A Bath with Degas

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A BATH WITH DEGAS

"Louise, I should like to do your portrait. You are extremely drawn."

—Edgar Degas

He knew that his acquaintances—Lautrec, Renoir, even Manet—spoke about him behind his back, accusing him of snobbism and worse. Walking by Deux Magots that night, he had heard misogynist! whispered in unison, rising over the clinks of many spoons and demitasses, then falling to rustle with the crisp and sibilant leaves at his feet. Raging, he turned his collar up and walked against the wind for seventeen additional blocks. Those whispers burned, made his wax paper ears with their visible webs of blue and red veins flush bright in the cold air. His ulcerous stomach pulsed; he could feel the acids churning and rising in hostile bobs, jerking upwards like thermometer’s mercury, until his esophagus was coated and he tasted bile at the back of his tongue. Twice, he spat over the stairwell before Louise answered his impatient knocks.

She opened her door just a crack.

“Edgar!” she said. Already he could smell her. Slightly sour and tinged with the reddest wine. He realized that beyond her yeasty burgundy, he was probably smelling his own upset insides. So when she pulled the door back and let him pass by, his nostrils were gratefully filled with the musky tallow from at least a dozen white candles which burned on her mantle.

Degas removed his hat and kissed Louise’s hand. This time he caught the essence of cocoa, and noticed,
upon closer inspection, that her fingers and palms were smudged with the sticky remains of what must have been chocolate. He felt thankful for Louise on that night, for the warmth of her sitting room, for her soft hair. His nostrils had become accustomed to her aromatic abundance, which had first washed over him like a strange sea.

“What are you doing, walking the streets so late, Edgar?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She moved to help him with his coat, but he brushed her away, and folded his arms against his chest. Knowing him, Louise let him be. She instead went to fix him an aperitif.

“Where have you been?” she called out. “I haven’t seen you in months.”

This was true. Degas had known Louise for years, but they saw each other infrequently. They had first met when he sat sketching on stage at Le Grand Ballet during dress rehearsals. The other dancers were put off by his presence. He seemed to be looking through them, intently, even though he sketched every detail of elbow and waist, poised neck and pointed toe. Some of the girls complained. Melanie had once cried, How ugly he makes me—all the green and the blue! And always he paints from below! Then she had skittered off stage like a mosquito, with bobbing tutu. One of the girls—it was Nadine—flew into a rage when Degas, in a preliminary sketch, captured her standing in the wings, pulling up her brassiere with puffy breaths. Aware that Degas had been watching her, Nadine snuck away during break and discovered the sketch while the artist was using the toilet. She tore it up, but did not stop there; she spat on several sketches of other girls, caught in more graceful moments. It was Nadine who stoked his ulcer, putting
him in the hospital.

But Louise. The day they met, he sat to the side, his eyes moving carelessly over the other girls. She was stretching, alone, at the barre. He saw her and for minutes forgot he held a pencil. Finally, when she began to dance, he began to sketch, although he was not conscious of this. She was a flame—the most graceful extension of particles—so that all he needed to do was sweep what he felt with his charcoal or brush. He captured each gesture without effort, filling his palette with globs of red and oranges, burnt sienna and creams. But even without the application of color, in his charcoal sketches alone, Louise conveyed all the warmth of those hues. *Enough!* Degas thought. Enough of the cold whispers of others that bit at the back of his neck like the fibrous teeth in his wool collar.

"I’ve been painting," said Degas. "I’ve sequestered myself."

"My goodness," said Louise.

Degas sat drinking an aperitif in one of Louise’s soft, green armchairs near the fireplace, his hat on his lap. By choice, he had no comfortable furniture at his own flat. He knew that such furniture would beckon him away from his easel, would lull him into eventual complacence. But how soft this chair of hers was—how it cushioned his elbows and shoulder blades. Louise had swept her skirts aside and poked the fire soon after he had arrived, and had added one more log, so that now the embers were active again. Degas noticed that the fire was perfectly composed; fingers of flame held the cylindrical log, crackling softly between serpent-shaped andirons.

As he drank and watched the fire in Louise’s drawing room, Degas heard himself telling her the
Deux Magots story. She listened with folded hands.

"Especially Manet," he said. "My god! I thought he was my friend."

Louise believed that Degas had been hearing things. "You said to me before that you haven’t slept in days," she reminded him. "Perhaps your ears are deceiving you."

"No," he said, sinking deeper into the chair. "No. I heard."

Louise stood up and walked to his side to rest her hand on his shoulder. He flinched at first, from the strangeness of female touch: pliable palm, the trace of sharp nails above fingertips. But when she started to turn away, he grabbed her hand and pressed it to his hot and clean-shaven cheek. She cradled his jaw, surprised by his affection, resting her index finger on the skin between his mustache and the corner of his mouth. Degas had the impulse to bite it. He spoke instead.

"Just weeks ago I explained to Manet why, when it comes to my work, I appear removed. This is what upsets me. I told him that my only wish is to be an eye. I cannot let myself feel too much for what I paint. If I did, I would place more importance on one thing than another. I would sacrifice my eye. Don’t you see?"

"Yes," said Louise. She played with the soft hair at the back of his head.

"And Manet nodded when I told him this. He nodded as if he understood. He patted me on the back." Degas made a fist and punched the top of his hat, smashing it down, inverting its shape.

"Poor Edgar," Louise said, picking up his hat. She went back to her chair and sat down lightly in a whirl of petticoats. She pushed the hat right-side-out again, and smoothed the felt down with her fingertips. Then she placed it on her own head.
Later that night, growing warmer still and sipping on a third aperitif, the idea struck him. Louise was still sitting in her chair, her legs jutting out toward the fire, her feet turned out the way dancers’ feet do. She was drowsy, and her soft voice had died away with the growing heaviness of her eyelids. As her head began to fall slowly forward toward sleep, the rim of the hat moved, too, obscuring bit by bit her moon-shaped face: first her eyes, then the tip of her nose, and now her chin. The fire waned, casting great, long shadows on the ceiling. The orange light licked at the spray of auburn hair that poured out from under the hat and curled over her thin shoulders and the bodice of white dress, over her tiny breasts. Even in this stillest moment, Louise glowed with the energy of anticipation.

Yes! Degas thought. He would ask her to pose for him, starting tomorrow. He would place her, motionless, just like this. He would turn her away from the canvas, so that her round and most beautiful face wouldn’t distract. On his canvas he would build a tribute to women. To the Louise in all women. Because it is the beauty in anticipation that fascinates the true artist, thought Degas. And the artist is the eye.

As he watched her nodding by firelight, he thought how his spiteful acquaintances at Deux Magots would be forced to swallow their words along with their café crèmes.

It was an unusually cold autumn. They could see their breath inside his studio even as afternoon sun slanted through tall windows and glinted off the white-washed walls. Degas twisted the right side of his
mustache into a pencil-thin curl and excused himself. He descended the basement stairs in search of kindling wood so that he could use the furnace, and left Louise alone in the vastness. Her high-heeled boots clacked on the floor as she filled the room with herself, whirling around to make her skirts puff out. There were no chairs and Degas’s easels, propped up without canvases, looked like wooden crosses in a soldiers’ cemetery.

All the space made her ravenous. Her stomach growled and she thought she could hear her insides echo off the walls. She crossed her arms and paced around for a few more minutes, annoyed with Degas’s absence. She could wait no longer. She walked over to the table—the one piece of furniture in the room—and grabbed the picnic basket she had brought for them to share. Louise crouched down and began unloading: bread, still warm from Madame Bisou’s oven, fresh strawberry jam Madame had given Louise for being a loyal customer, a sack of apples just in from the north—she could smell their tartness through the burlap and it made her mouth water—a tin of Camembert—mellow, not too strong, because she liked to mix it with the jam on pieces of bread—a slab of goat cheese wrapped in cloth, a chocolate bar—her favorite, from Switzerland, with bits of hazelnut inside—and two bottles of good burgundy that she had been keeping for occasions.

Louise was nervous about posing. At the ballet she had been the subject of many of Degas’s sketches and paintings. But never like this—alone, naked—and in such an enormous room with all the sunlight, without even a chair to hide behind.

She gave up on waiting for Degas and poured herself a large glass of wine. She drank it down and then made herself a Camembert and jam sandwich, taking bites off the chocolate bar every so often.
“Look, Louise. I found an old tin bathtub,” Degas said to his model, who sat on the floor, eating a second sandwich.

He had discovered the tub in the basement behind his wine rack, along with a lantern, a pail full of screws, a jar of cold cream called *Toujours Mince*, and the skeletal remains of some small rodent. The tub, something that previous tenants must have left behind, would be perfect for his composition. Since he wanted to give the feeling of a woman caught unaware, he decided to paint Louise in the midst of her toilette.

Degas arranged the props he had gathered. He placed the tub close to the table by the windows, over which he had hung long, white sheets to soften the light. On the table he arranged a yellow-flowered ceramic pitcher, a copper coffee creamer, a hairbrush, and Louise’s hairpins and rust-colored scarf.

“I made you a sandwich, Edgar,” Louise called out. “My favorite. Camembert and jam.”

At first the thought repulsed him. His stomach was tight with the rushing urge to paint. But then he realized that he had not eaten that day. And watching Louise eat her sandwich—she first licked the jam from around the sides of the baguette—was appealing. He decided that he, too, was ravenous. He sat cross-legged on the floor next to her and let her pour him a glass of wine. Today Louise smells sour again, a bit like wine and chocolate, he thought, and noticed that the bottle was almost empty. She passed him his sandwich and he took a careful bite. After a few sips of wine and a few more bites, watching Louise’s lovely mouth as she brought the wine glass to her lips, Degas decided that the sandwich was the most delicious he had ever eaten.
They finished the bottle of wine. Louise opened the sack of apples, took one out, bit into it, and then held it in front of Degas’s mouth. When he lifted his head to bite it, she pulled it away. He scowled. Louise laughed and took another bite, exaggerating her pleasure at the crisp taste. She held the apple out for him again. As he went for it, she pulled it away a second time.

"Don’t be a bitch, Louise," he said.

She laughed, covering her disappointment in his short temper.

"Anyway," he said, "it’s time for work."

Louise was glad she had brought the wine; she was warm and her nerves were calmed now. But before she would undress, she asked Degas to open the second bottle. He himself couldn’t drink another glass, for he had tried to work after too much wine before, and it made him sloppy. He couldn’t afford to be too loose. He opened the wine for her, poured some into her glass, and then sent her into the walk-in closet which he used as a changing room for his models.

"There’s a silk bathrobe hanging from a hook on the door," he called out to her.

He thought about the last time he had seen a naked woman. It had been Madame von Hennenberg, last spring, whose husband had commissioned Degas to paint her portrait. At the time, Degas had needed the money. Besides, he had rationalized, the von Hennenbergs had traveled all the way from Bonn. He remembered how Madame had shed her clothing while he was preparing his palette. When she flung open the closet door, she was wearing nothing but stockings, and her fleshy thighs poured over the tops of her garters. Take me, Degas, she had instructed. My husband doesn’t please me.
Christ, Degas had thought, his ulcer raging. He had scared Madame away by spitting up blood on the floor.

Louise opened the closet door and walked out, a dancer, her arms lifted and curved in front of her. She was silly from the wine and ran, with tiny but powerful steps and pointed toes, to the middle of the room, where she leapt in the air. The robe, in a silky flash, flew open, and she shed it while still in mid-air. When she landed she curtsied, right leg extended, and then stood up straight, hands at her sides.

"Where do you want me, Edgar?" she asked.

As Degas worked, Louise crouched, her back to him, her braided head lowered. In the shallow, circular tub, she leaned forward and rested her weight on her left hand. She held a sea sponge to the back of her neck with her right hand. This position, he knew, would suggest action without being action itself. The anticipation of action.

By placing her in the tub that way, Degas thought, I am able to capture both sides of Louise—her breast and the delicate ribs underneath, her thigh and hips, as well as that beautiful spine and back. He was amazed by how slight she was, but how strong. Standing at his easel, he was riveted to the colors and light; his model and the props were in perfect balance. As he sketched, the rest of his body dropped away, and in losing it, he became an eye.

Louise grew ill. She had eaten too much—the chocolate, the sandwiches, the apple and goat cheese and jam and Camembert—and had drunk too much wine. Her head buzzed with the alcohol and the frustration at her dilemma: how was she to rid herself of all that food and wine while she was held captive, naked
in this tub? She shuddered to think at how gross her stomach must appear, imagining it bulging out in great lumpy rolls of flesh. She glanced down at her thighs, seeing how the fat flattened out and spilled over the bones, how they touched at the tops. And her left hand, how swollen and dimpled, pudgy and repulsive. Louise was amazed that Degas had not commented on her pitiful chubbiness.

She tried to breathe deeply, hoping to speed up her digestion, to get rid of the feeling that she was suffocating in her own flesh. God, she thought, my picture will be the fattest anyone has ever seen. How disgusting.

"Louise," said Degas, "please don't breath so heavily. I'm painting your back."

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Luckily, Degas had a weak bladder and soon he needed to use the bathroom.

"Yes. Hurry, please," Louise said. "I have to use it myself." She picked up the silk bathrobe and walked around the studio, which by this time had warmed up considerably. Her head thick with wine, Louise felt as if she were moving through bath water. She couldn't wait to be rid of the food. It sat in her stomach like a huge lump of slop. Like a cow, she thought. I am a cow.

While waiting at the far wall, she discovered a row of small Japanese prints which Degas had mounted and framed. She stood there, craning her neck up like a child in a museum, looking at scenes of eating, drinking, lovers, and orgies. As Louise moved down the wall, the pictures got more erotic, and the more sex they showed, the longer she lingered in front of them. One showed a naked, grinning man holding his
disproportionate penis in front of himself, which stood up like an obelisk. A woman—unclothed except for the chignon sticks in her hair—lay on the floor, legs spread. In the next picture, several men stood naked in a semi-circle, holding their obelisks. Meanwhile, women crouched and squirmed and kissed and bent over backwards, their breasts hanging and swinging, making a show of it. They all wore ridiculous expressions—not of pleasure, but of strained performance—their eyes all focused on the men, their mouths open like dogs or twisted into lascivious sneers.

Louise heard footsteps behind her and turned around quickly. It was Renoir.

“Quite a lot of man up there, hey, wouldn’t you say?” he said, his smile so big that it disappeared somewhere in his thick, black beard.

“I suppose,” Louise said nonchalantly, “if you are referring to their fantasies.”

Renoir raised his eyebrows and took off his hat. Louise tightened the tie on the robe and walked over, extending her hand.

“I am Louise L’Amante,” she said.

“Auguste Renoir. I—of course—am charmed by your acquaintance.” He took her hand with both of his, large and hot. And when he bent down to give her hand a kiss, he farted. It was low in tone, but loud enough for Louise to hear. He carried on, as if unaware. “You know, I discovered those prints myself at La Porte Chinoise,” he said. “If you like them, I shall take you there. They are really quite amazing.”

“I’ve been,” Louise lied.

“Have you?” Renoir said.

“Edgar is in the toilet. We’re taking a break.”

“So I see.” Renoir walked over to the easel and cocked his head at the sketch. “Degas never does any
woman justice. Look! He has you turned away from us! What good does that do?"

"He thinks my face is too distracting. He wants to capture my essence."

"Distracting? Hah! Essence? Hah hah!"

Louise ignored the big man. "Edgar thinks that when the artist draws what strikes him—he calls that the essence—then memories and fantasies are freed from nature's tyranny."

"Very good!" Renoir shouted, clapping his hands. "Have you memorized that for posterity, my dear girl?"

"No, I remembered it because I thought it well-said."

"I see," said Renoir. "And do you love him?"

"Who? Edgar?"

"To whom else would I be referring?"

"As a man?" said Louise, pausing a moment. "I suppose that, yes, I do."

"As a man! Well, my dear, you must know. Degas is incapable of love. Just yesterday evening I enjoyed an aperitif with my good friend, Manet, at Deux Magots. And Manet—who sees and understands love better than you or I could ever possibly hope to see or understand—said that Degas cannot love. Manet believes that Degas is incapable of loving a woman, to tell her so, to do anything."

Louise was disgusted. "Those who were at Deux Magots last night are sadly mistaken," she said, brushing past him and over to the wine and food on the floor. Looking at it—the bread, the cheese—made her stomach contract. She swallowed deeply. "Would you like some wine, Monsieur Renoir?" she asked him.

"Yes, my dear. And if I may say so, you should let me paint you. I will do you justice. It will be then you will see this essence you speak of!"
From behind came a series of dry coughs. Louise and Renoir turned their heads to see Degas standing in the doorway.

"Degas, my friend!" Renoir bellowed. "Come and have a drink. I was just making the acquaintance of your model."

Louise used the opportunity to excuse herself. She rushed past Degas and ran upstairs, to the toilet.

"Lovely," said Renoir to Degas. "Much too thin for my taste, but lovely just the same."

Renoir left after finishing the other bottle of wine and the chocolate, bread, and cheese. Degas stood in the middle of his studio, his hands on his hips, watching Louise as she stretched on the floor before they continued their session.

"Louise," Degas said. "Come here for a moment."

She rose, tightened the robe, and walked over to meet him. When she was within reach, Degas took her hands, pulled her to him, and kissed her full on the mouth. Then he stopped and took a step back.

"Louise. Why is it that you vomit up your food?" Degas asked.

She stood there and stared at him flatly, taken off guard. Degas watched her.

"I smelled it on you last night and this morning and again just now," he continued.

Louise breathed deeply. She did not think to make up an excuse, as she had other times—to her mother, her lovers. Blood was rushing to her face, flushing her cheeks. She pressed at them with the backs of her thin wrists.

Degas waited.

"I am a dancer, Edgar," she said. "I love to dance. But I also love to eat."
“It doesn’t seem as though you love to eat,” Degas said. “You tear through your food so it is not even tasted, and then get rid of it just as quick.”

Louise blinked, but did not take her eyes from his. “Don’t you understand?” she asked him. “You of all people. I have no choice. If I didn’t do it, I could not dance. And dancing is my love.”

Degas’s eyebrows plunged in the middle as he considered this. Then he raised them, replying, “But Louise, you just said that you love to eat.”

Louise smiled and stepped toward him. Rising up onto her toes, she took Degas by the shoulders. “Don’t you think one can have many loves, Edgar?” she asked.

Degas stood firmly, thinking.

Later, the light in the studio began to change, becoming softer and infused with yellow. Degas had anticipated this and welcomed it; before they had started he had spotted his palette with madder and gold.

But now, standing near her, he suddenly had the urge to pick Louise up, just to see how light she was. So he did. Taking her around the waist, he felt her ribs beneath his fingers, the ribs he had sketched so carefully under the skin. Louise enjoyed being carried by him, as she always loved surprises. She laughed and leaned back so that her long braid touched the floor.

He held her like this for a moment, feeling—for the first time since he was a child, because of her very lightness—the strength in his own body. Then he jostled her gently so that she sat up in his arms, and, whispering into her ear, carried her over to the tub.