

Proof (That I Was Here)

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Proof (That I Was Here)

by [OpalApparition](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov has never had a drink that didn't mean something, or didn't make him think of *someone*. He's had a lot of drinks.

A history, told in cocktails.

Notes

Proof

/prōf/

The strength of distilled alcoholic liquor, relative to proof spirit taken as a standard of 100.

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

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [以酒为证 | Proof \(That I Was Here\)](#) by [theotherside_momo](#)

Kvas first. Always kvas first.

Lyosha bought it from the woman with the yellow tank on Tverskaya, two plastic cups for ten rubles, and Ilya drank his so fast the carbonation burned his nose. He was seven, maybe eight. Summer sat heavily on Moscow and the kvas was sour and warm and a little bit like bread left out in the sun. Lyosha wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said *eshchyо?* and Ilya said *da* and they spent their last coins on a second round they carried to the bench by the metro, kicking their legs in the heat, saying nothing because there was nothing to say.

They were brothers. The afternoon was long. The kvas was not good, exactly, but it was theirs.

He tried it once, years later, at a Russian grocery in Brighton, pouring it into a glass and stood in his kitchen in Boston and waited for something to happen.

His brother hated him, and he *knew* why.

It tasted like kvas.

“Schastlivogo novogo goda!”

It *was* a Happy New Year, and his mother drank *shampanskoe* on New Year’s Eve. The Soviet kind, sickly sweet, the bottle sweating in her hands as she poured a finger’s width into Ilya’s cup and told him not to tell Papa. He was ten. The bubbles fizzed against his teeth and he screwed up his face and she laughed—she had the best laugh, his mother, her joy too big for her small body, shoulders shaking—and in one hand held her cup, and the other touched his curls as she said, *Nu vot, Ilyushen’ka, teper’ ty vzroslyy.*

There, now you’re grown up.

He wasn’t. She was thirty-four. Two years later he found her in the bed with the pills on the nightstand, her hand dangling, empty, and the stillness that would follow him out of that room and into every room after.

Ilya did not drink champagne.

He didn’t make a rule of it. He simply found that his hand never reached for the glass.

Hayden Pike drank Hurricanes.

Hurricanes. Like a freshman at Mardi Gras. Like a man who had never once in his life considered the concept of dignity. Orange and red and sticky with grenadine, a cocktail engineered to be consumed through a straw by someone who did not respect themselves or anyone around them.

Ilya loved them, and he would die before admitting he liked anything Pike did.

Ginger ale.

He bought it because Shane didn't drink, or didn't drink much, and Ilya's penthouse had nothing in it but alcohol and sparkling water and leftovers. He stood in the grocery store aisle in Boston looking at the green cans and thought: *This is for him. I am buying this because he is coming to my home and I want him to have a thing he likes.*

The simplicity of that want leveled him. Totally and completely. He stood there holding a twelve-pack of Canada Dry and understood, with the sudden clarity of a man stepping off a cliff, that he was *fucked*.

Shane came. He stayed. Shane drank the ginger ale on Ilya's couch, and Ilya watched his throat move with each sip and thought about what it would be like to be that ordinary, that easy.

To be a can of ginger ale in Shane Hollander's hand.

And then...

Shane. Ilya.

I can't do this.

Misery, and there were eleven more cans in the fridge.

Peppermint schnapps.

That was the bad one. Shane not returning his calls, tabloid photos of Shane and Rose Landry at a restaurant in Montreal, and Ilya at a bar in Copley Square with three teammates who were not Marlow, doing shots of peppermint schnapps because someone called them Rumpleshots and said they were funny.

They were not funny. They were disgusting. They tasted like mouthwash and the specific flavor of a man trying to dissolve himself from the inside out, and Ilya drank six of them—*Mezhdru pervoy i vtoroy pereryvchik nebol'shoy*. Between the first and second glass, the pause is small—and then two more and then lost the hours somewhere between the bar and his bathroom floor.

He woke with his face against the tile and the cross around his neck digging into his collarbone and his phone open to Shane's contact—*Jane*, it said, because he'd never been brave enough to use the real name—with a half-typed message he didn't remember writing.

He deleted it. Brushed his teeth. The mint in the toothpaste made him gag.

Molodets, Ilya, he told his reflection. *Ochen' krasivo*. Beautiful work.

He could not escape Rose Landry.

Rose Landry liked vodka cranberries. He learned this from an interview on some late-night show he'd left on while half-asleep on his couch in Boston, and the host asked what she drank and Rose laughed and said *oh, vodka crans, always*, and Ilya stared at the screen with a hatred so specific it had a vintage.

Not for Rose. Rose was *fine* the way that things that did not matter, that people did not want to talk about, were *fine*. Rose was a woman on television wearing red lipstick and laughing too hard at a bad joke and dating Shane Hollander in broad daylight, which was the one thing Ilya had never been allowed to do.

It was the vodka, his spirit in her glass. The most Russian thing in any room and it was being mixed with cranberry juice and handed to the woman Shane had chosen to be seen with.

Instead. As if Ilya had ever been a real option. As if Shane had laid out his life on a table and weighed them both and picked.

Ilya pulled a can of ginger ale from the back of his own fridge—one of many left behind and undrunk—and went out onto the balcony. Boston glittered off beyond the treeline. He drank the ginger ale flat and warm and did not think about it anymore. He was very good at not thinking about things. World-class.

They should give a trophy for it. He had a whole shelf.

While in Florida, of course he was drinking Coronas.

Tampa, the All-Star game, January heat so foreign to both of them that the air felt borrowed. Ilya was wearing a shirt covered in palm trees because he'd thought it would be funny, and now Shane Hollander was walking into the hotel bar in a white linen button-down and slate blue pants that fit him like they'd been sewn onto his body, and Ilya felt like a fucking idiot.

Shane sat on the stool beside him and flagged down the bartender and ordered two Coronas without asking Ilya what he wanted. Like they did this all the time. Like this was a thing they *did*.

"So this should be fun, huh?" Shane said. "Always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team."

Ilya could not think of a single word in either of his languages. Bizarrely, they did keep talking. No, his parents were not here, and:

"Rose and I aren't together anymore," Shane said, not looking at him. "It was a short thing. We just weren't compatible."

Ilya picked up his bottle. The lime wedge bobbed against the neck. He could feel the entire axis of his life shifting, tilting, the whole bar rearranging itself around those last words, and

he took a sip of Corona and said, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Shane said.

“Okay,” Ilya said again, because both of his languages had failed him and *okay* was the only word left that would not ruin this.

They drank their Coronas. Their knees nearly touched under the bar. Nearly. The closest unit of distance Ilya had ever measured.

Ilya did not move his. Shane did not move his. The limes grew waterlogged at the bottom of the bottles and the condensation pooled on the wood and neither of them said a single word about any of it, and it was the best drink Ilya had ever had in his life.

Vodka was his father’s, and Ilya drank it anyway.

This was, he understood, its own kind of war. Grigori Rozanov drank Stolichnaya from a short glass after work and did not offer any to his sons and did not speak while he drank it. Vodka was an ending, in that apartment.

A door pulled shut.

Ilya drank it in Boston with teammates who thought it was hilarious, *of course* the Russian kid drinks vodka, and he laughed along and poured another and thought: *You have no idea what this costs me*. But he wouldn’t give it up. He refused to let his father have vodka, too, on top of everything else he’d already taken like his approval, his forgiveness, his hatred.

Sometimes it tasted like Stolichnaya.

Sveta had a bottle of pinot noir.

She opened that bottle the night she confronted him about Shane, cross-legged on her apartment floor in Moscow with a chocolate cake from the nearest bakery between them. His father was two weeks dead. Russia sat on Ilya like a hand pressing him into the earth, and there was an ocean between here and home—home being a country that was not his by birth, a city that did not speak his language.

She poured two glasses and didn’t say anything for a while, and then she said, *Ilyush, ty davno znal?*

How long have you known?

And he said, *Vsegda*, and she nodded, and they drank the wine and ate the cake with their hands, fingers stained dark with chocolate and tannin. The pinot was dry and round and tasted like the inside of a church—dark wood, old smoke, the particular sweetness of a place where people came to confess.

I love you, but not like that. I love him, and it can never be like that.

He never needed to confess to Sveta.

She already knew. She always already knew.

Cliff Marlow drank bourbon because Cliff Marlow was from Connecticut, and Americans loved their brown liquor with a devotion Ilya found both admirable and clinically insane. They sat at bars after games and Marlow ordered *Maker's Mark* and Ilya ordered the same, and they talked about hockey and cars and absolutely nothing of substance, and it was good. It was easy. Ilya learned to like the sweetness of bourbon, the way it finished with oak and smoke and a warmth that didn't ask for anything back.

Marlow was a good friend.

In April, Marlow caught Shane along the boards and Shane's head snapped back and his body went down and Ilya was twenty feet away on the same ice. He watched Shane crumple. He watched the trainers rush out. He watched them help Shane to his feet and guide him down the tunnel and Ilya stood there, in his Boston jersey, on his Boston team, and could not follow. Could not skate over. Could not even look too long without someone asking why the fuck Rozanov cared so much about Hollander.

He played the rest of the game. He did not remember a single moment of it, like he was blackout all over, passed out on the floor and dead on the ice.

That night Marlow came to his hotel room with a bottle of *Maker's Mark* and they sat on each of the queen sized beds and Marlow said, "I feel fucking terrible," and Ilya poured them both three fingers and said, "I know," and between them sat the kind of sadness that was easier to carry across four hands than two.

Shane was high on painkillers when Ilya visited, propped up in a Montreal hospital bed with his dark hair pushed in every wrong direction and a bruise spreading purple and green along one side of his face. He looked younger. He looked breakable, which was the cruelest thing a hockey player could look, and Ilya stood in the doorway holding a cup of water from the nurse's station because he hadn't known what else to bring.

"Ilyaaaaa," Shane crooned and smiled at him, dopey and higher than sunny day clouds, and Ilya wanted to burn the whole league to the ground.

He sat in the plastic chair beside the bed and handed Shane the water and watched him drink it in slow, careful sips, his hands clumsy around the cup. A concussion. A fractured collar bone.

Ilya felt unfairly lucky, blessed, that it wasn't something more serious. And to see Shane like this, nuzzling into his palm, starving for affection, melting into his touch.

"Will you... come to the cottage this summer," Shane said. His eyes were half-closed, the painkillers pulling him back under. "Don't go to Russia. Come to my house. We'll have so much *fun*, it's so *private*, no one will know..."

Ilya should have said no, and he tried to. Shane *knew* they couldn't do that and all the reasons piled one on top of the next to make a mountain: the risk, the exposure, the impossibility of two rival players spending a summer together and keeping it from the press. He should have said *nyet, Hollander, go to sleep, you are drugged and not thinking*.

"We could have a week, or even two? We'd be completely alone... *together*."

"Maybe," he said instead, his heart breaking in half, because Shane was smiling at him with his eyes almost shut and his bruised face and his stupid hopeful mouth, and Ilya had never once in his life been able to say the right thing to this man. "Maybe."

Shane's eyes closed. His breathing slowed. His hand rested on the blanket, palm-up, fingers loosely curled, and Ilya sat beside him drinking water from a paper cup and did not think about what *maybe* would cost him.

Water was not a drink. It had no taste, no memory, no history.

It was the most honest thing Ilya had ever swallowed.

Budweiser was, *maybe*, the most American beer in America, and Ilya drank it because it was June and it was the only thing in his fridge and the New York Admirals were about to win the Stanley Cup on his television.

He did not have a rooting interest. He had been eliminated by the Admirals himself, weeks ago, and now he was watching Scott Hunter—another man he barely knew and did not particularly like—lift the Cup above his head while the crowd in Los Angeles screamed.

And then, in the middle of the broadcast, Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend on live television.

Ilya set his beer on the coffee table. He watched Scott Hunter's arm around this man—Kip, the announcers were saying, stumbling over the story, trying to catch up—and he watched the crowd go silent and then, slowly, not silent, and he watched two men stand together on the ice with the Stanley Cup between them and refuse to let go of each other.

He picked up his phone.

Shane answered on the second ring. "Il—"

"I'm coming to the cottage," Ilya said.

A long pause. He could hear Shane breathing.

"Okay," Shane said.

And Ilya thought: there it is again. *Okay*. Their word. The one that meant everything they couldn't say, the door they kept propping open for each other, the smallest and bravest word in the English language.

He finished his Budweiser, and it tasted like the beginning of everything.

Double vodka ginger with lime. Ilya's standing order at every bar, every restaurant, every team dinner.

Nobody knew why he drank it. Nobody asked. Ilya Rozanov drank vodka gingers and that was simply a fact about him, like his lopsided smile, like his European sports cars, like the gold cross he wore against his skin.

He could have explained it, if anyone had bothered to ask—that ginger ale tasted the way Shane made him feel. Bright, clean, a little bit sweet. Bubbly, like champagne. His mother would've loved him and vodka gingers with lime. It was ordinary in a way that startled him, every time, because Ilya's life had never been ordinary and he had never wanted it to be until Shane Hollander sat on his couch in Boston drinking Canada Dry like the world was a simple place. And that Ilya had wanted to swallow that feeling, keep it inside him, carry it into every bar and every city and every lonely night on the road. So he'd built a drink around it. Ginger ale and vodka and a wedge of lime, and it was his, and it was Shane's, and no one had to know.

Shane knew.

Shane had figured it out on a Tuesday in the cottage, standing in the kitchen doorway while Ilya made their drinks. Ilya poured the vodka and reached for the ginger ale—Shane's ginger ale, the Canada Dry that lived next to Ilya's cans of Coke in the fridge—and tipped it into his own glass, same as he'd done a hundred times. He added the lime and took a sip.

And Shane said, from the doorway, very evenly, "That's my ginger ale."

Ilya shrugged. "We can buy you more."

"You drink Coke."

"I drink many things."

"You told me ginger ale was for children and Canadians."

"What? So it is a crime now for me to enjoy children's cocktail?" Ilya said, squeezing the lime wedge and dropped it into the glass and kept his eyes on his hands because if he looked at Shane right now the whole stupid fragile architecture of the thing would collapse. He'd been ordering vodka gingers for two years. Every bar, every city, every road game, alone in restaurants and surrounded by teammates who never once asked why.

Even before the cottage and that *I love you* and Shane had said it back and the whole world rearranged.

And the answer was so simple it was humiliating: because ginger ale was Shane, and Ilya wanted Shane in his mouth, in his blood, in every ordinary evening for the rest of his life, and this was the only way he'd known how to have it.

"And, since you have forgotten," he continued, "I am in love with a Canadian. So."

Ginger ale for Shane. And the vodka—well. His father didn't get to keep that. Neither did Rose Landry with her filthy cranberry. It was his spirit to savor, to mourn, to sip, to pour over ice and mix with the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Ilya finally looked at him, and Shane's face was doing the thing it did when Ilya caught him off guard; mouth slightly open, eyes too bright, freckles standing out the way they did when blood rose to the surface. "Is his fault I have such terrible taste."

Laughing, Shane took the glass from his hand and tasted it and his mouth puckered and Ilya laughed—his joy too large for his own massive frame, shoulders shaking—and pulled Shane in by the collar and kissed the ginger from his lips.

Every drink he'd ever had led here. Every sip, every shot, every night on a bathroom floor. The whole catalogue of what he'd swallowed and what had swallowed him. All of it, the entire bloodstream of his life, converging in a kitchen in Ontario where a man with freckles drank Ilya's drink and made a face and Ilya loved him so much the English language could not hold it all.

Cheers, the Canadians said. *Za zdorov'ye*, the Russians.

Ilya kissed him again, tasting vodka and ginger and lime and the whole long story of his wanting.

Za tebya, he thought. *To you. To you. To you.*

End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

In a mood today sipping my little sodas and did this as some writing practice. Cheers!

Also to that night in 2012 that I had too many peppermint schnapps at a bar in Philadelphia and forced my friends to join an airband competition only to not remember any of it, I am sorry, I love you

edit 3/31/2026: i learned that Aloshya was not the diminutive for Andrei, Lyosha is, and so its been fixed.

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🌈 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🍷 “Za tebya,”
- 🍹 “Ilya would fucking love Hurricanes if Hayden didn't like them”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”

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