

## Navigating on Moth Wings

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# Navigating on Moth Wings

by [forgotten80sfilm](#)

## Summary

"What is it like in Hell?"

There are things you prepare yourself for your child to someday ask but there are infinitely more things that you can never prepare yourself for. This is the latter.

or Sofiya Rozanova-Hollander is the best thing that has ever happened to her parents, Cup wins included. This is how they manage when an incident at school brings up thoughts and feelings they might not be prepared for.

## Notes

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

Shane strolls the same concrete path he went up this morning, carefully toeing around newly added pieces of chalk artwork. He almost steps on what he thinks is supposed to be a purple butterfly, but the capital B shaped wings aren't exactly attached to the hotdog-like body. The drawings dwindle the closer and closer he gets to the door until they disappear altogether under the shade of the awning. Though the glass is tinted and shadowed he can still see the outline of Ms. Janae walking up to the door to greet him.

Ms. Janae is his daughter's favorite of the various teachers' aides who mill around the school and Ms. Janae has always seemed more than happy to be her near constant companion. The thing Shane appreciates about her most is her consistency. She has a standard uniform, a turtleneck of a solid color underneath a patterned sundress. On Fridays she always wears a pink turtleneck and a sky blue dress covered in clouds and rainbows. Today is no exception. What is missing from her usual uniform however, is a smile.

Ms. Janae pushes the door open and steps out, keeping one white Converse wedged in the door so it doesn't slip shut. Shane is already nervous before she speaks.

"Hi Shane, Sofiya's fine but I thought I'd warn you we're having an off day."

"Off?" Shane frowns, that could mean a million different things, "Did something happen?"

"I really don't know," Ms. Janae admits sheepishly, "She wouldn't talk to Levi or I about it, but her mood dipped considerably in the afternoon."

He doesn't feel great about something potentially happening to his daughter and no one being able to tell him what the fuck it was. He's fighting back the urge to press Janae for more answers. But he knows from personal experience that Sofiya can be elusive, especially when she's really upset. It's inherited he thinks, from both sides.

Shane nods tightly, "Alright, thanks for letting me know."

Ms. Janae dips her head back inside and calls for Sofiya. Her classmates have already left with her teacher, M. Levi Fenley, out the front of the building. Sofiya however, waits behind with Ms. Janae to leave out the back. It's a mutually beneficially system they had to develop almost immediately at the beginning of the school year. It took one day for it to become clear other parents weren't going to let Shane pick up his daughter without making some sort of advance towards him or comment about his retirement. Besides, Sofiya has never expressed any desire to leave with her classmates. She's not one for crowds or chaos and if they leave out the backdoor she doesn't have to cover her ears because the busses' brakes hiss too loudly.

Sofiya walks out the door looking the same as she did when she walked in. Her hair is pushed back with a wide, paisley headband but otherwise is left to plume around her like a lion's mane. Her white and pink striped polo and blue jeans were still intact, knees distinctly free of grass stains or mud. Clearly she hadn't been hunting for bugs at recess like she normally would.

Her demeanor is off, Ms. Janae had been right about that. Sofiya is always a bit anxious at drop off but by the end of the day she's undoubtedly buzzing about something that she'd learned, saw, or collected at school. She has none of that energy now, eyes downcast and expression impassive. Her mouth is latched onto the soft skin of her right wrist, a habit reserved for particularly bad days. Shane and Ilya haven't been able to convince her that chewelry can be just as soothing. She hands over her Spider-Man backpack to Shane without comment. Shane tucks it under his right arm and takes her by her free hand. She squeezes down hard on his palm.

"See you Monday, Sofiya!" Ms. Janae performs her usual smile and wave, probably hoping she can eek a response out of her. Sofiya doesn't blink.

"Have a good weekend, Ms. Janae," Shane replies before turning his attention back to Sofiya. He rubs his thumb over hers and her grip loosens slightly. His voice softens, "Ready to go?"

Sofiya nods once and lets her dad lead her to the SUV parked on the curb.

Shane pops her door open for her and Sofiya ambles into her car seat. Her wrist leaves her mouth when she gets a hold of Носки (*Noski*), her appropriately named sock-bunny. She takes him with her from bed to the car and then the car back to bed each day. Носки is similar in dimensions to the more common sock-monkey aside from his additional floppy ears and puffball tail and he has been a comfort item for her since he came out of a gift bag from David at Sofiya's first birthday party. Sofiya tucks his long arms around her neck and presses her lips to the top of his head. Shane feels a little lighter as he tightens her seatbelt. Носки never fails to make her feel better.

Slipping into the front seat, Shane has to remind himself to keep his eyes on the road instead of looking at Sofiya in the review mirror the whole drive.

Arriving home, Shane hangs Sofiya's backpack up on its hook next to her matching Spider-Man raincoat. Despite having no interest in anything superhero related, Sofiya insisted on getting all Spider-Man related supplies for her first year of school, just because it had spiders on it. Ilya was less than enthusiastic (horrified) when, at the age of three, she plopped down in the grass at the cottage and let a daddy long legs crawl up her arm. Shane assured Ilya that he knew which spiders bite and which ones don't. He wouldn't let her pick up anything venomous. Since then Ilya's found his peace, mostly, with their daughter's love for bugs. Shane has often found Ilya staring at her with admiration while she does something like pick a worm off the concrete and carry it back to the safety of the grass.

"How did we make someone so gentle?" Ilya whispered once, when they were laying in bed together and the house was too quiet.

It was a layered question, which categorically meant Shane should've hated answering it, but with time he'd learned to decipher what Ilya meant.

"It's your fault," Shane whispered back, leaning in to kiss the spot between Ilya's eyebrows. "She gets her kindness from you."

"Mmm, no," Ilya sniffed, "I was a normal child who would not pick the creepy crawlies off the ground. You though... you would."

And if Shane chose that moment to inform Ilya, that actually Shane kept an ant farm for most of his middle school years that was his prerogative.

Anya greets them with a wagging tail at the door. No longer a puppy, she has better control of her temperament, saving up all her worst behavior for Ilya. She plops her fluffy butt down expectantly in the middle of Sofiya's path, and is overjoyed to receive a hug around her neck. She knows by now that Sofiya doesn't like to be licked so instead Anya snuffles at Sofiya's cheek which makes her squeak in delight. It's the first noise she's made since being picked up. Shane gives Anya an extra pumpkin treat for being a good girl.

Sofiya sits herself criss-cross on the floor at her knee height table with *Носки* propped up in her lap. Shane clicks on *James and the Giant Peach* and the film continues from where it left off this morning. He assembles her snack plate with the same combination as yesterday: six halved grapes, a cheese stick, a handful of fun-shaped pretzels and a diluted juice cup. Once placed in front of her, Sofiya dutifully starts to separate her pretzels out into stars, hearts, and butterflies, lining them up in rows before she eats them. Shane had asked her once why she always left the butterfly pretzels for last. She told him, matter of fact, that it was because butterflies tasted the best. Shane thought she might be too biased to be an effective judge on that. But deep down he knew that if there were Stanley Cup shaped pretzels he would eat them last too.

Shane brings a basket of clean laundry over and begins to sort it out into folded piles on the chaise end of their living room couch. It's a method with a lot less efficiency and a lot more dog hair involved compared to folding them on the table in the laundry room, but he feels the need to stay by Sofiya as much as possible today, so it'll work. At least he still has his earbuds in so he can listen to the audiobook version of *99: Stories of the Game*.

After the clothes are sorted and dispersed to their respective rooms to be packed away later, Shane plops down on the couch. Anya shuffles from her end of the couch over to his and presses against him. He checks his messages though he isn't expecting anything new; Ilya's return flight from Boston won't land for another two hours. Shane planned to take Sofiya with him to pick her Papa up, she'd been excited about it yesterday. Hopefully she'll still be up for it. He'd hate to make Ilya get an Uber or bother his parents for a ride. But Shane would if his daughter needs it, and he knows that none of them would judge him for it.

The credits begin to roll when Sofiya pushes up to her feet. Like she's motion activated, Anya sits up but upon seeing there's nothing left on her plate to snatch she lays back down. Turning back towards the couch, Sofiya decides to claim Shane's lap as her own.

"Hey Sunny." Shane greets her, popping out his earbuds and wrapping his arms around her.

"Hey Dad," she says, her brown eyes trained onto *Носки*'s button ones, "What is it like in Hell?"

There are things you prepare yourself for your child to someday ask but there are infinitely more things that you can never prepare yourself for. This is the latter.

He knows what Hell is like in general— hot, firey and full of brimstone (whatever the fuck that is). But he's never thought about what it'd be like *in* Hell, in the same way that he's never thought about staying up late to catch Santa Claus. It just isn't something he believes in. And no one in their family has ever introduced the concept of a hell to Sofiya, he's sure of that.

"I don't know," He concludes, "I don't think there is a Hell."

"What about Heaven?" She continues, "Papa says Бабушка (*Babushka*) is in Heaven."

"He does say that."

Fuck, he really wishes Ilya was here for this conversation.

They hadn't talked much about religion early on in their relationship. They'd always maintained an unbothered attitude towards each others beliefs or lack thereof, so there wasn't much to discuss. That changed a bit when they started talking about kids. Shane had never been religious; both Yuna and David being staunchly atheist, aside from corporate holidays and secularized X-mas. That didn't mean Shane wasn't pressured by other people's beliefs — in particular their beliefs about *him*. There is a reason why he no longer had contact with his grandparents, even though they were around when he was young. Meanwhile Ilya grew up Orthodox like his mama. She loved the Lord and believed he, the Theotokos and the Saints were watching over them. While Ilya's father, because he hated everything his wife loved, never let them pray inside his house. Ultimately, neither of Shane nor Ilya wanted to create an environment where their daughter felt forced to — or conversely, forbidden from — thinking any certain way. They opted to let her come to her own natural conclusions. Now that she might be coming to some of those conclusions, Shane feels severely inadequate in his preparation for this conversation.

He decides to tell Sofiya what he knows for sure Ilya has told him before, "Papa thinks everyone has a soul in them that keeps going even after their body dies. But he doesn't think anyone's soul is strictly good or bad. Where they end up depends on what they do in life, like how much they helped others or tried to be kind to the Earth."

Sofiya hums in acknowledgement before looking up at Shane, "What if they don't have a mom?"

Shane feels a tight squeeze in his chest, suddenly he has a dreadful idea of exactly where this conversation is going. "What does having a mom have to do with any of this?"

"I need a mom," Sofiya explains, like it's obvious, like it's a fact, "Two dads aren't enough. I need to have a mom or I'm going to Hell."

Shane takes a deep breath in and tries to mitigate how much it shudders on the way out. His eyes are starting to sting. He doesn't want to scare Sofiya by crying. "Did someone at school tell you that?"

"Someone at school. Two girls. I don't know them because they're not in my class."

Shane has to force himself to stay in the moment. His mind is already trying to get five steps ahead of him. Already trying to plan an email and schedule a meeting with her teacher and the Principal to get some answers on how this was allowed to happen at a school that brands "acceptance" all over its website. He needs to be right here with his daughter and make sure he doesn't fuck this up. He has to shove all the anxiety and boiling hot rage down somewhere deep in his gut for later. Shane puts on his best professionally calm demeanor that he hasn't had to pull out much since leaving the ice.

"Sunny, I'm going to be serious for a moment. I'm not mad at you. You have done nothing wrong, I just need you to know that I'm serious about this. Okay?"

"Okay," Sofiya scans all over his face for a moment before she nods, "You're serious."

"I'm serious," He rubs his hand up and down her back for his own comfort and hers, "those kids were wrong. You don't need a mom. There is nothing bad about not having one. They shouldn't have said that to you."

Sofiya frowns and looks back down at Носки, bringing his arms up once again around her neck. "But they're older kids. They want to help me."

Shane is hit with the visceral memory of a group of ten year old boys in line for picture day when he was seven telling him he should try pulling his eyebrows up so he won't squint so much when he smiles. It's like stretching a muscle, they said, you just have to practice at it and it'll get easier. It took weeks of doing it the bathroom mirror after he brushed his teeth before his mom caught him. Before she finally told him it'd been a joke. He was the joke.

"Sometimes older kids don't want to help. Sometimes they just want to be mean."

He can see the moment it clicks in place in her mind.

"Oh." She whispers.

Shane hates himself, watching her lip wobble and her eyes start to tear up. He pulls her in tighter and Sofiya presses against his chest. Носки gets squished flat between them.

"I'm sorry, Baby," He whispers to the top of her head, brushing his fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry they were mean. You didn't deserve that."

"I don't want a mom," Dry heaves and wet hiccuping noises fill the air, "I just. I just- I didn't-"

Sofiya turns her head to accommodate shoving her wrist in back in her mouth. He holds her while she sobs, reassuring her she's alright and gently rocking from left to right.

Anya paws at Shane's arm, her eyes dart from Sofiya, up to Shane and back. He gives Anya a pat between her ears to assure her that despite how things look they'll be alright. It takes a minute to convince her, but ultimately she settles down, resting with her snout on his knee.

For his whole life Shane has been like a bottle of pop, shaken up and capped. Bubbling up and waiting to burst but never. Constant pressure, both from the outside pushing in and the

inside pushing out, that's how he maintains his balance. Until one side collapses and everything comes fizzing out. That's the analogy his therapist came up with in one of their early sessions. Maybe it's the same way she explains it to all her patients who have the same kind of brain Shane does. It's gotten better with time. Or at least, he's gotten better at managing it, better at learning how to let out small whispers of pressure at a time before things get to be too much. He remembers how hard it was to keep everything inside when he was young. So as much as it devastates him to see her so upset, he is beyond grateful to be one of the people that his daughter feels comfortable letting go around. Shane can think of a long list of illegal things he'd do if it meant he knew for certain she always would.

Slowly but surely, Sofiya's sobs slow into hiccups. Every few minutes she tries to catch a deep breath. It seems like each one comes a bit easier than the last. Shane manages to coax her mouth away from her hand and onto one of Носки's ears. He considers that a small win. He'll still have to put lotion on her arms tonight. He remembers when his thumb cracked because he sucked on it too much.

Despite his desire to be fully present with his daughter, he is aware of the time in the back of his head. He bites his lip and tries to subtly extricate his phone from where it got lodged between the cushion and the arm of the couch. He checks the time: there's only thirty minutes until Ilya lands. If he was going to make it on time he should be in the car right now.

Before he can say a word, Sofiya sniffs and lifts her head, "It's time to go get Papa."

"It is," Shane thumbs a tear off her cheek, "Do you still want to come with me?"

"Yeah," Sofiya nods, pushing away a bit, "Let me go."

Shane shakes his head with a soft chuckle, the Hollander determination is strong with this one. He leans in, giving her a kiss on the forehead before complying to her request and unwrapping his arms. She hops off of his lap making her way towards the shoe rack by the door. Shane pads to her room to grab her tablet and her headphones. He predicts she'll want to rewatch *James and the Giant Peach* in the car.

The headphones turn out to be a very, very good choice. Thanks to their noise cancelling option Sofiya conks out almost as soon as the car starts moving. She must be absolutely exhausted, turned sideways in her car seat with one headphone resting on her seatbelt. If only Shane could switch spots with her. Traffic is absolute shit. Which is unsurprising because it's an airport at rush hour on a Friday, but Shane is on his last thread of patience. Every time someone honks he feels his blood pressure spike. He tells himself it's nothing compared to Montreal, but having a kid in the car makes even the most confident drivers paranoid.

Shane parks in the same parking lot he picked up Ilya from the first time he came to the cottage. It's the same parking lot Shane parks in every time he has to come to the YOW, down to the same spot if he can swing it. Of course today there is a large yellow van parked way over the line, taking up both his spot and the one next to it. Needless to say this doesn't help his mood. He bitches about the van's half missing bumper in his text to Ilya. Why take up two spots if your car is already smashed to shit? Whatever. Shane lets out a deep breath and leans his head forward to rest on his steering wheel.

Shane jumps when a tap-tap comes at his window. He looks to the left to see his husband grinning at him like a wolf. Shane flips him off. Ilya sticks his tongue out in retaliation. What a child. Shane rolls his eyes, reaching down to pop the trunk so Ilya can stow his highlighter orange roller suitcase in the back.

"Shanya," Ilya greets him, climbing the car and pulling his door shut behind him, "I missed you."

He leans over the center console to give Shane a long (four whole days) overdue kiss.

"Missed you too." Shane smiles softly.

Ilya pulls back, looking over his shoulder at the backseat. He reaches back, hooking a finger under Sofiya's chin to close her drooling mouth. She huffs and squeezes Hocky tighter to her but doesn't wake up.

"Our Sonya is very asleep," Ilya decrees, turning forward again, "and you," he eyes Shane suspiciously, "you are very tense."

"Shut up." Shane shook his head.

Ilya hums, reaching behind Shane's neck and starting to massage. Shane melts into Ilya's palm, letting him work out a knot Shane didn't realize was there.

"I can drive." Ilya offers.

"You had a four and a half hour connecting flight." Shane frowns.

"So? I was not flying the plane, Hollander."

Shane laughs in spite of himself, leaning over to kiss the stupid, stubborn look off Ilya's face, "I'm driving," he says with finality, "but if you want to help," Shane holds out his right hand, "keep this safe for me?"

Ilya threads their fingers together and presses his lips to his knuckles, "I guard it with my life."

Shane backs out of his spot and pulls away from the airport. He knows the ride home will be considerably smoother than the ride there by virtue of the added company alone. Eyes on the road, Shane recounts the conversation he had with their daughter. Ilya grips Shane's palm at certain intervals, but otherwise stays eerily quiet. Shane can hear the storm brewing in his head.

"We'll figure out who it was." He assures Ilya.

"Yes, we will." Ilya nods, he turns his head and spends the rest of the drive watching their girl while she sleeps.

Ilya leans on the door jamb, looking out at the orange and red leaves on the trees that line the back of their yard like a privacy fence. A little safe haven.

Sofiya had been able to have dinner and go to bed without incident despite how much her routine had been disturbed between the big feelings and impromptu napping. At that point Ilya thought she was simply too exhausted to do anything but what they told her to. He watched over Shane's shoulder as he drafted an email to Mr. Fenley about getting a meeting scheduled as soon as possible.

"Do you think this is the first time someone has teased her because of us," Shane had asked, "or just the first time they upset her enough that she finally said something?"

Tears started to fall from Shane's eyes and Ilya knew they'd probably been lurking just underneath the surface for hours. Ilya moved the laptop off of Shane's lap and set it on the side table by their bed, crawling on top of him instead.

"Ilya I have to-"

"It's eleven pm on a Friday *любовь*, he will not answer," he cupped Shane's face in his hands, "We will come back to this on Monday during business hours, okay?"

Shane bit his lip and Ilya could see the argument forming behind his eyes, all the swirling thoughts and fears fighting each other for control. He looked so tired.

"Shane?"

Shane gave in, nodding his head, "Okay."

He let Ilya maneuver their bodies until they were both laying down, Ilya on top of Shane, because he needed to feel the added pressure and presence to keep him grounded.

"We will work this out. Together." Ilya rubbed a thumb over his cheek bone and across his freckles, "There is no one our daughter trusts more than us. She told you because she trusts you. That is what matters."

Sitting on the back porch, Sofiya enjoys the last temperate days of October before it gets too cold for her insect friends. On nice mornings like this they bring her table outside so she can color in the sunshine. It's Woolly Bear season and ever since Sofiya read that they're used to predict the coming winter's weather in some cultures, she's been obsessed. She's keeping a tally of how many brown dominant versus black dominant caterpillars she's seen. Though currently she seems to have taken a break from that to cover every inch on a white piece of printer paper in an even layer of green crayon.

"Sonya." Ilya says.

"Papa." She calls back, putting emphasis on popping the p sounds because she knows it makes Ilya laugh. And he does laugh.

"Are you busy?" He walks around the table to sit down on the floor next to her.

"Not busy."

"Dad told me about the conversation you had yesterday," Ilya adjusts his position to stretch out his bad knee, "I was wondering if you thought more about souls."

"What about them?"

"Maybe they make you scared. Maybe you like the idea of them."

"I don't know," Sofiya hums, continuing to scribble intensely, "Do bugs have souls?"

Ilya has to physically stop himself from snorting, he stuffs the urge back behind a huge grin. Everything comes back to bugs, "Of course, all living things do," he tips his head before he adds, "Well, I think so at least. Dad not so much."

Sofiya is quiet for a little while, more and more white paper disappearing until she's fully satisfied and her crayon is half used up.

When Ilya starts to think that their conversation is done and she's about to walk away she says, "I saw an imperial moth caterpillar squished by a bike tire," Sofiya looks over at him, "He never got to be a moth."

"That," Ilya's smile falters as his brow scrunches, "That is not good."

"No, it's not," She continues "But I think it'd be good if he got to be a moth even though he's dead. Can his soul do that?"

"I think so," he nods, "Yes. His soul can be anything it wants."

"Then I hope he has one."

"I hope so too." Ilya wraps an arm around her and gives a light squeeze, feeling like maybe they've come to an understanding, "I missed you, солнышка."

Sofiya flops into his side. Ilya takes this as permission to bundle her into his lap. She doesn't protest when he tucks her head under his chin. Every year she grows bigger and every year Ilya feels more selfish for wishing she'll always stay small.

Ilya had been so paranoid when she was born. He'd never had a problem with babies before. Anyone who saw him with a child knew that he was a natural with them. But that was all performance. It was natural for him to entertain. Would it be just as natural for him to parent? This was his child, this was *Shane's* child. There was a part of him, not a large part but a relentless, nagging part that told him this was the point where all his latent fears get proven right. He was weak. He was lazy. He was unlovable.

Instead, Sofiya proved to him once again that there was some good in him. There had to be because she was so undeniably good. Where Ilya once looked to his parents and was convinced that he was only comprised of their faults, he now looks to Sofiya and is convinced she is comprised of only his best parts.

It's exactly because of this that the prospect of someone bullying his daughter is so devastating to him.

"Dad told me about the rest of your conversation too. The mean kids," Ilya feels Sofiya tense against him and he already knows the answer to his next question before he asks it, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Sofiya shakes her head vehemently, strands of her hair hitting her in the face.

"Okay," he concedes, "We do not have to talk right now." He really doesn't blame her. If he was in her situation he'd only want to talk to Shane too.

Ilya's been trying to keep a level head about things, trying to focus on the present. Focus on what he can control instead of what he can't and avoid falling into the ugly place of self-blame he's been to before. He's drawing from all those mindfulness things they teach in therapy. But mindfulness doesn't get rid of the enticing rage he feels, like a scab begging to be picked at. It doesn't change that the family he has, the shape of it, is something that some people will always find disgusting or defective. Something they'll try to use their faith to justify hating. It doesn't undo the fact that Sofiya was hurt. What focusing on the present can do is put him here, next to his daughter, ready and waiting for when she needs him to put the rage he has to good use.

"You should be a moth." Sofiya says suddenly.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"They like sunlight," She explains, "All the light bulbs confuse and hurt them. But sunlight they like."

"I see," Ilya presses a kiss to the top of her head, "For you I will be a moth."

Ilya closes his eyes. Sofiya is right, he does like the sun, and where they're sitting right now is the perfect spot. Not too hot or too cold. Sofiya starts to rock and Ilya sways to the pace she sets. They move two branches on one tree swaying in unison or like two butterflies sharing one breeze. Shane comes out to join them after a little while, back for his morning jog with Anya. He joins right in with the rhythm, keeping time and swaying with them, sitting shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee.

Sofiya spots a mostly brown Woolly Bear crawling from the grass to the driveway. She insists she's never seen that one before and leaps off Ilya's lap to go catch it. Shane holds the caterpillar in his open palms while Sofiya draws it's scientifically accurate crayon portrait to add to her collection. According to the tally thus far, 5 black dominant to 3 brown dominant, the Woolly Bears predict the coming winter is going to be cold and dark. But it's only October, there are still leaves on the trees that haven't all fallen yet and there are more caterpillars to find that could sway the vote. When she's done drawing, Sofiya leads Shane to a patch of clovers near the garage to set the Woolly Bear down in so he can have a snack.

After their lunch of Annie's Mac and Cheese and ants on a log, she tells Shane how, just like real bears, Woolly Bear caterpillars have to bulk up before they hibernate in the winter.

"Then they wake up in spring and wrap themselves in a silk cocoon and they come out as an Isabella tiger moth." She finishes proudly.

"Wow, they must be pretty tough to sleep all winter like that," Shane reflects her look of pride right back at her, "I like the ice but I don't think I'd last that long."

"Sounds like your caterpillars are Russian," Ilya offers from his position washing dishes, "We don't get cold."

Sofiya giggles and yells back, "They're North American! They survive because they make their own anti-freeze!"

"Maybe Russians do too, you don't know!"

That makes both Sofiya and Shane laugh. Ilya grins to himself putting the last plate in the dish washer and starting it. Privately he contemplates another tattoo. Not a Woolly Bear, he wouldn't go that far, but the moth they turn into might not be too bad. He'll have to look that up later.

"This is when you remind Papa that you're also Russian." Shane stage whispers to her and she parrots out what he tells her.

"Да, but you're Canadian too. Canadians cannot make their own anti-freeze or else they have no reason to wear the silly toques they like so much."

Now that lunch is done and cleaned up, they can head to the park. None of them wear toques, but they each grab a sweatshirt on the way out the door. Sofiya carries *Ночки* and a plastic clipboard that has a container attached to keep her crayons safe. Just in case she makes any discoveries she needs to document. Ilya walks Anya out to the car. Despite going for a jog already she's still pulling strongly towards the car. Shane checks Sofiya's seat belt before climbing into the passenger seat, letting Ilya take his turn driving.

The park they frequent isn't the closest to their house but the equipment it provides is worth the extra drive. Namely a fenced off dog run they feel confident letting Anya off leash in and several climbing nets that look suspiciously like webs. She doesn't like climbing much but she does like when Ilya climbs them and pretends to be a spider. In particular she likes when Ilya the spider catches Shane the fly and they end up wrestling on the ground.

It can get busy on a Saturday like this, but generally the crowd is more or less the same. The same adults, the same kids. Any hype there was surrounding the fact that two former MHL all-stars were spotted in an everyday setting died out years ago after one particularly crass incident when Ilya had to force a neighborhood mom to delete a photo she took of Sofiya in her stroller. He didn't pull his punches and Shane was right there waiting to wrap up his knuckles.

A three pack of ancient Yorkshire terriers, a three-legged beagle named Ted and a clumsy but kind great dane called Birdie are frequent visitors to the dog run. Ilya hasn't really bother learning their owner's names but he knows who goes with who so he figures it's fine. Besides,

he's charming enough that when refers to someone as something like "Mrs. Birdie's Mom" they laugh instead of getting offended.

The actual playground is generally built for kids a bit older than Sofiya's age. That's okay though because besides the swings and the merry-go-around she's more interested in picking the dandelions that grow in the surrounding field anyways.

She does have one friend named Felix. They don't visit the park as often but when they do, Felix's mom Gemma is kind enough to let Sofiya take a turn flying their swallowtail shaped kite. The first time she brought Felix a dead praying mantis she found as a thank you. While Shane, Ilya and Gemma seemed all equally horrified, Felix was overjoyed to join Sofiya in gently poking it's corpse with a stick. In short, it's easy to see how why the two of them get on thick as thieves.

In the backseat, Sofiya is starting to buzz from restlessness. Her impatience is spurred on by Anya's panting tongue and roving eyes. She hums *"That's the life for me"* to herself and kicks her feet.

All the excitement to be at the park seems to disappear as soon as her sneakers hit the asphalt of the parking lot. She drops her clip board on the ground and its plastic cracks.

"Sonya? hey," Ilya sees her first, crouching down to her level and frowning as she digs her fingertips deep into Носки's torso, "What is it, малышка?"

Sofiya shakes her head, eyes wide and fixed on some point in the distance. Ilya turned around and scanned, trying to see if he could pick out anything that would have scared her. He came up empty-handed. Its the same park they were at last weekend and the weekend before that for all he can see.

Ilya tries again, "Can you tell me what is wrong?"

Sofiya shakes her head with even more vigor, tugging on of Носки's ears into her mouth with her teeth, hiding her face behind his.

"Okay, no talking," He nods, trying to puzzle out what happened between parking the car and getting out of it, "That is fine. We will figure it out."

Shane rounds the car, a backpack over his shoulder, with Anya on leash. He stops in his tracks when he sees them, immediately also crouching down. Anya sniffs a blue crayon that rolled away when Sofiya's clipboard broke.

Shane furrows his brow, "What happened?"

"We don't like something and we can't talk about it." Ilya reports.

"We don't like something...", Shane's frown deepens, he pulls a similar maneuver that Ilya did a few seconds ago, turning and scanning across the park. He must see something Ilya doesn't because his eyes go wide, "Sunny, are the mean people here?"

From the sharp inhale Sofiya takes it's clear the answer is a yes. Ilya's body goes tense and it has very little to do with the fact that he should not be squatting on his bad knee for this long. Shane curses quietly. Anya starts to whine, confused why they're at the park but she isn't with her friends.

"Could you point to them," Ilya prompts, trying to breathe through the tightness in his voice, "I think Dad and I would like to talk with their parents."

Sofiya doesn't acknowledge him so he tries to reassure her, leaning in closer and speaking softer, "It's okay. We're not mad at you, yes? Just serious about this."

He and Shane had established early on that they never wanted their daughter to be afraid of them. After all Ilya did grow up in a household where any sign of tension was a threat. He could never quite tell what response he'd get from his father. Would he be angry, violent disappointed or cold, snide disappointed? It followed him most of his life as he became generally wary of any conversations that seemed heavy. Because of this, and because of Shane's own tendency to struggle read people's tone, they try to communicate as clearly as possible with their daughter. It's a far cry from the days when the two of them barely communicated to each other at all.

"Just serious," Shane echoes Ilya's soft voice, "We can handle serious right?"

Sofiya nods slowly, poking her face from out behind her sock-bunny enough to see. She points, and Ilya and Shane both crane their necks to see where to.

"On swing set, the brown haired girls dressed like evil twins?" Ilya asked. They look to be about nine or ten. Nearly twice Sofiya's age and that only makes Ilya madder. If there was one thing he believes in it's a fair fight. And there is no reason for a ten year old to be picking on a kindergartner.

One girl pushed the other high and ran underneath her swing in the way that Ilya and Shane always fought about. They both agreed it was dangerous so only one of them should do it in case someone got hurt then the other could call an ambulance. The problem was Ilya thought it should be him because he's faster but Shane thought the opposite because his knee isn't busted so he can duck easier. Neither of them considered the fact they could push their daughter on the swing normally without launching her into space.

Sofiya makes an affirmative noise and Shane is up on his feet in an instant. Anya leaps up too thinking their finally going to the dog run. She is sorely disappointed when Shane pawns her leash off on Ilya and keeps walking without her. Ilya pops up slower but catches Shane's wrist as he passes to make him stop. Ilya's not sure why, it's just his first instinct. Maybe in his head he thinks that if one of them is about to do something stupid and impulsive it should be him so he can take the blame.

Shane's head whipped towards him, his expression an eerily calm mask of it's normal self. Cold and determined. When he looks at Ilya his eyes soften a little, which tells Ilya that he has not been doing very well at keeping his worry off his face.

"I got this." Shane affirms and Ilya believes him. Whatever *this* is, Ilya trusts Shane. He gives Shane's wrist a final squeeze before he lets go.

Ilya watches Shane go, moving like a gale force wind towards a bench in the shade of a maple tree behind the swing set. On it a man and a woman, presumably Mr. and Mrs. Bully are sitting, looking disinterested on their phones. Ilya blows out a heavy sigh, forcing his shoulders to drop.

"I broke my clipboard." Sofiya sniffs, standing and looking down at the halved crayons and pieces of broken plastic by her shoes.

Ilya nods sympathetically, "Today is a bad day."

"Yeah." She agrees, a little wobble in her voice as she steps forward and grabs onto Ilya's leg and presses her face into his abdomen.

Ilya bends down to reach her head and starts combing his fingers through her hair, "We can go to the office store and get another on the way home."

Anya, realizing that Sofiya is upset is no longer whining to be set free but instead trying to shove her noise in between the two of them to see that Sofiya's alright. Ilya pets her head too so she'll stop.

"It won't be the same." Sofiya mumbles.

"I know, солнышка. I know."

His eyes drift back to Shane. Ilya sees Shane write something down with a paper and pen he must have borrowed from the other parents. He hands both back to them before he breezes away. He looks... satisfied? Mr. and Mrs. Bully look pissed. They call their daughters over towards them with emphatic waves of their hands. Whatever Shane wrote down on the piece of paper gets crumpled by the father and tossed onto the ground.

"Well that's taken care of," Shane decrees, dusting off his hands for no real purpose other than that's the gesture you do when you've completed a task, "Are we going home now?"

Sofiya shakes her head.

"We need another clipboard," Ilya explains, handing over Anya's leash once again so he can haul Sofiya up into his arms, "Probably more crayons."

"Right," Shane's Reebok toes some of the debris, "I'll find a trash can to throw that in before we go."

Sofiya is silent the whole way to the office supply store. Ilya knows it's impossible but that doesn't help his desire to find the magic button to press that will make all the anxiety suddenly disappear from her frame. She wanted to go inside and pick out her new clipboard herself. But all three of them knew that on a day like today even sunglasses and headphones were not going to make the store bearable for her. So she let Shane go instead, trusting her dad to be just as particular as she is.

Ilya gets out of the driver's seat, shooing Anya out of the way so he can sit in the back. Anya doesn't mind though, she's happy to hop the center console and steal the free passenger seat. Ilya pulls out his phone and puts on Sofiya's favorite movie, content to watch it by himself for the hundredth (thousandth?) time if being able to hear the familiar dialogue will make his daughter feel better. Slowly, Sofiya uncurls herself from her defensive position. Craning her head and Носки's so they can both see. Ilya tilts the screen towards her. She shimmies out of her seat and over into his lap. He squeezes her as tight as he can with the arm not currently holding his phone and she sighs in relief, going slightly boneless.

"Я люблю тебя, Соня." He tells her. She doesn't respond but she doesn't need to. Ilya knows.

When Shane comes back he gets in the driver's seat, looking back at Ilya with a concerned expression. Ilya does an elaborate dance to manage getting a seatbelt around both him and Sofiya. He clicks it in place. It's stupid and illegal but Shane doesn't comment. He hands back the shopping bag with Sofiya's new clipboard and crayons so she can approve them. She does.

For dinner Ilya and Sofiya have spaghetti and Shane has quinoa because for some people having food the same texture as worms is a positive experience and for some people it very much is not. Afterwards they watch *The Mighty Ducks*, because Saturday nights are movie nights and it's Shane's turn to pick. Despite its lack of bugs, the ducks are a comfort to everyone in the house courtesy of Shane whispering every line of dialogue in the film to Sofiya since before she was even born. Ilya smiles fondly, petting Anya while watching them bounce back and forth off each other.

"Wait," Sofiya says a second before Emilio Estevez does, "I don't know anything about children."

"They're like you and me except smaller." Shane replies back with a wink that makes her giggle.

At 8:30 it's time to start the night time routine. Spider-man pajamas are donned. Faces are washed and teeth are brushed. Lotion is put on the dry, bitten parts of her wrists. Shane gets her on a tangent about ommatidium (which they learn is apparently what makes bug eyes look so freaky) to distract her while Ilya picks the tangles out of her hair.

Flicking off the big light and turning on her leaf-shaped nightlight, Shane and Ilya both climb into bed on either side of her. Sofiya has to lay on top of them to make them all fit but no one seems to mind. On her book shelf there are enough *Ladybug Girl* books to read a different one everyday of the month. The original is her favorite and Saturday is her favorite day of the week so they read the original. Ilya makes sure to pet the illustrated basset hound before he turns each page. If he doesn't both Shane and Sofiya remind him. Once Sofiya is sufficiently sleepy, Ilya whispers a Russian prayer to her guardian angel on her behalf so she will be protected during the night.

"What did you do?" Now safely in their own room away from prying child eyes, Ilya maps himself onto his husband's back, slipping his hand underneath Shane's soft cotton sleep shirt and up to his sternum, "You have been so smug ever since we left the park."

Shane leans his head back against his husband's shoulder, "I didn't do anything," Ilya hums against his exposed neck, vocalizing his disbelief, "Okay, I very politely reminded our fellow parents about the Ottawa-Carleton School District policies on bullying."

"And the paper," Ilya prompts, squeezing Shane's left pec, "What did you write?"

"Just some random digits," Shane shrugs before casting a glance so Ilya could see the devilish glint in his eyes, "But I told them it was the number of a local counselor who specializes in effective co-parenting after divorce."

"Shane!" He gasps theatrically, unable to even pretend to be disproving because he's grinning too much.

"What?" Shane blushes, smiling back at him, "I was helping our kid. Their kids too. Clearly their marriage is unhappy if they've been shit-talking about ours."

Ilya slinks around to the front of him, gripping his hips and pressing their lips together. Shane responds in kind, opening his mouth wider when Ilya's tongue traces his bottom lip. His hands finding their way from Ilya's arms and shoulders to his neck then up into his hair. Ilya tugs on his flannel pajama pants (a gift from Shane of course), pulling Shane along with him as he stumbled backwards. They crawl into bed together rather inelegantly tugging off clothing as they go, reluctant to pull away from each other as much as possible.

"You," Ilya says eventually when he pulls back to catch his breath, he pokes Shane right in the chest to emphasize his point, "are the best dad."

"Can't we tie just this once?"

"A fucking *tie*?" Ilya's eyebrows raise, "Who are you and what have you done with Shane Hollander?"

"Hey," He butts their noses together, "I'm Shane Hollander-*Rozanov* now. Have been for awhile so show some damn respect."

"Fine," Ilya lets out a long-suffering sigh that doesn't match any of his body language at all, "We will win as a team. Best *dads*. Better than a stupid tie."

Shane's eyes are sparkling that what that only they can do and Ilya can't get enough of. He stoops to press a kiss to Ilya's Cupid's bow, "I love you so fucking much."

"Я тоже тебя люблю, моя Шейна."

## End Notes

This project has been in WIP-limbo for way too long but it's done! It's here! Praise be! Also just a note that I'm American and our school system sucks ass. I don't know anything about what the differences that may be between education in Canada vs. the U.S. so Canadians if something is inconsistent with your experience, that's why.

Thank you to René, or eeby\_deeby\_dark\_and\_creepy (on ao3 and tumblr) for beta reading.

Find me on Tumblr @forgotten80sfilm if you want :) that'd be cool.

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