

# Survived By

Matthew Baker

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I'm down at the wharf, scrubbing guano and black algae and dried wrack with a shit-stained mop, when Trino comes rattling down the docks on his bicycle, shouting something about how they've found a body. His back tire is bent, he's wobbling through the dockhands like it's his first time on a bike, he looks like a maniac. And so he trips off his bike and I drag him behind a stack of crates, which clatter a little as the butterfly fish flop around inside, making a big show of the fact that they're drowning. And I say, what's this about a body, you said they found a body? And Trino says, not *a* body. *Somebody*. I sit down on an overturned barrel. Shit, I say. *Somebody*? When. Just now, Trino says, they're already on the way, should be back anytime. Who, I say. Did they say who it was. No, Trino says. They weren't saying. All I know is the somebody was alone.

I need you to cover for me, I say. No, no way, Trino says, not a chance, I've got my own job to do, a box of squid waiting for me at the end of the wharf, and if I don't deliver the squid, I don't get paid. Come on, I say, I've got to tell old Touya, before someone else does. Which is what I call my mother, old Touya, except to her face. No, Trino says, no no no no no, and I say, just like an hour, it'll be nothing, I'll even deliver your squid on the way. And Trino's still saying no, but he's already smiling, he thinks it's funny, us swapping lives for the afternoon. He loves that sort of shit—we both knew he'd do it as soon as I started asking. And so he strips off his tattered shorts, and I wiggle out of my coveralls and give him

my shoes and my mop, and I jam the brim of my hat low over his face and send him marching out after the guano. I shimmy into his shorts, which are a size too small, and hop onto his bike, and this time it's me wobbling down the docks, cranking along in my bare feet, and all of the dockhands looking at me like, where the fuck do you think *you're* going?

Which where I'm going is to the carton factory, you fucking ragpickers, so go fuck a fucking corpse, although I don't actually say any of that. The dockhands all think I'm lazy just because I'm skinny and can't grow more than six or seven whiskers and come from the slums, but, fuck them, they don't do shit down at the docks other than sneak sips of whiskey and slip off to the warehouse to play dice whenever they can, and maybe I come from the slums, but I'm working my way out.

Anyway—I strap the crate of squid to the back of Trino's bike and then pump off into town, pretending I'm on my way to the market to deliver the squid like I'm supposed to, but as soon as I cross the footbridge I swing up toward the slums, which are slumped across the side of Mollendo's mountains like the body of something beautiful that got tired and then laid down and died, and now is just rotting, its bones poking out in places, smelling like death some days, other days, worse. I pass Cameroon and her sister splitting a mango on their stoop, and I shout, did you hear about the boat? Cameroon shouts, what about it? My father? But I'm already out of sight, kicking my way up the hill, weaving through taxis and stray dogs.

And then of course Trino's piece-of-shit bike falls apart, the chain drops off and I skid into a dumpling stall and knock over a pot of bubbling oil and the crate tips off the bike and spills Trino's squid all out into the gutter. And the man behind the dumpling stall is yelling at me and coming at me with a broom, and I scoop up what I can of the squid and run the bike off down an alley, stopping to catch my breath behind a tea shop, poking at

the pink lumps on my stomach and shoulders where I got splashed by the oil. Then I hit each of the squid against the wall, trying to knock off as much of the pebbles and dirt and street grime as I can, but then I think: okay, fuck the squid. So I hide Trino's bike at the end of the alley behind a statue of somebody's god, where I'm pretty sure nobody's going to see it, and then I hike the rest of the way to the factory on foot.

I hop the fence behind the factory, since I already know they're not about to let me go marching through the front gate, me barefoot and wearing Trino's threadbare cutoffs and covered in scrapes from my dumpling-stall accident. And so I shimmy up through an open window on the ground floor, which is about the point at which old Touya's supervisor catches me, as I drop straight into his office, right across from his desk, as if I had an appointment. At which point I try to explain that I need to talk to my mother and that it's extremely important, at which point he tells me to get the fuck out of his office and his factory before he tosses me *and* old Touya out onto our asses. At which point I try to explain that it's about the tanker, that they found somebody, that they found somebody and they're alive. At which point again he tells me to get the fuck out of his office and his factory, but then he sits back down behind his desk and puts out his cigarette and gets on the phone and calls someone who is apparently his sister who apparently also had a son aboard the tanker. And he gets very excited and talks to her for a while and then interrupts his sister to ask me, what had I heard, had I heard the name of the somebody, or anything at all, were they tall, fat, old, what, at which point I explain that nobody knows anything other than that they're bringing the somebody back to the wharf, soon, very soon. At which point he tells me I can talk to old Touya during her lunch break, and until then to get the fuck out of his office. Then he goes back to talking to his sister.

So I wait outside at the metal tables where the factory workers eat their lunch if they've got enough food to bring one, and about twenty minutes later it's lunch break and old

Touya comes hobbling out, squinting like she's half blind from the sun, taking steps the size of an infant's, just really playing it up. She's actually got it pretty good, I mean as far as carton factories go, especially considering that I'm paying about half the rent these days, and she only has to work two or three days a week. She hobbles right past me and sits at an empty table and unwraps some pork sausages in banana leaves, which I don't know where she found the money for those, when we've been eating nothing but gruel and fried bananas for months. At which point I say, hey, mamá, it's me, and she almost drops her sausages. What are you doing here, good-for-nothing, she says. You lose another job? No, no, it's nothing like that, I say. What happened is this: they found somebody. Somebody from Paolo's boat.

At which point old Touya shouts and really does drop her sausages, and hugs me and does a little dance, and says, you see, boy, you see! I told you, Paolo is a boy of miracles. Ever since he was small, surviving the bite of the banana spider, the illness of the purple boils, the knife shoved into his stomach by one of the older boys. I told you, old Touya says, all that was necessary was for you to have a little faith, that they would find him.

Mamá, I say, this is exactly why I came, I didn't want you getting all excited, getting all your hopes up for nothing. Almost a hundred men on that tanker, could be any of them they pulled out of the water. We don't know that it's Paolo.

But old Touya knows it's Paolo, she's sure, she's dancing again. We have to go down to the wharf, she says. No, mamá, I say, you've got to stay here, you've got to keep working. It's lunch break, she says. What's that, like fifteen minutes, I say. We can't make it to the wharf and back in fifteen minutes. But we need to be there, she says, and she's already wrapping back up her sausages, and then she hands them to me and hobbles off toward the front gate of the factory, and I say, shit, and follow her.

We hike it back through the slums toward the wharf, and old Touya is humming and

singing and waving at everyone, even strangers, as if she's off to move into a condo along the ocean, with a refrigerator and microwave and everything, done with the slums for good. We pass the fortuneteller's shop, and old Touya hobbles off inside, shouting, they've found somebody, Chani, they've found my boy. The fortuneteller, as always, has no customers, as everyone in this part of town already knows their fortune isn't worth shit—she's fanning herself with a scrap of paper, half asleep. But when old Touya mentions the boat, that wakes her up. The boat! the fortuneteller says. Did they say who? No, old Touya says, but it's got to be my Paolo, Chani, I just know that it's him. I guess you're probably right, the fortuneteller says. As soon as I saw that boy's birthmark, I knew he had an extra something.

Which birthmark is the one on Paolo's face, a purplish smear along his cheek and his jaw, which old Touya always said looked like he'd been stroked by a god, just once, in a tender sort of way, and which the older boys had always told him looked like the mark of a dog, which is when they had started calling him Mutt.

My nephew was on the tanker, the fortuneteller says, but he doesn't have a mouthful of luck in his whole body. Should have died years ago. He was lucky to have even made it that long without a cart running him down, a roof dropping in on his head. Not a chance he's the one they pulled out of the water. I unwrap the sausages and wolf one of them down, barely even chewing, then wrap the other one up again. But your boy, the fortuneteller says. He's got enough luck for all of us.

But the fortuneteller is on her feet now, gathering her sandals, her keys, her pouch full of coins, off to the wharf to see for herself whether maybe, somehow, it might be her nephew. And old Touya's already hobbling out of the shop, humming her goodbyes. I make her stop outside the alley by the dumpling shop, and I run down to pick up Trino's bike. Which is still there, except someone's made off with the squid, and also with one of

the tires, the bent one, which means it must have been just about the stupidest fucking thief in town, running off with some dirty squid and a bent tire and leaving the bike behind. But so I hike the bike onto my shoulders and march back off into the street, and now both of us are hobbling, me and old Touya. A man with a mustache shouts at us from a window, Touya, Touya, did you hear about the boat? We're headed there now! old Touya shouts back, waving. Me too, the man with the mustache shouts. If it's not my lover, I hope it's your boy! A couple minutes later he goes tearing past us on a bicycle, swerving off toward the footbridge. We've got to hurry, old Touya says, not because she's worried about getting back to the factory, but because she wants to be down at the wharf in time to see them pull the boy off the boat. Just you wait, you'll see, she keeps saying. As soon as you see that birthmark, you'll know. Mamá, come on, I say, try not to get too excited. We don't know anything yet.

And fuck if he didn't have it coming, anyway, although I don't say that much, just think it. You take a job that can kill you, it'll kill you. No question about it. That's why I work at the wharf, next to the sea instead of on top of it. You fuck around with hundred-foot waves, with flammable cargo on a flammable boat, it doesn't matter how much they're paying you, sooner or later you'll end up paying it back in years you're not going to live. Paolo thought old Haku was pretty stupid for getting caught up in the shit that he did, for getting his body dumped off a cliff while old Touya was still so young and the two of us barely even up to her knees, but, for me, there's no difference. Sure, at least Paolo got an honest job, like Trino's brother, but when it comes down to it, honest doesn't matter. It's just whether or not it's going to kill you more than it pays you.

And shit if there isn't the biggest crowd at the wharf I've ever seen—the footbridge about ready to collapse, us barely even making it across without getting knocked off by somebody's elbows. And not a second too soon, either, as the lifeboat is motoring into the

harbor, swinging toward a pier at the end of the wharf. We're not going to make it! old Touya shouts, smacking my arm. No, no, we'll make it, I say, and I toss her onto the bike and grab the back of the frame and wheel her off toward the boat, jogging now.

And we dump the bike next to a dock tie and shove our way through the crowd, me squirming through cracks, making an alley through the suit coats, the butcher's aprons, the railway uniforms, old Touya tapping shoulders, tapping backs, excusing her way to the front. And the coast guard sailors swarm around on the deck of the lifeboat, dropping a metal plank from the boat to the dock, pitching the anchor over the side, securing the boat cleats. Old Touya's supervisor is on the other side of the crowd with a woman in a black shawl, and the fortuneteller's not far from them, up on her tiptoes, scanning the boat for any sign of the survivor. And the man with the mustache, perched on a stack of empty crates, blocking the sun from his eyes with his hands for a visor, and Cameroon and her sister, each of them on someone's shoulders, looking for their father. And Trino, too, still wearing my coveralls and my shoes, squeezing my hat in his hands like a bundle of prayer beads, and who knows how long he's been standing here instead of doing my job. And everyone just standing there ogling the boat, each of them thinking it's about to spit out their own personal miracle. And old Touya smacking my leg with the back of her hand as the sailors usher someone wrapped in a towel out of the cabin and down the gangplank and onto the docks, someone with dark hair, still sopping from a night spent in the sea, and huge feet, and a dark, blotchy birthmark—a birthmark on his neck instead of his face. But still old Touya hobbles forward, shouting and clapping, hugging the boy and singing, kissing his chest through the towel. Until the boy tries pushing her away, and it's then, when the boy shoves her, that old Touya notices him, really notices him, for the first time.

And then she calls him a good-for-nothing, and starts punching his shoulder, and kicking his shins, shouting at him, until the sailors pull her off and drag her toward the edge of



the crowd, shoving her back in with the rest of us. And she hobbles over to me, still shouting and glaring at the boy. And I try to tell her something, but I don't know what. For a second she looks at me like it's my fault, like my not believing in Paolo is what left him out on the waves. But then she plants a paw on my shoulder, hanging from me like a child, staring at the boy in the towel. You have to be strong, she says. They'll keep looking. Sooner or later they'll find Paolo. If they found one, old Touya says, surely there will be others.

And the sailors guide the boy through the crowd, and no one comes forward to meet him, not the supervisor or the fortuneteller or the man with the mustache, not Cameroon, not her sister, not Trino, not me, not anybody. There's nobody here to meet him, he just walks straight through the crowd and then out of it, the fucking asshole, and what kept him swimming, I want to know, if it wasn't one of us.

## 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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