

This Old House

In the early 70's, we had no cash. Gary asked a builder, Oscar Spano, if we could paint the inside of one of his new houses for our down payment. Spano said yes. Gary came and did most of the painting. In 45 years, lots of things break down. One week was memorable.

On Tuesday the ice cream in our fridge was getting soft. I went into panic mode and hurriedly called a well-advertised repair service.

"We can't get to you for two days," they said.

I made an appointment for Thursday, but I kept looking for someone who could come sooner. Several phone calls later, I found a repairman who could come on Wednesday.

However, later on Tuesday, during a telephone call to my brother several states away, I mentioned our problem. He said, "When did you last vacuum under your refrigerator? It's not complicated, and it might save you a service charge." It was worth a try.

To clean under the fridge, I had to remove a series of hexagonal screws that held the back cover on. After a brief search, I found the right screwdriver and removed the back, revealing a whole warren of dust bunnies.

The needle-nosed vacuum attachment sucked the fuzz from under, over, and around every visible surface. My wife and I retired Tuesday night, hoping that the freezer would be working normally in the morning. Wednesday morning came. The ice cream was still soft.

A few hours later, a repairman pushed our fridge away from the wall, pleased that the back was already off. He knelt to get a better look. I stood behind him, shining a flashlight over his head into the dark cavity. The farther he bent, the lower his belt crept, until finally another dark cavity came into view. His butt crack smiled up at me like a . . . well, like a butt crack. I said nothing.

His examination complete, he rose, hiked up his pants, and announced: "Either the heater, or the fan, or the computer chip has malfunctioned. I don't work on any of those. You'll have to call someone else." He left without charging us for the call.

The following day, the repairman who was slated to arrive between 3:00 and 5:00 showed up about 6:30, without apology, and demanded payment up front. After pocketing my check, he glanced at the freezer and announced that the frost build-up told him which part had failed.

"We don't have that part in stock," he said. "I'll have to order one. I can install it Saturday." He congratulated us on our nine-year-old refrigerator. "You're lucky yours has lasted so long. Most fridges need new parts after only five years."

When I saw his estimate, I said, "Maybe it would be cheaper to buy a new one."

"No," he insisted. "Your design is a style that's no longer being manufactured. It's the best ever made." He added, "If you defrost the freezer yourself, that might save some labor costs when

we install the new part.”

With little time to spare, our son hurried from across town, and in short order, drove away with our ice cream and frozen food in the trunk of his Mercury.

The repairman’s defrosting instructions were simple: “To defrost the fridge, unplug it. Catch the water as the ice melts.” What he failed to mention was that water would drain from several different spots, at random times, hour after hour, all through the night. Every time we spotted a puddle, we caught it with a towel so as not to damage our floors. By morning, every towel in the house was wet.

As I was gathering wet towels to put in the dryer, my wife came in from the laundry room and announced, “Our dryer’s broken.”

“What? Do we have a service contract for it?”

“No,” she said. “We don’t.”

Hoping to save money, I called the repair service. “Can the repairman due back on Saturday replace the heating element in the dryer at the same time?”

The clerk said that for an additional charge he could look at it—not fix it, just look at it.

My son who had saved the ice cream said that replacing the heating element in a dryer was easy. So, using my online list of businesses, I began calling.

Again and again, I heard the words: “The parts would have to be ordered.” Surely, I thought, in a city of a half million population, parts should be available locally. At last, a clerk asked, “Is there any heat at all?”

“The unit gets warm, but not hot enough to dry clothes.”

He said, “The heating element in a dryer is like a light bulb. It’s either on or off. There’s no halfway. If there is a little heat, then the problem is not the heating element. Have you cleaned the lint trap lately?”

Was he kidding? We religiously cleaned our lint trap after every load. Still, I disconnected the vent pipe and looked in. It didn’t look dirty on the end I was looking at. My wife removed the lint trap in the dryer door and poked around. She said, “I feel something soft.” She kept on poking and poking and poking. I went back into the kitchen and closed the door behind me.

A few minutes later, she dashed into the kitchen and slammed the door. “What happened?” I said.

Out of breath, she said, “I turned the dial and pushed the start button. I heard a small rattling sound like a rattlesnake, then suddenly lint and dust shot out of the dryer like a Texas tornado. The laundry room walls and the ceiling are covered with dust, and lint is hanging from the ceiling.”

To fix the dryer meant replacing the tube that ran from the back of the dryer through the garage wall into a flowerbed outside. To do that, it was necessary to enter the garage.

Opening the garage door proved to be almost impossible. One of the coiled springs that held the door open lay broken on the garage floor. That necessitated a trip to Home Depot to purchase

a vent tube for the dryer and a spring for the garage door.

At Home Depot, the clerk directed me to aisle 9 for the vent, aisle 21 for the spring. I picked up a tube for the dryer, then went in search of a spring.

I learned that there was no “one size fits all” for springs. Did I need the 28”, the 30”, or the 32”? I took a chance and bought a 30”. Arriving home and placing it beside the broken spring, I saw another trip to Home Depot in my immediate future.

Installing the 28” spring required two people. One person had to hold the door open to a height of about eight feet, while the other attached the spring. My son came to our aid for a third time. I held the door up; he attached the new spring. It worked perfectly.

He also attached the new vent tube to the dryer in only a few minutes. We started and stopped the dryer a few times till the noise of tumbling debris died out. It worked fine.

By Saturday afternoon, the repairman arrived, collected a check for the original estimate without acknowledging our all-night vigil, and finally, after four days, our refrigerator was restocked, the towels were dry, and we celebrated by opening and closing the garage door several times—just for fun.