

tell it slant

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tell it slant

by [tofuflower](#)

Summary

He's not alone—hardly ever is, in Boston.

But maybe, just maybe, he's lonely.

It sneaks up on him in stupid moments: standing in line at the bank, catching a ride with Connors after practice, because he doesn't have a car yet. Lying awake at night with the low hum of traffic outside and the wrong kind of silence pressing in around him.

In his rookie year, Ilya makes an anonymous online friend. Unfortunately, it's a terrible idea.

Notes

when i used to be a big hockey fan, i spent all my time on hockey forums and livejournal communities. while others have already done a phenomenal job of epistolary fics that tracks fandom throughout history, this is my little personal homage to making friendships through hockey before social media existed in the form they do today

the timeline between the show and the book was making me go crazy a little while i was writing, so i followed this [timeline of events](#), which maps out the book chronology

once again, not beta read!

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

2009. June.

It's not that Ilya is alone. It's not even that Ilya is bad at making friends.

For as much as he can come across as acerbic, cutting, and—at times—an asshole (a word he learns from Zadonsky after their first game together, after Ilya spends an entire period chirping the Admirals' bench), he's never had trouble with people. Close friends take longer—those always do—but he's easygoing enough, likes to joke around, knows how to read a room even when he's pretending not to. Guys tend to like him, in the locker room and out. He makes them laugh. He buys the next round. He remembers names.

And it's not like he doesn't have Russians around him, either.

He's living with Sergei Vetrov and his family, paired up through the league's alumni program like a well-behaved exchange student. Svetlana fusses over him in a way that makes his chest ache if he thinks about it too long—because she isn't new, not really. She's one of the only pieces of *before* he's been allowed to keep: a childhood friend from home, transplanted here years ago, now standing in a Boston kitchen like she belongs.

The first weekend he moves in, they take him through Newton and Brookline, stop at three different grocery stores so he can get black currant jam, buckwheat, pickled cucumbers, caviar, and kvas. He eats until he's uncomfortably full. He thanks them too many times. He sleeps like a rock.

He's not alone—hardly ever is, in Boston.

But maybe, just maybe, he's lonely.

It sneaks up on him in stupid moments: standing in line at the bank, catching a ride with Connors after practice, because he doesn't have a car yet. Lying awake at night with the low hum of traffic outside and the wrong kind of silence pressing in around him.

Calling home isn't a comfort. His brother is a minefield, every conversation edged with expectation and resentment. His father is...his father. The conversations are stiff, when they do talk, and full of things neither of them is willing to name. And his mother is dead, which means there's no point in reaching for the one person who would've known how to listen without fixing him.

Even the logistics of it are exhausting. Getting an American phone number had been a whole ordeal—forms and plans and sales reps talking too fast—and now the idea of using it to bridge a distance that doesn't actually close makes his shoulders tighten. He could call. He just doesn't know what he would say that wouldn't make things worse, or heavier, or more complicated than they already are.

So he doesn't. Hates even *picking up* when Alexei's name flashes across the screen.

Instead, the silence settles in around him, familiar and unfamiliar all at once. Not empty, exactly—but uninhabited. Like a room he's supposed to know how to live in, but doesn't yet.

The first thing he does—instinctively—is open a Russian site on the computer he’s borrowing in Sergei’s computer room.

He closes it just as quickly, a faint twist of something uncomfortable in his chest.

Too close to home and too easy to be recognized. Just one slip, and the headlines would plaster with his humiliation. His dad would have reason to call, then, and that’s a horror that strikes deep in his heart. He doesn’t want to be Ilya Rozanov, first overall pick, prodigal son. He doesn’t want to be a Russian hockey player abroad.

He just wants to be anonymous.

So he keeps scrolling. English sites this time. Hockey forums and message boards with ugly layouts and too many subforums, where half the usernames are a nondescript string of words attached to numbers, as easily seen in *Call of Duty* as anywhere else on the internet.

He lurks longer than he means to, tells himself it’s English practice, even though it hurts his head to try and parse out all of the internet acronyms that don’t exist back home.

When he finally posts, it’s almost by accident.

Moved this year. Homesick. Don’t know why I’m posting this.

He stares at it for a second, then winces and logs out.

When he shuts the computer down—just in time to watch a movie with Svetlana, who has already claimed the couch like she used to claim the last seat in his mother’s living room—he’s not expecting a response.

Between practices, getting to know the team, and a series of extremely literal icebreakers, it takes almost a full month before Ilya remembers the forum—his post—and checks for any replies.

To his surprise, he’s received two. The first one is from a GoalieCaptain1 asking a few questions, whether he’s tried reaching out to the local community to speak his mother tongue, if he’s tried making any friends with other rookies, if he can call home (yes, yes, no, he answers in his head, already tired).

The second reply is from NorthernPike5.

NorthernPike5, on the other hand, does not ask a single follow-up question.

Normally I don’t post on these forums, NorthernPike5 writes. A stupid sounding name. but I came across your post and it resonated with me.

I don’t think there’s a trick to fixing homesickness. What you’re describing sounds less like missing a place and more like missing a version of yourself that made sense without effort.

That's normal. Especially when everything around you is loud and new and expects you to be impressive about it.

If calling home helps, do it. If it doesn't, that's also fine. "Just call home" is advice people give when they don't know what else to say.

You don't have to like it. You don't have to be grateful for it. You just have to get through today. That usually turns out to be enough.

—NP5

Ilya reads it once, then twice. For good measure, he pastes it into Google Translate and reads it a third time, this time in discombobulated and poorly rendered Russian. The answer irritates him, which feels unfair.

He opens the reply box to tell NorthernPike5 just as much. Types: *Thank you.* and deletes it. Types: *I think you're wrong,* then deletes that too. He logs off without posting anything at all.

It takes him three days to come back.

Ilya does not reply right away, not because he's uninterested—but because the response lodges somewhere inconvenient in his chest, and he doesn't quite know how to dislodge it without saying too much. The season starts, and with it, a road trip takes him away.

He rereads the message once he's back at Sergei's, his cursor hovering over the reply button like it might bite him. Eventually, he types back something brief and polite, in the best-mannered English he knows. *Thank you* he writes, *this helps more than you think.*

Only a day later, he gets a private message from NorthernPike5. *I get it. I just moved cities, though not countries. Still. There's one guy on my team who joined the same time as me, his family's only an hour away. You think that would help, but I can tell he's uncomfortable all the time.*

From there, it becomes a rhythm. Maybe it's because they're likely in the same sport—given that they're both lurking on *HockeyForums.net*. They don't offer names, or teams, or any identifying details. It's an unspoken agreement, the quiet contract of internet anonymity—and it turns out to be exactly what Ilya needs.

They go weeks without talking, sometimes months. Then, suddenly, a message appears, casual and unannounced, like no time has passed at all.

Sometimes, they talk about Ilya's homesickness, which fades during his first season in the MLH—somewhere between learning to enjoy the thrill of beating (or nearly beating) Shane Hollander, and the point where Svetlana stops feeling like an obligation attached to the Vetrovs and becomes, again, simply Ilya's—his oldest friend, smuggled into the present.

Sometimes they talk about NorthernPike5's roommate, who seems—slowly—to be warming up to him. He writes once about how the guy is quiet in a way that isn't shy, but more like careful. Like he's always double-checking the room before speaking.

He says it took months for the guy to come out of his shell, that he took everything seriously at first, but that he has a wonderful sense of humour underneath his exterior. NorthernPike5 shares that his roommate has been talking him through some of his concerns on his team, and that it feels good to have someone who provides a kind of silent, powerful encouragement. "Maybe one day he would make a good captain," he says.

Over time, Ilya learns a few things about NorthernPike5. Small concessions, offered like peace treaties:

They both play hockey.

They are probably not at the same level.

They are probably not professional.

The last two Ilya infers from context: from the way NorthernPike5 talks about next season like it's hypothetical. *If this works out. If I make it. Next year, maybe.* From the way he describes evaluations and proving himself again, like belonging is something that has to be renegotiated next year.

It's a feeling Ilya understands, but doesn't fear. And it makes him feel like he can help a little more. Like he can offer his own perspective, mentor, maybe, some kid grinding it out on a farm team, taking bad bus rides and sharing cramped apartments and hoping this year is the year it sticks.

Not everyone gets to be a first-round pick.

He thinks, unprompted, of Shane Hollander. Or maybe the second.

And so it goes.

Ilya plays hockey. He moves into his own place, but he still sees Svetlana nearly as much as he did when he was under Vetrov's wing—because she has always been stubborn about keeping him fed, and because it's easier to breathe around someone who knew him before the world and his father decided what he was.

He learns the cities by their ceilings and their hotel carpets. He learns which parts of himself sharpen under pressure and which ones ache. He learns that winning does not quiet him, and losing does not either.

He fucks Shane Hollander for the first time and irreparably, irrevocably changes his life.

Occasionally, he writes to NorthernPike5. And, on occasion, NorthernPike5 writes back.

2011 .

The season accelerates. Nashville. Montreal. Las Vegas.

At the All-Star Game, Ilya almost breaks records and definitely breaks expectations and still feels restless afterward, pacing his hotel room like there's something unfinished. The next morning, he stands beside Shane Hollander in front of a wall of cameras and pretends not to notice how easily Shane blushes, how carefully he answers questions, how his smile looks like something he puts on by hand.

That night, they do not pretend.

Afterward, alone again, Ilya's thumbs hover over the keyboard before settling on a message that says nothing at all.

Sometimes it feels like I am borrowing my own life.

He closes the laptop. He does not wait for an answer.

June comes. Shane wins Rookie of the Year. Ilya applauds from the audience and feels something sharp and unfamiliar lodge in his chest—pride, maybe, or want. Something dangerously close to tenderness.

NorthernPike5 sends him a message a week later, asks for his MSN contact, and tells him about a rough practice and a coach who “doesn't really see him yet.”

Ilya tells him to be patient. He does not mention that patience has never been his strong suit.

2012 .

The hookups with Shane become a known quantity. He does not yet know when they will end, but he knows it will have to. He trains himself to operate in secrecy, to contain himself and his desire to have Shane loudly, always. Ilya tells himself he prefers it this way.

There is one man who is not Shane. It feels like a mistake even while it's happening.

NorthernPike5 gets married.

Technically I upgraded roommates. Still miss the old one, though. He never stole the blankets, even if he ate like a bird and woke me up every morning with the sound of his green juice.

Ilya stares at the message for a long moment before typing congratulations. He isn't sure why it unsettles him. It shouldn't. This is normal. This is what people do. When he was younger, he always thought he'd want to get married. His mom would show him her diamond ring on her right hand, flip through an old photo album that is mostly blurry to Ilya, now, except for the photo of smashing glass that he still remembers.

He tries, briefly, to imagine it for himself—walking down an aisle with a bride, someone blonde, maybe someone more like Svetlana. Someone acceptable. Someone his father would approve of. Maybe his father would be there. Maybe even Alexei.

The image blurs. He can't get past freckles.

Ilya closes that line of thought immediately.

Marriage seems terrifying, he adds, attempting humor.

NorthernPike5 replies: *It is. But it's also kind of like having a permanent teammate.*

Ilya thinks, unhelpfully, of a line chemistry he'll never get a chance to experience, and of players who people are more excited to see against each other than with.

2013.

Shane and Ilya circle each other more than they collide this year. When they do, it's familiar and strange all at once—hotel rooms and hurried kisses and the sense that they are both pretending not to notice the weight of time.

NorthernPike5 becomes a father. They move from MSN to Skype, he sends a blurry photo of twins—the back of their heads, more than anything—and apologizes for the lighting.

Ilya has never held a baby. He heard from Alexei that he has a daughter now, and only felt sorrow at the news. He does not know what to say. He says: *They look strong.*

NorthernPike5 replies: *They scream like they're auditioning for something.*

Ilya laughs aloud in the locker room and earns a look from a teammate. He does not explain.

That winter, Shane invites him up to his perfectly styled condo in the Plateau. It's a nice neighbourhood, with live music thrumming down the street and gaggles of people flitting from one party to another. He walks from his taxi, past closed cafes and bookstores and vinyl shops, and thinks it's wasted on Shane, who surely doesn't appreciate the neighbourhood as much as Ilya would.

He's ushered through the stairwell on the way in. On his way out, he can't stop himself from kissing Shane one more time.

2014.

The Olympics are a study in pressure.

Russia loses badly while Ilya's captain. He feels hollowed out by expectation, by politics, by the slow erosion of his father's memory. Shane tries to talk to him afterwards—and he can

still see the hurt in his eyes when Ilya lashes out at him.

He writes to NorthernPike5 at three in the morning and does not mention hockey at all.

I don't know how to be the version of myself everyone wants.

NorthernPike5 replies hours later, apologetic for the delay.

I don't think anyone does. I think most people just get good at being one version longer than the others. You don't have to be every version at once. The people worth keeping usually love you as every iteration or yourself.

Ilya rereads it on the plane home.

That summer, Shane builds a cottage by a lake. Ilya watches a video interview about it on mute, focusing instead on the way Shane's hands move when he talks.

He wonders, not for the first time, how it is possible to want two things at once and be afraid of both.

2015. 2016.

Time stretches and compresses.

Shane and Ilya fall into a pattern that feels like almost. Almost something. Almost enough.

NorthernPike5 complains about bad coffee, early practices, and his former roommate that is “good with kids, actually, once you get past the awkward phase.”

Ilya smiles at the screen. He understands awkward phases. He understands patience now, or something like it.

He does not connect the dots.

Not yet.

At some point—quietly, without notice—the posts change.

He stops writing about homesickness, and writes about mistakes instead.

I have been making...bad decisions, he types one night, deliberately vague. *Nothing dramatic. Just things that seemed good at the time and then felt less good after.*

He does not specify that the bad decisions have names. That they have freckles. That they used to happen in hotel rooms with numbers he remembers better than birthdays, but now has

carved its space in his home, his penthouse. There's ginger ale in his fridge, and a pillow that he knows Shane prefers because it's firmer.

NorthernPike5 responds the next day.

Bad decisions are kind of a rite of passage, he writes. Especially when everything feels temporary. Just—be careful how you compartmentalize. It's fine to keep things separate. It's not fine to make someone feel disposable.

Ilya reads that line three times. And for the first time since he started posting, he closes the forum window without typing anything at all.

NorthernPike5, oblivious, lightens the mood in his next message.

For what it's worth, this is starting to sound like a crush.

This time, Ilya's reply is immediate.

No. A pause. Then another message. Absolutely not. Then, because he is Ilya Rozanov and incapable of half-measures: This is not a crush. Russians do not 'crush.'

NorthernPike5 responds with a laughing emoji and no argument at all, which somehow feels worse.

Around the same time, NorthernPike mentions—casually, in passing—that his wife is pregnant again. *Round two, apparently, he writes. We're all pretending this is fine.*

Ilya congratulates him, and this time, it comes a little more naturally. Easier—because he means it.

Life keeps moving forward for other people. It does this relentlessly, without waiting for him to catch up.

He makes the mistake of complaining to NorthernPike about his teammates—how they've been chirping him, grabbing at his phone, trying to figure out who *Jane* is. He doesn't say that name to NorthernPike. It's bad enough that his team seems to know.

They've been annoying lately, like they can't help commenting on the way Ilya disappears at the same cities. The way he doesn't bother flirting anymore, doesn't linger at bars, doesn't bring anyone new around. The way, when pressed, he shrugs and says, "I already have plans," like that explains anything.

He sees the notification for the response between warm-ups and puck drop, phone buzzing in his locker. He picks it up immediately—he always does, in case it's Shane—but it's not, this time.

NorthernPike5:

Okay, real question. Is this the same person again?

He types out, *Fuck you.*

That night, after the game, after the press obligations and the noise and the hands clapping him on the back, he ends up where he always does when they're in this city. The apartment is familiar, and so is the elevator. It's been a long while since he's stopped going up through the stairwell.

The door opens.

Shane Hollander looks up from the edge of the bed, hair still damp from the shower, freckles standing out against pink skin.

"Oh," Shane says, like he hadn't been waiting.

Something in Ilya loosens.

Later—after—the room settles into that particular hush that follows shared heat. Shane is half-draped over him, leg thrown across Ilya's thigh, breath warm against his collarbone. Ilya stares at the ceiling and counts the faint flicker of lights reflected there, like he always does when he's trying not to think too hard about what he's doing.

Shane shifts, sleepy. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Ilya says automatically. He presses a kiss into Shane's hair, softer than he intends. Shane hums and relaxes further, trusting in a way that makes Ilya's chest feel uncomfortably full.

When Shane drifts off, Ilya reaches for his phone.

NorthernPike5 has sent another message.

I'm not judging. Just noticing a pattern.

Ilya types back with one hand, careful not to jostle the weight against him.

It is convenient, he writes. Schedules align. No expectations.

The reply comes quickly.

Convenient people tend to stop feeling convenient eventually.

Ilya stares at the screen.

Shane shifts again, murmurs something unintelligible, fingers curling reflexively into Ilya's shirt like he's anchoring himself. Ilya stills, then covers Shane's hand with his own.

NorthernPike5 adds, almost as an afterthought:

Just...if it is the same person, make sure they know what they are to you.

Ilya's thumbs hover.

He looks down at Shane, at the faint crease between his brows even in sleep, like he's still thinking. Like he never fully shuts off.

It is nothing like that, Ilya types, too quickly. You are imagining things.

There's a pause this time. Then:

If you say so.

Ilya locks his phone and sets it aside. Shane shifts in his sleep, frowns briefly, and relaxes again when Ilya doesn't move away.

He stares at the dark for a long time, Shane warm and real against him, the weight of him familiar enough to feel like an omen, or maybe fortuity.

In the morning, he leaves before Shane wakes.

On Skype, NorthernPike5 does not bring it up again. Ilya thinks about it anyway.

2016. November.

Shane leaves before night falls.

He's not dramatic—never dramatic. He just moves carefully, his movements as coiled and tight as Ilya's chest, as he slips off the couch, out of Ilya's embrace, and pulls his clothes on with quiet, shaking hands. There's a hint of something apologetic on his face, but more glaringly, Ilya sees fear.

"I, I forgot—we have a morning meeting," he says.

Ilya knows he does not.

Long after the door closes, Ilya stays lying there on the couch, staring at the ceiling like it might explain what just happened.

The day had felt dangerously easy. Shane in his home, in his bed, on the couch, eating a tuna melt with the concentration of someone doing something illicit. The way he'd looked surprised when Ilya handed him a ginger ale, like it hadn't occurred to him that someone might remember.

They'd talked. They'd said each other's names like they were testing them out. Like they belonged in their mouths.

Now the apartment feels too quiet. The ginger ale in the fridge suddenly feels accusatory.

He showers. He doesn't go back to bed, and by mid-morning, he's angry enough that he doesn't know what to do with it.

I think I made a mistake, he types.

The reply doesn't come right away. A few more nights pass, and by the time it does, Ilya has already checked his phone too many times for someone else.

What kind?

The kind where you think you understand something, and then it changes, Ilya writes. *And then it leaves.*

There's a pause.

Did it leave, NorthernPike5 asks, *or did it get scared?*

Ilya scoffs, alone in his penthouse. *What's the difference?*

This time, the three animated dots linger.

All of it.

Ilya exhales sharply through his nose. *We've been seeing each other for years with no expectations and no complications. Suddenly—* He stops, his fingers stuttering on the *h-e* he almost typed out. Ilya tries again. *Is not a big deal, none of this is big deal. And still he just...runs.*

The response takes longer than usual.

Okay, NorthernPike5 writes eventually. *I'm going to say this gently.*

Ilya already hates where this is going.

If someone has spent years understanding the rules of a situation, and then one night those rules disappear, maybe she needs space to recalibrate.

Ilya's jaw tightens.

You make it sound like this is my fault.

No, but I'm saying there's a reason why she did that, NorthernPike5 replies.

Ilya's fingers hover over the keys. *He could have stayed.*

A longer pause this time. Long enough that Ilya pauses to reread what he sent—heart dropping out of his throat as the realization hits him too late. Fuck. *He.*

Before he can say something, maybe pass it off as a typo or a simple mistake by someone who doesn't speak English as his primary language, NorthernPike5 replies.

He could have, NorthernPike5 agrees. *And you could have warned him that things were changing.*

That lands harder than Ilya expects.

I didn't do anything wrong, he types, sharper now.

The answer comes back just as sharp—but not unkind.

I didn't say you did. I said you changed the shape of something that had kept him safe.

Silence stretches.

I think that the world we live in puts pressure on people to exist within definitions. My friend's like that—feels the pressure to follow some unwritten script out of fear, or maybe because he doesn't know how else to exist, NorthernPike5 continues. *If you took those away without talking about it, yeah - he probably panicked.*

Ilya leans back in his chair, runs a hand through his hair.

You're taking his side.

I'm not. I'm just saying that maybe he didn't leave because he didn't care, NorthernPike5 replies. *He left because he cared too much and didn't know where to put it.*

Ilya types three different responses and doesn't send any of them.

You don't know him, he settles on.

No. But I've seen that kind of fear before.

Ilya closes his laptop harder than necessary and stares at the dark screen, jaw tight.

2016. December.

The silence stretches. He talks to no one but Svetlana.

Then Shane Hollander starts showing up in photos.

Quiet, proper, reclusive Shane Hollander in tabloid magazines: Shane leaving a restaurant, Shane laughing with a woman whose name Ilya learns against his will—Rose Landry. Unluckily for him, it seems like the whole world already knows who Rose Landry is.

Ilya closes the app and opens it again ten minutes later like it might have changed its mind.

He does not talk to Shane. He doesn't reach out to NorthernPike5.

In the end, it's NorthernPike who breaks first. The message comes late, unannounced, like they always do.

Okay, I need to vent, NorthernPike5 writes. And I know you didn't ask for this, but you're getting it anyway.

Ilya sits up straighter.

Go on, he replies immediately, betraying nothing.

I have a friend, NorthernPike5 begins. Sweet. Too smart for his own good. Overthinks everything like it's a competitive sport. The best guy I know.

Ilya hates who he immediately thinks of—and hates himself for it.

He finally started seeing someone. And I thought—great. This is good. He never gives himself time to just live his life, and finally he's living it.

Ilya types, *And?* then erases it. Types again. *Why is this bad?*

The reply takes longer.

Because he's sadder than I've ever seen him.

Ilya's fingers still over the keys.

He's smiling for other people, but not for himself. It's like he's playing a part and waiting for someone to call cut.

Something in Ilya softens instantly, defensiveness dissolving into something sharper and more focused.

Did you ask him? he writes. *What he wants. What makes him afraid.*

NorthernPike5 responds with the shrugging emoji.

Of course I asked. He says he's fine. He always says he's fine. Which means he isn't.

Ilya frowns at the screen.

Part of it might be my fault. We have another kid on the way, 3 at home, and I've been split in half lately. I'm not sure I've been there for him the way I should be.

Ilya's jaw tightens.

You are there, he replies immediately. You are thinking about it. That counts.

I hope so.

Another pause.

Eventually, NorthernPike5 adds:

Anyway. Thanks for listening. I just needed to say it somewhere.

Any time, he replies, but the conversation has left him feeling heavy. He's not sure why. *Truly.*

He sets the phone aside and stares at the ceiling, unsettled in a way he can't quite justify. The feeling sits heavy in his chest.

He does not understand why.

2017. March.

When Ilya was a child, his father felt like an explosion—anger and pride and control packed into one atomic mess, shrapnel for everyone in range.

Hockey was how Ilya learned to stand outside the blast radius. No. Not hockey, exactly. Recognition. The kind his father could show off. Praise from coaches, handshakes from officials, the highbrow men his father liked to be seen beside. Ilya was good at hockey, and he became even better at preempting his father's temper, only to draw Alexei's resentment.

When his father dies, Ilya expects it to end the same way: loud, catastrophic, taking the whole room with him, the way he took his mom. It would be fitting. A final performance.

Instead, he dies quietly. Alone. Just the soft, mundane fact of it—like his body finally got tired of holding up the myth.

Still, he's empty when he calls Shane. Less empty by the time he goes home to him. Not fixed, nor better. Just...held.

He loves him. He loves him more than anything. And for that alone—Ilya knows he has to end it, before everything explodes on Shane too.

2017. April.

Before he can do it, Shane gets hit. He falls and doesn't move.

Later, he says he's fine. He always says he's fine, but Ilya isn't. He can't go to the cottage. But maybe he can nurture this fragile thing between him and Shane until it breaks anyway.

NorthernPike5 messages him three days later.

Hey. Random question.

Ilya is alone on the couch, television on but muted, phone already in his hand and warm from the message he just sent Shane—short, careful, harmless. He answers immediately.

Yes.

The typing dots appear. Vanish. Reappear.

Do you ever get the feeling, NorthernPike5 writes, that someone you care about a lot is managing your emotions without consulting you?

Ilya blinks.

That sounds inefficient, he replies.

Right?

Explain, Ilya adds.

A pause.

Someone close to me got hurt, NorthernPike5 says. *They're okay now, but somehow it still feels like there's something going on. Something they aren't telling me.*

Ilya thumbs at the screen. In theory, he understands why that would bother someone. In practice, he would be a hypocrite to condemn it outright.

Maybe it isn't something they can share, he types.

The reply comes back almost immediately.

I'm their best bud. They can trust me with anything.

Ilya exhales slowly.

People say that a lot, he writes. *It does not always make it true.*

Wow.

I mean that kindly, Ilya adds. *Trust is not about access. It is about safety.*

There's a pause long enough that Ilya wonders if he's overstepped.

They're always "fine," NorthernPike5 continues. *Always handling things. And I keep thinking—if they'd just told me, I could've helped.*

Ilya frowns.

Or they thought telling you would make it worse, he says. *People are very bad at asking for help when they think they are supposed to be strong.*

That's the thing, NorthernPike5 replies. *I don't need them to be strong. I just need them to be honest.*

Ilya goes still.

Those are not always the same thing, he types carefully.

I know.

A beat.

It just—

It hurts, realizing they decided what I could handle without asking.

Ilya leans back against the couch, stares at the ceiling.

Yes, he says. That part hurts.

You sound very sure about that.

I am, Ilya replies. Because people do not hide things from the people they don't care about.

The typing dots stop. Start again.

So what do you do? NorthernPike5 asks.

Ilya doesn't hesitate.

You tell them that they could have told you, he writes. You tell them that you hate they thought they had to carry it alone. And then you wait.

For what?

For them to decide if they believe you.

Another pause.

You're intense.

I am Russian, Ilya replies. This is the low setting.

NorthernPike5 sends a laughing emoji, then:

Thanks. Really. I needed that.

Any time, Ilya replies.

He sets the phone aside.

A moment later, it buzzes again—this time with Shane's name lighting up the screen.

My mom thinks the Admirals will take it all the way this year.

Ilya closes his eyes.

The kiss happens on live television.

Ilya watches it surrounded by noise—empty bottles, half-shouted commentary, someone’s arm thrown over the back of his couch, Svetlana helping him pack, muttering at him in Russian the way she did when they were kids and he’d forgotten his gloves again—but the room stills all the same. Scott Hunter waits at the boards, pulls his boyfriend onto the ice, and kisses him like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Someone whoops. Someone else swears. Someone says, “Holy shit,” like they’ve just witnessed a magic trick. Ilya doesn’t say anything at all.

He watches Kip’s hand curl into Scott’s jersey as Scott smile into it. Watches a future open up in real time and realizes—to his surprise—that nothing explodes.

The room erupts a second later. Cheers. Clapping. Arguments about whether this will get Scott fined.

Ilya excuses himself without explanation and takes his phone into the kitchen.

He calls Shane.

They don’t talk long. They don’t need to. By the time he hangs up, something inside him has shifted—settled, maybe. Like a decision finally made by the part of him that’s been dragging its feet for years.

When he comes back out, the game has ended and someone is arguing about overtime stats. The world looks the same.

It isn’t, not for him, but in a way that feels almost like relief.

NorthernPike5 messages him later that night.

Okay.

I just watched the game.

Ilya smiles faintly.

Yes? he writes.

Is it just me, or did the universe collectively decide to stop pretending today?

Ilya considers this.

It seems inefficient to pretend forever, he types.

That’s what I said!

There’s a pause, then:

Not gonna lie. That messed with my head a little.

Ilya stretches out on the couch, one arm flung over his eyes. He misses Shane.

In a bad way? Ilya asks.

In a “recalculating everything I thought was impossible” way.

Ilya pauses, considering.

Sometimes you see something, he writes slowly, and it rearranges the limits you built around yourself.

Jesus, your English really has improved. Poetics, huh.

I watched an old dinosaur kiss a man on television, Ilya replies. *I am allowed to be dramatic.*

He hesitates, then sends:

So. Hypothetically, he writes, if someone had been making very cautious, very dumb decisions out of fear, and suddenly realized maybe the fear was outdated—what would you recommend?

NorthernPike doesn't hesitate.

Stop pretending you are being careful when you are actually just hiding.

Oof.

I mean this kindly, he adds.

Of course you do.

There's a beat.

Did something happen? NorthernPike5 asks.

Ilya looks at the ceiling, at the faint reflection of city lights, at a future that no longer feels theoretical.

I decided to stop planning for disaster, he types. *It was exhausting.*

The reply takes a moment.

Huh.

Proud of you, man.

Ilya smiles to himself, surprised by how easily the words land.

Thank you.

Another message follows, lighter:

Also, for the record? If you ever start making life choices based on hockey players kissing on live TV, I expect credit.

Ilya laughs aloud.

You will be cited.

2017. July.

A different kind of explosion occurs after the summer—after the cottage, *I love you's*, and Shane's parents, and the plans for a foundation.

It's smaller than the one his father used to be. This time, there's no shrapnel, nor screaming.

In the end, it comes just as a notification.

Ilya is alone on Shane's couch in the cottage, feet up, television on but muted on Shane's favourite channel: CBC News. The house smells like pine and lake water and whatever Shane cooked earlier that evening. Shane's in their ensuite, taking a shower, humming absently, the sound of it drifting through the open bedroom door in a way that makes Ilya feel ridiculously domestic.

His phone buzzes. A familiar Skype name pops up on his screen as Ilya moves to unlock it.

It's nothing serious. Just another blurry picture of a baby—face red and pruned like a raisin. It's accompanied by a message that reads: *Last kid we'll have for a while, I think.*

NorthernPike's wife must have given birth. The baby is a little ugly, but Ilya supposes most babies are when they're fresh out of the womb.

You have said that after every child, Ilya types.

I'm trying to have a moment, NorthernPike5 replies. *Say congratulations to me, you fucker.*

Ilya snorts.

Before he can answer, the shower shuts off. Footsteps on wood follow shortly after. Shane appears at the doorway, towel slung around his neck, hair damp, looking relaxed in that rare, post-season way. His freckles stand out more after a day in the sun.

"You're smiling at your phone," Shane says. "Should I be worried?"

"Internet," Ilya says. "So yes."

Shane hums and wanders over, glancing at the screen without thinking.

“Oh,” he says. “Looks just like Amber. Kinda. I guess all babies look the same until they grow into their faces, huh?”

“Who is Amber?” Ilya asks. “You have secret baby?”

Shane pauses. Not dramatically. Just—still.

“...Wait.”

Ilya looks up. “What?”

Shane leans closer, squinting at the screen. There’s another message.

She’s healthy and loud. Already runs the house like my coach.

Shane’s brow furrows.

“Why does he talk like that,” Shane mutters.

Ilya stiffens. “Like what.”

“Like Hayden,” Shane says, then laughs once, reflexively. “Sorry. That was stupid.”

Ilya does not laugh.

Shane scrolls up, slower now. More carefully. His posture changes—not alarm yet, but attention sharpening into something uneasy.

“That’s—” Ilya starts, then stops. “He’s been talking to me for years.”

Shane doesn’t look at him.

“He types exactly like this,” Shane says. “And that thing about the house being run by a newborn? That’s his joke. He said it after Arthur was born. And Ruby. And Jade.”

The room seems to contract around them. Shane keeps scrolling.

Ilya almost tells him to stop. Knows some of those messages get too raw, too close to things he has never said out loud. But it’s like watching a slow-motion crash. He can’t intervene now without making it worse.

“Shane,” Ilya says sharply.

Shane scrolls once more.

Then freezes.

“Oh my god.”

Ilya’s stomach drops. “What.”

“NorthernPike5,” Shane says. “That’s his gamer tag. Hayden *Pike*. That’s his *jersey number*.”

Silence.

“He’s used it forever,” Shane adds faintly. “I’ve told him to stop. He uses it on everything. Which is not very cybersecure.”

Ilya leans back into the couch, spine rigid.

“This,” he says carefully, “is extremely bad.”

Shane lowers the phone.

“So,” Shane says, voice hollow, “you’ve been talking to my best friend. For—for how long?”

Ilya drags both hands down his face.

“And I,” he says, exhausted, “have been taking emotional guidance from the most irritating man in professional hockey.”

“He’s not that bad,” Shane says weakly, though he looks just as stunned. “Don’t be a dick.”

“This is a nightmare,” Ilya says flatly, closing his eyes. “This is—what do they say—punishment from heaven.”

He hears Shane sink onto the other end of the couch. Ilya keeps his eyes closed a second longer, like he can will the last ten years into being a different decade.

Across the couch, Shane makes a quiet, pained noise. Then—because he is Shane Hollander, and apparently incapable of letting a moral problem exist unsolved—he sits up.

“Okay,” Shane says into the ceiling. “Let’s make a plan.”

Ilya nods once, relieved. “Yes. We pretend we don’t know. I will never talk to him again.”

“You cannot ghost him,” Shane says, horrified. “He just had a baby.”

“I do not care for Pike babies.”

Shane points at the screen. “Clearly,” he says slowly, “you do.”

Ilya shuts his eyes again. “Oh god. I do.”

Shane takes the phone—gently, like it’s a live animal, a fucking Canadian wolf bird—and scrolls with the kind of careful focus he usually reserves for line changes and emotional conversations he doesn’t want to have.

“Okay,” he says. “First of all: why would he send a picture of his kids to an internet stranger. Jackie is actually going to kill him.”

“Technically,” Ilya says, numb, “I am not just any stranger.”

Shane looks up with a flat, pained expression. “You’re worse.”

The kettle in the kitchen begins to shriek—forgotten, boiling dry.

Ilya gestures toward it without looking. “Even the house cannot handle this.”

Shane makes a sound that’s half laugh, half groan, and goes to turn it off. When he comes back, he looks resolved. Which is worse than horrified, somehow.

“We’re not pretending,” Shane says.

Ilya stares. “Excuse me?”

Shane holds Ilya’s phone like evidence. “That’s my best friend.”

“Yes,” Ilya says. “The worst.”

“And he’s been talking to you for years,” Shane says, voice tightening in a way that’s familiar—Shane getting protective without raising it. “And you’ve been—” he glances down, cheeks flushing, “being a person to him.”

Ilya opens his mouth. Closes it. Says nothing, because Shane is right and that is intolerable.

Shane exhales hard. “We tell him.”

Ilya’s spine goes rigid. “No.”

“Yes.” Shane points at Ilya with the phone. “Because if we don’t, then every future conversation is a lie. And I hate lying.”

“We’ve been fucking for a decade,” Ilya says. “Your whole life is lies.”

Shane glares. “Not like this.”

Ilya’s laugh comes out sharp, disbelieving. “You want to tell Hayden Pike that he has been emotionally mentoring me—me, Ilya Rozanov—on the internet? For a decade?”

Shane’s expression flickers, somewhere between dread and vindication. “I want to tell him before you accidentally say something Russian at him and he has a stroke.”

“I am a very nice Russian man,” Ilya says, offended.

Shane stares at him for a beat, then rubs a hand over his face. “Okay. New rule. We do this my way, or you do not get to speak.”

Ilya blinks. “What is your way?”

Shane squares his shoulders like it’s a shootout and he’s about to take a shot. “We tell Hayden. Together. On the phone. Tonight.”

“Tonight,” Ilya repeats, faintly, because it feels like he’s been sentenced.

“Yes,” Shane says. “And we tell Jackie first.”

Ilya’s head snaps up. “Why?”

“Because she’s the only thing standing between Hayden and absolute chaos,” Shane says, matter-of-fact. “And because I am not getting him divorced over Skype.”

Ilya looks at the phone in Shane’s hand, at the stupid little baby, at the casual intimacy of it all. The ridiculousness. The sincerity.

“What do we say?” Ilya asks, and hates that his voice has gone careful.

Shane’s mouth twists. “We start with: congratulations. We end with: stop sending pictures of your kids to strangers.”

“That’s it?”

“No,” Shane says grimly. “Then we tell him the truth. And then we let him scream.”

Ilya’s stomach flips. “He will scream.”

Shane nods. “He’ll scream, and then he’ll ask a million questions, and then he’ll be mad, and then—” He swallows. “Then he’ll probably be...hurt. About us.”

Ilya goes still.

Shane looks at him, eyes steady. “And we’ll let him be. Because he gets to be.”

The room shifts around that, subtle and inevitable.

Ilya exhales through his nose. “I hate this plan.”

“I know,” Shane says. “But I love him.”

Ilya looks away, jaw tight. Then, because apparently July 2017 is the month where he becomes a functional human being against his will, he nods once.

He’s already met Shane’s parents. This surely can’t be worse. Right?

“Fine,” he says. “We tell him.”

Shane’s shoulders drop, relief visible. He reaches out, hesitates, then squeezes Ilya’s knee—quick, grounding.

“Okay,” Shane says, almost to himself. “Okay.”

Ilya’s phone buzzes again.

Are you going to say congrats or are you too busy being a robot about feelings?

Shane reads it over his shoulder and makes a strangled sound. “Oh my god,” Shane whispers. “He thinks you’re friends.”

Ilya stares at the message, horror blooming fresh and bright. “...We are,” he says, devastated.

Shane shuts his eyes like he’s praying. “Jackie is going to kill both of you. Then, she’s going to kill me. I’m collateral damage.”

Ilya watches the screen for a long moment.

Then, very carefully, he types:

Congrats. She looks just like you. Also, don’t freak out. Shane is about to call you.

He hits send before he can stop himself.

Shane’s eyes fly open. “You—why would you—”

Ilya looks at him, helpless. “You said tonight.”

Shane stares at the phone like it’s betrayed him personally.

Then he stands, squares his shoulders again, and says—like he’s stepping onto the ice:

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s ruin Hayden Pike’s life.”

Ilya’s laugh comes out sharp and terrible.

“That’s,” Ilya says. “Something I am good at.”

End Notes

thank you for reading!

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