

Matthew Baker: 'Origin Story,' a Short Story

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From rationing and desperation, greatness can arise! In 19th-century Louisiana, during a wartime shipping blockade. In 20th-century Japan, during a devastating economic depression. Or here, in 21st-century Detroit, during a global pandemic, in a squat pink house. Astonishing to think, for all of the drama that went down during those months in the house, afterward it was all eclipsed by that one event.

“I’ve had a breakthrough,” Beverly announced, appearing in the doorway to the living room in a pink nightgown.

The entire family was there for the lockdown. Her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, somebody’s exchange student from Scandinavia. Beverly’s house was the smallest, but she had refused to go anywhere else for the lockdown, and so the family had come to her, bunking on couches and recliners and the spare bed in the guest room. Air mattresses in the basement. Beverly was a 90-year-old widow with a high school education, and though she was grumpy and gossiped constantly and often embellished stories with scandalous details that were obviously invented, the family was devoted to her. Everyone, that is, except for Ellie. Nose-ringed and tattooed, Ellie was a freshman in college, and although the two of them had adored each other when Ellie was younger, as Ellie had gotten older the relationship between the two had soured, and for years she and Beverly had hardly spoken. Perhaps it was precisely because the two had once been so close, inseparable at family gatherings, that the rest of the family found the conflict so troubling. The feud had only intensified during the lockdown, now that the two were forced to coexist every waking moment, to share a kitchen and a washing machine and a bathroom with a finicky toilet. Ellie seemed especially bitter about the ice cream. The space in the fridge was limited, the supermarket had been rocked by shortages and, in order to make the supplies last, Beverly had instituted a strict rationing system. The daily allotment for ice cream was meager: for each person in the house, only one scoop a night. It was that or run out of ice cream immediately and have no ice cream at all, and so the rest of the family had accepted this as the best solution, albeit a sad one. Every night for a week the family had sat around the living room together, eating single scoops of ice cream with a sense of deprivation. Ellie had been particularly vocal about how frustrated she was by the situation. But now the family saw that Beverly stood in the doorway with a bowl in her hands.

“What the hell is that?” Ellie said.

“An innovation,” Beverly said.

In the bowl a scoop of ice cream sprinkled with crushed ice sat atop a heaping mound of crushed ice. Beverly explained that she had made the crushed ice by filling a plastic bag with ice cubes from the fridge and then beating on the ice cubes awhile with a rubber mallet. This, she said, would be a game changer.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” Ellie said.

“Now each of us can have a full bowl,” Beverly said.

“Nobody wants to eat watered-down ice cream,” Ellie said, disgusted.

“I would be happy to try,” the exchange student said.

“I call it ice ice cream,” Beverly said.

“Ice ice cream,” the exchange student repeated, with a sense of wonder.

“That is the dumbest possible name you could have given it,” Ellie said.

“I actually spent a lot of time deciding what to call it,” Beverly said.

“Saying ice twice is redundant,” Ellie said.

The exchange student, whose name honestly most of the family could never remember, displayed a masterful grasp of the English language by suggesting that in fact the repetition of ice might serve a valuable purpose, syntactically, in that what English speakers referred to as ice cream didn’t literally contain pieces of ice.

“I’ve never hated anything more in my life,” Ellie said.

Beverly made ice ice cream for everyone that night, shuffling back and forth from the kitchen, and although nobody in the family liked having to eat watered-down ice cream, the appeal of having more in the bowl was undeniable. For the rest of the lockdown, the family ate ice ice cream in the living room together every night, carefully getting some ice cream and some crushed ice in each spoonful. Only Ellie refused. She wouldn’t even try it. Instead, each night she ate plain ice cream, a single scoop in an otherwise empty bowl. After she finished, she would glare stubbornly at the carpet while the rest of the family continued eating, savoring every bite.

“You know, there’s something about this that’s kinda nice,” Beverly said thoughtfully one night, moments after swallowing a spoonful.

Across the living room, Ellie snorted in contempt.

Beverly died in her sleep a month after the lockdown was lifted, and not until decades later did the family learn about chicory coffee and rice tea. In 19th-century Louisiana, forced to ration supplies during a blockade, people had begun adding chicory root as a filler to coffee, but by the time the war ended the state had developed a taste for the drink, and chicory coffee remained popular there to this day; in 20th-century Japan, forced to ration supplies during a depression, people had begun adding roasted rice as a filler to tea, but by the time the economy recovered the country had developed a taste for the drink, and rice tea remained popular there to this day. Nobody in the family had ever even tasted chicory coffee or rice tea, and yet the family came to feel a powerful sense of connection with those events, because the same phenomenon had occurred with ice ice cream. Even after the pandemic, the family continued to eat ice ice cream — at first occasionally, out of nostalgia, but then routinely, until finally with some astonishment the family actually came to prefer it. The wonderfully gritty texture of the crystals of ice in the ice cream. The gloriously smooth feel of the shards of ice in the ice cream. How the ice would make the melting ice cream glitter beautifully in the light. Eventually the creation was introduced to friends of the family, to co-workers and classmates, and from there even to total strangers. One summer a cafe in the old neighborhood added ice ice cream to the menu, and by the next summer there were stands serving ice ice cream along the river. A local news program did a story about tourists trying ice ice cream for the first time. In a newspaper article, the mayor referred to ice ice cream as a cultural treasure. The family experienced all of this with a sense of awe. Beverly had lived for 90 years, and to be honest, by that final decade of her life the family had come to think of her as a relic. Even she had spoken that way, as if the great events of her life were behind her. And yet only then, at the very end, shuffling about the house in pink slippers and a matching nightgown with her hearing aid chirping from a low battery, had she done the thing she would be remembered for. She had created a sensation.

Yet the greatest surprise in the whole saga was an incident that occurred before the family ever even left the house. On the day the lockdown was lifted, before she would allow Ellie to leave, Beverly forced her great-granddaughter to sit in a chair in the kitchen and eat a bowl of ice ice cream. Ellie ate each spoonful with a bitter scowl, grimacing with every swallow, commenting between bites on how the ice absolutely ruined the ice cream, how there had never been a greater atrocity in the history of the culinary arts, how the very concept was so utterly abominable that angels were probably weeping in heaven and how, by the way, she still thought the name was dumb. When she finally set aside the empty bowl, she looked at her great-grandmother, who was staring at her with a neutral expression.

“What?” Ellie said.

Beverly suddenly began to laugh, putting her hand to her forehead with a look of

helplessness, and Ellie smiled in bewilderment.

“You can’t fool me,” Beverly said.

“I’m being serious,” Ellie insisted.

Beverly had to lean back against the counter for balance, laughing so hard now that her shoulders were shaking, and seeing her cracking up, Ellie began to laugh, too, at first attempting to keep the laughter from breaking out, her mouth quivering from the strain of keeping a straight face, but then finally bursting out laughing with her face in her hands.

“You only came up with the idea to mess with me,” Ellie said.

“I was just trying to help,” Beverly insisted.

The two seemed caught in a loop. The harder that Beverly laughed, the harder Ellie would laugh, until eventually there in the kitchen the two were doubled up laughing together, in tears.

“What are we even laughing about?” Beverly said.

Afterward neither of them had been able to explain what was so funny. In that moment, though, something seemed to have been released between them. Ellie even let Beverly hug her, one last time, on the way out the door.

origin Story

By

Matthew Baker

A short story from The New York Times Magazine’s Decameron Project.

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Illustration by *Jaedoo Lee*

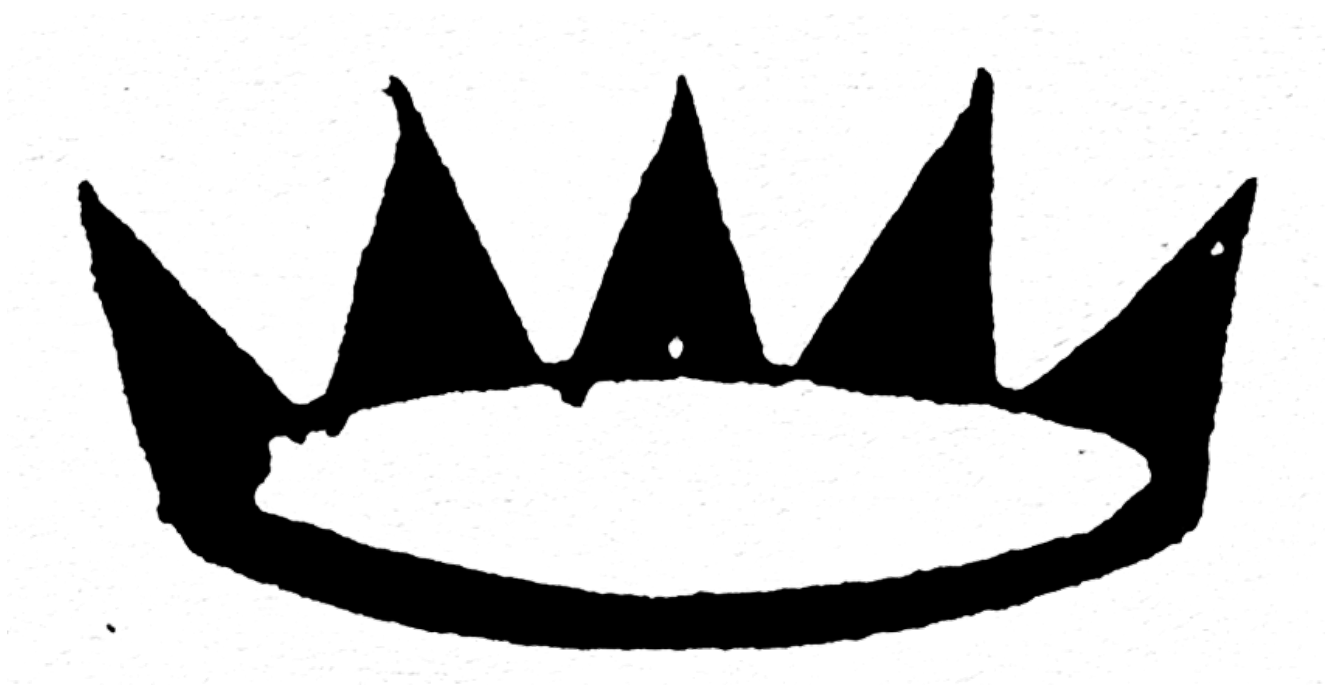
Spot illustrations and lettering by *Sophy Hollington*

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Matthew Baker is the author of the story collection “Why Visit America,” out in August from Henry Holt.

Jaedoo Lee is an illustrator in New York whose work is inspired by comic books and often uses highly saturated colors.

Sophy Hollington is a British artist and illustrator. She is known for her use of relief prints, created using the process of the linocut and inspired by meteoric folklore as well as alchemical symbolism.



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Additional design and development by *Shannon Lin* and *Jacky Myint*.

