

Legend:

Descriptions of places and behaviours

Inner thoughts

Place	Descriptions
Typical classroom scenario	<p>A thick layer of heat hung heavily in the classroom. The humidity was getting to us. We were fidgeting restlessly, clicking our pens in frustrated boredom. As Ms Tan continued scribbling Math formulas on the whiteboard, we scrolled through our phones underneath our desks, heads bent in secrecy.</p> <p>For a few seconds, we heard silence. Looking up from our phones, we saw that Ms Tan had turned to face us. Her eyes flashed with quiet rage, her mouth pursed into a disapproving line. She closed the cap on the marker, walked over to the teacher's desk and snapped the textbook shut. Heaving a deep sigh, she began to pack her things at a furious speed. Her body trembled slightly as she stood in front of the class again, her left arm carrying thick sets of prelim practice papers. In her 50s, Ms Tan appeared relatively healthy for her age. But in this instance, she looked vulnerable and frail.</p> <p>"I am truly disappointed in all of you," her low voice quivered. Before she left the classroom, she stared directly at me with a pained look.</p> <p>We looked guiltily at each other, knowing that we were in part responsible for souring her mood. Did something happen to Ms Tan? Where was her usual chirpy self?</p>
Exam-taking scenario	<p>Bags were lined up outside the main corridor. While some students were anxiously flipping through thick sheets of notes, eager to fully utilize every last second before the exams began, others speculated about the test topics while predicting their poor performances.</p> <p>As the students settled in their seats five minutes before the exams, the atmosphere in the classroom was tense and solemn. Despite the teachers' reassurances that their grades do not define their future, the students understood the immediate consequences of not doing well.</p> <p>Each of them had their own rituals when it comes to managing stress - some drew sharp breaths with deep exhales, some lined up their stationery in neat rows like soldiers preparing artillery for the</p>

	<p>battlefield, while others simply clasped their hands and stared resolutely at the whiteboard.</p> <p>"We have five minutes to the start of the exam. Can I invite the class to look through your papers to ensure that there are no missing pages," Mr Lim's low and solemn voice rang through the quiet classroom.</p>
Argument with a classmate scenario	<p>The chair screeched as Mandy stood up furiously and marched up to me.</p> <p>"Stand up!" She smacked hard on my desk, which was marked with our crimes of vandalism.</p> <p>I knew that look. It was the one she gave to those she felt had betrayed her trust.</p> <p>She leaned into my face, her hot, coffee-stained breath stinging my cheeks. Her eyes were glistening, red flecks of veins showing through the white. Had she been crying? Her eyebags looked darker and heavier than it usually did. Startled, I took a step back and almost fell.</p> <p>"I will not forget what you did," she hissed menacingly at me. Sherlyn and Tina looked away immediately when I tried to make eye contact. Of course, it was always safer to be on Mandy's side even if she had been in the wrong. Gaining Mandy's attention and affection was like winning the lottery - it depended on luck, and was not something that you could earn through loyalty or favours. Equally, losing Mandy's trust was as unpredictable as the lightning. No one could anticipate who would be struck out next.</p>
A blissful/touching moment with your loved ones	<p>The rain was thin and light. You could barely see it until you focused hard enough at the blank space mid-air. Then, you will see the silvery, sun-lit flakes falling silently, unnoticed.</p> <p>I walked home in the sticky humidity, my heart heavy with dread. I had just received my prelim results earlier and it was unexpectedly poor. I had studied intensely for the exams and had sincerely wanted to do well. However, the prelim exams were surprisingly difficult. The questions were more abstract and complex than the ones I attempted in practice papers. While I appreciated my teachers' intentions to stretch our potential in the last months leading up to the O levels, I wished they understood how demoralising it could be for their students.</p> <p>My stomach lurched as I imagined the crestfallen look on my parents' faces. They had been</p>

spending hefty sums on my tuition classes and buying up pirated assessment papers from the second-hand bookstores at Bras Basah. **I hated disappointing them, especially since I knew that they pinned high hopes on me.** I turned up the volume of my music to drown out the anxious and critical voices flooding my head.

Taking a deep breath, I braced myself for the worst as I stepped through the front door. The living room was dark, with the curtains drawn shut. This is strange. My parents had texted earlier in the family's Whatsapp chat that they were home.

"Mom? Dad? Are you home?" **My questions were answered with deafening silence.**

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY ANGELA!" **Two familiar voices boomed from the kitchen,** accompanied by the loud snaps and bursting confetti from party poppers. My mother carefully carried a candle-lit, mango cream cake to my face.

"Make your wish before blowing out the candles!" It was almost amusing that my parents looked more excited than I did. **They smiled expectantly at me. My dad placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze as I recovered from the surprise.**

We sat around our dining table, savouring the sweet and dense cream of this fruity cake. **I had been so caught up with studying for the prelims I had completely forgotten about my birthday. I was touched at my parents' gesture, but this was going to be a bittersweet celebration.**

As I reached for the report card in my bag, my mom held my arm and stopped me.

"We know you tried your best. It will be alright," **I have never heard her speak so gently before. I began to cry immediately, choked up with gratitude and relief.**