

What Was Always There

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What Was Always There

by [Hatchigo](#)

Summary

When a careless comment sends Shane down a path he never expected, he's forced to confront a possibility he's avoided his whole life.

A story about late autism diagnosis and denial, with the quiet, steady support of the man who loves him.

Notes

This fic is very personal to me. A lot of Shane's reactions and thoughts come directly from my own experience being diagnosed as an adult.

I hope that some readers might recognize themselves in it, and maybe realize that it's not necessarily a bad thing, just something different :)

I also want to apologize in advance for any inaccuracies regarding autism diagnosis in Canada. I did my best, but this isn't my system, and mistakes are entirely mine...

Ilya was lounging on the couch in their apartment in Ottawa. Shane was on the other side, squished into the little space left by his boyfriend's annoyingly long legs.

Practice had ended unusually early, but neither Shane nor Ilya wanted to do anything with their evening, except be lazy. For once.

Ilya was very focused on his phone, occasionally humming and nodding to himself. After a while, he suddenly said,

"I didn't know the word for autism in English."

Pause.

Shane frowned, confused. Why did that matter to Ilya? Before he could ask, Ilya continued, whining a little,

"You should have told me the word. You know I like knowing everything about you!"

He even had the nerve to pout at Shane, like it was somehow Shane's fault.

Shane thought carefully before reacting. Had Ilya just insulted him? No, no. Shane had been raised by very open-minded parents. He quickly corrected himself: that wasn't an insult, but a disability-related condition.

But did Ilya call him disabled? Or was it some weird mistranslation of a Russian insult?

After far too much thought, Shane looked around for the nearest Canadian-approved weapon.

The pillow hit Ilya square in the face, right in the middle of his pout. Shane might have used slightly more strength than necessary. But it felt good. Now it was time to teach his boyfriend how to be a nice, respectful member of society.

"It's actually very insulting to autistic people to imply that their disability should be used as a joke," Shane said patiently. "You should be more careful and considerate about people's disorders."

The fact that Ilya looked utterly perplexed was... concerning. Big Red Flag alert!

"Ilya," Shane said slowly, "don't tell me you really think that..."

"I don't really get the issue here," Ilya interrupted. "Do you not want me to acknowledge your... disorder?"

Shane felt his face burn.

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing,” Ilya rushed on. “It’s just your way of thinking that’s different. And it’s beautiful, really.”

Ilya’s visible panic calmed Shane just enough for a realization to hit him.

“Wait,” Shane said. “Are you serious? Do you really think I’m autistic?”

Ilya hesitated before answering softly, “Yes? I just thought you knew?”

Well. Shane couldn’t be mad at him. Obviously. Right?

He was still weirded out, but he forced himself to stay calm. “No, Ilya,” he said with an awkward laugh. “You’re probably confused.”

“I... I don’t think so,” Ilya answered honestly.

Shane froze.

“That’s... random, no?”

“No,” Ilya said, holding up his phone. “According to this website.”

Shane didn’t want to touch the phone. It felt like one of those moments you’d regret later. But Ilya looked so earnest. And Shane had just lectured him about being open-minded.

So really, he had no choice.

The website looked very professional. It belonged to an organization called “Autism Canada”. Too bad for him, there went the excuse that it wasn’t official enough. The homepage declared in bold letters: *“Support autistic and neurodivergent people, their families, and caregivers across Canada.”*

That sounded lovely. Shane didn’t want to scroll further.

He tried to hand the phone back, but Ilya refused. Rude.

So Shane read.

And immediately wondered why it was so hard. He could read anything. Why did this feel unbearable? Why was this subject so sensitive for him?

Oh.

That might be why.

He’d been called “sensitive” throughout his entire childhood. By teachers, coaches, and other well-intentioned adults.

He couldn’t read the rest. Tears stung his eyes. He pretended to keep reading for a moment before Ilya gently took the phone away.

Finally.

Ilya didn't say anything. No questions. He just pulled Shane into his arms, slow and careful. Shane cried softly, and Ilya let him.

After a while, Shane whispered, "I feel so stupid... I don't know why I'm crying."

Ilya hummed quietly. "Maybe sometimes it's hard to discover new things about yourself." After a pause, he added, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize it wasn't something I should say."

Shane wiped his tears and looked up at him with a watery smile.

"No... No, that's not your fault. I think it's just something that's been following me around, and I didn't want to acknowledge it."

"Want to pretend a bit longer?" Ilya asked gently.

"For today, yes," Shane said. "Give me some time, okay?"

"Of course."

And that was it for the evening. No more talk about this strange thing Shane had unconsciously avoided his entire life. Tonight, he wasn't ready.

It took months before Shane thought back on that evening.

Months.

Shane, usually single-minded and ready to face everything head-on, needed *months*.

He was back on the couch. Ilya had gone for a run, and for once Shane had declined. He knew Ilya was worried. Shane refusing a run was unheard of. But Ilya hadn't pushed. He'd kissed Shane on the way out and closed the door softly behind him.

Shane sighed and opened the dreaded website again.

He was ready to learn.

Honestly, the website was great. Clear, colorful, informative. Pleasant to read. Unless you didn't want to recognize yourself in every description. Then it became a terrible reading experience.

Shane spiraled.

The people described here... that was him. This was how they functioned. How were you supposed to realize something this big about yourself as an adult? How stupid was he?

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was all coincidence. Maybe everyone related to this stuff a little.

That was less scary.

Denial was great. Shane loved denial. It had worked for years before he admitted he was gay. This could be his new thing.

He knew it was a stupid plan. But he felt stuck, unable to move forward, unable to decide if it was true or not. Somehow, both options felt equally terrifying.

Ilya came back.

Shane didn't close the website.

Ilya had helped before, in a weird, awkward, mildly traumatizing way, but it had started something. That had to count.

Shane gestured for him to come sit. Ilya did, carefully, like he was approaching a skittish cat.

Shane took a deep breath.

"Okay. I went back to the autism website. It's good. They explain the spectrum, early signs, and characteristics. They talk about how to get diagnosed, which is useful. They even have a YouTube channel, did you know that? I haven't watched the videos yet, but I'm sure they are..."

Ilya raised a hand. "Shane. Breathe."

Shane stopped.

"I'm glad you looked at it," Ilya said. "Do you feel like that's something you want to do? Get a diagnosis?"

Shane deflated. "I don't know if I have the courage to learn the answer."

Ilya looked shocked. "Shane, you're the bravest man I know. Nothing they say will change who you are!"

"I think it will," Shane said quietly. "How I see myself. How I act."

"Then we learn the new you," Ilya said without hesitation. "You decide how you want to act. And I learn a new version of you to love."

"You really think it's that simple?"

"Nothing is simple," Ilya replied. "But sometimes it's still worth it."

That was why Shane needed him. Because no matter how hard things got, Ilya was ready to stand beside him and fight with him and for him.

The following months were strangely unremarkable.

Getting an appointment took time. Shane could've gone private, but he thought the wait would help him prepare.

He was wrong.

He swung constantly between certainty and denial.

"I'm not autistic, you'll see!" he'd say.

Then days later, "It just makes sense, though."

How Ilya didn't lose his mind was a miracle.

The appointment finally came. Unfortunately, on a day Shane was firmly in his "I'm not autistic" phase.

Ilya came with him to the clinic and stayed in the waiting room. They'd arranged privacy carefully. The psychologist was very understanding and made sure to offer him an appointment after the usual opening hours.

The last thing Shane needed was a headline about him seeing a psychologist specializing in adult autism.

The first appointment lasted three hours.

It was exhausting.

They talked about his childhood, social communication, sensory sensitivities, routines, special interests. Shane had thought this part would be easy.

It wasn't.

It felt like everything about him just showed how strange he actually was.

He'd barely spoken at school, except at hockey practice. No friends. He hated the texture of most foods, but blenders had been a lifesaver. He cut every clothing tags out, or he would go insane. Jokes confused him. Hockey wasn't just a passion, it was everything.

Small things. Normal things.

Now they were written down like evidence.

He barely remembered leaving the clinic or meeting Ilya again. He moved on autopilot for the rest of the day.

That night was awful.

Explaining his life like that felt like a violation. Not because it was secret, but because it wasn't supposed to be judged.

Everything he thought was normal suddenly felt fake. He'd been proud of being "normal enough", a successful hockey player, good at interviews, with friends and a boyfriend.

Apparently, autistic adults were just very good at masking.

When he asked, his parents agreed to help with the assessment by writing a short list of things about Shane when he was younger that could be patterns. Instead of a short list, they sent five pages. Small print.

He almost cried.

They explained that at home he'd been happy and social. School had been the problem. They'd done their best to protect him. When he decided early on to pursue hockey professionally, they hadn't pushed for an assessment.

Shane was grateful.

He couldn't imagine trying to become an NHL player as an autistic Japanese-Canadian gay man.

That was too much.

The second appointment came weeks later. Tests. Questionnaires. Logic exercises. Brutal.

The psychologist didn't wait long to schedule a video call for the results.

Ilya was next to him for the call, holding Shane's hand.

It was very anticlimactic.

"Yes," she said, calmly. "You are on the autistic spectrum, with an associated anxiety disorder."

Great, because one thing was not enough for him.

She spoke at length. Ilya listened. Shane mostly felt tired.

A thirty-page report followed by email.

It took months again for Shane to be okay with it.

Not great. Just okay.

He started reading forums. Then posting. Then replying. Anonymous, of course, but it helped.

It was strange, living your life and suddenly questioning why you did things.

Are you taking the time to meticulously fold your clothes every time you get naked because you are used to it or because you won't be able to feel comfortable until it's done? Are you always drinking the same smoothies because it's convenient or because you feel sick at the idea of having something else?

But did it matter?

Shane felt lucky. His family. His boyfriend. His friends. His career.

No, his differences didn't erase any of that.

They made him who he was.

And that was enough.

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