

bet it feels nice, turning your back on your whole damn life

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bet it feels nice, turning your back on your whole damn life

by [vettelian19](#)

Summary

On the anniversary of his father's death, Ilya bakes a sharlotka.

(or, grieving something you were happy to lose, ilya rozanov style)

Notes

Wrote this snippet because 1) Heated Rivalry obviously has me in the same chokehold we're all collectively embracing at the moment and 2) because I do not see enough people talking about the part of Ilya's Russian monologue from episode 5 when he said "And it kills me that he took care of my father and I didn't. But I couldn't. I wasn't there."

Eastern European queer trauma recognizes Eastern European queer trauma, I guess.

(title from Jeremy Zucker's hometown)

There is a special kind of tragedy in losing a rigged game. It is the classic version, the one that has prevailed through humanity's heartbreaking history: the one all the dusty old Greek men monologued about, the one they lovingly dramatized, the one they treated as almost like torture porn, stabbing one knife after one knife after one knife into their hero's back.

You know the kind. The kind where you had all the choices presented to you on a silver plate yet you still ended up with the wrong one? The kind where you knew how all of it would end, and still went ahead? The kind where you have nothing but you to blame?

The one where the hero is anything but the hero?

Good thing Ilya never thought himself a hero. Good thing he knew what he was all along: someone who wasn't even on the journey. Who said no to the calling. Who abandoned the fucking ship the moment it dipped.

—

The anniversary of his father's death comes on a particularly sunny day. The sky is so strikingly blue, Ilya has to squint his eyes when he leaves for his morning run. Everything is so bright and so vivid, it feels like he has to re-orient his whole world the moment he steps out on the cold concrete. Everything is just so—much.

He and Shane usually go on their morning run together, but Ilya's been awake since 4 am and didn't have it in him to wake Shane up whose face was basically lost in the pillow mountain he has slowly built up in their bed. He looked peaceful and happy and like he needed the rest. Ilya couldn't ruin that. He couldn't ruin that, too.

He starts with a jog, not wanting to tire himself out, but as he moves through the streets, he can't help but speed up, his feet taking him places without even thinking about where he's going. He only slows down when he feels the sweat drip into the band of his sweatpants, not like drops of condensation on a foggy bus window, but like rivulets making their way down from the mountaintop.

He eventually slows, and slows some more, and then he walks, his calf spasming for a second before the pain leaves him almost as quickly as it came. He goes to check his phone but it's not in the pocket at the back of his pants. He realizes he didn't even bring his earphones, listening to just the thump of his blood in his ear for the last hour or so.

He doesn't know if he was dissociating or just didn't pay attention. He remembers the run, he remembers the movement, he just doesn't remember if he was really there.

When he closes the door behind himself, Shane immediately stands up from the kitchen stool.

"You're home," he says simply when he spots Ilya. His phone is in his hand and if Ilya was a gambling man, he'd put a thousand dollars on his own phone having multiple missed calls.

Shane knew what day it was. Of course, he knew.

“I made you breakfast,” Shane says. He doesn’t ask why Ilya did not bring his phone. He doesn’t ask why he went running alone. He doesn’t ask if he’s doing okay. He doesn’t need to.

They eat in silence—eggs, vegan bacon, a blueberry smoothie that’s so cold, it gives Ilya brain freeze for a glorious few seconds.

He washes their dishes while Shane finishes up his weirdly citrusy ginger tea he got obsessed with a couple weeks ago, then heads up to take a shower.

By the time he’s finished, Shane’s already on the couch, curled up under a blanket reading a thick hardback he’s been slowly working his way through since his last trip to his parents. Ilya fits himself into the small space between his book and his stomach, Shane silently draping his blanket over the both of them.

“You wanna talk?” Shane asks.

Ilya just shakes his head, burrowing his face even deeper into Shane’s torso.

“You wanna call Sveta?”

“Maybe in a bit,” Ilya breathes out.

“Good,” Shane says and starts playing with Ilya’s hair, a movement so absent-minded, Ilya’s not even sure he realizes he’s doing it.

“You want to listen to your weird Russian music?”

Ilya snorts. “Is not weird. You just don’t appreciate art, Hollander.”

“You have a very loose definition of art,” Shane says, pressing a featherlight kiss to his temple.

Ilya hums, non-committal. They don’t talk after, allowing the silence to cocoon them like a thick blanket of snow.

—

He spends half an hour online digging up a semi-usable sharlotka recipe before he gives up and texts Svetlana.

Ilya: u have sharlotka recipe?

Not even two seconds after he sends it, the ellipses appear.

Sveta: i have one but swear on shane’s life you won’t share it with anyone

Ilya: 👍

Sveta: say the words with your pretty mouth

Ilya: i swear on shane's life now gimme

Sveta: 😞

He's expecting a link or a video, but Sveta just simply sends him a photo. It's of a piece of yellowish paper, Russian cursive scribbled across half of it with a surprisingly masterful ink drawing of a basket of apples taking up the other half.

It takes him a couple minutes to get used to the handwriting, feeling almost rusty deciphering the letters he's achingly familiar with.

He's almost done with peeling the apples when Shane appears. He went for his own run about an hour ago, so he's all sweaty when he corners him in the kitchen to press a kiss to the back of head.

"What are you making?"

"Sharlotka. Very bad for your diet."

"Sounds delicious," Shane says and sneaks a sweaty arm around Ilya.

"Go take a shower, you smell," Ilya says, but he subconsciously presses himself deeper into Shane's arm. He's very warm, and for a second, all Ilya can smell around him is Shane and apples and apples and Shane.

It's almost too much.

"Go," he says finally, and pushes him towards their bedroom. "I need to finish this."

With one last kiss, Shane departs. Ilya finishes the cake in silence, the only sound in the kitchen the slow humming of the oven he's pre-heating.

By the time Shane returns, the sweet smell of apples and sugar starts to waft through the kitchen.

"Smells like a bakery in here. Maybe you missed your calling."

"Chef Rozanov. Maybe after we retire. We can open a restaurant, you'll be greeting guests with your pretty smile and I'll be shouting at the kitchen people."

Shane plasters himself against Ilya and laughs quietly into his neck. "Let's circle back to this idea once I actually tasted this cake." Then after, apropos of nothing, he adds, "I saw a squirrel carrying a walnut on my run. It was straight up from a Disney movie, I swear."

Ilya snorts. "You and your nut obsession. Pervert."

"When can we eat the cake?"

"A cake? Shane Hollander wants to eat an actual cake? There is sugar in this, you know. Real sugar. The one that contains all the bad calories."

“I am not going to eat the whole thing. I want to try it, though. You’re making it.”

Ilya’s heart maybe skips a beat or two, but no one needs to know *that*.

They eat the cake in bed because the sun is shining through the window in a disgustingly beautiful way, and the moment Ilya suggests they do it, Shane caves like a marshmallow left out in the heat.

The sharlotka turned out great: all tangy apple with just a hint of vanilla. When Shane compliments his baking, Ilya kisses the taste off his lips, his tongue, every inch of his mouth. It’s still intoxicating, Shane mixing with all this sugar and apple and the general smell of baking, and Ilya wants to submerge himself in it all.

“He wasn’t all bad, you know,” Ilya says after they cleared their plates and placed them in a precarious tower at the edge of the nightstand. He’s not sure he made a conscious decision to start talking, but once the words start to tumble out of his mouth, he doesn’t want to stop them.

Shane doesn’t say anything to that, but the way he draws slow circles into his palm makes Ilya think that he’s hanging onto every word he says.

“He was mostly bad, yes,” Ilya continues, almost answering the question he knows was in both his and Shane’s head. “I’m—I’m happy he’s not here anymore. I’m—or maybe not happy, but I am relieved. Yes, it’s a relief. But he wasn’t all bad. He loved to play hockey with me, you know? He was good on the ice and when we were on the ice together, he finally paid attention to me. And it was good attention. Not kind, he was demanding, but it was good attention. And he loved animals. He was cruel to people, but animals were different.”

The figures Shane is drawing into his hand slowly change, turning into hearts and cats and dogs, like he wants to illustrate the story Ilya is sharing with him.

“Did he—did he like sharlo—sharlo—what was the name again?”

“Sharlotka. No, I don’t think so. He didn’t eat desserts.” *He was a man*, he doesn’t add.

After a second of silence, Shane says, “Did your mother like it?”

Ilya smiles. “No. I mean, maybe she did, I don’t know. I like to think she liked cooking, but I’m honestly not sure. I just—I like sharlotka, though. It smells like—”

“Home?” Shane supplies.

Ilya shakes his head. “No, home is this. Home is your terrible ginger tea and your ridiculously expensive cologne and the cottage in the summer. Home is this, Hollander.”

He can't say he's surprised by the sudden pressure on his lips, Shane acting like he wants to devour him.

"It smells like all the things I lost, I guess," he says, almost a good five minutes later, his heart still pounding away in his chest, head on Shane's shoulder, hands scrunching up his husband's T-shirt. Shane's lips are red and shiny, and he looks content when he looks at him.

"Maybe one day you can go back. Maybe we can even go back together," Shane says, and he sounds so naive, Ilya wants to both punch him and wrap him up in an even tighter hug. "You're a Canadian citizen now, the embassy could, maybe, I don't know, protect us from the worst."

Oh, yeah, Ilya's shiny navy blue Canadian passport, the one he worked so hard to get. The one he upended his life for, the one that made him finally breathe out the moment he received it. That stupid, stupid blue passport that he had to give his old one up for because you can't have both, that's not allowed. You have to choose, and if that's not the perfect analogy for Ilya's life, he doesn't know what is.

He always had to choose, and he knows he made the right decision every single time, but gosh, none of those decisions were really, truly *right*. No matter how perfect Shane is, no matter how real, how *precious* what they have is. No matter how much he can breathe now.

He always had to choose.

"No, I—even if I could, I wouldn't want to go back. There's nothing in Russia for me, not anymore. There was, at one point, there was quite a lot, but I wasn't there. And I'll never have that chance back again."

"You did everything you could," Shane says.

"I did," Ilya says, because he knows he did. There was no way he could have done more. There wasn't more. It was still not enough, though.

"I want to—I don't know what I can do to help," Shane breathes out after a few seconds of silence. "I don't want you to carry it alone, but I don't know how to take this from you."

"I think I like the pain of carrying it. Good pain. Very Russian. Maybe the only Russian thing I still have left, you know?"

"Ilya."

"No, Hollander. This is not something to fix, okay? This is—this is the only thing that's still mine. And I want to keep it."

Shane looks like he wants to still argue, but keeps his mouth shut. Ilya doesn't think he understands, not fully, but maybe it's okay. Maybe some things don't have to be understood, only felt.

"Now, tell me about that squirrel."

And Shane does and Ilya's heart is so, so light.

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