

ADAM HOSS

## The Last Duchess of Buffalo

OF ALL THE RESIDENTS in Shoreline Senior Center's Alzheimer's Wing, Gladys Rockwell was the most famous. Management tasked Ariel Ramirez with her around-the-clock care.

"Because of your people skills," Rachel said.

Ariel peered over the counter, straining to glimpse next week's schedule-in-progress on the screen. Julian assumed his customary pose behind the nurses' station, folding chair propped at an angle, one foot on the closet door. The reflection of Gladys Rockwell's Wikipedia page floated on his glasses.

"She was in movies with Charlie Chaplin," he said. "Here's a picture of her with JFK."

Rachel slurped the remains of her Pepsi through a straw. "She's a hellion."

"In 1949, she booked the Presidential Suite at the Paris Ritz but never checked in," Julian said. "Later she clarified the suite was for her poodle."

Ariel understood that her assignment was no promotion. Gladys Rockwell's arrival had transformed the nursing home staff into a hive of paparazzi. She carried with her suitcases of nostalgia and mystique, Oscar snubs, glamor shots, newspaper clippings of a storied life. The centenarian's antics were enough to see her blacklisted from several area care centers in Buffalo, her hometown, and across upstate New York.

I will endure this, Ariel told herself.

"You know she's a duchess?" Julian asked. "The Queen let her keep the title, even after her divorce."

Rachel held up her hand. "We get it." Then, turning to Ariel, "Go see how our diva's settling in."

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ARIEL HAD MANAGED to find employment. It was steady work, not too hard, save for the stifling thermostats, ever-present stench and voices calling her towards the underworld. Ariel tried remembering if she'd ever kept a job through two pay periods, but too much of her mind had become candle wax from past misuse. Whether helping Mrs. Bledsoe off the toilet or tending to Mr. Jackson's ever-dripping sinuses, Ariel resolved to carry out each task with the dignity and poise of the gainfully employed.

Her inner pep talk failed to prepare her for Gladys Rockwell.

"Who are you and where is the captain?" she demanded. "This is the worst cruise I've ever been on."

One hundred years on Earth had not reduced Gladys to the Gollum-like creature Ariel had imagined. Ariel stared, amazed at both her hair's thickness and its stubborn strands of black before recognizing it as a wig. Gladys sat propped in bed, wrinkled, age-splotched, eyes fluttering in the anxious way Ariel had observed in those losing control over their minds.

"You tiny thing," Gladys said. "Eat something. And if you're trying to attract a husband, dear, you'll need a better brand of concealer. You look like you've survived a massacre." She paused. "Or didn't."

"I don't wear makeup."

Gladys let her jaw slacken. "That's your natural face?" she said. "Yikes. I'm afraid you're beyond hope."

"I'm your new caretaker."

Gladys snatched a black notebook from her nightstand. "Let's see," she said. "They've told me to keep a journal. My little book of secrets. Oh yes, I've got dirt on you and all your friends."

Ariel fought an urge to smirk. The idea of a centenarian Alzheimer's patient tapping into a gossip grapevine in the nursing home was equal parts worrisome and absurd.

"Let's see here." She squinted. "Your friend Julian and his wife have been trying to conceive but he's worried she's infertile—correctly, I'm afraid. Then there's head nurse Rachel. She's been hospitalized twice for alcohol-related pancreatitis. And you can't work Wednesday afternoons because that's when you meet with your parole officer."

Ariel stood dumbfounded in the door frame. Her lips moved but no sound escaped.

"Heroin," Gladys continued. "Third offense, but you were a model prisoner, whatever that means, so they let you go." She closed the notebook.

“Run along now. Grandma’s thirsty. Fix me a martini. Extra dry, shaken, and for Christ’s sake go easy on the rocks. Why are you still standing there? You’re my caretaker, right?”

YOU TAKE THEIR JOURNEY WITH THEM. Ariel remembered this from her training. Gladys’ cocktail of Donepezil, Warfarin and Dulcolax would have to stand in for her drink order.

A nurse was supposed to administer the medications, but Rachel had vanished and Ariel wanted to avoid the wrath of a thirsty diva left waiting. She’d get Rachel’s initials later. This was something she’d seen Julian do without reprisal many times.

The nursing home had no pharmacy. Medications were stored behind lock and key in a walk-in closet of orange cylinders and boiler packs, plastic bins, room numbers, names. Ariel found ROCKWELL, G., and a notecard listing her dosage in milligrams.

As she matched bottles to notecard, Ariel felt her gaze drift towards the pink cardstock taped to a cabinet door. Its presence burned in her peripheries until, on a whim, she gave it a glance.

THIS CABINET CONTAINS CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES.

A dryness began on the underside of Ariel’s tongue. She stepped fully into the closet and shut the door. Her mind wasn’t racing. She was a perfect blank. She’d closed the door just because. No reason. She swallowed a lump, and when she touched her keyring her palms were sweating.

The notice contained legalese and stern warnings. Before Ariel could process the situation, her fingers tugged the handle.

Locked.

Huh, she thought.

She stood in the closet a moment longer, inhaling its medicinal aroma, then shut off the light and returned to her beat.

ARIEL TOOK THE BUS and walked the last stretch. The Miriam House for Recovering Addicts, an off-yellow box perched halfway up the hill, slouched against stars. She could already smell the despair.

Inside, she slinked down the puke-colored hall, quiet and careful. She could do without the nightly earful of conspiracy theories. The night after her arrival, Ariel had been accosted by a greying redhead, an ex-alcoholic on her seventh recovery stint, who’d pitched her on the idea of going into business as partners selling old tires. “Like us,” she’d said.

And getting older, Ariel thought as she reached her room without incident. She sprawled across a beanbag chair and gazed at the ceiling.

These stretches of downtime were poisonous reminders of what she'd lost. It was here, alone in a room with potted plants and Picasso prints, where her thoughts were least predictable and her impulses most dangerous. In prison she'd fold origami to occupy her mind. She didn't feel like it now.

Ariel ran her fingernails over her scar tissue. 294 days clean. Once she hit 365 she'd stop counting. Or maybe I should start again, she thought. Maybe the time inside doesn't count. 49 days on parole, so far. 286 days until the drug tests stop. 40 more tests. Nothing like time spent in a prison cell to turn you into a highly efficient counter of days. This deluge of endless restarts, endless reinventions—"opportunities" was the word they liked—left her exhausted and pumped full of body aches. When her phone rang, the ringtone came as a balm to her tortured mind. It was Rachel.

"Gladys is on a rampage," she said. "We need your expertise."

I WILL ENDURE THIS, Ariel repeated to herself.

Gladys had commandeered the activities room. She stood at its midpoint, wobbly on century-old knees, stabbing the air with a fork.

"Somebody gave her vodka," Rachel said.

A handful of residents slouched or snored in wheelchairs. Sun and moon had no authority here. When your mind begins to dissolve, Ariel had observed, the arrow of time becomes dreamlike putty, directionless, like a compass at the North Pole. For Ariel, it was terrifying to watch.

"I absolutely must keep my appointment with the Count," Gladys said. "The man is royalty."

"Let's get on either side of her," Rachel said.

"Who are you and where is the Count?"

Her frenzy intensified as they approached. Face flushed with fury, Gladys swung the fork like a switchblade. Ariel raised her hands slowly, no sudden movements, the way the COs had taught her.

"It's me," she said. "Remember? The model prisoner."

Gladys squinted. "You? What are you doing here, of all people? I can't be seen with you. Do you understand the embarrassment you've caused me? A society woman keeping company with prisoners. Imagine the headlines!"

"Gladys, you're in a home."

“They put me in a home?” Gladys said, blinking. “Who did? Rose?”

Ariel glanced at Rachel, who mouthed *sister*.

“They put me in a home,” Gladys repeated. Her features fell. Her hand relaxed around the fork, and by the time she swayed dangerously, Ariel was there to catch her.

Later, when they got her tucked in, Ariel thought for the first time that Gladys looked her age. These remains were a monument, the last archaeological remnants of a palace of a life.

“I’m sorry, dear,” Gladys said. “I thought I was back in the old days.”

Ariel sat on a stool at the beside. She didn’t feel like leaving. Her eyes drifted to the armchair near the window, then to the closet’s excess of bedding.

“I’ll stay with you,” she said.

Gladys bobbed her head and tried to focus her eyes, unsure of how to respond. “It’s coming undone,” she said after a pause. “The places I’ve lived, the men I’ve loved. I made a habit never to return. I never sent a postcard in my life. I thought, this way, all these people and all these places would remain in my mind the way I left them. But now the tapestry’s gone to pieces. Some days I wonder if I dreamed it.” She yawned. “Fetch me a nightcap, dear. What’s your strongest liquor? Something to put me out like a light. I’ve an important meeting with the Count tomorrow morning and I must arrive refreshed.”

“Why’s that?” Ariel asked.

Gladys recoiled at the absurdity of the question. “Why, because I intend to seduce him, of course. Now that we’re on the subject, how’s your search for a husband coming along? If he’s no good in the bedroom, you have to teach him.”

Ariel smiled. She touched the film star’s weathered hand and reached over to adjust her blanket.

“Tell me a story,” she said.

But Gladys was already snoring.

GLADYS DETERIORATED QUICKLY. The starlet was confined to a wheelchair within a week. Every morning, Ariel pushed her down the asphalt path and positioned her looking out across the lake. She folded origami while Gladys enjoyed the view. These excursions, at first, were full of acerbic remarks, advice on husband-shopping (“I’m something of an expert, you know”) and commentary on Ariel’s fashion choices (“Darling, those earrings are so

out of style you wouldn't find them in an Egyptian tomb"). With each day Gladys grew less verbal. She no longer required an around-the-clock caretaker. But Ariel had come to enjoy these sessions, when she could escape her co-workers and the stink of the home, sit by the lake, and keep an old lady company.

Gladys still had lucid spells. One morning, a police officer crossed their path, a tanned forty-something with green eyes and a silver-streaked stubble of a beard.

"Good morning, officer," Gladys said.

When he passed, Gladys craned her neck.

"Mmm hmm," she said. "If I were fifty years younger." Then, looking at Ariel, "Are you married? Never mind. Overrated. A husband is a useful creature, but, you know, he's a pain in the ass." She shrugged. "Some people collect bottle caps. I collected husbands."

On another morning, Ariel asked if she'd really slept with JFK, a comment to which she replied with a wink. "To quote my dear friend Cary Grant, I did everything in moderation, darling." She winked again. "Except for making love."

Seated beside such a woman, Ariel felt insignificance verging on despair. She'd done so little with her 31 years. She had nothing to show for her trip down the birth canal. By Ariel's age, Gladys had already been nominated for two Oscars and divorced twice.

Well, she told herself, I have my job. For now.

Another week passed. On one morning excursion, Gladys became livid at the sight of a sailboat drifting in the lake. "Was that bitch even listening?" she said. "I am not setting foot on that wreck. I require a fifty-foot yacht on set for the duration of filming for the purposes of personal pleasure. The dimensions of said yacht were explicit in the contract. You can ask Rose. She's my agent."

Ariel had read about Rose Rockwell, her twin, a woman who most certainly wasn't a Hollywood agent. Rose died in a car crash at age 9.

"No, Gladys. Rose isn't..."

She stopped herself. It felt like an act of cruelty. This was a time for myth-making, not for editing excess word count.

The name breathed life onto the faint candles of her eyes. "My sister?" Gladys said. "Have you met her? Marvelous gal. She was around yesterday. She brought me a set of old photographs."

Ariel nodded. "Yeah," she said. "She's nice."

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HIS NAME WAS MOHAMMAD and he was a violinist from France.

"Well, from New York," Julian clarified. Then, considering, "His dad's Pakistani, his mom's Canadian, he's from Buffalo and he lives in France."

"Mr. Worldwide," Ariel said.

He had sky blue eyes and a buzz cut, pockmarks on his face. He wasn't attractive, but neither am I, Ariel thought. Mohammad might have been fifty-five. He had an air of sophistication in his beige sport coat and snake-skin shoes. Ariel watched as he unfolded his music stand in the activities room.

"Mohammad's dad is on the top floor."

"I don't get upstairs much," Ariel said. "Gladys keeps me busy."

Mohammad fiddled with the tuning knobs. Ariel watched him. One of her hobbies was to imagine stepping into another life. She saw herself playing Beethoven in Versailles, sipping merlot, nibbling fancy cheese with men in bowties and women in evening pearls. You could have done that, idiot, she told herself. You could have become a violinist instead of becoming you.

Julian and Ariel watched him play a sonata for a half dozen residents alternately dozing and drooling. When he finished, she approached.

"Need help?"

Mohammad looked at her, confused, then at his music stand. "Oh," he said. "No, thanks. I travel light."

Ariel nodded. She wanted to ask what's the most expensive cheese he'd tasted in France, but lost confidence imagining how ridiculous the words would sound as they escaped her lips into the world.

"You're good," she said.

"Thanks."

An awkward silence blossomed as he stuffed sheet music into a folder, eyebrows raised, sensing that Ariel had something more to ask or say.

"Are you a musician yourself?" he asked.

"No," she said. Then, for some reason, added, "I've always wanted to, though." She paused. "But isn't that a thing you have to learn as a kid?"

"Nonsense. You're never too old to learn something new. My father's 88. He's learning chess. Anecdotal evidence suggests it helps with dementia."

"Oh."

Mohammad folded up his music stand. He turned to Ariel and smiled.

"I couldn't afford one anyways," she said, nodding at his violin case.

“That’s sad. I wonder how many Paganinis or Kreislers or Itzhak Perlman’s we’ve lost to history because they couldn’t afford to pick up an instrument.”

“Yeah,” Ariel said, nodding and pretending to know what he was talking about.

Another awkward silence.

“Anyways,” Ariel said, “thanks for the concert.”

SHE WANDERED PAST the nurse’s station, stopped, wandered back. Nobody home. Lights out. The residents were all tucked in and the night shift STNAs were likely clustered around the break room. She’d already clocked out. Shirt untucked, keys in hand. I’m off the clock, she told herself, so I can’t get in trouble.

She tiptoed into the medications closet. No particular reason. She liked being here, alone in this reliquary of medical miracles. Pills for any occasion. Pills to make you smile. Pills to make you dream. How does it work, even? The chemistry of the thing. The enzymes. Who invented the idea? This is human engineering. This is elevating our species.

Then, for no reason at all, she tried the door on the pink cabinet. It was locked.

“Looking for something?”

Ariel almost jumped out of her skin. She turned to see Rachel filling out the closet doorway.

“I was just making sure it was locked.”

Rachel’s face crinkled. She followed Ariel’s arm down to her hand. Her face morphed from a flash of indignation into the disappointed look of a mother overcome with sadness by her child’s act of betrayal.

“Is it?” Rachel said.

“Is it what?”

“Locked.”

Ariel nodded.

“Good. How about you let a nurse get Ms. Rockwell’s meds from now on?”

“Okay.”

Another awkward silence. Ariel cringed. She assumed the next words out of the nurse’s mouth would be “You’re fired.” Instead, she offered a sad smile.

“Go home, Ariel.”

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GLADYS WOKE WITH A GASP, her face clawing for something fading out of reach. Her head bobbed. Uncertainty gripped her eyes. Her glance darted, panicked, taking in the contours of the room, then landing on Ariel at her bedside.

“Oh,” Gladys said. “It’s you.”

Ariel handed her the pills. She didn’t take them. Instead, Gladys folded both hands on her stomach. Her gaze drifted across mythological horizons.

“I had the most marvelous dream,” she said. “I was in motion pictures. I got to see the world. Paris, Moscow, Rome. I vacationed on the most magnificent beaches and made love to the handsomest men.” She paused. Her lips twitched with the leftovers of a smile. “When I was little it’s all I wanted. Fame, fortune, name in lights. To be a star. Oh, well. At my age all I can do is pretend. Imagine little old me, up there on the silver screen, or getting swarmed for autographs. What’s the use? Glitz and glamor and all that’s overrated. The greatest good is small, as are the most heroic acts.” Her face focused. “But if I ever did strike it rich in Hollywood I think I’d buy my sister a house. The poor girl’s suffered enough for a dozen lifetimes.” She looked at Ariel, concerned. “Why are you crying, dear? It was only a dream.”

SHE COUNTED OUT THE PILLS. Alzheimer’s pill, blood thinner pill, laxative. She preferred not to think about the effects of the last one. She dumped them into her palm, determined not to look at the pink cabinet. But it existed, there in the corner of her eye, and tonight it had her full attention.

The cabinet was open.

She scanned her vicinity. This time, she knew she was alone. Rachel had clocked out hours ago. Only a skeletal midnight crew remained, and they didn’t know her or her past. She didn’t know them, either. She could be getting medications for a resident. In fact, she thought, that’s exactly what I’m doing.

Her chest tightened. She tiptoed across the closet and craned her neck, squinting into the crevice of the door. She grazed her pinky against the crack, then pushed it open.

Vials stood like soldiers at attention. Vicodin, Valium, Oxycontin, Xanax, Morphine, Fentanyl. In the fluorescent glare she saw own reflection in the bottles.

She faced the wall.

You'll get caught, she told herself.

But her brain was already in overdrive. Nobody will notice, she thought. It's not like I'm an addict. All I need is one, enough to take the edge off, just because of this whole thing with Gladys. It would be such relief for just one or two, no more than three, and Vicodin, not Oxy. But if I did take four Oxys I wouldn't need as many, or one morphine. That'd be less noticeable. Right? One pill disappears instead of five. And it's not like I'll have access again. Two morphine tablets go missing and they'll put a padlock on this cabinet and I can't get addicted because I can't get the pills.

Or I could sell them. Buy a violin and a one-way ticket to France. Or a down payment on a place of my own. A few months' rent, at least. I could take the Fentanyl to Eddie. I still have Eddie's number. He'll use it to cut heroin. Maybe he'll share a sample. He used to do that, back in the day.

Ariel paced circles, punching the air, cursing the nurse who'd left the door unlocked. Why is this happening to me? Why must I suffer? She felt the presence of evil and, not for the first time, felt that maybe she belonged behind lock and key herself. Because this is a battle I can't win, she thought.

Then she felt something else, a hunger in her veins, a shriveling of her soul's sustenance, famine after drought. This physical reaction took on mystical qualities. She knew, at some level, that this was a monumental moment in her life. Some people win the Nobel Prize. Or they cross a stage and get a diploma, get fitted for a wedding dress, move into a corner office on the top floor. I suffer in a closet full of pills.

She slammed the cabinet shut.

The world kept spinning. Ariel Ramirez hadn't broken the universe. Her first instinct was to tug the handle, chiding herself for doing something foolish, but the cabinet was locked. The drugs were gone. Nobody had forced her and she wasn't at gunpoint. She'd done this thing on her own, this routine gesture of closing a door, an act normal people perform every day without existential aneurysms.

She left the closet as she'd found it. As she walked away, the pressure in her chest deflated so quickly, and with such force, that she felt almost weightless.

GLADYS HAD STOPPED wearing her wig. She didn't remember she'd owned one. Her remaining wisps of pearl hair danced in the wind. The duchess' acerbic tongue had gone mute. Ariel helped her hobble down the sidewalk, no wheelchair today, taking a baby step at a time, and got her settled at the

picnic table in the courtyard. No more walks near the lake. Gladys slouched and stared with eyes distant and dull. Ariel started folding origami. She wanted to make a butterfly today, with the turquoise paper, the color of Mohammad the violinist's eyes, so she could give him a farewell gift. When she looked up, Gladys was following her fingers.

"I want to do that," she said.

Ariel shuffled some paper across the table.

"It's time I started a new chapter," Gladys said. With shaky hands she held up a sheet of cardstock, then bent it awkwardly. "But you'll have to teach me. You'll need to take it slow. I am an absolute beginner."

A breeze carried the smell of the lake over the courtyard. Ariel tightened the zipper on her hoodie and breathed in and out through her nose.

"Yeah," she said. "Me too."

They sat together in the courtyard. Birds chatted nearby. Then, with patience and a gentle touch, Ariel took Gladys' hand in hers and started showing her the way.