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‘Don’t say drugs are bad until you’ve tried them’

A knock on the door and in, like room service, came Dr. Seuss. Thirty copies of *Green Eggs and Ham* rolled in on a book cart by an intern for the school librarian.

Mr. Zeringue assigned reading parts for Sam-I-Am and the grouch, and the class of ninth graders giggled like they were three again and it was being read to them by their mothers.

When it was over and the grouch realized he liked green eggs and ham, Mr. Zeringue perched himself on top his desk.

There, on the desk, was a blue baseball cap with the initial Z.

“And what,” he asked, putting on the cap, “is the moral of this story?”

The hands shot up. Three, no, five, ten, fifteen . . . In the end, every student’s hand was up. Some waved their hands as if to say, “Call on me!”

Then someone came up with the idea to raise both hands, and several others did the same.

Finally, Mr. Z called on a student, who proudly told him the moral: “Don’t say you don’t like something until you’ve tried it.”

Another student, feeling the need to expand on what the girl had said, added his own explanation. “The grouch said he didn’t like green eggs and ham until he tried them. Then he saw he liked them.”

“That’s right,” echoed a third.

“I get it,” said Mr. Z. “Don’t say no, don’t reject something until you actually try it?”

Every head nodded, and the girl Mr. Z had called on initially, spoke apparently for the entire class. “Yes, that’s it. Don’t say you don’t like something until you try it.”

Still seated on the top of his desk, Mr. Z picked up his apple and leaned forward. “In other words,” he said, with a wry, twisted smile, “in other words,” holding out his apple in the palm of his hand, “in other words, don’t say drugs are bad for you until you’ve tried them a few times?”

“What?”

He breathed on his apple, polished it on his sleeve and held it out again. “In other words, don’t say pre-marital sex is wrong until you’ve tried it a few times?”

This second “Don’t” elicited snickers from two or three of the boys, but most of the students spoke out in opposition. “That’s not what it means!” “You got it wrong!” “That’s not what it’s saying!”

Mr. Z remained obtuse. “But that’s what you all said it means? You just told me: Don’t say you don’t like something until you actually try it?”

“But it’s not talking about that!” insisted one girl.

Mr. Z set down the apple on his desk. “All right. All right. Then answer just one question for me: If someone offered you eggs that were green and ham that was green, would you eat them?”

There is something people don’t notice, something they overlook, when they read the Bible, that is, who asks the first question?

Mr. Z picked up the apple on his desk and, like the snake, surveyed the faces in his classroom.

He took a big juicy bite from the apple.

This was the thrill he looked forward to every school year when he was assigned a new class of children to corrupt. It was the looks on their young, innocent faces when they realized they had been led astray.

They thought they were on a familiar path, Dr. Seuss, the way to Grandma's house, but, no, they were lost, in the woods, and no one was smiling, except the Big Bad Wolf, who took another juicy bite from his apple.

Twenty-eight pairs of eyes were fixed on their teacher. Fifty-six ears listened as he crunched and crunched.

Mr. Z slid down from his desk and repeated his question. "If someone offered you eggs that were green and ham that was green, would you eat them?"

He removed his baseball cap and set both it and the apple on his desk again.

The apple didn't look as delicious as before. Two big bites had been taken out of it.

"I wouldn't eat it," answered one girl. "If it's green, there must be something wrong with it."

"It's probably bad for you," added another.

"It would make you sick," said a third.

Mr. Zeringue walked down one of the aisles in the classroom. With his thumbs, he tugged on his suspenders. "You are all guilty of same-think," he said.

"Same-think?" The question came from a boy as Mr. Zeringue passed by his desk.

"People don't think," explained Mr. Zeringue. "They think they think."

"That's why," said Mr. Zeringue, "we will read great writers during our four years here at Sarpy High."

Positioned again in front of his class, this teacher with suspenders and a bow tie and an egg stain on his shirt, reached in the air above him with one hand and then the other as he spoke, as though he were snatching names out of the ether. "Homer . . . Sophocles . . . Dante . . .

Shakespeare.” (This last name came almost in a whisper as though he were invoking the holiest of holies.)

“These are writers who make us think.”

As he continued, with each word he spoke, he pointed at a different student, as if calling them out one by one. “This is what people today don’t seem to understand. They think all writers are pretty much the same. That’s why they -- why you -- are victims of same-think.”

Having pointed out every single person in his class, he said with a wave of his hand, “People read today, yes, but they read only news articles and magazines and books that are one-dimensional.”

“But *Green Eggs and Ham*?” interjected one boy. “This is a children’s book. Dr. Seuss is not Shakespeare or one of those other writers you mentioned.”

Mr. Zeringue turned on his interrogator. “And what is your name, young man?”

“Philip. Philip Marino.”

The name hung there in the air. Would he be disciplined for speaking out? For not raising his hand? His shirt was not tucked in. His hair was long. He needed a haircut. Had he made a mistake by calling attention to himself?

Mr. Zeringue spoke. “I congratulate you, Mr. Philip Marino.”

“Congratulate me?”

“You exhibit a very rare and valuable trait. You question my authority. Just because a teacher says a thing, doesn’t make it true. Most people in school -- and especially in college -- don’t challenge or question their teachers. They’re afraid of repercussions, afraid it will hurt their grades.

“But you must speak up, like Shakespeare, like Sophocles, like Dante, or else you’re just setting yourself up for mediocrity. And that’s something we don’t need any more of. This world is awash in mediocrity. We need more Philip Marinos in the world.

Someone clapped, and the whole class joined in the applause as Philip Marino looked proudly around the room.

Mr. Zeringue raised his hands to silence the class. “But to answer your question, just because Dr. Seuss writes children’s books, that does not necessarily mean he is shallow or superficial. In fact, I intend to show you *Green Eggs and Ham* is not the simplistic, one-dimensional story people think it is.”

Mr. Zeringue perched himself again on top his desk. “Before we explore *Green Eggs and Ham*, we have to examine why people fall into the same-think trap.”

His shoe was untied. Up went his shoe on his desk, and he tied it as he continued. “For starters, when people read a book, they peck, like pigeons, at the first meaning that suggests itself to them, and they conclude that’s all there is.”

Down went his foot. “But, more importantly, people don’t read Shakespeare or any of the other great writers from antiquity. And why?”

Seeing his hat on the desk, he again put it on and, suddenly, his hands shot up as if each had just been animated. “We don’t want Shakespeare!” they said together.

There they were, at face level with their puppeteer, like two talking mouths, and now each spoke in a different voice. The first in a deep, complaining voice and the second in a happy, cheery voice.

“Shakespeare is old.”

“We want new!”

“Shakespeare is hard.”

“We want easy!”

“Shakespeare is dead.”

“We want breathers!”

“Shakespeare is deep.”

“We want shallow!”

Mr. Z eyed his two talking hands and slowly lowered them, forming them into two fists. “If you think like this,” he said, “you end up like head-butting rams.”

The two fists came together, pushing against each other. “Left, right. Progressive, conservative. Democrat, Republican. Always butting heads, just one fist of same-thinkers butting heads again and again against the same-thinkers on the other side.”

Another thought occurred to the teacher. He hopped off the desk and went straight to the dry erase board. “Ted Cruz, Republican, and Charles Schumer, Democrat,” he said, writing both names on the board. “Did you know these two senators butted heads not long ago over *Green Eggs and Ham*?”

He sat again on top his desk. “And neither of them had the slightest idea what he was talking about. And why?”

The talking hands reappeared, speaking as before.

“We don’t read Shakespeare.”

“We read one-dimensionally!”

“We can’t think Shakespeare.”

“We think one-dimensionally!”

Mr. Z looked at one hand, then the other. He addressed the class. “Shakespeare? Heck, they can’t even understand Dr. Seuss!”

Finally, he spoke to his two talking hands. “I think it’s time the both of you went night-night.”

And they were hands again.

Again, Mr. Zeringue removed the baseball cap. “The time has come,” he said, sliding off his desk, standing again in front of the class, “to see what Dr. Seuss was doing when he wrote *Green Eggs and Ham*.”

He stretched out his arms on either side of him and wiggled his fingers, as though exercising them in preparation for a performance of some kind.

“Every time the grouch speaks, he speaks in eight syllables.” And, with that, Mr. Zeringue counted off each syllable on his fingers as he recited: “That Sam-I-Am! That Sam-I-Am! / I do not like that Sam-I-Am.”

He wiggled his eight fingers after each line for his class to see.

“And every time Sam speaks, he speaks in seven syllables: ‘Do you like green eggs and ham?’”

This time Mr. Zeringue wiggled only seven fingers. He continued, reciting from memory the next few exchanges between the grouch and Sam-I-Am, counting off, as he did, the syllables for the grouch and Sam. And always it was eight for the grouch and seven for Sam.

“Dr. Seuss employs this technique,” explained Mr. Zeringue, “so even his youngest readers can understand that Sam and the grouch are arguing. Adults, though, don’t seem to notice this change unless it’s pointed out to them.”

“Not always! Not always, Mr. Zeringue!”

It was that Philip Marino kid again. He had skimmed through the poem, quickly ticking off the syllables on his fingers.

“You found an exception?”

“Yes!” And Philip read from his book: “A train! A train! A train! A train!”

Mr. Zeringue recited the next line from memory: “Could you, would you on a train?”

“And he does it again,” said Marissa, a girl sitting next to Philip. “Say, in the dark? Here in the dark!”

Again Mr. Zeringue recited the next line: “Would you, could you, in the dark?” He then expanded on what Philip and Marissa had discovered. “If you check, you’ll find that, shortly after he offers the grouch the chance to eat green eggs and ham in the dark, Sam goes back to being a seven-syllable character for the rest of the story.”

The students leafed through the pages of their books, counting off the syllables, confirming for themselves what their teacher had said.

When several students had finished and closed their books, Mr. Zeringue posed another question. “But what about the grouch?”

Yes, what about the grouch in *Green Eggs and Ham*?

On two occasions Sam, who speaks in seven syllables, speaks in eight -- the first time when he mentions a train and, immediately after that, when he offers the grouch the chance to eat green eggs and ham in the dark.

But the grouch?

“Toward the end,” Mr. Zeringue pointed out, “the grouch starts talking like Sam, in seven syllables.”

He called on a girl to read. (Her name was Brianna, but he didn’t know that yet. It was, after all, the first day of the new school year.) Mr. Zeringue could tell only that she was shy, withdrawn.

Sitting in a desk near the door, she leaned against the wall as if for support. But there was something else that caught the teacher’s eye -- her blank facial expression, even when Mr. Z’s hands were talking to each other.

He pointed out the lines for her to read.

And she read them, as directed: “Sam! If you will let me be, / I will try them. You will see. / Say! I like green eggs and ham!”

After Brianna had finished reading, after Mr. Zeringue had ticked off with his fingers each of the seven syllables, he asked her to read the last line in the book, which she did.

“Thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-Am!”

There was a short silence, again broken only by a nervous cough.

Then Mr. Zeringue addressed his class: “So the final words show the grouch has become a seven-syllable person, just like Sam.”

“But what does that mean?” asked a boy in the back.

“Good question,” said Mr. Zeringue, “where does that lead us?”

Mr. Zeringue pointed to Philip Marino and the girl next to him. “As Philip and--”

“--Marissa. My name is Marissa.”

“--As Philip and Marissa have pointed out, Sam hits on a new tactic. He speaks in eight syllables, like the grouch. But the second time Sam pretends to talk like the grouch, he comes across as very sinister indeed.”

Off went the light, and in the gloom, Mr. Z whispered: “Say, in the dark, here in the dark? Could you, would you in the dark?” (Still whispering) “It’ll be a secret. No one will ever know.”

“That’s scary!” said one girl.

On came the light. Mr. Zeringue was himself again. “Who,” he asked, “does that sound like?”

The answers came quickly. “A creep.” “The devil.” “A pedophile.”

The last remark elicited a nervous laugh from the class. The dark atmosphere was gone. Mr. Zeringue sat again on top his desk. “In this other way of reading *Green Eggs and Ham*,” he said, “the grouch, instead of being close-minded, is an innocent.

“And Sam? Call him what you want. Someone said a creep. Someone else, the devil. Whatever. But one thing we do know about him: He wants to drag us down.”

“From eight syllables to seven,” inserted one boy.

“Exactly. No matter how many times Innocence turns away from something that is clearly not good for him -- that is, eggs that are green and ham that is green -- Sam keeps coming back again and again.

“And, finally, Sam breaks down the resistance of Innocence. How? By pretending to be just like his prey, an eight-syllable guy. By telling him--” (in a whisper) “--You won’t get caught. No one will ever know.”

The man could not sit still. He was up again, standing in front of his class. “That’s the other message in *Green Eggs and Ham*, besides the moral everyone seems to find. It’s a message targeted for Dr. Seuss’ older readers -- people still in their childhood -- like you.”

He paced down an aisle, pointing at individual students as he continued. “You are at that stage now in your lives -- you know it -- where you feel the pressure to be like Sam, to involve yourselves in risky behaviors, to experiment with drugs, to engage in premarital sex.”

He was in the back of the classroom, and every eye was on him. “It’s a cautionary tale,” he said, summing up. “Innocence succumbs and turns into a seven-syllable person -- just like Sam.”