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Edgar Degas, *The Pink Dancers, Before the Ballet*, 1884.

# FOUR SWANS

by *Madison Garber*

**T**HE BLUE HAZE OF THE STAGE LIGHTS leaks into the wings, making the crystals on the four girls' costumes glitter like moonlit frost. Tchaikovsky's score is muffled by the velour drape hanging to their left, the thick fabric of the leg swallowing the speckles of light that the dancers cast as they shift from foot to foot. But if they were to ease to the right, mindful of the hot metal of the light tree, careful to stay out of the audience's sightline, they'd feel its notes shiver across their skin, like a hand skimming the stiff tulle of their tutus.

The first girl stands closest to the stage, absently adjusting the bobby pins that secure her headpiece. The down of its feathers tickle her earlobes as she smooths it into place with trembling fingers. She watches the pair onstage intently, like she does after a long day of rehearsals, her feet prickling in a bucket of ice water as she watches the ballet greats on her laptop: Pavlova, Tallchief, Fonteyn, Makarova. Last summer, she watched the older girls at the intensive she attended in the same way, choosing to see their quadruple pirouettes and their 180-degree penchés instead of the cigarettes a few would smoke outside the back door of the studio. What they discussed while they were out there she didn't know, but their expressions were usually distant—flimsy smiles constructed, she thought, for those who were meant to move on by the end. So when she finally returned home, she'd been happy to see her own company's dancers—her family—whose smiles remind her of laughs shared in cramped dressing rooms and whose hands were always the first to clap, even if unheard, from the wings.

She claps now, silent but eager, for the couple onstage as Siegfried lowers Odette to the ground, her brief flight overhead now finished. The first girl then turns to smile at the

next girl in line—the one who had hugged her after she'd danced her first solo variation and who, while not perfect in her technique, is always beautiful to watch—the one, she realizes, she looks up to.

The second girl returns the smile. Her body is still aside from the slight shift of weight from her right foot to her left and then back again. She wipes damp palms on the rough basque of her costume, wishing she had time to get another sip of water, settling instead for licking the fronts of her teeth. She chooses to stare down at the marley floor rather than watch the girl dancing the pas de deux onstage—the girl she's understudying for. After all, she'd done enough watching from the back of the studio during the past three months' rehearsals. She'd watched the other girl lose herself between the bass notes of her variation, watched her image appear on posters and programs and newspaper articles, watched her make her entrance for an audience that applauded her before she'd even danced a step. So rather than watch now, the second girl marks the port de bras with her hands close to her body, careful not to disturb the curtain to her left. She lets go of her thoughts and lets them float overhead among the flown backdrops where the stage lights can't reach them. She imagines her feet fluttering in tiny bourrés as she moves away from Siegfried, her arms arching up and down and up again in feigned flight, only to be drawn back with his beckoning hand.

When the music fades, the audience fills the silence with applause, the sudden sound raising goosebumps on the second girl's arms. Only when Odette and Siegfried rise from their final pose to take their first bow does she look up again, ready to focus on herself now—on her fellow swans. She turns to the girl behind her—the one she had helped perfect the



**read about tutus**

Edgar Degas, *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage*, 1874

quadruple beat of the entrechat quatre. It had taken a few weeks of practice between class and rehearsal time, but with her help, the other girl had finally gotten it. It makes her smile to see that girl practice the move now, quickly and precisely marking one of the sequences they're about to perform. When the third girl finishes jumping, the second reaches out to straighten a piece of upturned tulle on her tutu. They smile and then take each other's hands, squeezing tightly. The move steadies the second girl, grounds her here where she is needed—part two of their unit.

The third girl goes back to bouncing up and down on her toes, praying her Achilles tendon doesn't ache for once. With the muscles in her heel too tight beneath her shoe, her tights, her skin, she now wishes that she had shown up

earlier to warm-up class these past few months. This, instead of rushing in five minutes before, coming straight from a student government meeting (petitioning for more senior parking spots had seemed important at the time) or the prom planning committee (there was no way she was going to let them choose an "under the sea" theme) or, in one case, from a frozen yogurt date with her friends (she still remembers the milk sloshing in her stomach as she arched back in a cambré during the first exercise at the barre).

Standing in the wings tonight, she knows none of those fro-yo friends are in the audience. She knew as soon as she learned that her performance—and not her "recital" as her friends often call it, ignoring her cringe at the word—was on the same night as prom that they wouldn't be. She catches herself wondering



Edgar Degas, *Ballet Rehearsal*, 1873

where everyone had decided to go for dinner, whether the DJ they'd settled on for budgeting reasons sucked, and how the jungle decor had turned out. But then her eyes drift down to her costume, the crystals on her bodice stirring to life whenever she inhales. Their sparkle reminds her of the certain magic that lies in this in-between—in the tenuous safety she feels in the wings just before she steps onstage, before the audience's eyes fall on her and her breath turns to a dry gust through flared nostrils. In that moment, it takes conscious effort not to look closely at the crowd. Still, every time she enters, she can't help but notice the reflection of eyeglasses in the house.

Drawing a slow breath, she puts aside thoughts of bowties and boutonnieres and closes her eyes. She runs through the

choreography in double-time and when she opens her eyes again, decides that this is the kind of dancing she desires.

The fourth girl glances up at the third from where she sits on the floor, retying the satin ribbons of her pointe shoes for the fourth time, trying to find the right amount of tension—secure, but not enough to cut off circulation. Already feeling the distant soreness of her bruised toenail, she wishes she had time to retrieve a corn pad from her duffle bag in the dressing room. That bag has always been stuffed with pointe shoes and lamb's wool, athletic tape and elastic, dental floss and sewing needles, shellac, spare tights, and skirts, but more and more, other things have begun creeping in as well—the way a blister could form on a long day of rehearsal:



Edgar Degas, *The Dancing Class*, 1872

slowly, almost imperceptibly, until it was too late. A plastic butterfly barrette, a few stray Cheerios crushed to dust, a pacifier she keeps only for emergencies or for when her daughter watches rehearsal from the studio doorway, bouncing enthusiastically off-beat, her bare soles smacking against the marley.

The fourth girl thinks of her daughter now as she pulls her pointe shoe back into place and stands. Part of her is here, her chilled skin anticipating the hot stage lights and the stares of spectators, but another part is in the audience, hoping her daughter isn't babbling through the whole performance. She's not sure if she'll be embarrassed if the little girl calls out "Mommy!" when the four girls step onstage, or if the sound will steady her as she takes her position, trying to suppress a smile.

As the couple onstage takes one last bow, the four girls whisper "merde!" to each other—a last wish of good luck passed down the line with cheek kisses. Then they reach out, weaving their arms together so they can take each other's hands, grateful for something to hold on to as they leave the wings. When they take their first steps into the light, the house lapses into silence. It's quiet enough that the hard boxes of the girls' pointe shoes knock, to them, too loudly against the floor as they take their starting position onstage.

The way they stand, poised, seemingly patient as they wait for the music to begin, makes it hard to imagine that three months ago they'd jostled as they tried to move across the floor at the same pace, their crossed arms straining or bunching as the distance



Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, 1874

"... my chief interest in dancers lies in rendering movement and painting pretty clothes." — Edgar Degas

[Read](#) about Degas and his dancers.

between them became too wide or too narrow. Other times, they'd bumped feet when their échappés became too broad, or kicked each other's ankles when they moved just slightly out of alignment. But by the end of the rehearsal, when they finally had let go of each other's hands, it had felt strange—a phantom feeling that something was missing. They smiled at each other without having to explain.

When the four swans reach the end of their variation, finally letting go to strike their kneeling pose, they do so together. Then they rise to curtsy in one slow and fluid movement. As they exit, the audience sees their feet flutter more swan-like than ever beneath them, but they do not see the girls embrace as soon as they are offstage. ❖