What is hell? I maintain as follows:

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by doctorenterprise

Summary

Shane remembers Ilya telling him once that hell is the suffering of being unable to love anymore, and Shane hadn't understood that then. He couldn't imagine being unable to love, because they were freshly married and blindingly happy and there was no force in the world that could take it away.

But Shane thinks he gets it now, as he thinks about that grey December afternoon and beautiful blond boy in a toque with no one to love and no one to love him. That's hell, he thinks. That's hell, and he can barely speak around the swell of emotion in his throat, around the grief he feels at having held Ilya's young hand for only a moment, for how he can never go back and hold him like he deserves to be held.

They're out - they've *been* out - and Shane can hardly stand it sometimes, how fucking good it feels to see Ilya enter a crowded room and meet his eyes and not feel that cold shock of terror zip down his spine. How plainly he can show love on his face after a decade of closed doors and frantic, not-enough stolen moments and being too terrified to let even his phone know he loves Ilya Rozanov. How he can reach out and tangle fingers with the love of his life and this new world they live in doesn't try to cave in, or make them leave it, or make them leave each other.

It drives him out of his mind daily, thinking about the life they lived together - apart, too fucking apart - for nearly ten years. Sometimes he looks at the slope of Ilya's shoulders peeking out of a dark cotton tank top on their couch or the point of his toes tapping Shane's across the space between their chairs or the soft swirl of golden curls darkened in the shower they designed together. Sometimes he looks at those things and his chest wells so full of love he feels like he might burst. Sometimes he looks at those things and feels like he might burst, yeah, but it's not what drives him crazy.

What drives him crazy is the memory of baby-rounded cheeks outside a rink in the prairies in 2008, in the dead of a bitterly cold winter, his first look at the face that would wallpaper his twenties, his whole life. Pinked by the wind, softened by youth, eyes sharp with interest but not familiarity, not yet. Eyes so icy grey they could have been carved from the pavement beneath their feet. A cigarette dangling from lips Shane hasn't felt yet, but thinks about for months after.

It's the cheeks, though, when he really considers it. Ilya's eyes are the same, still that same ice-cold grey, but softened around the edges by love and warmth and *being loved*. His lips are the same too, still full and pink, and they still stick in Shane's mind like a very lovely thorn, all these years later.

The cheeks, though. Soft and round, like a child on the brink of manhood, pink from the wind and maybe a blush - although Shane knows, he's heard it a thousand times, Russians do not blush, even though Shane's seen it happen a hundred different ways. They're different now, sharper and angled in a way that makes air stick in Shane's chest every time the light catches Ilya's perfect cheekbones *just so*. Shane knows the world looks at Ilya Rozanov, a study in curls and cheekbones and mouthwatering iliac furrows, and sees someone dangerous and hot.

Shane looks and sees a mouth softened with warmth, a divot between pecs that holds the dangling gold remnants of the only other soul who ever loved Ilya more than Shane does now. He sees a scar low on a golden stomach where doctors took Ilya's appendix three years ago while Shane waited alone and terrified in Ilya's Boston penthouse, feeling like a bird in a cage he built for himself. He sees calloused feet, scarred and blistered and worth millions of dollars.

And he sees those cheeks. Shane's life is a montage, or a flipbook of all his greatest hits, all still life images of Ilya Rozanov's beautiful face growing thinner and stronger and sharper with age right before Shane's eyes. It drives him crazy.

Sometimes he thinks he's at peace with it all, the years that passed them by and the youth and time and fear they wasted. He doesn't feel old, really. They're both thirty-one, they both have many years of hockey and their life together ahead of them. But he thinks about those soft cheeks on Ilya's seventeen year old face and he knows he will never forgive himself for the years he spent looking at Ilya as anything but the other half of his soul.

What he wouldn't give to go back, to stretch his hand out to the beautiful, pink-faced boy lighting a cigarette against the chill of a Saskatchewan wind in December and tell him he loves him. Too many years passed between that moment and their tearful, overdue profession of love at the cottage. Too many years where it was true and unsaid and only thought about with panic, or denial, or the desire for it to stop.

Years ago, a gentle soul stood in the cold with no one to love him, and Shane didn't fix it for far too long.

It drives him crazy.

It keeps him up at night, often, just like it does tonight. The house is dark, and Ilya is asleep beside him in their bed, one they've shared every single night for a year now - thank god, thank anyone, thank *everyone* - and Shane watches him like he still can't believe it.

He can't, not in moments like this when Ilya is still and peaceful and relaxed in a way that makes Shane's chest ache with love. It feels like a cosmic joke that Shane has ended up here, loved and in love, with someone who eases every ache that's ever settled itself in his mind, heart, and body. He doesn't feel special enough for a gift like this - he's already been given

hockey on a scale few have ever experienced, so it makes no sense at all that he should be gifted this life too.

He watches the slow rise and fall of Ilya's chest as he breathes, reaches out to straighten the crucifix that's slipped over his shoulder and settles it back where it belongs on Ilya's sternum. He follows the line of Ilya's linea alba to the left hand splayed open just above the elastic of his briefs. He sees the other piece of jewellery that hasn't left Ilya's body since it went on - the carbon and gold wedding band Shane gave him all too recently.

It looks good there, and Shane wishes he'd slipped it onto Ilya's hand the moment they met. Let it stay there forever, let his body grow and absorb it like a tree devouring a sign that's been nailed to its trunk for too long. Edaphoecotropism, he thinks. He read about it once.

Shane rolls carefully onto his side, doesn't jostle the bed for fear of waking his sweet, sleeping lover. He's grown used to the word now, for how Ilya uses it to introduce Shane to literally everyone they meet. It was a joke when he started, a few years ago now, but it's not anymore. It's true, Shane thinks. They are lovers, and it's not gross at all. This is the word that Ilya first used to describe them, and Shane has grown to love it like it's precious. They are in love, and they make love, and they give and receive love constantly.

That day in his parents' cottage, it had made him shudder. Today, all he can think about is how Ilya needed a word to express how he felt and chose the first one his Russian-language mind had hooked onto that encompassed love and intimacy and tenderness. His eyes burn, and Shane traces the black band around his husband's finger until he can't see it for the tears.

Ilya's breathing holds him to earth, the soft in and out of air through a thrice-broken nose, the gentle ebb and flow of Shane's favourite body keeping itself alive beside him. He can't take it anymore, he can't take just watching and listening, so he touches too. Gently, tenderly, he traces the sharp angle of Ilya's upper lip, thumbs over the angle of a nose Michelangelo would weep for, sinks his fingers into the curls that have coloured every dream in Shane's unconscious mind for a dozen years.

He rolls closer and presses a kiss against Ilya's sleep-lax lips, breathes in his warm, spicy bodywash, feels their skin brush together in a way that quiets the constant buzz in his mind that makes bright lights and scratchy fabrics and loud sounds unbearable most days.

“I love you,” he whispers into the dark, into Ilya’s skin. He wishes he was smarter, or more poetic, or more cultured. Maybe then he’d have the words to tell Ilya how deeply he feels, how full his chest and heart and mind are with love. It feels bigger than a simple *I love you*. “I love you, I love you.”

It’s not *enough*.

“Ilya,” Shane begs, and it feels urgent. He feels crazy, but his chest is too full of love and he might burst right here, right beside the body and mind where the love belongs, and he might not get to put it there before he does. So he shakes the body that holds his entire life, desperate in a way he knows he’s not eloquent enough to explain. “Ilya, wake up. Wake up, please. Please.”

“Moya lyubov'?”

Yes, Shane thinks. Yes, my love. Yes, I love you, please wake up. I need to tell you.

“Ilya,” he says, and he knows he looks insane. He knows, because Ilya is awake now, and he’s frantic in the way his hands run over Shane’s body as if he might be hurt or dying. Shane can’t even focus, can’t calm down enough to not incite panic and fear. Shane feels panicked, like he might never be able to make Ilya understand. “Ilya, please, *please*.”

“Dusha moya, are you hurt? Is it - emergency? Are you hurt?”

Shane gasps, and his chest is still full to bursting. His eyes burn against tears, but he can’t wipe them away. He can’t, because he can’t let go of Ilya’s face - no, he can’t do that. He has to hold on, he has to remember the feel of this face in his hands, has to carve it into his mind so he can never forget it, never.

“I love you,” he says, and it’s pathetic. It’s a fraction of a percentage of a sliver of how he feels, of how his soul feels like it’s opened a hole in its shell and sucked Ilya’s up inside of it. “I love you, Ilya. I love you.”

“You are scaring me, Hollander,” Ilya says, and his voice twists Shane up inside for how terrified he sounds, for how much pain and fear and worry he’s unloading into Ilya’s heart when he wants to pour love into it. “Hey. Hey, you are safe. I love you, you are okay here.”

He’s not - he’s not - he has to -

“No - no, I need to tell you,” he says, and he’s weeping now, he can feel the hot drip of tears off his chin where they are dropping onto Ilya’s bare chest. “I feel - it’s - I think it’s…I feel grief, Ilya. I love you. You are - everything to me. Everything.”

“Grief? No, no,” Ilya tells him, and Shane can feel those sloping cheeks under his palms, can feel the gentle lines at the edges of Ilya’s beautiful eyes. “No grief, dusha moya, no grief here. I love you.”

It’s not enough, it’s not enough. Ilya doesn’t get it, does he? How could he, when Shane is just a man, just a normal guy, just a hockey player? Shane isn’t a poet or a musician or a writer. And he knows Ilya has more words for love and the depth of their feelings for each other, because Ilya grew up with a mother who read him stories by the Russian greats, who taught him about love in a way that puts words to emotions in ways that Shane’s parents didn’t.

Shane’s parents love him, they love him so much it is glaringly obvious in every memory of his childhood. But they love with *action* - they pack him snacks for home games even now, show up unannounced for no reason besides missing him, they kiss him sweetly on the forehead when he’s sick or hurt or sad.

It’s another language Ilya doesn’t speak fluently, the way Shane’s parents love. Shane needs *words* this time. He needs to love Ilya the way Ilya knows how to be loved. Ilya, whose mother probably loved him like Shane’s parents do too, but he couldn’t carry that with him in anything but a memory, could he? Not like he can carry a book by Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky or Pushkin, a physical reminder of how his mother loved him as a child.

Shane remembers Ilya telling him once that hell is the suffering of being unable to love anymore, and Shane hadn’t understood that then. He couldn’t imagine being unable to love, because they were freshly married and blindingly happy and there was no force in the world that could take it away.

But Shane thinks he gets it now, as he thinks about that grey December afternoon and beautiful blond boy in a toque with no one to love and no one to love him. That's hell, he thinks. That's hell, and he can barely speak around the swell of emotion in his throat, around the grief he feels at having held Ilya's young hand for only a moment, for how he can never go back and hold him like he deserves to be held.

"Come here," Shane says, shaky and weak with emotion. Ilya goes easily, lets himself be scooped and cradled against Shane's body. It's not enough, it's not enough. He presses a kiss to Ilya's forehead like his parents do when he's sick or hurt or sad. "I love you."

"Yes," Ilya says, because Shane has told him this a thousand times. There's no doubt, of course. But Ilya doesn't know how much, because Shane doesn't have enough words for it. "I love you also, you know. We have rings for proof."

They do - they do have rings, it is proof. That helps a little, Shane thinks. There's something about a ring around each of their fingers that helps settle him a bit, that adds depth and significance and permanence that Shane doesn't have words for. The rings help, but it's not enough.

"I'm sorry," Shane tells him, and Ilya smiles. It's soft and so sweet and no one else has ever seen a smile like this on Ilya's face before, Shane knows this. It's for them, this private gentleness. "I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Is okay. You are so beautiful, how could I be mad?"

That's it, Shane thinks. He doesn't know how Ilya can do that. A few simple, sweet words and Shane feels so filled up with love that he might die. There's no doubting the loudness or purity or profoundness of Ilya's love for him, even when the words are so simple. And yet Shane feels like he could speak constantly for the rest of his life and still not spit out enough words to bring life to the love brimming inside of him.

"Can I try to tell you something?" he asks, and Ilya's eyes are soft and warm. They were icy cold once, that day they first met, but Shane's never seen them like that again. He thinks it

must have been that they didn't know love yet, or that they'd forgotten it and Shane hadn't reminded him. "I'm not good at explaining this, but I have to try. You have to know."

Ilya nods, and Shane breathes in deep and slow. He has to get this right. Ilya has to know.

"I love you," he starts, and the lingering tenseness in Ilya's face dissolves. That helps too, that hearing about Shane's love is enough to ease worry and fear and pain from Ilya's mind. "I love you so much that sometimes I can't keep it inside my body. I feel like I might burst open and the whole room will fill up with how much I love you. And I'm ashamed, I think. Of how it took me so long to admit it to myself, and to you, but to the world too. I'm ashamed of how long I made you wait and worry that I didn't love you enough to tell anyone."

"Is not your fault," Ilya reminds him, because they've had that talk more than once. "We made a decision together. Love was still there, even in secret."

"It was. It always was. But sometimes I think about the day we met, and how you were so young. We both were, but you were young and alone. And I didn't love you then but I love you now. I wish I could go back to that day sometimes, you know? I want to go back there and take that cigarette out of your mouth and hold you so tight you can't breathe. Or I would go back to that press conference we had together on draft day and tell the world how much I love you. It was so many years, Ilya. So many years of loving you, but I was too afraid to say it."

"I think you are pretty good at this," Ilya tells him with a wet laugh. He's crying a little, but Shane is too. It's still not enough. Shane's not doing this right, and it's frustrating as hell to be held back by his own sheer awkwardness and hockey-centric vocabulary. "See? We are both crying because of too much love."

"It's not too much," Shane argues. "It's barely enough, Ilya. I feel like I could tell you twice every second that I love you and it still wouldn't be enough. I lived so many years thinking I was a complete person on my own, but it's not true. I am half a person without you. Half the world is dark and cold and just - *gone,* without you. Do you understand what I mean? I can't explain it, I don't know how to say it right. I love you, but that doesn't feel like enough words."

“You are doing good job, moy lyubovnik. Very good job. My heart is very full.”

Good, Shane thinks. Good, that’s good. Shane would like to fill Ilya’s whole entire body with love, but his heart is a good start. He’ll keep pouring and Ilya will keep filling up and one day, eventually, he’ll be full to the brim with Shane’s love just like Shane feels full to bursting with Ilya’s.

“I think about your mother a lot,” Shane tells him, and it’s gentle because Ilya always feels fragile in Shane’s hands when they talk about his mother. He wonders if Ilya feels fragile like this when he talks about Shane too. He thinks that he and Irina are the only people who have ever loved Ilya like this, and who he has loved back like he does. “I think a lot about the five years you were alone between us, too. I wish I could go back there, to that day in Saskatchewan when I saw you for the first time. I wish I could go there and tell you I love you right away so you don’t have to wonder for years. And I think about how you talk about her, about how you talk about me too. It’s the same, I think. Being loved by you is the best prize I’ve ever won, Ilya. Does this make sense?”

“Yes.” That’s all, that’s enough. Ilya is quiet, but Shane can’t be. He’s still bursting, he still has so much inside that he needs to pour into Ilya’s sweet, gentle soul tonight.

“And I think about how you are so good at loving me,” he admits, and Ilya’s face is so open and soft in the glow of Shane’s bedside lamp. He looks so beautiful in warm, low light. Golden, like an angel. “I know you get frustrated sometimes at having to translate everything you feel into English. And I feel it too, because you have to hear my love through translation too, and I don’t ever want anything to get lost, you know? Sometimes I feel like I should put you in a shrine and worship at the altar for it so you’ll know how much I love you without words.”

“This is bit dramatic, no?”

“No. You hold my entire world together in your hands, Ilya,” Shane tells him. It’s true. Shane has considered more than once that Ilya’s hands might be a bit like religion. Everything Shane has ever believed sits in those palms - love and hockey and tenderness and devotion, all kept folded neat and careful inside Ilya’s loving hands. “I feel so safe in your hands. I hope you feel safe in mine, because I love you in ways I will never be able to explain enough.”

He thinks that might be enough for today, enough for how Ilya's eyes are leaking at the corners, enough for how he has a palm flat against his own heart like it aches from the stretch now that Shane has poured some of his love inside it. It's not everything, but he can see in Ilya's face that he's said the right words to make Ilya understand at least a little bit of his love tonight.

"Okay?" he asks, because they've been at this for over a decade now. He's picked up Ilya's habits like Ilya's picked up his. So he always asks, he always makes sure Ilya is okay now, because Ilya has always made sure Shane is okay. It's the same way Ilya says *hey, hey…* when Shane cries, or how Shane carefully folds sweaters but hangs jackets because Ilya is careful with his clothes, or how Ilya is the stockboy self-assigned to maintaining the rink's ginger ale supply these days. It's a life lived and loved together.

"Okay," Ilya tells him, and he tilts his beautiful head up for a kiss. Shane gives it easily, presses in for a long, slow kiss that he feels down to his toes. Their faces are both wet and they are both a bit sniffly, but it feels so good anyway. "I feel I am very lucky, Shane Hollander. Being loved by you is very special."

"You *are* special."

"Da," Ilya smiles. "We are both so special, and so loved. Do not feel bad that you could not love me when we were children, moya lyubov'. I am happy knowing we will love each other until we die. We are not lonely anymore."

Yes, they will and no, they aren't. Maybe there's no use mourning the years Ilya spent alone and unloved, because Shane was out there waiting to love him. They got there as fast as they could. Maybe it's okay they couldn't say it right away, or to the world for a while. Ilya's right, the love was always there, even in secret. And Shane loves him loudly now, and forever. It feels a bit like a prayer, the way Shane can count on this with levels of faith he's never had for anything before, not even hockey. There's no doubt, and he thinks Ilya knows that now.

He looks down at the sharp angles of Ilya's cheeks, long void of their babyish roundness, and sees the flipbook in his mind as they sharpened over the years. It doesn't stop on Ilya's face of today this time. No, it flips on and on and on, and Shane sees those cheeks in ten years,

twenty, thirty. He sees weathered skin and greying stubble and creases at Ilya's beautiful dimples. The baby-faced roundness is gone, yes, but there are decades of this face left for Shane to love him through.

That, Shane thinks, might be enough.

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