

The TALLEST BRIDGE in the World

A Story for Children About Social Anxiety

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Dear Reader,

Many people feel self-conscious, just like Tommy. I know I've felt that way. I used to constantly wonder things like "*What will they think of me?*" or "*Will I look silly?*" These kinds of thoughts distract us, and can sometimes make us feel so nervous that we avoid situations that might be fun.

Tommy wonders why he gets so nervous in front of the class or ordering his food in a restaurant. He notices that other people don't panic like he does when he has to do something in front of people. Even Patrick, who is shy, volunteers in class sometimes! Why can't he?

It can be useful to learn about the kinds of thoughts that make us feel nervous and the kinds of thoughts that don't (thoughts lead to feelings, so we're happier when our thoughts make sense). Maybe you'll recognize some of the thoughts that plague Tommy...

People are looking at me closely. Nope, nobody is looking at us any closer or in more detail than anybody else. That would take too much energy!

Things are either good or bad. Nope, most of the time it just is what it is. Not everything has to be good or bad!

Mistakes are embarrassing. Nope, mistakes are totally normal. In fact, they don't mean much, other than, well...you're human. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes!

We should hide our flaws or quirks from others. Nope, nobody is looking at our flaws through a magnifying glass anyway, and besides, it just is what it is. Sometimes those quirks are the things we like most about our friends!

Rose gives Tommy tools to overcome his fear of doing things in front of people. Tommy even discovers one on his own! You can use the tools too. With a lot of courage, Tommy decides to test them out and discovers that his nervous fears are pretty flimsy. The more he practices, the easier it gets, and Tommy is finally on his way to having fun and living life without the magnifying glass.

With these new tools, and a whole lot of practice, you can too...

Your friend,

Ellen

Chapter One

Thomas

“Get ready for the morning warm-up,” Miss Clark said to her math class as she posted a few problems for them to practice. Thomas Tuggle got right to work. He liked math and liked trying new problems. But he hated the old familiar feelings in his body; his face felt hot and was probably turning red, his hands felt sweaty, and his heart was racing. He knew what was coming. Sure enough, after a few minutes, Miss Clark asked for volunteers to go to the board and explain their answers.

Thomas didn’t volunteer. He never did. He was uncomfortable being the center of attention. “I hope she doesn’t call on me,” he thought, even though he knew his answers were right. Thomas wished he had the power to be invisible. He would use it now.

He glanced around the room. Everyone else seemed fine. Even Patrick seemed okay, and Patrick was shy. Thomas wondered why *he* was so different. Why was going to the board so hard for *him*? He

hoped nobody could see how nervous he felt. It was embarrassing.

Luckily for Thomas and Miss Clark, a lot of hands shot up, eager to show their work. Miss Clark picked Patrick first—quiet Patrick. “Oh no,” Thomas thought. “When he gets up there, he’ll feel like I do.” Thomas expected to see Patrick get red in the face and stumble on his words. “He’ll probably talk really fast so he can get it over with,” he assumed. But none of those things happened. Patrick was the same as always.

Then Miss Clark picked Bill, Thomas’s best friend. Thomas thought Bill seemed so comfortable in front of the class, like he was talking to a room full of friends. Even when he got part of the problem wrong, Bill just rolled with it, like it didn’t bother him. Thomas wished he could be like that.

* * *

After school, Thomas and Bill walked home and met Mrs. Tuggle digging in her garden. A steady breeze swayed the trees, blending the colors of the autumn leaves.

“The leaves remind me of a watercolor paint-

ing,” Mrs. Tuggle said. “Isn’t it pretty? The boys looked around at the colorful picture and had to agree.

“Everything used to be green,” Thomas said.

“That’s true. How was school today?” Mrs. Tuggle asked.

“Awesome,” Bill replied.

Thomas shrugged. “Okay, I guess.” He caught a leaf that gently floated from above. He wanted to tell his mom about his feelings, but didn’t know how.

“Swim team sign-ups are next month,” she reminded them.

They had talked about joining the winter team, but now Thomas wasn’t so sure. He didn’t like how the swimmers waited on the side of the pool to start the races. Everyone would stare at him. And what if he lost the race? Or what if he looked silly when he swam? That would be embarrassing.

“I can’t wait,” Bill said. “Are you joining, Tommy?”

Thomas shrugged. “I don’t know yet.”

“It’ll be fun,” Bill said, then continued on his way home. Thomas sat with his mom for a few minutes and watched her plant a yellow mum. He



thought about swim team and school. He remembered some of the group projects coming up and got a knot in the pit of his stomach.

“Mom, I hate going to school,” he confided. “It’s worse than last year. I think I’d rather play with a bunch of snakes.” That was saying a lot because Thomas hated snakes.

Mrs. Tuggle put down her shovel and sat next to him. She hoped things would be better this year. Thomas did too. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“I get so nervous when people expect me to do stuff.”

Thomas felt nervous when he did a lot of things. Even things he liked to do. He liked playing games and having fun with his friends, but not at birthday parties. Birthday parties made him feel uncomfortable. Would they have to play games in front of everyone? Would he look silly? Sometimes he got so upset beforehand that he couldn’t even go. And he liked hanging out with his classmates, but despised group projects—they were a lot of pressure. Would he do a good job? What would his group think of him? And eating out with his family was fun...until it was time to give his order. He didn’t like how the waitress stared at him. His face always turned red. Did he

look weird? Did his voice sound funny? So he usually looked down at the table, and luckily his mom usually ordered for him. And now swim team...it seemed exciting, but the thought of messing up and embarrassing himself was too upsetting.

Mrs. Tuggle said, “We all feel nervous sometimes. I used to feel nervous when I didn’t know the answers in school.”

“I feel nervous even when I know the answers,” Thomas explained. “And when we have to work in groups, I can never think of what to say.” Thinking of what to say wasn’t difficult for Thomas when he wasn’t nervous.

“What do you think will happen?” Mrs. Tuggle asked.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said. “I feel like I stand out like a sore thumb.”

This had been going on for a while. “Sometimes it feels like we’re on a stage performing, and we worry our audience won’t like us. Most of us feel that way from time to time,” Mrs. Tuggle explained. “Dad and I are going to help you with this. We’re going to meet a therapist named Dr. Goode—everyone calls her Rose.”

Thomas liked the idea of getting help, but he was nervous too. What would Rose think of him?

Children's / Emotions / Anxiety
Ages 8–12

The TALLEST BRIDGE in the World

Does my voice sound funny? What if I mess up in my presentation—will everyone laugh at me? What if I fail at swim tryouts? I'll be so embarrassed!

Thomas has always been a bit shy, but recently his nervousness has been getting in the way of the things he would like to do. He realizes it may be time to talk to someone. With the help of his parents and a therapist, Thomas learns how social anxiety affects his brain, as well as some everyday tools and strategies to cope with and combat it.

Includes a **Note to Readers** by Elizabeth McCallum, PhD, with more information on social anxiety and the cognitive-behavioral strategies you can use to cope with it.



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