does it make me better

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by smallestchurch

Summary

After Ilya leaves the cottage, Yuna comes over to cheer Shane up. And maybe—maybe—excavate some shit she's buried inside herself.

Basically I think Yuna and Shane should let their hair down and gossip a little. And, you know. Heal.

Notes

idk i just think yuna's neat. and neurotic about Self Improvement, like her son. title from marina allen's Getting Better. no beta, so sorry for any mess. xo

See the end of the work for more notes

Shoes on, suitcase by the door, no turning back.

It will go fast.

No, it won't.

I know. Tell me something you're glad about, Hollander.

I'm glad I don't have to wonder anymore. What this is. Whether I'll hear from you.

Wow. Shane Hollander, most glad about not hockey.

Shut up.

You will call me every night, and I will talk dirty to you, and then you will lull me to sleep with boring stories. And you will only wear your glasses for me.

Ilya. I need them to see.

There will be nothing you need to see, Shane. Not when I'm gone.

—

"David?" Yuna calls, in motion, collecting keys, phone, purse, hefting her overnight bag.

"Yes?" He pauses the motion of the knife against the cutting board first, and the low drone of his boring history podcast second. He turns, smiling, but his eyes immediately detect the whirlwind of chaos around her. "What's going on?"

"I'm gonna go to Shane's, maybe stay the night."

"Is everything—"

"He's fine, yes, sorry. He texted me earlier." It's true: he was fine, they were fine. Everything was fine.

He'd texted: *Ilya's gone, so you can go back to barging in whenever you feel like*. A normal enough text, his usual teasing edge. But there had been an amorphous shadow lurking within her since the moment she saw Ilya Rozanov standing nervous inside her foyer. The more she read that text, the more that shadow began to take a definitive and devastating shape: her son had let her off the hook far too easily.

"I just—" She looks at her long-suffering husband, who is already smiling knowingly. "I have to—"

“Text me later, let me know you’re okay,” he says, electing—she can tell—to say nothing. He kisses her. He hugs her with a sigh that calms her nervous system.

“Want to take him some dinner?” He asks, into her hair.

No, because she needs to be moving already, needs to be doing, needs to be going.

“Thanks. I’ll grab something.”

“See you tomorrow,” he says, with an easy, knowing grin, and clicks play on his podcast.

—

When her son was 14, he went to a birthday party for the first time. His social calendar was barely existent—Yuna was relieved. The party was for Matt, a friend from school. Matt wasn’t a hockey kid, so she hadn’t met him. Hockey took up so much of everything, by then.

When she asked about Matt, Shane only turned red, said he was just *some guy*. He was embarrassed. Maybe it drew attention to how few friends he had.

So she dropped him off. It was curious, she thought: the house was on a cul-de-sac, and there were no other cars, no other parents chatting in the street. She watched from the car, pretending to look for something in the glove box. Matt’s door opened. Matt was alone, free hand shoved in his jeans pocket. Shane looked around nervously. He stepped inside, gift bag clutched in his hand.

Later, he didn’t call to get picked up. Matt’s mother informed her over the phone that Shane had left hours ago. She panicked, reminded herself it was Shane, housed a cigarette in record time, and went to the first of three places Shane was almost guaranteed to be.

And there he was, skating drills around little cones on the frozen lake in the fading light.

He’d walked all the way home. He refused to say why he didn’t wait for a ride. All he’d say is that it wasn’t a party, it was *just some prank, a joke or something, please drop it*. He was angry. He was heartbroken. He seemed confused about why he was those things.

That was the first time she thought maybe she knew.

Yuna didn’t have the vocabulary. She was still too new at parenting a teenager, too nervous. But also, really, she didn’t know how to approach a problem without a solution at the ready. She didn’t know how to meet her son where he was, because when her son did not want to be where he was, he only shut down, shut her out.

She made him his favorite dinner, and didn’t complain when he barely ate it.

—

The media training.

He tells me everything. It was Yuna's flippant response whenever some other mother crowded her, crowing about how hard it all must be on Shane, the pressure he must be under. It was never concern for him, it was criticism of her, and Yuna knew it, every time. She shucked on her retort like her son did his padding. *He tells me everything*.

But really, she worried. He was young. That was her job.

It all got very real, very fast. The symphonic whir of the rowing machine, the protein grams, the 4AMs. Scouts and lawyers and better equipment and traveling weekends and local reporters and—

At some point, her worry calcified. It was her skeleton—everything else grew around it. Yuna, chain-smoking in the yard in the dark, worried the pressure was cleaving hunks out of her quiet, perfect son. Worried she was pushing him too hard. That the public eye would change him, that he was only doing all of this to please her, that he would scar in ways and places she'd never know until it was, in some nebulous fashion, *too late*.

And David, collecting the scattered pieces of her in his gentle arms as she tossed her half-burnt cigarette into the snow. *Yuna, this is what he wants. He's happy. All this worrying is making you sick. What can you actually fix, here, anyway?*

It became her mantra, her guiding principle. *What could she fix?* She could think of the things Shane wouldn't, as he was still too young to fear death, or treat the future with the respect it demanded. She could diversify his income streams, so the prospect of an unknown after, post-injury or retirement, didn't keep her up nights. Get him brand deals, get him into real estate.

She could get him media trained.

Yuna watched as the mask of neutral, vague answers slid right over his face. He seemed relieved to know there was apparently a singular correct way to communicate. It was good for him, she told herself. The press ate pellets from his flat palms like ponies at the petting zoo. And at home, he gave her just enough sass to let her believe it hadn't bled through—*I'm an adult, mom, I can remember, mom, Yes, mom, I read the contract, MOM.*

His career soared. The spotlights got bigger and brighter. He showed less and less of himself, even at home. Like he was always being watched.

And when she saw him flinch behind the mask? Well. She figured she owed it to him to let it go.

She worried too much, after all. *He tells me everything*.

—

I'm doing a silent retreat, he'd said casually, staring at his lunch, pushing it around with his fork. Beneath the table, his foot jiggled hard enough to ripple the water in his glass. Nothing to see here. *To calm me down. Help with focus*.

Just go over there and get it, she said casually to David two weeks later. Nonchalant. She yanked a weed by the root, not meeting David's eye. Nothing to see here. *It's only a silent retreat, just don't talk to him. He won't mind.*

When had she become just another watcher?

—

Through the second dinner, she'd watched the Ilya her son knew (*and loved*) slowly emerge.

A stiff handshake with David at the door, a peck on her cheek, a gesture toward the interior of Shane's cottage as though they might not know the way. The standard *Mr. & Mrs. Hollander*s followed by her and David's *please call me*s in two part harmony.

Shane brought up the rear, drying his hands on a dish rag. *Sorry, you didn't have to—I told you I would—*

Hollander, I am a charming celebrity, I can handle greeting your parents at the door, he'd said with just a peek of that megawatt bad boy smirk, and Yuna clocked it all: they way he'd read Shane's mind, the kindness inside the snark, the way her son instantly calmed with an eye roll at himself.

It was a snapshot of the kind of meeting she'd probably always pictured in Shane's future, only canted 45 degrees. Made weird, she'd realized then, not by her son's preference for men, or even the contrast of his quiet intensity against Ilya's brazen, swaggering, cheeky Ilyaness, but because of the careers that had swallowed them both.

How unfair to them, Yuna thought, that she'd clung so tightly to a persona crafted at a tender age by a vulnerable boy in a foreign country, desperate to protect his soft parts from a rabid and unyielding press. How unfair that the media narrative had worked so seamlessly on her.

How much it must have hurt her son to watch it work.

For a fiery, fleeting second, she fucking hated hockey.

Her son greeted them, hugging her stiffly, hugging David. Nerves thrummed in him. He was nervous because they were here—no, be honest, because SHE was here. Because she was inextricably woven into his hockey career, and he was afraid (rightly—*be HONEST, Yuna*)

that she was thinking more about that career than about his feelings for Ilya. He wanted her to like Ilya so desperately it clung like an aura around him.

How's your week been, boys? David asked brightly in the entryway.

Boring, Ilya said immediately, some sort of codeword that activated her son's most secret smile. The one that, only a week ago, she'd only ever seen him make at his phone when he thought no one was watching.

Ilya, Shane scolded lightly.

Ilya kissed Shane on the cheek, a big smack that made her son blush. *I never get to be boring so much*, Ilya said, and it was genuine, soft. *I see the appeal now*.

He winked at Yuna, as though daring her not to like him. And Yuna couldn't help it, she laughed. One thing she knew for sure about Ilya: he would always rise to a challenge.

It was Ilya who plucked the bag with the beer from David's hands, and the tray of food from Yuna's. It was Ilya who poured the beer into glasses and made sure they all clinked theirs together before they sipped. It was David who held his glass aloft and said, *To new family*— but it was Ilya who visibly teared up. And in that moment she felt a love so fierce she pictured the (boring) nature documentaries David sometimes watched, pictured a mother lion ripping out throats to protect her pride.

She would kill anyone who hurt them.

She just had to start with her own ego.

—

When Yuna was fifteen, her mother made her quit playing hockey even for fun. She was in danger of injuring her fingers, which were too important for her future career as a concert violinist. The instant the violin went from something she enjoyed being good at to the only viable way to spend her free time, she hated that fucking instrument with the full heat of her soul. She quit the minute she got to college. She got a job in the ticket office at the rink, landing right back where she'd always wanted to be.

And then she met David. Went stupid for him overnight.

In the past week, awake at all hours, trying to make sense of the shadow inside her, she'd watched some old Montreal-Boston games and couldn't believe what she saw. The way they watched and circled each other, their obvious respect and camaraderie on the ice. The way they pushed and pulled at each other, some invisible rubber band connecting them. Everyone else could only try to keep up. And there was the other thing, too. She'd always been too focused on Shane's game to notice his heart right there on his sleeve, in his eyes, climbing straight out of his mouth on a face-off as he smirked and chirped at the love of his life.

She recognized that look because she'd once worn it on her own face. Hanging around the rink at all hours, missing study groups and twirling her hair around her fingers, desperate for a run-in. She hung onto her GPA by sheer strength of will, but everything else fell away. In early polaroids of the two of them, her eyes were bigger than her face, her energy frenetic even in stills, her body always tilted toward David, toward the future she was determined to sculpt for them.

She hid David from her family for a full year, scared to endure her mother's disappointment that David was white. When David asked her to meet his parents, she melted down, because she hadn't even realized she'd been avoiding it as hard as she was.

Why on earth do you want me to meet your parents so bad, she'd snapped at him. *Is this not enough for you, are we getting married or something? You know I can't bring you home, you know that. You just want me to feel shitty that your family is so* nice*, is that it?*

He stood there looking crushed, confused. When she lashed out like that, fast and aggressive, David always shut down. His feelings weren't as close to the surface as hers. It took him longer to react, to unravel his thoughts. It made her furious that he would stand there and let her yell without yelling back. And maybe, somewhere deep in her subconscious, she knew this tactic usually resulted in him forfeiting an argument when she was the one dead in the wrong. So she kept going and going, yelling, falling apart. Storming away.

She cried, she smoked, she didn't speak to him for three days. Then, she swallowed her pride, went crawling back, and begged for another chance. Within the week, she'd caved completely. Met his family. Committed to a plan to tell hers.

As her son stood in her foyer with his stretched-thin composure, softly apologizing for having had his privacy blatantly invaded because he knew her feelings were crushed, she thought of her younger self. Screaming at her mother as her mother screamed back, because that's how they got through everything. Never apologizing, never giving an inch. Neither stepping into the pristine, fertile, neutral ground between them, not once, until her mother dropped dead and Yuna felt, primarily, relief.

Is this why you quit the violin? her mother had howled at her. *For some BOY?*

Is that really all you care about? I quit because I'm an adult and I fucking hated it, mother, she howled right back. *I love him. You can take it or leave it.*

David wasn't there for their fight. She'd never have let him see her that way. Not then.

As she watched Ilya's silent, unyielding support—as he kept her son calm, collected, centered—something deep within her itched as it began to heal. Later that night, smoking her secret cigarette after David was asleep, she thought that if she could go back in time, she'd have asked David to come. She'd have done it differently. She'd have been brave enough to ask for help. She was so glad her son had known to.

Maybe David's presence would have kept them both calmer. Kinder. David's careful consideration of his interiority during emotionally heated moments was a quality of his that she had grown most grateful for, over the years. It had taught her how to slow down, how to

really listen to him. It taught her that *I don't know* wasn't a deflection, it was a real answer, a placeholder to communicate that he was processing her barrage.

Shane was like David, that way. Yuna thought and spoke at twice the speed it took him to process.

She had always worried about Shane's heart. She worried about the solitude that might or might not be loneliness. Worried that hockey was his violin, a once-fun pastime that had eclipsed all the other experiences he might have enjoyed. She had never known how to talk to him about it, because he always wanted to please her so badly. She didn't want him to think that she wanted him to slow down with hockey any more than she wanted him to think it was the only path for him. It didn't fit neatly into the stack of Problems She Could Fix.

When she felt lost that way, she pushed for more control. And when she was afraid she was becoming as controlling as her own mother, she would scaffold routine and peppy optimism around him, hoping as hard as she could that it would help keep him steady. That he'd never see her sweat. That she was doing better than her mother had done for her.

—

By the end of that second dinner, Ilya was draped across Shane's couch like he'd spawned there at the start of his life. He argued with David about the rank order of the Fast and Furious movies, which David claimed to love ironically but Ilya maybe just loved. Ilya was animated, funny, gesturing as he needled David in rapid-fire sing-song English punctuated by the occasional phrase in exasperated Russian. David was having fun bantering, the same way Shane did. Ilya seemed fun to spar with.

Yuna sat at the breakfast bar beside her son. He swung his feet, watching the scene with dopey glee. She felt compelled—moved, even—to say something meaningful to him. Her feeling for Ilya had, over two relatively short interactions, melted and spread like butter across Sunday morning pancakes. She hunted for something that would convey the rush of relief she felt seeing them together, but couldn't quite pin down the words. Nothing sounded right as she rehearsed it in her mind. She wasn't used to talking easily about their feelings, their hearts. She thought about saying something about the foundation, but Shane had asked for no business talk, and she was determined to respect his boundary.

Maybe she didn't know what to do when there was nothing to do.

She settled for a brief moment resting her head on Shane's shoulder, and hoped it communicated something rather than nothing.

When Ilya ducked outside, David stood up with his patented Dad grin, declared Ilya *something else* with a hearty laugh and a pat to Shane's shoulder. Somehow it managed to effortlessly convey what she'd spent half an hour trying to script. Shane went liquid with joy.

He ducked his head and said, *Tell me about it*, all mock exasperation, loose and playful. Smitten.

Yuna got the public credit as Shane's manager, but once the cameras were gone, David was the mortar between everything. This was David's magic—letting it go, letting the past be the past, going forward as you mean to continue. Meeting people where they were, sharing that space with them. *You want me to like Ilya? Great, see? I already love him*. And Yuna would step into his slipstream.

Watching David's easy affection and Shane's gooey reciprocation, she thought: the thing about scaffolding is it clings to the structure—it's not load-bearing on its own. Shane didn't need more shit to hold—he needed someone to hold it with him.

Earlier that week, when Shane dissolved into panic at their kitchen table, Yuna's mouth had opened, ready to give him all the logical, rational reasons why he had no reason to panic if they prepared enough. It was David's hand on her knee, the minutest flick of his eyes toward Ilya, that had silenced her.

She watched as Ilya comforted him. Touched him gently, told him he wasn't alone. Steadied him. *You're good here*, he'd said, which was another way of telling Shane, *I'm scared too, but not right now*.

That was the strange sense of relief, she realized. That Ilya had found Shane's heart through all the scaffolding she'd accidentally built around it.

At the end of the night, after exchanging numbers, Ilya had kissed her cheek at the door, fingertips politely on her elbow. She probably scared the shit out of him when she threw her arms around his shoulders and squeezed. She forced herself to admit to herself that she hadn't done it for Shane—it was what *she* needed.

He hugged her back, after a second. It felt, at least, like a start.

Shane's phone pinged. Car in five minutes.

Don't be alone tonight, okay?

Ilya—I told you, I'm gonna clean, get ready to go back to—

Go to your parents'. Call Rose Landry.

You don't always have to use her full government name, you know.

Anyone but Hayden.

Fuck you.

My dick is too sore.

Stop.

Your mother does that, too, you know.

Does what?

When she doesn't want to smile at my bullshit. Mouth gets tight, eyes get crinkly.

Ilya.

What? She's beautiful. Like you. You know she texted me?

WHAT? God. Is she already trying to—

Just to say they'll miss having me around to eat leftovers, call if I need anything ever, and thanks for making you happy.

She—she said that?

Someday you will understand, maybe, how loved you really are, Shane.

--

"Mom? Is that you?" he calls from somewhere.

"Hey sweetie," she responds, shedding her shoes. Her purse lands with a jangly thump.

He doesn't come greet her. Normally, he would. She rounds the corner to find him curled on the couch, looking sad and small and young. He clutches his phone on his lap. She drops the takeout on the breakfast bar, sets the wine bottles in the fridge. He's watching her without looking at her.

"Didn't think you'd take my text so literally," he mutters.

"That's why I'm here," she says, trying to let that bounce right off her. She sits on the couch opposite him. "And it's the last time, I promise."

He wants to roll his eyes so bad, she can almost hear him restraining himself.

"Shane. Honey," she says, waiting for some acknowledgement from him. None comes. Might as well get straight into it, she decides, steeling herself. This will be messy and new and unrehearsed—but it will be better than what she would have done two weeks ago. Better than coming over with a pasted on smile and a list of a hundred reasons he shouldn't be sad. *The season always goes so fast*, or, *you'll be so busy you won't have time to miss him*, or, *think about how good it will feel when you get to see him again.*

Once, a long time ago, she sat in the back of a taxi on her way to the airport, ready to fly back home from college for the summer, knowing she wouldn't even talk to David on the phone because she hadn't yet overcome her own stubborn cowardice. Those trite, empty sentiments would have moved her to homicide.

"I bet you feel pretty shitty," she tries.

His head whips up in surprise.

Shitty, she thinks, is a word. There are probably other words. Many times, she'd watched Ilya search for vocabulary that Shane seamlessly provided to him. *What's the word for when the present hasn't yet become a memory and you're bone-deep terrified you're already remembering it better than it possibly could have been? What's the word for the first time in your life you felt night air on your skin and silt between your toes and his skin between your teeth, and then you had to stand there and wave and try not to cry, for him? What's the word for when you have to take all the stuff that makes you and cram it back into the box under the bed and hope it won't be moth-eaten and ill-fitting when you dig it out again—in weeks? Months?*

She sits inside his massive house that he once described in real estate terms—*spacious, high ceilings, natural light*—and wonders if it feels only cavernous and empty today.

She wants to hug him, but doesn't dare, yet.

"I mean. Yeah?"

While he's still looking at her, she makes a big show of holding down the button on her cell phone and waiting for the screen to go black. She puts it face down on the coffee table.

"Some wine?"

She doesn't wait for his response.

—

The sauv blanc is blissfully cold. He accepts the glass warily, placing it on a coaster. She keeps hers in her hand as she stuffs throw pillows behind her lower back, and pointedly does not think about what they might have been used for this week.

"I'm gonna try to talk to you about something," she says. "Is that okay?"

He nods, looking somewhere past her. Looking sad. Tired.

"I think I worry too much, Shane," she tells him bluntly. "And I know you can tell. I think you feel it before I do, sometimes. You tighten your seams, tell me everything's fine so I won't worry. But I worry anyway, so I tighten my seams, so you won't see that I'm worried.

But of course you see, and so around we go, this weird competition for who's the most okay. And then neither of us are okay, because it's not honest. And I think that's maybe how we got here."

"Mom. What the hell are you talking about?"

But he knows. She knows he knows. He just doesn't want to think about it. Or talk about it.

"You know, I'm a disaster, sometimes?" It's a truth she has only ever let David see. She laughs, a little deranged. "Your father has a cousin that hasn't spoken to us in almost 30 years because I smashed a dish on his kitchen floor on purpose on Christmas Day when he implied I was too uptight. Also, I blamed myself for you breaking your collar bone during a professional hockey game. Also I have a secret pack of cigarettes that I smoke at 3AM when the insomnia gets so bad I'm too exhausted to cry. Your father always knows, even if he's sound asleep. He snipes at me about it."

She's talking fast. She calms herself. Sips. He sips too, and she's glad, even as her nerves jangle. This normal thing they've never done, drinking wine and talking about nothing. Everything.

"The point is, I'm a mess. You must be a mess in there, too, sometimes. And yes, you're one of the steadiest and most capable people I've ever met." She swirls a hand. "But anyone who only knows me through my dazzlingly professional emails to men with three times my weight to throw around who always give me what I want probably thinks the same about me."

He chuckles, at least. His little secret smile opens up his face. He directs it into his wine glass.

"What?"

"Ilya does that."

It takes her a second. She keeps her face and tone carefully neutral. After all, nothing would surprise her after this week. He's an adult who is allowed to have bad habits. Secrets. Just like her.

"What, snipe at you for sneaking cigarettes?"

"No, ew. He sneaks cigarettes. I snipe at him."

God, and she can see it clear as day.

She laughs. She lets herself say something she never would have, in the before. "Shane. The kid lost both his parents. He's got the highest pressure job in the world, and a secret long distance boyfriend, and a home country he can't go back to. Let him sneak a smoke when he can't sleep."

"Yeah." He rolls his eyes, but Ilya's secret smile doesn't leave him. He checks his phone. Nothing. It fades to dark.

“I still want to be your mom, and your manager, Shane. But sometimes I also want to be a person with you. And I want you to get to be a person with me. Lord knows you get so few places to be. So, that’s why I’m here. To eat dinner, drink some wine, maybe get tipsy, and just *talk*. Is that okay?”

After a moment: “I don’t know.”

Processing, she reminds herself. There’s no convincing to be done, no argument to be made. Only patience.

She watches him twirl the stem in his fingers. He opens his mouth, closes it again.

“I think it’s okay,” he says softly. “But I don’t know how much talking I’ll do.”

And that’s okay enough.

—

She herds him and his phone and his wine glass to the breakfast bar. She decants the takeout from the Thai place she knows he likes into dinner bowls.

She slides one to him, makes one for herself. She sits a few stools down, close, but not crowding. She’s not hungry, but her stomach rumbles. The food tastes like hot, salty goo, which she hopes offers him some comfort, at least. She thinks about what to say to get him talking, and then remembers that the goal is to stop strategizing, stop manipulating. *Talk, Yuna. Be honest.*

“You know, when I saw you guys this week, all I could think about was—"

The feeling takes her by such surprise and with such force, she has to stop speaking so she won’t cry. She is a different person now, after hearing her son laugh like that again. Scooped out like a jack-o-lantern.

“All I could think was: you had nobody to talk to about him. When I first met your father, I couldn’t physically shut up about him. My friends couldn’t stand it, they got so sick of me. But all those years, you had nobody to gush to, nobody to bitch to, nobody to share him with. And then I realized, no, it was WORSE than that. Everyone thought you hated him.”

He pushes his food around. He smiles, but looks so sad. He checks his phone, clicks it back dark. “Well. Yeah.”

“Will you tell me about him? I mean. I’d love to just. Keep you company on a rough day, and maybe finally get to hear about your beautiful, funny, talented, sweetie pie boyfriend. Forget about hockey for a while. Or, I guess, as much as that’s possible, considering we’re talking about arguably the most famous hockey player in the world—"

He scoffs, fork clattering. “Except for me??”

“Well. He’s a different kind of famous—"

“Oh my god.” He laughs, shakes his head at her.

“I mean it, seriously,” she says. Allows herself one tiny nudge—old habits. “It’s not a secret anymore! Frankly, I’m amazed it managed to be for so long—that boy looks at you the way a kid with five dollars looks at an ice cream truck. So, whatever you’re comfortable telling me, I want to hear.”

What he says is not what she expects.

“I know you think he’s an asshole—"

“I do not think that, Shane,” she cuts in immediately. Guilt floods her.

Some rage she didn’t know was simmering in him seems to rear into a boil. “Are you kidding? Every time he was on screen, every time he came up.” He does a devastating impression. “*Fucking Rozanov, fuck him up the butt*, like some weird PG-13 version of every locker room I’ve ever been in. Asking me if there are any nice men in fucking Montreal. It’s just—"

He stops. He shakes his head, drops it into his hands. “Sorry.”

She feels herself stiffen. There is a powerful urge in her to argue, to defend herself. She stomps it like a cigarette butt. She focuses on his sunken posture, the hurt in his voice, the way that, even when he was fully justified in his outburst, he still apologized to her.

She reaches across the counter and pulls one of his hands off his face. She squeezes his hand, huge beneath hers.

“Shane. I didn’t know. I couldn’t know. But I want to know. I’m trying to know. I missed out on so much, and it was my fault, and I don’t want to miss any more of it.”

She lets go of his hand. She watches him compose himself, breathing.

“Sorry,” he says again. “I’m not mad at you.”

“You can be.”

“I’m not, really. I mean. He IS an asshole. Kind of. But it’s also more than that, like. The way he’s an asshole is so personally tailored to you, you start to realize it’s actually a kind of respect? He remembers everything, he notices everything. He knows what you’re thinking, what’s making you nervous, and he refuses to let it go unsaid. At first it’s fucking infuriating, but over time? It’s a relief. To be known that way. To be seen.”

“I noticed that. The way he teases you, it’s almost … intimate.”

“Please don’t use that word.”

Her laugh is over-loud in her relief.

“He messaged me from the plane earlier,” Shane says, looking at his hands. “He said he was next to this little six year old girl who’d never flown before, so he kept pointing out the window, saying he could see her house. She had her face pressed to the glass trying to see what he was pointing at, asking him which house. I can picture it, you know? The girl was scared, her mom was exhausted. He probably did that with her for an hour until she fell asleep on his arm. It probably cheered him up.”

He presses fingers into his glassy eyes. He swallows it down. “THAT’s Ilya, too.”

“Wow,” she says, and realizes that she is also crying. It’s something David would do. It’s something David would do without even thinking. He would see it as a fun game with a cute kid, not the heroically kind and beautiful gesture it was.

She sniffs, sips her wine, lets the cold against her teeth ground her. She can’t wait to get to know these new people, Ilya and Shane.

“Tell me how it started?" she dares to ask. "I won’t pretend I’m not dying to know.”

—

The first bottle is gone. She holds the second between her thighs and removes the cork with a satisfying *shunk.* She refills his glass.

“So, but, you fixed it,” she says, refilling hers next. She is pleasantly tipsy. He’s looser, too. Calmer. Most importantly, he is talking. “After you bolted, and the whole Rose thing?”

“Yeah,” he says, rolling his eyes, visibly cringing, “but not before I spent ten thousand dollars on new clothes to go to fucking *Florida* of all places.”

She snorts. She does not think about the horrendous feathered bangs she got a week before going back to campus to see David after those first three long months apart.

“To be clear," she jokes, "the clothes were to impress Ilya? The man who did most of his flirting while soaked in sweat and spitting out his own teeth? You had it BAD.”

“Shut up. He noticed.”

“Of course he did.”

“If you ever tell him that, I’ll deny it.”

“He definitely knows, Shane. Anyway, it’s sweet,” she says, feeling dreamy, imagining the scene unfolding. She stretches her legs out on the couch.

His smile is goofy as he thinks about how Ilya definitely knows. It almost melts off him. She wonders idly if the reason he never drank around her was because he didn't trust himself not to talk like this about Ilya.

"But yeah," he says, "I went to his room. Tried to clear it all up, best I could. I guess it sort of worked."

"Did you know you loved him? At All-Stars?"

"Oh yeah," he says, without hesitation. "Absolutely. I felt insane. I didn't tell him, because I didn't want to have that conversation in some shitty hotel when I had to leave in two hours, but I did drop some hints, tried to move things in that direction. It was … hard, we'd never talked like that. But we started to get somewhere." He breathes out, shaky, remembering. "Then a million fucking things happened—his dad dying, my concussion. Like we were cursed. I invited him here while I was high as fuck in the hospital and he was obviously terrified, so he would only say maybe, which I assumed was really a hard no as soon as I sobered up. I figured I'd spend the whole summer coming out of my skin knowing he was in Russia, miserable, but then—"

"Scott Hunter."

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"You took that call, and when you came back in, I had never seen that expression on your face before. I asked you, *Who was that?* and you said, *Oh yeah, everything's fine*."

He buries his face in the back cushion, turning redder than the wine had already made him. "Oh my god, I DID?"

"Yes," she says, laughing at him. "I was worried about your concussion for a second."

"I don't even remember," he says. "Maybe you should have been."

"Nah. I knew it was something big. And I knew you didn't want to tell me."

It feels like the best opening she'll get to say the thing she's wanted to say all night. The really important thing, the one she wants to get right, crystal clear: that they can keep doing this. Just like this, whenever he wants.

She sits up, wraps her fingers around his ankle, a small, grounding point of contact. His skin is cold. He's always cold. She resists the urge to offer him a blanket.

"I want you to know: it's okay that you didn't want to tell me. You're an adult. A grown man, with a whole life, and I'm so, so proud I get to know you. I don't want to keep doing things that make you shut down, or shut me out, or afraid to talk to me. I can't be less than I am, but I want to try to be … more. I want to feel like this, like it felt tonight, you know? You can always say to me, *Mom, I'm about to tell you this big scary thing, and I need you to not react right away*. I can do that! You don't have to be afraid to hurt me, or disappoint me. You never could, Shane. I mean it."

When he looks up, he's tearing up. He grabs the blanket off the back cushion, right on cue, lays it over their legs.

"Okay," he says after a moment, deciding something. "Mom, I'm gonna tell you this big scary thing, and I need you to not react right away."

And oh, what a fucking monkey's paw moment. It takes everything in her to keep her face even, her body still. She wants to leap off the couch and scream at him to tell her right this instant.

But she holds it back.

"I think I want to marry him."

She curses that fourth glass of wine in her hand, because—tears. Instant. So many of them, gallons, legions. She forces the words out and hopes they convey all the fizzy, bursting, golden things she feels inside for her son and his beautiful future, for his hilarious partner with cut glass cheekbones who plays with scared six year olds to cheer himself up.

"Oh, honey. You do?"

"Yeah," he says, steady as he is on skates.

"Tell me," she says.

"Last week, he was talking about marrying his friend in Boston, just for citizenship, you know, so he doesn't wind up in a Russian gulag or whatever if he gets injured? I probably should have supported him, I don't know, maybe it's selfish, but—but instantly, it was like. Like my whole body was screaming *NO. No, that is MINE, you can't take that from me*. I didn't even know I felt that way. It was just there, lurking in my hindbrain or something. I probably would have run from it if I saw it coming."

"Oh, baby," she laughs, wetly. "You get that from me."

"He'd been here four days. I hadn't even told him I loved him yet. It was the most time we'd ever spent together—ever. Five days before that, I was folding laundry and worrying we'd get bored of each other as soon as we were done having sex. Sorry."

"No, it's—"

"And the only reason I didn't ask him on the spot was because I didn't want him to think it was only about citizenship. Because it wouldn't be. Not for me. So instead I stayed up all night planning the foundation. I woke him up to tell him about the idea, and he climbed all over me and told me he loved me, and I said I loved him, and I thought: you idiot. Ask him. Ask him right now. But I still didn't."

A thousand paragraphs and warnings and caveats and predictions press against the back of her teeth. She swallows them all, forcing herself to listen.

"I don't know, Mom. It's all so much. I don't know how anyone does this."

Was that an invitation?

It feels like petting a cat in the wrong direction, but she tries something new. “Do you want my opinion?”

This time, there is no hesitation. No processing. “Yes.”

And right on cue, his phone lights up, vibrating with an incoming call. *Lily*. He snatches it, and he’s up and moving.

“Ilya, hey,” is all she hears before the glass door closes behind him.

Lily. *You little shit*, she thinks, laughing.

End Notes

this has been occupying my little rabbit brain during the leadup to a very scary week, so thanks to everyone in this rad fandom for being so nice about my words!

i'm smallestchurch on bsky xo

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