



So that's what this is all about...! Why did I think...?

...So James are you ready to answer our riddles?

What?

Are you ready for our five riddles?

I suppose so.

Do your best to answer them correctly. Remember that the future of our soon-to-be newlyweds depends on your answers.

Olga pauses importantly:

Your first riddle is from Olga — so listen carefully.

Olya clears her throat dramatically, and reads in a low exaggerated drawl:

“A man was put in a windowless prison for twenty years,” she begins. “Every day he ate nothing but dried bread. Not once did he leave the cell during his incarceration. But when they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones under his bed. So the obvious question is... where did the bones come from?”

Wait, I say, You spoke so quickly... could you repeat the question just to make sure I got it all?

Sure, she says and once again reads her riddle — this time just as fast... but louder:

“A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but dried bread. When they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones. Where did the bones come from?”

I stop to think. *If a man eats nothing but dried bread for twenty years... first of all, that's impossible... but assuming that it were possible, then it would mean that the bones had to come from something other than his food because there are, of course, no bones in dried bread... now if the bones weren't already there when the man was put into the cell then that would mean that... but what if they were already there... in other words, the bones didn't actually appear during the twenty years that the man was incarcerated...*

Were the bones already in the cell before the man was put there?

No, Olya says, The cell was empty. They fed him nothing but dried bread... and after twenty years there was a sack of bones that had appeared from somewhere.

Okay... so the bones weren't already there. That means that the bones had to come from somewhere outside the cell, in other words, from something that could get into the cell from the outside world... but what?

Did the bones belong to some rats?

No.

Mice?

No.

Cockroaches?

Not likely.

Then maybe they were the bones of the man? In other words, he himself was a *sack of bones*?

No.

I don't know then.

You give up?

Yes, I give up.

Vadim slaps his thigh:

You can't give up! he says.

Do you know the answer? I ask him.

Sure, he says and shakes his head, It's a children's riddle.

Olya laughs:

Well, before you two give up, I'll give you a clue. The answer is in the question. Now listen carefully... I'll read it to you again:

"A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but *dried bread*. When they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones. Where did the bones come from?"

Olya smiles deviously. All the Olgas are looking at me and waiting for my words. In my mind I try to imagine an answer. But can't. Logic has failed me again:

I don't know, I say, I've thought of everything: the bones weren't already there... they didn't belong to any animals that might have crept into the cell... and he didn't eat anything but dried bread which, of course, doesn't have any bones... I don't know what to say.

You don't?

No, I say, I don't.

Then in that case that'll be fifty thousand rubles!

The girls cheer.

Racketeers! Vadim moans.

The girls cheer again.

Racketeers!

So what's the answer? I ask, Where did the bones come from?

The answer, Olya says, is that the bones came from the fish soup that he had been eating.

What fish soup?

The fish soup that he ate every day.

But you said he only ate dried bread!

No I didn't.

Yes you did.

No I didn't. Here I'll repeat it... listen carefully:

"A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but fish soup and bread...."

See? Olya smiles.

The Olgas laugh.

So that's how far I've come? Six and a half years of studying Russian, and I can't even answer a children's riddle?



You should be ashamed of yourselves! Vadim says to Olya.

Why?

Taking advantage of James like that.

How am I taking advantage of him? He knows Russian. And besides, it's a children's riddle, and he is, after all, no child.

No? Then what would you say he was?

He's our age... I mean he's an adult just like you and me.

Adult? He's no adult!

He's not?

No he's not.

I'm not?

No, James, you're not... you're a foreigner!

Olya stops:

A foreigner? she says.

Yes, says Vadim, A foreigner.

Maybe Vadim's right, says one of the Olgas sheepishly.

Yeah, says another, Maybe James's knowledge of Russian isn't as good as he thought it was.

Olya puts her index finger against her lips to think. Finally, she pronounces her verdict:

All right all right, she says, If you insist... in deference to our foreign guest, we won't count that question...

And Vadim smiles and winks in my direction.

...But don't expect any more breaks!

Olya stares at me seriously:

Are you ready? she asks.

For what? I answer.

Your second riddle. Are you ready for it?

I guess.

Okay, this one is Olga's: