

wired a little different

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wired a little different

by [Adrenochrome](#)

Summary

Shane was, unfortunately, painfully aware of his autism, regardless of his perceived level of function. Only his parents and his psychiatrist know, as it is something he has guarded from the world for fear of judgment.

But now he is ready to share his secret with Ilya.

Notes

Can't believe these gay hockey boys dragged me out of a 5-year writing hiatus. This series has consumed me.

The brain worms told me that we needed more autism rep, so here we go. I may turn this into a series depending on how I feel.

Shane was, unfortunately, painfully aware of his autism, regardless of his perceived level of function.

Because, yes, from the outside, he could be regarded as an introvert with a passion for his chosen sport, albeit a little awkward in press conferences and interviews, but he indeed passed as neurotypical. So far. He wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible, thanks.

Neurodivergence, much like mental illness and other afflictions, was not something that mixed well with professional sport; you only had to read some of the commentary from the fans and avid watchers to see that. Being different was not a strength in their eyes; there should be no *weakness*, no *excuses*, no *pandering*. The vitriol and general disgust left in the comment section of the Metros team's post about Men's Mental Health Awareness Month were something Shane tried hard to forget, the words leaving a bad taste in his mouth for days.

So, like many people on the spectrum, he masked, and he did a damn good job at it, too. He worked hard on maintaining eye contact with others to give the impression that he was engaged and listening, even when it felt like his whole body was itching. His "macrobiotic diet" was the perfect cover for avoiding foods that were not safe for him. The routine he had built to keep himself grounded and safe was just what he needed to be the incredible hockey player he was, so no one batted an eye when he turned down invitations and social gatherings. Conversations with his team and staff flowed naturally because he had rehearsed everything in his mind two times over, with different possible outcomes. Stimming, which he did not do frequently anyway, was only done in the safety of his own room, out of the view of everyone's prying eyes. Hockey dudes had impaired emotional intelligence anyway, so that one didn't worry him much.

But despite his skill, honed and perfected over his many years of being thrust into social situations and fanfare, it still exhausted him. Game days were already so draining, the physical exertion, the hits, the surge of adrenaline which dropped off fast, leaving a tiredness in his bones so heavy he felt like dead weight. But when coupled with the arduous task of masking for extended periods, it felt ten times worse. Some days, all he wanted to do was walk off into a quiet room and stay curled up until everyone left, until the humming presence that surrounded him faded away so he could be alone with himself, no longer having to play this charade. But that would mean having to say goodbye to hockey, to that addictive feeling of being free on the ice, the sensation of his sharpened blades gliding through the frozen layer, etching lines and scraping up shavings as he cut through opponents, heart thumping so hard it drowned out all of the noise.

He could never give it up. Hockey was everything to him.

So he would play along, he would be the golden boy of Ottawa, showcased for the media and fans, for as long as his mind would tolerate. Because no matter how tired he felt, or how much he wanted to run away, the draw of the sport was always stronger, reeling him back in.

But sometimes... sometimes he just wanted to be himself.

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Throughout his teens and well into his adult years, Shane struggled to build and maintain friendships. He had some friends, people who had adjusted to Shane's peculiarities like they were nothing at all, usually because they were so open and extroverted that they would just say whatever was on their mind, removing the need for Shane to read between the lines and *infer* how they were feeling or what their intentions were. It was almost like they were speaking a language that he could finally understand, one without nuances and double meanings that he just couldn't get, no matter how much he tried. He tried to keep friends like those, like Hayden, close.

He supposed, in a way, that's why he was drawn to Ilya. With English as his second language, bluntness and neutrality just *oozed from him*. If he wanted something, he just said it. If he thought you were an asshole, he would tell you to your face. There wasn't any hidden meaning or carefully curated words that masked an alternative motive. What you saw and heard was very much what you got. The only times he ever really struggled to understand what Ilya was saying were when he literally didn't know how to translate his thoughts into English, which was nobody's fault, really, and was usually remedied with a quick Google search for random Russian words.

Of course, his autism still caused issues. He completely misinterpreted Ilya's attempts at easing Shane into a conversation about sexuality, hearing only the "I like girls" part, sending him on a downward spiral, questioning every interaction they had ever had. *Does he not like me at all? Is this what some friends do? Does Ilya want to stop? Have I made him feel uncomfortable, somehow?* Then he tried to overcompensate, Rose happened, and well, they knew how that all worked out.

Thinking back on it, Shane couldn't believe they had managed to survive it all unscathed—the emotions, the words lost in translation, the miscommunications of epic proportions. But they had somehow built a comfortable life together, a sanctuary where they could hide away from the world's judgmental eyes. This was the most relaxed he had ever felt in his whole life; there wasn't the constant need to portray himself as someone he knew he wasn't, and Ilya, god, that man was incredible. He made Shane feel at home.

He made Shane feel safe.

He made Shane feel *normal*.

His mom would chastise him if she knew he thought that. Yuna and David had drilled into him from a young age that there was no such thing as *normal*; people were all different, quirks and all, which was fine.

But fundamentally, was he normal? It was kind of in the name, neurodivergent. Neuro for brain, divergent to mean different. He was different from the norm. An outlier, a data point so far off the chart it isn't included. So, what was wrong with calling himself abnormal? Or different? It was just a fact, and between the special classes, the therapy, the uncomfortable conversations with his parents when he did something that was perceived as socially “weird”, he had accepted it.

Was he proud of it, per se?

The jury was still out on that one.

Because, despite his life being so entwined with Ilya's to the point where they knew (almost) everything about each other, where they had stripped each other bare and shown the most vulnerable parts of themselves, he still hadn't told Ilya the truth about that part of himself, and he didn't even know why.

It wasn't because he thought Ilya wouldn't understand, because he was sure he would; the man was way more intelligent than people realized. It definitely wasn't because he thought Ilya would judge him, because surely he would have been judged for other things by now,

right? Ilya seemed to love him unconditionally, putting his whole career at risk just to be with Shane in this way.

Shane had only reached one possible conclusion; it was because he didn't want to be treated like he was fragile. When he masked, when he played the part of Shane Hollander: hockey player extraordinaire, when he smiled at the cameras and laughed along with their jokes, he was just that. Just Shane.

But the moment he said it, he wouldn't just be Shane, he would be Shane the autistic guy, the one who hates eye contact and scratchy fabric, the guy with a weird obsession with hockey stats and numbers. He would lose the ability to be perceived solely for his hockey skills. How would Ilya see him? As someone whom he had to walk on eggshells around? Someone he had to speak to like a child because sometimes he didn't understand why someone felt a certain way? Would he see him in a totally different light, and would Shane hate it?

Would he change?

Shane hated change.

But he also hated the idea of lying to Ilya.

Huffing, he turned to face the other way. At night, when he was alone with his thoughts, he often spiralled like this. The silence could sometimes be overwhelming, and he felt the need to fill the void internally. When he lived alone, he would sometimes hum to himself, soothing himself. But Ilya was totally zonked out next to him, so he wanted to stay as quiet as possible.

He felt itchy under his skin again. He settled on gently rubbing his feet together to try to regulate himself.

Glancing over, he could see Ilya sprawled out, one arm slung over his eyes, mouth open slightly as he breathed steadily. In the dim light that filtered in from the closed curtains, he could see the reflective edge of Ilya's cross, nestled right where it belonged in the dip of his

collarbone. Shane signed. Of course, his boyfriend was sleeping soundly while he was having an existential crisis.

Hah, boyfriend.

Ilya had spent so much time with him that he almost wondered if he already knew. His mom had told him before that when he was in the comfort of his own home, he definitely allowed himself to be more... open? He had kind of given her a questioning look, only for her to gesture to his hand, resting on the side of his glass, rhythmically tapping in a pattern as he talked about the morning's practice, enjoying talking about his favourite topic.

"You're stimming," she had commented, a knowing smile on her face.

On reflex, Shane had immediately hidden his hand, ignoring her comment and continuing. But he knew she was right.

There must have been an occasion when Ilya had seen him do something, had he just not questioned it? Ilya did think North Americans were weird in general; maybe he felt that Shane was just odd because he was foreign.

Or maybe he was blinded by love and didn't know.

Shane rubbed at his eyes hard enough to see stars. To a certain degree, he was still masking in front of Ilya. Was it time for him to let the mask fall and be himself?

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When Ilya began to rouse from his sleep, Shane had already been awake for 43 minutes. He had watched the rising sun cast shadows across his bedroom, taking in the different shapes and patterns as he flexed his toes repeatedly. He was anxious at the prospect of having this conversation, and he had rehearsed a few things, but he was still not sure. What if Ilya wanted him to explain it to him? He didn't really know how to do that. He had barely

comprehended what the child psychiatrist had said to him as a fresh-faced seven-year-old, using words that were so foreign to him, trying to explain to him why he didn't *feel* the same way. If he couldn't even manage that, how could he explain it to someone who was not totally fluent?

Ilya groaned ever so slightly, stretching his arms out high above him, letting them fall slowly as he blinked, eyes searching for Shane, who was lying rigid on his back.

“Hey, c'mere,” Ilya had mumbled, accent thick, shifting his body to pull Shane closer to him, strong arms encircling him in a way that he knew Shane liked.

He practically melted at the touch, worry easing away at the light compression from Ilya's hold. Ilya was so damn warm despite his lack of clothing.

“Why were you lying so far away? You trying to run away from me, hm?” Ilya grumbled, words slightly muffled by Shane's hair.

Luckily, Shane could tell from Ilya's changed tone of voice that he was joking. He hummed into the man's chest, moving his arms to return the hug. Ilya still smelled faintly of his body wash, something minty and fresh. Shane enjoyed the clean smell.

“Just thinking,” he stated, because really he was.

“What are you thinking so hard about? Is it me?” and Shane could literally hear the smirk on Ilya's face. So smug.

He scoffed lightly. “Sort of, yeah.”

Ilya took that as an invitation to continue, hand trailing lower from the small of Shane's back towards the elasticated strip of his underwear, playfully. “Hmmm, were you thinking of me with no clothes on?”

Shane prodded Ilya's side with his index finger, getting a light "ow" from the other man.

"Okay, okay. But really, tell me what is on your mind. You were thinking so hard I could hear the gears turn in your head." Ilya relinquished his tight grip on Shane, leaning back ever so slightly to study Shane's expression. Shane mourned the loss of touch.

Ilya's eyes were all over him; his expression seemed... curious? Shane wasn't sure whether it was worried curiosity or if he genuinely wanted to know. Small changes in someone's expression always tripped him up.

"Ilya..." he started, trailing off ever so slightly as his brain worked out which pre-rehearsed phrase was the best to go with. All of them sounded like garbage.

"Shane..." he mimicked, and Ilya's eyes narrowed at him. Was he mad? Or was he just waiting?

Clearing his throat, Shane felt his toes wiggling again. Fuck.

"Do you think I'm weird?" he managed to get out, which was not really what he wanted to say.

Ilya's gaze softened, the corner of his lips curling up in a smirk. "I think you are weirdly smart and beautiful, yes. Why?"

"Well, thank you, but that's not really the kind of weird I meant," he said, a little quicker than he usually would, a slight blush creeping across his cheeks.

"Well, what do you mean by weird?" Ilya asked back, and Shane could hear that Ilya was moving from his typically playful cadence to something more serious.

Shane let out a big sigh. “Okay, I don't know how to word this without sounding weird, but just follow me, please.”

Ilya nodded, huddling up closer to Shane.

“Well, I have this thing...it's called autism. You've heard of it before, right?” Shane's mouth felt so dry, and he swallowed, eyes searching Ilya's face for any minuscule changes in his expression.

Breaking their gaze, Ilya hummed, pensive. “I heard it before... at charity event, but I don't really know what it is. Is it serious?”

There was a pause where Shane contemplated how to proceed. Was it serious? It really depended on who you asked. “It's a brain thing,” was how he answered.

For a fleeting moment, Shane saw Ilya's eyes widen. Fear, perhaps? “Brain thing?”

“Oh, no, it's not like a disease. Um, the way my brain is wired is just... different?” Shane had never felt so awkward in his life, stuttering as he fumbled over words that he'd never really said out loud.

“Different...” Ilya repeated, acknowledging that he was following.

“Well, it's a developmental thing, where you struggle with certain things and excel at others. For me, social interactions are complicated, and loud noise is uncomfortable. But I really like patterns and numbers.”

Ilya nodded slightly, fingers lightly brushing Shane's side. “I think I know what this is.”

Oh? That puzzled Shane slightly. “You know what autism is?” and he couldn't help the quizzical tone in his voice.

Ilya nodded again, more sure this time. “I read an article in New Scientist. It discussed this, I believe. I forgot the name of it, though.”

Shane blinked.

“Yes, sometimes I read New Scientist,” Ilya stated.

“Okay...” Shane trailed off, imagining Ilya with glasses perched on his nose, flicking through the pages of New Scientist while waiting for a flight. The image was certainly something.

“You have this, yes?” Ilya stated, bringing Shane back to his senses.

“Yes. I was diagnosed as a kid. Officially and everything,” he added. While Ilya might be familiar with the concept of autism, he probably wasn’t aware of the idea of self-diagnosing.

Shane watched as Ilya processed the information for a second, almost like he was connecting some faint dots. “Huh,” he said. “That does explain some things, Shane Hollander.”

That statement certainly caught Shane’s full attention. He shifted suddenly, feeling brushed cotton sheets touch him in a few places, the sensation ever so slightly comforting. “Does it?”

Shane had contemplated the idea of Ilya being aware, but he had not anticipated this response. He wondered how many things he had seen him do, the expressions that he could not hide, the aversions to certain things that made him want to peel his skin off. Had Shane been oblivious to Ilya’s perception?

Ilya smiled, pulling Shane back into his strong arms. For a moment, Ilya must have felt Shane wiggling his toes frantically as their legs tangled. “My love, I know there are things you do, like when you fold your clothes, you always put them down in the order that you

would be putting them back on again, or how you have to wash plates before you wash bowls. I see you get lost in puzzles, you watch the same three movies over and over, you like ketchup but not raw tomatoes-

“It’s the texture!” Shane defended himself, which made Ilya laugh and tighten his hold.

“Yes, it is the texture; it is too slimy for you. I also notice how you like me to hold you tight, like bear hug,” To emphasize his point, he squeezed Shane lightly, earning a content hum in response.

“But... I always thought that was just you, my Shane Hollander.”

Well... Ilya wasn’t wrong. Autism is such a vast spectrum, with such a variety of different ways it can manifest. Some people loved socks, some couldn’t stand them. Some people physically stimmed, some vocally. Some could mask, some couldn’t. Of course, the things that Shane experienced were unique to him because he was unique. Perhaps some things were more personality-related, just accentuated by the autism. There wasn’t really a way to tell, unless he suddenly woke up one day feeling neurotypical.

“These things don’t make you weird, they make you, you,” Ilya continued. “Doesn’t make me love you any less. Plus, I like raw tomatoes, so it benefits me,” he laughed slightly at the end.

Shane chuckled at that, too, returning the light squeeze, feeling Ilya’s firm body under his touch.

“Ilya?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you, too—a lot. I’m not the best at perceiving emotions, even my own, but I know for a fact I love you more than anything.”

Ilya's hand shifted from Shane's side to his cheek, the man's hands surprisingly soft as he guided Shane's lips to his own. "Ya tebya lyublyu," he said gently, after the soft kiss.

Shane seemed to let out a deep breath that he didn't realize he was holding. It really did feel like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything earlier. I just don't like it when people treat me differently."

Ilya hummed again, thumb gently stroking Shane's cheek, absentmindedly making the man melt at the touch. "Is okay. It does not change anything for me. Human brains work weirdly, don't they? Some people are good with other people, some have good hand-eye coordination, some are like me, hot and good and hockey, yes?"

That earned a full laugh from Shane.

"Yes, you are hot and good at hockey. I'm bad with people, but good at hockey."

"Ah, but you are hot too. Don't forget that, my love."

They settled into a comfortable hold, Ilya gently feeding his fingers through Shane's inky hair. This was one of Shane's favourite sensations, from his favourite person. The morning light was bright enough now that not even the thin curtains could block it out, so he took the opportunity to drink in the sight before him. Ilya's smooth skin, doused in golden light, the thick curls of his hair, illuminated in varying shades of blonde and light brown, the perfect structure of his facial features, sharp yet so ethereal. This man was truly everything Shane had ever wanted.

And even though sometimes he didn't like himself, he could find comfort in knowing that Ilya wanted him, regardless of his quirks.

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