

Snapshot

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Snapshots

by [cheryl123sing](#)

Summary

Shane accidentally discovers a box of Ilya's childhood photos, spanning from babyhood to his teenage years.

Shane wasn't snooping. Really, he wasn't.

He had been looking for tape, that's all. He was pretty sure there was a half-used roll somewhere from the last time they moved furniture, and he opened the wrong closet, nudged aside a pair of old skates, and there it was. A cardboard box, worn soft at the edges, the top folded but not taped shut.

He would have closed it again. He really would have.

But he saw a corner of glossy paper, the unmistakable edge of a photograph, and his name wasn't on the box. Ilya's was, written in thick black marker, the letters sharp and slanted like they'd been written in a hurry.

Shane lowered himself to the floor before he quite realized what he was doing. Inside, the photos weren't organized. They were stacked, loose, some curling with age, a few that obviously went together were joined with paperclips. He lifted the top one carefully, like it might fall apart in his hands.

It was Ilya.

Not the Ilya Shane knew, the one with the sharp mouth and sharper eyes, all confidence and bite, but still undeniably him. A baby, pale sandy curls already forming against his scalp, soft and fine, sticking up in places not entirely dissimilarly to how they often looked now. He was wrapped in a knitted blanket, staring at the camera with that same serious intensity, like he was already forming opinions.

Shane's chest tightened.

He flipped to the next one. A toddler this time, barefoot on what looked like a balcony, sandy curls looser now, falling into his eyes. One small hand was wrapped in a woman's fingers.

His mother.

Shane paused longer than he meant to.

She was stunning. Not in a polished, distant way, but striking all the same—high cheekbones, expressive eyes, a warmth to her face that pulled attention without trying. She was smiling down at Ilya, soft and open, her hair pulled back messily, like this moment mattered more than how she looked in it. There was nothing brittle or strained about her expression. She looked happy. Genuinely so.

That surprised him.

Ilya's mouth was open in laughter, his whole body tilted toward her like gravity worked differently when she was nearby, like the world made sense because she was holding his hand.

There were more photos. Ilya at around five years old, missing a front tooth, standing stiffly in a school uniform that was slightly too big. His hair had been cut short in this one, but the curls were still rebelling, softening the seriousness of his posture. Ilya at about eight or nine in hockey gear, curls escaping his helmet at the edges and sticking damply to his forehead, holding his stick and smirking with a playfulness that was very familiar to Shane. Ilya at ten or so, dripping wet at the edge of a pool, sandy-blond curls soaked and curling tighter from the water, plastered to his head, grinning at the camera.

A family photo stopped him.

His parents stood behind Ilya, his father's hand heavy on his shoulder. His mother leaned in close. She was beautiful here too, effortlessly so. But more than that, she still didn't look unhappy. Her smile was smaller, yes, a little tighter, but her eyes were bright. Present. Like she was trying. Like she still believed something could be held together.

Ilya's curls brushed his collar. He was maybe 11 or 12 years old. Beside them stood a boy a few years older - Alexei. Taller, broader, his smile sharp in a way that made Shane's skin prickle even through the gloss of the photo.

Shane flipped again.

The shift was jarring.

Teenage Ilya now. Taller. His face sharper, cheekbones coming in strong. In one picture his hair was really long, hanging past his shoulders in uneven, punk defiance. Still sandy, still curly, but heavier now, darker at the roots, grown out like a deliberate rebellian. There was eyeliner smudged beneath his eyes, his jaw set like he was daring the camera to comment.

This one stopped Shane cold. Because this was the point where Ilya started to look like himself. The same eyes. The same mouth.

And that was when Shane noticed it.

There was no crucifix.

His gaze flicked instinctively to the teenager's throat. Bare. No chain. No small gold cross resting against his chest the way it always did now. The way it had every single day Shane had known him.

A chill crawled up Shane's spine. It felt like slipping into an alternate universe where things are mostly normal, but just a little bit wrong.

He flipped to the next photo. Same era. Same defiant hair. Same guarded stare.

Still no crucifix.

He went back, scanning earlier photos more carefully now, and landed back on the family photo from before.

Middle school aged Ilya, curls brushing his collar, his parents behind him. His father's hand was still heavy on his shoulder. His mother leaned in close, her face open, luminous even in a casual snapshot.

And around her neck hung the crucifix.

The same small gold cross Shane knew by heart, resting just below her collarbone. It looked delicate on her, like it belonged there. Like it always had.

Shane exhaled slowly.

There were pictures of Ilya and a girl with dark hair who he recognized. Svetlana. In those ones, Ilya's hair was still long and wild, curls falling into his face as he leaned into her space. They were always close. Shoulder to shoulder, foreheads nearly touching. The two of them shared an undeniable sense of intimacy that made Shane feel like he was being punched in the stomach. He couldn't deny that they looked beautiful together. They could have gotten married and had gorgeous kids together, and...

Shane didn't hear Ilya come up behind him.

"What are you doing?"

The voice was flat. Careful.

Shane looked up slowly, guilt flaring hot and immediate.

"I... I was looking for tape," he said, which sounded weak even to his own ears. He gestured helplessly at the box. "I didn't mean to—"

Ilya's eyes dropped to the photos spread across the floor. Something shuttered in his expression, quick and precise, and then it was gone.

"Put them back," he said.

Shane did. Carefully. Reverently. He stacked them as close as he could to how they'd been, even though he knew it wouldn't be exact. He closed the box.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He sat down across from Shane instead, back against the wall, knees drawn up. He stared at the box like it might bite him.

"You kept all of this hidden away in the closet," Shane said after a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Why?"

Ilya let out a breath that might have been a laugh if it hadn't sounded so tired.

"Because it was easier," he said. "Because it was... before."

Shane nodded. He thought of Ilya at twelve. Of a boy that age trying to survive the grief of losing his mother alone. Of a house full of silence and cruelty. And of a woman who looked happy in photographs, who somehow still disappeared from Ilya's life.

"I was just looking for your crucifix in the pictures," Shane said, unsure whether explaining himself would make this better or worse. "I've never seen you without it before."

Ilya stiffened.

"My mom wore it," he said after a beat. "Until she didn't."

Shane swallowed. "She was beautiful," he said quietly. "And... she didn't look unhappy. Not in those pictures."

Ilya's jaw tightened, but his voice stayed steady.

"She wasn't unhappy. Or she hid it well."

"I'm glad you have the necklace now," Shane added.

"I kept it," Ilya said. "Because someone should."

"I liked your mom," Shane said softly. "I mean... I never met her. But she looked like she really loved you."

Ilya swallowed hard, and Shane had a feeling he should stop talking now.

"She did," Ilya said, finally. "She was the only one who did."

Shane hesitated, then reached out, not touching yet, just close enough that Ilya could pull away if he wanted to.

"Would you want to frame one?" he asked. "Of her. Just one. So you didn't have to keep her in a box."

Ilya's eyes flicked up to his, sharp with something like fear.

"I don't need it out," he said immediately.

"Okay," Shane said. "I just—thought I'd ask."

Silence stretched between them.

Shane thought about his parents' house, the walls crowded with framed photos: him in a peewee jersey, him at graduation, him with missing teeth and sunburns and bad haircuts. Proof, everywhere, that he'd been seen. That he'd been loved. That someone had looked at those pictures every day and thought, that's my kid.

"I have people who looked at my photos," Shane said quietly. "My parents still do. They have, like, six different pictures of me on the same bookshelf."

Ilya snorted weakly. "Sounds unbearable."

"Yeah," Shane said, smiling faintly. Then, more seriously: "You don't have that."

Shane's parents loved Ilya. They both knew that. Yuna and David had always treated Ilya like he was their own son, inviting him for holidays, fussing over him when he was sick, cheering

him on at games as though he was their first-born. Shane could see it in every look, every word, every small act of care. But no matter how much they loved Ilya, Shane also knew they could never replace his mother. That hole, the one carved so deep in Ilya's childhood, could never be filled.

Ilya looked down at his hands. When he spoke, his voice was rougher than before. "I look at them," he said. "Sometimes. When I forget what it feels like to be someone's kid. Stop feeling sorry for me. I'm fine."

Shane reached out then, resting his hand over Ilya's. This time, Ilya didn't pull away.

"You're allowed to remember," Shane said. "And you're allowed to keep things that matter to you. Even if they hurt."

Ilya squeezed his fingers once, hard, like that was all he could manage.

"Maybe," he said.

The box stayed where it was. Untaped. Unhidden.

A few weeks later, Shane noticed something different. On the fireplace mantle, among the candles and a photos of Shane and Ilya together, there was now a frame he hadn't seen before. In the frame was a photograph of toddler Ilya and his mother, her smile soft and open, her eyes bright and warm. Ilya was in her arms, curls brushing his collar, a faint hint of that defiant spark already in his gaze.

Shane smiled quietly to himself. It wasn't a big, loud declaration. It wasn't a perfect ending. But it was there. A small, steady reminder that someone had seen him, that someone had loved him.

And for now, that was enough.

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