

My parents bought a new mattress when they were first married and slept in it all their lives. It was their private bed, only shared with permission and then only with sick children. Definitely no pets, no visitors, and sheets changed every week.

How then did we end up with a collection of inherited and abandoned mattresses, mattresses that hold their own popularity and need to be protected from other family members who might swap them without notice?

When we were first married we inherited an old family mattress. It was an ancient double SlumberRest. While it would have been nice to have a new one, our budget could not accommodate this level of luxury. It came with a stunted wooden bed frame - cut down to make it easier to get in and out - and a faintly medicinal tang. But it was comfortable, real nestle down and cuddle comfort. It had already acquiesced to the human shape and there was never an argument about where your hip should rest or your toes feel warmest.

Over the years this old bed welcomed two children, several cats and a couple of dogs. Somehow we all fitted, and the medicinal tang broadened to take on the odours of a family. It smelt like home.

We moved to a new house which came with a couple of beds. There was quite a bit of discussion about who was going to have possession of these strange new family members. The imperious queen sized bed with its ensemble and carved headboard stood proudly in the centre of a giant master bedroom. No-one looked keen. In the chaos of moving, Dad was pragmatic "It's a good bed and it's here, so let's just use it".

A sigh of relief from the children. They were too old to share the bed, and if Dad wanted it, he wouldn't fuss about who had the family bed. They had also heard whispers that a previous resident had died in the bed and although not finicky, they were not arguing over ownership of this one.

So the parents played tradition and moved into the master bedroom. A second queen sized bed came with the house, hardly used and therefore quite suspect. Both children tested it, and although comfortable, it didn't have the cosy familiarity of the old family bed. So the eldest pulled rank and claimed the family bed, and the youngest bravely took on the task of breaking in the new bed.

Years passed and children grew. Mum's work took her away from home. She came to know other beds, hotels, family homes, a second bedroom in the city. The city bedroom created a dilemma. It came with a perfectly good new Swedish bed with a firm mattress, and the same comfort rating as a park bench: it was cold, hard, and the covers fell off. Now Mum is a pretty tolerant creature. She is happy to camp out in her swag in all weathers - and although her old swag is comfortable, there can be no doubt it's lying on hard ground. So why did this pleasant bed in a lovely room create such antipathy?

The children tried the Swedish bed. Agreement that it didn't feel right. They tried a mattress topper, a king sized down thing that wrapped the entire bed in a soft cocoon. A park bench with a doona. It just didn't understand how to accommodate a human body. What sooks we'd become!

It was about this time that Dad's snoring regularly topped the Richter scale. Mum had two choices: a park bench in the city, or a faulty chainsaw in the master bedroom. She was bordering on irrational, and threatening to use the chainsaw for ill means. So the spare bedroom was sorted out, junk relegated to the shed and the office squeezed into a corner. Now what to do about the bed.

The youngest child was the rebel of the family. Her room was nicely decorated and tidy, and even generated a pleasant fragrance. She had been taming the almost-new mattress for some years but felt it was time to live conventionally and have a new bed of her own. The rest of the family were dismayed. What was she talking about? We'd tried the new Swedish bed, it gave us nightmares about pigeons roosting on newspaper blankets. But she was insistent.

In the interest of encouraging an ethos of neatness and hygiene, Mum took the youngest shopping for a new bed and mattress. They came home with a soft topped queen sized therapeutic wonder, and a truck load of new bedding, nicely themed in white. Dad looked at these purchases in horror "How are you going to keep those clean?". Youngest was up for the challenge, "I'll wash them every week". Her resolve toughened when the rest of the family roared with laughter.

Several hours later, the new bed was resplendent with clean sheets, new blankets, white quilt and matching pillow cases. The room was immaculate and the colour scheme matched. The others were gobsmacked - to think a bedroom could look (and smell) like this!

However peace did not last long. Later that evening there was a roar from the youngest's bedroom. The family rushed in to find the pet ferrets held aloft, and blood stains on the white bedspread. An undercurrent of ferret contaminated the floral air. "They've been fighting on the bed and look at the mess they've made." Mum quickly rescued the ferrets and, given the stain-tolerant state of family clothing, provided accurate advice about laundering white cotton. The laundry did overtime, the ferrets entertained by other means (although the dog was not happy about his role as rodent distracter), and the beautiful room restored to its earlier glory.

The timing of the youngest's mattress transition was excellent. The nearly-new mattress that the youngest had been breaking in was starting to acquire the shape and softness expected by this discerning family. Mum needed a new bed, and her room was ready. So the now-worn-in-but-nearly-new mattress was installed in the spare room. Not to be outdone by the youngest's housekeeping flair, Mum added a handmade floor mat and burned some incense.

Things went along happily at the main house for some time, but the problem of the park bench at the city pad continued. Then there was an unexpected breakthrough. The city pad's handyman was over doing the mowing when he stopped work and asked "Do you know of anyone who wants a good mattress?". Who said there isn't a god?

Knowing the handyman's strange living arrangements, Mum cautiously asked about the lineage of the mattress. Apparently it had been barely used although the details of the prior owners were unclear. Importantly it wasn't on the handyman's bed (relief at this

piece of information, Mum had seen photos of the handyman's flat and felt that it would make a good training facility for hunting ferrets).

"Why do you want to sell it?"

"Can't get it up the ladder to the flat."

Mum was starting to get quite excited. How much? A number in the low hundreds was mentioned - quickly followed by assurances that this was a very expensive high end mattress. The deal was done and the handyman abandoned the mowing to organise delivery.

Not long afterward Mum heard car horns tooting and peeped out the front window. It seemed that there was some kind of traffic jam with people standing on the road in animated discussion. Noticing that a large mattress was at the centre of the chaos, she discretely closed the curtains and retired to the kitchen to put the kettle on. If there was a public outcry over a second hand mattress, she didn't want to be part of it.

Things gradually quietened down and there was a knock at the front door. Mum opened it cautiously to the handyman, who was balancing the mattress and grinning excitedly.

"Are you sure you want this mattress?" he asked. Mum said she thought so, but wanted to know about the commotion on the street before she committed herself.

"Someone saw me wheeling it across the road and offered to buy it" he replied, "I said it was sold and they asked how much. When I told them, they offered double." Mum couldn't hide her surprise. The handyman went on "Then someone else stopped and they wanted to buy it. I could have made a fortune!" Mum laughed and said that he'd better get it inside quickly before he changed his mind.

Together they moved the park bench to the spare room, where it continues to do excellent service discouraging repeat guests. The popular mattress was installed in Mum's room and the handyman dislodged with some effort.

Cautiously Mum tested the mattress, it remembered humans! This surely was a gold standard mattress, almost new (well at least no evidence of habitation) and yet it felt like an heirloom. She repossessed the king sized down mattress topper from the park bench and carefully tucked it in. Enthused by the youngest daughter's decorating example, Mum found an almost matching sheet set, unearthed her finest op-shop blankets and made up the popular mattress ready for her next visit. The other house mates were astounded, although whether from the glory of the decor, the story of its journey across the road, or the audacity of sleeping in a strangers' bed, was never quite clear.

The bedding arrangements seem finally to have been settled. Dad never complained about sleeping in state in the master bedroom, Mum had two (three if you count the swag) good beds to choose from, and the children had the mattresses of their choice. But the human condition is discontent.

The eldest child was testing her wings, and soon found bright city lights more to her liking. Despite assurances that she was not moving out, she started to leave the family mattress unattended for long periods. Other family members looked longingly at it, remembering its softness and warmth. The children had several serious discussions about where the eldest

was actually living, and it gradually became clear that claiming ownership was a very different thing than actually sleeping in the bed.

Although the very new mattress had been something of an achievement, it didn't take long before the youngest child felt a growing nostalgia for a well worn mattress. A cursory inspection showed that the family mattress was showing the effect of generations of wear. The cover was torn and stained, there was a hole in one corner that could reasonably be traced to last summer's mouse plague, but most importantly the human-shaped curve was now pronounced. It was just waiting to be filled.

Sure enough, there came a day between the eldest child's visits that the family mattress secretly found its way into the youngest's bed and the new mattress was made up in the eldest's room. The parents wondered at the youngest's smiling face every time she spoke about going to bed, but the mystery wasn't solved until the eldest returned home and retired for the night. The commotion was unbelievable and even offers of swapping the new for the nearly-new did not appease.

The youngest wasn't about to leave the family mattress unprotected and stayed in bed for the duration of the visit. Finally it was resolved that if the eldest were to return permanently, she could use the family mattress. We all knew that it was safe in its beautiful surroundings for some time to come.

Despite the attractions of a large comfortable bed, with a softened human-shaped curve, Mum prefers her swag in the bush. It has everything anyone would want. There's a light, some books and lavender balm. The blankets and quilt are specially selected from the best op shops. Most importantly, the mattress is soft and has the right curves in the right places.