

Shy Young Thing

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I'm standing on the fringes of a room full of strangers and a familiar sensation is seeping through my body. It's as if someone has snuck up behind me and spiked my drink, so that instead of a glass of mineral water, I'm now sipping a kind of sparkling, liquid concrete. My limbs are growing rigid, my neck is seizing up and my smile is turning into one of those insane grins on the faces of young ballet dancers whose pointe shoes are actually killing them.

It's a Saturday night in winter and I've been at this birthday party for about half an hour. My fella's football team won this afternoon and he's had a couple of whiskies somewhere between leaving the stadium and meeting me at the party, and now I can't find him in the crowd. I'm over forty but feeling about fourteen, and I'm sidling towards the door. The car needs to be moved, I tell myself. An hour won't be long enough, there must be a better park somewhere close by. (Or far away. At home, perhaps.) Anyway, I'll just go and move it, shall I?

My movements have become as fluid as a cat after a bird. Putting down my glass of fizzy concrete, I take three steps and I'm out the door and free and moving fast now, so fast it must look suspicious but I can see the car and I'm pressing the blue button on the key ring and the headlights are flashing and I've got hold of the handle and now I'm inside the car and alone and safe.

If it wasn't so ridiculous, I'd be laughing out loud. What's a polite, middle-aged woman like me doing leaving a party without even saying goodbye to her fella, let alone to the birthday girl?

Resorting to the shy person's technology-of-cowardice, I pull out my mobile phone and send him a text message, apologising for my disappearance and telling him I'll see him later. Then I start the car and, with limbs once again leaden, drive slowly back home. Pathetic.

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A memory. It's some time in the early 1980's and I'm at a holiday music camp in an old bluestone boarding school. I squeeze myself onto a bench at the long communal breakfast table. The dining room is full of people I've never met, and as I pick up my spoon, shyness strikes like a sudden palsy. The spoon full of soggy cereal begins to shake, and I have to put it down. There are two certainties in my mind, and they are entirely contradictory. First: everyone is looking at me, and second: I am completely invisible. If only the latter were true.

A thin boy with lips bruised a deep pink from the pressure of his trumpet mouthpiece sits down opposite me and introduces himself. I blush and stammer but somehow manage to have a conversation with him—and spend the next two weeks mistaking profound gratitude for romantic love. Turns out he comes from a city on the other side of the country, so I don't have to live with my mistake. But several decades later, I remember his kindness and am grateful still.

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According to a website called *shakeyourshyness.com*, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein and Ella Fitzgerald were all painfully shy. In fact, no less than eighty immortals are outed on this website as the kind of people who'd probably scuttle away from parties with the least provocation.

Strangely enough, it's possible that Einstein would have felt entirely comfortable speaking to a thousand awestruck fans of his theory of relativity from the Nobel Prize-winners' stage —just as Ella Fitzgerald was able to improvise her way confidently through a memory lapse while singing

'Mack the Knife' live in Berlin in 1960. Shyness doesn't necessarily impede public performance, especially when you don't have to interact one-on-one with your audience.

Fitzgerald's performance on that Berlin stage, complete with brand-new rhyming lyrics and a wicked impersonation of Louis Armstrong, is interspersed with girlish giggles as she gives up trying to remember the original words and surrenders to the moment. Offstage, she may have been reserved and self-conscious, but onstage, she is clearly enjoying herself.

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A memory. Some time in my early twenties I talk my way into a job as a national environment campaigner. It's as if someone else has taken over my brain. I walk in knowing very little about the Australian Conservation Foundation's history or goals and come out charged with the responsibility of alerting the nation to the looming threats of radiation contamination, ozone depletion and global warming. Two weeks into the job, I have to speak to a crowd of twenty thousand people at an anti-nuclear rally. Yet again I am inhabited by an alien, one who's never heard of the word 'shyness', and who is filled with the righteous conviction that the citizens of Planet Earth must be saved from self-destruction.

My family is astounded. Wasn't I the child who'd had to be dragged out from behind the pages of a book whenever visitors dropped in? Wasn't I the teenager who'd been so socially stricken that she'd avoided all school dances? What on earth had happened?

The answer, I decided many years (and several careers) later, is that if I was representing someone or something else, I could be virtually fearless. Any public role would do—ACF campaigner, ACTU arts officer, ABC presenter—I wasn't me, but the embodiment of an idea - *save the world, inspire the workers, enlighten the listeners* - and if I believed strongly enough in that idea, the symptoms of shyness would magically disappear.

But those professional initials offered me no protection at social events. And after I'd done a runner from that birthday party, I gave myself a very hard time. Just as reformed alcoholics berate themselves every time they fall off the wagon, shy people often mentally beat themselves up every time the mask drops and their social anxiety is revealed to the world.

I tried to remember previous victories in my battles with this thing; evenings where I've gone from wanting to disappear into the wallpaper to swapping email addresses with half the party guests. How has distress been converted to pleasure? Alcohol often helps, but that night I was on the wagon, in preparation for a singing recital – hence the mineral water. Does that put me into that clichéd category of grog-dependent social animals?

Self-flagellation gradually gave way to genuine curiosity. To control something, surely you must first of all try to understand it. What exactly IS shyness, and how do other shy people feel? Are all quiet, introverted people shy? And does shyness ever magically disappear?

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Psychologists talk about shyness in the context of *temperament*, a term I first became acquainted with just over two decades ago, when I spent a summer squeezing a stapler. During a hiatus between completing my undergraduate degree and heading overseas with a backpack, I sat in a sweltering university office for weeks, collating and stapling pages of typed questions before shoving them into envelopes. The envelopes were being mailed out to 2500 mothers of newborn infants, the first batch of thousands of questionnaires that would be sent out over the next twenty-four years to the participants in a new Australian study of temperament.

The researchers were interested in how temperament could be measured and, if so, how early in development. Could they identify children with easy or difficult, shy or sociable types of temperament? And was temperament stable across time, or did it change as children grew into adulthood?

These questions were about to become very pertinent to me, as I prepared for six months of solo

travel in Europe. Six months of staying in youth hostels full of complete strangers; six months without friends, family members or my usual routines; six months of making decisions—alone—about how to fill every minute of every day. For a shy person, this was somewhat akin to holding your hand over a burning flame, to see just how much suffering you could endure.

Psychologists have discovered that shy, timid children have a neural circuitry that is highly reactive to even mild stress. They sweat more than so-called bold children and their hearts beat faster in response to new situations; they are paralytically anxious in company; and they treat any new person as though they were a potential threat.

Their distress is both physical and psychological, and I knew mine would be too, as soon as my backpack hit the luggage carousel in Rome airport. But I also suspected, way back then, that if I didn't confront these fears, they could rule my life.

As it happens, one of the architects of that Australian Temperament Project was psychologist Professor Margot Prior—my mother. And now, after more than two decades of analysing those questionnaires, few people in the world know more than she does about temperament.

According to Margot, shyness is 'an inborn but not immutable biological disposition'. As children, we all fit somewhere on a spectrum called 'approach-withdrawal', ranging from the most engaged, extroverted kids who are happy to be with anybody, to the most withdrawn kids who hang their heads, won't pay attention and seem fearful and anxious.

Not all withdrawn people are shy, though, and not all anxious people avoid approaching others. As Margot explains it, kids who are very shy are more vulnerable to becoming anxious, but not all shy kids become anxious adults, and many adults who are anxious have not been shy kids.

There are plenty of introverted people who couldn't be described as shy because they don't actually find it distressing being in company – but their preference is for being alone, in their own world.

Perhaps Albert Einstein doesn't belong on the honour roll of the 'shakeyourshyness' website after all. Perhaps he just found physics infinitely more interesting than humans, and the scientific community should thank their lucky stars that he did.

I envy shy kids in twenty-first-century Australia. They can choose to socialise while sitting alone in front of a PC, interacting without having to be physically proximate. They can join invisible communities of people who share their interests, and create semi-fictional characters to inhabit while conversing with other (possibly semi-fictional) young folk.

During my own adolescence, there were no PCs, no chat groups and no avatars. Most of my vicarious experience of the world came from books, and as a teenager I spent many weekends lying under the glare of a bedside lamp, avoiding new, interesting and unpredictable social interactions in order to read about them.

At some point, though, it became obvious to me that vicarious experience would not suffice. I wanted a larger life than the one bounded by my innumerable, irrational fears. Just as Ella Fitzgerald had done when the safety net of song lyrics disappeared from her mind, I wanted to be able to make it up as I went along.

So what makes the difference between a shy, timid child who remains a shy, timid adult, and an adult who overcomes their social anxiety—if not by completely eradicating it, then by finding a way to suppress or re-direct all that nervous energy?

According to Margot, there are two clear choices for shy folk. They can either steer clear of situations where they might become paralysed with shyness, or they can decide to try and change. And part of what helps is desensitisation to the situations that they find uncomfortable, by having experiences which help them to develop confidence that it'll be all right out there—that they'll be acceptable.

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A memory. I'm sitting on a narrow bed in a youth hostel on the Spanish coast just south of Barcelona, feet resting on my backpack, listening to the murmurs of some young men in the next room. Their words are muffled by the door between us, but from the pitch of their cadences, they sound like they might be English. I am rigid with indecision. Four months into my European travels, easygoing interaction has become a craving that no amount of churros con ciocolata can satisfy. The two Canadian travellers who briefly adopted me in Italy have headed home, and it's been almost a week since I've had a conversation in my native tongue. The staccato sounds of the glottal stops coming from next door are unmistakable now, and I really want to know what they're saying.

And yet they are strangers. What if I can't think of anything to say to them? What if they don't want to talk to me? What if they're quite happy with their own company, thanks very much, and don't need some random Aussie bird barging into their boy's own adventure? What if they can smell my loneliness?

I sit there in the empty room, armpits drenched, locked in battle with myself as one form of distress competes with another.

Finally something tips and I stand, take the three steps to the door and knock. The voices go quiet and after a little while I knock again and, without waiting for permission, I open the door. And the world does not come to an end.