LE CYGNE BAISEUR

The women have gathered around Mr. Hubert, their eyes shining in the candlelight, their expressions eager. The hoops of their skirts bump and crinolines rustle as they jockey for position; looks containing entire conversations are exchanged. In spite of the lateness of the hour, the parlor is very hot. Sweat beads at the edges of their elaborate hairdos and trickles down more than one white-powdered cheek.

Mr. Hubert, the celebrated toymaker, is just as turned out as the women who surround him. Lace drips from his cuffs, and his waistcoat is embroidered with a garden's worth of fruits, flowers, and vines. He is enjoying their attention; it's obvious from his stance, his slight smile. By speaking in a low voice, he makes them lean in, exposing the plump tops of their corset-flattened bosoms, and tells them to come closer, even though they are crushed together already.

The women fall silent as he puts his hand on an object about the size of a sleeping St. Bernard, lumpy and obscure under a cloth. He asks them if they would like to see what lies beneath. They do; oh, they do—and once they have evinced an appropriate amount of eagerness, he reveals it with a showman's flourish.

The mechanical swan is a rococo wonder. The details are marvelous, from the painted feathers to the modeling of the sculptural components. It appears to sleep, eyes closed, metal beak tucked under wooden wing, long neck draped in a zigzag over its body.

The ladies stare at Mr. Hubert's creation as they ooh and ahh, but Mr. Hubert's eyes do not leave the women. He watches them watching it. At the ideal moment, just before their interest wavers, he produces an enameled key from his waistcoat pocket, also wrought in the shape of a swan. He jams it rather lewdly into the bird's backside, and turns it a few times as the women titter.

The swan stirs. It lifts its head, honks twice, and beats its great wings a few times, just like a real bird. Its movements are a bit jerky, clearly clockwork, but the illusion is remarkable. It even waggles its tail before lurching to its feet.

"What is it doing?" shrieks one of the women, as the swan wanders over to poke its bill beneath her skirts.

"Here." Mr. Hubert produces a handful of corn kernels and hands them to the woman. She frees herself from the swan and then leans down, hand extended. The mechanical

bird is immediately interested. It even lifts its head to swallow after nibbling delicately, then defecates on the floor.

“Clockwork my swan may be, but it has its… appetites,” says Mr. Hubert.

The polite applause fades away instantly. These women have been waiting for this moment; it’s obvious they have some knowledge of Mr. Hubert’s swan, and what it can do.

He smiles serenely. “I will need a volunteer.”

No one speaks up until the lady of the house, Mrs. Suzman, says, “Mrs. Fraser.”

Eyes swivel in their sockets to an older, dark-haired woman. She goes pale under her powder.

“Pamela,” hisses Mrs. Suzman. “Yours was the short straw.”

Mrs. Fraser, resigned, stands up a bit straighter. “I would love to assist Mr. Hubert,” she says evenly.

“Excellent.” He does not seem bothered by her trepidation. Instead, he offers her his hand and leads her to a gilded chaise lounge. She sits down, trembling, her dark eyes wide.

Mr. Hubert kneels beside where the mechanical swan has gone still and once again thrusts the key up its rear end. He turns it in a different pattern this time. The swan shudders and walks jerkily over to Mrs. Fraser. It bows to her, wings spread. Mrs. Fraser stares at it.

“You may find it a bit easier if you lie back and lift your skirts.” Mr. Hubert’s tranquil mood is just as terrifying as the swan, which has awkwardly leaped up beside her.

Mrs. Fraser hikes up her dress, exposing her clocked stockings and pale thighs. The swan cants its head to the right, inspecting what she has revealed, and then a large human-like phallus unfolds from its underbelly.

It is difficult to tell if Mrs. Fraser is aroused or frightened by the sight of the instrument. Curved and obscene, wreathed with veins, its purple head is bright against the whiteness of the shaft. But when the swan climbs atop her and penetrates her, her moans are pure pleasure. She writhes and bucks against the swan, eventually wrapping her ankles around its body to draw it deeper, as the mechanical bird’s webbed feet scrabble at the couch, tearing the velvet. It twines its neck around her at their mutual crisis, biting her shoulder. After it withdraws, its instrument folds back

into its belly.

Emily turns up the museum theatre's lights as the screen goes dark. Like Mr. Hubert in the film, she gazes serenely at the audience. They all seem a bit dazed, flushed, though it's difficult for her to tell if it's from arousal, anger, or some emotion she cannot perceive. She's seen just about every reaction to that scene from Le Cygne Baiseur over the past few months, including a first week freak-out from a woman that was so severe the museum had new programs printed with a stern warning right on the front.

The thing was, that was the least offensive sex scene in Le Cygne Baiseur.

"As we've seen, what man invents, he re-invents to be about sex," she says to her audience. They perk up a bit as they return to the 21st century and to the Erotic Parodies exhibit they've paid an extra fee and signed a waiver to view. "Le Cygne Baiseur is based on a short story of the same name. Attributed to Voltaire, 'The Amorous Swan' is about a toymaker who invents a mechanical swan that 'makes a Leda' out of a woman at a fancy party. He wrote it after the sensation made by Jacques de Vaucanson's 'Canard Digérateur,' or Digesting Duck, in 1739. Vaucanson's celebrated mechanical bird appeared to eat, drink, and defecate, though later it was discovered that the bird actually excreted pre-made bread pellets.

"There was no digestion scene in Voltaire's original story; that was an addition by British director Ben Blackwell, most famous for his controversial film What She Revealed, When He Departed, and Why They Lied. After reading an account of Vaucanson's life, Blackwell became obsessed with automata and other clockwork creatures and wanted to insert a tribute to the original inventor in his film. He also oversaw and even participated in the construction of his own personal, working 'cygne baiseur' which he used as a prop. Yes, that's right… the footage you just saw is all quite real."

Emily's heart begins to beat a little faster every time she reaches this part of the tour, leading them to the pièce de résistance of her exhibit. On loan from Prague's Sex Machines Museum, Blackwell's swan is truly spectacular. The grainy 1982 film, shot entirely by candlelight during the night scenes, doesn't really do it justice.

Though not in working order anymore, the enormous mechanical swan can still be adjusted, so of course they have posed it in its most iconic position: wings spread, cock erect. It has never once failed to elicit gasps from the audience, and today is no different. Emily smiles to herself; she really is just like Mr. Hubert, given how much pleasure she takes in watching people beholding the bird. A voyeur's voyeur.

The swan's roost is a low pedestal so that it can be viewed in the round. She lets her audience gaze for a few moments more, noting where they look, and where they don't,

before clearing her throat.

“The footage you just watched was from the British Film Institute’s re-release of Le Cygne Baiseur, available on DVD and Blu-ray in the museum gift shop. Which, if you will follow me…”

Thus ends another tour. Emily is pleased with herself. It went well. They usually do—she’s proud of this exhibit and enjoys talking about it. Just the same, she’s eager for them to get going. It’s the end of the day; she’s ready to get home, take her shoes off, and veg out with a bottle of wine. Netflix and some genuine chilling.

“That was a really great tour.”

Emily startles. One of the group has lagged behind. She noticed his floppy hair and sardonic smile earlier—a Paul Rudd-type who looked like he really ought to be wearing a flannel rather than a suit jacket over his vintage-looking t-shirt for some craft brewery.

“Thanks,” says Emily. “Glad you enjoyed.”

“I did. Everything was really interesting. Those Japanese woodblock prints of the little Bean-man were great,” he says, “but that film… that was something else.”

“It’s an amazing work,” says Emily. She’s happy to talk to him. He seems nice, and isn’t setting off her creep alarm, like a few randos here and there since the show opened. “You should see the entire film sometime.”

“I’d like to,” he says.

An awkward silence descends. He coughs affectedly into his hand to break it, like he’s in a movie, and then extends it. “I’m Paul.”

Huh. “Emily,” she says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah.” He smiles, then chuckles, blushing. Another silence, then he says, “Well, I guess I better…” and nods to the door.

Finally, Emily gets it. “What are you doing now? The museum shuts down in a bit, but after, if you wanted to watch it—the whole film I mean—I could get us back inside. I have a key.”

“Back inside the museum?”

“Yeah. I was thinking we could watch it on the big screen. I love our little theatre; it’s

a great opportunity to see movies as they're meant to be seen. I just don't want us to be interrupted by the cleaning crew while we're watching, you know?"

"Sure!" he says, and she's grateful he doesn't seem disappointed she hadn't proposed outright that they go back to her place. "I'd love to."

They go to a casual Italian joint, one close to the museum as it's quite cold out. She gets the butternut squash ravioli; he gets the carbonara. They talk about common things, like jobs and hobbies—he's in tech, but his real passion is climbing—and less common ones, like the exhibit.

"I was especially pleased to get Murakami's 'My Lonesome Cowboy' on loan," she says. "I know a lot of people have seen pictures of it, but in person…"

"It's hilarious and shocking," he agrees. "That semen lasso is just so… huge."

"So, what brought you in?" she asks. "To the show, I mean."

"That write-up they did in the local paper. But I have to say, when they mentioned you were screening a segment of a," he makes air quotes, "pornographic film, I wasn't expecting…"

"No. I mean, there's a reason no under-eighteens are allowed in, but calling it a porno felt like they were trying to make the show sound edgier than it really is. Though some of the later scenes…"

"Yeah?" He leans forward, all attention. Emily wonders if they will have sex later. She isn't averse to the idea. Watching Le Cygne Baiseur always puts her in the mood. There's something that turns her on about the lavish costumes, the period lighting, the unfathomable expressions and disconnected utterances of the actors, the lush Michael Nyman soundtrack based on grounds from William Croft, the curious movements of the swan.

"Yeah," she says, leaning in and lowering her voice. "For the theatrical release one scene had to be cut substantially to avoid an X rating, but the version we have at the museum is the restored, remastered, re-everythinged edition. I was so thrilled to see it for the first time, especially given the legend about it…"

"What legend?"

"Do you mind spoilers?" He shakes his head, floppy hair flopping around. "So, after the scene we watched, the party breaks up and Mr. Hubert presses his advantage with Mrs. Suzman, the lady of the house. Her husband is out of town, and she agrees to go to bed with him. But while they're fucking in her bedroom, her daughter sneaks

downstairs and has a tryst with the swan."

"Oh my," he says.

"Yeah. Even without the Toymaker's key up its bum, the swan comes alive for her. It's uncanny to watch on two levels. Within the film, the swan is an automaton, and therefore it ought to behave the same way each time it does the same things… but it doesn't. It's much more, uh, enthusiastic with the daughter. And sure, it's just a film, but the swan is also a prop, right? Pre-CGI. It's a practical effect, and should be constrained by similar rules… but it doesn't move like clockwork in that scene. That's probably why the legend got started, that the swan really did come to life that night while they were filming. It's said it surprised everyone, as you might imagine, but they kept the cameras rolling. It's true, the young actress seems genuinely frightened and bewildered, but it could just be acting. And…"

"And?" He's enthralled.

"Well, the earlier scene is just movie magic. It doesn't really penetrate that woman. But it's said the actress playing the daughter got into an interesting condition from the encounter." Paul looks baffled until Emily spells it out. "Pregnant."

"Pregnant? In the movie?"

"In the movie the daughter gets pregnant that night, but not the mother… shit gets real weird after that, as you might imagine," says Emily. "So earlier, when they toymaker makes the thing, he declares it 'beautiful enough to house Jove himself.' So the film becomes about whether the girl has gotten knocked up by a god, or whether something else happened that night. But the story is that it all really happened. In real life, to the actress." She shrugs.

"Enough people believe a mechanical swan came to life and impregnated an actress that it's become an urban legend?" He sighs. "I guess post-Pizzagate I shouldn't be surprised."

"I'm sure that part of it is that the actress only did this one film. It was her breakout role and she disappeared afterwards. Fell right off the map."

"I guess people could still do that back in the '80s."

"I know, right? Plus, there's this blurry old photo of a young woman who looks very like her. Someone who thought they recognized her snapped it in Greece, a few years after the film. She had a toddler with her, but as to whether it's actually the same actress… anyway." Emily realizes she's been talking for a while about this and gives him a look. "Want to see it for yourself?"

He does. They pick their way over the snow and ice back to the museum, stopping only to grab two bottles of wine, a brie, and some crackers at a fancy little shop.

She likes him. He hadn't seemed bored when she nerded out about her favorite film and hadn't droned on too long about his passion, either. In fact, his offer to take her indoor climbing sometime, while an intimidating prospect, seems fun and fresh.

The museum is silent and dark; a little spooky, actually. They giggle as they sneak through the hallways, though of course, it's all mock-sneaking. She's allowed to be here, it's just fun to pretend they're up to something taboo. The mood settles once they get into the theatre, pop in the Blu-ray, unscrew the wine, and the United Artists logo pops up.

"Thanks," she whispers, leaning in so that her lips almost brush that floppy hair of his. "I haven't watched this all the way through in a long time." He shivers, and his eyes flicker toward her and then back to the screen as the film starts.

Le Cygne Baiseur is undeniably slow, and absolutely bizarre, and yet there's something hypnotic about it. The performances captivate, even though most of the actors were only ever known for bit parts in old BBC adaptations of Dickens and Austen, or the lesser-known Hammer films. Every conversation feels freighted; every moment a clue that, if studied closely enough, might reveal the central puzzle of act three: whether or not Miss Suzman's pregnancy is truly divine in origin. The characters take various positions on the issue—the daughter believes yes; her father, not so much—but it's never made wholly clear what the "right" answer is.

Emily and Paul don't make it that far, however. They break into the second bottle of wine and the oozy brie just before the scene he's already seen, but Emily barely drinks any of it. She's too excited for what comes next. She loves the conversation between Mr. Hubert and Mrs. Suzman, so calculated on his part, so wanton on hers; loves the look on the daughter's face as she hides in the shadows, watching the verbal seduction in the parlor. Then comes the daughter's woozy stagger back to the swan, which shivers and comes alive as she strokes it.

When the swan begins to tear at the daughter's clothes with its metal bill, Emily can feel Paul's growing discomfort. It's true, after the swan pins her to the carpet with its weight the girl's cries are indeterminably of pleasure or pain. It's hard to watch.

Paul stands, knocking over his half-full glass of wine when the girl screams genuinely as the swan thrusts inside her with more than mechanical urgency.

"I'm done with this," he says over the clacking of wooden wings and immediately heads for the door of the theatre. Emily, dismayed by both his exit and the wine

soaking into the carpet, follows him.

“Wait,” she says, as they reach the door. “Paul—”

“That’s real,” he says. He’s very upset—his face, flickering blue and white from the action on the screen, is furious and frowning. “It’s not a legend. That thing is real, and what it’s doing to her is real.”

The girl’s cries have turned rapturous as the swan fucks her eagerly. She is now quite obviously enjoying herself, though her pleasure is ecstatic and disturbing in its intensity. She cracks a nail digging her fingers into the bird’s unyielding back, grinds against it wildly when it enters the short thrusts. The images of this monstrous machine ravishing the daughter are intercut with eerily similar footage of its creator finishing inside her mother. During an earlier viewing Emily noticed at various points the sounds are reversed, the honking and the grinding of gears momentarily imposed over animal thrusting; lustful manly grunts accompanying volucrine struggling. They both get caught up in it for a moment, until Paul flees into the darkness of the museum proper.

Emily says, “It’s just a—”

“It’s just nothing. I’m… look, thanks for the wine, sorry about the carpet. I think it’s time I got home.” He gives her a scornful, disgusted look as she lets him out. “Enjoy the rest of your film.”

She sees him calling a Lyft on his phone through the glass doors, and though the night is cold she locks them behind him. A car will likely come quickly, and anyway, she has wine to scrub out of a carpet.

Emily hears the film echoing through the museum like ghosts muttering about her date gone wrong. She’s upset, his disgust has hurt her feelings. She didn’t make the film, or start the urban legend. She only showed it to him at his request, what right does he have to condemn her for doing so? But as she stomps back to the theatre, she passes by the swan that caused so much trouble, and pauses.

It’s been well taken care of, over the decades. The swan’s paint and enamel are still so white that it seems almost luminous under the security lights. It really is such a beautiful object. She wonders how many hours Ben Blackwell and his team spent crafting it—she wonders, too, why he sold it to a museum. She would have kept it.

She knows the security cameras will catch her in the act, but Emily can’t resist. She approaches the mechanical bird, and just like the daughter in Le Cygne Baiseur, she strokes its chin, lightly, so as not to set off the pressure sensors.

The bird shivers. Emily steps back, alarmed and a little annoyed. It will be difficult to explain if she's engaged some ancient mechanism that causes the stupid thing to shift in some noticeable way. Her heart starts to pound as she hears the dusty squealing of unoiled gears and she steps back with a wince when the bird lowers its wings and steps off of its perch, peering at her.

No alarms sound.

"No way," says Emily. She takes another step back, but the swan pursues her, waddling on awkward metal legs, and then beats its wings a few times. It mutters at her gently, not really honking. She feels like it is calling to her, but of course, that's impossible.

Her eyes stray to its phallus. It depends from the bird's belly, curved like a saber. In the dim light of the dark museum it looks more alive than it ought to—the whole swan does, actually. It ripples with natural motion, artificial feathers puffing and settling, its breast heaving. It cocks its head; mutters at her again, appealing to her.

She hears the film's theme play faintly in the other room, reedy woodwinds and pulsing strings—it must be to the credits by now—and she is reminded how eager she'd been for a little action that night. The swan's invitation is unusual, yes, but she's never minded the atypical in bed. Honestly, it is the chance of a lifetime—to make it with the notorious, eponymous Cygne Baiseur.

"All right," she says, and she thinks the swan's next utterance sounds pleased as she peels off her pantyhose and thong in one semi-awkward motion. It comes closer as she kneels, close enough that she kisses its enameled cheek before it dips its head under her skirt to tug eagerly at her pubic hair with its bill.

She bats the swan away playfully. Undeterred, it climbs atop her. She runs her hand up and down the length of its shaft a few times to get it wet with whatever viscous fluid has emerged from the tip. She wonders only briefly where that reservoir might reside in its mechanical body—how it's stayed liquid for so many decades—before spreading herself open to receive it.

She lets the bird have its weird way with her in a flurry of honking and clanking. It is just as enthusiastic with her as it was with that actress, and she comes hard, twice, before it finishes loudly and with a gush of something surprisingly warm, given how cool its body is to the touch.

It withdraws itself slowly, with all the consideration of a human lover, and nibbles her earlobe affectionately before returning to its roost and resuming its former pose. She glances at it briefly as she cleans herself up. It's as if it never moved.

By the time Emily has her clothes back on and is more or less put together, she wonders if the whole encounter actually happened. By the time she gets the worst of the wine out of the carpet, she’s certain it didn’t. It couldn’t have.

Two weeks later, she’s surprised when her phone app alerts her that she’s late for her period. She’s usually so regular. But it doesn’t come. What does is a feeling of restlessness. For the first time, she’s unhappy with her job; her life. She wishes she were elsewhere. Somewhere warm.

She starts looking for tickets. It’s been a while since her last vacation.

Greece ought to be lovely this time of year.