

About My First Year of Teaching in Las Vegas

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There are refugee camps in Las Vegas.

I know this because my students live there.

A boy from Afghanistan pretends to read. When I help him, he covers his face with his small hands, dirt underneath his fingernails, and a scar shaped like the moon above his right knuckle. He tells me about Afghanistan, how he worries about his grandmother's store and wonders if the streets to school are the same. He laughs when I tell him he's smart. He asks for Takis because he likes the burn in his throat, the numbness on his tongue and the heat against the inner lining of his mouth.

A girl from Colombia is chronically absent. She suffers from headaches and nightmares and will ask me for things like a pencil or a tissue. When she writes, she takes her time with the curves of the letters *S* and *M*. "My favorite letters," she says, as she writes the letters in her name. I tell her good job because I don't know when I'll see her again. Her paper is blank except for her name, written neatly with big and small lines and hearts.

A boy from Ecuador only speaks Spanish. The words come out of him quickly, like a rolling waterfall, spilling out his mouth. His caramel-colored hands move in different directions, soaring like a butterfly, as he speaks to me in a language I barely understand. I hear words like: *divertido, gusto, partida*. He claps and chuckles as we play Uno and let the deck of cards fan across our faces. I always let him win because he wants to win the prize- a watermelon grape Rancher, so he can suck it between his teeth and stain his tongue.

A girl from Kenya listens to English videos. She wants to tell her friends about the lights and the tall buildings in Las Vegas. She plans to show them pictures of the red mountains, the wide streets, the ice cream cone as long as her foot. When she watches the videos, she draws a picture of her family and friends. She uses the darkest shade of brown crayon and likes how her family is the same color as some mountains in Las Vegas. When she points at them, her face glows like a strawberry moon.