

This Old House

Living in the same house for 52 years, one collects memories galore. One week had galore galore.

On a bright and cloudless Tuesday morning, the ice cream in our fridge was soft. I went into panic mode and quickly 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. After several phone calls, I found a repairman who could come on Wednesday.

However, later Tuesday, describing my problem during a telephone call to my brother several states away, he asked, “When did you last vacuum under your refrigerator? It’s not complicated, and it might save you a service charge.” I was happy to try it.

To clean under the fridge, I removed a series of hexagonal screws that held on the back cover. After a brief search, I removed the back, revealing a whole warren of dust bunnies.

Our needle-nosed vacuum attachment sucked the fuzz from under, over, and around every visible surface. My wife and I went to bed Tuesday night, hoping that the freezer would be working normally in the morning. On Wednesday morning, 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 and 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 for the call.

Then on Thursday, the repairman slated to arrive between 3:00 and 5:00 showed up about 6:30, did not apologize, and demanded payment up front. He pocketed my check, 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 it has lasted so long. Most fridges need new parts after only five years.”

When I saw the 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, that might save some labor costs when we install the new part.”

With little time to spare, our son from across town hurried over, and in short order, drove away with the contents of our freezer in the trunk of his Mercury.

The repairman’s instructions were simple: “To defrost the fridge, unplug it and catch the water as the ice melts.” What he neglected to mention was that water would drain from several different spots, at random times, hour after hour, all through the night. We caught puddles with towels so as not to damage our floors. By morning, every towel in the house was wet.

While I gathered towels to put in the dryer, my wife came in from the laundry room and announced, “The dryer’s broken.”

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

“No,” she said. “We don’t.”

Hoping to save money, I asked the repair service. due back on Saturday if they could 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 saved the ice cream advised replacing the heating element in a dryer. So, going down my online list of businesses, I began calling.

Again and again, I heard the words: “The parts would have to be ordered.” Surely 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 cleaned our lint trap after every load. Still, I looked into the end of the vent pipe. It didn't look dirty. My wife removed the lint trap at the dryer door and poked around. She said, "I feel something soft," and kept on 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, looking like she had just walked through a giant spider web.

"What happened?" I asked.

Out of breath, she stammered, "... I turned the dial ... and pushed the start button ... I heard a small rattling sound ... Suddenly lint and dust shot out of the dryer ... The laundry room walls are covered with dust ... and lint is hanging ... from the ceiling." I helped her un-decorate herself.

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 from the front of the house.

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

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

For garage door springs, There is no "one size fits all" for springs. Did I need the 28", the 30", or the 32"? I 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 to hold the door open to a height of about eight feet, the other to attach 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, so we started and stopped the dryer a few times till the noise of tumbling debris died out. It worked fine.

By Saturday afternoon, the refrigerator repairman arrived to do install the part and collect a check—without acknowledging our all-night vigil. 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.