

Small Serendipity

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Small Serendipity

by [the_hemlocked](#)

Summary

When he was seven years old, Shane Hollander was briefly lost at an airport. Luckily, the kindness of a stranger ensured he made it back to his parents safely, putting an end to a terrifying three hours for the Hollanders. It takes twenty years (and one heated rivalry) for Shane to learn the name of his rescuer. It takes twenty years for Ilya to learn his wish had already come true.

Notes

ABSOLUTELY NO AI WAS USED IN THIS FIC. you can pry the em dash from my cold dead hands

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

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [【授翻】一緣一會 \(Small Serendipity\)](#) by [undergroundsignal](#)

Chicago Intl. Airport, 1998

Shane sat on the hard, plastic chair and cried. He couldn't help it. He was a big kid now, almost eight years old, and he was crying like a baby. The embarrassment only added to his panic, the deep well opening inside him that everything was wrong and wrong forever. He was lost. Mom and Dad had been so excited to go on this vacation, the first one in years, and now he had ruined it. What if they never found him? What if he had to live in the airport from now on? Where people were constantly yelling and talking on phones and running—wheels squeaking, intercom blasting, noise and light and noise and noise—

Hot tears fell down his cheeks. Everything buzzed, his very skin not sitting comfortably, as if his socks were turned inside out except it was everywhere. He didn't know what to do, had no idea where his parents had gone or at what point he had lost them. They were probably on the next plane without him, maybe they hadn't even noticed he was missing. No one around him even seemed to see him, sitting in the middle of the bustling airport. That thought was even worse: invisible and alone, not missed. His breath caught in his chest, lungs trapped, and he doubled over in the chair.

Couldn't breathe. Couldn't stop crying. A big dumb baby with no one to help him—

The lightest touch on his knee made him flinch, his back hitting the chair hard. The woman who had crouched in front of him immediately held her hands up, as if she were as startled by him as he was by her. His heart pounded in his chest, and his muscles locked as he looked at her.

“Okay?” she asked, the vowels clipped and strange to Shane's ears. “You okay?”

She was beautiful. She had the same quirked, kind lips that his mom had. The same knowing, playful eyes. But her features were delicately angled, with fair-skin and dusty blonde hair that escaped in curling wisps from her ponytail. Shane stared at her, and she stared back. Her eyes got wider, bugged out, and in a thick accent she whispered, “What? Monster behind me?”

She glanced over her shoulder slowly, then gave a loud exhale of relief. She put a hand to her heart, crinkling the shiny coat she was bundled up in. “Oh good! Is just ugly old man!”

Shane stole a look in the same direction. In one of the waiting chairs across the corridor, a man the age of Shane's grandfather belched loudly.

“You had me, hmm, scared,” the woman said. “I thought—bad monster behind us! But all okay?”

Shane took a shuddering breath. He swallowed, throat thick with residual panic, but somehow this small interaction had interrupted his train of thought enough to stop his crying. The world was smaller, the noise less intrusive, narrowed to Shane and the woman in her shiny long coat and rose-tinged cheeks.

“I can’t find my mom,” Shane said. “Or my dad. I’m lost. I don’t know—I don’t where they went, and the plane’s probably gone, and I’m lost forever—”

“Woah, woah,” she said. “Slow down. My English—not so good, sometimes. Where’s Mama?”

Shane bit his lip. He felt tears well in his eyes again.

“Hm. Mama is lost?”

He nodded.

The woman said, “Okay, *zajchik*. We will find her, da? Together. No bad monsters. Promise.”

She held out her hand, inviting him to hold it. Shane knew that strangers could be dangerous, but sitting alone in a busy airport also felt dangerous. No one else, not the many men in suits or women with children or employees in uniform, had stopped to help him except for her. Still, he felt a tinge of fear, like the barest slip on ice, as he looked at her.

Her tight smile softened into something secretive. She leaned in and said, “You know, I have baby back home. Two! My little babies, my Alyoshka and my Ilyusha. I promise, I help you find Mama.”

Carefully, Shane extended his pinky toward her. “Pinky promise?”

Her mouth opened in a small laugh. “Yes,” she said, locking her pinky with his. “Pinky promise!”

Shane allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, wobbling like a deerling. The woman said something under her breath in another language, and then she said, “Now we go find help!”

She pulled Shane with one hand and her suitcase with the other. Whereas the crowd of travelers had seemed an impossible ocean before, sweeping Shane along in some wayward tide, now the waters parted calmly around them. They walked with purpose, the woman leading him, and all the while she muttered to him. Little things—look at the guide dog there, that woman is so pretty, do you like winter or summer? Occasionally, she forgot the word for something and talked around it in a way that was like a puzzle for Shane to figure out.

“What is—oh, English word! Bread that is tied up, and salty.”

Shane scrunched his nose up as he thought. “A pretzel?”

“A pretzel! Yes! Oh, with cheese, you like it?”

She did a wonderful job of keeping him from panicking, but worry gnawed at the pit of his stomach. He kept thinking he saw his parents out of the corner of the eye, only for it to be someone with the same hair color or a similar shirt.

Eventually, they made it to a help desk, where the woman tried to explain the situation. Shane dutifully recited his parents name to the attendant, who called over the loud speaker. “You

can wait over there,” said the attendant. “Thank you for helping him. I can keep an eye on him if you need to catch your flight.”

Shane reflexively squeezed the woman’s hand harder.

“Oh, no thanks,” she said. “I wait with him. My flight delayed.”

Then they sat on another set of hard plastic chairs, except this time Shane only sniffled and kicked his feet instead of sobbing.

“You see,” said the woman, sitting next to him. She leaned her shoulder into his. “Mama and Papa come now. All better.”

Shane trembled, his fear rearing. She nudged him again, wordlessly humming a question. “What if...” Shane swallowed. “What if they left me? What if they don’t come?”

“Whaaaaat?” the woman drawled out. “No way! That is not how Mamas work. I am Mama. I know. A Mama always comes for baby, *always*. We feel it here—” she tapped her heart “—when our baby is sad. We know. That is our magic. And I know you are *good* baby, *da?*”

He nodded, feeling his cheeks heat. “Promise?”

“Pinky promise,” she said, grinning. Then she poked him in the cheek and tickled him until he laughed.

Most of the time, Shane was incredibly particular about who got to touch him and when. Something about this woman had lowered his guard, or maybe he was just exhausted by the day that he needed the extra comfort. When she finally pulled away, laughing with him, he leaned into her, resting his head on her shoulder. She curled around him like a large cat, brushing her cheek against his dark hair, and whispered, “*Malysh, ty slishkom milyy.*”

He heard the attendant call over the loudspeaker again for his parents and tensed. The woman rubbed her hand down his shoulder. “You are brave boy.”

“Not really,” Shane muttered. “I’m... I’m weird. I know I am.”

“Weird?” she repeated. “What is weird?”

“Different.” No one had ever pointed it out to him. His friends at school were kind, and it wasn’t like he was teased or bullied, but no one had to for him to notice. He didn’t fit right in the world, or rather, the world didn’t fit right around him. The only time he felt like he was completely at ease was when he was on the ice, Mom and Dad coaching him and skating with him, the junior club team cheering him on—that was where everything made sense.

The woman hummed. “I see,” she said gently. “You know secret?”

“What?”

Lening in close, she said, “Me too!”

She smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling. Then she held a finger to lips, beckoning him to silence. He grinned at her, showcasing the gap where he'd recently lost a tooth.

"Shane! Shane, oh my God!"

He whirled to see his parents running toward him. Beside him, the woman straightened and made a noise of excitement. He was barely out of his chair when his mother swooped him into a crushing hug, crying into his hair. He felt his dad wrap his arms around both of them. "Oh my God," his mom said, "I was so scared. I was so, so scared—"

"I'm okay," Shane said, voice muffled into his mom's chest. Relief swept through him, making him dizzy. "I can't breathe—"

"Sorry!" She let him go, dropping him back to his feet, her hands brushing his hair and down his cheeks, examining him as if she was worried he would suddenly cease to exist. "Shane, oh, God, I'm so sorry, I thought you were right behind us, and I turned around and oh, my God, I'm the worst mom ever!"

He shook his head. The woman had been right along. His mom had come for him, had never forgot him. "I love you," he said, feeling those stupid tears in his eyes again, although this time he was less embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get lost."

"Oh, sweetheart, I know, I love you too. I'm sorry. Jesus, I'm never ever letting you out of my sight."

"I'm sorry," Shane repeated.

"Oh, champ," his Dad said, "we're just glad you're okay... You were the one who found him?"

Shane craned his neck to see that the woman was now standing, her hands clutched in front of her chest. She nodded, and another curl slipped loose from behind her ear. "Yes! He is good boy. So brave."

"Thank you," said his mom. Without hesitation, she opened her arms and brought the stranger into one of her famous, tight hugs. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. I'm sorry."

Shane saw the woman's cheeks tinge even pinker. "Oh, is okay," she said. "All okay! I tell him, Mamas always help babies. Always. I have babies, too. I hope—if they lost, someone help them, too."

His mom laughed. "Yes! I promise if your kids ever need help, I'll be there for them, too. Christ. Thank you."

To his embarrassment, Shane's dad pulled out the disposable camera he had for their vacation out of his pocket. He saw Shane looking at said, "What? It's a vacation memory!"

"David, seriously?"

“In twenty years, we’ll think this was really funny.” He waggled the camera in the air. “Let’s get a pic for posterity. Please?”

Smiling so wide she had dimples, the woman motioned Shane over. “Come here, *zajchik*.”

He shuffled to her side, and she pulled him close to pose for the camera.

“Say cheese!”

“Cheeeese,” she said.

Later, when the pictures from that trip were developed, he’d be chagrined to find that she had snuck two fingers behind his head as the shutter clicked, giving him bunny ears. In the moment, however, he’d only known how happy he was to see his parents and how grateful he was that someone had stopped to help him. As his parents finally led him away, both of them holding his hand like he was a toddler between them, he looked back at his rescuer. She was watching them with a peculiar expression, the beatific and eternally playful expression she wore wiped into something unrecognizable. Her eyes were still crystalline, her halo of hair escaping in golden curls, her hands still clasping over her heart. But there was something else in that expression, a measure of unchecked sorrow, that made him briefly stumble and forced him to look where he was going again.

Maybe she missed her own kids, he thought. When he tried to catch another glimpse, she was gone.

Ottawa, 2018

“Oh, look,” said David. “Here’s one of Shane! Holy cow, I did not think he could put away that many crab legs. How many buckets is that? I think he broke a record.”

“Oh, jeez.” Shane groaned into his hands. “Are we really breaking out the baby pictures? Really?”

It was Christmas Eve in Ottawa, and Ilya had never been so delighted in his life. Baby Shane in a bubble bath. Baby Shane crying on Santa’s lap. Baby Shane at his very first hockey match. Bundled in matching pajamas (matching! A Hollander family tradition!) with mugs of hot cocoa, the Hollanders had retired to the living room after dinner and dessert, and David—man that he was—had pulled out a thick photo album to leaf through. Ilya looked at the pictures, mouth agape in sheer joy, as he spotted a young Shane Hollander dressed up as a cowboy for Halloween.

“I need copies,” Ilya said. “Many. For blackmail.”

“Absolutely not,” said Shane.

It was the best holiday Ilya had had in a long time. He could never find the words to express how it felt for Yuna and David to have accepted him so readily into their family. They had included him in their traditions, and when Ilya’s eyes had watered receiving his pajamas,

Yuna had only kissed him on the cheek and told him to get changed with the rest of them. It was nice to spend so much time with them too, nice to curl up with Shane on his bed, nice to do boring jigsaw puzzles with David, nice to cook dinner with Yuna. Just... nice.

He grinned into Shane's shoulder. "I think it is very cute," he said. "Look, look, here is baby Shane screaming at clown!"

"Okay, and clowns are creepy! No one can hold that against me!"

Yuna threw her head back and laughed. "We never hired a clown for your birthday party, that's for sure!"

David flipped to another page. "Oh! Yuna, you remember that trip we made to Florida?"

"Oh, God," Yuna said. "That was the most stressful trip of my life. Shane, you remember? You got lost in the airport. I thought I was going to die."

"I remember," Shane said. "I remember being really freaked out at least."

Yuna said to Ilya, "It was like something out of Home Alone. We were on a layover at an airport, and somehow we lost Shane in the crowd. I'd never been so scared in my life. I felt like such an awful mom."

Shane nestled further into Ilya. "It ended up okay, though."

"You found them?" Ilya asked.

"No, thank God someone stopped to help him," said David. "Shoot. I wish we'd asked her name, but we were both so frazzled."

"She was an angel," Yuna said. She took a long sip from her hot chocolate, pulling her legs underneath her on the couch. "I swear to God, an actual angel. And she was so good with Shane. I don't know if you remember, honey, but you were terribly shy of strangers—not a bad thing, Lord, I had nightmares about someone taking you—but she seemed to just get you."

"Here," David said. He pulled a picture from the album and passed it to Ilya and Shane. "I got a picture of her. Said we'd laugh one day."

"I'm still not laughing," said Yuna dryly.

Ilya's chuckles stopped as he took the photo. His breath caught.

The picture: a round-cheeked Shane, a shy grin as he leaned into the side of a woman. A woman who Ilya had not seen since he was twelve, her wild hair and strong nose, her dimpled smile and shiny coat, her fingers behind Shane's head—bunny ears. It wasn't possible. But there she was, in all her glory: Irina.

Hands shaking, Ilya took in a pitiful breath. After she had died, his father had gotten rid of so much. Her clothes, her belongings, every photograph in the house vanished seemingly

overnight, as if she was a stain that could simply be scrubbed clean. He'd found her crucifix necklace, the one she never went without, tucked underneath his pillow. A parting gift.

"This is..." Ilya's voice choked.

"Ilya?" Shane asked. "What's wrong? Hey. It's okay."

Yuna and David shared a concerned look, and Shane patiently rubbed a circle onto his back. Ilya tried to think—He remembered vaguely something about a trip his mom had taken, but he lacked any of the details. That was her in the photograph, though. It had to be.

He hadn't realized how much he had forgotten until he was seeing her again. That was what she looked like. Those were her cheeks, her lips, her fingers—that coat. He remembered that coat. And there she was, smiling in a photograph, with his boyfriend. Perhaps there was some small serendipity there, some recognition between Irina and Shane of a future yet unrealized. Sitting in the Hollander's house, Ilya looked across time and saw his mother.

He laughed, a broken, messy sound. "This is—oh! Shane!"

"What? You're starting to make me worry."

"You remember her?" Ilya asked, pointing at the photo. He couldn't help the smile that was overtaking his features, even as tears continued to rise.

"Um," said Shane. "A little, yeah? She was nice. Literally the only person who helped me."

"Yes," Ilya said. "She would. She was like that."

There was a moment of silence as Ilya tried and failed to figure out how to say it. Shane's hand stilled on his back.

"This is my Mama," Ilya finally said. "This is her. Irina. Mama."

"Oh, my God," Shane whispered. His eyebrows drew together—so cute, so adorably fierce when he did that—as he scrutinized the photograph. "Holy shit. Holy shit, Ilya, she looks just like you."

Ilya laughed, loud and unabashed.

Yuna's hand shot out to grab David's. "Are you serious? That's your mom?"

"Yes!" Ilya nodded. "That's her!"

Yuna and David leaned to look at the photograph still in Ilya's hand. To his surprise, Ilya wasn't the only one teary-eyed. "Good lord," David said. "What are the chances? I mean—talk about a small world!"

On David's right, Yuna reached across to extend her hand to Ilya. Soft and dry, he took it and squeezed. "Your mom," she said, voice thick, "was a wonderful, beautiful woman. I'm so, so glad I met her."

Unable to speak, Ilya nodded. Shane pressed a tender kiss to Ilya's cheek, and Ilya enveloped him in a hug. "I told you," he said to Shane. He switched to Russian. There were some things that couldn't be translated. *"I told you she would have loved you. I just didn't know she already had."*

While Shane was picking up Russian at a frankly unfair speed, he likely didn't know what Ilya had said. He only wrapped his arms around him and held him. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," said Ilya. Then he felt David's hand clasp onto his shoulder, and then Yuna sighed, oh, come on, and he had his two new parents dogpiled on top of him and Shane. He might have been worried about the couch toppling over, but he was too elated to think of anything in that moment other than thank you. He wondered if his Mama was watching them, watching the little family she'd once helped so graciously love her child, seeing him happy.

Thank you, Mama, he thought, *for giving him to me.*

Yes. It was a good Christmas. It was a good life.

End Notes

hi. rachel here with an edit note. You guys are so so amazing, thank you all for your comments and kudos. I read all of them, even if I don't respond, and they seriously make my day.

THIS FIC HAS REALLY BEAUTIFUL FANART BY TOTHECHAOS OVER ON TUMBLR!! please forgive me, i know not how to format -- link below!

<https://www.tumblr.com/tothechaos/810447389032873984/ilyas-chuckles-stopped-as-he-took-the-photo-his?source=share>

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