

## english as a second language

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# english as a second language

by [Idday](#).

## Summary

Dialect (ˈdī-ə-,lekt). Noun: A variety of a language used by the members of a group.

...

Shane's been fucking Ilya Rozanov for a decade and yet somehow the more time they spend together the more he realizes how little he actually knows about Ilya, like, as a person. As a partner.

Again, he wishes he spoke Russian. That they had any shared native language besides sex and hockey.

## Notes

well. they got me.

set immediately after the close of the show, at the cottage. have not read the books, so we're in show-verse only.

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

*Compatible (kəm-ˈpa-tə-bəl)*

*Adjective: capable of existing together in harmony.*

...

“We are compatible, yes?” Ilya asks him.

Shane’s toes are literally still cramped up from his orgasm. He might have blacked out. And Ilya’s touching him, dragging his finger through the mess he’d left on Shane’s chest, which is beginning to edge its way over from mind-numbingly hot to absolutely disgusting, but Ilya’s still *touching* him, which means that Shane’s brain is a little fuzzy.

This may be why Shane’s reaction to this question is to look over at his boyfriend with an expression on his face that probably reads a lot like abject horror, based on Ilya’s alarmed reaction to it.

Or maybe it’s the fact that Shane’s been telling him, incessantly, mindlessly, besottedly, how much he loves him for the past few days, and so the question hits him like a blindside check.

“Of course we are!”

“Okay,” Ilya says. He leans over to kiss Shane, which is typically a pretty good way to both occupy his mouth and make his brain go fuzzy and soft. But now, Shane dodges his approach.

“You don’t think we’re compatible?”

Ilya makes his face that means, *probably, yes*. “We are together,” he points out.

Shane, stung, pulls away. He has spent a lot of time over the years watching Ilya’s face to try to puzzle out the answers to the questions that Shane would never ask, or to try to parse meaning out of things that Ilya would never say. Ilya’s not wearing the little smirk he uses when he’s intentionally trying to rile Shane up. In fact, his face is very open, earnest. Satisfied with their sex. Happy to be with Shane. He just looks like himself.

“Uh, what does that mean. To you.” Shane finally asks. Because they’re being honest. And he’s honestly confused.

“Together?” Ilya waves a hand between them.

“No, compatible.”

“I told you, I looked it up.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, “I know.” He badly wants a shower. It’s incredible, once the afterglow fades, how quickly being dirty goes from being something he craves to something that makes him physically uncomfortable and a little embarrassed. But now Ilya’s face is saying

something different, is saying, *I don't understand you*, so he stays. "What did it mean when you looked it up?"

He can tell that Ilya thinks it's a stupid question, but he humors him anyway. "Means, like. Together and happy."

"Oh," Shane says.

"No, it does not?"

"It does, sort of," Shane says. "I mean, yes, it does. But when... when you looked it up, that's not really what I meant."

Now Ilya looks annoyed, confused. Shane hastily adds, "I mean, that's right, but I meant more like. Rose and I weren't compatible because we weren't built to go together. Because I'm gay, and she's a woman, so we just weren't capable of being together."

"So you meant, good at sex," Ilya says.

"No." Ilya, Shane has noticed, always touches him when he has the chance. Even now, when they're – what is this? Bickering? Flirting? Shane knows that neither of them are mad, but they've mostly avoided disagreeing in the last few days, so he's a little off kilter.

Also, half-hard, because Ilya worms an arm under Shane's head and pulls Shane up against his body, even as Shane struggles for words that express what he's trying to say.

"Compatible, like we fit together. Rose and I didn't go together. Because of the sex, but also because – we just don't. Our personalities don't go together. Well, I mean, they do like friends, but not like... us."

He looks up at Ilya's face. He's listening intently, brow furrowed. "We are compatible?" Ilya asks again.

"Yes," Shane says, forcefully. "Yes. We go together."

Ilya nods, his face smoothing out. "And we are very good at sex." And there's the smirk.

Shane laughs, softly. "Yeah. And we're good at sex." This time, he lets Ilya kiss him; he leans into it, drifts on it. Then he pulls back and says, "wait, are you asking if I'm happy? Happy together, that's what you meant?"

Ilya lifts a shoulder like it doesn't matter.

"Yes," Shane says anyway, because he knows that it does. "I'm very happy."

...

*Camaraderie* (kām-'rā-d(ə-)rē)

*Noun: A feeling of friendliness, goodwill, and familiarity among the people in a group.*

...

Yuna does not take three steps back. Yuna has never, in her life, taken a step anywhere but forward, at any speed that's anything but full-steam ahead. The day after their dinner – which was less stressful for Shane than their lunch by only a very slim margin – Shane has in his inbox a proposed statement to keep in their back pocket should something, as his mother euphemistically puts it, *happen*.

Shane reads it once, and then he calls, "Ilya?"

Ilya wanders into the room shirtless. Shane nearly drops his phone.

"My mom sent this statement," Shane says, once he remembers how his tongue works. "Not to do anything with, just to have in case, like. Something happens."

Ilya raises his eyebrows and pads over. He kisses the back of Shane's neck when he comes up behind him, which distracts them both until Shane's phone buzzes with a follow-up from his mother that Shane swipes away from.

"Here," Shane says, offering him the screen. "We can change stuff, if you want to."

"We?" Ilya asks, pinching his waist. He settles his chin on Shane's shoulder, reaching around him to steady the phone as he reads. Shane reads it again, too – three times. Ilya doesn't say anything.

"I know it's kind of, like, formal," Shane starts after so long without a response that he has to wake his screen again.

"Shh," Ilya says in his ear. Finally, he pulls back from Shane and pulls out his phone without saying anything.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Listen, I know it's *boring*, but –"

"No, it is not boring," Ilya says, pocketing his phone. His face speaks irritation, just around the edges. "I know it is important. I have to look something up."

"Uh," Shane says.

Ilya sighs. "Show me again."

Shane unlocks his phone again, holding it between them. Ilya reads, forehead creasing, and then points. "Here. I do not know this word."

"Camaraderie," Shane recites automatically.

"Yes. Camaraderie," Ilya repeats, slowly.

"It's like, uh. Friendship? Or like." He stalls out.

"See, you do not know either," Ilya says, face easing. Teasing him.

Shane lets himself smile. “I know what it means,” he says, elbowing him gently. “It’s just hard to define it exactly. You know?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, sobering. “I know.”

Ilya’s been fluent in English for as long as Shane’s known him. He’s gotten much better over the years – accent fading, vocabulary growing – and Ilya mentions struggling with the language so rarely that Shane doesn’t usually think about it. How much work it must take.

“I’ll have my mom take it out,” Shane says.

“No, you do not have to do that.”

“It’s not even right,” Shane says, turning in his arms. “We never had camaraderie. We can just say we were friends.”

“Who had wild sex,” Ilya grins. Shane lets him deflect, and not just because he’s gripping Shane’s ass with both hands and all of the blood in Shane’s body is racing rapidly south.

“I’m not telling my mom that,” Shane murmurs against Ilya’s lips, forcibly repressing the knowledge that she already knows. He’ll rewrite the stupid statement later. Make it sound more like both of them.

Just in case.

...

*Domesticity* (dō-,me-'sti-sə-tē)

*Noun: The quality or state of being domestic or domesticated.*

...

Even the two of them can’t fuck for two weeks straight. They fill a lot of time working out, playing by the lake, scrolling on their phones in companionable quiet.

And, yeah. Fucking. A lot.

But after the first week, Shane caves and pulls out one of the books he’d packed. And then, after Ilya fucks him about his reading glasses, he actually opens it – satisfied, warm, happy tucked up against Ilya’s chest. He leaves his glasses off, even though he has to squint, so they don’t get distracted again.

He gets about three sentences in before Ilya whines into his hairline, “and what am I supposed to do?”

“You can read,” Shane suggests. “I have a lot of books.”

“Boring,” Ilya says dismissively. Shane turns the page.

“Most of them are about hockey.”

“Still boring. I like playing hockey, I do not have to read about it.”

“I think my dad left some New Yorkers lying around,” Shane teases.

“Ugh. Extra boring.”

Shane laughs, closing his book over his thumb. “You can do whatever, but I want to read. Is that okay?”

Like he always does when Shane actually asks for something, Ilya caves immediately. “Yes, is okay.”

He pulls out his phone, holding it loosely in his hand to thumb through his apps while he keeps Shane pinned up against his chest with his other arm. Shane glances over. His whole interface is in Russian, so Shane doesn’t let his gaze linger.

He turns another page. He’s been wanting to read this book for a while, but suddenly it can’t hold his interest. He’s been fucking Ilya Rozanov for a decade – well, mostly being fucked, but. Still – and yet somehow the more time they spend together the more he realizes how little he actually knows about Ilya, like, as a person. As a partner.

“Do you like to read?” he asks. A classic first date question, ten years behind schedule. Better late than never.

Ilya waves a hand. “Eh,” he says. “I hate to read in English. Feels like school work. You have a very stupid language.”

Shane huffs out a laugh. “Is that how you learned English, in school?”

“Some, very bad,” Ilya says, lifting a shoulder. “Should have paid better attention. I never cared about school, only hockey. Very lazy. And then, stupid me, hockey made me need English. I learned mostly by myself.”

“Impressive,” Shane says.

The Ilya that Shane’s known in hotel rooms and on back staircases and through interviews would have preened at that. This one, though, sleepy in his bed, says. “No.”

“It is,” Shane says. “You’re right, English sucks. And you’re really good at it.”

“No,” Ilya says again. “I am still learning new words, all the time. I am much smarter in Russian.”

Shane throws his book to the side. “You’re smart in every language,” he says, turning his face to find Ilya’s mouth. He vows, as he so often has before, to redouble his efforts learning Russian. Ilya was wrong: Shane has not learned Russian in a week, no accent, perfect. Duolingo is useless, and he and Ilya always get distracted when Ilya tries to teach him

anything. They're still stuck on *I love you*, but at least Shane has that one down pat. He likes the way it feels in his mouth, round and warm and heady.

Like Ilya.

Shane kisses over his jaw, down his throat, across his chest, messy and suddenly ravenous.

"Yes, you want?" Ilya asks, already spreading his legs. "This is what you like, reading in bed like we are one hundred?"

"I just like you," Shane says honestly, mouthing at Ilya's insane abs and down his treasure trail. He licks across the cut of his adonis belt, nuzzling into his clean briefs, inhaling the clean, masculine scent of Ilya's dick and Shane's detergent. "But I guess I kind of, uh, like the domesticity," he admits, fitting his mouth over the head of Ilya's cock through his underwear.

"What is this, this," Ilya stammers, pulling Shane's head back gently by the hair, "dome, what? Is this a new sex thing?"

Shane looks up at him. What the fuck did he even say? Having Ilya's cock anywhere near his face makes him completely dumb. The sight of his discarded book puts the word back into his head. "Domesticity," he repeats. Ilya mouths it, watching Shane's lips carefully. "It's like. Being at home."

Ilya smiles slowly. "You get turned on by being at home?"

Shane knows that he's joking. Still, he nods. "Yeah," he says sincerely. "I get turned on by being at home with you."

...

*Antagonize (an-'ta-gə-'nīz)*

*Verb: To incur or provoke the hostility of.*

...

Shane mostly succeeds in relaxing. Ilya makes it easier, because he ensures that Shane spends a good deal of time fucked absolutely boneless.

Plus, now that his mom actually knows why he wants a few quiet weeks, she's been respectful of his time. This means mostly that she still sends the emails, but doesn't expect him to read them right away. And that when his parents come to dinner, they mostly don't talk about his upcoming season or his endorsement deals.

Mostly.

But he's still himself, so he does read the emails. And Yuna is still herself, so she does talk about endorsements. Just not Shane's.

“It always surprised me,” she says, passing the salad, “that you didn’t have more opportunities, Ilya. In a market like Boston.”

Shane looks cautiously out of the corner of his eye at Ilya’s expression, which remains fixedly pleasant.

“Ah, it is hard to film commercials,” he says, serving himself a heaping pile of greens and dousing them liberally with dressing. “With my accent, you know.”

“Your English is very good,” Yuna says. “And your accent, really, it should be a hook – something distinctive and personal.”

Ilya hesitates. “Thank you,” he lands on.

Ilya has been on his best behavior around Shane’s parents, which is a side of him – polite, subservient – that Shane never sees otherwise. It makes him a little crazy. He knows that he should be glad that his parents came around to Ilya so quickly, but sometimes he wants to explain, *this isn’t even him!* His parents seem to like this version of Ilya. He has to believe they’ll like real Ilya, too, because Shane loves him so much, but he wants them to have the chance to prove him right.

“Mom,” Shane says.

“Do you have a manager?” Yuna asks, just as Ilya takes a massive bite of his sandwich. He chews and swallows before he answers.

“I have agent. For hockey.”

“Yes, of course. But a talent manager?”

Ilya looks over at Shane. “My talent is hockey.”

Yuna nods, conceding the point momentarily. “If you *were* ever interested in endorsements –”

“Mom,” Shane says, more warningly. “Not everyone wants to do stuff like that.” He chances a look back at Ilya, who looks blank. “You know, like brand deals. Commercials. Photos.” He nudges Ilya’s foot under the table.

Ilya pulls his foot away. “I know what endorsements are.”

The table goes quiet, uneasy. Shane thinks, *there you are*.

Yuna clears her throat. “Well, I’m just thinking, we have connections in Ottawa, and I know plenty of brands that would bite right now. If you wanted, I’d be happy to make some calls for you. They’ll be hungry for a fresh new face.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says again. He smiles politely, and takes another bite of his sandwich.

After they've waved his parents off, Shane locks the front door and tips his forehead against it. "You can just tell her no," he says, "if you want her to butt out. She'll listen."

Ilya's already washing dishes in the kitchen. "It is okay. I could be famous and rich, could be fun."

"You're already famous and rich," Shane says, dishing leftovers into containers for the fridge.

"Richer and famouser – more famous."

Shane waits until he's turned away, stacking the containers into the fridge, before he smiles. He's noticed that Ilya is less careful in front of him, now, when he flubs a phrase or forgets a word. More comfortable, maybe.

Except tonight. Shane grimaces.

"Uh, listen. I'm sorry. That I assumed you didn't know, you know. What endorsements were."

Ilya lifts a shoulder, scrubbing hard at a baking tray. "It is big word."

"Yeah, but I shouldn't have assumed. You know a lot of big words."

"Yes," Ilya agrees, and then he says, "your parents do not think this."

"Think what? That you know big words?"

Ilya turns off the water and then turns to lean up against the counter, crossing his arms. "That I am –" he waves a hand, which could encompass almost anything. "What do they think?" he finally asks.

"Of you?"

"Of course," Ilya says. "Of us. Together. They are happy?"

"I haven't asked," Shane admits. Then he says, hastily, "well, of course they're happy. Because I'm happy. And they love me."

"They do not think I'm a nice man."

Shane opens his mouth and then closes it, stepping into Ilya's space. He's hoping that Ilya will reach for him like he so often does so that Shane won't have to close the distance, but Ilya just stands there, gaze averted.

"You're not *nice*," Shane says. He puts his hands on Ilya's arm, hoping to soften it, but Ilya doesn't uncross his arms or create any space for him to get closer. "But I don't care. I don't want you to be nice."

"I can be nice," Ilya mutters.

Shane sighs. Ilya keeps his face down, and he's bouncing a heel against the floor, nervous. "Is that why you're being weird with them?"

Finally, Ilya meets his gaze, breathing once hard through his nose. He looks angry. At Shane? No – when Shane reaches out and chances touching him on the waist, Ilya finally unfolds his arms and puts them on the counter behind himself, letting Shane close the gap.

"I do not know what you want from me, Hollander," he says. "You do not want me to be nice? Your parents do not want you to be with a nice man?"

"My parents," Shane says slowly, "want me to be with someone who makes me happy. And you make me happy. They can be surprised, but they can't change that. And they're not going to try. Once they know you, they'll love you like I do."

Like it always does, Ilya's face goes warm and soft at Shane's words. Shane kisses him, indulging, but he doesn't want to let himself get derailed. "So you have to be yourself, Ilya, please? I want them to get to know you. The real you."

Ilya groans and lets his head falls back. Then he looks at Shane, eyebrows raised. "You are sure you want this?"

"Well, I mean, I would appreciate it if you didn't, like, deliberately antagonize them," Shane says. "But I don't want you to be scared of them. I want you to be comfortable around them."

"Antagonize," Ilya repeats. Shane instinctually opens his mouth to clarify, but he doesn't want to make the same mistake he made at dinner, embarrassing him, so he just waits. Finally, Ilya adds, "this is like. Disappoint?"

"Sort of," Shane says. "Not really. It's more like, make somebody mad on purpose."

"Oh." Ilya nods. "This is a good word."

"Like, when you play hockey, you antagonize people," Shane says, smiling. "But you're not like that, you know. Off the ice."

Ilya lets his mouth pull into a grimace that says, *well. Sometimes.*

Shane grins wider and puts his hands on Ilya's neck. "It's different than teasing. You don't antagonize me," he says, peppering kisses along Ilya's jaw, "when we're alone together. That's the Ilya I want my parents to know."

"Okay," Ilya whines, faux annoyed. He finally, *finally*, puts his hands on Shane's waist, his chest, the back of his head, and kisses him for real. "But I can be very nice, Shane. I can be very, very nice."

He sucks Shane's earlobe into his mouth. "And I'll prove it."

...

*Meticulous (mə-ˈti-kyə-ləs)*

*Adjective: Showing or requiring extreme care and attention to detail.*

...

By the time Shane wakes up the next morning, deliciously sore and with his open mouth mashed up against Ilya's ribcage, listening to his gentle snores, Yuna has already sent a list of potential sponsors to Shane's inbox, which he discovers scrolling idly as he blearily fires up the espresso machine in the kitchen. He wants to bring Ilya coffee in bed, since he actually woke up first for once. And because he thinks that it will probably inspire Ilya to say thank you in some new, creative way.

"Oh my God," Shane whispers, thumbing through the email. His mother doesn't have Ilya's email address – lucky man – but she thought he should forward it on. No pressure! Just something to think about.

Come to think of it, Shane doesn't have Ilya's email address, either.

Shane mentions this after their mutual pre-coffee blowjobs, with Ilya's head still on his thigh. The coffee is stone cold, and he doesn't even care.

"Why do you need my email?" Ilya wonders. "Is there word for sex emailing?"

"Shut up," Shane says, pulling his hair gently. "My mom sent some endorsement stuff she thought you should look at."

Ilya stares.

"You don't have to do anything with it," Shane rushes to say. "But she put it together for you, so you should have it if you want it."

"She is, uh," Ilya starts, his gaze distant. Shane waits him out. Intense, maybe. That's a word Shane hears a lot. Overbearing. "She cares a lot, I think."

Shane softens. "Yeah. I know it can feel kind of. Demanding. But it's how she shows she cares."

"Demanding, no," Ilya says. "Demanding is, you must do this, or else. My father was demanding. Yuna is not demanding I read her emails. She is just... offering them. Yes?"

"Yeah," Shane agrees softly. He didn't know that he had needed to feel this relief until it happens – that he needed to know that Ilya understands, about his mother. That he sees Shane's family like Shane's trying to get them to see him back.

"So she cares, about me?" Ilya asks. "With her emails and her questions about Boston and her media statements?"

Shane takes a deep, shaky breath. He softens his grip in Ilya's curls, scratching at Ilya's head with the tips of his fingers to make him shiver. "Yeah, definitely," Shane says.

Ilya's eyes go distant again. Shane knows that expression – thinking, translating. Debating what to say, and how much. He says, after perhaps a minute, “My father always said, listen, don't speak.”

Shane furrows his eyebrows, but Ilya is looking up at his face, so he smooths his expression back out. The more he hears about Ilya's father, the less he likes. “Is that what you meant, when you said he was old-fashioned?” he asks. “Like, children should be seen and not heard?”

“No.”

Shane nods. Again, he wishes he spoke Russian. That they had any shared native language besides sex and hockey. That the language barrier wouldn't stand like this sometimes, between them, both of them standing on opposite sides of this chasm of understanding.

Shane thinks about it so often: When Ilya had said his father was old-fashioned, what had that really meant? How would he have said it in Russian; how would Shane have heard it? When he says, demanding? Disappointed? Lazy? When he says, my father was so hard on her? Will Shane ever learn this piece of his boyfriend that neither of them seem to have the vocabulary to express?

“It is hard for me,” Ilya finally says, “to be, ah, open. With your parents. This is not how I was allowed to be with my father or the parents of my friends. I was trying to be respectful, or polite, maybe. And, of course, you were having a panic attack for five whole days.”

Shane ignores the last part – true as it was – and touches Ilya's face instead. “I appreciate that,” he says. “My family is pretty casual. My parents don't expect you to be, like, formal with them. It doesn't have to be right away, but I just want you to be comfortable around them. Especially, you know, when you move here, since they live here.”

“Oh, yes,” Ilya says, a little sarcastically, “I can go to their house for dinner.”

“Yeah, I would really like that,” Shane says, ignoring his tone. Ilya looks up into his face, registers his sincerity, and the humor falls from his expression. He pushes up on an elbow, kissing Shane on the mouth softly.

“Okay,” he says. “Then, read me this email.”

Shane thinks about protesting, telling him to do it himself. He thinks of Ilya saying, *I hate to read in English*. Thinks about the reading glasses.

“Okay,” he says. He grabs his glasses off the nightstand, and then he opens the email and starts reading. It is a very long email. It has bullet lists, which have sub-bullets and parentheses and asterisks. He wonders if it would be rude of him to edit it before he forwards to Ilya, pare it back. “Uh, sorry,” he says, halfway through stumbling through a sentence crammed with jargon that even Shane fails to understand. “My mom's really meticulous, which is good, but it's hard –”

“What is this,” Ilya interrupts.

“What?”

“That word.”

“Oh. Meticulous. It’s like, really focused on details. Thorough.”

“Ah, okay.” Ilya nods. “So this is also genetic.”

“I guess,” Shane says. He locks his phone. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.” Ilya raises his eyebrows expectantly.

“Does it bother you? When I use words like that?”

“What words, big words? I know big words.”

“Yeah, I know,” Shane says. “But, you know. Like at dinner. When I said...” He lifts a shoulder.

Ilya shifts on his lap, resituating his head. He turns and kisses Shane on the inner thigh. “I think,” he says carefully, “I do not mind when it is you. When it is other people, then.” He makes a little face that says, *embarrassing*. Shane realizes in the same moment both that he hadn’t known before now that Ilya could even be embarrassed, and that he’s seen that exact expression before.

But he has seen it. Ilya has let him.

Again, Shane is struck by it: for all that they are still learning about each other, he knows things about this man that nobody else in the whole world knows. He’s so sweet. Beautiful. Funny.

Overcome, Shane curls down over him and kisses his face, openmouthed and wet, off-centered. Ilya aligns their mouths, licks over his tongue, and Shane moans. “This gets you off?” Ilya asks, smiling. “My terrible English?”

“It’s not terrible,” Shane says. “And it’s just you. You get me off.”

Ilya pulls one of those moves like he does sometimes, twisting both of their bodies, rolling Shane under him. Shane doesn’t know how it happens, but suddenly he’s under Ilya instead of over him, his legs around Ilya’s waist, dicks rubbing up against each other. Ilya spits into his own palm, wet and messy, and reaches between them to hold their cocks against each other, rutting down into him.

Shane doesn’t understand how it can still be so good, after so long. Something so simple. But God, it’s like his whole brain goes quiet like this, like nothing exists but Ilya. He came about twenty minutes ago and yet he comes again, spilling over Ilya’s fist with a gut-punched groan, and Ilya follows right behind him, saying something in Russian that’s impossible for Shane to understand.

“Fuck,” Shane says drunkenly, petting Ilya’s hair as he pants against Shane’s chest.

“Fuck,” Ilya agrees. He rolls off of Shane and reaches for his mug. “The coffee is cold.”

...

*Nuanced* (ˈnü-än(t)st)

*Adjective: Having nuances, having or characterized by subtle and often appealingly complex qualities, aspects, or distinctions (as in character or tone).*

...

On the way to Shane’s parents’ house, he pulls into the grocery store parking lot so that he can buy the wine that his mom requested and the basil that his dad forgot. Ilya stays in the car, already scrolling absently through his phone as Shane looks over his shoulder at him through the windshield. He can’t help himself; he smiles a little, faintly, at the thought of Ilya being there when he gets back.

The cottage is private, but Shane occasionally gets recognized at the store. He keeps his head down and tries to move quickly through the produce section, and then he makes a clean break for it in the wine aisle. The cashier is French-speaking and chatty, so Shane slips into the language politely as well. It’s been a while. He speaks French these days mostly in response to inane media questions. He feels like he’s lagging a half-second behind as he translates, hyperaware of his anglophone accent.

Back in the car, he slides behind the wheel and presses the chilled bottle of pinot grigio to Ilya’s neck, snickering as he squirms and yelps.

“Is cold!” he says, shoving at Shane, but he reaches behind himself to take the bottle so that Shane can buckle his seatbelt.

“The cashier spoke French,” Shane says, putting the car into reverse and turning down the volume on the terrible Russian rap that Ilya’s put on the sound system, and Ilya interrupts somewhat sarcastically, “oh, bonjour.”

Shane shoves him right back and then leaves his hand on Ilya’s thigh. Instantly, Ilya threads their fingers together. He continues, “I completely forgot the word for bird. Just, could not remember it at all. It was so weird.”

Ilya says, “yes, sometimes the words, uh, run away.”

Shane squeezes his fingers. It must be exhausting, chasing those words all the time.

“When did you learn French?” Ilya asks, after a moment. “You learned it at home?”

“School, mostly,” Shane says. “A lot of people here are bilingual though. My parents are both okay. I’ve gotten better since I moved to Montreal.”

“French in Montreal, English in Ottawa?”

“Well, it’s a little more nuanced than that,” Shane says.

“Nuanced?” Ilya repeats instantly.

Shane glances over at him, long enough to check that he’s wearing a question mark in his eyes. “Like, complicated.”

“Why do you use these other words when there is already a word for it?” Ilya asks, but he repeats it as though he’s trying to remember how it feels to say. “Nuanced.”

Shane looks at him again. Ilya looks back; he pulls Shane’s hand to his mouth and kisses the back of his hand. “I hope I do not have to learn French when I move here,” he says. “I have barely learned English.”

“Your English is great, Ilya,” Shane says. “But you could. If you wanted to. I bet you’d be good at it.”

Ilya kisses his hand again. “No,” he says. “I can French kiss. Good enough for me.”

“Shut up,” Shane says, rote, as he turns up the driveway of his parents' place. Ilya opens the door immediately after he parks, halfway out of the car before Shane says, “hey, um.”

Ilya turns around, sees his face, and gets back in the car. He doesn’t close the door. “What. I will be on my best behavior.”

*Don’t be*, Shane wants to say. Instead, he just says, reaching back for Ilya’s hand like by touching him Ilya might somehow better understand him, “I was thinking. What if, like, if they use some stupid word or something and you want me to tell you what it means, there was a signal?”

“Signal?” Ilya repeats. Then he says hastily, “I know what a signal is.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, ignoring that, “like, you could pull on your ear or something. I don’t know. And then I could tell you, but, like secretly. Our secret.”

Ilya looks at him for a long moment, soft around the mouth. “You are not tired of secrets?” he asks, but he pulls Shane in by the back of the neck and says, “okay.” He reaches up and brushes his thumb across his own nose, quick and casual like scratching an itch. “Signal is this, yes?”

“Okay,” Shane says back, stupidly proud of his own dumb plan.

“And if you need me to tell you a word, just remember the signal,” Ilya says smugly, pressing their lips together. “Let’s go. Wine is getting warm.”

...

*Clandestine (klan-'de-stən)*

*Adjective: Marked by, held in, or conducted with secrecy.*

...

Ilya pretends he bought the wine against Shane's obvious protestations, and Shane lets Ilya touch him for more than three seconds in front of his parents. They're both making progress.

Conversation over dinner turns to the upcoming season. They've had thirteen near-perfect days, but Ilya's departing flight tomorrow afternoon looms. Yuna talks with him about the email she sent, which he apparently has read most of. He doesn't seem to care much about money; he's agreed to work with some brands but not others with reasoning that is completely opaque to Shane. He wants, badly, to know why Ilya does what he does. How his brain works. Everything about him.

He can feel it happening already, the slow, creeping panic of losing him. They will never have enough time – not while they're playing. Probably not after that. He wants to know everything and won't have a chance to ask. *Are you religious? What was your favorite food as a child? Do you look like your mother? Do you dream in black and white?*

Shane goes to get dessert from the fridge along with three plates and four forks. He gives Ilya an extra big slice of the pie because of his secret sweet tooth and because Shane wants to eat off his plate. Yuna is still talking when Shane gets back.

“ – should really be laying some of the groundwork this season, to shift the narrative. Then it will feel more natural when you announce the charity work.”

Shane slides Ilya's pie to him, watching for the signal. His hands stay on the table. That's a word he knows – narrative. Shane already told him that one.

“You have no plate?” Ilya asks.

“I don't want much. I'll have some of yours.”

“Nooo,” Ilya whines, wrapping his arm protectively around his plate, but he allows Shane to reach over and steal a bite immediately anyway. It's good, too rich. Shane's dad digs in right away, too, but Shane catches his mother watching them mistily.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she says, smiling and taking a sip of her wine. “I just like to see you happy.”

Shane squirms, uncomfortable. “Mom,” he complains.

“I'm sorry,” she says, not sounding it. “I just hate to think of you two having to go back to this clandestine relationship all year long. For years!”

Shane glances over at Ilya. Ilya hesitates; he thumbs hastily at his nose, and then picks up his fork and attacks the pie with vigor.

“I know, mom, but it has to be a secret relationship,” Shane says, nudging Ilya's foot on the word *secret*. Ilya squeezes his thigh under the table. “We know it's sad, but it is what it is. Okay?”

“I know,” Yuna sighs. “Sorry. I know.”

...

*Dialect ('dī-ə-,lekt)*

*Noun: A variety of a language used by the members of a group.*

...

Shane knows they're going to fuck when they get back to the cottage, knows it so emphatically that he doesn't mind taking his time to turn off the lights and lock up the house and wipe the kitchen counters down while Ilya wanders away to the bedroom.

Shane watches him walk up the stairs; Ilya clearly knows he's being watched because halfway up he strips his shirt off over his head with one hand so that Shane can watch the muscles in his back move as he disappears into Shane's bedroom.

Shane's hand clenches down hard enough on his kitchen rag that his knuckles crack.

When Shane climbs the last stair into his bedroom, Ilya's coming out of the en suite. He smiles, his soft, private version, and he comes across the room to kiss Shane, his hands damp from washing. His mouth tastes like toothpaste.

Shane kisses him back, soft and then harder, reveling in the way that Ilya licks into his mouth and holds his jaw just the way he likes it. Then he pulls back with a last peck. "Need to use the bathroom," he says. "Be right back."

He revels in that, too: being comfortable enough to leave without ruining it. Knowing that Ilya knows he'll come back. Shane uses the the bathroom, cleans up, washes his hands. He brushes his teeth, too. He leaves his clothes folded on the counter and goes back out into the bedroom, naked.

Ilya's naked, too, looking out the window at the lake, his whole body relaxed and unshowy. Shane catches his gaze in the reflection of the window and Ilya turns to look at him, slowly, his eyes catching Shane's first in the windowpane and then in real life. Ilya stalks across the room toward him, and their mouths meet again before any other part of their bodies.

Shane kisses and kisses and kisses him. It's terrifying, this deep, gnawing hunger. Like Ilya could climb inside his skin and it still wouldn't be close enough.

They've had a tremendous amount of sex in the last two weeks: playful, rough, romantic, experimental. Tonight the mood feels different. Sadder. They'll have time tomorrow morning for a quickie, but tonight feels like the real goodbye. Shane already has the day circled on his calendar, the double-digit countdown until they'll get to see each other again once he puts Ilya on that plane.

Shane pushes him down onto the mattress and climbs into his lap, his hands fisted up in Ilya's hair. Ilya palms him soothingly across his waist and over his shoulder blades, over his hips and down across his ass, where he gives him a cheeky two-handed squeeze.

“You want me to fuck you?” he asks against Shane’s throat, kissing across his skin.

“Yeah,” Shane says.

“How do you want it?”

Fuck. Shane tucks his nose against Ilya’s jaw. “Want to see your face,” he murmurs.

Ilya doesn’t say anything. He rolls him onto the mattress and reaches for the lube. Shane opens up quickly for him, body soft and craving. Fuck, it feels so good he can’t believe that it’s real. His skin is tender, tingly, and he can barely keep his eyes open. Ilya seems to uncover new sensations in him every time they do this, lighting up his nerves in ways Shane didn’t know were even possible.

Finally, finally, Ilya pushes inside him – bare, also new – and Shane moans involuntarily in the back of his throat. Ilya keeps peppering his face with kisses, and then he says, “look at me.”

Bleary and drunk on sensation, Shane struggles to obey. He blinks, slowly, and Ilya feeds his thumb into Shane’s mouth, petting at his tongue.

“Beautiful,” Ilya says, and then something else. It honestly could be English – Shane doesn’t know, because Ilya’s fucking into him slow and deep and so good and his brain is broken.

But it makes Shane say, around Ilya’s finger, “tell me.”

“What?” Ilya says, dragging his thumb free.

“Say it,” Shane slurs, “in Russian.”

“Hmm?” Ilya thumbs gently at Shane’s cheek. “Say what?”

“Anything. Everything. Tell me everything you want to say.”

Ilya knows a lot of sex words. He knew dildo when they were both nineteen – now, he knows promiscuous and safeword and deepthroat and consensual and hickey. He knows words about sex, about kinks, that Shane himself has to google. When he messes up sex words, it’s mostly to piss Shane off (*they’re not tits, Ilya!*) or to arouse him (*I can throatfuck you?*) or because he’s on the verge of coming and is rapidly dissolving back into broken swearing.

Shane doesn’t like to think about where Ilya learned all those sex words. It may be just because he’s interested – the very rudimentary Russian that Ilya is currently feeding him consists mostly of sex words and swear words – but Shane also suspects it’s because he spent a lot of time fucking a lot of Americans back in Boston.

But Ilya doesn’t usually talk a lot, during sex. This time, though – something in Shane’s request seems to have opened the floodgate like it did on the phone before. He talks: fluid, lovely, quickly, a whole stream of language burbling out of him like the dam has been let.

And his body moves, too, the oldest way that they know to have a conversation with each other. He fucks Shane slow and then harder, their breathing syncing up, fingers tangling. Shane hitches his leg up, digs his heel into Ilya's ass to encourage him.

"More," Shane says. "More, more, more, more."

He can come untouched but Ilya doesn't make him. Shane says his name when he comes, and then Ilya pulls out and looks at Shane, handsome face intent and sharp as he brings himself off over Shane's mess on his own belly.

"I love you," Shane says, when Ilya collapses next to him. It never gets old. He says it again, in Russian, clumsy but sure. Ilya lays over him and repeats it, ignoring the mess, his body blanketing Shane's. It's a reassuring weight. Shane tries to fool his brain into thinking that the moment will last forever.

They clean up again, side by side in the shower and then at the sink. Ilya hasn't packed yet and doesn't start, but Shane finds he doesn't mind – it makes it easier to pretend that tomorrow isn't the last day.

They change the sheets. Shane has done more laundry this week than he ever has in his life, and has already added *order extra linens* to his to-do list, right under *find Russian tutor*. They climb back into bed. Ilya's always been tactile with him, but Shane thrills at how much he likes Ilya touching him like this, so casually, without any expectation of sex to follow.

"Do you dream in black and white?" Shane asks abruptly.

"No. Do you?"

"No. But I guess some people do. That would be weird, right?"

Ilya takes a breath that Shane can feel beneath his cheek. His heart beats steadily; Shane is getting rapidly sleepy, from good food and good sex and his boyfriend's warm, clean skin. "I dreamed in English last night," Ilya says.

"Is that unusual?"

"Hmm, yes," Ilya says.

"What did you dream about?"

Ilya touches his face softly. "I don't remember," he says. "Just dream stuff. Made no sense. Why so many questions?"

"I wanna know you," Shane mumbles. "I wanna know everything about you."

"Okay," Ilya says. It's one of his favorite words. The first one that Shane heard him ever say. Surprisingly versatile. He uses it to mean, *yes*. To say, *I hear what you're saying, but I think that it's stupid*. To ask, *does that feel good?*

Right now, Shane thinks it means, *I'll let you. We have time. I want that too.* He likes that he knows what it means when Ilya says it, and when Shane hears it. Their own little dialect.

Shane smiles, kisses his chest and then his lips and then resettles his head on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya pets Shane's hair, holding him tucked in close. Almost close enough.

"Okay," Shane says.

## End Notes

I just think Ilya deserves a little momagering! as a treat!

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