

PROVISIONING

The stuff of motherhood

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My code name is CHUM.

My husband experiences the event that requires me to use this code name only through my (admittedly hyperbolic) description of it. Right now he is, in theory, watching the eleven o'clock news. But he's really keeping a slightly dismayed eye on me as I sit on the living floor for the third night in a row.

I'm sitting on the floor rather than on the sofa beside him because I need lots of elbow room. In what I've discovered is a surprisingly enjoyable ritual of momhood, I'm sorting through our two-year-old daughter Ava's clothes, fingers crossed that I'll be able to come up with enough cast-offs for the upcoming biannual consignment clothing sale at the Glenn School for Young Children to qualify for a ticket to its Preview Night.

So far I've priced and set aside, among other more prosaic things:

A tiny French knitted wool newborn outfit that arrived in Atlanta during one of the warmest springs on record;

A red plaid dress with faux-leopard trim on the collar, cuffs, and hem. (I came to like the idea of Ava masquerading as the child of one of the Sex Pistols but this dress never actually fit her);

The infant car seat that she was too big for by thirteen months, and that all new parents are admonished never to buy second-hand;

A pink velour dress with a cat's face picked out on its front in rhinestones;
A glittery magenta onesie.

This is my fourth time selling clothes at Glenn School Sale, which makes me neither an old hand nor a virgin. My homemade pricing kit is on the floor beside me (pen, scotch tape, safety pins, index cards, calculator and Ziploc Baggies I collected before the last Glenn School Sale and then set aside, knowing I'd use them again in six months). Three sales ago I bought two laundry baskets specifically for heaping full of clothes and stacking in my arms while I squeezed through makeshift racks of children's clothing in an overly warm school gymnasium. I'm prepared—and willing—to spend the next three to six hours of my life writing descriptions such as:

CHUM

1 Pink Polka-dot BabyGap Girl's Shirt

Never Worn!

12 month

1.99

onto blue (not white) index cards one after another and then pinning them to the upper left pocket area of each article of clothing, just for the chance to be among the first hundred or so allowed to go through the used clothing and baby gear.

I affix my price tags with medium sized safety pins (small ones or straight pins are frowned upon by the clothing sale volunteers who, when I bring my wares to Drop-Off, will check them for damage, wear, or any other affronts to Glenn School sensibilities). I place every item on its hanger facing left. I've long ago vowed I'll never let myself be publicly humiliated the way my friend LAWN was last year, when the Glenn School Sale Volunteers turned away her stroller as "too soiled."

Isn't chum the baitfish that makes sharks go into a feeding frenzy? my husband asks me.

I'm too busy with the calculator to even look up. Ninety-one dollars, plus two dollars, plus seventy-five cents, plus three-fifty, I mutter. My merchandise more than meets the fifty-dollar ante for admission the night before the sale officially opens.

Ha ha, I tell Mark. Very funny. I survey the sorted, hangered, and priced clothes before me with the sort of satisfaction I imagine a prairie wife would give her fully stocked root cellar just before the advent of winter—all those homepickled cucumbers bobbing in their brine! All those tomatoes in their Mason jars, curved and luscious, rubied! Is it thrift or greed or my first slip into a sort of Stepford Mommydom that drives me, or something else entirely?

It's 4:00 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon, and here we are, waiting in line for the school doors to open, which will happen at 6:00. "Feeding frenzy" might be an apt description of the Glenn School Sale, legendary throughout metro Atlanta, but that's not what I think of tonight as I join the queue on Preview Night. Tonight, I am CHUM, everybody's friend, dutifully initiating new moms (this time it's a friend with the code name DAWN) into the intricacies of Preview Night. I've just introduced DAWN to LAWN and BONY, who two years ago initiated me into the same rituals. We've assured the woman waiting behind us that DAWN didn't cut in line but got here the exact same second as the rest of us and then went off to the restroom in a building across the street to change out of her work clothes into an outfit better suited for sifting through quantities of used children's clothing. We've got bottled water and lawn chairs and a picnic dinner to eat in about an hour.

The woman ahead of our group is sitting in her own folding chair working on some sort of crafts project and occasionally checks a list of the gear she's hoping to find tonight. It's an extravagantly balmy spring afternoon and the line continues taking shape behind us until it snakes around the side of the school

building and out of sight. I can spot one dad. As politically incorrect as it might be, Preview Night is predominantly a female event.

In fact, if such a thing existed as the Mommy Olympics, this might be one of its highest-stakes games.

When I was pregnant with Ava—hardly pregnant at all compared to how pregnant I would become—someone mentioned the Glenn School Sale to me. Huge. Indescribable. Run like clockwork. Everything you'll possibly need for this baby. I thanked her politely but didn't even note of the name of the sale or ask her when it was held. I hadn't made that first trek to Babies "R" Us yet, and I hadn't read a single one of The Books (the ones that tell you that you need hundreds of things when you have a baby and that you should buy very few of them used). My feet were still firmly planted in before, a before that included long weekend mornings spent lolling in bed with The New York Times, popping out spontaneously for dinners that included drinks, appetizers, courses, dessert, and after-meal coffee, and actually seeing first-run movies in theaters, a life I now realize was made up of equal parts sloth and leisure.

At the time, I thought the woman (who was passing along a huge tip, though I was too inexperienced to recognize this) was nice enough but possibly a little nutty: I was barely even showing, for goodness' sake, and just how much stuff would one single baby who was still practically hypothetical at this point going to need? I had no idea just how much gear I was going to buy in the next few years of my life and just how thoroughly I was going to agonize over the purchase of every single article of it (should we go with the complete transportation system or just use a carrier until our child could sit up in a stroller?). I had no idea just how many pairs of newborn socks my mother would rush out to purchase the day after we brought Ava home from the hospital (twelve—Ava was born in January) or how many times Ava would kick them off before we'd understand she would never actually wear them (dozens). I had no idea that while gear doesn't make the baby, just as clothes don't make the man or woman, things (whether we like it or not) may be one of the ways we process what happens to us. We plan nurseries to distract ourselves from, and convince ourselves of, a future that is almost unimaginable in its enormity.

We buy because we love, even when we know better. The week after we brought Ava home from the hospital, Mark ran out to the grocery store so often "just to pick up a couple of things" that I had to beg him to stop. To be a parent is have an overwhelming desire to provide, and provide well, but what that actually means is something we can learn only through experience.

The Glenn School Sale is run by an experienced crew. Its procedures have been honed over the years to a fine edge and cut through the crap, which may go a

long way toward explaining the sale's seductiveness: It's one of the few experiences I've ever had in parenthood that allows you to do things by the book and still end up with the outcome you desire. Preview Night always starts at six o'clock on a Thursday night and the line will always begin to form at three o'clock that afternoon. The doors will open for the "official" sale at 9:30 a.m. the next morning, by which point Preview Night veterans tell themselves the best bargains have already been snatched up. No children are allowed into the building before noon, and this means you. Saturday will be half-price day, but by then you're taking your chances. Follow those rules, and you'll come home with your child's entire wardrobe for the next six months.

There are people, I've been told, whose children regard the Glenn School Sale as a kind of Christmas: They run downstairs the day after as if expecting to find not second-hand clothes, but the presents Santa left them.

A few months after Ava was born, I met LAWN in a postnatal yoga class. Everyone else's babies were sleeping peacefully on blankets on the floor while their mothers settled on their haunches in the cat pose. LAWN's eyes met mine over the heads of the squalling infants we held. By then I'd discovered that babies grow out of their tiny outfits the second or third day after they first wear them, so I was much more open to the idea of consignment sales in general. But LAWN wasn't just talking about the Glenn School Sale. She was talking about Preview Night, which elevated the sale from a simple rite of passage to blood sport. Was I game? she asked me. LAWN was a veteran of the trenches: she'd gone into labor with her second child at the previous Preview Night, an event that had already become an Atlanta legend. Was I game? You bet. This sounded like some inside track, and I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be on one. Besides, at my age, standing in line at Preview Night was probably as close as I would ever get to camping out for Bob Dylan tickets again.

The Glenn School Sale Volunteers start moving down the line at 5:45 to check our required photo IDs and make sure we're not slipping in illegally (tickets are NOT transferable). LAWN, BONY, DAWN, and I have eaten our picnic dinner, checked in at home by cell phone, and briefed DAWN, the newbie of the bunch, on some of the lore of previous sales, including that of the couple behind us in line last year who confessed they'd once earned fifteen hundred dollars from selling the toys of a three-year-old.

As people start taking their chairs back to their cars and shifting their empty laundry baskets to their hips, an palpable frisson of excitement travels down the line, which by now wraps all the way around the building and out to the street and contains numerous mommies I recognize—the yoga teacher from the class where LAWN and I met, a woman who once regaled the entire waiting

room at my obstetrician's office with the blow-by-blow of her extremely difficult labor, the wild-haired mom BONY spotted at the playground last week attempting to round up four children and clearly dangerously close to her wits' end.

Amy Carter's here, BONY turns to me and whispers, referring to the daughter of former president Carter, who still lives in Atlanta. A soft murmur works its way down the line, as if the presence of Amy has just bestowed upon the sale its ultimate seal of approval. On a quick run to the restroom, I catch wind of a rumor that a woman somewhere in line gave birth yesterday, and I overhear discussion of the one who went into labor here last spring (our LAWN!).

I make it back to my place in line just as the doors open. We hand over our Preview Tickets and file into the building.

— O, dingy hallway packed with bulbous plastic slides and Cozy Coupes, still sticky with the residue of all those years of Cheerios ...

— O, unpopular unpeopled room stacked floor to ceiling with barely-used infant car seats, where that necessary item nobody will ever buy used must go to die ...

— O, official toy room, with cardboard box after cardboard box labeled simply Teething Toys, where everything is tatty, plastic, brightly-colored, and just walking in triggers the toy-induced equivalent of insulin shock ...

— O, Exersaucers and Barbie Playhouses ...

— O, boneyard of stacked up baby gates ...

— O, wily moms, who snuck your stained and button-missing Zutano pajamas past the eagle-eyed gatekeepers; who priced flannel shirts (size Boys 4T) at seven bucks (too high) and five Medela bottles at one dollar (a steal), depending upon nothing more than your whim or how much sleep you got the week you sat up pricing after the kids had gone to bed; O, my sisters, who sort and cull sprawled out upon the floor with cheerful camaraderie, whose shirts occasionally gap open to reveal nursing bras you've forgotten to hook the flaps back up on ...

— O, uncomfortable dads: the husband who earned fifteen hundred dollars; the cheerful, sweating man standing in for the wife who at this moment is defending her dissertation; the grandfatherly type whose job seems to be to carry a folding chair from place to place for his wife; O, dad, you of the car idling in the parking lot, who stands supervising two unruly kids made drunk by the novelty of being up this late when I go past to deposit my first full laundry basket into my car ...

It's only stuff.

Or is it? Every time I attend Preview Night, I end up buying the cast-offs of a woman code-named LEAF, who clearly shares my taste in children's clothing. When BONY, LAWN, DAWN, and I file downstairs with our overflowing baskets, I catch a quick glimpse of a woman still sorting, whose pile looks like it mostly contains my cast-offs. While I was sorting through the boxes full of shoes, I noticed that the woman beside me was looking for shoes a size smaller: when I came across an immaculate pair of Stride-Rites, I passed them right over. DAWN's basket contains not only things for her boys, but clothes for her sister's daughters. The spring I had a sinus infection and couldn't face the line, BONY and LAWN (both the mothers of boys) harvested the Girls 2T racks, finding Ava a wardrobe of sundresses that drew the compliments of everyone who saw them, including my own mother.

It's only stuff. But here in this overly-warm school auditorium, something else is being handed down as well. We might be provisioning ourselves for our longest, most strenuous haul; we've come together here to shore ourselves up. For life with children can be so much like the Glenn School Sale itself: so greedy and unheeding of larger events, so over-the-top and rare, so excessive and effusive, so must-be-experienced to be believed.

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When this essay hits the newsstands, I'll be preparing for another Seller's Night, my fifth. LAWN is moving to New York, though she swears she'll find a way to make a business trip down to Atlanta to wait in line next spring. DAWN and her husband have decided to adopt a child, making theirs a family of five. Time marches on, and Seller's Night has become a sort of commemorative event when we take a breather and evaluate what's occurred since the last sale (though I purchased two swim suits for Ava I did not end up signing up for "Skipper" classes at the Y as I had planned), and what the future may bring. In my guise as my alter ego CHUM, I'm contemplating my upcoming fortieth birthday and asking myself whether the time's come to sell my "big" gear—the crib, the changing table, the stroller, the maternity clothes. But that decision's fodder for another essay.