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An Outing After Supper

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Abstract

Their grandfather made Edmund unlace his hobnailed boots where they stood near the lake and the yellow balloon with its wicker basket tethered to the dock.

Keywords

grandchildren, enemy, floating, death



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An Outing After Supper

A Story by Matthew Baker

Their grandfather made Edmund unlace his hobnailed boots where they stood near the lake and the yellow balloon with its wicker basket tethered to the dock.

With his boots off, mud came squishing through the weave of his socks. Ugsome clouds hung above the leafless trees. Edmund got into the balloon's basket bootless.

Edmund's brother, a whilom friend and now enemy, was hunched over the rot of a whitefish in the sand, pinking it with a tool from their grandfather's toolbox. He was muttering a curse on Edmund. He was not a boy for swimming.

Their grandfather handed Edmund the canteens of lemonade and the sack of square cookies they would take with them on their outing into the clouds. Edmund's brother was not coming. Edmund and his brother and their grandfather's stomach had each grown larger since their outing the summer before, and their grandfather had said that the balloon could not carry the weight of the three of them any longer. Their grandfather had chosen Edmund as his second. Edmund's brother would stay at the cottage with their aunts and their chores.

Their zaftig aunt stood on the porch, scraping charred gristle from the grill, watching Edmund in the balloon, her yellow dress ashy at her hips where she had wiped her hands. Their svelte aunt stood in the thicket behind the cottage in a dress patterned with raspberries, picking blackberries and raspberries and gathering the comminglings in a

striped bowl under her arm, watching Edmund in the balloon.

Their grandfather took the tool from Edmund's brother and adjusted the burners spurting fire into the balloon's skirt and gave the tool back to Edmund's brother, who was still ignoring Edmund in the balloon and instead considering the fish in the sand. *Goodbye, Pieter*, their grandfather said to Edmund's brother, rumpling his hair. *Tomorrow's outing will be yours.*

Edmund wished his brother would become his whilom enemy and now friend, that he would cheer as Edmund floated away with their grandfather and would shout at Edmund the secret word that they used to tell each other that through-and-through they were each other's man. But Edmund's brother scowled in a fashion that said that if he could not have today's outing, he would have nothing to do with tomorrow's. The balloon's basket heaved as their grandfather came into it in his muddy socks and took metal binoculars from a pocket of his jacket and handed them to Edmund, who began using them to consider an enlarged version of his whilom friend.

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Yet even as Edmund did, their grandfather untethered the balloon and flung shut the basket and hauled the burners' lines. Then the balloon went wobbling from the dock, over the oarless rowboat scuttled at the lake's bottom, knocking along the lake's shore through the branches of the leafless trees, whose twigs nicked at Edmund's arms where they hung over the basket with their shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows. Then Edmund grew tired of waiting for his brother's moping to become cheering and instead chose to perform a cruelty upon his brother—Edmund hooted at him down below, where he was still squatting in the sand!

At this his brother leapt up and shouted and threw his tool, which splashed into the lake, and his brother was running now, his pantlegs rolled to his knees and his bare arms pumping, running after the balloon. Their grandfather, who was winding knobs on the balloon's burners, was unaware that Edmund's brother, though grounded, was following them—was hurtling between the leafless trees, pattering across foam as a wave would slide onto shore and then pattering across mud as the wave would slide away again, hurdling wooden docks and overturned beach chairs—unaware until Edmund said, *Look, Pieter*, and then as the wind came scooping spray from the caps of the waves and whisking the balloon away from the shore and across the lake, their grandfather looked over the basket's edge and saw as Edmund's brother tried to follow the balloon across the water by running down a stranger's sunbleached dock and then flinging himself from the dock's tip into the lake, splashing about and shouting at them, this swimless boy. Their grandfather shouted, *Pieter, you idiot*, and Edmund wrenched at their grandfather's jacket and said *Take us down, take us down*, but their grandfather grimaced at Edmund in a fashion that said that their balloon could not sink back to the

lake soon enough for Edmund and their grandfather to help Edmund's drowning brother, and all they could do was watch or not watch. And so then it was Edmund the Watcher, and their grandfather the Shouter and the Coverer of Eyes.

Then from the leafless trees their zaftig aunt in her yellow dress came splashing into the water after Edmund's brother, their svelte aunt in her dress patterned with raspberries wringing her hands back on shore. Their zaftig aunt hauled Edmund's brother onto the dock, where a puddle spread with him at its center, and their svelte aunt knocked the water from his lungs, and still the balloon was floating on away. And Edmund shouted their secret word at his brother to tell him that Edmund was still his man, through and through, but from where Edmund was now, getting tugged into the ugsome clouds, Edmund knew that to his brother their secret word would sound just like any other.

Matthew Baker is the primary English translator of the interlinked novel *The Numberless* (www.thenumberless.com) and the randomized novella *Kaleidoscope* (www.kaleidoscopeof.com). He has an MFA from Vanderbilt University, where he was the founding editor of *Nashville Review* and where he now holds the program's Postgraduate Fiction Fellowship.

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