be neighborly!

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be neighborly!

by steelknuckles

Summary

Ilya's new neighbor is annoying. Sucks that he's ridiculously handsome, and good at cooking, and Ilya might be falling in love with him.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Ilya would have never heard the door if it wasn't for the shitty electricity cutting out before coming back on again, the way it has every other day since he moved in this stupid fucking building.

The music is just some trance thing with beats that aren't all that creative, but he's pretty sure even this DJ's not so horrible that he'd splice in a full second of silence in the set. It's through that quiet that he hears the banging, so loud it's like someone's trying to break the whole damn door down.

By the time he gets to the front the music has resumed like nothing happened. The writhing mass of bodies in his living room don't seem to have noticed. They're either too fucking drunk, or too fucking miserable to care, or both.

He wrestles for a moment with the latch on the door – rosewood, antique, way too fucking expensive for something so hard to figure out, what the fuck – but it eventually swings open to reveal a man.

A good-looking man. With a horrible haircut. A good-looking man with a horrible haircut and a frown on his face so deep that it might become permanent if he's not careful. His fist is raised, midway to another fit of banging. As soon as he sees Ilya he returns his hand to his side, standing like he's at parade rest.

"What?" Ilya asks and, *goddamn* he really needs to start working on his manners in English. To be fair, people don't normally knock and then just *stand there* without saying anything.

"You're being way too loud," the man finally shouts to be heard over the noise, but now the only thing Ilya can notice is that he's in gym clothes. At two in the morning.

"Are you going to the gym?" Ilya blurts out, because this is a very weird sight. A very, very weird sight.

"The gym?"

"Yes. The gym. Are going to the gym?"

"No!" The man sputters. "I'm trying to go to sleep, and you and your friends are being way too loud!"

"If you're trying to go to sleep then why are you in gym clothes?"

"I'm not –" He tugs on his shirt, looks, then scowls. "I sleep in this!"

"You sleep in Reebok gear?" Ilya can feel the muscles contorting his face starting to cramp up. Canadians are so fucking weird.

"Why do you care what I sleep in?"

"No idea," he replies honestly. Then, because he's an asshole: "Why can't you sleep?"

Gym-man's face twists into half-grimace, half-bewilderment. "I live above you, and this little party you're throwing is out of control."

"It's a good party, yes?" Ilya grins, mirth stretching his cheeks as he pulls his door open even wider for him to look. The way Svetlana is moving on the dancefloor is almost *godlike*. Anyone would be lucky to have her.

But the other man doesn't even bat an eye as he clenches his fists at his sides. "I don't give a *shit* whether it's a good party or not. It's too late and I need to sleep."

"If you live above me, why didn't you come say hi when I moved in? Like a good neighbor?"

"If you're a new neighbor it should probably be *you* saying hi to me."

"Oh," Ilya ponders it seriously for a moment. "Well, but I'm Russian. We don't do that sort of thing."

"Yeah?" The number of faces this guy can pull is cracking Ilya up. "Do all Russians throw parties until two in the morning without care for who might be living above them?"

"...*Yes*," he says, and it's in the language of the motherland. Just to, you know, really drive the point home.

His neighbor rolls his eyes and starts to walk away.

The hallway is long. Long enough for Ilya to appreciate the sight of him stomping away. Long enough for Ilya to have a think. Long enough for Ilya to shout after him: "Fine, I'll chase them out soon. My name is Ilya, by the way."

"Shane," he replies, after an extended pause. The way his voice travels – bouncing off the marble walls and carpeted floors – makes the name sound dangerous but lonely at the same time. Like the way the tail of a rattlesnake sounds.

"Nice to meet you, Shane," Ilya calls after him. "Good night!"

He does not say good night back. Rude. Maybe he'll ask the DJ to turn it up just a little bit.

Like, what is the thing that the Americans say? One for the road?

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Shane must be friendless. Maybe even an orphan. Like him.

Because Ilya has been in this building for almost three weeks and he's never heard another set of footsteps in Shane's apartment. No laughter, no dragging furniture around, and *definitely* no parties. Even if he stays really quiet and focuses really hard, the most he can hear is Shane pattering about upstairs on the weekends – from the kitchen, to his living room, then to the kitchen again, before retreating to his bedroom.

He leaves the house very early in the morning on the weekdays and comes home at a reasonable hour. Sometime around six or seven in the evening.

It isn't beyond Ilya to camp out at the back of their building in hopes of bumping into him; the problem is that the back of their building is dark and kind of scary. Also, there are raccoons that think it's funny to scare the shit out of him as soon as he gets too near to the dumpsters.

But as the days pass he finds himself forgetting little details about Shane. Like, he was so sure that he had freckles, but now he's not sure how many there were or how they look like. He jumps back and forth between thinking that they were faint but dense, and thinking that they were dark but rare. And his hair – was it black like a raven is black? Or brown like the tail end of a sunset? Or maybe a bit of both? The hallway lights did sort of make his stupid hair look fluorescent at the ends, so maybe it's another colour altogether.

The more he thinks about Shane, the more Shane feels like both an abstract idea and someone he's known for an entire lifetime. His chest throbs with memories he cannot possibly have about him, and Ilya doesn't quite know what to do with this annoying development.

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The knock on his door comes at two in the afternoon, this time.

"Hi," Shane says as soon as the door opens, as if he'd rehearsed the timing. He's holding a plate of burgers and dressed, again, in gym clothes. Ilya wishes he remembered that disturbing detail about him before he got himself all twisted up about a boring neighbor with a good face and a better ass.

"Hello," Ilya says, the half-bitten peach in his hand dripping nectar down his wrist. He licks at it before it can get too far, and doesn't miss the look of horror that flashes across Shane's face. "Welcome back!"

"Would you, um." Shane clears his throat and shifts on his feet, which are clad in running shoes. "Have you eaten lunch? Would you like some burgers?"

"Did you have party or something?"

Shane frowns, and Ilya fights an unreasonable urge to drag a thumb across the divot between his eyebrows. His freckles are tan and dense. "No. I just made too many. The recipe was for eight but it's only me, so."

"Recipe?" Ilya asks, throwing the peach pit into the garbage can with an accuracy that astounds even himself. He looks back at Shane, hoping for a similar shock factor, but the guy's face is unimpressed and blank.

"Not a cool shot?"

Shane shrugs. "Sure."

“You’re boring.” Ilya rolls his eyes and huffs. “You can cut the recipe in half, you know? Why you make eight instead of four? Or two? You can’t do math?”

Shane blinks, then scowls. “You’re such an asshole. Do you want the burgers or not?”

Ilya smiles and holds out his hands for the plate. When Shane passes it over, Ilya can feel the heat from his fingers lingering on the bottom of the porcelain.

“What are you doing later? In the afternoon?” Ilya asks, lifting up one of the buns with his fingers. Lettuce and pickles. Yummy.

Shane takes so long to respond that Ilya looks up, thinking that maybe he’d phrased it wrongly. But Shane doesn’t look confused, just shocked. “Why?”

“We can… What you say, *chill*. If you're not doing anything.” He’s trying to pick up more English slang now that he knows he’s going to be staying for a while. For a long time he had been undecided on whether he should stay in Canada, but he’s starting to accept that maybe his lot in life is to feel homesick no matter where he in the world he is, so might as well stick around for a bit and see what this place has to offer. They have good mountains. Good for snowboarding. And Shane is a welcome distraction from a years’ worth of seething and weeping.

It’s been almost *fun*, wondering about him, actually. A lot of jerking off also. Plus, Russia sucks for people like him – people who like boys and girls – so maybe while he’s in Canada he can fool around for a bit – hopefully with someone as close as one floor down – and it won’t be that big of a deal.

“Are you sure?” Shane asks, peeking over Ilya’s shoulder. It’s cute and kind of sad, the way he almost loses his balance and has to catch the tips of his fingers against the wall to stop himself from falling. “I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s just me. And I promise I’m not a murderer." Ilya smiles widely. "From Russia, but never killed anyone."

Shane sticks up a finger in the air. “See, that didn’t even occur to me but now I’m thinking about it.”

“Then don’t think about it. Because I’m not a murderer. I already said.” Ilya swings the door open and starts walking, listening to see if Shane follows. Which he does, but not after asking whether he should take his shoes off and snicking the door closed behind him, carefully.

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Saturday lunches become a thing. Ilya makes a zharkoye, once, and tuna melts, twice, but it’s usually Shane who cooks.

Ilya has never had a routine like this. He’s barely had homecooked food in his life, and his friends aren't the sitting-around-a-table kind. But despite himself, Ilya finds that he likes this. He finds himself living for Saturday afternoons, like there’s something in his core that keeps

ushering him impossibly close to Shane. This stilted, sweet, blushing idiot who's the exact opposite of what he's looking for but somehow the only thing he can think of wanting.

He starts to learn that the guy's not bad at math or unable to halve recipes. He's just really… precise. It's in the way that he plates food, and can't stop correcting Ilya's jokes with "*more accurate information*", and tries to sit on the same part of the couch whenever they waste the afternoon away on the Xbox. It's in the way that Shane couldn't care less about many things, but once he finds an interest it's all-consuming, gobbling him up for regurgitation at every possible chance.

Shane has other strange habits, too. There's a specific way in which he moves his wrists from time to time – almost like he's shaking it out – except he does it even when he hasn't been holding anything heavy. It's nothing like Ilya has ever seen before, but it's just another piece of the puzzle that is Shane. And Ilya is really starting to like putting those pieces together.

He likes the way Shane traces the edge of his plate with an index finger while they're chatting at the dining table. He likes the way his laugh always starts from the right side of his mouth before spreading across his entire face, deep dimples and all. He likes the way Shane's entire body jerks whenever he's annoyed, or the way he looks like a cartoon puppy when he's angry. He's even starting to like that Shane wears gym clothes all the time. They look soft, and they always smell freshly laundered.

Ilya thinks he knows how it'll happen.

It'll happen when they're gaming, maybe. Or watching hockey. Or a movie, with Shane being noisy and asking his million unnecessary questions.

Their feet would accidentally touch. A casual bump. And then Ilya would slide his foot over Shane's ankle, then calf, then thigh. They'd turn to each other and just stare, for a while. Watching the light of the TV change colors over their faces. A laugh track will play or an advertisement will start, and Shane would shift a little closer, couch squeaking under the change in weight. He'd hesitantly link their pinkies together; maybe even hold hands. His eyes would be wide, and gorgeous, and even though his cheeks would be dark pink with embarrassment, his lips would be parted, panting softly. Wanting.

He'd ask: "*Are you okay?*" Because he's stupid and annoying like that.

But then Ilya would reply: "*Perfect.*" And smile that cocky smile of his that never fails to get him what he wants, especially with the ladies. He'd lean in, maybe, if it was alright. Put a hand on his knee.

Shane would close his eyes way too early, but that wouldn't matter. Ilya would reach out to cradle his face, rub a thumb against the shell of his ear. He'd kiss him, the way he's been dreaming about: softly, slowly, before increasing in urgency. Shane would open his mouth to let him in and Ilya would lick at his tongue, trying to get a taste of him, trying to take whatever he wants. Then he'd press kisses along Shane's jaw, taking his time at the junction between his neck and shoulder, and Shane would moan into his hair, reaching up to grab desperately at the curls. Ilya would let him, focusing his attention on licking and biting at the edges of the scar on the back of Shane's bicep.

But for now, his neighbor is wiping at his cheeks self-consciously and then looking down at his lap before looking back up again. “Is there something on my face? Why’re you staring at me?”

Ilya smiles wryly and throws a pillow at his head.

Fucking idiot. Ilya should kick him out.

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The absolute best is when Shane cooks Japanese and comes down with a steaming container of soup, or a pot of rice with meat. Because Shane is a genius at cooking Japanese, and because he always ends up talking about Yuna on those days.

Yuna sounds nice. Mama would have liked Yuna.

Maybe.

Ilya’s not really sure, because he’s only ever known her as a mother and never as an adult. She never got to grow old with him in that way.

So he guesses he’ll never know whether mama would have hung out with Yuna, sometimes. But he knows that mama would definitely have loved Shane. Because mama would have loved any boy who loves their own mother so much.

Listening to Shane talk about his family is like suddenly receiving rain after years of drought. On some days, the water threatens to drown him. On other days, he lifts his head to the sky and thanks it for its providence. It saves and kills him at the same time, but he remembers Svetlana telling him once that healing does often feel like breaking.

Except, when he wakes up from a particularly bad nightmare one night, the breaking just feels like breaking. It doesn’t seem like anything meaningful or anything other than shards of grief digging so deep into his lungs that it feels like he’s having a heart attack.

Not that he knows what a heart attack would feel like, of course.

He forces himself out of bed and into the balcony, where he lights a cigarette with a shaky flame. It tastes like shit since this is an old pack, and the tobacco is all loosened with time and the moist Canadian air. The filter is also all squished from the time when Svetlana had accidentally sat on them.

Bad cigarettes normally catapult him into a shit mood, but he looks up and the stars are so brilliant tonight that it hardly matters. They’re so bright and full that it looks like a photo. Or maybe *he’s* the subject and the sky is the dust-speckled lens of the universe.

The night that his mama died was almost just like this: him as a child looking up at the moon and wondering how things could be so beautiful when he felt so ugly inside. There’s probably a metaphor in this whole thing – that Ilya has always lived in the night of her death, that he’s never figured out how to wake up from that horrible nightmare of finding her, or something like that. Cruel world.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and the force of it against his thigh is so unexpected that he almost leaps off his feet.

It's a text from Shane, and it reads: *Smoking is bad for you.*

Ilya huffs, and his breath makes a cloud of condensation in the air. He doesn't quite know how to respond so he doesn't, but his phone is only halfway to his pocket when another text comes in.

Coming down.

Shane has a spare key from when Ilya had to be away for a few days, but he'd never returned it despite Ilya asking multiple times. Since then he's used it whenever he wants, the most memorable one being the time he burst into the apartment, taking a long, awkward moment to stare at Ilya's half-naked and dripping wet form, before scuttering into the living room and turning on the hockey channel. They'd spent the entire afternoon watching endless replays of Scott Hunter kissing his partner on national television, jaws dropped and in complete silence.

So Ilya doesn't bother moving from his spot on the balcony to let Shane in tonight. He chooses to remain and nurse his cigarette down to the filter.

In a few minutes, the front door opens then shuts in that gentle way that is so familiar by now. Before he knows it, there's suddenly a heavy throw around his shoulders.

"What are you doing out here without a jacket? It's cold as balls." Shane grabs the edge of the throw that's hanging down his side and threads it through his arms so he's wrapped up like a sushi; elbows tucked close against his ribs. "You're going to freeze to death."

"I wouldn't. I'm from Russia." Ilya sighs dramatically. "And if I did, who would eat your eight ridiculous burgers with you?"

"Yup. The burgers are definitely my biggest concern." Shane zips his own jacket all the way to the top and huddles his face into it. His breath comes back up through the vent and Ilya imagines each puff condensing on the tips of his eyelashes.

They don't say anything. Not even when Ilya lights up a second stick. Not even when he sucks in deeper and deeper breaths, holding all that toxic shit in his lungs before expelling it in slower and slower exhales. His heart is still racing, but Shane being next to him is helping. If there's anyone in the world that he would want here, it would be him.

When he makes a move to pull out a third stick, Shane reaches over and grabs ahold of his hand. It's so quick that Ilya doesn't even have time to move away, and goosebumps trickle down his back at the feeling of skin on skin.

"Smoking is bad for you," Shane repeats.

Wow, I didn't know that is on the tip of his tongue but he stops short because there's something wrong. There's something wrong beyond the fact that they're standing barefoot on

a freezing balcony in the dead of the night. He can see it in the way that Shane is holding himself: like his knees are about to buckle as he stands across from him.

And that strength beneath his grip – the way he's digging into Ilya's hand – is more than just annoyance at the smoking. It's… It's something closer to desperation.

Ilya knows that old emotion like a second skin.

So he reaches out and brushes a thumb against those unbelievable freckles. His skin is tight with the cold wind and his nose is red and there's a look on his face that Ilya has never seen before. Ilya knows that it's new because this is the first expression of Shane's that he hates.

The words come out before his brain even catches up: "Why do you look sad?"

As soon as they do, Ilya feels his heart shattering, like he's stepped on ice that hasn't frozen over thick enough and the whole thing has gone out from underneath his feet.

Shane fusses his bottom lip between his teeth, then bites at the bump that it leaves for a second or two before answering. Ilya can hear some stupid animal out in the wilderness making a noise through a gust of wind – it's probably that family of raccoons in the garbage.

"I'm sad because you look sad. You look… You look really sad."

Oh.

Ilya reaches up to rub at his own face, as if he'd be able to *feel* the expression on his skin. But of course, his hand comes away clean.

"Do I?" He tries to tug his other hand out of Shane's grasp, but the other man holds on even tighter. Stubborn bastard. "I'm fine. Just couldn't sleep, you know? Cold."

Shane looks down at the ground. "I know I'm not… the best. With people." Wiggles his toes in his socked feet. "But you never… Um, you never talk about yourself."

Ilya waits for him to say something further, but that's it. Frustratingly. He pinches at the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "What do you… I don't think I'm understanding what you mean."

Shane looks up so abruptly and with such determined intensity that his eyes are almost glistening. "Maybe I'm asking the wrong questions, but you never talk about yourself when we hang out. And I think… I want to know you. And I think you want to know me, too. I want to be known. So I talk. I tell you about things I've never told anyone. But you… I don't know you. I don't know how you feel about me, or how you are, or *who* you are."

"You... know I'm from Moscow," Ilya says carefully, because he has no idea what is happening. "And you know what I do for work."

Shane lets go of him, and turns to grab at the metal railing of the balcony. His grip is so tight that the metal squeaks beneath his hands. "That's what I mean! That's *all* I know about you. And that's not… Then I come over, and you look so *sad*, and I don't know what to do." His

fists clench closed on the railing so now his palms must be full of frost. “I don’t know what to do. I… I don’t know anything at all.”

“I’m not… *sad*.” Ilya wants to laugh but it comes out like a grimace instead, confusion clouding his vision on this entire exchange. “Stop being so weird.”

Shane whirls around, puffing his chest out. “Then why are you smoking at this fucking hour?”

Anger sparks then burns through his whole body. In a fraction of a second his body is alight with a fire so hot that it’s making him sweat under the throw. “I’m just smoking! Why do you even care? You’re not my–”

He hasn’t called out for his mom since she died, and this is… He’s not going to start now. Not here, and definitely not now. Not when there’s a slight chance he might start crying if he did.

“What?” Shane crosses his arms, but it doesn’t make him look scarier. It makes him look smaller. “I’m not your what? I’m not your friend? I’m just a neighbor?”

Ilya is suddenly so exhausted, nicotine trudging sluggishly through his charred veins. And even though he’s always wanted to stay gentle and kind, his mama had left a hole in him when she decided to do what she did. Which wasn’t her fault – she was in so much fucking pain and out of options – but then there was nothing left to fill that hole after she was gone. Nothing but papa, and Alexei, and their anger. Their resentment for a woman who was too great for this world. Their resentment for a son who had more options than they’ve ever had.

Despite it all, Ilya has tried not to become hateful. He has tried his best to go against everything he’s ever known. But it just hasn’t worked. It hasn’t worked because here he is, saying: “*Yeah. You’re not a friend. You’re just a neighbor*”, to the most beautiful man he’s ever met.

Here he is, watching wordlessly in the cold as that man grinds his teeth – once, twice, his jaw tensing and relaxing like whole continental plates shifting. He’s watching wordlessly as something behind that man’s eyes locks down tight, a mask going up on his face that looks nothing like him. A mask that looks only like a cheap, ugly imitation of him. Ilya hasn’t seen it since that first night, with that stupid party that he shouldn’t have thrown, because then Shane wouldn’t have had to meet him.

Here he is, watching as Shane walks away, his heart drowning but his tongue frozen rock solid in his mouth. The door slams behind him, and there’s nothing left for Ilya to do but to pull the throw around his shoulders even tighter, begging for even a scrap of warmth.

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He spends the next few hours thinking, curled up loosely on the couch. His eyes are open but unseeing, heart thudding steadily in his chest like someone pounding relentlessly against a locked door.

He wonders why his whole body hurts this much.

He wonders if he loves Shane.

He wonders if Shane loves him.

He wonders whether he even knows what love is.

He wonders if this is love.

Because love was always so heavy for him. Love was always his jailer. It was something that he had to find, too – searching in rinks, and hallowed hallways, and digging through the mud, crawling on his knees – even though he'd known it was a hopeless endeavor. Loving his mama through her sadness was difficult, and his papa had been confused for a long time, and Alexei… he'd lost Alexei the moment his brother had chosen money over their grieving family. Probably even before that.

But Shane.

Shane is right here. On Saturdays for lunches, and leaving stupid fucking notes about books or whatever in his mailbox over the past month, and making him feel lighter than he's ever felt in his life. Making him feel like he could fly.

The problem is – if he loves Shane, and Shane loves him, then that means that Ilya has always had the capacity to love and be loved. He just never managed to muster it for his family. But how could that be, when he'd tried so hard for so long?

He wonders, pathetically, if the big bang was painful. If creating something out of nothing must always feel this terrible.

Before he knows it the sun is up, rays pressing so insistently on his windows that he has to get up to draw the blinds. And once he's up he doesn't feel like going back to wallowing, so he starts his day. He can hear Shane above him, and wonders what he's doing.

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Next Saturday, Ilya waits patiently until one in the afternoon before heading up.

Shane's doorbell is some creepy chiming melody, and Ilya has to stop himself from pulling a face of distaste as he stands there, waiting for it to end.

"I know you're in there," he shouts, when the door doesn't open.

There's no response, so he rings the doorbell again and waits another torturous 20 seconds for it to end. Then again, and again, and again.

"What do you want?" Shane *finally* yells from inside the apartment, and he sounds so angry that Ilya finds himself wanting to laugh. He hadn't even thought that Shane would have the capacity to be this furious.

“You’re late for lunch.” Ilya gets on his knees after a while then lowers himself to the floor, face down. It’s a little gross but he turns his face and pillows his cheek on his hands so that he can speak through the gap between carpet and door. “Did you cook? I’m hungry.”

He sees the shadows of Shane walking towards him then stopping short, but he’s close enough now that Ilya can see that he’s wearing his Canada Dry socks. The hideous ones that came free with a six-pack.

Shane has five of them. He’d stupidly accepted each one with each purchase, complaining about how he doesn’t need this many socks, until Ilya informed him that he could simply refuse when they offered at the store.

“Hello?” He tries again. “Shane. I am *extremely* hungry. I am *starving*.”

The door swings open. “You said – What the fuck are you doing on the floor?”

“Looking at your very ugly socks,” Ilya says, pushing himself up and dusting off the front of his shirt.

Shane peels his socks off with a growl and throws them behind him without looking. “Why would you want to have lunch with someone who isn’t even your friend?”

Ilya had been nervous, coming up. Maybe even fearful. But petty Shane is a Shane he’s seen often. A petty Shane is a Shane he can handle.

“You look like shit,” Ilya says, and it’s not even false. There are bags under his eyes, though Ilya’s sure there are bags under his, too.

“Gee, thanks a lot.” Shane nods sarcastically, a little bobbing of the head that’s slow and calculated, as if he’s a panther about to pounce. It’s cute.

“I’m sorry.”

Shane blinks at him, hand paused midway to the door handle, and the changing of emotions on his face happens almost at half-speed. It reminds Ilya of the last few seconds of a match, where everything is happening in slow-motion and everything is blurred around the edges, the only thing he can hear between his ears is breath ripping itself from his lungs.

Shane’s eyes narrow. “What are you sorry for?”

“We *are* friends,” Ilya says, with a finality. “That day was a miscommunication. Is that the correct word?”

A frustrated grumble is followed by a frustrated hand raking through thick black hair. “*Is* that the correct word? All I know is that I go down, wanting to see if you’re okay, but you tell me I’m weird and that we’re not friends.”

“The second part is wrong. We are friends. But the first part is correct. You are weird.”

Shane flinches and steps back, but his eyes are wistful like he hasn't even realized he'd done it. His shoulders are back up to his ears, trap muscles forming a straight line underneath his tank top. Ilya knows they're supposed to be fighting at the moment, but he takes a second – just a second – to appreciate his biceps, bare and freckled and rippling with strength.

Then he drags his eyes back up to Shane's face. It's filled with so much shame that any lingering fun he'd been having with this situation drains out of the room.

"But I like that you're weird," Ilya says, and his throat is so tight that the words come out in a whisper. "I like you."

"What?" Shane looks up, now. His eyes are wide in a way that makes him look like a doe. His pupils are ablaze like the cherry-red of a cigarette butt.

"I like you," Ilya says again, louder this time, trying his best to relay his earnestness. "I know I'm an asshole. And I know I don't talk about anything… real. But I want to be known by you, as you say. I probably just… need some time."

Shane is silent for so long that Ilya thinks that he's really fucked this up. But he hasn't looked away, and they're both competitive, so they're just locked in a weird staring match until Shane says, slowly: "Because you're Russian?"

The unexpected joke knocks a laugh out of him, and he braces his hands on his knees as he nods, a film of unbidden tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. He hadn't realised he'd been holding his breath until this very moment. "Yes, Shane, because I'm Russian."

He's about to straighten up when an outstretched hand enters his vision. They caress over his forehead and slide into his hair, nimble fingers tucking his curls behind his left ear. The hairs don't stay there for long, because he's still folded over, but then Shane is suddenly pressed up against him, one hand wrapping around his hip and the other wriggling into the back of Ilya's shirt collar to cup at his nape. His palms are so warm – Ilya had never known anyone could run this hot.

There's a lurch in his stomach so strong that it moves him to reach out, his own hands coming up automatically to circle Shane's waist, interlocking behind the small of his back.

The adrenaline racing through his body feels like electricity, leaving him jittery and wanting to flee. But Shane is here, breathing and tilting his head upwards so they can lean their foreheads together.

They're so close that Ilya can see his reflection in his pupils. The edges of the brown are so light and clean that they look like ginger ale.

Ilya wants to cry.

Because the sun is shining outside and Shane has big windows and he's tugging him into the apartment so that they can both be in the light.

Ilya squints at the change – he has to – but doesn't let go of his grip. "This means you like me too, yes?"

Shane laughs, so buoyant and resonant and beautiful. "Yeah." His hand trails up underneath Ilya's shirt, and he leans forward to kiss him. "Yeah, yeah. This means I like you too."

The big bang happens, and the universe grows.

It does not hurt.

End Notes

gotta be honest, i watched heated rivalry on mobile data because i felt bad watching such a gorgeous show on free wifi

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