O

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O'S BIG BOOK OF HAPPINESS

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WISDOM, WIT, ADVICE, INTERVIEWS, AND INSPIRATION

RELAX....YOU...ARE... GETTING...BOLDER!

Beverly Donofrio was shy, mute at parties, and thought talking to strangers was a good way to ruin an evening. Then she had a session with a hypnotist, and she'll tell you all about it once she gets the lampshade off her head.

A few years ago, when I complained to my latest, greatest, and now past therapist that I didn't want to go to some party I was invited to, I'd be bored, have nothing to say to people—whom I wouldn't like and who wouldn't like me—she pinned me with her penetrating gaze and said, "You're a shy person."

I didn't believe my therapist. Even though I did remember suffering paroxysms of dread whenever I might be called on in elementary school, and how I would sit for an hour salivating in front of a candy bowl at a relative's and still refuse the candy once it had been offered because I was too shy. But that was a long time ago. Shy adults can't make eye contact; they dress plainly and turn red if you compliment them. I am not like that at all. I can be a flamboyant dresser, I meet your eye, and positively glow from attention and praise. I can even, if in the mood, be gregarious.

Sure, I often turned down an invitation, but I thought I was merely a recluse or maybe a wet blanket until the afternoon I took a beta-blocker and experienced what it is like to truly not be shy. A few of us had made up a song and dance routine to perform at a friend's wedding as a toast. Before the performance, I took a beta-blocker, offered by a musician who claimed she could not be a performing oboist without it. Beta-blockers are disinhibitors, often prescribed for people who have to speak or perform in public. I didn't take the pill sufficiently in advance to calm my nerves during the performance, but by the time I took my seat at the dinner table, it had kicked in. I am certain of this because of the outrageous idea I had: I should talk to somebody I *didn't* know.

After I talked to a dozen perfect strangers—and table-hopped to do it—instead of going home after the wedding reception, I went looking for a party I'd been invited to. I'd left the address at home because never in a million years had I expected to go. I couldn't find the party, so I drove into town to hear my friend Roland (who'd been inviting me for a year) play jazz at a bar. It felt a little awkward to walk into a bar alone on a Saturday night, but not awkward enough to stop me. As I sat down and ordered a lemonade—Sundays are my favorite days and I didn't want to risk a hangover—it occurred to me that I was having fun. It also occurred to me this was probably due to the beta-blocker. I felt calm and easy, curious. It wasn't like being drunk, when you might say or do outrageous things. On the beta-blocker, I was behaving in the way I'd always aspired to: I was open, spontaneous, friendly.

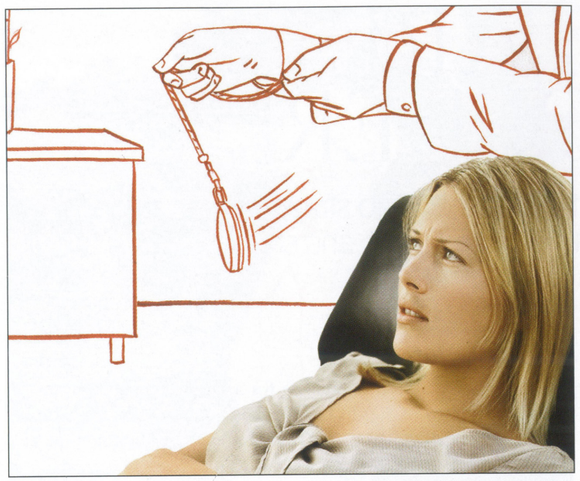
At the bar, I struck up a conversation with the couple sitting beside me. They were tourists in my town, and when they told me they were thinking of returning for a month in the summer, I suggested that they might like to rent my house because I'd be away then. We made a date for them to come by on Sunday at 2 in the afternoon.

The next morning, no longer under the influence of the beta-blocker, I had a mini breakdown. Strangers interrupting my Sunday? And I'd have to talk to them. The old panic rushed in. Talking was easy last night, but it wouldn't be today, and they wouldn't like me. I taped a note to my door apologizing for being unable to meet with them and then went about my solitary day—until 2 o'clock, when there came a knocking at my door. Actually, it was a banging. Evidently the note had blown away. I didn't answer, and the strangers didn't go away. Once I'd failed to respond, it was impossible to answer the door. They knocked on neighbors' doors. They waited on the stoop. I crouched on my bed, my arms over my head, like I'd been taught to do as a kid in case of nuclear attack.

I felt awful—selfish, mean, and a little nuts. I was beginning to suspect there was something wrong with me. A few nights later, I knew there was. I'd stopped in the middle of town to watch a procession, which in my Mexican town is about as common as cornflakes for breakfast is in the States. An attractive man on the other side of the street smiled at me. I smiled back, then immediately cast my eyes to the ground and turned my back. I sensed him cross the street to stand next to me. I thought to myself, *Say something. Talk to him.* I could not think of a single word, nor could I look at him. Eventually, he moved away and I went home.

That night I couldn't sleep for recalling all the times shyness had tripped me up. I'd gone to Guatemala to study Spanish for three weeks and never once struck up a conversation with anyone the entire time—in Spanish or in English. I'd noticed the starving street dogs and how they slunk around anticipating a kick, and on a particularly low day I decided I was like them. Afraid of people, anticipating a kick in the pants metaphorically. Shyness, I realized, was a defense mechanism, meant to place a distance between me and people, between me and hurt. But like most defenses, after a time it had turned on me and become the source of hurt.

I'd spent too many years and thousands of dollars to want to jump back on the therapeutic couch. And I didn't think even a Herculean act of will could make me flirtatious and friendly, open and at ease, but I did believe hypnotism could. A year earlier, my friend Amy, who had been complaining that she'd lost her soul ever since she became the president of her own company, had been hypnotized to "feel her feelings." The hypnotist put her under and spoke to her unconscious. "I know in the past there were very good reasons for Amy not to feel her feelings," he said. "But she'd like to feel them now. So can we let her feel her feelings



for three months? If it doesn't work out, she can go back to not feeling them." Amy told me she immediately started feeling her feelings and she still did, although sometimes she wished she didn't. A few weeks after Amy told me about being hypnotized, I sat next to a Lacanian analyst at a dinner party who said, "Psychoanalysis doesn't work; hypnotism does."

Two positive mentions in two weeks were enough to make me want to give hypnotism a go. Amy recommended a hypnotherapist in Toronto. When I called Debbie Papadakis and said that I wanted to be hypnotized for shyness, she said, "Good for you. You're going to change in ways you can't even imagine. This will affect your entire life."

Even as I realized that Debbie had just planted a suggestion, the possibility of being comfortable in my own skin sent a tingly sensation right through me.

Debbie said, "If you want to take a long time and have somebody hold your hand, I'm not for you. I like results."

We met for six hours. I told her that one of my beliefs is that I am difficult and boring, and that people, most often men, don't like me.

Debbie explained that she would put me into a deep relaxed state. Then she would ask me questions derived from the exhaustive questionnaire she'd sent me. She told me that we probably wouldn't deal directly with shyness, since shyness encompassed so many issues. "Think of a circle," she said, and drew one on a piece of paper. "And all these little circles around the circumference are your issues. They're all connected, see?" she said, drawing lines crisscrossing from all the little circles to the other little circles. "What do you think happens if one of these little circles unravels? All the connections start unraveling. So you see, we don't have to unravel all your issues, only some."

I sat in a reclining chair as Debbie asked me to close my eyes and imagine walking down stairs toward a beautiful, peaceful scene. Each step I descended drew me deeper down and made me more relaxed. When she asked me to open my eyes, I couldn't. Maybe I could—I wasn't sure—but I was sure I didn't want to. When I couldn't count backward from 100 past 97, I was under. It felt like being all cozy in bed the moment before you drift off to sleep.

Debbie had coached me ahead of time about responding to the questions she would ask me. I was to answer quickly, the first thing that came into my mind. It didn't matter if it was true or not. I was to say the first words or memory I thought of. Half the time I didn't know if I was making things up.

"Where are you?" Debbie barked, "inside or out?"

"In."

"How old are you?"

"Two."

"Who is with you?"

"My father. He just pushed me off his lap, and I'm crying. I think he had an erection."

"Can you forgive him for that?"

"No. He thought it was my fault."

"Can you understand how frightened his erection made him feel?"

"Yes."

"Can you see that it wasn't your fault and that he was just frightened, that in his heart he didn't mean to hurt or reject you? Can you talk to him and tell him how you feel?"

In six hours we dealt with my mother, father, child, money, fiction writing, feeling stupid, a girlfriend I was having a problem with, my grandson to be. Shyness was never mentioned until I was about to leave. She asked if I felt that I would still be shy. I thought I might not, but that shyness had been a habit for a very long time. "Habits," Debbie said, "are easy to break once you've done this work."

That evening a friend threw me a cocktail party, inviting all the people I knew in Toronto and a few neighbors, more than 20 people in all. Normally, I would be filled with anxiety, thinking that small talk slays me, I will have nothing to say, people will think me boring, I'll want to leave in a few minutes and will be stuck for a few hours.

At one point, I sat on a bench in the garden between a woman and man who began talking about a person I didn't know. I had nothing to say, no entry into the conversation. I wondered if I should try to change the subject or if I should get up and talk to someone else. Then I realized I was quite comfortable on the bench and happy just to sit there. Nothing was required of me; I was fine. In that moment, I realized I really might not be shy anymore. I was no more skilled socially, but suddenly I didn't care.

Right after that I returned to New York. Walking in Brooklyn one day, I caught myself casting my eyes to the ground when I passed a man on the street. I decided not to do that anymore. Then I decided to smile at everyone I passed. I was now middle-aged and my smiles were not likely to be misconstrued as come-ons. People smiled back. It felt pretty good. It felt great. I wasn't smiling to be liked or to elicit a smile in return. I smiled as a gift. I spread a little joy. It hadn't been my intention, but it was the effect. And that's when I discovered something profound about shyness: It's a little self-involved. How can you ever think about the other person if you're so busy worrying about yourself?

I decided to knock it off. The hypnotism session was more than two years ago, and I have actually enjoyed social gatherings since. A few days after I came back home, I went to a dance and made a date to meet a man at a chocolate factory. The chocolate was deep, dark, and delicious. The man turned out to have a Mexican girlfriend.

Even conquering shyness didn't make life perfect, but it has made it more interesting, and now when I feel like being a wet blanket, I know it's my choice.