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# The Uses of Disease

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## THE USES OF DISEASE

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Our library occupied the end of one east-pointing wing in the old Evergreen High School building. In furnishings it resembled nothing as much as the traditional reading room: bare rectangular wooden tables surrounded by straight-backed hard-oak wooden chairs. Windows pierced the outside walls that bounded it on the south, east, and north sides. Around the walls rose short semi-full shelves of books that I never saw taken down in my years of occupying the building. No periodicals sat in sight, nor did any traditional finding aids for books or periodicals. At the room's east end stood an elevated desk and space behind it, then a glass partition with office behind that. On the northwest side was a small entryway with doors into the library, office, rest of the building, and to the outside. The hallway's interior doors and walls matched those in the library: windowed above wainscoting.

The library mainly functioned as a study hall rather than as an actual library. Most students had an assigned study hall period, at least until the ninth grade. Band and choir students did not; nor did those known in that day as "Vo-Ag" students (those on vo-tec or agriculture track). Students did homework, wrote and passed notes, or talked surreptitiously when possible. No assignments in any classes required books being checked out of, or used in, the room. The librarian's main duty involved overseeing study hall, and in the process keeping things quiet. She lacked the physical strength to—or even interest in—discipline. And while she could have sent recalcitrant students to the principal's office for punishment, such a referral would have lowered her in the principal's estimation and hence was avoided at all costs.

The librarian's major interest was readily apparent to anyone who looked into her small office behind the desk. There one could find the latest version of a popular product marketed as a solution to the spread of Spanish flu in 1918 and later for feminine hygiene and birth control: the aerosol application called Lysol Spray. Not only did Mrs. Mildred Jones have multiple cans lined up precisely on a shelf; after each change-of-class, she would seize a can and a cloth, charge any spot a student had occupied, and spray and wipe down that chair and the table as far as she could reach. She introduced me to the concept of a germaphobe—though we didn't use the term. But all students certainly knew of her phobia.

The possibility of using her phobia to our advantage occurred one fine spring day when a teacher's absence threw our class into the library. There was no substitute, so Principal Morris Ward met us, told us that our teacher was out, and that we were to go to the library for study hall. Because we were well-trained and obedient students, he did not accompany us to the library to ensure our transition. So we trooped down the hall, through the half-glass door, and into the entryway, where Mrs. Jones stopped us, surrounded by glass and doors.

She demanded suspiciously what we were doing there, for she already had a few students spread throughout the library as their schedules demanded. We had appeared without authority and she was a worrier. Our story required authentication.

We were few in number and confined in the glassed-in entryway and hence seemingly at her mercy. But knowledge gave us power beyond our numbers and inferior estate. As she ducked back into the library and shut the door behind her on her circuitous route to her office to verify our story of being sent by the principal, Mike Kilpatrick whispered “cough.” That single-word imperative made its way from his mouth to my ear and quickly throughout the class. First one, then another fake cough emerged. Some of our classmates feigned well, others poorly. But the collective sound rose beyond the glass to the high ceiling and spread throughout the room.

In her office, Mrs. Jones heard clearly. Her head whipped around and her hands reflexively reached for a Lysol Spray can. She scuttled back to the door from which she’d accosted us and opened it enough to hold the can over her head, arm fully extended and nozzle directed through the crack, imperiously order us to go outside, then spritz a stream of Lysol over our heads to settle down on us and, hopefully, destroy all germs expelled into her space by our coughs.

The day was lovely, the kind of sun-filled Southern spring day that was warm enough to accommodate our “inside clothes” and unfit our souls for indoors. We enjoyed the hour of grace without compunction, completely free in the knowledge that she would not report the event or her reaction to our ruse, instead harboring resentment of the principal for sending the class to her in the first place. And we reveled in the power of our tested knowledge and absolute conviction that, if called upon again to exercise it, we could produce the outcome devoutly to be wished.