

It is past noon, and I'm still waiting for the repairman, promised for early morning, to fix my stove.

The burners don't light. The gas is flowing, but I have to resort to a match to get things going. What really burns me up, though, is that the stove is brand-new—literally installed last week. I rushed home to my kitchen, eager to see everything all set up—gorgeous—and was inspired to whip up a celebratory dinner. The kitchen is so beautiful that I decided on the spot that I was going to learn to cook and become comfortable enough to throw many dinner parties for my friends. I turned the knob under my omelet pan, only to hear a couple of ignition clicks on the other side of the stove. Nothing else happened. Now, I am not especially confident in the face of gas-leaking appliances. Nor am I particularly adept with instruction manuals. But after trying every suggestion for this problem, I knew that this was a matter for the professionals—I just couldn't believe that they would have to be summoned so soon after the delivery of the new appliance. And so I began the descent into service purgatory. Never mind what the Catholic Church says, purgatory does exist, and it involves endless phone loops with soothing voices telling you how much they care about you and your business—while you wait poised for eternal damnation.

Meanwhile, I couldn't get the alarm on the refrigerator door to stop beeping, no matter how firmly I shut it. I finally disabled it in frustration. But when I tried to disable the freezer (one of the reasons I bought this machine, which costs as much as a car, was the many energy-saving devices it boasted, such as its being able to disable compartments that aren't being used), I couldn't get the process to function properly. A few more calls to the recommended repair outfit finally yielded the information that, indeed, the manual for this new appliance had been written incorrectly.

Naturally, all these problems surfaced at the end of the day, at the end of the week, and so it was several days before anything could be addressed, much less scheduled, much less attended to, and so here I wait.

I wish I weren't in such good company. As soon as I began to complain about my problems, I heard other people's tales of woe—the most harrowing of all from a woman whose eyebrows were singed off when her oven exploded in flames. And

it isn't as if problems were limited to appliances. I met the president of a furniture company who ordered a couple of sofas and waited an extra six months for delivery due to a foul-up with fulfillment, only to have the furniture arrive with broken legs. His own company! From all over the country, the stories arrive: doors are hung, but they are warped; fabric is unevenly printed; chairs show up in the wrong color; carpets are laid down stained.

Sometimes I wonder how our industry survives.

It isn't worth naming names here; too many companies subject their customers to this kind of abuse, and that's what it is. We fall in love; we believe in what we are buying; we pay dearly; and then, we are betrayed. Who has time for this? And why is this necessary? There are now several Web sites that collect consumers' appraisals of products, including large appliances, and believe me, it has completely changed the way I shop. In the market for a new washer and dryer recently, I saw that many people were having the same problem with foul odors emanating from the rubber gasket of their front-loading washing machines—I had had a repairman out to my house three times for exactly the same problem. I promptly switched to another company with a better rating—and even so, I'm having problems.

We take great care, in our pages, to celebrate the custom-made, or encourage our readers to wait for the best, or justify

the sometimes extraordinary cost of products, because they are handmade, or rare, or distinguished by superb engineering or design. I, for one, truly believe in buying the best you can afford; I think it pays off, ultimately, because you get design you can appreciate for years and quality that outlasts cheap imitations. But where am I left when nothing is reliable? What does this say about our manufacturing standards? I have the power to complain in these pages, but so what? All over the country, we are sitting at home, waiting for service—service we wish we didn't need.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR