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The Mirror

Lafcadio trudged along the dark wet sidewalk, listening past the hum and Lswish of traffic on nearby streets, listening for the dreaded shuffling footsteps that surely must be tracking him. The rain had stopped shortly after nightfall, and a pervasive sodden gloom settled over New Orleans, muffling all sounds of life and seeping into every pore. The sparse traffic noise faded away momentarily, and in the silence Lafcadio could hear a distant foghorn—one long, lone blast, its echo muted by the dense wetness.

After the foghorn's cry, there was a moment of even more complete silence—no sound but the omnipresent dripping from saturated moss that hung like tattered clothes from the trees along Rue St. Marie. The air felt as if a massive thunderhead, too heavy to remain airborne, had settled to earth, embalming everything in a sodden blanket of moisture.

Ever so faintly, Lafcadio heard a *whisper* emerge from the fog, bouncing randomly from the infinity of water droplets, softly reaching him from all directions. It was a whisper of another time, another world, and it filled him with dread. He couldn't make out the words, not exactly, but the intonation was unmistakable. Death was near, and had been lurking for some time, awaiting new clientele.

Shrugging deeper into his hoodie, Lafcadio hunched his shoulders and pushed on into the fog, quickening his pace. He should never have come this way, through the old streets where so many souls had already been lost. Cartloads of despair had jounced across these cobblestones in the old slave days, heading from the shipyards and bound for the paddle-wheels and unspeakable markets up-river. Desperation from centuries past still

mingled with the droplets suspended in the air, swirling through alleys of indelible horror.

The whisper came again, timed perfectly in another silent gap in the muffled urban background. This time it was not entirely unintelligible: "*Return the mirror.*"

That, of course, was unthinkable. Lafcadio shuddered, despite the oppressive humidity. He had gone too far to turn back now, and besides, what benefit could possibly come from giving the thing back? *Return it to whom?* He was the only mortal soul who even knew it existed, and if he attempted to return the cursed thing it would be all too obvious what he must have done to obtain it.

No, his only choice was to press on, and find out if *any* of the old stories were true, or had at least some shred of reality to them. The fact that the mirror had been where they said it was, that was proof enough that *something* legitimate was involved. But he could never be forgiven for the desecrations he had done to remove it from the crypt.

And it was theft, pure and simple. If word got out into the Community, if even a whisper of this reached Mama Laboux, he was a dead man.

If he wasn't dead already.



Acrid smoke filled the basement room, glowing red from racks of colored glass offertory candles that flickered all around the altar. Tiny bones were piled high on a silver tray, bird bones, frog bones, finger bones. A high voice was humming through closed lips, tunelessly, without thought.

A glassine envelope fell with a soft slap onto the altar table, alongside the tray of bones. Spindly fingers spread it open and removed a lock of black hair, and placed the hair atop the bones. A match flared. Sulfur blended with the candle-smoke and incense. The lock of hair caught, burning and convulsing into a curl of ashes. A little cloud of grey smoke rose above the altar, adding to the cloying aromas of spice and offal.



Eduard awoke with a start. Confused, he sat up and looked around the room. Was this his room? Nothing seemed familiar. He sniffed, but smelled nothing, just the wet fog outside in the city. It had stopped raining, but the

incessant New Orleans drip continued, audible through the open window. Not a breath of air stirred.

His head was filled with fragments of nightmare, now a familiar experience in the decades since his thirteenth birthday, but these terrors always seemed distant, uninvolving. He cast back in his mind, trying to find a thread. *Hurrying through a dark street, pursued, but alone (not pursued?). Fearful of discovery. Elated. Guilty. Danger.* Then the pile of bones, and the smoke. The red smoke.

The bedsheets were saturated and claustrophobic. He threw off the covers and got up. To his bare feet, the floor felt warm and damp at the same time, like the hide of a huge living creature. Whispers were fading all around him, echoes of whispers, those sounds that can only be remembered by the animal brain, the brain with no language.

The house creaked, as it was wont to do—a long drawn out creak that sounded like a door slowly closing. Eduard had known these sounds all his life, and each creak had a familiar feeling, like an old friend nudging him. Tonight the friendliness was gone.

He gazed out the window at the old trees along Montaigne Street: older than he was, older than his parents, maybe older than this house. In the distance, a bus slowed and turned onto Montaigne, fat tires splashing along the puddled pavement. The rain hadn't been stopped for very long.

A faint mixture of moon-glow and street lamps illuminated the sidewalk, mottled by the overarching branches. Eduard craned his neck to see the stars overhead, but the sky was the color of wet ashes. The only light came from an invisible moon, and the two street lamps, one at the corner, and another half a block down the lane.

The bus rolled along, passing by on the other side of the garden wall. He watched the lit windows flicker through the iron fencing, dimly reflecting his house. The bus was empty, except for the driver, a large black man in city uniform, driving like a zombie through the empty streets, picking up no passengers and dropping none off.

For a second, Eduard could see a translucent image of the whole lower floor of the house in the bus windows. He recognized the solarium, the big front porch, the tall dining room windows, the great South wing stretching out into the darkness. He shook his head in surprise. *What South wing?* It was long gone, dismantled a century ago, after hurricanes decimated the

Garden District. He had seen it only in pictures, mottled silver bromide glass plates of the family's glory days.

The bus was gone, and with it the reflections of another age. Eduard frowned. This wasn't the first time he thought he had glimpsed the South wing. His dreams must be catching up with him, as his father liked to say. Late at night, thoughts lose their proportions. Things transform.

Shrugging, he yawned and considered returning to bed. It was late, but he had no idea what time it was. The house and the city were silent, and he was tired from dreaming long and difficult dreams. Then, impulsively, he dressed and went downstairs.

He opened the front door and stared out into the night. The fog softly hugged the house. Then he set out into the city, thankful for the faint movement of air against his face.



The beer cans were all warm, but Lafcadio was glad he had stashed them at the foundry. Since hurricane Katrina nobody ever came into these derelict blocks of half-collapsed factories and warehouses. Nobody but crazy bums or desperate fugitives.

He sipped the warm beer and his quaking limbs began to calm a little. He felt like a puppet on twitching strings. It was much clearer now that stealing the mirror was the stupidest thing he had ever done. Beyond stupid—suicidal.

A large rusting gun safe stood in the corner next to a huge broken desk. Some rich executive had sat there, lording it over everyone, making people like Lafcadio miserable and hopeless. He eyed the dilapidated condition of the desk with faint satisfaction. But then his attention returned to the safe.

The mirror was inside. The key to his dreams, and the seal on his demise.

Yesterday, after the prolonged nightmare of digging into the mausoleum and hauling the mirror back to the foundry without being seen, he had discovered the gun-safe's combination taped inside its open door. It was an invitation he couldn't resist.

He had unwrapped the mirror and glanced into it, wondering if the stories were true. It was insane to have gone through all this without even

knowing if the mirror worked. Magic! How idiotic it seemed, now that he had made the commitment and his world was about to collapse.

The mirror had supposedly belonged to Jean Lafitte, or one of his wives or concubines, stolen from an unknown merchant ship in the Barbados. The legend said the mirror's owner could see through it into any place or time, like the drug stashes of the local dealers, or the secret lock boxes in closets and under beds all over the city. But last night all Lafcadio could think about was what he had just stolen, and who might feel the loss.

He had peered into the mirror, to make a quick check on its unlikely powers, but at first he saw only his own taut face, scarred and gaunt, quivering with excitement and fear. Then the mirror had fogged over and all he could make out was a pair of wrinkled hands, doing something with candles and bones. Voodoo.

He had recoiled and almost dropped the mirror. What was he looking at? His mind had still been fixated on the theft, and on the person he most feared might discover what he'd done. Was this she? He had heard a faint humming song from the mirror, like an old lady doing her chores.

In a panic he had pulled the gunny sack over the mirror and shoved it into the safe. The thing apparently worked, but he couldn't control it, and he couldn't stand any more fear. Maybe later, in a few days. It was too incredible. His first real success in life, and probably his last.

He had slammed the safe door and spun the lock. Safe was a good word. The mirror was safe inside, and he was safe from the mirror. Nobody would find it here, and nobody could open the safe even if they knew about it.

Now, exhausted from another sleepless day collecting meager provisions for his lair, he collapsed onto the old mattress he had dragged in, and nursed his can of beer. Outside, the city dripped and hummed. After another warm beer, Lafcadio slept.



Eduard paused on the sidewalk outside his house, staring into the gloom where the old South wing once stood. The garden, if you could call it that, had reclaimed the grounds, and there was no way he could have glimpsed it reflected in the bus windows. He shook his head and decided to walk around the block.

Later, still walking aimlessly through the neighborhood, he was drawn to an avenue with a row of magnificent magnolia trees. He could just make out the ashen sky between their broad branches, and it reminded him of stories his grandmother had told about the early 20th century.

Several blocks to the East he found an intriguing wrought-iron fence that enclosed a gigantic estate with multiple houses and pathways connecting them. He continued wandering, his mind empty of thought, letting random impulses guide him this way and that, into the crooked streets of the older districts.

He walked slowly, but at a steady pace, and after an hour or more he found himself standing at the foot of a huge brick wall, a black shadow rising several stories above. He looked around, but didn't recognize this part of town.

A large opening breached the wall where a loading dock once stood. Inside, the building was pure darkness, featureless black within black.

Even as Eduard impulsively mounted the steps to the doorway, he was wondering why he would ever venture inside such a place. The curiosity that drove him wasn't intense, but it was accompanied by the feeling that he was doing the right thing. There might be something important in those dark rooms.

His good sense told him this was unwise, that there surely couldn't be anything of any interest in this abandoned wreck, but he thought, *What the hell? Take a chance now and then. You never know.*

He picked his way blindly through the gloom. Ahead, a large room was partially lit by the glow of nearby streetlights. Inside, a scrawny figure was sleeping on an old, filthy mattress half propped against one wall like a daybed.

Eduard stood still and stared at the unconscious vagrant.



Tendrils of smoke rose in a dense filigree, lit red by a circle of candles in colored glass. Bony fingers moved among the smoke trails, molding them so that they slowly solidified in the air. The fingers pushed and kneaded the congealing smoke until it floated motionlessly like a greyish red sculpture of knotted rope.



Eduard was content to remain standing in the dark, unmoving, while the other man slept. Then, purely on a whim, he spoke out loud. “Where is the mirror?” A tiny thrill of pleasure gleamed as he said it. *Why not say it again*, he thought. “Where is the mirror?”

Every few minutes, he repeated the question, and each time he noticed a little blooming sensation of happiness deep in his body. So he kept repeating the words, monotonously, for almost an hour. Now and then a vague feeling of concern would arise, but then he would say the question again and feel better.



Lafcadio coughed and roused slightly from deep sleep. Something was wrong. His head was full of dark clouds and confusion. He rubbed his eyes and looked around the ramshackle foundry building, but there was nothing to see. No, wait! He wasn’t alone.

A tall figure was standing on the other side of the room, silhouetted by the blown-out windows. It just stood there without moving, arms at its sides, head down. He couldn’t tell if it was really looking at him or just staring in his direction.

When it spoke, Lafcadio stifled a scream. His heart pounded, and he felt his arms dampen with clammy sweat.

“Where is the mirror?” it said.

What the hell? Who is this guy?

The dark figure remained motionless, and then it said again, “Where is the mirror?”

Lafcadio couldn’t decide what to do. He waited.

“Where is the mirror?” the figure said again, in the same tone as all the other times.

Every minute or so it repeated the question, like a robot.

How does he know about the mirror? Lafcadio looked desperately around the room. He could try to make a break for the door, but it wasn’t far enough from the dark figure. And this unknown person was much taller than Lafcadio, and might be very strong.

“Where is the mirror?” it recited, like a man possessed.

Lafcadio leaped to his feet and lunged across the room. He dodged to

one side, and then spun around and made for the door with all the speed he could muster.

The figure jumped suddenly to the center of the doorway, in a single, impossibly swift motion. “Where is the mirror?” it said, tonelessly.



Eduard watched the other man wake up, recoil in surprise, and then run for the door. *I think he should stay here*, he thought, and found himself standing in the doorway while the other man stumbled back, a look of shock on his face. Moving fast like that felt surprisingly good. *I could do this all night*, he thought. “Where is the mirror?” he said, and felt a little thrill.

He remained there, blocking the doorway, for another hour, repeating the question and feeling tireless and capable. Someone must surely be very proud of him. He smiled with satisfaction, inside, but his face was blank.

The other man staggered around the room for a while, gripping his head, as if testing various escape routes in his mind, and then went back to the mattress and sat down. He seemed to be sobbing.

“Where is the mirror?” said Eduard.

A distant clank echoed softly through the warehouse. The other man tensed and looked around fearfully. Eduard blocked the doorway.

Footsteps crunched across the warehouse floor, followed by a rustle of heavy fabric and beads.

For no particular reason, Eduard moved to one side. A low dark mound of clothing moved through the doorway into the room, like a pile of rags.

The man on the mattress was visibly shaking, uttering tiny inarticulate noises. *He sounds like a bag of baby rats*, Eduard thought.

In the dim street light, Eduard could discern an old woman, dressed in layers of dark, ragged skirts and shawls, her long disheveled hair splayed out around her shoulders. He couldn’t make out her face, but when she spoke her voice sounded like a lovely child on a summer day.



Lafcadio watched in horror as his worst nightmare unfolded before his eyes. He had never seen Mama Laboux, but he knew this must be she. The mound of tattered fabric shuffled to the center of the room, facing him as he cowered on his mattress, and he knew he was about to die.

“Where is the mirror?” she said, in a voice like ripping canvas.

He glanced desperately in all directions, not daring to answer.

Mama Laboux followed his gaze and noted how he avoided the gun safe in the corner. “It’s in the safe, is it?” she rasped.

Lafcadio tried to deny it, but no words would come. Across the room, the tall stranger stood motionlessly by the door, watching.

The witch moved closer. “Open it,” she said.

Lafcadio continued casting about in his mind for a way out, still in full denial.

“Open it now,” she said. Her voice was more energetic, like a small chainsaw.

Lafcadio struggled to his feet, twitching and coughing. It was time to give up. Once she had the mirror, his life was over, and there was obviously nothing he could do about it.

He limped across the floor to the safe, trying not to faint along the way. Mama Laboux shuffled along, too, and they reached the safe at the same time. Lafcadio looked at her face, only inches away. A quarter-millennium of black magic looked back at him, and his torso jerked and twisted, and he stopped breathing.

“Open,” she hissed.

Lafcadio fumbled with the dial, missing the numbers repeatedly, and then at last the mechanism clicked, and he pulled the handle and swung the heavy steel door open.

“Give it,” she said.

He reached inside and pulled on the gunny sack leaning against the interior of the safe. His fingers trembled as he drew the object out into the room.

“Show me,” she said.

Lafcadio was scarcely able to control his hands and arms. He loosened the drawstring on the satchel and pulled the opening wide. As he drew the bag down, his arm twitched violently and he nearly dropped the mirror. Regaining his balance, he felt the bag swing against the safe door and he heard a faint crack. *My god*, he thought, *I’ve broken it!*



Eduard stood watching the murky drama without much thought other

than dreamy contentment. The little man was standing by the open safe with the mound of rags, unwrapping something. He almost dropped whatever it was, and Eduard could see it fly partway out of the man's grasp and bang on the open steel door.

The faint *tick* of glass cracking was as loud as a thunderclap.

The dark heap of clothing reeled back, crying out like an animal beneath the wheels of a bus. As she fell slowly to the floor, Eduard suddenly slumped against the wall. *What the hell am I doing here?*

He looked around the mangled office and saw a shabby little man standing by an open gun safe, clutching a large brown bag, and shaking violently. Next to him, on the floor, a large featureless lump was writhing and vibrating, howling and yipping insanely.

He looked down at himself, and moved his limbs voluntarily for the first time in hours. *What just happened?*

He took a step toward the little man with the bag, and then he noticed that the heap on the floor was beginning to rise up.

Adrenalin shocked him into action. "Run!" he shouted, and ran out into the warehouse. As he leaped over debris toward the gaping loading dock, a strange mixture of animal sounds rang through the building.

In the street, Eduard realized he had no idea what part of the city he was in, but early dawn was brightening the eastern sky, so he began running in the opposite direction, Westward, toward civilization.

The sun was almost up when he reached the big house in the Garden District. The early morning air was fresh and the light of day made his horrific memories less and less real. He staggered into the foyer and slumped on the settee. *What the hell was that all about?*



Steam rose from a large vat, the size of an old iron bathtub. The vat was filled with what looked like hot mud, and its surface writhed with thousands of wriggling worms. A scrawny shriveled arm rose from the mud and gripped the side of the rusty tub.

Mama Laboux shimmied her ancient body deeper into the steaming organic soup. A faint smile played across what passed for a face as she luxuriated in the glow of victory. The mirror was hers again, and this time

nobody would ever find it. Or any of the other countless treasures she had accumulated over the generations since her beloved Jean passed away.

That wretched little gutter-rat Lafcadio was suitably punished for his transgressions. Too bad her powers only permitted possessing family, not just anyone at all, or she could have made Lafcadio bring the mirror back himself. But dear Eduard never even knew what happened.

She sighed and allowed herself to sink deeper into the healing mud. It had been unexpectedly delightful occupying such a nice, healthy young man, her sixth-great grandson. The mud-worms wriggled against her dessicated skin. *I'll definitely have to do that again*, she thought. *Sometime soon.*