

Dear Ilya, Please Let Me Love You

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Dear Ilya, Please Let Me Love You

by [Meishali](#)

Summary

“When was the last time you ate or drank anything?” Yuna quickly scans the bedside tables. There’s a mug with a dried brown bottom and a can of coke, presumably empty, since it’s lying on its side without any spills.

The mountain of covers shifts once as if Ilya shrugs underneath. She’s certain he’s not eaten anything that day, and maybe even the day before.

“I brought soup. I can heat some up and bring it over to the bed?”

Yuna Hollander takes care of Ilya Rozanov during one of his “quiet” episodes and attempts to communicate through the universal love language of food.

Notes

Biggest thanks to the amazing bthyme for beta-ing this craziness.

This was written during a fever dream sustained by fumes and negative sleep. Changes to canon and characterization are all done for my entertainment. Constructive criticism is welcome and appreciated.

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

Chapter 1

Now

Yuna uses her own key to open the door to Ilya's house slowly.

The inside is quiet and the air slightly stale. She tried calling and texting before coming over but never got any response.

Ilya has a few days free but Shane's away in Toronto for a brand sponsorship engagement. Yuna and David didn't hear back about their invitation to dinner from a couple of nights ago, and despite Shane's reassurance that Ilya, albeit more quiet than usual, is still answering his texts and calls, Yuna just wants to make sure with her own eyes. She asked Shane and he agreed. Maybe Ilya's got the flu and is too polite to ask.

Rozanov and polite are not two words she ever imagined putting in the same sentence a year ago, but beyond that boisterous exterior, he's just a boy away from home without his parents. No matter how many hockey camps they've attended or how many billet families they've stayed with, they are just boys who never got the chance to properly grow up.

"Ilya, It's Yuna," she calls out. The house remains silent. Maybe he's just out.

She puts down the food containers on the kitchen counter and the grocery bags on the floor. She's only been to the house once, only briefly, to pick something up from Shane, and she's not sure what to expect. It looks messier than Shane's place in Montreal, but that's probably true for most people's homes. There are several throw blankets strewn over the sitting area and some hoodies too. A cup is left on the coffee table and two more on the counter. A few dirty bowls sit in the sink. Yuna assumes Ilya probably uses a cleaning service, but maybe it's hard to hide the presence of a second person if they come too frequently. At least the boys trust her enough to give her a key.

The hallway behind the kitchen leading toward the master bedroom is dark and quiet as Yuna approaches. The bedroom door is closed.

"Ilya, are you home? I'm coming over to the bedroom." Yuna calls out again, before knocking on the door a few times, waits a few seconds, and knocks again. She holds her breath. She's not sure why she's so anxious. He's an adult and can take care of himself. Probably.

After what feels like a few long minutes but is probably closer to under 30 seconds, she hears what sounds like rustling of fabrics muffled through the door.

"I just want to make sure you are ok since you didn't come for dinner. I'm going to come in." She waits a few seconds for any verbal objections and turns the door handle.

The room was surprisingly bright with the curtains wide open and only the sunshades down. Yuna immediately clocks Ilya's golden curls, messier than usual and slightly matted, peaking

out from what appears to be a mountain of tangled sheets and duvet.

“Ilya. Honey, are you sick?”

The mountain of bedding shifts and Ilya pokes the top of his head out from under. Yuna releases a breath she didn’t even know she was holding. He doesn’t look too bad, more exhausted in appearance than plague.

“No.” Then after a while, “Maybe. Little sick.”

“Do you have a fever?” She takes a step closer to the bed before Ilya can answer and reaches out quickly with her hand but then slows down at the last minute. Ilya is either too out of it to register or genuinely doesn’t mind, he tilts his head minutely in the direction of her out-stretched arm as she gently settles her palm over his forehead. It feels dry and a touch warm, but that could just be from being under the covers. She makes a mental note to check for a medkit and thermometer in the house.

“When was the last time you ate or drank anything?” Yuna quickly scans the bedside tables. There’s a mug with a dried brown bottom and a can of coke, presumably empty, since it’s lying on its side without any spills.

The mountain of covers shifts once as if Ilya shrugs underneath. She’s certain he’s not eaten anything that day, and maybe even the day before.

“I brought soup. I can heat some up and bring it over to the bed?”

Ilya doesn’t seem to understand what she is saying, and after a few moments, she reaches out to his forehead again with the same hand and brushes some of his curls away. This works to snap him out of whatever fugue state he was in.

“I... I’m sorry.” He takes one arm out from under the covers and tries to sit up. Yuna automatically leans forward to help. It makes no sense; he’s even taller and bigger than Shane and there’s no way she can help lift him up at all, but at this moment, she feels she can see him wrap himself inward to appear smaller.

“Don’t be. I do this for Shane and I would do the same for you.” Yuna states firmly. She wants to tell him what a silly boy he is. He’s part of the family now. Perhaps she can have a talk with him when he’s better and more alert.

“I don’t know if that’s what you have growing up back in Russia, and I’ve never made borscht before,” Yuna pauses, almost nervously. “But I’ve got this Eastern European cookbook and watched some tutorials online. I think it tastes pretty good and at least similar to what I’ve had at restaurants.”

Ilya stares at her confusedly and doesn’t respond right away. Yuna almost wants to smack him on the head if he weren’t sick.

“I, um, you don’t need to. I can...” Ilya stops, wisely, as Yuna presses her lips together, although she holds back from saying anything. She watches him shift uncomfortably, and for

such a large, intimidating, and famously obnoxious hockey player, he looks small and afraid, and mumbles, “I’m sorry I worry you. You come all the way here, check on me and bring me food.”

“I worry about you because that’s what families do.” She remembers when Shane was drafted – a lifetime ago and just like yesterday – so young at seventeen, and how hard that was for him (and for David and her!) to be truly away from home for the first time, even though they were only two hours away. Ilya was drafted at the same age, moving to a new country, learning a new language, making new friends. And now he’s moved to yet another new country. *To be closer to Shane*, her mind supplies, *but they are not even in the same city AND they can’t even talk about it publicly*. Perpetually an outsider, always foreign.

“I...just, I think no one make me borscht since I left Russia.” After a moment, he adds, quietly, “and for a long time before that.”

Yuna belatedly remembers Ilya’s mom died when he was a kid and wants to kick herself for inadvertently reminding him of that loss. She also knows what Shane’s told her about Ilya’s relationship with his father and brother and wants to kick them on Ilya’s behalf for being terrible human beings. She wants to reach out and hug him but refrains. Not yet. Maybe later. Right now she just needs to get some soup into him even if it kills her.

“I will bring some soup for you.” She gives him the final verdict.

“Um... Ok. Thank you.” See, it’s much easier to just listen to her. Satisfied, she rests her hand on his shoulder briefly and then straightens up to go back to the kitchen.

~~~~~

## **Then**

Yuna Hollander knew exactly what it felt like to be an outsider.

Before she was a Hollander, she was a young Japanese woman (albeit born and raised in Canada) trying to prove herself in Montreal, that she was just as good as those “Canadian” consultants, thank you very much. And before that, she was a small Asian girl, desperate to fit in in a town in Nova Scotia with nothing but fishing and lumber, where her parents had to drive over an hour to the big city (aka Halifax) to buy rice and soy sauce.

Her parents never truly talked about why they moved to Canada. She’d ask them when she was young, but always got a slightly different answer. All she knew for sure was that her father went to Dalhousie to study finance in the late 60s as a Masters student, and her mother came along, because they were already married in Japan. They then decided to stay when Scotiabank opened up a new office in her town and wanted to recruit someone with a higher education in banking right around the time her father graduated. The branch manager was initially transferred from Halifax, but Yuna’s father was quickly promoted after a few years,

right after Yuna was born, so the previous manager could move back to the real city. She supposed that even “real Canadians” didn’t want to stay in her town for too long.

There was one other Asian family in town. She found this out when she started grade one and the school principal thought they must be introduced during the first morning assembly. The teacher chatted excitedly about how wonderful it must be to meet someone similar as she walked Yuna over to the corner of the gym/assembly hall where they would meet.

The girl, Daisy, who was a few years older, turned out to be Thai. Well, sort of. Her family ran a Chinese restaurant in town (“but we mostly serve Thai food, although no one seems to have noticed” according to Daisy) and her parents were Chinese refugees escaping the war who were born in a refugee camp in Thailand. Yuna remembered nodding solemnly as if she knew where Thailand was, what was a refugee camp, or which war Daisy’s family was running from. They exchanged a few stilted words, mostly on Yuna’s part because she was so scared she would mess up her English and somehow sound foreign in front of another Asian. Daisy, who was much more sociable, invited Yuna to come eat at her family’s restaurant.

The teacher asked Yuna why they didn’t try speaking in their own language as she walked Yuna to her new classroom. She had no idea what her response was but still clearly remembered the teacher saying, *well, it’s good that you both speak English then.*

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

My love to all of you who read, liked, and commented. Fandom is a truly unique place and it fills me with joy to be a part of it. Thanks to bthyme for suffering through this, again.

I like to think both Crosby and Ovechkin exist as themselves in this universe, but maybe a hockey generation older to make Shane and Ilya's storyline work. I'm so excited to see Sid lead Team Canada in the Olympics again – with Celebrini on the roster no less!!

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

### Now

By the time Yuna comes back with a bowl of warmed soup, Ilya has emerged from the heap of bedding and is now sitting against the headboard wearing an extremely wrinkled t-shirt that has seen better days.

She frowns and almost makes a comment before consciously wills her mind to “let go”. This is something she's been trying to work on, ever since Shane's been living successfully as an adult (aka an MHL captain that led his team to three Cups), but especially since she (and David) found out Shane's been hiding such a huge part of himself from them, never feeling quite safe or comfortable enough to share.

Taking a deep breath, Yuna hands the bowl and spoon to Ilya, who accepts tentatively with both hands.

He stares at the soup bowl as if he is lost and the dark liquid contains the answer to the universe. She almost tells him that *it's not 42 but maybe he should ask about 81*, before realizing that she doesn't know him.

Sure, she knows all of his hockey stats and he is seeing Shane (*since the summer before their rookie year*, argh, she is still not over that). But what does he do outside of hockey? Does he

like reading? What about travel? What's his favourite food? She knows his dad died, and it was a challenge when he was alive, and that his brother is no longer in the picture.

Does he have any family he's close with? What about friends in Boston? With so much going on inside, did he ever let anyone close?

It dawns on her that he's probably not used to someone (who is not Shane, who shares the same secret) coming into his home and seeing him in a vulnerable position. *Maybe he can get to know me*, she thinks, *maybe he can be comfortable around me*.

Yuna decides it will be best for her to supervise Ilya with the soup eating, seeing he may need a bit of a nudge, and pulls a chair from the other end of the room to sit down.

"Go ahead. I tested the temperature and it's not too hot."

Ilya lifts the spoon to his lips and gingerly takes a bite. Yuna holds her breath.

After a brief pause, he takes another spoonful, and then another. She finally lets her breath out.

The room is comfortably quiet with the occasional sound of the spoon hitting the bowl and soup being consumed. She can't help but let a smile tug at her lips.

"Is very good. Thank you." Ilya says quietly as he puts down the finished bowl. He seems so much younger, almost shy, than Yuna is used to seeing him, at games and interviews.

"Of course." She squeezes his hand in what she hopes is a reassuring way.

"There are these dumplings in Russia we call *pelmeni*." He pauses, tilts his head up slightly and looks past her toward the window at the far side of the room. "My mother used to put in borscht for me when I get sick. Is not usual way to eat pelmeni, but..."

In the stillness, she can hear her own breathing. She waits to give him time and space.

“But, I was active boy and she wanted me to have energy. And I didn’t like pelmeni in...” He searches for the right word, “How do you say something is soup but has nothing in it?”

“Broth?” She supplies.

“Yes, maybe broth. I didn’t like pelmeni in broth like my father or with sour cream like my brother. So she put it in borscht for me. But only when I was sick.” He dips his head abashedly, as if he is ashamed, and Yuna is instantly filled with the urge to show him a world with all the love in it.

He sits up slightly and adjusts the duvet.

“I’m not sick,” Ilya murmurs abruptly as he leans back on the headboard. “No, no, I’m not saying it right. I’m not sick like I have a cold. Well, maybe, but only a little. I’m sick like... I don’t feel happy sometimes.”

Yuna folds her hands in her lap to stop them from reaching out and schools her face into what she thinks of as a neutral, unbiased expression. He isn’t even looking at her but instead out the window into the far distance again.

“Team in Ottawa is shitty but everyone is nice. Coach is good. New teammates think I’m best player in league. I will teach team to win cup soon.” Yuna lets out a half strangled laugh. “Shane is only two hours away and no borders to cross.”

“I am happy.” He emphasizes. “I see Shane more. Shane has 10-year plan for us.” Then he adds tentatively, “you have 2-year plan for me; contracts, brand deals. I *am* happy...” Yuna senses there’s a, *but sometimes I’m not*, left unsaid.

“But it’s hard to be in a new place and make new friends?” She prompts gently.

Ilya nods slowly, “*Da*.”

“My parents moved from Japan to Nova Scotia in the 60s, when there were no Japanese people in all of Nova Scotia outside of Halifax. They never talked about it to me much, but I think it was very hard for them. We had to drive hours to buy rice.”

That seems to surprise him, staring at her with wide eyes, so she continues, “Yes, it’s probably hard for you to imagine because you’ve only lived in big cities, but I’m from a small town in Nova Scotia.”

“Like Crosby?”

She laughs out loud because how *very predictable*, and tells him as much. But she can’t blame him because even Canadians outside of the maritime provinces don’t know shit about Nova Scotia. “Not quite, but close enough. This was way before Crosby was born; we had McPhee and less padding.”

She isn’t sure whether he remembers or even knows the player but files for later that perhaps they can watch some old Voyeurs vs Citadels games together. *Argh*, how she wishes there are still two teams in the MHL from Eastern Canada.

“My father came here for school and stayed for work. I was born and raised here. And we both loved hockey. But it was very hard for my mother. She was a stay-at-home mom, and my town didn’t have many opportunities for jobs and even fewer for learning English. She was here for my father, and then later for me. I think she was very lonely and often sad.”

Ilya nods again, solemnly, and murmurs, “for my mama also. Has... has Shane ever said anything?”

Yuna shakes her head. She knows about the foundation and their plan to name it after his mother, who died when he was young.

“My mama was sad for a long time. She tried so hard for me. She sing for me, she make food for me. She dance in the most beautiful dress. But it was too hard at the end...” He mumbles, eyes shiny and lips quivering, “she would have loved Shane, like I love him.”

Yuna can’t keep it in any longer, leans forward pulling Ilya into her arms, and Ilya responds by folding himself into her embrace. Her arms can barely wrap around his back due to his size and the awkward angle they are in, but that doesn’t matter a single bit at the moment, not when he is warm and human and she has so much love to give. *It’s ok*, she says, *you’ll be ok*.

They stay like this for what feels like forever, with only their chests moving with each breath. Yuna only lets go when her back starts to strain.

They sit in companionable silence for a while longer, Yuna’s hand never leaving his.

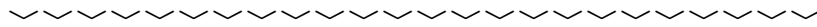
Eventually, he looks up at her, “Your mama – Is she... are they...?” He seems to be having a difficult time choosing the right words, but she understands him nonetheless.

“They moved back to Japan after I was in university. It was...very hard for a long time, I think,” She feels her throat tighten and has to pause to swallow. “I will introduce you to them over Skype next time you and Shane come over.”

“I like that very much.”

Yuna smiles and clears her throat after a while, “My mom used to make me okayu when I was sick. It’s a Japanese rice porridge you eat with pickles; great for when you just want something simple and comforting. I still make it for Shane sometimes. Maybe I can bring some over tomorrow.”

Ilya makes a choked sound but he's got a tug at his lips and nodding, so Yuna knows everything is going to be alright. Most of the time. Eventually.



## Then

The summers were sunny and crisp, and the water was perpetually too cold to swim in for long. The winters were dark and long. But boy oh boy was there Hockey.

Yuna's father learned about this decidedly Canadian sport while at Dalhousie and went to see his first game with some classmates. It was love at first sight. *The speed, the force, the passion, the cold air; there's nothing like it in Japan*, her father used to say, *it feels so freeing to watch, I can just let everything go*. Yuna didn't remember a time when she wasn't watching hockey with her father. At home, mostly, but also at the local rink. And on one memorable occasion when she was in grade eight, the whole family took a trip to Montreal to watch the Voyageurs play the Guardians. (The Voyageurs won, of course.)

Before starting school, Yuna was mostly raised by her mother at home, whose English was limited. Her parents were both worried (terrified!) that Yuna would have a hard time learning English and only ever spoke (or tried to, on her mom's part) English to her at home. She watched a lot of TV and played with the neighbourhood kids. She repeated lines from TV shows and movies on her own, trying to figure whether she had an accent - she did, because much of the television programming was American.

School, at least the English learning part, turned out to be fine. She could understand all of the teachers and most of the other students (except some of the kids in the French class) and be understood by everyone. School was easy and learning was fun for Yuna. The only hiccup was lunch. She had naively agreed for her mom to pack what they usually ate at home for lunch at school. She didn't realize that rice and fish didn't keep well, wasn't good cold, smelled funny, and was so, so very foreign. She held her head high and ate her lunch despite pointed looks and giggles, but requested sandwiches with lunch meat and cheese plus milk from the second week of school onward. None of this mattered because she was as Canadian as any of schoolmates, perhaps even more, because she loved hockey more than most of them.

The local rink where Yuna grew up stood by the edge of the town, just beyond the only supermarket. The building was rundown and a quarter of everything in it had been broken for years.

Yuna spent countless hours at the rink as a kid. First to learn skating, which she took to like a fish to water. But they separated the boys and the girls. The boys learned skating for hockey, while the girls had to learn figure skating. She was fast, really fast, all sharp turns, skating circles around the hockey boys her age. But they told her she couldn't play with the boys and there weren't enough girls who wanted to play hockey. *It's too expensive to play*, her father added, *and for boys, they could make something of it, like play for the MHL, but there's no such thing for girls.*

They wouldn't let her have more ice time at the rink, so in the winter, she went to play on the lake. It was really just a large pond that was shallow enough to freeze over most of the winter and deep enough for an even surface without rocks or plant debris, and the local residents kept it clear of every snowfall for the neighbourhood kids. Once a year, some careless kid would fall through the ice, but that never deterred Yuna.

Her father got her skates and sticks and pucks so she can shoot pucks in between two boots on the frozen lake. Occasionally, neighbourhood boys let her play pond hockey with them, but that eventually stopped as she got older because she was smaller, slower, lacked any formal training (*and also a girl*, as they repeatedly told her). She channeled all of her energy into everything else in her life, desperate to escape her small town, desperate to go somewhere, be someone – *Just as Canadian as the rest of you!* – but she kept hockey safe in her heart and took it everywhere with her.



## Now

Yuna comes back with a plate of cut fresh persimmon slices. These were impossible to get in Nova Scotia when she was growing up and she's only ever had dried ones as a kid, brought back by her dad when he travelled to Montreal for work. Her mom often talked about the

crisp sweetness of fuyu persimmons that she had in Japan in the fall, and how hachiya persimmons turned jam-like when overripened until the winter.

“I thought we could share some after-meal dessert,” she says as she sets the plate down on the floor in front of the couch. They decide that showering can wait another day as long as she doesn’t have to spend more time with him in the enclosed bedroom, hence moving to the living room. She misses sitting on the floor sometimes, as long as there are enough cushions.

“Is not dessert,” Ilya eyes the fruit dubiously, scrunching up his nose. “Is this where Shane gets his weird food words from? Always saying green sludge is food, is delicious.”

She can’t help but bark out a laugh. “Have you ever had persimmons? They are one of my favorites, and you can only get them this time of the year. These are slightly tart, which is wonderful after a meal. Go ahead, try one!”

Yuan watches Ilya touch the pale golden-orange slices with great trepidation and carefully puts one in his mouth.

“Oh. *Oh!*” He chews happily. “I have them in Russia I’m sure! We eat in cake... and, I don’t know English word, but like sauce. We say xypma.”

“khur-MA,” She sounds out the word tentatively.

Ilya beams at her and pops another piece in his mouth. She returns the smile and lets the sensation of warm contentment settle around her as they share a plate of fruit slices together.

Her world has really changed a lot since she was a little girl. She can buy daikon and paneer at Sobeys or Loblaws, from the regular sections and not the “ethnic” aisle no less. The local fruitmart by their house has at least two varieties of persimmons and more types of mangoes, when they are in season, than she knows the names of. And hopefully, the world will continue to change for the better, one day at a time.

## Chapter End Notes

1. Biggest thanks to everyone who sent thoughts and prayers. It actually worked LOL.
2. Highly recommend Beartown to y'all hockey fans.
3. HR is hockey *gay*porn; hockey porn is watching the highlight reel of McDavid scoring goals. This is an important distinction.

## End Notes

If you've gotten this far, please spare a minute for thoughts and prayers for my home team, who has forgotten how to play hockey this year and is at the bottom of the division.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!