Constancy

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by elwenyere

Summary

After nearly fifteen hours, two tumblers of vodka, and seven cigarettes, Ilya still needs an extra ten minutes—jaw set, his fingers gripping a bathroom sink—before he can walk into the room where Shane's been admitted to Montreal General.

Or, Ilya watches Shane take a hit; the ramifications take some time to translate

Notes

My heart wants approximately 10,000 versions of the "Shane takes a hit" scene, so here is one of them. The title is taken from
the Joseph Brodsky poem, which was one of the inspirations for this story. Thank you to Jules for the help with crowd-sourcing and to the very generous friend of a friend of a friend who provided an invaluable Russian-language assist. And thank you to everyone who takes the time to read! I really hope you enjoy.

CWs: brief, non-explicit description of sex; occasional oblique references to suicidal ideation

See the end of the work for more notes

After nearly fifteen hours, two tumblers of vodka, and seven cigarettes, Ilya still needs an extra ten minutes—jaw set, his fingers gripping a bathroom sink—before he can walk into the room where Shane's been admitted to Montreal General.

Ilya resists the urge to shake his head, knowing it won't stop the ringing that keeps returning to his ears. From the moment Shane had looked back at him—the moment Ilya first followed the arena lights dotting his visor down to the flush on his cheek and the grin cresting his shoulder—to the moment when his body had hit the ice and hadn't moved, Ilya had heard nothing but a thin, animal whine so keen he couldn't believe, later, that the whole crowd hadn't seen him being pierced by it. As he'd watched the replays of himself skating listlessly, orbiting Shane's crumpled form, he'd found himself remembering the old story, of the detective who caught his culprit by yelling《На вope и шапка горит》and waiting for the guilty man to reach toward his head. Shane had gone down with a smile for Ilya on his face, and Ilya had been so leashed to what he's tried to take for himself he hadn't realized he was reaching until the ref was pushing him away: *the thief's hat is on fire.*

Since then, Ilya has seen the hit a hundred times—on television, through his feeds, in his mind—slowed down and cropped close and refocused from more angles than one pair of eyes could ever take in. The turn, the smile, the toffee-slow gnawing of dread before the impact, the crunch of plastic and bone, and then Shane Hollander down, crushed, and limp—looking *lifeless*, as Ilya's mind keeps supplying: not figurative, as in скучный, or boring, but literally безжизненный, unbreathing, or else мертвый, dead.

"Also on the ice is Boston's Ilya Rozanov," one of the video captions had read, "who just returned from burying his father in Russia."

Burying my father, Ilya had thought. *Is that what I did?*

Shane is not dead, though Ilya had to wait what felt like eight centuries to verify that was true. Beyond his coach, once, as casually as possible, there'd been no one he could ask about Hollander's condition without arousing suspicion. For hours—by the lockers, in the room he's sharing with Connors, on the roof of their hotel—he'd been at the mercy of internet gossip and the spare details the Metros would release to the press. When the first local item refreshed to include *Shane Hollander in stable condition*, he'd felt a flush of relief so solid it was as if he'd been checked, and then he'd had to lock himself in the bathroom to bury his face in a towel.

Ilya takes one last look in the mirror now, and then he sucks in a breath and shakes out his arms like he's getting ready to dive.

"Okay," he says, and he makes himself press through the door and down the hall to see Shane. He can fucking do this.

"Ilyaaaaaa," Shane calls out, his smile unspooling, morphine-loose, as Ilya steps into his room, and fuck. Ilya had been wrong: he absolutely cannot do this.

"I, um. I just wanted to -" Ilya has to stop. There's a drill whining through his ears again—the ref's whistle, the crowd-murmur, the terrible stillness, called in English *out cold, out cold, out cold*. He tries to swallow. "Are you okay?"

"Concussion and a fractured collarbone. Out for the playoffs, but -"

Shane draws out the conjunction, and Ilya's eyes drop to the sling over his chest, the pulse monitor pinching his finger.

"Those hands," Svetlana had said, before the All-Star game, and Ilya's mind hadn't turned to stats or to rankings but to the photo of Rose Landry, smiling for the camera, clasping Shane's hand in full view.

Ilya had still been thinking about it in Tampa, chewing through the old feeds so compulsively it had made him giddy when Shane said he was there alone. "Not compatible," Shane had explained, and it had made Ilya smug, like he'd gotten a notch back up on the world. He'd played smug, passed smug, pressed a kiss to Shane's helmet right there on the ice, because here was something no one else could do but him: make Shane fucking Hollander play better hockey, make him love it even more.

Eat your heart out, Rose Landry.

And then last night: the turn, the smile, the crunch, the collapse. Last night he could have ended Hollander's career.

"Could have been worse," Ilya finishes.

"Could have been worse," Shane agrees.

Modal verbs in English, Ilya knows, are used to talk about a past that hasn't happened. Could have, a modal verb of ability: could a less distracted player have shouted a warning in time? Should have, to express what would have happened if everything was fine: Shane should have been in Ilya's arms last night, instead of strapped into a brace. Would have, the third conditional: would Shane have gotten hit, if Ilya hadn't been on the ice?

Ilya has always strained against that last one, the English conditional. In Russian, it’s not a tense that distinguishes conditional futures but a syntactic structure: separating real, open conditions (если будет возможность, we can fuck later) from what is only hypothetical or imagined, contradictory to fact (если бы была возможность, we could be something).

"Would you want to be, if we could?" Shane had asked him in Tampa, and Ilya had held himself still, though inside his head had been shaking and shaking and shaking.

What is "if"? He'd wanted to beg. *What is "would"?*

"What does it fucking matter?" he'd snapped instead, because he doesn't know how else to make Shane understand the unmovable бы.

When something is made by the violence of wanting—a career, a child, an empire—whatever that violence begets, it binds. It doesn't matter where Ilya plays, where he parties, where he

runs: there is nowhere he could place himself that wouldn't be bounded by the perimeter of a master bedroom in Moscow, with its three shrouded windows and its oak-paneled armoire, where Ilya used to shut himself in with the smell of camphor and pine, of the mimosa and jasmine that clung to the sleeves of the blouses that had hung there, unworn, in the dark.

Home is the place where, when they call you, you go. Time is what you weather: it stagnates or it storms, and you stand it until you can't.

Ilya had known all this, and still, when Shane had crawled into his lap and kissed him with *those hands* in Ilya's hair, Ilya had clutched Shane to his chest, buried his face against Shane's shoulder—right where Shane's collarbone had split, as if Ilya's weight had started a hit that just took a month to land.

"Marleau feels terrible," Ilya says, though that isn't what he means. "He did not mean to hurt you."

"I know. Part of the game. We all get our bell rung eventually, right?"

"Right," Ilya agrees, and Shane must see something in his face—something Ilya thought he'd suppressed—because he's reaching out, a new, high note worrying at his voice.

"Hey," he says. "Heeeeyyyyyy," and Ilya's moving toward him, like he'd been desperate to do on the ice.

"Okay, okay. Shhhh, shhhh."

Ilya takes Shane's hand in his, and Shane's eyes fall shut, his thumb sweeping Ilya's knuckles.

"Yes," he whispers. "Better."

Ilya watches him breathe and cradles the warmth of his palm. When Shane had landed on the ice, his arms had been slung out in front of him, his glove covering his face. And Ilya hasn't knelt before an icon since he was a boy, but as he'd stared at Shane's body lying there, like something tossed aside and abandoned, he'd felt himself fold into a plea he'd once thought of as prayer: *please, please, please let him move.*

"You scared me," Ilya admits.

"I'm sorry I didn't text you last night."

"No. It's okay."

He brushes his thumb over Shane's cheek, over the bruises mottled into his freckles, and tries not to feel sick with envy that someone else will bring him ice packs for his shoulder and cold cloths for his headaches. When he gets bitchy and anxious about sitting on the bench, someone else will tease him back out of his head.

"I was excited about last night," Shane says. "I'm mostly mad at Marleau for fucking that up."

"He feels really bad," Ilya replies, skating quickly over the pronoun.

"You know. I had a whole plan to ask you something."

Ilya feels his head start to shake.

"Maybe it's better if you just rest now," he suggests.

"I was going to ask you -"

"Hollander."

"- will you come to my cottage this summer?" asks Shane. "Don't go to Russia. Come to my house. We'll have so much fun. It's so private. No one will know."

"So private you do yoga routine with one hundred thousand views?" Ilya almost replies, but he doesn't, because Shane's face is too bright to bear a deflection, and because at least twenty of those views are his. Ilya's never wanted to sort through everything he feels—tickled, fond, resentful, afraid—about the way Shane invests in his space, so he makes jokes instead.

"Mr. Real Estate," he'd quipped once, when Shane had asked him who designed his place in Boston: the one Shane had first thought of, over FaceTime, when Ilya had said he was at home.

What Ilya can't explain—not when Shane's on the other line, asking how he is—is that he bought his apartment in Moscow pre-furnished, as a favor to one of his father's old friends: a former deputy defense minister who'd acquired an impolitic quantity of debt. Across the river, held at arm's length, is the gay club called Central Station, which had to shut down after the games in Sochi, its doors riddled with bullets and surrounded by barbed wire. When Ilya left his building for a run, he'd always jogged in the opposite direction, toward the city center and the Kremlin and the river's other bend. The former deputy defense minister never had cleared his debts, which were soon alleged to involve arms deals in Ukraine. He'd left for France, arrested in absentia, and Ilya's father stopped mentioning his name. When Ilya returned from his runs, or from bringing groceries to his father or a picture book to his niece, nothing in his apartment had ever changed. From the night Ilya first slept there to the day he signed it over to Alexei, he'd never so much as updated the drapes.

"Hollander," Ilya says, "you know I can't do that."

"We could have a week—or even two. We'd be completely alone. Together."

The last word comes out as a whisper, like it's a secret, or a promise, and Ilya can't decide what's harder to look at—the sight of Shane beaming up at him, Душа нараспашку, his soul wide open, or the image that "together" is threatening to plant in his mind—so he speaks before either vision can take hold.

"Maybe," he lies. "Maybe."

"You make me curious," he'd told Shane, so fucking long ago, and it's unbearable now to think how much more honest he'd been than he knew. Shane with his ifs, his conditional tense

and his subjunctive moods: Shane wakes up something Ilya's been trying to lay to rest since he was twelve years old. *"I wish things were different,"* and *"I wish you were here."*

The door handle rattles, and a woman in scrubs walks in, a mere moment after Ilya manages to release Shane's hand.

"Uh oh," she says. "You're not going to smother him with a pillow, are you, Mr. Rozanov?"

"Ah, no," Ilya says, his media smile back in place. "No, no, no. But good thinking. But no, I was just leaving."

"Okay," Shane rasps, his voice breaking the word into two, and Ilya knows well enough it will be a mistake to look back at him, but he looks back anyway. "Bye-bye."

That night in Tampa, after Shane had held Ilya while he cried, they'd fucked until Ilya's legs almost gave out beneath him—the post-game ache, the fresh burn of new exertion, and something Ilya's been less willing to name: the shakiness that sometimes seeps into him when Shane's skin is under his hands.

"Ilya," Shane had breathed. "Fuck. I want to see you come. Please, please, come for me."

And Ilya had come so hard it had felt like a sob.

"That was so fucking good," Shane had mumbled, afterward, his lips pressed to Ilya's hair, and Ilya's chest had pulled like a muscle, cramping around the part of his heart that had managed to form the word "stay."

"Goodbye," Ilya says now, or tries to: it nearly sticks in his throat.

Shane stifles a cough, then squeezes his eyes shut—against the light, or in pain.

"See you next season," he says.

"Get well soon, Hollander."

Ilya sets his feet toward the door.

"Thank you," Shane calls after him, and then, his voice dropping and dragging into what Ilya assumes is an attempt at a casual tone: "I appreciate it."

It sounds like someone tipsy trying to walk a straight line, and Shane is looking so pleased with his work, and Ilya already misses him—the low tide of Atlantic separation tugging at his mood even when he's still in the room—but he mouths "shhh" again, "shhh," because they're no longer alone.

He walks back down the hall, shaking his shoulders out once more. He won't see Shane for the rest of the season. He won't text while Shane can't look at his screen. He'll go back to his hotel room, and he'll throw his shit in his bag, and when his ears start ringing as the plane leaves for Boston he'll tell himself that in exchange for Shane Hollander safe and sound, Ilya

will pay everything back: the hypotheticals he's borrowed on, the mortgaged past that's still under his name.

Weeks later, his bag half-packed for Russia, Ilya watches Scott Hunter kiss a man from the crowd on national TV, and it's like someone has thrown back the curtains or kicked down a door: what if? Maybe. Если будет возможность.

"What the -" Shane starts, when he answers the call.

"I'm coming to the cottage," Ilya says, and when Shane breathes in the declaration—the shift from counterfactual to real conditional—it's as if the walls around Ilya expand.

End Notes

Thank you very much for reading!!! <3<3<3 Kudos, comments, and keyboard smashes are deeply cherished, and I would love to know what you think.

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