

In translation

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In translation

by [cipherpolice](#)

Summary

> "Genetic. Huh, when'd you learn that word?"

5 words Ilya has learned in English over the years, and 1 word he relearns.

Notes

Russian is mostly in angle brackets, except for one phrase, and there's a reason for that.

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

Trouble

2006, Russia

Trouble, Ilya wrote, in the blank in the righthand column of the page. Beside it, a definition was printed, English: **Noun:** *A state of distress, affliction, difficulty or need. Public unrest or disorder. A disturbance. Effort, especially when inconvenient or troublesome.* **Verb,** **intransitive:** *To afflict with pain or discomfort. To inconvenience; bother. To agitate, stir up.*

Ilya sighed, twirling his pencil between his fingers. There were so many definitions attached to one little word. English was a soft, mushy language, without enough words to be precise. What did distress and public unrest have in common?

Regardless, he was done with this test, and never one to sit still to begin with. He marched to the front of the class, past the rows of students still writing, slapping the paper on the teacher's desk and walking out as she called after him.

"<Ilya Rozanov, get back here!>" he heard echo against the linoleum as he jogged down the halls and out the doors of this school. It was summer: a searing heat was beginning its sweep through Moscow, and he'd just finished his last test of the school year. *Trouble* he thought. Noun: Public unrest or disorder. A disturbance.

He sauntered out of the building and onto the street, running his hands against the metal fence surrounding his high school on the way out. He was causing trouble, leaving early from the test. But he was the best student in the grade, so the teachers couldn't really say anything when he finished his test in half the allotted time. He tried it out loud to himself, muttering "trouble" as he walked to the metro station. The word rolls off his tongue in a way he's sure isn't right, catching on the *r*, pushing its way out, the *b* eclipsing the *le*. He has trouble saying *trouble*, it seems. The thought makes a laugh bubble up in his chest. English was a stupid language, but he needed it.

School stopped being challenging years ago, but he kept going for English classes. He was going to get the fuck out of here, and go to the NHL. He needed to be able to speak English. So he went, and he learned the stupid difference between a transitive and intransitive verb, how to make do without the Dative case, and how to tell people that he washed himself in another language.

But those plans were years in the future. In the meantime, a long, lazy Moscow summer awaited him.

Ilya met Sasha in front of the club at midnight, waltzing out belligerent from the apartment as his father railed on and on. He'd long stopped trying to physically block Ilya from leaving –

an upsetting reminder to his father of his age and comparative frailty, Ilya imagined – but that didn't stop him from yelling at Ilya as he slammed the front door shut, the sheet metal giving it enough weight to slam soundly as he left. *Trouble*. Verb, intransitive: To agitate, stir up. Yes, he imagine his father found his disobedience *agitating*, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

He felt his blood rise as he heard the sound leaking from the club and the line of people outside it. Girls in short skirts and high heels, and boys in shirts and jeans, cigarettes hanging behind their ears. Ilya loved this. He'd started going to clubs a few years ago, when he started training with the national junior team, and had met the coach's son, Sasha.

Sasha was gay. Ilya didn't know how he knew this, but he was sure. And if his coach pretended not to see it, well, that was just the way things were. *Trouble*. Verb, intransitive: To inconvenience or bother. Just because something was troublesome, didn't mean it would be addressed, especially if it meant brining shame upon Sasha's father by association.

Sasha had the kind of looks Ilya could only think of as reptilian: he seemed like he'd slither against your skin frictionlessly, hold you in his gaze like he was hunting you. He was dressed in a silk shirt, unbuttoned nearly to his waist, and skintight black leather pants, leaning against the brick wall with a boneless sort of grace. Yes, Sasha was gay, Ilya thought, and was unsure exactly how anyone could think otherwise.

Ilya was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. A feeling lived under his skin when he was Sasha. *Trouble*. Noun: A state of distress, affliction, difficulty or need. Yes, Ilya thought, there was certainly a *need* here, wasn't there?

But looking at Sasha, his skin glowing in the spotlights outside the club, Ilya thought with a smile: *I think I like trouble*.

Genetic

2014, Boston

Ilya stepped into the team doctor's office like he was sneaking in, the quiet click of the latch ringing in the silence. Dr. Marchen sat at his desk in his usual t-shirt and track pant combo, his stethoscope sprawled carelessly under some papers. The team doctor didn't see the need to stand on ceremony with a lab coat. Ilya appreciated that about him. It made him feel more at ease when he needed to come here, unlike the stifling distance of wealth and education whenever he'd seen the doctors in Russia.

At that reminder, and still slightly uncomfortable, Ilya tongued the dental implants at the front of his mouth. Just a couple teeth missing, but still.

Dr. Marchen looked up at him expectantly, swivelling in his chair, "You wanted to speak, Rozanov? Is something wrong?"

Ilya shifted on his feet, clasping his hands behind him. "Yes. Not about me. About.." he swallowed, "my father."

Americans always had such open faces, and so it seemed to Ilya that Dr. Marchen made no effort to smother his surprise. Ilya took this as his cue to continue.

"Back in Russia. He is... old" Ilya settled on, after some time. "And his mind.. It goes. The doctors in Russia say it is, how you say," here he paused, grabbing his phone from his pockets, unlocking it to the word he'd written down in the Notes app after a late night of Googling, "dementia".

Dr. Marchen's eyebrows rose ever higher, and his eyes softened like a puppy's. "Oh Rozanov," and Ilya shuffled awkwardly at the softness in his voice, wishing he could disappear into the wall, "that's terrible to hear. I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do to support?"

Even after years in this country and countless teammates injured on the ice, Ilya still wasn't sure how to deal with the outpouring of.. Feeling.. Americans put into illness and injury. In Russia, it was straightforward. You brought a bouquet of flowers, particularly if it was for a woman. Odd number of flowers, to avoid feelings of death. A basket of fruit for teammates. A sharp knife to peel with, while you sat beside their bed. You never heard of things like dementia back home. Families just took care to hide their loved ones from life. Lines and gray hairs appeared on the brows of caregivers. Everyone knew but no one talked about it. An abortive way of maintaining dignity, he supposed.

Ilya had suspected something was wrong with his dad for years, but going home during the Sochi Olympics and seeing it himself had only confirmed matters in his head. Alexei was useless for getting a straight answer out of. Polina, once finally cornered, had been the one to

tell him. And once he knew for certain, Ilya did what he always did: made arrangements and bled money in the process.

His jaw tightened, turning his attention back to the conversation with Dr. Marchen. “There is.. It is handled. I continue to play. Is.. best that I help with cost.” he said, keeping it brief. Dr. Marchen continued to ooze sympathy and suddenly Ilya wanted nothing more than to end this conversation and go for a run. Preferably not on the rink’s treadmills, but outside, and away from here.

He hustled along, “So what I want to know is: will I have problem too?” He didn’t like the way his voice quivered on the last note.

Dr. Marchen’s face changed, again, sympathy sharpened to understanding. Perhaps they were both feeling a little unmoored by this conversation. “There’s lots we don’t know about dementia. They’re often linked. It’s caused by different factors in different people. Sometimes lifestyle factors like alcohol consumption are the issue, and other times genetics predispose people to it.”

Ilya’s head was swimming with big English words. He’d gotten pretty good about chatting with the team; even better at what the boys called “chirping” at his opponents. He could order at restaurants and flirt with girls. But this was above his grade level, so he asked, voice wobbling again in that horrible way, “Genetic? What is genetic?”

Dr. Marchen replied “Determined by your genes. Your DNA. Inherited from your parents. To be predisposed to something genetically means that your parents passed the issue onto you when you were born.”

Ilya swallowed, struggling to keep stoic, “So I will be like my father?”

Dr. Marchen smiled, “Not necessarily. Despite the partying, Ilya, you’re very healthy compared to the average person. It’s a side effect of being a star athlete,” the doctor chuckled, continuing.

“It’s definitely something to keep in mind as you get older, but by then you’ll probably have a wife and kids around you who can help you spot the signs. You won’t be alone in this.”

Ilya’s throat tightened at the thought. His father at home, alone, lost in his mind. His stepmother off spending Ilya’s money, Alexei no better.

Corners of his mouth pinched into a tight smile, Ilya concluded the conversation. “Thank you, Doctor. Is good to know. I go now, yes?”

Dr. Marchen heard the dismissal, responding “Of course Rozanov. Have a good afternoon, and feel free to come to me with anything.”

Cottage

2016, Boston

Ilya turned the TV off and threw the remote on the couch, moving behind Svetlana to leave for the club. An uber tonight rather than one of his cars. They planned to drink, to dance, maybe to fuck. The usual.

Svetlana always looked like a queen amongst women, willowy and statuesque, covered in silky fabrics that grazed her hips. An untouchable sort of beauty compared to the softer American women; their stretchy tops pulled tight over breasts. Svetlana was an image of femininity he'd grown up knowing; of perfectly manicured nails and dramatically arched eyebrows. But he liked the American girls too, with their flirtatious eyes and soft skin.

He studied her in profile for a moment, limned by the streetlights as they raced through the Boston streets. She was focused on her phone, held primly in her thin fingers, scrolling through Instagram. Noting his attention, Svetlana looked up, asking in Russian, “*<and what were you watching so intently before? Shane Hollander doing yoga?>*”

Ilya rolled his shoulders, feigning a nonchalance that didn't match the swooping of his stomach at Shane's name on her lips, “*<Just some special that came on after the game. You know the type. They did one about me too. But this one was about Hollander's....>*” Ilya paused. He didn't know what to call it. There wasn't a concept in Russian for that glass palace by a lake with its warm timbers. He knew Shane didn't live there year-round, but it was too big to be a summer retreat. “*<He has built a house, in the countryside of Canada. To go to in the summers. And do yoga, apparently. I don't know what to call it in English. A summer palace, made for a prince.>*” Ilya finished, with a dramatic flourish, waggling his eyebrows until Svetlana took the bait and laughed at him.

“*<It's not a palace, Ilya!>*” she said, a teasing tone in her voice. “*<They call them cottages. Houses for the summer, in the country. It's popular in Canada especially. They're like... >*” Svetlana paused, searching in the opposite direction as Ilya just had, trying to translate the concept from her native English to Russian, “*<It's like a dacha, I suppose.>*”

Ilya burst out laughing, a caged thing shaking free from his chest and dispelling the lingering unease-excitement that always came when thinking about Hollander. “*<That.>*” he said, still shaking, “*<That giant thing, a dacha?>*”.

Ilya recalled summers outside of Moscow in his youth, when his father was still sturdy, visiting what he called the family land. The dacha. His mother on a hammock in the small garden. Comically sloped roofs to shed the snow when they were in town. A two-room affair with raw wood walls, no central heating, and nothing to do. Ilya hated the dacha. It was boring, and reminded him of the way his mother seemed to grow ever inward year after year. No, Hollander's house was no dacha. It was interesting to look at.

Svetlana had the good grace to look embarrassed and laugh along, replying “<Well. Not exactly the same. But it’s a place where rich people go to pretend that their lives are simple for a few weeks in the summer. It’s good, that Hollander has somewhere like that. Being a captain is lots of pressure.>” she said, returning to her phone with a small shrug.

Is that what Shane wanted, Ilya thought, looking out the window at the passing lights.
Simple?

Ilya hid his laugh behind his hand, choking on its sound. He supposed that was fair enough, given the circumstances.

Boyfriend

2017, Montreal

His phone buzzed and Ilya palmed it immediately, flicking the message screen open. He hadn't even taken off his shoulder pads, and his hair clung to the back of his neck.

Jane: I'll meet you at the side door as usual. Text me when you're near.

Lily: ok

Setting his phone on the shelf above him, Ilya let the familiar rush of an impending meeting with Shane course through his body. He swore it felt like more than just an uptick of his pulse. It was like the entire world became sharper in detail, slowing slightly. He always remembered every detail of it. Sex with Shane and hockey games, even when the rest of the world seemed to slow into a dull sludge between the two, always seemed so crisp in his mind's eye.

Lost in his own thoughts he didn't even notice Marlow laughing at him, until a raucous slap landed on his back, shaking him out of his reverie.

Marlow's eyes were light with laughter as he teased, "Off to go see your Montreal girlfriend, then? Have fun spreading the," and, God help Ilya, Marlow punctuated this last bit with a dramatic waggle of his bushy eyebrows, "seeds."

Marlow turned to the rest of the Boston locker room, which was quickly rising in a chorus of *ayyyyyyyyy* in response to the joke, while Ilya tried to avoid the urge to cram himself into a locker and never come out.

Instead he squared his jaw and manned up to ribbing, saying with a practised casualness, "Is not like that. Jane is... she is friend" he finished, affecting a shrug for good measure.

"Really, Rozy?" said Marlow, turning to him fully, "Come on man, it's been *years* now. We all know you text her whenever you're in Montreal. You can't tell me it's not at least a little serious at this point."

No, Ilya said, his mouth opening in a mute stutter, a small choking sound coming from his throat. But before he could even think to himself *It's not like that, we're just fucking*, he was cut off by Johansson, the Swede drafted a couple of years ago.

With what Ilya could only assume was culturally characteristic stoicism, the Swede began, "Well are you friends, or are you" he said, pausing, making a small gesture with his head, "*friends*."

The Americans dominating the room quieted a little bit, and Ilya was reminded once again of how differently the English language was used around the world. *He* understood what Johansson was implying, but—

“Wait, what?” interrupted Connors, appearing from the showers where he’d apparently been listening in. The rest of the locker room, mortifyingly, had transformed into a rapt audience to the conversation. “What are you even trying to say, Johansson?”

Ilya was mortifyingly caught in the crossfire as Johansson replied, as if explaining things to a grade schooler, “Maybe it’s just a European thing, no, Rozanov? But you know, you become friends with a girl, then you’re talking, then you hang out a bit, maybe you start kissing, then you’re *friends* and all of your friend-friends know what you mean when you say you’re talking about your *friend*, and then...” he shrugged “you move in together and everyone knows it’s serious and that’s it”

“*What?!*” exclaimed Marlow, injecting himself into the conversation once more. “No. Nonononono. You have to *define the relationship*. It’s like, a whole situation, dude.” The other Americans in the locker room nodded along.

Ilya decided to phase back into reality, hoping to redirect the conversation to safer territory, “What is *define*? You are either fucking or you are not, and we are fucking so..”

The locker room erupted once more, zeroing in on their captain’s avoidance, “*No!*” declared Connors. Johansson had turned back to packing up his gear, a laugh rippling through his shoulders. “You’re telling me you’ve been seeing this girl for five fuckin’ years and you haven’t talked about what you *are*? You’re a dog! Shit or get off the pot, man!”

Ilya had no idea how to respond to that. He’d never *defined* anything with anyone he slept with. They met up, they did what they wanted, they either left, like Shane, or they didn’t, like Svetlana. And he didn’t think that Svetlana fit into this idea of *girlfriend* the Americans seemed to find so sacred. She was a friend. They hung out together, they fucked, and they took care of each other. A friend, or a *friend* as Johansson might understand it. He decided to bring up his thoughts. They’d met Svetlana before. This was safe.

“So what is the difference,” he asked, genuinely curious, “Between girlfriend and friend? Or friend that you fuck? I fuck Svetlana but we are not...” The clattering of gear being packed into duffels settled into a dull roar in the back of his mind.

Marlow looked at him incredulously, saying quietly. “The difference is that you *care* about a girlfriend. As like, a more than a hole. Boyfriends and girlfriends are in a real relationship. We all know you and Svetlana are fuckbuddies, Ilya. What we want to know is whether it’s.. more with this Jane of yours.”

Unnamed thoughts roiled in Ilya’s stomach like a brewing storm as he stood outside the hotel later, waiting for an Uber to Shane’s place.

Self

2020, Ottawa

He fidgeted uncomfortably on Dr. Galina's couch, as usual. Tried to ignore the tissues on the side table, as usual. It never got easier being here, but it did seem to get easier *in general*, Ilya supposed.

Dr. Galina drew his attention, reluctantly, back to the conversation at hand. They'd been chatting about when Shane came out to Ilya, that night in Tampa Bay. Ilya still wasn't sure why rehashing ancient history made him feel better, but it did, and Dr. Galina insisted upon it, so down the rabbit hole they went.

"<And,>" she asked, in Russian, as usual. "<*How do you think Shane felt, when he told you he was gay?>*" Ilya's eyes darted around the room like a grade schooler hoping he could find the answers to this test on the classroom walls somewhere.

He didn't think he was going to get full marks on this one, so he settled for simplicity. "<*Bad?>*" he said with a wince, knowing it was a shitty answer.

Dr. Galina huffed a small laugh at him, and the knot in Ilya's chest eased. He wasn't being tested here. His brain knew that, but his body wanted to lock up like a bank vault anyways.

"<*I imagine saying it must have shifted how Shane felt about Shane>*" she said. Ilya cocked his head slightly at the peculiar phrasing. He'd learned that this meant Dr. Galina was queuing up a teaching moment. It was cheesy, but he gave his attention to her.

"<*Did you ever come out as gay to anyone, Ilya? Back in Russia?>*" she probed.

He thought back briefly, but the answer was already on his tongue. "<*Well, no. It doesn't matter. It's just a thing that I do. I have sex with women, I have sex with men. They are just... things that I do. My brother found out, by accident, but that was different, and even then. I did not feel that it was anything I had to justify. It just was a thing that I did, to have sex with Sasha.>*" he said, not following where the psychologist was leading.

Dr. Galina seemed to consider this for a moment before responding, "<*Would you have come out to your father if you could?>*"

Ilya shook his head no immediately. There was no point, he thought, in considering coming out to his father. And there was no way his father would've ever reacted well.

Dr. Galina took Ilya's nonverbal answer as an opportunity to pivot the conversation in a direction he didn't expect: "<*Do you think you're a different person, in English?>*" she asked suddenly

Ilya was temporarily stunned silent. Where had this come from? He didn't know how to answer, at first, falling silent.

He flirted more in English, he thought. Made more jokes. Provoked more. If he had to guess, he was a more subdued person in Russian, but somehow more direct. Action-oriented. In Russian, Ilya always thought of what he was or wasn't doing – or was or wasn't about to do, or had or hadn't done. He was prone to falling into silence in English, but it was his second language: surely that could be expected? That wasn't to say he wasn't playful in Russian, either – he still flirted and joked – but it was, somehow, just.. Different.

Upon telling Dr. Galina this, she sat back, looking thoughtful. “English is... a clunky language, no? ”

Ilya's eyes popped open at her sudden use of English. She had the smooth, soft sound of someone who'd grown up speaking it, unlike his Russian, which remained accented despite a decade outside the country. English flowed out of her, like Shane. For Ilya, even now, he felt like English fought him on the way out, his Russian tongue holding onto consonants and releasing them like a sudden avalanche.

He stuttered out a response “Yes, but is my second language, so..”

She smiled, “And Russian is mine, but I do not feel that it is clunky. No, to speak Russian is to participate in a grand stage play. It always sounds dramatic, no?” Ilya nodded along. His teammates always thought he was mad at them, unless he took great pains to overexaggerate and joke. English, he supposed, was a blunt force instrument.

Dr. Galina continued, “Russian is more beautiful than German too, but just as precise. You can say things in Russian or German that there is no good translation for in English, don't you think?” Ilya nodded again, and Dr. Galina got to her point.

“In Russian, we don't say “myself” or “yourself”. You took English in Russia, yes? Do you know what those words are called?”

Some deep school age trauma must have conjured up the answer, because Ilya hadn't thought about English grammar in years. “Yes,” he responded. “Reflexive pronouns”

Dr. Galina smiled at him, clearly pleased, and some boyhood part of him preened in response. “Yes. But we don't say ‘I dress *myself*’ in Russian, do we?”

Ilya responded, “Of course not, we use Я одеваюсь”

The doctor smiled again, “Yes. The self is built into the verb, no? It is the same in German. But not in English. In some languages, it's the opposite. In Tagalog, the language they speak in the Philippines, the relationship to the other is built into the language: *klasmate* becomes *kaklasmate*, or a classmate becomes *your* classmate, that you have a relationship to.”

Ilya was still confused, but starting to get where she was going. “Yes but how does this relate to Shane?”

“I think, for people who think in English,” she began, “There is an idea of *self* that exists as a concept. An idea. A solid thing. But maybe less so if you think in Russian. In Russian, you have actions that you take against yourself or other selves.”

She mused, “I think, for Shane, perhaps his sense of *self* has changed, and that’s hard to accept. That’s hard to show other people. It must be a very big change, for him, don’t you think?”

That squirming feeling came back to Ilya. He fidgeted with the stitching on his jeans; running a thumb along it, for comfort.

Dr. Galina turned, looking briefly at the clock in the corner behind him. “We’re out of time for today, Ilya, but perhaps for next time, it might be useful for you to think about how *your* sense of self has changed in the last few years. You’ve been through some big changes, and not all of them easy. Perhaps it’s time to re-meet yourself.”

Ilya swallowed nervously. He was afraid he wouldn’t much like who he’d end up meeting.

+1 Home

2021, Tampa Bay

They kept the entire plane at the airport for *five hours* after the emergency landing. There were doctors, sent by the airline. No one was hurt. The doctors looked over everyone anyways, one by one, then made them all sign waivers not to sue.

Ilya's phone battery drained itself, and everyone else's phones apparently died too. It was a battlefield at the few outlets along the walls of the terminal, and Ilya was too rattled to trust himself to be civil to others right now.

So he sat and stared at the ceiling, empty, tracing his eyes along the ducting and fluorescent lights. He wanted to go home, to his bed, with Shane's too-many pillows on it and Anya curled at his feet. Or maybe Yuna's house, with a bowl of ice cream on the couch and a fuzzy blanket and the heater turned up high. Or maybe the cottage, where he could sit and watch the sun reflecting off the lake and let the horrible stress of a plane crash slide off him and dissipate in the water.

But most of all, he wanted to bury his face in the crook of Shane's neck, have his hands run through the hair at the nape of Shane's neck, kiss the freckles along his clavicle that only popped up in the summer after a few weeks of running about shirtless at the cottage. He wanted to go home.

He wondered when *home* stopped meaning Russia, and started meaning Shane.

End Notes

This was very much inspired by my time living in Germany and learning the language and thinking about how much that shapes your perception of the world, but also how difficult basic things like speaking to medical professionals are. As a filipino, it was hard not to slide in the use of ka- into the conversation, either.

Ilya Rozanov is my baby and I hope you love him as much as I do.

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