

AU PAIRS AND SUCH

The country was poor by American standards. They found that many Danish families, although considered middle class, arranged for their supper to consist of only a bowl of oatmeal at the end of the month before paychecks arrived. Though they house they rented was charming and cozily decorated, and even had heated pipes running just below the bathroom floor, they learned that many otherwise comfortable homes had no bathtub. It was quite common for Danish families to go to a bathhouse once or twice a week.

Liz complained that Josy was extravagant. “You give your children orange juice for breakfast every day,” she admonished. “Oranges are a luxury here in Denmark. They come all the way from Israel or Spain. Who can afford that?”

She disapproved when Josy changed the children’s underwear daily. “You can’t tell me those socks are dirty,” she insisted one evening as she watched Josy get the children into their pajamas and ready for sleep.

Another big issue with Lis was American bedding.

“Danes sleep with ‘dinyehs’, not blankets,” she propounded with authority. Dinyehs were quilts, and Lis decried the use of blankets as filthy.

“When a dinyeh gets dirty,” she explained, “you simply peel off the cover and wash it. But your blankets,” she continued derisively, “how often do they get cleaned?”

To Josy’s explanation that sheets, not blankets, were what touched the sleeper’s body, and that these did get washed regularly, and that Josy personally disliked dinyehs because they were too short to tuck in at the bottom and prevent the sleeper’s feet from sticking out under the covers – to all this Lis merely sniffed. Josy got the distinct impression that Lis’s contempt for most things American actually masked her resentment that her only child had married an American girl and moved away to Texas.

Young Jean Dupont had married a girl from Houston. He had worked for a while as a tour guide in Copenhagen and had met his future bride-to-be this way. Lis and her husband had given young Jean his own apartment in their same building when he turned fifteen. “He’s a young man now,” she had claimed. “He deserves his privacy.”

Indeed, during their year in Denmark José and Josy would find some standards of behavior quite startling from an American point of view.

They had a total of five different au pair girls during that Fulbright year. They had fully intended to bring one back to America with them, since Josy planned to return to teaching after they got back. They had heard from several people that despite the cost of transatlantic transportation both ways for the au pair, this was still a wise and practical thing to do. But it never came about, and after

hearing some experiences and misadventures others had had in that regard, they came to consider themselves lucky that things worked out the way they did.

Their good friends Neils and Ella Haugaard later recounted their own experiences along this line. They, too, had had a year in Denmark, where Neils had been born and grown up. His best friend from childhood had approached him at the time, begging him to take the friend's daughter (age eighteen) back with him as an au pair. Neils and Ella had willingly agreed.

"This way," the friend had told them, "I will know most intimately the family that she is staying with, and my mind will be at ease." This latter part, however, turned out quite differently.

Shortly after arriving back in the United States, the girl, docile at first, got acquainted with another au pair (from Sweden) working nearby. Every Thursday night on their time off they would go out partying together. Before long they began hanging around the bars at Seventeenth and Market Streets, a questionable area of Center City Philadelphia. They soon picked up two Hungarians in their late forties, and one became the lover of Neils's and Ella's au pair. When they found out about this, the Haugaards forbade her from seeing the fellow again.

"He's more than twice your age," they cautioned, "and you don't know the first thing about him."

Learning of this, the Hungarian came to their house in his car, banged on their door, shouted that they were keeping him from his one true love, and demanding that they send her outside. He parked in his car out front, refusing to leave, and conspicuously waving an enormous rifle at them. They had to call the police, who arrested the fellow and soon reported back to the Haugaards that they had found in his apartment a huge cache of weapons. He was in the United States illegally, and was deeply involved, it turned out, in a political revolutionary movement back in his native Hungary. By the time their au pair returned to Denmark one year later, she had become pregnant by an Argentinian engineer that she had also picked up on Market Street and whose name she never found out. Her father blamed Neils for failing to control the girl, and the dearest friend that he had ever had refused ever to speak to Neils again from Sweden.

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Marianne was José's and Josy's first au pair. Lis Dupont had found her for them. Marianne's father worked in the printing department of *Politken*, Copenhagen's main newspaper, where Lis was the editor of the paper's feature magazine. Marianne was sixteen when she came to stay with them. She lasted for six months, longer than any of the other au pair girls who succeeded her. She loved

the children dearly. Often she would blurt out passionately, “These are the nicest children in the world!”

One evening when José and Josy returned home from a party at Professor Lindestrom-Lang’s house, they found a strange situation.

The windows of the large bedroom where the children slept were flung wide open, even though it was snowing outside. Orange peels lay distributed everywhere about the floor.

“Marty threw up,” Marianne explained, almost hysterical, “and I wanted to get the smell out of the room before you got home. So I let in fresh air, and I called my mother, who told me that orange peels make a room smell nice and fresh!”

They were all invited to the home of Marianne’s parents one Sunday afternoon. Suddenly a great commotion arose. Marianne’s little brother, age ten, had gotten into a fight with his mother. When she sent him up to his second-floor room as punishment, he climbed out the window onto the slanting eave outside. Everybody spent the entire afternoon coaxing him to come back in, praying in the meantime that he did not fall off the roof.

Then one day Marianne came to Josy, sporting a shaggy new haircut.

“How do you like it?” she demanded. “Tell me honestly.”

“You’re such a pretty girl, Marianne,” Josy replied. “I really liked the other style better. I thought it was much more becoming.”

In a huff Marianne left, never to come back again. They had to find a new au pair to replace her.

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Next came fifteen-year-old Lotte. Josy had met her at a nursery school that she had observed nearby, where Lotte apparently was unhappy and ready to move on.

Lotte arrived for an interview all the way from Elsinore, thirty miles to the north, one afternoon with her mother. Over tea and cakes Lotte’s mother explained that her husband was one of the owners of Scandinavia’s largest ship-building firm, which had branches not only in Denmark, but also in Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Lotte didn’t really need the money, she explained (a fact now becoming quite obvious) but the law at the time favored having prospective nursery school teachers and nurses spend time living with a family with children, preferably foreign born, so the girls could pick up another language. This would be Lotte’s way of fulfilling the requirements. The conversation proceeded quite amicably and lasted over an hour.

“Well,” the mother announced, finally getting up from her chair to leave, “we mustn’t keep the taxi waiting any longer!”

Glancing out the window, Josy noticed for the first time a cab parked out front.

“Yes, we thought it would be more convenient to take a taxi from Elsinore,” the mother told her. “The train takes too long.”

Lotte started work the following morning. She arrived with five trunk loads of clothes and a pair of skis. Two days after her arrival, José had to leave for his Fulbright lecture trip to Italy. Josy was to have gone with him, but it was not only the arrival of an au pair who was new that deterred her in the last minute. A few days earlier the children had come down with a skin rash. Josy had called the pediatrician recommended by the Carlsberg Institute.

“Not to worry, Madam,” he assured her. “Your children have small pox!”

She almost fainted. Seeing the look of consternation on her face, he quickly added, “No, no! My English is not so good. I mean chicken pox.”

The end result was that, although double-occupancy reservations had all been made and paid for, she remained in Denmark with the children while José left by himself for Italy.

His arrival in Rome proved an adventure. At that time his hair was completely black, and he wore a mustache. It so happened that the famous screen idol Clark Gable, whom he very much resembled, was due in Rome at the same time. When José got off the plane and entered the waiting room, mobs of screaming fans spotted him.

“Ah, Clark Gable!” they shrieked. And they grabbed at him, tearing his shirt, trying to kiss him and grab some part of his clothing, anything for a souvenir. His hosts barely managed to tear him away.

Meanwhile, Clark Gable’s plane arrived at the other end of the airport. He was rushed off to an unmarked car waiting out back and promptly whisked away unnoticed.

Josy later teased that José was impossible to live with for a while after such an ego trip. Finally she reminded him of another incident that brought him down to earth. Back in 1948, while in Vancouver, Washington, visiting his family, the two of them had been seated in a small park when a group of teenagers approached asking shyly, “Would you by any chance be Thomas Dewey?” (Dewey was the Republican presidential candidate very much in the news at the time, running against Harry Truman. Though he lacked the glamorous good looks of a matinee idol, he, too, had black hair and sported a moustache.) They both continued to joke about this for some time to come.

José would bring back from Italy a beautiful silk dress and jacket as a souvenir for Josy. It had a lovely muted gray, beige, and olive-green pattern and the unmistakable elegance of fine Italian silk. He told her how he had bought it. Going into a very posh shop near the Spanish Stairs in Rome, he had asked for

their best dress for a redhead.

“What is her size?” they had demanded.

“I don’t know,” José had replied. “She’s about five feet seven tall, and her measurement are...” and here he gestured with his hands. The saleslady must have understood since, except for needing to be taken up just a bit in the shoulders, the dress fit Josy beautifully, and continued to remain in fashion for several years to come.

Meanwhile back in Denmark, while José was still away, their au pair Lotte lasted for exactly five days. In addition to caring for the children, au pairs were expected to help with light housework. Accustomed to her own servants at home, Lotte had not the slightest idea how to do any work around the house. Washing dishes proved a catastrophe; she broke more than she cleaned. Mop and broom were new tools for her; she never was sure which was which, and which end to hold onto. Josy tried to teach her how to make a bed. She failed miserably. Two, three times a day they would practice, but Lotte never could remember which went on first, the sheets or the blankets.

Though she was quite plump, Lotte’s diet left a great deal to be desired. She ate only one thing – ketchup sandwiches. Taking two slices of white bread, she would pour on huge quantities of the red sauce, eagerly licking what spilled off from her fingers.

“But don’t you want to eat anything else?” Josy would ask her.

“No, this is fine, this is good!” came the usual answer.

Five days after her arrival, Josy awoke one morning to find Lotte still in bed,

“I am very sick,” Lotte told her, moaning piteously. “I have a fever and I need aspirin, right now, and it had to be this particular brand. Could you get some for me please?”

Josy touched her forehead and felt no excessive warmth. She took her temperature and it registered 98.6. But since Lotte insisted on a particular brand of medicine not in the house, Josy agreed to run out to the pharmacy and buy it. The children were still asleep upstairs, and Josy counseled Lotte to stay in bed, but to keep an ear out for them.

She returned with the aspirin some twenty minutes later. Here she found the children in the living room with a gentleman who announced himself to be Lotte’s father.

“This will never do,” he pursed his lips. “My daughter is very sick from the overwork you gave her. She cannot possibly work for you for even another day. She phoned me, and I came to take her home.”

Dumbly, Josy nodded. It was easier than trying to reason with him, she told herself. Things were not working out anyway.

“However,” he continued, “I wonder if I might use your phone.

“You see,” he went on, “I have ambulance insurance. All these years I’ve been paying for it. And now I want to see if I can use it to save some expense when I take her back to Elsinore.”

Going to the phone he made a quick call. Five minutes later the wail of a siren came sounding up the street. Up and down Kvaedvej windows flew up in the houses nearby. Neighbors stuck their heads out to see what all the commotion was about. Pulling up in front of the house came a shiny silver ambulance. Two uniformed attendants jumped out and rushed up the walk carrying a stretcher.

“Where is the patient?” was what Josy understood them to ask in Danish. They went upstairs, and soon came down with Lotte lying prone on the stretcher. Lotte’s father directed operations, holding the front door open for them. The children, huddled behind the sliding glass doors that separated the living room from the hall and stairway, peered out round-eyed in wonder. Catching sight of them, Lotte dramatically crossed both arms over her chest and closed her eyes. The attendants took her out to the waiting ambulance, then came back inside for her five trunks of clothes. The ambulance sped off, leaving the whole neighborhood agape with wonder.

The following day Josy received a phone call from Lotte’s father.

“The ambulance got us safely back to Elsinore,” he told her, “and it didn’t cost me a cent. The insurance paid off. You understand, of course, that Lotte can’t come back to work for you. It’s much too difficult. But the ambulance people forgot her skis. Don’t bother, though, I’ll send a taxi for them!”

And he did, the next day.

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The third of the five au pair girls they hired was Vibikeh. Vibikeh was fifteen when her mother brought her to the house for an interview.

“She is my baby,” the mother whimpered when it had been concluded that Vibikeh would start working for them the next day. “Please treat her as you would your own child. Take care of her, please. This will be her first time away from home.”

“Of course,” Josy promised. “I understand. The children will call her ‘Sister’ and we’ll certainly watch over her as we would expect anyone to do for our children.”

And Vibikeh moved into their house the following morning. As was the local custom, her night off was Thursday. That first Thursday evening, promptly at eight o’clock, there was a knock on the door. Opening it, José and Josy found a polite young fellow, about sixteen, standing outside.

“Hello, I’m here to see Vibikeh,” he said.

“Oh, hello, Peter,” Vibikeh called leaning over the bannister from the second floor. “Come on upstairs.”

And Peter entered, climbed the stairs and disappeared with Vibikeh into her bedroom, closing the door behind them.

José and Josy stared at each other askance.

“What shall we do?” Josy asked. “I promised her mother we’d watch over her.”

“Let’s wait a little while,” José suggested.

And they waited. Five minutes went by, then ten, then twenty. Silence from the room upstairs,

Finally Josy insisted, “I promised her mother we’d take care of her. I think we’d better do something.”

So they went upstairs, knocked on the door once, twice, a couple times more, until it was finally opened by Vibikeh herself. She was buttoning up her blouse, while Peter lay spread out on her bed.

“Yes, did you want something?” she asked mildly.

Taken aback, Josy replied, “I think you’d better ask the young man to leave.”

“Why?” demanded Vibikeh.

Not knowing what to say, Josy repeated her request. Peter arose, put on his coat and shoes, and departed. Vibikeh, in a huff, gathered her possessions and left the house, also.

“I’m going home,” she snorted, and disappeared.

José and Josy had no idea what to do next.

The following morning a phone call came from Vibikeh’s mother. Angrily she denounced them, scolding that they had offended her family and that Vibikeh would no longer be working for them.

“First of all,” she railed, “you cannot tell me that your children are normal. Your little girl Lois, during naptime, used a spoon to dig out the plaster in the wall. This is normal?”

Lois, ever mischievous at that age, had indeed done just that. She explained later that she had heard the world was round, and that she and the others were diffing in hopes of reaching China. (José and Josy later got the wall repaired before eventually moving out.)

“And my daughter!” the woman railed on. “What have you done to her?”

Josy recounted in detail what she and José had witnessed in Vibikeh’s room with Peter the night before. “You told me to take care of your daughter,” she reminded the woman, “and I tried to do just that.”

“Yes,” shouted the angry mother, “What I meant was to see that Vibikeh wore her galoshes in the snow, that she put on a sweater under her coat outside. But not interfere with her social life!”

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The next au pair girl to come was Inge. Plump, with a ruddy face and a peasant-like outlook, she was older than the others – seventeen. She came with good references and seemed trustworthy, polite, and honest (which turned out to be not true since, after she eventually left, they discovered she had taken with her their bicycle, toaster, and iron). But at the time they hired her she seemed entirely dependable.

“You know,” she confided to Josy on her second day there, “once I was pregnant.”

Armed with an awareness by then that the accepted standards for social behavior in Denmark differed from what was openly customary in America, Josy replied lamely, “That’s nice.”

“And my mother was furious with me,” Inge continued.

“I’ll bet she was,” Josy replied.

“Yes,” Inge explained. “I had a miscarriage. And she told me, ‘You fool! You don’t scrub floors and lift heavy furniture in your second month!’”

Inge lasted four months with them. When she left she was ten weeks pregnant.

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They finally ended up with a seventeen-year-old named Charlotte, who served them well for their last few weeks but had no wish to go back to the States with them. When they finally left Denmark, they went without an au pair as originally planned. Later they heard from Lis Dupont that Inge had phoned her crying bitterly that she had not accepted their offer to take her to America. The boyfriend who had gotten her pregnant had deserted her, and she wished she had not stolen from them. Her greatest regret was that she would never again have the opportunity to travel and see the world outside of Denmark.