Vocabulary

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Vocabulary

by girlmercury

Summary

Shane picks up a few Russian words over the years. He can recognize what *люблю* sounds like.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

You don't fuck a Russian guy for years without at least attempting to learn a little bit of the language. More importantly, you don't face down your biggest competitor on the ice year after year without wanting some kind of an idea of how he's shit-talking you. He's capable of enough of an advantage when it comes to goals, it seems ridiculous that he knows when you're calling him an asshole but you never know what he's saying about you.

Shane looks at Rosetta Stone software Russian lessons, but that's way too much commitment. He's not marrying Rozanov, he's sucking his dick, a situation in which he's much better off saying nothing at all. Two hundred and fifty whole Canadian dollars seems like basically buying a ring, for a guy he's fucked a handful of times over a couple of years. Obviously he can afford the money. He doesn't think he can afford the embarrassment.

A couple more years go by. More hotel rooms, the hookups as personal to his life as the pictures hung on the wall, or so he tells himself. He didn't personally decorate his own home, either, but that doesn't make it any less home. It's a metaphor that he pretends is complicated.

He Googles Russian swear words. *Хуй, пизда, блядь*. He has to find some Youtube videos to hear how those are pronounced, and he definitely recognizes some of them then. *Хули-?* Yeah, he's definitely heard the sound of "what the fuck?" before. The videos get into the many nuances of ways to ask *what the fuck*, and he loses interest.

Some amount of time later, he strains a ligament and the physical therapist orders him to not practice for a week. He could go crazy with boredom, but instead he learns Cyrillic. Actually, that might have just been him going crazy with boredom: sane people don't practice the difference in pronunciation between *ы* and *и* at eleven o'clock at night before jerking off and passing out.

Before Sochi, Shane gets way more normal about it, because he's visiting another country for the Olympics: of *course* you learn some travel lingo. He didn't for any other country he's gone to, but all those times have mostly just been practices and hotel room service anyway.

Пиво, пожалуйста. I'll have a beer, please.

Не подбросите меня до….? Can you take me to…, for taxi rides.

Где туалет? The most important one: where is the washroom?

His mom, ever supportive, learns something too: *Я тебя люблю*. I love you. She says it proudly. (He doesn't know how to say it back. *Спасибо, мама*, he says weakly, in an accent be knows is atrocious.)

He doesn't end up using a whole lot of what he learned; the whole world is in Sochi, speaking everything but also a lot of English, and it doesn't change how close Ilya wants to keep him, anyway.

Ты, тебя, you, you. *Я, меня*, I, me. *Отец, папа*, the subtleties of navigating a formal *father* and longing for *dad.* Shane picks up things, watching videos of Rozanov, interviews that are

subtitled rather than having an annoying translator speaking over the voice he has so often heard telling him to kneel, to get on the bed, to roll over. To go fuck himself, just as often. His voice is the same in Russian and English, low and direct, something Shane never thought to appreciate before he watches enough fan commentary videos to hear people practically switch octaves when they switch languages, smoothing out their rolling Rs to lessen their accent.

The years go on, and the ache Shane feels grows, though he channels that into the gym and the ice. He has the most peaceful night and day of his life at Ilya's until he fucks it up, running away when he hears the intimate sound of his first name, not Hollander, not what Ilya calls him when they're staring each other down on the ice in that moment before the playing starts.

Rose happens, an unexpected gift; she's something new that he hasn't had before. He has friends, he has teammates he'd trust with his life, but it's all in hockey world, where he can't express in even the slightest way that he is only interested in men, and genuinely interested in only one of them. He doesn't even have language for it when Rose gently asks him about it, he just nods. He's better with his body than he is with words but in that moment even his own native language is not one that gives him the words to say the truth of how he feels. It's okay, though: she sits there and lets him say it however he needs to. And it isn't until he says yes, he likes men, it is better with men, he even prefers it one way with men, that a weight lifts off his shoulders that he knew he was carrying, but not how heavy it was.

Rose understands, even when words fail him, as they often do. More importantly, she insists on sticking around to hear whatever he can say, however he can say it. She might have, in breaking up with him in a way that left no room for wounded pride or for blame, become his best friend.

When Ilya's father dies, Shane knows it is hard: the bad relationship, the dementia, the secret that is always going to sit between him and everything in the Russian side of his life. And when Ilya says he can't express what he needs to in English, Shane thinks back to the table with Rose, his lips sealed from confessing one of the most fundamentally true things about him. All the times he's never had the words to say something true.

"Then tell me in Russian," Shane offers, not knowing what else he can give. But it is enough.

He listens to Ilya talk, his voice so familiar but never speaking to him like this. Words full of Rs and shushing sounds, sibilants and Vs; he could get caught up in not knowing what they mean, but he doesn't want to.

"Bolsha, bolsha, bolsha, bolsha," Ilya says again and again with such anger and despair that it makes Shane's heart clench, though he doesn't know what the word is. It's enough to know that it is hurting him. Shane closes his eyes, blacking out everything but the sound of Ilya's voice.

Shane can parse *Мой брат*— enough to know when Ilya is talking about his brother, no more than that, but the raw heartbreak that comes after the word is unmistakable. There's a division there, a connection that should have been unshakable but instead is simply anguish to Ilya.

The flow of words that follow, all bleeding into each other, remains anguished and Shane picks out *Svetlana*. *Она любить*… Maybe she loves something, or maybe Ilya loves her, he doesn't know, but he hopes Svetlana is there with him now, the way Shane can't be. But Ilya isn't talking to Svetlana like this, he's talking to Shane, and now the words he knows are back: *тебя, люблю, любить, тебя, тебя, тебя*…

You, you, I love, you, you, you, you.

Shane doesn't know what that means, what that adds up to, when the words are assembled and the grammar is added and all of it comes together to mean something. He could hope, of course, but— he doesn't know. He can't know.

"Okay. I'm done," Ilya says briefly, short and direct as ever, all of the emotion flowing for the past several minutes now contained again. But not hidden, not anymore. Not taken to another room, like that time his father had called while Shane was there. They could work through the meaning together, like Shane does with Rose: she can never know what it's like to be him, yet she knows *so well*, willing to use whatever words that work whether or not he can talk about it.

Words aren't everything, but maybe Shane will take another look at those Russian language programs anyway.

End Notes

Excuse all errors: I, like Shane, know about three phrases, the Cyrillic alphabet, and a few verbs, one of which is “to love.” And to notice that Shane is pretty consistently ты and not вы to Ilya. Извините.

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