

Short Story About a Guy Who Rents a Baby

by Max Barry

Began: 11am 22nd August 2009.

“You can rent babies,” said Niva. “For trial purposes.”

I looked up. “What?”

“Well...” She snuggled closer. “I heard about it on the radio and I thought it sounded like a good idea. You rent a baby for six weeks, then decide if you want to keep it.”

I put down my copy of *Astonishing X-Men #11*. “You rent them?”

“One,” said Niva. “You rent one.”

“What for?”

“It’s for people who aren’t sure if they’re ready for the commitment.” Her eyes avoided mine. “To, you know, test the waters.”

“We don’t need to test the waters. We

I said nothing. It wasn’t my waters that needed testing. Niva had been ready for a kid for years, but I couldn’t see the rush. We were still in our twenties. I wasn’t against children. I was fine with that. But later. Not now.

“And if you like the baby, you can keep it,” said Niva. “For a small additional fee. But if you don’t, you give it back. So it’s risk-free.”

I shifted in the bed. “I don’t think we need to rent a baby.”

Niva lay her head on my chest. “But maybe we could.” One arm curled around me. “We could just go to the agency and have a look.”

I began to see the danger here. An actual kid I could say no to. An actual kid meant a lifetime of commitment, which we clearly weren’t ready for. But a rental kid, obligation-free, I had no reason to refuse. “We’ll see.” I raised my comic.

Seconds passed. I should have seen it coming. “I already made an appointment,” she said.

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The agency building was a concrete fortress, vaguely Soviet. Niva and I gripped hands as we moved through its hallways, passing haggard-looking mothers clutching bundles of pink flesh. “Look at them,” I whispered to Niva. “They look exhausted.”

“They look happy,” she said.

After 45 minutes in a crowded waiting-room, we were ushered in to see a nurse. That’s what they called them: nurses, like these were real babies. “Greg and Niva Haversham.” She took a seat behind her desk and eyed us over our application form. “You’re interested in a six-week rental?”

“Yes,” said Niva, before I could open my mouth.

“You’re in luck.” She put our file on her desk. “We have a wonderful little girl in stock at the moment. You’ll love her.”

“Actually,” I said, “we’re just looking today.”

“That’s completely fine,” said the nurse. “However, I should inform you there’s often a significant waiting period. Particularly for a baby of Stephanie’s quality.”

“Stephanie,” echoed Niva.

The nurse smiled. “Would you like to see?”

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“Oh my God.” Niva clutched at my shirt. “She’s gorgeous.”

“I know,” said the nurse.

I stared through the glass. Stephanie, the high-quality baby, lay in a plastic crib. She was not particularly ugly. She wasn’t particularly anything. She was just a baby. I could not have picked her out from a line-up of generic babies in a million years.

“I’ll tell you something,” said the nurse. “Usually, we place a baby on public display for seven days before accepting applications. But I have a feeling about you two. I’m prepared to let you jump ahead.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I said.

Niva’s hand tightened on my arm. “What do you mean?”

“I can tell when a couple and a baby just fit,” said the nurse. “And you three, you fit.”

“Wait,” I said, but it was already too late: the nurse was unlocking the nursery door, and Niva moving through it, and as soon as I saw that baby in her arms I knew I was never getting it out.

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The first night, she woke eighteen times. I am not making this up. It took longer to convince her to go to sleep than she actually spent sleeping. It felt like a depraved sociological experiment. “Maybe she’s broken,” I said. “This can’t be normal.”

“She’s not broken.” Niva looked a little broken herself. She was on the couch, cradling Stephanie, during one of the four-minute periods the baby was actually asleep. Outside, dawn loomed. “Some babies take a while to learn how to sleep.”

“The nurse said she was *high quality*,” I said. “It’s deceptive advertising.”

Niva said nothing.

“I should call them. It’s probably not too late to switch.” I reached for my phone.

“We’re not exchanging her.”

“We’ll get one that sleeps better.” I punched in the first few numbers. “I mean, it’s not fair, expecting us to cope with this. And if we have to wait a while, that’s okay—”

“We’re not exchanging her,” said Niva, “and you are going to *do this properly*.”

I put down my phone.

“You said you were ready. You said you would do this.”

“I am—”

“Well, here she is, Greg.” She rose from the couch. “This is the baby we have. And she screams a lot, and she won’t sleep, but this is the baby we have. So you are going to try.”

She thrust Stephanie into my arms. I was so surprised I took her.

“Wake me in two hours,” said Niva.

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I stood as still as possible. Somehow, Stephanie hadn’t woken during the transfer from Niva to me, but the slightest movement could set her off. She was a pink, twenty-

inch bomb. Minutes passed. I began to sweat. Somewhere, a dog barked. Stephanie opened her eyes.

“Hello,” I said softly.

Her face contorted. Her lips curled in a manner I had never before seen on a human being. Her eyes squeezed tight, and she screamed.

“Shhh,” I said. “It’s okay. You’re okay.” I rocked her. I bounced on my heels. “Swoosh!” I said. I didn’t know what I was doing. “Whee!”

<<AND THAT’S IT FOR TODAY!!!!!!>>

<< Maybe Greg’s happy the baby is trouble... thinks it will convince Niva that they’re not ready for a real one? >>

<< Problem here is Greg’s really been forced into it. He’s entitled to be upset. He really needs to have agreed to this at some point, then be trying to backtrack. <-- Yeah. This. So maybe he said yes at some point in the past: Yes, I want to have kids, let’s start trying; but (in reality) he’s surprised when she actually gets pregnant and not really ready for the baby. Which (in story) means... he’s said he’s ready, but he’s not feeling it. So Niva wants to know when. Maybe it’s always next month. >>

By midnight, Niva and I were snapping at each other. By three, I was prepared to drive Stephanie back to the agency and wait outside until somebody showed up.

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Ideas so far!

- Invasion of foxes – intelligent obvious.... aliens... what is their plan?
- Epidemic of never-ending pregnancies... maybe guy frustrated at partner's inability to actually bring pregnancy to birth, blames her. ("It's not a *choice*. It's a *condition*.") Kinda cool in that there's frustration as we pass 40 weeks... when is this kid going to pop? So why is she not delivering? (You can't give birth until you are mentally ready?) So it *is* a choice? Doctor says she's just not ready: this woman is genuinely holding the kid back (because it's really frickin scary). So then the guy has to talk her into it... and I guess she's holding back partly because she doesn't think he's ready, so he needs to pass that mental block himself.
- Rent-a-child (trial kids)... guy unsure of readiness for fatherhood, uses practice baby which you can return if you decide you're not ready. (Internal? Turns out to be his internal process. So he's under pressure to give his wife/partner a kid, he wants to rent a kid first, goes through a few trials, at the end it's really his kid, has been all along, but he's been going through this process in his mind.) (Application process: you get to choose from a variety of baby models—guy didn't even realize there were differences. Who's choosing who gets which baby here?) Nice opening dynamic in that you can't say no to rental babies, because you can always give them back. (JUST LIKE THOSE CHICKENS.) So our guy is kind of dragged along by partner. And I like that it's really his journey into early parenthood: he's actually got this baby and is learning to adjust to it. So he's throwing up objections and saying we should give this kid back, but his partner is keeping him in it(?). Smile of baby: that's a huge moment.
- Guy goes insane writing short story in public
- Family dinner, trying to bring together warring factions.
- What if writer's block was contagious?
- 11:30am
- OK, 11:45am, I'm going with the rent-a-baby idea.
- 1. Niva suggests rent a baby, Greg not so keen, but hard to say no
- 2. Greg & Niva go along to the agency, learn terms.
- 3. Take Baby (name??) (Greg surprised baby has name) home, Niva smitten, Greg prepared to give it a go.
- OK so need 3 or 4 moments: a screw-this-I'm-taking-the-kid-back moment, a final ok-we'll-keep-her moment, etc. Poo. (Things you're not prepared for.) Sickness. Actually, that should be it: kid gets sick, Greg's relieved it gets better. Wrapping: couldn't see her for a moment. Kid looks like Greg & Niva. Responds (smile). Fontanelle (soft part of head) is freaky. Temperature (debate about

whether kid is warm enough—friction between G&N). Baby ruins key bachelor symbol. Excluded because of kid—mates don't really care, some places don't cater for it.

- Guy finally gets kid to sleep via goony dancing. A win, a first bond.
- Hiring agency is really the hospital. Maybe the way we do the ending reveal is they go back to the agency & we see it's the hospital where Niva gave birth 6 weeks earlier.
- Actually, let's have a deadline: you rent the kid for 6 weeks and then go back to the agency and tell them if you want to keep it or not.
- Bachelor thing: footy? Xbox? Running? Comics? Kinda like comics because he can read them to the baby, then she can vomit on them. X-Men? Yeah.
- Baby name: Stephanie.
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