

His Last Duchess

by Lauren Henderson

I watched him from the bow window on the staircase as he loaded his things into the Range Rover and climbed up into the driver's seat. We had only been married a few weeks and there was still a secret, furtive thrill at the sight of him like this, unaware that I was looking at him, seemingly free. But he wasn't; he was mine. I twisted the ring on my finger automatically. With other men the thrill had always dissipated after a while; sooner or later I would see them coming up the steps from the tube station, or doing something equally mundane, and no matter how handsome or endearing they looked, suddenly a wash of familiarity would surge through my veins like a tranquilliser dart and I would want to yawn so hard it felt like the corners of my mouth would split apart with the effort. Yawning, a boyfriend told me once, is simply the body's way of getting extra oxygen. He said that to reassure me, because I was yawning so much that evening; it's OK, I'm not offended, he was saying. And I stared at him in disbelief. What could be more offensive than someone who needed repeated blasts of oxygen to get through an evening with you?

He didn't last. None of them did. And yet I had married my husband after having known him for barely a fortnight. Clearly I did not anticipate being easily bored by him.

I turned the bunch of keys over in my hand.

"Explore the house," he had said. "That should keep you amused in my absence. Put that degree of yours to good use."

"Shall I write you a thesis?" I said. I was always casting him as my professor.

"Oh, it's scarcely coherent enough for that. Take one of those rambling travel books written by eighteenth-century travellers as your model. 'Sundry Observations On A Journey Through Herr Brinkmeyer's Scottish Mansion'. That sort of thing."

"Why don't you give me an oral?" I suggested.

He leant forward and kissed my mouth. The texture of his beard was still shocking, silky and bristling, almost obscene. His breath was hot, his tongue pointed and wet. I hardly moved, letting him kiss me, closing my eyes to savour it even better. Finally he withdrew his hand from between my legs and stood back.

"You can use all the keys but the smallest," he said. "It's the room

beyond my darkroom."

He smiled at me, his dark pink lips moist with my saliva.

"I keep my failures there, to remind me to do better next time. I can't have anyone but myself seeing them."

I nodded. The keys were heavy in my palm.

"I'm the chatelaine," I said, lifting them by the central ring. It was iron, waxy in texture, almost big enough to fit over my wrist, and the keys hung from it in an extraordinary jumble: gigantic old-fashioned ones crowned with elaborate swirls of iron, like something from a fairy tale, dwarfing the shiny modern Chubbs and Ingersolls with their miniature scratchings of teeth.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said.

He would often visit the hut for a few hours, but this was the first time he had stayed there overnight. It was on the tip of the island, a high ridged promontory cutting out into the sea like the prow of a racing yacht. When I first came here he had told me that occasionally he would spend the night there and asked if it would bother me to be alone in the house. No, I had said, I would be fine.

What would he have done if I had said yes? Got straight back in the launch and taken me back to the mainland? Probably. But then I was only a secretary. Simple enough to advertise for another one. A wife was not so easy to replace.

As the front door closed behind him I went straight up the nearer wing of the staircase to watch him go. The wind caught his hair, and the sunlight turned it the blue-black of sables and ravens. My Gothic husband. His skin was dead white, thick and matt like heavy paint, his lips rose madder. Snow White's grown-up son.

He went down the wide stone steps as lightly as if he were unencumbered by the cameras slung over his shoulder, the pockets of his Barbour bulky with film and lenscaps. I thought of the way he was always surprising me in the house, coming up on me as silently as if his shoes were soled in velvet. For a big man, he could seem weightless. (That made me think of bed, his body on mine, and I flushed with remembered excitement.) The door of the Range Rover banged shut. How final that sounded, the heavy slab of metal swinging into place. As the jeep crunched and ground the gravel of the drive, rounding the far corner to disappear down the oak-lined avenue, I realised that I felt bereft.

My first instinct was to reach out for someone else to fill the hole of his absence. It was lucky that there was no phone in the house; it would only have reminded me that I had nobody to ring. That may sound maudlin, but it wasn't. I simply had no family, or none that I ever would choose to speak to again. And this deliberate isolation from my relatives had

kept my friendships few and shallow too; I had learnt no other way. There were ex-flatmates, old students from college, but no-one who I would ring now, with my monumental news. It was too big a conversation to have with someone I knew only casually. And how could I have anything less?

I looked around me, taking stock of the house. This was mine, too; well, ours. But his leaving me alone like this, with the keys in my hand - for a moment it seemed all mine, to do with what I liked. I put the keys down on the padded velvet of the windowseat and sorted through them. None were labelled. He knew them so well he reached for the right one automatically. When the cleaning people came - a boatload from the mainland, once a fortnight - he would open all the doors necessary and we would leave the house for the day. Once, the weather had been perfect, and we hiked around the island, climbed down to the little beach, took a picnic and sat with our backs against the rock listening to the white waves tear along the shingle. The other time we had crossed to the mainland. But that wasn't exactly routine. That was the day we had got married.

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The advertisement had been simple: secretary wanted for photographer on his Scottish island. House beautiful but remote. Must be able to work in solitude.

"Must be able to work in solitude," I said aloud, my voice echoing in the vault of the mahogany staircase. The cleaning team had come a couple of days ago and on either side of the crimson carpet the treads were dark mahogany mirrors, the two wings reaching down on either side of me like great outstretched arms.

I had never been good with people. The idea of being marooned on an island was almost perfect. Why hadn't I thought of that before? The only catch was the personality of my prospective employer. If he were a chatterbox, a lonely man buying company under the guise of an assistant, the house would be a cage, not a liberation from society. He rang me to say that he had paid my fare to Edinburgh, where he would come to interview me, so he must have liked my letter. When I got out of the taxi he had sent, at the large impersonal hotel where he was staying, I believed that at the imminent meeting the advantage was mine.

Well, that changed as soon as I laid eyes on him.

His money for the airplane ticket, his private taxi to collect me, his hotel suite. And his presence, his restraint, only emphasising his power. I felt bought by him the moment I stepped into the room, something he had taken on approval which he could return to the shop whenever he wanted. And I liked the part about being bought. Free, unfettered, equal-rights me; I liked it. It was liberatingly simple. I just didn't want to be sent back.

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I picked up the keyring and went slowly upstairs. It was so heavy I felt I should have it hanging from my belt, like Mrs Danvers. Only I was in jeans, and on me the effect would be more handyman than ancestral housekeeper. Maybe on another woman it would have been different, but I had an irredeemably practical face and body. Straight mousy-brown hair, features that didn't suit makeup - it always made me feel like I was in drag - a bottom as flat as a teenage boy's and a chest hardly more developed. I didn't care much about clothes. My jeans were paint-blotched and my layers of sweatshirts were old and familiar, softened over the years till they felt like second skins, as cave people must have felt in their furs. My fingernails were always chipped and stained with caulk or wood sealant. I did most of the repairs around the house.

Along the upper corridor hung a whole series of his photographs; his last wife, the beautiful Brazilian who had lasted precisely two weeks on the island before returning precipitately to San Paolo. His last wife. I almost giggled at the Gothic resonances; it was Rebecca again, the gorgeous ghost to torment the new, obstinately plain woman trying ineffectually to take her place. Only Ana wasn't dead, and I had never been the jealous type.

Ana stared over her shoulder rather sulkily. She had a bottom I could have built a shelf on, defying gravity with its upward tilt. With a woman that beautiful it was hard to tell what she was feeling; she looked bored, though, which might have been a pose, but could also have reflected her first inklings that life on the island had been a catastrophic mistake for her. I saw myself reflected in the glass, and I grinned; how different we were. He had been married before Ana, but so far I hadn't seen the photographs of the others, though they must exist. I wondered whether he went from one type to another, disliking to repeat himself, and I liked this idea, having done the same myself. Always a fresh start.

Imagining him putting up my photographs beside Ana, I laughed out loud. Me in my workshop, planing down a piece of wood, or on my knees in front of the library door, replacing the screws on the doorknob so that it didn't wobble annoyingly. What a contrast that would make.

He had taken a couple of rolls a few days ago, and said they were the best of me so far.

"You concentrate on your repair jobs with the same absorption with which my second wife put on her makeup," he had said, amused. "How the modern woman is changing. I'm going to pull out some old shots I did of her to show you what I mean."

He knew the contrast wouldn't worry me. That was the great thing about this marriage. We had known a few central things about each other instantly, and all the rest was there for us to discover. Layers upon layers. I wasn't in a hurry, or I hadn't thought I was. But I found

myself going up the further flight of stairs, uncarpeted wood, that led to his studio. Maybe the photos of me would be developed. I was curious, yes. All women are, he often said. Well, we had that in common with the rest of the animal kingdom, I said. Without curiosity we would be stuck in ruts, mouldering away. You mean dead, in other words? he said. I nodded. Or as good as. He smiled and changed the subject.

I pushed open the door to his studio. It was always closed but only locked when he was working on something and not to be disturbed. The photographs of me were everywhere. I hadn't realised that he had taken so many. They were all in colour, which seemed appropriate. I didn't have the mythic black-and-white, film-still beauty of Ana or his second wife, the opera singer whose name I could never remember. There was a detail to the photographs which astounded me; somehow he had captured all the minutiae of whatever task I was busy on. And I was always busy, my expression always concentrated, focussed: squatting, a heap of tiny screws spread out on the floor in front of me, or a drill in my hand, splinters flying up into the air like sparks from a fire. My eyes never met the camera lens. How competent I looked, and, yes, how absorbed, as if I were in a world of my own which no-one could touch. Was that how he saw me?

This was what I had been curious about: his image of me. And here I had it, along with further proof of my difference from Ana - who, bored though she might be, was always acutely aware of the eyes on her, of her audience of one - or the opera singer, who in the single photograph I had seen was neither bored nor distant but nakedly engaged with the man behind the camera, her great eyes wide, almost pleading, as if no amount of his attention would ever be enough.

I wondered if he had found the shots of her he had mentioned just now. They weren't here, or at least not on view; every single image was of me, a collage on every surface, as if he were trying to fix me in his brain for all time. As if I had gone, and he was trying to remember every detail of how I had been. Well, I wasn't planning to head off to San Paolo any time soon. He would just have to get used to the flesh and blood version.

My fingers ran over the keys, feeling automatically for the smallest one of all. I knew he had said not to enter the darkroom, but the red light was off over the door; it wouldn't damage anything. Besides, he would never know. A quick glance, just for a moment - how irresistible it was to do what you knew you shouldn't -

I found the key. As I took it between index finger and thumb, the others fell back from it so heavily that I nearly dropped the iron ring. The weight would unbalance the key in the lock; eventually the teeth would begin to bend out of shape. What was he thinking of? I untwisted it from the ring, making a careful note of its position among the others. Then I crossed the room to the darkroom door, and slid the key into the lock.

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They were all there. In the dim red light, as soft and flattering as pink-shaded lamps in a plush crimson velvet restaurant, their faces gazed back at me, their expressions calm, their eyes wide. I had known he had been married four times before; he had made a joke of it. But somehow seeing all his ex-wives, one after the other, so much larger than life, ranked in what I assumed was chronological order, a series of beautiful black-and-white photographs running down the left-hand wall of the darkroom - I took a deep breath. I was unable to decide whether I was more confused by the knowledge that he worked like this, under the constant, unwavering gazes of those four women, or the fact that there was so much empty space still left. Instead of widening out the frames to fit evenly along the wall, he had hung them close together, almost touching. There was room for at least another four, maybe five. The blank red-lit plaster seemed to be staring at me even more than my predecessors did: look, it said, look where your image will hang, and the one after you, and the one after her...

Oddly enough, I took it as a challenge. So he's not sure this marriage will last? Well, I thought, I couldn't blame him. There was the evidence of divorce on the wall in front of me, in black and white, unignorable. Perhaps he kept them there to remind him of his past mistakes. My shoulders straightened and for some reason I looked down at my hands, my rather large, blistered hands with their stubby cracked fingers and short, ragged nails. They reassured me more than anything else could have done; more than his arms around me, his comforting words. My hands were brutally practical, like me, and they said that there was no point worrying about the past, that I was the present, and the present was all there was. I turned the key over absently, its cold, unyielding metal shape solid in a sudden drift of uncertainties. I always came back to objects in the end. You knew exactly where you were with them.

Across the darkroom was a door, half-ajar, a ghostly white light filtering around the jamb, like dry ice melting into the red glow. When I had come in I had flicked the main switch; it must have turned on the light in the far room as well. I crossed the studio and pulled the door fully open.

They were all there. It took me a long, long moment to work out what I was seeing, doubtless because I was resisting with all my will. Again, they were lined up chronologically, their glass coffins propped at a slight angle against the left-hand wall. Whatever system of tubes and pipes he had installed to preserve their bodies emitted an odd greenish light which cast an eerie glow over their faces. Perhaps it was that which had made the scene before me look initially so unreal. I thought of an art exhibit, of dead animals fastidiously preserved in formaldehyde, floating hacked-apart in a pale bluish liquid which echoed amniotic fluid. No such comfort here, no substitute womb.

The coffins must be fibreglass. And the apparatus was there to drain off the gases produced by decaying bodies, avoiding any stench or increasing pressure which might cause the coffins to explode. The wounds on their

bodies were all different but all equally unmistakable. A ligature mark as thick and deep as a man's thumb, blackened as if scorched in. A single stab wound, slicing up through the ribs, glaring open like a mouth. The opera singer's head lolling, oddly relaxed, at an inhuman angle. Ana, a hole in her chest big enough to put a fist into, single marks around it showing how closely the shotgun had been held to her body.

The gunroom downstairs was full of them, always cleaned and broken after a day's shooting. I would never know which one he had used.

The key fell from my hand. Oddly enough, the flat metal noise as it hit the concrete floor was reassuring. My universe might have suddenly turned upside down, but things still fell down, rather than up, and sounded just the same when they did. I didn't pick it up straight away. I was staring at the rotting flesh of my husband's first wife, observing how her wound seemed larger than it must have been when he first stabbed her, because the skin was decaying, falling away from the gaping crack, pulling it wider and wider as time passed, until just the bones would remain, only some cuts on her ribs to show how she had been killed.

What did he have in mind for me? He seemed to have covered most of the conventional bases already. At this thought a spasm gripped my ribs, almost like laughter. I bit my lip hard to steady myself and bent down to retrieve the key. It was so white in here my eyes were dazzled by it. The walls were blurring into each other. I felt as if I had been in this room for hours, days, and understood the full force of sensory deprivation, how disorienting it could be. It was a struggle for me to find the door. The white light blotted out everything else. I groped around in a controlled frenzy and only stumbled into the open door by chance. The doorknob under my hand steadied me more than I could have imagined. The metal was cool in my palm, round and solid, reassuringly real. If it broke I would know how to fix it.

I set the door at the same angle, more or less, that I remembered it having before. I don't remember picking up the bunch of keys or leaving the darkroom; I don't even remember locking the door, though I know I did, because I went up those stairs later and tried it, to be sure. The first thing I remember is finding the place on the ring to put the darkroom key, separating the others with my fingers and pulling the key out of the lock, turning it round to start sliding it around the ring. And noticing the red stain on its teeth, bright as fresh blood and equally impossible to overlook.

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While the key was soaking in a concentrated solution of Stain Devil and bleach, I took stock of the situation. Every few minutes I would scrub the key briskly with a nailbrush - a wire wool pad would have left telltale scratches - and then let it sink back again to the bottom of the bowl. That no tinge of red was beginning to infuse the thick white liquid I didn't take as a sign to panic. I had never understood how

these stain removers could absorb blood into themselves. The water merely turned slightly dirty, slush rather than snow.

The fortnightly cleaning and maintenance team would have done all our laundry, down to the occasional touch of monthly blood on my underwear, without batting an eyelid. They were paid a fortune to do everything that needed doing without being asked, and to keep their mouths firmly shut. He had chosen them well. A grimmer, more dour bunch of people I had never seen, so uninclined to gossip that they much preferred all current occupants of the house to be off the premises when they went about their work. But it would never have occurred to me to let someone else wash my dirty underwear. I did that all myself. Which was why I was probably the first wife of his practical enough to look at a bloodstained key, think: "It'll be much easier to get that out straight away, while it's fresh," and trot immediately down to the laundry room and the small magic bottle of Stain Devil (Blood, Red Wine and Fruit Juice).

I lifted the key once more and glanced at it. The stain was almost gone. I let it drop without even bothering to give it a scrub. It tinkled to the base of the sink, a few bubbles rising briefly in its wake, and disappeared. The bloodstain itself was a mystery to me. I couldn't believe there had been blood on the floor of that room; surely I would have noticed it, distracted as I was? And even if there had, how could fresh blood possibly have flowed from those poor dessicated bodies? At the memory of them I felt myself shiver, and as if from a long distance away I observed myself, surprised to realise that the shiver was not entirely one of revulsion. I felt oddly excited. My heart was pounding, my pulse racing, no matter how calm and automatic my movements were.

Adrenaline, obviously. I was in a serious situation. The cleaning team had just been a few days ago; it would be well over a week until they returned. And even then I half-doubted that they would let me travel back with them. He paid them munificently for their discretion; now I wondered how far that ran. Did they know, or suspect, that his previous wives had never left the island? He had his own motor launch, his own private landing stage on the mainland with another Range Rover waiting. There would be no way to tell for sure who had come and gone. Yet I thought they might suspect something, if not the whole. Now I looked back, there had been a change in their attitude to me when he told them about our marriage, and not just the extra deference to the lady of the house. Was I imagining it, or had there been something assessing, calculating in their narrow stares, as they wondered how long I would last - or how long it would be till he set the trap, his overnight absence at the hut, the bunch of keys with the prohibition on using one of them, even his previous allusion to the photographs he had done of me, an extra bait?

The key was clean, but smelling slightly of bleach. I rinsed it in soapy water till the ammoniac smell had gone, dried it off with a cloth that wouldn't leave traces and put it back on the ring.

After that I was free.

I could have shot him as soon as he walked in the door. The evidence upstairs would acquit me of anything; they wouldn't even press charges. But I didn't even bother to check the gunroom. He knew me, or at least that side of me, knew how practical I was. The first thing he would have done before leaving would have been to make sure that none of the guns was usable. He had probably taken all the ammunition away with him in the jeep.

I jingled the keys in my hand, absently, thinking things through. The keys - the prohibition - the blood - even the deliberate mention of his darkroom and his failures, just before he left. It was all a trap. And it had the air of being strictly regulated, a kind of macabre game whose rules were always the same. So what if I didn't spring the trap? What if I handed the keys back to him, clean as they had been when he left? What would he do if I sprung the trap on him instead?

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I had never seen my husband speechless before. It was a heady sensation. I watched him stammer, unable to form the words, genuinely, completely, taken aback, and I could have hugged myself with excitement.

"So what have you been doing to amuse yourself while I've been gone?" he had asked affably, taking off his Barbour. "I do hope you haven't been too bored."

"Oh no," I assured him. "I listened to the football on the radio last night. And I've been messing around with that driftwood I've been collecting. I thought I might try to make a frame with it. Something simple, to start with."

"Good... good," he said. I thought he sounded surprised at the easiness of my manner: well, so was I. I never realised I had that much potential for dissimulation.

"Do you have my keys?" he said so casually that I knew at once that this was just the way he had pronounced this sentence four times before.

"Yup - they're here, somewhere..." I had thought it would look too suspicious to produce them patly. I scabbled around on the hall table for them. "Here you go."

"You'll have to forgive me," he said, counting through them. "An old habit of mine when I've been away, even for short periods - I like to check everything..."

A long moment later, after a pause filled only by the chink of key against key, he looked up. His face was wiped blank, his lips parted as if to ask a question his brain would not allow him to make.

I had a sudden rush of impulse. His mouth, his moist lips framed by his dark beard... I leant forward and kissed him, not the swift brush of greeting but a deeper, proper kiss, my tongue slipping into his mouth, my hand sliding round his neck to hold him to me. I felt him stir against me; he was already hard. The anticipation of catching me out, perhaps; had he already decided how he would kill me? I moved against him, grinding my hips against his. I was tall for a woman, and our heads were nearly on a level. I reached down and started to unbutton his trousers.

"I've missed you," I whispered into his mouth. "I missed you a lot."

My hand slid through the slit on his boxers and caught hold of him. I realised that I had never been like this with my husband before. I had always let him make the initial approach. In awe of him, maybe, feeling that the rules were his. He was the vastly experienced older man with houses in three countries and four ex-wives; I was just the secretary with a nice plain face and a gift for carpentry. But now the rules were changing. Everything was blurred. I was free to do what I wanted. I sank down and took him in my mouth, and when he was groaning I pulled him down to the floor and straddled him. The noise we made echoed through the rafters of the hall. Afterwards, as I collapsed on top of him, he looked at me as if he had never seen me before.

I knew that he would go away again, for longer periods, and he would press the keys on me, urgently imploring me not to go into his darkroom, dropping all the hints he could until he practically hung a sign on the door. But I wouldn't go in. Once had been enough. I would like to; I would like to look at them again. Still, my practical nature told me that he might lay other traps. Why run the risk? He belonged to me now. I had broken the pattern, and now it was mine to make. My husband lay beneath me, arms outflung, limbs loose, as if I had just thrown him from the balcony above, panting as if he had just run a race. I closed my eyes, nuzzled my head into his shoulder, and smiled.