

# Fun with Dick and Jane

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"Let's make it a short night," my wife, Irene, suggested as we turned onto the Cunningham's street. Tuesday afternoon, she ran into Jane Cunningham in the supermarket. The software firm where her husband, Dick, worked had just put him in charge of a lucrative, overseas contract and the couple wanted to share the exciting news with friends. We didn't consider either one of them friends in the conventional sense, but I could hardly get angry with my wife. Jane comes on like a jackbooted Nazi storm trooper, and, after a while, you would jump off the Mystic-Tobin Bridge into Boston Harbor in the dead of winter just to be rid of the boorish beast. "With that squat body and turned-up, snout of a nose, it's painful sitting in the same room with her."

"People can't help how they look," Irene replied.

"It would kill the woman to brush her teeth once a week?" The last time we visited, Jane reeked of halitosis and a grimy ridge of greenish-yellow gunk rimmed the gum line. And how she belittled her husband! She sniped at Dick, making snide comments about his nerdy appearance, the fact that he didn't know how to wash a load of laundry and similar such nonsense. One time in mixed company Jane sniggered, "Dickey wouldn't remember to wipe his pimply ass, if I didn't keep an extra roll of Charmin extra soft on the vanity." Granted the woman had already downed three martinis, but if my wife ever talked to me like that, I would whack her upside the head with a pressure-treated two-by-four then debarked to a warmer climate.

"Hi, guys!" Dick ushered us into the living room. Thin with a sunken chest and pencil moustache, his brown hair flopped down over watery blue eyes.

"So what's all this exciting news?" Irene asked.

"It's not that big a deal." He smiled self-consciously. "Our corporation is opening a European division."

"What he conveniently omitted," Jane joined us from the kitchen, "is that management handpicked Dickey to oversee the new contract."

"I'll be flying to Munich for a couple of weeks around the end of the month," he confirmed. Irene gave him a brief hug and when she pulled away the guy was blushing, literally turning red in the face.

It was still light out and we went out on the deck. The weather was a balmy seventy degrees. A black swallowtail butterfly flitted among a messy overgrowth of wildflowers in the rock garden. On the far side of the fence, a neighbor was grilling T-bone steaks while his young sons kicked a soccer ball about the manicured lawn. Jane brought a cheese ball with an assortment of crackers from the kitchen. The cheese, which was dusted with crushed walnuts, tasted like sawdust. Guests seldom got anything decent to eat when they visited the Cunninghams. In addition to her other faults, the woman was stingy as hell.

"When Dickey caught wind of the position, he immediately signed up for a crash course in conversational German." Jane smeared an orangey wad of cheese on a whole wheat cracker and stuffed it in her mouth. "As long as we been together, he never showed an aptitude for much anything, neither hobbies nor vices." She erupted in a malicious, cackling laugh. "But none of the other programmers could speak a stitch of German," Jane glanced at her husband dismissively, "so it wasn't like he had much competition."

Jane stuck her pudgy face up under her husband's nose. "How you going to survive in Deutschland without a nanny to read you a bedtime story and tuck you in at night?" Jane whacked him playfully on the side of the head, and Dick had to grab his horn rimmed glasses before they went flying off his ears.

"You'll want to visit the red light district," I quipped, more to rattle his obnoxious wife. Irene shot me a dirty look.

She could see where this was going, but before I could get up a head of steam, Jane interjected. "Tell them about the Topic-a-Day teaching method, while I get some more ice tea."

The sun, which had been hiding behind a cottony wad of late-afternoon clouds, reemerged, spraying the deck with a soft, luster. "Mrs. Steiner, the language instructor, picked a new topic each day - clothing, weather, sports, colors, food, politics, and so on - along with half a hundred essential words,... just enough to get us by in social situations."

"And grammar?" I asked.

"We had basic text books for that plus a newspaper... a page or two, written on the level of what second or third graders might understand."

"How ingenious!" Irene noted. "Such a clever way to learn."

"Let me give you an example." Dick cleared his throat. "One day we were covering the four seasons along with the types of weather that -"

"Did he tell you about the German comic strips?" Jane suddenly returned, dragging the conversation off in a totally different direction. Dick slumped forward, his eyes growing dull and sipped at his drink. Somewhere in the house, a telephone rang and he went off to answer it.

"That milquetoast is gonna be the death of me!" Jane confided once her husband was out of earshot. "I've been worried half to death that, when he gets to Munich, those damn foreigners, are gonna eat him up alive."

"They're not foreigners," Irene noted.

"How's that?"

"Technically, Dick is travelling to their country."

"You know what I mean," Jane shot back in her gruff, take-no-prisoners tone. "In social situations, Dickey's clueless ... doesn't know how to hold his own." "If I'm not there to run interference, he stands around like a cigar store Indian."

Did Jane really think that, left to his own devices, her husband might show up his first day in Munich dressed in leather lederhosen with red suspenders, knee-length socks and an Alpine-style feather cap? Granted, the guy was unassertive, but in a quirky sort of way he got things done. Jane was all mouth - all fluster and bluster with nothing tangible to ever show for all her whacky pronouncements. Strangest of all was the woman's delusion that somehow she was the driving force, the brains in the relationship. "He learned a difficult foreign language in a short period of time and won the promotion on his own merits." I couldn't resist the impulse. "I think you're selling your husband short."

"Yeah, well I live with the nebbish and know his limitations." A disagreeable sound welled up in Jane's throat, never quite reaching her lips. "And, of course, Dickey's gonna need a decent wardrobe so I'm taking him to the mall tomorrow."

"J.C. Penny and Filene's have a nice men's selection," Irene offered.

Jane rolled her eyes. "You can get the same crap at the bargain outlets for half the price."

"Sorry for the interruption." Dick returned. "So what did I miss?"

A half hour later, Jane brought Irene into the back yard to inspect the vegetable garden. "Want a beer?"

The question caught me by surprise. I always thought Dick a teetotaler. Or at least that's what we had been led to believe never having seen him sipping anything stronger than a cup of Columbian coffee. "Beer would be nice."

He went and got a couple of Heineken longnecks, and we sat watching the women eighty feet away mucking about the pole beans and cherry tomatoes. "One day toward the end of the fifth month, it hit me that I was no longer fumbling for words but actually thinking in a foreign language. Someone would ask a question and I answered in German... spontaneously, without hesitation or uncertainty." As he spoke, Dick was absorbed in the process of peeling the green label from the front of the amber bottle. He really wasn't that goofy once you got him away from his castrating bitch of a wife. I could imagine some sensible-minded woman might even find the man attractive in an phlegmatic sort of way. "The final week of class, the instructor handed out a short story written by a famous German writer."

Something in his demeanor had abruptly changed. The man sitting next to me wasn't Dick Cunningham. I don't mean to suggest that he had gone weird on me. Even to this day, I still don't comprehend what really happened. We were just sitting there sipping beers in late June with the goldfinches flitting about the shaggy hemlocks bordering the property, a lawnmower sputtering in the distance.

"A mild mannered apothecary marries a shrewish woman, a regular fishwife, who constantly berates her husband. The fellow goes off one Sunday morning on the pretext of purchasing the newspaper but

never returns. Instead he travels to the port in Marseille and takes the ferry across to North Africa where he promptly joins the French Foreign Legion."

"All this in a short story?"

"Would you like another Heineken?" We had only been by ourselves a few minutes but his beer was gone and he ran off to retrieve another. "Ten years later, the apothecary-turned-soldier-of-fortune returns home dressed in camouflage fatigues with a gun strapped to his hip. He's sunburned, twenty pound heavier, muscular and covered with dust."

"And how did the reunion work out?"

"Just as you might expect. At first the German hausfrau was so overjoyed to have her husband back, she showered him with kisses and platitudes." Jane waved at us from a row of bell peppers. Dick stared at the woman with mild indifference. "She even baked this huge strawberry shortcake to celebrate the homecoming."

"And then?"

"And then she started in again with the nagging. 'Where the hell were you all this time? The picket fence needs painting. Get rid of that moronic uniform!'" Two-thirds of Dick's second beer was already gone as he positioned the rim up against his lips, upending the bottle. Glub. Glub. Glub. Glub. "The estranged husband jumps to his feet. Wrenching the revolver from its holster, he aims the muzzle at his wife's forehead and pulls the trigger."

"He kills her?"

"No, at the last second, he lowers the barrel and releases a round into the strawberry shortcake splattering his wife with whipped cream. The woman screams and faints dead away."

"And then?"

"He goes away never to be seen again."

"Nice story."

The waning sun ran up against another velvety cloud and was swallowed whole. "It's an allegory." A fleeting sliver of a smile creased his mouth. "More like an epiphany."

"Yes, I can see that." The women returned to the deck.

Later that night when we were lying in bed, I confided, "Dick is going to Germany on the pretext of setting up the new division; he isn't coming home." I told her about our conversation.

The room grew very still. "Dick Cunningham will do just fine." Irene finally broke the silence. "It's Jane that's gonna end up in a straight jacket on a locked ward at the Institute of Mental Health." Reaching beneath the covers, she patted me on the thigh. "Are you horny?"

"Too tired. Maybe tomorrow night."

"Goodnight." She rolled over on her side, and less than a minute later, my wife was snoring softly.

Back in the late nineteen-sixties, my parents were among the last batch of American children to sound out words using the Fun with Dick and Jane reader. Blonde haired Jane, resplendent in her pink frock and Dick with his brown shorts and pale blue, wrinkle-free polyester shirt racing giddily down the street - they epitomized youthful innocence. And of course there was their darling puppy, Spot and playful, fluff-ball-of-a-kitty, Puff. Fun with Dick and Jane - I found a tattered copy of the reader in a drawer of my mother's personal effects after she passed away.

Fun with Dick and Jane. Jane Cunningham couldn't deliver the goods. She threw a sobering pail of ice water on any attempt at rambunctious fun.

Dick wanted fun.

He had no dog.

He had no cat.

No Spot. No Puff.

But he had a plan.

See Dick board the plane.

See Dick fly away.

Far, far away.

Bye Jane.

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