



The Refrigerator

Jeffrey E. Hansen, PhD

Yesterday, my refrigerator taught me something about appreciation. Now, you may think it odd that a grown man could receive a meaningful life lesson from a kitchen appliance. Fair enough. My brain works in strange ways. Whether that is a blessing or a curse remains an open question. You tell me.

Leah and I have been two ships passing in the night for the better part of three weeks. I took a solo motorcycle ride through Colorado, up to Grand Junction. She spent much of a week watching our son and daughter-in-law's dogs while they were in Washington State, then headed off with her best friend, Cindy, for a much-deserved vacation along the beautiful California coast. A girlcation. We men have mancations, so that seems only fair. She had a wonderful time, and meanwhile, I was home, more or less, baching it.

When Leah left, our refrigerator was in beautiful condition. Over time, it began to reflect my personality. Put it here. Put it there. Slide this behind whatever that is. Take something out, swing it back in, and find a space for the next thing. My organizational philosophy is straightforward: if the door closes, the system works.

Unfortunately, the door did not always close. You know how a refrigerator door will sometimes remain open half an inch, quietly passing judgment on you while cooling the kitchen? We had several of those episodes. Thankfully, I survived my own housekeeping.

Then Leah came home. She had bought groceries. I had bought groceries. We had an abundance of food and a shortage of anything resembling a plan. What I considered a reasonably functional refrigerator; Leah regarded with a look some husbands will recognize. No speech was necessary. Her face said it all: *Who is this man I married? Who is this barbarian, and what has he done to my refrigerator?*

“Well,” she said, “I need to fix that.” To her credit, she did not say much more. She simply began taking everything out. Now, for me, organizing a refrigerator is a three-minute job. Five if something spills. You push a few things around, throw away whatever has become a biological question, and make enough room for the groceries. Leah was preparing for a different undertaking.

A little family history may help. Her father was a Navy captain who fought at Midway and later worked with the Pacific Maritime Association in ship safety and loading. He understood how to organize cargo, use space, and make sure everything was precisely where it belonged. He was also fully German. Leah is half German, and I am fairly certain the half she inherited includes the entire department responsible for cleanliness, order, and doing things properly. Apparently, you can inherit the ability to load a ship. In our house, that ability has been applied to the refrigerator.

Out came the food. Out came the containers. Then came the sponge and the cleaning of every shelf, corner, nook, and cranny. Nothing escaped her attention. By the time she finished, you could have manufactured microchips in there.

This morning, I opened the door and beheld civilization.

My tonic water cans stood in perfect formation, labels facing outward. The strawberries sat neatly in their little containers. Everything had a place, and everything occupied its place with a degree of confidence I rarely achieve myself. Nothing was out of true. Nothing was out of square. I suspect a ruler was involved. Possibly a laser. Somewhere, her father was smiling. The cargo was secure. The ship could sail.

I stood there longer than a man ordinarily needs to stand in front of a refrigerator unless he has forgotten what he came for, which, in fairness, happens. But this time, I was taking it in. The transformation from complete chaos to complete order was something to behold. And as I looked at it, I began thinking about my beloved Leah and realizing that this is how she does so many things.

I see it in the rooms she arranges, the things she chooses, and the details she notices. She has an eye for beauty and a gift for making a space feel welcoming. I would never think to put certain things together, but she does, and somehow, they look as though they always belonged that way. Our house is a showplace, but it is also a comfortable, beautiful home. I love living here, and so much of what I love about it comes from her.

Yet I often enjoy all of that without giving much thought to the work behind it. I walk into a beautiful room and settle in. I appreciate the comfort and the order. Then I put something down wherever it happens to leave my hand. Occasionally, when Leah asks me to put it where it belongs, I even have the nerve to get annoyed.

Standing in front of those perfectly aligned tonic water cans, that struck me as a fairly impressive failure of perspective. Here is a woman whose care makes my daily life better in a hundred quiet

The Refrigerator
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

ways, and I can get irritated because she would prefer that I not undo her work on my way through the room. Well done, Jeff.

Perhaps we grow so accustomed to the good things someone brings into our lives that we stop seeing how they get there. The house looks lovely. The kitchen is clean. Things are where we need them. After a while, we begin to experience all of that as simply the way things are. Then we are left in charge for a couple of weeks, and the refrigerator tells the truth.

Mine certainly did. And when Leah restored order, I found myself noticing the care and effort I too often take for granted. Even those little rows of tonic water cans reminded me how much attention she gives to our home and how readily I enjoy the results without remembering to thank her.

So, Leah, thank you for the beautiful home you make, for the care you put into our life together, and for the patience you extend to the man who considers a closed refrigerator door an organizational achievement. I love the life we share. I love you. And I need to remember to say thank you more often, preferably before you have to excavate the groceries.

I am a lucky man. A beautiful wife, a beautiful home, and a refrigerator to die for.

Now, if I can just remember to close the door.