

The Sadness of Jaromir Jagr

Written by Scott W. Gray | January 2009

I think the trainers are worried about accelerated heartbeats ever since Alexander died on the bench. We all watched him die, his heart overwhelmed, his eyes searching. Hands clutching our sweaters as his muscles stiffened and then betrayed him. Gasping. Weird silence.

I was supposed to guide him on his career and now he is gone. Those of us who remain are like abandoned parents, unable to speak of our loss, or embrace what life we have left. The guilt of those left behind is an endless warm-up for a game that never starts - we just slowly circle the perimeter. A fog around us.

This is an industrial town that knows death, understands loss, but will not accept grieving. I feel death more acutely now that I am here. My hips hurt, and my back cracks, and now my hair is cut short - no longer a flamboyant symbol of my spirit and youth. I must be a man, show no emotion, next shift's a heavy one.

Since Alexander died, I just want to silently blend into the landscape, but in a city like this that means disappearing, and taking on a grayish pallor. I've seen it in the faces here.

And really, I could never disappear when there are so many billboards promoting my presence.

My face is enlarged on signs above factories and beside highways, and I drive a powerful German car slowly beneath them on my way to the rink each morning. I look old, especially in such gross proportions.

And I've noticed I look as tired as I *actually feel*.

I want to return to New York and play hockey on Broadway, where I can be a young man again - a slash of smile, hair like a rock star. My contract in Omsk depreciates every day as the Ruble falls apart, and I am chained to an arrangement that will drag me down over three years. By the time I am finished with it, I will be broken and old and exhausted beyond words. You can never sleep that off.

But now, I watch the sun rise over Omsk from the kitchen in my condo. The counter is cool under my elbows and from here the sun is a weak amber glow through a barrier of fog and pollution. It never seems to lift. In the distance, some billboards and the highway. I drink black coffee even though the trainers say I should avoid caffeine, but I am tired all the time, even when I skip our optional practices or sleep late.

Why am I always so tired?