

Papercuts

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Papercuts

by [dinosaur](#)

Summary

Shane accidentally stumbles upon a memory of a happy summer day in Ilya's childhood. Its edges are sharp like a knife.

Notes

1. I don't know much about Russia and Russian culture, sorry for any mistakes.
2. Same for English, as it's not my mother tongue.
3. We're in Shane's head for this one, so remember that what we think is an interpretation of facts and not a fact in itself.
4. The timeline for this is super hazy, don't think too hard on it.

(TWs in end notes)

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

Shane has never seen books in Cyrillic before. Ilya watches him from the corner of his eye as he pulls one off the shelf. There are different types of birds on the cover.

“This is a book about...is it like a bird identification guide?”

Ilya's lips press together. “No, this is book about war.”

Shane shrugs and picks up another one. The cover is a building in ruins, smokes billows into the dark sky. “This one is also about war.”

“This one is Russian fairy tales.” Ilya chuckles. “Okay, today is hot, I go shower. Have fun not knowing how to read.”

“Fuck you very much,” Shane quips back without much heat as Ilya disappears into the bathroom. Shane sits crossed-legged on the rug and leans against Ilya’s king-sized bed, by the bookshelves. He peeks inside the fairy tale book.

Knowing any language means being able to parse similar ones, but Russian is surrounded by a steel wall made out of letters he has no familiarity with. He thinks of Ilya, seventeen years old, cigarette smoke curling out of his mouth and every word a shield, just as impenetrable as Cyrillic. Fortunately, Shane knows English, French, and his way around basic Japanese. He has always known if one invests enough patience and time, any language can be deciphered.

He opens different books, fascinated by holding so much inaccessible information in his hands. He can’t read any of it, but if he had to guess, there are many types of books on the shelf. He knew Ilya read, and not about hockey, but he didn’t know he was so eclectic. It hits him from time to time, how he doesn’t know that much about Ilya at all.

He moves a blue one, the illustration of a hot air balloon takes up almost the entire cover, to get at what looks like a thick encyclopedia underneath. He freezes, as something that had been caught between its thin yellowed pages falls at his movement and spills across the carpet. It’s a dried pressed flower, Shane realizes, and a few faintly faded Polaroids.

Shane has seen uncountable pictures of Ilya, in magazines and on his TV, on the internet and in ads, but he has never seen a picture of Ilya so young before. They all seem to have been taken on the same day, at a park. *Парк Горького, 1997* is scratched underneath one of them. Ilya would have been seven years old.

He recognizes the small girl in the picture because she has seen her as an adult in pictures before. Svetlana. Her hair is bunched up into two pigtails as she stands on top of a structure that looks like a monkey bar on steroids, fist up in the air like a superhero, as if she won whatever game they had been playing. Something warm blooms deep in his chest as he spots Ilya, as uninterested in rules as ever, hanging upside down by his legs, head dangling far too far away from the ground to be safe. His curls form a halo around his head, so pale they look almost colourless.

This is how they had looked, he runs a thumb over it, before they darkened into their current gold.

“Oh, you found a book for your level.” He’s so surprised by Ilya’s voice, he almost drops the picture he is holding. Ilya’s easy grin morphs into a curious frown. “Ey, what is all this?”

“Sorry,” Shane blurts out as a rush of guilt blindsides him. “I really didn’t mean to snoop into your shit, I was just messing with your books and these fell out. You didn’t— didn’t know they were here?”

“They are from boxes from my father’s place, these were from my mother’s things, I didn’t have time to really look at them yet.” He kneels next to him shirtless, only in his baggy red Nike shorts. A surprised chuckle escapes him as he inspects the picture closer. “I don’t remember being *so* tiny.”

“You seem to get along well.” Shane comments. Both Svetlana and Ilya are grinning brightly at the camera, Svetlana proudly displaying her missing front teeth.

Ilya hums distractedly. “We didn’t know each other so much then. This is, uh, I just met Sveta that week at party. This is the first time we go somewhere together. It’s first, uh,”

“First play date?” Shane risks and Ilya nods enthusiastically.

“Yes, first play date. We went to Park *Gorkovo* for the entire afternoon.”

Ilya doesn’t seem irritated, so Shane feels it’s safe to pick up the other photos. All of them feature a myriad of kids in colourful clothing tumbling in the background, so that when Shane breathes in, he can taste the smell of being a child during summer vacation on his tongue.

In one of them they are sword fighting with sturdy sticks, both sprouting flat green leaves, some of which got caught in Ilya and Svetlana’s hair. In the third one, Ilya is pushing Svetlana on a swing, their faces flushed and joyous. Then, there they are picking red flowers underneath the shade of a large, imposing tree. In the most faded Polaroid, Ilya is kissing Svetlana’s scraped up elbow as she rolls her eyes. In the sixth one, Ilya is licking a stripe out of an ice cream as his friend makes a disgusted face.

“It was her ice cream, she only liked *sgushchyonnoye moloko* ice cream.” Ilya’s mouth moves smoothly over both languages, nostalgia in his voice and eyes. “I dropped mine. She didn’t love sharing.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe from the tree when we were making swords?”

“Why were you climbing a tree with an ice cream cone anyway?”

Ilya snorts. “You sound like Sveta. She spent entire day bossing me around and pulling me off from tall slides.”

Shane chuckles. He has never explored the negative emotion that wells within him when he hears her name from Ilya's mouth, but this time, surprisingly, it doesn't rear its head.

"Sounds like a good friend for you to have."

"Of course you think this." Ilya quips. "You like rules. When you were kid, you read instructions before playing with Christmas toy."

Shane feels exasperatedly seen. "Shut the fuck up." He mumbles, as he moves the photo back to reveal the last one.

Svetlana must have been behind the camera for this photo because, as the sun is finally lowering in the sky, her pigtails are nowhere to be seen. The framing is also slightly crooked and closer than the other ones, like an excited child took it.

Instead of Svetlana, there's a young woman in her twenties with a flower behind her ear, almost invisible in the mane of her wild curls. She's caught mid-laughter as Ilya hugs her middle, like he had hurled himself at her while she wasn't paying attention and caught her by surprise. His face is buried into her cardigan in a carefree, loving expression.

Because Ilya is looking over his shoulder, his face so close to the nape of his neck, Shane can tell the exact moment he stops breathing.

"It's a beautiful photo."

The photo starts at the woman's waist, this close, it is easy to see the fading bruise on Ilya's left cheek and a split lip visible in his adoring smile. Now that he has noticed it, he can spot it in the other pictures too.

"I forgot we took so many photos this day." Ilya's voice sounds distant, although he hasn't moved an inch.

"She's really young." Shane remarks, because she can't be much older than they are right now.

Ilya sits down and takes the photo from his hands carefully, like it's spun out of gold. Then he glances at him with a measuring look, the gears in his brain turning between what he wants to say and what it's safe to say. Shane gives him time and doesn't take it personally. He can't blame Ilya for acting like any other animal and protecting his soft underbelly. He notices belatedly that the dried flower on the floor is also red, like the ones Svetlana and Ilya had been plucking from the grass and like the one in the blonde woman's hair.

"She was piano player. She played piano at big parties my father had. She got pregnant, so to not have scandal, they got married. My father is police and in Russia, you don't question police, so everybody closed their eyes and nobody said that she is *too* young to have kids or to get married."

The words are clipped. Shane gets the impression he doesn't talk about this at all, much less in English.

“What was she like?” Shane asks, and adds quickly. “Only if you want to tell me, I mean.”

“Is fine.” Ilya says dismissively. He sighs, his thumb moves against the picture, where his mother’s hand is buried in his hair. “She wasn’t from the city, and she liked to be outside, so she took us to Park *Gorkovo* a lot. She knew all the names for flowers and birds. She didn’t let us kill any bugs, not even spiders.” The clipped words seem to flow now, gaining impulse and turning into an unstoppable torrent. “She liked to watch cartoons with us on Saturday morning, I think she liked *Nu, pogodi* more than we did. When the episode was boring, she turned the sound off and we invented dialogue. She hated cooking, she was terrible cook. She would make pancakes and burn both sides. And she loved books. After the park we would go to the library and she would get books for everyone. She would read anything too, if there’s no new books at home she read shampoo bottles out loud before bedtime.”

Shane chuckles. Ilya said some of this with such an exasperated fondness that Shane has only heard from him before, when the subject had been himself. Ilya scoops up the blue little book where the pictures had been hidden in, and opens it in a familiar movement.

“My father didn’t think much of books. She knew he wouldn’t find this. She was the one who read this book to me before sleeping. What do you think is about?”

“The book?”

“Yes.”

“A children’s book about, I don’t know, adventures?”

Ilya grins. “Not bad. It’s *Adventures of Dunno*, there are many of them and he always wears blue hat. This is, uh, something like *in the Clouds*. My favourite.”

Something twists in his stomach as he remembers that the woman in the picture is long dead. Maybe because here, at this moment, looking at this picture where she is frozen in time like an insect caught in amber, they are the same age, and he has the odd sensation they could have been friends. She sounds creative, interesting and hilarious.

Only, of course, this photo is from the nineties. By the time Shane learnt of Irina’s existence, she was no longer in this world. By Shane’s age she was already caught in the whirlwind of raising and protecting two children of a difficult man from a difficult man, hiding scraps of happiness between pages like secrets.

“She sounds like a great mom.” Shane says.

“She was.” Ilya nods. “She understood about hockey.”

“She liked hockey?”

Ilya looks confused and Shane understands something got lost in translation.

“*Nyet*, she had no idea about it, but she understood. She learnt piano to move to Moscow and then away. When I started hockey, she thought it was great idea. She knew it was like piano, yes? She knew it was escape too.”

Shane has watched hockey since he had been old enough to sit in front of a TV. It had been a hobby, then a responsibility and later a duty. He knows the name of all the great hockey players, their stats, and their teams. Ilya is nothing like that because he didn't fall into hockey to fulfill some childhood fantasy. Shane has never truly been able to understand where his motivation came from, but now he believes he does. If Ilya had thrown himself at hockey, playing through injuries and fighting everyone in his way like losing wasn't an option, it had never been out of love for the sport, but because he didn't have a Plan B.

"She looks really happy in the picture. Like she was happy to have you, even if..." Shane doesn't know how to express what he's trying to say. "Even if it wasn't easy."

Ilya nods non-committally. "Yes, but only because this was good day. She had many more bad days. But if it's good day, she wanted to do everything. Make *syrniki*, see birds, play piano, write stories, move furniture, paint..." he grits his teeth and seem to struggle with his words, "One time I broke my tooth in half and even breathing hurt because the nerve... it was out?"

Shane cringes. "You had an exposed nerve?"

"Yes, I had that. She was like that too, like exposed nerve. She felt everything, loved everything. My father, well, he didn't like this. It wasn't easy for her to be exposed nerve in our home— where I, where we lived."

Ilya's voice was so surprisingly steady up to this point, it's jarring the way it suddenly cracks and splits into a thousand little pieces as he changes the end of his sentence at the last second. He lets go of the picture like it had suddenly turned into a razor blade and cut his palm open. The movement is so sudden, Shane flinches away on instinct.

"I'm sorry," Shane starts, but Ilya interrupts him in a firm, yet not unkind voice.

"Is okay. All long time ago." He turns his back to him, but it is of no use. Shane can always spot when Ilya is bleeding.

He watches as Ilya begins laying the first layer of bricks one by one, tight against each other. It grows higher and higher as he picks up the pictures and the flower, placing them carefully back into the book before returning it to the shelf on top of the thick tomes like it had never been touched. When he finishes, the wall surrounding him is so high Shane can barely get a glimpse of his curls.

"C'mon, I'll make sandwiches now."

It is always a bit jarring to see Ilya do this, he muses, even as he follows him out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Shane's emotions overpower him to the point where sometimes he needs to turn the lights off and breathe into the quiet for minutes and minutes before he can get a word out. Ilya's emotions are wilder, but he is better than Shane when it comes to stuffing them back into their place.

As Ilya prepares sandwiches, Shane tries to distract himself by studying the squiggly lines of Russian cursive scrawled across a small whiteboard stuck to the fridge. His brain drifts,

uncooperative. Shane has always been the one overly protective of his career, stuck on how much they may lose if anyone found out. Ilya usually keeps his feelings about possibly never stepping a foot in his country again under wraps.

At first, Shane thought Ilya just didn't care for the place. His family is so different from his own, brash and cold, whereas his has always been warm and steady. In Sochi, Shane had watched helplessly as every muscle in Ilya's body locked up, his fear so thick it festered the air around him, turning him cruel.

Russia has never been that welcoming anyway, Shane reflected grimly as he felt Ilya's fear clogging his pores, stealing his oxygen, *maybe some places are only good for leaving*.

How blind had he been back then, how ignorant and naïve. Of course, every country has beloved playgrounds, childhood friends, interesting birds, bedtime books, morning cartoons, summers bathed in sunlight, flowers waiting to be plucked, and graves where loving mothers are laid to rest.

A phone buzzes on the counter. The name is in Cyrillic, but this is one of the few words Shane has seen so many times he can parse out what it means even without understanding the individual letters. *Alexei*.

Ilya ignores the call. "We're eating," he grumbles as he takes a bite from his sandwich. "Good?"

"Great." Shane answers, but the praise doesn't brighten Ilya's mood at all.

The phone chirps once again. *Alexei*. Ilya hurls it violently across the kitchen, where it skids to a stop at the end of the counter with a cracked screen. The cloud over Ilya's head darkens into a sickly gray and Shane smells the ozone in the air. Maybe he should leave and give him space. Shane caught him by surprise after all, and Ilya might be regretting baring his wounds. It's only fair to give him space to lick them clean in peace. As soon as he finishes his last bite, he goes to the sink and washes up.

"I should go."

"Don't." Ilya blurts out so quickly that for a moment Shane is paralyzed against the counter. Then, one arm snakes around his chest and the other plays tantalizing with the drawstrings of his pants. "I'm not done with you yet."

It shouldn't have caught him by surprise, though for some reason it did. Unfortunately, seconds later, it's already hard to remember the reason for his initial reluctance. His brain always misfires when Ilya breathes into the back of his neck like that, his mouth tracing a winding wet path from his shoulder blades up to his ear. Something sizzling hot travels from the spot where Ilya's mouth is open against his throat to each of his extremities. Ilya groans, a low scraping sound, and lowers his hand to the tightness inside Shane's pants.

It happens so fast that when he comes to it, he's already sitting on the kitchen counter, legs spread wide open as Ilya kisses him, opened mouthed and wild. His hands gripping his face, his arms, his thighs, the muscles on his back, mouth desperate like he's about to swallow

Shane whole. Some scrap of sanity in the back of his mind tries to slow it down, to place kisses along the column of Ilya's throat and run a soft hand through his wet curls, but Ilya all but bats them away.

"Okay, okay, slow down a bit, man." Shane chuckles and Ilya nods absent-mindedly.

He picks Shane up easily and drops him on the couch before sliding his right hand inside his underwear to grip him firmly. Shane's breathing hitches as Ilya starts to jerk him off. He attempts to return the favour, his hand tracing the path from Ilya's neck down to his chest, but just as he is pulling the elastic of his shorts down, Ilya flinches and pulls his hips away.

"Not fair," Shane complains.

"You first," Ilya barks out, skilled hand moving more insistently.

"Not fair, you too."

Shane is not completely devoid of tricks. He bends his leg and seeks Ilya's body above him, finding the spot between his legs and using his thigh to grind against Ilya's crotch like he has done so many times. Ilya likes to play up being unaffected, but this usually earns him a stuttering exhale or a choked off grunt. It catches Shane off guard, when he finds nothing to move against. Ilya's dick is not even half hard.

"Serious now, slow down. C'mon." Shane pulls his hand away from Ilya's back and lays it onto the mole on the left side of his face.

The fog in his brain starts to clear, as Ilya obliges and freezes on top of him. Shane can feel everywhere they touch how much Ilya is shaking. He has had the same body trembling on top of him so many times before, but this time it's different. It's wrong.

"Just give it time." Ilya mumbles dismissively and tries to kiss his neck again. Shane wiggles his hips to dislodge the hand around his cock.

"That's not it, it's just, is this actually what you want right now?" Shane stutters out and Ilya nods against his neck, but he's not convinced. He can feel it in his skin that something is very off. "I don't think so. Hey, look at me for a moment, man, I'm trying to talk to you."

Ilya raises his head. There's no half-lidded gaze there, no lust at all. Shane can't find anything in his feverish eyes except frustration.

"I don't want to talk anymore." He snaps and then, so suddenly it surprises them both, a wayward tear escapes out of his eye and lands on Shane's bottom lip, the salty aftertaste lingering on his tongue.

Ilya swears, scrambling away from him to the other side of the couch, and Shane is left cold and confused. Sometimes, just before a match, he'll be strung out so high it's difficult to figure out if what he is feeling is excitement or anxiety. He wonders if Ilya's wires sometimes get crossed too, if it's hard to tell the difference between wanting sex and just wanting someone to stay.

Shane is a terrible sea captain, he never knows how to navigate this thing between them. He doesn't know how far he can sail before he crosses this invisible line they keep pushing, willing themselves to believe it will snap back into place like a rubber band before their next meeting, instead of growing loose from all their reckless stretching of it. He sits next to Ilya, hands wrapping slowly around his shoulders, mimicking Rose's careful fingers as she approaches stray feral cats, whose only defence is attacking.

Ilya tenses and tries to slip out of his grip, but Shane pushes him roughly into his shoulder until they are holding each other. Ilya's breathing is frantic and humid against his collarbone as his hands clutch clumps of his shirt.

"Sorry," Ilya says, even though there's nothing to be sorry for, really.

"No, I'm sorry." Shane doesn't know exactly what he's apologizing for, but he knows he didn't mean to stick a finger into a festering wound. He only ever wants what Ilya is willing to give him, when he is comfortable giving it. "I fucked up. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories."

Ilya chuckles wetly and slides down the couch and Shane goes with him until they're tangled horizontally, legs thrown over each other, Ilya's hands on his waist, and his forehead knocking against his own. He breathes in the familiar coffee scent his shampoo left in its wake. His curls brush against Shane's face when Ilya shakes his head.

"You didn't. I should have looked into her things before. I didn't, because I only remember how—" his face makes a complicated painful shape, but he pushes through it, even as his voice shakes, because Ilya is an expert at playing with bruised ribs. "I only remember how I found her after school. Everything else is just blank. When I think of her, I only remember how her skin was cold."

He can almost see this smaller, younger version of Ilya dropping his backpack at the door and finding his mother cold to the touch, blue fingertips hanging off the couch next to a bottle of pills. It's unfortunate the power a memory like that can have, it makes a sad sort of sense, that it can override years of good ones.

Ilya sniffs and runs an impatient hand under his nose. "Anyway, thank you for finding it. Is good memory. I'm happy to remember her like that."

He doesn't look happy, but Shane understands how happiness is simple as it happens, but can maim when one's looking back. Like grasping a knife confidently, only to find your fingers wrapped around the blade instead of the handle.

"The way you talked about her, it almost feels like we could have been friends." Shane says quietly, hoping it doesn't sound stupid.

Ilya's eyes are still shiny and a bit red, but the corners of his lips pull upwards. "She also ate like bird. You could prepare lots of bird food together."

Shane slaps his arm lightly and Ilya groans dramatically. He remembers suddenly the split lip that had marred Ilya's toothy smile and places an impulsive chaste kiss to the spot he just

targeted. An optimistic part of him would like to believe Ilya fell on the playground due to his daredevil antics, but the more realistic part of him remembers Ilya choking harder on the word *home* than on anything they have ever spoken about before.

“I think I’d like that. Cooking with her, I mean.” He replies, even though he knows it had been a jab. He sees an older version of Ilya’s mother in his mind’s eye. A parallel life where her skin was allowed to wrinkle, her hair to grey and her life to be lived.

“Salad is the only thing she could make because there is no cooking, really. I would pretend to be rabbit.” Ilya explains. “I think I still eat more carrots than it’s probably good for me.”

“Carrots are never bad for you.” Shane replies automatically. “Smoking is bad for you.” Ilya rolls his eyes and hisses familiar sounding Russian expletives against his skin.

“If she was here, she would agree.” They are so close he can see every hue that makes up Ilya’s irises. “I wish you could meet her. I think, no, I’m sure she would really like you.”

The rush of affection he feels is dizzying. Not knowing what to say, he slides closer still until it’s hard to tell where his limbs end and Ilya’s begin. Ilya melts against him and cradles him closer, even as his breathing slows, blending into the silence of his living room. Something in Shane feels lighter knowing that Ilya, who has done his best to drive him away so many times before when they had stumbled too close to each other, decided to take the risk of asking Shane to stay this time.

He allows himself to stare, after Ilya loses his battle against exhaustion. The little towheaded boy hugging his mother so tightly had no way of knowing the majority of their time together was already in the past, or that he possessed enough talent and stubbornness to be catapulted into a wave of success so astounding, he would be hammering together the exit hatch his mother had wished for him before he could even legally drive.

“She’s so fucking proud of you.” He whispers against his skin, even though he reckons Ilya is already fast asleep. “Wherever she is.”

He will never meet Irina Rozanova. He’ll probably never even be able to visit her grave, but he realizes, in the hazy moment between consciousness and sleep, the opposite is not true. Somewhere in the future, Ilya and his mother can meet, talk and sit at the same table. Even though his mother harbours a profound animosity towards his rival, both Yuna and Ilya enjoy cooking, card games, driving too fast and telling Shane what to do. He is pretty sure they’d eventually get along like a house on fire.

His mother would be proud of Ilya, Shane is sure of that, just like she is proud of Shane. Shane would even accept if she were prouder of Ilya, after all, he had fought for longer, and he had been all alone.

Shane had balked at letting Ilya into his home, but Ilya allowed him into his own like it was a given. He shared the memories of his mother freely and Shane knows to treasure that, knows Ilya barely had the time to gather enough of her affection for himself, let alone enough to share. Shane can’t change the past, but he can move forwards differently.

Half asleep, he sees the younger version of Ilya in the sunny park, surrounded by Svetlana and his mother. They had loved him with all they had, a love as essential to his life as oxygen. Nevertheless, compared to him, Ilya must have spent most of his life starving. Shane's life is brimming with such an abundance of love, he can barely find enough space for it, he has to stack it in the most unexpected nooks and crannies of himself. His parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and the children of his friends all swim in his mind wrapping him in a warm, comfortable blanket.

One day he will be brave enough to open all the doors within himself, so that everyone will look at him and see him for exactly who he is. In his dreams, he is already brave. He slams each door open so violently the hinges snap clean off, allowing all the love that surrounds him to flow into Ilya and wrap around him too.

End Notes

TW: discussions of death, suicide, trauma, grief, implied statutory rape and implied child abuse. There's a short scene that could be read as dubious consent (better safe than sorry).

Thanks for reading!

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