

My Little Loon

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76543601) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76543601>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov & Irina Rozanova
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Irina Rozanova
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant , Missing Scene , Episode: s01e06 The Cottage (Heated Rivalry) , Grief/Mourning , Loss of Parent(s) , that feeling when you want to share good news with someone you love, but you can't because they're gone , Character Study
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-28 Words: 1,957 Chapters: 1/1

My Little Loon

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Summary

“Mama,” he says, bringing the cigarette to his lips. “You have been worried about me. I know.”

The smoke in his throat is so familiar. When he breathes out, it's already jagged. "I wanted to tell you that you don't have to be. Not anymore."

(Or: after waking early one morning at the cottage, Ilya goes down to the water to talk to his mother.)

Notes

if you subscribed to my account because of the goofy rpf socmed fic, i am very sorry. this is who i really am.

Title from Sufjan Stevens' *Fourth of July*.

Shall we look at the moon, my little loon?

Why do you cry?

Make the most of your life, while it is rife

While it is light

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



He wakes before dawn while the light is still grey. Shane is still sleeping beside him, and this unusual. Normally this goes the other way, Ilya waking to an empty bed and the sound of someone in the kitchen.

It's weird— how they already have a routine. It's only been a few days.

Glorious days.

But it's early. Too early even for Shane. Ilya rolls out of bed without waking him. Without moving him, even, tucking the blanket around his shoulders and replacing a pillow in the space where Ilya had been. He stares at him, for a long minute, taking in the peace of him. Soft, and warm. Hair in disarray.

One day, he'll get a picture of this. Will live a life where he can have it on display— his phone background, or hanging on the wall. But that day isn't now, so instead Ilya just memorizes the scene, all of its little details. And then he turns away.

He finds his bag in the hallway and reaches into an interior pocket, one he had sworn to himself he wouldn't touch, out here in paradise. The package of cigarettes is just as full as he'd left it, only two missing, smoked outside the Boston airport, one after another in an attempt to keep his hands from shaking. It had worked— for a time.

He hasn't thought about them much, but he's thinking about them now.

They go, with his nondescript black plastic lighter, into a pocket in his shorts. He doesn't bother to put a shirt on, air outside already humid and warm, threatening another muggy afternoon and an evening storm. The door opens on brand new hinges and Ilya stands there, for a second, with the air conditioning at his back and the morning at his face. Split between two worlds. He looks out at the forest, and breathes it in.

Ilya closes the door with his hand on the handle, keeping the latch disengaged until he's sure it's seated. He's not trying to wake anyone. Not now, not yet. Not this morning.

His feet find the now-familiar path down towards the water, packed soil and stone edged with tangles of a thorned berry Shane had named, but Ilya has forgotten. The dock and the boat garage are to his left, pristine and sharp-cornered. That's not what he wants, not right now, so instead he turns right, towards where the water is shallow, boulder sticking out of the lakebed, facing where the sky is slowly getting lighter.

It is too early for even the birds.

He's careful at the shoreline, dodging lily pads and the snarl of pine roots, stepping into the water. He trudges through it, ankle-deep, and climbs on top of the stone. It's cool, under his

hands, uneven and rough. Smooth enough to sit on. Big enough for two.

But Ilya is alone.

He takes the lighter and the cigarettes out of his pocket. Somewhere in the distance, a fish jumps, breaking the silence. His eyes try to find the disturbance, the break in the water, but all he sees is the wide expanse of dark. The pattern of the wind.

He pulls a cigarette out of the package. Puts the rest of them away. The lighter sparks— once, twice— and then lights.

“Mama,” he says, bringing the cigarette to his lips. “You have been worried about me. I know.”

The smoke in his throat is so familiar. When he breathes out, it's already jagged. "I wanted to tell you that you don't have to be. Not anymore."

His fingers know every etching on the crucifix around his neck. Each bump and sharp edge. He holds it in the hand not holding the cigarette, and looks at the sky.

"I did not think this would happen," he says. "My life, I— I have not had— "

"Is this your miracle, Mama?" he asks. In the darkest parts of the sky, he can still see stars. "Did you send him to me? Is this your doing? Did you see how I was— Who I was going to be?"

He shakes his head. The metal bites into his skin. Something in his jaw aches. "He looks after me. He has all these— plans. Like the future is something I am allowed to want," he says. "I don't know how to believe him. I keep expecting to wake up— in Boston. In Moscow. In my father's house those first few weeks after you were gone."

His breath abandons him and his head falls to his knees, choking out, "I wish you could meet him. God, I wish you could meet him."

"You would love him. He is not anything like me. He is— " Ilya laughs and lifts his head, blowing smoke. "Boring. I tell him he is boring and he does not like it, but I like it. I've never had boring. All my life, looking for home. And I didn't know it when I found it. Mama, I was so stupid— "

"You would have told me I was being stupid. Seen it right away. This is what happens when I don't have you, I get— stupid. Blind. I listen to my father. His awful words." The lake goes blurry in front of him, but it could just be the morning fog. The light is starting to change, getting warmer, into gold.

"He laughs like you, sometimes. Like he's scared of someone hearing," Ilya says. "He's so scared. I do not know how to help him. You would know, Mama. I was never scared with you. Not even when my father— " He takes another drag off his cigarette, just to have something to do with his mouth that doesn't involve the sob he can feel building in the back of his throat.

"I hope you are proud of me," he says, and it is the singular, honest, truth.

It's not something they ever discussed, an untouchable subject in the house Ilya grew up in, but he has to believe she would be proud of him. Isn't able to imagine a world where she is not— not in the face of this happiness. Not his mother, with all of her joy.

Across the water, a fisherman in a silent boat comes into view, tossing his line into the lake. Ilya doesn't hear the sound it makes, if it makes one. The man waves. Ilya waves back. It's what's expected of him.

Within seconds, the man and the boat slip around a corner in the shoreline and out of sight.

And then Ilya is alone again.

"He makes me happy, Mama," he says as another fish jumps, closer this time, so Ilya can see the rings in the water. "With his colour-coordinated underwear and rabbit food. He is a *fucking* good hockey player. You would agree. Better than me. You never liked the players who get into fights. Another thing for me to apologize for."

Everything Ilya can see is rose-toned, sepia in the dawn. Even the leaves, deep green, take on a shade of it. Crystal, where they dip into the water.

"I know I have not been a very good son," he says. "I do not come visit very often. I hope you are not lonely. I hope you can hear me just the same here as you can in Moscow— I do not know when I will be there again."

"I might not ever go back. If something happens— " He cuts himself off, not daring to even really speak it. His cigarette drops ash onto his knee and he doesn't bother to wipe it away. "I will not be able to go back. I will have to leave you there. In the cold. I am sorry— "

And that's what breaks him. After all of it. He sobs into his elbow, shuddering, quiet things of old grief, and new grief. He thinks about his mother's grave going untended. How much she always loved the sun. How she is buried, now, next to his father. In the place bought out for their family, where he has never seen his brother visit.

Moscow is a city of old graves. He used to walk by them, unable to read the names, wondering about all of the forgotten people. Here, at Shane's cottage, seven thousand kilometres away, Ilya is one of only two people in the world who remember her smile.

With his face still buried, he whispers, almost a prayer, "Alexei has a daughter. I told you when she was born. She will be my one regret, my brother's child. She will have money, but — I will not know her. Look out for her, Mama. Somebody will have to."

A bird floats past him in the water, black and white, regal. It looks at him with a single red eye, and it's not until it is almost past him that Ilya notices the baby, almost invisible, head tucked under one wing, on its mother's back. Sound asleep. He raises his head and laughs, wet, kissing the crucifix. "You hear me," he says. "Mama, you hear me."

Maybe it's just a bird. Maybe he's just desperate to believe in something good. The cigarette burns itself down to the filter. He breathes in, deep, and nods his head.

"So, mama," he says as he puts the cigarette out against the stone underneath him, tucking the butt into his pocket. "You don't need to worry about me. I'm okay. I'm— better than okay. I have a good life. A job I am good at, that pays me a lot of money. I have a beautiful lover, and brilliant friends. So you don't need to worry about me anymore, okay? You can focus on your rest."

There's a splashing in the water behind him, the sound of someone coming down the hill. Ilya doesn't turn. He knows who it is.

"You're up early," Shane says, voice still sleep-thick, pressing a kiss into the back of Ilya's left shoulder. He stays there for a long moment before he says, "You've been smoking."

It takes Ilya a second to switch languages, gears grinding in his head. He lets the crucifix fall out of his hand. It's warm against his chest, catching the rising light.

"Just one," he says, and his accent is thicker than he normally hears it.

It must give him away because Shane doesn't say anything else, just puts his head back into Ilya's neck. Together, they breathe as the sun finally breaks the edge of the trees and sets the lake on fire. Ilya closes his eyes. Swallows. Smells nothing but the mint and eucalyptus of Shane's shampoo, tinged with lakewater. He turns to press a kiss to the top of his head.

Shane shifts so his chin is on Ilya's shoulder instead. "Do you have opinions on breakfast? I was thinking— "

Ilya doesn't mean to cut him off, but he does. Into Shane's hair he says, "Anything you want. I mean it."

Humming a sound that could mean anything, Shane slips back into the water and grabs Ilya's hand. Tugging lightly, he says, "Okay then. Come on. The turtles are going to want their rock back now that the sun's up."

And all Ilya has to do is follow him— up the hill, and into the house.

Where he has been made welcome.

Half way up the hill, Shane gasps, and spins him around. "Look, Ilya— " he says, pointing. Ilya follows his finger to the bird in the water. The same one as before, with the baby on her back. "Look at the loon. You were so scared of them last night, but look, see? Nothing to be scared of at all. And she has a baby, oh my god— "

End Notes

[if you have never seen a loon swimming around with a baby on its back u are missing out.](#)

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