



Mirror Memory

By Sarah T. Brown · Illustrated by Bethy Williams



Kate walked past the giant mirror, stopping to stare at it for the 14th time since she'd bought it on impulse at the antique store the previous week.

Calling Irma's Oddities an antique store was a stretch. Most of the items there were junk—purely decorative items from the last 50 or so years, made to look older than they were so people who couldn't afford real antiques (like her) could still create the illusion of old luxury. When they moved, or died, or decided to go midcentury modern instead, their conversation pieces sometimes ended up at Irma's—as did a few lonely souls like Kate. She loved moving between the musty, overstuffed aisles, and loved that someone who had known her mom and shared her love for old things had curated those aisles.

This mirror was one of the few pieces at Irma's that seemed like it might actually *be* old, rather than just made to *look* old. Though it appeared Victorian, Kate didn't think it could possibly be authentic—especially since she found it in a junk shop in Montana. Still, it didn't come from a Home Goods circa 1998. Optimistically, she thought it might have been from the 1930s or 40s. She'd fallen down an internet rabbit hole trying to figure it out, but didn't know enough about it to discern if websites were selling genuine pieces or throwing around terms like “Victorian gothic” to make the sale.

Now Kate couldn't decide what to do with the damn thing. It was in decent shape; some spotting around the edges of the glass and various nicks in the mahogany frame were its only defects. But the carving work was so beautiful she just couldn't leave it in the shop next to piles of crumpled curtains, wash boilers, and 70s-era bar glass sets. It was huge—more than six feet tall and three feet wide—so for now, she propped it on the floor in the entryway to her apartment.

More than once, she stopped to do a double take as she passed the mirror, thinking she'd seen something out of the corner of her eye. Did her hair look weird? Was there a dark shadow behind her? Did her blush look insanely rosy? Of course not.

Kate cued up her favorite Victorian Christmas playlist on a Bluetooth speaker that resembled an old Victrola phonograph,

another impulse buy she refused to feel bad about. She fished the dustmop out of her tiny pantry, determined to take care of the dust bunnies that swayed in the draft sneaking through the crack under her front door.

Not that she had any reason to clean. She wouldn't be hosting any dinner parties or cozy gatherings for the holidays. Such activities required getting to know people, and that was a skill she did not possess. When her mother was alive, she'd been quite content to drift in her orbit, joining her at parties and outings. Kate liked being the youngest person in the room. It was one more example of her affinity for old things. But hanging out with those people now felt wrong. She tried it a few times, and everyone was always exceedingly kind. But each event had a hole in it the shape and size of her mother.

Kate scooted the mop toward the entry, hoping to catch some bonus grime on the way. As she passed in front of the mirror, she startled so badly that she dropped the mop.

Something was definitely different. A harpsichord rendition of "Greensleeves" lilted through the apartment while she stared at her reflection in disbelief. She forgot about the cold draft and the dust bunnies and even the loneliness. She was mesmerized by her reflection in the mirror, which inexplicably wore a tidy chignon with soft curls framing her face.

Kate raised her hands to her hair, feeling her usual tangle of brown waves cascading past her shoulders. The hands in the mirror did the same but found no such hair to grasp. Kate shrieked and ran to her kitchen, the furthest room from the mirror.

Her reflection in the microwave door was just as she expected it to be—long, unkempt waves. She began to hyperventilate. She picked up her phone from the counter. Who do you call when you think you've seen a transfigured image of yourself? 911? Your therapist? She put the phone back down and took a steady breath. And another. And a third.

She hadn't slept well the night before. She'd read one too many gothic novels that winter. Maybe her apartment had a gas leak? Determined to make it go away, whatever the cause, she forced herself to walk back through her living room toward the mirror.

Kate peered at it from the side, careful to stay out of the

reflection zone. She grabbed her scarf from its hook on the wall and wrapped it around her hand, then carefully tipped the mirror forward just far enough to check behind it. There was nothing there, just some water-stained wood slats and two weeks' worth of dust. She dropped the scarf and reached out to touch it, her hand shaking. Her fingers met the warm, dark wood with no shock, no bolt of lightning. She wasn't struck dead on the spot. She pulled her hand back and stood staring at the mirror, trying to figure out what to do next.

After a full minute contemplating the thing, she held her breath and moved into the field of view once again. And there it was, her hair in that tasteful bun with the framing curls. As she looked down at the rest of her body, she realized that her reflection wasn't wearing the same jeans and old sweatshirt she had on. Instead, her mirror self wore a crimson floor-length skirt, bustled in the back, with a green velvet jacket. A row of delicate buttons fastened it up to her neck.

Kate smoothed the front of her shirt, half expecting the feel of velvet beneath her fingertips. The disconnect was so disorienting, she yelped and scurried back to the kitchen. She grabbed her phone from the counter and tapped open the camera app, switching it to video. She hit record, walked purposefully toward the mirror, and shuffled back into view. Two curious things happened—the phone didn't appear in the reflection; and she looked like normal, 21st Century Kate on the screen. She gasped and dropped the phone.

All of these movements appeared the same in the mirror, just without the current-day parts. She scrambled to pick up the phone, and this time snapped a still picture before hopping out of the frame. With trembling hands, she opened the photo she'd just taken—to find everything as expected; just an average mirror selfie, albeit with a completely terrified look on her face.

So, she was delusional. That was all.

She stowed the phone in her bustle—er, back pocket—and slowly made her way back in front of the mirror.

There it was again—the crimson dress and emerald velvet jacket; the hair; and for the first time, she noticed her own fake Norfolk pine garland hanging in the background. But the warm white LED lights that twinkled on her side of the glass were miss-



ing; and the greenery looked far more realistic in the reflection.

Kate had no idea how long she stood there looking at this Victorian-era version of herself. She turned left and then right, watching the mirror fabric swing in response. The combination of the bustle and the corset she was obviously wearing made her curves look amazing. She was sure that the costume was from sometime in the Victorian period; she'd read enough books and watched enough period dramas to know. It reminded her of the time her mother had made her an Ada Lovelace costume for Science Day in the 4th grade. When she finally tore her eyes away, she looked down at her tattered jeans and felt a deep ache to look like she did on the other side of the mirror.

Ridiculous.

It was, wasn't it?

But the idea that sprung into her brain fully formed seemed like the most natural, logical idea in the world. Kate ran to her tiny bathroom, digging under the cabinet for bobby pins, styling tools, makeup, and hair products. Within five minutes she was sitting in front of her Victorian portal mirror, the items scattered around her. The hand mirror propped next to it helped her assess her actual progress as she pinned and curled and sprayed. None of the products showed up in the reflection. Not even the bobby pins.

But as her reflection in the hand mirror grew closer and closer to her reflection in the portal, her face began to glow. She couldn't stop now if she wanted to—and why would she? She had to make the two images as close to each other as she possibly could. She couldn't explain why; she just knew she had to do it. As she made progress, other details started to emerge. A cameo brooch at her neckline. Delicate gold earrings dangling from her earlobes. A bit of lace peaking above the collar of her jacket.

At once, she knew she'd done it. Her hair looked exactly like it did in the mirror. She could tell from the reflection in the hand mirror, but she could also feel it, looking in the portal mirror. She reached out and touched her reflection in the glass for the first time—and a spark of electricity ran through her body.

Kate scrambled to her feet, ran to her closet and began pulling out items and dropping them on the floor. Pirate wench costume she wore two Halloweens ago? No. Fifties-style pinup dress from her last work event? Wrong era. Her renaissance faire costume

wouldn't work, though there might be a few elements she could use from it. She pulled it out and threw it on the bed.

Then she found it—the green velvet jacket she'd inherited from her mother when she'd passed away. Her mother, the old soul's old soul who had loved to play dress-up—especially if it involved anything before 1900. It was perfect.

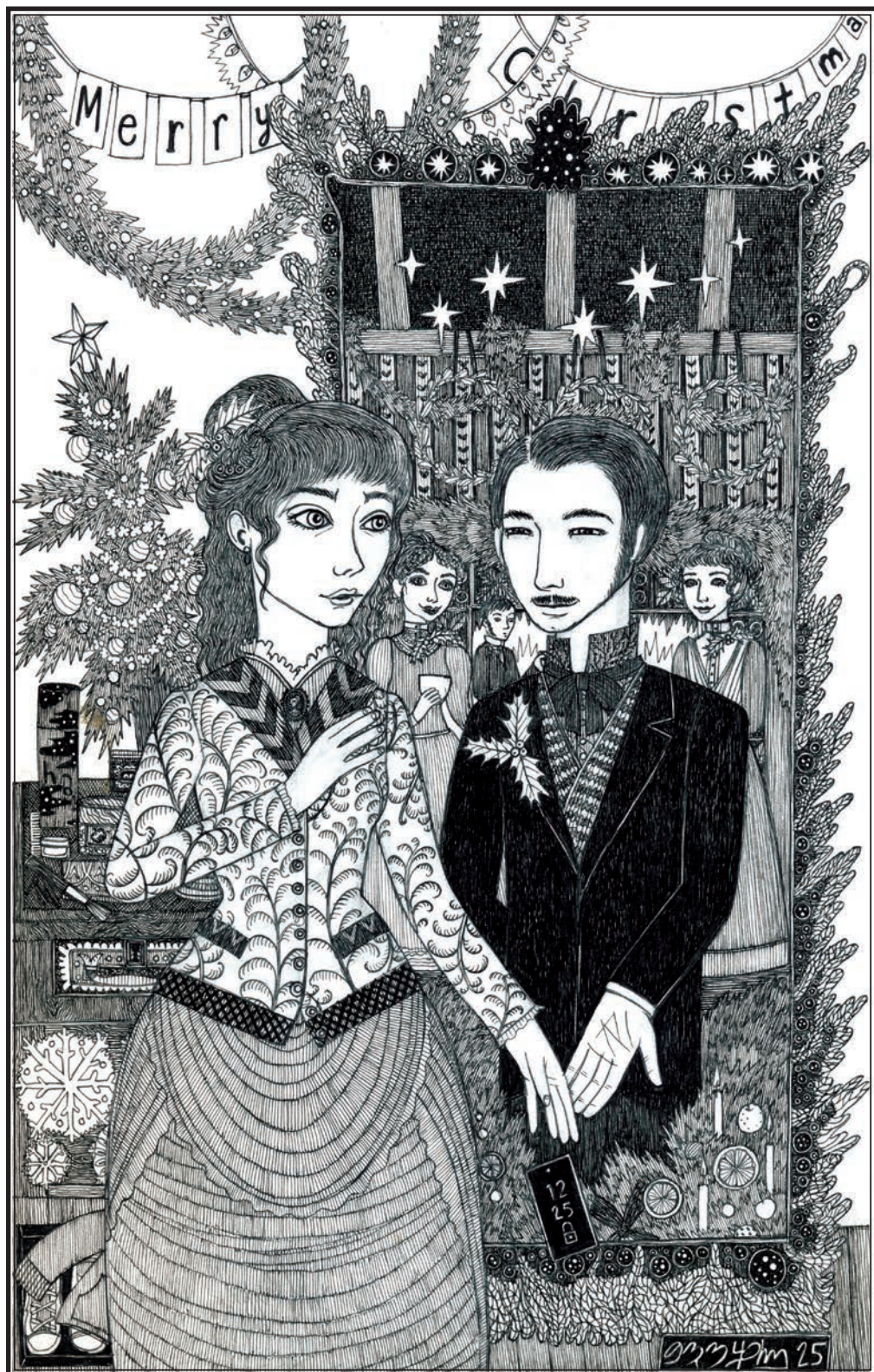
Next, she found the long, crimson dress she'd worn the week before when she had found a single ticket in the front row for the Nutcracker at the last minute. Paired with the jacket and a lace handkerchief from the ren faire outfit, the dress replicated the skirt in the portal quite well.

She turned to her vanity table and began digging through her jewelry tray, which overflowed with estate sale finds—another favorite pastime she had shared with her mother. Quickly sorting through costume pearls and carved jade bangles and beaded combs, she grabbed the faux-ivory cameo brooch she'd also found at Irma's, and a pair of drop pearl and gold filigree earrings she'd been saving for ... what, exactly?

Kate fastened the final bauble into her earlobe, and gasped when she paused to evaluate her efforts. She thought for the briefest second that perhaps her bedroom mirror was enchanted as well. Then she realized everything else reflected in the room was the same—alarm clock, TV, her phone on the bed—and she started breathing again. But the similarity between this image and the portal mirror made her pulse race. To finish the look, she pulled on gray lace-up ankle boots and walked back toward the entry to her apartment.

She stopped before she could see her reflection and took a deep breath. She wasn't sure what would happen, but it felt ... big. Afraid that if she didn't do it soon, whatever magic—or delusion—this was might end, she squared her shoulders and stepped in front of the frame.

Kate didn't know what she had expected, but this wasn't it. The edges around her own reflection shimmered, and then the background began to melt. The green of her garland and the white of her wall ran together and reformed into a grand parlor. Behind her, a party was in full swing. A group of children played with dolls by a crackling fireplace; a couple talked closely on a wooden-legged sofa; ornate wallpaper lined the walls; and tall windows revealed



snow swirling outside. When Kate looked behind her, though, she was still standing in her entryway. It had grown dark outside and the lamp on her side table threw a long shadow behind her.

Despondent, she turned back to find that she couldn't see herself in the portal mirror at all now. Instead, three people stood peering curiously back at her. Two were women around her age, dressed beautifully in satin and lace with holly berries pinned to their necklines. The woman on the right's eyes sparkled with delight. The astonished smile of the woman on the left looked warm and, somehow, familiar. And in the center, a man in a dark tailcoat with the kindest eyes she'd ever seen leaned toward the portal between them.

Still smiling, he reached out his hand, which glowed as it broke the plane between the reflection world and her own. He held it there expectantly, waiting for her to take it, just like a Victorian-era gentleman welcoming a lady into a party. Had she ever had a deeper, more foolish wish in her entire life?

Without hesitation, she grasped his hand.

