begin again

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begin again

by aurora_chiroptera

Summary

Irina flees Russia with 9-year-old Ilya, hoping for a new start in Canada's capital. While she is working through asylum paperwork, Ilya runs into a boy his own age in the hallways of a government building.

Notes

Would immigration and finance be in the same federal building in Ottawa? Probably not but let's ignore that and play in this sandbox together.

Irina's POV has a lot of suicidal ideation, so major trigger warning for that. You can skip it by going directly to October 2000 - Ottawa. Also sorry to Andrei, he has been left behind but Irina was not in a place to think very logically. He will still have mama trauma.

See the end of the work for more notes

September 2000 - Moscow

Irina lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Sleep stayed far from her. The new bruise on her shoulder thudded with each heartbeat.

That evening had been bad, worse than it had been in a while. It had exploded after her husband had come home and found Irina had burnt dinner. She'd tried to keep the boys out of what followed.

Then she was just left to try to watch over herself. She retreated into her mind as spit hit her face and her bones creaked where her shoulder had been held. The thoughts that comforted her were dangerous ones. 'If only I could die, if only I could die, then this would be over. A car accident, a train, anything.'

One thing her husband shouted had gotten through her wall of ideation though. "And what are you teaching our son? Ilya is just like you. I bet he is like you in every way. He's a little mama's boy, huh? What are you filling his head with?"

The way her husband's eyes had flashed when he said "like you in every way" replayed over and over in her mind. In it lived the reason she was married to this man. Her parents had caught her kissing her girlfriend and it was the beginning of the end. Irina remembered what it was like sometimes, to feel alive, to laugh. To have someone love her unconditionally.

Was Ilya like her? Had she doomed her little sunshine boy to a fate like hers? Worse than hers.

Would his own father arrest him?

Irina had to cover her mouth to silence a sob or a sharp broken laugh, she wasn't sure. She knew the sides of her face were damp with tears. She'd held them in until her husband had fallen asleep at least.

The next thought felt like a shock. She couldn't die - not yet. What if she saved Ilya first? She could do that. She could wait a little longer for Ilya and make sure he was safe.

A plan began to form in her mind.

October 2000 - Ottawa

So far Ilya knew one thing: he hated Canada. He couldn't understand anything and it made him feel stupid. He hated feeling stupid. People seemed to look at him that way too, but it wasn't his fault he couldn't speak or read English or French. Was he going to need to learn both? He felt exhausted just thinking about it.

But he wasn't going to tell his Mama about it, because she'd worked so hard to get them here. She even seemed a little happier, though she held tight to him whenever she got the chance. It was like she couldn't believe he was there, with her. Whenever they went out, he let her hold his hand even though he was too old for it.

They sat in an office now, a woman with dark skin and tidy braids on one side with a computer, and the other side was Mama and an older woman. She had pale skin and grey hair like a grandmother, but she could speak both Russian and French. At least Ilya was pretty sure it was French, he was trying to at least be able to tell that difference.

Ilya was sitting at a little table in the back of the room, ignoring the coloring pages he'd been given. It was more interesting to listen as the Russian speaking woman interpreted between Mama and the office lady. Ilya wished she could come with them everywhere - it would be less embarrassing than getting lost and not being able to ask for directions.

He wondered if the interpreter knew about hockey. Mama had said he could still play it in Canada, but they hadn't been able to bring his gear with them. Ilya was so bored and found he was even missing being in school.

Not that he could learn anything in a Canadian school if he couldn't understand the teachers. But he could probably figure out hockey, if he was given a team to play on.

Mama fiddled with her necklace, providing information that was tapped into the computer after interpretation. Ilya sighed and wondered if he could get a snack. The door beside him wasn't fully closed, showing a boring hallway full of other offices. Mama said they were safe here, so it would probably be okay if he explored a little.

He didn't want to scare Mama though, so he stood and gently tugged on her sleeve. All three women's attention was now focused on him instead of the computer.

"Can I find a bathroom?" Ilya asked, glancing between Mama and the interpreter.

The corners of Mama's mouth pulled down, but the interpreter said, "There is one just down the hall. He should be okay to go alone."

Mama patted his head, another thing he was definitely too old for but it brought a smile to her face. "Okay. Just come right back here."

Ilya nodded, flashed a smile at the office lady, and slipped out into the hall. He'd seen a vending machine when they walked in, so Ilya made a beeline for that. He didn't have any money, but maybe that could lead him to other snacks.

To Ilya's surprise, there was a kid his age standing in front of the machine. The boy turned his dark haired head and Ilya could see he had freckles across his cheeks. He seemed as surprised to see Ilya as Ilya was to see him, but smiled and said something in... English, Ilya was sure. When Ilya shook his head, the boy spoke again, this time in French.

Ilya shook his head again, and said, "I only speak Russian" on the off chance the boy also knew it.

The boy tilted his head to one side frowning, as if that could help him understand, which was cute. Then he shrugged and said something else. He pointed at himself and repeated, once, then twice more.

Ilya realized it must be the boy's name. He wondered how he could get him to say it again. Pointing to himself, he said, "Ilya." Then pointed at the boy again, ready to listen closely.

"Shane," he smiled again, seeming pleased they got this far.

Ilya had to smile back.

They stood there for a while, just smiling at each other. It was silly but... nice. Ilya then spotted the hockey sticks and puck in the center of Shane's navy shirt.

Before he could puzzle out how to ask about that, Shane tapped on the glass of the vending machine. "Ilya," he said, pointing first at Ilya and then pointing at the machine. He pulled some coins from his pocket, pointing again.

Ilya was pretty sure Shane was asking if Ilya wanted to pick a snack. It was kindness he didn't expect, not from a random boy his own age in another country. He blinked quickly and turned to study the snacks. He wasn't sure what a lot of them were, so when he saw a bag of gummy bears, he tapped the glass over them. Shane nodded, carefully putting the coins into the machine and pressing the buttons. He retrieved the treat and opened it, holding the bag out to Ilya.

Ilya grabbed a handful and managed a "thank you." Those were words Mama had asked him to remember, because there would be many people to thank in their new home.

Shane said something back and then carefully dug out some of the green gummy bears for himself.

Ilya looked at his handful, selecting the green ones to pass back over to Shane.

This earned him the brightest smile yet, Shane's nose scrunching a bit. "Thank you!"

Ilya stuffed his mouth with gummy bears, while Shane ate his green ones one at a time. Ilya kept looking at Shane's shirt and decided the easiest way to ask was pointing. He ended up poking Shane, who made an annoyed noise before tugging his own shirt out where he could see what Ilya was pointing at.

Shane then said a bunch of things very fast and Ilya huffed. Shane's excitement didn't dim, instead he grabbed Ilya's wrist and tugged him along. Ilya wanted to follow, more than anything, but when they took a turn that was away from his mama he stopped and didn't let Shane pull him further.

"I need to ask my mom," Ilya said. "My mama." Hopefully some word was understandable to Shane.

Shane's grip loosened and he stood still, watching Ilya. When Ilya grabbed his hand, Shane didn't push him off, just followed at a more sedate pace as Ilya went back to where the office was. If any of the adults that passed them or saw them through office doorways were concerned, they certainly didn't do anything about it.

Ilya poked his head in and it was the lady behind the desk that spotted him first, smiling. Shane pushed the door open a bit more and greeted her, getting Mama and the interpreter's attention too. Shane seemed to explain something which made the woman smile wider and the interpreter nod.

“This is Shane, his father works for the government as well, a few floors above us,” the interpreter said, mostly to Mama, though Ilya wanted to know everything about the boy. “He seems to think Ilya might be interested in seeing his hockey gear. He says Ilya wanted to check in with you first, so Shane wants you to know it will be okay.”

“Please,” Ilya asked, wanting this with an unexpected ache. “He has been very nice.”

“Are you sure that's okay?” Mama asked the interpreter. “I don't want to impose.”

“It should be fine. Shane's father is a kind man,” the interpreter assured. “And we still have at least an hour left of paperwork.”

“Okay,” Mama said, then met Ilya’s eyes. “Ilya, be on your best behavior okay?”

“Yes Mama,” Ilya said, as the interpreter spoke to Shane.

Shane tugged on Ilya’s hand again. Ilya had forgotten to let go, but it made it easy to follow him. They ended up in an elevator, Shane carefully selecting the button. He pulled the bag of gummy bears out of his pocket and Ilya took some more, making sure to leave any green ones.

It was not a long ride and soon Shane was leading him down a new hall. The offices up here seemed bigger, nicer. There were more windows and light. Shane waved or greeted any adults they passed, who all seemed to accept his presence. They ended up at a closed door and Shane knocked.

A deep voice responded and Ilya flinched. Shane didn’t, instead opening the door, immediately talking to the man behind this desk. Probably explaining why Ilya was there. It seemed Shane had been set up at a table much like Ilya had been, but he had a backpack and sports bag tucked under it, plus a hockey stick against the wall. Ilya’s full attention was on that and he reached out to touch it. It was nice, newish, though clearly Shane had been using it.

Shane didn't seem upset that Ilya was touching his stuff. Far from it - he'd knelt to pull out the bag, unzipping it to reveal skates and padding. He was still talking and Ilya could feel the excitement in his words even if he couldn't understand.

Ilya suddenly felt like crying. He rubbed his fist against his eye to try to stop it. But he missed hockey so much, he missed his friends, and he even missed his home, though he was less angry and Mama was less sad without Papa.

He looked around the room and spotted some pictures on the wall. He stood up, interrupting Shane, so he could see them better. They mostly were of Shane, though he was younger in

them, and some of a woman that looked more like Shane than his dad did. Shane was in a hockey uniform in one, and Ilya pointed at that, then back to himself.

Shane had stood too. He nodded at Ilya, head tipped again, which seemed to mean he was thinking something over. He then went to his father, who was focused on his computer, and tugged on his sleeve just like Ilya did with his mama. Shane's dad turned to give him full attention as Shane talked to him, bouncing slightly on his toes. His dad nodded and pulled a notebook over, writing on it. Ilya watched for signs of anger, but they never came. Shane's dad then ripped the page off to give to Shane, who then passed it to Ilya. Ilya didn't know what it said, but he has a feeling the interpreter would. Maybe it was about hockey.

Shane settled at a chair at the little table, and pointed to the other then Ilya. Ilya sat, and found a magazine pushed towards him. It was open to a page about hockey players, and though he couldn't read, Ilya studied the page and began flipping through it. While he did, Shane sorted their gummy bears by flavor, which Ilya thought was smart.

Ilya pushed the magazine back across when he was done, but Shane left it in the middle of the table. He flipped back to where it had been opened before, pointing at different player profiles and giving them a thumbs up or thumbs down. Ilya ate his gummy bears and tried to keep track. Shane made a face at one and gave two thumbs down, which made Ilya laugh.

Ilya didn't know how much time they'd spent together, but Shane must have been keeping track. He suddenly closed the magazine and grabbed Ilya's hand, before making a whole new face. Ilya giggled, though he felt a little bad. It was probably his sticky hands that caused that face. In his defense, gummy bears got sticky.

Shane took matters into his own hands by bringing them to a bathroom and having them both wash up. That mission done, Shane retraced the path back to the elevator. Ilya would have probably followed Shane anywhere at that point, so it was good his new friend was just bringing him back to Mama.

Shane waved to the adults and then, after a pause where he just stared at Ilya, gave Ilya a hug. Ilya was so surprised he almost didn't hug back. But he did, feeling happy, and then all too soon he was waving at Shane as Shane jogged away, back to his dad.

When Ilya shared the paper, it turned out what Shane's dad had written was hockey related. It was all about a kid's league that Ilya might be able to join. It also had the phone number for Shane's house, though Ilya didn't know what he or Mama would say if they did call.

Mama hugged him tight when they got back to their hotel room, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I'm so proud of you for making your first friend here."

Ilya hugged her back and nodded. Maybe Canada wasn't so bad after all.

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Shane had never been very good at making friends. It wasn't that people disliked him, they just also didn't seem to like him very much either. Among his classmates, his focus on hockey was unrelatable and even the ones who said they liked the sport seemed to find Shane's

thoughts about it boring. Among his teammates he was often the most visibly different and he just didn't click right. His parents assured him it wasn't his fault, that he didn't do anything wrong, the one time he tried to explain it to them but had ended up crying instead. When he heard them talking in whispers about it the next night, he felt guilty about making them worry, so he kept his trouble making friends a secret. Because he got along fine with most people - especially coaches and teachers - he just didn't have a best friend. That should be okay since he just had many people who were kind of his friends.

Then he met Ilya and, despite not speaking the same language, Shane had felt like someone understood him. And liked him for just wanting to talk about hockey. The next week when he was there with his dad, before Dad would be able to drive him to practice, Shane couldn't help but look to see if Ilya and his mother were there again.

He tried to cover his disappointment when he came back to Dad's office, but Dad knew him too well. "We just have to wait for Ilya's mom to call, okay?"

Shane nodded, because he did know that. But he also knew that Ilya, and so probably his mom, didn't know English or French, so how could they call? He settled himself back at the table and frowned at his homework. He needed to get it done before practice anyway, so it was probably good Ilya wasn't there.

It was almost another full week before the call did come. He'd been helping Dad in the kitchen, so Mom picked up. He realized who it must be, when he heard how Mom was talking - careful and to the point, no extra words.

He stayed still, listening as he leaned on the counter. Shane only remembered he was supposed to be helping stir cookie batter when Mom came into the kitchen. She smiled at him. "That was Ilya's mom. I think we confirmed for them to come over for lunch this weekend."

"That's nice," Dad said, coming over to pour chocolate chips into Shane's bowl. "I wonder how long they've been here?"

"Not long, I should think," Mom said. "I also tried to tell her I would ask to see if Ilya could join Shane's team. I know it's late in the season, but it seems like something they should be able to make an exception for if he already knows the basics." She turned back to Shane. "You excited?"

Shane nodded. He'd been worried that maybe he'd been wrong about making a friend, but he didn't want to tell her that. He was relieved and happy, as much as he was excited.

Mom ruffled his hair. "I'm glad. Now what are you boys making in here?"

For the first time in his life, Shane worried about what he was going to wear. His face felt warm with embarrassment and he knew it was silly, but he needed to get having a friend over right. After putting most of the shirts he owned on his bed, he grabbed the same one he wore the day he met Ilya. It had helped them talk about hockey, maybe it could again.

As he finished pulling on some sports pants, Mom knocked and stuck her head in. “Hi sweetie, you ready?” She caught sight of his bed. “Do you need help with that?”

Shane shook his head, running back across the room to start folding his shirts. He’d cleaned up the rest of his room that morning.

Mom came in anyway and joined him. “Are you ready for lunch with Ilya?”

“Yes.” Shane carefully copied Mom’s movements. “Do you think I can take him outside after dinner to do practice shots?”

“I don’t see why not,” she said. “You should have a spare stick or two. Maybe Ilya would like one if he joins your team?”

“I can share.” Shane was careful with all his gear, so it would be in good shape to share. He wondered if Ilya had any gear of his own. Was that something you could bring with you if you moved to a new country?

One day he would be able to ask Ilya all these questions and more. But it would have to wait.

Once he was sure his room was tidy again, Shane went downstairs. Leaning over the back of the couch in the living room, he watched out the window for Ilya and his mom to arrive. He could hear Mom and Dad in the kitchen, speaking softly and the clack of pans and dishes. His curiosity at what they were talking about didn’t overweigh his excitement, so he stayed put.

He wanted to make sure that Ilya, and his mom, would feel welcome. It was something he had talked a lot about with Mom, because she’d shared her own experience. Shane knew she’d been born somewhere else, but it had been the first time she’d shared the details of coming to Canada and how she’d just wanted to be welcomed by the other kids. Shane decided he could definitely do that for Ilya.

It was close to the agreed time that Shane finally spotted them. It was easy enough - Ilya and his mom had similar hair, and Ilya's curls were all over the place from the walk. Shane thought they must have taken a bus and then walked. He’d have to ask Mom about that. A car definitely didn’t seem like something you could take with you.

“They’re here!” he called, scrambling off the couch and hurrying to the door. Shane pulled it open as Ilya and his mom came to the sidewalk in front of their house. Shane waved.

As soon as Ilya saw him, he let go of his mom’s hand and ran up the walkway. Ilya was grinning and Shane couldn’t help but smile back. Nerves he hadn’t realized were there until they were gone left nothing but relief.

“Hi,” Shane said, stepping back so that Ilya could come in.

“Hello,” Ilya said, followed by some quick words that Shane now knew were Russian.

Shane didn’t understand them, but reached out to grab Ilya’s hand. It had worked well when they first met. “Let me show you my house! Oh shoes off first.” He pointed to Ilya’s feet and Ilya did as asked.

Once he was done, Mom and Dad had appeared, and Irina had come up the pathway and into the doorway.

Shane looked between the three of them and said, “I’m showing Ilya the house.”

Dad chuckled at that. “We heard. Don’t be too long, lunch will be done soon.” He then addressed Ilya. “It’s good to see you again, Ilya.”

Ilya straightened, though didn’t let go of Shane’s hand. If anything, he squeezed it tighter. “Hello,” he repeated, looking at Dad and then said it again to Mom.

“Okay, back soon!” Shane successfully got them out of the cluster of adults and into the living room. Ilya followed him. “Here is where we watch hockey games and my trophies are over there...”

Shane did try to keep the tour quick, but he saved the best for last. He brought Ilya out to the back porch, even in their socks, so he could see the hockey drill supplies Shane had set out. “We can play after lunch,” Shane said.

Ilya had let go of his hand to lean over the railing and stare at the backyard. He started nodding and said, “Yes!”

When Ilya made to run into the yard, Shane caught him. “Not yet, food first.”

Ilya pouted at Shane, giving Shane’s arm a half hearted tug.

“Soon,” Shane said, laughing. “Play soon.”

Even if Ilya didn’t understand the words, he seemed to understand the meaning. He sighed dramatically, tipping his head back as if lunch was the worst thing ever. Shane thought it was very funny and almost gave in, when Mom stuck her head out to call them to the table.

It was hard to have a conversation over a meal when not everyone could understand each other. Shane was glad it wasn’t impossible though. There was a lot of laughter to fill in the gaps and it felt like everyone was happy. Shane tried to teach Ilya the English words of things on the table, which Ilya engaged in until they got to parmesan. Then Ilya rolled his eyes and made a face that started Shane laughing again.

Once they had finished and Shane had shown Ilya how to put the dishes in the sink, Ilya grabbed Shane’s hand to bring him back outside.

“Wait, wait! We need our shoes now,” Shane said, tugging him the other way and bringing him back to the front door. Shane opened the closet to pull out a light jacket and realized that Ilya hadn’t had one when he came in. Shane grabbed another off of the coat hook that his parents had put up so he could reach it easily. “Here.”

Ilya looked up from putting his sneakers on, and stared at the jacket. Shane wiggled it, because he couldn’t put his on until Ilya took it. Ilya smiled a small smile that seemed to be very happy, despite its size, before he took the jacket. “Thank you.”

Soon they were outside, and Shane handed Ilya a stick, setting a milk crate filled with practice field hockey balls. “Let’s see what you can-”

Shane wasn’t able to finish before Ilya had taken a ball and hit it perfectly into the net set up against the fence on the other side of the yard.

A new feeling like excitement sparked in Shane - could Ilya be as good as him? “Do that again!”

Ilya looked over at that with a grin so wide all his teeth were showing. He grabbed another ball and hit it into the net.

Shane wanted to shake him, because this was going to be so fun. Shane took a ball, moved to where Ilya had been standing. Ilya stepped to the side, crossing his arms. He lifted both his eyebrows as if to tell Shane to show him what he could do. Shane wasn’t going to disappoint him, quickly hitting one, two, and then a third ball into the net.

Ilya whistled (something Shane hadn’t figured out how to do yet). Shane looked over and Ilya said, “Good.”

“Thanks. You too.”

Ilya snagged a third ball and got it into the net, even at an angle. “Yes.”

Shane really hoped Ilya was going to be on the same team as him. “Good.”

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Yuna watched the two boys play in the backyard, mug of tea in one hand. Shane’s laughter echoed back, and she felt her eyes get damp. She worried about her baby, but he was always putting up a brave face. She hadn’t realized something might be wrong, but she also couldn’t remember the last time he laughed like this.

Irina joined her, and Yuna could see her reflection in the window, smiling shakily. Yuna didn’t know why this woman had made the choice to come to Canada, but she could make guesses. She remembered how hard it had been when her parents had moved with her. She had been a little younger than Shane and Ilya were now. While there were a lot of differences between the situations, Yuna felt a lot of empathy for the younger woman beside her.

“Thank you for coming,” Yuna said, speaking slowly. No matter what she did, some of the words would be lost to Irina, but it felt important to say them. “Shane has been very excited to see Ilya again.”

Irina didn’t look away from the yard. Ilya and Shane had paused drills of shooting balls into the net that she and David had gotten Shane for his 8th birthday. They were now chasing each other around the yard. Shouts coming from them both could be heard, and they were very happy sounds.

“Thank you,” Irina said, almost a whisper. “Happy, kind.”

Yuna wanted to reach out a reassuring hand, but wasn't sure that would be welcome. "You are always welcome," she said instead.

Irina did turn then. "Welcome?"

"To visit again. Just call me," Yuna pointed towards the phone.

Irina smiled. "Thank you."

They went back to watching their sons. A late in the season beetle seemed to have caught Shane's attention, and he stopped abruptly. Ilya ran into him, setting off more laughter, before Shane was pointing out his discovery. Ilya didn't seem put off by the sudden change, instead crouching to examine it with Shane.

"Shane is happy," Yuna said, blinking away tears. How alone had he been, and how could she not have noticed?

"Happy," Irina repeated, agreeing. She played with her necklace, an Orthodox cross. "Is good."

"Yes, it is very good." Yuna wondered if Shane had finally made himself a friend just by being his kind thoughtful self. She could only hope it would last.

End Notes

I have some partially written ideas for more stories in this AU, so please follow the series for more. Despite Irina's part at the beginning, this is an Irina Lives AU as much as it is a childhood friend's AU. Her and Yuna will probably continue to have snapshots of POV with Shane and Ilya.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!