

NON FICTION

In Which I Buy a Refrigerator

Betsy Woodman



Abundant choice is a great thing, right? Not if you're a consumer wimp.

I'm standing in Sears looking at a dozen different models of refrigerators. Let's see—what size do I need? 18 cubic feet—19—22—25—27.6? Freezer on top or freezer on bottom? Single door or French doors? Ice maker? Water dispenser in the door?

Most of these refrigerators seem very expensive to me, since the last time I bought one, it cost \$450. I'm eyeing a \$1,500 model, which is closer to the low end than the high. It's possible to drop \$10,000 on a refrigerator, and have it decorated with custom art to go with your kitchen's color scheme. I'm sticking to black.

Suddenly a scruffy-looking bearded guy with deep-set blue eyes is beside me. Oh Lordy, it's Hank. He shows up at the most inconvenient times. Now he steps closer and murmurs in my ear, "Simplify, simplify!"

Easy for you to say, I tell him silently. You're a ghost. Ghosts don't have to buy refrigerators.

Then I soften a little, because I'm feeling a little sorry for the fellow these days, after that bashing he got from Kathryn Schulz in the *New Yorker*. Also, I truly wish I *could* follow his advice.

"Hank, I'm *trying* to simplify!" I say. "I'm really trying. This is one of the *least* complicated models they're selling. It could be worse. There's no ice-crusher in the door. Plus, it doesn't keep your food inventory from barcodes and announce when you're out of orange juice."

At this, Hank's expression is totally blank. "A talking icebox?" He recovers and says quickly, "Do you really need an icebox at all? Can't you drink beverages at the temperature at which nature serves them to you?"

I remember now that Hank hates refrigeration. I've heard him before on the subject of ice harvesting. Yup, he's already got that preachy expression on his face and is up on his soapbox: "A gentleman farmer I know wanted to double his money in the ice trade, so he *violated* my favorite pond. He took off the only coat, ay, *the skin itself*, of Walden Pond in the midst of a hard winter."

"Ooh. That does sound cruel," I admit.

"All so people in New Orleans and Madras and Bombay could sip their cold drinks," he says gloomily.

"Look, I'm not tearing off anyone or anything's skin," I said. "This refrigerator is a *thing*, not part of the natural landscape. It will allow me to store food so I don't have to go to the store all that often."

"The store!" he snorts. "Why don't you just grow a row or two of beans. You don't need all those different kinds of food. Instead of a hundred dishes, eat five."

"Oh, come on," I remind him. "*You* ate more than five foods when you were alive. Rice, cornmeal, rye bread, apples, squash, beans.... And pies." Which you swiped from your neighbor's windowsill, I add silently, and stare straight into those blue eyes to try to get him to flinch.

"Stupid rumors," he says dismissively.

“My dear Hank,” I say, “simplify, simplify is an inappropriate approach to many things, notably cooking. I get bored of eating the same old dishes day in, day out. This year, I’m going to learn some new recipes. In fact, I’m going to—complexify!”

Darn, “complexify, complexify” doesn’t have the ring of the high moral ground. I add hastily, “All this business about simplicity often is little more than giving in to laziness. The desire to simplify can be mere wishful thinking. Does it work in music? According to you, the best tune would have only a few notes. Maybe only one! And no ornaments, or variations on a theme. Why do I love Bach, Handel, Telemann? Largely because they ARE complex.”

Ha! Got him.

“You’re not supposed to take everything I say literally,” Hank says. “Or apply it to all situations.”

He sounds uncharacteristically conciliatory, so I calm down a little. Secretly, I agree that I do indeed need to simplify. Keep surfaces uncluttered. Get rid of clothes I never wear. Give away books I’ll never read again. I definitely should do those things.

But back to the refrigerator. Now the salesman is turning one of them around so that I can see...

Eek! Refrigerator brains!

The salesman now explains (sort of) how all this circuitry works. Hank’s eyes glaze over. He doesn’t want to learn a bunch of new words, such as “compressor” or “evaporator,” let alone “saddle valves” and “condenser coils.” Neither do I, even if learning new words might challenge my brain and prevent Alzheimer’s disease.

“Couldn’t I buy a model with no computer in it?” I ask. “Something simpler?”

“There is no such thing,” the salesman says.

In due course, I make my choice and haul out my little rectangle of plastic.

Hank looks at the card with some curiosity, but when I explain what it is, he turns disdainful. “Keep your accounts on your thumbnail,” he mutters.

“I’d love to,” I say, scribbling my signature on a tiny screen.

Afterwards, Hank follows me out to the parking lot, and I offer to drop him off somewhere. “I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot,” he says, a bit self-righteously. “Have it your own way,” I say. “Nice seeing you again.”

Maybe he’ll leave me alone for a while, I think. Alas, no such luck. When I arrive home, there he is, at the front door. He thinks he beat me here because he’s on foot; I chalk it up to his being a ghost.

“You again,” I say.

“Yes,” he says, “when we left that cement-covered field outside that ugly clump of buildings, I noticed a look of quiet desperation on your face. I was curious as to how you would handle your mood of despondency.”

I adopt what I hope is a calm and dignified expression. “I thought I’d do some Googling.”

“Gargling?”

“No, *Goo*... Oh, never mind, just come in.”

He comes in and looks around, obviously doesn’t really approve of my upholstered couch. A straight-backed chair should be good enough for anybody.

“I was worried about you,” he said. “You’re not going into debt over that...that *icebox*, are you?”

“No, I certainly am not,” I say proudly. “I’ve got twenty-five days to repay without interest. Speaking of debt, my friend, aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black? Did you ever recover your investment in that book you published yourself? How long did it take you to repay *that* debt? But never mind, I’m glad you published it. I’ve got it around here somewhere.”

“How long did it take me to get out of debt? Does it matter now? Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.” His voice takes on a dreamy tone as he examines my bookcases, and his face lights up when he sees a copy of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. I don’t have the heart to tell him that I bought a second-hand copy on Amazon.com for a penny plus shipping.

“Shouldn’t you get on with your gargling?” he asks.

“Googling,” I say, drawing up a second chair to the computer, where I start typing away. Hank’s look of incomprehension is priceless—he’d obviously rather be chopping wood or cultivating beans.

The point of my Googling is to comfort myself about the big-ticket purchase I’ve just made by taking the long historical view. I find that such a view often makes current day problems seem trivial. For example, I remind myself that, had I been born a few decades earlier—before antibiotics, modern dentistry, and modern obstetrics—I probably wouldn’t have even lived beyond age thirty, if that.

On the web, I find several pictures of refrigerators from the 1920s. A Frigidaire advertisement reminds me that if I own one, I’ll pay less than if I were having ice delivered. That’s a happy thought—and no raping of ponds, either.

“Ha!” I say, making Hank jump. “Wikipedia says that in 1922, a 9-cubic foot refrigerator with a freezer compartment that made one tray of ice cost \$714. Do you know what would be in 2015 dollars? Over \$10,000!”

A few more calculations, and I realize that the cost of refrigerators came down quickly, rather like the cost of computers did many decades later. A plumber in Boston making a dollar an hour in 1922 would have taken 714 hours to earn enough for that early refrigerator. Four years later, a Frigidaire cost \$285, and our Boston plumber’s wage had gone up to \$1.25, allowing him to pay for a refrigerator in 228 hours. By 2015, his great-grandchild—if also a plumber—could pay for my \$1,500 refrigerator in 38 hours.

“Has your gargling—giggling?—googling?—delivered any new insights?” Hank wants to know.

At this point, I’m comparing the price of 1922 refrigerators to the cost of 1922 house kits

from Sears. At that time, you could buy the “Betsy Ross” kit—all the materials you needed for a house with four rooms AND bathroom—for \$1,504. The refrigerator would have set you back almost half as much.

By now, I’m feeling quite euphoric that my refrigerator isn’t going to cost half as much as my house. To avoid quiet desperation, I tell myself, all you have to do is cultivate the art of cherry-picking your historical facts.

“Your thoughts?” Hank asks.

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” I say.

“I’m sorry, my friend, that was *my* thought,” he says.

The thing about Hank, he often gets the last word.

Sources:

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BETSY WOODMAN is the author of *Jana Bibi’s Excellent Fortunes*, *Love Potion Number 10*, and *Emeralds Included*, published by Henry Holt & Company. Betsy spent ten childhood years in India, studied in France, Zambia and the United States, and now lives in her native New Hampshire. She was a writer and editor for the award-winning documentary series, *Experiencing War*, produced for the Library of Congress and aired on Public Radio International. Please visit www.betsywoodman.com.