

Ilyusha

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Ilyusha

by [Soncasong](#)

Summary

In which Shane learns about Russian nicknames, becomes obsessed with Ilya's, and fucks up.

Notes

Now with a [Russian translation](#) courtesy of [Magghead](#)

On day nine of their cottage retreat, after the accidental parental discovery and the coming out and the quiet dinner together, Shane broke out the one-thousand piece puzzle. Sex, as nice as it was, was not a sustainable activity for all seventeen waking hours of a human day, and Shane had already done most everything else with Ilya. Plus, he had been excited to do this one. A panorama of Canadian winter, stretched out over one thousand cardboard pieces for him and Ilya to assemble. Shane liked puzzles, liked the methodical rhythm of finding each piece its rightful place. It made his mind quiet.

“Shane. What the fuck is this?” Ilya asked.

“It’s a puzzle,” Shane explained, “Put it together, makes a picture. They’re fun.”

“Oh my god you are so boring,” Ilya groaned.

But he indulged Shane. Surprising, but also nice, like Ilya was willing to dabble in Shane’s hobbies despite the fact that they were not his usual choice. Shane wondered what Ilya’s hobbies were. He’d like to learn. He loved Ilya so much that it scared him sometimes, but he also didn’t know much about Ilya – not in the small, silly, domestically catalogued ways a couple with their years of history should know each other. But he would like to learn. He’d like to archive every single detail about Ilya, memorize each idiosyncrasy like he had memorized the constellation of moles dotting Ilya’s body. Shane would like to be able to do normal couple things with Ilya. Like doing a puzzle together.

They were making good progress, halfway through the puzzle, when Ilya’s phone rang. He looked at his phone, smiled, and began talking rapidly in Russian to someone on the other end. Shane didn’t understand what Ilya was saying, but he thought he could catch a name. Sveta. It sounded awfully close to the name of that friend Ilya had thought about marrying. A feeling, similar to what had bubbled in his chest during their conversation that harrowing, exhilarating night, prodded at Shane for attention. He knew this one. Jealousy.

When Ilya returned, Shane asked, “Who was that?”

“Svetlana,” Ilya said, looking down at the puzzle and slotting a piece into place, completing another snow-covered pine, “I told you about her.”

Shane tapped the puzzle piece he was holding against his hardwood floor. He liked the feeling. It was grounding, stabilizing, letting Shane know that he was allowed to feel what he felt. That he would not be punished for it. “Is she pretty?”

“Prettiest. But you are even prettier,” Ilya said. He pressed another puzzle piece into place. “Are you jealous?”

“Fuck you,” Shane said, but he was chuckling. “Maybe a little. You said you wanted to marry her, so...”

Ilya grabbed Shane’s chin. Tilted Shane’s head back. Maintained eye contact. “Shane. I told you. I’m not marrying her.”

“I know,” Shane said, hoping it didn’t come out like a whine, “I only said a little. I was also wondering...why’d you call her Sveta?”

Ilya let go of his face to scratch at his mole, a habit Shane had seen Ilya do many times before. He had just deciphered what this little motion meant. Ilya was embarrassed. “It’s... cutesy kiddie name. Because we’ve been friends for so long.”

“What’s your cutesy kiddie name?” Shane asked, because he wanted to learn more about Ilya, beyond just the many ways their bodies could fit together.

Ilya sighed. But he humored Shane. “Ilyusha.”

“Ilyusha,” Shane tried the name on his tongue. He liked it, but... “Why is it longer than your actual name? Like, isn’t the point of nicknames is that they’re shorter?”

“Is Billy not fucking nickname for Bill?” Ilya said.

“Fuck you, they’re both short for William,” Shane said, playfully shoving Ilya to really punctuate his point.

Ilya looked like he wanted to pounce on Shane for revenge, but his eyes flickered to the unfinished puzzle on the floor. He waved the conversation away like it personally offended him with how boring it was, “It’s a Russian thing, you will not understand because you are boring Canadian with boring Canadian rules.”

Shane nodded, though his brain had already filed away Ilya’s little nickname for later, to be rolled and tumbled and twirled in the chambers of his overthinking mind until the edges had worn smooth. Ilyusha. Ilyusha. *Ilyusha*.

“Let’s finish boring puzzle,” Ilya said, “I’d like to fuck you while there’s still daylight.”

“Well, you better hurry, then,” Shane said.

“Ilyusha, could you pass me my glasses?”

“Fuck you, Ilyusha, you know that call was *bullshit*.”

“Oh...Oh, holy shit, Ilyusha, fuck...harder...”

“Ilyusha, hurry up! We’re gonna be late!”

Shane practiced. He let those syllables roll on his tongue over and over again, like he was trying to memorize the shape of Ilya’s nickname until it became instinct, until it was as second nature to Shane as his own name. Real couples did this. And they were real now, real

in a way that excited and scared and devastated Shane, so Shane was determined to do this *right*.

“Shane?” Ilya asked one night as they lounged on the couch, their feet touching as they tapped away on their phones.

“Yes, Ilyusha?”

Ilya smiled. It was his small, private, genuine smile, the one Shane knew Ilya only used when he was with Shane. “I love it when you call me that.”

Shane blushed and went back to his search for more recipes he wanted to try with Ilya. He mouthed the name to himself again, quietly, because practice made perfect. *Ilyusha. Ilyusha. Ilyusha.*

Practice became routine and routine became habit and habit became personality, at least according to half of the self-improvement books he had read over his decade stint as a hockey player. He had applied the wisdom to his exercise routine, to his diet, to the drills he ran, doing the same things over and over again until they were etched into his being. He’d tried to do the same thing with his media persona, but it always felt wrong. A little stilted. A little too far to the left. Like Shane had practiced until routine became habit, but his personality would stubbornly refuse to mold itself in this way. He had to force himself to be okay with that, but he hated it. Both the media gauntlet and his inability to absorb it into his skin.

They were doing a joint interview, tracing the lines of the roadmap they had drawn since those two wonderful, aching, stressful weeks at the cottage. Ilya had signed with the Ottawa Centaurs. Shane had allowed himself to be photographed with Ilya at a few public events. Now they were doing some press together, casual chats with monosyllabic publications that would hopefully ease the public into the idea that the two of them didn’t actually despise each other. This one was booked by his mom, some sort of variety show where Shane and Ilya were supposed to pick and compare their ten essential items with each other. It should have been fun, and maybe Shane might’ve started having fun around item number seven if not for the fact that this was also being streamed live for reasons that were incomprehensible to Shane. It made Shane hyperaware of what his body was doing, and he hated it.

“Alright, last item,” the interviewer said, and Shane fought the urge to sigh in relief. Just one more, and then he’d be done, and Shane had blocked out the rest of the afternoon to be spent at Ilya’s Ottawa residence. “Shane, Ilya, what’s number ten on your list of essentials?”

Shane reached into his prop bag and popped on his reading glasses, smiling in a way that he hoped was confident and didn’t betray how bashful he felt to finally reveal to the world that he needed glasses to read. It felt private, too private, but he had felt compelled to follow the rules of the game - ten essentials, and his glasses were pretty essential.

“Yeah. These are my reading glasses. Need them to, you know, read,” Shane said. *Be casual, have fun*, his publicist had told him, and Shane hoped that he was conveying the right amount of casual and fun for this to feel authentic. “I, uh, I’ve needed them for awhile, now. But only for reading and looking at screens, so I’ve gotta have them with me like, all the time.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Do you see how boring he is? Hollander is so boring. Look at this.” Ilya had been insistent that the two of them keep each others’ ten essentials secret from each other, and Shane had indulged him with just the slightest sprinkling of dread. He knew Ilya had a silly side, that he showed his affection through both tender words and mischievous teasing, but it had taken quite the bout of meditation to align himself with the fact that he would not know what kind of chaos Ilya would pack in his essentials bag. Ilya had been rather tame so far, even a little vulnerable when he talked about his mom’s cross. Nothing would prepare Shane for Ilya’s finale.

It was a bottle of lube. It was the same bottle of lube they had been using this morning.

Practice became routine and routine became habit and habit became personality. Shane had been practicing. It was dangerous that he had been practicing.

“Ilyusha!” Shane hissed. Pushed Ilya. Smiled, bright and easy and free.

Then he realized where he was. That they were live. That he had just done something too personal, too close, too intimate in a place that was too public.

Shane tensed. He felt his shoulders shoot up to his ears. His entire body locked up. He tried to count in his head, to tap his finger against his palm, to focus his eyes on the too-bright lights behind the camera, but nothing helped. His brain raced.

He fucked up. He fucked up he fucked up he fucked up. He’d been careless, he’d been comfortable, he’d forgotten that there were other people here, and now Ilya was going to pay for it. Ilya, who needed the safety, the security, the anonymity of staying hidden, who couldn’t be out until his future was secured, who was going to hate Shane forever because he had to run his big stupid mouth. He hated his stupid brain, he hated his stupid carelessness, he hated his stupid self. He wished he was anywhere but here.

Ilya was saying something. Shane was trying his best not to collapse. He knew he had stopped smiling at some point, but all he could do was nod along. He nodded as Ilya covered for them. He nodded as the interviewer wrapped off their interview. He nodded as the cameras called cut. He nodded all the way to the parking lot, to his car, to the bubble wrapped place his mind retreated to when the world got too bright, too loud, too overwhelming.

A gentle tap on the car window. Ilya had followed him.

Against his better judgment, Shane unlocked the door to let Ilya in, because he was a weak, weak man who desperately wanted his boyfriend to hold him.

But he shouldn’t. “You shouldn’t be here,” Shane said, “It’ll...It’ll make it worse.”

“You let me in,” Ilya said. He didn’t touch Shane. He just sat in the passenger seat of Shane’s car and watched Shane with eyes that were somehow both too observant and too fond. Shane hated that he wanted Ilya to touch him. “What do you need?” Ilya asked.

He needed a time machine, or magic, or some other abstract way he could turn back the clock to a moment in time before he had let that word slip from his mouth. Ilyusha was only meant to exist in the space between Shane and Ilya. But Shane had accidentally let everyone else in. He needed Ilya to punish him. He needed Ilya to forgive him. He needed...He needed...

“You,” Shane said.

Ilya pulled him close. He whispered sweet, soft nothings in Shane’s ears, reassurances and promises prettier than the looming maw of Shane’s mistake. Shane didn’t deserve Ilya.

“I’m sorry, Ilyusha.”

The internet exploded. They analyzed every little interaction Ilya has had with Shane over the years, cataloguing anything that had a hint of affection. There were bibles, manifestos, compilations, evidence so neatly organized that Shane couldn’t find any cracks in the armor that could protect Ilya.

“I’m so sorry, Ilyusha.”

The videos surfaced. Old, grainy, nearly indecipherable, taken on phones zoomed past their recommended specs or security cameras with no sound. Shane letting Ilya into his building. Shane leaving Ilya’s apartment. Shane kissing Ilya at the cottage. Insignificant by themselves, but damning as a collective.

“I...I wish I could fix this, Ilyusha.”

The nightmare began. Montreal made it clearer than crystal that he would not be coming back. The bruises his teammates left on him during practice, unnecessary checks that slammed him against the boards with too much force, let him know where they stood. But at least Ilya was fine. Ilya was safe, for now, because Ottawa supported him, Ottawa kept his visa, Ottawa would do anything in their power to have Ilya stay. Shane clung to that like a lifeline.

“Ilyusha, I...”

“Stop apologizing.”

“But it’s my fault!”

“You wanted to show me you love me. It’s not a crime.”

It felt strange walking into this press conference knowing that Ilya would be by his side – not as a rival, or a friend, but as his boyfriend. The two of them had still not made an official statement to the press about what happened. But they knew. Everyone knew. And now Shane was forced to be brave after an entire life where cowardice had been so routine it had baked itself into Shane’s personality.

“You look good. Pretty,” Ilya whispered beside Shane, breath ghosting in Shane’s ear like a promise. *It’ll be okay.* He had his hand pressed to the dip in Shane’s lower back.

“So do you,” Shane answered. Then, because this feeling had been roiling in his chest ever since the day he realized that maybe he was that thing everyone liked to make fun of in the locker rooms, Shane blurted out, “I’m scared.”

“I know,” Ilya said, “It will be okay. We practiced, remember? Now we do. Just like we practiced. Like hockey.”

Practice became routine became habit became personality, and maybe it was time for Shane to practice being brave. He nodded. “Yeah. Just like we practiced.”

Someone shouted out that they were on in five. Shane steeled himself. Ilya’s hand had dipped off Shane’s back to search for Shane’s hand. Shane grabbed it and squeezed. For this, he could be brave.

“Ilyusha. I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too, Shane,” Ilya replied.

Shane took a deep breath, counted to ten, and walked out into the flashing lights, Ilya’s hand clasped in his. It felt like courage.

“Hi. I’m Shane. Hollander. But you all already know that. I’m...I’m gay. And I’ve been in a relationship with Ilya Rozanov for a long time. I love him. Um...that’s...that’s all. Thank you.”

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