

## Mr. Fry Pan

I worked for a man while in high school who taught me a few things. I admired him because he was a businessman, wore a suit and drove an Oldsmobile convertible. He was also a college graduate. He was all those things that never happened in my family.

A salesman who considered himself a professional, Achilles Freytag was the kind of guy who first chose his life style, went out and purchased the house, the car, the woman, and then tried to figure out how to pay for them. I would never want to live that way, but it doesn't stop me from appreciating people who push through life chest first.

Mr. Fry, as I called him, ran a small wholesale business in the old part of town with his domineering second or third wife and a part-time accountant. He considered himself a wholesale jeweler because he sold diamonds from time to time, but Edna the accountant ... a college girl only a few years older than myself ... told me the profits were all from the electric fry pans he managed to peddle, thus earning the nickname Mr. Frypan among the downtown merchants of the city.

A big man and solidly built, he had been a star quarterback at Colgate University twenty years before. He had traveled a long and I suspect disappointing road since then. He drove around the valley selling the money-maker fry pans to a variety of small retailers, along with clocks and watches and toasters and Ronson cigarette lighters, often returning to the office in a cheery disposition after a spirited lunch, his face reddened by his successes and a few drinks. After doodling over his paper work for a while, he would wrap up the goods to be mailed out to his customers. I helped with the packing as I listened to the retelling of his exploits. And in the late afternoon I lugged a handcart loaded with packages down to the post office. The work was easy, even for a lazy kid like me.

Mr. Frypan was a born storyteller, another reason why I liked him. With just a little nudge from me, off he would go into a repertoire of yarns from his college days at Colgate. This slowed down the pace of our work considerably, which was more than acceptable to me. But his wife, Miz Madeline we all called her, would often hover nearby to spur us back into action, tsk'ing about the lateness of the hour and the items left to be packed for shipment. Mr. Fry always treated her with the utmost respect, and more so the longer he had spent at lunch. It seemed to work. As his courtly speech and manner reached a crescendo, Miz Madeline would back off and finally leave us to our business.

"We don't use boxes ... too expensive," said Mr. Fry during my half hour of lifetime training for the job. "That's what this roll of corrugated paper is for," he said. The material looked like what most of us call cardboard, but it was quite flexible and could be wrapped into a pocket-like container. "I'll show you how to make an indestructible 'shipping carton' with the least materials," said Mr. Fry.

And he did. A few years later in a college design class, my uncooked egg would survive a 30 foot drop, artfully wrapped in corrugated paper and shaped like a football, folded on the ends to form bumper cushions just as I had learned from the master.

Mr. Fry's stories always had a moral, I noticed, and most were about the challenges of growing through one's years as a young man. His tales often began with college freshman frolic ... fast cars, beer drinking, football games, pretty girls ... and ended with a thinly disguised lesson. Not preachy, he was very good at getting his point across without talking down to me. Had he not been Jewish, he would have made an excellent Methodist campus minister.

I thought Mr. Fry and I worked well together, even though he did most of the work. Somewhere in the middle of a story one afternoon we were interrupted by the sound of Miz Madeline bearing down on us as her high heels clomped along the plywood ramp leading back to our lair. I saw Mr. Fry's mouth set in a hard line as his wife came up behind him.

"Dear," she said, "I need David for some chores up front."

David wasn't doing much but listening to her husband's stories, and we all could guess what she wanted me for ... to clean the bathroom. That had been one of the many duties I'd agreed to when I took the job, although I had not yet performed it in my three months of employment. I guess Edna was cleaning the toilet up when necessary.

Mr. Fry was a nice guy and a terrible executive. Miz Madeline was a taskmaster. She would have served well as the road boss of a South Carolina chain gang. As far as she was concerned, I had sold myself for the minimum wage and was expected to perform the contract. But Mr. Fry would never ask me to do anything that he would have been embarrassed doing as a teenager.

For example, I didn't mind hauling the hand cart down the block to the post office at the end of the day, bumping the little wheels down off the curb across the pot-holed street. But I avoided pulling the cart uptown for deliveries to the stores where I might be seen by my friends. So Mr. Fry would often perform that chore before I came into work at three o'clock. This act of kindness in deference to my idiotic social fears at age 15 sent Miz Madeline into a tizzy, according to Edna. "What are we paying that kid for?" she reportedly asked.

When Mr. Fry did not turn to acknowledge his wife that afternoon, she edged around to his side and peered up at him.

"David is busy here, Madeline," said my savior.

"That is certainly not the case, dear," she replied with heat in her voice. "He's needed up front."

Mr. Fry's face now reddened deeper and he replied, "I do not like having to repeat my..."

"Achilles!" his wife said loudly, and this was the first time I heard his name spoken, "send David up front. NOW!"

Miz Madeline whirled around, her flouncing skirt rising like a square dancer's and she clip-clopped back up the ramp to the office. Mr. Fry stood rigid trying to control himself. Then the retired quarterback turned and with tremendous force hurled the alarm clock he had just wrapped toward

the ramp. The package, with its perfectly folded bumper ends, hit the wall like a football and bounced up to the ceiling where it smashed a 4 foot long florescent light tube and bounced down to the adjacent wall, knocking the clock to the floor behind Mr. Fry. As the clock smashed down behind him and shards of glass dropped from the ceiling light, the enraged man threw his arms over his head for protection and stepped backward onto the fallen clock, losing his balance and tumbling farther backward into a large open shipping box of frypans, where he finally came to rest in a seated position.

It was the funniest scene I had ever witnessed, and I started to laugh but then tried to cover it with a cough. Mr. Fry, defeated and embarrassed, was now in a terrifically bad mood.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he thundered as he extricated himself from the frypans and stood to his full height.

"Me?" I asked, "I wasn't laughing." The man was my boss and far exceeded my years, my height and probably my strength. I was not going to admit I had laughed at him. I was thoroughly intimidated.

"I'm quite certain I heard you laugh, David," he said, still with a raised voice, moving toward me. His ire was going to be taken out on me. That angered me and I took the offensive.

"It is totally unfair of you," I said loudly, "to accuse me of laughing when you could not possibly have seen my face. And then all but call me a liar and physically threaten me!" I declaimed this jewel in my best imitation of a dandy whose besmirched reputation had been unfairly called into question.

My little speech brought him up short and his face changed from indignation to surprise. He looked at me as if sizing me up and sat back down on the pile of fry pans. Then he lowered his head and covered his face with his hands. He sat quite still and I began to feel bad for the fellow.

"I'm sorry you fell in the box," I said. I didn't get a reaction. He continued to sit with his face in his hands.

I now felt awkward. I said, “And I’m sorry you ... broke the light and the clock and the ...” I had to stop or I’d soon be laughing again.

Time ticked away and Mr. Fry just sat there on the fry pans, hands covering his face.

“Well,” I finally said, “are we going to wrap packages or not?”

The big man raised his head as his hands fell away and down into his lap. He looked me straight in the eye.

“I’m waiting,” he said, “for you to apologize to me for lying.”

“I already told you ...” I began, but he interrupted me.

“I am waiting for you to be honest. I think you can do it,” he said. “I know you’re not a man yet, but you don’t seem to know that it takes honesty to become a mature person.”

“Look,” I said, “maybe I started to laugh, but ...”

“Oh,” he interrupted, “excuses, huh? A man doesn’t offer excuses, he owns up to his behavior.”

I knew he spoke the truth and what he said was not unfamiliar, just difficult. I bit the bullet.

“OK,” I said, “I lied. I did laugh, or start to.”

“Good beginning,” he said.

“But then I covered it with a cough.”

“Why,” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do,” he said.

“You’re my boss,” I said, “and I’m not supposed to laugh at you.”

“Supposed?” he said. “What about plain old respect? For age, for accomplishment.”

Mr. Fry got up and came over to stand directly in front of me.

“I don’t ask for respect,” he said. “You have to decide to give it.”

“Yes, sir,” I responded.

“When deserved,” he added.  
I made no comment.

“And Madeline is right,” he continued. “You did agree to clean the bathroom.”

“I know,” I answered.

“So, go do it. Go do it while I sit back here and figure out how to earn my wife’s respect.”

I had never cleaned a bathroom in my life, but I headed for the office, where I could at least flirt with Edna and get her into the tiny bathroom for a lesson.

Mr. Freitag had no children and maybe he needed to offer fatherly advice to someone from time to time. I know he liked me and I remember him often encouraging me to get better grades and to plan for college, advice he may have sensed was not offered to me at home.

While on a trip to see my parents twenty years later, my mother showed me Mr. Freitag’s obituary that she had saved weeks before from the local newspaper. No mention of Miz Madeline was made. I guess he never succeeded in earning her respect. But although I never took the opportunity to tell him, he earned mine.

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