

The Best Thing

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The Best Thing

by [broccolicheddarchicken](#)

Summary

“Sometimes, when people are very sick and they don’t get the medicine they need, they can feel very sad, and the sickness tricks them. It makes them think they’ll never feel better. They end their own lives so that the sadness will stop. That’s what happened to your grandmother.”

Sonya furrowed her brow and took a bite of her yogurt. “I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t understand either, solnyshko. I wish I knew the answer. The sickness is very confusing, sometimes.”

“Are you or daddy sick?”

Ilya has a difficult conversation with his five-year-old daughter.

Notes

as always, I hope you enjoy reading this at least half as much as I enjoyed writing it. <3

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

It had been a good weekend.

They'd spent Saturday at the Hollanders'. The plan hadn't originally been to stay the night, but then the girls fell asleep, and Shane, Ilya, and their parents stayed up well past midnight playing games, drinking Sleeman, and talking. By the time they'd finished, both Shane and Ilya were far too exhausted to drive home, and Yuna had *insisted* they just sleep in the guest room.

Four people in one bed was a little cramped, even with two of them being small children, but it was the kind of cramped Ilya didn't mind. He'd felt like he was in a den of some sort, safely tucked away with all the people he loved most within arms' reach.

That morning, Shane and Ilya had been permitted to *sleep in*. David and Yuna fed the kids, played with them, and gently redirected them when they wanted something from papa or daddy. It was an impossibly rare treat.

Shane and Ilya woke up in each other's arms around nine and made out lazily for a little—usually Shane didn't let Ilya kiss him until they'd brushed their teeth, but he made an exception given the circumstances—then wandered out to eat the breakfast Yuna had made, rumped and sleepy. Afterward, Yuna took the girls outside to play some more while Ilya and Shane helped David fix the back fence.

(David and Shane fixed the back fence. Ilya watched while holding the screws and drill bits.)

Around two, they left the Hollanders' and went back home. Katerina, their youngest, had been half-asleep in the backseat. She wasn't yet three and still took naps in the middle of the day.

Ilya had asked if Shane needed any help getting Katya put down, but Shane had said he'd be fine solo. Their eldest, Sofia, had mentioned being hungry on the car ride home, so Ilya used the free moment to whip up one of her favorite snacks: vanilla Greek yogurt with apple slices and a few almonds on top. She was sitting at the kitchen island now, quietly eating as Ilya grabbed a Coke and mentally sketched out the rest of his day. He was feeling a little sluggish, so he'd see if Sonya wanted to play outside some more.

Actual workouts were a challenge, nowadays—Shane and Ilya had to stay up late or wake up early if they wanted to work out together, so most of the time they opted for shifts while one of them watched the kids—but when Ilya had that itch in the back of his neck to do *something*, Sonya's endless energy was almost always ready to be burned off. She loved football and catch and pond hockey, or even just racing her dads in the backyard. Even Katya was getting big enough now to enjoy running and playing and wrestling with her sister.

Ilya's train of thought was broken by his daughter's voice. "Papa?"

"Yes, Sonya?"

"Daddy says grandma is his mommy."

Ilya smiled. He loved conversations with Sonya, he loved talking to her in Russian. He loved little moments like this, where certain facts of the world hadn't quite sunk into his daughters' minds. Sonya understood that Yuna was family, but didn't understand how. There was something so innocent, so endearing in it. He finished pouring the soda into the glass and took a sip before he spoke.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Sonya's next question was quieter. “Do you have a mommy?”

They’d had a talk, not too long ago, about why Sonya’s friends had mommies and she didn’t. Shane had taken the lead on explaining that: most kids had a mom and a dad, but some people had two moms, or two dads, and some kids had just one parent, and some kids had a daddy and a papa, and all of those arrangements were okay. Sonya had understood pretty well—at least, Ilya thought so—but she’d also taken to asking everyone and anyone she met whether they had a mom and a dad.

The way the conversation was progressing made Ilya slightly nervous, but he tried to ignore it. He tried to never be less than perfectly honest with the kids about important things, even if it meant toning his explanations down to be age-appropriate.

“I do,” Ilya said.

“When will I get to meet her?”

Ilya’s stomach dropped, but he wasn't surprised. It was the natural next question. He made his voice as gentle as he could.

“Well... never, sweetheart. She died before you were born.”

“She’s dead?”

Ilya nodded. He was somewhat grateful that she already understood the concept of death—it was something they’d had to explain when Anya had died the year prior.

“Why?”

A momentary flash of panic ran through Ilya’s mind, which was swiftly replaced with strategizing. Ilya decided to switch to English. Sofia’s Russian was very good, but just by virtue of their surroundings, her English was stronger. For something as complex as this, Ilya wanted to make sure there was no confusion.

“Sometimes, when people are very sick and they don’t get the medicine they need, they can feel very sad, and the sickness tricks them. It makes them think they’ll never feel better. They end their own lives so that the sadness will stop. That’s what happened to your grandmother.”

Sonya furrowed her brow and took a bite of her yogurt. “I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t understand either, solnyshko. I wish I knew the answer. The sickness is very confusing, sometimes.”

“Are you or daddy sick?”

Ilya pressed his lips into a thin line.

“I used to be, but that’s why I take medicine in the mornings, and go to my appointments every other week. It’s just like a broken bone or the flu. When you treat it, you get better.”

“Are you gonna make yourself die?”

Bile at the back of the throat. A skipped heartbeat. *Are you gonna make yourself die?*

Ilya remembered once thinking that someday he might want to take his own life. That it would be out of his control. Nowadays, he was certain that would never happen. He hadn't allowed himself to have children until he was sure he could manage his depression well enough to stay with them. It was one thing—one terrible, dreadful thing—to leave Shane alone, but his girls? He could *never*.

It wasn't that Ilya thought himself stronger than his mother. He wasn't. The difference was that he had access to the treatment he needed, and a patient, loving, supportive spouse who understood that the downward twists of his brain were out of his control.

The images came in a few flashes: *mama*? A limp wrist hanging from the side of a bed. An empty bottle. Gray skin. Milky eyes.

Ilya's jaw tensed.

“No. Never. I’ll be here with you, your sister, and daddy for as long as I can.”

Sonya, for her part, accepted the answer for what it was. She nodded, her little fingers still wrapped around the spoon, as though Ilya had just asked her to pick up her toys in the living room.

“Will you die at all?”

Ilya took another sip of Coke to buy himself a moment to form his response. “Everyone dies, so yes. Someday. Hopefully not for many years.”

“Where do you go when you die?”

For not the first time, Ilya wished Shane were here. This didn't seem like the sort of conversation Ilya should've been having with Sonya alone.

“Nobody knows for certain, but I think you stay with the people you love for as long as they need you.”

“So even though you’ll be dead, we’ll be together?”

Ilya tilted his head, brushing his fingers over the cross hanging from his neck. “I think so.”

Sonya processed this another moment, then looked up at him curiously. "Will I be able to talk to you?"

"No. But you can always remember me in your heart, and I'll love you as much as I can from wherever I am."

"Does your mama love you even though she died?"

Different memories, this time: a certain warmth in Ilya's chest the day he married Shane. Deep-seated pride the first time he hoisted the cup, as though Irina were just on the other side of the glass. Pressure like a hug the morning after he'd told Shane he loved him.

"I think so. I think sometimes I can feel her with me, even though I can't see her or talk to her." Ilya smiled. "I felt her when we had you."

Sonya frowned, her adorable lip jutting out almost petulantly. "I don't want you to die and be far away."

"I'm not going anywhere for a long, long time, Sonya. And when I do, you'll be brave. You're stronger than you think."

"Were you strong when your mama died?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I am not so strong." Ilya was fidgeting with his cross again. "You know, this belonged to your grandmother."

Sonya looked at the necklace with as much concentration as a five-year-old girl could muster, her head tilted like a confused puppy. "Can I touch it?"

"Of course." Ilya crossed the island and leaned down so the little piece of gold hung between them. Sonya held it up and pinched it between her fingers.

"Your grandmother wore this every day, her whole life. When she died, I decided to start wearing it. To remember her."

"Doesn't it make you sad to remember?"

"Sometimes. Especially the first few years. Now it's been long enough that most of the time, I can talk about her without getting too sad. There are lots of good memories." Ilya paused. "I miss her a lot, and I wish I could talk to her. I wish you could've met her, because she would've loved you very much. But it is okay."

"How is it okay?"

"It is okay because..." Ilya hesitated, trying to figure out how to phrase his thoughts in English.

"I think sometimes, things are supposed to work out a certain way. My mama died, and that was hard. Very hard. But then I came to America, and I met your daddy and fell in love with

him. That let me marry him, and that let us have you. And you, *solnyshko*, are the very best thing that ever happened to me, because you're the one who made me a papa."

"Really?"

"Of course, *really*." Ilya leaned down further to kiss her little head, then whispered conspiratorially in her ear. "But don't tell daddy. He gets so jealous."

Sonya giggled a little, which was only made more intense when Ilya slid his hands over his ribs to tickle her. She wasn't sad—she was still smiling and laughing, and Ilya thought that maybe the conversation hadn't gone too badly after all.

After a moment, Ilya relented, Sonya still giggling even after he'd withdrawn. He looked at her snack bowl: mostly empty.

"Are you done with your yogurt?" Ilya asked, switching back to Russian. He tried to speak it with her as much as possible since he was the only place she could possibly learn it.

Sonya nodded. "Papa? Can we please go upstairs and watch Anastasia?"

Anastasia. It wasn't exactly an accurate take on Russian history, but telling Sonya it was about where papa was from had been enough to make it her favorite princess movie. Ilya, regrettably, had seen it about a hundred times, as had Shane, Katya, and Sonya's army of stuffed animals and dolls.

"Of course," Ilya noticed Shane coming down the stairs, though, so he decided to talk to his husband first. "Go pick out which of your animals is watching with us and I will be upstairs in just a minute."

Sonya nodded and scurried off, bounding up the steps just as Shane approached, trapping Ilya between his body and the counter. He kissed Ilya, then—chaste and warm, a greeting more than anything else.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Hi. We need to talk. Your daughter is very curious."

Shane shook his head gently. "We don't. I was standing on the stairs, I heard everything."

Oh. So Shane *had* been there. Why hadn't he just come down the steps?

"Was what I said okay? I would've talked to you about what to say first if I had known."

"Everything you said was perfect, baby. Maybe later tonight, you could show her some of your old pictures on the thumb drive. I think she'd like that."

The thumb drive. Where every family photo Ilya had bothered to scan and bring with him was carefully stored, backup copies in his iCloud account and on the computer in the home office. Most of them were of him and his mother.

"Maybe," Ilya agreed. "If she wants to. How's Katya?"

"Asleep. Finally. I think Mom wore her out with the bubbles this morning, thank god." He paused, looking at Ilya thoughtfully, then pushed one ringlet back from Ilya's face. Ilya automatically nuzzled against his fingers, and Shane responded with a gentle kiss to his temple.

"You did really good with that," Shane said. "Much better than I would've."

"Well. You know me and my tongue."

Shane's face flushed, and Ilya thought that maybe he'd get another kiss, a whispered promise of *later tonight*—but instead, their interaction was cut off by a little pair of lungs, yelling at the greatest volume they could produce from the second floor.

"Papa!"

Ilya chuckled. He pointed upstairs with two fingers, then mimed a salute. Duty called.

"Do you want to come watch Anastasia with us?"

Shane raised his eyebrows. "For the third time this weekend? Of course."

"Come on." Ilya tangled his fingers with his husband's and took him up the stairs, grinning to himself the whole way. Watching kids' movies for the five-hundredth time with his husband and daughter was a privilege he had worked hard to earn. Maybe afterwards they'd go outside and play, like Ilya had been thinking about earlier, or maybe Ilya would let Sonya put butterfly clips in his hair and paint his nails.

Either way, he'd be here, with his little family that he'd put in so much effort to create and protect. It was the best thing he'd ever had.

End Notes

solnyshko - sunshine/little sun

thank you so much for reading! comments and kudos are always appreciated :)

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