

## Experiment

My mother could never understand why we boys tore apart our Christmas toys before the week was out and attempted to rebuild them to some other purpose. Or why we carried out experiments just to see what happened ... even if what could happen was dangerous. It didn't matter whether our inquisitive minds attacked our toys or our food. Or our classmates.

The year I turned fourteen my best friend George and I often stopped at Jean's Beans after school to buy a bag of potato chips. Jean's was quite popular among Utica's Catholic families in the 1950s, especially during Lent. Their baked beans and potato chips were a treat. But most memorable ... in a way ... were their deep fried fish and French fries. I mean *really* deep fried, soggy and greasy. A one pound cod fish from the North Atlantic would easily gain another pound in Jean's fryers on its trip to the dinner table. You could probably make a small candle from one of Jean's French fries by sticking a wick in it.

George and I took our chips over to the empty bleachers two blocks away at the ball field where we often sat and hatched one boyhood prank or another. We talked a lot about girls, too, and the possibility of dating them.

Neither of us was ready to take a girl out, a reality we were unable to admit. So instead we devised a wildly ridiculous plan that would never work. It cost us more effort than a real date. We told ourselves it was an experiment, but it was only an excuse to build up our juvenile egos. I never anticipated the embarrassment it brought me.

We took turns over a few evenings during the week before Easter and began to call every girl in our 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. We asked for a date at the movies. We didn't plan to follow through with tickets and popcorn for those who accepted. We just wanted a score sheet so we felt better about ourselves when probably half of them accepted. Or so we thought they would. I now realize I was just testing how much of my line of baloney I could get away with. That's pretty important to a teen age boy.

I may not have been able to pull the wool over the eyes of pubescent girls, but I could still get one over on my little brother. A little brother is a perfect victim on which to practice the arts of persuasion. I tried out all my stories on him and always got valuable feedback. He was like my own personal bullshit meter. If he didn't believe something I said, nobody would.

I told him he could probably light up a Jean's Beans French fry since it must be half grease. On Good Friday morning, while Mom and Dad were out of the house, Mike sat down at the kitchen table and held a French fry over a lit candle.

"This'll never work," he announced after a few minutes of drowning the candle flame with oily brown drips.

"Sure it will," I said. "You just need to have some persistence." I laughed to myself.

He looked doubtful and shook his head. "It's not going to work."

"But you're not holding it right," I said, and made up a new wrinkle just to keep him at it.

"It's all in the angle of how the French fry meets the flame."

"It is?"

"Sure, it's called the Combustion Angle and any good college physics text will explain it."

"They light up French fries in college?" said Mike.

After repeated failures, I couldn't just tell him I'd been kidding, so I suggested he dump a few fries into a paper bag and take it outside.

"Put 'em on the lawn and light the bag," I said. "See what happens."

His enthusiasm returned immediately. "You think that'll work?"

“If it doesn’t,” I said, “you can always squirt some lighter fluid on it from Mom’s supply under the kitchen sink.”

Not long after the screen door slammed behind Mike, I heard our neighbor Mrs. Petrucci yell at him out back. And just then my parents pulled the car into the driveway and drove to the back of the house. I quickly left by the front door.

I walked down the block to Pete’s barbershop on James Street where I sat around for an hour. For some reason, Pete became annoyed when I lounged in the shop and read his magazines or attempted to give solid advice on world affairs to the old men who hung out there.

I returned home in an hour with a practiced look of innocence on my face and found my mother in a state of ferment.

“I don’t understand why every time your father and I leave this house,” she said, “you boys insist on getting into trouble. Mrs. Petrucci almost called the fire department.”

“It was just an experiment,” I said.

“It’s always some baloney with you.”

I thought her remark was unnecessarily cruel, even though it was true.

“Look,” I said, now ready to needle her, “everyone knows women don’t always understand the drive to experiment and to discover new –“

“Hold it right there, Buster,” she said, spitting the B out. “Don’t give me that ‘Me man, you woman’ stuff.”

My male chauvinist routine often charmed my mother. Not that day. Her face turned red with anger as she picked up plates from the sink’s drain board and slammed them into the cupboard. They weren’t even dry.

Mom’s infrequent temper outbursts were usually on the mild side, but lately she would blow up big-time, and on a regular basis.

About once a month, come to think of it. There were tears sometimes, accompanied by a rapid fanning of her face with anything handy. We boys had no idea what was happening to her. If we’d even suspected it involved sex we would have been astounded. We knew very

little about the subject. Our Irish culture allowed sex to be mentioned only when filling out forms for life insurance or a driver’s license. It was certainly not a household topic.

I’m not sure what Dad understood and I suppose even Mom may not have known what to expect as her procreative role in life began to ebb. But we knew when she started to fan herself with the Reader’s Digest it was time to find someone else to pick on. My ten year old brother, as yet clueless about living with a woman, was surprised at Mom’s ire, but I soon became used to it. My father knew how to handle her. When she began to fume he left the house and went to sit in the car.

Mom looked at the empty parakeet cage. The door hung open.

“Where is that damned bird?” she said.

Now she was swearing. “What damned bird?”

“Watch your language, young man. The damned bird you’re always letting out of the cage.”

“Mendelssohn is a part of God’s creation, Mom. He has to be free. It would be a sin—“

“You think I don’t know you let him out to crap on your brother’s pillow?”

“I would never—“

“I saw you toss the bird seed on his bed.”

“It must have spilled when I –“

“And no more calls to the girls in your class,” she said. “That’s right. Did you think word wouldn’t get around? What a terrible prank to play on those poor girls.”

My calls to the young ladies with George might now be public knowledge, but I hoped no one heard of the last telephone conversation, the awful one with Maureen, a girl in my class I really liked. She responded to my experiment at first with suspicion and then anger. She ripped into me with words I was surprised she knew.

George and I had not been halfway through our list when I called Maureen, but I ended it right there. I was very embarrassed and upset.

“George, why did you think this would be a good idea?” I said to him.

“I thought it was your idea, Dave.”

In fact, none of the girls accepted. Half hung up before either of us finished our pitch. We were disappointed and dejected. In particular I smarted from Maureen's anger. The dressing down she gave me was humiliating.

George summed up our disappointment. "They may smell nice, but they don't act very nice."

The backyard French fry episode was not over. My father caught up with me and held me by the elbow in his pincer grip of thumb and fingers. It had hurt when I was younger, but not after muscle began to fill in around my bones at puberty. I resisted the temptation to escape his grasp with a quick twist to free myself of him. Reluctant to deflate his authority, I sensed we would have looked at each other and wondered what to do next. Between a father and son there is nothing to do after the teenager refuses a physical reprimand, except to begin an adult relationship. Neither of us was ready for that.

"Did you tell your brother to light up the bag of French fries on the lawn?" he asked.

"Well," I said, taking a half second to plan an answer, "I meant it only as a Thought Experiment."

"A what?"

"You know, a Thought Experiment, like Einstein argued his special theory of relativity. He couldn't actually measure the speed of one train as it slowly passed another at high speed, so he imagined it with enough specifics to convince his audience."

"OK, but you haven't convinced me," said Dad.

I stalled again. "Well ... the dog was barking so Mike may have missed a few words and misconstrued my meaning."

"We don't have a dog."

"Of course I meant a stray dog passing through the yard. At that exact moment. A coincidence. Scientific experiment is full of coincidences, Dad."

"OK, Einstein," he said. "You're housebound tonight and tomorrow night, too, unless you admit you're full of crap."

"I'm full of crap."

"I was sure of it," he said. "And why did you leave so suddenly when your mother and I came home?"

"I remembered a magazine I wanted to see down at Pete's."

"Too bad," said my father. "Maybe you could have helped out with your Thought Experiments. Mike and I couldn't get the fries to burn, even with lighter fluid."

"So it's *you* Mom is mad at," I said.

He rolled his eyes skyward. "No, it's you. You're still salvageable. You get the attention. I get a pass."

I wondered how any man could live with a woman. Maybe I never would. "Dad, do you think I should get married some day?"

He was surprised. "Oh, of course. Why wouldn't you want to?"

"I don't know. Women can be a pain."

"Your mother and I love each other, you know" he said. "You learn to live with someone. It's like a dance. You just have to remember the steps."

"I can't even get a date, so I guess I won't worry about it."

He laughed. "You keep inhaling and exhaling. Eventually a girl will come along and say you're doing it wrong."

"The way I breathe?"

"Anything you do. She'll want to teach you her way. Don't argue with her. Pretend it's an experiment ... a life- long experiment."

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