

Perspectives



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Maybe I Should Answer This One

Jack Viola

The racket pounded in my ears as I walked down the hall through the throng of shouting boys. Every now and then I would hear one stop mid-sentence and watch me until I was safely out of earshot; others didn't even bother and just went on talking about what they were going to drink on Saturday night. I couldn't care less what they were saying. I continued down the corridor until I reached the stairs. Down the stairs, through another overcrowded corridor and I was at my office. I unlocked the door and bumped it with my shoulder to move the rusted hinges.

As I looked into the office I saw my desk covered in correction papers that needed to be done. I slumped into the chair and dragged one of the tests down in front of me. Just as I was thinking how long a night it was going to be, I heard a knock on my office door. 'Just a second' I called out from my desk and in the muffled reply I picked out the voice of the most annoying student of all time. His name was Pat and he was here basically every afternoon with some problem or another. Always complaining about the B+ I gave him and insisting that *his* work deserved an A. But you had to feel sorry for the kid. Every class the other boys made sure there were no gaps in their ranks, no spare desk in the row for him to sit at. These, however, were not the thoughts going through my head after a long day. Before I'd even thought through what I was doing I had my bag packed and over my shoulder and a leg

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outside my office's only window. I swivelled and made the short jump to the lawn below. I loved having a ground-floor office. I shouted back into the office 'Come back tomorrow' and slammed the window shut behind me. I heard the words even through the window as he opened the door saying, 'But sir, it's urgent' to an empty office. This was either the greatest escape since Stalag Luft III or I was going to be in a lot of trouble tomorrow.

The next morning on the drive to school all I could think about was how stupid I'd been jumping out my office window. What if Pat told the principal? I'd be gone for sure. I pulled up in the teachers' car park and trudged to my office. I bumped the door and it swung open to the pile of uncorrected papers and I saw a little yellow post-it note sitting on top of it all. 'Please come to Mr Dune's office as soon as you receive this.' Mr Dune was the school's principal and a world-class pain in the ass. If he called you to his office, you knew you were in for a rough day. For a couple of minutes I stood stock still and cursed myself for not locking my office door before I jumped out the window. On the journey from my wing to the east wing, where Mr Dune's office was, I said goodbye to all the things that I saw since I was sure this would be my last day at the school.

I arrived at Mr Dune's office and turned the doorknob. Unlike my office door, Mr Dune's swung open easily and without a creak. Dune was sitting at a large, stately desk and looked up from his portable TV as I walked in. His face was solemn as he motioned for me to take the seat opposite him.

'Mr Cruiser,' he began, 'This is concerning your student Pat Highland.'

As soon as he said the name my heart dropped and I knew I was fired.

'His mother called the school this morning to inform us that he was found yesterday afternoon in his bedroom with his wrists slit. An ambulance was called, but he died on the way to the hospital.'

If my heart had dropped with the mention of his name, at this news it hit the floor and shattered.

‘Now an official announcement will be made at the school assembly tomorrow, but I want you to break the news to the boys in your class today.’ Before I could answer he continued. ‘Well thank you. I think you’d better head out now and think about what you’ll say to them.’

With that he turned his portable TV back on and his eyes dropped to watch the screen. I looked up and realised I was free to go. I got up and left without a sound.

I walked down the hallway in stunned horror at my own actions. What if he hadn’t been coming to talk about one of his marks? What if he’d had a serious problem and I was his last hope for help? And I jumped out a window and ran to my car. Brilliant!

So there I stood, in front of a room of teenage boys staring up at me, wondering what I was going to say. My conscience wouldn’t let me pad the news, to soften the blow for the boys, so I just came out with it. ‘Pat Highland has killed himself.’ For the rest of the class no-one moved, no-one spoke, it seemed that no-one dared even breathe. I saw the same shocked guilt in every one of their eyes as I felt on mine. We were the culprits and we would punish ourselves.



The bell went and a new set of boys sprinted out the door to another sunny afternoon. I packed up my gear and walked out into the corridor. As I walked past every conversation stopped until I was out of earshot. I made my way across to the east wing and my office door opened without a creak. I sat down at my stately desk, covered in unmarked papers, and I heard a knock at the door. I looked at the window and thought, ‘Maybe I should answer this one.’



Jack Viola wrote this in 2008 when he was in Year 11 at Xavier College in Victoria.