

The Roommates

Joel Scambray

Writer's comment: It's kind of weird when life presents to you the opportunity to write a story like this. Usually when I get an assignment in an English class, I groan and moan, get writer's block for a week and a half, write the thing over dinner, spend all night typing it, print it up the next morning and sprint it off to class. Then I try to explain to my prof why it was three days late.

This story was different, though. When Eric Schroeder gave us the assignment in English 103C last fall, I knew what I was going to do right away. The topic of the paper was to be one of my choosing, and the only real restriction on it was the length: 8-10 pages. Just about perfect for the piece I had been wanting to do since I was a sophomore in high school. See, even as far back as then I've wanted to write about...well, you can read the story for yourself; it's all there.

But, before you begin, a word about words: language is a powerful tool, and I have tried to use it to its utmost effectiveness in this story. And yet, words do have their limitations. I could write volumes about my first year in college (who couldn't?) and the experiences I had with Suresh Ojha and still never do justice to the things that happened then; I just hope the few pages that follow convey to you the important things they taught me about friendship, acceptance, and understanding. Suresh, this one's for you, ol' buddy. Radical X!

-Joel Scambray

Instructor's comment: Like Liz Garone's essay, Joel Scambray's was written as the final assignment in my English 103C course, Magazine Feature Writing. Unlike Liz's story, however, which is a feature based primarily on Liz's research and combines a variety of sources, Joel's story is more narrative and is based on his own experience. What Joel doesn't tell you in his introduction, though, is that both he and Suresh about whom he writes were students in my Integrated Studies class, the class he mentions briefly in his essay. I can therefore assure you that Joel does not exaggerate the differences between the two. I was absolutely amazed when I found out that the two were roommates; I couldn't figure out how they had managed to keep from killing each other. Joel's narrative is thus a wonderful tale of growing up, of learning about differences, of discovering the many guises friendship assumes. It's a story that I think John Updike himself would appreciate.

-Eric Schroeder, Lecturer, English Department

When I was a sophomore in high school, my English teacher made me read a story by John Updike called "The Roommates." It's about a small-town kid who goes to a big college and rooms with a 1960's radical-type, and although my recollections of literary works I was exposed to during those tender years are vague, my English teacher had the presence of mind to show me a Public Television production of the tale. My memories of the television I watched during high school are much more crisp, and a few of the scenes from the video version have managed to stay trapped in my head. The film conveyed the tense feeling between two people forced to room together, and how, gradually, the two began to overlook the vast differences in their backgrounds to become friends.

The scene that really stands out in my mind was the phone conversation played at the end of the film, while the credits rolled. The roommates are talking to each other many years after they have graduated from college and journeyed far along their separate paths, and though they haven't spoken in years, the bond that they formed during college remains intact. This scene had the same sentimental qualities as those AT&T commercials that ran on TV a while back; I wanted to pick up the nearest phone and call my college roommate to talk over memories. There was only one problem: I hadn't yet gone away to college.

And in my youthfully narrow perspective, the idea of having a *Roommates*-like experience remained just a quaint notion inspired by my sophomore English teacher; I filed it away in some mental backroom and continued on with more pressing high school matters: girls, basketball, and goofing off.

Sometimes it's funny how life imitates art. Like all good things, high school came to an end some endless years later, and, lo and behold, I found myself preparing to embark upon life's first great camping trip, college. Late in the spring of my senior year I was accepted at the University of California, Davis and was informed that I would be assigned a roommate. It really never hit me that my life was paralleling Updike's story until I received the assignment from Davis Housing. The letter was terse and to the point:

Your roommate will be:

Suresh Ojha

XXX Yth Street, Sacramento, CA 95616

Included was a phone number in case I wanted to call this person with whom I would be living in a small room for the next year.

I thought about calling; I struggled to make a mental picture of the person on the other end of the line, his house, his family. Suresh Ojha from Sacramento—it sounded Indian (if I was pronouncing it right). My mind conjured images of a family of dark-skinned creatures running around an adobe hut outside of Sacramento, heads tightly wrapped in turbans, jabbering at each other in an incomprehensible dialect, swatting at sacred cows and engaging in bizarre rituals that only an uncultured kid from Fresno could dream up.

For a while I wondered, but never picked up the phone. Once more, other things in my life took precedence: preparing for the coming year, packing my life into boxes to be moved

out into the world, saying goodbye to friends and family. Finally, at the end of the summer, more out of duty than want, I wrote a letter to Suresh Ojha. No reply came. In the chaos of going away to college, I didn't even notice.

As Departure Day approached, college began to look less like an extended camping trip and more like exile to a Tibetan monastery. I was a pampered kid, and the idea of living three hours away from home-cooked meals, cleaned and pressed clothes, and my own room was frightening. The decision had been made, however, and my father, having plunked down a sizeable fee for tuition, room and board, drove me to Davis early in September while I fidgeted nervously in the front seat of our station wagon.

I dozed off somewhere around Modesto, and when I woke to my father's gleeful "Here we are!" the first thing I saw was—cows. Hundreds, maybe thousands of cows. I covered my nose against their stench and stared sleepily at UC Davis. I wanted to turn around right there, but instead we parked in a huge lot near the edge of campus, and began toting cardboard boxes filled with my life to a group of monolithic buildings in the distance.

Moments later I stood before the door to 414 Bixby Hall. The key I had been issued fit, and I swung open the door to a vision of starkness: two beds, two desks, two bureaus, antiseptic marble floor, and harsh sunlight from a huge panoramic window. But no Suresh Ojha. My father and I started unpacking.

Twenty minutes later, someone was standing in the doorway. He was about my height, with a dark East Indian complexion; he wore horn-rimmed glasses, faded Levis, and a T-shirt. No turban. And when he extended a hand in greeting, his English was flawless. I shook it, and for better or worse, the partnership was begun.

For a while there it looked like it was going to be for worse. His classes were early, and his alarm never failed to wake me at a startlingly new hour of dawn every morning. We studied in terse silence; I preferred to listen to the radio, but he had no stomach for what he called my bizarre taste in music: I liked Van Halen, he thought Simon and Garfunkel held the musical answers to the world's problems. On a couple of occasions, I returned from the bathroom down the hall, dripping with shower water, to discover that he had locked me out of the room and departed for class. To compound these things, we were both enrolled in the same freshman honors program, a situation that put a competitive edge on our conversations about classes, homework, papers, and studying. Worst of all, he was a die-hard 'Niners fan; I hate the 'Niners.

We even decorated our respective halves of the room in diametric opposition. On my closet door, I put up a poster of Arnold Schwarzenegger as "The Terminator" staring out from behind a menacing pair of mirrored sunglasses. On his closet door, Suresh plastered a huge blown-up photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr., staring right back at Arnold.

What stands out most in my memories of that tense Fall Quarter, though, were our

nightly discussions in the dorm cafeteria. We argued about everything: politics, sports, religion—there was nothing under the sun that we could agree on. Our favorite topic of dispute that quarter was the so-called “War on Drugs”: Suresh did volunteer work with underprivileged kids in Sacramento, and he held strongly that the only solution to the drug problem was education; he believed that if children born and raised in ghettos were given other opportunities through schooling, the demand for drugs would be cut off, and the entire illicit drug industry would collapse. I held no such fanciful notions, and stoically maintained that so long as human beings existed, there would be a demand for controlled substances. Although the most experience with controlled substances I had was at keg parties in high school, I was convinced that Suresh’s views were unrealistic. Our disagreements were often carried back up to 414 Bixby Hall, where they continued until the early morning hours under the stark moonlight streaming in through the huge window.

To make matters worse, we were both in the same civil rights course that quarter, providing us with a broader range of issues to disagree on. Before moving to Sacramento, Suresh grew up in Nepal, where the caste system and the tyrannies of the Nepalese government gave him quite a different perspective on Constitutional civil rights issues. While he had a great appreciation for the liberties that our Constitution grants us, I felt that our country had grown too liberal in its acceptance of things like the Gay Rights Movement and flag burning; my traditional instincts told me some things were just plain wrong, no matter how we interpreted the Constitution. We argued so strenuously about this during and after class that our professor was astonished at the end of the quarter to discover we were roommates; he wondered how we hadn’t strangled each other during the ten-week course.

During Finals Week that quarter, we almost did choke the daylights out of each other. My first taste of college had been tough and intense, and I ached to return home for the two-week Christmas holiday. Suresh was also a bit strung out over the pressures of final exams. One night, as we settled down to sleep in our separate corners of the room, we talked about our post-quarter anxieties. I don’t recall exactly what we said, but the next morning, he thanked me for keeping his head on straight during the stress.

Finals eventually passed, and, with the obligatory, “Have a good Christmas,” we parted ways for the holidays.

I thought Suresh Ojha would pass from my mind again, as he had during the hectic summer. When I was unpacking my boxes of clothes and other essentials at home during vacation, though, I found a small green envelope nestled between two shirts. It was a Christmas card from Suresh. “Thanks for the help during finals,” it said, and I set it upright on my nightstand next to my bed.

During the vacation, I went out with all my old high school friends and did the usual goofing off, played some basketball, called some old girlfriends. Each night when I came home, though, the card was there on the nightstand before I went to sleep, and I would lie in

the darkness of my own room and think about the arguments I had had with Suresh. Never before had anyone challenged me to think so much, to evaluate and defend my own values and perceptions, to stand up for my own beliefs. I realized that Suresh was doing exactly what I was during our arguments—defending the ideas and values that he had been raised with, that he had faith in. As I mulled over our specific disagreements in my mind, I came to a better understanding of his point of view, and, grudgingly, I began to admit to myself that maybe Suresh's perception was just as valid as my own. Was education the answer to the drug problem? Does a person have the right to burn an American flag? The answers to such questions were clear-cut before I went away to college, but only because I lacked the perspective to formulate different solutions to these problems. He was still a 'Niners fan, but I couldn't overlook the fact that maybe, just maybe, his ideas on the nation's drug problem deserved listening to.

By January, I was ready to go back to school.

During Winter Quarter, I began taking my room key on trips down the hall to the shower, and every once in a while, Suresh would admit that a particular song I was listening to wasn't all that bad. His poster of Martin Luther King and mine of the Terminator stopped looking like a study in contrasts, and became an integral part of our room. Once, I even helped Suresh cheer the 'Niners on to victory in the downstairs TV lounge.

Our philosophical arguments began sounding more like debates, and then like gentle discussions. To our mutual amazement, we even reached agreements on a couple of things: one night under the two a.m. moonlight flooding into our room, we came to the conclusion that religion, advanced calculus, and R.E.M.'s song "Stand" all had absolutely no redeeming social value whatsoever. (I guess this is one of those times when you had to be there.)

The Davis winter gradually thawed into spring, and during our last quarter as roommates, Suresh and I solidified our newfound friendship. We both enrolled in a class about the Vietnam War, and in our late night debates, we haggled over the controversies of that era: the draft, "hearts and minds," Kennedy, Nixon, Westmoreland, My Lai, Tet—the moral issues surrounding war itself. The ideas that emerged from our discussions were pretty deep (and eccentric, depending on how late we stayed up), and once, we even considered buying a tape machine to permanently record our brilliant discourses for posterity.

We never did get a tape player, though, and the only record of our conversations lies in the walls of 414 Bixby Hall and in our memories. When the last day of Spring Quarter came and we pulled our posters of Martin Luther King and The Terminator down from those walls, it seemed like the end of an era. For me, it was; that quaint notion from my high school years had become reality, and I was crushed to see it end. We said farewell with the haste of leaving the dorms, but as my car pulled out of Davis and into summer vacation, there were tears in my eyes.

Sometimes it is funny how life imitates art. I called Suresh that summer from Fresno, and when I heard his voice crackling over those long-distance lines, I couldn't help but recall that final phone conversation I had heard ages ago in "The Roommates." As we talked over old times, a mixed feeling of déjà vu and a sense of accomplishment came over me; it was hard to believe that I was actually living what I had seen in the film, but now it seemed so natural to me that it was almost as if I had done it a thousand times before.

The partnership that began in 414 Bixby Hall is now sealed. I visited Suresh at his home in Sacramento later that same summer and met his family (no turbans and no sacred cows, I might add), and now that school has started again, we see each other frequently. And every time we do, we never fail to disagree about something; life may at times imitate art, but some things never change.