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All Keyed Up About Russian Doors

By Jennifer Monaghan

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For anybody who has lived in a Russian apartment, this is a familiar scene: It's mid--December, you're leaving the apartment early in the morning and have spent the past 15 minutes putting your winter gear on. You step outside the front door and spend the next five minutes, keys in hand, systematically working through each of the multiple locks that line your door.

Two minutes later, you realize you left something inside and the whole process is reversed.

My stay in Russia has had its share of door traumas. My first incident came a year after I started learning Russian, when my university group was sent on a trip to Petrozavodsk in the Karelia republic. For four weeks, I stayed at the home of a plump, friendly lady who probably wished she had never met me.

I had only been staying with Tamara and her dog, Got, for a couple of days when she took off to the dacha, while I headed off on a whitewater rafting trip with friends.

Having returned home later that day and after opening front door No. 1, I found to my despair that front door No. 2 refused to open. Although door No. 1 had been easy enough — just three locks — key four of five refused to click on door No. 2.

I called Tamara, but with my minimal grasp of Russian we were both left frustrated. In the end, Tamara's grandson was despatched to the apartment and kicked down the door.

The next week, all was forgotten when Tamara returned from the dacha with a fluffy cat under her arm. It belonged to her daughter, who was going away for a while. Under no circumstances was I allowed to leave the door open for one simple reason: The cat had a reputation as an escape artist.

I recalled this advice a few days later when, leaving the door slightly ajar, I looked up just in time to see just a grey tail slithering away.

Fortunately, the main door to the building was locked, and the cat was forced up the stairs. Chasing up nine floors, I managed to corner it and returned to the flat puffing and panting as my host emerged from the bathroom none the wiser.

Two years later, I was back in Russia, all memories of my door misfortunes behind me. I was here studying on a four-month exchange program and living again with a host family in Moscow.

The next day, the family handed over a set of keys, which I put in my purse for safe keeping. About three hours later, my purse was stolen, and my hosts decided to change all the locks.

Then there was my time in St. Petersburg, where I lived with Viktor, a 78-year old former Soviet colonel who could still do 20 chin-ups on the bar outside my door.

On my first night out in the city, I found myself at a cafe with a group of fellow students — a nice opportunity to make new friends and have a good time, I thought to myself. But alas, my key troubles were to get the better of me again.

That night, I spent 20 minutes trying to regain entry to the apartment before I plucked up the courage to ring the doorbell. As the clock struck 5 a.m., I was greeted by a semi-naked septuagenarian.

For the past five months, I feel incredibly lucky: I haven't had any major door incidents. Of course, I still spend a good hour every week locking and unlocking the two doors to my apartment. Usually, this is because I have left my phone, purse or metro pass inside. The process has become just another part of my daily routine.

To this day, my heart stops for a second when I can't find my keys.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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