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Tête-à-tête

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Tête-à-tête

Abstract

It's not like the ice rink downtown is a private establishment for members only with plastic membership cards that get scanned at the door, it's a public rink that anyone can go to who owns a pair of skates, or even anyone who doesn't, because if you want you can rent them at a window inside, and anyway you don't even have to skate, it's totally normal just to come and order one of the concession stand's city-renowned pretzels and sit at one of the tables along the edge of the rink and just watch everyone, or play videogames at the arcade next to the bathrooms by yourself having a good time, and if my boyfriend was going to take out some bimbo with a fur jacket and her own ice skates instead of yours truly on a super romantic date where they're wearing mittens and holding hands and are more snuggling than even skating out on the ice, he could at least have had the decency to take her to a private rink, am I right?

Cover Page Footnote

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BOOTH



A JOURNAL

Tête-à-tête

Fiction by Matthew Baker

It's not like the ice rink downtown is a private establishment for members only with plastic membership cards that get scanned at the door, it's a public rink that anyone can go to who owns a pair of skates, or even anyone who doesn't, because if you want you can rent them at a window inside, and anyway you don't even have to skate, it's totally normal just to come and order one of the concession stand's city-renowned pretzels and sit at one of the tables along the edge of the rink and just watch everyone, or play videogames at the arcade next to the bathrooms by yourself having a good time, and if my boyfriend was going to take out some bimbo with a fur jacket and her own ice skates instead of yours truly on a super romantic date where they're wearing mittens and holding hands and are more snuggling than even skating out on the ice, he could at least have had the decency to take her to a private rink, am I right? Where I'm not going to happen by the rink on that very same night of their super romantic date, just planning on getting a pretzel and maybe a soda before going out to one of the many costume parties and ballroom galas to which I'm frequently invited, and to which my boyfriend could not garner even a single invitation unless he happened to be dating yours truly, as he's not even that cute and is an economics major which is considered *très* boring among the playwrights and trombonists and escape artists with whom I tend to hang? So what am I to do, but wait until my boyfriend and the bimbo part ways, my boyfriend skating off toward the concession-stand side of the rink, the bimbo skating off toward the arcade-and-bathroom side, or, at this point, my side, as I happen to be heading toward the women's bathroom at that very moment?

In the bathroom the bimbo takes the extra large handicapped stall, despite the fact that she exhibits not even a single physical handicap, and the additional fact that all of the normal-sized stalls are also unoccupied, and when I hunch down on my knees outside of her stall, I see that

she's already tugged her super ugly black jeans down around her super dumb ankles. All the better—I'd rather not do this face to face.

I knock on the door of her stall, and she says, "Someone's in here," which obviously I am already very aware of, and which I think is exactly what I should be saying to her about *my life* and *my boyfriend*. Instead I say, "That guy you're with has a girlfriend." Then, of course, from pants-around-her-ankles, the expected, "Excuse me?" I reexplain the situation: man, extant girlfriend, you're a bitch.

Then things get *très* freaky, because I hear the lock on the stall door snap open, and then pants-around-her-ankles tries to open the door—pants still around her ankles! Which, does she think I really want to see *that*? Thanks but no thanks. So now I'm holding the door shut, and she's inside trying to kick it open with her pants-around-ankles monoleg, and that's when a mom with a saggy face and a twin kid attached to each hand comes swinging through the bathroom door, looking at me like, Jesus, this goddamn city.

Inside her stall the bimbo's saying, "Prove it," and I say, "His name is Peter Inconnu and he likes cop movies and no sugar in his coffee," but then before I have a chance to present any additional compelling evidence I see through the crack in the door that pants-around-her-ankles is in the process of transforming into a fully mobile pants-pulled-up-onto-her-hips, so I run past the saggy-faced mom and her twins and out the door back into the rink proper. Then I get my coat from my table and zip it up to my chin and tug my hood over my face and decide I've suffered enough shock and humiliation and outright degradation for one night, *merci beaucoup*. But after I leave, I wait outside the front entrance of the rink, peeking in through the windows, until I've seen bimbo skate back out to my boyfriend at the center of the ice, where he's waiting for her with a cup of something warm, and from the way they start swinging their arms around, I can tell that bimbo's asking him about me, and now they're fighting, and everything is good, so good.

*

Back at my studio I find a note from my landlord reminding me that exterminators are coming in the a.m., the necessity of which seems iffy to me, as I haven't seen a single insect or rodent or even nonhuman in my apartment since moving in a year ago, and as I am a private person who doesn't like having her apartment exhibited or her belongings trifled with, I call my landlord's office number and leave a message saying that I do ever so appreciate his offer to send a number

of strangers with foul-smelling sprays to come visit my digs, but as I'm currently caring for my great-aunt, a great-aunt who's just recently been confined to bed, a bed located in this very same studio he's planning to fumigate in the morning with black-market toxins, I'll definitely have to pass.

Then I call my sister to tell her the latest about my supposed-to-be-perfect boyfriend, and of course she doesn't answer, as she's probably either mad at me or busy getting skewered by her super nice husband on one of the counters of their super expensive flat. To which I would say—mad at *me*? Whilst thou are skewered by a dreamboat husband, and thy unfortunate sister doth suffer outrage after outrage at the hands of lesser men? My sister's husband is only so nice because he's from Canada, and in Canada they don't know how to be anything but. He and my sister work at an advertising company downtown, whose job it is to make people believe that toothpaste is *so* much better than just toothpaste. She's always mad at me for things I didn't actually do. Like when we were younger and our father went off to Paris with someone we'd never met and left my sister in charge for an entire week, and the other fifth graders on my bus asked why I was riding the bus instead of our father driving us like always, and I told them that my father had gone off to Paris with someone we'd never met and had left my sister in charge for an entire week, but when my sister heard she got mad at me for being what she thought was *très* untrustworthy and jejune, because all she'd told the ninth graders was that our father was busy and couldn't drive us, because she was afraid of kidnappers and burglars and also our father who apparently had specifically said that we weren't allowed to tell anyone about how he'd left us alone for the week, or alone at least except for the credit card he'd given my sister in case we wanted to order pizza or rent movies, which even though she hadn't told the ninth graders about Paris, she'd already shown them and the fifth graders and even the bus driver *that*. My sister has also gotten mad at me for flirting with her husband who was then just her boyfriend and who was actually flirting with *me*, for wearing an orange dress to her college graduation party when I knew she was planning on wearing an orange dress except that I *didn't*, and for entirely forgetting about her twenty-ninth birthday and not sending her a present or a card or even calling her except that I was super unwell at the time and basically just throwing up and vomiting and retching and dry heaving her entire birthday weekend, and how is one supposed to put together the customary birthday tribute for one's sister when one is more or less on one's deathbed at the time of the birthday in question? Moreover, does a twenty-ninth birthday really merit that much fuss to begin with? Wouldn't one think one's sister would prefer not to commemorate her being on the brink of middle-ageness, cultural irrelevance, and the general loss of good looks?

*

I take down the half finished sculpture from along my windows, which I've been working on as a surprise for my boyfriend, and which I now plan on destroying, either by wrench or by hammer, or by tossing it off the roof of my building and into the street. Then I notice—this sculpture is way too genius for me to just smash apart over a boy, am I right? Future generations might never forgive me? While I'm deciding what to do with it I accidentally finish an entire bottle of wine. Then my sister calls me back. "What," she says. I can hear dumb-advertising-party noises in the background. "What what?" I say. "What-did-you-call-me-for what," she says. I tell her about how my supposed-to-be perfect boyfriend has fallen in love with someone with superstar breasts and a cute button nose. "Since when is he a boyfriend?" she says. "Are you taking his side?" I say. "I can't believe you're taking his side." "Well," she says, "what's so good about him anyway?" "Everything!" I say. Which then I realize is true. At which point I realize that I can't destroy the sculpture, because I still want to give it to him. So I tell my sister about how the button-nose bitch took a handicapped stall and how I was about to kick in the door on her when some middle-aged woman showed up with her entire brood, at which point I realized that it wasn't the fault of button-nose anyway, and so I decided to leave the ice rink so that I might better plot my eventual and inexorable revenge. Which my sister thinks is funny, especially the part about almost kicking in the door, and finally she starts talking like she's somebody's sister instead of somebody's stranger, and tells me that if my boyfriend prefers a probably unemployed button-nose to a city-renowned painter and watercolorist and illustrator with exceptional and in-proportion breasts, my boyfriend can go get fucked, and that if button-nose thinks she's getting away with anything by dating a traitor and a cheat, she's got a thing or two coming. Then she does some freelance advertising and convinces me that life is *so* much better than it actually is.

*

I suffer the usual discrimination at work, my manager citing disheveled hair, wrinkled clothes, and a makeupless face as evidence of what he calls poor hygiene, which really means he's just afraid that we aren't going to sell much coffee unless us baristas maintain a fuckable appearance. He doesn't care about who he hired, about who I actually am. He wants me to be someone else. "No one wants to buy pastries from someone wearing a uniform that looks like it's been used as a dishrag," he says, "and smells like spoiled milk." Then he points out some crusted paint in my hair, and asks when was the last time I even showered. I explain that this very morning my apartment was invaded by exterminators, circumstances of which I was not even forewarned,

which forced me to vacate the premises, my *own premises*, for a three to four hour period, a period which I would have happily invested in a general cleaning-up-of-self, if I had only had the chance. At which point, as if to quite possibly stress out yours truly to the point of complete and utter mental collapse, my boyfriend walks into the café, wearing a super cute scarf.

I duck into the back and pretend to be slicing pears. Dessek the barista peeks through the doors. “We’re getting slammed,” he says. I say, “Can you just cover for me a minute?” Dessek says okay, only because he’s been head-over-heels in love with me since day one of my temporary employment here at this city-reviled café. Dessek’s uniform is wrinkleless, and his face appears recently soaped—obviously I hate him. For a while I read a magazine someone’s left in the back. Then Dessek peeks in again. “Wasn’t that that guy you were dating?” he says. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I say, flipping a page, not even looking at him.

And anyway, if my father still bothered to pay my rent I wouldn’t have to do the servile chores of a barista, but when my sister got married he cut the both of us off at once, which is why I was mad at my sister for almost an entire year. I consider my sister’s marriage a tragedy that forced the both of us to grow up too soon. Our father is one of the wealthiest contractors in the city—if we had both stayed single, he probably would have kept paying our rents till we were fifty. But of course the last thing my sister cared about was whether or not I ended up on the streets—for her it was just love love love. *Très cliché*.

Which somehow she even ended up blaming *me* for—talking to her about anything is talking to her about how you aren’t good enough. She’s just like my father. Tell him you made some new friends, he’ll say if you’ve got time for that, get an internship. Tell him you got a boyfriend, he’ll say at your age your sister was already engaged. Tell him you learned a recipe for roast fennel and quail, he’ll say last week he found a restaurant that makes the best quail in the city. If you don’t make enough money to keep your apartment? Watch less television, take night classes, find a man who’ll buy you your dinners.

My manager comes into the back. “What are you doing reading a magazine?” he says. “I’m on break,” I say. “You got here twenty minutes ago,” he says. I say, “Dessek said he didn’t need me.” Then I ask if I’ve sold any paintings since my last shift. I let the café sell my paintings—it likes to pretend it’s a part-time art gallery. “No,” he says. I once saw him stare at the butt of another barista for a full minute—she was bent over, picking up some pecans she’d spilled onto the floor. My friends know all about him. I’d tell his wife about him too, if she ever came into

the café. But Dessek says she has mouth cancer and keeps smoking anyway even now that she's hooked up to machines, so I guess that won't be anytime soon.

I go out front, take an order for a small chai latte, make it, ring it up, then let Dessek take back over. My boyfriend is sitting over by a window, eating some sort of pastry. I guess he hasn't noticed me. "Did you two break up?" Dessek says, dolloping whipped cream onto somebody's coffee. "Jesus," I say, "it's not like we were even that serious. We only went out three times. If I decide I'm not that into him, what's the big deal?" "Oh," Dessek says, buttering somebody's toast. "I thought you were more serious than that." To which I think, don't get any ideas, Dessek the barista—a recently soaped face will only get you so far. Dessek got kicked out of college for cheating on an essay test. He wanted to be a doctor, since his family is from India, but now he just works at a café. His life's going nowhere.

"Anyway," I say, "he's already started dating someone else." Then while Dessek is washing out an empty carton of milk I tell him about how I happened to run into them at the ice rink, and how his date started talking shit to me in the bathroom—from inside her stall, no less—and how I kicked in her door on her and then left her there, pants down, door open, and laughed the whole way home. "Funny," Dessek says. He has to pretend not to like me, to cover up how googly-eyed in love with me he actually is.

Dessek has to run into the back to get more milk, so I take someone's order, and when she orders a coffee I ask, "Sweetener?"—like our manager has told us we're *supposed to do!*—and she says no thanks. After I've cashed her out, my manager comes over and says, "Don't say sweetener—that makes it sound artificial and cheap. Ask if they want agave nectar or raw honey, so they know it isn't fake." "Since when is our honey *raw*?" I say, because I know it isn't. "Since always," he says. Of course he's itching his crotch through his pants this entire time.

*

Back at my apartment it looks like the exterminators never ended up coming after all—apparently my landlord got the great-aunt message in time to call them off. How I know is that the exterminators came through once before, and after they left my apartment smelled like rotten lemons for an entire week. But when I get back tonight, no lemons.

I'm supposed to hang out with my friend Carlo C., but he's not answering his phone. I'm afraid this might mean he hates me again, which sometimes he does, for only the stupidest of reasons. While I'm waiting I take off all of my clothes except for my socks. Then I stand in front of my mirror. Then I stand an imaginary naked button-nose bitch next to me and compare our bodies. What I like best about myself are the dark freckles on my nose and my cheeks, the bigness and whiteness of my teeth, and my clavicles. What I like best about the imaginary button-nose next to me is the smallness of her lips, the smallness of her eyes, and the way her breasts will sag in twenty years.

Someone knocks on my door. I think: boyfriend? Although I know it can't be him, because he doesn't know where I live, unless maybe he waited outside the café and then followed me home. He almost walked me home once after one of our dates, although I didn't care that he didn't—who wants to be walked home by an uncute economics major who can't even be bothered to pay for his date's coffee? Especially yours truly, the *crème de la crème* of twenty-something women? As we were at the café where I work, it didn't really matter—Dessek never charges me for coffee anyway. But my boyfriend—or now maybe ex-boyfriend—didn't know that.

It's my landlord. Of course I put on some shorts before opening the door, and also a sweater. "Rent?" he says. "I don't think my heater's working right," I say. "And I hate being cold more than anything." "Yes, but what about the rent?" the landlord says. He has a stomach you could fit small children in, if they were curled up in the right way. "Well, I have the money, but I think I ought to save it, just to be safe, because I don't have a job anymore," I say. "No job?" he says. "What happened to your job?" "I quit," I say. "It just wasn't working out. But I have a much better job lined up anyway, and I just sold a series of large paintings, so it will all work out. I'll send you a check next week." "Did everything go okay with the exterminators?" he says. "I don't think they came," I say. "Didn't come?" he says, squinting at me and rubbing his children-carrier. I say, "Doesn't smell like they did. What were they even supposed to kill?" "Anything in the building that doesn't belong," he says. "If they weren't here today, they'll be here tomorrow." "But what about my great-aunt?" I say. "What am I supposed to do with her?" "What great-aunt?" he says. "If you've got a second person living here we'll have to renegotiate the rent." "I never said anything about anyone living here," I say. "I was just asking about my great-aunt, but never mind." "Okay then," he says. "Exterminators tomorrow."

I bid the man *adieu* and again take off my clothes. I have the heat cranked up to eighty, because I really do hate being cold. I call my father about the rent, but he of course doesn't answer, and I

don't bother to leave a message. I look in my cupboards for something to eat, but can't find anything except for salty things, and if I loathe anything as much as the cold, it's salt. The worst part about seeing my ex-boyfriend at the café was that even after he definitely saw me he definitely didn't even bother to come over and say hi. Which, if you had recently had an adulterous ice-skating-with-a-button-nose date cunningly ruined by someone whose identity was unknown both to you and the button-nose in question, wouldn't you want to tell the story to just about *everyone you know*? Especially a woman with adorable freckles who had not once but thrice treated you to *gratuit* coffee and the most exquisite *tête-à-tête* imaginable? A woman with unparalleled abilities in sculpting and baking and the speaking of French? But apparently, despite her smallness of lips and smallness of eyes, button-nose had charmed him to the extent that he'd forgotten my very existence.

*

Carlo C. calls. "Hello?" he says. "Hi," I say, and explain who I am, in case he forgot. We met once at the supermarket—Carlo C. asked for my number, then gave me his. "Oh, that's right," he says. "Sure, sure, I'll come over." Carlo C. is a renowned attorney with a firm here in town.

I put on my orange dress and mid-thigh striped stockings. Next I try and fail to clean my apartment. Next I accidentally drink an entire bottle of wine. I call my sister but she doesn't answer. I hook on hoop earrings that are *très* hip, take them off, hook them on. Carlo C. is at the door and I'm holding it open, been holding it open—how long? Not sure. I decide no more wine for at least twenty minutes.

"Sorry if there's bugs," I say. "The exterminators are coming in the morning." Carlo C. is unfazed by the prospect of being set upon by creepycrawlies. "Cool sculpture," he says. "It's based on my ex-boyfriend," I say. "If you can't tell it's him, that's okay—it's abstract." "I like it," he says. "Very cool." Carlo C. is wearing a black button-up and smells like sex. I don't mean sexy—I mean he smells like he just had sex, very wet and sloppy sex, so recently that it almost surely must have happened somewhere in the stairwell outside of my door. "Anyway," I say, "I was going to destroy it, but if you want it, it's yours."

I tell Carlo C. we should go out to a costume party or ballroom gala but Carlo C. says he loves the ambiance in my apartment (*bien sûr!*) and wants to stay here. He opens a bottle of wine and

washes one of the snifters in my sink and pours himself a drink. I turn on some electronica, which I assume Carlo C. will like, as he's from somewhere in Eastern Europe.

“Don’t you work at a café here in town?” Carlo C. says. “I think I’ve seen you there.” He’s sitting on my futon, so I sit down next to him. “No, not anymore,” I say. “My manager told me they couldn’t afford to pay someone ten dollars an hour to come in and read magazines, or to chop up an entire box of pears that was supposed to last us the entire month. In other words, we’re not allowed to take breaks—which *has* to be illegal but we’re not allowed to do extra work either. Work too little, you’re fired! Work too much, you’re fired! So I quit.” “Too bad,” Carlo C. says. “I like that place.” He’s playing with one of my hoop earrings. “It only happened because my ex-boyfriend came in and I got all upset,” I say. “Him?” Carlo C. says, pointing at my sculpture. “Yes, him. Just last night I caught him with another woman,” I say. “They were out ice skating, and from the second you saw her you could tell *exactly* what sort of woman she was—ugly fur coat, super ugly black jeans, and him already snuggling up all over her. This in front of families—with children! I was supposed to meet my friend, a city-renowned skater—” “Who?” Carlo C. interrupts. “Does he play hockey? I love hockey.” “No,” I say, “he *hates* hockey. He’s a figure skater. Anyway, as soon as I saw my ex-boyfriend with her out on the ice, I called my ice skating friend and told him not to come—it’s totally platonic, but my ex-boyfriend was always jealous of the skater anyway, because the skater has super huge arms and a super rugged jaw and is an artist, and my ex-boyfriend was not even that cute and had girlish arms and a girlish jaw and was a mere econ major—*très* boring, am I right? Maybe now I’ll date the skater, now that things are over between me and my ex. Anyway, I ran into the bathroom because I was so upset—and who do you think follows me in but my ex-boyfriend’s new cunt- in-a-fur-coat? I don’t know how she recognized me, but she came in saying shit like, ‘Excuse me,’ and ‘What are *you* doing here,’ and when I tried to explain that excuse *me* bitch but you happen to be out on a date with *my* boyfriend, she said, ‘Prove it,’ as if she’d sooner believe *him* than yours truly. At which point I was wishing I *had* let my ice skater friend come, so I could have stood him up next to my ex-boyfriend and said to her, look, who gives a shit about your new cock-in-a-cute-scarf, because he’s pale and bony and thinks *cop* movies count as favorite films.” Carlo C. pours more into his snifter. “I love skating,” he says. “We should go sometime.” “No, I hate it,” I say. “Anyway, I told her to get fucked. Then I went banging out of the bathroom. But as soon as I did, I realized I had a whole lot more to say to her, so I went banging back in. She was in one of the stalls—apparently she’d had other business to tend to in the bathroom, aside from victimizing me—the handicapped stall, no less, with someone in a wheelchair already waiting in line outside of it. So I knocked on the door and told her what I

really thought of her coat and my ex-boyfriend, and told her that if she thought she was getting away with anything by dating a traitor and a cheat, she had a thing or two coming. Then she said, ‘Where do you get off, thinking you’re better than me, just because you’ve got perfect teeth and perfect freckles? You’re just a lonely bitch with no real friends.’ So I went to the sink, pounded on the soap dispenser about a hundred times until I had an entire handful of it, asked the woman in the wheelchair to wheel out of the way, and then kicked open the stall door, and I slapped her with my soapless hand, and then when she screamed I shoved my hand with the soap over her mouth and let her choke some of it down, really taste it. My father used to do this to us when we were younger—rinse our mouths out with soap if we said something bad.” “My mother used a wooden spoon,” Carlo C. says, tipping the rest of the bottle out into his snifter. “Not on our mouths, on our asses. But my brothers and I always had it coming.” “Well so did this bitch,” I say, “and she got it. I left her gagging down the rest of the soap. ‘She’s done now,’ I said to the woman in the wheelchair as I walked out the door. ‘It’s all yours.’ She gave me a thumbs up—she was on my side.”

“Damn,” Carlo C. says. “So what’d you do to the ex-boyfriend?” “Nothing yet,” I say. “What do you think I should do?” “As an attorney, I’m not going to say anything,” Carlo C. says, twisting the corkscrew into another bottle of wine. “But as Carlo, I say that soap trick is pretty funny—maybe hit him with that.” “No, he’ll get something a whole lot worse than that,” I say. “Well, if you do anything naughty, like naughty in the illegal sense, I’ll defend you pro bono,” Carlo C. says. “I’ll only do something I can get away with,” I say. “Well, if you want pro bono, I’m yours,” Carlo C. says. “The past couple months I’ve been defending a murderer—it’d be a nice change of pace.” I kiss Carlo C. We kiss for a while. Then we take a break and drink more wine. “I mean I don’t really give a shit about him or anyone,” I say, “but still it hurts to get passed up for someone else. Even if she’s not better, it makes you think she must be.” I swing my legs up onto the futon. “Who?” Carlo C. says. I kiss him again. “You have nice hair,” he says. Then we kiss again, for so long that I’m not sure if we’ve ever been not kissing or will ever be not kissing ever again. Carlo C. kisses my cheekbones and my eyebrows and my forehead and my cheeks, and he says, “You deserve someone better,” and I say, “I know,” and he says, “I’ll take good care of you,” and I keep kissing Carlo C., but as I’m doing it, I know how my ex-boyfriend must have felt when he was holding that bimbo’s hand through their mittens—how you can touch someone, and be thinking of someone else the entire time—I kiss Carlo C.’s dimples, and I’m thinking of the tiny gap between my ex-boyfriend’s teeth, and Carlo C. kisses my shoulders and I unbutton his button-up, and I’m thinking of the way my ex-boyfriend used to stir his coffee with a spoon even though he never took any milk or sugar, no sweetener, no agave nectar or honey,

raw or otherwise, and Carlo C. shoves my dress up over my hips and spits into his hand and makes what isn't wet wet, and I touch Carlo C.'s ears and his jaw, and the more I touch them the more I love the way my ex-boyfriend could talk to a complete stranger about economics and not be embarrassed or shy about loving such a nerdy nerdy thing, back when I was a complete stranger, when we first met, and as I tongue Carlo C.'s tongue the more of Carlo C. that I taste the more it makes me forget him, and I think, is this how my ex-boyfriend felt, holding the hand of that button-nose, but thinking only of me? And what now, now that I know this, know how he truly felt? When I have sent Carlo C. away again, will I have any choice but to gather my shoes and my half finished sculpture, and to trek through the night, by subway or by bus, to the apartment of my boyfriend, to end this silly quarrel? To tell him he's forgiven? To tell him that my love is a love that will not be beaten? To tell him that I want nothing more than to buy drapes with him, and eat ice rink pretzels, and read books to him under the covers of a bed we'll someday buy? How else could it ever have happened? I will buzz his door, and run up his stairs, and when he sees me he will be so happy—*très* happy—so happy now to not be alone.

Matthew Baker's stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *New England Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Best Of The Net*, among others. He is the primary translator for the interlinked novel *The Numberless*, the randomized novella *Kaleidoscope*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*. He lives in Ireland.