

After School

Matthew Baker

After School

On Tuesdays I always have to do my homework on the bus so that as soon as we get dropped off my mom can drive my sister and me to the Radiology Center downtown. But that Tuesday on the bus ride home everyone got in trouble: first the Jeluso twins tore apart leftover slices of salami and bologna and then smushed the chunks of lunchmeat onto the windows in the shapes of naked people, and then Alyssa Mata and Michael Whitman held down Unibrow Tommy and put a temporary tattoo of a fairy with orange wings on his forehead, and then a seventh-grade girl at the back of the bus, who always wears a black bra under a white t-shirt, which is a big deal because my sister doesn't wear a bra yet and neither do any of her friends and they're in seventh grade too, but the girl with the black bra ripped up a secret note that someone had given her and then tossed it out her window and the note scattered onto the windshield of a blue mini-van in the other lane and the mini-van sped up and then honked at the bus for a while before it turned down another road, and so then our bus driver Judy the Troll yelled at everyone and pulled over the bus next to a laundromat, and a man inside the laundromat with red pants and a newspaper stared at us while the Troll dragged all of our backpacks to the front of the bus so that we couldn't do anything anymore except count the freckles on our arms or see how far our spit could dangle without dripping out of our mouth, which meant that I couldn't finish my homework because I was only halfway done with geometry and hadn't even started my

worksheet about wolves. But when we finally got to our bus stop, which is the last stop on the whole route, our mom wasn't even there. Every Tuesday she parks our station wagon across the street from the bus stop where the sewage creek gurgles out of a concrete tube under the road and into the thornbush thicket. But the street was empty. So my sister and I and the Jeluso twins collected our backpacks from up front and then said goodbye to the Troll and got off the bus. The Jeluso twins yanked their bikes out of the thornbush thicket and pumped off up the hill, and my sister sat on her trumpet case, and I sat on the grass, and we waited. Which was good because now I could finish some more of my homework. But now we would be late for my sister's appointment at the Radiology Center, which was worse.

"Do you have a pencil with an eraser?" I asked my sister.

She was drawing a stick figure on the pavement with a white rock. A week ago huge black trucks with orange and yellow lights had repaved our street, and so there were lots of pebbles in the pavement that hadn't been worn down yet. My sister's rock bumped across the pebbles, making the stick figure's legs and arms and body look jagged and wobbly.

"No," she said.

"Okay," I said. "Are you sure it's not an f?"

"A thousand percent sure," she said. She swatted at a bug on her leg and then bent back over the pavement with her rock.

I scribbled out the word *carnifore* and wrote *carnivore*.

The Jeluso twins went flying by on their bikes shouting something about Frankenstein. Yellow birds on the telephone lines above the street squawked and then flapped off into the huge trees beyond the thornbush thicket. The twins careened around the dead end and

then pumped back to the bus stop. They skidded to a stop next to my sister, sliding off their seats and straddling the bikes, leaning over the handlebars.

“Do either of you have any matches?” the twin with crooked teeth said. One of the twins had crooked front teeth and the other twin had straight front teeth. I had told my sister that that meant they weren’t actually twins, but she had said that they still were. The other twin had a huge mole under one of his eyes, and my sister and I didn’t know either of their names, so we just called them Crooked Teeth and The Mole.

“No,” my sister said, not looking up. She hated them because one time she saw them in our backyard hitting our swingset with huge sticks. Now our swingset poles looked like they were made out of crumpled tinfoil.

“Or a lighter,” The Mole said. “How about a lighter?”

“What are you burning?” I said.

The twins hopped onto their bikes and started circling us.

“The matches aren’t for us,” Crooked Teeth said. “They’re for our brother Blake.”

“Why are you two just sitting here?” The Mole said. “Are you already in line for tomorrow’s bus?”

“We’re waiting for our mom,” I said.

“Why don’t you just walk home?” The Mole said.

“Because on Tuesdays she picks us up,” I said.

“That’s dumb,” The Mole said. “Hey Dandelion—if you see a frog with three legs, will you catch it for us? It escaped in the middle of an important experiment.”

The twins called me Dandelion because they said I had a huge dandelion head and a really long really skinny dandelion-stem neck. Which was true but my sister said it wasn’t. I didn’t really mind looking like a dandelion, but I hated having Dandelion as a nickname because it sounded like a girl name, not a boy one.

“Anyway, we’re going to go dig up some things we hid in the woods,” Crooked Teeth said.

“So long, Dandelion!” The Mole said.

Crooked Teeth and The Mole tossed their bikes into the thornbush thicket and then hopped into the sewage creek, splashing off into the trees.

“Where do you think Mom is?” I said.

“I don’t know,” my sister said. While I had been talking to the twins, she had drawn a stick figure on a pogo stick, a stick figure dancing on a chair, and a stick figure being eaten by a shark. “Maybe she had to stay at work late. Or maybe she got home early and fell asleep watching television.”

“Mom never watches television,” I said.

“I know,” she said. Her t-shirt had dark sweat shadows under her armpits.

“Does this mean you won’t have to get a brace?” I said.

“Come on,” my sister said, chucking her rock across the street like a skipping stone. It bounced off into the thornbush thicket. “Let’s just walk home.” She swung on her backpack and grabbed her trumpet case.

“Do you have your key?” I said, scrambling to my feet.

“No,” she said, shuffling across her stick figure village into the street.

My sister has scoliosis, which means that the bone in her back is shaped like a snake. Or like a lightning bolt. She isn’t a hunchback or a mutant or anything—everything wrong with her is on the inside. The only thing is that one of her shoulders is higher than the other because the head of the snake pushes it up. But other than that she looks normal.

When Doctor Mabel first sent my sister to the Radiology Center to get X-rays of her back, my sister’s backbone was curved 18 degrees. 18 degrees is bad but not that bad be-

cause you don't have to wear a back brace unless your backbone is 20 degrees or more. So my sister just had to go in every Tuesday to have checkups to make sure she wasn't 20 degrees yet.

My mom always made me go with my sister to the Radiology Center because my sister was never as scared if I came. I would make her laugh, which is easy to do if you know her but hard if you don't. And I didn't mind going anyway. I liked looking at the X-rays of her back—her backbone always looked like the ghost of a snake charmer's snake coming out of the basket in my sister's hips.

But last Tuesday the ghost did something bad: it wobbled a little farther out of the basket, and instead of being an 18 degree snake it was a 21 degree snake, which my sister said meant her life was over.

My mom said that my sister would only have to wear the back brace for a few years, maybe just until she graduated high school, and that she would still be able to play soccer and have sleepovers and go on dates. But my sister said that no one would ever date a cyborg.

The garage door was closed and our front door was locked. My sister shimmied along the house behind the bushes where the brown spiders with white spots live and peeked in the living room window. I couldn't see inside of it because I was too short but my sister said it was empty and the lights were off.

We ran around to the back of the house.

"Where's your key?" I said.

"Inside," my sister said, dragging a bucket coated with dry mud out from under the porch. "Probably somewhere on my floor. Or in one of my other pairs of pants." She propped the bucket against our house next to the white vent that always spits out fog that

smells like perfume when my mom is doing laundry.

“Why didn’t you bring it with you?”

“Because we never need it on Tuesdays.” She grabbed the edge of our mom’s windowsill and scrambled onto the bucket. The heels of her feet popped out of her sneakers as she lifted onto her tiptoes. She was wearing green socks. “Her room is empty too.”

If we ever get locked out of the house or if anything ever happens to our mom, we’re supposed to go to Mr. Pietro’s house next door. Mr. Pietro has a brown and silver mustache, like a squirrel’s tail except it never twitches. Mom says that we can trust Mr. Pietro and that we should never wait outside our house alone if we get locked out because someone that used to live in a prison lives on our street now. She knows that he does because the prison person had to send everyone in our neighborhood a letter when he moved in telling them that he had been in prison once. My mom told me his name but I forgot it. All I remember is that he went to the same high school as my mom and that before he lived in prison he used to kidnap kids.

We hid our backpacks and my sister’s trumpet case under the porch because we didn’t want to carry them all the way over to Mr. Pietro’s. I dragged a big oak branch out of the woods and covered up the backpacks with it. Then I sprinkled dead leaves on top of it to make sure everything was covered. My sister said that I was dumb and that backpack stealers would never be crawling around under our porch anyway. But I said it was good to be safe.

There were four newspapers on Mr. Pietro’s front steps and one in his bushes. We rang the doorbell but no one answered.

“Maybe Mom forgot about your appointment and went to the grocery store to buy bananas and milk,” I said.

“Maybe she met someone cute at a vegetable stand down the road and then eloped to Switzerland,” my sister said, kicking a newspaper into the bushes.

“At least now you don’t have to get a brace.”

“No, now it’s worse. I’ll still have to get a brace, and now I have another whole week to think about how my life is going to be over before they give me a brace and it actually ends. Waiting for it is even worse than wearing it.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Everyone has weird things about their body.”

“Scoliosis isn’t a weird thing. It’s a disease. It means you can either do nothing and let your spine turn you into a mutant, or you can let doctors shove you into a back brace and turn you into a cyborg.”

“I have two huge bumps on my stomach that leak out slimy white puss. Does that count as a disease?” I lifted up my t-shirt and pointed at the bumps. One was next to my belly-button and the other was just above my hipbone. They looked like tiny eggs trapped under my skin.

“Gross,” my sister said, leaning on her knees and squinting at my disease. “Did you show Mom?”

“No. I never tell Mom about these things. If you wait long enough they usually just go away.”

My sister poked one of the eggs like she was afraid to crack it. “Or they get worse and you drop dead during recess.”

“Maybe,” I said.

We ran across the street to the Garzas’ house. Mr. Garza was mowing the lawn with huge headphones on. We yelled at him but he just waved. We knocked on the door and an orange cat came to the window and stared at us and stretched and then left. No one else was home. We hopped over a fence coated with moss and ran to the house where the an-

gry black dog with one eye lives. Every time I ride my bike to Roswell's Gas Station to buy root beer and gummi worms, the angry black dog with one eye always barks at me and then chases me to the part of the road where it curves past the swamp. There's a rusted fence at the edge of the swamp to keep out kids and an abandoned rowboat half buried in the sludge next to the fence and the angry black dog with one eye always sniffs the rowboat, barks at me one last time, and then turns around and runs home.

The dog came trotting out of the garage and barked at us and then my sister shouted at me to run and we ran and the dog chased us into the street. Then it saw a rabbit and chased the rabbit instead.

"We just have to find someone who will let us use their phone," my sister said, gasping and wheezing and leaning against a blue mailbox with ducks painted on it.

"Let's try this house," I said, spitting into the grass. My mouth tasted like a spoon.

Someone had left a shovel on the lawn next to a tree. We knocked on the door. A wooden carving of an owl hanging above the peephole rattled against the glass.

A man wearing an orange long-sleeve shirt opened the door. He had a bulgy belly and his socks had green toes and he was chewing on a bent cigarette. His house smelled like clothes that have been left in boxes in a basement.

"Can we use your phone?" my sister said.

"Our mom has either been kidnapped, arrested, murdered, or eloped to Switzerland," I said.

"Where do you live?" Green Toes said, shoving a hand into his trousers.

"That way," my sister said, pointing through the trees and past the angry-dog house toward where our house was and our hidden backpacks.

"In a gray house with a chimney and a driveway," I said.

Green Toes made us take off our shoes and then led us into his living room. My sister

sat on a brown couch and used the phone next to the lamp. The carpet was orange and longer than it should be. A huge wooden clock above the fireplace was ticking but I could barely see it because the only light in the room was the lamp.

“How long has your mother been missing?” Green Toes said. He had a mustache like Mr. Pietro’s except skinnier and red.

“Maybe an hour,” I said. “My sister is late for her appointment. Is that a real bird?”

On a bookcase beyond the couch I could see the shadowy outline of something with wings.

“It’s a crow,” Green Toes said. “It’s not alive. It’s stuffed. Where’s your father?”

“We don’t know,” I said. “Making a new family somewhere with his girlfriend.”

My sister hung up the phone. “No answer,” she said.

“Maybe she forgot her cell phone at home,” I said.

A door banged open. I could tell it was the front door because I heard the owl carving clattering. The Jeluso twins lurched past the living room dragging a muddy fertilizer sack.

“Dandelion!” The Mole shouted. “How did you get into our house?”

“Get that mess back outside!” Green Toes shouted, stomping towards the twins.

“Okay okay okay!” Crooked Teeth shouted, grunting and dragging the sack back toward the front door. “You don’t have to get all riled up!”

The Mole wiped mud from his hands onto the shoulders of his t-shirt. “Blake said he needs matches or a lighter and he also wants a ham sandwich,” he said.

“He’s also going to need a couple more boxes of nails,” Green Toes said. “And the red toolbox. And bring a can of wasp spray too. Blake said there are already a couple nests under the frame of the garage.”

“I saw them, I saw them!” Crooked Teeth said, hopping back into the doorway. “They were bee nests, not wasp nests. Blake doesn’t know anything about bugs.”

"We can't carry all of that by ourselves!" The Mole said. "Wasp spray, a toolbox, boxes of nails, and a ham sandwich? And matches? We've only got four arms!"

"He can help you," Green Toes said, pointing his bent cigarette at me.

"Dandelion?" The Mole said. "I don't know how much help he'll be."

"What about my sister?" I said.

"I'm going wherever he goes," my sister said.

"Someone has to stay here to keep calling your mother," Green Toes said.

"Besides, Blake hates girls," The Mole said.

"Then we both stay," my sister said.

"It'll only take like ten minutes," The Mole said. "It's just down the road."

"Dandelion, you carry the toolbox," Crooked Teeth said. He swung his arm around The Mole. "And you get the nails, and the *bee* spray, not the wasp spray. And I'll get the matches and the ham sandwich."

"Ten minutes," The Mole said to my sister. "Tops."

We walked back to the bus stop, the Jeluso twins marching along the yellow stripes in the middle of the road, me staggering along the side of the road across spongy molehills and clumps of grass. I hated having to help the twins. I hated being called Dandelion and hated that they had beat up our swingset and hated leaving my sister with Green Toes on the couch in the living room. The red toolbox was almost as big as my sister's trumpet case and weighed twice as much. It kept thumping against my knees, the screwdrivers and bucksaws and wrenches rattling.

"What does your brother need all this stuff for?" I grunted. A molehill deflated under my sandal, caving in. I stumbled and the toolbox cracked against my knees.

"He's building a house off that private drive," Crooked Teeth said. "Back in the woods."

The twins' bikes were hanging across the thornbush thicket like the skeletons of huge birds that had crashed into the bushes. At the cul-de-sac beyond the bus stop, the dead end sign was perched on the edge of the woods, tilting a little. We turned down the dirt road next to the bus stop. Mailboxes crawling with vines and weeds lined the street for all of the houses on the dirt road where the mailman wouldn't go.

"How far down the road is his house?" I said.

"Past the dome house, past the molester's, past the horse farm, past almost everything," Crooked Teeth said.

Huge trees loomed over the road, forming a winding tunnel of gnarled branches and sparrow nests and rustling leaves. A green house with a glass dome on one side was perched on a hill beyond some pine trees. A couple of unattached hoses were sprawled across the lawn. We followed the road as it curved past the dome house and dipped through a pine grove past a bunch of moss-spotted boulders.

Crooked Teeth stopped across from a house with boarded-up windows.

"Let's cut through the molester's," Crooked Teeth said.

"No way," The Mole said, adjusting the boxes of nails propped against his stomach.

"It's so much faster!" Crooked Teeth said. "Look," he said to me. He pointed into the trees beyond the house. I could see the wooden skeleton of a two-story home standing far off on a hill. "That's Blake's house. If we stay on the road, we have to follow it like a mile in that direction, past the horse farm, across the creek, and then curve all the way back around to Blake's. But if we cut through the molester's we can just go straight there."

I didn't know what a molester was, but I thought it might be the same thing as a prison person.

"I hate when you do this," The Mole said. "This place is so freaky. What if he's got a kid tied up down there or something?"

“What are you so afraid of?” Crooked Teeth said, slapping the plastic bag with the ham sandwich against the back of The Mole’s head. “He’s just a person. It’s not like he’s half alligator or an alien from Mars.”

Crooked Teeth scampered across the yard, hopping over an upside-down sprinkler. The Mole and I ran after him, the nails tinkling in their boxes, the tools banging against the sides of the toolbox. We slipped along the side of the house. The glass had been smashed out of one of the tiny boarded-up windows along the ground and I could hear scratchy violin music coming from somewhere in the basement.

“Blake says all grownups are like the molester,” Crooked Teeth whispered, edging along the siding. “He says that everyone has this gray pod in their stomach, and that when you grow up the pod gets too big and splits open and spills this slimy juice into your stomach and makes you crazy and obsessed with something weird or illegal or just really messed up, like how Dad likes to kill birds, or like how Mom ran away with that bowling alley guy, or how the molester kidnaps kids. So I’m not any more scared of the molester than I am of Dad.”

“What about Blake? What’s Blake’s thing?” The Mole whispered, ducking as he shuffled under a window.

“Blake said he doesn’t have one,” Crooked Teeth whispered. “He said he’s the only one he knows whose pod never opened.”

“Your mom ran away too?” I whispered.

“When we were in first grade,” Crooked Teeth whispered.

“Every year she writes us a letter,” The Mole whispered. “Dad never reads it.”

“He was a lot more fun before Mom met that bowling alley guy,” Crooked Teeth whispered. “He used to always make us do puzzles with him or help him fix the cars or drag us to the zoo and make us look at all of the dumb animals.”

“But now he just goes into the woods with his guns and then brings back birds,” The Mole whispered.

“That’s what got us started on our frog experiments,” Crooked Teeth whispered.

The backyard was littered with broken flowerpots, crumpled yellow fly strips dotted with dead insects, and a deflated wading pool covered with green algae. Something rattled inside the house, like someone cranking a giant music box. We scampered across the backyard and crashed into the woods, crunching up the hill across brown pine needles and dry acorns. I leaned up against the trunk of a tree to catch my breath and glanced back at the molester’s. A long-sleeve shirt with polka dots hung across one of the boarded-up windows, swaying a little with the wind.

We climbed a metal ladder into the second story of the wooden skeleton house. Blake was sprawled across the ground next to a pile of wooden planks, reading a book with a dragon and a girl in swirly white clothes on the cover. Sawdust spotted his hair. A crumpled sleeping bag and a black lantern were tucked into a corner of the skeleton.

“We left the toolbox downstairs,” Crooked Teeth said, throwing the ham sandwich at Blake. It skidded across the ground into the pile of planks. “And some bee spray and some nails that Dad told us to bring. They were too heavy for us to carry up the ladder.”

“Did you bring matches?” Blake said, flipping a page in the dragon book.

“Yeah,” Crooked Teeth said.

Blake glanced up at us. “Who’s your little friend?” He tossed his book onto the planks and pushed himself onto his feet.

“Dandelion,” Crooked Teeth said, handing Blake the box of matches.

Blake pulled a bent pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and tapped out a cigarette. He lit it, puffing it a couple times so that the tip went neon orange, brownish, neon orange,

brownish. "Here," he said, offering it to The Mole. The Mole puffed on it and then handed it to Crooked Teeth. Crooked Teeth puffed on it a couple times, biting the end. "Let Dandelion have a sip too," Blake said, bending over and grabbing a level off the ground.

"No thank you," I said.

"How old are you, Dandelion?" Blake said.

"Eight," I said.

"Second grade?"

"Third."

Crooked Teeth took another puff on the cigarette, spewing smoke at The Mole.

"Dandelion, you won't be old enough to buy cigarettes until you're eighteen," Blake said. "That's ten years. You could easily be dead by then. This might be your only opportunity to ever taste a cigarette. As a veteran smoker, let me assure you that this is an experience that you will want to have before you die. Take a sip."

Crooked Teeth handed me the cigarette. The end of it was wet from his mouth. I sucked in the tiniest puff of smoke I could, then spit it out.

"Experience is the most important thing," Blake said, taking the cigarette and popping it into his mouth. He set the level on a wooden beam forming a doorway between two other beams. "Does this look straight to you?" he said to The Mole.

The Mole squinted at the beam. "It looks sort of... tiltish."

"I thought so. This level is fucked up," Blake said. "I've used it on every beam in the house. It's close, really close. Just a couple degrees off. You can't even really tell unless you're looking for it." He tossed the level onto the pile of planks and shook his head. "Shit." He bent over and grabbed the plastic bag with the ham sandwich, dropping the cigarette into an empty white mug.

"Dandelion's mom disappeared," Crooked Teeth said, inspecting some bubblewrap on

the ground. He picked it up and started popping bubbles. The Mole picked up the level and started testing the empty windows.

“Disappeared?” Blake said, chewing a mouthful of ham and wilted lettuce.

“My sister tried to call her,” I said. “But she didn’t answer.”

“I wouldn’t even bother calling her,” Blake said. “When a mom disappears, she usually disappears for good. The same goes for dads.” He peeled some crust from the sandwich and lowered it into his mouth like a worm. “If I were you, I’d start planning a new life. Maybe move in with a nice aunt or uncle. Do you have any nice aunts or uncles?”

“Not really,” I said. “We’re supposed to go to Mr. Pietro’s house if anything happens to our mom.”

“Mr. Pietro?” Blake said. “I don’t know anything about a Mr. Pietro. All I know is that when our mom disappeared, she did it in the middle of the night. She tucked in the twins and made me brush my teeth a second time and then, poof, in the morning she was gone. Even our dad didn’t know. He’d been sleeping on the couch because his snoring had gotten bad. We didn’t hear from her again until two months later, when she was already in Arizona working at a laundromat.” He swallowed the last of his sandwich. “Did you say bee spray?” he said to Crooked Teeth.

“Yeah,” Crooked Teeth said, popping another bubble.

“Shit,” Blake said. “I told Dad wasps, not bees. Wasps.”

We cut back through the molester’s and ran back down the dirt road and back to the Jelusos’ house. The Mole kicked open the front door, pretending to shoot imaginary soldiers with a machine gun he made with his hands. Crooked Teeth tossed a grenade at the soldiers and rolled under the couch in the living room, covering his ears and waiting for the explosion.

“Hi,” my sister said.

She was playing checkers with Green Toes. Green Toes was winning by three checkers.

“There are a couple frogs hopping around your room,” Green Toes said to the twins, staring at the checkerboard. “Go put them in a jar or something.”

The twins armycrawled off down the hall, shouting something about land mines.

“Still no answer,” my sister said. “I’ve called her nine times.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go.”

My sister hopped off her stool. “You smell funny,” she said. “Like a campfire.”

“Where are you two going to go?” Green Toes said, standing up and wiping some fuzz off his shirt.

“Home,” I said. “To wait for our mom.”

My sister slipped on her shoes. My sandals were still on. We waved goodbye to Green Toes. He gave us a couple tangerines to eat while we waited.

We walked home and sat on lawn chairs on our back porch. The sun was dark orange. A couple clouds hung from the sky like decorations.

“What if she doesn’t come back?” my sister said.

“Then a pack of wild squirrels will raise us,” I said. “Or we’ll build a treefort in the woods and make our clothes out of leaves.”

“What about my back brace?” my sister said.

“We’ll get you one someday,” I said. “I guess.”

It was already too late for my sister. I knew that whatever had been incubating inside her back had already woken up. The doctors could slow it down with a brace, but sooner or later the pod inside of her was going to crack open. And then she would leave me too.

I went under the porch and uncovered our backpacks. I pulled a sweater out of mine and brought my sister her backpack. I wiggled into my sweater and sat back down.

My sister didn't say much more of anything—she just watched the birds hopping around the trees, our swings wobbling when gusts of wind would bump across the backyard. Eventually she fell asleep, curled up on the lawnchair, using her backpack as a pillow. I thought about finishing my worksheet about wolves—it still wasn't finished—but I wasn't in the mood.

I lifted up my sweater, shivering a little, and inspected the tiny eggs underneath my skin. Now that my mom was gone, I had no one to hide my diseases from. I pressed a couple fingers against the one above my hipbone. The lump slid a little. It felt ripe with puss.

A cold breeze slid across the porch, rustling dead leaves in the gutters. I yanked the sweater over my stomach and leaned back into the lawn chair. I stared at the sky, thinking about the bumps. Maybe these were the ones that wouldn't go away.

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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