

COLUMN

Cold shower prompts lessons in tanked water heater

"Call the police," was my mother-in-law's suggestion when the hot water heater tanked last week.

I had just had my second cold shower and had declared an emergency.

D.C.'s mom, who is 86 and has gotten a bit dotty, is staying with us for the month. Calling the police is her answer to many situations, especially because Russian spies are nearby and not to be trusted.

A week can feel like a month when you have no hot water and your mother-in-law is living with you.

What a week.

Thursday:

I notice the hot water isn't kicking in. D.C. calls for service. Because it's after hours, an automated system answers and promises someone will call in 24 hours.

Meanwhile, our electrician, who shall remain nameless for reasons that will become apparent, is coming tomorrow for other work, so we ask him to see if our tankless water heater is getting power.

Friday:

The electrician assures us the water heater is getting power. Mom thinks the electrician is involved with the KGB.

That afternoon, D.C. calls the plumbing service back. His message never got conveyed. Now, the soonest a plumber can come out is Monday morning.

Although D.C. and I can withstand a few cold showers, we can't subject Mom to one. "Call the police!"

Monday:

D.C. works from home so he can meet the repairman. Dispatch calls and pushes the plumber's arrival to early afternoon, which gets pushed to 4:30 p.m.

At 5:30, he shows up. He doesn't speak English. The plumber has to call his partner and explain in Spanish what is wrong, so the partner can tell D.C. it's the water heater's valves; parts will take 10 days to three weeks to arrive.

"Haven't you heard of FedEx?" asks D.C., who now needs a cold shower to cool off.

"You can't trust those Rus-

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sians!"

He calls another plumber contractor.

"He's calling the police," Mom reassures me.

Tuesday:

The new plumber, Zack, pulls up like John Wayne. He speaks English.

He looks at the tankless water heater. The valves are fine, but whoever installed it didn't put in drain ports. Tankless water heaters - we learn -- need yearly flushing to clean out minerals that collect. This unit hasn't been flushed since it was put in 10 years ago when the house was built. We wonder how it passed inspection.

"Russian spies!"

We tell Zack that the unit is getting power. Zack then checks our propane tank. It's running low.

Zack suggests we get more propane before we resort to replacing the water heater. Tankless water heaters aren't cheap.

I call the propane company. Our service day is Monday.

"Six days from now?" I ask the scheduler. "Can they come faster?"

"Only in an emergency."

"My mother-in-law hasn't showered in a week," I say.

"The expediting fee is \$150."

I look at D.C.

"Pay it," he says.

Wednesday:

The propane company fills the tank. I rush to the faucet to await the warm feeling of hot water, which doesn't arrive.

Thursday:

Zack installs the new tankless water heater. We still don't have



Nothing like a cold shower - to make you appreciate hot water, one of those amenities you take for granted until your heater tanks. Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

hot water. Our hearts fall when we learn the electrician was wrong. The water heater wasn't getting power. The junction box is corroded. ARGH!

"Call the police!"

Though a plumber, Zack gets electricity run to the new heater.

Hot water never felt so good. But I want to sentence the whole string of incompetent workers - from the initial installer who didn't add ports, to the building inspector who missed it, to the first tardy and inept plumber, to the electrician who didn't catch the electrical malfunction and cost us \$3,000 we wouldn't have had to spend -- all to a year of cold showers.

D.C. is more sanguine; "We would have had to replace the system eventually."

Although I hope I don't have to replace a water heater ever again, I had to find out whether the cost for a tankless water heater, about three times more than a tank water heater, was worth it.

"Though tankless water heaters account for only a small fraction of all water heaters sold, they are a growing category," said Julie Singh, water

heater merchant for the Home Depot.

They have many advantages:

- Save space. At the size of a backpack, tankless water heaters take up less space than standard tank water heaters, which are about the size of a grain silo.

- Save energy. Tankless water heaters, which can be gas or electric, save energy, because they aren't keeping 50 gallons of water hot at all times, but, rather, heat water as you need it.

- Endless supply. With a tankless system, you never run out of hot water. Anyone who has lived with a family of four or more, knows that to be fourth in line for a shower means be fast or be cold.

- Lifespan. Tankless water heaters last on average 20 years compared to the average 10-year life of a tank water heater.

- Downside. Converting from a tank system to tankless can be expensive, said Singh. But if you're planning to stay in your house for a long time, the investment could be worth it. A tankless water heater costs between \$1,000 to \$1,500, plus

installation, which can double the cost. Tank water heaters cost between \$300 and \$600, plus \$500 to \$1,000 for installation.

- A hybrid. Homeowners can add a tankless booster to their tank heaters. When the attached Smart Boost system senses the hot water running out, it kicks in. "The \$349 add on is not truly tankless," she said, "but it can double your hot water supply."

- Care. Tankless water heaters require a little more maintenance, said Singh, confirming what our plumber said, that you should flush it once a year, because mineral build-up can cause corrosion, which could have shortened the lifespan of ours.

Besides a mistaken electrician, I'm beginning to think the KGB was involved.

Syndicated columnist Marni Jameson is the author of home and lifestyle books, including the recently released "Downsizing the Family Home - What to Save, What to Let Go" (Sterling Publishing 2016).