

## *Ignorance Training*

When he spoke, Jeremy Stencil's big hands were like two American flags commanding instant attention.

Raising his left hand to about half-mast, he began:

"Good evening. Welcome to the Ignorance Training Seminar. It sounds ironic to teach ignorance but, I assure you, anything is possible. Before we begin, how many of you have never read an entire novel? Let's see a show of hands."

"Excuse me sir," a young man spluttered from the third row. "Is this a joke?"

Twice Stencil's nose twitched, causing his thick-rimmed glasses to dance above his eyebrows. It was his only sign of perturbation. "I see no hands, so I assume you've all read a novel."

"I asked you sir," the young man stood up, "if this is a joke."

Removing the thick glasses, Stencil lowered resentful eyes to the intruder. "Millions of people have never read a novel, and I'm simply asking if any are here in this room. Does that sound amusing?"

"Yes." The young man was perspiring like sudden bad weather. His neck became slick as a seal's. His pockets were full of nervous fingers.

"Would you care to tell the group what's so funny?"

"That's just it. There is no group. There's no one here except you and me."

The instructor's shirt appeared to stiffen. Like an academic cowboy in a one-sided duel he moistened his lips, ready to fire. The victim cowered, bobbing his head side to side as Stencil approached.

"What's your name?"

"Scott Cooper."

Stencil glanced around the room, a small room inside the Holiday Inn. He stretched his arms emphatically. "Mr.

Cooper, these people have paid to hear me speak, not to hear you interrupt. Is that clear?"

"But there's nobody else here! I'm the only one."

Back at the podium, the instructor said:

"My seminars have always been popular. This one is no exception."

Opening the black book, he called roll.

"Scott Cooper."

"Here."

Stencil closed it and put it aside.

The big hands, Scott saw, trembled with a kind of electric imbalance. If not for the sixty-five dollars he had paid, Scott would have run out the door right then.

"I'd like a volunteer to tell me why they enrolled in the course. Let's see . . . How about Mr. Cooper?"

"If there are so many others here, why not ask one of 'em?"

Stencil checked his watch. "I have two hours to wait."

Sweat dropped from Scott's armpits to his sides, as he slumped in his chair defiantly. He heard footsteps in the hall of the hotel, tapping like seconds on a clock. An evening breeze caused the Venetian blinds to shudder like madness up a spine. He thought he was going insane. He talked almost involuntarily.

"I signed up because of my girlfriend and my buddies. They all say I'm complicated and depressed. It's true. I don't mix well; I'm too deep for people. I've done too much reading and thinking. I've alienated myself with my intellect; otherwise I'd fit in. My girlfriend is beautiful and I hate myself for being bored with her."

"So you want to become stupid just like her."

"I prefer the word 'innocent.' She isn't corrupted or depressed she's—"

"She's stupid Cooper. And you'll be stupid, too."

Scott turned away with chagrin. He was so ashamed to sound so prideless and weak.

"Tell me what books you've read."

"Novels mostly. Kurt Vonnegut's, J.D. Salinger's . . ."

"How do you expect to relate to people when you read that crap? Their ideas are poison. They'll get you ques-

tioning things, intellectualizing, and unable to watch network television. If you must read, read gossip magazines. Gossip is the fiction of the people. As Laverne herself once said, 'C'mon Squiggy, get with it!'

"Laverne from the T.V. show?"

Pacing wildly in front of the empty chairs, Jeremy Stencil said:

"That goes for everyone. I want you all to get with it!"

If Stencil was insane, he was the most organized lunatic Scott had ever seen. His gestures were smooth, his tone so persuasive—Scott envisioned the roomful of students when he tried. They were there: colorless, blurred, but practically alive. Scott's second stage of sweat smeared out, as it always did when he thought about it, making the old sweat stale and offensive.

"Mr. Cooper, are you related to Gary Cooper the actor?"

"Gary Cooper? Of course not."

"You don't say 'of course not.' You say 'no, but I wish I were.' Ignorant people like being related to famous actors."

Scott guessed what Sissy, his innocent, gorgeous girlfriend was up to. Probably trying to paraphrase her Valentine's card, he thought. I can't get down to her level. It's inconceivable. But hopefully, I'll learn to simplify . . .

"Are you paying attention?"

"No. I was—"

"Splendid! Thinkin' 'bout that void out there. It's O.K. Everything is O.K." Stencil clasped his big hands together, congratulating himself for this new revelation in the field of ignorance.

Everything is O.K.

\*

To Alvin Bungard, life was hardship, and each day was an interruption of sleep. He felt this way because of his excruciating shyness.

For years, he felt too shy to answer his telephone. Writing and receiving letters was the only way Alvin could

endure communicating. Even his parents, though they lived three blocks away, had to converse with him through the mail.

Alvin could afford to live in isolation because of the money he had made on an invention. He had invented an electric fly-swatter that vacuumed up the flies after crushing them. He spent many hours using this machine.

Life became unbearable. Alvin tried a “Shyness Clinic,” which did not help. On another spurt of courage, he tried “Touch and Tingle Therapy.” It made him vomit. Suicide seemed inevitable until he read an ad in the newspaper.

**HAVING PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS?  
IT COULD BE THAT YOU'RE TOO SMART  
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THE IGNORANCE TRAINING SEMINARS  
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Alvin Bungard enrolled in time for the second session. After class, he approached Scott Cooper.

“What did I miss last week?” he asked in a painful, tiny voice.

“You didn’t miss a thing. Don’t you remember what Mr. Stencil said? Nothing matters.”

“I’d still like to know what went on,” Alvin explained, looking bashfully at the ground.

“Well, it was pretty jocular—I mean lightweight—compared to tonight.”

Alvin panicked. “Listen, could you write down the details and mail ’em to me? Here, I’ll give you a stamp.”

After the fifth and final seminar, Alvin stared directly into Scott’s eyes. “I’m cured,” he said.

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Alvin’s mother was the hostess of the party. “The guest

of honor will be here soon," she announced.

Without any sign of sweat, Scott Cooper looked at Sissy, his innocent, gorgeous girlfriend.

Sissy smiled into his vacant eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Scott asked Alvin.

"O.K. Everything is O.K."

The two ignorance graduates helped themselves to hors d'oeuvres, and went into the den to watch T.V.

"I can't wait to meet him," Sissy said to Alvin's uncle. "He's done such nice things for Scott. Since the seminars, me and Scott have gotten along so nice."

"As for Alvin," the uncle said, "that fellow transformed him from a sheep, into a human being."

The guest of honor arrived. Alvin's relatives applauded. In a formal black suit, Jeremy Stencil circled the living room, shaking hands and gathering praise.

"I love seminars," Alvin's mother said to Stencil. "I've taken seminars on self-hypnosis, sex and power, and sewing. Next week, I'm taking a seminar on 'how to give seminars.' I plan to —"

"That's very interesting, Mrs. Bungard," Stencil interrupted. "I suggest you remove that newspaper from the table. It may be detrimental to the relatives. That fireplace looks like a good place for it."

Mrs. Bungard did not object, as he tossed the newspaper into the blazing fire.

"What are you watching, boys?" Stencil asked, moving into the den.

"*Three's Company*," they replied in unison.

"That Jack is some kidder, isn't he?" the guest of honor said, eyeing the heavily stocked bookshelves. "Alvin, get me a cardboard box."

Mr. Bungard came in a few minutes later. "Mr. Stencil, I was — what are you doing to my library?"

"I don't think you'll be needing these," Stencil said, packing several books into a cardboard box.

The onlookers sat dumbfounded, as the books crackled away in flames.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" The guest of honor was warming his hands beside the snarling fire.

“You want to help Alvin, don’t you?”

After dinner and many drinks, Mr. Bungard took Stencil aside. “My son has always had a fertile mind. That fly-swatter is an ingenious device. Don’t you think, at some point, he should continue using that mind?”

“Don’t you think you’re behind the times?”

“Maybe so. In my day we took pride in our intellect.”

“If you love your son, burn the rest of your books. The fun things in life occur when one loses his intellect. Take, for instance, sexual intercourse, or situation comedies . . .”

A few yards away, Mrs. Bungard was eavesdropping. She began to fear Jeremy Stencil. Could it be, she thought, that my Alvin’s been brainwashed by a madman? But why? she wondered. What does he want from us? The tray of drinks that she held trembled, advertising her uneasiness to the rest of the party.

“The human race is doomed,” Stencil continued. “It’s not even worth learning about. That’s why I barbequed your books. Knowledge brings truth, and the truth is that we’re a dying species. Why not enjoy the time that’s left, and sign up for my seminars? Get with it, Mr. Bungard.”

“You preach ignorance,” Mr. Bungard said. “Why don’t you abide by your philosophy? You don’t strike me as being ignorant.”

In a harsh, crazy whisper, Jeremy Stencil said:

“One wise man shall rule the earth.”

The drinks flew off the tray, toppling onto the carpet. Jeremy Stencil let out a discordant laugh, as people came rushing to the scream.