To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

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To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

by papisadhu

Summary

In some cruel twist of fate, Ilya can only recall his mother’s face in his nightmares.

Notes

Thank you to the wonderful mezzaninec for beta-reading this for me.

Please heed tags. This fic is an exploration of grief, how it takes up space even in the mundane moments of our lives, and the way old grief can still find new ways to hurt us.

Fic title taken from the iconic "To be or not to be" soliloquy in Shakespeare's Hamlet (Act III, Scene I)

See the end of the work for more notes

Ilya cannot remember his mother.

He's not entirely sure when, or how, it happened. It’s just that one day, as he’s scored a hat trick to ensure the Centaurs will make it through to the playoffs off an assist from Shane and screams out in excitement for his Mama, he is hit with a memory of scoring a hat trick for his childhood team. His mother had been in the crowd, and he remembers screaming out for her in his excitement then too as she had cheered loudly from the stands. But try as he might, he cannot recall Irina’s face.

Everything else in his memory is clear as day. The sour look on the opponent goalie Mikhailov’s face, the delighted screams of his teammates ringing in his ears as they piled onto him, his mother in the crowd wearing her favourite red parka and even the matching beanie that his father had gifted her in a rare display of affection. But not her eyes, her nose, her smile.

Shane wraps his arms around Ilya and plants a wet kiss on his cheek, his face so radiant and beautiful and full of joy. Ilya loves him so much it physically pains him sometimes. But in this moment he cannot recall his mother's face and his team has just won a difficult game thanks to his efforts and the love of his life is laughing into the crook of his neck and oh God, Ilya cannot remember Irina Rozanova’s face.

Ilya's stomach drops. He thinks, as hard as he can, of that memory of his mother in the stands. It is one of his favourite memories, it’s why he thinks of it often when he wins these particularly challenging games. He squeezes his eyes shut in concentration. He focuses solely on the image of Irina in that red parka, on the smile that he knows had been there. Yet there is only a vague resemblance of a face, just a smooth expanse of pale skin, radiant under the arena lights and starkly striking against the deep red of her outfit with bits of golden curls poking out from her beanie. But no facial features to speak of at all.

Shane notices something is wrong, pulling his head away from Ilya’s neck to look questioningly at him with those beautiful doe eyes. Whatever he sees concerns him. Ilya notices the slight furrowing of his eyebrows, the almost imperceptible downturn of his mouth. But the moment ends quickly as the other Centaurs descend on them. Everyone is cheering and laughing and Ilya is trying his damnedest not to start weeping. Thankfully through it all Shane’s arms are wrapped protectively around him like an anchor.

Eventually the on ice celebrations end but Shane doesn't let Ilya face the media. Ilya sees Shane say something to Wyatt and Troy, and then their goalie is tugging Ilya away toward their locker room while his right-wing skates off to speak with Harris. He keeps his eyes on Shane even as he is dragged off, his husband, his anchor, his everything. The last he sees is Shane stepping up to the mics and cameras, wearing his media smile like armour.

The locker room is quiet, everyone is watching Ilya with concern. He should probably care about their looks, about the fact that he has dampened the mood of their celebrations. But all he can think about is Irina and the blank space in his memory where her face should be.

He feels someone - probably Wyatt - start to tug off his gear. They say things to him but it’s all garbled. Ilya lets himself get stripped naked, lets himself get steered into the showers, lets whoever it is turn on the water that he wishes was hot enough to burn him down into nothing. He just stands motionless under the shower as his mind swirls relentlessly, letting the water beat down forcefully onto his body.

He doesn't know how long he stands there, but it must be a while because the soft murmurs of his teammates dissipate and the water eventually gets cold. He thinks distantly that he should care about this, but cannot seem to find the strength of mind to do so. He thinks and thinks and thinks as hard as he can of his beautiful Mama, who he definitely remembers is beautiful but suddenly cannot draw her beauty in his mind any longer. Is this punishment perhaps, for not having loved his mother enough when she had been alive?

Perhaps his mother, while alive, had been an unremarkable presence in his life. In much the same way that the sky is blue or that the snow is cold, Irina's existence had been but a mere fact of life, an infallible truth. An existence that Ilya had not cared to truly appreciate until its absence had carved a chasm into his very soul. He had discovered her the morning after that day she had celebrated in the stands, thinking that she had just been resting again, but she had not been breathing and there had been no pulse beneath his fingertips on the limp arm hanging off her bed. His world had been knocked off kilter, like the sky had suddenly turned green and snow had become scalding to the touch, and he had been the only one who had felt the change.

This memory lapse is punishment, perhaps, that he had not fought against his father and brother harder to honour her memory in the aftermath of her death. That he let them lie about the reasons, that he let her be sad, that he never said Irina’s name out loud again until Shane had asked him at the cottage.

Gentle fingers press into the back of his neck, and Ilya instinctively knows that it is Shane. The water stops. He presses his eyes shut, and focuses on the sensation of those fingers. Another set of fingers cards gently through his hair. Ilya sinks to knees, his back still to Shane, and rests his head on the cold shower wall. He feels Shane sink down with him, feels the press of his skin along his back, the touch familiar and comforting.

"Ilya," Shane says so gently, so lovingly, that it finally breaks open the dam inside.

"Moya Mama," Ilya says and a sob finally wrenches free, its echoes bouncing off the tiled walls. Shane's arms wrap around him from behind protectively, and he feels his lips press lightly into the junction between his ear and his neck. "I cannot remember her face."

In some cruel twist of fate, Ilya can only recall his mother's face in his nightmares.

The night before the Centaurs' first playoff game against Boston, Ilya has a nightmare about Irina. It is a nightmare he has had before. She is lying in the hammock at the cottage, limp arm hanging off like it had all those years ago. And Ilya can see her face, her features sharp and clear and achingly familiar. The curve of her brown eyebrows, her deep blue eyes, the soft pink of her cheeks, the heart shaped lips, all framed by the golden brown curls of her hair. She is so beautiful and *young*. So impossibly young and Ilya realises that he will soon be older than his mother ever got the chance to be.

The thought startles Ilya awake.

He sits up in the dark, sweating profusely even though it's a cool spring night. He shuts his eyes again and tries to remember his mother's face in the hammock. He should know it. Should have it memorised. He had just seen it. She is the person he loves most besides Shane. But Irina's facial features slip through his memory like grains of sand and Ilya feels like he has let her down yet again.

He tries to go back to sleep, tries to regulate his shaky breathing, tries to focus on the game against Boston tomorrow. He can feel the panic attack incoming anyway. What is it that Galina always says? Ground yourself. Focus on your senses. The 5-4-3-2-1 method.

5 things you can see. *Not my mother's face*, Ilya thinks pathetically and immediately bursts into tears.

It wakes Shane, which is the absolute last thing in the world he had wanted. It takes his husband a moment to adjust before he's sitting up and pulling Ilya’s face to his chest. He lets Ilya cry, rubbing soothing circles on his back with one hand and gently scratching his scalp with the other. Eventually the tears subside and Ilya feels so spent that he can barely feel the moment sleep comes to claim him.

He wakes with a start in the morning and knows, even before he reaches for his phone, that it is very late. They were supposed to have been at an early morning team meeting. Had Shane gone without him? But he can hear movement downstairs, can tell by the rhythm of the noises that it can be no one except Shane. Anya comes pattering over, and although he knows Shane will complain, Ilya lets her into bed and holds her close. He lies there cuddling Anya for an inordinate amount of time, just listening to the distant pitter patter of his husband's footsteps and the clamour of kitchen utensils, unbearably fond and still so in disbelief that this is his life now.

He eventually rolls out of bed and freshens up before heading downstairs. Shane is focused on loading the dishwasher when Ilya hugs him from behind and buries his face in Shane's hair. “I love you,” he says in Russian and presses kisses down the back of Shane’s neck.

“I love you too,” Shane replies, also in Russian, and turns his body around to press his lips chastely to Ilya’s. Ilya has Shane crowded against the countertop and a part of him wants to take Shane apart right here, wants to kiss him senseless and let Shane take him apart in turn. But Shane is looking at him now with that same searching gaze like he had after that last game. “I told Coach Wiebe that we would be unavailable for the meeting today.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says, and rests his forehead against Shane's.

“Did you have another nightmare about your mom?”

Ilya nods and says, “I could see her face, in my dream. But I could not remember her when I woke up.”

Shane tries to pull him out of playing in the game too but Ilya does not allow that. He has seen Shane's own fears come to light, that even after all he has achieved he feels the need to prove himself, that he keeps pushing his body to the edge to be the best. He has seen the tension coiled in Shane's body, like prey anticipating an imminent attack from a pouncing predator. Ilya cannot remember his mother's face, but he can be there for Shane out on the ice. This is their first season out in the open, as husbands and as teammates, and even though Shane has proved himself time and time again the world of hockey demands *more* and Ilya will not leave Shane to face that alone.

Ilya plays as if in a stupor because nothing else can matter in those minutes of gameplay, and Shane is truly the best hockey player the world has ever seen. They win decisively, and the locker room erupts in chaos. His teammates try to give him space, but Ilya will *die* if they treat him like this so he carries on too, hooting and hollering all the way to Monk's.

Shane keeps looking at him with that questioning gaze through the night but Ilya avoids looking back at him too closely, lest he break apart again. Eventually Shane lets loose in the bar, getting overly competitive at darts with Chouinard and Ilya watches on, nursing his beer but finding it hard to bring the drink up to his mouth.

"Hey," Wyatt greets him, taking the seat opposite him at the table. He looks at him with concern too and Ilya wishes the ground would swallow him up whole. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right?" he says gently, reaching out to give Ilya's arm a squeeze. "Even stuff you can't tell Shane." He grins mischievously. "I was your friend first so my loyalty is to you Cap."

That makes Ilya laugh, and he feels a little lighter, but he is not ready to talk about his mother yet. He makes eyes at Shane, who eventually catches on. They go home, and Shane pulls Ilya into him the moment they get through their front door. They don't make it beyond the living room, where Ilya gets down on his knees and doesn't stop working his mouth and fingers until his husband has been reduced down to nothing but whimpers and pleas for "Fuck, I need you inside me Ilya."

Ilya obliges, and he lets Shane rake his nails down his back, lets Shane kiss him senseless, lets his own hands wander and rest on Shane's chest where his heart is beating, so wonderfully *alive*. And later, when they eventually make it back to their bed, Ilya lays down on top of Shane with his ear to his heart and hopes, against his better judgement, that he will have another nightmare so that he can see Irina's face again.

His wish is granted, and he does see her again, her face so beautiful and carefree, and he reaches out for her desperately but is not able to get to her in time. He never does. When he wakes up desolate and disoriented again, he cries softly so as to not wake Shane. He still cannot recall his mother's face.

They win the second playoff game too. The day before they head off to Boston for the third, Ilya and Shane go to dinner at the Hollander house. Ilya helps Yuna in the kitchen, his designated spot for many years now. He keeps his eyes trained on her, mapping every minute detail of her face and hoping to sear it into his memory. He has forgotten the face of one mother, he cannot bear to forget another.

He notices that so many of her features are a part of Shane too, her warm eyes, the rounded jaw. He looks out to the living room where David is talking while Shane listens with rapt attention, notices that he sees David's sharp nose and the determined set of his mouth in Shane. He realises how Shane is a masterpiece painted with all of the beautiful parts of his wonderful parents and a cruel thought comes to him, unbidden. What if the memory loss is a genetic gift from his father? Perhaps Ilya is Grigori's son more than he is Irina's, and that is the terrible truth he can never escape, however far he runs from his birthplace.

Yuna senses his tension and wraps an arm around his shoulder. "Ilya," she says softly and pulls him closer when he begins to cry again. Ilya lets himself be comforted by Yuna Hollander, by a mother who is his but also not his, because it's not the same, because she is Yuna not Irina, because Irina Rozanova has been dead for nearly two decades, and somehow in that time Ilya Rozanov has forgotten her face.

After Ilya's emotional breakdown at dinner, Shane tries to force them both off the third game but Ilya finally placates him by booking an appointment with Galina for when they return from Boston. They both play terribly in the third game but Luca and Troy get them across the finish line. They play terribly again in the fourth game too and this time Boston is just too good despite the best efforts of the remainder of the Ottawa team. Ilya has nightmares of his mother every night of the roadtrip, and he knows that even his silent tears have woken Shane up because there is always a point where Shane wraps around him like a cocoon, takes hold of his hands and rubs his thumbs gently back and forth along his knuckles until Ilya falls back into fitful bouts of sleep.

Ilya goes to see Galina the day after they return. He talks himself hoarse while his therapist listens.

"Human memory can be a fickle thing," she tells him once he's finished. "Tell me, in your dreams, what version of your mother do you see? How old is she?"

Ilya thinks hard, because he still cannot conjure his mother's face. But he concentrates on his own feelings when he sees Irina in his nightmares. How young she looks, much younger than he had ever known her to be.

"Very young," Ilya says quietly, "Maybe eighteen, nineteen." She had been eighteen when she had been married off to Grigori Rozanov, a man nearly twenty years her senior, and nineteen when she had birthed Andrei. Twenty-three when Ilya was born. So, so unbelievably young.

Ilya is struck then that he knows nothing of substance about his mother. She had no family of her own, it was why she had stayed with the General despite his cruelty. But what had young Irina dreamed of? Did she enjoy sports? Is that why she had taken Ilya to his training sessions and his games almost as religiously as she had taken him to church? What had brought her joy, before the sadness had taken root in her heart?

"You imagine a version of your mother in your dreams that you never got to meet. That is not a memory," Galina says gently, bringing Ilya back from his reverie. "Memories are fickle, they fade with time, as emotions change. It's been a long time since you've seen her, it makes sense that her image is no longer clear in your mind."

"But I don't want to forget," Ilya pleads.

"Do you have photographs of your mother?" Galina asks.

He did, once upon a time, before his father had gone on a rampage to delete any whisper of Irina's existence in their household. That had been the first time Ilya had hit Andrei, for being

older and taller than Grigori yet still letting their father destroy so many memories. “Not anymore,” Ilya says quietly.

“Ah,” Galina says, and the office is quiet for a moment. “Sometimes,” she says slowly, “It is more important to focus on the emotions. Your mother was your source of comfort and happiness, and so you like to think of her when you need that additional comfort or want her to share in your happiness. You wear her necklace with you always - even if the memory of her face is fading, you are still holding onto the emotions of those memories, how she made you feel.” She pauses, checking that Ilya is still following along. “You have been denied the opportunity to grieve for her in the past, and perhaps the specifics of your memories are fading. But you know that she loved you and you carry that love with you always.”

Shane draws them a warm bath when Ilya gets back from the session, feeling ragged and raw. He isn’t sure, exactly, that speaking to Galina has helped but he is perhaps getting impatient again. He lies back against Shane’s body in the bathtub, lets Shane run his hands through his hair comfortingly as he relates a summary of his session with Galina. He and Shane have been getting better at that, at sharing the ugliest parts of themselves even when it makes him feel horrifically exposed.

“You don’t have any photographs of your mother?” Shane asks.

“No, my father destroyed it all. This necklace is all I have left of her.” Ilya shouldn’t, but he giggles at the memory of his tiny fist knocking into Andrei’s jaw. It had been the only time that Andrei had not hit back. Shane makes a confused sound behind him so Ilya tells him that story too, and he hopes against hope that he will have another nightmare tonight so that he can see his mother again.

There is a deeply determined set to Shane’s jaw before game five against Boston, and he keeps checking his phone intermittently like he is waiting for a notification of some kind. Ilya doesn’t question it. Shane is painfully superstitious and this is the first playoff game against Boston that hasn’t come off the back of Ilya’s nightmares the night before. Ilya feels ready to take them on, despite the minor disappointment that he had not been able to see his mother’s face again.

He makes sure to win, makes sure to celebrate, makes sure to ignore the absence of his mother’s smile in his memories when he picks Shane up to spin him around giddily. Shane laughs and bends down to kiss his cheek, and then the team are surrounding them in a huddle

because the Centaurs have progressed to the second round of playoffs for the second year running. Ilya takes off his gloves to squeeze Shane's wrists and knows that together, they will be invincible going into the third round and beyond. Ilya will make sure of it.

They go to Monk's after the game again, Ilya even indulges his team in dancing, he makes fun of Dillon for being slow and ribs Troy and Harris when they go to a dark corner to make out. He notices that Shane is still checking his phone periodically, which is unlike him, but he doesn't bring it up until they're back in bed and Shane is getting pressed down into the mattress, panting deliriously while Ilya drives into him.

"Do you like this?" Ilya asks, bending down to bite Shane's shoulder, "More than whatever it is you're waiting for on the phone?"

Shane freezes, and Ilya immediately stops. This is not the reaction he had expected. He pulls out and Shane flips himself around to look up at him. He reaches up to cradle Ilya's face, looking serious and Ilya feels an inexplicable sense of dread crawl over his skin. "I'm trying something," Shane says in a small voice, "But I'm scared that it won't happen. I don't want to tell you just yet in case it doesn't work." His fingers run down from Ilya's face to his neck, and Shane does not tear his eyes away from where the cross and the ring sit beside each other on Ilya's necklace. "Can you trust me?" Shane asks, looking back into Ilya's eyes. "Just be a bit patient and I promise I'll tell you everything."

"I love you," Ilya says, "Of course I trust you." *It is myself I cannot trust*, he does not say.

"I love you more." Shane grins, pulling Ilya down and crashing their mouths together, using his free hand to guide Ilya back inside.

The nightmares continue on and off through the second round of playoffs too. Ilya still cannot remember Irina's face when he is awake, and finds himself sickeningly wishing he would have more nightmares just so he can see her again. The games against Toronto are harder than Boston. The night before game five, Ilya has a particularly violent nightmare about Irina. It's Shane who wakes him up, because he had been screaming in his sleep, and it is Shane who holds him all night as Ilya shakes and cries and wishes bitterly that Shane had not woken him up, that he could go back to the dream because then at least he can see his mother's face again.

Shane pulls them out of the game and Ilya does not protest. Well, he tries and fails to push his husband at least to play but his pleas are not heard. Yuna and David come over in the afternoon and they all huddle together on the sofa to watch the game in the evening. Ilya lies with his head on Yuna's lap and his feet in Shane's, and David sits on a cushion on the floor, Anya in his lap, in front of Yuna. Ilya lets himself be comforted by the presence of his family, knowing that he is loved, and watches his team eke out an unbelievable win in overtime thanks to Luca, and wishes desperately again to be able to picture his mother's face and that nightmares were not his only avenue for doing that.

Ilya and Shane hit the road again for game six. Shane is glued to his phone on the flight over to Toronto, and Ilya chooses not to press even though this is so uncharacteristic. He knows somehow, intrinsically, that Shane is not checking the vitriolic responses to their absence from the previous game on social media, and he trusts that his husband will tell him about whatever is going on when he is ready, but he is nervous. He doesn't have a nightmare before game six, but he is jittery before the game anyway. Shane also seems on edge, and Ilya sees the angry looks he sends his phone before packing it away.

It's a different story on the ice. Ilya looks at Shane, knows that this is do-or-die. If they lose tonight they get knocked out, if they win then game seven awaits as the decider for the Conference finals. Ilya will not lose. He will not let Shane lose either. Ottawa plays like a well oiled machine that night, and they win decisively with a four goal difference. Ilya loves the sound of silence in opposition arenas, loves to be the one to shut them up, and he loves that he gets to do this with the love of his life who pulls him into a hug after he scores the final goal in the closing seconds of the game. He wishes he could picture his mother, in her joy, or even her pain.

Game seven is anti-climactic. Ilya has a nightmare before it, but it's manageable and he is even able not to wake Shane. Shane is clearly angry about something and he takes out his aggression on the Toronto players. Ilya has never seen Shane play like this before, like a man on a bloody rampage. The impossibly polite Shane Hollander gets a ten minute penalty at one point, but it doesn't seem to register for him at all. In the end, Toronto is no match for Shane's rage and Ottawa wins easily.

Shane is particularly needy when they get back home, and Ilya loves it when he gets like this. He slams Ilya up against the front door the second it's shut and sinks to his knees in one languid motion. He takes Ilya into his mouth with no preamble and *holy shit* Ilya thinks he might see stars at one point. Shane wants it rough tonight, and Ilya indulges his husband. There are bruises blooming across their bodies by the time they shower and climb into bed, and Shane latches onto Ilya like a koala. He wants to ask what it is on his phone that has

Shane all worked up but he stays quiet, because he said would be patient, because he trusts him to come to Ilya in his own time.

They win the Conference finals against New York, and Ilya makes sure to slip a snide comment about Scott Hunter's age to their opposition captain during the handshakes after game six. And there's something in Hunter's eyes, even as he lets out an amused huff, that lets him know that he will not be a fixture in this game for much longer. It bowls Ilya over, the concept of ageing, and that he can't remember his mother's face, and he feels it so unfair that Irina wasn't allowed to grow old. Scott invites all the Centaurs to the Kingfisher, and Ilya forces himself to go even though all he wants is to go back to his hotel room to sleep. To sleep, and to perhaps dream of his mother so he can see her beautiful, young face and wish ardently that he could one day be allowed to see her wrinkly and grey too.

The nightmares stop during the Stanley Cup finals. Ilya doesn't know whether to be happy or sad, but he throws himself into practice with extra vigour. Soon, the Centaurs will defeat Edmonton. Soon, Ilya and Shane will be Stanley Cup winners again. Soon, they will have done it together and Shane will finally have nothing left to prove. The first two games are tight battles in Edmonton but Ottawa loses them both. Shane is incredibly tense on the flight back, but he lets Ilya hold on to his hand and press gentle kisses to his knuckles throughout its duration.

Ilya notices that Shane does not seem as anxious around his phone between games two and three, but he takes to checking their mailbox at least three times a day. Ilya has no idea what is going on, but he does his best to shut Shane's mind down. He takes Shane apart in the gym, lights down low again, lets the overstimulation send his husband over the brink and then pulls him back again with a searing kiss as he whispers, "I love you," across every inch of Shane's skin.

Game three is another nail biter but Shane squeezes in a goal with 2 seconds left on the clock and it is, quite possibly, the most beautiful thing Ilya has witnessed in his life. Shane is so ecstatic that he forgoes his usual chaste celebrations to launch himself at Ilya's mouth right there on the ice. Ilya can hear the Centaurs whooping around them and he feels delirious with joy when Shane pulls away a few seconds later, looking suddenly very shy, and Ilya is so, so in love with this man he thinks his heart may burst. For the first time in a long time, Ilya forgets that he has forgotten his mother's face. He forgets again when they win game four.

They head back to Edmonton for game five, and Shane is tense again. He sees Shane take a call from Yuna away from their group before the game, watches him look exasperated with

whatever he’s saying to his mother, watches him take a moment to collect himself before he heads back to the locker room. Game five is nothing short of a battleground. It’s a match full of fights and penalties, and even Shane, who has been on his best behaviour, loses his cool and gets two minutes in the box. But Ottawa wins by the skin of their teeth in overtime, Troy scoring off an assist from Luca. Shane collapses on the ice from the sheer exhaustion of that game, and Ilya thinks of his mother again and hopes that he falls asleep to a nightmare.

Shane checks their mailbox at least five times on the day of game six. It puts Ilya on edge and they argue at home. The drive to the arena is silent, and things continue to be tense in the locker room. There’s a restlessness within the team. If they win today, they will win the cup. If they lose, it will go to a do or die away game. Ottawa have never made it this far before, so there has never been a possibility that they might win the Stanley Cup. This season had been the first Conference finals for most of the team, and only Ilya and Shane have ever made it to a final before.

Ilya does his best to rouse the team with a speech but it does not work well. Edmonton are ferocious on the ice, and it's a miracle that no player is injured by the time the final siren blows and Edmonton have scraped their win with the singular goal of the game. The drive back home is silent too, and Ilya hates it, hates feeling like this with a passion.

“Shane,” he says, pulling his husband into a desperate backhug, “Will you please tell me what's going on.”

Shane leans back on Ilya and his eyes flutter shut. “Soon. hopefully. I promise. I just don't want to disappoint you by telling you about something that might not happen.” He turns around in Ilya's arms to bury his face into Ilya's chest. “I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I love you too, мой почтовый ящик.”

“Mail box?” Shane laughs and presses his lips to Ilya’s.

The Centaurs return to Edmonton for game seven, surprisingly zen. Ilya still has not had any nightmares through the Cup Finals, but he has learned to be okay with that. He's seen Galina twice more during the playoffs and thinks he understands her words about connecting to the

emotions. Even if he cannot imagine his mother's face, he knows that her spirit is with him. He fiddles with the ring and the cross against his chest. The two people he loves most in this world, right above his heart.

Game seven is a battle of tit-for-tat but in the end, Ottawa takes the glory. Shane scores the winning goal, completing his hat trick, with an assist from Chouinard. When the final siren buzzes, Shane looks immediately to Ilya and they skate to each other on the ice. It's Shane who takes the lead, tugging Ilya closer by his jersey to crash their mouths together. Ilya feels Shane tug off his gloves and knock off his helmet and follows suit. The world around him feels muted, like it's just the two of them in this moment.

"We did it," Shane smiles when he finally drags his mouth away.

"We did," Ilya replies, throat tight and eyes watering.

Shane rubs his thumb gently across Ilya's cheek and catches the first tear that falls. "For your Mama," he adds quietly.

"For my Mama," Ilya agrees, "But also for us." He surges forward to kiss Shane with a ferocity he has never felt before. He forgets where his mouth ends and Shane's mouth begins, like he's trying to crawl inside Shane's body, like he wants Shane to crawl into him. It must look obscene to everyone looking on but Ilya does not give a flying fuck right now. All he cares about is Shane, that they have won a cup again, that they have won *together*, and no one and nothing can take this from them.

They are forced to break apart eventually, so they can do the trophy presentation. Roger Crowell looks none too pleased about the situation and Ilya can't help but grin and kiss Shane again in front of the Commissioner. And Ilya thinks of Irina, in her favourite red parka and the gifted red beanie in the stands, cheering loudly, and still he cannot envision her face but it's okay because he knows that she loved him. That she loves him still, that her spirit lives on, that his beautiful, darling husband loves him too and holds him through all the dark nights, and will continue to hold on to him.

Everything after the cup win is a blur, and the celebrations seem to last forever. He is horribly hungover by the time they get back to Ottawa. Shane drives them back from the airport, laughing at Ilya's discomfort and Ilya tries to be upset at his terrible husband but he is so unbearably fond that he can't even fake it. It’s late morning by the time they finally get back to the house.

Shane sends Ilya inside first, offering to carry their bags in and Ilya gratefully accepts. He rips off his clothes and dives into bed naked, letting sleep claim him. He dreams of his mother for the first time in weeks, the familiar nightmare in the hammock. He wakes with a start and realises that it's dark outside. Shane's side of the bed is empty. He pricks his ear, listening for sounds of life from his husband but doesn't hear anything.

Perhaps Shane has gone out, or perhaps he's sleeping on the couch but either way Ilya makes his way into the shower feeling irritated. When he finally feels alive again he heads downstairs and stops short when he sees Shane sitting at the dining table, leg bouncing nervously. There is a small white envelope sitting on the table in front of him and Ilya instinctively knows that Shane is finally about to tell him why he's been extra anxious lately.

Ilya slips into the seat across from Shane, and taps his foot under the table. “Hi,” he says quietly, and reaches out for Shane's hand.

“Hey,” Shane replies, and places his hand in Ilya's. He takes a deep breath then says, “I’m going to tell you something that will probably make you really angry. And it's okay if you get angry or yell at me or whatever. But I need you to let me finish telling you everything before you do any of that. Okay?”

Ilya nods, his heart beating out of his chest. His hands suddenly feel clammy. “Okay,” he says finally, “I will just listen first. Tell me everything.”

And so Shane tells him. That he had been horrified to learn about Grigori's destruction of Irina's photos, that it had taken some time but he had tracked down Andrei’s contact details, that he had taken his time to convince Andrei to confirm if he had any photos of their mother, that he had begged Andrei to send a photograph through, that he had paid for postage and that the photograph was finally here.

Ilya listens to it all in stunned silence. His first reaction truly is anger. How could Shane have taken this decision by himself, how could he have reached out to *Andrei* of all people. And clearly there has been an exchange of money too. But the anger chokes in his throat because in front of him, there is an envelope that has his mother's photograph. He will see her face for the first time in nineteen years.

“Have you opened it?” Ilya asks finally, hot tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Just a peek,” Shane confirms, “Just to make sure he really did send it.”

It’s a tattered old photograph, taken in the park across the road from their home. Irina would take Andrei and Ilya to the playground often, and little Ilya would ride the slide and Andrei would pretend to hate going but ride the swings all the same. Ilya remembers the day this photo had been taken, a rare family outing involving his father that hadn't involved him chewing them all out. Grigori had taken the photo. Irina is in a bright red summer dress with white floral patterns, her face is as beautiful as he remembers. And boy does he remember now. She is smiling wide, with her arms wrapped around Andrei, and Andrei is tackling a laughing Ilya.

The tears won't stop flowing down his face. Ilya is perhaps eight or nine in this photo, Andrei is twelve or thirteen. They look like any other happy family and it is all so impossibly unfair that Irina will be an immortalised memory at thirty years old, younger even than when she had died. Ilya weeps for his mother's lost dreams, her lost years, her lost future. He weeps for all the things he has achieved in her absence.

“There was-”

Shane's voice cuts through his crying.

“There was another photo. In the envelope.”

This is a fresh photograph, of a serious looking girl who has the same curly hair as Irina and the same deep blue eyes, although her nose and lips are different. Ilya instinctively knows

that this is his niece and flips the photograph around. There's a messy scrawl there, in his brother's handwriting. *Katya Rozanova*.

He looks again at the photograph of his mother, notices the frayed edges and the scratched pigments and wonders how often his brother has looked at this photograph too. How he had hidden it from his father, *from Ilya*. Andrei had lost a mother too, he too had been a child, only sixteen. And he too had not been allowed to grieve his mother's death, and that simple fact had set the brothers on irreconcilable paths.

“I can't believe I forgot this beautiful face,” Ilya murmurs, thumbing over Irina's face reverently.

“Ilya.” Shane says his name like he has missed something entirely obvious, looks at him imploringly as if he expects Ilya to solve some puzzle. “Do you really not see it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ilya replies desperately.

Shane waits a beat and then pulls Ilya up from his seat. He tugs him along until they’re standing in front of the mirror in their hallway. “Look,” he says, eyes locked in on Ilya’s reflection. He doesn’t understand what Shane means but Ilya looks into the mirror, into his own sad face where the tears are still flowing from his eyes. “You look just like her,” Shane says breathlessly.

Oh.

Ilya looks down at the tattered photograph in his hand then back up to his reflection. He has the same curved eyebrows, the same rosy cheeks, the same blue eyes, the same heart-shaped lips. A sound escapes him, half-laugh half-sob, and Shane wraps his arms around Ilya’s waist from behind. Ilya’s eyes drop to the chain around his chest, his mother’s cross sitting right next to his wedding ring. He looks at the matching ring on Shane’s finger. There really is no denying it.

Ilya Rozanov can never forget his mother’s face, because he is wearing it. He is Irina Rozanova’s son after all.

End Notes

I've wanted to write about Ilya and Irina for a long time but have struggled to find the words until now. This is perhaps the most personal work of fiction I have ever written, even though Ilya and I have wildly different families. Inspired by my own struggle to recall my late mother's face, and my father sitting me down to tell me that I only need look in a mirror. Thank you for reading if you got to this point.

To those of us who lost our mothers in our youth, when she also was too young - I see you. I love you. May her memory be a blessing (even if you, like me, also struggle to recall her face) ❤️

I'm not particularly active anymore, but you can also find me on tumblr (warning for nsfw content).

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!