

Морковь по-корейски (Korean-style Carrots)

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Summary

Takes place at some point during *The Long Game*.

Ilya wants to make the one Russian-Korean dish he knows for Shane's parents when they get together to watch one of Shane's playoff games together, but finds that his expectation of doing it perfectly all by himself might not be what he's looking for, and that family may not just be about paying back what you owe.

(Recipe included)

Notes

This very light AU is rooted in the books, and takes place sometime during *The Long Game*, but is inspired by a comment I saw on r/heatedrivalry a while back that they wished the show had followed the casting of a Korean-Canadian actor as Shane and shifted the character's heritage to match. The reasoning was that the books don't contain a lot of specific references to Shane's Japanese heritage, and that they wouldn't even have to change his mom's name, since Yuna works as a Korean name as well. Apologies, I with the flood of show posts I don't know that I can find this specific comment again and credit the poster for this nugget (if this sounds like something you said, please let me know!)

This set off seeing this as a deeply missed opportunity for Ilya to connect with Shane's parents, particularly his mother. The routine of bringing out many small dishes like banchan feels like it would resonate with someone Russian in general as a familiar kind of hospitality and comfort, even if the dishes themselves were not wholly familiar.

And then there's this salad, which originates with the Koryo-saram, a group of ethnic Koreans that initially moved into the Russian Far East to evade Japanese colonial rule, but ended up largely based in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan because Stalin. Finding themselves without a number of ingredients, they developed dishes with the ingredients they found readily at hand, like carrots in lieu of daikon radish.

So, a weird fact about me that tells maybe a lot is that I celebrated my 21st birthday in a gay bar in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where I lived for about 8 months doing a really odd version of junior year abroad. I can speak to the Korean presence there (among other things, my landlady was Korean), and I can speak to the omnipresence of this salad in particular, which was so well integrated I didn't fully realize it was Korean in origin. This dish has been

embraced and assimilated in Russia too, and I couldn't pass up the idea of Ilya making Russian-Korean food for Shane's Korean mom.

Which brings me to my last point, which is why writing about food at all. I firmly believe that food is the closest we can come to instantaneous travel through time and space, in the way that it engages all the senses and taps into memory in a way few other things do. Ask Proust, or whatever.

Also, it's tasty.

“I don’t understand how they are cutting the carrots so thin,” Ilya grumbled to himself in Russian, gripping the knife a little too hard as the thick stack of carrot slices slipped away under his grasp again.

He took a stack of just two long slices of carrot, pressing them even harder into the board, bending to bring his face what seemed like mere centimeters from the board as he lined up the knife to cut the thin slices into thin sticks. The carrots stayed mercifully stacked as he rocked the knife through them. He scraped the slender matchsticks into the bowl and gritted his teeth as he looked at the pile of carrots in front of him.

Several short stacks of carrot passed and Ilya nearly jumped as Yuna walked into the kitchen.

“You ready for a beer yet?” Yuna asked as she crossed past him towards the fridge.

“I would say, ‘always,’ but I think if this game is what it looks, it may be a long one,” Ilya said, only looking up briefly from the cutting board. “I need to save my drinking for when I have to look at Shane’s sorry excuse for a playoff beard on the screen.”

Yuna laughed, turning back from the fridge and refilling her glass from the pitcher of boricha on the round table in the cottage kitchen instead.

“What a pain cutting it so thin by hand,” she said, peeking around him and topping up his own glass. “At home, I have a peeler that will make those long, thin strips, but not here at the cottage. You want me to help you?”

“It’s alright, I can do this,” Ilya said, trying to sell the calm he tried to put in his voice, lining up another couple slices of carrot and leaning over close to cut them the other way.

Yuna wordlessly pulled up a cutting board next to him on the small counter, grabbing another one of the peeled carrots.

“No, I am making this for you,” he said, the conviction leaving his voice as she chopped the carrot in half and cut a thin slice from the side of one.

“It’s still a while before the game will be on,” she said, deftly cutting the carrot into thin slices.

“Is this a dish your- people in your family would make for you?” she asked, the swallowed word still hanging in the question.

“I don’t really come from people who cook much,” Ilya shrugged off the question, the memory of rare moments in the kitchen with his mother flicking through his head. “This salad I get from the market in Russia. Did you learn to cook from family?”

“My halmeoni - my grandma - moved from Korea to live with us when I was 7, after my grandfather died. My parents both worked a lot, so Halmeoni did most of the cooking after she moved in. She was the one who was there when I got home from school, too.”

“How do you cut those so thin?” Ilya asked, frustrated with how stupid his fingers felt trying to cut the carrots into perfect tiny sticks like she did.

“You’re doing fine,” Yuna assured him, “See how much nicer they are just since you’ve started?”

“I feel like I am doing surgery on a snake, and I am not certain that the snake will survive,” he said, stopping to take a long sip of the cold barley tea.

“Here, one thing, it won’t roll away as much if you cut a little bit off of one side so it has a flat part to sit on,” she said, cutting a slice off another half carrot and turning it on its flat side to cut into thin slices.

Ilya took his next carrot and mimicked Yuna’s procedure, pleasantly surprised at how much more secure the carrot felt under his fingers as he attempted to cut thin slices from it. He stood up a little straighter, no longer feeling the need to eye the cuts from quite as close.

“Your halmeoni? Am I saying that right?”

“You got it.”

“You learned to cook from her?”

“I did. She didn’t have much English, especially right after she moved, and my Korean was - well, it was better than her English, I guess, but I don’t know that I can say much more for it when we first lived together. But we only needed so many words to work together in the kitchen. I would help her after school - making dinner, making banchan, starting pickles and other preserves. She planted a garden, and I helped her there too. My sister wasn’t born yet, so it was just the two of us a lot of the time.”

“It didn’t get boring, just doing work and not talking?” Ilya said, already knowing the answer in his heart, but wanting to hear her say it.

“It didn’t,” Yuna smiled softly as she said it. “It was maybe a little awkward sometimes when she wanted to explain something and showing it wasn’t quite doing the trick, but she would laugh about it and then so would I. She would hum to herself while we were working or we would have the radio on for company. It’s actually part of how I got into hockey - we would listen to games on the radio. No better way to learn how to be Canadian, eh?”

“Hockey seems to be helping me with that also,” Ilya grinned openly and Yuna chuckled alongside him. They worked on chopping the carrots quietly for a few minutes, and Ilya could feel his mother in the shadows of his chest, as if the warmth of the moment could reach her just a little.

“My mother didn’t really cook,” Ilya said cautiously. “She would slice up bread and cheese and sausage, maybe some vegetables. She would cook breakfast sometimes, when I was younger. Nothing fancy. When it was just the two of us, I remember her singing along with the radio sometimes.”

“Just the two of you?”

Ilya’s knife slipped off the side of the carrot again and he cursed under his breath in Russian.

“My father was very precise about his time,” he said, “And everyone else’s I guess. Very little tolerance for nonsense from the people under him. My brother, he just picked up on the part where you punch down, I think.”

“Whole lot of good that’s done him,” Yuna said and Ilya snorted, thinking about the last he’d heard from his brother, desperate over some bullshit or another. Ilya couldn’t be bothered to find out more at this point.

“Bowl’s getting full,” Yuna said as she picked up a couple of carrot pieces and crunched them.

“Not if you have anything to say about it,” Ilya smirked at her, giving up on the final cuts of the carrot in front of him and handing the last thick piece to her as he tried to recenter himself in this kitchen and this moment. He looked over the notes he’d scrawled for himself on a piece of notebook paper, a patchwork of Russian and English as it seemed a lot of his writing was these days.

“So have you ever actually made this recipe before?” Yuna asked.

“Not precisely,” Ilya said. “I asked a couple friends, and they had suggestions, but not answers.”

In all honesty, most of his notes were secondhand from Svetlana’s babushka, but her instructions were more like a shopping list than a recipe, with no amounts. Svetlana had pressed a little harder than he wanted for a reason that he suddenly was homesick for carrot salad and told him that the better plan was just to go to Brighton Beach the next time he was in New York. Svetlana was always going to figure it out before anyone else, one way or another, but he didn’t think she’d quite connected the dots yet. She was sharp, she was relentless, but she was discreet. That said, having a recipe list he trusted made it easier to pick through the recipes online to find one that looked right.

“Next we add salt to the carrots and let them sit for a bit while we get the rest ready,” he read.

“I’m going to guess that it wants us to massage the salt into the carrots before sitting,” Yuna said. Ilya raised an eyebrow at her. “You said this was a Korean dish, kind of. That’s what I would do if this were a Korean dish.”

“Okay, then,” Ilya handed her the canister of salt. “One teaspoon.”

“You add the salt,” she said, handing him the measuring spoons and going to wash off the knives and her hands.

When she came back she stuck her fingers in the bowl and started massaging the carrots, turning them over and rubbing them between her fingers.

“Go wash your hands, then it’s your turn,” she said. Ilya washed his hands and crossed the few steps back. Wordlessly, Yuna took a step to the side to make room for him in front of the bowl.

“Yes, where is the tight spot?” he said to the carrots, working to mimic what she had done as best he could. Yuna laughed warmly. “You need to ice this or it will be sore tomorrow,” he said as he set the bowl aside.

“What’s next?” Yuna asked.

“We fry an onion and we make dressing,” Ilya said, squinting at his notes.

“Fried onion? Now it is a Russian dish again,” Yuna laughed as Ilya picked up the onion from the counter. He turned the onion in his hands and gave her a ridiculous hurt look that made her laugh harder.

“You do not like the smell of onions when they fry?” Ilya asked, looking up a video on his phone. “Smells like home. You are lucky it is fried. There are those in Russia who eat them raw like an apple,” Ilya grimaced, thinking of his coach from juniors and the way he would eat onions like that ahead of big games.

“Are you watching a video about how to cut onions?” Yuna asked, peeking over his shoulder.

“I know how to cut onions, but I want to make these small and even,” Ilya said defensively, turning away from her. Yuna stepped away to put a few clean dishes back in the cabinets as he watched the cook on the screen make tiny, precise cuts in the onion.

“I can show you,” Yuna said, lopping off the ends of the onion and slicing it neatly in half. “It’s not that different from what we did with the carrots.”

It wasn’t long before Ilya’s eyes began to burn as he worked closely at making tiny cuts on the onion, trying not to slice as far back as he could without cutting all the way through the end. He snuck a look over to Yuna’s cutting board as she deftly worked through her half of the onion. Ilya chewed the inside of his mouth as he looked at his own cuts, mostly small, but not as even as he’d hoped.

He’d been grateful for her presence as she joined him in cutting through the pile of carrots, even where it was quiet but he had wanted to do this for them. Yuna and David had welcomed Ilya as family quickly, especially after his move to Ottawa, and he felt he could never fully give enough to repay that welcome.

Yuna gave no sign that it was any burden to work here with him, though, or even that there was anywhere else she’d rather be.

“You’re right about the smell of frying onions,” Yuna said as they began to sizzle gently on the stove, smiling warmly through her own red-rimmed onion eyes.

“That it is better than biting into one like an apple?” Ilya said, his wry grin softened like the onions in the pan. “Of course.”

“It does smell like home,” Yuna said.

Морковь по-корейски (Korean-style Carrots) - Recipe

- 1 lb carrots (4-5, depending on size)
- 1 tsp kosher salt (or 1/2 tsp table salt)
- 4-6 oz. onion (1 small or medium onion, half a large one), very small dice/mince
- 1-2 clove garlic, minced or grated
- 3 Tbsp neutral oil
- 1 Tbsp sugar
- 1 Tbsp Ground coriander
- 1 tsp Russian red pepper/Hot paprika/gochugaru/mix of sweet paprika and cayenne (see note)
- 2-4 Tbsp white vinegar (to taste)

Cut carrots into thin matchsticks or use a julienne peeler or mandoline to cut them. Use a heatproof bowl. You won't get the right *crunch* if you grate the carrots, but the flavors will still be good.

Sprinkle the carrots with salt and massage until you don't really see the salt anymore.

Set salted carrots aside while you prepare the rest. Heat the oil in a wide skillet over medium-low heat. Add the chopped onions and stir occasionally as the onions slowly cook to a dark brown over 10-15 minutes. If you don't love a garlicky bite, add some or all of the minced garlic to the last 30-60 seconds of cook time in the oil. You can start adding the sugar, coriander, and pepper to the carrots while the onions cook. You may need to stir the onions more frequently the closer they are to done.

Pour the onions and oil over the carrots. Add any remaining sugar or spices and the vinegar, then stir until well combined. This will be pretty good right away, but gets better the more time it spends in the fridge. Ideally let it rest for at least an hour before serving.

Store the carrot salad in the fridge - it'll be even better the next day.

Note about Russian red pepper: It is a mildly spicy, finely ground red pepper. If you have a grocery store with Slavic products, you may be able to get what would typically be used, but I usually just use the other ground lightly spicy pepper I typically have on hand, which happens to be Korean gochugaru. Other than that, you can use almost any hot paprika or a mixture of 3/4 tsp sweet paprika, 1/4 tsp cayenne. Or more cayenne if you're spicy.



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