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## TRAGEDY IN THE CLASSROOM

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This is a small story about the murder of one of my colleagues at a small state school in the West. (You may have heard about the incident. It made the wire services at least once, although the death of an academic in a small Western town is hardly good copy in New York or Baltimore.) I share the story here because my colleague's death is important to *all* academics—and writing teachers in particular. In many ways, his is our life. His are our concerns. But his is, hopefully, not our fate.

I did not know Jack Filby personally. His death, in fact, gave me the opportunity to teach at the University for the first time. I inherited his office with two shelves of old student notebooks, a drawer of old papers, and underneath the desk, two cardboard apple boxes of old letters and memos to various people, including many of his students. He was an incredible letter writer and apparently encouraged many of his students to develop long-term relationships with him through various letters and memos passed back and forth during and between classes.

Of the papers, by far the most important were those that related to Melvin Potts, a thirty-seven-year-old student enrolled in one of Jack's introductory English 110 classes. From these papers, I was able to piece together at least part of Jack's story, and just this year, I had the opportunity to interview Melvin himself at a state correctional facility in Boise, Idaho, where he was serving time for some recent embezzlement and mail fraud. To my surprise, he was particularly candid with me and even instructed his mother to allow me to look through some of the boxes of his life stored in her garage.

From the notes I originally found in Jack Filby's files and related memos I discovered in Potts's private papers, I have been able to piece together the framework for the drama that follows. In developing this story, I have chosen to include large chunks of the actual correspondence between Filby and Potts as their actual language provides a stark reality to the actual events.

Sometime in the fall of 1982, Melvin Potts wrote Jack Filby his first note:

Dear Professor Filby:

I do not know if you recognize me from this but I am [in] your English class—the old guy with the hat that says liquid fertilizer. I am named M. Potts. The M stands for Melvin. I am coming to school finally after much hardship which I do not want to talk about it but I have decided to go again because I know I can do better than when I did go before. But that is not why I am writing this now what I need to know is when do we start the grammar? I like this sentence combining alright but you said we will do real [writing] and I want to do it so well and right now and I will try so hard that you will see.<sup>1</sup>

I have no evidence that Filby did anything special to encourage Potts to write him, although at this time he did receive a number of letters from other students, notably two love letters and an invitation to a wedding. In keeping then, with what appears to be a strong personal commitment to his students, Filby wrote Potts back immediately:

Dear Mr. Potts—

I'm so glad to hear from you! Come in and we can talk your problems out. I know you feel small and not all that competent but all you need is some more process and a bit of invention and some sentence play to go with your natural horse sense. Stick with it and you will flex your sentence muscles and write big fat good-looking sentences. I want you to have fun. Writing is fun, fun, fun. Like bouncing balls and bowling. And you can have fun as you grow and mature into the writer I know is deep inside you.

From here, the correspondence continued for several weeks with Potts evidently demanding more structure and less process and Filby firmly yet professionally refusing to give in. You can get a sense of Filby's problem in the following exchange:

Professor,

I am not thinking that you are not giving me drills that I need. The drills you have are ok but they are all the same. When will you give me some drills over the rules? If I work hard and memorize, I know I can do it. Maybe you could show me how to use commas? Then I can write my perfect sociology paper.

p.s. Do you have a handbook I can look at?

Dear Mr. Potts:

I cannot of course *guarantee* that you'll write big daddy papers. But believe me, if you take pages and pages of those baby sentences and put those baby sentences with the other baby sentences, you will make bigger and bigger sentences until whee! you'll make momma and poppa sentences. I want you to hear in your little brain the rhythms

<sup>1</sup>Note in all subsequent correspondence, I have corrected the spelling and made other necessary changes to make Potts's notes easier to read.

of your stylistic options; I want you to grow and gain power and feel like the adult you are on the outside.

I cannot impress upon you the importance of your age—by the time you were a little child six years old, you had a brain with little sentences in it. Believe me. You still have those little sentences in your head. I can make you feel good about your writing if you just let me have a chance.

Dear Professor,

I have been practicing with baby sentences put with other baby sentences and I have got a real nursery going.

I have tried to be sincere and happy about my writing too, but the harder I try the more and more it seems like I am wasting my time. You know that I have much to learn and I am in a hurry. Actually, too, I want to learn how to lie and cheat with my sentences soon so I can get a good job too.

I do not want to tell you this, but I *must* because it is causing me to dislike what I am doing, which is, that I do not see that I am going to be able to write sociology any time soon.

For several weeks, Filby seems to have tried to turn Potts away from the practical, the mundane. At one point he tries to bolster Potts's flagging self-confidence and build on his strengths:

I liked your story about the dead squirrel you saw in the street. I can see you are getting stronger every day.

At another, he tries more forcefully to steer Potts away from English and Theme Writing:

You ask good questions and I am sure you wouldn't ask them if you didn't really feel they were important. But they are beginners' questions. Bear with me. I'll have you loving writing any day now. Do you write in your journal every day? It is a shame that you have to write that paper in sociology. Have you asked your teacher if you can turn in a short story instead?

Yet despite Filby's personal concern for Potts's success as a writer and human being, Potts appears to show signs of increasing, almost adolescent frustration. His reply to his professor even hints at violence:

I do not think my sociology professor likes short stories and I want to punch you in the mouth. When do we learn about nouns and verbs? I think they will help me to write better.

I do not want any more warm fuzzies and smiley faces on my papers as I want As. I feel like taking my warm fuzzy and stuffing it in your nose.

Faced with such irrational behavior, Jack seems to have responded coolly and professionally:

I liked your last note. It was ALIVE and REAL. Keep it up! I thought the last assignment you wrote about killing your English professor was full of life and honest, brilliant strokes. The section where you stuck your teacher in the ribs with a knife fashioned out of free writing exercises was ingenious, if not totally loose loose LOOSE!  
WOW!

This might have marked the high point of their relationship. For some reason, Potts seems to have become increasingly belligerent and sullen, and while Filby does his best to keep things

under control, the situation rapidly gets out of hand. One exchange is particularly notable:

Dear Prof.

I have found a book with real drills in it and I would like to show it to you before I beat your nose black and blue.

Mel—

If all teachers would make you feel good with your work, you'd feel good. And I would be less threatening to you. We must change attitudes about life. All of us. Come in. You *can* learn. You must get it into your little head that not everyone *sees* you like I do, but they **MUST!** Progress is slow and you must have patience, patience, **PATIENCE!** I do not think I can emphasize that too much. With progress comes inner strength. And with inner strength, inner muscle, comes Sociology.

Come in. We need to talk about how to write for that sonofabitch who teaches Sociology. I think if we sit down and analyze him and see what makes him tick, we'll beat the shorts off his next assignment.

Dear Professor Jack.

I am sorry that I got mad for you doing a job. I appreciate our talk about sociology. But I have been thinking. I am sure that knowing that my sociology professor is a wheedling mealy mouthed Republican who is sleeping with the department secretary is important but how do I apply that to my next sociology? I do not think that I can begin that with that little joke about morons and fags, either.

I have no idea what the jokes are that Potts refers to, but it is clear from the context that Filby has gone out of his way to influence his student's life. As he writes back:

I know that you will not really understand but I must say this anyway: don't get so uptight. Life is not going to end because of Sociology. Let your mind out to wrap around your thoughts—bring in your life to make it **PERSONAL**—play to the sonofabitch's weakest point—make him pant to read your next page. Make him sweat to get to your next point!

But by now, despite Filby's sincere encouragement, Potts evidently failed to pick up the ball and run with it. A short time later, Potts summed up in one sentence what must have been his overwhelming problem:

I have failed the sociology.

I have no record of what was going on in Filby's head at this time. Certainly he must have been deeply frustrated by Potts's failure to come to grips with himself and sociology. But Filby seems to have done his best to respond and continue his honest encouragement, even though he must have realized that things were no longer in his control. His encouragement is, in fact, almost frantic in its essential force:

Have you been free writing like we've been practicing? Are you opening your mind and letting the ideas flow forth in rivers of sound and energy and fury? I want you to feel your own *ideas* punching *you* in the nose. To hell with sociology. I am concerned with your thinking . . . with the process of your *thinking*. The best kind of writing comes from a soul that is tuned into the joys of creation. You want to be loose loose **LOOSE**. I can tell you want to retreat into yourself. Don't do it. When you are writing automatically,

when you are acting like all *great* writers, you will be great. Believe me!!!

Certainly Filby was under considerable pressure. Potts apparently began to threaten him and at one point, told him "I have bought a gun with six big bullets." Yet even then, Filby tried to respond with wit and spirit:

Your writing gains power and authority every day! Your concerns are my concerns and I think we can make the most of your inner drive and spirit.

After this note, the record begins to fall apart. At some point, Filby apparently began to give Potts some workbook drills that made Potts overjoyed:

Thank you for the drills today. I think I will become perfect as long as I keep on working on them. I will put in 6 hrs tonight. And tomorrow night, too.

And Jack continued his encouragement, even though he must have realized how much he was selling himself out:

Hey Big Guy—

I hoped you'd see the work you did as rewarding! Believe me I think the drills will do it! If you do enough of them, you will be able to do them like lightning. It's only a matter of practice and time before you can take all those baby sentence parts and put them with other baby sentence parts until whee!!! big baby! and then big momma! and big **POPPA!**

There is a note of sadness in that last "POPPA" even though Potts's next—and apparently final—note to his teacher is full of intense optimism and joy:

Dear Professor Sir:

I do not want you to think that I have anything against you, but I must tell you that I am going to drop your course soon. I have just got back my last paper from the mealy-mouthed Republican sociologist and he *does* seem to understand my flow of ideas now: He says so long as I keep my mouth shut about him and her and he would help me all he could. And he wants the negatives after school's out.

I know it is not your fault. But I have other things now to do besides English. Drills are so long and they are all the same. I have always admired English teachers and how they can turn a word into another with the point of their pen. But progress is slow and I do not have very much time. I must succeed or I have to get on to another job. I thank you for your help and I know I will be able to apply my drills someplace on my own. Again, I want to thank you. I suppose that if I was 10 yrs ago I would not think like I do right now but now that I do, I will see you later.

I have no record of what, if anything, Filby said or wrote to Potts after this. But certainly, Potts's strength of purpose and budding sense of control clearly show through here in his relaxed unself-conscious, vigorous prose.

Unfortunately, Filby was unable to capitalize on Potts's growing sense of personal well-being and mental power. A short time later, he was dead, shot through the chest by a large caliber bullet. The police, of course, picked Potts up and questioned him intensely. But, while they felt that Potts had sufficient motives for killing Filby, they had to release him when the wife of a certain mealy-mouthed Republican sociologist turned her husband in and made a small splash as a discontented spouse.

Some may claim that Melvin Potts had nothing to do with Filby's death, that Filby was a fool who could have met his fate from any number of slip-ups in his personal relations and pedagogical technique. But I would point out a fact none of us should overlook: certainly Filby would have *lived longer* if Potts hadn't intruded on his life, if Potts hadn't tried to take his education into his own hands. And perhaps that is the most important point for all of us: if we want to live longer, more rewarding lives, we ought to watch out for the Melvin Potts's of this world who can intrude in our lives, try to tell us what is good for them,

call attention to their self-centered restlessness, and try to make us worry about their unreasonable skepticism, outspoken demands, theory-free stubbornness, desire for immediate satisfaction, and fear of life. Some of my colleagues suggest that we might begin with a Department policy banning all students over thirty-five years of age from class, and I would heartily support such a plan. But in the meantime, we would all do well simply to ignore all those students who seem to want to know too much too fast in the wrong way.

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