

How I Got Smart

By Steve Brody

- 1 A common misconception among youngsters attending school is that their teachers were child prodigies. Who else but a bookworm, with none of the normal kid's tendency to play rather than study, would grow up to be a teacher anyway?
- 2 I've tried desperately to explain to my students that the image they have of me as an enthusiastic devotee of books and homework during my adolescence was a bit out of focus. On the contrary, 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.
- 3 But in my sophomore year, something beautiful and exciting happened. Cupid aimed his arrow and struck me right in the heart. All at once, I enjoyed going to school, if only to gaze at the lovely face in English II.
- 4 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.
- 5 Occasionally, Debbie would catch me staring at her, and she would flash a smile that radiated intelligence and quickened my heartbeat. It was a smile that signaled hope and made me temporarily forget the intellectual gulf that separated us.
- 6 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 special price of 29 cents. The remaining volumes would cost \$2.49 each.
- 7 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 Brain in English II and sweep my princess off her feet with a surge of erudition. I had it all planned.
- 8 My first opportunity came one day in the cafeteria line. I looked behind me and there she was.
- 9 "Hi," she said.

- 10 After a pause, I wet my lips and said, "Know where anchovies come from?" She seemed surprised. "No, I don't."
- 11 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."
- 12 "How fascinating," said Debbie, shaking her head in disbelief. It was obvious that I had made quite an impression.
- 13 A few days later, during a fire drill, I casually went up to her and asked, "Ever been to the Aleutian Islands?"
- 14 "Never have," she replied.
- 15 "Might be a nice place to visit, but I certainly wouldn't want to live there," I said.
- 16 "Why not?" said Debbie, playing right into my hands.
- 17 "Well, the climate is forbidding. There are no trees on any of the 100 or more islands in the group. **18** The ground is rocky and very little plant life can grow on it."
- 19 "I don't think I'd even care to visit," she said.
- 20 The fire drill was over and we began to file into the building, so I had to step it up to get the natives in. "The Aleuts are short and sturdy and have dark skin and black hair. They live on fish, and they trap blue foxes and seals for their valuable fur."

21 Debbie's eyes widened in amazement.

22 One day I was browsing through the library. I spotted Debbie sitting at a table, absorbed in a crossword puzzle. She was frowning, apparently stumped on a word. I leaned over and asked if I could help.

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

24 "Try amah," I said, quick as a flash.

25 Debbie filled in the blanks, then turned to stare at me in amazement. "I don't believe it," she said. "I just don't believe it."

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

27 In the classroom, too, I was gradually making my presence felt. One day, during a discussion of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", we came across the word albatross.

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

29 My hand shot up. "The albatross is a large bird that lives mostly 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 fish and shellfish. The albatross has an enormous appetite, and when it's full it has trouble getting into the air again."

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

31 What I failed to perceive was that Debbie all this while was going steady with a junior from a neighboring school — a basketball player with a C+ average. The revelation hit me hard, and for a while

32 I felt like 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 basketball instead.

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

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

35 Although the original incentive was gone, I continued poring over the encyclopedias, as well as an increasing number of other books. Having tasted of the wine of knowledge, I could not now alter 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.