

Strawberry Thoughts

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Today marks the start of WA¹, basically a round of tests with results threatening our annual aggregate. June holidays are round the corner, but it's no secret that there will be a tonne of homework waiting! Argh, I can't wait for PSLE to be over in October when we can officially play!

Mrs Gomez walks into the classroom.

"Good morning class! I have an announcement to make. Lessons are cancelled today." Her voice sounds like she is shaking a little inside. She pauses and looks intently at the whole class. I hold my breath. "We received news from Henry's parents that he has passed away. The school has decided to postpone WA to next week. We are shifting the class to the Computer Room now. After that, those who are close to Henry, please come forward to see me."

What?!!!!

My mind goes blank. My heart feels like it has stopped. I turned to look at Jayden next to me, taking in the many faces of wide-eyed disbelief and shock.

"Teacher, what happened to Henry?"

"How did he die?"

"Can we visit him?"

"We don't have the details. No, we are not supposed to visit him. Come on, class, let's start moving."

Like clueless but compliant little chicks, we are shooed to the Computer Room to sit in random groups. Jayden, Vishnu and Chris, who are usually with Henry during recess, speak to Mrs Gomez and they are taken somewhere. Before Jayden disappears into the corridor, he mouths to me that they are going to see Mr Ken, the school counsellor.

I am glad we are left with nothing to do. I have too many questions. What could have happened to Henry? Sudden acute sickness? Traffic accident? Did he drown, although he doesn't like to swim? Hit in the head by a basketball while playing his favourite game? It is not likely because it's the eve of WA, his parents won't allow him to do anything else other than study. Now that I think of it, Henry seemed a little less of his

spirited self lately. Maybe he committed suicide? Hmmm... likely. The adults are always super secretive about such things. They always think we shouldn't know.

My cousin Isabelle lost her best friend Annette last year. She told me she received a WhatsApp message from her that read 'Thank you for your love and friendship the past 6 years since we met in P3'. The message was sent about 1am. When Isabelle woke up in the morning, she called and called but there was no answer from Annette. When she got to school, it was something similar to what happened to me today – her class was shifted to another room, she was referred to the counsellor. All the while, no one mentioned how Annette passed away and she didn't get to visit Annette to say goodbye.

"It was obvious, wasn't it?" Isabelle remarked and I agreed. 'I cried every night because I missed her so much. I wished I had talked to her more about how to not feel depressed. I wished most that I could go see her at the wake and bid her farewell.'

Vishnu is the first to come back to the Computer Room. He looks like there are too many emotions in him: sadness, pain, heartbreak, shock, puzzlement, disbelief... A few of us take turns to give him a hug.

"Mr Ken didn't want to say anything," he finally says. "I think he committed suicide."

"I think so too. Otherwise the adults wouldn't be hush-hush about it."

"Yeah! why won't they just say? Why do they think that we cannot handle?"

Chris is back next. "They just won't say anything. Just keep asking if I am alright. How am I alright if I cannot visit him? I won't believe he is dead until I see him at the wake."

"Why did Henry want to do this? He still have us what. We can talk it out."

"Haiz... Why did Henry think that death is a solution?"

"Yeah! Death is never a solution!"

"Chris, can you talk to his parents and let us go to the wake?"

I really don't know or care who is talking. The room is filled with a huge sense of loss and sadness, and so many questions. Why didn't Henry reach out to any one of us? Memories of our foolish moments, goofy jokes, play dates and birthday parties since P1 float around my mind. I recall him giving me a hand when I fell during PE class. He would have been such a great guy if he had stuck around.

Isabelle's words rang in my head repeatedly. I guess the same is going to happen to us. Especially since we are even younger than Isabelle and Annette.

I wish the adults trusted us more. I wish they could talk to us about what to do, when we notice a friend feeling sad, maybe even depressed. I want to be there to say goodbye.

They can't treat us like strawberries just so they can label us as such.

We are not strawberries.

Foot notes

¹WA Weighted Assessment

²P1 Primary 1

³P3 Primary 3