

Russian Lessons

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Russian Lessons

by [hcsvntdracones](#)

Summary

10 moments in the long process of Shane learning Russian.

Notes

Thank you so much to Maddie, Mariusperkins on here, who read this and gave me feedback on whether the Russian stuff was too confusing for someone who doesn't know the language, and for reading this at all when she hasn't watched the show yet <3

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

ODIN.

“How do you write my name in Russian?” Shane asks one night, when they’re alone together in the cottage and the TV is murmuring in the background, a game in a sport that neither of them particularly care about.

“Hm?”

“There’s a different alphabet, right?”

“Yes. Cyrillic.” Ilya sits up from where he’d been leaning against the back of the sofa, Shane’s head resting on his lap, and grabs a pad of paper from the coffee table. He rests it on his knee, and Shane sits up beside him, leaning over his shoulder as he writes.

What he writes is incomprehensible, of course. Loops and curves, curling and quick and illegible, the pen cutting across the paper like a figure skater across ice. He holds the pen tight, pressure against the page leaving a deep impression. Back in school, Shane thinks, Ilya must’ve gotten cramps in his hand from writing so hard, dents in his finger tips and a callus on his knuckle.

The name starts with something that looks almost like a W, to Shane’s eyes. Then an E, recognizable, identical to English. Then there’s something that looks kind of like a U with a hat, and finally an H.

“Weuh,” Shane reads, smiling a little goofily.

“Yes, wow,” Ilya agrees, misunderstanding, “Is cursive, I will write again in print for you.”

And he does— this time the W is more like a sideways E, the U with the hat becomes a backwards N, still with its little hat on top.

“And that says my name?”

“Sh,” Ilya says, pointing at the first letter, and then onward through the rest, “Eh, Yuh, *nnn*.”

“Oh. So what about the rest of it? ”

“What is your dad’s name, for patronym? David, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok, so. You are Shane Davidovich Hollander,” he says, writing more, focusing on the paper with more intent than he probably needs, for something as simple as writing a name he has to have seen written in Russian a thousand times, between tabloid articles, lists of competitors at Sochi, the internet, social media, maybe texts with the mysterious Svetlana—

“I already have a middle name,” Shane points out.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Shane scoffs.

“It kind of matters to *me*,” he says, mildly, pouting. Ilya looks up from writing, expression guileless, like he hadn’t been trying to get a rise out of Shane, for once.

“For *Russian*, doesn’t matter,” he explains, “Not for *everything*.”

“Ok, so how do you write it?” Shane asks, rolling his eyes, “It’s Katsuya.”

“Ok, ok,” Ilya says. He starts writing again, still in print. The K-A is the same as in English, comfortably recognizable. Then a weird kind of square U with a little tail, a Y, and a backwards R, like in the Toys R Us logo. Ilya moves on to the patronymic, then. A little triangular house character, almost like a delta. Then A, B, another backwards N— this time with no hat— another of the little deltas, and O, B, backwards N. Then something that Shane doesn’t recognize at all, like a 4, almost, or an upside-down and backwards lower case h. Then he starts writing Hollander: an X and an O, two of something that looks like you fucked up writing the symbol for pi, followed by A, H, delta, E, P. Then, Ilya writes the whole thing over again, this time in cursive, as graceful and incomprehensible as the wind. His pressure on the paper and hold on the pen have both loosened up a bit, smoother and lighter and easier-flowing than when they’d started.

“There.” Ilya looks up from the page, a challenging angle to his brow, “Shane Katsuya Davidovich Hollander. Or maybe should be Davidovich Katsuya, I dunno.”

Shane runs a hand over the page, a little wonderingly.

“Usually, for English words, we say G instead of H,” Ilya says, “But sounds weird for Hollander, so...”

“Wait, what?”

“Hm?”

“Why G? Do you not have an H sound?”

“We have very good H sound,” Ilya says, offended, “*CHAH*,” he adds, guttural, in the back of the throat, like Shane’s sometimes heard people use when talking about Chanukah, or like a German saying Bach. It sounds a little bit like Ilya’s about to hock a loogie, but Shane doesn’t say that, because knowing Ilya, he probably would— even though they’re inside— just to get under Shane’s skin.

Ilya writes an X as he makes the sound again, and taps the page with his pen. “Like in Hollander. Or *The Hobbit*,” he says, emphasizing the sound at the start of each word, “But

hamburger is *gamburger*, for example,” And in that moment, Shane loves the way he says *exemple*, of the years of unsung hard work and effort that come across in Ilya’s accent, even while Shane knows that he himself has only ever felt embarrassed by his Anglophone accent in French, or worse, the tiny handful of stilted, limited Japanese phrases he has in his back pocket, but dreads to try to use. “We know famous Shakespeare play *Gamlet*,” Ilya continues explaining, “There is big, uh, palace? Peterhof? That Peter the Great built? But in Russian we say Petergof.”

Shane’s smiling, he’s sure of it. He hopes it doesn’t seem like he’s laughing at Ilya.

“Petergof,” he repeats, “Huh.”

“It is in St. Petersburg,” Ilya says, “Not near me.”

“Show me how to write the alphabet,” Shane suggests, resting his smiling face against Ilya’s shoulder, smothering his fondness with a kiss pressed to the top of his bicep.

And Ilya does.

DVA.

After sex, naked and sweaty in bed, wrapped up in each other and content, Svetlana calls. It’s past 11 at night in Canada, which means it’s just after 7 AM in Moscow. She’s on her way home from a night out. It’s nice, Shane thinks, to just listen to Ilya chat with her in Russian—not fighting, but loud; not yelling, but animated. And so, so different from the conversations he’d overheard before with Ilya’s dad and brother, which had left Ilya looking hollowed out, frustrated, and lost, but trying not to show it. He’s smiling, laughing, even blushing at one point, like he’s fighting for his life while Svetlana teases him. Shane hopes some day he’ll get to meet her. He dozes while they talk, head resting on Ilya’s chest.

He’s woken up, just a little, when Ilya hangs up, and leans over to place his phone on the bedside table.

“Hmm,” Shane hums, sleepily. Ilya kisses his hair, shushing him.

“Go to sleep,” he murmurs.

“No,” Shane says, shaking his head slightly, “I’m awake.”

“Oh, you are?” Ilya asks, wry.

“Yeah, super awake,” Shane mumbles, “I have a Russian vocab question for you.”

Ilya laughs at that, and the movement of it wakes Shane up even a little bit more. He leans so that he’s closer to sitting up properly, weight on his elbow to scoot up against the headboard, instead of lying back on Ilya’s chest. He narrows his eyes at the laughter, now feeling properly awake mostly out of stubbornness. He really *did* have a question, after all, before he’d gotten sleepy.

“Ok, ok,” Ilya says, letting his head fall back against his own pillow in surrender, “What is the question?”

“There’s a word you say a lot, and I wanted to ask what it means,” Shane says, feeling his cheeks start to heat. Ilya makes a lazy sort of conducting gesture, *go on*.

“You want to learn to curse?” He asks. “Good first lesson.”

“It…” Shane blushes, looking down at the mussed sheets and feeling bashful. “Well, it *sounds* like cock—”

A burst of laughter explodes from Ilya.

“—but there’s no way you’re just saying *cock* all the time,” Shane finishes, confused. Ilya covers his mouth with his hands, looking up toward the ceiling like he can’t believe his luck.

“*Kak*,” he says, after getting himself under control. He’s repeating Shane, though there’s a definite difference in the accent, in the sharpness of the K sounds, the length of the vowel, “It means *how*.”

“What.”

“*Kak dela?* How are you? *Kak ckazat*”? How do you say? Very important word.”

“Oh my god,” Shane says, sure his face must be bright red.

“*Kak* Shane?” Ilya asks, mouth twisted into an almost-smile, like he’s trying not to laugh, “Will you survive?”

He pulls Shane back to lie against him again, so that Shane’s burning face is buried against Ilya’s chest, still rumbling with laughter.

“Please don’t tell Svetlana about this,” Shane mumbles, nose pressed against the side of Ilya’s pec, where it curves downward into his underarm, breathing in the sweaty scent of Ilya and deodorant and sex, blushing all that much harder as he does. Ilya presses a kiss to the crown of Shane’s head, raking his fingers over the hair at the nape of his neck.

“Never,” he says, sounding sincere. Shane can feel the tension go flooding out of him, sagging against Ilya in relief. Ilya spreads a hand, possessive and comforting, over his shoulder blades, tracing slightly ticklish, comforting swirls. Then, after a moment, Ilya clicks his tongue, regretfully, teasing, “Well... maybe *someday* I might tell her...”

Shane shoots up to look him in the face, aghast.

“You’re such a fucking asshole,” he says, shoving him, and Ilya is cackling with glee, so Shane moves to straddle his waist, grabbing his wrists, holding him down in something akin to a wrestling hold, while Ilya fights and bucks and laughs.

TRI.

Shane’s put up post-it notes of the alphabet— *azbuka* in Russian— around the cottage, like he’s a toddler learning his ABCs, instead of a fully grown man. He feels a little silly, but he *is* learning. Memorizing plays. Getting familiar with a new mode of thinking. Building a new storage facility in his brain.

The backwards N with a hat is called *ee krotkaya*, for example, and it means *Y*, but not *Ye*, which is *E*, or *Yo*, which is *E* with an umlaut, or *Ya*, which is the Toys R Us *R*, or even *Yoo*, which is like a little sideways stick figure. It all makes his head spin a bit, but it’s a challenge he doesn’t want to back down from, like looking up at the hill you’re about to hike and knowing the view from the top will be worth all the work it takes to get there.

He orders an exercise book to start practicing in, while Ilya is away from the cottage handling other things that he needed to do over the summer, staying at the cottage for a few days here, a week there, going back and forth between their sanctuary and his place back in Boston. Rose might be coming up soon, if her reshoots ever wrap, but for now, Shane is having fun teaching himself something new, in between visits from his parents, work outs, cooking, and doing the little bits of home improvement that the cottage needs, after months of being left mostly vacant during the hockey season.

He’s working on a chapter early on in the workbook, which is having him use his newly-minted alphabet skills to practice family vocabulary. Papa and mama, he’d known, or at least figured, but *otets* is father, and he’s pretty sure he’d heard that word from Ilya, back when he’d still spoken to his family back in Moscow. It seems odd to know that, now; to realize that he’d called his dad *father* as often as he’d called him *papa*, to have a little bit of that language barrier between them stripped away after the fact.

Shane is translating an English sentence about “my sister” when Ilya gets back from running errands, back in Canada again for a few days. He stops by the kitchen table where Shane is hunched over his workbook, and presses a kiss to his temple.

“That’s wrong, by the way,” Ilya says, as he goes to put the carton of eggs he’d brought from town into the fridge. He’d told Shane once he still finds it utterly bizarre that American eggs need to go in the fridge, but that when Marlow and his then-girlfriend had let Ilya stay with them at the start of his rookie year, she’d tried to explain it to him— it was something about the eggs being washed, he thinks— and Marlow had added that if Ilya ended up with food poisoning and had to miss a game because of it, the coach would kick his fucking ass, which had been enough to convince Ilya.

“What is?” Shane asks, somewhat taken aback, looking up from his work. Ilya steps away from the fridge without shutting the door, and leans over Shane, over the table, over the workbook, to tap on the words that Shane has been painstakingly writing in blocky printing.

“*Maya seestra*,” he reads, “Means nothing. Should be *maya sestra*.”

“What?”

“*Ye*,” he says, meaning the letter that looks like a standard English E, “Not *ee*.” The one that is the backwards N, no hat. “Is unrecognizable like that.”

Shane rolls his eyes. *Clearly not*, he thinks, considering that Ilya *had* recognized it.

“And *brat*,” the word for brother, “does not have *myakhgiy znak*,” Ilya adds, “It’s not a verb.”

Shane erases the *myakhgiy znak*, a little annoyed, without pointing out that *mat’*—mother— *does* have one, despite not being a verb, either, so clearly that isn’t actually the distinction.

“I still don’t really get what that one is for,” he admits. Ilya shrugs.

“You will,” he says, instead of explaining for the dozenth time that it’s a ‘sign of softness’, whatever that means. “You are smart, you speak French.”

“I *live* in Montreal,” Shane points out.

“Yeah, maybe an unfair advantage,” Ilya teases, with a lopsided not-quite smile. Shane’s gotten better at reading his not-quite expressions, he thinks. Or maybe they’ve started to be a little bit less not-quite, a little bit more *there* than they had been in the earlier years, another barrier being lowered between them, bit by bit.

Ilya goes back to putting groceries away. He’d worn sunglasses and a ball cap to the store, in hopes that it would make him less recognizable. It’s hard to say if it’s working, but there haven’t been any paparazzi shots of him in Canada just yet, or speculation in the rumor mill about what he’s even *doing* here, up in the Hollanders’ neck of the woods instead of in Boston, or back in Moscow. So far, they’re safe. They think. They hope.

Shane had wondered if maybe he should wear a mask, too— like people do in Japan when they have a cold, to cover the mole on his cheek and to hide his lips— or if people other than Shane might not find the particular curves of Ilya’s mouth quite as distinctly, immediately, uniquely identifiable as he does, even with the eyes and the curls of the hair intentionally obscured.

He’s still wondering about that, erasing his repeated misspellings of ‘sister’ across the list of vocab sentences, when Ilya finishes unpacking the groceries and sits down on the tabletop, on top of the open workbook pages, taking off his hat.

“Hi,” he says, voice soft, draping his arms over Shane’s shoulders.

“*Privyet*,” Shane replies, leaning up for a kiss, workbook forgotten.

CHETERI.

Rose finally makes it up to the cottage at the end of August, and Shane is so excited to see her, he almost forgets to warn Ilya that she’s coming.

“Your *girlfriend*?” Ilya asks, raising an eyebrow, “Rose Landry?”

“*Ex-girlfriend*,” Shane corrects, rolling his eyes. They’re lying on the sofa together, watching TV. Shane only gets public access channels up here, but they’d figured out how to connect his laptop to the TV with an HDMI cable, so that they can stream shows. They’re watching an anime that Rose had recommended. Shane’s never really gotten into anime much, mostly because people in school always seemed to expect it of him, just because he’s half-Japanese, but he trusts Rose’s taste. It’s about two male figure skaters— one Japanese and one Russian — who fall in love, according to her. So far, it seems to involve a lot of characters picking on the Japanese skater for his weight, which Shane isn’t loving, but which *is* consistent with what he knows about figure skating. “And we were barely even dating,” he adds to Ilya, petulant.

“Psh, but you invite her to your cottage? *Na dache?!?*”

“Huh?”

“*Dacha*,” Ilya explains, “It’s what we call a summer cottage in Russian.”

“Oh,” Shane says, “Cool. Did you have one?”

“Everyone has dacha, even just a little one. Nobody stays the whole summer in the city, if they can avoid.”

Shane likes the image of Ilya at a little summer cottage outside of Moscow as a kid, maybe with his mom, maybe with cousins. Swimming, playing card games, eating... Well, he doesn’t know what they’d be eating.

“What kind of stuff did you do up there?” He asks, “What did you eat?”

“We eat *food*, Hollander,” Ilya says, and Shane kicks him gently, annoyed.

“Duh,” he grumbles, “What *kind* of food? Like, probably not hamburgers, right?”

“Well, yeah, we eat hamburgers, too, but not a lot. We would have... blini for breakfast, sometimes. Kasha. Tvorog. Black bread. We would make green borsch with dandelion. Pelmeni with smetana. We’d go looking for mushrooms to cook, or berries, eat them warm from the sun. Sometimes my mother would buy uh... those little black fish eggs? Very nice, very delicious.”

“That sounds good,” Shane says, softly, instead of asking what kasha or tvorog or smetana is, or if Ilya’s dad and brother had gone to the dacha, too, if those weeks of summer had been just Ilya and his mom, safe together in the countryside. “We should go to a Russian restaurant sometime.”

“We should.”

They both know that they won’t, but the thought is nice. Maybe, at least, they can find one to order in from.

PYAT’.

When Rose arrives for Labor Day Weekend, Ilya is barely holding it together in a way that makes him seem unfriendly, but which Shane suspects is more because he’s nervous. But he comes across as if he’s put out that she’s there, annoyed at having to share Shane, quiet and sulky.

Briefly, Shane wonders if it would’ve helped to have suggested they invite Svetlana, too, so the numbers would be more even, and nobody would have to feel quite so much like a third wheel, but he quickly dismisses that thought. It’s stressful enough for him as the host, introducing these two sides of his life to one another, without adding a third circle to the Venn diagram, and with it, even more chances for things to turn awkward.

Rose makes an effort, thank god.

It's impossible to hate Rose.

Her interview clips always go viral, because she always seems to make a genuine connection with any reporter, laughing like old friends.

Every Reddit thread about her has at least a few Redditors talking about times they've met her, how she's almost always happy to take photos or sign things, how lovely she is, how she can make anybody feel like they're the most interesting person in the room, like *she's* the one who's lucky to get to talk to *them*, instead of the other way around.

Shane hopes that her magic, whatever it is, will work on Ilya, too.

They're out back, sitting around the fire pit, Shane and Ilya in athletic shorts and t-shirts, barefoot on the patio as the night cools down and the loons cry out somewhere on the water. The sound still makes Ilya jump a little bit, though he tries to curtail his reaction. Rose is in jeans and sneakers, with one of Shane's sweatshirts on top, because she says if she comes to set for her next movie covered in mosquito bites, her make-up artist will kill her.

If it were just the two of them, Shane knows he and Ilya would be holding each other, kissing, watching the fire and talking stupid nonsense. And if it were just him and Rose, they would be laughing, gossiping about her next movie and all of the horrifically terrible scripts her agent keeps sending her. But she doesn't know Ilya well enough to break NDA for him, and he doesn't know *her* well enough to so much as slouch with her around, to let his guard down, to show Shane the kind of easy affection they've both started to take as second nature. And Shane, in the middle, doesn't know how to bridge the gap.

So instead, they're roasting marshmallows for s'mores and trying to make conversation.

"So, Ilya," Rose says, licking molten marshmallow off her thumb, "are you excited for next season?"

"Excited," he repeats and nods his head back and forth, in a kind of 'eh, more or less' motion. "Hard to say. Things will be different."

His marshmallow melts too much and falls off the end of the stick he was using to hold it over the fire and he makes a frustrated sound. Shane laughs.

“Don’t set this one on fire,” he suggests, handing over a new marshmallow.

“On fire is the best way,” Ilya says, just to be contrary, poking the new marshmallow onto the end of his stick and then directly into the flames.

“Different how?” Rose asks. She’s got an actual s’more assembled, and is endeavoring to eat it without getting her face or hair sticky. It’s a difficult task.

“Don’t know yet for sure,” Ilya shakes his head, “But it will be... interesting.”

“Oh?” Rose asks, smiling.

“Cannot tell you details, you will tell Detroit.”

“Oh, right, because I have a psychic connection *straight* to their coach—”

“Yes, like Pope has direct line to God.”

“Are you saying I’m the Pope of hockey?” Rose asks, a little bit playfully smug.

“No,” Ilya says, shaking his head, “Not at all. Pope of Detroit.”

Something in Shane relaxes, then, to hear them picking on each other, chirping back and forth, talking hockey. Of *course*, he thinks, that would be the perfect inroads. Of *course*, Rose

would find it. Of *course*, she would know how to tease back, how to laugh at Ilya without pissing him off too much or hitting at something too personal, baby sister to three hockey-playing brothers that she is.

“So you *are* excited,” she says, starting a new marshmallow. She keeps hers safely out of the fire, just close enough to feel the heat, turning it carefully until it’s golden brown all over.

“Eh, excited is not really a word in Russian,” Ilya says, shrugging lazily.

“Wait,” Shane says, “What? I *know* I’ve seen it in my dictionary.”

“You have a dictionary?” Rose asks, delighted.

“Yeah, I fucking *do*,” Shane says, getting up to go get it from inside, handing off his marshmallow-roasting stick to Ilya as he goes, “Don’t burn it,” he instructs.

“Boring!” Ilya calls after him, and Shane is just happy he’s finally relaxed enough to make that kind of joke in front of Rose.

He finds the dictionary in no time, and brings it outside. It’s a brick of a thing, with a blue cover and a cracked spine. And yeah, he could probably just rely on Google translate, but there’s something better about looking a word up in an actual, physical book. Something about having to interact with his hands, leaf through the pages, read along the lists of words to find the one he wants... it all makes him feel like he’s learning more, learning better, than just typing into his phone and getting an answer spat back out at him. He sits back down by the fire, with his phone’s flashlight on to read by and flips through the English half of the dictionary, looking for the E’s and the word ‘excited’ specifically.

“Ha!” He crows, finding it, “V...z...boodorajen...” he reads, slowly, sounding it out. There are so many fucking consonants in Russian words sometimes, all clustered together. “Or vos...torgeh? Or... vozboojdyon?”

Rose raises a challenging eyebrow at Ilya.

“Yes, but. Mostly they mean... worked up. Anxious.” Ilya makes a gesture like clawing toward his throat and chest, as if he’s indicating the anxiety. “And last one is kind of sexual. Not what you Americans mean when you say ‘excited’.”

“Oh,” Shane says, face heating. He’d been so pumped to prove Ilya wrong.

“Oh, my god!” Rose laughs, “That must make it *so* weird when reporters ask you if you’re excited for a game, or the playoffs!”

“They do this all the time!” Ilya agrees, eyes widening in frustration, “Everyone is always excited about *everything* in US.”

Rose rolls her eyes, nodding.

“Sometimes I think if anyone asks me if I’m excited to be in some shitty thriller where I have to kiss a man my dad’s age ever again, I’m gonna lose my shit. So I guess I get it.”

“Rose Landry,” Ilya says, sounding almost impressed, “you might be Russian, secretly.”

SHEST’.

In the fall, with the season starting up again soon, training with the Metros in full swing, and Ilya back in Boston for what none of his teammates know will be his last season with the Raiders, Shane is alone in Montreal. But soon, Ilya will be in Ottawa. Soon, they’ll only be a few hours apart for most of the season.

Shane hires a Russian tutor.

It's difficult to find one in Montreal, where most people are either working on learning French or English, and he isn't especially comfortable with the idea of going in-person, where anybody could see him and wonder why, after all these years in hockey alongside a variety of Russian players, he's suddenly interested in learning the language. So he's taking one-on-one lessons, Skype calls with a professor who works at an upstate New York liberal arts college, with next to no athletics program.

Her name is Olga, and she's in maybe her early 70s, plump and grandmotherly and kind, but in a way that brooks no nonsense. She's always late, always concerned about how he's eating, and if he's dressed warmly enough, and she tells him about growing up in the Soviet Union, fond memories and horror stories alike, the kinds of stories he doubts Ilya would want to share, or *could* share without it feeling too vulnerable. He has to remind himself from time to time that it was probably really different for Ilya, growing up immediately after the fall of the USSR, than it was for Olga, who was a little girl at the height of the Cold War. But he doesn't really know. Ilya doesn't talk about Russia much, his childhood even less.

Olga tells him about how the word for 'bear' in Russian supposedly comes from a phrase that meant 'one who knows where honey is', and how the word for 'plane' literally means 'self-flyer'— *samolot*, with 'sam' meaning self, like in *samovar*, a self-boiler.

She has him listen to songs in Russian, and memorize poems, and starts introducing him to the cases, which are a nightmare, and when he complains to Ilya that he hadn't realized he was going to have to learn to *conjugate nouns*, Ilya just starts complaining back about stupid fucking *articles* and English spelling and grammar rules that Shane knows instinctively but never would have been able to explain in a million years.

Olga suggests he pick a Russian name— and for their lessons, Shane agrees. He wouldn't want to use a different name with Ilya, not in English or Russian or French or Portuguese or any other language. Not when calling each other by their first names had been so hard-won and is still so precious to him.

But it adds another layer of anonymity that he kind of appreciates to his lessons. She doesn't seem like she knows who he is, or recognizes him, and he isn't sure she'd even know *how* to Google him, but there's always the chance that she might mention her Canadian student Shane to somebody who could put the pieces together, and if she's calling him some other name, then all the better.

He looks up baby name websites on his phone, in a hotel room for their first away game of the season. In the other bed, Hayden is scrolling Twitter, with no idea what Shane is up to.

If he knew, if he saw, he would get so excited. He'd assume that Shane had a girlfriend and that she was pregnant, that they were finally making it official. He would shake Shane by the shoulders and pull him into a bear hug and insist on ordering champagne for the room, on going out with the guys to celebrate. Shane hopes that he would do the same if he ever found out the actual truth, but he doesn't know.

'Shane', he finds in his research, is an Anglicization of Séan. And Séan is the Irish form of John. John, in turn, comes from the Latin name Iohannes and its Greek counterpart, and they both come from the Hebrew name Yoḥanan. And Yoḥanan means 'Yahweh is gracious'.

So, he supposes that must be what Shane means, too. He'd never really thought about it before. He'd always figured his parents just liked the sound of it, the balance of a one-syllable first name to go with Hollander, even though he knows Katsuya means victory or success, and that they must've chosen it specifically for that meaning. He wonders if Hollander means anything, or if it's just... a last name for someone whose origins are Dutch, however far back.

But in his research, he also finds out that Ivan is the Russian form of John, so he settles on that as his Russian name.

Backwards N, B, A, H.

И, B, A, H.

I, V, A, N.

It's short and easy to spell, just like Shane. He'd always liked that about his name. Always felt kind of bad for the kids in his kindergarten class who had long names, the Samanthas and Alexanders of the world who had to contend with so many letters, while he only had 5 to worry about. He'd also liked, at the time, that his name was 5 letters long and he was 5 years old.

He *has* gotten a lot better at writing the backwards N, now that it's at the start of his name, sort of. He even adds a Russian keyboard to his laptop, thinking it'll be helpful for turning in assignments. It's slightly brain-melting to try to touch-type with a different alphabet and a different layout on the keys, though. It takes him twice as long to finish anything, so he usually ends up writing by hand anyway. He buys a scanner for the apartment, to turn in handwritten pages digitally for Olga.

One day, when he's home again in Montreal and Ilya is in Boston, and they're FaceTiming as they both make dinner, he asks.

"Is Ilya short for anything?"

"Hm?" Ilya says, confusion written clearly across his face, even at the size of a postage stamp.

"Just 'cause... my teacher says a lot of the time when a name has a *Ya* at the end, it's a nickname. Like... she's Olga, but people call her Olya. Or she calls me Vanya, instead of Ivan most of the time... that kind of thing."

"Uh, no," Ilya says, "Is just my name." He smiles, suddenly, just a small, affectionate, amused thing, tilting his head to the side. "She calls you Vanya?" He asks.

"Yeah," Shane tells him, blushing a little, "Sometimes Vanechka."

"Vanechka!" Ilya repeats, sounding overjoyed, "*Bozhe moi.*"

For a moment, Shane's a little embarrassed. At being babied, at all of the kindness Olga shows him, at the affectionate nicknames that he doubts Ilya heard much of when he was growing up.

“It’s not a big deal,” Shane says, “I just wondered.”

“Sometimes,” Ilya says, having mercy on him, “Sveta calls me Ilyusha.”

“Ilyusha?” Shane says, trying to imitate the shape of the lips, the strange way the L and Yu flow into each other. Ilya smiles, closed lips, and ducks his head, a sure sign that he’s blushing, and Shane wants to kiss him and call him Ilyusha over and over again.

CEM’.

“What are you making for dinner?” Shane asks, a little while later in the same conversation.

“Onion soup,” Ilya says, flipping the phone camera to show a pot full of what looks like French onion soup without the bread and gruyere. Beef broth, caramelized onions. If he made that himself, Shane’s pretty impressed. If it’s from a can, less so, but warming it up on the stove is still better than doing it in the microwave.

“*Supa lyuk?*” he says, squinting as he tries to think of the translation. Ilya smiles, lopsided.

“Good try,” he says, “but no. You make ‘onion’ an adjective, don’t make ‘soup’ genitive. *Lukovii sup.*”

“Damnit.”

“And if you are making ‘soup’ genitive, it would be after ‘onion’. Onion belonging to soup.”

“Fucking hell.”

“And you said *lyuk* instead of *luk*.”

“And the difference is?” Shane asks, annoyed.

“*Luk* means onion. *Lyuk* means manhole.”

VOCEM’.

At the Christmas break, they go to the cottages again.

Shane’s parents have a little indoor Endless pool at theirs, for his mom to exercise in when she’s there in the colder months, paid for by Shane. The idea is that it creates a current for you to swim against, so that you can swim and swim and swim without moving forward, like doing laps, but without requiring a huge pool.

It’s also heated, so it’s cozy and lovely in the harsh Canadian winter, and the room it’s in steams up with the heat, so you never want to leave. He and Ilya swim together with the current turned off, just relaxing in the warm water, sitting on top of the ductpipes that run around the outside edge of the pool and generate the current. Shane is on Ilya’s lap, more or less, or floating just above it, with Ilya’s arms holding him down like a seatbelt, Ilya’s cheek resting between Shane’s shoulder blades.

“When the little cousins come over,” Shane tells him, smiling nostalgically, “They always turn on the current and pretend they’re falling over Niagara Falls, all thrashing around like they’re drowning.” Ilya huffs a laugh and presses a kiss to Shane’s spine.

“What does ‘drowning’ mean?” Ilya asks, after a moment, face still resting against Shane’s back.

“Huh?” Shane says, turning around to look at Ilya, surprised, “It’s... it’s when you die in the water. You sink and breathe in water and die.”

“We don’t have this word in Russian,” Ilya says, shrugging and leaning his cheek on Shane’s ribcage, since his back has twisted away now. Shane raises an eyebrow, skeptical.

“You don’t?” He asks, sure Ilya is fucking with him.

Ilya shakes his head.

“Or swim,” he claims next.

“*Bullshit*,” he says, thinking of the All-Stars game in Florida, of Ilya playing in the pool with a whole passel of kids, “I *know* you know what swimming is.”

“Yes, I *know*. But in Russian, is the same word as thing boats do, sail. *Playat’*.”

“What the fuck?!”

“And the opposite, too. *Tonoot’*. Boats, people, ducks. Loons. All the same.”

“That is so fucking weird,” Shane says, marveling at the way that Russian and English— or even Russian and French— have such utterly different logic sometimes.

Ilya smiles a half smile, face squished against Shane’s side.

“Wait until you hear, we don’t have different word for arms and hands, or legs and feet,” he says, teasingly.

“What!”

DEVYAT'.

By the 23rd, Shane's parents have made it up to the cottage, too, now that Shane's dad has started his own break from work. Shane had worried it would be too weird to share a bed in his parents' house with them right there, but he might've been worrying for nothing. It'd been strange, at first, but only on that first night, when he and Ilya had turned in to go to sleep and Yuna and David had stayed up to finish watching their documentary and shared a little knowing glance as the boys headed upstairs.

On Christmas Eve, in the guest room together, since Shane's room at his parents' cottage only has a twin bed, they kiss and talk about Christmas in the morning, and how in Russia, they celebrate New Year instead, with a decorated tree, and presents, and even a sort of Santa, *Dyed Moros*.

Ilya's gotten David and Yuna a few gifts, and of course he and Shane have gifts for each other. Shane knows his parents have some things for Ilya, too, and he hopes he'll like them. It's hard to shop for him, for anyone who has the money to buy whatever they want, whenever they want.

"*S Rozhdestvom*," Ilya whispers against Shane's skin, at midnight, after they've fucked as quietly as they can, knowing that Shane's parents are only a floor away. Shane knows enough about Russian grammar by now to put together that something starting with 'S' like that, at least in this context, is probably a well-wish. It means 'with', but it's used for congratulations — happy birthday, happy new year, that kind of thing. So it's probably equivalent— more or less— to saying merry Christmas, like how in Russian you don't exactly say 'good morning', it's more like 'kind morning' and you don't say 'good night', you say 'peaceful night'.

"Yeah," Shane replies, kissing him, "You too."

They fall asleep at 1 AM, and wake up far too early to the sounds of Shane's parents vaguely attempting to be quiet while opening up their stockings, making coffee, and settling down around the Christmas tree together.

It's 5 AM. They might as well get up and go running, or rush to the car to make a flight, or get their pads and skates on for an early morning ice time. Shane sighs.

“What the fuck,” Ilya groans, so half-asleep that his Ws are melding into Vs.

“Merry Christmas,” Shane mumbles, barely articulate himself. He’s gotten way too used to sleeping in over the break, too used to staying up later than he should with Ilya.

“Why are they awake?” Ilya grumbles, “The gifts are *from* them.”

“They always wake up this early,” Shane tells him.

“Your parents are insane,” Ilya says, but he gets out of the bed and pulls the quilt around his shoulders, leaving Shane with just the top sheet, before trudging into the living room, bleary eyed, for his first Canadian Christmas.

DESYAT'.

“I have one more gift for you,” Shane says, around 10 AM, when the living room is a mess of wrapping paper and discarded boxes, and his parents are in the kitchen, his dad making pancakes and his mom brewing more coffee.

Ilya looks at him like he’s lost his mind, like there can’t possibly be more.

Olga loves to have Shane memorize poems for his tests. She says it’s a common thing in Russian schools, but he doesn’t know if he actually believes her on that one. Some are Soviet poems, written about freedom from within gulag walls, about hope during censorship, about loving your country even as it fails you. Others are from the 1700s, 1800s— love poems, poems about nature, poems about serfdom and Tsars and doomed lovers. Poetry, she says, is Russia’s greatest pride. He’s pretty sure Ilya would object, if only jokingly.

He kneels on the carpet in front of Ilya, who’s seated on the sofa, and takes Ilya’s hands in his, clearing his throat before he starts.

“*Pystoe vi*,” Shane recites, hoping to god that he’s remembering the words right,
“*Cerdechniym ti. On, obmolvilcyia zamenil i vse schastlivie mehti v dyshe vlyooblyonnoy vosbydil. Pred nevo zadoomchivo ctoyo; svesti ochei c nim nyet siliy; i govoryoo yemu: ‘kak vi milii’, i mislyoo: ‘kak tebya lyooblyoo.’*”

Empty 'you', the poem means, at least according to Olga, who had helped Shane try to understand it, to memorize it well enough for *this*, rather than just for a test, and to change the pronouns, something he’d been terrified to ask her about, but which she’d helped with happily. *Heartfelt 'thou'. He let slip, replaced, and all is a happy dream. The lover’s soul awakened. I stand before him, pensive, unable to take my eyes away. And I say to him: ‘How lovely you look.’ And I think: ‘How I love thee.’*

She’d mentioned this Pushkin poem to him, about the joy of hearing your love accidentally call you by the informal ‘you’ instead of the more appropriate formal one, when they’d been drilling the differences between the two. It was something Shane hadn’t thought he would *need* much drilling on, since French has the same thing, but to be fair, it isn’t as if Olga knows he speaks French. And besides, it had turned out that the rules were slightly different — Olga, for example, had insisted he should call her *ti*, when he would *never* have dared to call any teacher *tu* in French.

But when they’d talked about it, it’d hit him that he would never know when it was that Ilya had stopped calling him *vi* and started calling him *ti*, but that it must’ve happened at some point, if only in his own thoughts. Unnoticed, undeclared. An important distinction in their relationship, a before and an after that Shane’s only found out about now, maybe years after the fact. And he’ll never know when exactly it was, or how it came about, or what it meant to Ilya, even now that he’s learning to understand.

Ilya pulls him onto the sofa, into his lap, clutching at him.

“*Ya tebya lyooblyoo*,” he says, over and over, pressing frenzied kisses to Shane’s hair, his cheek, his nose, his lips, both their faces damp with tears, “*Kak tebya lyooblyoo.*”

KONETS.

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Apologies to anyone who actually speaks Russian properly, or as a native speaker. I took 2 years in college and studied abroad in St. Petersburg, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if some of the things I remember are specific to St. Petersburg and not Moscow, etc.

Also, my transliterations in this are very much all over the place, please forgive me. I was aiming more for what Shane is hearing, as someone who doesn't know the language yet, as opposed to the correct/accepted versions of how at least some of these words are usually transliterated into English, with the added fact that I haven't actually studied Russian since like 2011. Please forgive me.

Oh! Also, I haven't read the books yet, but I know Shane learns Russian in future parts of the story. I couldn't find anything about him having a middle name, so I chose one for him. I liked the thought of him having a Japanese middle name :)

Also, certain details about the cottages-- only having public access channels, for example-- were very much inspired by my grandmother's Canadian cottage that is by no means a cottage. Having to use an HDMI cable to stream a sketchy anime website onto your TV is my extremely subtle 2017 "period" detail. Obviously they're watching *Yuri!!! on Ice*, in case you missed that :)

I think most people are at least passingly familiar with blini, borsch, and pelmeni, but if you're wondering about any of the other Russian foods mentioned, kasha is any type of porridge or hot cereal, but is often specifically buckwheat, tvorog is farmer's cheese, and smetana is sour cream!

And finally, especially huge apologies to Pushkin for making his poem gay. But aren't you glad I didn't have Shane recite Jdi Menya? This could've been so much longer.

Here is the original poem, for reference:

<http://russianpoetry.yale.edu/poet/pushkin/ty-i-vy.html>

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