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### A Home Unlike the Rest

The first time I drove to the Volkov's home in Decatur, I thought I had made a wrong turn. Or several wrong turns. I gripped the steering wheel firmly as I drove past crude graffiti, intimidating people, and crucified baby dolls. I was terrified. My excitement of being a full-time nanny for Elena (6) and Lyosha (3) began to turn into fear. Maybe I should tell Dianna and Slava to find another nanny. But just when I was about to give up and go home, I saw a house that looked surprisingly welcoming and unlike the other suspicious houses on Brooks Avenue. Little did I know that this house, #340 on Brooks Avenue, would be a place of countless occasions of discovery, learning, and growth for me. The Volkov's had hired me primarily because I would be able to speak German with the kids like Dianna always did. But ultimately I received much more back from them. I was blessed. Living with the Volkov's as a nanny last summer was one of the best experiences of my life thus far.

Even though Decatur felt unsafe at first, I discovered an exciting part of Atlanta that I grew to love. Decatur was less than an hour away from home, but it seemed like another country. I quickly learned the distinctive way that people lived in Decatur. It became normal for me to see a person dress like a hippy, walk or bike everywhere, and shop at the farmer's market. One afternoon, Slava gave me the opportunity to be like a true Decatur native. He gave me some cash and asked me to buy bread and cheese at the "Candler Park Market". I proudly walked down Brooks Avenue because by this time I felt not only comfortable with the area, but also happy to

be there. The market looked nothing like the grocery stores around my house: the brick walls on the outside were covered in old murals, and the paint was chipping off. Inside, the aisles were cramped closely together, and the food on the shelves had only natural ingredients: ‘Lucky Charms’ cereal would never stand a chance. I went to the back of the store to fetch the freshly baked bread. I chose a whole-wheat loaf with sunflower seeds and rolled oats sprinkled on top. The lady at the counter sliced it for me, and then weighed it. Next, I went to the cheese counter. Since Elena and Lyosha loved Muenster cheese, I bought one pound of that. I felt like a real local. I realized that even though I’ve lived in Atlanta for almost my whole life, there are still wonderful parts of the city that I haven’t seen. I learned that I should not jump to conclusions about the sketchy parts of town. Decatur was, in fact, an incredible place. I loved experiencing the unique rhythm of life there, especially with the Volkov family.

Throughout the summer, the Volkov family showed me that beautiful family life can and does exist. At the time, my parents had recently separated and were going through the divorce process. But seeing the daily interactions of the Volkov’s gave me a lot of joy and hope for the future. I vividly remember one evening during my second week there. We had just finished eating dinner, and Elena eagerly wanted to do arts and crafts with me. We sat on the living room floor drawing and cutting animals out of construction paper. We were making a zoo. Meanwhile, Dianna played on the piano while she and Slava sung in Russian and Lyosha danced around the room. The light was dim and I felt very at home. Even though he had already brushed his teeth, Lyosha was still hungry and said, “Mama, kann ich bitte Wassermelone essen?” Since Lyosha asked so nicely, Dianna allowed him to eat some watermelon. But soon all five of us sat around the kitchen counter with watermelon juice dripping down our faces, enjoying each other’s

company. I was sitting on the wiggly bar stool this time, but it didn't matter because this was such a wonderful reminder of how beautiful family life can be.

The Volkov's lived their daily life in a way that I would like to imitate one day. Their balanced lifestyle influenced me and gave me ideas for my own family: reasonable bedtime, lots of exercise, delicious and healthy food, and the sound of beautiful musical instruments. On one of my first mornings with the Volkov's, I was woken up around 7:00 AM by the sound of Dianna playing a beautiful classical piece on the piano. I had no idea what song it was, but I knew that it was extraordinary. I kept my eyes closed and let the melody flood my mind. I could smell a sweet scent coming from the kitchen. Slava, who is originally from Russia, had gotten up early to make "каша"—a traditional Russian breakfast item similar to oatmeal. Together, we set the table outside in the screen porch, and enjoyed our breakfast in the cool summer morning. Elena and Lyosha eagerly showed me how to best eat the "каша". They helped me sprinkle a few raisins on top and pour some honey over the grains. On the side, we enjoyed some juicy red grapefruit fresh from the market. Kids who love grapefruit? I was shocked. Slava called this the "breakfast of champions". It was wonderful for me to experience a family that wakes up early in order to eat a wholesome breakfast together before heading to work. I hoped that one day my family would be like the Volkov family.

Apart from giving me ideas for my future family's daily life, Dianna and Slava taught me how to best take care of kids and how best to discipline them. They were constantly teaching me new tactics, whether they knew it or not. One particular afternoon, we all went on a walk to Candler Park. Lyosha brought his favorite tennis ball with him and Elena brought a jump rope. That afternoon, Candler Park was especially busy. There were families with children everywhere. Kids were climbing on the monkey bars, throwing frisbees, and playing in the creek.

In the midst of all of this commotion, Lyosha threw his tennis ball at his friend Luke. Instead of Dianna telling Lyosha (in German, of course) “No, do not throw the ball”, she told him “Lyosha, if you want to throw the ball, then throw it at that tree or at the bushes”. Wow. What an interesting way of disciplining. Never before had I thought about phrasing “no” in such a way. Instead of reprimanding Lyosha for doing such a thing, Dianna used this opportunity as a teaching moment for him. By telling Lyosha to throw the ball at the bushes instead of at Luke, she taught him that it is not okay to throw a tennis ball at another child, but it is okay to throw it at a bush. This was one of the many methods that Dianna and Slava taught me throughout the summer. I learned that instead of restricting a child completely from an activity, it’s better to use his mishaps and mistakes to teach him something. It seems far more effective than only ever telling a child “no” when he does something wrong. These techniques were especially helpful when I encountered the challenges of being a full-time nanny.

Living as a full-time nanny was not always easy. I worked about forty hours a week. I only went home on the weekends. And sometimes the kids were rowdy and disobedient. And I wasn’t even a full-time parent! Probably my most difficult task was potty training Lyosha. One day, he shamefully tucked himself behind the straw rocking chair in the sunny living room. From the look on his face, I could tell: he had wet himself again. And he knew he would not get a sticker that day. Like usual, I helped him change into a new pair of underwear and throw the wet pair in the dirty laundry hamper. Gross. It was gross. But I did it. As the weeks went by, it became increasingly more important that Lyosha stay dry all day so that he could attend preschool in the fall. Although Dianna was hesitant about doing this, she eventually upped the bribe. If Lyosha went to the bathroom by himself, he would get a scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream. That did the trick. For me, there was nothing more satisfying than knowing that weeks

of wet underwear and poop-filled pants led to carefree outings, and preschool. In the end, I learned that even though raising kids is challenging and demanding, it is also incredibly gratifying.

Being with the Elena and Lyosha everyday brought me a lot of joy. One of my favorite memories with the kids was when we rode our bikes about five miles to the Avondale Estates Swimming Pool. I carried Lyosha in a child seat attached to my bike, and Elena rode her own bike. When we arrived, we saw that unfortunately the pool was closed for maintenance, so we ended up spending four hours at the Avondale Park instead. Yes. Four Hours! Elena and Lyosha entertained themselves as different kids from the neighborhood came and went. Since they had their swimsuits on, they filled up their water bottles at the water fountain and dumped the water over their heads. I loved seeing the huge smiles on their faces as the water flowed from their head to their feet. This was better than swimming in the pool. One time, Elena ran over to me and accidentally called me “mom” and said, “Guck mal, Mamma!” (“Look, mom!”). Of course, I had to join in the excitement as well. We had too much fun. Not just that day. Every day. I found that I really love children and would like to have a few of my own someday.

The last time that I drove to the Volkov’s home in Decatur, I knew I was in the right place. This time, I felt no anxiety. I had just gotten back to Atlanta that week for winter break and my excitement of visiting the Volkov’s grew increasingly as I approached their charming house on Brooks Avenue. My joy was rekindled when I passed by the “Candler Park Market” and saw that its brick walls still had chipping paint. It looked just the same. When I saw #340, all of the memories immediately flooded my mind. I could hear the melody in my head of Dianna’s fingers playing on the piano, I could see Elena cutting paper with scissors and Lyosha prancing around the living room, and I could smell the aroma of Slava’s delicious cooking. I wanted to

live with them again. The Volkov's. Who were so instrumental in helping me discover, learn, and grow. And who blessed me with knowledge that will benefit me for the rest of my life.