

Gringa Guilt and Housework

by JANICE EIDUS

On a July afternoon, in a picture-book-perfect, colonial Mexican town, high in the mountains, my five-year-old daughter, who is adopted from Guatemala, draws happily with markers in the shaded corner of the otherwise sun-dappled patio of our brightly colored, art-and-plant filled Mexican *casa*. My husband and I bought this house six years ago, and we're deeply attached to it, although we're able to stay here just a few months of each year. Our demanding jobs back home in New York City, where we live in a two-bedroom apartment, approximately one-fifth the size of this house, preclude longer vacations. When we're not here, we keep the *casa* rented.

I watch my daughter as she bends her head intently over her coloring book. Her long, black hair, loose and shimmering, falls across her heart-shaped face, and I note, not for the first time, how much she resembles (far more than she resembles me) the sisters-in-law, *Señoras* Carmen and Silvia, who clean our *casa* and cook our meals.

If my Brooklyn-born, lower-middle-class parents—both avowed, lifelong left-wingers—were alive to see me today, they would be horrified. They, who raised me and my siblings in a wonderfully integrated and diverse (sometimes dangerous) Bronx housing project, never wavered from their progressive social and political beliefs, which did not include “hiring others to do our so-called dirty work,” as my unfashionably dressed, sensible-shoe wearing mother had declared one afternoon after we'd returned from an awkward, never-to-be repeated visit to the opulent home of her suburban Republican cousin, who employed a live-in maid, a gardener, and a cook.

Expanding upon my mother's words, my always loud and didactic father said, with great feeling, “All the work in one's home is noble and honest! Grow up”—he looked hard at me and my sister and brother, although at me most of all, the sloppiest and most rebellious of the three of us—“and do all your own work!”

Were he and my mother visiting me today in my Mexican *casa*, they also would bring up, with self-righteous passion, the fact that my daughter's ancestral history in Guatemala very likely contains numerous sad, and enraging, stories of cinnamon-skinned women who did all sorts of “so-called dirty work,” for low—or no—pay and who were horrifically exploited by unfeeling, imperialistic *gringos* and *gringas* who very much resemble me.

My parents would be right, of course. But here's my dilemma: I hate doing housework. And so, despite my own progressive social and political beliefs, I can't stop myself from taking advantage of the fact that, here in Mexico, I can afford to pay someone else to do it for me.

As a child, back in the Bronx, in our claustrophobically small kitchen

in the housing project, day after day, I watched my mother as she swept, dusted, washed, and wiped, while my father, despite his rhetoric about “noble, honorable work,” never once lifted a finger to help her to do what to him was “women's work” and, therefore, beneath him. I swore to myself, like so many rebellious daughters before me, that I would grow up to be *nothing* like my mother. I assured myself that such pointless, trivial domestic tasks were beneath me, too.

I was wrong, of course. As an adult, I quickly discovered what the point was of all that seemingly endless sweeping, mopping, washing, and dusting: Living among filth is disgusting. Women's work or not, I didn't want to live surrounded by clutter, *schmutz*, and all the vermin that *schmutz* attracts. Fairly quickly, I came to see that there's nothing intrinsically demeaning about taking care of one's home and that, in fact, housework really is honest and noble work.

But, I still loathe doing it.

Therefore, for two fabulous months each year, I do no housework at all. *Señoras* Carmen and Silvia sometimes laughingly tease me, speaking slowly because they know how primitive my Spanish is: “*Señora* Janice, we don't believe that you know how to boil water or sweep a floor!”

In my grammatically flawed Spanish, I laughingly respond, “*En mi casa en Nueva York*,” I do both of these tasks, plus more. “But not,” I add honestly, “as well as you do them, *Señoras*!”

Casting their eyes to the floor, they shyly and graciously accept my compliment, and then they tell me how glad they are to be in my employ. “*Mucho gusto, Señora* Janice,” they smile. Silvia adds that it is the money she earns working for me that enables her to send her son to college, a dream she never thought would come true.

Now it's my turn to cast my eyes downward, embarrassed by the power imbalance in our relationship.

“Mama!” my daughter suddenly exclaims, from across the patio, braking my train of thought. She puts down her coloring book and crayons and comes to stand beside me.

“Yes, sweetheart?” I shade my eyes and look directly into her dark ones, amazed, as I so often am, by the absolute ferocity of my love for her.

“I want to go help Silvia and Carmen,” she said.

“*Seguro*,” I say, nodding, speaking in my stilted Spanish, trying as best I can, in my Jewish, *gringa* way, to keep her connected to the language of her birth country. ■

Janice Eidus's recent novel, *The War of the Rosens*, won an independent Publisher Book Award and was a finalist for the Sophie Brody Medal, an award for the most distinguished contribution to Jewish Literature for Adults. Her forthcoming novel, *The Last Jewish Virgin*, explores myth, Jewish identity, and mothers and daughters.



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