

Sport

Matthew Baker

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Couldn't have been as odd for anyone as it was for us, when Finland's blood factories were shuttered. We were in the Pacific, then, fighting one of the wars the Americans had organized, our company was fighting on a hilly island but my platoon had become separated from the rest of our company, then what's more my section had become separated from the rest of our platoon, we'd been wandering the jungle for almost a week, our gear soaked through with the rain that wouldn't stop and our radios dead and, yes, I was the Cpl, so it was my fault that we'd become separated, or so everyone was muttering. A week ago, when we'd been with our platoon and our platoon with our company, the Samoan terrorists in their cotton pants and red headbands had been tearing through the trees every couple hours, shrieking in their Samoan language, popping a few shots at us and we'd kill a few of them, but since our section had gotten separated we hadn't seen even a Samoan, let alone an American or one of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, and Pte Keith had injured his wrist and Pte Wheeler had been bitten by a spider or a mosquito and Pte Lindsay had developed a bit of a rash. Then the rain stopped and we stood there, in the muddy creek where we'd been standing, and watched the rainwater drip from the jungle's trees and the blue birds in the trees knocking water from their wings and Pte Keith scratching himself, and then a Samoan came tripping out of a thicket into the creek and LCpl Beckham shot him. The rest of us just stood there, we'd forgotten what we were even there for, but LCpl

Beckham shot the Samoan before the Samoan could shriek even a word at us in his Samoan language. LCpl Beckham actually shot the Samoan several times. The Samoan wasn't wearing a red headband and so may not have been a Samoan terrorist, but also the Samoan may have been a Samoan terrorist who just hadn't been wearing his headband so that then, maybe he'd thought, nobody would shoot him. Regardless Pte Keith and the others had been doing quite a bit of muttering, maybe going so far as to where it could have been called grumbling, about the situation they said I'd gotten them into, and if shooting this Samoan who had forgotten his headband back at his hut was going to ease a few tensions, I wasn't going to say anything. We splashed upstream toward where the Samoan was facedown in the muddy water. Pte Wheeler despite the spider or mosquito bite on his neck helped me drag the Samoan from the creek into the trees. It was then that the men in my section became uneasy. The situation was this. LCpl Beckham had shot the Samoan once through the shoulder and once through the neck and once through the forehead and the Samoan was not bleeding. It seemed as if the Samoan was dead but also it was unclear if the Samoan was dead because there was not any blood. "Cpl?" Pte Keith said, and after so much muttering and maybe even grumbling it was unusual to hear Pte Keith using a tone that was so unsure, a tone that was so afraid. Pte Wheeler nudged the Samoan's head with his boot. Pte Wheeler said, "Is he dead?" Pte Wheeler and Pte Regis opted to shoot the Samoan again, which I was against, at least privately, but publicly I said have at it. Pte Wheeler and Pte Regis each shot the Samoan a number of more times, in the Samoan's face, in the Samoan's groin, in the Samoan's chest. One wound leaked a sort of yellowish liquid, but it wasn't blood, and the other wounds leaked nothing. "Doesn't seem right," Pte Malick said. We didn't have an RLC videographer with us to film it. The men were unnerved. We kept marching. We saw a few more Samoans, these ones even wearing their red headbands, but we didn't shoot at them, they didn't shoot at us. Some-

thing was off. Later that day we found our platoon, which had found our company. We followed them back to camp. We ate sausages and canned spinach and some sort of warm pudding. Pte Keith had his injured wrist put into a wrap, Pte Wheeler had a cream applied to his spider or mosquito bite, Pte Lindsay's rash had disappeared, and before any of us could mention the incident with the Samoan who hadn't bled we were hearing rumors about what had happened in Finland. Capt Lambert was our platoon's Capt, Maj Keith our company's Maj. Maj Keith was unrelated to Pte Keith, although they sometimes spoke. I found Capt Lambert in his tent, burning a row of cigarettes he wasn't smoking. He hadn't shaved in days, it looked like, which was against protocol for even a Pte. His boots were untied. Between his boots is where Capt Lambert had the cigarettes, in a row, and was lighting one after another.

"What's this about Finland?" I said.

"Don't you come after me about it now, too," Capt Lambert said.

"How long've the factories been shuttered?"

I'd been to the blood factories, once, as a boy—my stepfather had taken us there on a holiday. The factories stood in a seaside town, their smokestacks perfuming the town's wharf with smoke and ash. The week we'd been there, the town'd had a funfair. The town was partly known for the blood factories, but mainly for the toffee apples sold there along its wharf.

"Days, now. First we heard bankruptcy. Then that it was a matter of raw materials," Capt Lambert said. I saw then the bootprints on Capt Lambert's cot. It seemed he'd thrown some sort of fit. "The minerals they need to make it, they've used them all up. We weren't worried, when we heard it was bankruptcy—if the Finns weren't going to make the blood, somebody would. But now, Cpl? Now, Cpl, we are worried."

"Finland knew this was coming?" I said.

“For years, maybe,” Capt Lambert said.

“They didn’t tell anybody?”

Capt Lambert grunted, “Finns.”

Capt Lambert’s cigarettes had burned away. I helped Capt Lambert to his cot. He reeked of gin and sausage. “Nothing to do, here,” Capt Lambert said. “You may as well have stayed lost.”

“Weren’t lost, Capt—just became separated, was all.”

“Even the war in Africa’s come to a standstill. Not much point to it, without the blood. No satisfaction. Worse for the civilians, even.” Capt Lambert, I knew, had a daughter, a girl with eyes like a horse’s and teeth clapped in yellow braces. I didn’t have offspring, just younger brothers who wore headphones the size of helmets and let hip-hop songs lullaby them through their lessons. Capt Lambert said, “It’s them we fight these wars for, Cpl. At home, in their matching pajamas, watching their tellies. It’s their taxes that pay for all of this, and they’re not paying for nothing—they’re paying for a good show.” I saw LCpl Beckham waiting for me, now, beyond Capt Lambert’s tent. LCpl Beckham, it seemed, had nicked a crate of gin. “It’s that the civilians don’t know what to make of it,” Capt Lambert said. “We fought a day or two without the blood. The RLC broadcast shots of it back home—on the tellies, the internet. Doesn’t look right, though, to the civilians. Makes it seem fake, in a way. Rehearsed. Lots of complaints.”

“But what about the Samoan terrorists, Capt?” I said. “The Namibians?”

“They’re put off by the whole thing too,” Capt Lambert said. “Seems they were only shooting back. When we stopped shooting, the Samoans just wandered away.”

I sensed, then, how far the fallout of this Finnish situation would reach. Who was going to shout “bloody this” or “bloody that” anymore? Like shouting “unicorns this” or “unicorns that”—might’ve existed once, but if you shouted it now, you’d sound like a halfwit.

“Don’t bother me any more about it,” Capt Lambert said. “They’ve all complained to me, I’ve complained to Maj Keith, Maj Keith has complained to Lt Col Wallace, Lt Col Wallace has complained to Maj-Gen Wheeler, everybody’s complained to everybody, everybody knows that everybody is unhappy with the situation.”

Maj-Gen Wheeler was, as it turns out, a relation of Pte Wheeler, although distant enough that they never spoke. I wrapped Capt Lambert in the sheet with the bootprints and switched off Capt Lambert’s light. We spent a week in camp, in our tents, drinking gin and doing crosswords. Pte Lindsay developed another rash. Pte Wheeler and Pte Michel tipped a stack of crates onto LCpl Beckham, inadvertently, and broke LCpl Beckham’s toe. Pte Malick made an international call on Maj Keith’s telephone to the governor of the town in Finland where the blood factories had been shuttered, muttered something to the bint the rest of us couldn’t understand, then hung up the phone. The RLC videographers cleaned their cameras. The Americans drove through camp in their covered trucks, shot fireworks at each other, drove away again. Pte Keith shot a dog, just to check. Nothing came out of it. We felt more lost than we’d felt in the jungle in the rain wading through one muddy creek after another. Or at least I felt that way. Since I’d been a boy they’d trained me to do a certain thing, to play a certain game by certain rules, and now the game’d been called off.

But the rain came again, left again, we sobered up and straightened out. I made a speech that roused our whole section, Capt Lambert made a speech that roused our whole platoon, Maj Keith announced he’d be making a speech to our whole company and someday Maj Keith still might. We dismantled our rifles, gathered our missiles, our mortars, our grenade launchers, regrouped, readjusted, marched into the jungle, sent the Samoan terrorists napping there scattering. Blood had never been necessary, we understood now. One didn’t even have to see the people one was killing, technically—there had never been

a rule that one had to, it had only ever been a sort of tradition. We mustered our pluck—we weren't going to spend the rest of the war pouting—yes, a rule had changed, but we were all willing to give it a chance. Perhaps, we thought, this new rule could make our old game even a bit more sporting still. The smokestacks of Budapest's organ factories were still smoking, the smokestacks of Thailand's skull factories, the smokestacks of Thailand's factories for teeth and tongues. We couldn't make the Samoans bleed, but there were still ways of bombing, disemboweling, gassing the Samoans—there were still ways of orphaning the Samoans, widowing the Samoans—there were still ways of popping the eardrums of, charring the skin of, splintering the ribs of, the spines of, scorching the faces from, somersaulting, flattening, flaying, bursting apart, burying alive the Samoans—we could still find ways to make our fans cheer and scream.

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*.

Acknowledgements

“Sport” originally appeared in *Conjunctions* in 2012.

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