

Fiction
2,734 words

Album

I'm witnessing a miracle of modern science. Well, okay, it's not that modern. The only real modern thing is the room we're in – the entire maternity wing, actually – recently redesigned to look/feel like a posh hotel, like the Ritz. This room itself is actually bigger than our first apartment – and way better furnished. But what I'm witnessing is as old as the Earth itself:

The birth of my son.

I'm leaning against my stove. I'm wearing jeans. I'm in my socks. It's cold outside. Mid-January. My prospective roommate looks around the room. She's got on a black jacket and scarf, and has a bobbed, late-80's haircut. Black. Black black black. She's cute. Seems friendly. Just one more in a parade of potential roommates.

I'm blasé. What else could I be? The whole thing is annoying. I can't afford the rent by myself. I could probably skate by, but I'd rather have the money. And I'm used to having a roommate. Besides this tiny, crumbling piece of shit is prime Manhattan real estate, right? I won't downright screw anybody. But sure, I'll take the bigger room – let the new roomie pick up the bulk of rent. Why not? It's my apartment.

A parade of potential housemates descends on me: artists, students, freshly minted temp workers.

I call the service. Look, I say, I specifically said *no women*. No women, no pets, no smokers. The apartment's small enough as it is. I need someone quiet, easy-going. No tension.

Oh, oh - our mistake, they say. We'll change the form. Sorry. Uhm - there are going to be some women coming by – could you please just be *nice* to them. They're paying a fee, y'know. Sorry.

Nice? Hhhn. No, no – I tell the next woman. This was a mistake.

Mistake?! I paid \$125 for this list.

\$125? Really? To look at my place? I'm *so* sorry. Okay, so I'll pretend – sure, I might take a female roommate. Mm. Well, look, maybe I could take a female roommate. I'm easy-going, flexible. I've had gay roommates. How bad could a woman be? I'm not looking to get laid. I'm an adult. I'm looking for another human being to share an incredibly small amount of space with: straight, gay, white, black, male, female. It doesn't matter. If it's right, it's right. Just gimme a year till the lease is up.

She's casual, low-key, friendly. She looks around. It's small, but how much room does she really need? No one spends time in a Manhattan apartment. The rent's not too bad. And for work – she's doing something – some medical thing. Good. No actors, no artists. Medicine can pay the rent. The small talk is about as good as small talk gets. At one point, she turns and – *shit, she broke my lamp.*

Sorry!

No, no, it's okay –

Lamp? It's a pole with a shade held on by a pencil. A broken pencil. She's looking for a year. Great.

I'll probably never see her again.

My wife is having a baby. My baby.

I'm telling Bill I don't know what's happening to me. I'm trying to be calm – to be normal. Adult. But it feels – it feels like it's getting more involved. Intense. The apartment is so small. I don't want it to get weird. I don't want to do the wrong thing. I don't even know what the wrong thing is. I don't know. We're spending an incredible amount of time together. Not unnaturally – nothing forced. We're just – that's what we're doing. Going to shops in the Village. I helped her buy some bookshelves and we carried them all the way back to the apartment – ten or eleven blocks over and up three flights of stairs. I don't know. She's smart, passionate. Unlike every other girl I know. The apartment's so small. I don't want to be a scumbag or anything. I don't – I don't know what I'm thinking.

But I like her.

I'm on a John Wayne kick. I've got to see every John Wayne movie ever made. I just read an article about "The Conqueror." John Wayne plays Genghis Khan leading an army of Huns. It's supposed to be one of the worst films ever made – not just because it's purely bad – but because it was filmed on a former A-bomb test site which eventually killed Wayne, his co-stars and several crewmen via cancer. But it's unintentionally

hysterically funny, highlighted by the moving love story of Khan, formerly known as “Temujin,” and his Hun gal, Bortai. We stay up late through the night watching and talk about it for days afterward.

At a concert. We’re all here as friends. I’m here and she’s here and her friend’s here. Sitting up on risers. Just hanging out, having a drink. I’m sitting up on the riser next to her, my new roommate. And she’s relaxed – she’s got a drink – having a good time.

And her knee touches mine.

Her knee. My knee is frozen. I’m touching her. I don’t pull away – or apologize. I let it happen – this knee-touching thing. This body-contact thing. It’s natural. It just happened. It’s the first time we’ve physically touched. The first time we’ve had physical contact of any kind. It doesn’t mean anything. She probably doesn’t even notice that – that – physically we’re touching. And I can’t hear the concert. I’m alone in the crowd – frozen – just me and her and my knee and her knee. Touching.

This is a major change in our relationship. *No, no, idiot – your knee is brushed up against hers at a rock concert! Stupid, stupid.* It doesn’t mean anything. It’s an accident. No – there are *no* accidents. *Yes, yes, of course there are!* But it’s still there. She hasn’t moved hers. Maybe she’s too drunk to realize – no – the knees – they’re – they’re just languishing there –

What does it all mean?

I call her “Bortai.” She calls me “Chimuga.” (Neither of us can remember “Temujin.”)

I’m carrying a television down the street, to Soho. I always seem to be carrying furniture down the street. Manhattan is too small. No need for cars and vans and pick-up trucks, much less hiring actual movers. So, I keep carrying furniture back and forth, back and forth – from here to her new apartment.

Her new apartment. It’s smaller than the old one. The one I still live in. About half the size, if you can believe that. But it’s a single – a one bedroom.

It’s for the best. We agreed. The apartment was too small. Too small for two people who are involved in the kind of relationship we’re involved in. Too close, too much, too soon. We both needed space. More space. We agreed. It’s mutual. Of course it is. Nothing is changing, really. We’re going to have the same relationship. We’re just not going to live together. It makes sense. Of course.

Nothing is changing.

It seems like we’ve already had the baby. He’s been such a part of our lives now for eight-and-a-half months – especially the last three. We’ve taken every birthing and child care class imaginable. I could probably teach a class on breast-feeding at this point. Or maybe not. I knew tonight would be the night. I knew from the way she was pounding on the dummy at the CPR class earlier this evening – that we would be here, now, doing this. Another surreal moment. Anxious. Exciting.

New apartment. Bigger. Transitional and in the suburbs. It's almost like a real home with a built-in dishwasher and usable garbage bins outside. Holy crap. Am I domestic?

I think one of the rocks over the fake fireplace looks like a bear's head.

Our picture taken on a beach.

Eating Mexican food.

I love the arcade. I'm way too old for this. But the little boy in me loves it. When I was a kid it was all pinball machines and ski-ball and air hockey. And now it's all video games. Actually, the ski-ball and air hockey are still here and even a couple of the pinball machines. So, really how much has changed? Credit the town for trading in on nostalgia. For realizing that folks want the 50's-era beachside resort community to remain a 50's-era beachside resort community while the planet's still spinning. It's certainly what I want.

I know she hates the arcade. But she smiles anyway, and I let her know she gets huge points for humoring me and catering to the whims of my inner eight year old. She's already humored my eight year old several times this trip. We ate breakfast at the restaurant with the giant taffy pulling machine in the window. We went to the newsstand and bought "Hot Stuff" and "Little Lotta" comics. As we play air hockey and pinball, I reflect that my eight year old has been pretty well taken care of.

I wonder what I can get at the prize booth for my 37 ski-ball points. There's not much you can get these days for 37 points – but another seven and the rubber spider ring is mine. And I see her standing in front of a funky-looking, ancient machine, definitely from the 50's – checking it out. She puts a buck in and tugs on this incredibly-difficult-to-pull stamper. The thing stamps out whatever you type onto a tiny metal Lucky Key Chain, embossed with horse shoes and four leaf clovers. She stamps something out, knowing she can't go back and make changes. If she makes a mistake, it's set in there. It plops into the dispenser and she hands it to me:

BXRTQI LXUS CHMGA

I get her some water.

Soaked in sweat, hair matted.

I've spent months in classes, training to be her “coach” – but really I don't do anything. I'm just there to be there. I say, “come on, honey” a lot. “You're doing great.” “Come on.” And I give her little chips of hard candy to suck on.

She's been carrying this medicine ball in her belly for months now. Through sheer force of will and physical exertion – and an excruciating, primal, effort that will screw up her body for weeks to come – she will bring new life to the planet, for God sakes. Me, I'm going to hold little pieces of candy in a Dixie cup and try not to sound too retarded.

“Push, honey. Push. Want some candy?”

In a pretty good tuxedo, I wait in front of a couple hundred of people all decked out in surprisingly nice formal wear. And I have incredible gas. So, every cliché you hear is true. I didn't sleep the night before. I'm completely exhausted. But my beard looks great. Trimming my goatee is always an unpredictable experience. It's all guesswork. Instinctive. The slightest jerk and the whole thing gets set-off. Unbalanced.

I'm going for short. She likes it short. But today has to be special and much much better than average. It has to have *flair*. Almost a European salon look. And I have to do it myself - on no sleep, with the worst gas in history and a thousand things racing through my mind. No nicks. No bleeding. And God forbid I cut slightly too much from one side. Then all that's left is to try to balance it - cut from the other side - cut from the first - balancing, balancing - till I've lost all perspective and then - what? Nothing to do but shave the whole thing off. Or cancel the wedding.

I'm surprisingly calm. Maybe it's lack of sleep. If anything I'm giddy. But why not? Really, I don't have to do much. For once, showing up really is everything. Everyone looks so nice. I look nice. Hell, the whole thing is nice. I can enjoy this. It's just hard to take it all so seriously.

And then she appears.

This person I've known my whole life, now. This angel in white with that black, black hair walks towards me. *Me*. Her eyes sparkle. Her smile literally lights up the room. Everyone stares at her, breathless. And suddenly, she's there, beside me - and everything else ceases to exist. The family, the priest, the rabbi, my gas, my exhaustion, everything. Yes, yes, the ceremony is lovely. But look at this. Suddenly, I *am* the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in town.

She learns how to play poker.

Better than me.

Jerry Garcia dies.

“Push, honey!” “C’mon!” “You can do it!”

We don’t actually own the house yet. We own it as of tomorrow, but we’ve got the keys. For all intents and purposes it’s our house.

Our house.

And we’re ripping up the carpeting. God forbid the deal goes south in the next 12 hours as we would then be ripping up carpeting in someone else’s house. But it’s unlikely the deal will go south. The carpet is funky, old, discolored, extremely lumpy in the middle. And this is the master bedroom. What were these people thinking? Obviously, personal comfort wasn’t very important to them.

Ripping up the carpet is invigorating. It’s like a New Year – a new life. Out with the old and in with us. We paid for it. We paid the broker, the inspector, the lawyer. We trudged through snow and slush. We cut notices out of the paper and taped them to blank pages and made phone calls and argued and toured neighborhoods every time we saw an “open house” sign. We saw houses. A dozen, at least. And now we’ve bought one. Surely, we must be adults now. Right?

Look at us – gleeful, delinquent teens – the Bonnie and Clyde of carpet removal – sneaking into the old man’s house while he’s on vacation and ransacking his property. Only there is no old man and it’s our property. Or it will be tomorrow, anyway. We are primal, unprofessional in our carpet rippings, heaving and sweating.

Neither of us has ripped up carpet before. We knew something was holding it down. Nails? Tacks? Stapled, to the floor and to thin, brittle, wooden planks framing the carpet. As we rip and pull, millions of staples and nails jut out at us, everywhere.

How do people in houses dispose of things? Throw it on the street? Hope someone picks it up? Take it to a dump? We don’t even know how our own garbage works. Where’s a landlord when you need one?

I go out to find where the trash is kept. Three cans under an eave at the right side of the house, before the garage. Okay. Great. So, someone must pick it up.

“Garbage picks up Tuesday and Friday. But we have to call them to get service started back up.”

“They discontinued service?”

The trash cans are full. Great. The sellers discontinued service and left us weeks worth of trash. Foul. Rotted food –

“Get rid of it! Get it out of here! Take the carpet with you!”

“Get rid of it?”

“Take it! It stinks! Go on!”

“Where?”

I load the garbage and carpet into my car trunk. Maggots crawling across the garbage bags drop into my trunk. The stench is unbearable. I drive back to our old

apartment complex and dump everything in the trash bins. No one sees me. No one cares. Technically, I'm still a tenant till the end of the month. I heave the carpet with my super strength. The carpet is gone. Gone.

Over the course of the week, I make three more trips back to the complex before we determine how to get our garbage picked up.

We are proud new owners of a house.

We discover we like basketball.

Several doctors and nurses attend us – a lot of people for such an intimate experience. And then – and then – oh boy – there he is – really – his head – his eyes – arms – his legs – his tiny tiny feet curled up. He's out. Out! There he is, Mrs. We – we actually have a baby.

And we're a family, suddenly. We must be adults, now. We must be. And the angel in white is lying on the bed, smiling and crying, exhausted, spent, resting, recovering.

And then, then – there – he's – he's in my arms. My son. My little boy. So small. Hardly anything. He's so small. He's beautiful. My boy. My little little boy. Our boy.

Our son.

Translated: "Bortai loves Chimuga."