They See Right Through Me (I See Right Through Me)

by izloveshorses

Summary

Anya was haunted by ghosts for as long as she could remember. Unfortunately, she had no idea who they were or why they followed her.

au where the author takes the concept of ghosts in this show a little too literally.

Notes

Plot twist: I write another fic in the same year

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Anya had seen ghosts as long as she could remember.

It wasn’t much. The nurses at the hospital she woke up in were terrifying but kind, horrified she couldn’t even remember her own name. She knew something terrible had happened to her and she hated not being able to figure it out.

The ghosts came to her almost immediately.

They were never clear to begin with, only mist, vague shapes and faces. They’d linger in the dusty...
corners of church on Sundays, glaring at her relentlessly. She’d see them when one of the nurses touched her arm with affection—an intimate gesture that reminded her of someone from long ago. They’d appear in the mirror, sometimes in her own reflection, even—this was more startling to Anya than the ghosts themselves. She thought they must’ve had some connection to her life before whatever happened to her. They felt familiar, somehow, like something from a dream. But how was she supposed to know? They never said a word to her. Just stared, waiting for her to figure it out.

When they entered her nightmares, though, they were relentless. Still faceless, but calling out to her, demanding her to find them.

In the years after she recovered from whatever accident happened, Anya was left to fend for herself. She figured the ghosts had to at least be her family or of some significance in her past. Why else would they haunt her? If she could decipher who they were, maybe she could fit another puzzle piece in her brain and take one step closer towards figuring out who she was.

Sometimes she’d beg them to give her a clue. “Tell me!” she sobbed one night after scrubbing the floors of an inn for hours, “Tell me who you are or leave me alone!” Nothing. Just an empty face, towering over her, unforgiving.

The innkeeper must have heard her deranged screaming and crying. Anya pleaded to stay, she had nowhere else to go, she’d be quiet, she’d even work until dawn, just please don’t send me away.

He cast her out to the street immediately.

Rumors spread like wildfire and she found herself amongst the flames. No one in town wanted anything to do with the “crazy” girl who had visions and would collapse into violent fits of tears and shaking at the sound of a truck backfiring, so she had to search for work elsewhere. Maybe they were right, but she couldn’t argue with what was right before her eyes. Being insulted didn’t make her ghosts go away.

It was torture. She felt hollow—a ghost of someone she used to be, a girl with no name, no memories, no past. Sometimes she wondered if she was even alive. She might as well have been dead, no one talked to or noticed her. She was as invisible as the ghosts who kept her company. But her blood still pumped through her veins, her feet still ached from walking several kilometers a day, the hairs on her arms still stood up in the cold Russian winter air, and that was enough to remind her she was still alive. She filled the empty hollowness with cautious hope of a warmer future. Next town, she told herself, next town I can rest. Until they casted her out again.

At first Anya drifted aimlessly, just looking for work and settling into a small town until they deemed her too insane. Most of the time her ghosts tormented her in sleep and she’d scream and cry too loud for any innkeeper to tolerate, so she usually ended up outside, underneath bridges, sidewalk benches, wherever she could find shelter from the bitter winds. Some places were crueler than others. There’d be people who’d offer her a spot by a fire barrel, others would try to reach underneath her skirt and chase her down the alleyway when she refused to let them. It was getting more and more difficult to find a job while the new regime was growing monstrously. But her ghosts, in their weird, stoic way, almost encouraged her to travel. She couldn’t explain it (not that anyone would care to listen). They felt less menacing when she reached a new town further west. That had to be a clue.
To cope with little to no interaction with people for days at a time she daydreamed. Usually not by choice, but sometimes it was nice to imagine herself in a better place. A ghost or perhaps a distant memory whispered an idea: Paris. She didn’t know if it was her gut or her ghosts telling her to go there, but for some reason she felt that was where she’d get some answers.

In a weird way, it was less lonely being haunted. They were terrifying and frustrating, sure, but she had company wherever she traveled. By this point, her ghosts were somewhat recognizable, still not clear, but she could distinguish between them. One was a man with a beard, always standing near an elegant woman. Three figures in dresses, one smaller figure with a dark mop of hair. These were the ones who constantly followed her. There were other faces too, but as far as Anya could tell they didn’t appear as often as the other six. They were still only vague smudges in space.

Anya’s indescribable need to get to Paris was proving to be… challenging. She’d marched all the way to Petersburg where she caught wind of someone who could get her the exit papers she needed to escape.

Unfortunately for her, he was the most insufferable man alive.

After asking around, she found him and an older fellow holed up in one of the old palaces, lounging on dusty couches and chairs, avoiding her questions. She was used to people avoiding her by now but she still hated it.

“I’m not crazy!” she said, almost boiling over. I’m haunted. No one understood.

They were her only ticket out of Russia. Borders closed like coffins and heavy cellar doors—inescapable and confining. As frustrating as it was, she had to get through to them, or else she’d be stuck sweeping streets filled with ghosts of a stranger’s past for the rest of her short and miserable life.

She was desperately trying to explain her predicament— why she even bothered at this point, she had no idea— when a flicker of movement caught her eye.

A ghost—a new ghost— was lingering near a dusty mirror, clearest a ghost had ever appeared. Still blurry and unrecognizable, but Anya could tell it was a woman, beautifully dressed. Another figure appeared, carrying a tray of champagne, polite and kind. She gasped.

Anya knew better than to greet the figures in front of strangers. So she just muttered that she’d been in this room before, which led to reluctantly explaining her lack of a name and why she was there. They laughed at first like all the others. They quieted, though, and Anya’s confidence rose as Dmitry’s stupid grin slipped into a more serious expression. She tried to keep her story short and to the point, only mentioning the bare facts they’d need to know. But then she drifted into an unprompted daydream again about her hopes of what was to come. Another figure always appeared when she thought about Paris, someone warm and comforting, maybe someone waiting for her.

Dmitry’s slow “Maybe we can help you after all” brought her back to reality. She was shocked to see one of her ghosts sitting on the old sofa give her a single, solemn nod.

Anya figured Dmitry would never admit this, but maybe she found someone who would finally listen to her.
It was almost impossible to tolerate at first. She was excited to leave, yes, but she felt like a liar.

Anya supposed it made sense. Theoretically, she could be the Anastasia everyone was talking about. She was killed around the same time Anya lost her memories and her family, and it wouldn’t hurt to try to see if it was the Dowager who was waiting in Paris for her (Well, it could end up with them all standing in front of a firing squad, but that was the only drawback).

But to get there meant she had to lie. She hated liars. She had to wonder if the ghosts were just illusions and lies or if they even existed. So much of her life was already questionable, she needed people to be straightforward with her. It would be unfair if she weren’t the same with others. Dmitry told her she wouldn’t have to, though, because if it wasn’t true, it would just be an honest mistake.

That boy was getting annoying. She was sick of Dmitry and Vlad constantly correcting her. Who were they to tell her her own memories?

Yet— she wouldn’t admit it— she was sort of glad to have something better to do than just working. Learning about the imperial family still felt disconnected from her past, but it was something. Her gut was pulling her in this direction and she wouldn’t argue with it.

At one point she and Dmitry encountered some handsy drunkards and had to fend them off. The fight was scrappy and dirty but it was nothing she hadn’t dealt with before and they made it out okay. He was more tolerable after that, a bit softer around his hard edges, and she could imagine him as a little boy, as hungry and lonely as she was.

Maybe Dmitry had his own ghosts, too. Not the same as hers, but he was definitely haunted by his past. They reached some kind of weird place of level ground and for once they weren’t arguing when he plopped a music box in her hand.

“You’ve earned it!” He laughed. It was refreshing to hear a laugh of delight, not a laugh of mockery. It was broken, he admitted shyly, embarrassed. He looked so small and boyish that Anya forgot why she’d sworn to hate him. It reminded her of what she imagined it would’ve been like to make a friend in a schoolhouse.

He gasped when she was able to open it, and the gentle melody that followed stirred something in Anya’s heart. I’ve heard this before, she tried to say, but her voice faltered. Somewhere inside her were the words to the song she had no idea she knew. She fell into a trance, muttering the words along with the twinkling of the music box.

Her ghosts appeared again, but with a whole ballroom full of dancers in tow. She gasped. She could see their faces! They danced around her to the rhythm of the music. The man with a beard reached out to her, grinning, inviting her to join him. She reached out but there was only mist. Still, he knelt down and she twirled around him, barely containing her childlike delight. Now that their faces were identifiable, she couldn’t stop looking at them. They were dancing with partners, yes, but they smiled, warm and inviting, like they were greeting an old friend.

One by one they faded away until only her six remained. They, too, dwindled, leaving the straight-backed man with a beard holding hands with the elegant woman wearing the most elaborate gown
Anyanka had ever seen. Their smiles dimmed and they gave her a quiet, sad look before leaving.

The song finished and Anyanka closed the music box, tears on her cheeks, more confused than ever. What does this little toy have to do with my past? They had been clear, so clear, but there was still some disconnect between her and them. It was like studying strangers in an old photograph instead of seeing someone face-to-face.

She completely forgot Dmitry was there, watching her dance with air. She wiped her tears and sniffed angrily. This was always the part where she was kicked out, deemed unfit for work or companionship, left to fend for herself again. They’d sneer and laugh and shove her away.

But she was waiting for a blow that never came. He was staring at her in bewilderment, his eyes filled with wonder instead of fear. He tentatively cupped her cold and blistered hands in his, still holding the music box, and for the first time she thought she stumbled upon someone who wouldn’t abandon her.

The next few days were a flurry of excitement. Scraping up every last possible ruble, finalizing their travel papers, making sure they wouldn’t leave a trail to follow. If Anyanka’s ghosts visited her again she was too busy to notice them.

Until they made it to the train station.

Vlad was filling them in on their cover story when a ghost appeared, real as ever, right before the trio. He knelt and took her hand and Anyanka realized he wasn’t actually a ghost—the others saw him too. Still, Count Ipolitov apparently knew her, or knew Anastasia according to Vlad, and he was terrifyingly familiar. He’d fit right in with the ones who haunt me, Anyanka thought morbidly.

The conductor called for last-minute passengers and Anyanka froze in hesitation. She knew she was homeless, but Russia was the only home she’d known. Was she really willing to sacrifice this place for the possibility of a future elsewhere?

Her six ghosts emerged by her side. They seemed to be in mourning for what they were leaving behind, too. A few more appeared before her, identical to the horrors she’d witnessed in the streets. Hungry children, jobless men, a few loyalists, anyone who’d died or had been killed by this country could be seen in these hollow eyes. One of them, an emaciated woman with a child on her hip, stepped forward, lip trembling, staring mercilessly at Anyanka. She nodded firmly, approving something. Was she giving Anyanka permission to leave?

Dmitry tapped her shoulder when it was time to board the train. She followed, but when she looked back at the woman and the rest of the ghosts, they were gone.

When she sat down by the window she saw a glimpse of the mother again, but it was as fast as a flash of headlights on the horizon.

She was leaving them behind but she’d still carry them with her everywhere. She’d never forget whose lives she’d encountered, even if she didn’t know their names. For them, she’d find her family. For them, she’d escape and live a life they deserved.

Her six ghosts followed her and sat in their compartment. They wouldn’t go away that easily.
Everything was running smoothly until a gun went off.

Anya collapsed into one of her episodes, shaking and crying, her ghosts agitated around her. They were frantically swirling around and huddled together, in fear it seemed, and Anya felt she had been among this before. She was muttering a fragment of a memory when Dmitry grabbed her shoulders.

“No one’s pointing guns at you!” He whispered, his eyes not leaving hers. She waited for him to call her crazy again, but he was more concerned than afraid of her.

“What if I really am her—” He shushed frantically and brushed a stray hair from her face and she froze, her heart still pounding. Instead of pushing her away like she expected, he was determined to calm her down. The idea that someone actually cared was what steadied her breathing. Maybe he was right, maybe she was taking this too far. But her ghosts huddled around her as if they were protecting her. “You put these ideas in my head. I’m beginning to think they might be true.”

It wasn’t until they escaped the train that she realized Count Ipolitov’s face had joined her ghosts.

Unbelievably, they survived the trip.

They actually made it. Paris! It was beyond anything Anya could fathom. Thankfully her ghosts stayed away so she could enjoy the excitement and energy of the city. It was strange, though; Paris was bustling with endless activities and entertainment and shopping… but it was also peaceful and still and quiet. The city was a breath of fresh spring air after a dark and endless winter.

At the end of a long day of exploring, Dmitry and Vlad left her alone and she was thankful, for the first time in a while, for the solitude. She found herself on the Pont Alexandre bridge and she realized the years of yearning for a sense of belonging were so close to being fulfilled. The evening lights glittering and reflecting off of the water, distant music playing in the street, and the solidness of the bridge’s railing under her hands were perfect for grounding her while she contemplated and processed everything that had happened in the past few months. Before this whole thing started, she would have never imagined herself to be standing there, in this beautiful dress— she would’ve slept underneath the bridge, let alone walk across it.

She gripped the little Russian History book she’d been studying. Yeah it was a pain trying to learn someone else’s memories, but now… it didn’t seem so unattainable. The Dowager could be her family. If not, she knew in her bones that whoever was waiting for her was here.

The sun slipped beneath the horizon. A flock of birds took off in the distance and Anya’s heart soared with them. It was expensive to hope, but wow, the results were worth it.

So many stars and lights glittered on the water. Street lamps, patisseries, flower shops, office buildings, homes… was one of those lights the family she was looking for?

The tension in her back and the breath in her lungs loosened, finally releasing the weight and anxiety she’d been carrying with her for years. The breeze sighing across her face felt like the caress of a loved one. Her ghosts appeared at her side, and this was the first time she was genuinely comforted instead of haunted by their presence. They weren’t pressuring her to solve an impossible puzzle, they were celebrating the view with her. Anya risked so much to get here— her life, even—and yet she felt she’d been here before.
She was a lot closer to home than she thought.

The nightmares always came at the worst time.

Lately they had been leaving Anya alone, letting her rest and enjoy her progress, but tonight they were relentless.

“Who are you?” she cried. “Every night you come.”

The man stepped forward. And we will, until you remember us. They were looming over her like she was the old photograph in a dusty photo album.

Can I tell you a secret? the little boy asked. I'm going to die soon. We all are. He was floating over her ominously, and the rest surrounded and trapped her, eyes glowing. Do you have a secret?

She reached out to one of them but they moved away, disgusted. “I don’t know who I am.” A secret, indeed.

Her answer agitated them. They circled around her at dizzying speeds, crying out in desperation. She strained her arms out to them but her fingers curled around the mist that was filling her vision and her lungs. They disappeared but their voices still rang in her ears, Anya! Anya!

She reached out as if she were a small child again, longing for some comfort and protection from the terror consuming her, but no one was there. “Papa!” she screamed.

She didn’t have time to decide what that meant because Dmitry was there, pulling her out of the darkness, and his arms were enough comfort for now.

Anyà couldn’t believe it.

She was Anastasia. Her shared memory with Dmitry brought her clarity. Her ghosts were there, clear as the boy standing before her, and she wept. They were her family. She could name them, recognize them, remember them. Her sisters and brother laughed and danced joyously around her, her parents, smiling ear-to-ear, eyes glistening. They had been waiting for her to remember them. That’s why they followed her halfway across the continent. It all came flooding back to her—the palaces, banquets, parades…

Her past and her future fell into a violent collision. To be Anastasia meant saying goodbye to Dmitry… was she ready to leave the only person who had never left her?

For the first time, Anya wasn’t sure where her heart was telling her to go.
“I will ask you one last time,” the Dowager yelled. Anya couldn’t believe she was looking at her grandmother when yesterday she didn’t even have a family. “Be very careful what you say. Who are you?”

“I don’t know anymore!” Vlad had asked her the same question the day they met. Except this time, she was more frustrated and desperate for an answer she’d never get.

The Dowager seemed determined to maintain her elegance and authority despite the years of loss weighing her down. Anya wondered, since they both suffered from losing their entire family, if she was haunted by them too. She asked quietly, as an afterthought, “Who are you?”

The Dowager’s eyes widened in shock. Then she sighed, defeated, finally letting the sadness show. “An old woman, who remembers everything the way it should have been and nothing the way it was.” She looked at a spot on the floor, lost. Anya knew what that felt like. “I am unreliable… I am a historian of the heart.”

Her vulnerability struck a chord in Anya. “Do you remember the last time you saw Anastasia?”

“I didn’t know it was the last time, we never do!” the Dowager was distraught and Anya gathered enough courage to take her hand. “We never know which goodbye is the last.”

“You were leaving for Paris,” the memory laid itself out before her like a blanket, “you never came back. You gave her a music box—”

Anya jumped up and frantically dug through her small bag of belongings. This was her last chance to get through to her or all of her years of suffering and wandering would be in vain. There it was, as dazzling and magical as the day Dmitry dropped it into her palm. Who knew the first gift she remembered receiving would contain her past. Despite his betrayal, his presence still lingered on her heart like dust settling on everything he’d touched.

That loss still stung. She’d worry about recovering from it later. No, this wasn’t a gift from him. It was from the woman sitting beside her.

As soon as Anya opened the music box and let it play its dream-like melody, the Dowager’s eyes widened and filled with tears, and Anya knew she’d done it.

“We’ll walk the bridge, together, for all of them, Nanna.” And with them.

“What took you so long?” Nanna gripped her trembling hands still holding the music box.

Anya thought about her journey here. Her years of hiking on foot across Siberia. Sleeping under bridges. Trying to decipher why ghosts haunted her every step of the way. Through her tears she saw the face of a woman who’d endured as much loss and hardship as she had. Someone finally understood. She wasn’t alone anymore, and that was all that mattered. “It’s never too late to come home, Nanna.” She believed it. She was home.

As her Nanna cradled her while they cried, she was finally able to feel the warmth of her ghosts’ embrace she’d spent years longing for.
Anya discovered that remembering was hard. She watched her entire family die right in front of her on that horrific night all those years ago, and she was about to witness it again.

Of course Gleb had followed them to Paris. It was too easy. He cornered her, deranged, unrecognizable, screaming about her family and how they got what they deserved.

“Finish it,” she dared, fists clenched at her sides. Her life had been filled with people—living and dead—trying to intimidate her, but she would tolerate it no longer. “I am my father’s daughter.”

She didn’t know what she expected. With quivering hands he pulled a pistol from his pocket, and the breath left her lungs. Her ghosts—her family—appeared and surrounded her, the way they did on that horrible night in the cellar, and of all things to feel in this moment, Anya wasn’t afraid, she was angry. Furious that she was about to witness a repeat of history.

“Do it! And I will be with my brother and sisters in that cellar in Ekaterinburg all over again!”

He pointed the gun directly at her face. The ghosts around her whirled in agitation, it was too familiar. Two more ghosts appeared—men in uniforms, men she thought were trustworthy, men raising rifles. But Gleb’s eyes revealed everything. He saw them—he was haunted by the ghosts of the past, too.

She decided to use that against him. “Look at their faces in mine,” she pleaded, voice unwavering. “Hear their screams, imagine their terror, see their blood!”

Gleb cocked his gun.

Her sisters clung to each other in fear next to her. Mamma held Alexei, burying his face in the crook of her neck to protect him from what he was about to witness. Her Papa stepped forward, arms raised to protect his family, and that moved Anya into action. No, this will not happen again.

Gleb screamed at her again, demanding her to tell him who she was. She marched forward in front of Papa, in front of her family. For their sake she’d survive. They died when she forgot them, and denying who she was would kill them all over again. Their presence gave her the strength to shout it, to shout her full name loud enough for it to echo in the halls for generations.

As her voice defiantly rose, his hand holding the gun slowly lowered. The ghosts next to him dropped their rifles and her family breathed a sigh of relief. The tension released from Anya’s lungs and she remembered that Vlad once said that together they’d change history—in a way, she just did.

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Despite everything, Anya ran to him. Despite everything, Dmitry was waiting for her. Despite everything, she knew he would.

She was alone. No ghosts, no weight, no fear. Her family would haunt her no longer. They’d live through her, where they’d never be forgotten again. Her only company was this disheveled boy who was still unaware of how much she adored him. He was muttering something stupid about leaving when the word love escaped his lips. Her heart leapt to her throat. He seemed determined
to sulk in his angst but she couldn’t help grinning, not hearing a word after that.

The last time she stood on this bridge she’d been wondering which of the glittering lights reflecting off the water was the one she was looking for. Little did she know it was the boy shining beside her all this time. The boy who made her feel like a bird set free, like one of the lights shining below her, like she wasn’t tethered to the horrors of her past.

So she kissed him, her heart uncaged, and he kissed her back, and that was enough.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments and Kudos are appreciated. Talk to me on Tumblr @izloveshorses <3

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