the stones and the boulders

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the stones and the boulders

by smallestchurch

Summary

it's after the after. after the sunset, back at the cottage, the comedown. a quiet conversation in the warm tub, night buzzing in through the open window. some ideas about the future. about what it's like to have one at all.

Notes

hi, hi. after i watched the finale, i kept thinking about “we just want a future” and also about the day we all learn to drop the things we needed to keep us safe once they no longer do, and also about Ilya wearing a bear skin. i still feel super nervous writing for this fandom so thanks for being nice to me and letting me play in your sandbox! It’s the only way to get them out of my brain. Some things:

- I maybe smeared some folklore together—sorry, just go with it
- I know he has a bear tat in the books but I technically haven’t read them and including that felt like stolen valor, so imagine it if you would like
- (yes I also know they get a dog, just let me live with the fantasy of their cat 4 cat energy for a minute)
- title from Baby Rose / "Go"

ETA: there are TWO podfics available, linked below. don't make me choose, they're both gorgeous and perfect!!!!

See the end of the work for more notes

“Big day,” Ilya says. He leans on the wall, shedding his shoes at the door.

A huffed laugh, a shake of Shane’s head. A big exhale, like a structural collapse inside him.

It’s dark. The drive was short, but long enough to lose the sun. Lights out on all that.

Ilya watches Shane click on a lamp. As he takes his hand away, it’s shaking. Just a little. Shane leans against the sideboard, looking around, maybe trying to decide what to do next, what to say. He looks wan, worn. Shattered. No—softer. Melted. The adrenaline had crashed out of him at the dinner table. The dregs of dizzy relief left him during the drive. This was whatever came after that.

“What do you need?” Ilya asks.

“I don’t know,” he says, scrubbing a hand down his face.

Ilya waits, letting him breathe the air on this side of things. He’s probably not used to anyone seeing him like this.

“Going to guess something … quiet,” Ilya says. “Extra boring.”

Shane grins, at least. “Shut up.”

“Come on,” he says, taking his hand.

Ilya turns the water to scalding. Fizzy bubble bath thing, pink. Epsom salts, because it never hurts. Off season is a carnival of itching, pulsing agonies sweeping through their joints and muscles as they heal, or try to. Everything they refused to deal with when there was work to be done. He wonders how long they’d have to soak before it would reach their hearts.

He stands, watching the water a moment, making sure the drain is plugged. The tub is parked next to a tall window, cracked open. The layered sounds of Canadian night creatures spill in with the cooling breeze, melting into white noise with the filling tub.

It’s dark now, but he knows the window looks out on lush, green woods. He remembers from the b-roll on the silly yoga thing. A fleeting shot, from this exact vantage, twinkling candles, magazine ready, a steaming oasis in a desert of white tile. Seeing it had made his stomach hurt with want.

Shane’s reflection in the window leans rag-doll limp against the counter, arms folded, feet crossed at the ankles. Satisfied with the tub’s progress, Ilya turns to him. He presses a palm to Shane’s chest, aware of a strange need to make sure his blood still runs warm beneath, that his heart is still pumping away. He kisses the corner of his mouth.

“Be back,” he says, slipping out to grab them each a beer. “Stay.”

Ilya rummages the fridge, its glare harsh against the dim glow of the under-cabinet lights. *I should feel something*, he finds himself thinking. Worried, maybe. About what comes next, about being found out. About how fast this thing escalated. Secret hotel fucking to family dinners, almost overnight.

Or he should feel wrecked, maybe. The whole afternoon had been an extended exercise in vulnerability and openness. It had been effortful, keeping himself from bristling. He'd had to remind his body to stop bracing for a fight. Those reflexes were powerful; they had kept him alive for so long. Despite whatever brief respite these few days with Shane had afforded him, he had been coiled up that way since—well. Twelve.

So he should feel something, probably. But walking back through Shane's cottage door, there'd been nothing but an eerie serenity, an enveloping calm. Green trees, soft lamplight. This pencil sketch of a future, rendered on a bar napkin, folded into quarters and tucked safely away in the pocket near his heart.

He pours one beer, tilting the glass.

There are folk stories from back home. Stories of men wearing bearskins until the fur sprouted roots, reaching beneath the thin, flimsy, human skin into blood and viscera. The pelt would change them, slowly, until they were distant and unknowable. Until their loved ones no longer recognized them. Until all the soft, human comforts were meaningless when set next to raw meat, cold earth, and dark, hidden dens. Until they couldn't take it off again.

Pouring the second beer, he thinks maybe the absence of feeling is okay. No tendrils piercing his flesh, no animal skin constricting him, hiding him, crushing his heart. Maybe when he walks through this door, the pelt falls from his shoulders, crumples on the ground at the his feet. Merely a coat. Someone else's, another animal's. Pounds of weight, gone.

He showed his tender, human flesh today. And he lived.

Maybe this is what it's like to feel normal. Safe.

The bathroom is warmer when he returns. Foggy. The tub is almost full. He sets the beers on the little side table. Shane only watches, body slouched and still.

Ilya approaches slowly, silently. He starts with an easy, slow kiss, and warm, roaming hands, until Shane unclenches a little. Smiles, a little. He's not sad, Ilya thinks, watching him carefully. Just emptied out. Ilya gets it, maybe. When something is so big, even when it goes well, it can kick up all that grief. Everything that had made it seem so big is still in there.

A beginning can feel like an end.

He lets Ilya lift his shirt. Ilya folds it loosely—good boyfriend—sets it on the bench. He kneels, pulling Shane's shorts down, kissing his stomach, his hipbone, his thigh, in quiet adoration. Ilya folds it all, makes a neat little pile. He strips himself next. Two neat piles, side by side. Nothing to bug Shane while they soak.

He steps in first. The heat rushes his head, makes him dizzy. He lowers himself slowly, exhaling, joints cracking.

“Come, come on,” he says, hand out, gesturing to Shane.

He might never get used to it, watching Shane walk around nude. The perfect machine of his body. The subtle, unconscious arrogance in his stride, the way he seems more comfortable naked with Ilya than clothed in any context. Even half hard, his dick is a revelation.

Shane steps in, inhaling. He sits with his back against Ilya’s chest. He drops his head back onto Ilya’s shoulder. He’s warmer than the water, than the bath, than the stupid fucking bearskin. He fits perfectly there, folded in to Ilya. His exhale is small, shaky. Ilya runs damp fingers through his hair, kisses his temple, once, twice.

“Good?” Ilya asks.

“Yes. Thank you,” Shane says softly, tilting into Ilya’s neck. “For this. For everything.”

“Nothing to thank me for,” Ilya says. “You invited me.”

“I know, but. You didn’t sign up for that.”

“I signed up for you.”

“Stop,” he says, but Ilya can feel him grin.

“Mmm—no.” He interlaces their fingers on Shane’s chest.

“I hope they didn’t traumatize you.”

“Shane,” he says. He is about to show more than skin. He is about to show vital organs, pulsing. But Shane taught him how, anyway. “It was weird, maybe hard, at first, but. Haven’t had a family dinner in … long time." Home cooked food, laughing, pictures in frames. "Not my family, I know, but—"

“They are, though.” Shane says. “Trust me. You’ll wish you never met them.”

Ilya closes his eyes. Breathes through it. Birthday presents, Christmas dinners. All the wounds he disinfects with vodka so regularly they never get a chance to scab over.

But someday, maybe, he’ll be with a group of people, and everyone will start talking about their families, and then? For once? He’ll have stories to tell, too. About people that he loves, people that annoy him, people who post things on Facebook that make him cringe. Not for a little while, but. He’d scribbled this on the bar napkin, too. That part of Someday.

We just want a future, Shane said, and, of everything, THAT was what almost had Ilya tearing up into his pasta. There’d never been a future before. Only an unending present he accepted as good enough because he knew how to make sure it usually contained sufficient dopamine to keep him distracted, and because it was better than the past.

“So. Prepare me,” Ilya says, eyes still shut, still breathing. “Tell me about this future we want.”

“I dunno,” Shane says. “Like I said, you go to Ottawa—"

“No, no,” he interrupts. “Past that. Ours.”

“Oh.” He thinks on it a second. “I keep this place, maybe? Nice in summers, holidays. We have another place, in a city somewhere? I know you like to go out. Dance.”

“Only if you come.”

“I am NOT a good dancer,” he says.

“I know, I’ve seen. Still want to feel you up in public,” he says, letting his hands crawl around him. Shane’s muscles flex, a little ticklish. *Later*, he tells his stirring cock.

“I do like Montreal,” Shane says, ignoring him. “It’s a nice city.”

“Good city, yes. Good memories,” he says, kissing his cheek, his ear. “Okay, penthouse there. What else?”

“A cat?”

“Mm. Two.”

“Two?”

“Better in pairs.”

“Okay. Two cats.”

“Lily and Jane.”

“Stop,” Shane says, grin in his voice.

“No. What else.”

“I dunno. You cook, probably? You’re better at it. I clean, do laundry. I bitch at you for not using coasters,” Shane says, looking slyly at their drinks on the side table.

“You are insufferable,” Ilya tells him, squeezing him around the shoulders.

“You love it."

“I do. Is sick. Disgusting,” he says. “And what do I bitch at you about? Hm?”

“Being too perfect,” Shane says, and Ilya laughs so hard it jostles the water. Ilya pinches his nipple, and he flinches, laughing too.

“No, I mean, like,” Shane says, serious, “trying too hard to be all the time. You know? Controlling everything.”

An admission, maybe. An apology. Some revelation forged in the day’s events.

“Yes, I see that,” Ilya says. He hopes it sounds validating, rather than condescending. He wraps an arm tight around his shoulders, and Shane grips his forearm with both hands, mouth pressed there.

Ilya can feel Shane's gears turning. The quiet hum in his body when he’s unsure whether to say something. When he speaks, it’s softer. Tentative.

“We could—I mean, I dunno, it’s far off, but. We could adopt a kid? Maybe? If you wanted that? I know you like kids.”

Oh, and there was nothing that could have prepared him for that. No pelt thick enough, no den deep enough. Blood, viscera everywhere. Ilya’s entire body tenses. His heart kicks up a riot. His lungs ache. The tears are instant, thick, undeniable. He buries them in Shane’s hair. Shane grabs his hand and squeezes so hard the tendons grind.

“You would do that,” Ilya says, sniffling. “Raise a person with me.”

“Yes,” he says, matter of fact, trademark Shane big feelings deadpan, *holy shit*. “With you.”

It’s a long, silent minute as he untangles the mess inside him. Shane, poolside in Tampa, smiling behind his sunglasses, thinking about this. Noticing, earlier this week, that Ilya choked up talking about his niece. Dropping things into the spreadsheet in his mind about what would make Ilya happy over a lifetime.

He’s never been able to hide from this man. Never.

Can he picture it? Maybe. Someday. A tiny person, painting his fingernails different colors, spilling polish all over Shane’s hardwood. A protective hand under a soft belly while they learn to kick their legs in the lake.

Tiny skates.

More people who actually deserved all the love he had to give.

All these things Ilya only ever thought he’d get to borrow.

He sniffles. When he speaks, his own voice is hollowed out with emotion.

“So does that mean we are getting married? In this future?”

“I mean, if—" Shane laughs nervously.

“No bullshit pageantry,” Ilya says, rescuing him. “No cameras. Is ours. We sign papers, we disappear to a beach and fuck until one of us goes to the hospital. After that, we throw huge fancy party and feel each other up on the dance floor.”

“No pageantry,” Shane says softly, in a quiet, teary voice that reminds Ilya of filthy public restrooms, of unspoken apologies, of smelling his neck for the first time in months. “Deal.”

“Who asks?”

“You beat me to everything else with us, so.”

“Probably because you were too busy trying to do it perfectly, *so*.”

“Wow,” he says. His head rolls away, looking out the open window into the darkness. He holds his breath.

“God,” Shane says, and yes—tears. “Are we really talking about this?”

“Only talk,” Ilya says, soothing, hand on his head to pull him back close. He nuzzles him, breathes him. “Only dreaming. Not contracts.”

“Yeah,” he says, relaxing. “Used to trying to guess what you want, maybe. Weird to hear you say it.”

“Did not say I want to marry you,” Ilya deadpans. “You are much too boring.”

He laughs, shifts, but stays quiet. Too quiet, Ilya thinks. No comeback.

“You think about it too? Yes?” Ilya asks.

“We’ve been boyfriends for like. Four hours,” he says.

“Hollander. You’ve been mine since rookie season.”

“But you weren’t mine,” he says.

Ilya laughs. “You are kidding, yes? I don’t remember their names. None. Your name, I remember, day one. Forever.”

“That’s because I was already famous.”

Ilya’s jaw hits his chest, because that is, without a doubt, exactly what Ilya would say. It shocks the words right out of him. He can only laugh, squeeze him, kiss his stupid perfect head as he squirms.

“I don’t understand it sometimes,” Shane says, after they go quiet again. “I mean, I am, you know. Boring. I was then, too.”

“Tell you more about eyes?”

“Shut up,” he says. “I know you feel it, obviously. I just don’t understand why, sometimes.”

It’s not fishing, it’s matter of fact. It is a flirty joke with Ilya, but maybe a truth everywhere else in his life. And all the people who say it—the media, other players—are the same ones who've labeled Ilya his precise opposite: dangerous, wild, carefree.

He lets his hands roam Shane's body, his chest, his stomach, up to his shoulders. The water sloshes with it. He kisses his neck, speaks softly into his ear.

"Because you tried to be kind to me. Because you seemed lonely, too. Because you made me laugh. Because you are so fucking pretty to look at. Because on the first night you handed me your heart, told me I was first. Trusted me. Because you are brave, Shane. Like I told you."

"I was terrified," he says, shaky.

"Afraid is the only way to be brave. You were gorgeous. I went back to my room and jerked off two more times remembering how fast you came for me. So easy, so sweet. Thought about you for weeks."

"Me too."

Ilya lets his head fall back. His arms stay wrapped around Shane's torso. The room is dim, the big window fogged, the water still warm. Shane relaxes into him, finally, all the hard things said. Their breath, he realizes, synchs, the water lapping with the rhythm. He thinks about how he was supposed to be in Moscow this week. He thinks about how if he had, he might be all bear by now. Frozen in his den, alone. Alien, even to himself. No coming back.

"I think … I think I have never been as happy as I am right now," Ilya says, without totally meaning to.

Shane twists to look up at him with urgency in his eyes. To kiss him. To grasp at his neck.

Ilya hits the drain.

The morning is cool, dewy, pink. Steam rises off the water. A string of ducks skate into a landing, shattering the mirror surface of the lake. His coffee cup is empty, so he swings his legs off Shane's lap, takes Shane's empty mug, kisses his forehead, and heads inside for refills.

He yawns. They'd barely slept. They should have been exhausted, but there had been so much dreaming to do there in the darkness. More plans, more ideas. Overdue. Years overdue. Even sex hadn't knocked them out. They were drunk on time, maybe. At dawn, Shane had tugged him from the warmth of their bed, and Ilya thought maybe the sunrise looked totally different like this—sober, giddy, feet on the ground, heart on his sleeve, fucking Canadian.

They'll pad back off to bed after this, probably. Sleep away the morning after some lazy orgasms, wake again later, hot and bleary and naked and starving—and together.

He sets the mugs on the counter. Alone in Shane's house, he breathes. The feelings are so big here, they're hard to live around. With Shane in the room, it's easier. Alone, they sometimes try to suffocate him.

He looks toward the door, toward the crumpled bear skin.

He'll have to put it back on, and soon. He knew that when he shed it. But, for this minute, at least, he doesn't resent it. After all, it had kept him safe, all those years. Kept his heart warm and hidden through all the winters, all the ice, until it found a bright, warm, easy place to set it down—finally.

It led him here.

To a future.

In his mind, he picks the pelt up, smoothes it. Hangs it on the coat hook above his sneakers. Pride of place.

With his hands—the ones that held Shane as they shook in the darkness, hours before—he pours the coffee.

End Notes

thanks, pals! smallestchurch on bsky xoxo

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