

Song Of *i*

Matthew Baker

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Nicholas Surrey is at the kitchen table wearing a normal green t-shirt and normal blue jeans and normal white socks and just starting his homework for precalculus that's due *tomorrow* when his aunt comes banging through the door still wearing her work uniform and shouting about how his goddamn cousin ran away again. Nicholas Surrey's mother is flipping through notes in her briefcase at the counter. His mother is divorced and his aunt is never-married which in the 17th century would have meant that Nicholas Surrey was a boy and that his cousin Taylor was a bastard. But now it's the 20th century and that doesn't matter. What does matter is that Taylor's grandparents are what they call Hispanic which means that Taylor's father is what he calls Latino which means that Taylor is what he calls Native and what everyone at school calls Wetback, Spic, or Nigger. Nicholas Surrey is learning about imaginary numbers such as *i* which is the square root of -1. *i* does not exist but mathematicians use it anyway because it is useful for solving certain problems.

"The little shit has an algebra exam in the morning and hasn't even started his English homework," his aunt says [forte]. "I locked him in his room, so he jumped out his window."

"Going where?" his mother says [mezzo-piano]. His mother pours a glass of juice but his aunt doesn't want anything.

"He wasn't about to tell me," his aunt says [forte]. "But I'm guessing nowhere good."

His mother hands the juice to Nicholas Surrey. Nicholas Surrey already has a plan. He pretends to pencil in an answer.

“We’ll find him,” his mother says [mezzo-piano], taking her purse down from the wall. “We’ll drive around all night if we have to.”

“I have to wake up for work again at three a.m.,” his aunt says [staccato]. She sits at the kitchen counter, taking off her nametag and her apron. “Three a.m.” [decrescendo]. “That little shit is on his own.”

Nicholas Surrey knows that calling his cousin a little shit is what might be considered his aunt’s *ostinato*. Nicholas Surrey has been playing the violin since he was five. He drinks the juice and says he’s going to the bathroom and then runs upstairs to his room which is not the bathroom. Nicholas Surrey lies only when lying is better than telling the truth.

I leave the house at nightfall, wearing my brass spectacles and my very best hat. It’s a black top hat I obtained recently on a trip to the islands of Malta. It’s spring, and the air is sticky, and the air stinks of ragweed. At nightfall on a school night, all of the local roughs are out—Phil “The Big D” Deroos sprawled out on the trampoline in his backyard; Jordan “Rotten” Otten and the Beatriz sisters cranking off on their bikes toward the bus garage and the abandoned tennis courts; Amy Green and her friend Katie B., hunched on Katie B.’s porch, eating what appear to be sandwiches. I wear my fanciest union suit—with an actual fireman’s flap—and yellow galoshes. I also wear a yellow sailor’s jacket, in the pockets of which I carry my matchbook, a tiny knife, and a couple of chocolates. I prefer dark chocolates with an orange filling.

I hop the fence into The Big D’s backyard. The Big D has Valerie P. lying on the tramp with her shirt off and also her belt but not her pants. I offer The Big D a truffle.

“Piss off,” The Big D says.

“Don’t pay attention to him, pay attention to me,” Valerie P. says, tugging on The Big D’s shirt.

“I can’t when he’s just standing there like that,” The Big D says.

I pocket the truffle.

“I’m looking for Taylor Whitman,” I say.

“Hey, okay, I don’t know where Taylor is,” The Big D says. “So please will you go terror-ize someone else?”

I pick up Valerie P.’s shirt and take out my knife.

“If you don’t tell me where Taylor is I’ll carve up the girl’s shirt,” I say.

Valerie P. crouches at the edge of the tramp.

“Put down my shirt, Queerley,” Valerie P. says. Which isn’t my name—she’s confused me with someone else. I find this often happens with high schoolers.

“Is there a party tonight?” I shout. “Are there any girls with parents out of town?” I poke my knife into the silk of the shirt, just enough so the knife doesn’t actually pop through but so Valerie P. still gets the message.

“That blouse cost me a hundred dollars,” Valerie P. says. “If you so much as nick it, Queerley, I’ll knock you straight through the top of your hat.”

I don’t say anything. Valerie P. reminds me of a sailor I once met in the Galapagos. I hated that sailor.

“Anyway, there’s a big fight at the gravel pit, so maybe he went there,” Valerie P. says.

“Grazie,” I say, kissing the collar of her shirt and draping the shirt over the edge of the tramp. I take off my hat, and I bow, and then I patter off into the night, knife still in hand.

What Nicholas Surrey likes about his cousin is that parts of them overlap and parts of them don’t, so that they’re the same but also different. One of them is descended from a

circus ringmaster; one of them is descended from a convicted bootlegger; they're both distantly related to Boris Karloff. Nicholas Surrey's grandparents are what they call Italian which means that his father is what he calls Italian which means that Nicholas Surrey is what he calls Italian and what everyone at school just calls White. His cousin Taylor says that Nicholas Surrey isn't White and that in the 19th century Nicholas Surrey would have been called Wop, Guido, or Guinea. Taylor does not believe that White exists. Taylor thinks that White is just an imaginary word people use for solving certain problems. And Nicholas Surrey believes that, because he knows someone who is part Vietnamese who everyone calls White and someone from Israel who everyone calls White and someone half Brazilian and half Colombian who everyone calls White too. But he knows someone else who is part Vietnamese who everyone calls Korean and an exchange student from Israel who everyone calls Al Qur'an and someone from Central America who everyone calls Fucking Cuban. At school, what White actually means is +, and everything else means -.

What Nicholas Surrey got from his father was a brain that's good at learning things, which is why as a seventh grader he is in precalculus and anatomy and chemistry, which are all high school classes, and a heart that's bad at pumping things, which is why he failed his physical and couldn't try out for the basketball team *or* the baseball team *or* the soccer team, which made him feel sad^{sad}. What Taylor got from his father were muscles good at building themselves, which is why he is big and good at fixing things with his hands and why Nicholas Surrey wants to be him, but Taylor got cut from the basketball team anyway, he says because he's Native, the coach says because of his attitude. What they got from their mothers was each other.

I cut through the bus garage, sneaking through rows and rows of empty buses, then across

the abandoned tennis courts and the meadow and into the gravel pit. This isn't the first assignment I've taken in Michigan—I know the area quite well. I wiggle under the fence and light a match to look at the map posted along the gate. Back in the meadow the crickets are screeching, but in the gravel pit it's quiet, only rocks.

I creep through the hills toward the pit. The Jeluso twins and Unibrow Tommy are hunched along the top of a gravel pile, peeking at something beyond. I scramble up the dark side of the pile, shadowed instead of moonlit, and drop alongside them.

“Greetings,” I say.

Unibrow Tommy ignores me. The Jeluso twins nod at me, then turn back to the pit. Below, the high schoolers are perched in the beds of pickup trucks and on the roofs of minivans, some of them with bottles, some of them with pipes. Jordan “Rotten” Otten and the Beatriz sisters are sitting across the pit halfway up a gravel pile, their bikes stashed below. I recognize some of the high schoolers: wakeboarders, hockey players, most of the homecoming court. Not a flutist or mathlete among them.

“I'm looking for Taylor Whitman,” I say.

“So was everyone else,” a Jeluso twin says. “That's why we're here.”

“Go on,” I say.

“Today Taylor told Crumb to fuck himself,” a Jeluso twin says. “So now Taylor and Crumb are going to fight to the death.”

“Crumb?”

“Adam Martindale.”

“I've heard tell,” I say. “Biggish fellow? Jaw like a horseshoe?”

“He's the one who got Kelsey Green pregnant last year, before Kelsey Green got hit by that bus,” a Jeluso twin says. “He made a speech about it at the homecoming game.”

“His mom owns the bar that does karaoke,” a Jeluso twin says.

“He sounds like the sort of fellow who would get along swell with Taylor Whitman,” I say, adjusting my spectacles.

“It all started because Crumb called Nicholas Surrey a faggot,” Unibrow Tommy says, still watching the crowd. But then one of the Jeluso twins elbows him and gestures at me. “Oh,” Unibrow Tommy says, looking at me for the first time. “Sorry.”

“Please, speak openly, I’m accustomed to such vulgarities,” I say.

Unibrow Tommy mutters, “Well, down there they’re about to kill each other over them.”

Then I spot my quarry: Taylor Whitman has stepped into the ring of high schoolers, squeezing past Graham “The Little D” Deroos and the Pitsch cousins and peeling off his shirt and tossing it at a girl wearing a black bikini. The girl in the bikini ducks his shirt and lets it fall to the gravel. Someone shouts Spic at him, and in a town where most everyone thinks they’re White, no one’s about to shout otherwise.

“He doesn’t look that scared,” Unibrow Tommy says.

“He looks scared shitless,” a Jeluso twin says.

If I had brought my pouch of banknotes, I could have bribed these middle schoolers into becoming my temporary sidekicks. But the pouch is back in my rented room, along with my pocketwatch and my lantern, and anyway I lost most of my banknotes a few weeks ago during an incident in Nepal.

I wiggle up the hill, trying to see better.

“Hey, keep down, are you crazy?” Unibrow Tommy says. “Those kids hate middle schoolers. They’ll bury us alongside Taylor Whitman if they catch us watching.”

Adam “Crumb” Martindale and about the entire wrestling team lumber out of a mini-van at the edge of the ring and shove their way through the crowd. Taylor’s big for a tenth grader but Crumb’s a twelfth grader and just big for a human. He has a man’s worth of blond stubble and a bellybutton the size of a silver dollar. Crumb knocks past kids in jer-

seys into the center of the ring. When he sees Taylor he just laughs.

“Those are some dark nipples,” Crumb says. Crumb’s chest is covered in fur. He has tattoos on his shoulders and most of his back—the number from his football jersey, the number of his weight class, the name of a girl, the name of another girl, a flag. The other wrestlers back into the crowd, looking like they’re waiting to get tagged in.

“Fuck a corpse,” Taylor says.

“He’s about to,” one of the wrestlers shouts.

“You don’t have to fight me,” Crumb says, taking a bottle of beer from someone in the crowd. “If you would just accept that Nicholas Queerley is a giant faggot, we wouldn’t have anything to fight about.”

“He probably is a faggot.” Taylor ducks as someone throws a can. “But that’s not the point. The point is that you’re all faggots too. And I’m a faggot, and Pitsch is a faggot, and Katie Bree is a faggot, and your mom is a faggot, and the people that work here in this gravel pit are faggots. We’re all each other’s faggots.”

“If you’re a faggot,” Crumb says, “then we have something to fight about.” He downs the rest of the beer, then palms the bottle, stepping toward Taylor.

“That sounds like my cue,” I say. I stand, the wind snapping my jacket, my galoshes sinking into the gravel.

“Oh Jesus,” Unibrow Tommy says, and I hear the middle schoolers skittering off down the hill behind me.

“Hey Tidbit,” I shout. “Want a chocolate?”

I slide down the hill and walk into the crowd. Everyone stares at me, not making any noise, not even breathing. Crumb’s laughing again. Taylor’s holding his hands over his face like either he’s ashamed or afraid of what’s about to happen.

I poke at a girl's name tattooed on Crumb's stomach.

"Choose a pocket," I say, sticking my hands into my jacket.

Crumb's laughing too hard to choose.

"Be idiotic if you choose left," I say. "Be annoying if you choose right."

He's still laughing.

"You're being annoying, so you chose right," I say. I offer him a truffle from my right pocket.

"How very thoughtful," Crumb says, still laughing, but tossing aside the bottle and bending for the truffle. "And totally gay."

"But you're being idiotic too, so you also chose left," I say, and I take the knife from my left pocket and grab his wrist and stab the knife into his hand. Crumb shouts and tries jerking away but can't, and I take the knife again and stab at his cheek, but he bats it away and then knocks me off onto the gravel and all of the high schoolers are either screaming or cheering. Taylor comes running but one of the wrestlers grabs him and tosses him down and one of the other wrestlers kicks me in the stomach and then for a long time I'm just trying to suck in some sort of air but can't. Crumb's wrapping his hand in his shirt.

"Get him out of that silly shit," Crumb says, not looking at me.

Then the wrestlers take my spectacles and my hat and my jacket and then, one by one, my yellow galoshes.

Nicholas Surrey is sitting in his pajamas in a gravel pit with his cousin Taylor Whitman. Nicholas Surrey is feeling < a hero and scared^{scared}. Taylor's hands are tied with his shirt and Nicholas Surrey's hands are tied with the sleeves of a yellow sailor's jacket. The jacket belongs to someone Nicholas Surrey knows who even in these circumstances would be feeling = a hero.

“Your mom’s going to freak,” Taylor says [piano].

“Your mom already did,” Nicholas Surrey says [pianissimo].

Crumb and his friends are trying to decide whether it’s wrong to beat the shit out of a seventh grader or whether under these circumstances it might be okay. Regardless they think it’s okay to beat the shit out of a tenth grader. Most of them have taken off their shirts. They all have tattoos—the school mascot, the numbers from their jerseys, the name of a dead grandfather. Crumb’s playing with a knife that belongs to someone Nicholas Surrey knows.

“And I still have algebra,” Taylor says [portamento].

“I’m only halfway finished with my precalc,” Nicholas Surrey says [piano].

“Fuck,” [fermata].

Nicholas Surrey is named for a county in England that borders the Kent, East Sussex, and West Sussex counties. Nicholas Surrey is 0% English. His great-great-grandfather who was what he called Italian and what everyone else called Wop, Guido, or Guinea changed his last name from Monte to Surrey when he was fifteen years old.

“Cut that faggot up!” someone shouts [allegro] from the roof of a minivan.

The remains of someone Nicholas Surrey loves are scattered around the gravel pit: the girl in the black bikini ashing a cigarette into the top hat; the spectacles on The Little D, as he impersonates someone Nicholas Surrey loves for the Pitsch cousins; the Beatriz sisters wearing the galoshes like puppets. A body’s been ripped apart and people are wearing it. Nicholas Surrey thought it would be fun to have an adventure with his cousin but knows now that an adventure with his cousin is only scary. It had never occurred to Nicholas Surrey that it was possible for high schoolers to hate a high schooler who had muscles and could make his free throws. It also had never occurred to Nicholas Surrey that it was possible for Taylor to get into a situation that Taylor couldn’t get out of. Taylor is supposed to

get away with everything.

“Why aren’t your friends here to yell things at Crumb’s friends?” Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-piano].

“Because they’re going through a phase where they hate me,” Taylor says [mezzo-piano].

“So they’re not going to save us?” [mezzo-piano].

“I don’t want to talk about it,” [piano].

What Nicholas Surrey knows about limits is this: say you have a function, like $f(x) = 1/x$. When $x = 1$, $f(x) = 1$. When $x = .001$, $f(x) = 1,000$. When $x = .000000001$, $f(x) = 1,000,000,000$. So as x becomes smaller—as x approaches zero— $f(x)$ approaches infinity. Nicholas Surrey knows he is a function too, and sometimes he feels like there is a sort of infinity his brain is approaching, like when his arms are saying things with his violin that there are no words for, or when his fingers are saying things with numbers.

“Why did you say I’m probably a faggot?” Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-piano]. “Do you really think that I am?”

“I could not care less,” Taylor says [mezzo-forte].

Nicholas Surrey enters a series of variables into his brain: the number of high schoolers in the gravel pit, the number of trucks and of minivans, the distance between Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman to the bikes belonging to Jordan “Rotten” Otten and the Beatriz sisters, the tightness of the sleeves of the jacket tied around his wrists, the number of matches remaining in his matchbook, the probability of finding a container of gasoline in the bed of a high schooler’s truck, the speed of Nicholas Surrey, the speed of Taylor Whitman, the speed of a six-foot-six-inches two-hundred-and-fifty-pounds on-the-football-team on-the-wrestling-team high school senior.

“Are you?” Taylor says [mezzo-forte].

“I’ve never really thought about it before,” Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-forte].

“If they give me a fair fight I’m going to tear that ape’s tongue clean from his skull” [forte].

“They aren’t going to give you a fair fight,” [forte].

“Spay the gay!” the high schoolers are shouting [homophony].

The wrestlers are laughing at something that Crumb said. Nicholas Surrey is still feeling scared^{scared}, but now he’s also feeling smart^{mastermind} + strong^{superhuman}.

“I have a plan,” Nicholas Surrey says [forte].

“An escape plan or a revenge plan?” Taylor says [forte].

“Both,” [pianissimo]. “How tightly are you tied? I’m going to call the Beatriz sisters over here, and when—”

Nicholas Surrey never finishes saying his plan, which was genius + perfect + mere-seconds-away-from-being-initiated, because Crumb has tossed the knife onto the gravel and has bent into the cab of his truck and is now walking back through the crowd toward Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman with a tattoo gun in hand.

[Caesura].

One of the wrestlers kicks Taylor Whitman in the stomach and Taylor curls up coughing up blood and one of the wrestlers kicks Nicholas Surrey in the stomach and Nicholas Surrey curls up coughing up nothing but what feels like everything, and then they untie both Taylor and Nicholas Surrey and unbutton Nicholas Surrey’s union suit halfway and yank the union suit down to his waist, and Taylor and Nicholas Surrey are splayed out on the gravel, and the high schoolers are cheering [falsetto + contralto], and with his gun Crumb writes a name onto each of them, somewhere they won’t be able to see it, at least not without a mirror, but where everyone else will be able to see it, all of the time, forever, if the cousins are ever again brave enough to walk around shirtless.

At midnight on a school night, even the local roughs are at home and in bed, but it's been a hell of a night for me and Taylor Whitman and his cousin Nicholas Surrey and we're still walking. I have my jacket and my knife and one of my galoshes, but my top hat is gone, and so are my spectacles—I'm hardly feeling like myself. This has been worse than Morocco, worse than Pakistan, worse than that entire week in Siberia. As we hike out of the gravel pit and through the meadow and across the abandoned tennis courts and through the bus garage with all of its sleeping buses, Nicholas Surrey tells me he won't need me anymore—his cousin has been found, he'll take things from here. Nicholas Surrey folds my jacket over his arm, doing me the courtesy of carrying home what remains of my galoshes. I bid them adieu, and then patter off into the night, disappearing into someone's backyard.

"I want to move," Taylor says [mezzo-piano].

"I don't," Nicholas Surrey says [mezzo-forte]. "As bad as it is here, it'd be even worse moving somewhere else and having to be the new person."

They walk through the middle of the street, Nicholas Surrey in his pajamas, Taylor wearing his shirt again. The lights are off in every house. There are no cars. Nicholas Surrey is happy to be with his cousin, who is so strong he didn't scream or make even a single noise when it was Crumb's turn with him. Nicholas Surrey's back hurts like it's very cold and very hot all at once. He knows that even though Crumb has won, this is not the end of it. This is the Da Capo. They are a song that Crumb will want to keep on singing.

"Next time don't come looking for me," Taylor says [forte].

"I know," Nicholas Surrey says [piano].

Nicholas Surrey is thinking about his precalculus homework, about how many problems he left unsolved. Then the headlights come swinging around the corner, flying toward them, and Nicholas Surrey and Taylor Whitman stop in the street, blocking the light

with their hands. Their mothers climb out of the car, leaning over the tops of their doors, yelling at them to get in, and calling them things that they know that they're not.

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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