The Golden Mean

Matthew Baker

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A.

Tryg spent the week, like every week, in the suburbs, lounging in the hammock with his mother, bouncing on the trampoline with his stepfather, choreographing plays with his sisters, sneaking cookies from the pantry with his sisters, building a hopscotch course with his sisters that had numbers chalked into the squares and spanned the length of the driveway and included multiple routes and by design took the shape of a fractal, doing homework, and reading, and, that whole week, his empty duffel bag lay in a crumple by his bedroom door, never letting him forget that eventually he'd have to leave. The duffel bag was made of a camouflage material, with his name embroidered beneath the zipper in cursive lettering, and a canvas strap. The mere sight of that bag would send a jolt of despair spiking through him. He couldn't enter or exit his bedroom without passing it. It haunted him. He waited for the microwave to heat his oatmeal, leaning back against the cupboards, trying not to smile as his mother read puns aloud from a magazine, and afterward, when he brought the bowl of oatmeal into his bedroom, there lay the duffel bag. He rooted through gelato in the freezer, searching for a certain flavor, cracking up while his stepfather did impersonations of coworkers, and afterward, when he carried the bowl of gelato into his bedroom, there lay the duffel bag. He burrowed into the throw pillows on the window seat in the living room, wearing thick woolen socks, watching the ceiling fan

whip about in blurry ovals, listening to mingled voices as his mother recited credit card pins into the telephone in the hallway and his stepfather called out sports scores to a neighbor from the porch and his sisters debated whether what rainbows were was actually just friendly lightning, feeling cozy and warm and very content. And later, in his bedroom, there lay the duffel bag, reminding him that he couldn't stay, that his days there were numbered.

Then, the weekend came, that quickly the weekend came, and as the sun began sinking through the clouds outside his bedroom window, he stood over the duffel bag, feeling a sense of doom.

He packed it. Just threw things in, helplessly, resigned to his fate. In went his textbooks. In went his graphing paper. In went his compass, his protractor, his calculator, his ruler. Clothing wasn't necessary. Neither were toiletries. He already had all of that where he was going.

Tryg was in-between age-wise—not quite child, not yet teenager—a pudgy, clumsy, nervous creature who routinely slaughtered standardized tests. He was taking calculus at a high school. He counted everything, instinctively, avoided doing anything in uneven numbers, obsessively, and, from memory, could recite the first hundred decimals of π. His only serious crush was on ∞. His sense of fashion was logical to a fault, favoring comfort over style, loose sweatshirts and baggy slacks, shoe inserts for arch support. He read mathematics journals for recreation.

He had two families: the Appelbaums and the Bergquists. Privately, he referred to them as Family A and Family B. Family A had members {Mom, Stepdad, Tryg, Natalie, Isabel}. Family B had members {Dad, Stepmom, Tryg, Elliott, Parker}. They were separate families, but together they were his family, $A \cup B$, {Mom, Stepdad, Dad, Stepmom, Tryg, Natalie, Isabel, Elliott, Parker}. He was the only member of both sets, the only intersection, $A \cap$

B, {Tryg}. That was what defined him. He had the largest family out of anyone, and was the most alone.

Family A lived out in suburbia.

Family B lived on a farm.

His mother was shouting for him to hurry.

Tryg dragged the duffel bag out of his bedroom, down the staircase, and into the brightly lit expanse of the living room, full of despair. The sunset tinted everything. Back during the flood, so much rain had fallen in the suburb that even with all of the windows latched shut the water pouring from the gutters of the house had seemed to roar. Tonight, the windows were all propped open, letting the breeze in through the screens. The weather was unseasonably mild for autumn in the Dakotas.

Dinner was cooking in the kitchen, emitting a savory smell: roasting meat, root vegetables, crusted with herbs and dripping with oil. Candles were lit at the center of the walnut table in the dining room. The places were already set. His spot was bare. No napkin, no cup, no fork, no knife. Just a blank stretch of tabletop. Seeing that, he felt a spasm of misery. He didn't want to eat at the farm. In the living room, games were stacked on the tufted ottoman—card games, board games, dice games—and the printout coupon that had been stuck to the refrigerator was gone, replaced by a pair of movie rentals tucked discreetly into the painted cabinet that housed the television. Anguish swept through him. At the farm, there would be no games, there would be no movies. Tomorrow his mother and his stepfather were attending a banquet at the museum, some heritage event with ceremonial awards and plattered appetizers. His sisters would be dancing in costume. He'd miss that too.

Tryg dropped the strap of the duffel bag and then collapsed onto the carpeting, leaning back against the leather sofa, burying his head in his arms. He could feel the rolls of his

gut folding over in a series of creases, with the bottom curve pressing against the buckle on his belt. He peeked up over his wrists.

"Can't you just say that I'm sick?" Tryg muttered.

"You would still have to go," his mother said.

His mother was rooting through a purse in the hallway. Her dress was striped, her nails were painted, and her hair was damp from a shower. Her shoes were already on, the ragged tennies with the splitting seams and the permanently discolored soles that she only wore when she knew she wouldn't have to get out of the car. She worked as an engineer, was an unapologetic germaphobe, and had been a lifelong advocate of wind energy, birds be damned. She snored at night, a comforting drone that drifted through the house. The sound helped him sleep. Nights at the farm were eerily quiet in comparison.

His mother wrested a ring of keys from the purse with a jingle, threw open the door to the garage, and then turned back toward him, holding the door open at 45°.

"We've got to leave."

"Not yet," Tryg said.

"We're already late."

"Just wait," Tryg begged.

In the kitchen, his stepfather, who was still wearing a suit from the firm where he worked as a paralegal, had slipped on polka-dotted oven mitts to check the temperature of the prime rib in the oven. His stepfather had his glasses tugged down from the bridge of his nose to the tip, the way he always did when the glasses were giving him a headache. Something extraordinary was, his stepfather could juggle. Also, his stepfather was multi-lingual. His stepfather always made very precise, confident, deliberate movements. Even watching his stepfather do something as mundane as remove a thermometer from a drawer could be pleasant somehow. Being around motions like that made him feel totally

secure. No one at the farm moved that way.

His stepfather pivoted away from the oven, ± the thermometer, he couldn't tell.

"Tryg, buddy, do you want us to save you some leftovers?" his stepfather called.

"It won't be the same," Tryg mumbled.

His sisters (half-sisters technically), shy red-haired girls whose faces and limbs were spotted with freckles, were perched on the window seat. The breeze coming through the bay window rustled their clothing, checkered blouses and khaki shorts. Natalie's body < Isabel's body, yet, oddly, Natalie's head > Isabel's head. They had been passing the time until dinner looking at puzzle books with hidden objects in the illustrations. They set the puzzle books aside, drawing their knees up to their chins, wearing concerned expressions.

Generally his sisters were too proper to ask personal questions, but, overcome by curiosity, dared to ask some now.

"What will you do there?" Natalie said, tentatively.

"Be bored out of my mind."

"Is there a hammock?" Natalie said.

"There's nothing."

"Is there a trampoline?" Natalie said.

"There's nothing."

"You don't like anything there?" Natalie said.

"The house is depressing, the food is terrible, and there's nothing to do."

"What about your other family?" Natalie said.

"I hate them and they hate me."

His sisters considered that, glancing at each other, and then turned back to him, looking worried.

"What if the hopscotch washes off while you're gone?" Isabel said.

Tryg stared at his sisters over his wrists, unable to answer, upset[loyalty]. He knew his sisters were bothered by the thought of him belonging to another family. His mother and his stepfather were the same way, tried to hide how they felt, but they didn't like having to share him either. They didn't like him missing things. Among the matrix of family photos above the fireplace hung pictures he wasn't in, taken at events he'd been absent from, as if he'd been just blanked out from certain moments in the family history. There were episodes from the family lore that he knew only as stories, family jokes that referenced incidents he hadn't shared. It didn't matter whether an experience the family had was positive or negative. Ultimately the |experience| was enormous. If any pictures were taken at that banquet at the museum tomorrow, he'd be missing from those too. He dropped his face back into his arms.

"I don't want to go," Tryg shouted, emphasizing that for some reason, he wasn't sure why.

His sisters didn't get math. Even at their age, they should have at least understood the basics, addition and subtraction, multiplication and division, but they were hopeless. They flunked their assignments. They bombed their quizzes. Numbers made no sense to them. He loved that about them. He loved that his sisters would peer at him timidly from his bedroom doorway, too mannerly to enter until they had been invited, when they came to him for help with worksheets. He loved that his stepfather had a sneeze so powerful that if he was standing out in the driveway sipping an iced lemonade while his stepfather was sorting through dusty boxes down in the basement, and all of the doors were shut, and all of the windows were shut, he could still hear the sneeze from out there. He loved that his mother sang oldies while she was sweeping the kitchen sometimes, unprompted by anything, would just suddenly break out into song, poking him in the ribs to annoy him. He loved when the family was crammed into the bathroom together, his stepfather drying the

hair of this sister, his mother snipping the nails of that sister, him squeezed between the sink and the toilet just trying to brush his teeth. He loved the suburb, everything about that house, the walls painted in bright citrus shades, the gleam of the marble counters, the decorative goblets filled with shells and corals, the tiled motif of triangles and quadrilaterals that surrounded the bathtub. He flopped backward across the floor, digging his fingers into the carpeting, trying to savor everything he could about the place while he still had the chance. He was stalling, there was no way of getting out of going, but every additional second he managed to delay seemed priceless. He hated that the other family was allowed to take him away from there.

Once, flipping through the newspaper, searching for the funnies, Tryg had stumbled onto an article about a local man who for years had lived a double life, secretly, with two separate families. Tryg had reeled. Who would ever voluntarily choose such a thing?

He had been a newborn, zero years old, at the time of the divorce.

This had been his situation his whole life.

His mother pointed into the garage, swinging the door open to 90°.

"We really need to go," his mother said.

Tryg got into the hatchback, lashed himself with a seatbelt, and wrapped both arms around the uneven lumps of his duffel bag, peering over the top. He watched in the mirror as the garage door separated into individual slats divided by fissures of sunlight, which, following the tracks, gradually combined back into a single door on the ceiling above the hatchback. The radio murmured pop music. Leaving the suburb, his mother, whose current state = preoccupied and whose driving record ≠ amazing, nearly plowed over a cat with a collar that was crossing the street. His families lived on opposite ends of town. If the city was graphed, using miles for coordinates, with the axes expanding from an origin downtown, his mother lived at (−1.2, +3.1), his father lived at (+1.3, −3.4). That is, north-

northwest, south-southeast. Per the visitation arrangement, he spent [Monday, Friday] with his mother and [Friday, Monday] with his father. Every week. He had suddenly remembered so many things he wanted to talk to his mother about, things to ask her, things to tell her, he'd had days, he didn't know why he'd wasted so much time just sitting around listening[polite], because there were things he urgently needed to say. Clutching the duffel bag, he turned to her, opening his mouth to speak. But saying anything seemed impossible now. The pressure—having a deadline, a countdown ticking away to a moment when soon he'd be cut off from his mother entirely—panicked him. He'd never say everything in time. He turned away from her, closing his mouth again, distressed. Businesses whipped past: strip malls, grocery stores, gas stations. An inflatable bison advertised the price of snowmobiles. Someone in a uniform swept the walkway of the motel where back during the flood the evacuees had gotten to stay for free. His mother seemed to have forgotten the speed limit, maybe had forgotten there even were such things. He felt a sort of desperation settle onto him as the hatchback carried him increasingly farther away from where he wanted to be. Why should he be taken from people he loved to go stay with people he hated?

The exchange always occurred downtown, in the parking lot of a convenience store. Neutral territory. As if he were a prisoner of war. Which, in a sense, he was. The pickup had beaten the hatchback there. Skaters with dreadlocks lounged against the dumpster, sipping from to-go cups, squinting at the vehicles, as if present to act as witnesses. Someone had dropped a slushie, which had melted into a puddle of neon on the asphalt. The dumpster was so full of garbage bags that the lids couldn't shut.

"See ya soon," his mother said, leaning over to kiss his forehead.

Tryg hesitated, then removed his seatbelt, distraught that this final moment with his mother was slipping away.

Lately, in his leisure reading, he had been studying ratios. Ratios were about relationships. Relationships between numbers. There was a certain ratio, known as the golden mean, that especially captivated him. The golden mean often appeared in nature: the branches of trees, the curves of shells, the scales of pineapples, the seeds of sunflowers, the spirals of genomes, the dimensions of bones, the bodies of galaxies, the trajectory of falcons, the ancestry of bees. It had been used in the design of drawings and photographs and paintings and sculptures. It was considered the most beautiful proportion in the universe. Expressed numerically, its first nine digits were 1.61803398.

Reaching for the handle of the door, he suddenly thought to calculate something. When he did, the result was staggering. Between weekdays with his mother, weekends with his father, alternating holidays, and periodic vacations, the time he spent with his families roughly approximated the golden mean. On average, 4.3 days per week with Family A, 2.7 days per week with Family B.

If that were true, shouldn't the situation have seemed beautiful, instead of so ugly?

B.

On the outskirts of town the parking lots and utility poles gave way to fields and trees. In the pickup, he said nothing, just stared out through the streaked sheen of the window, furiously, watching what passed: the farm with the weather vane; the farm with the storage tank; the farm with the basketball hoop with the rusted net. At the camp of prefabs where the oil workers lived, someone was pounding on a door, wearing coveralls spattered with black gold. Earlier that week a tornado had swept through, and the crumpled wreckage of several trailers lay at the edge of the camp, hadn't yet been hauled away. Further down the highway, roadkill bloodied the side of the road, the remains of some raccoon or skunk. Twilight was falling. Dust billowed as the pickup swung into the gravel driveway. When he

climbed out, his father was still talking, rambling$^{\text{boring}}$.

"Welp, we certainly missed you here this week," his father said in conclusion, slapping the pickup, then reached to take the duffel bag.

His father wasn't a farmer, actually worked as an electrician, but was the type of person who was always consumed with some new hobby or another, and over the course of his childhood had transformed the property into something that ≈ farm. A sunroom extended from the back of the house, where misters on automated timers watered containers of vegetables, carrots and squash and radishes. A hut stood near the garage, a coop for the chickens, who were nowhere in sight. Beehives in painted boxes sat on cement blocks down by the woods. Unexpectedly, as the smell of compost hit him, he was struck by a wave of euphoria. He squinted. The feeling confused him.

"You're here!" Elliott grinned, grabbing him by the cuff of a sleeve, her mouth crusted with bits of dried jam, and then suddenly she was running, dragging him by his sweatshirt, leading him down past the ferns through the woods to the creek. Parker was there, throwing rocks at a squirrel while she waited. His sisters (half-sisters technically) were pale blond-haired girls with spindly frames who chattered so excitedly they often interrupted their own stories. Elliott was wilder, generally bandaged from some scrape or cut. Parker was sneakier, but always got caught. In the fading light, the trees were indigo, the mushrooms caps appeared bright white. His sisters splashed barefoot across the creek, yanking the legs of their jeans up to their knees, shoving the arms of their tees up to their shoulders, as shadows × and ÷ over their bodies.

"Let's do this thing!" Parker cried, throwing her hands up, flashing victory signs.

Tryg frowned. He'd forgotten. The weekend prior, he and his sisters had lugged buckets of paint down from the garage, an assortment of colors, and painted a target onto a boulder by the creek. Concentric rings rippled out from the bullseye at the center. Numbers

marked the annuli between circles, indicating the value of striking the target there. Nearby the boulder lay salvage he and his sisters had taken from the garbage can: wine corks, rusted nails, melted spatulas, empty lighters. Each type of object had also been given a certain value, which, together with the value of the spot where the target was struck, determined the points scored for a throw. Tossing stuff at the boulder had actually been fun[addicting].

"You won't believe how good we've gotten," Elliott said.

"We're saying bullseyes every time," Parker said.

"We made up some new rules," Elliott said.

"You're going to love the one about bottle caps," Parker said.

As his sisters squatted to choose projectiles, his father, standing somewhere up near the rain barrels by the slider door, shouted that dinner was ready.

"But we're doing the target thing with Tryg!" Elliott yelled.

"You got all weekend," his father shouted.

"Tryg doesn't want to wait though!" Elliott yelled.

"It's too dark for that now anyway," his father shouted.

His sisters bolted toward the house, chanting something about food.

Tryg trudged back through the woods, baffled by what had happened at the creek. Slipping into the house through the slider door, he discovered his duffel bag perched like a trophy on the laminate counter in the kitchen. His stepmother, who worked as a paramedic, and recently had turned vegetarian, had a gingham apron on over jeans and a turtleneck.

"Tryg, honey, do you want pop or milk?" his stepmother asked, squeezing his shoulders as she swept past toward the dining room.

His sisters had already claimed seats at the rectangular oak table, were now poking the

palms of their hands with the tips of their knives, testing the sharpness. His father switched on the same disc of swing music that always played during dinner, snapping his fingers. His stepmother hung her apron from her chair. A ceramic container sat on a crocheted potholder at the center of the table. He sat down across from his sisters, eyeing the thing suspiciously. His stepmother lifted the lid, revealing macaroni and cheese topped with a layer of crushed crackers. It smelled astonishingly delicious. His stepmother generally served the meal once ⟨visit⟩. Something about the smell of the meal and the sound of the music and the sight of these faces was affecting him oddly. Euphoria swelled in him again, a kind of ecstasy. That and a sense of foreboding.

As he chewed, he snuck glances at the house, examining everything, stunned[revelation]. He'd missed this stuff. He'd missed the dishes, the colorful swirls on the rims. He'd missed the utensils, the clear plastic handles shaped to look like beveled glass or cut crystal. He'd missed the placemats, which were quilted, with a stitched pattern of astroids and deltoids. He'd missed everything about the place, the wildlife calendar in the kitchen and the landscape watercolors in the hallway and the musty smell of the carpeting and the curtains that matched nothing except each other. He loved the way his father squinted with satisfaction when bending down to sniff a fresh scoop of food, wrinkles forming around his eyes; he loved the way his stepmother would grind the pepper mill high above the table, letting the seasonings tumble dramatically down onto her plate, as if daring someone to intercept some flakes; he loved the way his sisters would swing their legs under the table while they were talking and kick him accidentally and apologize and stop talking and sit very still and then moments later start back up talking and forget to sit still and swing their legs under the table and kick him again and when they realized what they'd done burst out laughing and sometimes laughed so hard they forgot to breathe. He was a traitor. He was a two-timing, double-crossing, no-good fucking traitor. He didn't hate coming

here. He didn't hate this family at all.

How could he have forgotten? Did this always happen? Was the way he'd thought he'd felt just a lie he told himself so he could tell the lie to his other family?

"What did you do this week?" Elliott said through a mouthful of noodles.

"Just boring stuff," Tryg said.

In the article in the newspaper, there had been a blurry photo of the man who had led the double life, taken perhaps from online. A trucker with plain hair and an ordinary face. Beneath the photo, the man was quoted, "I just, I dunno, always felt really lucky, having twice as many people to love."

Tryg tossed the duffel bag into his bedroom after dinner, put away the folded laundry sitting on his dresser, threw on a polyester jacket from his closet. He was ecstatic. He could barely contain how happy he was being back again. The coyotes were howling. The temperature had plunged. The moon was 62% shadow and 38% light. His father dragged the firepit out of the garage and built a blaze in the backyard, marching around proudly with his hands wedged into the pockets of his jeans, squatting occasionally to blow a gust of breath into the logs to fuel the flames. His stepmother leaned back in her fold-out with a plaid fleece blanket wrapped around her legs, pointing at the stars, inventing constellations, giving each a mythology. He set marshmallows on fire with his sisters. They removed the charred exteriors with their fingers, plucked the stuff into their mouths, chewed the ashy sugar, and bit off the gooey interiors whole. Then lunged around the campfire, shouting mock insults, fencing with their branches. He was ecstatic—but that wasn't all, because as his sisters chattered back and forth, he caught references to things the family had done over the course of the week, without him, earlier that week his father and his stepmother had taken his sisters to the hardware store to pick out a new birdfeeder together, and he hadn't been there, earlier that week his father and his stepmother had

watched from the edge of a track as his sisters had strapped on fluorescent helmets and ridden dirt bikes for the first time ever, and he hadn't been there, earlier that week his father and his stepmother and his sisters had huddled in the basement with flashlights and canteens and weathered the tornado in a state of utter terror, and he hadn't been there, he'd missed everything, he couldn't be anywhere without creating an absence elsewhere, he was even less a part of this family than the other one. He was on the run now, fleeing jabbing branches, heading toward the road, laughing, but beneath the laughter, beneath all of the delight and the joy and the pleasure, there was something else, something that was always there, a sadness[sadness]. He was only a fraction of a son. He was only a fraction of a brother. He would never be whole to them like they were whole to each other. He would never be whole to anyone.

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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