

INTERVIEW WITH A MORON

By Elizabeth Stuckey-French

SUBJECT: RICHARD MARSHALL LEE, feebleminded man, twenty-five years of age

INTERVIEWER: J.D. LEE, honors student at Purdue University, twenty-one years of age

On May 14, 1892, at approximately 9:03 a.m., Interviewer boarded the Wabash Special in Lafayette and rode to Logansport in order to conduct this interview. The train stopped at every unincorporated settlement between Lafayette and Logansport and twice ground to a halt in the middle of an empty field, backed up a short way, and then went forward again. The conductor offered no reasonable explanation for these unscheduled stops.

After inhaling coal dust for one hour and fifty-eight minutes on the train, Interviewer disembarked at the station in Logansport. There he hired a hack and endured a wild ride with an inebriated coach driver for another six and a half miles east to St. Bridget's Home for the Feebleminded. The cost of the round-trip train ticket and coach fare equaled exactly half of Interviewer's monthly food and entertainment allowance.

St. Bridget's Home for the Feebleminded is a large, handsome red brick building four stories high, not unlike Cary Quadrangle, the dormitory at Purdue University in which Interviewer currently resides. Interviewer, who had never before set foot in a home for the feebleminded, boldly entered

through the front door and was directed into an office barely big enough for a desk and the large Sister sitting behind it. Sister was drinking tea and eating a sugar cookie but did not offer Interviewer any sustenance after his forty-six-mile journey. Sister is missing her left front incisor and has a wattle hanging over her wimple.

Interviewer introduced himself to Sister as Subject's younger brother, J.D. Lee. Sister, who'd been expecting Interviewer, rose from behind the desk to shake Interviewer's hand in a manly fashion. She expressed gratitude that someone from Subject's family had finally come to see him. Interviewer nodded and did not reveal that he had come in order to satisfy a requirement for Dr. Ernest Grubb's Senior Psychology Seminar, a course that Interviewer was given special permission to take, in spite of the fact that he is only a junior.

Sister explained to Interviewer that Subject, although he had been informed of Interviewer's imminent arrival, had gone outside in order to stand in a hole. Sister reported that Subject often stands alone in this hole, located on the grounds behind the home, for hours on end. Sister smiled as if she found the idea of a grown man standing in a hole amusing.

She was asked why Subject stood in the hole but said she did not know. When asked if he had dug the hole himself, she said she did not know. When asked how long he'd been doing this, her reply was the same.

Sister should know more than she claims to know.

After this unhelpful exchange, Interviewer went outside onto the grounds, which are extensive and well maintained, having the appearance of a pleasant city park. Hardwood trees obscure the iron fence around the property. There are gravel paths that go round in circles and multiple beds of garish tulips.

It was a fine spring day on which there blew a pure breeze untainted by urban coal. Interviewer observed a number of inmates out taking the air—a young man with a thin beard sitting

on a bench with his eyes closed and two men in heavy sweaters walking on a path. All three men appeared to be of normal intelligence but must not be, or they would not be in a home for the feeble-minded.

Interviewer found Subject on the eastern edge of the grounds, standing in a hole approximately one meter deep and 2.5 meters in diameter. Subject recognized Interviewer and called him by name, offering his hand, which Interviewer shook. Subject and Interviewer had not seen each other in two years; nevertheless, Subject did not feel the need to climb out of his hole. Subject remarked that Interviewer looked like an old man, which is not an accurate observation.

Subject himself looks much younger than his twenty-five years, which might be due to the fact that he has no cares in the world. All his needs are seen to, and he is treated like a child, allowed to stand in a hole for no purpose whenever he so desires and for as long as he so desires. Subject was clean-shaven, and despite the dirty hole in which he was standing, his heavy cotton shirt and loose trousers appeared to be neat, clean, and in good repair. Subject asserted that Interviewer was fat and that his cuffs were frayed. Both remarks are clearly inappropriate.

Interviewer asked Subject why he was standing in the hole, and he replied that standing thusly passed the time. When asked what he was looking at, Subject said that he watched whatever was in front of him. There appeared to be nothing in front of him, save some flowering bushes. When asked if he had dug the hole, he said that it had already been there but that he had made it deeper. When asked how long he'd been doing this, Subject said since he was a baby, which is a false statement. Subject has only been residing in this home for two years. Also, babies are unable to dig large holes. When Interviewer pointed this out, Subject began talking about how he had recently invented a machine that shucks corn but said that he could not show it to Interviewer because he was afraid of his idea being stolen and he was, at present, unable to acquire a patent for his shucker.

Interviewer said he had no intention of stealing anything from Subject. Subject brought up a time, many years ago, when both Interviewer and Subject were children, and Interviewer took a pocketknife from Subject's desk drawer. Interviewer reminded Subject that he had simply borrowed the knife, but Subject replied, "Where is it, then?"

Of course, Interviewer returned it long ago, has no idea of its present location, and cannot be expected to keep track of Subject's childhood possessions, and said as much to Subject, who did not appear to accept this explanation, as he shook his head and grimaced.

Subject's memory appears to be faulty.

Subject steadfastly refused to show corn-shucking invention to Interviewer but agreed to show him something else he had made instead. He swung himself nimbly out of the hole and walked across the grounds at an unnecessarily brisk pace. Interviewer struggled to keep up. Subject went directly to a tele- scope of premium quality sitting on a tripod beside the path. Subject claimed that it was his own telescope and that someone had given it to him as a gift.

Have not been able to confirm truth of Subject's claim.

Subject then directed Interviewer to look through the telescope, which was pointed at an object standing on the grass not fifteen meters away. According to Subject, the object under observation was of his own design, a sculpture he'd assembled in the recreation building. The object appeared to be a small heap of rusted metal that could easily be seen by the naked eye. No telescope was needed to view said object.

When asked the purpose of the object, Subject said that if Interviewer looked long enough at the object through the telescope, the purpose would become clear. Interviewer asserted that he didn't have time to stand and gaze through an unnecessary telescope at an uninteresting and nearby object.

Subject countered that the meaning of the object was very profound but could not be put into words and that Interviewer would be sorry if he did not give it a try. To humor Subject, Interviewer gazed through the telescope at the object. Interviewer counted thirteen nails and thirty-nine screws, which were fixed by a length of wire onto a section of iron pipe. As expected, no profound meaning yielded itself to Interviewer. He informed Subject that his experiment was a failure. Subject responded by asking Interviewer if he'd seen a penny on the object.

Interviewer said no.

Interviewer asked Subject if the meaning of the object was related to the penny. Subject said no, and that furthermore, there was in actuality no penny on the object.

Interviewer then asked Subject why Subject had mentioned a penny if there was no penny. Subject said that many things were not on the object and that this was the meaning of the object. Interviewer reminded Subject that Subject had previously stated that the meaning could not be put into words but that he had just stated the meaning using words. Subject said that Interviewer had misunderstood him. He had said that the deeper meaning could not be put into words.

Against his better judgment, Interviewer gazed again through the telescope at the object while Subject stood at his side. Just then another Sister came along the path and asked Interviewer what he was watching through the telescope.

Interviewer stepped away from the telescope and assured Sister that he wasn't looking at anything. This Sister was a young woman with a pretty face, not unlike the face of one Rosie McCarthy, who used to live in the house next door to Interviewer and Subject.

Sister said to Interviewer, "Oh, I know what you were looking at. Isn't it marvelous? We all find Richard's object very intriguing."

Unlike Rosie McCarthy, this Sister did not appear to have much common sense. Sister and Subject smiled at each other in an unseemly manner. Began to wonder if this home is best placement for Subject. Was relieved when Sister walked off, apparently to attend to an unspecified errand.

Interviewer queried Subject as to whether he'd noticed the similarity between the Sister and Rosie McCarthy. Subject insisted that the Sister actually is Rosie McCarthy, which is a false statement, as Rosie McCarthy is now Mrs. William Weigel of Battleground, Indiana. Subject insisted that the two women are one and the same. Interviewer, though in the right, let the matter drop.

Subject then asked Interviewer when he would be allowed to go back home. Interviewer said that their parents were unable to take care of Subject any longer, because he needed such close supervision. Subject protested, saying that as long as he had a hole and his object that he would never be a burden to anyone. Interviewer was forced to go into the story of how Subject had strained the nerves and the health of his parents by misspending his youth in a variety of ways, including nailing clothing to walls and stealing animals. Reminded Subject of incident with organ-grinder's monkey. Reminded Subject of how their parents had worried and fretted over the Subject's behavior and lavished attention on him, to the detriment of his sibling, whose stellar behavior had gone unnoticed and whose needs had gone unmet.

Subject demanded to know what stellar behavior Interviewer was referring to. Reminded Subject of time when Subject, at twelve years of age, had climbed out the attic window onto the roof, and Interviewer, though only eight years old and terrified of heights, climbed out onto the roof to retrieve Subject, who sat blithely pulling up the edges of the shingles. Interviewer took Subject's hand and led him back across the roof, while Mrs. McCarthy screamed Dear God, Dear God from her yard below. Inside Mother wept and wept, saying she was sorry, she was so sorry she hadn't been watching Subject closely enough, and she would never let him out of her sight again. Mother had no reason to be sorry, in Interviewer's opinion, as she had done nothing wrong, but Interviewer

knew better than to state his opinion, because nobody ever listened to anything he said. During and after this event, no one thanked Interviewer or even acknowledged his brave deed, and Subject was never punished.

Subject, who did not appear to be interested in this account of how Interviewer saved his life, again asked when he was going to go home, and whether or not anyone there still loved him, as they never wrote letters to him or came to visit.

Interviewer pointed out that he was there visiting right now.

Subject asked why the rest of the family hadn't come with Interviewer. Interviewer reminded Subject that he now attends Purdue University and no longer lives at home and rarely sees their parents himself. Interviewer admitted that since he left for college he might as well have stepped off the earth, as far as their parents were concerned. He confessed that he had been glad to leave home, because after Subject was taken away Mother had turned into a mouse and Father had increased his drinking. Interviewer then surprised and embarrassed himself by suddenly blurting out that he had been lonely at home without Subject, as he had nobody to look after.

Subject, not seeming to appreciate or comprehend what he had just been told, asked again why Interviewer had not brought Mother and Father with him. Interviewer inquired as to why he alone was not sufficient. Subject said it was because Interviewer was a vile and wicked serpent.

Interviewer reminded Subject that he was the one who had just been crawling around in a filthy hole like a reptile.

Subject reached out and placed his hand on Interviewer's shoulder, stating that even though Interviewer was a silly, stupid, stubborn man, he pitied Interviewer. Interviewer knocked Subject's hand away and said that the only reason he had come to see Subject was because he had been assigned by a professor to interview a moron.

Subject shoved Interviewer.

Interviewer shoved back.

Subject boxed Interviewer's ears, causing extreme pain.

Interviewer leapt on Subject, knocked him down, and sat on him, pinning Subject's arms as a safety precaution.

Subject, using his typical childish maneuver, sank his teeth into Interviewer's wrist and thus managed to wriggle free. Subject ran away laughing and yelling unprintable insults having to do with Rosie McCarthy.

Interviewer pursued Subject but was unable to catch him.

Interviewer was forced to terminate the interview and to take Subject's metal object with him.

On his way out of the home, Interviewer hid his bitten wrist in his pocket. He told the cookie-eating Sister in the office that Subject had hurried off to the recreation building, but before leaving had expressed satisfaction regarding a sudden inspiration for a new invention on which he wanted to start construction directly. Interviewer told Sister that Subject had given the object to him as a gift. Object now sits on Interviewer's desk.

As of this time, no meaning has been derived by Interviewer from the object. Subject would undoubtedly say that it is because Interviewer is not looking at it properly through a telescope. Interviewer would respond to this by declaring that he will never purchase a telescope in order to gaze at the object. The purchase of a telescope in order to gaze at a pile of rubbish close enough to spit on is the act of a moron. Interviewer is certain that the object will never be seen more clearly than he is himself viewing it at the present moment.

However, as a last-ditch effort, and in order to be as fair and unbiased as possible, Interviewer took one of his own pennies, one that might have been spent on well-deserved pastries, and wired it onto the object. Interviewer then sat and studied the object for twelve minutes, to no

avail. Subject's object, like Subject himself, remained stubbornly opaque and whimsical. This fact should come as no surprise to Interviewer. Interviewer has never known what to make of Subject, nor has he been able to decipher what makes Subject tick. Furthermore, he has never once been successful in his attempts to clearly communicate his own thoughts and feelings to Subject.

However, Interviewer is not one to give up easily. It is certain that when Interviewer next calls on Subject, Subject will no doubt be engaged in another activity of a pointless and selfish nature and, as no other person seems to want to shoulder the burden of attempting to make Subject face the truth about his actions, Interviewer will once again step into the breach.

On future visits, Interviewer will remain at all times objective. He regrets that he lost his temper and removed an object Subject apparently found to be important, even though it is ugly and useless. If physically attacked, however, Interviewer retains the right to defend himself.

Interviewer is well aware that straightening Subject out will be a difficult feat to accomplish. As Dr. Grubb has said in his lectures, it is nigh on impossible to reason with a moron, and with that statement, Interviewer must heartily concur. His recent interview with Subject has demonstrated as much. In fact, all of Interviewer's experience with Subject has underscored the truth of this assertion. Dr. Grubb has also opined that morons are a corrupting influence on the rest of us, but I must differ with Dr. Grubb on this point.

My brother, Richard, as far as I can see, has never had any influence on anyone, most especially not on me. In fact, neither one of us has ever had any effect on the other.

For example: When Richard was fourteen and I was ten, he tried to enlist my aid in stealing an organ-grinder's monkey, telling me that the organ-grinder was abusing his monkey and that it would be better off living at our house.

I told him that this was a very bad idea, and then I explained why. Stealing was stealing, I told him, and he could be arrested. If he was arrested, Mother and Father would be humiliated. Even if he was not arrested, we could never take care of a monkey in our home. There were too many breakables. Besides, we didn't know anything about the care and keeping of monkeys. Anyhow, I reasoned, the monkey might be perfectly happy capering about in a plaid bathrobe collecting coins in a silver cup. It was not up to us to judge whether or not a monkey was happy, even if we could. The monkey belonged to the organ-grinder. This should have been the end of the matter. But with Richard there is never an end to the matter. Against all my counsel, Richard went downtown, distracted the organ-grinder, snatched the monkey, and ran away. He brought the little monkey, whom we named Willie, back to our house in a shoebox. We attempted to hide Willie in Richard's room, but the creature escaped and Mother caught him pulling the tail feathers out of her stuffed cockatoo. It was an extremely unpleasant day at the Lee house.

However, what I took away from this incident was not that I was right and that morons are incorrigible, and I do not recall that the incident ever created in me a desire to go forth and be wicked also. Nor do I dwell at all upon the upheaval and commotion that resulted from my brother's crime. Instead, I remember how Richard, when the police finally arrived, clung desperately to Willie, who only wanted to escape his grasp. I cannot forget how Richard's face looked as he attempted to cuddle the ungrateful monkey to his chest like a ring-tailed baby and how I, forced to stand there and witness this spectacle, would've given anything, anything at all, if the beast would only cease its caterwauling and throw its arms around my brother, just for little while, and love him back.