

# More Than Machines

Household appliances become plugged into our emotions, making them difficult to replace *By Rebecca Powers / Illustration by Michael Byers*

**T**he mellow post-vacation feeling from our anniversary trip ended seconds after turning the house key in the front-door lock.

Inside, we were immediately assaulted by a smell that had us wondering if a small creature had slipped into the house and died while we were away.

A search turned up no culprit until, that is, we spied a seemingly harmless splotch on the floor in front of the refrigerator. A thin trail of dribble led our eyes up to the freezer door. We opened to investigate, and its formerly frozen contents belched forth with an acrid greeting of week-old orange-juice concentrate and smelts (as in the little fish). Yum.

Apparently, the “coppertone” (brown) icebox that matched the other appliances in the mid-century ranch I’d “married” a year earlier shut down the instant we hit the road.

Our reward for cleaning up the welcome-home stench was a new refrigerator, range, and dishwasher, and a redo of our galley-style kitchen.

Neighbors may be the wild card of home ownership, but homes themselves are time bombs. What could go wrong next?

In a different kitchen in a different house, our faithful helpers — named Jenn-Air, Maytag, and KitchenAid — are well into their dotage. Tick, tick, tick. And don’t even mention the elderly Kenmore cousins in the laundry room. Six appliances — all the same vintage. When they go, we’ll be doing our part to boost the sale-of-durable-goods index.

I take the word “durable” seriously. Stretching the lifespan of appliances is in my genes. My parents held onto their Crosley Shelvador refrigerator (purchased before the last three of their five children were born) for decades. They demoted it to the basement, of course, where it capably stepped in to handle the overflow of party-sized platters too big for the “harvest gold” newcomer upstairs. Last we knew, the workhorse was decades old and still humming in the basement of my parents’ home, where it was left for the new owners. I hope they figured out the intricacies of the “dad-style” repair job, a jury-rigged fix to the door grip that was prone to “flying off the handle,” becom-

ing an airborne missile if you didn’t hang on while latching.

Following in the family tradition of geriatric care for appliances, we recently touched up our Maytag dishwasher racks with vinyl paint — with like-new results, I might add.

New appliances are seductive, of course. Those chunky red knobs on the Wolf range (I want one). The convection option on the De’Longhi countertop oven. La Cornue’s vast color options. (A La Cornue owner once told me that he liked to pre-heat his pajamas in the warming drawer on winter nights.)

But decisions, decisions. Thinking long term makes classic white appealing. Brushed stainless is crisp and popular, but with oil-rubbed bronze in the wings, will stainless go the way of “avocado”?

And what about the other traits? A French-door configuration? Gas range? Front-load? Steam? So many practical considerations for companions that evoke more emotion than we might guess.

Appliances are partners in so many pleasures. A hungry college student microwaving a plate of home-sweet-home leftovers. Your teenage brother opening the refrigerator and drinking milk straight from the carton.

My familiar kitchen companions stand ready to help a few more birthday cakes rise to the occasion, to soften the ice cream that goes with it, and reheat the coffee that sat too long. The dishwasher, with its touched-up prongs will, with luck, hum efficiently after the holiday company’s gone and we nod off to sleep.

Those sweet dreams could be interrupted at any moment by the nightmare of mechanical failure. (Last night, we thought we heard the microwave groan.) Two years ago, the Sears repairman gave the “almond” washer and dryer two years to live. Then he diplomatically complimented their well-maintained condition.

I’m reminded of *The Brave Little Toaster* and its theme of loyalty and obsolescence. Maybe my parents were reluctant to part with the refrigerator that held their babies’ bottles, along with the Southern-style lard that my dad used for Sunday fried eggs, and that’s why the Shelvador stayed well past its prime.

Likewise, as long as the household help is drawing juice from the wall, I’m inclined to live without a mandatory retirement policy. ■

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