

The Predicament

“Sorry, guys. I got distracted reading the paper and burned the mac and cheese,” said Chuck.

“Is *that* what was burning?” said Anne. “I could smell it clear upstairs!”

Patty got up from the kitchen island and headed for the phone. “I’ll go order Thai takeout.”

“Folks, we’ve got to get this cook thing settled,” said Lionel. “Let’s meet after dinner to strategize. Sorry if I sound exasperated—but I am!”

“Maybe no one wants to be around a bunch of old farts,” said Chuck. He lounged 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 scowl she’d perfected over the years. Frown lines creased her forehead and mouth. “I can’t see why it’s so hard to find a cook. We offer a decent salary and room and board in a fine old Seattle home, so why can’t we find anyone who’ll stay?”

Mugs in hand, the residents of the mansion sat around the fireplace in the large and imposing room, its high ceilings lavishly embellished with wood molding; the faintly peach walls glowing in the light of two lamps; Oriental rugs scattered here and there on the polished wood floors.

“I think Chuck has a point,” Lionel said. He sipped his coffee. “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. “You’d think people would figure it out.”

“We don’t really know why they left, even though we asked,” Lionel said. “They didn’t have any specific complaints when they gave notice. Maybe they were embarrassed to say why, so we just have to guess.” 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. “The point is, what are we going to do now? Do we put another ad on Craigslist and wade through all those ‘I’ll apply for anything’ people, or go to an agency, or what?” She passed the Oreos around again and got up to refill coffee cups. “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 next week. I have a class Monday night, but I can do Tuesday. Everybody can sign up on the kitchen blackboard.”

The next night, everyone was still up when Patty returned from a meeting at the school where she had taught for over twenty years. She was excited to tell them about a prospective cook she’d learned about from one of the board members, and she filled them in as they sat around the kitchen island. The pale-yellow paint and the recessed lighting made the kitchen luminous; it had come to be a second living room, 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 had his own restaurant in Moscow. They wanted to sell the

restaurant and start over in the US, and they got lucky in the green card lottery. 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."

"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 countertop with his fingertip.

"Well, thank goodness we're all pretty healthy," said Patty. "Though with most of us in our seventies, 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?"