have I found you, flightless bird?

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by clockworkaim

Summary

Shane Hollander has wings. Ilya Rozanov loves him. There's no 'despite' about it.

Wings as a metaphor for autism. Because. Fuck it.

Or

The mortifying ordeal of letting the people who love you care.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

2010

Shane winced as his wings expanded and stretched – he let them flare wide as he finally shed his harness. It had been a long day. A very long day. He knew he shouldn't be up here, visible on the rooftop. But he'd just won Rookie of the Year, he'd just beat Ilya Rozanov, and goddamn it he was maybe a little tipsy.

And his wings were so itchy. They'd been particularly bad all day, it'd been a bit too long since he'd been home to see his parents, since he'd sat on their living room floor and spread them until their tips knocked the lights and let him Mom comb through and oil them while they yelled at Jeopardy together. Mom had Dad to do it every week, like he was meant to. Shane just had those few weekends he could spare the time to make the drive to his parents' house.

Nobody else could know. He'd considered, for half a second at the start of the season, asking one of the other rookies to help. But none of them could be trusted to keep his secret, not to blab about their rare siting to anyone. Even Hayden couldn't be trusted to keep his mouth shut. He'd got a new girlfriend during training camp, Jackie, who he told literally everything. It was sweet. But Shane couldn't trust anybody. Nobody could know.

So, his wings had become tangled, old feathers half falling off and new feathers still in their sheaths. His muscles screamed whenever he took his harness off – so he'd started keeping it on longer.

It was comforting almost, the pressure, feeling them pinned tight to his back, under all his clothes. Like a tight hug through the day. He knew he should spend as long with his wings free as possible, but halfway through his first season he'd started sleeping in the harness too – let himself wake up imagining he was flightless, normal.

He looked back at his wings now, the jet black-blue expanse shimmering behind him – let them reach high, catch most of the wind in the high Vegas sky. Ignored the spasms at the base of his back. It had been too long this time. More than a week. He'd been keeping them bound, even when he showered.

Mom would kill him if she knew.

They were ugly. Dry and falling apart, Shane could see hints of bleeding skin peeking through the bald patches where the straps chaffed.

He was used to the pain; the ache was familiar. He'd been keeping this close to his chest – his wings close to his back, since he'd learnt to walk. His Mom had a box in the attic filled with tiny vests and harnesses, up to the one he'd grown out of when he'd finally got his flight feathers at 16. A late bloomer as ever.

Grandma had a similar box of his mom's at the top of her closet – Shane remembered parading around in harnesses too big for him, wondering when he'd fill them out.

He'd more than filled them out – his wings were the biggest in the family, longer even than Uncle Tony's – and he was a good few inches taller than Shane. Family Christmas was always a house full of fallen feathers and easy laughter – one of the few days a year they saw anyone else with wings. They were rare, not unheard of, but singular enough. In Japanese tradition they would still be considered strange, but there they were a blessing – that was a blessed house. Grandma told stories of flying free in her youth, wings unrestrained and wind in her hair.

In America, now, they were bad luck. Very bad luck.

Shane had been hiding his wings his whole life – but never more than when he started playing hockey. No team would take a flighted player – too bad for morale, too easy a target on the back.

Shane had played up a year – let the bigger jerseys swallow his already small frame and hunched his shoulders. Still the other boys had noticed – made fun of his posture, his baggy clothes. He'd begged and begged his mom to let him tighten his harness tighter, to get a newer, top of the line model. She'd shown him articles citing the restriction in growth, the muscle wasting, permanent feather loss. He hadn't cared. He'd just wanted to be the same as everyone else. Maybe he could never shower with the rest of his team, but he could wear the same clothes, swagger the same walk, cut the same silhouette.

Now he lived alone, in a new city, he had the best, most restrictive harness money could buy. And it was good. He'd ordered it online, under a fake name, the minute he'd got his signing bonus. And he'd barely taken it off since.

The smell of smoke and footsteps forced him to turn away from the Vegas skyline. The silhouette of another man was facing away from him, cigarette glowing. Golden curls highlighted by the embers of sunset.

Shit.

He folded his wings as quickly as he could, tangling them first in the rags of the back of his shirt. Harness buckles clinked together as they swung uselessly behind him.

Ilya Rozanov stood in front of him. His sworn enemy. The man he'd just beaten for Rookie of the Year. The man he'd been fucking since last October.

He hadn't seen Shane, had he? He was absorbed in brooding towards the skyline. Had he noticed the outline of a winged man against the sky behind him? Had he known it was Shane?

Rozanov didn't know. He'd laughed at Shane's refusal to remove his T-shirt, tutted at his declining of a shared shower, pouted when Shane moved his hands off his back. But he hadn't yet pushed.

And what they had was too special – it felt too close to flying – for Shane to give up. So Rozanov couldn't know.

Shane looked down to the balconies below him, up to his wings. Back to Rozanov. He'd finished his cigarette.

Shane jumped.

Thank God he'd booked a balcony suite.

It was the last time he'd fly for years.

2016

Rose Landry was great. Really great. But Shane knew he wasn't great for her. Hell, he was only dating her because he was trying to prove a point to Ilya fucking Rozanov.

Still, she was gorgeous, she was funny, she had great taste in restaurants. She was also definitely breaking up with him.

"I just feel like maybe, maybe, I don't do it for you? Like we're a square peg and a round hole. I've never even seen you without your shirt on." She was looking at him expectantly. He sighed at himself for getting into this mess, having to hurt her feelings.

"It's not you."

"No, I just think that sometimes you'd rather be with someone like Miles?"

Shane felt like he was drowning. This conversation might actually kill him. Rose reached for his hand across the table.

He found himself nodding.

"How did you know?" He chanced a look at her face. How was she smiling at him right now? He didn't deserve her.

"Babe, I went to theatre school, like 80% of my boyfriends left me for other men." He laughed despite himself.

"The thing is…" he had no idea how to say this. "I kind of prefer being the hole than the peg." He winced internally. But Rose was guffawing, reaching for more wine.

"Wow, just wow."

As they left the restaurant, Shane thought it could have gone worse. As being broken up with by Rose Landry went. Now he wasn't forcing himself to think about fucking her he could appreciate how pretty she was.

It was the first time he'd admitted to someone he was gay, that he'd slept with another man. And he was on a high, and Rose was smiling up at him on the sidewalk promising to be friends, to keep the secret.

He took a deep breath.

"Actually, there's something else." This stopped her walk towards her car. "Could we go back to yours."

Nodding she smiled, held out her hand for him to join him.

At Roses apartment she'd busied herself digging in the fridge and returned with a block of cheese she was slowly eating slices from.

"So," she raised her eyebrows. "What's up? Want to tell me about your secret boyfriend you've been keeping from me, now that we're best friends?"

"It's, uh, kind of why I never took my shirt off?"

"You mean I get to see Shane Hollander's abs? I should have broken up with you weeks ago"

"Shut up." Now they were both laughing.

He stood in front of where Rose lounged on the coach and took the plunge. Pulled his thick jumper up.

"A strip tease?" Rose heckled. He kept going. Took the jumper off. Then his T-shirt.

He heard Rose's gasp as she took in the strapping striping his chest. The inflamed raw skin where the straps met, the indents in his shoulders.

Closing his eyes he reached for the main buckle and let the harness clatter to the floor behind him. His wings hung limply at his side. Watched Rose like a hawk.

She stood, mouth gaping.

"Shane."

He looked away. It was too much. She was going to tell him to leave. Even having him in the house was bad luck. She was going to tell him to leave, and then she was going to tell everyone about the winged freak she'd invited into her home. Who'd tricked her into sleeping with him.

"Shane, look at me."

He couldn't.

Her finger's grazed his cheek and guided his gaze to hers.

“I’m so sorry.” Why was she sorry? He was the one who’s lied. “I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell me.” Her eyes were half filled with tears.

Great, now Shane had made her break up with him, and made her cry in the same evening.

“Hey, no it’s okay.” He tried to comfort her, but she pulled back. Having someone other than his parents see his wings made him feel naked, more naked with Rose than he’d felt when they were having sex. She was looking him up and down, taking in every inch of his wings.

He knew they looked a mess. He hadn’t been home in too long, distracted by Rose and a cup run and trying to not think of a certain Russian.

“Shane, they’re gorgeous,” Rose breathed. She reached out to brush the adula of his left wing before jerking backwards.

His wings flared, preening behind him at the attention. That was what he hated about them most. They gave him away. Made him utterly transparent.

Rose huffed out a laugh. Her eyes raking over their whole span. He closed his eyes in shame at the state he’d let them get to. His primaries were cracking and damaged and There were barely any secondary feathers left, the ones left still pins or covered in the flaking remains of them. His bare skin underneath was scarred and chafed. The feathers further up were matted and dull, going grey, and the body of his wing was nothing but wasted muscle. They were hideous.

“Shane.” He looked her straight in the eye. She was looking at him like he was something beautiful. “Can I hug you?”

He nodded once. She wrapped him tight, nestling her arms just underneath where his wings met his back. It was better than any harness and Shane let himself go limp in her arms.

In his ear she whispered, “Does it hurt?”

A damn burst.

He broke down crying into her shoulder. She just stroked his hair and pulled him closer, swaying gently.

After she’d broken out the ginger ale and forced him to show her how to start detangling the mess hanging of his rhomboid muscles. It was nice, having someone he trusted sat behind him, carefully plucking out dead feathers.

It was the best break-up he’d ever had.

2017

The All-Stars game had been weird. There was no other word for it.

Shane had regretted walking out of Ilya's flat the minute he'd slammed the door, but never more than seeing Rozanov across the bar. He was stunning. He cut a slim figure in a loose Hawaiian shirt, unbuttoned half to his waist. Shane's mouth had gone dry the minute he'd seen him.

It had taken everything Shane had to approach.

And it had been fine. Rozanov had been friendly, barely even insulting him. Hadn't mentioned Shane' s outburst as he had feared. Hadn't pushed about Shane's secret.

Rozanov scared him. Not on the ice, on the ice he was formidable, but predictable. Off the ice though, in Shane's bed, he was terrifying.

He was too close. Ilya saw right through Shane Hollander to just Shane underneath.

And he knew Shane was hiding something.

Of course he did; they'd been fucking on and off for 8 years and he'd never seen Shane shirtless. That was why Shane had fled like a coward, Ilya had started pulling up his shirt, wanting to massage his shoulders. Shane had shaken him off, but Ilya had started asking questions. Questions which were just too close to the truth.

So, he'd fled. Like the coward he was.

Sitting by the poolside in Florida, watching Rozanov in the pool, splashing some of the veteran's kids and swimming terrible laps, Shane wondered what it was like, to be able to bare your back to the world, and for the world not to stab you in it.

From his place safely on the side of the pool he wanted to get up and join Ilya, to play and splash alongside him. But it wasn't his to have.

The game was fucking magical. Playing with Ilya was fun, fun in a way hockey hadn't been in years. Skating at top speed down the ice, with Rozanov on his wing, was the closest to flying Shane had felt since Vegas. And Ilya had kissed his helmet, complimented his goal. Shane was soaring.

Ilya had given Shane his room number, when Shane asked. He took that as a sign they weren't over. Not just yet. He had a chance.

Ilya let him in and leant against the sideboard. Shane sat on the bed. Took a deep breath.

"We should talk."

"Okay." Shane smiled. Always Ilya's favourite word.

"I'm sorry for freaking out last time."

“Is okay.”

“I just, it’s – it’s not just me that it felt different right?”

Ilya sighed. Shane was fucking this up.

“We fuck, is simple.”

“Maybe for you, you’re not gay.” Ilya snorted.

“Not completely, no.”

“Well maybe I am. Gay. Entirely.” It was so easy to say the words he’d been fighting his whole life.

The bed beside him dipped under Ilya’s weight. He leaned into him. Pushed his arm down as it came up against his shoulder.

And then Ilya told him about Russia. About how much he was risking, being with Shane. About his father.

And Shane forgot about his stupid wings and had great sex.

He’d tell Ilya next time.

The next time he’d chickened out. They had a game that evening, he was too in his head about it, they didn’t have time for Ilya to freak out.

He was full of excuses.

And then Ilya’s father died.

And Shane couldn’t be there with him, couldn’t even understand his language. Couldn’t hold him when he cried. Utterly useless to the man he loved.

Shane didn’t see Ilya again until the next Boston Montreal game.

He’d made a plan. It was a good plan.

Ilya would come to his house after the game. He’d cook them both dinner, he’d bought Ilya the diet coke he liked. And when they inevitably went to bed, he’d finally let Ilya strip him bare and see him.

That was the end of Shane’s plan. He had no idea how Ilya would react. What was the Russian idea of a winged person? A deformed monster, a blessing, an angel, a bad omen.

Shane had heard them all. Had been them all.

Unfortunately the plan fell at the first hurdle, like all Shane's other good ideas.

They'd cut the harness off him in hospital. Called in a wing specialist. Apparently, it was bad. They seemed more worried about his wings than the bone he'd broken. They said he might never fly again. Shane didn't see why they cared.

Shane thought it was better than it had been. Rose had been helping, whenever she was in town. And he was sleeping without the harness some nights. Even though his wings itched like hell when he did.

But here in his hospital bed he was trussed up, wings held at an artificial angle away from his back, strange braces fitted to the curling muscles and stinging creams applied to every raw inch of skin.

The feathers were the worst part. After two minutes of a nurse digging through his worst matt he'd screamed, thrashed against the brace. They hadn't tried again since.

The morning sun was bright against his face. The pain in his head was worse.

He'd refused all visitors except his parents, and they wouldn't be here until the afternoon. Couldn't bear the thought of another person seeing him like this. Until someone mentioned the name Rozanov.

His ears pricked, and he'd found himself nodding. He didn't think he'd come at all.

Ilya appeared through the door and Shane felt his face break out in a grin. He came! He was here! His Ilya was here!

Ilya looked a lot less happy. Ilya looked horrified.

"Hollander, I did not think was this bad."

"A concussion and a broken collar bone." Shane tried to shrug him off. "Could have been worse."

"No Hollander, your wings."

Oh yeah.

Shane's wings were free. Suspended behind him and restrained by the braces, but Ilya could obviously see them. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Heyyy." Ilya did not move. Shane wanted him next to him right now. He patted the bed. "Hey, come."

Ilya strode over to him, took his hand. His eyes continued their path over Shane's wings.

"Marlow feels terrible." Ilya sounded like he was reading from a script. "He did not mean to hurt you."

"Ehhh, happens to us all. I'm mostly pissed that he ruined our plans. My plans."

Ilya raised his eyebrows at this.

"I was going to show you. My wings. And ask you -"

"What happened to them."

"Nothing. They're just like that." Ilya's grip tightened.

"No."

"Come to my cottage this summer – "

"I can't."

"It'll be fun, we can have a week or two – "Shane wanted nothing more than for Ilya to never ever leave.

"Hollander. I can't" Ilya looked regretful, but resolute.

So that was it. Shane had thought that maybe – but no. Of course, Ilya wouldn't stick around. Not when he knew the truth. Not when he'd seen the whole of Shane lying spread in front of him.

A nurse bustled in to check on him. Rozanov left. Shane let himself drift into drugged oblivion.

Staying at his parents' house was hell. Shane didn't know how he'd ever lived here 16 years. Well, he did. He hadn't had to have his wings out that whole time.

Doctor's orders were to keep the braces on for 6 weeks, the sling on for 8. And no harness for the whole summer. And Mom was making damn sure he was following them.

He'd been sulking around his parent's house for weeks, wearing nothing but shorts and old tees with holes ripped in the back, watching all the hockey games he wasn't allowed to play with his mom's commentary. Tried not to be jealous of how neatly her wings were tucked away.

He didn't mind Dad's cooking though. That was one bonus.

Shane couldn't stand the way they looked at his wings. Like they were disappointed in him, for letting it get that bad. He wanted to scream at them; to tell them that he had no choice but

to. That they'd raised him to never let anybody see.

Nobody was allowed to groom them, not whilst the new feathers grew in, finally free of the chafing harness. He couldn't bear to let his mum apply the ointment he'd been given either. The pain in her eyes hurt too much.

It itched like hell.

Late at night, contorting in his childhood bed, unable to satisfy the itch, Shane texted Ilya. And he responded. It was a miracle.

2017

The drive to the cottage was too long. Shane was fidgeting the entire way. Ilya had been glancing at him, at his wings, back to him for an hour now. His wings kept fluttering behind him, making the seat massively uncomfortable. They didn't like being looked at either.

Another 2 months and he could put the harness back on and get back to his life.

But he was glad Ilya was here, he'd missed him, missed talking to him, being with him. Missed fucking him.

And he was getting used to it, slowly. Letting a very few people see his wings. His parents and Rose had been enough. Ilya was an accident, although he'd meant to eventually. Shane just hadn't expected him to come back afterwards.

It was awkward, once they got to the cottage. Shane gave Ilya the tour, but he seemed nervous to touch him. Eventually he'd come up behind Shane whilst he was cooking.

"That's a lot of burgers."

Shane looked down. He had a point. "Yeah well the recipe was for eight so…"

"Okay so you cut it in half, Hollander." Shane hadn't thought of that.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane's middle, tucking himself between the folded wings and his head onto Shane's shoulder. He fought the instinct to shrug of the touch and let himself relax.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That I didn't tell you. That you had to see them like that in hospital. That you must see them now."

Ilya had spun him around now and was leaning against the table.

“No.”

“No? What do you mean no?”

“No, sorry. Is not a problem. I have been fucking you all these years, you think I never noticed you had fucking wings?”

“You knew?”

“Of course, I knew Hollander, I am not idiot!”

“Oh my god.” Shane was going to throw up. He felt his legs give way.

“Shane.” Ilya was above him in a moment. “Is okay. I don’t know why you hide them or what happened to them but is okay.”

“Nothing happened to them.”

“Hmm I think doctor says different. Okay, dinner is ready, yes? You sit and we talk.”

The burgers were good, even if they had way too many.

Ilya had listened. Listened and nodded and asked the right questions and not run screaming.

Shane had told him everything. About his first harnesses, about his parents teaching him how to keep the secret, about the locker room jokes, the itching, the pain, the hospital. About the rooftop in Vegas.

It had all come pouring out at once. Nine years of words and now Shane had none left.

That night, Shane had made a plan. A way for him and Ilya to be together. To be them. And Ilya had said he loved him.

Shane’s wings had spread wider than they had in years, knocking the lamp of the bedside table, and Ilya’s face had dropped. He’d drawn back, started prevaricating, until Shane finally found his words again. And said what his wings already knew.

The rest of the two weeks was so perfect it was dizzying. They swam, joked, laughed, fucked and slept, and then did it all again. Shane wondered if this was a dream. He wouldn’t have minded if it was.

One night, sitting by the fire, it was Ilya’s turn to talk.

He told Shane about his mother. About how beautiful her wings had been. About how she’d been an angel to him. How his father had broken her and her beautiful wings.

Shane had never known.

Ilya insisted on grooming Shane's wings. Properly, not the half hour sessions he'd been allowing Rose or his mother once every few weeks.

So every evening they sat, and Ilya ran his long fingers through Shane's feathers, plucking out old molt and gently coaxing the new pin feathers out. He covered Shane in creams and ointments and kisses and slowly brushed oil through his primaries.

No one had ever touched Shane like this before, with such care, such reverence. Ilya worked at his wings like he was holy, precious. He sat patiently, for hours on end, with a single-minded determination.

And by the time they were nearing the end of their time at the cottage, by the time Shane's dad had burst in and ruined their little oasis, Shane's wings looked almost restored to their former glory. The new feathers were free from their pins, no old fluff or mats remained, and the bare skin was fully healed. And the colour. Dark blue green with purple shot through. Ilya couldn't stop smiling each time he saw it, and Shane almost couldn't either. He'd never seen his wings like this before, so loved, so cared for.

He'd almost come to terms with the fact he'd likely never fly again. He never needed to, never wanted to.

But looking at his wings like this. Still broken, still bearing the scars of all he'd put them through. He thought maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing. To fly.

2018

The start of the next season had meant that Shane returned to wearing his harness. He had to – at the very least the league had a bylaw somewhere about wings being dangerous to play (not that there were any winged players around to be penalised.) So he went back to his old harness, loosened the straps slightly to protect the new feathers Ilya had so patiently coaxed forward, and went back to his old routine. Private showers, loose clothes, hunched shoulders – all had served him well over the years.

But at home was a different story. Ilya was closer now in Ottawa – he saw him almost as much as he saw his parents. And Ilya loved him – wings and all. So at home, even alone, Shane let himself free. Let himself wander his flat shirtless. Let his wings wince and dance and laugh behind him as he watched TV. He let Rose and Mom and Dad and Hayden (who'd walked in on him showering on a road trip) see him as he was.

And he let Ilya stroke his wings, kiss them, grab them, move him by them. He let them be adored, as he'd let every other inch of himself be adored by Ilya over their decade together.

At some point that year it stopped feeling like enough. Shane wanted his teammates - the men he'd skated into battle alongside for years, too often to victory – to know him too.

So, one day, in the middle of the season. He just stopped hiding. Not to everyone of course – maybe that would come one day but he always did things by halves. No, he just undressed at the end of practice, like everyone else. Headed for the showers like everyone else.

Hayden hadn't blinked, just shoving him by the shoulder like he always did.

Shane wished he could have said the same for anyone else.

He knew he'd been lucky, with Ilya and Hayden and Rose. He knew he had good people around him. People who didn't give a shit about old superstition and folklore. He'd hoped – perhaps vainly – that his teammates would be the same.

The locker room had been silent for the next week. Coach had benched him – no one except Hayden would play on a line with him. JJ had hurt the most, he was the one Shane was trying not to think about.

He'd cried on the phone to Ilya every night, hoping it would get better. It hadn't. If anything it got worse. They'd lost their first game after his reveal, and everyone's suspicions had been held correct.

He'd been completely shut out, of practice, of games, of the team. He couldn't be their captain any longer.

So he'd called his agent, waived his no-transfer term, and gotten himself a deal with Ottawa. With Ilya.

He knew it was cowardly, to run from Montreal, from the team who'd given him so much. But he'd given them everything he had, and they'd abandoned him when he had nothing more.

Ottawa was better. It would have been anyway; Ilya was there.

But the team was good. Not at hockey – they had a bad reputation for a reason – but they were working on that. Him and Ilya being on the same line helped. But for Shane. Their social media manager was winged and had never hidden it. The manager and coaches had made it very clear that Shane would be supported in the locker room.

And he was. There'd maybe been some hesitance at first, when Shane had walked into the dressing room with his wings on full display, Ilya grinning beside him proudly.

It'd passed after their first practice. Shane had been proving himself through hockey for as long as he could remember. All he needed was a chance, and a chance he got.

Ilya's grin followed him: when they made their first playoff appearance, when Shane did his first interview sans harness, when the first paparazzi pictures were published. It never stopped feeling like coming home.

2022

Shane and Ilya had lifted the Stanley cup together, as co-captains, for the first time that spring. It was magic.

Each stall in that locker room had had a fallen feather tucked away, a gift, a trust, a good luck charm.

Shane only wore the harness for games, for safety now. A properly fitted one, by the best tailor money could buy. At home, at the gym, travelling, *living* – he was free. He felt like he was walking on air. Ilya loved showing him off, and he let him, let himself be seen.

It was maybe vain to admit but they were magnificent – the damage he'd done had healed slowly through the years and he now had a full set of feathers back on each wing, each feather gleaming under Ilya's care and attention.

They were at the cottage for the summer, like they always were.

Shane closed his eyes, appreciating the wind through his feathers, the lapping of the water against the lake shore.

Ilya shivered next to him, kissing him on the cheek and turning to the warm inside.

Shane stood, meaning to follow him, before looking out to the woods across the water.

He stepped back, spread his wings. And took flight.

End Notes

don't ask
This was written almost entirely at 3am and I haven't really proof read any of it - any mistakes I will happily correct.

Title is from Flightless Bird, American Mouth by Iron & Wine

tumblr

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