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Disaster(s)

Most people learn from one mistake. Some people don't. Back in the 1940's, men's blue socks were not colorfast. I knew that, but I still had to learn it. The hard way. Several times.

One of my first impressions of suburban Portland was of towering front-yard stacks of pungent slabs of firewood. Our neighborhood had what was then the characteristic aroma of Portland - freshly cut fir slabs. Our building was one which was heated by these slabs; we walked through a double-walled arc of ascending sidewalks to our apartment front door, just inside the entrance to the building. The memory of that aroma haunts me pleasantly more than half a century later. I rather like it, but there was one aspect of the wood which does not leave me with pleasant memories.



The laundry room was in the basement, which contained a furnace for burning the waste wood, which was restacked next to the furnace from the front sidewalk as it was needed. The basement was far from spotlessly clean; every surface was covered with soot from the incomplete combustion of the furnace. The one washing machine, serving the whole building, was a typical thirties or forties machine, with a tub containing an agitator from which I learned to lift the wet, clean white clothes from the soapy water into the adjacent tub for rinsing and subsequently for running through the hand-operated wringer and thence to the drying lines stretched just barely beneath the low-hanging, sooty ceiling. Those operations gave large wet objects, such as sheets, several opportunities for acquiring soot. Our lovely new wedding-present linens got a lot of wear in the multiple washing and wringing I had to do until I learned to lift them carefully from machine to rinse tub, to wringer, and finally to the drying lines to spend the next six hours drying. There were a great many variations on the lessons I learned around that basement; I had to learn how to keep all varieties of clothes from touching sooty surfaces, and it was a hard lesson that I had to learn again and again.

There was one additional hazard. Paul wore a sparkling white shirt and navy blue socks to work each day. I didn't always separate the white and darks as meticulously as I should have. To wash just one blue sock with a white sheet or two, along with five or six white shirts, produced a supply of blue sheets and shirts, which were not part of his working uniform. I truly didn't mind blue sheets, although colored linens hadn't yet become fashionable. Back to the washing machine and plenty of bleach for the shirts, not once, but several times before I learned to police those white loads for blue socks. I did learn.

A number of years later when washing baby clothes, I carelessly pitched George's pale blue baby blanket into a load of his diapers. The diapers emerged, not just blue but fuzzy blue ... completely - not advisable for tender baby bottoms. Another washing of the diapers did very little for them. I had to hand-pick all that fuzz from every diaper. At least that time one disaster was enough to teach me the lesson. I always washed the blue blanket alone after that one lesson. I made many washing errors, and still do occasionally, but today I don't ever mix even color-fast blue socks or blue blankets with white clothes.

Then with cooking, I had to start learning all over again. I managed to make almost every mistake one can in cooking, even though most of the time I improved after the first mistake. However, when I tried to be ultra-efficient with my time in Chapel Hill, I did have trouble. We lived several miles from the campus and with only one car, we went early for whoever of us had the first class and stayed late for whoever had extra work to do. Naturally, we arrived home late, wanting dinner immediately. I decided I had to be more efficient in my cooking. My first exercise in efficiency began at breakfast with my putting several eggs on to boil for a salad I planned for dinner. It was a good beginning, except that we scurried off to school without my turning off the heat under the eggs.

We returned to our little house to encounter a distinct odor of some kind of singeing. On the range we found a bright red electric eye glowing through a bottomless small pan - and no eggs. They had exploded into tiny pieces of shell and very hard-cooked egg fragments, covering the walls in the minute kitchen and embedded in the ceiling. I suppose we were more than a little lucky that nothing more had burned and exploded. I don't remember what we ate that night, but I do recall several hours of cleaning up -sweeping shell and disintegrated eggs from the floor and walls and laboriously picking tiny pieces of shell from the ceiling. I opted to return to my usual inefficient cooking. That is, until several years later in a different house and city, when I decided to try to make a rich butterscotch pudding which a friend had told me about. It was simplicity itself. Remove the paper wrapping from a can of condensed milk, put the can in a pot, cover the can with water, and leave it to boil for an hour or so. Again, I left home, this time to run a few errands. Returning to the kitchen, I found, not a can of delicious pudding but a floor, four walls, and ceiling dotted with uncountable numbers of small dots of exploded butterscotch pudding. At least the can had only blown its lid. I had only to clean up the gallons of pudding which had burst from that eight-ounce can. Efficiency is just not my bag.