

To love you unjustifiedly, desperately (любить тебя неоправданно, отчаянно)

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Summary

Shane and Ilya are invited to a Russian wedding that forces them to confront old fears about visibility, belonging, and acceptance. By the end of the celebration, Ilya realizes he has reclaimed a part of himself he thought he had lost: he is still Russian, still loved, together with the husband who stands proudly at his side.

Notes

Zemfira — Жить в твоей голове is the song that made me write this one, hope you like it

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

It was a couple of years after Shane and Ilya had gotten married in their backyard, and months after Shane's determined adventure of learning Russian for Ilya, when a fancy-looking envelope fluttered into their mailbox.

They had kept a careful, distant friendliness with the Russian community in Ottawa. Polite smiles at the market, brief conversations, nothing too personal. For obvious reasons, they hadn't wanted to engage too deeply. Shane never mentioned learning Russian for his husband, and somehow it never came up. Not that he owed anyone an explanation, being a star player for Ottawa and married to his teammate gave him a certainty that everybody knew, but still, discretion felt safer. The women at the market didn't seem to mind either way, so he said nothing.

The envelope changed that.

Inside was a wedding invitation: Sofia's daughter, Mila, was getting married.

They both froze.

The idea of simply being themselves, openly and publicly, in Ilya's community made Shane's chest tighten. This wasn't just any wedding. This was Russian. This was family, tradition, memory, history. This was Ilya's world.

They talked about it for days. Long conversations at the kitchen table. Quiet ones in bed. One therapy session later, Ilya finally made the decision.

"We should go," he said, voice steady but eyes bright.

Shane searched his face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Ilya said softly. "We're invited. Both of us. Everyone knows. And I want to go."

When he said it out loud, excitement bloomed in his chest like something long-dormant waking up. He was invited, with his husband, the man he loved, to a Russian wedding. He was still welcome. He could still keep this part of himself.

They RSVPed yes.

A few days later, they ran into Sofia at the market as usual. The moment she spotted them, she clapped her hands together.

"You're coming!" she exclaimed, eyes shining. "I was hoping-oh, I am so happy!"

She went on enthusiastically about the venue, the decorations, the endless food, and the guest list. Shane felt his shoulders tense as the picture grew larger and louder in his mind. Still, Ilya stood tall beside him, asking questions about the music and decorations, switching easily between Russian and English.

"What kind of band?" Ilya asked. "Live or DJ?"²

"Oh, both," Sofia laughed. "You'll see. It will be beautiful."

She leaned in conspiratorially. "And don't worry. You'll be safe there. Everyone will be happy you came."

The way she said it-so certain, so warm-made something unclench in Shane's chest.

Ilya asked if they were invited to the ceremony or only the reception.

"The whole thing," Sofia said immediately. "Of course."

As good neighbors-and, as Ilya had taught Shane, as proper guests-they offered to help. Sofia waved them off but invited them over for coffee so they could meet Mila properly before the

wedding.

Sofia's house was the definition of cozy. Warm light, soft blankets, and the scent of honey and freshly brewed coffee filled the air. Shane felt overwhelmed in the quietest way possible. Is this how Ilya feels all the time? He wondered.

Watching Ilya chat easily in Russian, Shane suddenly understood the exhaustion behind long media days, the short temper afterward, the way Ilya sometimes retreated into silence.

Speaking a second language all the time-carrying your whole self through it-was exhausting. Sofia noticed Shane's discomfort and switched to English after a few minutes.

"I'm okay," Shane said quickly, shaking his head. "You don't have to. I want to listen."

Ilya glanced at him, surprised-and proud.

Sofia smiled approvingly and continued in Russian, slow and clear. Mila arrived soon after, laughing as she kissed her mother on the cheek. She looked so much like Sofia that it made Shane smile.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Mila said warmly in English. "Mama talks about you all the time."

"Only good things," Ilya promised.

Mila laughed. "Then you'll survive the wedding."

At home that night, Shane finally broke.

He collapsed into Ilya's arms, words tumbling out in a breathless rush. He didn't know the traditions. He'd read something about weddings lasting forever, but hadn't really processed it. There would be so many people. What if not everyone accepted them? What if he greeted someone wrong, used the wrong fork, and embarrassed Ilya?

"I don't want to ruin this for you," Shane whispered.

Ilya held him tight. "You won't. I promise."

When the panic finally ebbed, Ilya smiled gently. "Okay. Speed course."

He explained everything, from the bride ransom games to the solemn church ceremony, from shouting "Gorko!" to the importance of toasts and dancing. He demonstrated dance steps in the living room, laughing when Shane stumbled.

"Enthusiasm," Ilya said, pointing at him. "That's what matters."

Over the summer, their apartment filled with Russian music, laughter, and clumsy dancing.

Shane learned enough to feel steady. Before the wedding, they dropped Anya off with

Shane's parents, picked up the gift, and drove to the venue together.

The wedding was everything Ilya promised-and more.

When they first stepped into the banquet hall, Shane felt it immediately-the subtle weight of being seen.

It wasn't anything obvious. No whispers, no pointed fingers. Just the sudden awareness of how many eyes were in the room, how many conversations paused for half a second too long before resuming. Shane instinctively slowed his step, his fingers brushing against Ilya's sleeve instead of lacing through his hand.

Ilya noticed.

"You okay?" he murmured in English, barely moving his lips.

"Yeah," Shane said, though his voice came out a little tight. "Just... a lot of people."

Ilya nodded. He understood too well. For all his excitement, his chest was buzzing with old, familiar nerves-the kind that lived deep in his bones. Russia had taught him early what visibility could cost. Even here, in Canada, surrounded by warmth and celebration, some part

of him still braced for impact.

They stood a little closer than usual, shoulders almost touching, both of them hyperaware of every smile directed their way, every glance that lingered a second too long. Shane caught himself automatically analyzing expressions: curious or judgmental? Friendly or forced?

At one point, Shane leaned in and whispered, "If anyone says anything--"

"They won't," Ilya said quickly, then paused, more honest when he added, "And if they do, we leave. Together."

Shane squeezed his arm. "Okay."

The first test came sooner than expected. An older man with a thick mustache and a serious face approached them with a glass of vodka. Shane's stomach dropped.

Here it is.

The man looked between them, then nodded. "You are Ilya, yes? Sofia's neighbor."

Ilya straightened instinctively. "Yes."

The man smiled, clinked his glass gently against Ilya's, then turned to Shane. "And this is your husband."

Not a question. A statement.

"Yes," Shane said, heart pounding.

"Good," the man said simply. "You came. That matters."

He walked away before either of them could respond.

Shane blinked. "Did that just--"

"Yes," Ilya said, breathless, eyes wide. "That just happened."

Little moments like that kept happening. A woman complimented their suits and asked how long they'd been married. Someone pulled Shane into a toast, slurring affectionate English words mixed with Russian. During a dance, an auntie grabbed both of them and laughed, insisting they spin together because "Love is love-now dance!"

Each time, the tension eased a little more. Shane's shoulders dropped. Ilya's smile grew freer, less guarded.

But it wasn't until later, after several toasts, after too much food and not enough water, that it really hit Ilya.

They were sitting at the edge of the dance floor, music thumping through the room. Shane's tie was loosened, hair slightly damp with sweat, eyes bright with laughter. Across the room, Sofia was crying happy tears as Mila danced with her husband.

No one was staring at them now.

No one had ever been cruel.

Ilya swallowed hard, emotion swelling in his chest so suddenly it almost hurt.

Shane noticed. "Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

Ilya nodded, then shook his head, then laughed quietly at himself. "I just... I didn't realize how much I was holding my breath."

"For what?"

"For this to go wrong," Ilya admitted. His voice dropped. "For someone to remind me why I left. Why I was scared."

Shane took his hand, thumb brushing over Ilya's knuckles. "And?"

"And it didn't," Ilya said, eyes shining. "I left Russia, but Russia didn't... leave me. Not all of it."

He looked around the room-the music, the language, the food, the warmth.

“They still see me,” he said. “As Russian. As a man. As someone who belongs. Even with you. Especially with you.”

Shane smiled softly. “You deserve that.”

Ilya leaned in, pressing his forehead to Shane’s. “I never thought I’d feel this again.”

So they kissed - not afraid, this moment felt sacred in its own quiet way. Around them, laughter rose, glasses clinked, and someone shouted “Горько!” again.

And for the first time in a long time, Ilya didn’t flinch at the sound.

He laughed, stood up, and pulled Shane back onto the dance floor - home, at last, with the man he loved, welcomed exactly as he was.

End Notes

I just want my boy Ilya to be happy and keep his home close to him, is that too much to ask?

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