Shine A Light In The Morning

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/77168886.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Gen, M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Alexei Rozanov's Daughter & Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov & Svetlana Vetrova
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander, Alexei Rozanov's Daughter
Additional Tags:	Post-Canon, Family Reunions, Grief/Mourning, Canon Typical Discussions of Parent Death/Suicide, Character Study, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Dysfunctional Family, Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, which means there will be fingers in mouths. naturally, Mild Sexual Content
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-05 Words: 14,355 Chapters: 1/1

Shine A Light In The Morning

by thegoodthebadandthenerdy

Summary

She looks, if he unfocuses his eyes, if he tries very hard, if he pays close attention to the bridge of her nose and the baby fat still in her cheeks, not much different than she did when he last saw her. A little stone angel marking time at a mean old man's wake.

Notes

happy birthday sav, thank you for spinning yarns with me, I hope you enjoy ❤️

||

Deliver your children to the good, good life,
Give 'em peace and shelter and a fork and knife,
Shine a light in the morning and a light at night,
And if a thing goes wrong you'd better make it right

Deliver Your Children _ Wings

See the end of the work for more notes

There is a small picture on his phone screen that has turned mostly to indecipherable pixels from how far he's zoomed in. Predominantly little white and peach squares, some brown, more than a few blue. Pulled back it shows long brown hair under a wool cap, tiny silver glasses shining with the sunlight reflecting off the snow cover. Round cheeks that fall to a tentative smile and an angled, prominent chin. She looks like anyone, he thinks. She looks nothing like her father, for which she is lucky. She looks, if he unfocuses his eyes, if he tries very hard, if he pays close attention to the bridge of her nose and the baby fat still in her cheeks, not much different than she did when he last saw her. A little stone angel marking time at a mean old man's wake.

He taps away from the photo and back to the account it's attached to, backs out to the email attached to that. It had been forwarded to him yesterday in the early afternoon from Yuna's foundation email and slipped through the cracks. He doesn't check his inbox with any schedule and probably wouldn't have seen it at all if she hadn't followed it up with a text this morning.

Just checking in. You may want to take a look at the email I forwarded. Let me know if there's any way I can help. -Y

He had laughed quietly to himself, such unimaginative fondness in him, so sure it was nothing because Yuna was very much like her son in the way everything she typed, good or bad, came out sounding so grave. An email from Yuna usually meant the clean lines of complicated spreadsheets; help meant someone pointing him toward the one piece of data he actually needed and building out from there. Occasionally she sent links to articles she liked, a restaurant she thought they should try when they are all in the same place with enough time to care about how and where their meal came. David was the one who sent the puzzles, the recipes, random things, little offerings to be discussed at the next dinner, the next delay before the boardroom. Mostly very boring, but nice things to read in the quiet half hour spent on the couch at night when Shane needed to not talk for a while.

So, yes, it had been a surprise to open an email from her and find words instead of a stacked list of PDFs. It being in Cyrillic—aside from a brief and formal English paragraph at the beginning—had been enough to make him pause. But it had been something else entirely, something he didn't have the word for in any language, to realize where it had come from and why it was at all.

He taps back through to the photo. It's an unhelpful gesture, nervous, but he can't stop. Like something will change in the time it takes to switch from one to the other. Like it will not be real and he will not have to decide what it is he feels after all. More hopefully, like it will speed up the process of memory and somehow he will recognize this young woman who he wouldn't know from anyone on the street. She looks like a girl, very young, and maybe she is, maybe the photo is an old one. It feels like it should have been so many more years, all the days he has lived since they were last in the same room. That she should be a hunched old woman and he should be in the dirt.

Bare feet scuff the floor behind him just before a weight drapes around his shoulders and warms the expanse of his back. Heavy forearms, bony chin, a blurry, minty mouth unhurried

at the soft spot by his ear.

"Good morning," Ilya murmurs, still frowning at his phone even as he rubs a hand up and down Shane's arm. They are magnetized to each other. All of this touching and never is it enough.

"Morning." Shane tucks his face into the crook of Ilya's neck so he can inhale him, because he is a creep. Ilya lets him, cheek to the crown of his head, because he loves him untouchably. Not the right word, right enough. He passes his phone to his other hand and reaches back to spread his hand over Shane's skull, to hold this very dear thing and feel warmth and weight and sureness because he can't find it looking at this picture. If he could he would have found it after two hours of looking, surely.

He's been up for hours now, squinting against the sun, padding around the kitchen in his sweatpants, a hollow stitch in his chest that had been fine, mostly fine, until he checked his phone and suddenly had not been fine at all. So now the coffee pot ticks as it cools and there's a bowl of fruit warming on the counter and he has a picture on his phone he did not have yesterday. It's not so rare anymore to have the house to himself at the start of the day, not in the summers when Shane does the work of wanting things and having them. When he's not too busy wanting Ilya and having him, it's sleep he goes for, more than any of his trainers would ever believe if someone told them. He is lazy in the first couple weeks of the off-season, he'll sleep through the sun and the birds and the breeze and not emerge until a respectable eight or nine with pillow lines on his face and a drowsy hitch in his gait. Ilya wishes they were still there, the sheets warm, the duvet up around their shoulders, breathing deeply, no thinking required. Already his eyebrows ache from all the thinking.

Only once they have stood there for a moment, swaying slightly, does Shane slide his hands down Ilya's sides, press a kiss to the dip in his shoulder from an old separation, ask, "What're you looking at?"

Ilya takes one long inhale and pushes it out roughly. "Email your mother sent to me. She got it through the foundation, but it was meant for me. I am 'hard to reach', apparently."

Shane huffs a quiet sound, part laugh, part question, and Ilya doesn't have to see his face to know he's squinting hard at the screen and that it's not from curiosity. Not just from curiosity. Ilya pats the side of his face roughly. "Glasses, huh?" he asks. "Your eyes will fall out of your head if you look at phone without glasses. Not a good look for you, and I will be very sad. It would be such a hassle to train new husband now."

"You're funny." Nipping at his jaw first, Shane does peel away, retrieving the glasses he keeps in the drawer by the blender so he doesn't have to squint at the label on his protein powder. He says that's not what they're for but, ah, Ilya knows these things. "Don't tell me the love children of your wild youth are old enough to start reaching out. There's nothing in the fridge for a welcome to the family dinner and Erin's *not* going to get emergency groceries for that."

"So we will go out. Here." Ilya pushes his phone across the bar, the email open once again. "You read, see if you can figure out the Cyrillic with your little workbooks. I'll make breakfast. Yes, yes," he cuts in on himself, throwing his hands up before Shane can even ask, "Yes, even your smoothie that tastes like grave dirt. And then I will never kiss you again."

"Your loss," Shane says, already frowning at Ilya's phone.

|

He only knew she had been born because of Sveta's inscrutable ability of information. Someone ran into them on the labor ward, someone told someone else, Sveta called from her early morning to his late night and he had said many uncharitable things that amounted to prayer. It took twenty minutes to find the number for a shop that would take his card over the phone, and then he spent another twenty minutes holed up in the hotel room's bathroom so his roommate wouldn't hear him unsure what flowers to send, what colors, unsure if it mattered but sure he wanted to get it right.

The clerk at the store had made suggestions that meant nothing to him and he had simply agreed, *yes that is fine, that will be fine,* over and over, sitting on the edge of the tub with his head in his hand. Conjugating different ways to be fine as if it was just tense splitting his family down the center. His mother would have known what flowers to send. His mother was dead and so he had to choose; it was not the first time, would not be the last.

|

"Holy shit." Shane sets Ilya's phone screen down on the counter and scratches absently at his cheek, bumping the arm of his glasses with his knuckle and skewing them slightly on his nose. These are plain. Clear plastic frames, nothing fancy. Ilya likes the way they underscore his eyebrows instead of blocking them; right now, it means he can see the line high up where they're drawn together in a surprised peak. It's good.

Leaning back on his hands in the corner of the counter and crossing one ankle over the other, Ilya sighs. Plant butter oozes around a skillet to his right. Slow-moving, not yet bubbling. Always now there is time between one thing and the next.

"What are you thinking?"

I should call mama. It is an unnatural impulse, to want to pick up the phone and simply have her voice on the other end like he did when he was little, only so high, stuck boarding with the family of a local boy at a junior's tournament, wishing only to tell her he was okay and good night. To hear the smile in her voice and know that even if he couldn't see it the fire in the hearth could. He had never cared to be away from her for long, so he rarely was. A strange want, then, not because she is dead, but because he never had it when she wasn't.

"It was always a possibility, yes? For her to have questions. You know, it was not a small amount of money." He scrubs a hand over his face, pinching his eyes into the bridge of his nose. The stool at the counter drags against the floor. "I didn't expect her to actually ask any of them, I think. No one ever asked why the money, only where it was, when it would be there, how it was not there already." He laughs and it is an old bitterness he thought he'd expelled, but there it is. The shame of the money, the guilt for having it, for having done nothing to earn it, for not giving it away fast enough, for not having more, for it not fixing anything, for it making things worse.

The burner snaps off with a crack and suddenly Ilya is being crowded against the counter until it digs into the small of his back and the waistband of his sweatpants is gnawing lines into his skin. Shane's arms bracket him on either side, tendons flexing down his forearms where he grasps the counter. Heat rolls patiently off him and it's like a hot stone on a twisted muscle. Ilya leans into it, their temples grazing.

"I've thought about it. That she would be eighteen and maybe…." He sighs again through the aching work of muscles in his throat. February. Four months. "But then—'what if she doesn't remember me?' Stupid questions like that. And now she is sending emails to my mother-in-law."

"So she's resourceful," Shane says, smiling against the side of his head. "She sounds like a sweet kid. In her email, she sounds—I don't know, like she has a good head on her shoulders. Smart. I mean, using some of the money to go abroad for undergrad, that's a pretty good choice."

"Oh, yes, I forgot, you are financial planner, you're very impressed."

"Well, she could've done something stupid with it, like buy an impractical car. Or archival Gautier."

Ilya bites down on the closest stretch of skin, only hard enough to make Shane jump, to leave a scattershot of fading marks. "I wasn't thinking. I should have made a, what is it, a provision. 'You can't use money for boring things'. Big letters across the top of the page."

Shane pulls back far enough to press a chaste kiss to the cleft in his chin. There's heat in it because there's always heat where their bodies meet, it has never dulled, not since that first kiss. The manic, unrelenting fever of it still thrashes in Ilya every time and makes him a little stupid, every day, close to twenty years. But mostly it's a sweet gesture, a need to be close. "I don't think it would've worked. She sounds like she has her own plan."

"And…? Since you have it all figured out," Ilya goads, smiling against him, pressing his teeth flat to the dimple at the corner of his mouth.

"If you want to talk to her you should. We'll figure it out, I'll back you either way. But I think…*that's* what she wants. I don't think she wants anything else, you know? It sounds like she really does just want to talk."

It's very rarely anymore he finds himself wishing Shane did not know these things, that they were not true, no need to be seen. But there has always been a raw nerve when it comes to his brother. Alexei, who he had only been allowed to love for a very short while before he was made to dread him. Ilya has always wished he did more, that there had been anything he could have done against a hate that went right down the family line. He used to wish and no longer does that Alexei cared enough to do anything except stand idle. And still he remembers the sickness in him the last time he went home. The terrible anger, his body trembling in the restaurant, in the street, not from the cold but because he finally knew for certain what he had always been made to understand, that he would never be more than someone to be taken from down to the very last. How he hated it—how he already missed it, being wanted by them for anything—before he could even call the airline for his return ticket.

If Ekaterina wanted anything else Ilya would give it, anything, there is no doubt in his mind of that. It's the first thing he learned how to do in this life, will be the last thing he forgets. Like Alexei's name still in his phone. Just in case.

He kisses Shane's face until he hums, eyes closed, his forehead smooth. Ilya touches his sides, his back, rubs over his offset collarbones, and finally lays a hand against his neck so he can feel the steady thrum of his rabbit heartbeat. Strong and fast and clever.

|

She was a very loud baby, he remembers this, always wailing in the background of Alexei's calls, day or night. In the summers he would be able to hear her three rooms and countless layers of ancestral velvet away in his father's house, when he and his brother were called from their cross-points in the city to have dinner, to answer for themselves.

She liked only to be held by her mother and tolerated everyone else with barely disguised disappointment. Always tilting her big eyes around in search of the one she really wanted and, when she found her, waving her fat little fists like she was hailing a taxicab. The only time Ilya ever held her wasn't the summer after she was born, but the one after that, when she was still so small but her hair had begun to fill in and she had two little pearl white teeth poking past her bottom lip. She had yanked on one of his curls like a bell rope and laughed maniacally for minutes, let him kiss her forehead with its bright purple veins before she grew tired of their game, became restless, began the search for her mother while his father started in on how long he'd let his hair grow.

|

In her emails she is very quick, very funny, even though she is clearly trying not to be. He imagines she talks very fast and is pleased, when they get to talk on the phone for the first time a week later, to find that he's right. She's studying to become an engineer of some kind, he isn't sure which, and had already been accepted into a program at uOttawa before she ever tried to find him. (She played football for eight years and doesn't know anymore about hockey than she can get away with.) When she laughs she makes a squeaking sound like a mouse and puts her hand over her mouth so anything that comes after is muffled. She is so unlike anything he ever hoped she could be, that he couldn't help her to be except with money unattached from the rule of her father.

For the nearly three weeks they email Ilya walks around the house with his skin buzzing. He works out and dozes in the sun and helps cook but always he's writing his next message over and over in his head. Not for want of language, but because there are so many things he never thought he'd get to say that he's forgotten most of them and doesn't know where to begin. It's, at least, a good time for it. Summers at the cottage, when he can find Shane stretched across the couch with a book, can bully him upright just enough that Ilya can lean back against his chest from between his legs and act like he doesn't know Shane's reading over his shoulder, like he hadn't planned it that way.

In less than a month she'll fly into Ottawa International and he will be there waiting for her. From her first email she's talked about friends from home who are already in the city, who she'll stay with until school starts in September. She has only ever asked for unobtrusive

crumbs of his time, maybe lunch, just an afternoon to try to piece together what she remembers with the story she has only guessed. But now she will stay a week in their home and Ilya will say *good morning,* he will say *this is what I know and this is what I don't,* and maybe they will be able to teach each other something.

|

Ekaterina—had it been on purpose, naming her with the sound of their mother's name crouched at the end? Ilya had never asked. Had not, since he stood in his child's suit at the front of the chapel between his father in full regalia and his brother in his junior officer's uniform, spoken about their mother with his brother at all.

Alexei had been so mad always at her. When she was alive, when she was dead. He had spent more years taking their father's poison. Alone, an unremarkable boy with no particular talent except for mimicry. Perhaps that wasn't fair. But so many things weren't.

|

Ilya shifts in bed, an arm tucked under his head, staring up at the white ceiling where light from the lamps on each nightstand make two glowing circles. Little sounds of Shane moving easily in the en suite come intermittently; a drawer opening and closing, the faucet, the drawer again, the light switch. The door slides shut behind him and the bed dips underneath some of his weight but not all of it. Ilya rolls his head against the pillow and finds Shane with a knee in the mattress, his big thigh flexing under his tight black briefs, his head tilted slightly.

His hair is flat to his forehead and it's absurd, maybe, how obscene he is to Ilya. The hair on his shins and the crease in his stomach where he leans forward and his funny-shaped kneecaps. It's stupid, he makes Ilya stupid, his forehead and his elbows and his ears and all of these things that shouldn't do anything to him but because they're Shane's make him feel fevered and unwound.

"What? What is it?" He brushes over both of his cheeks. "Something on my face?"

"Nothing," Shane says. He brings his other knee up and balances there, left hand hovering around the dark trail of hair that goes all the way down, Ilya's checked.

He's wearing his wedding ring, it's something he's started doing, another thing to look forward to in the summers, when he slips it off the chain and fits it to the base of the finger that sits crooked from an awkward hit into the boards a few years ago. It is one of the greatest sights of Ilya's life, that ring on that hand.

"Nothing," Ilya repeats, dubious. "If it's nothing, why are you staring? Perverts stare."

He shrugs, a slow smile curving his mouth. "It's just that there's this stupidly hot Russian asshole in my bed thinking so loud and—" Inhale, his smile hitching higher under the dragging bow of his mouth, the involuntary pink in his cheeks he still gets sometimes when he's honest. *"Somehow* I'm just supposed to go to sleep."

Ilya pushes up on his elbows, schooling his face. Heat had started pinching low in his stomach the moment he turned his head, had already dropped into his eyes. He's not fooling Shane at all, but it's the principle of the thing. "I haven't heard this. I think, maybe, you got bad information."

"Yeah?" He slings a leg over Ilya's waist and settles, sliding his cold hands up and down Ilya's sides, digging his fingers into sharp hip bones, the shadow underneath his pecs, the ladder of his ribs.

Ilya can only look blissfully up at him and his stupid flat hair, the happy creases coming in by his eyes. The lamplight catches him twice, making his freckles stark on his face like coffee grounds. *Fuck,* Ilya still thinks in these moments. They're unfathomably far from that shower, from those hotel rooms, and still, every time: *fuck.* He was a child wanting when he first saw Shane. Scared, yes; sure, *yes.* Not because Shane was kind, not because he could see the want in him, too. These things were everywhere if you just looked. But because when Ilya looked at him he had seen, for the first time, someone looking back. Seeing something in him Ilya couldn't understand of himself. It was electric, *gratifying,* it was frightening, it was not love, but it was something. Shane was beautiful, and funny, and he could be terrible, just as terrible as Ilya, and that was not scary at all.

Shane's fingers press high on Ilya's ribs and he dips into the soft flesh under his arm, catching the ends of wiry hair underneath his strong fingertips. Pressure, heat, tenderness. He has that concerned tilt to his mouth, when he wants to ask something but he's thinking it over. Finally, "Are you still okay about tomorrow?"

"Yes. Just—worried." He flashes a small, sad smile and reaches for Shane's other hand so the one will stay where it is in the vulnerable crook of him. He draws it to his face and kisses each fingertip. Only when Shane's eyes fall shut does he circle back and run his tongue along the underside of his ring finger, tracing the lines at each knuckle, going all the way down until he bumps the warm band at the base. He kneads into the meat of his palm, taking him deeper into the hollow of his mouth.

"Shit," Shane mutters and sinks his thumb into the soft underside of Ilya's jaw, the biting stubble from a day unshaven.

The flush is pushing down his throat. It's a bet Ilya has with himself, how far he can make it go. He usually forgets to keep track sometime around it spreading across Shane's chest, but he'll keep trying. One of these days. He runs a hand up Shane's thigh, up his clenching stomach—*so expressive*—and thumbs over the hard point of his nipple. Squeezes. Tugs.

"Just—hold on a second." It's funny, how bravely he's trying to keep them on track, as if Ilya can focus on anything when he can taste one part of him and is on his way to tasting others. Like the way he runs his tongue across his lovely mouth trying to remember his train of thought doesn't make at least half of Ilya's brain go black.

"I wanted to ask, tomorrow, do you want me to, *oh, fuck."* A low, punched out sound coming from low in his throat when teeth graze his second knuckle. Reflexively, his other hand scrabbles, smacks, clenches, and Ilya grins around him. "Tomorrow," he repeats. "Do you want me to clear out. For a while. I can let, uh, let you guys have some time together. One on

one. I could be home for dinner. Just, if you thought it would make things easier, at first. I wanted to offer. *Fuck, Ilya."* He groans with the flick of Ilya's tongue and his thighs tighten around his hips.

This is Ilya's favorite part. Before the fucking, before the impossible slide of skin and sweat and saliva, before the thrill of knowing each other like this for so long it's like being on the ice, knowing exactly where the other's going to be, what he needs. Before all of that, Ilya loves the moment when Shane's brain remembers not to give a fuck about any of it. It's a shame he has to spoil it by saying stupid things.

Ilya slides off his finger, leaving behind a wet trail of spit that must be going cold. Unpleasant, if the way his eyebrows draw together are anything to go by, and they usually are. "What are you talking about? Did I miss you taking all of your things away?" His brows shoot up. "Do you not live here anymore?"

"Don't be an asshole."

"You would think I would notice, this stupidly big house all to myself."

Shane grins and cuffs his jaw barely. He drags his thumb next to his mouth, down his cheek, chin, throat. Runs his thumb gently over the swell of Ilya's Adam's apple, pressing against it just enough that he must be able to feel the drag of breath underneath. "This is important. To you, to me." He cuts his eyes across Ilya's face, focused, serious, lighting him up everywhere he looks. "I don't know how to help."

Ilya exhales, grazes a kiss across his wrist at this awkward angle. "Be where you want," he says, reaching, smoothing a few of the flat hairs back. "I don't want you anywhere else."

Shane nods, a barely there incline of his chin that Ilya can read from across a room. "Okay." He ducks in, a bare pass of his lips over Ilya's. It's more humid breath than touch, more weight than pressure. He hums into the next kiss and leverages himself with a hand over Ilya's shoulder, leaving the other at his throat, skating circles in the soft underside of his jaw and leaving red fingerprints at his neck.

They can take their time now, when they want. It's nice. Maddening. A competition, just a little. Who can stay still the longest, who can keep their hands to themselves. Ilya gives up a little ground just because he can and tips his head the way he knows will make Shane lick into his mouth. Some things are worth the dropped point.

"Besides," Ilya murmurs, sliding a hand down the curve of his back the same time he drags a humid, wet kiss down the column of his throat. "You are everywhere, all of these pictures. If you aren't here Ekaterina will think I am estranged from my very self-absorbed husband. It would be very embarrassing for me and only half true." Abruptly, he pushes off with his heels, dislodging Shane and tumbling him over onto his back, following after, because he is still a terrible liar and still likes so much when Ilya does that. "My husband, see, he is many things. Perfect mouth, perfect dick, very funny."

"Sounds like a catch."

"Just like I said, self-absorbed." He works down his chest, mouthing over the rise and fall as his breath kicks up, getting close but not quite to all the spots that make him writhe. "But yes, I am lucky, that part's true. It's the other part. We are not estranged."

"No?" Shane presses up with his hips, drawing a groan out of Ilya with a well-practiced movement. "What exactly would you say you are, then?"

"Well…" Ilya says, ticking his head back and forth like he has to think about it. He skates a crooked knuckle between the thick muscles of Shane's chest, right where his necklace chain usually ends, down his stuttering stomach, the trail of hair. He hooks a fingertip under the waistband of his underwear—"I think right now we are supposed to be fucking, but I don't think he's caught up yet."—and snaps it.

Shane's surprised yelp swerves into a laugh and he shoves half-heartedly at Ilya's shoulder. "Fuck you!"

"I am *trying,"* Ilya bemoans, going when he's pulled by the back of his neck into a filthy kiss, pressing down on him, laughing into his mouth.

|

Ilya was always happy to see her when he went home, one of the very few things he still looked forward to. It wasn't her fault, all of this anger and fear, and she was still young enough it did not affect her in the same way, didn't make her angry and fearful yet. She would run over the thick rugs in the hallway with her dolls and princess dresses, a red bird in the snow.

He always brought her little things whenever he went home, kept them apart from the money and the demands. A tiny, generic Raiders shirt chosen over the child-sized reproduction of his own jersey because he thinks there is at least a chance she will be allowed to wear it. A postcard from the Boston public garden, where he only went because Scutzy's wife kept giving them these horrible, pitying looks and inviting him on their family outings because she had the idea he was wasting away for lack of sun and water, like a sad little plant. When she was five, he tucked a stuffed bear the same gold as Boston colors into his carry-on and she clapped when he presented it to her.

She was always so delighted by the smallest things, babbling in her tiny voice with her serious words. She would take whatever gift he gave her and walk around the room, showing everyone what he had brought, and then she would go sit quietly in the corner, holding the postcard to her nose and bending the corners, balling up and smoothing out the t-shirt, holding the bear to her chest, proud to have this thing just her own.

|

In the last three hours—so, the full drive and the unbearable hour at home after he was ready but before he could reasonably leave—he has worried a raw spot into the space in his gum where he lost a molar from a fight with one of Carolina's blueliners a week after his birthday many years ago. He keeps pressing the tip of his tongue into the sensitive patch of skin until

his jaw jumps and the nerve fires off a warning shot of pain. It is not working. If he doesn't stop, it will start bleeding.

The Jeep's blinker is so loud while he waits to get into the parking lot. He tries turning the radio up. Turning it down. Bracing his elbow in the windowsill and digging at his eyes underneath the sunglasses he found in the center console. They're Shane's, because the Jeep is Shane's, because it is the kind of vehicle made for picking people up at airports, for the kind of people who volunteer to pick people up from airports. Ilya would not be surprised if this Jeep is on some kind of watchlist, all the time Shane spends picking people up and dropping them off at this airport. Rose, Yuna and David; Sveta, once, but she did not like how he drove and they agreed it would be best if he did not pick her up from now on. Ilya smiles into his hand, the line moves forward.

The plane gets delayed on the tarmac, so it is still another hour before he is standing in the sun, alternating between checking his phone and looking at the doors where a line of people dressed for the wrong weather stream out. He is looking again at his phone, the unmoving WhatsApp thread, when he hears a delighted laugh that squeaks at the end. His head snaps up and there is a girl with long brown hair straight as pins coming toward him, tugging her bags faithfully along. When she smiles her round cheeks push her glasses up into her brow-bone. She takes her hand off one bag and lets it roll beside her just long enough to wave, a silver bracelet sliding down her wrist.

|

"Katyusha," he says very quietly, which he called her as a baby and has not uttered since. Her smile is shy, but firm, and when she looks at him it is with eyes the color of his mother's. He had not been able to see that in the little picture attached to her email.

"Djádjuška," she says with two white pearl teeth poking past her bottom lip. It is the sweeter diminutive, chosen deliberately, spoken with a lightness that eclipses many years. She puts her arms around him and lets him kiss her forehead and he marvels at how much she has grown, at how she still fits in the crooks of his arms. Hot tears slip from behind his sunglasses, her shoulders shake. What a lucky thing.

|

She insists on putting her own bags in the car, letting him go so far as reaching for one before she spins it out of his grasp and hops to the side, laughing, chattering about her flight and the other passengers and the clatter of the airport and all of these things. She has a smart little carry-on and a beastly hard-shell that is nearly half as tall as she is and which she hoists to her chest and thumps into the back of the Jeep with no problem.

Up front he fiddles uselessly with the A/C, telling her to adjust it however she wants, to tune the radio to something she likes. He had told her in one of the emails or one of the brief calls they shared that it was a long drive, but he tells her again as he twists in his seat to check behind them when he backs out of the parking space.

"Yes, two hours, maybe three. Not so long, if it is as nice as you say. Your Shane, I will meet him there, yes?" she asks in her accented English, looking expectantly from the window to

him as if she has asked for something as simple as the time, not even pausing as she clicks her seatbelt into place.

She seems so small in the passenger seat, her hands folded in her lap, her baby blue sweater that is too big, a white pleated skirt, tights swamped by the tall, uncomfortable looking boots that come up almost to her knees. She has her glasses on, so they must be real, or at least not just for reading. From her mother's family, then. Ilya knows of no one else in the family that needed them before old age.

He opens his mouth, closes it, rattles his fingers on the steering wheel. There is an uncomfortable tightness in his throat and somewhere in his head. A loss, just this once, for words. He had tried to imagine this part, what he would say, and yet it still surprises him.

When you search his name online the first five links that come up are his Wikipedia page, then his Instagram, the foundation's website, his player profile on the official MLH website, and the long interview he gave to Sports Illustrated last summer. There is not a single one of any of them where Shane is not at least referenced. When quoted, there is not a single one where Ilya can keep Shane's name out of his mouth. Even the search bar, before you can finish typing, will ask about him. *Ilya Rozanov height, Ilya Rozanov net worth, Ilya Rozanov Shane Hollander married.*

Ilya knows this because the night of the first email he had shifted around restlessly on the couch in the dim glow of the TV, feeling foolish typing his own name into his phone, even moreso when he started clicking through. Never before had he thought much of it or cared at all, what he looked like from a screen. *Digital footprint,* one of Yuna's favorite terms.

Further down there are links to old interviews he gave when he was young and less subtle about being an asshole. Old, blurry videos of him bathed in blue and purple club lights and pinching shot glasses between his teeth with his hands clasped behind his back. There are blogs that tally how many minutes he spends in penalty boxes and compare it to scenes in TV shows. There is the short documentary ESPN produced about the hockey camps and the foundation. Videos of him dropping his gloves and brawling with a smile on his face. There's a very nice photo of him and Shane at the foundation's anniversary dinner the year after they got married, when Ilya grabbed him by the chin and kissed him on the cheek right as the photographer had called their attention; Shane is trying not to laugh, so instead he's smiling so very brightly, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes so deep they look like they've been scored into his skin.

It is so obvious, what they are to each other. Beyond marriage, beyond hockey, all of these things, it's impossible to look at them and not see how unfathomably they love each other. He doesn't know how they ever hid it, he knows exactly how they did. Kill it before it starts, kill the good parts of you when you can't stop it. He couldn't have stopped it if he tried.

He has introduced Shane as his husband, yes. To many people, all kinds of people. He has said, smiling secretly to the cashier at a Panera in the airport after the second flight delay, *my husband is the one with the vein in his forehead that is about to explode, he'll get our food when it's ready.* He gives it away so easily, glad of it, thrilled by it, to all of these people he does not know, who mean no more and no less to him, just because he can. There are more people who mean something to him now, his team and the family that has made him one of

their own and the friends that showed up and would not leave, but it's different, they already knew, he never even had to tell them.

|

And though Shane has said to his mother, to his father, to the few aunts and uncles and cousins that are spread across the continent, has said *this is my husband,* has claimed him to the people who where a part of him before Ilya, never has Ilya been able to look to someone who shares the burden of his name and say *him.*

Ekaterina says it so plainly, already knows it and that's a relief. *Your Shane* in a voice that sounds like all the quiet memories of the childhood he misses and would never ask to have again even if he could. He has never done this and it makes something quiver at the base of his neck.

"Yes, of course," he says, glancing at her with a smile he can't wipe off his face, even when he turns back to the road. *Of course. Where else would he be? Where else would I be going?*

|

At home they come to a truce around the bags: he will take the larger suitcase and she the smaller. Not because she is petite—which he is beginning to sense is a spot of soreness for her—but because he is married to a good Canadian boy and it is a grave matter of national pride that he carry at least one of these bags, the greater the better.

"It's good practice for citizenship test," he tells her over his shoulder as they trundle up the walkway, "They make you carry bags of puppies out of burning buildings while saying 'sorry'."

"I thought it was kittens, like firemen in cartoons. Does not matter. Maybe I start calisthenics again, so I will be ready."

Ilya barks a laugh, hip checking the front door, calling Shane's name into the house as he kicks his shoes off into the tray next to Shane's frayed boat shoes. He crosses his hands on the handle of her suitcase, listening for the tap of bare feet on the floors, observing Ekaterina wiggling out of her boots. Over her tights there's a pair of ankle socks, white with red trim and a pattern of smiling cherries. She takes those off too and stuffs them into one of the boots, standing there in her stocking feet like a dancer, her hands hanging at her sides, her neck craning as she tries to take in as many things as she can, like it will all go away before she can see it.

"You did not do justice," she tells him, splaying her hand from the ceiling to the bank of windows. She looks out from under the gentle slope of her brow-bone, showing so much of the whites of her eyes, making them look big, like a deer's. "It is…yes, very nice."

"Hey, sorry, I was," Shane is saying when he comes around the corner, a thumb thrown over his shoulder, indicating the patio, the kitchen, Ilya can't tell, but there is the smell of something warm and spiced cooking somewhere that gives it away. His eyes go to Ilya first, a boyish, close-lipped smile that Ilya returns, raising his eyebrows.

"Shane, Ekaterina, my niece. Ekaterina, Shane, my husband," he says, motioning between them. The skin around his eyes tight. His chest close to bursting.

They look at each other for a second that barely counts, but to Ilya seems to last all the time in the world. Ekaterina's face, impossibly, brightens more. "I would give you hug, but I smell like airplane and terrible perfume of woman next to me. Thank you for inviting me. I am," she laughs, "Very happy to be here with you both."

"We're really happy you're here. Me, *I'm* happy you're here. But we can—you're probably exhausted from your flight, let me grab your bag and show you your room. There's a bathroom next door, so you can grab a shower, if you want, or just take a minute before dinner. Whatever." He makes a small, pinched expression, the lines at the corner of his mouth dipping, like he's realized he's talking so much. He reaches for her bag and she lets it go willingly. "It's through here."

"Yes, that would be good. Thank you."

Shane nods, mutters *right,* and turns on his heel, her carry-on tucked carefully under his arm.

Ilya looks to Ekaterina. "Oh, so he can carry your bag. Big smile, thank you, no problem." Already they are in on this joke.

She hooks a finger in each boot, letting them swing at her side when she moves to follow. "He is nice Canadian boy. Very sweet. I will not make it hard for him."

|

That morning they had put fresh sheets on the bed in the guest room with the better view of the lake. The corners are still sharp, the comforter smooth. Ekaterina absently runs the back of her hand over it as Shane explains how to work the blinds, where the bathroom is, where he left the linens. He was busy while they were gone. Pacing, probably.

Ilya rests his elbow on the dresser and props his chin in his hand, his eyes drifting between the two of them. She barely comes up to his chest, but she stands with her shoulders thrown back easily, a serious, focused look on her face, unafraid to ask questions as they cross her mind, which will be a relief for Shane. No guessing.

It is only because Ilya knows him so well that he can see Shane trying very hard not to tense up, to keep the wrinkle from in between his eyebrows, his shoulders down. Close to the conscious efforts he makes at the big events, but more earnest. He wants so badly, Ilya knows, to get this right. He hasn't said it in so many words, but he has been so careful in the way he speaks about the whole situation, choosing when to offer his help, when to be hands off, always right there, wanting to be the right thing.

He has listened to Ilya talk through it so many times now in the last weeks. Every ugly feeling, every small hope, all of the old fear that comes to him as an echo more than anything solid. Neither of them know how to do this and that is, if anything, familiar ground to be on together.

|

In the living room Shane stands with his hands in his pockets, Apple watch pushed up his wrist and flashing with muted alerts, his button down and shorts in complimentary shades of blue. Close now, and Ilya can see his hair is wet. Just a little, on the side, like he'd fallen asleep on it and tried to pat it back into place. It is ridiculous, how much Ilya loves him.

"What is that smell? I can't figure it out."

"Peppercorn chicken. There's salad and garlic bread, too. And, uh, the eggplant thing with the cheese you like. I figured keep it simple, I wasn't sure how she'd feel after her flight."

Ilya's tongue ticks off the back of his teeth and he nods, lips pursed. "Ah, I see. So you cheated. You called Erin."

They face off like that, just a few steps between them, faces carefully blank because that's what this part calls for. Shane rocks once on his feet, his chin dips. "I called Erin," he agrees, and his mouth splits into a fantastic, stupid grin. Unconsciously they advance, chess pieces on the board moving toward the same goal. "Last week. She *really* did not want to do it when I told her it was for you."

"But you convinced her, because you are so charming. See, I know all of your tricks, I am not impressed."

"I think you are a little bit," Shane counters, unabashedly focused on Ilya's mouth, already tilting his head back that fraction of an inch, like he knows what's coming. Expectation, but that's not the right word.

"No, I don't think so."

Their mouths meet with two sharp inhales that would be loud if not for the sound of the shower running. One, two sound kisses, before Shane slips an arm around his middle and presses his cheek against his arm, a kiss to the slope of his bicep. "Drive okay?"

"Yes," Ilya says, looping an arm around him. "We would have been home sooner, but, you know, grandpa car only goes so fast."

Shane snorts. "I'll take my grandpa car any day over no leg room, no cargo space, and like, the worst mileage rating I've ever seen. You're basically in the negatives."

"Mm, yes, but it's so much nicer to look at." He presses his face into the crown of Shane's head, lips pursed in the absent gesture of a kiss. "She's very excited. I think…she's looking forward to getting to know you. I am too, her knowing you. You knowing each other."

Shane exhales quietly, rubbing idle lines over Ilya's stomach. The sun has started to fade out over the lake and they stand there, like they have so many times before, watching the perpetual motions of the world until a timer goes off on Shane's phone, left in the kitchen and echoing from his watch. He presses a kiss over Ilya's heart, pats him solidly on the side. "Come help me with this?"

|

He takes two glasses from the cabinet and has to go back for a third, leaving them in a jagged line on the counter when he turns to take the filter from the fridge.

"So, you got to talk some on the way in?"

"Some. Little things, not much." He tips his head back and forth, weighing. "Do you remember your first meet away from home? Overnight. You have to ride so many hours and you have to go to shitty hotel and then there are all of these other children who are annoying and that doesn't stop how much you want to impress them. So you try to skate your best and shoot your best and it makes sense, because you are all doing the same thing, yes? And then the coaches tell you it's time for lunch and you all realize you have only trained for the hockey and not what comes in between."

"Yeah," Shane agrees. He looks up from where he's poking at the chicken in the pan, moving it around in the sauce with a fork. "Yeah, but then the second day. You know what's coming."

"Second day. It gets easier."

|

They eat dinner on the couch and fill the room with ten years' worth of memories. The good ones, to start. Ekaterina's first football game rained out, a pack of children with jerseys so muddied their parents couldn't see their numbers to tell them apart and only knew to cheer when one group of children did. Then her school, her friends, her childish mistakes. So they give her first Cups, second Olympics, the wedding, the big days through the inconsequential things they remember.

Ilya mentions the foundation with his eyes on his plate. He can't look at her when he does. Not wanting to see the recognition in her eyes, yes, but more unprepared for what happens if it doesn't mean anything to her at all. They keep getting close it, but never close enough for it to matter. Ilya feels it hanging over him like a light, how he can forget it's there but never is it not changing the look of the room. A constant buzz just loud enough to hear, anticipation and shame.

He wants to get it over with, whatever it will be. To say what it is that will be said only so he doesn't have to wonder anymore. She doesn't hate him, but she doesn't know him, and blood has never been enough to smooth these things.

But first there is dinner. The food all has one taste in his mouth and still he eats. He will make sure, later, to text Erin and thank her. She sleeps maybe never and will be up anyway, she enjoys him more than she lets on.

|

Ekaterina drinks black coffee after dinner because, she says, it will make her tired and time is still mushy in her head from the flight. Shane can't hide his bafflement and Ilya can't hide his

laugh, the way it hiccups out of his chest, how silly it feels, how much he loves this moment among all of the moments.

The conversation lightens, sparing when they gather around a small fire on the back patio. It's tradition, each time someone new comes to the cottage. It works on her, too, if there's anything in the way her voice quiets and her eyes turn sharp. She folds her hands under her cheek and watches it curl up the logs Shane carefully arranged.

It becomes so much more obvious to Ilya then, how careful she is. How she tries very hard to say the right things. It hadn't come across so much in the emails. Or, no, it had, but he'd thought she was just nervous. And they were always racing timezones and schedules when they spoke on the phone. Now after hours learning the shape of her uninterrupted conversation, he hears it. Most when she isn't saying anything at all.

In the car she had at least gone between languages, which had helped some, but she's very careful not to speak Russian in front of Shane. Politeness. But she will trip over her words in English and she will physically bite the tip of her tongue, so frustrated, trying to find exactly what it is she wants to say, and it makes Ilya recall what it felt like to be in his first MLH locker room after a life on domestic teams. The roar of noise and the confusion and the kernel of resentment. More than that it reminds him of how a child who is responsible for too many things speaks. Listening and waiting for the right moment, saying things quickly so they are always in response to the exact thing they should be, so there is the least possibility of being misunderstood. He had missed it, because she spoke so much, so fast, but now he can't unhear it. As much as she says and it's always to explain herself further. He doesn't know what to do with it and it is another thing he feels helpless for. Always there are things repeating where we can't see them. *For what?* he wants to ask, but who is there to answer.

When he rises to get another drink he brushes a hand across Shane's shoulder and asks, in Russian, if he wants anything. His writing is maybe unsalvageable, but his accent is pleasant, his conversation smooth if a little formal. Without thought he replies just like that and Ilya sees, when he passes by on his way to the kitchen, Ekaterina's smile buried in her arm.

|

Her phone rings as she's tipping back the last of her coffee and her eyes glance quickly, habitually, down her cheeks to check the screen. In a moment she has brightened and popped to her feet. "I will be back." And then, in bright, pattering Russian, "Good morning, Mama. Yes, my flight was good, how are you?" as she slips inside and pulls the door closed behind her.

Ilya turns his face away, roughly thumbing his nose, ignoring, or trying to, the burning line at the base of his eyes. Blaming it on smoke from the fire, even though they always burn clean. Focusing instead on the shrubs, the lake, the liquid dance of shadows on stone.

"Hey," Shane murmurs, his hand warm and dry when it comes to sit in the crook of Ilya's elbow.

Something constricts in his chest and he drags in a hard breath that trembles and shakes. In, in, in and never does it release. There's a rustle of movement and a very quiet *Ilya* and two

strong hands on either side of his face, thumbs smoothing across his aching eyebrows.

"She's here," Ilya says around the clot in his throat, it's all he can say, but it is so inadequate, so useless to explain the screaming tear in his chest. She's here and what he means is there was another like her meant to be here, she's here and what he means is I didn't think ever would there be a time where I had any of this, she's here and what he means is it hurts and it is so wonderful that it makes this pain worth it.

All of the pains he has endured and never did they seem to have a reason, love least of all. It was meant to hurt, like a limp hand over the side of the bed, like a strike across the cheek. He'd thought he was running from it for so long he never realized he was going toward it, that he could not escape this thing he wanted so terribly and fought so senselessly, that it would find a way to hurt, one way or another, but it would find a way to get older too.

"I'm so proud of you," Shane says with a traitorous wobble in his voice. He kisses the peak of Ilya's hairline, his temple. "Fuck, Ilya, I'm so proud of you, you have no idea. This is—I can't even imagine how hard this is."

Pressing his lips together, Ilya hums a discordant note, shaking his head slightly, trying to—he doesn't know. Just trying. He takes in another ragged breath that smells like Shane's eucalyptus and mint shampoo, the one that's always sold out so he buys five, six bottles at a time and keeps in travel bottles in his duffel so he never has to use the clinical stuff they keep in hotels and gyms. Another, another. Later, he will let himself cry for it all, but now there is still more.

|

She comes back wrapped in a jacket that's too big and mottled green like a bird's egg, not zipped but held tight around her sides with clenched hands. A grimy stuffed bear that might be brown and might be gray hangs from the front pocket. Wordlessly she curls back up in the chair she's claimed as hers, her pale feet with bright pink toenails poking out of fuzzy sleep pants covered in smiley faces, the bear's ear worrying between her fingers. She is trying very hard not to seem like she's looking at he and Shane's hands tangled together in the space between them.

It's funny to think there are things this girl does not yet understand. That she is still a child, eighteen, very ahead of her years in ways and tied to them in others. Maybe that's all there has ever been for the children of this family. Irina working long afternoons after school in her grandfather's fields. Alexei and his early birthday, finishing school and joining the police academy and leaving their father's home all in the six months after he turned seventeen. Ilya, eighteen-years-old, released from his tutor to be the number one draft pick of a nation, living in Scutzy's spare room until the season began and his first check cleared.

|

"How is your mother?" Ilya asks, leading them both gently back. They have managed, this whole day, not to speak of her father, even if they are both surely thinking of him. Ilya's problems, at least, were never really with her mother. She did not know, not really, what she was getting into with Alexei, what she would have to ask her daughter to carry for the choice.

It would be hypocritical if he were angry at her for staying. Twelve years, yes? And those are just what he saw another do.

"She is well. Tired." She flicks her fingers in an agitated gesture, her mouth pulling. "Not that she tells me this, but I know." She worries the bear's ears some more, she chews the inside of her cheek so hard there is a hollow shadow on the outside.

Shane's fingers apply pressure to Ilya's hand.

"I have not told this to anyone," she says slowly, her eyes shining. Tears, maybe. The yellow fire. "I want her to come here, to Canada. When I am finished with school I will take care of her. She does not believe this yet, but I will make her."

Ilya feels sick, the way she checks out of the corner of her eyes, like she's waiting for the venom for saying such a sweet thing. It is so much for a child, and still he understands. Would he have brought her here, his mother? Would she have come? She was so very loyal, he thinks, and so very tired, and what would six more years have done to her spirit? He remembers how thin she had gotten, by the end, how he hadn't realized it for what it meant, only that her cheeks were not so round anymore and it made the yellow curls on her head seem that much bigger. That her wrists had felt like bird bones when he held them and the obtrusive lines of the tendons in her throat had held the necklace chain aloft, the crucifix gold against wane, gray skin. How when she smiled it did not always reach her eyes and the corner of her mouth would shake like the line a child cuts in the ice on his first pair of skates.

He would have done anything to have her here. Whatever it took. He would have bought her a little apartment in Boston and filled it with the pretty teapots like the ones she kept in the cabinet in the kitchen. He would have made sure she ate, even when he was across the country, the world. Would have told her to stay when he went back for Sochi and called her from his bed in the village instead of going to the receptions with his father. He would not have been able to lie to her about Shane Hollander, not much longer than he had been able to lie to himself, and she would have laughed so sweetly with her pretty hazel eyes and said *oh, my boy.* And now? She would have loved Shane, would have doted on him until he melted, a mushy thing, kissing his cheeks like she always did Ilya. Would have charmed David and been charmed by Yuna and would have loved the vast expanse of the land and the racket the birds make in the trees. Her granddaughter, Ekaterina, Katyusha, she would have loved her too, her mind and her mouse laugh, her sweetness and her strength. He knows these things he will never know, he loves her for who she tried so hard to be and who she was, he misses her like the stars reflected in the water's surface must miss the sky.

Absently, he twists the chain at his throat, pinching the crucifix between two fingers and spinning the clasp out of the well of his throat. "And your father?" He can feel Shane's eyes, his tenderness, like he can feel the heat of the fire on his legs. Now it will be said.

She shakes her head and it sends her hair sliding in streaks. "Papa, he will be fine. It does not matter if we are there or here or wherever, he likes better to drink alone." She pulls her knees against her chest and rests her chin in the dip between them, staring into the fire that plays tricks across her glasses and the ruddy apples of her cheeks. The bear moves from her pocket to her lap, and instead of the ears she wiggles the arms back and forth at the shoulder so it looks like it is swimming against a fast-moving current.

Her jaw works silently for a while, angry tears reddening the white lines of her eyelids where she has cleansed the make-up away and left it bare. "Was he ever good? Maybe this is not the right word. Has he always…" Lines dig deeply into her chin, her lips pressed together so hard they turn white, two trembling fingertips digging against them to push the emotion back, as if it has ever worked, as if the love and pain for a father has ever been kept at bay. "He loves me, I think this is true. It is not enough, I know this is true. I only wanted to know if it could have been, or if he has always been so, so hard, and so, so sad." She chokes out a pitiful, aching sound and her fingers travel to her forehead, shaking now, the only part of her that is.

Ilya feels pinned in place, a butterfly on a board, pins to the most delicate parts of him. Now it is being said, these things that have never been said before. It's like his mind can't hear them, that they are blacked out the moment they're spoken and he has to gather them as quickly as he can. "Sad," he repeats to remember and has to push his tongue against the roof of his mouth not to say anything else. She has held this as long as she has had breath to do it, let her say it now.

"Yes. My whole life, what I remember. He is mean, but not like Grandfather. You are surprised I remember Grandfather? Yes, but very little. I remember he gave me small candies, I remember he sounded like a big sick wolf when he snarled at Mama and Papa. He was mean so everyone else would be miserable and he would look happy next to them. My father, he is mean because he wants to be alone in life like he is in his head, and when he is alone he drinks and he puts his head on his desk and weeps. For what? I ask, my mother says it is not for me. I go to him, he yells, he drinks more. I grow up, years of this, and when I am fifteen I ask my mother again and she says because he will never leave and he will always be with his ghosts. So I decide, me, I will not make same mistake. If I work hard I will go, I will bring my mother with me. We will not stay with ghosts that are not, that are not—*fuck!"* Her voice fails her then and she disappears into herself, thick, hard sobs wrenching her whole body, sending something running from one of the bushes farther down the lawn.

Ilya and Shane move at the same time. Shane inside, not even pulling the door behind him to keep the bugs out. Ilya to kneel beside her, to take her glasses and carefully set them to the side, to hold one of her long-fingered hands between his. This brave girl, who knows these things even he had not known or had not wanted to. Who comes all the way here to say them, to try to understand.

"Katyusha, Katyusha," he repeats. "I am sorry. Please." He doesn't even know what he's asking for. What can he ask of her that hasn't already been asked? That hasn't already put the pain in her?

Shane comes back with a box of tissue and two bottles of water, saying *easy, easy,* when he pushes her hair to the side and presses a bottle against the back of her neck.

Hovering around her, they let her cry. It feels wrong to look away and Ilya doesn't, watching this precious face contort until no sound comes from her mouth and only fat, oblong tears that are two and three stuck together slide down her chin, making the dark spots on her jacket darker. She holds deliriously to his hand, clawing at it, trying to get a better grip.

He has always thought Alexei was their father's mirror. Never had he thought, even for a moment, he was anything else. That perhaps he remembered things of their mother Ilya

didn't. That maybe his mimicry had been of her too. Sad. All the things he has ever thought Alexei to be: a drunk, a bastard, a bitter, miserable man. And he is, but maybe he is also so very sad and has never had the words to explain it to his beautiful daughter who lives with it too.

"I don't know," Ilya begins, squeezing her hand, rubbing his thumb erratically across the smooth skin. He tries to say *our mother* and it makes the muscles in his jaw jolt, but he tries and tries until it comes out. "Our mother was depressed. And me, I am depressed. And perhaps Alexei is depressed also. I don't know. It's not where cruelness comes from. And you can't—it is not your job to fix, to make better. It can't be." He passes a hand over her sweaty hair, making indecipherable noises like *chchch.* "It's not your fault. Please, it's not your fault."

|

When she can breathe again she stares with blank tiredness into the fire, her face flush and tight with dried tears. Without her glasses it's easier to see the bruises under her eyes from not sleeping. How worn she is, like the little bear she works between her hands.

She says something to the fire first. It is such a weight to move her heavy eyes, but they eventually slide over to him and he has to lean forward to hear her when she repeats herself. "You gave this to me. Do you remember? When I was little."

He frowns, eyebrows together, looking at the grizzled thing she clutches so tightly. The black string of its nose has unraveled and curls away from it like a whisker; one eye is lower than the other, popped off and stitched back on; its stuffing lumpy, uneven, so it flops at each joint. But still its stitched smile is there and maybe underneath spikes of faded fur he can remember gold.

He did not know what to give a child. Never did. It was always a shot in the dark made easier because it was her and she was so grateful. Ah, but he had seen it on the rack at Logan International, waiting on his flight home because he never did have anything better to do than wait at the airport. His apartment closed up, his sunglasses and black cap and red eye flight enough for him to pace mostly unaccosted, to drink shitty coffee and eat a stale danish and look for a gift he had forgotten to get. Because he wanted her to remember him when he was not there. He had always been so sure every visit would be the one that broke things that the one that was snuck up on him, he hadn't brought her anything.

It has been so many years since he has seen Moscow, her skyline and the peculiar color of the dawn beyond the city. Since he prowled the halls of his father's house feeling he was dying another death there; his mother's, his own, each day, every time, however much he loved it because it was the last place he saw her. It has been so long since he walked down to the old chapel of his mother's family, the muddy dirt road to the cemetery where she lays in consecrated ground between the grandfather and grandmother who loved her, because his father's lie gave her one thing, gave her a churchyard burial, a last comfort, respect he had never extended her in life.

All of these things Ilya gave and they were not, like he'd thought, just for his benefit. Still they come back. Kept. Changed the way all things will, but cared for.

"It was a reminder, yes?" She turns toward him fully, holding the bear by its paws so that it stands plaintively on the cushion, staring up at him with its smiling, lopsided eyes. "Of my uncle, so funny and kind. Thoughtful. And when I looked at it I knew, ah, you were here, or —you were not there. Same thing. This is better. And so I knew there are other places to see, other chances. I have never said thank you. For making sure I knew this, for making sure I would be able to try when it was time."

|

The clock in the kitchen says it's just after four when he passes through. He slips into his shoes and eases out the front door, shoulders scrunched when he pulls it behind him. The stoop is cold and hard underneath him and still he sits, his elbows tucked into his lap, his hands cupped in front of his mouth.

If he could he would have a cigarette or three, but it has been eight months this time, and if he can make it through this without one maybe he is done for good. It's a funny thought. He has smoked longer now than he didn't. The first with Sveta, he hasn't thought of it in so long. Thirteen and hiding out in the crumbling garden shed behind her parents' house, a crumpled pack swiped from one of her insufferable older cousins after Epiphany service. They had coughed and retched and laughed at their own foolishness, passing one back and forth underneath the cobwebs. Her hair had glowed copper in the flame of the lighter and he had leaned in and pecked her lips very quickly, which had only made her retch more, because the one thing she hated more than the taste of a cigarette was the secondhand taste of one. Neither of these things dissuaded him and he kept smoking right on, kept stealing the kisses Sveta allowed him to.

There is so little need for any of it now. The little rebellions, the things he did because they seemed obvious and what was obvious if not right. What did he know of right? That motherless boy who couldn't bear to look at himself in the mirror just so he wouldn't have to see her wheat straw curls. And the man he became—he is only learning it now, that there is a difference between right and good, that it's only human to wonder which is which.

He huffs another breath into the hollow of his hands and flexes his fingers to keep it. Shorts and a t-shirt was not the smartest choice to sit on concrete at dawn, maybe, but it had been at hand and he had not wanted to think, had not wanted to wake Shane by digging through the closet.

It's not so bad. He had thought maybe it would be. That there would be no amount of pills and therapy to quiet how bad it would be to finally have this mess out in the open and he would have to start all over. But after the first swell of feeling, the desperate wish to have shielded Ekaterina from this life, it had only ebbed out gratefully. For the first time in a very long time it wasn't the first thing on his mind, the second, the third. There, yes, always, but not so frantic. It's a delirious feeling, like after a hard skate. His body tired, his brain so quiet.

The front door opens and is pulled quietly to. His knees and ankles pop when he sits on the other end of the stoop, pushing a soft *umph* out of him. His feet are bare, his legs only to his shorts, but he's wearing a hoodie, at least, the hood pushed down but it's better that way because it makes it easier to see the flips in his hair from the pillow.

Ilya lifts his eyes to the tops of the trees where the black shadows look unreal, like cut outs pasted onto the glowing purple steel of the sky. "Did I wake you up?"

"No. It's just cold without you," Shane says, tucking a yawn into his shoulder. "Would've been okay if you did."

"I know."

He puts a mug of something hot between them. Ilya hears the scrape of ceramic on concrete and feels the ambient heat through the slick fabric of his shorts. He glances, smiles. Hot water colored amber with honey, a spent wedge of lemon bobbing on the surface. Light, bright, warm, not too much. Ilya sighs and reaches for him, cupping the back of his neck and threading into the fine hairs there, drawing him into a slow, lazy kiss, their bodies bowing toward one another. Ilya moves the cup to the step below and they scoot closer, pressed together at the shin and thigh and shoulder. Shane leans his head on Ilya's shoulder, his hand dips between Ilya's knees and cradles his kneecap, thumb brushing the slopes of the increasingly fragile bone. Solid, unbending.

"Are you doing okay?" he murmurs, his voice low and scratchy in his chest, vibrating underneath Ilya's hand.

"Mm, yes. I am…what's the word for thinking about things from past. Thinking about them again? It's too dark outside, I can't think."

Shane laughs quietly, sending a puff of air across Ilya's throat, a thread of goosebumps. "Reflecting. Reminiscing, I guess, too."

"The first one. Reflecting." He drags a hand through Shane's hair, thumbing at the patch over his ear that grows in a swirl. "I thought it would be different. I considered many ways for our big talk to go. She hated me in most of them, which was easier. I am used to that, or I have been, I could be again. Yelling, angry tears, sure, yes. I didn't think…."

Fleetingly, Shane's hand tightens on his knee. "That she wasn't mad at you for leaving?"

"Yes. Everything I thought, it always started with her being mad. Maybe not at me, just at everything. But she is so strong, and so good in her heart, and she only asks why because she wants to understand. I couldn't do that when I was her age. Even now, I don't know how she does that. It's, it's so different than anything I ever could imagine, and I am grateful. But I had been thinking it would go badly, and it hasn't, so I am reflecting."

Shane hums. "Don't let me stop you," he says, squeezing Ilya's knee one more time, and in it there are all of the things he knows Ilya can't hear right now.

"You are good, you know?" Ilya dips to kiss the back of his neck before pulling the hood of his sweatshirt up. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Drink your stuff. Reflect. I'll—" A bigger yawn. "Be right here."

|

She is not so loud anymore, but she is surrounded by such noise and life. Humming any interesting noise, very soft so it's almost like she puffs her breath in rhythm. The impossibly heavy tread of her feet. The bright pitch of her voice, up and down, always asking questions, always listening.

It's a few days later when she catches sight of the picture tucked away on one of the shelves with all of the other pictures. Yuna and Ilya at an after-party, both stupendously drunk, both flushed virulent red even though they both swear they're incapable of it. Yuna's hair hangs in a waterfall down her back, the encroaching gray making for the whitecaps, her hand in the crook of Ilya's am as she laughs raucously. Ilya is faced slightly away from the camera, his shirtsleeves pushed back and his curls falling out of the product put into them at the start of the night. He's smiling Shane's favorite smile, the one where his teeth press together and he looks almost disbelieving, like his mouth doesn't know how much farther it can split.

Ekaterina studies it openly, touching the corner of the frame but not lifting it. She looks over her shoulder, finds Ilya, glances past him looking for Shane. "This is the woman I sent my email to, yes? Your mother? She is very beautiful. You will thank her for me. She works very fast. Impressive."

It surprises a laugh out of him. "Yeah, definitely, she'll—god, she's gonna love that. She was excited to be a part of it, even in a small way. Her and my dad are kind of obsessed with Ilya."

"It runs in the family," Ilya says solemnly, such a burden.

"Don't be a dick."

"Yes, I can see family resemblance," Ekaterina says in perfect deadpan as Ilya cuffs his hands over her ears.

"Not in front of little ears, Hollander. All of Pike's crazy children didn't teach you this?" *Later* he mouths over her head.

No way, Shane says through a grin.

|

He got into the habit of taking pictures his second, third year in Boston. When he realized what he had to show of his life was tabloids and photoshoots and blurry photos on Twitter taken from a half block away of him crossing the street. Construction would come through and suddenly that street would look different. The billboard would get replaced. He would change and have nothing to meet it with, no hard proof of where he came from and no one who remembered and could back it up.

It was why he kept the photos from those first MLH awards, because he cared so much about Shane—did he love him then? It's hard to remember before and after of what has been so much of his life—and he didn't know how to want him beyond the obvious ways. He kept them so when it was over he could remember what it looked like.

Like that, the pictures were for him, every little thing that meant something to him, that he could hold and show to prove that he had been somewhere and seen and known and cared for something even if he had not been cared for by anything. And now there are pictures all over the house he shares with his husband in the summers. A paper trail of this life beyond the medals and the trophies.

He holds it close, grateful. It's so easy not to have any of it. He has only one album of his mother's girlhood pictures. Black paper with little white triangles at the corner of each print. Her blonde hair, so pale it had looked white when she was young, made pink from the red tint of the old pictures. There are a few of her very young on her grandfather's farm, her hands raw from the wheat chaff, her smile so big. More from when she was a teenager, many once she went to university, the scholarship that changed her life. So beautiful and resilient and with a sadness in her even then. He had wept the first time he saw them, when he realized what life did to her, the promises it broke. But there is one he loves, of her around Ekaterina's age, taken at a department store or something like it, a close up on her beautiful round face, her smile that pinched at the corner, her bright hazel eyes, all of those curls. She is so happy. For this one moment she is untouched.

There's a copy of it in their apartment in the city, a smaller one in his wallet. He had another printed when Ekaterina texted her flight details. All of these things he wants her to know and now there is time to tell them, to show her the things that have made both of them. This is where he starts.

He finally gives it to her on her last morning, standing just outside the front door, the Jeep purring in the driveway and Shane fussing with the mirrors more than usual to give them time. Her lips pressed together tightly, she tucks the envelope carefully away in her suitcase. It's the third time she has seen Irina's face, after the picture in her father's desk when she was fourteen, the picture in Ilya's wallet when she is eighteen.

|

"Wait, wait," Ilya calls, jogging down the walkway, looking for—

Shane steps out of the Jeep, his forehead wrinkling. "Ilya?"

His phone. It's all the way down in the bottom of one of his pockets, between his keys and the pack of nicotine gum he's debating. He holds it aloft with two fingers and wiggles it a little at Shane. "You are so good at being my assist."

Shane shakes his head, laughing, and snatches the phone from him. *Prick.* He sends them back up the walkway and follows behind with his hand over his eyes and the phone extended so he can center them just right. This is all David, the way he cranes his neck and flicks his eyes between screen and subject, the way he directs *left, other way, there we go, looks great* and takes one million pictures in case anyone blinks or the sun shifts the wrong way behind the clouds.

"All of these pictures and you forget we need one until my hair looks like bird nest," Ekaterina complains, pressed into Ilya's side, pleased. *"Shane,"* she calls with her head tipped back, waving him over. "You must come here, I need one with you, too. No one will believe I

just got here and already know best player in MLH. I will win so many points at school. So cool."

Shane fits to her other side and throws an arm round her shoulders, his hand hot and solid spread across Ilya's back. He lines the three of them up in frame, smiles a shit-eating smile.

"Already she is doing charity to look better at university," Ilya says through a grin just before he snaps the picture.

|

It's the picture that pops up when she calls. It's printed out and framed by the time she comes back. His two favorite people in the world, mid-laugh. He shows anyone who will look.

End Notes

tumblr @cauldronoflove :) / rebloggable here

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!