

Kirill Leonidov

THE REFLECTION
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The Reflection. A
Collection of Novels

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Аннотация

Someone or something is toying with me. This character is absolutely ruthless, it keeps testing me, constantly changing the mise-en-scène. At first I do not recognize it, I just observe and interact with the reality around me. But after a while I see my companion and sometimes even understand what it wants. This thing is myself, the reality itself and everything above it, my reflection in the shards of all the mirrors across the Universe. This is both exciting and terrifying.

Содержание

The Reflection	5
Всё	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

The Reflection

A Collection of Novels

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The Reflection

My name is George. And I have something to tell you. I didn't do it earlier because I deemed it to be too personal. But with time I understood that this could potentially be important for the others to understand the world we live in. It is as if nobody asks for help, but many need it, stuck in an eternal maze with no way out.

I wasn't so old back then... when I set out to do something quite peculiar. My days were an obstacle race, my every thought occupied by the need to stay on my feet, to not fall down. You "run" so fast that you stop feeling anything, you lose all empathy. Your thoughts and emotion dull under the stress of pursuing some imagined finishing line called "Success". Win the race and a great deal of fame and recognition is sure to come, sometimes even with some big numbers on your bank account. But if you can't pull it off... Then the finishing line becomes your personal apocalypse, where the sun goes down, never to be seen again.

But when the race is over and the dust settles down, you find yourself emotionally broken and empty. Having a significant other often does not change a thing, does not fill the void. Your beloved one had his or her own race to run and is still recovering.

Tired and sleepy, you hear the sounds of music fade; see TV actors' shapes dim and the scars of political battles heal. Finally, the TV just becomes an ambient light, the computer is

on standby, the weary hands can no longer hold the phone – your consciousness starts fading and the body prepares for the brave new day of the same old race.

But I am naturally curious, you see. This curiousness, must be imprinted on the cortex, burned and soldered in. I always want to learn something new, some mysterious thing that is beyond the grasp of our chaotic reality. Is there anything as tempting, as an attempt to widen your mind's horizons? A “salesperson” in daily life (I sell electronics, which is harder than it sounds. Selling something in our demanding, irritable, greedy and paranoid society is quite a feat), at evenings I turn into an inquisitive primeval creature with a lust for knowledge and information. That is it. At day, I am a specialized robot, and at night – a cute little animal in perpetual search of an unheard of fruit of wisdom.

I learned about EVP [Electronic Voice Phenomenon] from the Internet, like many others. And decided to do a couple of experiments. Why? Out of the curiosity, of course. I didn't have any ulterior motive, I swear. My friends called it nonsense. They still do. And you probably will. But you're mistaken. Its way, way more complicated than that. Way too damn complicated. But, let's start at the beginning.

You got to have the right equipment to experiment with the EVP. Not unlike a fisherman, you pick the right “hooks and nets” to catch the elusive voices. I picked up the most reasonable gear I could get. All you need is a computer, a soundboard with a special function, a sound editor program, a microphone and

an amp.

Days, and sometimes even nights passed by. All my hard work was for naught. The “fishing” was unsuccessful – even the sound editor couldn’t make the noises clearer. On the Internet people say that it works... Not for me though. Only one time I heard something weird. “Is that him?” Or so my brain heard. I asked my wife, if she’d like to partake in my experiments. Her answer was... unusual, so to speak,

– “Honey, let’s do it in the bed, please? I am ready to risk there. It’s safer and more fun.”

– “Are you afraid?” said I.

– “I’m just saying we could be doing something ‘more useful’ more often.”

The embarrassment in my eyes made her chuckle,

– “I’m just kidding. But I am afraid, though.”

– “Of what?” I asked.

– “Well... I dunno. What if the some kind of demons will curse us and destroy our lives.”

– “Like, if we open a door... a portal and couldn’t close it, and no one could. You have to be morally prepared to these kinds of accidents. And I am not.”

– “We could try summoning your mom, for instance...”

– “Are you crazy?”

– “Why so?”

The wife let out a sigh,

– “She didn’t think of me much when she was alive. I advised

her to divorce my father. He hated her. And then she started hating me for bringing this up. But she didn't fall out of love with him. I can't even imagine the things she'd say now."

This conversation made me inclined to stop the "studies", but one night, already feeling drowsy, I heard strange clicking sounds coming out of the next room. I can't stand the other room's noises, ever since the childhood. Especially if they come out of the farthest one. I remember waiting for my parents to come home from work, waiting painfully long till midnight or two o'clock. One time I tried, as I usually did, to take my mind off the bad thoughts, but couldn't do it – the noises kept distracting me. Then somebody started walking "round the flat... It was impossible to ignore – the sound was getting louder and clearer. It was obvious that I was not alone. I snapped. Took a deep lungful of air and flew towards the unknown, ready to kick, punch and bite the uninvited guests, just to end this once and for all. I rushed in the farthest room, swung the door open and started rattling my parents' wardrobe, screaming like a mad maniac.

Ever since that day I never had a big flat, even when I could afford it. And never lived by myself. And hated "Home Alone". Could it be a childhood trauma?

And now again... Even though, the wife and the dog are here. The latter, as well as the former, doesn't hear a thing. They both sleep tight and snugly. The dog doesn't hear it, but I do.

I get up and go to the next room. My steps are almost as firm as that of the grownup. Almost. Funny to see me so afraid

and ashamed. I didn't find it amusing though. I come in through the open door and see a figure in the centre of the room. Upon flicking on the light, to my utter surprise, I see a child of twelve years old. He, as I used to, stands in the middle of the room crying. He's wet with tears, the water is dripping from him, his face is pale and freckled. The hair is as light as the bundle of flax. I was paralyzed by dread, can't say a word, can't make a sound. And I wake up.

The wife and the dog are asleep. By the God, it was only a dream. I stop shivering, but the anxiety doesn't leave me. I venture forth into the darkness of the real next room. Obviously, I do not find anybody there. For no particular reason I turn on the PC and start recording.

I ask, "Who's there?"

The EVP enthusiasts usually don't ask such questions. What does the "who" and "there" even mean in such context?

But I got a definite answer. It was quiet but discernible. I didn't even need to edit these three words: "Simon is here".

Baffled, I blurted out,

– "Why?"

The answer was delayed by a minute or so,

– "Dark... Take a hand. Pier heard."

– "What pier, Simon?"

– "Pier heard."

– "Screamed and heard?"

– "Yes... Not leave."

– “I won’t leave. What is happening?”

– “Alone. Always alone.”

– “You are not alone now, Simon. My name is George. Can

I help you?”

– Kelp.

– Help?

“What’s going on?” asked the wife. She and the four-legged best friend looked at me puzzled.

The sessions was over, I did not get an answer for my last question.

– “Ugh, why did you interrupt me? I finally made contact!”

I grumbled.

– “With whom?” Emma asked surprised.

– “I thought, it asked for help.”

– “This is where it all starts. Haven’t you seen the movies?

‘They’ always need your help, the next thing you know – they come pouring down, all in need of something. Promise me to stop. We don’t need any more troubles. We’ve got enough on our own. Better call your son more often. Or walk the dog, if you need to relax. The dog woofed in agreement.”

I promised. Just to defuse the situation. I didn’t mean to follow up.

The next day, when Emma left, I started up the equipment again.

– “Simon, please respond. It is George. Do you hear me?”

– “Yes...”

I gasped for air,

– “Do you still need my help?”

– “Will you?” he replied.

– “What is happening to your right now?”

– “Need sweem. Waters dark. And pain. I’m afraid.”

– “Do you see the light?”

– “Do you?”

– “Its light here, I am not swimming in the dark.”

– “Yes. Not swim... “[unintelligible]

– “Do you know how to get out?”

– “Nobody... Breathe.”

– “Please, try to calm down. Calm down.”

– “Help.”

– “How?”

– “Say: ‘Hang on, Simon. Ish not for ever.’”

– “Simon,” I was too anxious, lost my breath, the tears started rolling down. Can’t even remember the last time I felt like this.

“Hang on, it’s not forever!” If my words do mean something...

– “Not for... Thanks. Struggle.”

– “Fight it, Simon. Try as hard as you can. You will do it.

What do you see around you?”

– “Loneli...”

– “Loneliness? You can’t see that.”

– “And you.”

– “Me?”

– “You and me. Reflect.”

The session was over and Simon did not answer. Did he drown? Where? What kind of crap is that? Why did he say “you and me” I laid down on the bed and the dog started whining, probably felt my confusion. I couldn’t for hours. Suddenly then, I remembered myself drowning. I was twelve at the time. My cousin saved me. Grabbed me from the very bottom of the lake at pulled to the surface. Felt very nauseous afterwards. Can’t stand the smell of lakewater now.

And back then... I felt that loneliness. The despair, the weakness, the indifference of the world. Simon is right I saw it too! Saw! At the bottom, looking up and feeling my consciousness slip away I saw a flickering light of the surface. My friends playing under the weak light of the sun. We were on different planes of reality and I felt pain and cold. I need to say something encouraging to him. To give him the strength to fight! I jump up and go back to the computer. No voices. Just some static and vibrations. The EVP enthusiasts call them “nulls” – you can’t usually hear anything intelligible in these recordings. What did he mean by “reflect”? Is it just another word that got corrupted? And “you and me”. What do we have in common? I came up to the mirror and save a gloomy looking fellow with bags under the eyes and drooping mouth. Yeah, sure. “Reflect”. I’d certainly love not to.

The next night I waited to speak with Simon tête-à-tête. But it all began even stranger than before. Firstly, I got a response from “Sanjita” station, even though I explicitly asked for Simon. They

said they'd try to make contact and I should "talk to myself", so that the connection would be better. What did they mean by "to myself"? What should I ask? Then Simon responded,

– "I'm still here. We should bi..."

– "Be what?" I asked.

– "Bid far..."

– "Farewell? No, let's go up first, then say our goodbyes. Believe in yourself and move forward. There's no weight where you swim. You are full of energy. You must... see the light."

Where did the "energy" and the "light" come from? Astounding! The feeling of guilt and pain started growing in me. It appeared suddenly and enveloped me, I felt as if I let somebody down.

– "I'm sorry..." I exhaled loudly.

– "I see!"

– "See? What do you see?"

– "The light. It is alive and warm. Warm. Warm."

Unbelievable. I hear him loud and clear, as if he's talking on the phone – no static and interference. I can even hear him breathe,

– "Are you out yet? Simon?"

– "It is yours," he responded.

– "Mine? What is mine?"

– "You know..."

The last words were lost in the static. I've never heard of him again and soon stopped experimenting with EVP, much to the

delight of my wife. I want to believe that Simon isn't lonely anymore. I see the sun in a different way now. While there's light, there's hope.

But the story doesn't end here. After a while, trying to figure out where did the feeling of guilt come from and what do I and Simon have in common, I remembered something I tried to (and almost succeeded) forget. Long time ago, I was having a picnic near a pond. Somewhere in the middle of our feast a boy started drowning in the pond. He desperately flailed his hands; around him were his older friends that could've easily pulled him out. But no one did, they only shouted at him. "Swim, stay afloat!" The boy could not possible make it to the shore. He panicked the waters started swallowing him. No use trying to hide it – I was drunk. I did not immediately see the scene. It was April the water was ice cold. But could've and should've tried to rescue him. Swim to him! Instead I waited for his friends to help. My indecisiveness wasted the precious seconds the boy had. He drowned right before our eyes. Afterwards, I counted seconds, tried to console myself. Said that I couldn't make it even if I saw it right away.

But the truth is – I could. And did not. Did not do what my cousin did.

After the contact with Simon, I looked into that incident once again. Going back to it was hard. I dug up the details. The boys tried to raft on the pond, but it overturned. That one boy did not know how to swim. Can you guess his name?

Sometimes, I stand in front of the mirror and look the reflection in the eyes. I talk to myself. And to *him*...

Bee

The married couple of Vladimir and Maria Kretov left the hotel room... I wouldn't say early. The male half of the couple sure did take his sweet time getting up from bed, bathing and dressing up, as if being late for breakfast was a necessary part of some ritual: everyone was waiting for his entrance with fanfares. Vova cared not for the lost time, for the usual morning hunger (which he surprisingly didn't have), and especially for his wife's reproaches and grumbling.

The breakfast itself left no strong impression on him. His eyes looked somewhere beyond the bacon, which was quite "not-bad-at-all" [this is one of words Maria uses to evaluate everything, and it falls somewhere on the middle of the scale. "Super-duper" would be the highest praise possible, while "cheapish" is reserved for the lowest of the low]. Masha explained her husband's behavior quite simple: he was overworked and tired. Vladimir Kretov was the Head of a bank's Legal Department and recently, due to the economic difficulties, the bank worker's bread and butter had very little of the latter on it. Well, that was not unheard of then. Theirs was not the only company in dire straits. The work piled through the roof. Hordes of idiots came pouring from everywhere. There was no shortage of their kind before, but now it could be called a full-blown infestation. The small fries reacted to their bigger Moscow siblings' battlecries and began

spreading all kinds of conflicting, doubling or nonsensical orders. Everyone, even the fools eventually got confused by this state of affairs. The idiots were baffled. How could their orders bring anything but prosperity to the bank and the country? Then they tried to fix the situation, which, of course, consisted of trying to find the scapegoat in the ranks of the non-idiots. The work turned into the struggle to survive, akin to paving your way through the “jungle” with a dull blade. But the “jungle” was getting thicker, darker and scarier.

– “You better eat, since this week we’re spend our days suntanning. The cheaper cafes are far from the shore. I wish we could afford an “all-inclusive”... says Masha.

– “Why would you need to tan the whole day? “Vladimir asks surprised.

– “Don’t you get it, Vova? What will we show the world? We are like the ambassadors of the unlucky ones, coming to the land of pleasure to rest for us, and for them. And the proof of us being here – is the tan. It is our duty to get it. The souvenirs, magic balms, cups and t-shirts come next in the order.”

She blurted this tirade out and continued consuming the pile of exotic fruit on a giant plate,

– “And we need to find out where are the affordable guest-houses. Vera asked us. You remember, she and her dog are coming here in a month. If the dollar exchange rate doesn’t rise, of course.”

Her voice started fading in a sea of restaurant’s noises.

Vladimir ate silently and pondered on what was happening to him. He wanted to relax, see the blueness of the sea, embrace its giant vastness and inhale the fresh breeze. But he suddenly felt irritated, as if he had come to a psychological dead-end, as if he had lost this two-week paradise he and Masha longed for every year. She marveled at the sight of the sea, as usual, each time trying to spot something new in the distance. The sea loved to make surprises. Its fundamental nature was to never repeat itself. It can be turquoise, or change its colors from teal near the shore to lilac near the horizon. Or it can look like a scrap quilt – a mosaic of all imaginable colors. And it smells of watermelon, kelp and iodine... It moves forth in a wave, wrinkles with the wind, splashes around like in a bottle, jumps up in places, throws itself in your face; or stays still like glass, graciously sauntering along the shore; or boils and sizzles; or hisses at you like a scary wild beast; or rages on, going berserk like a giant otherworldly blob.

All of this is only a small fraction of its states and moods.

Coming here every day, you notice even its inhabitants change. Today there are near-transparent stinging salpas, tomorrow – all kinds of jellyfish, both big and small. Everywhere you see are some bioluminescent critters, crabs, schools of fish; each different and amazing. The sea lives and breathes. Blessed are those, who can feel its breath. These Chosen Ones are few, far fewer than those that fear and avoid the sea. That's fine by me. More place for those who like it.

Masha came back from the deep parts excited,

– “You won’t believe this. I saw a crab and this big sand-colored striped fish fight for food.”

– “What kind of food?” he responded listlessly, laying on his side under the parasol His voice was so quiet, it barely reached the wife.

– “For what they had caught, silly. What else they could fight for? Listen, at three we need to go to the Old Town.”

He grumbles something in response, but his wife manages to hear him.

– “No, tomorrow at eight the stores are closed, we need to go.”

Vladimir still hasn’t moved an inch, like a stingray in the shallow waters. Masha discerned his quiet protests again,

– “Come on, get up! What should we buy though? The elephants again? All they do is collect dust. Let’s buy T-shirts for all of them. Whad’ya think?”

Now his voice sounded quiet and clear,

– “Buy me a boomerang.”

– “Are you out of your mind? Where will I find one?”

– “Australia is not *that* far...”

Clearly being offended by his retort, she left for the sea again. The husband still was motionless under the sunshade, not even trying to look at the sea.

Only on going back to the nice warm water, did she start pondering on the reasons of Vladimir’s gloom. “Oh, I get it now. It’s all Svetka from the Mortgage Division. That bitch. The

girls did tell me, but I didn't believe them. "What are talking about, he loves me so much. No, one should remember – when you get used to each other and know what the spouse will say without them even opening the mouth. That's when the lovers start to appear. Always looking at him like she wants to give him a BJ or something. Of course, who would resist. Especially when it's by such a young girl. And those texts, "The office feels empty with you on vacation"... Well, go eff yourself!"

The situation has gotten even worse at night. Their lovemaking turned into another dispute,

– "You're beating your head on the back of the bed."

– "No, I'm not."

– "Yes, you do. The bed is shaking, I hear it. And the neighbors do too. Turn around."

– "How?"

– "Sideways, how else?"

– "I did, better now?"

– "Ow, wait a moment..."

– "Waiting."

– "Let's go again. What's wrong?"

– "Now you wait, honey..."

– "Shall we start over?"

– "Yeah."

– "You just don't want to be with me anymore."

– "What made you think so?"

– "Your 'thing' says it all. No need for any lie detector."

* * *

Vladimir woke up very early, even by the local standards. It was dark outside, cicadas were singing away and the hotel, decorated by the yellow lanterns, stood frozen in the magical sleep. He came out to the balcony and saw the cloudless sky and a small visible piece of the sleeping sea. He tried to lead an internal dialogue of the following kind,

– “What is going on, Vladimir Gennadyevich? Have you lost your job? Your parents? Did you get gravely sick? Or did the wife leave you? Have you been betrayed by your friends, children or your country? What else do you need from life?”

– “Honestly, I can’t explain. I simply can’t I feel... empty. The dirt is everywhere. Not the actual dirt, you know. I mean, you get it, you are smart after all. There’s no trust, no truth, no love between people. Everybody lies and kisses somebody’s ass these days. Now do you get it?”

– “I do. But what about Masha? You have what many others lack. She always believed in you, helped you when you were sick and weak.”

– “It’s true, but you can’t build your relationship on the sweet memories and gratitude. Something more substantial is needed, something for the future. Like fuel for the ship to venture forth to the unknown.”

– “Welp, just take a break. I advise you to go freshen up at the

sea. The water is magnificent now! And look at the sky, Vova. The sky!”

Vladimir tried to persuade his wife to get up, but she was adamant. It seems they have switched the roles. “I hereby bless you to go and rethink your behaviour. Maybe the morning sea will clear your head up a little,” she said before closing her eyes again.

The sky already turned slightly orange when he cautiously waded the water, trying not to disturb the natural silent harmony. The sky-blue sea and the sea-green sky meshed together in an eerie entity that could be only called the Cosmos.

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