

Likeness

Matthew Baker

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Or like somebody waiting at a kitchen window with an empty serving tray. Emmy had been late again, she had been super late, but anyway she was there, wearing the required uniform for servers at the diner, a light blue dress, plain sneakers, and a clean apron. Eye-liner and mascara. A couple swipes of deodorant, a couple squirts of perfume, to hide that she hadn't bathed in days. She was afraid she was going to get fired. Her boss had been mad at her lately. Her boss said that she daydreamed too much. She didn't pay enough attention. So far she only had one table, a conservative family talking about the election. The cooks began sliding plates onto the window. Crispy strips of bacon, greasy sausages, bloody steaks, fried eggs. An animal lover, a devoted vegan, Emmy owned a moody tabby cat with a gluten allergy and liked to volunteer once a week at the dog shelter. When she looked at a plate of meat she saw pointless suffering. She had survived a mass shooting in kindergarten. She never missed a march for gun control. She arranged the plates between the cups and the mugs on the tray. A cute blonde with tortoiseshell glasses was staring at her from the booth over by the jukebox. Emmy was suddenly horny. She was still hungover. She had drunk a fantastic quantity of bourbon at the derby party the night before. Her heart was fluttering from the espresso she had downed back in the kitchen. As she lifted the tray onto her shoulder, her phone began vibrating in the pocket on the hip of her dress, probably her mom calling, maybe about her mammogram, and she had so much

love in her heart, and she had so much pain in her heart, and she felt the balance of the tray shift as the juice and the coffee sloshed in the cups and the mugs as she turned from the window toward the booths, and her boss was playing bluegrass over the radio again, a shrill chipper album with twangy banjos and whiny singing, and the music was driving her crazy, had been driving her crazy for weeks, like a stone caught in a shoe, a stone caught in the shoe of somebody who had been walking all day, a hard sharp pebble pressing into the sole of a foot with every step that somebody took across a barren field. A farmer, with a bald head and white stubble and a windburned face creased with wrinkles, whose back was too sore to bend over to take off the shoe to shake out the stone, and so he just kept walking, carrying a rifle and a box of spare ammo. Tom had been awake since dawn, patrolling the woods around the farm, checking the snare traps for coyotes. A coyote had gotten into the chicken house the week before. He had lost a couple hens. He was worried about the mortgage. All of the traps in the woods had been empty. He limped back across the field toward the chicken house. His heart was pounding from the hike. Lately his heart had been having issues. Beating arrhythmically. His doctor referred to him as a reluctant patient. His doctor knew that he deliberately hid new symptoms. He'd rather live with the unknown than a diagnosis. A sharp throb of pain shot up his leg as the pebble caught a nerve in his heel. Daybreak had been hours ago, but the air was so damp and cool that there was still dew on the grass. Flowers were blooming on the buckeyes behind the chicken house. He breathed deep as he passed the trees. He loved how the farm smelled that time of year. The billboard across the street from his doctor had recently been changed to an advertisement that accused animal farmers of murder. Paid for by a liberal nonprofit. The type of hippies who'd protest the meat industry while simultaneously fighting for the right to murder unborn children. Tom had been conceived out of wedlock. He had almost been aborted as a baby. He had nightmares sometimes about having never

existed. As he reached for the handle on the door to the chicken house, his wife began calling his name from the kitchen window, probably for his lunch, or maybe his medicine, and he glanced back and then went cold as a coyote came trotting out from behind the toolshed in the yard, a massive canine with bright gleaming eyes and grizzled fur, lips curled back to bare a mouthful of jagged teeth. Tom staggered back against the door, accidentally dropping the box of spare ammo, which hit the dirt with a jingle. The sudden sight of the coyote had made his heart skip a beat, had startled him, startled him badly, like a splash of water in the face, a splash of water striking the face of somebody who had been sleeping, an icy spatter of sleet pelting down onto somebody asleep on a train. A homeless drifter, with greasy hair and dusty cheeks and a lip scarred from a cleft palate, zipped into a ripped sleeping bag in an empty gondola car, who awoke with a jolt when the sleet suddenly struck him, interrupting a dream about a carousel. Alex wiped the sleet from his face, blinking blearily. He had dozed off after hopping the train earlier that morning. He glanced around the gondola car. All of his treasures were still there. His backpack. His fiddle. The battered milk carton he'd filled with water at a faucet at a gas station by the rail yard. By the time he had crawled out of the sleeping bag the floor of the gondola car was rippled with slush. He sat on the edge of the gondola car in his hat and his jacket as the tracks rushed past below. The train was clattering through a valley in the wilderness. A herd of elk was grazing in a meadow. A flock of geese was flying toward the mountains. The peaks were snowy. Alex wiped sleet from his face again, quietly looking around, feeling pure awe. He had been wandering the country ever since graduating school, over a year now, hitchhiking and dumpster diving, busking and hopping freight. He hadn't warned anybody that he was leaving. He wondered if his parents actually missed him. He wondered if his sister still wanted to be a senator. He didn't care about politics. He didn't believe in a god. He wasn't exactly an atheist either. He had gotten stabbed in the stomach

by a gutterpunk at a convenience store the night before. Alex lifted his sweatshirt and carefully peeled back his bandage to look at the wound. The cut was red and ugly and looked infected. He needed to disinfect the cut. A bridge had appeared on the horizon. The train was approaching a vast gorge. The gondola car trembled beneath him as the train sped up with a shriek of the horn. Alex dug through his pockets for the tube of ointment he had gotten at the pharmacy. His hands were streaked with dirt and grease. He squeezed a glob of the antiseptic onto the tip of his finger. The sleet had turned to snow, a wild blizzard flurrying past the train with the wind, and as the train rushed over the bridge and the blur of ponderosas down in the gorge, he reached down to spread the ointment across the wound, bracing for the pain like somebody bracing for impact, somebody in a speeding vehicle bracing for an unavoidable collision, somebody in a truck about to crash into a streetlight. An owner of a local barber shop, dressed in chinos and an oxford with blue suspenders, gripping the wheel of a rusted truck with oldies playing over the radio, whose steering had gone out just as he was making a turn, sending him hurtling toward a streetlight with screeching brakes. Jamaal got punched in the face by an airbag the instant the truck hit the streetlight. Whiplash. Glass had shattered. For a second he was too stunned to think. He coughed. He blinked. His ears were ringing. The radio was still playing. Motown jams. Jangling tambourines. Jamaal staggered out of the truck down onto the pavement, resting back on his hands with his legs splayed out across the road. He'd been taking a shortcut through a neighborhood where all the houses were abandoned. Dandelions were growing in all the yards. He saw a pheasant with iridescent feathers scurry into a thicket behind a decaying garage. He noticed a couple of mice quick skitter across the sill of a boarded window. The weather was mild and sunny, and he could smell the melting snowbanks along the curb, the sweet scent of the thaw. Jamaal sat there a minute just smelling the air. After a while he realized he might be in a state of shock. He

looked over at the truck. The comic book his daughter had left in the truck had gotten thrown onto the dashboard, leaving superheroes peering out between cracks in the windshield. His daughter had a dance recital later that night. His daughter loved sequins like frat boys loved beer. The truck looked totaled. He realized he'd rather risk dying from a concussion than call the police. He realized he'd never be able to collect insurance without calling the police. He had to report the accident. He didn't have a choice. He took out his phone as a breeze drifted through the neighborhood, rustling the tarp hanging over a door across the street. He hated having to interact with cops. He'd once seen a pair of cops beat his brother unconscious with metal batons. He'd once witnessed a pair of cops shoot his neighbor dead in the street. He thought cops who attacked unarmed people should get the electric chair. He thought immigrants should be welcomed. He thought healthcare should be universal. He thought drugs should be legalized and regulated by the government the same as tobacco and alcohol. His wife had told him to bring in the truck for a checkup months before. Jamaal briefly imagined his daughter having to grow up without a father because he'd been killed by a couple of trigger-happy pigs, imagined the scene in such graphic detail that his jaw clenched and his back stiffened and his hand squeezed tight around his phone, and just then in the derelict house across the street the tarp hanging over the door rustled again, and out stepped a barefoot kid in a ratty tank top and some stained cotton shorts, and the kid padded across the porch and down the stoop and into the yard, carrying a plastic cup of lemonade with the careful reverence with which a preacher would carry a chalice of sacramental wine, and then after glancing in both directions as if to check for oncoming traffic, the kid came into the street, walking gingerly over the twigs and the pebbles and the scattered glass, and offered him the cup. Jamaal hesitated, looking at the kid, then took the cup, and drank a sip of the lemonade and felt a shiver of relief and breathed and then tipped the cup back and gulped the lemonade down until

there was ice on his face and the lemonade was gone. He must have been more shaken by the accident than he'd thought, because the sweet cold taste of the lemonade was profoundly comforting, so comforting that he was suddenly teary, blinking the blur from his eyes, swallowing a lump in his throat. As the kid vanished back into the derelict house, he felt overwhelmed with gratitude, like somebody who had just recovered a precious object, somebody holding a belonging that could have been lost forever, somebody who had briefly believed that the belonging was gone. An executive of a financial services corporation, wearing diamond earrings with a collared blouse and a red skirt, clutching a framed postage stamp that she had bought as a child, the first investment that she had ever made, which was now her single most valuable possession. Laura hung the stamp back on the wall in the bedroom. She had swung by the grocery store after yoga to buy peaches for cobbler, and had arrived home to discover the window by the door had been shattered, leaving shards of glass scattered across the steps. Her husband, who was out of town on business, had made her promise to wait for the police before going into the house, so she had waited in the driveway, gripping the pepper spray from her purse, clutching the tire iron from her trunk, keeping a lookout for the intruder. An officer had arrived on the scene minutes later, greeting her as respectfully as a minister about to perform a baptism, and then had proceeded to search every room in the house. The intruder was gone, along with the televisions, the stereo, the speakers, a laptop, and some costume jewelry from her vanity. All of her valuable jewelry had been locked in the safe in the bedroom, along with the antique china her grandmother had given her as a wedding present. Laura didn't care about the stolen electronics. Electronics could be replaced. The officer had left her a number to dial for updates on the case. Laura had already called a contractor to come fix the window in the morning. After sweeping the glass and taping a tarp over the window frame, she went out to the porch swing out back, sitting with the pepper spray and the tire

iron on either side of her, each within reach of a hand. The air was hot. The shade felt wonderful. Her heart was still pounding. A graphic novel her son had been reading over spring break was lying on the seat of a rocking chair, with a smirking supervillain on the cover, dusted with a bright grit of pollen. The spine had a call number for the college library. Late fees were coming. Her son was flunking a required math class again. Her son was as ambitious as a lunch lady. She watched a squirrel scamper across the grass. She watched a cardinal flit through the underbrush. The brittle clumps of moss hanging from the oak trees swayed with a breeze. Laura lived in a gated community. She wondered how the intruder had gotten in. She wondered where the intruder was at now. She had seen a suspicious teenager walking through the neighborhood just the weekend before. She had been too lenient. She should have reported it. Racial profiling could be a useful tactic if, speaking just solely in terms of the statistics, a vast majority of crimes were committed by people of a particular ethnicity. Laura knew the issue was complex. She could sympathize with the victims. Rap music was the problem. The rappers were to blame. For creating a culture that celebrated gang violence, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, and contempt for law enforcement. She thought foreigners who belonged to extremist religions should be banned from the country. She thought foreigners who entered the country illegally should be punished like any trespasser. She thought taxpayers shouldn't be forced to cover medical bills for strangers. She thought musicians who admitted to breaking the law, who bragged about committing crimes, should be prosecuted accordingly. The lyrics should be treated as confessions. She felt violated by the burglary, she suddenly realized. She wanted to cry. She hated that some random thug had set foot in her home. Her neighbor, a judge, stepped out onto the porch next door with a platter of ribs, giving her a friendly wave before lifting the lid on a grill, and though she hardly knew the judge, though she had spoken to the judge only once and even then merely to remark upon the weather, at the

moment she was so desperate for a familiar face that the sight of the judge made her feel overcome with joy, like somebody reunited with a crowd of beloved relatives, somebody who had been alone way too much lately, somebody ecstatic not to have to be alone anymore. A retired nurse, a heartbroken widow, wearing a white raincoat over shorts and a tee with plastic sandals, crouching on some wet kelpy rocks along the shore of the ocean, surrounded by grandkids she adored. Beatriz called her grandkids over to her, pointing at a bright anemone. She had brought her grandkids to the beach to explore the tide pools. She had made her grandkids a stack of blueberry pancakes earlier that morning. Sleepover weekend with grandma. The difference between videochatting with her grandkids and seeing her grandkids in person was like the difference between a firecracker and a firework. A sprinkle of rain was falling, and all of her grandkids were buttoned into raincoats too, all wearing the hoods up to keep dry, except for the youngest one, who instead was wearing a flimsy neon visor. Jellies shimmered among starfish in the tide pools. Barnacles were crusted to the rocks. Back on the beach, colorful mounds of seaweed lay on the golden sand. Some teenagers in wetsuits sat next to surfboards, cracking jokes about the president. Beatriz wasn't political. She never voted. She had been retired for nearly a decade now. She had been a widow less than a month. She didn't have a favorite grandchild, loved every grandchild equally, loved every grandchild unconditionally, but her husband had had a favorite, the youngest one, the timid munchkin, the delicate runt, who was hanging back nervously as the other grandkids gathered around her at the tide pool. Her husband had given the visor to the child at the hospital the night before dying. The child wore the visor everywhere now. The teenagers in the wetsuits had strolled off down the beach, leaving behind the surfboards. Beatriz reached a finger into the tide pool, touching the anemone, and smiled as her grandchildren squealed and exclaimed at the sight of the tentacles closing around her finger, and then lightning flickered through the

clouds and thunder rumbled across the ocean and on the cliffs behind the beach a great wind blew through the trees in the forest, the redwoods and the sequoias, and then the wind rushed across the rocks in such a powerful gust that her hair whipped back and forth and some of her grandchildren staggered and the youngest one stumbled as the visor got blown straight off of his head. The visor tumbled through the air before landing out in the water, and the child cried out in distress, shouting the name of his dead grandpa. Beatriz reacted without thinking, moving purely on reflex, kicking off her sandals and tossing aside her raincoat and stepping down into the water, shouting at her grandkids to stay back on the rocks. The visor hadn't sunk yet, was floating on the surface, gently bobbing with each wave, far out from the rocks, and as she waded out into the shallows she felt the water rise to her knees and her thighs and then soak her shorts and rise to her navel and her ribs and then soak her tee, and by then she was getting close to the visor but the wind was still blowing and there was too much resistance from the water to keep walking and so she began to swim, and she could hear her grandkids shouting behind her, and she knew that the visor didn't actually matter, that the visor was only a material object, but she knew that to her grandson the visor mattered, that the visor was a priceless memento, and so she kept swimming, even when she realized that there was a current, even when she realized how strong the current was, even when her arms began to tire, until finally she glanced back and saw how far that she was from shore, how small that the children seemed, and that was when the waves began to overpower her. A wave hit her in the face and she coughed and she hacked, choking on the saltwater, blinded, and before she could recover she got hit in the face by another, and her arms were burning, and her legs were aching, and her lungs were weary, and as a wave lifted her and dropped her with a frightening lurch she looked back at the beach feeling weak and foolish and helpless and scared, and she remembered what her husband had once said to her about being afraid of failure,

that there was no shame in failing, only in giving up or never trying to begin with, and she remembered his face and she remembered his hands and she remembered his laugh and she remembered the way that when she was young and he was young and she was strolling with him down the sidewalk sometimes he would glance over at her and stare at her blankly and then suddenly shout go and then he would break into a run and she would have to run too, laughing and sprinting and pumping her arms, racing him to the nearest stoplight, and as she struggled against the waves she heard his voice shout go, and she felt a surge of adrenaline, flaring her nostrils and clenching her jaw, and rather than turning back she swam on toward the visor, kicking and panting with an arm extended until she was almost close enough to touch the visor with her fingers, reaching for the visor like somebody straining to catch a ball, somebody desperate to make a rebound, somebody leaping with an outstretched hand. A convicted felon, with buzzed hair and neck tattoos and bright blue eyes, playing a game of pickup in a prison yard, who tipped the basketball out of bounds and swore and grimaced and then jogged back down the court with the rest of his team to set up some defense. Carter bent over with his hands on his knees to catch his breath as another inmate crouched to tie a shoe. There were still icicles hanging from the part of the drainpipe the sunlight never touched, but the air was warm enough that the icicles were dripping, forming a puddle over by the wall, shimmering on the concrete like a mirror. Carter was so hungry his mouth kept watering. He already knew what was for lunch. Turkey sandwich. Cranberry sauce. His cellmate worked down in the kitchen. Carter glanced up, still breathing hard. These gigantic clouds as colorful as the maps in an atlas were floating in the sky. A couple of pigeons suddenly flew over the prison yard, twisting and darting. Carter felt a glimmer of pleasure. Pigeons had always been his favorite bird, had always been his favorite animal, period. Those shimmers of color along the throat. That soft light color in the feet. Just because pigeons were com-

mon or ordinary didn't mean that pigeons couldn't be special. Pigeons were beautiful. He had never understood why everybody thought pigeons were disgusting. He stood back up again, wiping sweat from his face. The pigeons had been flying in the direction of the harbor. The bay. He imagined the pigeons gliding over the water. He remembered going fishing once with his dad, pattering through the islands in a rusted motorboat, just before twilight on a balmy summer evening. Throwing a baseball back and forth in the street. Splitting a striped box of popcorn at the ballpark. Praying together during mass. Eating dinner together in the light of the lamp. Oyster crackers. Clam chowder. He wondered if his dad would still be alive by the time he got set free. His father was a serious person, a lawyer who liked to make speeches about the importance of voting. Carter had still been too young to vote back when he'd gotten arrested. He wondered if he would have bothered to vote in the election that fall if he hadn't been in prison. Maybe not. The basketball got passed back inbounds, putting the game back into play, and he crouched with his legs tensed up and his arms spread wide and his fingers dancing in anticipation, ready to steal, grinning with excitement, like somebody on the verge of a confrontation that had been years in the making, somebody eager to clash with a sworn enemy, somebody impatient for a decisive battle to begin. A tenured professor, with a nose piercing and freckles and shiny red hair twisted into a bun, chained to a bulldozer in a desert, who had been sitting there waiting since an hour before dawn. Rivka could finally see trucks approaching in the distance. She was ready for a showdown. The governor had lifted the protections around the land the week before, giving a gigantic mining company permission to strip the land for coal. In response, an environmental organization that she belonged to had orchestrated a protest at the site of the planned mine, acting on a tip that the operation would be beginning that morning. A protester was now chained to every bulldozer. Approaching the site, the trucks gradually slowed and then came to a halt, and miners in coveralls and ball-

caps stepped down from the cabs, frowning and cursing. Rivka was only mildly surprised that the miners were actually so ignorant as to be visibly upset at being prevented from destroying a natural wonder. The miners conferred with each other, speaking in grunts, with appalling grammar. Like all conservatives, the miners appeared to be simpletons. Trailer trash, inbred hicks, each with the approximate intelligence of a lump of gefilte. The type of idiots who were against abortion but didn't mind sending the military overseas to kill foreigners, who weren't opposed to slaughtering an entire village in a drone strike just to eliminate a single target. Who thought a human life was unconditionally sacred only until the baby was born. A miner shouted into a radio in the cab of a truck, explaining the situation, asking for orders. Rivka glanced over at the beautiful strata in the mesa on the horizon, the parallel bands of color from different sources compressed into a single landform. Sand. Clay. Silt. Lime. Volcanic ash. A hawk coasted on currents of air above the desert. A rabbit with twitching ears was hiding behind a cactus. A fluffy cloud was drifting across the sky. Rivka could smell the smoke from the wildfires in the canyon. Her boyfriend was crouched behind a nearby boulder with a phone, streaming the protest live over the internet. He had studied feminist theory back in film school. He was working on a documentary about toxic masculinity. She loved how brilliant he was. She was regretting wearing leggings. Most of the other activists were wearing shorts. She felt overheated. She felt dizzy. She hadn't had any water since daybreak. Her tongue kept sticking to the roof of her mouth. Her tee was clinging to the sweat on her back. She hadn't expected the sun to be that intense so early in the morning. She was going to get dangerously sunburned, even with all the sunscreen she'd applied. She didn't care. She participated in protests nearly every weekend, and she went into every protest knowing that death was a possible outcome. To endure, to thrive, a democracy needed activists. Civil disobedience. Nonviolent resistance. She was an unabashed socialist. Some of the rallies she organized were for

unions, or universal healthcare, or prison reform, or gun control, but most were to fight against climate change. The melting glaciers. The rising waters. She was trying to save the planet. A couple of miners came over to inspect the chains, and as the miners murmured together, some of the protesters began to sing, warbling a hopeful protest song. The mix of voices was beautiful, high with deep with rough with sweet, some slightly out of tune, and listening to the song made her feel wonderfully calm, like somebody on a vacation, somebody relaxing in a deck chair, somebody with toes in the sand. A freelance programmer, wearing designer sunglasses with a dark polo and a white swimsuit and a latte in hand, browsing the internet on a tablet in the shade of a thatch cabana, whose only plan for the day was to take a dip in the water sometime before dusk. Nathan had spent the morning googling different memes. He hadn't taken an actual vacation in years. Moments earlier a sudden cloudburst had drenched the city with rain, and now that the sunshine was back the air felt steamy, and seagulls were flying over the ocean, and sailboats were drifting across the waves, and the empty hammocks hanging between the palm trees were swaying with a breeze. An elderly treasure hunter in a floral shirt and khaki shorts was wandering the beach with a metal detector. A couple of faggots walked past. A family with a stuttering retard. Kids wearing souvenir hats from one of the amusement parks. Nathan drank a sip of the latte. He was considering ordering a margarita next. Maybe some crab for lunch. He had been programming since kindergarten, when a teacher had showed him how to view the source code of a search engine. He didn't really identify as a supremacist. He preferred to be called a nationalist. Fascism actually got a bad rap. He volunteered for a fascist website, helping to keep the website online, to protect the website against attacks. His girlfriend was in the hotel, getting a massage in the spa. She didn't support all of his positions, but she did of course agree that there was no link between climate change and human activity, that the media was institutionally corrupt, that affir-

mative action was inherently racist, that political correctness was draconian, that welfare programs incentivized unemployment, that there was a socialist plot to take over the country, and that college students were being radicalized by the university system. He loved how smart she was. Thinking about liberals made him tremble with rage. All of the lies. All of the hypocrisy. The bigoted censorship. Pretending to champion free speech while stifling any opposing views simultaneously. The website he volunteered for had been taken offline over a dozen times in the past year. A hosting company would drop the website in response to protests, so he would find a new hosting company for the website, only to have that hosting company drop the website eventually too. By now almost every hosting company on the planet had already banned the website. The company currently hosting the website was literally the last bastion of free speech. He was just thankful there was still somebody out there with the courage to resist the internet mob. Pilgrims had suffered less persecution. Nathan glanced at the empty hammocks and the palms trees, looked at the sunshine on the ocean and the waves, and then he clicked over to the website he maintained, and a jolt of alarm went through him. Instead of the home page, an error page was displayed. Nathan stared at the screen in disbelief. The website was offline. He tried refreshing the page. The page still wouldn't load. He tried not to panic. Maybe the hosting company was only doing some routine maintenance. Maybe the website was going to be back online soon. He was terrified this hosting company might have finally banned the website too. His heart was racing. As the latte went cold in the cup, he hunched over the tablet, carefully tapping at the screen like somebody laboring over a work of art, somebody dabbing painstakingly at a canvas, somebody who still wasn't sure whether the desired image would ever appear. A famous painter, with box braids and furrowed eyebrows and a blotchy white birthmark across the throat, wearing flipflops with a linen dress and a pair of eyeglasses with clear frames, listening to music over earbuds

while squinting at a painting on an easel, standing on an airboat in a marsh. Imani had been struggling with the balance of the composition. She wasn't painting the marsh. She didn't paint landscapes. She didn't paint scenes. She painted abstract representations of natural objects. The light on the water had a certain multilayered quality that she was trying to capture. Nearby, a pelican floated near a log. A heron stood motionless among cattails. Dragonflies flitted over lily pads over by a heaped mound of branches, maybe a beaver dam. Imani bit a lip, scrutinizing the canvas, and then reached for a couple of tubes of paint. The air was humid, and she felt a drop of sweat trickle from her armpit down her side as she blended the colors together. All that she cared about was art. About creation. About expression. Money didn't interest her. Awards didn't interest her. Politics. Celebrities. Tabloids. Pop culture. She liked to listen to planetarium soundtracks while she painted. Music that made her feel the emotional tenor of outer space. The mystery of being a sentient organism on a terrestrial planet drifting through an unimaginably vast universe. The cryptic history of the human species. The breathtaking future. She believed in visions. She believed in prophecy. She had never experienced astral projection personally, but the possibility exhilarated her. She subscribed to a sidereal system of astrology with a thirteenth astrological sign. She read tarot for her friends after brunch every weekend. She had been almost continuously single her entire adult life. Relationships weren't as satisfying as sex with strangers. The driver who she had hired to take her into the bayou was beautiful, but maybe too young. Imani glanced at the driver where he was flipping through a fishing magazine over by the engine of the airboat. She studied the definition in his forearms, his biceps, his triceps, his calves, what she could see of the rigid musculature in his thighs before his thighs disappeared into his shorts. He was as sturdy and sinewy as a classical statue of a demigod. She briefly imagined fucking him in the boathouse back at the launch. Then she thought about her aunt and her uncle, who had raised her, and who

had both recently retired, and had been using the free time to pester her, constantly nagging at her to settle down and get married. Imani glanced away from the driver back to the canvas, and just then the battery in her phone died and the music playing over her earbuds went silent, and for a moment she heard only the sounds of the swamp, the humming of nearby cicadas, the distant whooping of cranes, a faint trickling of water, and she looked around the swamp, and she got an eerie feeling, and then suddenly hail began to fall from the sky, massive lumps of ice that hit the airboat with pings and thunks and clangs and thuds before bouncing off of the airboat into the water. On instinct she quick crouched and covered her head with her hands, and the driver ducked and shielded his head with the fishing magazine, and there were splashes around the airboat as lumps of hail hit the water, and hail rained down on the airboat, and the easel hit the deck with a clatter. Just as fast as the hail had appeared the hail was gone, and then the bayou was quiet again, and she looked around the swamp with a feeling of apprehension, searching for meaning in the hail, interpreting the hail as an omen. She registered the driver asking if she was okay, though she didn't respond. Her painting had been destroyed. Lumps of hail lay on the canvas, already melting, blurring colors. With a sense of dismay, she wiped the hail from the canvas, feeling sad and bitter that so much time and effort had been ruined in seconds by an act of nature, but then she froze, staring at the canvas in astonishment. The painting was perfect. The changes made by the hail had balanced the composition. Every stroke of color now had the perfect placement in relation to all of the others. She saw the whole of the visual system in an instant, like somebody connecting the dots in a monstrous conspiracy, somebody who hadn't even been looking for signs of a conspiracy but who had suddenly noticed the signs had been there all along, somebody who should have come to the realization long ago. An army veteran, with a straw hat and a frizzy bob cut and a red thong, sunbathing topless in a reclining lawn chair on the shore of

a lake, whose mind was wandering between memories when in a moment of inexplicable clarity she suddenly made a connection between a random news story that she had recently read about online, a basic history fact that she had memorized in elementary school, and a peculiar phrase that she had once glimpsed on a classified document back in the military, and in a flash, a breathtaking possibility, a horrifying relationship, formed in her mind. Maria had just lit a cigarette. The shock of the revelation made every detail in her surroundings seem ominously significant. Her cousins were over by the rope swing in a pair of fluorescent bikinis, preparing to jump into the lake. A dust storm had blown through town earlier that morning, these massive rolling clouds of dust as tall as mountains, and drifting particles of dust still glittered in the air. An armadillo waddled through the sagebrush, heading toward the plains, the grassy hills beyond. Heat haze shimmered on the horizon. Maria was a patriot, that was why she had enlisted, but she didn't see any point in voting. The politicians were all just puppets anyway. The deep state ran the whole show. The moon landings had been a hoax. Aliens were almost definitely monitoring the planet. Contrails were chemtrails. The fluoride in the water was for mind control. She didn't drink tap water. She only drank well water, for safety. Thinking about the connection that she had just made, she glanced up at the sun. That lone star. Maria kept staring at the sun until she heard vehicles approaching, tires crunching over gravel, and then she turned toward the sound, blinking through the afterimage of the sun burned into her vision as a pickup and a minivan and a convertible pulled up to the shore of the lake. Her ex was sitting in the bed of the pickup with an arm slung over a cooler. Maria had been avoiding him ever since splitting up, and normally seeing him would have stressed her out, but just then she felt intensely relieved that he was there, because he was the only person she could trust with her theory. She might have had her differences with him, but he was smart, and he was logical, and she knew he wouldn't hesitate to tell her if her the-

ory had any flaws. He had been the one to show her the truth about power structures and human society. Mass brainwashing. As much as her theory thrilled her, her theory terrified her, too. She wished the theory had never occurred to her. She desperately wanted for the theory to be wrong. Maria got out of the lawn chair, flicking the cigarette into the dirt, and stepped into a pair of sandals. Her ex had always hated when she'd gone topless in public, and she considered putting her top back on to avoid triggering any old arguments, but then she looked at him pulling the cooler out of the bed of the pickup, and he was topless too, and if he didn't have to wear a top then she shouldn't have to wear a top either, so she walked over toward the pickup topless. The afterimage of the sun was gone. Her ex was squinting at the contents of the cooler like a poker player examining a hand of cards. As she got closer to him she saw the constellation of moles on his neck, and she was suddenly struck by a memory of whispering with him in the dim neon haze of the arcade at the shopping mall, thumbing coins into a video game. Back when she had dressed grunge and he had dressed grunge. Baggy flannel. Ripped jeans. Back before she and he had gotten married. Now she and he were both divorced hipsters. She remembered drinking root beers with him over at the horseshoe pit behind the trailer where he'd been raised, remembered sneaking into a confession booth with him, remembered waving around glittering sparklers with him on the football field after the homecoming dance, remembered making out with him behind a woodshed during a game of capture the flag, and then was suddenly struck by a memory of her best friend in the army getting obliterated by a sniper in a spray of flesh and blood, and she felt a shimmer of horror. Maria had been out of the army almost a decade, took all of her meds like she was supposed to, and sometimes the memories still fucked around with her head. The wailing of muezzins. Eyes peering from niqabs. Her ex turned from the cooler, looking startled when he saw her approaching. He nodded at her in greeting, looking unsure, almost anxious, as if he was expecting her to

get angry at him, to tell him he couldn't be at the lake when she was. As she began to talk, he kept glancing down at her breasts, not so much in a judgy way as with a sense of longing, but as she tentatively explained the connection that she had made between the news story and the history fact and the classified document, he lost all interest in her chest, locking eyes with her, looking stunned, even frightened, and that was when she knew that she wasn't crazy. That her theory was plausible. That her theory was probable. That she might have just stumbled onto the biggest cover-up in the history of the republic. Her ex insisted that she couldn't keep the theory a secret, that she had to tell the others, and then he called the others over, shouting at the others that she had something serious to say. As everybody at the lake gathered around her she was overcome by a sense of gravity, like somebody standing on the edge of a precipice, like somebody preparing to step off of the precipice, somebody suddenly acutely aware of the speed and the force with which gravity could pull a body to the ground. A naturalized immigrant, wearing a dress and a peacoat and a windup wristwatch, with skin as thin and as wrinkled as a dollar bill on the verge of being taken out of circulation, standing at the edge of a curb in orthopedic shoes, afraid that attempting to step down from the sidewalk to the street would mean a spill across cobblestone. Wei hesitated before making the descent, planting her cane for stability. She hobbled along the cobblestone as her niece and her nephew strolled ahead of her, chatting about a new bakery nearby, about the hygiene of the mayor. Wei had lived in the city for over half a century. In her homeland she had been an engineer. Here she had worked as a housekeeper. Now her arthritis was so bad she could barely grip her cane. Her fingers were fantastically gnarled. Her hands bulged with blue veins. She held the peacoat to her chest as a breeze rushed down the street and made the dress flutter around her legs. Earlier that morning as she had heated a kettle of water for tea at the stove the window in her apartment had been crystallized with frost, but the temperature of the air had since

risen above freezing, and now every pane of glass in the city was clear. A flock of ducks flew over the skyscrapers toward the river. Rats darted out from behind a trash can into an alley. She flinched as a mob of teenagers on skateboards clattered past her with yelps and hollers, and then she saw the towering marble pillars of the stock exchange, and she saw her granddaughter waiting for her over at the entrance, waving and smiling. Wei grunted as her niece and her nephew promised to wait for her at the entrance, and then her granddaughter led her into the stock exchange, into a security area with a metal detector and a uniformed guard. The guard asked for her name and her birthdate and her address and her identification, as nosey as somebody taking a census. While the guard waited for her to dig her wallet from her purse, her granddaughter bantered with the guard, and then the guard inspected her identification, and checked for her on a list, and waved her down with a wand, and then told her to enjoy her visit, and she followed her granddaughter down a hushed darkened hallway where her shoes squeaked on the linoleum, an unnervingly long hallway, a seemingly endless hallway, until her granddaughter finally stopped at an imposing door. Tucking a stray strand of hair behind an ear, her granddaughter said that this was it, that the trading floor was just through the door. Wei remembered lifting her granddaughter onto her shoulders at a holiday parade when her granddaughter was only a child, remembered watching her granddaughter squeeze a tube of chocolate chip cookie dough onto a sheet pan, remembered teaching her granddaughter how to play songs from an animated movie on an electronic keyboard, remembered bundling her granddaughter in a coat and boots and a hat and mittens when the weather turned bitter, and looking at her granddaughter now she was suddenly amazed by the size of her granddaughter, by the confidence of the movements and the gestures that her granddaughter made, by the quality of the suit and the heels that her granddaughter wore. She felt intimidated, but then her granddaughter glanced back at her and reached to take her by the arm and called her by

the special pet name used only for a grandparent, and then she felt powerful again, felt the great pride of being a respected elder, and she gripped her cane and straightened her back and held her chin high and then stepped through the door, hobbling into a vast marble hall with a vaulted ceiling and a massive flag. The trading floor was immense and breathtaking and somehow reminded her of the inner chambers of a temple. Felt sacred. She had fled her homeland to escape persecution, after being harassed for praying to a statue of a bodhisattva, after being harassed for praying over a lit stick of incense, after being beaten for trying to defend a group of monks, for refusing to denounce her faith. She had come here for religious freedom. She had traveled ahead of the rest of her family, arriving in the country alone, carrying a battered suitcase stuffed with photographs and a camera and a calculator and a journal. Jumbled clothes. Wei had voted in every election since being granted citizenship. Even midterms. She wasn't conservative. She wasn't liberal. She was a moderate. She believed in balance. In doing whatever was necessary to maintain political equilibrium, to save a country from the horrors of revolution. That was her great prayer, the prayer that she offered at the shrine in her apartment every morning, that the opposing forces of conservatism and liberalism would remain in a state of balance rather than tear the nation apart. An empire could collapse at any moment. Her granddaughter had wanted to take her into the stock exchange during business hours, but crowds upset her, and noise upset her, so instead her granddaughter had offered to take her into the stock exchange over the weekend, when all of the brokers would be at home and the trading floor would be quiet. Wei stared at the circular kiosks arranged like altars throughout the room, at the arcane symbols hanging over the kiosks, at the cryptic screens glowing in the kiosks, with her heart beating hard. Glancing over, she saw her granddaughter looking at her and realized her granddaughter had brought her there hoping to impress her, and she was impressed. She was astounded. Her granddaughter had secured the job straight

out of college. She could scarcely believe her granddaughter worked at such an important institution, especially at such a young age. Wei turned away, gripping her cane, looking at the gigantic brass bell that she knew was rung at the start and close of each trading day, thinking about how unfathomably complex that the national economy was, about the dramatic changes in fortune that room had witnessed. How precarious the balance was. The balance of supply and demand. The balance of risk and caution. The balance of tradition and innovation. Of yin and yang. She had an urge to ring the bell. The urge surprised her. She hadn't had such a playful impulse in decades. She did, though. She wanted to ring the bell. The longer she entertained the idea, the more the idea delighted her. She decided that she would do it. The decision made her feel young and mischievous, like somebody creeping around a suburb with a can of spray paint. A graffiti artist, thirteen years old, with big eyes and dimpled cheeks and a charming snub nose, wearing a bright red windbreaker, white sneakers, and some faded blue jeans, spraying anarchy symbols onto mailboxes and fire hydrants and telephone poles and dumpsters. Drew shook the can with a sense of glee. The weather was perfect for graffiti. A thick murky fog drifted through the streets. Mist blurred the windows of cars and houses. Nobody was outdoors except for him, and nobody indoors could see him. Raccoons and chipmunks rustled through the evergreens along the road. He trotted across the street toward the bank across from his school. His school mascot was a sasquatch. His parents had still been asleep when he'd slipped out earlier that morning. His tongue still had an aftertaste from the cereal he'd eaten for breakfast. He had been an anarchist for years. He knew how to make fertilizer bombs. Smoke bombs. Letter bombs. Pipe cannons. Grenade launchers. Molotov cocktails, flamethrowers, napalm, nitroglycerin, nitrocellulose, and land mines. He could arm an entire militia with a single trip to the supermarket. All he needed were soldiers. He had already begun recruiting. America, like any nation, was only a notion, a concept in-

vented by a bunch of crusty old colonists wearing wigs and corsets who had known fuck all about the world. All government was tyranny. All states were oppressive. The only legitimate laws on the planet were the laws of nature. Drew crouched by the flagpole at the bank, spraying an anarchy symbol onto the flagpole in a splash of fluorescent color. Every anarchy symbol he sprayed was meant as a call to arms. A warning to the citizenry. An uprising was coming. Take heed. Make ready. Drew stood and capped the can of spray paint, thinking about the arsenal of weaponry back in his bedroom, fantasizing about the day his plans would go into action, and then he glanced toward the road and froze, because standing there in the fog and the mist was somebody who looked exactly like him. A doppelganger, wearing the exact same color of windbreaker and jeans and sneakers. The face of the figure was obscured by the fog and the mist, but the similarities were still creepy. The build. The stance. The style of the hair. The figure seemed to be staring at him. Drew took a step back, gripping the can of spray paint. Goosebumps tingled down the skin on the back of his neck, his shoulders, his arms. He suddenly felt that something terrible was going to happen. He heard a patter of footsteps behind him, his friends coming to meet him, calling his name, and at that exact moment the figure faded, vanishing back into the mist and the fog like a myth, like an illusion. Like a mirage disappearing as the light shifted. Like a hallucination passing as the fever broke. Like only a figment of the imagination, there and then gone. Just like that.

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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