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L'Étoile

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L'Étoile

S. A. Culyer

INT. BALANCHINE'S OFFICE - DAY

Melanie Roebing, prima ballerina sits down across from George Balanchine. She is young, thin, and nervous. Balanchine is old.

BALANCHINE: Do you want a treat, Melanie?

He holds up a platter of danishes.

MELANIE (emphatically): *No.* No, thank you.

BALANCHINE: Good girl.

MELANIE: Yes, Mr. Balanchine.

BALANCHINE: Now. It has come to my attention that you have been seeing Mr. Mancilla?

MELANIE: Who told you that?

BALANCHINE: It doesn't matter. Is it true?

MELANIE: We, um. We—

BALANCHINE: I understand that you all need to, as you say, blow off the steam. It has always been that way. I married my first wife because I needed to blow off the steam. It did not last, but that does not matter. We all need someone. I need someone, you need someone, but I repeat myself. In this case, I need you. I need you to be perfect, Melanie. You are twenty-four, how long do you have left?

MELANIE: I've never looked better. I've never danced better. I'm doing exactly what you told me.

BALANCHINE : You cannot focus on anything else. You can have your time together, but you cannot sleep with him. This is a crucial performance. So many donors! So much to do! You are the principal. You cannot be less than Giselle! He must be Albrecht. He cannot be less than Albrecht.

MELANIE: But, both of us are dancing better than we ever have.

BALANCHINE: I do not care if you are dancing better now, Melanie! You must lose him. You must lose your Albrecht! He is not worth the time. This is your life. My ballet is your life! MELANIE (lowly, weakly): I can't do it all, sir. I need him. Look at me, Mr. Balanchine. Look at me. I'm about to fall in on myself. I'm going to fall apart if I don't have him. He holds me together. I need him.

Balanchine pauses for a few beats and collects himself.

BALANCHINE: Then, after *Giselle*, we may have to assess your employment with my company.

MELANIE: *What?!* Why? You can't take this away from me. People come to see me! I've given you everything!

BALANCHINE: No, no, no. *We* have given you everything. We gave you the stage just across that pavilion, we have given you a generous salary. We have given you fame and a purpose. Myself and my Ballet have made certain that you have a place in the world. We have asked for very little, but you seem to have your own ideas about how you want to live.

He takes one of the danishes from the platter and eats it violently.

MELANIE: I fell in love with someone. That's all. It's nothing. I promise. I have to have something else. Something besides you, the stage, and the studio.

He stands up and plants his fist on the desk.

BALANCHINE: We weren't given a break at the Imperial Theatre. For seven hours we would dance. Seven hours a day, six days a week. We would dance if they couldn't find coal for the furnaces, we would dance if the sun burned the grass in the Summer Gardens yellow. We would dance if the roofs leaked or if the windows were broken by the rioters. We didn't stop dancing until the Red Army came across the River and broke the last stand of the Whites. I walked past bodies riddled with bullets, lodged in the snow on my way to my academy. You will stand here though and tell me you need something else? It is all I had because there was nothing else. I would have starved to death with the other dancers if I had not been good enough to find work outside of the Imperial Theatre. Find that desperation in yourself, or you will never be good enough to dance on my stage!

Melanie begins to cry.

BALANCHINE (cont'd): Oh, love. Don't cry.

MELANIE: I'm sorry, Mr. Balanchine.

BALANCHINE: You will leave us at the end of *Giselle*. I'm sure somewhere will take you. As I understand it, there's a company that formed a few years ago near your home town.

MELANIE: It's not like here.

BALANCHINE: I would expect not. They call it, what? Cold Country?

MELANIE: *Coal* country. But, why would I finish *Giselle* if you're just going to fire me afterward?

BALANCHINE: Because you're a ballerina, my dear. I have known many ballerinas in my time. I know you aren't able to do something halfway. You couldn't live with yourself if you didn't finish it.

MELANIE: I'll leave you. I will! *Goddammit*. Dammit all, I'll leave you now, Mr. Balanchine!

BALANCHINE: No you won't, my dear. I know you won't. Why don't you go downstairs to finish up the rehearsal? It's two thirty. They should just be beginning the Mad Scene. *Giselle* would be in a bad place if our principal ballerina weren't there to lose her mind before she dies.

They look at one another, and Melanie relents.

MELANIE: I'll let it go. I'll leave him.

BALANCHINE: Good girl. Off to rehearsals with you.

He pushes the platter of danishes toward her, and she shakes her head.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

Melanie Roebing and Jeffery Mancilla sit on the single bed next to each other. The room is small - no larger than a dorm room. There is an N.Y.C.B. poster behind them, one of a slightly younger Melanie dressed as the Swan Queen from Swan Lake. Jeffery is holding her in a Poisson dive.

We can see the record that is playing is Minkus' Don Quixote. Kitri's first variation, a bright, bounding variation from the ballet plays in the background.

JEFFERY (gently): Do you know it?

Melanie shakes her head.

JEFFERY (cont'd): We don't have to keep doing this, Mel. The doctors say you should be resting, this isn't resting.

MELANIE: Just give me a moment. Just a moment.

We can see she is becoming more annoyed with herself.

JEFFERY: It's because you haven't been eating. It's why you're here.

MELANIE (Angry and scared): Not everything can be because I don't eat sometimes, Jeffery! Even on 3500 calories a day, I can't remember this!

JEFFERY: Then what is this? We don't have to do this. We don't have to run through this every time I visit.

Melanie looks genuinely distressed.

MELANIE: I don't know. I did this one, I know. I can't remember, though. I did it in front of *thousands* of people. I don't know how I don't know!

JEFFERY: It's Kitri's first variation from *Don Q*.

MELANIE: FUCK!

Jeffery edges across her small room and puts his arms around her. Melanie tries to push him away, but he holds her tighter. She realizes he's crying.

MELANIE (cont'd): Why the *fuck* are you weepy!?

JEFFERY: I hate to see you like this. You used to be so much happier.

MELANIE: I used to be able to eat dinner without everyone losing their mind.

JEFFERY: You never forgot about dinner, you chose not to eat it.

He tries to hug her, she pushes him away.

MELANIE: *Fuck you.*

JEFFERY: I love you.

MELANIE: No, you don't.

JEFFERY: I came here with you! I left Balanchine, and a contract, and I came here because *I love you.*

MELANIE: You don't love me. If you loved me we wouldn't be in a dormitory. We would be at your apartment. I wouldn't be forced to eat anything I didn't want to if you loved me. You used to not care about how I ate.

JEFFERY: I do love you, and you love me too. That's why you're here and I'm with you. On the plane ride here, we said we'd do it together.

Melanie stands up and shakes. She looks older, more tired.

MELANIE: Maybe I don't love you. Maybe you should have come back. If Balanchine hadn't died, I would have left you to stay there.

JEFFERY (low and mournful): Don't say that.

MELANIE: Why? Because you'll realize how stupid you are?! Leaving Balanchine, and a paycheque for the *fucking* City Ballet?!

JEFFERY: I know it's just because you're here that you're talking like this.

MELANIE: *FUCK* off!

JEFFERY: I know how it—it alienates you from people.

MELANIE: What do they know? What the *fuck* do you know about it? You haven't been here!

JEFFERY: No I haven't so—

MELANIE: *You don't have to be here!* (murmuring) Please, please, just *fuck* off. Please.

JEFFERY: All right.

Jeffery stands up and gathers his satchel. He takes the needle off his record clumsily, and the music stops abruptly

MELANIE: Wait.

JEFFERY (almost sharply): *What?*

JEFFERY (cont'd) (softly, now): What?

MELANIE (plaintively): Just, can you sit here?

JEFFERY: Sure.

MELANIE: Can we listen to *Swan Lake*? End of the second act?

JEFFERY: Of course.

He finds the record in the milk crate underneath the bedside table, puts it on the record player, and finds the track.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Melanie is dressed in the costume of the Swan Queen. The red lights in the wings and the white lights of the stage cut her in two. Balanchine stands with her.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

Melanie rises from the bed, standing on the balls of her feet. Her arms at her sides, graceful, pale, and trembling.

JEFFERY: *Don't dance, don't overexert yourself!*

She just looks coolly at him, and he holds his hands up in surrender. The Swan Lake Act II finale fills the small room.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

To the rising tones of the violins, Melanie-Swan Queen makes her entrance, we see her from the wings.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

For a moment, Melanie shakes her head. Standing in the middle of the floor, she cannot recall what Odette's port de bras for the end of the second act of Swan Lake was.

MELANIE (In a whisper): I can't remember it. I don't know.

But, she realizes she is sick, she does have a problem, and she will rise above it.

The oboe's note rises, and the dark, low horns repeat them. She suddenly remembers: Melanie pushes her arms to the side, as if she is a swan, peering around a tree in a black forest.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Melanie-Swan Queen does the same motion. She stands en pointe, she is strong, and graceful all at once.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

Melanie bows her head beneath an arm before she raises it again. She crosses her arms in front of her sternum and lifts them to cover her face. She flaps them together once, twice, three times, she bows her head between her arms again. As the violins rise with the horns for the finale, she shakes slightly. Through the soaring violins, she uncrosses and flaps her arms like wings.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

As the horns explode for the last time, Melanie-Swan Queen crosses her wings and lowers them to her waist, and she freezes; he felt tears on his cheeks. Melanie bowed her head and curved her neck downward.

Somewhere, von Rothbart the Sorcerer has transformed her back into the swan.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

As the moment dies and the music for the next scene begins, she looks up to see Jeffery. He

stands like Prince Siegfried with his crossbow: the scratched record of Don Quixote trembled in his hand. Melanie realizes there are tears on her cheeks.

MELANIE: I'll be better. I'm sorry. I'll be better.

JEFFERY: I'll always love you, Mel.

MELANIE: I love you too. I love you so much.

She teeters, and with a small sob, she falls into his arms. She lets him put his arms around her and hold her together again.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER -
NIGHT

Melanie rises in her final pose, B-plus position, the music rises again, and the scene ends as she prepares to bow.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. MELANIE'S APARTMENT BATHROOM - NIGHT

There's a pregnancy test-- positive-- on the sink. The bathroom is in disarray.

FADE TO:

EXT. CITY STREET - CONTINUOUS

Melanie is walking desperately down the street, bundled against the cold. We follow her as she walks for what seems like hours.

She stops at a coffee shop and looks through the window. In the display case, there are bright red danishes. She goes in to buy one and leaves. When she looks at the danish outside, as she walks along she flinches, and hurls it into a trash can.

FADE TO:

EXT. THE METROPOLITAN PARK - CONTINUOUS

Barring one side of the Metropolitan Park is an Opera House, Melanie's face is on the

posters overlooking it. She focuses on them, watching them as she walks. She trips over a man, and looks down.

BALANCHINE: Melanie. You look the picture of health.

MELANIE: Mr. B.! I mean, Mr. Balanchine, sir.

BALANCHINE: It's been a while, my dear. You're still dancing. That boy put a baby in you, though. That could be an issue. Which is why you're talking to me. Again.

MELANIE: There were times, a lot of times, after I left, that I wanted to talk to you. After you died, especially.

BALANCHINE: I'm never dead, my dear. They still put my pieces on, they will forever. But we're talking about *you*. You must know doctors. We all know those kinds of doctors, for when we have those kinds of problems to fix.

MELANIE: I don't know if I want to do that.

BALANCHINE: Well. Do you want to keep dancing?

MELANIE: It's all I have.

From the shadow of his coat, Balanchine pulls out a danish, like the one Melanie threw away.

BALANCHINE: Take the danish, Melanie.

Melanie shakes her head.

BALANCHINE (cont'd): Take it. I suppose you're eating for two now?

MELANIE: Yes. I mean, no. I can't. Not if.

BALANCHINE: Not if what? Not if you want to keep dancing? Don't you want it? Are you eating for two, then? Are you eating at all?

MELANIE: No, no, sir. No. I don't want it. I've been eating too much.

BALANCHINE: Good girl. You'll always have the boy, you know.

MELANIE: Even after you get rid of it? This isn't about Jeffrey and me, it's about my career. It's about ballet. About me. Right?

BALANCHINE: I'm just a choreographer, my dear. I set the dance on the dancer, nothing more. I've always been there to give the rubber stamp to a performance.

MELANIE: You were a god to me.

BALANCHINE: I was a god, wasn't I? But what is God but a rubber stamp for how we live our lives? I could have told you to jump off the highest balcony in the opera house, and you would have done it.

Balanchine rips the danish apart with his front teeth.

MELANIE: What do I do, then?

BALANCHINE: That's up to you.

Tears glitter in Melanie's eyes.

MELANIE: I can't leave it behind. Even if I have to leave in a few years, it'll be worth it.

BALANCHINE: Good. A decision is good.

They look at one another for a time. Balanchine licks his fingers complacently.

MELANIE (abruptly): Was I ever thin enough for you? Pretty enough, I mean?

But there is no one else in front of her. She is alone, and the park is impossibly big. She sighs, sniffles, and pulls her coat around her. Melanie looks at her face on the banners, and she turns to go home.

FADE TO:

INT. MELANIE'S APARTMENT ENTRANCE - DAY

Melanie is waiting in her foyer. Jeffery lets himself into the apartment, crosses the floor, and kisses her. She does not hug him back.

JEFFERY: I missed you, how are you?

MELANIE: Fine. How was the production?

JEFFERY: They paid me well, I think we should do it together next time. I know you're busy with *Coppélia*, but I think they wanted both of us. Do you want to do dinner?

MELANIE: I don't know. I'm not hungry.

JEFFERY: Is everything all right? Are you sure you don't want some dinner?

MELANIE: I just missed you, that's all. Is it okay if we don't? I'm not hungry. I just ate a lot.

He looks at the spotless kitchen.

MELANIE (cont'd): I just cleaned it all up.

JEFFERY: All right. I might make myself something then. Why don't we have a nice lunch tomorrow? I know we can't do dinner together, because of your night rehearsals, but we could go to the café beforehand.

MELANIE: I can't. I have a doctor's appointment at that time.

She looks out the window. Outside, the dying leaves are drifting like white feathers one by one, from the skinny, barren trees. The cold, fat sun rolls in an amniotic sky.

FADE TO BLACK.