of the large field truck very early on that June morning and saw Consuelo sitting alongside her mother and father deep in the truck's back end. It turned out to be a very hot day, and I remembered seeing tears in Consuelo's eyes when her father told her we would all be working until late in the day. Not only did we work all day that day but we worked until late in the afternoon every day. And Consuelo cried every day as well.

Another student I recalled seeing in my neighborhood was Alonzo. He was a hardheaded little kid whose mom could cuss up a storm as well as anyone else I had ever met. Alonzo lived in the rundown "Mi Casa Apartments" and once when I was taking a shortcut through the place, I heard a woman screaming loudly at someone who had obviously gotten her quite mad. I looked in the direction where the hollering was coming from and saw Alonzo creep out of a window with a torn screen. Just as he landed on the ground a hand reached out after him and grabbed him by the hair. It was his mom, and she shook his head back and forth as she uttered every cuss word in the book and more. Before letting him go she ordered him not to move from that very spot. By the time she came out of the apartment door (which had half the screen missing as well) Alonzo was running full speed toward the back alley. When his mom made it outside, she was carrying an old broom and was still very upset. She picked up some rocks and hurled them at Alonzo.

"Vas a ver cuando regresas," she hollered at him as she threw him another rock and then pulled back her unkempt hair after she threw the broom in the direction of her apartment's entrance.

Upon seeing me looking at her she angrily asked, "Y tu que ves? Vamonos de aqui!"

I left immediately and went home wondering what Alonzo had done to tick her off.

If life seemed tough at home for most of us it was a circus in class every single day. How Ms. Bridge could handle us I don't have any real idea. I just guess that she had worked with the class D kids for so long that she knew

what to do in every situation. She knew when to smile and when to get angry. She even knew when to give kids a hug, which she actually did quite often.

The mixture of kids that made up our class made for some interesting characters. From the hyperactive Salvador and Alonzo to the quiet and reserved pupils like Jesus and Myra. Both hardly ever uttered a word in class. One thing was certain though; humorous situations and events were bound to happen and unravel on an almost daily basis.

There was the time when the principal, Mr. McMillan, walked into our classroom and found us all reading a story called, "The House Beyond the Meadow." Mr. McMillan seemed impressed with what he saw. What he did not know, however, was that hardly anyone ever understood even half of what we were supposed to read. As a class we lacked comprehension skills. Sometimes it was due to the simple fact that much of the literature we read was written in the northern states, particularly the New England states. It was difficult to relate to the subjects we often read about.

Before walking out of the room Mr. McMillan praised the class for being so attentive and he asked if anyone could make a sentence with the word "meadow". After getting no response from anyone, the principal pointed at Julian, a kid who was always smiling in class, and asked him if he could come up with a sentence using the word meadow.

Julian gave a big smile as he rose and gave the following example, "In the Olympics if you win first place you can win a gold meadow."

Mr. McMillan's smile slowly disappeared from his face as he turned to face Mrs. Bridge. She had half a smile on her face too and when their eyes met, He said, "You're doing a fine job with these kids, Mrs. Bridge, keep up the good work." Without saying anything else he walked out of the class.

Another student, I don't remember who, patted Julian on the back when he sat down and said, "Man, that was good, ese,"

I put my head down on my book and giggled to myself. When I looked up again Mrs. Bridge was shaking her head and smiling. She did not bother to correct a happy Julian.

There was also the time before we broke for Thanksgiving vacation, and the school had been promoting a program called "Better Food for a Better Life." A health expert, our school nurse, stopped by our room and told us not to forget to eat fruits and vegetables along with our turkey. Well, the truth was that hardly anyone in our neighborhood ever ate turkey for Thanksgiving. Most of us ate fideo or rice and some beans with some nopalitos on the side. Our meat serving was usually chicken in mole and some canned meat such as Treet or canned wieners. And, of course, we always had atolé de arroz or capirotada for dessert.

After going through a lengthy explanation about the beneficial vitamins and minerals that certain fruits and vegetables provided, the nurse asked if anyone could tell her what valuable source of enrichment bananas provided for a healthy human body.

After getting no initial response from the class the nurse called a quiet girl named Natalia to see if she knew the answer. Just as Natalia stood up to answer, Salvador who was seated next to her, excitedly raised and waved his hand and blurted out, "I know, I know, it's plutonium!"

Before anyone else could say anything else Marisol frustratedly said, "Ah, buttinski, you're always talking out of turn!"

I don't know how Salvador came up with the word plutonium, since none of us had ever heard the word before. The nurse and Mrs. Bridge exchanged glances and shook their heads simultaneously.

"No, bananas are rich in potassium. Plutonium is used to make atomic bombs," said the nurse.

Marisol continued her barrage, "Oh, el buttinski wants to blow up toda la school, esta bien menso."

Salvador smiled a sheepish smile as Natalia turned to face him. She gave him a smile and sat down. I knew she didn't know the answer. She hardly spoke any English. Plus, Salvador had a crush on her, so I knew he didn't mind taking the fall for her.

Another time that one of my classmates made a minor blunder was a few weeks later when our music teacher, Mrs. Salas, had us singing "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." She asked if anyone had ever been on a sleigh ride.

Since it hadn't snowed in South Texas since the last ice age thousands of years before, none of us could say we had ever ridden on a sleigh. Almost as if this fact suddenly dawned on Mrs. Salas, she decided to simplify matters by breaking down the topic even further.

"Well, has anyone ever seen a sleigh or know what they're made of or anything?"

When no one responded, Mrs. Salas decided to call on my quiet friend, Jesus.

Jesus hesitated a little and so Mrs. Salas, in an attempt to help him out, said, "Give me a sentence telling what a sleigh is."

Even though no one had asked him to stand up Jesus did so and confidently said, "I want to go to China to eslay a dragon."

The first thing that came to my mind was, "Jesus and his darned dragon slaying warriors."

The rest of the class, however, was hollering and laughing. Mrs. Salas allowed a brief laugh to escape her mouth, but she quickly regained her composure and tried to save Jesus from any permanent embarrassment.

"Well, that's a correct usage of the word slay, spelled s-l-a-y but now I want a correct usage for the word sleigh spelled s-l-e-i-g-h.

Someone eventually got it right and everything was back to normal. Jesus later asked me why I hadn't told him there was another spelling and another meaning for a word sounding like slay. So, I told him about deer as in d-e-e-r and d-e-a-r. I also told him about h-e-r-d and h-e-a-r-d. He seemed to understand and after a while everything was forgotten.

By the time March rolled around I had gotten quite comfortable attending class in the portable classroom. Everything was fine and no one ever bothered us except for the time when Salvador got in a fight with a kid named Ramon.

Apparently, Salvador was doing his usual bragging after lunch when Ramon asked him why it was that he was in a special-ed. class if he was so smart. Salvador didn't like it so he told Ramon to, "shut up your face!"

Somebody told Ramon to push Salvador, which he did. Salvador did not want to fight so he backed off and everyone there started to call him chicken. And then somebody yelled out, "Eh, Ramon, mojale la oreja!"

That meant that Ramon was to moisten his fingers in his mouth and wet Salvador's ear as a sign of humiliation. When he attempted to do just that, Salvador, who weighed close to 200 pounds, pushed him away causing Ramon to fall and before he could get up Salvador climbed on top of him and held his hands down until 15-year-old Jesus told Salvador to let him up.

Ramon was so embarrassed that he went to the principal and told him that Salvador and the kid from Mexico (Jesus) had ganged up on him.

The principal threatened to call the police and the parents. When Mrs. Bridge was told the real story she went to the office and brought the boys back to our class in the portable building. She was not about to let the principal punish her innocent kids. We were her kids, and she watched over us like a mother hen.

In Mrs. Bridge's class I did not become an all-A student, but I did pass her class. As I think back, I don't recall a single academic thing I learned in her class. What I recall was the social, everyday kind of living education I received in her class.

She never humiliated anyone in her classroom for not knowing an answer or for not understanding an assignment. One of her favorite phrases (whenever anyone missed an answer) was, "That's okay dear, I know you'll get the next one."

It wasn't long before everyone in the class would repeat that phrase whenever anyone would answer any question incorrectly, "That's okay, dear, I know you'll get the next one." It became our class catch phrase.

By the end of the school year, we had all acquired much better social skills than we had when we first stepped into her classroom.

Even Salvador learned to raise his hand and wait to be called upon before speaking out. By the end of the year even Marisol stopped calling him buttinski and actually called him Salvador.

Since it was Mrs. Bridge who first called Salvador buttinski, she made it a point to call him up to the front of the classroom one day and apologized to him.

"Salvador, there was a time here in class when you would butt into everybody's business like there was no tomorrow. One day I called you a buttinski, a term I learned from my dad because I would often do the same thing as you used to do. But you have slowly grown to become one of my most mature and respectful students. I want to apologize to you and say I'm sorry for any hurt I may have caused you. Please accept my apology, sir."

Salvador smiled and gave Mrs. Bridge a hug and everyone in class clapped.

And then Mrs. Bridge pulled out a framed certificate and gave it to Salvador. It read:

To Salvador, my most improved student.

Reach for the stars, for there are no limits but the sky,

Again, everyone clapped and some even started calling him "sir".

Marisol even went so far as to even calling him "Sir Lancelot."

In this little world of ours, Mrs. Bridge had given us our very own celebrity. Even if it was only for the few weeks remaining in school.

Minor learning incidents went a long way in our class. Mrs. Bridge led by example as she encouraged us to always work on our social manners. Please, thank you, you're welcome, and I'm sorry, became common phrases in our classroom. I even began to use them at home.

All of us were promoted at the end of the year. As I recall, most of us learned what we could at our own pace. Jesus learned how to read in English, and it was Mrs. Bridge who had allowed him to learn at his own pace. By the end of the year, he was reading at 4th grade level. Not bad for a kid who started out the year at 1st grade reading level.

Salvador and Marisol got along well by the end of the year. It was even rumored that Marisol had developed a crush on him. Funny how things work out.

I'm sure we also picked up a few scraps of knowledge in each subject area. But isn't that what we picked up every year? A little bit of knowledge at school

combined with what knowledge we brought from home is what made us more complete individuals.

I guess the biggest difference Mrs. Bridge made in our lives is that she made us feel as if we belonged in school and not as interlopers in some classroom that was not designed to fulfill our educational needs.

Even though I was placed back in the "A" group the following year I would come to treasure that year with the "D" group forever. I no longer looked at them as slow learners, as I had before, but as my friends, simple as that.

Mrs. Bridge retired after that year. The portable building where she taught for many years was moved away to who knows where. One of my other teachers told me that Mrs. Bridge had taught for over 30 years. I was lucky - no I was blessed - to have been in her class before she moved on with her life.

No school, nor anything was named after her. She just seemed to have faded away. Well, maybe not completely.

After graduating from college, I went into the teaching field partly due to Mrs. Bridge's influence. I worked in a school near Houston where I felt I could hopefully make a difference. I asked for and was assigned the underachieving students. I figured that if I could just teach them some important fundamental social and academic skills, they might have a better chance at life.

Last year my principal was so impressed with my kids' progress that he granted my request to visit NASA with my class. It was a great trip for us all. However, it was something that happened there that made my trip a trip of a lifetime.

After touring the space center, I met one of the directors of the space program. It was big Salvador.

He had tried out for the astronaut program, but the rigors of the physical conditioning and exams had curtailed his plans. I hadn't seen him since high school, and we caught up with talk from back home. It turned out he had earned his doctorate and was living in Houston with his wife Marisol. Yes, that Marisol.

He invited my class into his office, which was very spacious and luxurious. It was adorned with the fanciest equipment that only a high-ranking individual can possibly merit.

On one wall were many models of rockets, satellites, and air ships, while on the opposite wall were the plaques and honors, he had received in his lifelong commitment to the agency. In the section where pictures with famous people were displayed, I noticed he had taken a picture with the last four presidents. Impressive, quite impressive.

Just as I was about to turn away and go look at the rocket models a simple little frame caught my eye. It was located right smack in the middle of the

wall where all the diplomas and degrees Salvador had earned through the years were.

I could hardly believe what I was looking at.

The old worn plastic frame, now held together by a few pieces of scotch tape, where Mrs. Bridge had inserted Salvador's certificate all those years before, now hung in the most important place of prominence of this high-ranking individual in NASA. I reread the message.

To Salvador, My Most Improved Student:

Reach for the stars, for there are no limits but the sky!"

"It's what drove me forward all these years," Salvador's voice said from behind me.

"I remember when she presented it to you," I said as I turned around to face him.

"Yeah, my mom showed it to the whole neighborhood," he smiled and spoke.

"Did you ever find out whatever became of Mrs. Bridge?" I asked.

"She wasn't offered a teaching contract for the following year after we were there. She never went back for any of her stuff either. As a matter of fact, she suffered a stroke at home and died in her bed the following year."

"How can that be," I asked, "she never ever missed a single day of school as far as anyone could remember.

"You don't understand," he added, "she died on the morning of the very first day of school."

I nodded my head and murmured, "Now I understand."

I said my goodbyes to my old friend soon afterward and rounded up my students to go back to school.

We were soon climbing aboard our bus and my kids' excited response was evident in their comments.

"Man, this was a lot of fun," said a little boy named Jose Angel, "Gracias, Sir!"

I smiled and said, "You're welcome!"

"If we hurry up," interrupted the bus driver, "we can make it back to school before lunch."

"Aw, man, do we have to go right back," asked Norma Linda, a usually very quiet little girl. Her comment caught me by surprise. "I've never been to the mall. I was really hoping we'd go there."

"Guess what, Norma? We are going the mall to see how business today relies so much on new technology," I said.

"Really?" Norma Linda asked in an incredulous way.

The kids around her began to clap.

The bus driver gave me a puzzled look, so I walked over to where he was and informed him it was all right.

“But they’ll miss lunch.”

“No, lunch today is on me and Mrs. Bridge.”

Again, the bus driver gave me a puzzled look.

“Have you ever heard of an inside joke?” I asked.

He nodded his head.

“Well, this is an inside story. You needed to be there to understand.”

The bus driver smiled as he turned the bus around.

“We’re going to the mall,” an excited Norma Linda yelled, “I can’t believe it; we’re going to the mall!”

Everyone on the bus clapped and cheered loudly as we headed to our new destination. As we got off the bus at the mall, I could have sworn I saw Mrs. Bridge’s identical twin sister walk by, smile at us, wink at me, and continue behind the school bus where she slowly faded into the parking lot.

— *the end* —