

Firefly is falling apart. “Firefly” is what Marie’s older daughter named the bed when it was brand new thirty years ago. On Sammy’s limited salary, buying the two girls sturdy army cots with strong wire flats and not-too-thin mattresses had seemed the best idea.

They’d worked fine, and then Sammy got a raise around the same time the girls had growth spurts. Marie pored over the Sears catalogue for weeks until she finally settled on beautiful maple-look bunk beds. Then Firefly and Nightmare (their younger daughter had thought of that name for her own cot) spent time folded up in the basement behind the water heater, and later in the crawl space under the roof.

Two years ago, when Sammy had his first heart attack, Marie asked her son-in-law to bring Firefly down to the mudroom where she unfolded it next to a space heater from Canadian Tire. Marie wanted to be close enough to Sammy’s bedroom door, but not *in* the bedroom. Sammy needed his sleep and the girls’ room—now the guest room—is always made up in case the girls come home for a visit. It was just easier to be here off the kitchen; she doesn’t disturb Sammy when she wakes up at night to read with a flashlight or gets up early in the morning to make tea in her “Best Mom” mug.

But now Firefly’s mattress is leaking through the wires. Whenever Marie manages a proper cleaning, she collects tiny swaths of cotton from under her cot—sometimes even from beneath the girls’ bunk and behind Sammy’s recliner. And the wires themselves have been letting her down. She can’t get comfortable on her right side because she feels her hip sagging towards the floor, which makes her feel off-balance and causes dreams of falling from airplanes or towers. If she turns over, a small but persistent mound of mattress thrusts itself into the right side of her lower back. If she inches to the left, her arm or leg drops off the edge.

Still, the idea of calling either girl and asking them to drive all the way to Cedar Springs and then take her to one of those massive furniture stores at the edge of town, well, it’s just too much to think about. Besides, according to the flyers, even small beds cost hundreds of dollars nowadays.

One morning, a huge truck delivers a new stove to Jerry and Susan next door. Late that evening, Marie drags the empty stove box from the curb into her backyard and covers it with garbage bags held down by stones and a big stick. She spends the next afternoon with her kitchen scissors making small cuts in the tough side seams until she can flatten one side of the box. Then she scores the bottom seam with her biggest knife and cuts the side off completely. She stomps on the leftover flaps so she can fit them into her recycling bin. That part takes the most time. Sammy is watching the sports channel and enjoying the low-fat chips and dip Marie brings in. He doesn’t even ask what’s keeping her busy in the backyard.

Marie takes the flattened side of the box and pushes it under the upper two-thirds of Firefly’s mattress. A little line of cardboard is showing; she adjusts the blanket to hide it. She lies down on her right side, sighing deeply, feeling supported, almost falling asleep.

And her daughters are just plain wrong to say she’s not coping any more.

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Let Sleeping Cats Lie by Caitlin McGuire