

The President's Doubles

Matthew Baker

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The president of the island had been president for nearly nineteen years, and, as was often the case with presidents, many people wanted to kill the president, and some people even had threatened to, and some people even had attempted to, which was why, nineteen years ago, before the president had even been sworn into office, the president's advisers had begun searching the island for lookalikes. The president's advisers insisted that the president have doubles. The president was against having doubles. The president's appearance wasn't exactly common or uncommon—beady eyes, a broad nose, full lips, a constellation of moles across the neck. Lookalikes were found. A bank clerk. A mail carrier. A rice farmer. Others. The president's surgeons reshaped their faces, altered their bodies, tweaked their hairlines, however necessary, and after that the bank clerk and the mail carrier and the rice farmer and the others lived at the president's mansion, and wore the president's suits, and dined at the president's table, with the president. Every day, the president and the doubles would leave the mansion together, lower themselves into separate sedans with separate drivers, and get driven to separate meetings. The president wasn't convinced that the doubles were necessary. That first year of the presidency, a double was being driven through the city when an anarchist fired a missile at the sedan, totaling the sedan and killing the double. The president didn't know whether the double killed had been the former bank clerk, the former mail carrier, the former rice farmer, or whoever, but regard-

less, after that the president was convinced that the doubles were necessary. As was often the case with presidents, the president wanted to avoid assassination. The president had vowed to reform the island, which the president loved. The president often paced the president's office, brooding about the island's past, worrying about the island's future. The president had been born in a hut in the island's capital, had been scarred across the shins by the island's reefs as a child, had been educated as an adult by the island's universities. The doubles, now, had scars across their shins. Sometimes the doubles would appear at official functions, as the president, and would have to give speeches, and make promises, and cast votes on certain issues. That wasn't a problem. The president wrote the speeches the doubles gave, and chose the promises the doubles made, and instructed the doubles how to vote. Whatever the president said, the doubles did. The fifth year of the presidency, a double was poisoned with a lemon tart. Also the fifth year of the presidency, a double was poisoned with a milk tea. Also the fifth year of the presidency, a double was poisoned with a tube of toothpaste. The doubles always spoke with the president's voice, as the doubles had been trained to speak—pronouncing how the president pronounced, enunciating how the president enunciated, speaking at the president's pitch. The seventh year of the presidency, a double was watching a ballet from a private box at the national theater when an anarchist disguised as an attendant stabbed the double thirteen times with a switchblade stiletto. As the double coughed blood onto the rich carpeting of the private box, the double, in the president's voice, spoke the double's dying words. Only the anarchist overheard the double's dying words. Moments later that anarchist was killed. The island's healthcare system was improving, the island's crime rate was decreasing, the island's economy had recovered from a recession, but nevertheless that ninth year of the presidency the president was shot in the neck while giving a speech at a rally. The president survived, but just barely. After that the president and the doubles were moved from the mansion to a

building like a fortress—concrete walls, barred windows—and the doubles themselves were given doubles. Every day, a double and that double's doubles would leave the fortress together, lower themselves into separate sedans with separate drivers, and get driven to separate meetings. Then another double and that double's doubles would leave the fortress together, and then another double and that double's doubles would leave the fortress together, and then another double and that double's doubles would leave the fortress together. Every few months the anarchists would manage to kill a double, or a double's double, trying to kill the president, but what the anarchists didn't know is that the president never left the fortress. The president's advisers insisted that the president never leave the fortress. The doubles and the doubles' doubles appeared as the president, wherever the president needed to appear, whenever the president needed to appear. The president had the mind the island needed; the doubles and the doubles' doubles had the bodies. Sometime in the fifteenth year of the presidency, the president's advisers thought of a troubling possibility: what if the anarchists themselves made a double, sent the fake double to the fortress, and had the fake double kill the president? After that the doubles and the doubles' doubles were given separate houses on the island, and nobody was allowed into the fortress, except for the president, who lived there, and a blind servant, who cooked the president's meals and washed the president's clothes and cleaned the president's rooms, who lived there. Deliveries were left at the door. All communication was done over computer. Years passed, and as various doubles were shot, and bombed, and stabbed, and strangled, and poisoned, and bludgeoned, security at the fortress became increasingly heightened—fences were built around the fortress, and guards patrolled the fortress, and rumors were spread that the fortress was now a prison, to mislead the anarchists, but the truth is that it was a prison, that the president lived like a prisoner, that the president ate meals from a tray, and wore the same clothes day after day, and at night often stared out the window of the office,

watching the guards on the watchtowers, dreaming of escaping.

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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