

There is a Light That Never Goes Out

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There is a Light That Never Goes Out

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Summary

Time was doing that thing again.

The medics should be here by now. The rubber band was pulling back, everything in slow motion, everything but Shane and Ilya. Ilya, whose brusque, lofty demeanor could occupy a whole room, who was so still and not lofty now, whose head was bleeding onto Shane's lap.

I needed whump & hospitals so I wrote it

Shane had seen bodies before.

Not like, mid-emergency-situation, but suited up and made up and already in caskets.

Just two. Not people he really knew.

His grandmother, when he was 8. He'd only met her a couple of times. Her glossy red-oak coffin had been mounted on a wheeled table and someone had lifted him up to look at her. He vaguely remembered the soft, cotton-candy tufts of hair puffed up around her bland face; how pale she was, how old-looking. He hadn't formed a clear enough memory of her alive to know whether or not she looked like herself going into the ground. What he remembered most about that funeral was his mother crying very quietly against his father's shoulder. His mom never cried.

In eighth grade, his art teacher, Renee, died suddenly. He was already on his way to giving up on art, as hockey took center-stage in his life, but he hadn't told her yet. She was well-loved. Kind of an odd woman, freer with her feelings and affection than Shane expected people to be, easy to amuse and always light on her feet. He guessed her family was the same way, because her daughters held an open-casket funeral right there in the school auditorium and invited anyone who wanted to come. Shane couldn't imagine inviting a whole school to look at his dead mom.

Shane's parents took him. He hadn't known what he would feel; of course he was sad that she was gone--they'd had a rapport, and she really liked Shane, even though he wasn't all that good at art. But he didn't *know* her.

His father stayed in line with him for the viewing while his mother made the rounds, socializing and offering condolences and sharing memories. It had seemed strange to get in line for something like this. To say goodbye. But that was what people were doing, and Shane Hollander went with the flow.

He remembered this funeral because he hated it. Everything leading up to the viewing was fine. A little sad. Nothing unexpected. Students hung their art on a corkboard and a few people spoke. Her daughters spoke. Shane thought about how it would feel if it was his mom. That made him sad.

But the viewing wasn't exactly *sad*. He didn't know what the word for it was. It was...uncanny, maybe. He hated it.

Renee still had her long, light hair, blonde struck through with coarse silver. She was dressed in an outfit that she would have worn to school. Patterned dress, layers, heeled boots with laces, a yellow scarf around her neck. Her nails were painted a glossy red. They shone where her hands were crossed over her stomach.

Shane heard someone behind him say, *they did a wonderful job. She could just be sleeping*. But Shane didn't agree. Renee was not sleeping. Renee was not even Renee. She looked like a puppet of herself. The light was gone out of her. The color of her skin was wrong in a way Shane couldn't quite identify. Her hands were stiff, forced together, and he couldn't believe they were the same hands that he'd seen at the pottery wheel in class, shaping soggy lumps of clay into trinket trays.

It was the first time in his life that Shane had gotten a glimpse of what death actually meant. That a person could truly stop existing. His teacher had been there one day, a whirl of life and energy and laughter, and now her body was still here, but she was gone from it.

It had made him feel sick. The only saving grace was that her eyes were closed. He didn't think he could stand to see her eyes.

He dreamed of her dead eyes opening for a week afterward, of a glazed stare with nothing

behind it. The dreams weren't about *Renee*, exactly, but more about death in general; the absence of life; the fragility of physicality.

It wasn't a dramatically life-altering experience. There was no epiphany, no sudden surge of energy that propelled Shane into pouring all his energy into hockey, into living, into embodying his physical form for as short a time as he might have it. It was just a moment in time. A subtle shift in worldview. One of the many maturities a person accumulates as they grow up. Everyone confronts death for the first time some time.

The only thing was, Shane didn't expect to be doing it again so soon.

He was twenty-four. He hadn't thought of his grandmother or Renee in years. Had no reason to.

But he was thinking of them now, while he stared at Ilya lying prone on the ice.

Hockey wasn't the *most* dangerous team sport--that honor probably went to football, or maybe rugby, Shane honestly didn't know--but it wasn't easy on a person, either. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who had at least been disabled by an on-ice accident. And there were the horror stories, the rare deaths, the skate-slashing and head-banging and high-speed collisions. Two bodies slamming into each other at 25 MPH was not a pretty sight.

Ilya's body.

It occurred to Shane that he hadn't moved in some time. It couldn't have been very long--there hadn't been a surge of movement from the crowd yet, no follow-up to the hushed gasp that Ilya's collapse had warranted. But it felt, suddenly, like time had caramelized, and Shane was stuck in it. He was looking at Ilya, whose eyes were closed, and around whom Harris was flitting frantically, and around whose head a dark puddle had begun to form, oozing out from the place Ilya's helmet had been knocked off, and he was telling himself to move, to go across the rink and check on him, but time would not let him.

Until it did.

The universe snapped back like a rubber band. It had slowed only long enough for Shane to set his sights on his target, the way the world slowed when he was about to take a shot, and as soon as it let him go, he was catapulting across the ice, probably dangerously fast, but he didn't care. He was in the zone. Stray players who had only just begun to realize what happened, who were slowly turning around to look at Ilya and then at Shane, were obstacles he easily avoided. The path lit up before him like magic. It had always been this way with hockey, with skating, and now it was this way with Ilya, too.

He made it before anyone else did. Except Harris, of course, who had hit Ilya, accidentally. Harris was bent at the waist, hands on his knees, wheezing from the impact and trying to say *Rozanov*.

"Get out of the way," Shane snapped, and didn't look around to see Harris comply. He knelt beside Ilya. His eyes went first to his hands.

It wasn't a choice. He wanted to look at Ilya's face, to see if his eyes were open. But he couldn't do it yet. It was too scary. Hands first.

Rozanov's hands were crossed over his stomach, and an image of Renee's superimposed itself over them, glossy red fingernails, plastic-y dead skin. Shane's breath left him.

But Ilya's hands were clenched and twitching. Holding himself. Not dead. Not still. Not yet. That made it safe enough to look higher.

His eyes were closed, his helmet half-off. He'd been taking it off when Harris slammed into him.

It was rash. You never take your helmet off on the ice, even if a play is over. Rozanov knew that. But Rozanov was rash. He liked the attention. He liked to finish with a flair. He liked to shake out his lion's-maned hair while the camera panned over him, liked to shoot that cocky grin through the jumbo screen, to make the girls (and some of the guys, Shane included) swoon.

He was not grinning now. His lips were tight and pale. Shane knew he shouldn't, but he had to see more. He gently pulled Ilya's head to his lap, gently slid the helmet away.

Blood pooled inside it. His hand shook and the helmet slipped, pouring red onto the ice.

Shane's hands were in Ilya's hair now. That golden hair. Wet, red. His hands were sticky.

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Shane kept one hand in his hair and moved the other to join Ilya's clenched ones. Before time could resume its normal pace, he squeezed Ilya's hand. Willed him to open his eyes.

"Hey," Shane said.

Snap.

They were surrounded by medics. Shane found himself helping to lift Ilya onto a spineboard, though he didn't know what he was doing. Someone had tried to push him out of the way, but he hadn't gone.

Ilya was heavy. He had always been tall and hulking and had therefore always probably been heavy, but it was a new kind of heaviness. Not the weight Ilya imposed upon Shane in hotel-room hookups late at night, or the stomping heaviness that followed him after a particularly brutal loss. This was Ilya holding none of his own weight at all. Dead weight.

Shane let go. His breathing was getting shorter. Professionals strapped Ilya onto the board, secured his neck, pressed towels to his head. Other players had begun to gather around Shane. Around Ilya, really. Keeping enough distance that the medics could work, but enough closeness that they could see.

Shane was probably too close. He hadn't thought about it at all, that the jumbo-tron could have been following him this whole time, could have seen him place his rival's head in his lap and stroke his hair and hold his hands. Now that he did think about it, he couldn't bring himself to care. That could come later. After.

Well, as long as I'm not caring, he thought, and he gripped one handle of the spineboard lightly, letting himself be dragged on his skates along with Ilya as the medics towed him off the rink and began to roll him out the back door. Probably they wanted him to go away. He could not care.

The ambulance wasn't there yet. Shane hadn't taken off his skates, of course, and he was wearing them on the pavement now, probably ruining the blades. He couldn't make himself let go of the spineboard.

"Hollander?"

Harris was there. Naturally, he would be. He was injured, too, Shane remembered, had been breathing heavily. The thought reminded Shane of his own breathing. That he should breathe. He did, fast, short breaths. He couldn't do much more than that.

"I think it's worse than it looks," Harris said. He sounded shaky. "Head injuries, you know, they bleed a lot."

That was true. Shane clenched and unclenched his hand around the spineboard handle. Ilya's eyes were still closed.

"It was an accident," Harris said.

Obviously, it was an accident. Shane didn't know what the point was of saying it.

"He'll be okay."

It sounded more like a question than a statement. Like Harris was asking Shane for forgiveness. Shane looked up at him then. A bruise was already blossoming on Harris's cheek. He'd been hit harder than Shane realized. Probably got Ilya's elbow to the face while Ilya was getting his helmet off.

But Harris wasn't on a spineboard. Harris was standing up, only slightly hunched, his arm slung around his stomach as though he'd been hit there, too, or maybe for comfort.

Shane looked away. "Yeah."

They didn't let him onto the ambulance. Harris was bundled into a separate one, and Shane stood on the sidewalk in his skates, watching the lights bloom red against the night sky.

Shane slept roughly. He had the same dream of Ilya that he'd had of Renee years ago. Of his eyes open, but not seeing. Empty. He dreamed it again and again, waking up and lapsing back into nightmares, until he finally dragged himself out of it at 5 A.M. and put himself together enough to shower and go to the hospital.

He checked his phone on the way. His Uber had tinted windows and a shade between the driver's side and the backseat, which suited Shane, who felt he was doing something illicit by going to visit Ilya in the hospital, and felt it even more intensely when he saw the tweets he was tagged in. The jumbo-tron did not seem to have captured any of the hubbub, beyond the initial impact, but some onlookers had. There were fuzzy camera-phone photos of Shane kneeling on the ice with Ilya in his lap. It hadn't been long enough for credible news outlets to put together coherent stories, but the tabloids had already begun spinning tales of, at best, sportsmanship, and, at worst, the torrid love affair of two doomed rivals. One outlet quoted an unnamed source: *The Montreal player and his Russian rival have been getting cozy in recent months, a teammate says. Will Ilya's injury spell the end of a romance--*

Shane flicked away from the article. He didn't care about that right now, he just wanted to see if Ilya was *okay*.

A headline jumped out at him.

Boston Player in Critical Condition after On-Ice Impact, it read.

A source inside the hospital tells us that we may not be seeing Ilya Rozanov back on the ice anytime soon, Shane read. *If the Center wakes up--*

Shane's heart hammered in his chest. If. If. If.

The dream of Ilya's dead eyes came back to him. It couldn't be an *if*.

The Uber pulled to a stop. Shane didn't even thank the driver, just tumbled out of the backseat and onto the sidewalk, through the hospital doors, to the front desk.

"Ilya Rozanov," he said before the attendant could even ask what he was there for. "I need to see Ilya Rozanov."

The person behind the desk, a petite woman probably about his mother's age, dressed in pink scrubs with her dark brown hair tucked neatly into a bun, frowned at her computer.

"Relationship to the patient?"

"I, uh--"

Shane didn't know what to say. They weren't related. They weren't even teammates.

"Friend."

She tapped a finger on her keyboard. "Visiting hours start at 6," she said. Shane looked up at the clock behind her. It was 5:30. "But ICU patients are family-only."

"He doesn't have any family," Shane said.

He hadn't really thought about that before. They didn't talk about the loss of Ilya's father

much. They never talked about his brother. But now that he said it aloud, he realized it was true. Ilya was alone here. Shane was all he had.

The woman looked up at him, her eyes softening when she saw his expression. "I'll see what I can do."

Ten minutes later, Shane was being ushered into a room that did not feel private enough. Ilya's bed was curtained in, but he wasn't recovering yet; he was wired to machines and IVs and doctors and attendings were navigating between other beds, around other curtains, efficiently and impersonally.

Shane pulled the curtains tighter, though they were already closed, and sat on the stool beside Ilya's bed.

Ilya was breathing. The machines said so, though Shane couldn't quite see it for himself, beneath all the blankets and wires. He reached out a hand and put it to Ilya's chest, wanting proof.

There it was.

The flutter of a heartbeat.

Shane drew in a deep breath. Relief flooded his lungs.

He'd known Ilya wasn't dead. Had known it on the ice, even while he was panicking, because Ilya's hands were twitching, and his teeth were clenched. His body was still working. And he'd known it later, when he was alone in his room, because if Ilya Rozanov had died, it would have been all over the news. Someone would have told him. And, he would have--well, he would have *known*. Somehow, Shane thought, he would have just known.

Still, there was nothing like the surety of a heartbeat.

He moved his hands down to Ilya's, interlocked them over the Russian's. The stool was on wheels and he rolled it closer so he could press his forehead to their joined hands. A pulse flickered weakly in Ilya's wrist, too, and Shane turned his head so his ear was covering that pulse, like he was listening to the ocean in a seashell, so it was all he could hear.

Twisted like this, he could see Ilya's face. Still drawn and pale, but someone had cleaned up the blood. A bandage obscured some of his hair, which sprang out around the gauze at uneven intervals, the curls uncontrolled.

He wanted to wrap his hands in it, but he didn't want to let go of Ilya's hands. He wished he had more hands.

Shane closed his eyes and listened to Ilya's pulse and breathed along with it. It was a little too slow, but that forced Shane to breathe deeply, and he felt calmer when he opened his eyes again.

"Oh," Shane said.

Ilya's eyes were open, too.

They were not the dead, unseeing things of Shane's nightmares.

They were dazed, flickering, but alive and golden and locked on Shane's.

"Ilya," Shane said.

He let go of Ilya's hands and, carefully, grasped his face instead, wanting to look at the life there, wanting it to swallow him.

"Ilya, Ilya," he said again.

One of Ilya's hands came up and caught Shane's wrist. His grip was weak.

"Is okay," Ilya said thickly.

"Oh, my god, oh my god," Shane said, without really meaning to. He was mumbling other things, too, little gratitudes and platitudes and whatever people said when their not-boyfriends woke up from life-threatening injuries in ICUs. Some *thank yous*, some *god*,

Ilyas.

"Hollander," Ilya said, and his touch ran up Shane's wrist, to his face. He wiped one thumb across Shane's cheek. "Shane."

Shane hadn't realized he was crying until Ilya caught the tears.

"Can you--" Shane started, then realized he didn't know what he was going to ask. Can you kiss me? Can you be mine? Can you just forget, can we both just forget, about the rest of the world now, because this was way too scary and I'm actually so in love with you and if this happens again and I can't be here it will kill me?

Both of Ilya's hands were on his cheeks now, cupping his face, drawing him in. "Yes," Ilya said, though Shane hadn't finished a question. "Whatever you want."

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