

A lot to live without

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Summary

After pressing a kiss on Ilya's lips, Shane tucks himself against his side and meets his eyes. "Feeling okay?"

The question presses onto Ilya's heart. It has the same reasoning behind it as to why Anya is allowed on their bed just this once. It is also why he'd rather sleep through the entire day. Eyes closed again, Ilya nods. He gives himself a few seconds before opening them again. "Is not as bad as long time ago. Feels like I am allowed to miss her now and be happy at same time."

Stern whispers coming from the other side of the door wake Ilya up. The fog of sleep drifts away slowly, yet he refuses to open his eyes. In the back of his head he knows his body won't allow him to doze off again. That doesn't stop him from still trying, though. A frustrated groan escapes his mouth as he rolls over and pushes his face into the pillow. The thought of smothering himself with it so he can pass out and sleep some more flickers through his mind.

"Any- no, come here!"

Before he can even lift his head, a heavy weight lands on Ilya's back and pushes an 'oof' out of him. A wet nose is pressed to his cheek, the sound of panting getting closer to his ear. His protest against waking up crumbles immediately. Whilst squinting his eyes open to get used to the light, he carefully rolls onto his back. Anya then once again jumps on top of him.

"Pretty girl," Ilya mumbles as he wraps his arms around her. She excitedly wags her body along with her tail and pushes her nose back to his cheek. He can't help but fall into laughter, trying to avoid her attempts at kisses. In the corner of his eye Ilya notices Shane watching them. His smile grows even bigger. "Pretty boy."

Shane snorts at that. "She's been trying to get in for hours," he says as he walks over and climbs into the bed. After pressing a kiss on Ilya's lips, Shane tucks himself against his side and meets his eyes. "Feeling okay?"

The question presses onto Ilya's heart. It has the same reasoning behind it as to why Anya is allowed on their bed just this once. It is also why he'd rather sleep through the entire day. Eyes closed again, Ilya nods. He gives himself a few seconds before opening them again. "Is not as bad as long time ago. Feels like I am allowed to miss her now and be happy at same time."

Today marks another anniversary of Irina Rozanova's death. Throughout the years Ilya's coping mechanisms have changed drastically. Most of them involving alcohol, fighting or working out until he couldn't breathe. Afterwards he'd always find his mother's grave and lie down next to her, falling asleep for a few hours. That isn't a possibility anymore. Marrying his husband had also meant that he would never be able to go back to Russia. And even though Ilya would make that choice a thousand times over, he feels a bit lost every time this day arrives.

Shane presses a kiss to Ilya's hand, which is closed around the pendant of his necklace. "Go take a shower whenever you're ready, okay? Then I'll make you some breakfast." He brushes a curl out of Ilya's face and looks at him. The soft smile turns a bit sheepish, a tinge of red creeping onto his cheeks. "I uh-, I also brought a bottle of vodka. And your secret pack of cigarettes - which is far too easy to find, by the way."

For a few seconds Ilya just stares at him. Then he starts laughing, pulling Shane even closer. A wave of serenity washes over him as he breathes out the last giggles. "Hollander, you are terrible therapist. Terrible, awful." His grin seeps into his voice. He presses a longer kiss onto Shane's lips and grabs his hand to intertwine their fingers. "But you are the most amazing husband. Thank you."

They stay like that for a while. When the silence in his head starts to turn into a building pressure, Ilya decides to finally get out of bed. “I am going to shower. No healthy breakfast, yes? Is sad day for me, you have to be nice. Yogurt with granola is not nice.”

“I would never,” Shane laughs, not even trying to sound believable. They have an unspoken agreement that Ilya tries his breakfast first before making something else. It’s not a huge success. So far, only two or three times he has gotten a positive reaction. Shane is pretty sure all of those had been lies to make him happy, but he’ll gladly play along if that means Ilya eats a healthy breakfast once in a while.

After a last kiss, Ilya walks to the bathroom and turns on the shower. The pressure in his head is still growing - breaking down the walls he built for it. By the time his skin finally meets the scorching hot water, he has to put his hand against the wall to prevent himself from falling over. His mind races with thoughts he wouldn’t even dare to speak out loud. Not to Galina, especially not to Shane. The pendant hanging from his necklace finds itself in his other hand as he slowly drops down against the wall. When he is seated, one arm around his knees, he lets his head hang.

Ilya Rozanov does not believe a god exists. Just like the fairytales his father had spoiled for him at a young age, Ilya has left that part of his culture and childhood behind. However, he will always revisit the faith he once desperately clung onto just in case. He doesn’t believe it works, he refuses to even acknowledge a god that has taken so much from him. But his mother did and that is all he has left from her. So Ilya prays. He speaks to his mother, apologises to her for everything she had to endure - despite none of it being his fault. He begs her to visit him in his dreams, even if it is in another nightmare. His arms are shaking and his tears blend in with the steaming water as he pleads for her to come back to him.

It takes some time for him to calm down again. Whilst he gets his breathing back under control, he washes his hair and scrubs his body with shaky breaths. The fingers that had been clamped around the pendant now carry angry red indents with a pain he ignores. Ilya turns the shower off after what could have been either five or fifty minutes, quickly dries off and puts on black joggers.

Back in the bedroom he takes off the bedding and replaces it with clean sheets. Shane had been very persistent in not wanting Anya on the bed, yet still let her go this morning. Changing the sheets so Shane won’t have to worry about them is the least Ilya can do. He throws the old bedding into the laundry basket, slides into his slippers and then makes his way to the kitchen. The gnawing feeling around his heart lessens upon hearing music and soft singing.

“I am still dreaming. My husband is almost too perfect.” With a grin he wraps his arms around Shane, who transfers the fried eggs to the avocado toast and then turns around. Ilya holds his face as if it’s made out of porcelain to study the freckles he knows by heart. His own grin softens to a genuine smile after they share a kiss.

“What do you mean ‘almost’?” The playful tone in Shane’s voice feeds his expression. He raises an eyebrow at Ilya, gesturing to the plate full of food and the bowl of fruit next to it. “I’d say I’m pretty much nailing this marriage thing.”

Ilya nods in agreement, grabbing his breakfast and putting it on the table. “Well, you can not be perfect because that would mean you are best at everything. For example, hockey. But it is okay because you married best hockey player.” Ignoring the sputtering protests of Shane, he cuts into a piece of toast and gestures with his fork. “So you are perfect by law, yes? Like assets! You marry someone, you share assets. You marry me, I share hockey talent because that is asset I brought into marriage.” He meets Shane’s narrowed eyes with an innocent expression. “Is not that hard.”

“I’m getting a divorce.”

“Noooo, I take it back. You are too perfect.”

“So that means I’m the best hockey player, right?”

”Yes of course, if you want me to lie.”

“You’re such a dick. Don’t know why I even put up with you,” Shane groans, no bite in his voice at all. Right as he sees Ilya open his mouth, he shushes him with a pointing finger. “Eat your food first. Please.”

Raising his eyebrows with a smug smile, Ilya slowly nods and takes yet another bite. It’s all obvious filler conversation so he won’t spiral, but it’s helping. And he appreciates it more than he could ever express - English or Russian. So, he doesn’t allow himself to think about it too much and enjoys the food instead.

When Shane walks by to get the empty plate, Ilya quickly grabs his wrist and pulls him into his lap. “There are other chairs, y’know,” Shane mumbles, staying seated. “I know. I want like this,” Ilya answers as he grabs the bowl of fruit. He disregards the small fork and picks up a blueberry with his fingers instead. Without saying anything, he holds it in front of Shane’s mouth. “You are so annoying, Hollander,” he mutters when nothing happens after waiting a couple seconds. He pushes the blueberry against Shane’s lips and pokes his side with his free hand. Shane starts laughing, giving a chance for the blueberry to drop in his mouth. Then Ilya whispers ‘goaaal’ and he starts laughing even harder.

They eat the rest of the fruit together. Shane lets Ilya feed him half of the pieces before he gets up to wash the plate. “If you’re up for it, we could take a walk with Anya,” he proposes. Anya perks up at hearing her name and tilts her head at ‘walk’. She trots over to Ilya instead of Shane, wagging her tail slowly. Shane doesn’t even try to hide his smile. He does hide his chuckle in a cough when Ilya nearly pouts back at Anya’s begging eyes.

“Okay. We go for walk, pretty girl,” Ilya tells Anya, who barks once out of excitement. “Yes I know, I am best father ever. Way better than your other father.”

“It was my idea! And I took her out like two hours ago!”

“Oh my god, you whine even more than Anya.”

It takes barely five minutes for them to get dressed. Right as he walks out of the front door, Ilya shoves the pack of cigarettes into the pocket of his jacket. He tells himself not to touch

them for at least ten minutes. That he can go without them, he just needs the weight in his pocket. Not even two minutes later he has Anya's leash in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

His shoulder bumps into Shane's every few steps. A silence hangs over them. Ilya would normally not be bothered by it, but right now he can't even seem to break it. All his movements are slowly starting to feel like pure muscle memory instead of decisions. It isn't until someone grabs his arm that he realises the silence was never even there and his ears are ringing.

"Ilya? You were zoning out again," Shane tells him with a worried frown. His first instinct is to laugh it off with a comment, which he pushes away immediately. He drags Shane over to sit on a tree log whilst balancing the cigarette between his lips. Anya gets clipped off her leash and hurries to sniff out everything she can find.

"Every year is the fucking same, da? Every year I know this shit comes," Ilya starts with a slight waver in his voice. His heartbeat slows down a tiny bit when he feels Shane intertwining their fingers. Not knowing how to translate his thoughts directly, he switches over to Russian. "And I did not lie - this year is good. I am very happy with the love of my life being here with me. But I want her to see. And I want to see her."

There aren't any tears, though his hands are shaking and he feels his heart beat in his throat. All Ilya can think about is the image of his mother laying lifeless on the bed. He tries to replay any other memory of her but it keeps getting overshadowed. It's almost nauseating.

"Hey," Shane whispers to him, taking his chin and turning his head so they look at each other. "She's here. You have her right here with you, remember? Always carrying her by your heart." Their hands, still intertwined, move to the spot on Ilya's chest where the pendant hangs.

Ilya stares at him for a moment. "You understood that but not when I ask you which way to the supermarket?" It earns him an eyeroll, which he gladly accepts with a small smile. The cigarette gets dropped on the ground and put out by his shoe.

"That's bad for the environment." The dead serious frown Shane says it with takes Ilya completely out of his thoughts. He barks out a disbelieving laugh as he picks up the cigarette butt and puts it in his pocket. He then pulls Shane closer to him. "Oh I am so sorry, mister environment. I was thinking about my dead mother, please forgive me." Shane's cheeks turn red whilst he starts stammering, but Ilya just presses a kiss on his head with a smile and a whispered 'thank you'.

Their walk continues after that - Anya proudly carrying a big stick the entire way. They take turns throwing it, until Ilya accidentally throws it against a tree and it snaps in half. Anya refuses to look at him and starts walking next to Shane instead.

It's dark outside when the bottle of vodka makes its appearance. Right as Shane gets up to get glasses, Ilya pulls him back to his chest and takes a sip straight from the bottle. He then

passes it - surprised when it actually gets taken. They go back and forth between the alcohol and giggling about everything they can think of. The vodka eventually ends up half empty on the coffee table.

“Do you think she would have accepted us?” Shane asks, curled up against Ilya’s chest. He lifts his head to meet his eyes. After a short silence, Ilya shrugs. “No, not at first. She would hate seeing me with another man,” he says matter-of-factly. Then his face softens a bit. “But she would say that she’d hate missing seeing me happy even more. And I think-, maybe she would just be very scared. For hate I would get.” Imagining it is hard and easy at the same time. Irina would adore Shane, just as much as he does. She would never blame either of them for their love. And for the first time today, thinking about her makes Ilya feel like he can breathe again. “But after that? Yes. She always understood me, even when I did not myself.”

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