

MIRROR

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White in her vision.

Cold wood under her feet.

The sensation of falling.

Gertrude shivered as she sat up on the cot. There was blood on the sheets, but she couldn't tell where she was bleeding. The gas lamp outside her cell flickered from a draft. Another nap ruined by the dream. A few faint rays of light poked through the tiny window above her head. The place smelled stale, disused. A man walked past the bars to her cell, the timbre of his voice oscillating as he sang a song Gertrude's mother used to sing to her when she was alive.

"Up to mighty London

Came an Irishman one day.

All the streets were paved with gold

So, everyone was gay."

An unexpected wave of melancholy washed over her. Was it the song? Her mother died long before the song. Or did she pass just recently? Why did the song make her sad?

Another set of footsteps interrupted her thoughts. A young woman came into view—a tangled mess of brown hair, modest skirt, and shoes that Gertrude swore she used to own. The lightness of her gait gave the impression that she was floating as she walked. Gertrude didn't know why, but she felt hatred towards the girl. As soon as she saw her, she wanted to wring her neck.

"Hello mother."

There was something uncanny about her that Gertrude couldn't understand. The shape of the nose. The way her hair hung low and wide.

Gertrude grabbed the blanket she was sitting on and wrapped it around herself. "You're quite mistaken, dear. I don't have a daughter."

The woman frowned. "Then what do you think brought you here?"

Why was she here? Gertrude knew there was somewhere she had to go soon—a horrible place that made her feel weightless in her dreams. Nowadays, no matter how hard she tries, some things in her mind are simply out of reach, like chasing your shadow at sunset. Memories came—some clear, others fuzzy—but never the ones she wanted to remember, like unwelcome dinner guests.

"I keep dreaming of a man dying," Gertrude said. "I don't know why."

"Your memory has grown quite dim, hasn't it?" The young woman's voice was airy, convictionless.

Gertrude lay on the cot. A half-sleep and half-awake state jostled a memory out of the void.

January 1914

16 years ago

She accompanied Edward to the military ball. The concert hall was a cavernous white marble room, and weightless chandeliers cast down blinding light that hurt Gertrude's eyes.

"The Serbs will pull the Russians into the war, I know it." Edward sat with his elbows on his knees at one of the mahogany benches flanking the dinner tables. He hadn't touched his plate of fried salmon.

Gertrude adjusted her dress and sat next to him. "Edward, honey, there's no sense in discussing this now. Let us at least try to enjoy the evening."

Edward scoffed. "It'll be a bloodbath. And England will be called to join, as always. I don't know how you convinced me to attend this farce."

Gertrude scoffed. “Farce?”

Edward gestured to the dancing crowd. “All of these men will be thrown onto the battlefield soon. As will I.”

The memory’s edges swirled at this point and Gertrude didn’t remember much else about the rest of the night except crying and a walk alone through the grounds. The only other thing she *did* remember was a man in a worn-out military uniform she never should’ve met. She saw him from afar, a loose cigarette hanging from his mouth. He wasn’t particularly good-looking, but his lithe frame and sullen demeanor captured something within her and wouldn’t let go.

“You look as excited to be here as my husband,” she said as she sat next to him.

The man glanced at her for the briefest of moments. “I’d rather be fighting the Boers again.”

“Then why attend at all?”

“Because occasionally, divine creatures such as yourself show up.”

The man’s nonchalant tone caught Gertrude off guard and made her cheeks flush.

“And what is the name of such a forthcoming gentleman?”

“Alan.” The man smiled for the first time—a warm smile that made Gertrude feel as though it were the first spring day after a frigid winter. “And yours?”

“Gertrude.” She tried to hide her own smile, but knew she wasn’t.

“Well, Gertrude, my mother always told me to ask women endearing questions to break the ice ‘tween us. In that spirit, if you could choose between having a daughter or a son, which would it be?”

“I’m not sure I want a family, to be honest.”

“But, hypothetically, if you did?”

“A daughter.”

Alan smiled again. “Me too.”

The train tracks of Gertrude’s memory break here. Years pass. Alan’s face staring at her was the next thing she could recall, his expression worn and tired and his sweaty skin reflecting yellow candlelight. The room was white all over. Early daylight filtered through the weightless sheer blinds. Gertrude remembered feeling wearier than she ever

had before. She didn't recall why she was there, but there was a newborn in her lap, silently breathing even breaths.

Was it hers?

Gertrude didn't want to vocalize it, or give it much thought, but a feeling of resentment had grown inside her along with the baby. She never wanted a child, but the prospect of a family life with Alan enticed her to such an extent that she was willing to throw all caution to the wind and do it anyway. The realization that another human depended on her now, and for many years thereafter, slammed into her as soon as the child was born.

"We should call her Anne," Alan said as he shuffled his chair closer to the bed. He gazed down at her, and his expression turned sorrowful.

"What's wrong?" Gertrude said, despite already knowing what was coming. She could see it on his face.

Alan paused. "I didn't want to add any more to this already eventful day." He pulled a piece of paper out of the breast pocket of his wool coat and handed it to her. Gertrude's vision swam as she skimmed the letter. This was it. The event she prayed every night wouldn't happen.

"Why? What's there that they need you for?"

"Stop it, Gertie."

Her face burned, and she threw the paper on the ground. "Stop what? How is this fair? What's the point of it all?"

Alan sighed and crossed his arms. "I don't know. All I know is where to go and when."

"And our family?" Gertrude's head was pounding, anger having pushed her even closer to her limits than the birth. "What about us?"

Alan stood and paced around. He sat on the windowsill. "Do you believe we're the only family torn apart by this?"

Gertrude knew they weren't, but it hit her like a sledgehammer all the same.

"France, then." Gertrude said with finality.

"The boys think it'll be over by Christmas."

1930

Present

“It’s time, Miss Aldredge,” a husky, mustachioed man in a blue military jacket said through the cell bars.

Gertrude rushed up to the bars and grabbed them. She looked around for the girl, but realized it was just a creation of her sick mind. That’s what the doctor said.

The man sighed and shook his head when he glanced at her, a look of pity on his face. “Come along now.”

Come along where? Why was she in prison? Where were they going? Gertrude tried to ask everything at once, but all that came out was an incoherent blubbing as the man clasped irons around her wrists and led her down the stone hallway and out to the courtyard. A white bus stood there. The guard pushed her up the stairs. She was the only passenger. It rumbled out of the prison grounds and onto the road. The weightless feeling overtook Gertrude again as she leaned her head onto the glass.

June 1922

Eight years ago

Anne poked the bronze bust sitting on the desk.

“Don’t touch that,” Gertrude barked. She squeezed the washing rag into the bucket and began scrubbing the brown streaks of mud off the floor, her knuckles burning with pain from the cold water. The receiving room reminded her of the one in her childhood home—two comfortable plush chairs, a piano nobody ever played, and plenty of tables that normally sat laden with food and drink.

“But why not?”

“Because it’s not ours.”

“Why don’t we have a home like this, Mama?”

Gertrude sighed. *Because of you.*

“We don’t have the money for it anymore, darling.”

“Why not?”

Gertrude stifled the urge to yell at Anne. "Be quiet, won't you? Mother's working."

The door to the receiving room opened, and a portly woman with curly gray hair entered.

Gertrude stood and held her rag in both hands. "Hello, Mrs. Taylor."

The woman smiled, her yellow teeth showing. "Hello dearie. I wanted to inform you that the doctor I mentioned yesterday who lives three houses down is actually quite interested. An Aldredge shouldn't be down in the muck with the peasants. He's looking to wed, and your family name still holds value."

"I'm not interested in getting married again, Mrs. Taylor."

The woman's face turned to shock. "Well, why in the world not? He doesn't even mind that you already have a child." She glanced at Anne with a forced smile.

Gertrude's exhaustion nearly forced words out of her mouth she knew she'd regret. She wanted to scream at the woman that the doctor wasn't Alan, and with her luck he'd get sent to some far-off war as well, and die a painful death too, but she bit her tongue at the last moment.

"I'm just not interested."

The woman looked at her with an expression of pity and annoyance. "Fine." She pressed two shillings into Gertrude's palm. "You can go early today if you'd like."

With her knees and hands worn and stiff, Gertrude went to the market with Anne. She spent most of her pay on bread, some sausage, and potatoes. The sun hovered over the horizon by the time Gertrude and Anne entered their tenement. Two mattresses, stained with age, sat in the corner, while a table with uneven legs dominated the center of the room.

Gertrude set the groceries on the table. Every fiber in her body screamed for rest. She sat on a chair and didn't move.

Anne stood in front of her. "Mother, are you alright?"

I never wanted you.

"Yes, I'm just tired, darling. Eat the sausage and bread tonight. I'll cook us a proper meal tomorrow."

1930

Present

The bus hit a pothole, which shook Gertrude awake in time to see the rusted metal gate pass overhead with Pentonville Prison painted in white on it. Red sores on her wrists from the shackles contrasted against her pale skin. The overcast sky spilled pallid light onto the grounds. Gertrude remembered nothing else until she was in her cell and a young-faced doctor arrived to weigh and measure her.

“Why are you doing this?”

The man didn’t look at her when he replied mechanically. “To make sure it’s done *right*.”

“What?”

The doctor clicked his tongue as he wrote her weight in a notebook after clearing the balance scales. “Is your memory truly this poor? We discussed this just a few minutes ago.”

December 1924

Six years ago

Gertrude woke in the middle of the night. It was the nightmare again, where she imagined how Alan might have died and how terrified he must’ve been. The chaplain’s letter sounded just like all the others-

Alan Winslow met his end with bravery. His last thoughts were of home.

It was a lie, and one that did not stop the decade of night terrors of all the ways Alan could have passed in France: gas, barbed wire, dysentery, and if he was lucky a bullet, bomb, or bayonet.

She glared at Anne’s sleeping form huddled under the dirty blankets. It was all her fault. The unfolding disaster of her life began when she was born. She should’ve convinced Alan to wait. Anne shouldn’t exist. If Gertrude hadn’t met Alan at all that night at the banquet, maybe things would be better. Anne planned all of this. Gertrude knew it. It must be the reason why the girl smirks when she looks at her. She knows that she tore down the facade of Gertrude’s life and took the remnants of what was left.

Gertrude didn't remember why, but she was kneeling at the side of Anne's mattress. She looked so much like him, too. It was almost as though Anne had taken his place. The girl, however, was a muddled mirror image—a weak simulacrum—that had none of what made Alan so captivating. All she had was a mouth that constantly needed feeding and a face that reminded Gertrude of the life she could've had.

But she was hers, and she loved her.

The next thing Gertrude remembered was Anne squirming as Gertrude's hands squeezed around her throat. Anne gurgled as she fought her, and her eyes filled with tears when she looked up at her.

It took much longer than Gertrude would've guessed for her to die. Not a single fleeting hint of regret or shame passed through her head during or after.

1930

Present

At eight o'clock sharp, a guard came to escort Gertrude to a different cell. When the door opened, a strange sight met her eyes—a wooden platform about seven feet high with a staircase leading up to it. The hangman's noose hung delicately from the wooden beam. White tiles plastered the walls and ceiling of the room.

She remembered little else about the ceremony until she was standing on the platform, with a small host of spectators facing her. As the executioner placed the noose around her neck, a tidal wave of it all hit Gertrude all at once, as though a dam finally broke.

Longing for the life she should've had.

Guilt over killing her only daughter.

Horror at how unjust and terrifying Alan's death must've been.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She shook her head when the warden asked for her last words, and the executioner put a white covering over her head.

White in her vision.

Cold wood under her feet.

The sensation of falling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yevgenii Kisarauskas is an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who later grew up in the rainforests of Southeast Alaska. His writing, which has been published in *Santa Monica Review* as well as *MSU Roadrunner Review*, draws on these extremes—chaos and quiet.