

The Predicament

The residents of the mansion sat around the fireplace in their living room, having their aperitif. “I don’t see why it’s so hard to find a cook,” said Patty, exasperated. Her round face was frowning. “We offer room and board in a lovely home and a decent salary, so why can’t we find anyone who’ll stay?”

“Maybe no one wants to be around a bunch of old farts,” said Chuck, lounging back in the comfortably worn leather armchair, his long, jeans-clad legs stretched out in front of him.

“We’re not a bunch of old farts!” Patty said, giving him the teacher’s-disapproving-look she’d perfected over the years.

“I think Chuck has a point,” Lionel said, taking a sip of wine. “We all know it’s not cool to be old. Who wants to be around old fogies? They just remind you you’re going to die one of these days.” He got up to poke the fire.

“We’re a growth industry,” said Anne dryly. “You’d think people would figure it out.”

“Maybe people are more put off by aging than they are drawn by money—unless they don’t have any choice,” said Lionel. “It seems as though the people who’ve worked for us decided they had other choices. They didn’t have any specific complaints when they gave notice.” He sat down again, tugging gently at the crease of his sharply pressed pants. He didn’t like baggy knees.

“Whatever.” said Patty, waving her hand dismissively. “The point is, what are we going to do now? Do we put another ad on Craig’s list and wade through all those ‘I’ll apply for anything’ people, or go to an agency, or what?” She passed around the rosemary pecans and got up to refill wine glasses. “We’ve got to get this settled so we can move on to the question of our fifth housemate. Our budget has a hole in it until we find that person.”

“I’m not worried about the budget yet,” said Lionel. “Who we choose is much more important. But I agree we need to get on with finding our cook. Does someone want to volunteer to call a couple of employment agencies?”

“I’ll make some calls tomorrow,” said Anne. “Meanwhile we need to make up a schedule for who’s cooking for the next week. I’ll do Tuesday, because I have a class Monday night. Everybody can sign up on the kitchen blackboard.”

That night everyone was still up when Patty returned from a board meeting at the school where she had taught for over twenty years. She was excited to tell them about a prospective cook she had learned about from one of the board members, and filled them in as they sat around the kitchen island. The pale yellow paint and the recessed lighting made the kitchen glow; it was a comfortable room to which they all gravitated, even though it was set up to be a caterer’s dream. “So it’s this Russian couple—she’s a nurse and he’s a chef and owned his own restaurant in Moscow. They got lucky in the visa lottery and decided to sell the restaurant and start over in the U.S. What do you think? We could invite them to see the place and meet us, tell them what we’re looking for, and see what works out.”

“Sounds like a possibility,” said Chuck. “I wonder how good their English is.”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect,” said Anne. “I rather like broken English and accents. They’re so much more interesting than boring old American. OK with me, Patty,” she said, scooting back her stool. “I’m bushed, see you all tomorrow.”

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“Fine with me too,” said Lionel. “I like the idea that she’s a nurse. You never know what’s going to happen,” he said, tracing a pattern in the granite with his fingertip.

“Oh, stop it, Lionel,” snapped Patty, pretending to be annoyed. “You’re healthier than all the rest of us put together. You’re just after attention. Seriously though, with most of us over 70, we’ve got to be realistic about what’s coming down the pike.” She took a cookie out of the cookie jar. “Anyone else want one?” No one did.

The Cook

It was arranged that Mikhail and Karina Azarov would take the bus and arrive between four and five on Sunday afternoon. Alighting from the bus, they walked through the fine old neighborhood of big trees and houses in one of Seattle’s upscale neighborhoods.

“God’s Mother!” said Mikhail. “These people must be rich as Abramovitch! Georgi told me they were old people looking for hired help.” They stopped before a three story mansion on a double lot with lots of grass and shrubs. It was February and the flowering plums and crocus were just coming out. Yes, this was the right address. They rang the bell and the door was immediately opened by a plump, smiling woman with curly gray-blonde hair and hazel eyes.

“You must be Mikhail and Karina—I’m Patty Carson. Come in, come in, let me introduce you to my housemates.” They followed her into a spacious living room with elaborate wood moldings, a high ceiling and a grand piano in the corner. The three other people who had been sitting stood to meet them. Patty said, “This is Lionel Blackburn, this is Anne Aikins, and this is Chuck Ganatt.” After the coats were hung up and the formalities completed, they all sat down. “Would you like tea or coffee?” Anne offered.

As Anne poured tea and passed the cream and sugar, Lionel began. He was a man of medium height, a full head of brown hair, graying around the edges, and lively brown eyes. “We thought we’d tell you who we are, and about our situation, and what we’re looking for. It’s a somewhat unusual arrangement. And then maybe you can tell us about yourselves, and we’ll have a tour of the house. Just stop us anytime you have questions.” Mikhail and Karina nodded.

Lionel began. “I’ll start. I’m seventy years old and was a professor of mathematics at the University of Washington for about forty years. I also play the piano with some amateur groups and give a few lessons. I don’t have any family, and I didn’t want to live in a retirement home, so I came up with the idea of finding some housemates for a long-term living arrangement. It took about a year for us to find each other, and then we chose this house. I paid for it, and for the remodeling, with some money I inherited, but we all participated in making the decisions. We each contribute a monthly amount to pay expenses, like food, utilities, taxes, maintenance, staff and so on. OK, I’ll stop there; I could go on and on.” He smiled and looked over at Anne, a slender, erect woman with collar-length, straight gray hair. She smiled back, affectionately.

“I’m also seventy,” Anne said, “and I was a ballet dancer when I was young. When I got too old to dance, I went to work for the ballet company in their school, and then in their office. I’m retired now, but I teach movement to children at the community center a few blocks from here, and I volunteer at a day-care center. I have a daughter and granddaughter here in Seattle, but I don’t see them very often. I met Lionel years ago. He used to accompany me when I’d go around to schools doing little ballet demonstrations. That was before he was a full time professor.” She stopped, and looked at the man sitting across from her. “Chuck, your turn.” She offered more tea and passed around a plate of cookies.

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While he was listening to each story, Mikhail couldn't help wondering how such different people could decide to live together. How did they know who was messy and who was neat? Did they care? How did they decide how much to spend on food? Who got the nicest room?

"I'm the house artist," said the tall man with a grey ponytail and vivid blue eyes. My studio's out in the garage. I've done a lot of things in my life, because you can't hardly make a living as an artist. I got in trouble in high school, and ended up in a juvenile detention facility..." He could tell from their faces they didn't know what he meant. "That means I broke the law, and they put me in a jail for kids under eighteen. I was really lucky because when I was there they were running an art program for juvenile offenders, and that's where I learned about painting. That was it—that's what I wanted to do. Later I was in the Navy, worked as a mechanic, a bartender, you name it. Anything to keep buying paint and canvas. Anyway, I met Patty's husband because he owned an art supply store, and I worked for him and we got to be friends. She introduced me to Lionel and Anne. What else? Oh, guess I could add I've never been married, no kids," he said, with a glance toward Anne.

"Chuck's seventy-two, he forgot to tell you," said Patty. "I'm sixty-nine, and a retired grade school teacher. I was looking for an accompanist for the movement teacher at my school, and Lionel showed up. He was retired by then, and looking for things to do. We've been friends ever since. My husband died five years ago and my kids are married and living in the Seattle area. So there you have it! Any questions?"

Karina and Mikhail were full of questions, but she said politely, "Is a lot to hear. Maybe we will have questions later. Shall we tell you now about our life?"

Karina looked at Mikhail, who began. "Our families are from Ukraine, but we lived in Moscow all the time. My father worked in factory. I attended school for cooks and then joined army. I worked very hard, and made special dishes for my commanding officer. He offered to buy restaurant for me after army—was good man. My business was successful, but when the Soviet Union broke apart, the criminals took over. If I didn't pay them money, they would smash up my restaurant or burn it. They threatened my wife. So we decided to leave and I sold restaurant." Mikhail had been wringing his hands nervously as he talked, looking mostly at the coffee table, his dark eyes occasionally glancing at his wife and the others. He gestured that she should continue.

Karina was fair with thick dark blonde hair which she wore in a plait down her back. "I am nurse. I worked for twenty years in hospital in Moscow. I want to learn about new kinds of health care, but is very hard in Russia. We would like to start restaurant in Seattle, but Mikhail's cousin, Georgi, tells us it would be very expensive and we should wait until we save more money and know how things work in America. So we are looking for jobs and place to live. We cannot stay with Georgi's family much longer—is burden for them."

"You're very brave!" said Patty. "You're like the first Americans—just pull up and leave and go somewhere where things can be better. Good for you! Now let me show you the house. Then we'll come back and talk more with the others about what we're looking for."

Patty led them through the living room to the library, a wood-paneled room filled with bookcases and artwork; a desk in the corner held a PC and printer, and comfortably-worn chairs and lamps were scattered around the room. Then through to the breakfast room, which had seating for four. Adjacent to that was the kitchen. Mikhail breathed a sigh of admiration. There was a commercial gas range, a gigantic refrigerator, lots of cupboards and counter space, and a large built-in chopping block. "Bozhe Moi, to cook in such a kitchen! Is a dream!"

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“We never had any complaints about the facilities from our previous cooks. We’re not sure why they left. We all love to eat, and don’t like to cook, so you wouldn’t have anyone spoiling your broth,” Patty quipped. “I’m going to leave you here and let you poke around the kitchen for a while. Feel free to open all the cupboards and drawers, nothing’s secret. I’ll be back in about fifteen minutes and we can finish our tour.”

Mikhail and Karina went through the drawers and cupboards methodically. “Dull knives—good thing I have my own!” he said. “Good pots, but we will need a better sauté pan. Plenty of silverware and dishes. Look at these graters, all different sizes, wonderful! Pepper grinder, sea salt grinder, nutmeg grinder.” He continued to inspect the drawers, delighted with the contents.

“Mikhail, what are all these things?” asked Karina. She had pulled out drawers under the island and found the kitchen appliances: coffeemaker, coffee grinder, waffle iron, regular blender, immersion blender, food processor, sandwich grill, yoghurt maker, electric can opener, electric knife sharpener, regular and hand-held mixers, and some items they couldn’t identify. There was a toaster and another coffee pot on the counter. “I could be very happy here,” Mikhail said, smiling at his wife.

When Patty returned, they continued through a formal wood-paneled dining room with a table that could seat twelve, and back to the foyer. Then up the elegant curving staircase. “There are five bedrooms on this floor, and three bathrooms, including a big guest bathroom with laundry facilities. Oh, I forgot to show you the powder room on the main floor.” They continued up another flight of stairs. “And this is the cook’s apartment. There’s a sitting room, bathroom and bedroom. This floor has a view of the Cascades.” She led them to the east-facing windows where there was just enough light to appreciate a spectacular view of Lake Washington and the Cascade mountains. Street lights and porch lights were appearing as day changed into night.

On the way back to the living room, Patty pointed out a small elevator that had been added at the back of the house. “For when we’re old and decrepit,” she joked. After they were seated, Lionel continued with the description of their experiment. “What we want to do is grow old as a family, an ‘intentional family,’ if you will,” he said. “We don’t like the American model for getting old—end up alone, or in a facility being cared for by strangers, or be a burden on your family. We have an agreement that we’re not going to complain about being old. We try to do things that will help us grow old gracefully and be helpful to others. And we want to enjoy the life we have left as much as possible. That’s where the help comes in.”

Anne continued. “We want someone who will cook dinners for us every night, have food available for us to make our own breakfasts and lunches, and do the shopping. We don’t have any special dietary needs now, but we may have in the future. As much as possible, we like fresh, local, organic food, lots of taste but not too rich. We do the dishes. One or two nights a week you wouldn’t have to be here, if the meal was prepared in advance. That would give you some time off. We think this is about twenty hours of work a week, and we’re offering \$25 per hour, which works out to about \$2000 per month. Then, of course, the apartment comes with the job, no rent for that. Do you have any questions for us?”

“About the cost of the food?” ask Mikhail.

“Oh,” replied Patty, “you’d have a budget for that. It’s about \$150 a week per person. We’ll increase it when we get our fifth family member, which we hope to do in the next few months. We’re sure this is a lot to take in—why don’t you think about it for a few days, and call if you have questions. We’d really appreciate it if you could tell us by Friday.”

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“One more thing,” said Chuck. “This may not appeal to you, but we’re looking for someone who really wants to be here. We don’t want someone who’s just looking for a job and will move on in a few months or a year. We know it’s not a lot of money, but you’d have time for other work, if you could figure out the right thing.”

Mikhail stood up. “Is a lot to think about. We will talk and call you before Friday. We thank you for the tea. Thank you very much,” he said, with a slight bow.

“Yes, thank you very much,” said Karina. They rose and shook hands as Patty brought their coats, and then went out into the chilly night.

They walked back toward the bus in a daze. “I worked eighty hours a week for that much money, when business was very best!” said Mikhail.

“An apartment like that in Moscow would cost two or three times as much as we paid for ours! Oh, how I’d love to live in such a beautiful place!”

On the bus ride they discussed their expenses (minimal) and how much they could save, and what options there were for other work, especially for Karina. For the time being that was an unknown. “I feel these are good people, very good people,” she said. “We must be sure that we could stay with them a long time, as they want. Are we willing? What would prevent us?”

“If they have not told the truth, it would be OK to leave. Or if they were unpleasant to us; if they act different in future from how they are today, it would be OK to leave. But what if we have a chance to make more money and we can’t do it and still work there?”

“How much more money do we need? All you ever wanted to do is cook, and as long as we have good home and food, and friends, what do we want more money for?”

“Our health. Georgi says doctors are very expensive here. And what about when we are old—who will take care of us? We need to save money for our future. And I still want to own restaurant.”

They rode in silence, thinking over all these points. Karina took her husband’s hand, “We cannot know everything now. But for as long as we can see into the future, this opportunity looks very good to me. I have good feeling about it.”

He smiled his covert smile at her—he had very bad teeth. “I agree. We should take this opportunity.”

The Mansioners were meanwhile discussing their recent visitors. “I think this looks very promising,” said Patty, proud that she had found the couple.

“Should we have them cook a meal for us, or give us a suggested week of menus or something,” asked Lionel. “We don’t really have any references.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Anne. “Why don’t we ask them to make up a week of dinner menus and give them \$100 for one night’s dinner and see what he does with it? Will he do something fancy and blow it all at once, or spread it out, or what?”

“Excellent idea,” said Lionel, plumping the sofa pillow behind his back. “Patty, would you call them and pass on this suggestion?”

“Sure, happy to. And I’ll suggest a night this week.”

“We’ll leave you to your meditation now. I’ll help Chuck with his mac and cheese extravaganza,” Anne said as she and Chuck left for the kitchen.

Lionel and Patty got comfortable on the sofa. Patty put a shawl around her shoulders, Lionel spread an afghan across their knees and they lapsed into silence. They had been meditating for years, Patty with a group loosely associated with a church and Lionel in a Buddhist group. They had begun meditating together when they moved into the house and now it

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was a daily occurrence every afternoon at five. The grandfather clock struck a melodious ending chime at six.

“Well, my meditation wasn’t very calm tonight,” said Patty. “Lots of thoughts. I caught myself looking for some emotion that could be causing all the thoughts, but I didn’t come up with anything. Maybe an insight will come later.” She sighed. “It’s so easy to slip into analyzing, thinking about why I’m thinking, and to get judgmental about having thoughts, instead of accepting them. I just keep going back to the mantra, or following my breath, and reminding myself thoughts are OK—just don’t get hooked on them.”

“Maybe it’s some concern about new housemates. Did you feel some anxiety when the last cook and his partner came?”

“Maybe anxiety is too strong a word. Discomfort, perhaps. Yes, maybe that’s it, Lionel. Getting used to new people just kind of soaks up energy, and then if it doesn’t work out, it’s awkward, and all that. Maybe I’m just a little worried about these two, and if it’s not a good fit, et cetera.” Patty folded up the afghan and laid it across the back of the sofa. “I sure hope Mikhail and Karina work out,” she said. “I’ll go set the table.”