pieced together, picture perfect

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pieced together, picture perfect

by MOSTLYVOlD

Summary

It was difficult to wrap her head around the idea that Rozanov—*Ilya*—missed his team flight to drive five hours seemingly for the sole purpose of bringing Yuna the largest bouquet of carnations she had ever seen, but if there was another explanation, it was beyond her.

Notes

delusional ao3 author attempts to shake hyperfixation by telling themself that there's no harm in writing just *one* little fic. I have been in love with all the outsider-POV fics and this is my small contribution to that lovely pool of stories! if I can't shake this, there will be more... (sorry to anyone waiting for a hvoia update....)

not beta read, posted in a rush before work - sorry for any proofing nits! set in November 2017.

thanks for reading!~

As a child, Yuna spent all of November looking forward to her birthday. There were a lot of components that young Yuna thought her parents got wrong about her birthday: the presents (which were never as cool as the gifts her friends got from their parents); the cake (because her mom only ever bought weird, fluffy cakes layered with fresh fruit and not the *right* cakes, the big ones from Dairy Queen that Yuna's friends got for their birthdays); the attention (because her mom and dad always worked on her birthday, like they worked every day).

Young Yuna forgave those flaws because every year, her parents bought out the local community centre rink for a couple of hours and invited all of Yuna's classmates to come. It made Yuna's birthday parties something to look forward to; something that evened the playing field between the Canadian kids and the kids like Yuna (who was Canadian, but not the *right* kind—this, Yuna understood early). On the ice, Yuna belonged.

Many years would pass before Yuna realized how how costly that sense of belonging was—how her parents and grandparents scrimped and saved to make her birthday special, to endear her to her classmates. Learning the price left a bad taste in her mouth. It explained why her presents were boring gifts like new winter boots and jackets instead of brightly-coloured, branded toys; why her parents passed their own birthdays without remark.

As an adult, Yuna's birthday has never been much of an event in their family. Perhaps because it fell during the hockey season; perhaps because part of adulthood was learning to empathize with your parents; perhaps because once she became a parent, she much preferred to spend time, money, and attention on her brilliant son; perhaps because she was too old for rink parties.

Whatever the reason, it was an event that typically passed with little fanfare. If Shane had a home game, they would have a meal before (or after) the game at a spot that met Shane's particular dietary needs. If the Metros were on the road, David took her out for a nice dinner. David bought her a piece of jewellery from a vetted list. Shane gave her a cheque, because a son in the MLH meant that she wanted for nothing (except, of course, a bit more time with said son).

Yuna liked the simplicity and predictability of the occasion; liked that the day was marked by little more than patterns repeated and refined over years. She was not particularly fond of surprises—a lesson David learned the hard way back in their university days, when he threw her a well-intentioned but misguided surprise party at the Alpha Delta Phi frat house that nearly ended their relationship before it had truly begun. It was a lesson Shane never had to learn. For better or for worse, Yuna passed her aversion of surprises onto him.

This year, Yuna's birthday fell in the middle of a Western conference roadtrip for the Metros, so she knew what to expect: breakfast in bed, a dinner at Tanière with David in his good suit, and a not-so-quiet evening on the couch watching Shane's game against San Francisco.

David woke her with a kiss, a doubleshot of espresso, and a tray bearing okayu, miso soup, grilled salmon, tamagoyaki, spinach goma-ae, tsukemono—a tradition begrudgingly passed onto him from Yuna's mother before she passed, once she accepted that he wasn't going anywhere.

Her morning passed as usual—phone calls and emails with sponsors, with Farah, with the folks at ESPN who were working on a documentary about the Metro's back-to-back Cup wins despite the much more recent Admirals victory. Shane phoned at 11, like clockwork, to wish her a happy birthday and, more importantly, dissect the previous afternoon's game against the Hammerheads.

For lunch, David threw together sandwiches that they ate together on the couch, with the recording of last night's Raiders/Guardians game on the TV. Yuna watched raptly, commentating the whole time; David expertly split his attention between Yuna, the TV, and a 1000-piece puzzle of a Tom Thompson painting.

Yuna had always watched a lot of hockey. It was how she filled her days, when she was not managing Shane's career. It was as much research as it was recreation. When the Metros weren't playing, Yuna prioritized games with teams that were leading their conference, or teams that were scheduled to play against the Metros in the near-term.

This season, in an unusual (if explicable) break from pattern, Yuna had started prioritizing Raiders games. Yuna had always kept a close eye on the Raiders, but she tended to favour highlights, analysis, and statistics more than their actual games, because (like any other self-respecting Metros fan) watching them play, watching them *win*, made her blood boil. This summer's revelations did nothing to dampen her disdain for Boston, but they did make Yuna watch every single Raiders game this season.

Not for Boston, of course, but for Rozanov.

Yuna had always followed Rozanov's career. He was the second-best player in the league, after all. But she paid more attention now—to how he played, to how he spoke, to how he acted. Interviews that she used to avoid because she found his arrogance unpalatable were now opportunities for study: not of a rival player, but of the man who held her son's heart in his hands.

Before puck drop, they aired a brief pre-game interview with Rozanov, where he was all sharp smiles, glancing jabs about the quality of the Guardians' first line, and cocky remarks about his place in the scoring race (first, for now, but it was close). Yuna was struck, as always, by the difference between the wild bravado of Rozanov, Captain of the Boston Raiders, and Ilya, the sweet boy who scarfed down pasta like he hadn't eaten in days and shepherded her son through a minefield of emotions that even his parents had never managed to map out armed with nothing but a gentle voice and a steady hand.

Yuna used to believe that the Rozanov on screen was the real one. This belief was undermined by their first meeting this summer and completely shattered by the end of their second encounter. She should have known better. Captain Shane Hollander was practised, self-assured, humble, *perfect*; a persona forged in the crucible of excellence. Her Shane, the real Shane, was complicated: brilliant and timid; focused and anxious; independent and lonely. It stood to reason that Ilya was the same.

When asked by ESPN, for probably the twentieth time since October, what Rozanov credited for his career-best start to a season, Rozanov's face split into the widest smile yet as he said, with a wink to the camera, "I had a good summer. Very restful, if you know what I mean."

David chuckled. Yuna bit down on a grin, reminding herself that she would not have found the same remark charming a season earlier.

Once the puck dropped, Rozanov became familiar again: the same fast, focused, energetic, deadly player that had dogged Shane's footsteps since they burst into the league. He played a physical game, but a clean one—something Yuna admitted less grudgingly now, amidst the cacophony of Metros fans for whom *dirty* and *Raiders* were synonymous. Where Shane's game was technical, Rozanov's was flashy, but to suggest he was style over substance was reductive.

If someone had told Yuna a few months ago that she was going to spend the afternoon of her birthday voluntarily watching the Raiders play, she would have assumed they hit their head. She still wanted Boston to lose every single game, but something dangerously close to *pride* rose in her chest as she watched a slick pass from Rozanov connect to give Boston the lead. She had kept her eye on the score while watching the Metros game the day before so she already knew the Raiders won. She took solace in the fact that they were at least keeping the Guardians out of the race.

The doorbell chimed midway through the second period—a break in her perfectly planned peace. Yuna rose to answer, waving off David's insistence (a beat too late) that he would take care of it. He had spent the last fifteen minutes obsessing over finding the last edge piece lost in the sea of red and orange foliage, and Yuna knew it would take him at least another fifteen minutes if he was interrupted. She was sparing herself, really.

Yuna did not glance through the peephole before opening the door, still racking her brain for what they had ordered recently that might be delivered on a Sunday.

"Hel—Ilya?"

Yuna blinked twice, as if the six-foot-something Russian might have been a trick of the light. He wasn't. No, Ilya was here, at their home in Ottawa, wearing a fitted black turtleneck under a jacket that looked too light for the weather, radiating an energy so anxious it would have given Shane a run for his money, and holding a bouquet wider than his torso.

"Ah, hello," Ilya said, discomfort lacing his voice. "Sorry for, uh, dropping by. Shane mentioned it is your birthday. So - uh. Happy birthday."

"You..." Yuna trailed off, staring blankly between the beautifully arranged flowers, the twitching fingers gripping the stems, the tiny, crooked smile, and the sleek, black rental car parked in the driveway. "You drove here?"

The barely-there smile dimmed, and Ilya shuffled nervously, looking everything like the man who hovered a step behind Shane in the entryway of their cottage this summer and nothing like the arrogant superstar on her screen. "I probably should have texted."

"Aren't you playing in Buffalo tomorrow?"

Yuna knew, somewhere in her mind, that she was being rude; that the flowers (all carnations, in reds and oranges and yellows, some bewitching hybrids of swirling fall colours) were for

her; that she should have invited Ilya in out of the cold already, especially since he had not thought to dress appropriately for the sub-zero chill; that this was a lovely gesture and not a surprise calculated to upend what was supposed to be a perfectly predictable birthday.

Ilya nodded. "I have flight this afternoon. From Ottawa."

It was difficult to wrap her head around the idea that Rozanov—*Ilya*—missed his team flight to drive five hours seemingly for the sole purpose of bringing Yuna the largest bouquet of carnations she had ever seen, but if there was another explanation, it was beyond her.

Ilya glanced back at his rental car like he was thinking of making a run for it, and Yuna pushed through her disorientation to ask, "Can you stay for lunch? David and I already ate, but we have some extra sandwich fixings."

"No, no, I don't want to intrude," Ilya said, shaking his head. He was betrayed a moment later by the audible grumbling of his stomach.

They both started laughing, and it broke the tension enough that Yuna stepped aside. "You're not intruding. It's good to see you. Come in, please. I can take those. They're beautiful."

After a moment's hesitation, Ilya's shy smile returned and he nodded, passing her the hefty bouquet and leaving his shoes on the mat without having to be asked. Yuna heard herself fawning over the flowers as she led him down the hall only half-consciously, while the rest of her mind tried to process how *surreal* the whole thing was.

David, as ever, was her rock: whatever shock he might have felt seeing Ilya trailing Yuna into their living room was quickly shuttered behind a wide, genuine grin. "Ilya! I feel like I'm seeing double."

Ilya's brow furrowed for a moment, and then again when his gaze landed on the screen and his eyebrows escaped into his hairline. "You are watching my game?"

Yuna took the opportunity to slip into the kitchen, placing the bouquet on the counter while she fished through the fridge for sandwich ingredients. Her eyes kept wandering back to the autumnal blooms that would not have looked out of place in David's puzzle. Carnations had always been her favourite. Had Ilya known that? It seemed unlikely—she doubted Shane knew. He didn't pay attention to that sort of thing.

"Yeah, we missed it last night. You've had an incredible start to the season," David said easily. "Hope you don't mind watching yourself play?"

"How could I not enjoy watching best player in the league?" Ilya said with an impish grin.

"Second best," Yuna said instinctively. When she glanced at Ilya for his reaction, she was met with a blinding smile and the visible loosening of Ilya's shoulders.

"Yuna Hollander thinks I am second best player in the league? This is greatest honour. Better than Conn Smythe."

Something about his tone—light, joking, but unmistakably delighted—made her think he meant it. Perhaps she really had spent too much time watching his interviews this season. Either that, or Yuna had succumbed to his charms.

"Does this mean you were cheering for Raiders?" he added, like he could not help himself, and Yuna soundly ruled out the latter possibility.

"Not a chance," Yuna said, at the same time David said, "Of course."

"David!" Yuna half-shouted, nearly knocking the mustard off the counter with a stray, flailing elbow, while Ilya made a sound that could only be described as a giggle. "Absolutely not!"

"Oops," David said, with a cheeky grin and a wink. "Do you like puzzles, Ilya? I could use an extra pair of hands."

It was a graceless pivot in the face of Yuna's impending fury, one so ridiculous that it almost won him an unwilling laugh. But just as she opened her mouth to tell him to *leave the boy alone, David*, Ilya finally crossed further into the room (steps still small, tentative, nothing like the confident strides of the skater who was racing down the ice on the screen) and lowered himself onto the couch, where David was patting the cushion next to him.

"Yes. When I was younger, I used to do puzzles after school. Though it has been many years," he admitted, softly, and Yuna's words caught in her throat as she watched Ilya study the pieces. After a moment, he snagged one off the table. "I think this is your missing edge piece, yes?"

David made a delighted noise and clapped him on the back, and just like that, Ilya Rozanov and her husband were hunched intensely over her coffee table, sorting bits of cardboard by colour.

Yuna shifted her attention back to the sandwiches because her heart was beginning to feel too large for her chest. Feeding Ilya was, she had learned, a simple task. Yuna never minded Shane's particularity, but there was something rewarding about seeing Ilya scarf down anything put in front of him with a wide grin and a polite request for seconds. She laid out a couple extra slices of bread in case he was extra hungry. If not, he could always have them on the flight.

The commercial flight, her brain supplied, *which he is taking because he drove here from Toronto. On a travel day.*

Sandwiches assembled and sliced diagonally, Yuna raised her head to see both David and Ilya still staring intensely at the pieces scattered across the table, matching furrows in their brows. She surreptitiously pulled out her phone, snapped a photo, and sent it to Shane.

Yuna: *You should have warned me Ilya likes puzzles. I am outnumbered.*

It occurred to her, the moment she hit send, that Shane probably did not know that Ilya was here. He would have almost certainly mentioned it on their call this morning, if he had. Shane

did not respond immediately, and a glance at the time confirmed he was probably still at morning skate.

Ilya received the sandwiches with profuse appreciation and obvious hunger, demolishing one half in three large bites that were almost certainly not chewed enough. He groaned happily around the mouthful and gave her two thumbs up that made him look younger than his years, before turning back to the puzzle with another half-sandwich held aloft.

Yuna shifted her focus back to the game (which the Guardians must have tied late in the second period) as she unwrapped the bouquet and trimmed the stems just in time to watch Ryan Price smash Ilya hard into the boards, giving Barrett the chance to steal the puck and make a beeline towards the other end of the ice for an unsuccessful shot on goal.

"Ouch. Have your ribs even recovered from last season?" Yuna asked, as the camera panned back to Ilya, slow to rise but waving off the ref after the stoppage. Once he was upright and skating towards the bench, arm wrapped around his midsection, the broadcast replayed the hit from several angles.

"Eh, looks worse on camera. I was mostly...struggling to breath?" Ilya asked, gesturing as if to grasp a word just out of reach.

"Winded?" David suggested.

"Winded, yes. Price is a good guy. He was just making sure I was awake so I could score goal."

Sure enough, the next time Ilya stepped on the ice, he stole the puck from Kent after a hard, clean check, wove through the Guardians' defence like they weren't even playing the same damn sport, and faked out Hayes to slot the puck into the net. His linemates piled on him and when he emerged, he skated past the Guardians' bench to blow Price a kiss. Price raised a glove to cover his mouth, and Yuna could have sworn he was *laughing*. Kent, meanwhile, broke his stick against the boards.

By the time the flowers were arranged in a vase that just barely contained them, it was 3-1 for Boston with only three minutes remaining, thanks to a sloppy Guardians penalty, and Yuna knew from the final score that Boston managed to hold the lead through the end of the game. She found her gaze lingering on the puzzle instead, on the way Ilya let one hand trail over the pieces like he might intuit their intended location, where David's fingers only touched a piece when he had already figured out its spot.

It was strange how the image of Ilya in their living room—something that, a year ago, might have occurred only in Yuna's stress dreams—was almost *natural*. With the season in full swing, she had not really had the chance to see him yet, except on screen and on ice. The Raiders had played in Montreal already this season, but they did not see him then. No, Yuna wanted to organize a *family dinner*, but Ilya had to fly out that same evening and David gently reminded her that their entire relationship was composed of minutes and hours scavenged back from their unforgiving schedule, and that they deserved the night alone.

This was the first time she had ever seen him in person, without Shane. It should have been jarring. Instead, Ilya looked like he belonged there, on their couch, giving commentary on the last few minutes of the game like he had no clue how it ended, making the same excited little noises as David when he found an important piece, and shovelling back sandwiches with the enthusiasm of a teenager.

Yuna's eyes drifted to the sideboard behind their couch, to the framed photograph that had sat there for almost a decade now. An image she could have recreated from memory; a memory that David would not have faulted her for saying was her happiest (their wedding was a close second). In the centre of it was Ilya—*Rozanov*, as he was to her then—with a blinding smile, a Raiders jersey, and his shoulder pressed against Shane's. And there Shane was, holding the jersey of a team he would give his life to, bearing the tight, picture-perfect smile that he had trained himself to pull out when faced with a camera. She remembered thinking at the time that Rozanov looked so much older than Shane, whose baby fat still clung to his cheeks and who still would not partake of a celebratory beer at home because *it wasn't legal yet*.

Looking back, they were both impossibly young, with impossible futures ahead of them. Perhaps it was only natural that they lived those futures out together. Perhaps that was why Ilya looked so at home in their living room—a small part of him had been there all along.

Her phone buzzed several times in quick succession.

Shane: *????????*

Shane: *What's happening*

Shane: *Is this your house??*

Shane: *What is he doing there????*

Shane: *How did he get there??*

Shane: *He's supposed to be in fucking Buffalo.*

Shane: *Mom????*

Yuna does not have enough time to begin typing out a response before another phone starts buzzing from across the room. Ilya fished his phone from his pocket, not fully looking away from the puzzle to glance down at his notifications. His lips curled up at the edges and he clicked the screen off, placing it down on the table next to him.

"You tattled on me," Ilya said, sounding closer to delighted than upset. "Now I am in trouble."

Several more successive notifications lit up Ilya's screen while Yuna typed out her reply, and he diligently ignored them in favour of slotting a piece into place that connected two segments they had built up.

Yuna: *Be nice to him. He brought me my favourite flowers. [photo attached]*

A moment later, Ilya's phone began to buzz continuously. He let out a long-suffering sigh that was betrayed by the fond smile, and betrayed again by the softness of his tone when he answered on the final ring.

"Hello, *moy lyubimyy*. How was practice?"

If she had not already known it was Shane calling, the brisk, agitated tone would have given him away, even without being able to make out the words he was saying. Ilya leaned back against the couch cushions, puzzle forgotten, with a goofy smile on his face.

"You should not worry about me missing games. How else will you catch up in the scoring race?"

David snorted, and Yuna groaned as the audible agitation on the other end of the line elevated.

"David and I are working on a puzzle. Do you know when they started making pieces with such strange shapes? I do not know what was wrong with ordinary puzzle pieces."

"This is what I've been saying," David agreed enthusiastically, holding up what must have been a particularly offensive specimen. Ilya recoiled at the sight of it.

A moment later, Ilya's grin froze and then fell, almost imperceptibly. "No, no. No one saw me. I was careful."

With a lurch in her stomach, Yuna wondered, not for the first time, if the secrecy was sustainable. If those stolen minutes, hours, days, weeks were enough, or if the distance, the time, the league, the fans, would all become too much. Even the two bravest, strongest, stubbornest young men in the world could surely only take so much.

Whatever Shane said next made Ilya glance over at Yuna with that same shy smile he wore when she first opened the door to find him on her doorstep. "Lucky guess. Carnations were my mother's favourite, too."

Another piece slotted into place for Yuna, like the missing edge piece David was fussing over; like the photo from the draft. A sweet, kind boy raised by a loving mother he lost too young. A child who had to learn to be someone else, because the world left for him in the wake of his mother's passing was intolerant of what it saw as weakness. Someone for whom *home* lost all sense of love, warmth, or safety, and became an icy tundra of duty and despair. But all the world's cruelties could not truly displace the sweet, kind boy who did puzzles after school and remembered his mother's favourite flowers.

Ilya wrapped up call with a promise not to miss his flight and some Russian words mumbled with a tenderness that rendered translation superfluous. After hanging up, he stared down at the screen for a moment longer (at the contact card that still read *Jane*), lips still curled at the edges and gaze still soft, before clearing his throat.

"I should go. Shane gets nervous when I fly commercial," Ilya said, in an unconvincing imitation of a beleaguered spouse.

Ilya washed his plate over Yuna's objections but let Yuna wrap up the remaining sandwiches without protest. At Ilya's request, David promised to send Ilya a photo of the completed puzzle. Despite Yuna's protestations, Ilya promised to score a hat trick against Buffalo for her. They walked him to the door, Yuna holding the sandwiches while Ilya tugged on his shoes without retying the laces.

It was as strange to see him go as it was to see him on their doorstep, just an hour earlier. As she opened the door for him, Yuna said, "Thank you for visiting, and for the flowers. It was very sweet of you."

"You're always welcome here," David added, and she hoped that Ilya knew this was not mere courtesy: that whatever their initial reaction to his and Shane's relationship was, however much of their past was a mystery to them, they understood the most important part—Shane and Ilya loved each other.

Before Yuna could second guess herself, she reached around his shoulders to pull him into a tight hug. He stilled for only a moment before returning the embrace with the force of someone who needed it more than he ever would have admitted. Just for that, she held on longer, until his breathing became unsteady and her eyes began to sting. The moment she released him, David swept him into a second rib-crushing hug, and she watched as Ilya repeated the process of relaxing into his grip.

If Ilya was a little misty-eyed when they separated, it went unmentioned. Glass houses, and all that.

"We'll see you at Christmas, yes?" Yuna asked, clearing her throat. "Lucky that you're playing in Montreal on the 23rd."

Ilya blinked at her, eyes clearing. "Oh. Um. I don't know. Shane and I haven't talked about it."

"Oh, Shane," Yuna groaned, mostly to herself, and David shook his head. She reached up to place her hands on Ilya's shoulders and said, with certainty, "We will see you at Christmas, Ilya."

"OK. Yes. I will see you then. Thank you. I hope you have a good birthday."

With that, Ilya stepped back out their doorway. Her and David stayed on the threshold as Ilya got into the rental car with a wave; they stayed as he backed out of their driveway; they stayed to watch the vehicle pull down the road; they stayed a little long, after he turned the corner and disappeared into the city beyond.

"That was a nice surprise," David said cautiously, eyeing Yuna as he spoke.

"Yes. Yes, it really was."

Back in the living room, the carnations perked up and unfurled with the first sips of fresh water, and when Yuna placed the vase on the sideboard next to the image from the draft, it too looked like it belonged.

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