

stranger to my eyes

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stranger to my eyes

by [galehautstomb](#)

Summary

Should he grieve Boston? Probably. Loyalty was important, thank you very much, Yuna Hollander — but perhaps that wasn't what this situation was. Boston felt like a stopping point for Ilya. Neutral ground, his saving grace, fresh off the plane from Moscow, finally separated from his family by an ocean they couldn't afford to cross, not without his help. He was grateful to the city, to the Raiders and their fans, truly, deeply, but he owed them nothing.

He owed Shane Hollander everything and more.

(Or, Ilya at the cottage, and his final year in Boston.)

Notes

First, Happy New Year! I so so hope it's a good one for us all, we really fucking need it.

Episode 6 killed me, like it has killed so many of us, and I DON'T KNOW I wanted to write about Ilya being introspective? Yeah, he's leaving Boston, he'll do it in a heartbeat, but he has to have SOME feelings about it. I imagine the summer at the cottage and the year that follows feels like an emotional fucking sledgehammer to the chest. This is my attempt at capturing that.

FYI this is firmly written in Heated Rivary TV canon, but if book stuff squeaks in...can't be helped.

The title is from the song "Killing Me Softly", specifically the Fugees cover. If you haven't heard that song before, go listen right now. I saw a Hollanov edit with it on TikTok and bawled my eyes out.

Un-betaed. There will be a few facts in the endnotes. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

For Boston's home opener, they faced the Admirals.

Scott Hunter leaned against the side of the goalpost, chatting with their veteran goalie, Bennett. One of the modern greats, and surely soon to retire. There was a pocket of red jerseys behind the glass. Admirals fans always traveled well to Boston, and Ilya always enjoyed watching their smattering of visitors at the arena after a win. New Yorkers were creative with their curses, hanging over the tunnel spewing all kinds of hilarious bullshit as Ilya walked to the locker room. He soaked in their vitriol, spongelike, and it fed him for weeks on end while he fielded his own melancholy, dodging calls from Andrei, and stalking Shane Hollander update accounts on social media.

There were no New York obscenities now, just a lot of cheering and a few Pride jerseys. A group of teenagers banged on the glass, and one of them had a sign in hand.

In magic marker bubble letters, it read, "HUNTER #21! I CAME OUT TO MY PARENTS BECAUSE OF YOU! YOU CHANGED THE GAME!"

A poorly drawn sketch of the Admiral's mascot, an old-timey revolutionary in a tri-corner hat, took up half the poster. His hat and uniform were colored in all the colors of the rainbow.

Hunter gave the fans a puck, because of course he did. Bennett too. Ilya watched it all while he stretched and wondered what would happen if he skated over. Roughish grin, sly remark, enduring Hunter's questioning look, and tossed his stick over the glass.

Guess what, kids! I'm gay too! Not as gay as Hunter, but gay enough. Want to guess who I'm fucking? Bet you a million dollars you can't.

There were about ten million reasons why he couldn't reveal himself, but that was a million reasons *less* than the year before. After Ilya handed the Admirals' ass to them, he'd march down into the showers, then the locker room, talk shit with the boys, and high on his win drive home to his big empty house and call Shane. Shane fucking Hollander, who was in love with him, who twitched in his sleep, who liked his burgers well-done, who always answered the phone after one ring, he would answer — and maybe they'd have phone sex. Maybe they wouldn't. Maybe Ilya would fall asleep tonight with his phone in his hand, listening to his boyfriend sleep an entire country away.

So many maybes. One thing was sure. He would never have a home-opener in Boston again. It scared him, how little that hurt, and that maybe, he wished it would.

That first summer at the cottage, Ilya had no commitments.

Russia was a slow-healing bruise he would not allow himself to touch. He would never go home. He didn't want to. It hurt all the same. He cancelled his plane ticket and rebooked another back to Boston in early September for training camp. He texted Svetlana, who promised she would drop in on the house every week and take shameless advantage of his ridiculously large flatscreen.

How is Jane? she texted one morning, and Ilya's heart thundered into a stampede. Could he tell her the truth? Was he finally allowed to be honest? This minutiae was not one of the many painstakingly serious conversations he and Shane had frogmarched through in the past week. 'I love you' in secret was a lot easier than 'I love him' to a stranger. That's what Svetlana was to Shane, a stranger. The competition, carefully propositioned as such by Ilya when he was at his most jealous, his most petty, feigning indifference when he brought her up *just* to see that stone mask slide across Shane's face, and the tears that followed.

Sucking my dick, he told her, and she said something about his crudeness he'd heard a hundred times before.

"Will you hire a housekeeper? To check on the house in Boston, I mean," Shane asked him later over dinner. A fresh garden salad with grilled salmon. Red onions, shredded carrots, leafy greens; small, colorful tomatoes from David's vegetable patch, sliced into glistening half-moons. They'd visited that morning, the second time they'd gone to Shane's parents since Shane first drove them over — terrified, teary-eyed, but in love enough to bare himself wholly to the people who raised him.

"Of course. I am millionaire. I will hire maid for each day of the week," Ilya lied, stabbing three cucumber slices with a fork and transferring them to Shane's plate. Even he knew not to bring Svetlana up again now.

Shane liked cucumbers because he was boring. He liked his salads with olive oil and a red wine vinaigrette, because he was a diet-obsessed fiend. Ilya had learned more mundane everyday things about this man in the past two weeks than in the past nine years.

Shane rolled his eyes, but accepted the offered food like a barn cat pawing for kitchen scraps. Skittish, yet pleased, deep in his soul. Ilya pictured the way Shane's eyes would flutter shut when Ilya knotted his fingers at the roots of his hair and directed him where he wanted to go. Shane was a connoisseur of dogged affection and rough-handing. Ilya thought of what he'd categorized as *The Night* in his mind. The "I love you's" falling from his mouth in a deluge, the devastation of reciprocation, and his chest cracking open as he cried. Shane's waterfall of kisses over Ilya's brow, like his mother used to do when he had the sniffles.

Ilya tried imagining what coming out to his mother would have been like. He liked to think she'd smile, brush his hair back, and tell him she loved him. *I will love you always. What sweet boy have you ensnared, Ilyushka?*

Honestly, he was guessing. Fantasizing. He knew nothing about what his mother thought about gay people or bisexuals, men who sucked cock and fucking loved it. Those weren't the kinds of conversations Russian parents had with their twelve-year-old sons. The truth was, by the time he was twelve, Irina wasn't talking about much to anyone at all.

Look, Ilya wasn't advertising himself as an expert on Boston life.

What did he *actually* know about the city? The natives were single-mindedly obsessed with Dunkin' Donuts, even if their iced coffee tasted like sewer water. The city streets were narrow, cobbled, and rickety the closer you got to the harbor. Old brick buildings (but not as

old as Russia's) squeezed between new shiny corporate monstrosities made for tech start-ups or engineering firms. Brutally cold winters and sloshy gray snow. Lots of young twenty-somethings wandering around, drunk, or scurrying off to class at one of the many expensive universities. Pubs and pubs and more pubs, half of which Ilya frequented as a rookie, before his fame exploded and he could walk through a dark bar without getting mobbed.

These days, Boston was nothing to him; he was rarely there. His house was in a ridiculously wealthy suburb thirty minutes from the arena and ten from the practice facility. Even before he and Shane figured themselves out, he'd been slacking on his social calendar. After a win, the boys would round up whoever they could for a night out at one of the high-end clubs downtown. Ilya let them go off alone, feigning an injury, or top-secret "Captain's" duties, when all he really did was drive home and sit alone in the dark, a pointed loneliness crouching on his chest, heavy as a gravestone. Sometimes Sveta came over, comforted him, but soon that was less about sex and more about the restlessness she saw in his eyes but couldn't quite fix. Words didn't have to pass between them for Ilya to know she was worried. The years slogged on like this, and his father had gotten sicker, Andrei more belligerent, and Shane a ghost he couldn't quite catch. Ilya sat in the dark more often, eyeing his phone like it would kill him.

These days, Ilya drove home, popped one of his pre-made chef's meals into the oven, and FaceTimed Shane while it warmed up, happy as a clam. Shane always held the phone too close to his face, like an old man. Ilya ribbed him viciously for it, but sometimes he said what he really meant, which was, *I don't mind. I can see your freckles better this way. I missed your beautiful face. I miss you.*

Why should he give a shit about Boston when the trade-off was this? A sleepy Shane Hollander on the other side of his phone, recounting his day, hour by hour, because Shane had a damn good memory and fixated on the randomest things. They shared all the inane bullshit real couples did with each other, or at least, Ilya thought they did; he didn't exactly have an example to abide by. He only hoped this was how they were supposed to be acting, eating dinner together and talking about absolutely nothing of importance, even 492 kilometers and an international border away.

Should he grieve Boston? Probably. Loyalty was important, thank you very much, Yuna Hollander — but perhaps that wasn't what this situation was. Boston felt like a stopping point for Ilya. Neutral ground, his saving grace, fresh off the plane from Moscow, finally separated from his family by an ocean they couldn't afford to cross, not without his help. He was grateful to the city, to the Raiders and their fans, truly, deeply, but he owed them nothing.

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Yuna had great taste in wine. Ilya couldn't say he was surprised; she was a classy woman, with expensive tastes, and the means to acquire anything top-shelf.

One evening, after dinner at the Hollanders' old cottage, David took Shane outside to look at his grill. Ilya doubted how helpful Shane would be with fixing a gas valve, or whatever it was David said was broken, but there seemed to be a casual edge of "father-son" bonding time to the whole escapade. Ilya wouldn't interrupt; he wouldn't even know what to *do* in that

situation. Why waste time on trying to fix a grill he knew nothing about when he could pay an expert to do it for him? It's not like they were lacking in funds.

While the "boring" Hollanders busied themselves, Yuna led Ilya to the cozy living room and poured them each a glass of Inniskillin icewine to pair with the chocolate mousse cake she'd made for dessert. Shane, the heathen, had taken one measly bite of it. She left the pink glittery bottle within arm's reach, and it wasn't long before they finished it off. Then, another one.

"Oh my god. Mom, what did you do to him?" Shane said, when he found them an hour later, curled up on the couch laughing their asses off watching Canada's Drag Race. On-screen, a contestant lip-synced to a Céline Dion song in a floor-length crystal-studded ballgown. Yuna had spent the past five minutes desperately searching for the production manager's email. Shane could be a guest judge once he came out! A great idea! It wouldn't be awkward at all! He was a fashion expert!

"I didn't do anything! I'm bonding with my future son-in-law!" Yuna declared, and Shane blushed high across his cheekbones. Almost as pink as the wine, and certainly sweeter. Ilya wanted to lick him.

"Drunk as skunks," David said, standing behind Shane with one of their empty wine bottles.

It was time for bed, apparently, or time to make the drive back to Shane's cottage. A task easier said than done. It took Ilya a minute or so to find his footing. Now that he wasn't lying flat on the couch anymore, his head was spinning. Goddamn, what did the Canadians do to these grapes? Fucking icewine.

"No! I can do!" Ilya said when Shane offered him an elbow for balance, then promptly stumbled over the edge of a rug. Shane caught him before he could brain himself on the coffee table. Yuna was cackling, curled up on the edge of the couch. David had two strong hands on her shoulders, rubbing his thumbs over her collarbones. Sweet. So casually domestic. Fucking strange. Ilya wanted to watch them for hours.

Yuna hiccuped, then slammed her palm over her mouth, laughing. "Oh, Ilya, honey. I'm sorry! I thought Russians could hold their liquor!"

"Is not alcohol. Is sweet poison!" he said, then reached for the second bottle on the side table. There was a little bit left. It would be rude not to finish it.

Shane snatched it up and ignored Ilya's pouting. "Nope. Nope. No, thank you. We'll take you up on that offer, Dad. I am *not* driving him home tonight. Do we need fresh sheets for the bed?"

They did not, and *only* after Yuna gave Ilya a long, cuddly hug goodnight, her soft manicured fingers at his nape, his chin tucked over her shoulder, breathing in her bright citrusy perfume, did Shane shuffle them off to bed.

Shane's old room at his parents' cottage was an exercise in practicality and nostalgia. The bookshelves in the far corner were packed with hockey trophies and binders of trading cards.

An old, but well-made wooden toy chest by the door doubled as storage for extra towels and linens. When Shane shut off the lights, glow-in-the-dark ceiling stars winked on the ceiling, a remnant of childhood. Shane made a half-assed attempt at setting up a sleeping situation for himself on the floor before Ilya grabbed him by the waist and tumbled them both into the twin-sized bed. Would they sleep well? Two full-grown hockey players in a bed meant for a ten-year-old? Fuck no, but like hell if Ilya would be separated from his boyfriend now, it was too soon for that. It would be too soon in a few weeks from now.

Ilya shifted onto his side. Shane was already there, with his soft smile and his earnest eyes. “Hm, what to do now? Hollander, you are naughty. Good boys don’t sleep with boyfriends in their parents’ house...”

Shane poked him on the chest. “Sleeping, yes. That’s *all* we’re doing. Don’t get any ideas.”

“You are one with *ideas*,” Ilya grumbled, which made no sense, but he also didn’t really give a damn. Shane had opened his arms, and Ilya wiggled closer until he squished his face into the crook of Shane’s neck. He was warm, and he rubbed his fingertips up and down Ilya’s back in smooth, nonsensical patterns, like his fingers were figure skaters. A sudden wave of sleepiness washed over Ilya.

“You have good parents,” he slurred, drunk and happy and safe. He couldn’t hold it in. He’d been thinking about it all night, with Yuna’s homemade dessert in his belly, and David’s quiet, attentive conversation seeping in from the patio.

Shane feathered kisses over his forehead, and he was saying something, maybe it was important, maybe Ilya would ask later, but he was soon asleep, bone-tired and heavy, but in a way that felt healing. He liked to think he’d wake up in the morning, his worries weathered away, one kind act at a time.

Cliff cornered him outside the GM’s office. He looked as serious as Ilya had ever seen him, which was saying something. Cliff Marleau was a jock through and through, better behaved than most, but still kind of dense. A man with whom a younger Ilya Rozanov found easy camaraderie.

“Negotiations, huh?” Cliff asked, following Ilya to the training room. It was early in the morning, an hour before practice started, and most of the guys wouldn’t arrive in for thirty minutes or so. Frankly, Ilya was surprised Cliff was here; he was never on time or early. Ilya had heard more than one long-suffering rant from Cliff’s wife at a team party on his lack of punctuality.

Ilya waved him off. “Yes. Contract bullshit.”

This was *not* a conversation he wanted to have right now. It was only December for Christ’s sake, Ilya thought he had more time before the team and the press worked themselves up into a froth about his contract.

Cliff stepped in front of the training room door. Ilya was tall, but Cliff was a fucking giant. He could loom without even trying, and another man might be intimidated by this half-assed

peacocking Cliff was trying, but Ilya wasn't some shy rookie to be pushed around.

"Doesn't seem like bullshit. They'll give you whatever you want, Roz," Cliff said sharply.

"And do you know what I want, Marleau?" Ilya asked, coldly. He knew the look he was sporting. Blank-eyed, chilly, the face he reserved on the ice for heavy-handed goons or up-jumped AHL nobodies who thought they were hot shit. Cliff, who sadly was Ilya's closest friend on the team, never faced this look head-on. Ilya watched his face shutter, dogged determination into something shameful and unsure. Cliff looked away and rubbed the back of his head with his hand.

"No. I guess not. I didn't mean it like that. We want you here, Cap."

Ilya sighed. He didn't feel like exercising anymore. He wanted to go home, curl up in bed, and call Shane, but he was on an early flight to San Francisco, and Ilya's quads would kill him later if he didn't warm up. Some days were such a fucking slog, he didn't know how he got up and bore through them.

"I am not a free agent yet. Still talking with management," Ilya said, but it was like throwing a starving dog measly scraps. Cliff wasn't the brightest bulb in the box, but he knew hockey, and he knew management well enough to know just how much money Ilya was offered. Most men would take it and retire rich, a Boston icon, his face plastered across every bar in New England. Ilya would have signed by now if he wanted to stay.

This wasn't an easy thing to say out loud, so Cliff didn't. "Sure, Ilya," he said, and walked over to the treadmill.

Ilya joined him on the opposite side, and they ran in silence; they didn't even turn the TV on, nothing but the obvious unsaid fact between them. In a few months, Ilya wouldn't be here, and Boston would whine and grouch and curse his name, but after a while, they wouldn't miss him, Cliff wouldn't miss him, and then it would be like he'd never been there at all.

Shane had a set of kayaks in the shed, so they paddled far out into the lake, part competition, part a half-baked attempt at some off-season conditioning. Eventually, they docked at one of the small islands not too far from the other shore.

"This is a sugar maple grove. You can get syrup from them," Shane said, patting a weathered tree trunk on the side. His face tipped upwards, almost parallel, as he peered into the green canopy. The sun dappled in through the leaves, playing in splotchy shapes over Shane's cheeks, spotlighting where Ilya intended to kiss.

Ilya pulled his kayak farther up on shore. Shane would throw a fit if the water sucked it back out. Once secure in the sand, he came at Shane from behind, his long fingers slotting perfectly on the curve of his waist.

"Real-estate man. Bird-man. Tree-man. Who *are* you?" he mumbled into Shane's ear.

“I’m Mr. Boring,” Shane answered, and he seemed less bothered saying so now than before. Ilya hadn’t missed that. How Shane threw Ilya’s half-baked insult back at him with extra barbs, somehow both apologetic and accusatory.

Ilya didn’t know how to tell him that these last two months were the best and perhaps most boring days of his entire life. Days at a complete snail’s pace, hour after hour, filled with crossword puzzles, underwater handstands, mid-day hikes, naps on the couch, his head in Shane’s lap, watching Shane read, listening to Shane read aloud, kissing him quiet, fucking him slow on the rug by the window, the discarded book within eyeshot, splayed open on its spine, words out to the world, while Ilya fucked sweet hiccuping noises out of *Mr. Boring*.

A boring day in Moscow rarely came. Treasured were the days when Ilya went to bed without enduring Andrei’s rough, jealous hands on the collar of his shirt, or his father’s cold cutting remarks trailing after him from the living room.

Ilya walked Shane to a bare spot of grass at the center of the island. He needed more light. He needed Shane bare and bathed in the high noon.

“Undress,” he ordered. “Tell me about the trees while I fuck you.”

Shane complained like he didn’t want it, which was typical foreplay for them at this point. A snappy remark into the soft skin of Ilya’s shoulder, meanwhile, Shane’s hands grasped at the raspy synthetic material of Ilya’s swim trunks, desperate for a hard cock in hand. Once freed, Shane balled Ilya’s trunks in his hand to toss them away.

“Wait, wait. Impatient. We need lube,” Ilya scolded, and fished a silvery packet out of his pocket.

Shane nibbled at his neck. “I can’t believe you brought lube *kayaking*.”

Ilya tore the packet open with his teeth and spat the discarded plastic on the ground. Shane glared at him.

“What? You want to use maple syrup? This is not safe. You are too Canadian.”

Shane smacked him across the chest, laughing. Ilya slid two fingers into him, already loosened from their slow mid-morning fuck. There were no complaints after that.

Ilya fucked him like an animal. Loud and unrestrained, he started with hard, punishing thrusts, a hand at the nape of Shane’s neck, holding him down against the ground with his drooling face pillowed on the meat of his forearm.

Only when Shane started shaking, mumbling pleased pleas into the crook of his arm, did Ilya slow down. He wanted this to last; he wanted the memory to stretch long and blurry and golden in his mind after summer ended.

Ilya sat back on his heels, then kneeling, and without separating them, brought Shane backward into his lap. Immediately, Shane knotted his fingers into Ilya’s hair and craned his

head back for a wet, sucking kiss. Ilya took his cock in hand and pressed the pad of his thumb over the leaking head.

“Ilya,” Shane breathed against his lips. It wouldn’t be long now.

Ilya responded in Russian. “Do you know what you do to me? You are perfection. You’re so good. Give it to me, my love. I want to watch you come.”

Shane choked and pressed the back of his head hard against Ilya’s shoulder. His cock spurted thick in Ilya’s fist, making a mess of Ilya’s hand.

“I love you. I love you, Ilya,” Shane breathed through the aftershocks. Ilya wasn’t letting him go. He jerked Shane off even as he got soft, and grinded his cock in deep, held himself there as he came. A gut-punch, and he was breathing as hard as he did during a bag-skate.

Shane let him stay inside. They lowered themselves to the ground, and a pebble or a root was digging into his thigh, but Ilya didn’t care. His forehead lay flush with the smooth, hot skin of Shane’s shoulder. It felt like he’d just been flying, and now he was in a freefall.

Montreal won the shootout, and Ilya was tired enough to sleep for a week.

His left knee was bothering him, but not badly enough to go to the trainer. He’d need surgery for it in a season or two; best not to tell Ottawa that. His cartilage was shot, bone scraping against bone, or at least, it soon would be, and Ilya would be lucky if he could *walk*, let alone skate, by the time he was in his fifties.

Ilya caught a glimpse of Shane at the opposite end of the ice, hovering by the net while the team gave their goalie congratulatory head pats. Shane would be the last Metro on the ice, that was for sure. A dutiful captain, driven by grit and routine and all the expectations of Montreal behind him. He’d give the team another Cup, maybe not this year, their defense at the blue line was sloppy, but soon. Montreal fans had become cocky after years of miring in mediocrity, and they would wring Shane Hollander dry for all he was worth. That was Ilya’s opinion at least.

Ottawa, in turn, would be grateful, frothing at the mouth, just to have Ilya in the building. That was one thing to look forward to, he supposed.

Ilya fielded the press. He always made himself available after a losing game to spare the boys the more asinine questions, before heading home. Shane had already texted him. He was inside, and apparently spicing up some old vegetables in Ilya’s fridge for a chicken stir-fry. After Ilya walked in the door, a warm, smoky smell washed over him, like wood and coriander. Lo and behold, Shane already had the fireplace going and was plating them both heaping hockey player portions of a post-game meal.

“Oh. You’re back.” Shane jumped a little, then untensed. He was never fully relaxed anywhere but at the cabin, but he didn’t mind Ilya’s Boston house. Despite his protests, he really did have an eye for good real estate and favored the bright, clean lines of a house of modern architecture.

Ilya dropped his bag on the floor, right in the middle of the hallway, and watched Shane's eyes narrow in annoyance. "I'm back. Is my house, Hollander."

"You're going to trip on that," Shane said.

"No. I will be doing other things." He pounced, and Shane let him, only with a mild complaint about the food on the counter. Ilya moved them to the couch.

Ilya hadn't seen him in a fucking month. He'd left Shane's cottage in September, they'd had a Metros-Raiders matchup in early October, and a weekend around Halloween where Shane managed to sneak away to Boston for thirty-six hours, but after that, *nothing*. Ilya spent Thanksgiving at the Raiders' Finnish goalie's house. His wife was always happy to host the out-of-towners. Not that Ilya gave a fuck about American traditions, but all the "happy-family" vibes fucked with him a bit. Like all the years before, Ilya got drunk and sexted Shane from the bathroom halfway through dessert. Only this time, his dick picks were interspersed with misspelled declarations of love and a dozen *I miss yous*.

Now, Christmas was in a week, and there was an email in Ilya's inbox with his visa approval from his agent (fucking Russian passport) — he would spend three full days with Shane at his parents' house in Ottawa. But first, Ilya thought, as he pulled Shane's shorts over his knees, he was going to *feast*.

"You look drunk," Shane mumbled, thumbing over Ilya's tingly lips, after Ilya ate him out until he cried.

Ilya felt like he could be drunk. The feeling was much the same. What else was a starving man to do after weeks of nothing? Ilya wiped his messy mouth with the back of his hand and crawled up Shane's body until he was crouched over his stomach. He roughly shoved Shane's t-shirt up to his armpits, then started jerking his cock in hot, heavy strokes. With his other hand, he took Shane by the chin, turning his head here and there, then offered two fingers, which Shane graciously sucked on.

"I made a mess of you," Ilya said, eyeing Shane's soft cock resting on the crook of his thigh, smeared in Shane's come. Shane was practically hairless. His pubic hair was soft and sparse, but it looked thick and dampened now with release, little pearlescent smears splattered all around. Ilya's cock kicked hard in his hand, just looking at it. Leave it to him to get all romantic about Shane's come.

He took his fingers out of Shane's mouth to scoop up his come and fed it back onto Shane's tongue. He squeaked, then his eyes fluttered shut, and he sucked and sucked until Ilya groaned and came all over Shane's stomach. What a pretty picture. Thank you fucking God.

Ilya grabbed a few tissues off the nightstand to clean them up. Shane was quick to fall into Ilya's outstretched arms, gently tapping their foreheads together. Ilya yawned in his face and relished in the complaining that followed.

"You're so gross," Shane said.

Ilya tapped the little furrow of skin between Shane's brows. It wrinkled up whenever he was annoyed, or turned on, which, around Ilya, was most of the time.

"You like me anyway," Ilya sing-songed.

"No. I *love* you, anyway," Shane said, suddenly serious. Who was this earnest stranger in Ilya's arms? A man who loved Ilya, who made him home-made healthy dinners, and added a little heart emoji to Ilya's contact in his phone. "That's an important distinction."

Yuna's voice came shrill and disbelieving over the speakerphone. "You can't bail on Reebok!"

Shane held his phone away from his ear like it was a live bomb. Ilya was trying his best not to burst out laughing. Shane could pretend all he wanted, but anyone with a brain knew he didn't care about all his fancy luxury brand deals. That was Yuna Hollander through and through, and Shane was her poor workhorse.

"It's not a photoshoot, Mom. It's just a marketing meeting. Who cares if I'm there or not—"

"I care! They care! There will be ten people on this call, Shane. Marketing, publicity, *and* editorial. You're their top ambassador, and with the Olympics coming up, you need to know all the details of the campaign."

Shane knew he was fighting a losing battle; it was all over his face. Ilya giggled into a throw pillow. "But, Ilya's only here for a little while..."

David's voice came through the speakerphone. "Oh, don't bother trying to convince her, son. I'm going into town today to pick up a few things, and I could use some help. Ilya, why don't you come with me? That'll keep him busy while you guys deal with Reebok."

It wasn't that Ilya minded spending the day alone with Shane's father; it's only that he wasn't sure how to do this "meet the parents" schtick. He wasn't the boy-next-door girls liked to bring home. He was loud-mouthed, cocky, and sure he could charm the pants off anyone, but there was a difference between getting Shane into bed and grocery shopping with his dad. No matter, it was decided.

Hours later, David had a notepad in hand, hunched over his shopping cart, ticking off his list at the one grocery store in town. Ilya's house was bigger than this store. There was one old woman at the front by the register playing sudoku, and a little lucky cat statue on the counter, waving its mechanical paw.

"Ah, Honey Bunches of Oats. The one with almonds. Would you mind grabbing that?" David said, then pointed at the top shelf.

Ilya grabbed it, then turned back to the shelf, his eyes fixed on a carton of Fruit Loops.

"Do you want it?" David asked.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Pft! No. I don't need. Is bad for me. Full of horrible food dye."

“Yes. But I asked if you *want* it.”

There was no judgment in David’s face. No snide remarks about Ilya being spoiled or ruining his diet, or asking for things he shouldn’t. Ilya tried to remember the last time anyone ever bought something for him on a whim, just because.

A vague memory of sneaking off to the corner store with his mother after hockey practice, and stumbling around the aisles, still in his gear, looking for his favorite candy bar. Standing next to his mother as she paid, not tall enough to reach her shoulders yet, grinning at the cashier with two front teeth missing, and sliding the chocolate bar across the counter. His mother’s gentle smile shone down on him, a little sun of its very own, and she was telling the cashier all about her son. Her little, *llyushka*, who was a diligent student, so big and strong, who could outrace all the kids at practice, and insisted on staying afterward to clean up all the pucks. *So kind*, she said. *So handsome. You’re breaking my heart!*

“Yes. I want,” Ilya croaked, and tossed the box into the cart. David hummed, satisfied, and carried on down the aisle for oatmeal. He chattered on and on, something about the heatwave due in a couple of days, and didn’t say anything about Ilya’s silence, or the stray tear he had to wipe away.

Ilya invited Svetlana over to watch the Celtics get their ass whooped by Toronto, and ordered extra Italian takeout from her favorite restaurant.

“I know you are bribing me with carbonara,” she told him, twirling the pasta on a plastic fork. She managed to make eating such a messy food elegant. She was wearing a white fuzzy sweater and light-wash jeans. There wasn’t a single stain on her.

Up until this point, cutting Boston out of himself felt clean-cut. A scheduled surgery, open him up, take out all the bad parts, and move on with his new life — but that wasn’t Svetlana, and never could be. He was lying to her, or at least, he couldn’t confirm her suspicions. He was leaving for love, and by God, he could tell no one about it.

On the TV, a forward was shooting free throws. One, off the rim. Two, missed it entirely. The arena, *Ilya’s* arena, buzzed with a sour anger. On the broadcast, the crowd’s booing was crystal clear. It was the fourth quarter, and the Celtics were down by more than twenty points. The Raptors were making out of Boston like bandits — they’d probably win the championship this year. Ilya wouldn’t be surprised. It was time to switch his allegiance anyway.

Svetlana had stopped eating, and Ilya barely touched his own food. They haven’t hung out in a while, Ilya’s doing, and they both knew why. She watched him for a long moment before asking in Russian, “It’s done then? You’re leaving.”

He nodded.

A quick inhale, and she closed her eyes. She’d always been so very good at collecting herself. She wore a better mask than he did, one for her father, one for her large and glamorous circle of friends, one for the sleazy men she sold cars to. Ilya never imagined she’d use one on him.

He reached for her, a pained sound caught in his throat.

Was she crying and smiling? She cupped his cheek with her small, soft hand. “Oh, Ilya. I’m happy for you. I really am. I’d lost hope that you’d ever do it.”

“Do what?”

She said it so simply, like it was the natural path for him to take. “Choose yourself. Choose love.”

On their final day at the cottage, they ate outside, late into the dusk. When Ilya grabbed their dirty dishes of pesto pasta, Shane clasped him by the wrist. His eyes were dark and teary in the golden light. Ilya couldn’t see his pupils. It felt like being swallowed whole.

“Just stack them here. I’ll take care of it tomorrow. Let’s watch the sunset,” Shane said.

Shane, who detested mess and uncleanness. He kept his garbage bins locked just in case of bears. He swept the front steps of the house every other day. Just this morning, he’d spent an hour ranting about that TikTok trend where people ate tidepods. Stupid, and a waste of good soap, he said.

Ilya rubbed the back of his hand over his nose. He couldn’t cry now, or he’d never stop. “Okay. Anything you want, *moy lyubovnik*,” he said and set the plates back down. He moved Shane to the outdoor lounging couch by the fire pit and went to turn it on. Ilya had been here long enough now that he knew how to make a bonfire himself.

They sat there, in the dark, with nothing but the fire and the cicadas to accompany them. It was late, and the sky was a deep black pinpricked with stars. Ilya never got to see this many, so clear and bright, streaming over their heads like thick lines of fog. Shane said when he was a boy, his dad got him a telescope for his tenth birthday, and they spent that whole summer mapping out constellations. Ilya’s love welled up in his chest, sure to burst open and kill him. Was it possible to love someone this much?

“We can make s’mores?” Shane croaked, another compromise. Shane wouldn’t eat the chocolate, just nibble on the graham crackers, but he’d cook a marshmallow for Ilya. Turning it slowly through the fire until it was golden brown. Ilya liked to stick the whole thing in at once, burn it black, then blow the fire out.

They couldn’t. Ilya had a flight back to Boston at eleven o’clock the next morning. Shane had to pack up the cottage, call in the cleaning service, and drive back to Montreal.

“Not this time,” Ilya whispered.

A big shuddery inhale into Ilya’s neck, and for a moment, Ilya thought this emotional spell would pass, but then Shane’s shoulders curled in on themselves, like a pillbug. He moaned a long and low against Ilya’s pulse point. He hiccuped and brought his clenched fist to his mouth to smother the sound. Ilya watched the little white edges of his teeth bite onto his

knuckles. The guilt poured over Ilya in waves, even if it wasn't rational, even if this had to happen.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm coming back. I'll always come back," Ilya whispered in Russian, and rocked Shane through his quiet sobbing. It was so dark now that Ilya could barely see anything. They hadn't left any lights on inside. A cottage on the other side of the lake glowed in the distance. A cloud of mosquitoes had quietly congregated around the patio table. Ilya felt them hovering at the nape of his neck, where he was the most sweaty. His foot was falling asleep, and his knee ached the way it did when he went too long without PT. Shane was sniffing snot all over his throat, and there wasn't even the call of a loon to crack the moment clean, and let all the pressure out.

Ilya grunted, bracing against the body aches, the battered score of his athlete's body, and shifted Shane higher up on his chest, so he could kiss that tender, lovely face.

Shane tasted like sunscreen and smelled like expensive shampoo. Ilya wouldn't give this up for all the money in the world.

Free agency dawned. Ilya signed with Ottawa on the first day. He checked his email once for the contract details and left the rest to his agent. He deleted every social media app from his phone and swore he'd only redownload them once he was in Ottawa.

His house was empty, the furniture sold off, the measly boxes of his belongings packed away with the moving truck, which would meet him in Ottawa at the house he'd bought on the shore of the Gatineau. Big windows. Privacy hedges. A three-car garage. Yuna had toured it for him, gleefully holding out her phone with Ilya on FaceTime while she gushed about ample closet space and the stunning skylight in the foyer.

Ilya would have lived in a shack if he needed to. It didn't matter. Regardless, Ottawa was ready to roll out the red carpet. That welcome phone call from the GM was long-fucking-winded.

He FaceTimed Shane once all the movers were out, walking around the airy space of his former life, the tall windows, the grandiose bedroom, the counter he'd kissed Shane on, when they were so young and unsure, desperate in a way that defied words.

"Okay. Mr. Real Estate, what do you think? Will I get lots of money for this property?" Ilya asked, twirling around the room with the phone camera held out.

Laughter rang out, tinny over the speakers, but still as lovely as any sound Ilya's ever heard. "Stop, Ilya! You're going to give me vertigo."

Ilya pouted at the screen. "But I want a real estate agent's opinion!"

"Fuck you. When's your flight?"

Ilya looked at his watch, then cursed. "Uh...an hour?"

“Oh my god. Come on! You need to go!”

“I am, I am!” Ilya grabbed his backpack and his suitcase. Everything else would meet him at his new home. He stood in the foyer while Shane yapped on the phone about traffic and cab prices. Ilya stared at the empty space in the living room where his couch used to be, and he could see Shane there in his mind — on that day when everything changed for them. Shane’s hesitant pleasure as he licked tuna off his fingers, his supple body under Ilya’s hands, his breath in Ilya’s ear, his love and his horror before he left, plain as day.

“Ilya? Are you okay?”

Ilya cleared his throat. “Yes, sweetheart. Just, uh, what is the English word, thinking about the past—”

“Reminiscing?” Shane’s voice went softer, and when Ilya finally looked back at his phone, his brow was furrowed, but his smile was sweet. Like he still felt guilty about leaving, even if it was necessary, to get them where they were now.

“Reminiscing. Yes. A good word, but I don’t need to do this anymore.”

“Why is that?”

Ilya stepped out the door and into a balmy Boston May. He wouldn’t miss it. “Now, I think, I will look to the future.”

End Notes

The sugar maple is the official tree of Canada. Yes, they're where we get maple syrup from.

Canada is also the largest producer of icewine in the WORLD. Most of it is grown and produced in Southern Ontario, where the temperature is just right to freeze the grapes before harvesting. At a glance, it looks like Inniskillin is one of the nicer wineries that produces icewine. Never tried it myself, but like Ilya, I love sweet foods.

Also, Canada's Drag Race came out in 2019... but let's pretend it arrived earlier ;)

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