

An Outing After Supper

Matthew Baker

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Their grandfather made Edmund unlace his hobnailed boots where they stood near the lake and the yellow balloon with its wicker basket tethered to the dock.

With his boots off, mud came squishing up through the weave of the wool of his socks. Ugsome clouds hung above the leafless trees. Edmund got into the balloon's basket bootless.

Edmund's brother, a whilom friend and now enemy, was hunched over the maggoty rot of a whitefish in the sand, pinking it with a tool from their grandfather's toolbox. He was muttering to himself a curse on Edmund. He was not a boy for swimming.

Their grandfather handed Edmund the canteens of lemonade and the sack of square cookies they would take with them on their outing into the clouds. Edmund's brother was not coming. Edmund and his brother and their grandfather's stomach had each grown larger since their outing the summer before, and their grandfather had said that the balloon could not carry the weight of the three of them any longer. Their grandfather had chosen Edmund as his second. Edmund's brother would stay at the cottage with their aunts and their chores.

Their zaftig aunt stood scraping charred gristle from the grill on the porch, watching Edmund in the balloon tethered to the dock, her yellow dress ashy at her hips where she had wiped her hands. Their svelte aunt stood in the thicket behind the cottage in a dress

patterned with raspberries, picking blackberries and raspberries and gathering the com-minglings in a striped bowl under her arm, watching Edmund in the balloon.

Their grandfather took the tool from Edmund's brother and adjusted the burners spurt-ing fire into the balloon's skirt and gave the tool back to Edmund's brother, who was still ignoring Edmund in the balloon and instead considering the fish in the sand. *Goodbye, Pieter*, their grandfather said to Edmund's brother, rumpling his hair. *Tomorrow's outing will be yours*. Edmund wished his brother would become his whilom enemy and now friend, that he would cheer Edmund as Edmund floated away with their grandfather and would shout at Edmund the secret word that they used to tell the other that through-and-through they were each other's man. But Edmund's brother scowled in a fashion that said that if he could not have today's outing, he would have nothing to do with tomorrow's. The balloon's basket heaved as their grandfather came up into it in his muddy socks and took metal binoculars from a pocket of his jacket and handed them to Edmund, who be-gan using them to consider an enlarged version of his whilom friend.

Yet even as he did their grandfather untethered the balloon and flung shut the basket and hauled the burners' lines. Then the balloon went wobbling from the dock, up over the oarless rowboat scuttled at the lake's bottom, knocking through the branches of the leaf-less trees, along the lake's shore, whose twigs nicked at Edmund's arms where they hung over the basket with his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows. Then Edmund grew tired of waiting for his brother's moping to become cheering and instead chose to perform a cruel-ty upon his brother—Edmund hooted at him down below, where he was still squatting in the sand!

At this his brother leapt up and shouted and threw his tool at the balloon, which tool splashed into the lake, and his brother was running now, his pantlegs rolled to his knees and his bare arms pumping, running after the balloon along the lake's shore. Their grand-

father, who was winding knobs on the balloon's burners, was unaware that Edmund's brother, though grounded, was following them—was hurtling between the leafless trees, pattering across foam as a wave would slide onto shore and then pattering across mud as the wave slid away again, hurdling wooden docks and overturned beach chairs—unaware until Edmund said, *Look, Pieter*, and then as the wind came scooping spray from the caps of the waves and whisking the balloon away from the shore and across the lake, their grandfather looked over the basket's edge and saw as Edmund's brother tried to follow the balloon out across the water by running down a stranger's sunbleached dock, and then flinging himself from the dock's tip into the lake, splashing about and shouting at them, this swimless boy. Their grandfather shouted, *Pieter, you idiot*, and Edmund wrenched at their grandfather's jacket and said *Take us down, take us down*, but their grandfather grimaced at Edmund in a fashion that said that their balloon could not sink back to the lake soon enough for Edmund and their grandfather to help Edmund's drowning brother, and all they could do was watch or not watch. And so then it was Edmund the Watcher, and their grandfather the Shouter and the Coverer of Eyes.

Then, in her yellow dress, out from the leafless trees, their zaftig aunt came splashing into the water after Edmund's brother, their svelte aunt in her dress patterned with raspberries wringing her hands back on shore. Their zaftig aunt hauled Edmund's brother onto the dock, where a puddle spread with him at its center, and their svelte aunt knocked the water from his lungs, and still the balloon was floating on away. And Edmund shouted their secret word at his brother to tell him that Edmund was still his man, through and through, but from where Edmund was now, getting tugged into the ugsome clouds, Edmund knew that to his brother their secret word would sound just like any other.

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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