

Futures

Eyes on history

Passing time. By Yelena Crane



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

A turn and the Dial displaces Aleksandre and Jules through time. The paved road is layers of muck. Horse manure steams in a fine mist. It's too early. With his debts, Aleksandre can't have an unhappy tourist, and if he doesn't fulfil the assignment, someone less kind will. He readjusts. Walls appear, weather and wear. The dome of St Catherine's blushes with every sunset. Monks dance. Silver crosses dangle from their chains, flickering twilight shafts of trapped daylight. Another turn and they're in the mid-twentieth century, when prayers turn to screams and church stone becomes the Sukhanovka. The monks vanish, they haven't been born. It's good ghosts don't exist. The dead won't know Aleksandre is a reluctant tour guide helping tourists get off on the past.

Engines running, fumes spouting, prisoners are shoved from the black marias.

"It's like we're here *with* them," Jules says. History plays out like a movie.

The subject of historical interest stumbles

out, bruised waist-down from early labour and waist-up from her arrest.

In training, Aleksandre thought he would be a steward of history. Each tourist proves him wrong.

They follow the prisoners in for processing.

Inside: guards yell, prisoners mumble, weak pipes weep.

Jules wants a tour. Aleksandre must oblige. They go to the private cells first. The windows are muzzled and thick-glassed so that to tell the time by natural light it is always twilight perceived or darkness descended; it is always eternity.

Next, the punishment cells, where a man is trussed. His breathing is slow and sore. When Jules turns to leave, Aleksandre whispers futile words of comfort to the man who can't hear him.

They tour the hot cells, a special feature in this prison. Hell spits from vents, showering the room in searing heat even when the winters are cold enough to win wars.

They peek into the tiny isolation box, where prisoners have no room to stand.

"Can you imagine?" Jules tries to hide a smile.

The Dial makes imagining unnecessary.

Last, they return to the main subject. Her interrogator holds a handkerchief over his face to stamp out the thick stench. He pushes papers for her to sign. She must sign, lie and betray everyone she knows. Her reward will be freedom into a cell's cold comfort. Then more false confessions.

"My baby?" she dares ask.

The interrogator laughs and removes a tool from his jacket. In a decade, he'll be in a room like this one, accused of treason himself and stripped of his medals. A small justice.

"What happened to her kid?" Jules asks, as if she didn't choose this subject, pregnancy and gulag, at random.

"Orphanages weren't kind during the famines." Aleksandre hopes it doesn't give her ideas.

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The papers reveal her name: Ekaterina Yureyivna Kozala. Aleksandre won't tell Jules. He can help Ekaterina keep this much of her dignity without risking protocol.

He knows he should do more. Aleksandre lets the Dial slip. Hopes Jules can see the person mistaken for entertainment. It means his own time will be unpaused and lost to undocumented time travelled. What's a few years for his soul?

"It was just about to start!" Jules says.

Ekaterina's full name makes her easier to find across time. She's catching snowflakes on her tongue.

"I'm bored," Jules says, threatens.

Aleksandre can't make her stay or see. He time corrects, hoping Jules won't mention this in her review.

On fast forward, the girl twirls and fades into vapour until she's again the woman in the chair.

Jules sits as one with Ekaterina, their four knees shaking. The interrogator forces the tool under their nails.

Jules covers her face as though she can feel Ekaterina's pain.

"We can tour a happier time —" Aleksandre hopes again.

"No, just tell me what happens."

As tour guide, Aleksandre doesn't have the luxury to turn away. Witnessing his discomfort

is another perverted pleasure for Jules.

"Well?" she says.

"Well ..." Aleksandre tells all, fighting to keep his voice steady, to keep his eyes dry. Tells of Ekaterina's loyalty. Jules will remember how she broke; Aleksandre will remember her resistance.

Peeking through gaps in her fingers, Jules releases a cathartic sob. "She'd have wanted me here."

"She doesn't know you exist," Aleksandre says. It's the least he can do. Tourists always make excuses for why they watch the past for tear-jerker porn.

Jules leaves the tour satisfied. Aleksandre offers to let her hear Mozart in concert, to see cures discovered, anything else. She wants to witness the sinking of the *Titanic* next.

After hours, Aleksandre breaks his oath to the service and travels back despite the years he'll lose.

He finds Ekaterina young and free, her hair crowned with dandelion heads. She sings to an audience of wheat stalks. The tourists would gorge on this, too, so their cries at her end would be fuller. It's not why he's here. He needs to restore these bits of dignity for her sake and his own, else the tours will make him bitter and time-mad like the other Diallers.

Aleksandre lets the Dial work its way forward slowly. It is the late twentieth century, just before the monks' restoration, when the worst is too fresh to forget and too raw to repeat.

The church is abandoned, its field untended and overgrown. Winter's first flakes fall in a wail to fill the empty space. Knees aching, Aleksandre sings Ekaterina's song into the same broken windows that once dimmed light and the passage of time. Song and snow suffocate the Sukhanovka and its blushing dome.

Earth, asphalt and elbow grease is all it will take for the monks to bleach history out of the cellars. Cover up what it had once been. Stone stands, amnesiac and crackling in the frost. Aleksandre will remember, for Ekaterina and all those ghosts who don't exist, and time moves on.

Yelena Crane is a Ukrainian/Soviet-born and US-based writer, incorporating influences from both into her work. With an advanced degree in the sciences, she has followed her passions from mad scientist to sci-fi writer. Her stories often explore the boundaries of technology, the complexities of human nature and the consequences of our choices. Follow her on X (Twitter) @Aelintari and <https://www.yelenacrane.com>.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Yelena Crane reveals the inspiration behind *Eyes on history*.

Since the Russian–Ukrainian war, I've been reading a lot of depressing literature on the gulags of the Soviet Union. In learning about such a painful subject, I wanted to explore the trap many writers and other entertainment media fall into of fetishizing torture and trauma when trying to shed a light on history. My attempt with *Eyes on history* is to speak about the horrific aspects of this largely forgotten piece of Soviet history (gulags persist to this day!) and the exploitation of historical trauma in which narratives of injustice get commodified, turned into entertainment or feel-good stories, and perpetuate a cycle of exploitation. Is there a way to stop this and still learn from history's mistakes? I don't know, but I think we're moving in the right direction by asking the question.

