

Anonymous

Prof. Chris

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The Tide That Turned

“Where is he?” my extended family and friends exclaim. A cold shiver climbs up my spine, like a squirrel climbing a tree, running from an unknown presence. I slowly creep away from my father’s back and frailly mumble, “Con chào Cô. Con chào Chú,” a respectful Vietnamese greeting used to address others who are older than you. The parents behind them stared at me, and I started to overthink. *Did I say something wrong? Should I run upstairs to my friends? Does my hair look weird today?* I try to walk off politely, hoping to turn attention away from myself. The dreadful thought of going back downstairs to pick up food for myself haunts me every time. The voices in my head whisper, *Am I grabbing too much food? What if I don’t get enough vegetables? Is it okay to grab this? Is anyone going to notice?*

Anxiety: A feeling of nervousness and unease that fills someone up, usually due to an event. How can one small word wash over me like a wave crashing along the shore, taking sand as it goes? Is the word “Anxiety” even small? It comes in many forms, and the one I have is social anxiety. Social anxiety stems from self-consciousness, embarrassment, and nervousness during interactions. Nonetheless, social anxiety is often misunderstood. Many think that people who have social anxiety choose to isolate themselves because they are shy. However, this is not

applicable in many cases. I don't avoid people because I want to; I do it because I'm afraid of saying the wrong things, being judged, or not being enough. I frequently catch myself overthinking every word, every action, even long after the interaction has ended.

A room full of eager kids awaited my arrival. I fixed myself up to look presentable and waited for the room to quiet down. Swinging the door open, I roared out like a wild animal, "Stand out of my way, for the savage beast has arrived!" As a kid, my friends would describe me as a bundle of joy - the life of the party. I always tried to entertain others, which made me happy in return. The room exploded with laughter and applause as I confidently walked towards my spot on the bed.

Back then, I always had my ways of making people smile; it was like a gift made just for me. Every absurd story, joke, and dance crafted energy around me, energy that I consumed. But as I grew older, things suddenly changed. The glimmer of joy from my childhood started to disappear. *What if they don't laugh? What if they think I'm weird? What if they make fun of me?* My outgoing words transformed into self-conscious questions. I found myself watching as others dominated the game I used to rule.

I never imagined I would miss that fearless kid, the one who kicked down doors and shouted out corny lines. But sometimes, when I doze off in class, I hear a whisper: *I'm not gone yet*. And maybe, just maybe, he's right.

Joy rushes through me like a gust of wind on a chilly autumn day. "There won't be school for the next few days? Sweeeet," I blurt out, ringing my friend's number. Days turn to

weeks, and weeks turn to months. Our hangouts slowly fade away as a sudden shift in circumstances arises. Then, an announcement is displayed on our screens: COVID-19, a virus outbreak that had many fatal cases in the matter of days. An international call for quarantines and isolations are set in place. *No more school. No more sandman at the parks after a long stressful week of exams.* “What does this mean?” I cry out as panic seeps into my voice. “I’m sorry, son,” my parents gently say. “You won’t be able to meet up with your friends for the time being. Don’t lose hope; this will all end soon,” my father and mother assure me.

With nothing but time and Wi-Fi, my world soon shrank into screens. Google meets during the day, Discord and videogames by night. Anime Adventures, a tower defense game on Roblox became our lifeline. “I need to go eat. Sorry,” my friend says in disappointment. “Can’t you just bring your food to your setup? We can’t miss out on the raid, especially with the weekend luck boost.” I beg. The longing for better units and chaotic voice chats brought laughter into my world, even when things felt heavy on the outside. But not everything was great. Interactions with those I used to be familiar with got harder. When going to the grocery store, having eye contact with others felt like a challenge. My words stumble like beads in a rain stick. While passing by a neighbor, someone I used to talk to at the bus stop, we exchanged awkward waves, almost as if we never knew each other. *Have my social skills really gone downhill?*

I wasn’t always like this. Where did things go wrong? My view of the world changed, and so did my reflection. A dark, never-ending void filled the gaps beneath my eyes. A growing, heavy consciousness made its nest in my head. The constant echoes of doubt and melancholy bounced through the walls of my mind like disks in a Plinko board. A familiar face approaches me as I walk along the aisle with my mother at an Oriental Market. “Hey, Chris! It’s been so

long! How have you been?" *Do I know her? Why can't I remember her face? Oh. Of course. She was one of my best friends before the pandemic.* "Hey! How have you been doing?" I ask, trying to sound normal. "I can't stop thinking about our old friends. We should reconnect with everyone." A sudden spark of hope shoots up my spine. *Is this what I've been waiting for? Is this what he's been waiting for?* "Sure. I'd love to get back together." A long-awaited reunion with my old, dorky crew. An opportunity to leave behind the shadow I had been dragging and start being myself again. This time, I wasn't trying to entertain others for their approval. I laughed, spoke, and acted for myself. That marked the beginning of my final year of middle school, 2022. A time when I finally started to feel like myself again.

"Cô khỏe không?" (Are you doing fine?) I finally stepped out from behind my shield, the one that only stopped me from connecting with my family. "I'm doing great, thanks for asking! You must be hungry, go get some food!" I politely bowed to my aunt and walked toward the island full of trays with food. *Am I grabbing too much food? What if I don't get enough vegetables? Is it okay to grab this? Will anyone notice?* My thoughts slowly fade away as I grabbed a plate filled with delicious Vietnamese cuisine. I walked over to the kid's table (the tables were separated between adults and kids) and set my plate down near a cousin I hadn't talked to since I was a kid. "Hey, what music do you listen to?" The words came out before I could stop them, like doors that were meant to be swung open. Anxiety is a common emotion felt by people all over the world. But it shouldn't cause you to turn away from your goals in life. For me, anxiety has blocked many pathways to opportunities I had facing me the entire time. But it has also taught me to give myself another chance, to think critically and act with intention. Anxiety had washed over me like a wave crashing along the shore, taking sand from beneath me. But this time, it stripped away my doubts and replenished my authentic self.

