

How I Got Smart

■ Steve Brody

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As you read his account of how love made him smart, an essay that first appeared in the New York Times in September 1986, notice his well-chosen and thoughtfully emphasized details.

For Your Journal

Motivation is a difficult topic about which to generalize. What motivates one person to act often will not work on another person. How do you get motivated to work, to join extracurricular activities, or to take care of yourself? Are you able to motivate yourself, or do you need someone else to give you a push?

A common misconception among youngsters attending school is that their teachers were child prodigies.¹ Who else but a bookworm, prowling the libraries and disdaining the normal youngster's propensity for play rather than study, would grow up to be a teacher anyway?

I tried desperately to explain to my students that the image they had of me as an ardent devotee of books and homework during my adolescence was a bit out of focus. Au contraire! I hated compulsory education with a passion. I could never quite accept the notion of having to go to school while the fish were biting.

Consequently, my grades were somewhat bearish.² That's how my father, who dabbled in the stock market, described them. Presenting

¹prodigies: people with exceptional talents.

²bearish: trending downward; a term used to describe the stock market.

my report card for my father to sign was like serving him a subpoena. At midterm and other sensitive periods, my father kept a low profile.

But in my sophomore year, something beautiful and exciting happened. Cupid aimed his arrow and struck me squarely in the heart. All at once, I enjoyed going to school, if only to gaze at the lovely face beneath the raven tresses in English II. My princess sat near the pencil sharpener, and that year I ground up enough pencils to fuel a campfire.

Alas, Debbie was far beyond my wildest dreams. We were separated not only by five rows of desks, but by about 50 I.Q. points. She was the top student in English II, the apple of Mrs. Larrivee's eye. I envisioned how eagerly Debbie's father awaited her report card.

Occasionally, Debbie would catch me staring at her, and she would flash a smile—an angelic smile that radiated enlightenment and quickened my heartbeat. It was a smile that signaled hope and made me temporarily forget the intellectual gulf that separated us.

I schemed desperately to bridge that gulf. And one day, as I was passing the supermarket, an idea came to me.

A sign in the window announced that the store was offering the first volume of a set of encyclopedias at the introductory price of 29 cents. The remaining volumes would cost \$2.49 each, but it was no time to be cynical.

I purchased Volume I—Aardvark to Asteroid—and began my venture into the world of knowledge. I would henceforth become a seeker of facts. I would become chief egghead in English II and sweep the princess off her feet with a surge of erudition.³ I had it all planned.

My first opportunity came one day in the cafeteria line. I looked behind me and there she was.

"Hi," she said.

After a pause, I wet my lips and said, "Know where anchovies come from?"

She seemed surprised. "No, I don't."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "The anchovy lives in salt water and is rarely found in fresh water." I had to talk fast, so that I could get all the facts in before we reached the cash register. "Fishermen catch anchovies in the Mediterranean Sea and along the Atlantic coast near Spain and Portugal."

"How fascinating," said Debbie.

³*erudition*: extensive knowledge gained from books.

NARRATION

"The anchovy is closely related to the herring. It is thin and sil- 16
very in color. It has a long snout and a very large mouth."

"Incredible." 17

"Anchovies are good in salads, mixed with eggs, and are often 18
used as appetizers before dinner, but they are salty and cannot be di-
gested too rapidly."

Debbie shook her head in disbelief. It was obvious that I had 19
made quite an impression.

A few days later, during a fire drill, I sidled⁴ up to her and asked, 20
"Ever been to the Aleutian Islands?"

"Never have," she replied. 21

"Might be a nice place to visit, but I certainly wouldn't want to 22
live there," I said.

"Why not?" said Debbie, playing right into my hands. 23

"Well, the climate is forbidding. There are no trees on any of the 24
100 or more islands in the group. The ground is rocky and very little
plant life can grow on it."

"I don't think I'd even care to visit," she said. 25

The fire drill was over and we began to file into the building, so I 26
had to step it up to get the natives in. "The Aleuts are short and
sturdy and have dark skin and black hair. They subsist on fish, and
they trap blue fox, seal, and otter for their valuable fur."

Debbie's hazel eyes widened in amazement. She was undoubtedly 27
beginning to realize that she wasn't dealing with an ordinary lunkhead.
She was gaining new and valuable insights instead of engaging in the
routine small talk one would expect from most sophomores.

Luck was on my side, too. One day I was browsing through the 28
library during my study period. I spotted Debbie sitting at a table, ab-
sorbed in a crossword puzzle. She was frowning, apparently stumped
on a word. I leaned over and asked if I could help.

"Four-letter word for Oriental female servant," Debbie said. 29

"Try *amah*," I said, quick as a flash. 30

Debbie filled in the blanks, then turned to stare at me in amaze- 31
ment. "I don't believe it," she said. "I just don't believe it."

And so it went, that glorious, amorous, joyous sophomore year. 32
Debbie seemed to relish our little conversations and hung on my
every word. Naturally, the more I read, the more my confidence

⁴*sidled*: approached sideways or in a stealthy manner.

grew. I expatiated⁵ freely on such topics as adenoids,⁶ air brakes, and arthritis.

In the classroom, too, I was gradually making my presence felt. 33
Among my classmates, I was developing a reputation as a wheeler-dealer in data. One day, during a discussion of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," we came across the word *albatross*.

"Can anyone tell us what an albatross is?" asked Mrs. Larrivee. 34

My hand shot up. "The albatross is a large bird that lives mostly 35
in the ocean regions below the equator, but may be found in the north Pacific as well. The albatross measures as long as four feet and has the greatest wingspread of any bird. It feeds on the surface of the ocean, where it catches shellfish. The albatross is a very voracious⁷ eater. When it is full it has trouble getting into the air again."

There was a long silence in the room. Mrs. Larrivee couldn't 36
quite believe what she had just heard. I sneaked a peek at Debbie and gave her a big wink. She beamed proudly and winked back.

It was a great feeling, having Debbie and Mrs. Larrivee and my 37
peers according me respect and paying attention when I spoke.

My grades edged upward and my father no longer tried to avoid 38
me when I brought home my report card. I continued reading the encyclopedia diligently, packing more and more into my brain.

What I failed to perceive was that Debbie all this while was going 39
steady with a junior from a neighboring school—a hockey player with a C+ average. The revelation hit me hard, and for a while I felt like disgorging⁸ and forgetting everything I had learned. I had saved enough money to buy Volume II—Asthma to Bullfinch—but was strongly tempted to invest in a hockey stick instead.

How could she lead me on like that—smiling and concurring and 40
giving me the impression that I was important?

I felt not only hurt, but betrayed. Like Agamemnon, but with less 41
dire consequences, thank God.

In time I recovered from my wounds. The next year Debbie 42
moved from the neighborhood and transferred to another school. Soon she became no more than a fleeting memory.

⁵*expatiated*: to speak or write at length.

⁶*adenoids*: masses of tissue that obstruct nasal and ear passages into the throat.

⁷*voracious*: excessively eager.

⁸*disgorging*: discharging violently; vomiting.

NARRATION

33 Although the original incentive was gone, I continued poring over 43
the encyclopedias, as well as an increasing number of other books.
34 Having savored the heady wine of knowledge, I could not now alter
35 my course. For:

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing:
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring."

36 So wrote Alexander Pope, Volume XIV, Paprika to Pterodactyl. 44
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