

Maid in Moscow

By PANG-MEI NATASHA CHANG

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The message on my answering machine isn't for me. It's for my housekeeper, who spends so much time at my apartment in Moscow that her family looks for her here. "Larisa, Larisa, pick up the phone. Our Sergei has died!" her relative says in Russian. I'm not sure that I understand the message correctly, even though I've been studying Russian since my husband's law firm transferred him here five years ago. Sergei is Larisa's 16-year-old grandson. How could he have died? Not knowing what else to do, I call Larisa.

"Yes?" she answers, recognizing my voice. She thinks that I'm calling about some dress I can't find or food that she has left in the refrigerator for me. Larisa comes to my house at least three times a week, to iron my underwear, shine my shoes and organize my drawers. It's embarrassing how completely I've adjusted to this aspect of the expat lifestyle. I don't even admit to my own mother how little I have to do around the house. But that's just the way it is in Russia: nobody resents it (at least openly), and everybody benefits (at least in theory). Larisa runs my house the way she likes, and we pretend that I'm in charge.

"Y-you have to telephone your family," I stammer. I'm so flustered that I do something I will always regret. I hold the receiver to the answering machine and play the message for her. Larisa screams, and the line clicks dead. Minutes later, she calls back. Through her sobs, I manage to understand that she has just spoken to her daughter and that it's true about Sergei -- sudden heart failure after swimming in a cold river.

I met Sergei only once, several months earlier. My husband and I were renovating one Moscow apartment while living in another. Our contractor went AWOL before finishing the job, and we ended up moving into a construction site. I desperately needed a handyman. Larisa never said, "Hire Sergei." Instead, every minute we unpacked, she sang his praises. After several days of her campaign, I understood: Sergei was the handyman of my dreams, and whether I liked it or not, he was coming to work for me.

Larisa never asked directly for what she wanted; she suggested, persisted, cajoled. Usually I didn't mind. The things Larisa wanted -- extra money, days off or makeup -- I was happy to give. But this time, I was uneasy. No matter what Larisa said, I didn't believe a 16-year-old could manage the work. Why did Sergei suddenly need a job? Did he owe someone money? I asked, but Larisa closed up tighter than the Kremlin.

Sergei arrived all insolence and scruff. He bungled every job I gave him and even broke things. I finally relegated him to the sofa to watch TV and wait for Larisa. When I gave him the money we'd agreed upon earlier -- more than his grandmother herself made in a single day -- I was seething. Larisa smiled at Sergei and said, "Now, my love, you've earned all you need to get that knapsack." I wanted to throw them both out of my house. I would have willingly donated a knapsack or given Larisa money. Instead, at my expense, she'd involved me in what I could only assume was her misguided teen self-esteem program.

After Sergei's death, I didn't hear from Larisa for a week, and it would be several before she came back. During her absence, I found myself sheepishly asking neighbors where to empty the trash and how to call the building superintendent; graciously and wordlessly, Larisa had

always done these things for me. I missed her -- not just her work, but her companionship. She had built my home here with me.

Later when I called Larisa's apartment, her daughter-in-law answered. "How's Larisa?" I asked. "She's in shock -- we've had to wait for the autopsy before we can hold the funeral," she replied. It was only then that I realized that I hadn't been invited.

The next day, I showed up at her place with luxury food that I bought at a Western-style grocery store -- cut-up fruits, vegetables and meats -- conveniences to make Larisa's life easier while she was in mourning. Larisa's daughter-in-law greeted me at the door and disappeared into the kitchen with my offering. I was left in the vestibule, uncertain what to do. As my eyes adjusted to the darkened room, I saw Larisa crumpled on a sofa. I started toward her, wanting to comfort her, then stopped. I was rooted to my spot, aware for the first time how little I was needed. Larisa may have been an indispensable part of my life, but I wasn't even in hers. I had confused proximity with intimacy.

On a large cabinet in the living room there stood a framed photograph of Sergei surrounded by flowers. I was oddly happy now that Larisa had pushed her grandson on me. It was the only time she'd asked me into her life, the one that included her family and friends, obligations and inconveniences -- all the things she dealt with in my life. What I gave Sergei was so little -- yet it was more than I could give now. Larisa didn't even look up as I left.

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang is the author of the memoir "Bound Feet and Western Dress."