

punchline

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punchline

by [shrobbery](#)

Summary

punchline

/ˈpʌn(t)ʃlʌɪn/

noun

the final phrase or sentence of a joke or story, providing the humour or some other crucial element.

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Ilya is— he’s allowed to love Shane out loud now. Because he does. He loves his husband. Adores him with every staccato beat of his heart so surely, so intently, that he’s positive that if he were to be hooked up to a polygraph machine and be asked if he loves Shane Hollander, the shape of his pulse as he answers “yes” would coincide with the rhythm of Shane’s bashful laughter anytime Ilya tells him that his freckles are stunning.

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It’s funny, though. He can almost see Irina’s brand of humor slip through the cracks, like sunlight peeking past the gaps in their blackout curtains. He can almost hear her laugh. Gone as she is, she lingers and clings to him like cigarette smoke.

Ilya, Shane, freckles, fate, and his mama. Alternatively titled: the stars outside of Moscow

Notes

This is my first time writing for this fandom so i'm like. real fucking nervous rn 😭 Everyone here is such a good writer it's making me aaaaaaaa skhgisehr

i saw a lot of discussion about how irina could have sent ilya shane and i ran with it and now i have this fic to show for it lmao

Here's [my twt](#)

english isn't my first language but i still hope you enjoy!!

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

When Ilya was about ten years old, his mother had taken him out for a drive one night. He doesn't know where they'd gone, he's never known, but it was far away enough from home — from the city— to see the night sky with little to no light pollution. It's still vivid in his memory. The sound of Irina pushing open the car door and gently lifting him up to sit on the hood of their car despite him weighing as much as she did. No matter how tall he could have grown, she used to say, mama would always be able to carry her little boy.

Shame, she never did get to see him grow taller than her.

The skies were clear that night, so were the roads save for a car or two passing by. Under the dim light of the moon and stars, the bags under his mother's eyes deepened and morphed her into an odd sort of apparition. Ghostly, haunting, breathtakingly beautiful all the same. She'd given Ilya her gloves, put a frigid hand to his wrist and guided his hand to point at the brightest star in the night sky.

"See that?" she murmured, "That's the star you always see when you look out the window at home. Isn't it so much brighter out here?"

Ilya nodded, his every breath coming out as puffs of white mist as he spoke, only a little entranced, "There's so many of them."

"More than you can imagine," Irina smiled and nudged his pointer finger a little to the left, "When there's a few stars forming some sort of shape like over there, it's called a constellation."

"They taught us that in class," with great difficulty, he pulled his eyes away from the twinkling clusters of light and looked at his mother inquisitively, "Do you know which one that is?"

"No," she snorted. Her face stretched oddly around her wide smile, as if the muscles weren't quite used to making that expression anymore, "I just wanted to show you the stars outside of the city."

“Thank you, mama,” he said, legs swinging from where he sat. There was a soft rustle beside him as Irina began to lay down on the hood, pulling him down with her by the scruff of his coat, her cool wedding ring brushing against the skin of the back of his neck, giving him goosebumps, “How long until he wants us to come back?”

Her fingers, which had begun gently combing through the tangles in his curls thanks to hockey practice just this afternoon had stilled for just a moment before continuing their ministrations, “Well technically, he doesn’t even know we’re gone.”

Ilya frowned, “He’ll be mad.”

“At me,” she soothed, as if it would make him feel any better, “It’s not like you could have driven yourself all the way out here.”

You’ll be sad again after he yells at you, Ilya had wanted to say, The kind where you don’t shower for days and move like you’re carrying weights on all of your limbs. I hate when you’re like that. It’s scary. It scares me. Instead, he said, “I’ll bring home that cake you like after practice.”

Her head shifted to the side just enough to plant a kiss on his temple, “I would love that, Ilya. Thank you.”

In reality, they’d only spent less than an hour laying on the hood of their car counting stars and watching clouds languidly floating across the sky, making them lose count every few minutes. The forty-five minutes they’d spent there carried the weight of a billion fragmented little infinities that they only ever kept losing in that dimly lit Moscow apartment.

By the time his mother nudged him and beckoned him back inside the car to drive back home with a hand closed around his elbow, Ilya had counted eighty-one stars in the night sky of whatever Russian countryside his mother had deigned to risk Grigori’s wrath for. Just to show him the stars outside of their dreary city and that apartment haunted by his papa and the rancid stench of vodka breath and his imposingly large body and his booming voice and the weight of his wrath and the sting of his disappointment.

As silent as the drive back was, Ilya had been content.

Content enough that when it comes to picking his jersey number, he settles on eighty-one. Perhaps it's borne from an insipid sense of sentimentality that his father should have long beaten out of him, but still, he picks eighty-one. The point at which he had lost count of the stars in that mediocre night sky just a little ways out of the big city, his mama's discreet way of showing him the endless possibilities of a world outside of that apartment that she never did end up leaving, that bed she never got up from. But Ilya did. Not completely, of course not, but for long enough that he can almost dream of putting roots down somewhere neither Grigori nor Alexei have touched. Somewhere that could just be Ilya's.

Ilya Rozanov. Boston Raiders number 81. Skating around with his mother's cross around his neck and her number on his jersey. Ilya Rozanov with his many luxury cars and his luxury house in Boston and a luxury condo in Russia and a very distinct lack of a home.

In hindsight, Shane Hollander's entry into his life feels almost like a cosmic joke. Ilya can appreciate a good joke. His mama was a very funny woman, after all. *This* particular joke, however, has about a decade's worth of set-up before the inevitable punchlines.

Ilya's obsession with the freckles is... borderline demented. It would be easier if it were an obsession with freckles in general but no, it's these specific freckles on this specific person's face and everywhere else on his body to Ilya's great delight upon discovery. He's always liked freckles, of course. *Liked*. He's plenty capable of being normal about freckles on quite literally *anyone else*. Sasha had a dusting of freckles on the bridge of his nose that only showed up in the summer, there was Hayley and Anne and Sam and Hikaru and Serena. They all had freckles. He *liked* them well enough. But he's never had the urge to draw lines in between the dots to make constellations, or to kiss every freckle until they dissolved into ticklish giggles. No, the honor and the urge belongs to one Shane motherfucking Hollander.

That day in Saskatchewan, it had been like the freckles had their very own gravitational pull. Truthfully, Ilya had looked at them first before meeting Hollander's wary but friendly gaze. Even during the frigid and cloudy months of winter, they had been stark against the growing flush on the bridge of Hollander's nose. From that very first glance, his obsession with Hollander's freckles and not much later, Hollander himself had come into contact with a spark and caught flame, growing brighter as the years went by.

Continuing to smoke that cigarette had been a bad idea, in the end. Since then, he's never managed to inhale that brand without thinking of Hollander and his fucking freckles.

He did quit that brand for a while. After that All-Star Game in Tampa, though... it's the only brand he's ever smoked since.

Nights at the cottage spent sitting by the campfire are what really and truly did him in. Never had he been able to spend time to simply sit back and soak in Shane's presence considering most of their time together has been spent hurriedly shedding clothes and getting rugburn on their knees from kneeling on shitty hotel room carpet for far too long, hurrying out of the door with nothing but a kiss goodbye and sometimes, not even that. In short, as much as Ilya has tried and oh boy has he fucking tried, he's never been able to just stare at Shane for the sake of staring at him, just to observe little quirks and blemishes he's never had the bandwidth to pay attention to before through all that urgency. So, being able to note how the lighter freckles, almost invisible, dusted on the bridge of Shane's nose seemingly disappear as the flames dance and pull light away from them is just— almost overwhelming. It makes the air a little harder to inhale. It crawls under his skin and burrows into the very fabric of his existence. Ilya's fucking crazy about them, he really is.

He stares a lot at his boyfriend's face that summer, sue him.

If Shane notices, he probably doesn't really mind all that much. Or at least, he better not mind. He's the one that invited Ilya and he should know what that entails by now, after so many clandestine meetings ending with Ilya brushing a fingertip or a kiss over the bridge of his nose or the jut of his cheekbone or both. Because Ilya and his damn-near unhinged fixation on Shane's freckles are very much a package deal. A buy-one-get-one-free deal, if you will. And Shane likes the attention— *Ilya's* attention. Shane likes being liked, adores being adored. He positively lights up at any semblance of positive attention Ilya gives him now. He's just so *receptive*. The only thing he likes more than feeling good is making Ilya feel good and it's almost magical. Being wanted this much, this earnestly, is— Ilya knows desire. The rises and falls of it, the dips and bumps. He knows desire and knows it intimately. He knows how it is to desire, he knows how it is *to be* desired. Desire and the way it drenches almost every hand that has ever touched him skin to skin, every pair of lips that's met his.

Being wanted for the sake of being wanted is something new. Usually, Ilya is a prize— a hot fuck, a *good* fuck, a *famous* fuck, nothing more. The people that want him around without the precursor of sex are few and far in between. Ilya could go on a fifty-minute rant about the compatibility of certain pasta sauces to certain pasta shapes and he's genuinely sure Shane

would stay through all of it, even add to the conversation. Svetlana would probably stay through half of it and then say something for the sole purpose of pissing him off and then put Shane on the phone just to make the ensuing argument even more chaotic while she sits back and films with her second phone because she loves seeing Ilya make a fool of himself and he'll let her because he loves her and he's so unbelievably glad that these two people he loves, love him, like each other enough to make fun of him together.

Shane loves him. Shane Hollander *loves him*. Being wanted this much, this earnestly is a concept so absurd and unrealistic that for a while, Ilya had thought it nothing more than a dream and a far-fetched fantasy. In retrospect, fantasy has always been an apt way to put it because what is this— thing. This *something*. This everything with Shane if not a fantasy? But that's almost insulting to the life they've managed to build with each other. Their very real, very tangible life in technicolor.

And through it all, from the very first moment they met. The freckles. They're imprinted in the folds of his brain, dogging his every step, his every choice of one-night-stand for the better part of a decade. An ever-present phantom living under his skin.

The first punchline feels more like an uppercut to the jaw more than a punchline to a joke. It comes during a lazy morning at the cottage, the atmosphere languid as rays of sunlight shine upon their lax forms as Ilya and Shane lay tangled up with each other in their bed. Ilya noses at the hollow of Shane's collarbone, pillowcase rustling under his head from his miniscule movements. And then, and then, *and then*, he notices a tiny freckle on the notch of Shane's throat. It's a little geometrical, two slightly longer freckles meeting at an intersection, one almost imperceptibly longer than the other. An X marks the spot. Or...

"A cross," Ilya less than speaks, more than whispers against the skin of Shane's chest.

"Hmm?" Shane hums inquisitively, voice scratchy in the early morning as he pulls back a couple of centimeters to blink blearily down at Ilya, "Wha'ssthat?"

Ilya swipes a reverent finger over the freckle, trying to swallow down the aching lump in his throat. He tries to school his face into something aloof and uncaring but Shane knows him too well for it to work at this point. For better or for worse. Now, more than usual, which is really saying something, they feel made for each other. They feel inevitable. Shane feels heaven-sent in the most literal way possible.

Only for two people has Ilya been able to muster this softness— tenderness. With everyone else, he is to be titanium. Unbreakable, un-fucking-dented upon every moment of impact. But for his mama, he'd been able to shed the exoskeleton and expose the raw, fleshy parts of himself knowing it comes with unbearable hurt, knowing it'll be worth it anyways. And then she'd died and the exoskeleton had sealed itself shut. He never thought it could be cracked open ever again. But Shane had to be a goody-two-shoes and tell him to stop smoking. Just about the best reprimand Ilya's ever received in his life. There had been one person he trusted to hurt him and make it worth it, he'd lost her and then came skating in a second.

"There is— cross," Ilya mumbles, his thoughts getting lost in translation through the tremble of his bottom lip, "On your throat. Freckle."

Shane squints at him before tilting his head down and trying to get a look, his chin digging right into the spot where the freckle lives. The ridiculousness of the sight draws a wet bark of laughter out of Ilya. Damn, crying again. It's like all he does at the cottage is swim, fuck, grill, and cry. Well, as long as it's with Shane...

"Shut up," He groans, shoving at Ilya's shoulder. He doesn't lift his hand after the shove, though. Instead, he rubs circles into Ilya's skin with his thumb before pulling him into a tight hug, "What's wrong, huh?"

"Nothing, is just—" Ilya clenches his eyes shut and presses his nose into Shane's skin, inhaling the scent of him. The only thing that's *wrong* is that the two people he's held the most dearly will never get to meet and it's not like it's anything either of them can ever fix. He can't find the words for this kind of kismet, not in Russian and most definitely not in English. So, that's why he chooses to reiterate a statement he'd made back when this thing between them was still fresh and new and tentative and fragile, and he hopes it's enough, "She would have loved you," he whispers, and he means it like nothing else, "Like I love you."

Shane doesn't respond for a moment, his hand combing through and detangling Ilya's bedhead. When he speaks, the tone of his voice is a little stilted, Ilya loves it anyways, "She'd be proud of you," he drops a kiss onto Ilya's hairline, "Like I'm proud of you."

It's simultaneously the best and the worst thing Ilya could have possibly heard at that moment. He wishes he could distill those words into something tangible and keep it in a little jar, wear it around his neck, hear it clink against his mother's cross, his wedding ring. He wants these two magnificent presences in his life to intersect, wants it so badly it *aches* like a fresh bruise. He wants the stellar collision, fiery and bright and writhing and blinding, just like the way he loves. Because he has so much of it to give and sometimes, sometimes, he's afraid he'll scare Shane away with the sheer magnitude of it, the sheer brilliance. Not one being is built to withstand the kind of destructive love Ilya gives. That's what he thought until recently at least, until Shane took it all in stride and even matched his offerings with his own stellar brilliance.

For so long, Ilya had thought— maybe his mother couldn't handle his love, a supernova. That he'd played a part in killing her. Neither Grigori nor Alexei ever bothered to correct the assumption, in fact, they only ever played into the narrative. He doesn't anymore— doesn't think he killed his mama. Not very often, anyways. And Shane has developed a refined talent and a honed eye in spotting whenever Ilya falls into that particular pit of self-loathing and then grabbing him by the scuff of his neck to pull him out.

Shane pulls back a little after a while of holding Ilya, just enough to be able to speak clearly, "Feeling better?"

Ilya presses the pad of his thumb firmly against the freckle, "Was not feeling bad in the first place."

"You were crying," Shane passes his finger gently over the delicate skin under Ilya's eyes, his fingertips brushing past the tears still clinging to his bottom lashes, "You kind of still are."

"Good crying," Ilya turns his head to the side and presses a kiss into Shane's palm, "Not happy, but not bad either."

Shane, familiar with the complexities of Ilya's feelings when reminded of his mother from nights spent staring at the dwindling embers of a campfire and speaking without looking at each other, simply nods. But then, he hesitates, "Do you... want me to cover it up or something?" he offers earnestly, "Laser it off?"

Ilya almost physically recoils at the idea, he pinches the bare skin of Shane's hip, "*No*," he wrinkles his nose, "Keep it," he pauses, then adds just in case, "Or else."

"Alright," Shane smiles and then groans distractingly as he sits up, massaging away a crick in his neck.

Ilya slides his arms over Shane's abdomen and across his lower back, keeping him in bed, and whines like a child because he gets to be like that now, like a child, "Nooo, do not go yet."

"Ilya—"

"Is *summer*," he bites into the bone of Shane's hip, "Just one more hour."

"Ilya."

"Sweetheart." Ilya frowns, looking up at Shane pleadingly. He reaches up and massages a knuckle firmly but gently against his right collarbone, which he knows is still aching from a hairline fracture he'd gotten in his last game of the season. A bad check from some irrelevant defenseman from Buffalo. The doctor had told him to take it easy for the off-season. Ilya's pleading and the doctor's medical advice just might be enough to convince Shane to sleep in for once.

Maybe.

Shane falters and then shakes his head fondly, sliding back down to his rightful place beside Ilya in their bed. With their arms wrapped around each other, Ilya is eye-level with the freckle. Silently, he thanks Irina. Very often, it really does feel like she'd sent him Shane. Very often, it feels like he and someone so perfect for him couldn't possibly have found their way to each other with no guidance. *Shane* definitely thinks they did. Which in its own way is nice. To think that Shane genuinely does love him of his own volition. *Ilya* still can't fathom what his life could have looked like if Shane hadn't been a goody-two-shoes that day. Ilya believes in fate, and more than anything, he believes in his mama.

“Better?”

“Better.”

The second punch line, much like the first one, has been hiding in plain sight the entire time he and Shane have known each other.

One of the commentators is droning on and on about some rookie’s statistics, cleverly dodging any comparisons towards neither Ilya nor Shane because *their* rookie stats would put half of the current NHL players to shame, let alone a fresh new nineteen year-old playing for *Buffalo*. And also because there have been attempts to downplay their achievements after coming out. Key word: Attempts. The four Stanley cups between the two of them from when they were on opposing teams is hard enough to understate without the added spotlight of the fifth they’d just won *together*.

All in all, despite Crowell’s very obvious efforts that have Yuna Hollander seething enough that her husband knows to fill her wine glass to the brim whenever his name is even uttered in her direction, Ilya and Shane persist as the league’s top earners. Despite Crowell and his numerous vague threats that have Shane be so agitated after every conversation about him that he can’t go to sleep unless Ilya fucks him to the point of complete exhaustion, Ilya and Shane are still the league’s best players. And they don’t have a choice but to advertise them as such. And as husbands. Because they are. *Husbands*.

Ilya still wears the running shorts from the Reebok pride collection from last June. With the visible yet tasteful colorings of the bisexual flag at the waistband and hem. Shane, surprisingly, preferred this June’s collaboration with New Balance. He’d sported an almost boyish grin as he ran his fingertips across the rainbow accents all across the black surface of the shoe. He wears it everyday when he walks Anya and Ilya can barely restrain himself from snapping pictures every morning. He wasn’t strong enough to resist the first time Shane wore them, though. Actually, he snapped about... thirty five pictures that day. And four videos. Yuna Hollander had run both collaborations like the navy.

God, he has *pictures* now. The prospect still galls him at times. *Pictures. Videos*. That he can *keep*. For so long, he was stuck with that measly handful of selfies he’d taken at the Las Vegas award show. For so long, it was the only physical evidence he’d ever had of what he

and Shane were to each other, at least for a few nights every season. Now, he has albums upon albums, videos and pictures documenting their life together. *Shane* likes taking photos now too albeit not posting them quite as eagerly as his husband. Ilya doesn't have to post cryptic references to the love of his life on Instagram anymore, he can just post a snapshot of him frowning at the television because the new center from Toronto got too cocky and tried to take a risky shot that the opposing team's defence had no problem blocking. And he can caption it something cheesy or vaguely insulting and either way, Shane will glare playfully at him and threaten to get him in trouble all with a blush high on his cheeks and a smile radiant on his face.

Ilya is— he's allowed to love Shane out loud now. Because he does. He *loves* his husband. Adores him with every staccato beat of his heart so surely, so intently, that he's positive that if he were to be hooked up to a polygraph machine and be asked if he loves Shane Hollander, the shape of his pulse as he answers "yes" would coincide with the rhythm of Shane's bashful laughter anytime Ilya tells him that his freckles are stunning.

He's loved him so much, it had felt like agony. He loves him so much, it feels like slipping into a warm bath right after winning a Stanley Cup. And Ilya *would* know the feeling because he's done this twice now. Once, alone. The second time, with his husband lathering shampoo into his scalp after kissing him on the ice in front of a crowd of thousands. Certifiably, the second time around is much preferred. And that's not even counting the celebratory sex that had led up to the hair-washing.

"He's too eager to score," Shane leans forward, rhythmically tapping the remote against the back of his hand, "He's gonna fumble that pass."

Sure enough, the kid fumbles the pass and the opposing team gains possession of the puck, scoring not too long after.

Ilya huffs lightly, "I could have made that."

Shane nods absently, humming at Ilya's fingers scratching against his scalp, "*Seaver* could have made that."

"He is twelve."

“And better than Carson,” Shane frowns disappointedly, “He’s got your inclination to flashyness without half of the skill to back it up.”

“Inclination?”

“Like he’s— he’s cocky. He’s drawn to it, you know? Being flashy.”

“Aw,” Ilya coos mockingly once he comprehends the full sentence, “So you think I can back it up, Hollander?”

“You underestimate how much of a turn-off it would be if you couldn’t.”

Ilya thinks about the fire that had lit in his gut at the sight of Shane recreating The Rozanov flawlessly, the wink that followed. Thinks about how he wouldn’t have given Hollander or his stupidly distracting freckles nearly the same time of day if they hadn’t been two teenagers rising far above their peers, how this whole thing between them wouldn’t have started without that silent, mutual understanding of just being *better* and being hated for it by so many before even hitting legal age.

“I would still be hot.”

“Hmm,” Shane hums distractedly, “You’d be college athlete hot at most.”

Ilya jerks away from him, trying to keep his laughter at bay as he clutches at his own chest, a wounded expression on his face, “Ow, sweetheart.”

“You’ll be fine,” Shane leans forward and pecks him square on the lips, grinning, “Because you *can* back it up, and we *are* married.”

“With a dog.”

Shane nods resolutely, “With an Anya.”

“And a house.”

“And a cottage,” Shane adds.

“And a sex life,” Ilya cracks a crooked grin, “A *very good* sex life.”

Shane’s stern facade is undermined by the crimson flush spreading across his cheeks, still shy enough to be embarrassed about their debauchery after all these years, “That, too.”

Ilya hums in satisfaction, settling back against the cushions to continue watching the game. Beside him, Shane does the same.

They’re silent as they watch for another five minutes before simultaneously cringing when Carson’s attempted backhand shot misses the goal by a foot.

“Five dollars says one of his teammates drops their gloves by the end of the match.”

Ilya, never one to be upstaged, says, “*Ten* dollars says one of his teammates drops gloves by the end of second period.”

An hour and a half later, Ilya is ten whole dollars richer and cuddling in their bed, a mildly irritated husband. He chuckles when Shane bites his bicep in reproach when he tries to slide a frigid hand down the back of his shirt, “Don’t be an ass.”

“Ah, but then you would get bored,” Ilya splays a hand over Shane’s thigh, “And we cannot have that, Hollander.”

Shane wrinkles his nose but still presses a kiss onto the hinge of Ilya’s freshly shaven jaw.

“I want my reward.”

Shane’s gaze flicks to him, baffled but not uninterested. Almost never uninterested. And then he stares pointedly at Ilya’s gray sweats, freshly changed, a silent question. *Haven’t you already gotten it?*

Grinning, Ilya swipes his thumb across Shane’s face, over the freckles, “These, on your face” he sighs almost wistfully, “I have always wanted to count them.”

Like he always does with every mention of Ilya’s obsession with his freckles, Shane flushes. He’s stopped trying to hide, though. Ilya’s wrenched his hands away from his face, planted kisses on his cheeks too many times for him to keep hiding. For a moment, he hesitates, pursing his lips. But he shrugs it all away, always so eager to be whatever Ilya wants, and he says, “Go on, then,” he leans over Ilya’s torso and clicks their bedside lamp on, lays his head on his pillow, “Count.”

And Ilya, as helpless to Shane’s whims as ever, counts.

He starts at Shane’s hairline, his fingertips grazing lightly across the smattering of dark brown. Embarrassingly often, he loses count. When Shane’s eyelashes flutter as his eyes slip shut, Ilya loses count, when Shane’s breath stutters, Ilya loses count, when his nose twitches, Ilya loses count, when he tries to hold back a yawn, Ilya loses count.

Still, a man on a mission, a sailor on an odyssey, Ilya keeps counting. Stopping and re-starting so many times that Shane has fallen asleep by the time Ilya gets halfway down his face. Realization dawns on him as slow as a sunset, slides down his throat, thick and cloyingly sweet, syrupy slow. He hits forty at the tip of Shane’s nose, eighty-one at the very edge of his jaw.

Ilya blinks. Pauses. Counts again.

Eighty-one.

Counts again.

Still eighty-one.

The syrup sliding down his throat coagulates into a lump the size of a boulder until it aches. Until *everything* aches.

He's ten again, the hood of a car painted dull silver frigid under his thighs. Irina, there, in a way she never will be again. There's something he'd forgotten about that night, something insignificant until it wasn't because suddenly, all time spent with his mama had become a finite source, cut off the moment those men in uniforms had wheeled her cold, cold body out of her room. In the backseat, Ilya had fallen asleep to his mother humming a lullaby. Something childish, something that Ilya, feeling— or rather, *trying to be* more grown up, would have been embarrassed to have enjoyed, something Grigori would have scolded his mother for, a song that Ilya has, ultimately, forgotten. He has no recollection whatsoever of the lyrics, not the tune nor the rhythm of his mama's fingers tapping against the steering wheel as she drove. Just another thing of hers he'd lost. Just another thing of hers he'll never get back.

Recollection still eludes him but, oddly, the song is a half haunting, half comforting tune in the back of his head as he counts eighty-one freckles on Shane's face, once, twice, thrice, seven times, nine, twelve, fifteen. Eighty-one, over and over. That song, over and over. That night, over and over.

Eighty-one stars, eighty-one on his jersey, eighty-one freckles on the face of the love of his life. His mother's cross around his neck, his wedding ring sharing the same chain. All of it, a circle, a mobius strip, over and over, over and over.

For the first time in a while, Ilya doesn't simply brush his fingers against the bruise that is his mother, his beautiful, anguished, miserable, radiant, funny mother. He doesn't even simply push against it, like he has with Shane. No, he sets his fingernail over the skin painted in a myriad of colors, bruised dark red like the wine he'd seen her drink so many nights, and then he digs, pushes, pushes until he bleeds. It'll help, he discovers, as soon as he breaks skin. Incision and drainage.

There weren't only eighty-one stars in that night sky. There were far, far more, an endless sea of blinking light, an infinite universe of pasts, an ever-growing graveyard to all those spitting balls of fire that had, at some point, died like everything magnificent. Eighty-one was simply where he'd stopped once Irina had beckoned him to the car.

It's funny, though. He can almost see Irina's brand of humor slip through the cracks, like sunlight peeking past the gaps in their blackout curtains. He can almost hear her laugh. Gone as she is, she lingers and clings to him like cigarette smoke.

However heavy everything had felt, however little she'd wanted to exist, she had loved Ilya with the ferocity of all the stars in the universe. And thus, it really is no wonder she'd burned out eventually. Leaving Ilya cold and dark and all alone, no gravity left to keep his solar system together. But she'd loved him *so much* that it really isn't difficult for Ilya to imagine that she'd sent him the boy with just as many freckles as there were stars in her and Ilya's night sky.

Is really it so far-fetched to imagine Irina showing her son the stars outside of Moscow again?

Ilya had wanted roots untouched and untainted by Grigori and Alexei and unknowingly, he'd grown them in a couple dozen hotel rooms, a so-called "investment building" in Montreal, a lake-side cottage in Ottawa, wrapped around the beating heart of a boy, later a man, with stars outside of Moscow all over his face, eighty-one of them, a cross-shaped freckle on the notch of his throat.

English is a stupid language. Why would the funniest part of a joke be called a punchline? Why gift-wrap something that's supposed to bring laughter with a word that connotes pain, violence? Ilya's never understood this English turn of phrase.

Now, with Irina's squeaky laughter ringing in his ears like tinnitus, a sound that can only be heard in the very absence of sound itself, he gets it. He gets it like a punch to the gut, breathless from both the bruising pain and the laughter bubbling in his throat.

God, what a fucking joke.

If Shane is written into every beat of his heart, Irina lingers in the silence between.

Incision and drainage.

He feels lighter, for some reason. It's a silly concept, a childish concept, to believe that your dead mother has sent you your soulmate just because he has a freckle mirroring her old necklace on his throat, and because the number of freckles on his face coincides with the number of stars you'd stopped counting at before your mama had told you to get back in the car so she can drive you back to your shitty brother and even shittier father that you both, somehow, some way, still found yourselves loving. It's a silly concept, yes, but preordained by the powers that be or not, Shane is still so indubitably perfect for him that Ilya still feels like he's in a desert, running after a mirage in the horizon at times.

But he's real and solid and vowed to Ilya, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, til' death do them part.

And so, Ilya feels all the lighter for it.

He considers waking Shane up, teasing him about having had Ilya's jersey number on his face for all these years without either of them knowing. He even considers fucking him about it. It would be fun. Hot. He likes it, having his number on Shane's face. There's the loon tattooed in midnight black on his own skin and his number smattered like paint on Shane's face. They match now, marks, claims. It makes the blood in Ilya's veins flow like lava, lights him up from the inside out.

But he's always been hard pressed to wake Shane up like this. Perhaps it's a tick borne from years of sneaking away and never getting to see each other asleep before the urgency and risk of getting caught had crept up on them. It's not even a novel sight anymore, Shane falls

asleep around him all the time now, has been falling asleep around him for years, even before they'd gotten married. Still though, Ilya can't help but let him sleep. When you've been deprived of something for long enough, when you *want* so badly it hurts without even knowing it, you get that first hit and then hesitate. If you decide to take that second hit, you'll never want to stop. An addiction.

Ilya knows addiction, he's got a couple of vices himself. There's alcohol, more specifically good, strong vodka, there's cigarettes.

There's Shane Hollander.

And so, in lieu of propositioning his husband for another round of sex, Ilya does something just as satisfying. He burrows himself under their comforter, wraps his arms around his biggest vice, and lets Shane's thudding heartbeat lull him to sleep.

When Ilya opens his eyes, cold dread slips through the dark corners of his consciousness. Nausea permeates his body. He's at the cottage again, the edges of his vision swimming, a telltale sign of the dream. In front of him swings the hammock, his mama's hand slung to the side casually, not quite the limp way Ilya remembers, not quite the limp way her hand is sure to hang soon, just like every other dream.

Through the window is Shane. Shane who will never meet Ilya's mama even in his dreams. Even knowing that, even remembering all the other dreams that had ended in futility, Ilya waves him over, tries again. He expects Shane's look of confusion, the gesturing and the meandering way he steps into the backyard.

But no. No, he... he points at himself once, shrugs, smiling as he half runs, half jogs towards Ilya and Irina.

In a panic, Ilya whips his head towards his mother. Shane may be here sooner than is typically scheduled but that doesn't mean he'll get to meet Irina. Maybe, even though Shane had rushed to Ilya's side, maybe Irina had gone cold anyways while Ilya wasn't looking. But she's still there, bright and alive, dropping a foot to the ground to swing the hammock back and forth, back and forth, laughing as Shane almost trips on a stray stone on his way to the pair. That same squeaky laugh.

Shane comes up behind him as he stares at his mother, his world tilted. He wants to introduce Shane to her, wants it so badly, his bones feel heavy with it, the need gnaws through that yawning hole in him, but he can't look away from her. He's scared. He's *so* scared she'll be gone again when he looks back. Or, like in the most nightmarish variations of this dream, *Shane* will be slumped on the ground, unconscious when Ilya turns to look at him.

But— he's burning alive. Burning up until there's nothing left like one of the eighty-on stars he'd counted that night.

Irina's eyes brighten as she sets her gaze upon Shane, "*Oh,*" she exclaims softly, in Russian, "*Is this your boy?*" she giggles, "*My boy's boy.*"

Swallowing harshly, Ilya gathers all his resolve and responds, "*Yes,*" without looking, he grabs Shane by the arm and pulls him in front of himself, thankfully still conscious, "*I love him,*" he pauses, "*I think you will, too.*"

"Uh—" Shane's eyes dart back to him and Ilya nods encouragingly. He likes to tease his husband about learning Russian but, really, anything a son of Yuna Hollander puts his mind to, he will inevitably excel at, "*Hello, I'm Ilya's...*" Shane squeezes his hand, silently asking for permission. Ilya squeezes back. Once. "*I'm his husband,*" And then, Shane smiles, that private quirk of his lip, all genuine and earnest and Ilya can see his mother add him to her list of sons, loving him just like Ilya does, just like Ilya always knew she would, "*It's nice to meet you.*"

"*You too,*" her eyes twinkle, "*You speak very good Russian.*"

Shane grins and elbows Ilya in the ribs, "*I had the best teacher.*"

She laughs, "*I'm sure you did.*"

They're meeting. Holy shit, they're fucking *meeting*. It's— the stars. They're colliding. It's the supernova. It's the only person in the family who he could have told about liking boys

too, the only one who would have loved him anyway. It's her and this miraculous second person that he's managed to find somehow, maybe with her help, another person who'll love him through anything, who saw him, introduced Ilya to his family and included him thereafter.

Faintly, he registers the edges of the dream fading further, it smarts like getting shoved into the boards at first but it fades into more of a dull sort of pain. The ache Shane sometimes gets in his long-healed collarbone that can uncannily predict a rainy day before the clouds even start to darken.

He's been thinking so deeply that he's tuned out most of the conversation around him.

"...And I'm really proud of him," Shane grins.

Irina turns her affectionate gaze to her son, the sky above them flickers into the one she'd taken him to when he was ten. That sky outside of Moscow, *"I am, too."*

Now, much like his usual dreams, Ilya snaps into awareness with a strangled gasp, tears pricking at his eyes along with the silver moonlight peeking through their curtains, painting white slivers across their furniture. He blinks up at the dark ceiling, trying to clear the blurriness out of his vision once. Twice.

He's in the middle of digging the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees fireworks when Shane jerks awake beside him, groaning. Immediately, Ilya turns his attention to him, "Good morning, moya lyubov," he says, smacking a kiss onto each of his husband's cheeks.

Shane's attempts in pushing his face away only end in his cheeks being cradled between two warm palms. His eyebrows furrow as he stares intently at Ilya's wide grin, abnormally cheerful this late in the night, even for *him*, "Had the weirdest dream."

Ilya's smile falters just slightly at the edges, "Yes?"

“There was this lady on our hammock— kind of old, I just—” Shane purses his lips, averts his eyes for a moment and Ilya just feels lightheaded now, “I guess, I thought... she smiled like you.”

Ilya doesn't speak for a moment, lets his mother live in the silence between them, like the ringing in his ears.

It's unlikely Shane remembers anything from whatever his dream was. Still, Ilya can't help but ask, “Did you like her?”

Shane looks at him for a moment, utterly baffled before understanding creeps across his face, “Yeah,” he murmurs, pulling Ilya close and pressing a kiss against his forehead, “She's funny as fuck.”

Ilya can't help the wet snort that escapes his mouth as he stares past Shane's shoulder, at the night sky of their cottage. He thinks of the dream, of the way his mama had seemed to be staring straight at the sun as she swung back and forth on the hammock. But perhaps they hadn't been looking at the same sky then, maybe she'd been looking at a different one from two decades ago, a lifetime ago. Either way, Ilya can only be incandescently happy.

Irina had gotten to meet his stars outside of Moscow after all.

End Notes

yeah i sliced my thumb open while cutting cheese and also i hit my head on a corner by my bed so many times i'm lowkey genuinely afraid there's a dent in my skull now but atleast i didn't find out about any half siblings this time! i think the ao3 curse is finally setting me free guys

Here's [my twt](#) again :]

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