

A Global Conspiracy Of Scientists

Matthew Baker

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Many years ago now, in a quaint happy town on the shore of a great lake, there once lived an anti-vaxxer. On a rainy spring evening when all the cherry trees were in blossom, a foreign doctor came to town to give a lecture at the community center, arriving in a flashy sports car with pop music playing over the radio. Lacey was only there at the community center that night because she'd gotten the dates confused—she'd thought that that night there was supposed to be a talk about meditation. She almost slipped back out of the community center when she realized the mistake, but she hesitated when she saw the foreign doctor step onto the stage, and on an impulse she decided to stay. The doctor—or former doctor, technically—had somewhat juvenile taste in clothing, but nevertheless was charming, speaking passionately, with a captivating accent. He had come, he said, to spread word of a grave threat: that vaccines were dangerous, and caused autism in children who'd been vaccinated. Lacey was stunned by the figures he cited, and was especially alarmed when she learned that the scientific community had suppressed the results of the study he'd conducted. Earnestly, with a terrible sense of urgency, standing there on the stage with both hands raised to the heavens, he pleaded with those in the audience to resist vaccinating the children in town. For an instant he looked directly at her, as if making a personal appeal. Lacey returned home from the lecture with a tote bag full of pamphlets and her heart pounding and promptly sat down at her laptop, still wearing her raincoat,

and began to scour the internet. What she discovered terrified her. Thousands of parents who were already aware of a link between vaccines and autism, exchanging information on blogs and forums. Parents concerned about a link between vaccines and epilepsy. Parents concerned about a link between vaccines and diabetes. Parents warning about the danger of vaccines that contained mercury, formaldehyde, aluminum. Lacey was nine months pregnant, expecting to give birth any day. Earlier that year her husband had been killed on a foot patrol in a war overseas. She was going to be a single parent, solely responsible for the life of her child. She wanted so much for her son, but what she wanted most of all was for her son to be healthy. Sitting there at her laptop with her palms resting on her belly, she felt her son moving in the womb. Already so playful. Energetic. That was the night she decided that she would never vaccinate her child.

Her son was born a week later, a healthy rosy-cheeked baby with shiny golden hair and bright blue eyes. He was a happy newborn, hardly ever cried.

Later that month her friends from college drove over to the house to meet her son, bringing homemade casseroles, bouquets of flowers, tramping into the kitchen in sorority sweatshirts and vintage sweaters. Lacey felt her cheeks glowing from the attention. Her friends all wanted to have kids someday too, and she was anxious to warn her friends about what she'd discovered. But when she told her friends about how dangerous that vaccines were, her friends laughed nervously, glancing at each other.

"That's, like, definitely a conspiracy theory."

"Like, seriously, it's a certified hoax."

"You should for sure have him vaccinated."

"You don't understand," Lacey said, trying to remain calm.

Her friends smiled awkwardly, as if embarrassed for her.

"Honey, when you honestly think about it, what seems more likely to you? That millions

of medical experts, belonging to hundreds of nations and possessing a tremendous diversity of political views and religious beliefs and personal ambitions, could all be coerced into participating in a massive cover-up? Or that the one doctor who supports the claim is a fraud, and is motivated by self-interest?”

“He has proof,” Lacey exclaimed, on the verge of tears.

She desperately tried to explain, but her friends refused to accept the evidence.

“Lacey, he’s a quack.”

Her sister drove over to the house to meet her son a day later. Lacey had never been particularly close with her sister, but she’d imagined that her sister would be supportive. Her sister was enthusiastic about healthy living, a vegan yogi who only ate food that was local and natural and organic and who brewed homemade kombucha in gigantic jars. Her sister had an easygoing personality, was broad-minded, and typically responded to any difference of opinion with an expression of amusement. But when she told her sister about the decision not to vaccinate her son, her sister suddenly became grim.

“I honestly can’t tell if you’re joking,” her sister said, sitting across from her in the kitchen with a mug of herbal tea cupped in her hands.

“Vaccines are dangerous,” Lacey said.

Her sister gazed at her intently for a moment, then set the mug down on the table.

“I’m sorry. I sometimes forget that you were a biology major in college,” her sister said.

Lacey hesitated, confused.

“I sometimes forget that at graduation, as you were crossing the stage to be handed your diploma, the dean of sciences grabbed the microphone and, totally overcome with emotion, announced to the crowd that you weren’t just the most brilliant scientist of your class, you were the most brilliant scientist of your generation.”

Lacey said, “I—”

“Wait, that never happened, did it?” her sister said.

Lacey felt her cheeks burning.

“Because you didn’t study biology in college. You studied business,” her sister said.

“I’ve been doing a lot of research,” Lacey said, flustered.

“You’re not an expert. You’re an amateur with internet access,” her sister said.

“There are legitimate reasons to be concerned,” Lacey protested.

Lacey tried to describe the data she’d discovered, but her sister stood to leave, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

“No offense, but you’re fucking wack,” her sister said.

Her sister refused to be his godparent unless she vaccinated him. Her gynecologist scolded her. Her dentist rebuked her. The babysitter she’d found to watch her son while she was at work clearly disapproved, judging her in silence whenever the topic of vaccination was referenced. At the library, when she happened to mention that she wasn’t vaccinating her son while chatting with a librarian, the librarian begged her to reconsider, becoming visibly emotional, offering to pay for the shots personally if necessary. When she announced that she wasn’t vaccinating her son to the bespectacled teller at the bank who’d always been so friendly, the teller reached across the counter, grabbed her by the shoulders, frowned, and ordered her to vaccinate her son, sternly, and then seemed to become self-conscious, releasing her and apologizing for perhaps overstepping. When the lip-ringed cashier at the pharmacy discovered that she wasn’t vaccinating her son, the cashier sneered at her over the register with an expression of utter contempt. Her friends from college, who’d initially been so polite about the decision, now had become angry at her, simmering at her with bitter resentment, as if disappointed in her, and began to occasionally exclude her from get-togethers. Lacey felt lonely and persecuted. Her only support was blogs and forums on the internet, where ostracized parents in distant villages and

faraway cities encouraged her not to succumb to peer pressure, urging her to prioritize the health of her son.

On his first birthday, she took her son on a stroll through the neighborhood, carrying him in a sling as he babbled and pointed and sucked on his fingers. In the lungs of a teenager with neon elbow pads and neon knee pads rollerblading down the street, varicella viruses were rapidly replicating.

On a warm clear morning that pollen was floating down from the hickory trees, she and her son sat on the stoop together with a pair of binoculars, watching the birds. A block away, in the throat of an elderly neighbor shuffling out to a mailbox with a stamped envelope, pertussis bacteria were replicating.

On a humid windy afternoon that fluffs were blowing down from the cottonwood trees, she and her son squatted over the driveway together with sticks of chalk, drawing a hopscotch course. Up the road, in the throat of a grizzled neighbor sweeping dust from a porch with a straw broom, diphtheria bacteria were replicating.

On a holiday weekend, as the smoky scent of barbecue cookouts drifted about on the breeze, she brought her son to a park to teach him how to ride a bicycle, cheering and clapping when he finally managed to balance on the bicycle for a couple of seconds before tumbling off the bicycle into the grass. Hepatitis viruses were replicating in the liver of a toddler with sticky hands licking an ice cream cone in the grass nearby.

On a hot summer day, she and her son went to the beach in bright swimsuits, sunbathing on colorful towels in the sand, drinking cans of cola still frigid from the crushed ice in the cooler, eating chilled grapes, munching chocolate candies, occasionally running into the lake to play together in the waves. In the gut of a child in a fluorescent one-piece splashing around in the water nearby, rotaviruses were replicating.

On his first day of kindergarten, she had him pose for a photo at the door to the house.

Her son grinned proudly, wearing a brand-new backpack that he'd carefully packed with pencils and toy cars. In an apartment complex down by the train station, measles viruses were replicating in the lymph nodes of a foreigner in town visiting family, who'd just set down a pair of suitcases still tagged with stickers from the baggage check at the airport.

A day later, after breathing in the face of a newborn baby, sneezing over a drawer of silverware, using a shirtsleeve as a handkerchief, licking a fingertip to flip through a wad of dollars, spitting phlegm into the sink in the restroom at a gas station, and coughing onto a laminated menu at the local diner, the foreigner was hospitalized with life-threatening symptoms.

Lacey magneted the photo of her son to the fridge, then followed the sound of giggling to his bedroom, where he was talking into the oscillating fan on his nightstand, cracking up laughing at how the spinning vanes changed the pitch of his voice.

"Mom, you have to try this," he said, running over to take her by the hand and lead her over to the fan.

Her son had been so excited for kindergarten, and kindergarten was truly a beautiful time for him. His teacher adored him, taking her aside one day to tell her how intelligent he was, how helpful, how kind. Lacey was so happy to find another person who appreciated just how special her son was. At five years old, he was already her favorite person she'd ever met. Her best friend. He jumped into piles of raked leaves with her, and cracked jokes in the car, and pranked her with rubber snakes, and presented her with finger paintings, and invented constellations with her at night on a blanket in the grass under the stars in the backyard. He shouted advice at characters in movies, covering his eyes during the scary scenes, sitting next to her on the sofa with a bowl of popcorn in his lap. He knew when she needed the ketchup, passing the bottle to her before she'd even asked.

"Is it hard to be an astronaut?" he asked her one night as she was tucking him into bed.

“I believe that you could do it,” Lacey said, sitting on the edge of the mattress, stroking his forehead.

He gazed at the moon out the window, thinking for a moment.

“I’d probably rather be a janitor,” he said.

“You wouldn’t get paid very much,” Lacey said.

“I think cleaning is really satisfying,” he said.

Feeling a duty to protect the other children in town, that autumn she printed out flyers about the dangers of vaccines, stapling the flyers to the community bulletin board in the entryway of the library, but when she walked back through the entryway minutes later with a tote bag full of books she discovered that the flyers had already been torn down. Waiting to pick her son up from school, she tried to talk to other parents, attempting to explain why she hadn’t vaccinated her son, but the other parents dismissed her outright, ignoring her. When she broached the subject of vaccination at a rare get-together with her friends from college, who’d all gotten pregnant in the span of a year, her friends exploded with anger, insulting her, and afterward refused to speak to her whatsoever. In an argument with her sister, her sister accused her of neglect, suggesting that if she wouldn’t vaccinate her son then she simply wasn’t fit to be a parent. When his teacher discovered that he hadn’t been vaccinated, his teacher took her aside again, this time speaking in hushed tones, trying to pressure her into vaccinating her son, warning her that her son was in danger, even as she explained that she was protecting him, that vaccines were the true threat.

An older neighbor attempted to hand her a stack of articles printed out from the internet, individually paper-clipped and labeled with fluorescent sticky notes.

Lacey stared at the articles with a sense of alarm.

“That’s bad science,” Lacey said.

“Um, these are peer-reviewed papers that were published in some of the most prestigious journals on the planet.”

“Those studies are all paid for by the companies that make the vaccines,” Lacey said.

She sat on a bench at a playground, watching her son climb on the monkey bars in a windbreaker and a wool hat.

Dropping to the woodchips, he ran back across the playground to her, grinning with flushed cheeks.

“I’m going to keep you safe,” she whispered, hugging him.

A week later her son was exploring the heap of scrap lumber rotting in the weeds behind the garage when he stepped on a rusty nail that pierced the flesh of his foot through the sole of his shoe. Afterward a neighbor suggested that he might have been exposed to tetanus, cautioning her to keep a lookout for symptoms. But he was fine. The wound in his foot gradually healed. He recovered. He climbed trees in the backyard, and sang opera in the bathtub, and danced goofily around the kitchen, healthy as ever. In the end, her son was never infected by tetanus, or polio, or rotavirus, or varicella, or hepatitis, or diphtheria, or pertussis, or rubella, or mumps, or measles. A stranger at the supermarket sneezed in line at the checkout, spraying thousands of microscopic droplets into the air through the gaps between the fingers of a hand raised in an attempt to cover the sneeze, and her son, standing nearby, chattering about dinosaurs while gazing at a display of candy, breathed in a great swirl of the droplets, and then breathed in another, and breathed in yet another, oblivious, until his tongue and his throat and his lungs were shimmering with droplets, and her son was infected with the flu. The following evening her son began to complain of a pounding headache, shivering at a chill despite that when she slipped a thermometer under his tongue he registered a burning fever. He was pale and sweaty when she tucked him into bed, and he vomited so many times during the night that by

dawn he was dry-heaving over the toilet bowl, looking miserable and exhausted. Lacey called into work to stay home with him, nursing him with a nourishing array of comfort foods and natural remedies. She cooked him a pot of homemade chicken soup hearty with heirloom carrots and organic celery, and gave him zinc lozenges to suck, and brought him coneflower capsules to swallow, and spooned glimmers of elderberry syrup between his lips, and served him steaming mugs of honey and ginger stirred into hot lemon juice, and made him peanut butter toast with the crust carefully trimmed off just how he liked, and buttered salted crackers for him, and ensured that the jar of water on his nightstand was always full to the brim. But whatever he ate and whatever he drank was soon ejected from his body in the form of vomit or watery explosions of diarrhea so violent that afterward, back in bed, he would stare at the ceiling with a wide-eyed look of trauma, still trembling from the shock. He began to visibly fear having to eat or drink, even as she stroked his forehead to try to comfort him. His breath reeked of sickness even after she'd helped him brush his teeth. He rubbed the skin under his nose raw wiping at the snot constantly dripping from his nostrils, and his fingers were constantly sticky with wet globs of mucus that he'd sneezed into his hands, blinking at the furniture in his bedroom with a look of delirium, through bloodshot eyes. She'd expected him to recover quickly, but instead within days he became gaunt and sallow, grimacing at sudden throbs of his headache, flinching at jolts of pain in the muscles of his arms, whimpering at bursts of pain in the muscles of his legs, and suffering from brutal fits of coughing that shook his whole body, leaving him splayed out on his bed afterward, panting for air. Dizzy, frail, he needed her help just to shuffle back and forth from the bathroom without falling. The scent of any food made him queasy, but he was constantly thirsty, and by that weekend he was so desperately thirsty that he began to cry, weeping there in his bed with wild sobs of utter desolation. Lacey had never heard him cry like that before. The sound terrified her, making her skin crawl with

goosebumps over where she stood in the doorway, frozen in fear. But what frightened her more than anything was the sight of his face. No tears were falling from his eyes. His eyes didn't even appear to water. Her son sobbed for whole minutes, and afterward his face was perfectly dry, as if he was too dehydrated for his body even to produce tears. Lacey was so worried that she finally called a pediatrician, who prescribed a medication for him, but by then all the local pharmacies were closed for the night, and when she went back into his bedroom to check on him she saw that he was struggling to breathe, wheezing at the air with feeble gasps, gripping fistfuls of his sheet in a panic, and his lips had an eerie bluish tint.

She carried him out to the car in his pajamas and drove him to the hospital under a starless sky.

Streetlights illuminated the interior of the car in quick flashes between stretches of darkness.

"I don't want to be sick anymore," he said with a tone of pleading, slumped in the passenger seat, as if all he needed was her permission.

"You're going to be okay, baby. You're going to be better so soon," she said, trying to contain the fear in her voice.

Those were the only words he managed to speak during the drive.

Although initially the staff at the hospital seemed hopeful, within hours her son was in a coma, and a week later her son was dead.

She stood in a daze in a hallway of the hospital until she realized that the doctor who'd delivered the news was already gone.

She suddenly remembered the morning he'd been born, when she'd cradled him to her chest in a bright sunny room in that same hospital.

"Excuse me," said an aide pushing a patient in a wheelchair, trying to navigate past her

in the hallway.

Afterward, for days, she wandered alone through the streets of the town, wearing no coat, just sweatpants and sneakers and a stained t-shirt, mascara smeared under her eyes, her shoulders hunched with hunger, shivering at the bitter chill of the wind, clutching a pair of his pajamas in her bare hands as she hobbled down the sidewalk. A dusting of snow fell. Snow fell in a flurry. Cheerful holiday decorations twinkled in the windows of shops. People stared at her from the windows of shops. In the steamy windows of cafes, people sipped coffee, and nibbled at pastries, and stared at her passing. In the candlelit windows of restaurants, people slurped up noodles, and savored wine, and stared at her passing. People stared at her from the windows of passing cars. People stared at her while passing her on the sidewalk, carrying colorful shopping bags brimming with presents. She recognized all of the faces, and through the blur of tears in her eyes every face seemed to be contorted into a grotesque expression, laughing and shrieking at her, “You fool, you fool, you fool, you fool, you fool.”

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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