

Wink Wink Kiss Kiss

Matthew Baker

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Before they leave for the mystic society's costume ball, Alex's sister makes Alex swear (as meanwhile she's helping him with the clipping on of his clip-on bowtie, her toothbrush clenched between her half-brushed teeth, Marina talking through a mouthful of toothpaste and foam) that he will not cooperate with these suburban bourgeoisie, that he will not yield to their propaganda, that he will not eat even one of their exquisite truffles or tarts or puffs of meringue. Despite their many protests, she reminds him, despite their boycotting of dinner-plate vegetables and household chores (which boycotts were ended within a matter of minutes, broken by the embargoes their parents then imposed on the television, the iPods and iPads, and even *Super Mario Bros. Wii*), they will be forced to attend the mystic society's ball, but he should consider it not an opportunity to "make new friends" as their stepfather has suggested, not a night for the flirting with and wooing of seventh-grade women in their bourgeoisie dresses and heels, but rather an opportunity to infiltrate this sect of Alabamian capitalists and tyrants and to destroy them, a night to sabotage this costly gala, this private celebration of gluttony and glut and the exploitation of the proletariat. Before Alex can once again take this vow (which vow Marina has forced him to make at least once a day over the past week, usually on the bus ride to school in the morning), their stepfather walks past the bathroom carrying red heels for their mother and overhears Marina's anti-capitalist propaganda, and so once again Marina and their

stepfather (whom Marina calls “padre” despite his insistence on “Dad”) get into a fight regarding Mao and the Kennedys and of course as always Cuba, a fight which carries them from bathroom to staircase to kitchen and (at one point) even onto the deck, and which results in their leaving for the costume ball almost an hour later than originally planned.

Marina is a communist for the same reason that she is an occultist and a listener-of-crunk: because she is fourteen years old and because her parents are capitalists, Catholics, and listeners-of-jazz. She and her best friend Anna Firmat became obsessed with the one haunted house in Mobile for which they could find any documentation—an estate on the outskirts of town that had been razed to the ground during the Civil War by (allegedly) a group of runaway slaves, with the plantation’s owners and the owner’s children and an elderly unwed aunt trapped inside, the ghosts of whom are now supposed to haunt the site of their death. Alex (whose name Marina sometimes pronounces as if it were spelled “Alux”) doesn’t believe in ghosts, not even after Marina held a séance (or in other words made Alex sit on the floor of her bedroom while she shuttered the windows and lit candles and did a little dance and acted as a medium between Alex and the spirits) during which she introduced him to a casket girl (who had almost “perished” in 1709 from “black vomit” and who apparently just ended up getting run over by a runaway “charabanc” in 1711 as it was) and someone named Clotilde (who didn’t have much to say aside from “The sea, the sea! Alack, the sea!” and who afterward Marina said she thought must have been the restless spirit of a “merperson” who had died on land, “far far away from their undersea kingdom”). Afterward Marina’s room had been raided by their parents, who had seized her candles and dowsing twigs and casting bones and matches. Only her hand-me-down tarot cards (from Anna) survived the raid (she’d brought them to school in her purse). Instead of replacing them with more casting bones and candles, the next day Marina

brought home an armful of books from the public library, including a diary by Raúl and a book of Fidel's letters, and skipped dinner to hole up in her room (in a makeshift tent she'd made out of bed sheets, reading by flashlight) to memorize all of her favorite new "quotes from our comrades."

Even after she had returned the books, whenever she and Alex would play games in their backyard (dressed in camouflage soldier costumes or store-bought bear suits and raccoon suits) Marina would find some way to reference Fidel (once muttering to Alex as they hid behind a thicket of trees, Marina gripping their fake rifle and Alex their fake handgun, "Listen to how they're shooting at us, Alex. They're terrified. They're scared of us because they know we're going to get rid of them," and then charging out from the trees shooting everywhere she saw an imaginary soldier). Their favorite game to play was a we-are-shipwrecked game (dressed in cutoff pants and t-shirts with tiny holes scissored into them), until the day they started fighting about how to play it: Alex wanted to pretend to be making a new life on the island (he wanted to build an imaginary treehouse and train imaginary monkeys to be their pets) but Marina wanted to pretend to be trying to escape the island (she wanted to build an imaginary raft, have that raft capsize just offshore, swim back, and next work on building an imaginary hot air balloon), and after fighting about it for a while and throwing rocks and sticks at each other, Marina had said, "You should know, sir, that my country is much greater than yours: Latin America is my country," and then had walked out across their imaginary ocean and back into their house, refusing to play that game or any other with Alex ever again.

In the car their mother (whom Marina calls "madre" despite her insistence on "Mom") reminds them that their primary duty at tonight's costume ball is neither to "meet people" as their stepfather has suggested, nor to "destroy the regime" as Marina has suggested, but

rather to watch their baby brother (Robert) throughout the night—to carry his basket with them wherever they go, to wrap him in blankets if the ballroom’s climate proves to be chilly, to pluck him from his basket and mutter him lullabies if he gets to crying. Although they’ve lived in Mobile (a town their mother doesn’t particularly like, as she says the Southerners here are “very different from the Southerners in Florida” and that it’s “about time they got over the Civil War—half the people here think they’re still living in the Old South”) for three years, this Thanksgiving ball is the first carnival ball to which their parents have been invited, and they “won’t have time to babysit” Robert or Alex or Marina because “it’s crucial” for their mother’s real estate business that she and their stepfather (a roofer) have time to “network” with the other adults at the party.

Alex wears his only suit (its left arm specially tailored), Marina wears what she considers her “most bourgeoisie of dresses” (which dress she therefore hates), and even Robert has been dressed in a collared shirt. Alex asks again why they can’t wear costumes if they’re going to a costume ball, as he’d prefer to be wearing a superhero cape or a glow-in-the-dark alien mask as opposed to this suit. Their mother explains (an explanation she’s been forced to make at least once a day over the past week, usually while helping Alex with his English or history homework) that, as has been the custom in Mobile for hundreds of years, only members of the mystic society hosting the event are allowed to wear costumes to these carnival balls, and therefore Alex would have to be a member of Las Lloronas if he wanted to wear something other than a suit. It’s only just now occurred to Alex that he could have told his mother that he *was* a member of Las Lloronas, and that he was therefore not only allowed but obligated to wear his glow-in-the-dark alien mask to tonight’s costume ball, and as his mother (whom Alex calls “Mom”) would have been unable to prove that he wasn’t one of Las Lloronas (as the identities of the members are of course secret), she would have had no choice but to let him wear it. Robert starts whim-

pering in his buckled-in basket, and Marina leans over Alex's lap and tells Robert (whom Marina calls "Bob") to shut it.

As they pass Hopjack's and Cammie's and Three George's Candy Shop (each of which on any other night Alex would have begged and begged could they please stop at, promising homeruns and A's and double the chores, if only they could "just this once" get pizza or ice cream or some of Three George's toffee) on their way to the expressway, Marina writes Alex a list on her iPhone outlining their numerous missions at tonight's costume ball:

1. downfall of b.g.
2. liberation of p.t.
3. freckles
4. dad?!?!?

"freckles" being her nickname for Benjamin Nibelheim, to whom she's been writing notes (which she calls "love letters" despite Alex's insistence that love letters are only love letters if they've been sprayed with perfume and sealed with a lipstick kiss) swearing her eternal devotion to his "revolutionary eyes" and his "lips like Che's" (notes which she then gives to Anna to deliver to Benjamin during band, as Anna—a saxophone—sits three chairs down from him), and whom Marina has been told was invited to and will be attending Las Lloronas' costume ball with his newscaster father and dentist mother. "dad?!?!?" meaning not their stepfather, but their father father, who was sent overseas to fight for oil, some of which oil (that their father won) is now sloshing around in the tank of their stepfather's SUV.

Alex takes her iPhone and adds to the list:

5. PIANO

Which “PIANO” is the 19th-century Schwechten grand belonging to the famous pianist at whose manor tonight’s costume ball is being held (and is, aside from the embargoes, the reason that in the end Alex agreed to come along to the ball, as he’s been promised (by “Mom”) that the pianist will allow him to play it). Alex has been taking lessons, and his piano teacher (whom Alex calls “Mr. Kimble” despite his insistence on “Rich”) has told his parents that he never imagined anyone could do so much with “the ivories” with just one hand.

Then the SUV is passing cornfields and wooded thickets and broken fences, no driveways or mailboxes or streetlights, just the blackness of the magnolias stretching from both sides of the road up and over it and blotting out the light from the moon. Then a driveway, and they follow it through a stone gate and up through a winding drive with more magnolias and then park on the grass. Then Marina is hauling Robert’s basket out of the car and Alex is standing staring at a woman or maybe a man wearing a black mask sitting on the rim of a stone fountain and their mother is adjusting their stepfather’s tie and their stepfather the zipper on their mother’s dress and then their parents begin walking toward the house beyond the fountain and say good evening to the woman or the man in the mask, who doesn’t answer, and Marina stands next to Alex with Robert’s basket in one hand and her other hand reaching for where Alex’s used to be before his left arm got lopped off at the elbow (she likes to do this whenever she can tell he’s afraid, has done so ever since she first heard about the phenomenon of phantom limbs, hoping that just once he might be able to feel her hand, to feel even the “tiniest of tiniest of tingles”), and then she squeezes where Alex’s hand would have been and Alex sends an imaginary squeeze back which gets stuck in his stump and then they’re walking, together, up the steps, up more of the steps,

and already Robert is crying.

Marina is convinced (and has convinced Alex) that their father will be attending the costume ball (“It’s the perfect opportunity!”), despite that their father is first of all still deployed overseas and second of all (due to a restraining order filed by their mother) not allowed to come within a hundred feet of them anyway. Marina’s theory is based on a letter their father sent in September (the last letter he sent) saying, “Be good in school and maybe I’ll see you at Thanksgiving wink wink kiss kiss,” which winks Marina interpreted to mean “in disguise” and “no matter what it takes”—Alex’s plan, which he’s told not even to Marina, is (if their father does sneak into tonight’s ball) to ask his father to take him away with him, and if his father refuses, to just follow him anyway, and to go live with his father and the other marines under his father’s cot, where (Alex knows) he would not have television or iPods or iPads or a Wii but would at least get to sleep under the person Alex thinks he loves most of all.

Inside Marina hands Robert’s basket to Alex and kisses him on the forehead. “Sedentary gypsy, I expect to see you when the smell of gunfire has died away,” she says, and then patters off to look for Benjamin Nibelheim. Their parents are already dancing. A stooped woman wearing a gold wig and a fish mask (with red and gold scales) sitting at an empty table is staring at Alex—or at least he thinks she is, until he realizes that what she’s really staring at is Robert in his basket.

Marina and their stepfather fight the same fights that their stepfather and mother fought almost every night of the first summer of their marriage, a summer which Marina spent at a camp where she got to go kayaking and learn the guitar and collect fox skulls and bird’s

nests and bits of dried-out honeycomb, and a summer which Alex had to spend in the apartment they were renting until moving to Alabama in the fall, a summer in which he had to share a room with a Marina who wasn't there and a Robert who they'd only just discovered was living in his mother's stomach. In other words: it was really just Alex and their mother and their stepfather.

Which was okeydokey and not that bad until one night after dinner their stepfather said something about Castro which their mother didn't like and after that it was not that okeydokey but just bad. Their stepfather—a Chicano who had immigrated (illegally) to New Mexico with his sharecropper parents before they'd given birth to his brothers—had been a Castro fanatic ever since watching (on his parents' eight-inch black-and-white television, as meanwhile he was sprawled across their living room carpet with his fingers folded up under his chin) an interview with Castro (recorded originally in 1961) in which Castro recounted, among others things: his imprisonment on Isla de Pinos; his exile to Mexico and his recruitment of rebel troops (including one Argentine); his *Granma* invasion and the slaughtering of all but twenty of his men; his guerilla encampments in the Sierra Maestra; and his rebels' eventual ousting of Batista and their liberation of the Cubans. This interview was broadcast just days after their stepfather had seen *Return of the Jedi* (for the fifth time) at the local cinema, and before the interview with Castro had cut to even its first commercial break, their sixteen-year-old stepfather had already fused Castro's story with that of Skywalker's, with Batista as his Emperor, El Che as his Solo, and Camilo as either his 3PO or his Wookiee.

Despite that he knew that their mother was Cuban—despite that he knew her family had been wealthy landowners in Batista's Cuba, landowners whose land had been seized by Castro, ex-landowners who had fled to the United States with what little they had left and could smuggle (which amounted to less than 2,000 USD), ex-landowners who had

been exiled to Little Havana and forced to work as janitors, as public restroom managers, as parking lot attendants, simply to feed their children—still, after channel surfing on the (sixty-inch LCD) television in their apartment and coming onto *A New Hope* (as meanwhile Alex and their mother were setting up a board game on the floor), he told their mother how much he thought Castro's struggle had paralleled that of Skywalker's, and how much he admired Castro for surviving so many assassination attempts—exploding cigars, lovers with pistols, syringes concealed in ballpoint pens—a number of attempts that surely must have required some sort of Force-like ability to somehow avoid.

“Castro is a thief and a pig,” their mother said. “Cuba was once a beautiful island where everyone was happy. Now the Cubans are starving and the island is shit.”

Their stepfather turned up the volume and then turned it down again and said, “You were seven years old. Everyone thinks everyone is happy when they're seven.” Their mother didn't say anything and so he went on. “And of course you remember it as a beautiful island where no one was starving,” he said. “Your family was one of the ten families on the island who had any food—all of the food.”

As a result of which Alex and their mother never got to play their board game.

The next night they went to visit Alex's grandparents (the Cubans—not the stepgrandparents, the Chicanos), and their grandfather gave Alex a *Baretto Wōresu* comic, and then their grandmother (as meanwhile they were all gnawing on the lamb skewers and roast corn his grandfather had grilled out on their porch) spent two platefuls worth of dinner reminiscing about Cuba—about the boliche in Cuba, and the sunshine in Cuba, and their tobacco farm in Cuba which, she explained to Alex, would still be their tobacco farm if not for that guajiro Fidel.

“Someday he'll die,” their grandmother said, “and then we're all going back.”

“Until then,” their grandfather said, scratching at his stubble and reaching for the butter,

“this shithole.”

Their grandmother told Alex that she wished he could have been born there, like his mother, but that at least someday he could die there.

Their stepfather said nothing during the meal (aside from how “great” the lamb was and how “really good” the corn), but as soon as they were in the SUV headed back to their apartment he said, “Christ, it’s like they never left the island.”

“They didn’t,” their mother said (as meanwhile she was rifling through her purse). “That’s what it means to be an exile—you don’t want to leave, and you can’t wait to go back.”

“But fifty years? Every time we go over there they spend the entire night daydreaming about Cuba. I try talking to your father, and he doesn’t even see me—he’s somewhere else, walking around some street in Havana.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” their mother said. “You’re an immigrant. Your family came here looking to make a new life. We came here waiting for our old life to start up again. My dad didn’t care about getting a better job or a promotion or making more money—every morning he was bent over the paper looking for news of Fidel’s death or his deposing, thinking that maybe this day was the one he’d get to go back to our tobacco farm and back to his life. At school, around the neighborhood, we didn’t try to make friends—it was all just a sort of temporary.” She gave up on whatever she’d been looking for, tossed her purse back onto the floor.

“Fidel or no Fidel, Cuba would have changed,” their stepfather said. “They talk about Cuba as if, if there had been no Fidel, then the Cuba of 1960 would have just kept on being the Cuba of forever. Even without Fidel, that Cuba they’re waiting to go back to wouldn’t be there anymore. *It’s not a place that should still be.*”

Their mother put on her sunglasses and shook her head. “Immigrant,” she said, “of

course you would think that.”

The fights went on all summer (as meanwhile Alex would be drawing vampires at the dining room table, or carrying a wet towel to the laundry basket in their parents’ bedroom, or sneaking a fig cookie from the cupboard, or playing a spelling game on their mother’s laptop, or lying in his bed just trying to sleep) with their stepfather shouting that Fidel was a hero and that anyone waiting to go back to pre-Castro Cuba was completely delusional and insane and their mother shouting that Fidel was a demon and that when hell took him back she’d be the first on a plane to Havana. Until eventually their stepfather realized that the only way to live with their mother (in peace) would be just to accept, or at least pretend to accept, that Fidel had not been Skywalker, but may very well have been the Emperor himself. And so their stepfather stopped talking about pre-Castro Cuba as if it were an imaginary place and started talking about it as their mother talked about it, as if pre-Castro Cuba were the Cuba that Cuba would once again become, just as soon as Fidel did them all a favor and got car bombed or shot.

Then, just when their stepfather and their mother had finally forgotten about these spats and moved on from fighting about Fidel to fighting about the other “demon” from his mother’s past—Alex’s father—and shopping for drapes for their new house in Alabama and sheets for their new bed and pans for their new kitchen—then Marina came home from summer camp and announced she was a communist.

Their mother was chopping tomatoes at the dining room table (the counter in their apartment’s kitchen being too small for even a full-size cutting board). She put down her knife, stared at Marina (as meanwhile Marina still had her summer camp duffel bag slung over her shoulder, her homemade fishing pole propped up over the other), and then stared at their stepfather (who had just picked up Marina, was still holding the keys to their car).

Their mother stood up. “I’m not going to talk to this one,” she said to their stepfather, “until you talk some fucking sense into her, like I talked into you.”

And so their stepfather—in order to prove that his new allegiance to pre-Castro Cuba (and therefore their mother) was genuine and supreme—was forced to fight with Marina, against his childhood hero Fidel, while their mother went downstairs to do the laundry and to ignore the both of them until they were finished. It didn’t matter if their stepfather believed what he was shouting, if he actually believed that Marina was wrong. He simply said what he had to in order to keep their mother happy. And he’d been saying it ever since.

Alex tries to ignore the woman in the fish mask; he turns away and looks around the ballroom trying to find the grand piano, but all he sees are: servers in black vests carrying silver trays; chandeliers bigger than Alex chained to the ceiling; a man wearing a demon mask; plants bigger than Alex sprouting from pots bigger than Alex; women in cat masks with stripes painted onto their skin; a jazz band with string bass and trombones and saxophones set up along the ceiling-to-floor windows. When Alex looks back at the woman in the fish mask she points a finger (twice as long as any finger Alex has ever seen) at Alex and then curls it back so that it’s pointing at her, then uncurls it and recurls it, indicating *come here*. Alex is afraid to disobey one of Las Lloronas, so he walks over to the woman, Robert’s basket thumping against his hip.

“Babies aren’t allowed at the costume ball,” the woman says (her voice more falling-apart than even Alex’s grandmother’s), “unless they’re being served as one of the hors d’oeuvres.”

“What’s an hors d’oeuvres?” Alex says.

“Something you eat,” the woman says.

“Well that’s okay, because it’s not a baby,” Alex says. “It’s my grandfather’s costume. He’s just a very tiny man.”

“I wasn’t talking about *that*,” the woman says, pointing her finger at Robert in his basket, “I was talking about *you*.”

“Well you can’t eat me either,” Alex says, “because I’m only here because my mom made me, and because my dad might be here somewhere in disguise.”

“*Somewhere?*” the woman says (as meanwhile she’s laughing so loudly that other people in masks and not masks are looking over). She bends down and puts her hand on Alex’s handless shoulder. “Honey, it’s *me*.”

Alex is about to say something about how even his father isn’t good enough at disguises to give himself fake “boobs” and a fake “grandma belly” when he remembers that once (when Alex was a baby, so he’s only seen pictures) his father dressed up as a woman for Halloween, with a striped dress and a wig and somehow also fake “boobs” and a fake “pregnant belly,” and his mother dressed up as a man. Alex looks at the skin on the woman’s arms, which is all stretched-out and see-through with purplish veins underneath, and seems to Alex (he thinks in his head) as if it’s at least “a gagillion years old,” and *is this his father or not his father?*

But now the woman is laughing again, and she says, “Just joking, buttercup. I’m nobody’s father,” and lets go of Alex’s shoulder. “I tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. If you give me your baby—I mean your grandfather in his baby costume—I’ll tell you the secret behind *my* costume.”

Marina hates “Bob” (and Alex must therefore pretend that he also hates “Bob”) because he’s only half theirs, a mother-plus-stepfather baby, instead of being mother-plus-father like them. Blood is blood, Marina has said, and half blood is half shit.

“I’ll think about it,” Alex says (by which he really means no), and then hikes away

through the empty tables (with their white tablecloths and their glass bowls and floating white candles), Robert's basket thumping against his hip, and Alex looking for his parents or for Marina or just anyone in the world he actually knows.

Marina (she tells Alex later) found Benjamin Nibelheim following a server carrying a platter of chocolate truffles, Benjamin tapping the server on her shoulder as soon as he'd finished chewing one truffle to ask for another. Benjamin was wearing a tie tie, not a clip-on (which made him seem to Marina even all the more "revolutionary" and "debonair"), and was utterly oblivious that Marina was now following him as he followed the server with the truffles. Marina lost him once when she saw someone especially "Dad-looking" (wearing a costume made out of strung-together ferns and leaves, his skin smeared with mud) dancing with a woman in a black dress, but once she had established that the "Dad-looking" mud man had eyes far too close-together to be their father's, she climbed onto an empty chair at one of the empty tables, spotted the truffle server's black ponytail out among the crowd, and ran to her, where Benjamin was just again asking for more chocolate.

Marina "stepped herself" (while "channeling the nerve of El Che") and then approached Benjamin, introducing herself (as meanwhile she curtsied and extended her hand) as "Marina Joy Famosa, or perhaps you know me better as the M with five hearts" (she'd been signing each of her love letters as M♥♥♥♥♥). To which Benjamin said (while mashing away at the gooey remains of a blackberry truffle) that hello he was Benjamin but he had no idea what she was talking about.

"The love letters," Marina said. "The notes." What notes, Benjamin wanted to know. "The ones," Marina said (as meanwhile, she later told Alex, she felt herself "filling with the fury of the Castros"), "with the poems and the drawings, which have sometimes been

folded into the shapes of birds or giraffes or sea lions or snakes, and which have been delivered to you every day *for the past month* by Anna Firmat during band.” They were still following the server with the truffles, and Benjamin indicated for Marina to wait as he tapped the server’s shoulder, selected a raspberry truffle from the tray, and then turned back to Marina, chewing. Then he told Marina that he knew Anna, yes, but that the only notes he’d been given this month or given ever were notes written by *her*, signed not by an M with five hearts, but by an Anna with six hearts, six hearts that (Benjamin had deduced) stood both for Anna’s deep love for Benjamin and also the six letters of Anna’s last name. At which point Marina realized that the love letters she had handcrafted during English and history and algebra and Spanish in the hours leading up to band (hours in which she had paid little to no attention to the blackboard at the front of each classroom, sacrificing many A’s on quizzes and tests for these letters, instead taking B’s and C’s and sometimes D’s in order to have the time to express to “Freckles” how she “really, truly felt”) had been co-opted by *her very best friend* (a friend she had stolen cigarettes for, had loaned ten or sometimes twenty dollars at a time, had slept in the bed of for sometimes entire weekends) and used as propaganda in Anna’s own campaign for Benjamin Nibelheim—that Anna had managed to erase the M in each note by scribbling over it *with a sixth and final heart*, and that, because of this, Benjamin had never heard of Marina Joy Famosa, or even noticed her at all.

Benjamin asked if Marina knew Anna, and if Anna would be coming to tonight’s ball. “I wrote those notes,” Marina said. “So if you think you’ve fallen in love with Anna, you’ve really fallen in love with me.” To which Benjamin said (as meanwhile he was tapping the server’s shoulder, reaching again for the tray of truffles) that even if he had fallen in love with Anna, he’d fallen in love with her teeth and her ass, not those silly letters, so even if Marina had written them, and even if he had known that all along, it wouldn’t have made

the slightest bit of difference. Anyway, Benjamin said, had she, Marina, tried the truffles?

Alex finds Marina in a hallway (dark wallpaper lit by orangish lamps) leading to one of the manor's many bathrooms, spitting at herself in a ceiling-to-floor mirror. She's outlined her body with her spit, as one might shoot at a target, trying to score points on the hands and the heart and the head and the eyes.

"What do you think of my teeth?" Marina says (as meanwhile she's pushing her lips apart, spreading them over her nostrils and her chin, exposing her teeth to Alex and the pink of her gums).

"I think they're good," Alex says. "They're very good at nibbling and munching. I've noticed."

"That's not good enough," Marina says, turning back to the mirror.

"Did you find Freckles?" Alex says.

"Yes, and it turns out that he's an idiot bourgeois, a bourgeois through and through."

"Are you sad about it?" Alex says.

In his basket Robert is crying.

"Shut it, Bob," Marina says. "Yes I'm sad about it, because on Monday I have to steal all of my best friend's notebooks and books and also her purse out of her locker, while she's in gym, and light them on fire in the dumpster behind the school."

"I can hug you if you want," Alex says.

"I don't need a hug," Marina says. "There will be many Camilos, as Fidel has said. The same of fucking Freckles."

Alex sets Robert's basket onto the floor to give his arm a rest. "I looked for Dad everywhere but couldn't find him," he says. "I checked all of the men in suits and all of the servants with trays and none of them were him and I checked everyone in disguise and none

of them were the right shape or size or had even close to the right eyes, so I think he never came back for us and is still with the marines.”

“I checked everyone too and that’s what I think too,” Marina says.

“But I did find the piano,” Alex says.

“And?” Marina says. “Was it as beautiful as madre promised?”

“Yes.”

“And did it sound as beautiful?”

“I don’t know,” Alex says. “I was afraid to talk to the guy who owns it because this is his house and he was busy talking to people in masks. But a kid saw me looking at it, and then the kid asked me what happened to my arm.”

“What kid?”

“A kid who lives here,” Alex says. “I said a spider bite, and he said that spiders can’t bite off half of someone’s arm, and I said that I never said that that’s what the spider did. He said yes I did, but then he asked if I wanted to play the piano, so I said yes I wanted to play the piano, because I’ve been taking lessons for almost two years and also my mom promised me that I could. I even said I’d be careful with it, and not play too loud. So then he said that only true pianists are allowed to play his dad’s piano. So I said that I’m a true pianist. But then the kid said that true pianists always have at least two hands.”

Marina says that she’ll find Alex later. “After the revolution, that kid will be the first to hang,” she says. “But in the meantime, I’m off to destroy his bedroom.”

The first time their father came home from fighting overseas (with his hair buzzed and his mustache, which he’d had the last time they saw him, lopped clean off) he was still married to their mother and they were still living in Florida and Alex (who was five) had wanted to sleep in the bed with their mother and their father but their father said that it

was a double bed and too tiny but that Alex could set up a sleeping bag next to the bed if he wanted to sleep in their room. Their father said Marina could too but Marina (who was seven) said she didn't want to because the ghosts in the cellar might come up through the floor. So Marina slept in the top bunk in her and Alex's room where she always slept and Alex slept on the floor in their parents' room and everything was okeydokey and not that bad until a reddish bump showed up on Alex's wrist which got itchy and then worse than itchy, throbbing, and then after that everything was not that okeydokey but just bad. Their mother wanted to take Alex to the ER because Alex said it hurt and kept crying but their father said that that it was just a bruise or a bug bite and that they didn't have money for the hospital and he was only home for two weeks so could they please try "just this once" to all have a good time. Then Alex's vein in his wrist had turned dark and they could see the dark in it moving up his arm toward his shoulder and toward eventually his heart (not moving so quickly that they could actually see it moving, but moving quickly enough that every couple hours when Marina would check it it was worse). And then the skin on Alex's wrist around the bite had turned necrotic. Which is when finally their father had realized that something was "definitely fucked up" and they had all taken Alex to the ER and the surgeons did what they could with what they decided was the venom of a brown recluse and what they said that maybe a couple days ago they "might have been able to do something about," but now things would be harder, they said, and they were, and eventually the surgeons had to take off Alex's arm at the elbow, which didn't exactly save Alex, but at least kept him alive. When Alex got home Alex's father (who had never before cried in front of Alex or Marina or even their mother) cried onto Alex's shirt and so much that it got wet (which for Alex was even scarier than when sometimes his father would shove him or Marina around) and said that he was sorry, and then cried onto their mother's shirt, saying he was sorry some more, but their mother never cried, just kept saying, there

was room in the bed, and goddamn it we had that money.

When she comes back Marina takes Robert's basket from Alex and tells him to go do something fun. "This party is shit," she says, "and everyone here hates us."

Alex goes looking for their mother, who he finds talking to a man in a pig mask made of sequins and laughing and touching the man on the arm. Alex asks if she wants to dance with him and she says yes but later. Alex sees a server carrying a tray of truffles but remembers his vow and doesn't take one. He goes back to the piano (down a hallway and into a room with huge windows and lamps only in its corners), sees that "the kid" (whose bookshelves have just been tipped over, the pillows on his bed pissed on and spit on, his iPod and iPad dumped into the toilet in his personal bathroom) is still hanging around it, and so Alex goes back to the ballroom.

He sees that Marina is talking to the woman in the fish mask and goes over in case Marina wants to be rescued. "Yes, I've seen it," the woman is saying, looking not at Marina but at Robert in his basket.

"If you're lying to me I'll have you shot," Marina says. "What did it look like?"

"You can see all of them," the woman says. "The father putting things into his dresser, taking them out again, the mother washing their baby with a wet cloth, the children reading books or staring out the windows, the old aunt talking to herself in an empty room. They're there every night, from sundown to sunup, haunting that fourth floor that they died in, floating above the trees. Living out the lives they would have had. Even the house itself is a ghost—a door only appearing when one of the children opens it, the rugs only appearing when the mother leans out a window to beat them against the side of the house that isn't there. They've been there as long as I can remember, and some time before that, and I imagine they'll be there even after I'm dead and you're dead and we've all passed on."

“But you’ve actually *seen* it?” Marina says.

“Of *course* I’ve seen it,” the woman says. “Most people have. It’s only a ten-minute walk from this place—a two-minute walk from mine.”

“This is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to us,” Marina says to Alex. “The ghost house is *here*. We have to go to it and we have to go to it now.”

“But what about Robert?” Alex says.

“We’ll take Bob if we have to,” Marina says.

“I wouldn’t take the baby,” the woman says. “It’s over a ditch and through a corn field and into the woods, and this in the dead of night—no place for a child.”

“We found zero Dads and you played zero pianos and I kissed zero Freckles,” Marina says. “This is our only chance at getting anything out of this night. Please, Alex—I’ve been dreaming about seeing this place for years and *years*.”

“Will it be scary?” Alex asks the woman.

“Of course it’ll be scary,” she says.

“Okay,” Alex says to Marina, “I’ll go.”

“I can watch the baby if you’d like,” the woman says.

“We’ll take him with us,” Alex says, but Marina says, “Okay,” and hands Robert’s basket to the woman.

“He’s not really our brother anyway,” Marina says. “He’s only half ours, and our bad halves at that.”

“I’ll take good care of him anyway,” the woman says.

“But if you want the baby, you’ll have to give us some cigarettes,” Marina says.

“They’re cloves,” the woman says, pulling a black pack out of her purse.

“That’ll do,” Marina says.

“You also told me,” Alex says, “that for the baby you’d give us a secret.”

Then Alex and Marina are out running down the winding driveway and back through the gate and onto the road, and then farther down along it, in the direction the woman (who whispered the secret name of her costume into Alex's ear, *rusalka*, before giving Marina her cigarettes) told them to go, and they pass a dip in the road past some swamp with shrieking frogs, and then a gravel driveway leading down to a tiny cottage, and then (at the magnolia with the rusted nails hammered into it, holding up things that are no longer there, just as the *rusalka* said it would be) they're sliding into the ditch and then scrambling up out of it, and into the cornfield, tearing down the furrows and away from the road, snapping through the leaves of the stalks and the unharvested cobs, and sometimes stumbling from one row into another, knocking over a door's worth of stalks each time that they do.

And then (just as the *rusalka* had promised) they come stumbling out of the cornfield into a clearing (littered with the crumpled beer cans and cigarette cartons of the teenagers who come to the clearing on Halloweens and those weekends-with-no-parties, waiting for the ghosts to appear) and beyond the clearing the wooded thicket that's grown up through the ashes of the Civil War estate, the trunks of the magnolias bending up through the first and second and third floors of the plantation house, sprouting limbs through the first-floor windows that are no longer there that the father and mother had boarded up when (the *rusalka* had told Marina) the runaway slaves came with their torches and shovels and stolen rifles and machetes, the magnolias' leaves popping out every spring in the bedrooms and bathrooms on the second and third floors, then getting torn off (dead) every autumn by the wind, drifting down through the floors that are no longer there, just as the fire (torches tossed through the second floor windows) had drifted up them, and the stairs, and the walls, moving slowly for the fourth floor where the children were coughing,

the great aunt already passed out from the smoke, the baby wailing, and the parents fighting over whether to jump or to not jump now that they'd run out of ways of getting higher. It's this floor that they still live on, just above the magnolias, living in that South before Lincoln, who had left them poor and starving even before the slaves he'd been fighting to free came for them and took what they did have left, their living. Every night they're there, the rusalka had promised them, but Marina and Alex wait and the ghosts do not come. Fireflies drift through the trees and the frogs are shrieking and the ghosts—these ghosts that Marina has been trying to contact ever since Anna first told her the story of their burning—the ghosts are not floating above the trees, they are not anywhere, and now the night is even worse than before.

Marina and Alex wait by sitting on the dirt at the edge of the cornfield, then wait by wandering around the clearing kicking cans and kicking sticks, then wait by muttering hexes and curses and trying to summon the ghosts with what words they do have, wait until they can see (beyond the cornfield, back along the road) the headlights of cars leaving the costume ball, heading home. Still they wait (only Alex yet thinking of their brother, although Marina will be the one who, when they've finally returned to the ball, their clothes streaked with dirt stains and sap, and have found their parents waiting with the rusalka, who will have managed through both tickling and singing to finally stop Robert's crying, will have managed to even get him giggling—Marina who will haul Robert from his basket, and kiss him on the forehead, saying, "I don't think you and I are very closely related, but if you are capable of trembling with indignation each time an injustice is committed in the world, we are comrades, and that is more important") until Alex gets sick of waiting and shoots an imaginary gun at Marina—not expecting her to play back, but she does. And then (for the first time since their fight when they were shipwrecked) they are crawling along the dirt toward the trees, Marina whispering that she calls Fidel,

but he can have Raúl, and then signaling to Alex that she sees the enemy soldiers, that Batista himself is among them, and whispering, “If they attack us, we shall arm even the cats.” And then they’re scrambling up onto their feet and into the magnolias, shooting at the people that are not there, leaping over the branches bent low over the ground and ducking under others, and Alex is happy to be running through the night and to have his imaginary pistol and to be tripping over roots with his sister, and Marina shouts at him from where she’s gutting an imaginary soldier with the soldier’s own imaginary knife, “After we’ve taken the island, Alex, all of the pianos will be yours!” and then they’re scrambling up into the trees, Alex doing what he can with his one hand and his armpit on the other side, Marina heaving herself up the branches (one of the rusalka’s cigarettes clenched between her teeth), both of them climbing up through the first floor of the estate and its boarded-up windows, and up through the second with its torches spitting onto the floor, and up through the third and eventually they know they will come straight up through the canopy, where they will not see a single ghost, but where they’ll still swear to each other that they do.

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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