

VALENTINA ALBERTI leaned out the window of her bedchamber. Tonight was the last night of Carnival, and she and her family had been bidden to a masked ball at the Palazzo Medici. Golden light slanted through Florence's streets, gilding the ornate walls of the villas and warming the stone paving. Soon the sun would set, and night would throw its cold blanket over the city.

Valentina shivered. In the street below, her neighbors were already celebrating the last, frantic night of excess before the beginning of Lent. The laughing cries of young men—half-earnest, half-mocking—rose to her.

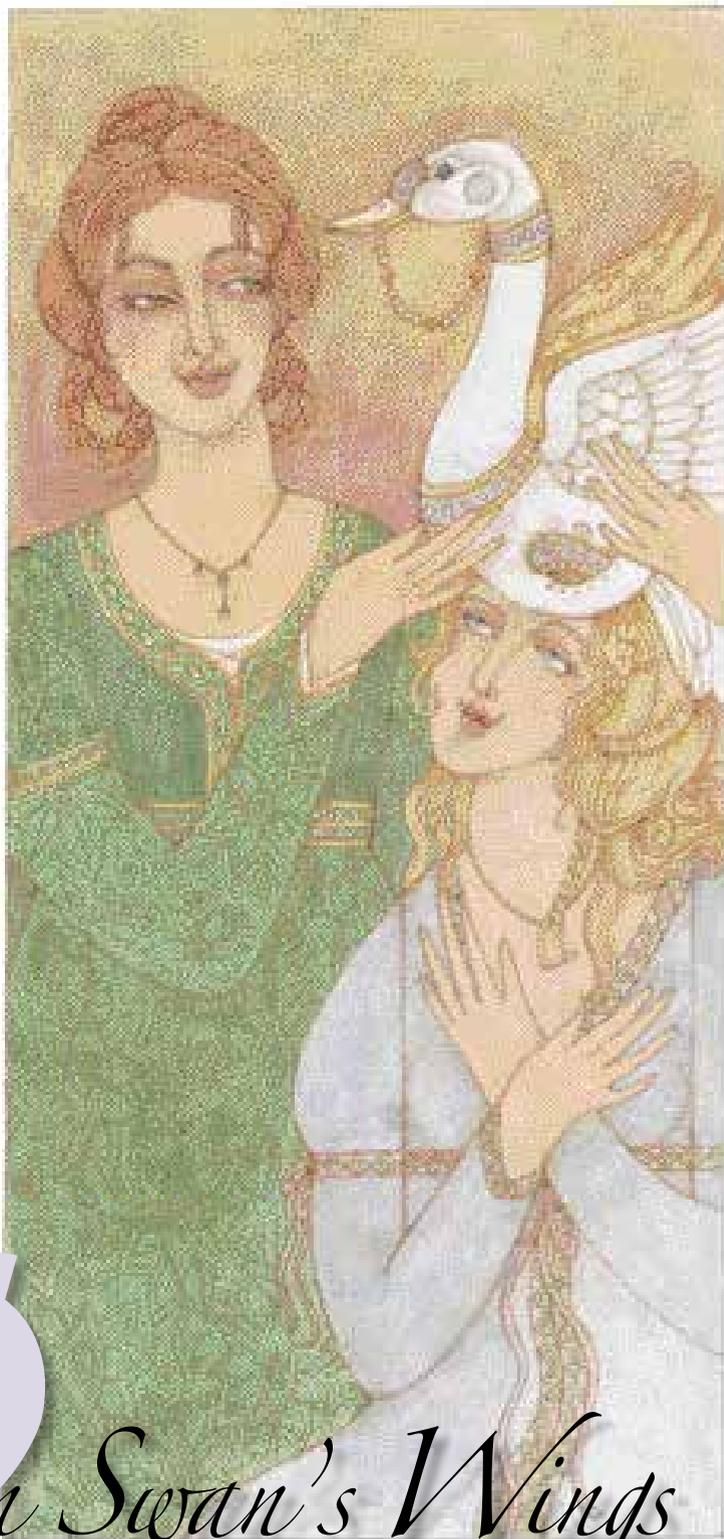
"Valentina! Valentina, will you be mine?"

She ignored them. She was a lady now, and if her father had his way, she would marry a Medici. The Medicis were the ruling family of Florence and only took their wives from the very best of its families.

Today was also Valentina's sixteenth birthday, the day of the saint whose name she shared. Many hundreds of years ago, Valentine, friend of lovers, had been martyred for secretly marrying Roman couples in defiance of Emperor Claudius's ban. Married men made bad soldiers, so the emperor had decreed that none should marry. Valentine had wed them in secret.

"Valentina! My heart is yours, *cara mia!*"

She pulled the mullioned window closed. Those boys had taunted her ever since they had been children playing in the street together, blissfully unaware of future responsibilities.



O *On Swan's Wings*

by Patricia Nagle

IN CHRISTIANITY, LENT IS THE PERIOD OF FASTING AND PENITENCE THAT PRECEDES EASTER.



Illustrated by Kat Thacker
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She turned from the window and looked at the gown on her bed. It was of velvet, deep red with narrow stripes of gold. The ivory brocade overdress, long and capelike in back, was bound below the bosom by a belt embroidered with roses and adorned with pearls.

A lady's dress, designed to proclaim her family's wealth. A dress that offered its wearer's riches to the highest bidder. Valentina stifled a sigh, reminding herself that it was a great honor to be considered worthy of marriage to a Medici.

Her mother bustled in, already dressed for the ball in a gown of green floral brocade. She carried something bundled in cotton cloth.

"Valentina! Come and see what your father has bought for you to wear."

Her mother laid the bundle on Valentina's bed and unwrapped it, revealing a magnificent swan mask, brilliant white, with sapphire eyes and elegant, swooping feathers. Valentina felt a little flutter as her mother lifted the mask and placed it on her head.

"Bring the mirror, Giada," said her mother.

Her mother's maid brought a large hand mirror and held it up so that Valentina could see herself. The swan's neck rose in a graceful curve from her brow, while the white feathers draped softly behind her head.

"You will shine tonight, my daughter," said her mother. "You will win the heart of your future husband."

Valentina turned. "Who is he, *Madre*? Has my father made an agreement?"

A slight crease formed on her mother's brow. She took away the headdress and set it carefully back in its nest of cloth.

"Nothing is certain yet. Do not fret yourself about it."

Valentina kept silent as her mother and Giada dressed her in the white silk underdress, the velvet gown, the heavy brocade overdress. She thought about her future husband. It could not be Lorenzo, the old Capo's elder son, for he was married. The younger, Giuliano, was fifteen and, according to Giada, already had a mistress. It would be the duty of his wife, whenever he chose to wed, to disregard the mistress.

Could Valentina's father have arranged for her to wed Giuliano? If so, she would be the envy of every young lady in Florence. She would live in a grand palazzo, with rich furnishings and many servants. How strange to think she might soon have a husband.

Her mother picked up the swan mask once more and carefully set it on Valentina's head. Then her mother donned her own mask, a simple green domino, and hurried Valentina downstairs to where her father waited in the atrium. Signore Alberti wore his best tunic of black velvet, a matching hat, and a red mask with a ridiculous long nose like Pantalone.

"Ah, Valentina! You look very well, my child. Remember that your behavior tonight will reflect on all your family."

"Yes, *Padre*. Thank you for the lovely gown, and the swan."

"You are a good girl. Come, give me a kiss."

Valentina placed a dutiful kiss on his cheek, then Giada bundled her cloak about

ADOMINOISAMASKCOVERING
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her and helped her step into the pattens that would protect her red velvet slippers from the dirt of the street. They were awkward to walk in, but necessary in Florence, particularly with Carnival raging.

Servants bearing torches waited outside the house. The men surrounded Signore Alberti and his family, forming a circle of golden light as they walked to the Palazzo Medici.

Valentina had never been to the Medicis' palazzo before. Torches illuminated the rustic stone arches of the entrance, and light streamed from the windows above. Strains of lute music drifted down, accompanied by the high piercing tones of recorders. Servants in Medici livery greeted the Albertis and led them into the palazzo, where they carried away the guests' cloaks and pattens. One of the servants guided the family up a broad staircase to a long chamber filled with laughing, chattering people, all wearing masks and costumes that ranged from the ordinary to the outlandish. A table draped in red cloth groaned under platters of roasted meats, cheeses, figs, nuts, and cakes. A trio of musicians tucked into a corner played a lively tune.

Valentina stood blinking at the dizzying noise and color of the assembly. Her father, whose eyes had been searching the crowd, now hastened his wife and daughter across the room to where the old Capo sat in a massive chair, surrounded by his family.

Though he was masked, old Piero's gray curls betrayed him. He was dressed in white robes as a Roman emperor and crowned with a golden laurel wreath. Lorenzo stood beside

him, also dressed as an ancient Roman, as was the pretty lady who must be his wife. On the Capo's other side stood a young man dressed as a centurion, with a scarlet silk tunic showing beneath his gilt armor, a real gladius at his hip, and sandals laced to his knees. Valentina could only see his eyes through the helmet he wore, but she was sure he was Giuliano.

"Greetings, friend," said Piero. He did not rise, and Valentina remembered hearing that he was troubled by gout.

"Thank you for welcoming my family, Signore," said her father, bowing low. "Allow me to present my only child."

"What a pretty little swan,"
Piero said. "We must see how
well she flies."

No names were given. This was a masked ball, and the conceit was that everyone was a stranger until midnight, when all would unmask.

Valentina curtsied, holding her head high though she kept her eyes modestly lowered. She knew that Piero and his kindred were watching her closely.

"What a pretty little swan," Piero said. "We must see how well she flies. Signore Centurion, escort her into the dance."

The centurion bowed to the emperor, then approached Valentina and bowed again, displaying a shapely leg.

"Will you dance, Lady Swan?"



“Thank you, yes.”

The chamber into which he led Valentina was as broad as the first, but much longer. Many people stood talking and watching the dancers who crowded the center of the room. At the far end a half dozen musicians provided the music, lutes and flutes striving to drown out the laughter of the revelers.

Valentina recognized the music, for her mother had spent hours teaching her the steps of all the current *balli*. Now she stood beside Giuliano and watched him perform each figure of the Amorofo, then repeated it herself. When the music ended, Giuliano turned to lead her away. A man stepped before them.

He was young, a few years older than Giuliano. He wore a doublet of red velvet the exact shade and pattern of Valentina’s gown. It was a new fabric, she knew, and quite costly. His mask was a long-nosed fox’s face. Valentina glimpsed green eyes through the rusty-red fur.

“The next dance is Belfiore,” the fox said in a quiet voice. “May I have the honor of dancing it with you both?”

Giuliano answered, “Very well, Lord Fox, but you had better not bite my pretty swan. Ha-ha!”

Valentina gave her free hand to the fox, whose clasp was warm and gentle. The three of them returned to the dance floor.

Belfiore was a dance for two men and a lady. Valentina had practiced it with her mother and Giada, but though her feet knew the steps, this felt very different. She shared her smiles equally between her partners, but

found her gaze drawn more often to the fox. The dance ended too soon for her liking.

“Lord Fox,” said Giuliano haughtily, “do me the kind favor of returning Lady Swan to the signora in green over there. Lady Swan, I beg you to excuse me.”

Giuliano bowed curtly and turned away, leaving Valentina so abruptly that she felt her cheeks color with embarrassment.

“Will you walk with me, Lady Swan?” said the fox softly.

She turned and smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Lord Fox.”

The musicians struck up another tune. Valentina wished the fox would ask her to dance, but he merely guided her around the other couples.

“That was the first time I danced Belfiore,” she said, a little nervously.

“I would never have known it. You danced it perfectly.”

“You are gracious, and also very kind,” she said, stealing a glance at the fox’s profile. “If I danced perfectly, it is because you helped me.”

He smiled but made no answer. They reached Valentina’s mother, and the fox bowed low to her.

“Signora, I return your swan to you.”

Her mother made a small curtsey. “Thank you, kind sir.”

Valentina curtseyed, too, murmuring her own thanks. The fox smiled again, then strode toward the archway at the bottom of the hall. Giuliano was standing there, talking and laughing with a group of young

men and women. His smile flashed as he leaned toward a pretty shepherdess.

“What did you think of him?” her mother asked.

“Oh . . . he is a very good dancer.”

“Is that all?”

“It was kind of him to dance with me.”

“Yes, he is a kind man, or so I have heard. He will make a good husband.”

Valentina looked swiftly up at her mother, who was smiling at her. Nodding, her mother took her hand and squeezed it.

“Your father has made an agreement with him. He wanted to see you tonight before concluding the bargain. I think he is pleased with you.”

Valentina’s mother turned her head to look toward Giuliano, who was now listening to the fox. Valentina saw Giuliano nod, then laugh. Her heart went cold.

If Giuliano was to be her husband, she would have no joy in marriage. She would be lonely while he busied himself with city affairs, or amused himself with shepherdesses.

She blushed at the ingratitude of her thoughts. If she married a Medici, she would be respected throughout Florence, throughout Tuscany, even throughout all Italy. Her joy would come from her children, and from upholding the family’s honor.

Yet she longed for more than that. She longed for a husband who was kind and understanding. Who cared for her, as her own father cared for her mother in his quiet way.

“Come, child. You look a little warm. Let us find you a cool drink.”

Her mother led her down the hall, past the dancers, past the corner where Giuliano was holding court. Valentina glanced up at the little group, and her gaze met the fox’s. She felt a jolt of pain in her heart, almost as if she had been stabbed.

Who was he? Even as she wondered, she realized she might never know. Most likely they would never meet again, unless he were a close friend of Giuliano’s. That thought gave her no pleasure, for it would be no pleasure to welcome green-eyed Lord Fox to her husband’s home. She liked him far better than she would ever like Giuliano.

Valentina followed her mother into the first chamber and accepted a goblet of cool, sweet wine. Her father soon joined them, his face lit with a happy smile beneath the long nose of his mask.

“My daughter, there is a noble gentleman here who wishes to make your acquaintance. Come, he is waiting in the loggia.”

Valentina felt her mother’s hands on her shoulders, gently urging her forward. Her father led her toward the entryway and up a flight of stairs to the palazzo’s third story, a broad loggia open to the chill night air. It was quiet and dark.

Valentina looked down into the palazzo’s central courtyard with its statues, including one of a winged angel. How she wished she had wings, to fly away from all her troubles!

“Signore,” her father said beside her, “I have brought my daughter to meet you.”

Valentina glimpsed a man standing in the darkness. She lowered her gaze, unwilling to meet his eyes.

“We are most grateful to your cousin for bringing her to your notice,” her mother said brightly.

“As am I,” said a quiet, gentle voice.

Valentina’s gaze flew up. In the darkness she could not really see the man before her, but the moonlight caught the stripes on his doublet. Gold on red velvet, like her gown.

“Valentina Alberti,” said her father formally, “I present to you Signore Prospero de’ Medici.”

Prospero. She had heard the name, some cousin of Piero’s, she thought. He bowed, and Valentina saw in his hand a mask, shaped like a fox’s face. At the same moment she felt her mother lift the swan from her head. She curtsied, feeling warmth steal into her cheeks. The gentleman straightened, his green eyes glinting.

“I am honored to make Signorina Alberti’s acquaintance.”

Valentina found her voice. “The honor is mine, Signore.”

She reached out her hand, and Signore de’ Medici bowed over it. She felt his lips brush her skin, and a tingle went through her as her heart took flight on swan’s wings. 



The Swan

by Mary Oliver

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air—
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
Into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music—like the rain pelting the trees—like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—
A white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

