

Liberated Waters

My story of hope



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The following story covers my life until the age of thirty. It's about my journey of developing and overcoming a severe social anxiety disorder known as Paruresis. If you suffer from this in your life right now, I'm sorry. I know how hard it is. I hope with all my heart that this might help you, even if it's just a little bit. Don't despair or give up.

This is a story of hope.

In my sixteenth year, my life changed drastically. Up until then, I had a relatively normal life. By normal, I mean I had loving parents, a sister two years younger, and a brother six years younger. I hated going to school. I hated going to church.

It wouldn't be entirely truthful to say I was completely normal. But then again, what's normal? For one, I could not poop anywhere but home. This was especially challenging during birthday parties or visits to my parents' acquaintances. Generally, right before heading out, I'd feel the need, and drama would ensue. My mother, annoyed, asked why I hadn't gone earlier and told me to hurry. And I couldn't. And I knew the coming hours would be uncomfortable at best. Enjoying myself was hard because the discomfort kept me from being present. I knew it wouldn't ease until I got home. Luckily, it wouldn't happen often. As a kid, I needed a bowel movement every two-to-three days, so while it caused occasional issues, I could live with them.

I was a quiet kid. A little anxious. I would, for example, hide behind my mother's skirt around curious strangers. In stores, I panicked if I lost sight of her for even a second. At school I was like this too—until my second year.

I grew louder, distracting classmates with jokes. I became the class clown. Teachers disliked this, which didn't help my relationships with them. This made me hate school. I wasn't able to behave and received punishment after punishment, which to me often felt unjust.

I had trouble concentrating, and because of this, I started really underestimating my intelligence. I had a very hard time with subjects that had a time limit. Not only did this affect my self-confidence, it also distorted my self-image.

I wouldn't call myself a popular kid. Sure, I'd get a lot of laughs during class, but my relationship with boys, especially in a group setting, wasn't good. I hated sports and avoided them in the schoolyard. I was also very small for my age and sucked my thumb constantly throughout the day.

Needless to say, gym or physical exercise classes were one of the worst parts for me. Being small and especially awkward with sports that involved balls (most) made me dislike gym days.

I loved girls. I was always more interested in playing with them. Unsurprisingly, this didn't make me popular. I was bullied on and off for a couple of years. Never physical or anything like that, but enough to sometimes come home crying my eyes out.

That all changed when we moved. At 11 years old, we moved towns, and I switched schools. After spending the previous seven years on the same school, I finished the last year on a new one. It was a big change and it was scary.

During the 8-week summer break, I hit puberty. I quickly grew taller and realized on my first day at the new school that I was now among the biggest kids. I hid my thumb-sucking from the new kids as best I could. I gained a big boost in confidence thanks to my sudden increase in size and strength. That final year went well. I made friends, excelled in sports, and left behind the thumb-sucking, insecure kid.

In my first year of high school, I experimented with alternative clothing styles. I wore baggy, oversized clothes with a chain hanging from my pants. Part goth, part skater. I also started listening to darker and darker rock music. It was my way of rebelling against my Christian upbringing. I wasn't popular or unpopular but got along with most people.

In the second year, things changed. The start of that year I still mainly rebelled through music and clothing. Although I did start watching porn through easy access to the internet, I was still basically innocent.

I hadn't even kissed yet. It felt like I was the only one. But soon into this year, I met a girl. We met at the church I occasionally joined with my best friend's family. We began dating. Our four-month relationship involved a lot of physical exploration. Looking back, she initiated most of it. I know now it was her way of rebelling against her stepdad, but either way, things moved fast. Weeks earlier, a kiss felt like an achievement; now I was half-naked and being touched.

Movies like American Pie taught me the main issue in male sexuality was a premature orgasm- that was also my experience watching porn, I wouldn't need more than a couple of minutes. So, when she first touched me, I expected the same to happen.

Yet not only did it not happen quickly, it didn't happen at all. This was very confusing to me. It didn't help that during these explorations, when she felt precum and asked if I'd come, I hadn't. I didn't know what to tell her. How could I explain why it didn't work if I didn't understand it myself? I started to fear I wasn't normal. Her efforts to make me orgasm only increased the pressure. I couldn't perform. It made these explorations into something I felt I had to go along with, rather than enjoy. I never dared touch her, since I had no idea what to do. After months of failed attempts at an orgasm, we tried actual sex. After an hour of trying in missionary, I was exhausted. I felt muscle soreness for days.

After that experience, we were so disturbed we avoided each other for weeks and soon broke up. We never talked about it; we were too inexperienced and young.

In the same year, I became friends with a classmate from another town. He smoked so I started smoking. At his birthday party, I got drunk for the first time. There, I first saw how cruel teens could be. For example, one of us passed out, and they carried him four blocks away and abandoned him. They thought it was incredibly funny that when he'd wake up, he wouldn't know where he was. Similarly, when people went to the toilet, they thought it was funny to climb the stairs and look through the upper window, making comments about their dicks. Avoiding them, I used the second-floor toilet but struggled to pee. Even there, I feared someone would notice I was gone and find a way to see me.

The next morning's hangover was brutal. Nauseous and unable to move, I watched a guy wave his dick around as a 'joke.' I'm sure I made some comment that he didn't like. Three guys pinned me while he put his penis into my ear. The nickname 'penis-in-your-ear' followed me for years.

Though this should have been enough reason not to go there anymore, it took me some time to learn to avoid wanting to be around people like that. That year, with that toxic group, I first tried weed and ecstasy. My entrance into drugs. I loved weed's high and especially XTC's euphoria. The opportunities to try drugs were awesome. The people I had these first experiences with weren't. They would target some of us that appeared weak, me included. After a couple of incidents, my friend encouraged me to make

them stop. Here I learned for the first time the need to be violent.

It was also during this period that a very important girl in my life got raped. We grew up together, both being born around the same time, we'd been close friends for our entire childhood.

She was 12 years old. A classmate of hers, a black twelve-year-old kid, with five of his friends, lured her into tall grass and raped her. They ranged in age from twelve to seventeen.

It shocked me to my core. Could I have done something to prevent it? Should I have paid more attention to who she was close with?

This event changed my life. Since all the guys that did that to her were black, it drove me to bond more with racist groups. They were easy to find. Something common then- the Lonsdale youth scene in the Netherlands. You could spot kids that thought alike by their Lonsdale clothes. (Lonsdale's branding unintentionally evoked Hitler's NSDAP via its lettering.)

This killed my alternative phase. I now wanted to belong to a group.

This girl started a relationship with such a guy who I became friends with. His constant weed use made me smoke daily as well. He regularly boasted about confronting her attackers. I admired him.

He was a heavy guy and would beat me up often. Telling me I needed to learn to defend myself. I started confusing self-confidence with aggression. Not that I would get into fights. I've never had to punch someone in the face. Yet at school, I punched friends. Aiming for painful spots: muscles in shoulders, arms, things like that. I became an asshole. I grew more lost, convinced being a man meant being tough. Convinced being safe meant showing I could be dangerous.

Between second and third grade holidays, I started another relationship. Again, I faced sexual trauma and the profound damage it does to someone. Sex was difficult because of what had happened to her. Here, too, I felt obligation, but in a different way. She felt obligated to provide sex; I felt pressured to desire it as a male. Early attempts ended in tears and failure due to her trauma. Now I see how this traumatized me too. My existing sexual anxieties only worsened from this. Once, I smoked weed before sex with her, and it felt wonderful. For once, I was present- no performance anxiety. Weeks later, we tried to recreate this. It wasn't the same. It was horrible. Forget not being able to orgasm, this was the first time I wasn't able to get hard. When I discovered that the next time we met, it still wasn't possible, there was panic. I couldn't even masturbate. Even alone, I wasn't able to get an erection.

Luckily, a forum post advised starting from scratch. We took it slow, like we were new. Just cuddling and kissing. Slowly working our way up towards touching and eventually trying again. In a few weeks, the 'problem' disappeared. Looking back, I'm amazed we handled this so maturely at 15. But as I'd learn later, this trauma lingers and has a nasty habit of resurfacing.

When this relationship ended, I started hanging out in groups after school. We would meet at a spot near a petting zoo. On peak nights, we'd average around 40 teens, smoking cigarettes and weed and probably being a bit of a (relatively innocent) nuisance to the neighborhood. Priding ourselves on being Dutch and generally wanting to separate from kids that, in our perception, weren't.

Being fifteen years old now and freer to do things my parents had no idea about; I started exploring the other side of many boundaries I'd had as a child. Especially when it came to drugs. My first meth experience wasn't casual, I snorted over a gram in one night. I loved it. With access to drugs, I had no self-control. Luckily, my access at this point was limited mostly to weed.

That year, friends invited me to a discotheque. Something that had always been strictly forbidden by my parents. As a kid, I would be confronted with this already. On our usual camping trips to France, they deliberately chose disco-free sites. It's relatively common in Europe to have some kind of children's disco at camp sites. My siblings and I helped choose vacation spots, with the explicit rule: no discos. Discos symbolized forbidden territory.

So, when the chance came- hell yes, I went! So that evening I found myself in my very first discotheque, ironically in the basement of a church.

I would now pinpoint what I experienced here as the trigger of what would become the chain around my ankle for the next 15 years.

I didn't love it. It was small and incredibly crowded. I was anxious and too awkward to dance since I had never been exposed to dancing as a child. I stayed at the bar, too shy to approach girls, just observing. I realized you can't really talk either because of the music. So yeah, I hated it, deep down. What I did like was the fact that I was 'doing it', doing something I wasn't allowed to do. Being rebellious. I was in a disco, and my parents had no idea!

At some point I had to pee. I walked to the bathroom, and to my shock, it was basically a repurposed communal shower with a big drain on the floor. You had to stand side by side, peeing against the wall. At fifteen years old, I'd never used a urinal, not once. I come from a family that didn't go out much. I was born when both my parents were 21. Money was tight; going out was rare. If we went somewhere, it was either church or family and, in some cases, friends of my parents. Very rarely to things like a bowling alley or amusement park. But in every case, places with toilets and doors. I can't recall if I'd avoided urinals as a kid when given the choice. I do remember that camping toilets bothered me, but only for pooping, and at least they had doors and locks. Either way, it hadn't been relevant before this time.

So, having overcome the shock, standing among the others, I tried- nothing came. No matter how badly I needed to go, I couldn't. Fine, a little distressed maybe, but I didn't think much of it at that moment. There was one toilet with a door, so I figured I'd go there. It turned out the door didn't have a lock. Worse, it had a gaping round window.

Given enough time, who knows, I might have been able to go, and that was that. But while I was standing there waiting for it to come, a guy I already didn't like much stuck his head through the window and mocked me for just standing there. Whatever he said exactly, who knows, but it came down to something like 'Can't pee? What's wrong with you?'

I don't remember anything about the rest of this night. Did I go in the end? Did I hold it in until I left? I don't know.

One thing I do know, the seed of anxiety took root, and started growing.

Initially, places like this were the most problematic. Crowded places without the privacy of a door that I could lock. Also, situations with time pressure. Family road trips were hard. Usually to locations that were between a 10-to-15-hour drive away. Missing a rest-stop pee meant hours of agony- increasing pressure, which meant failing again next stop. My dad would say, 'Relax, it'll come.' But no matter how hard I tried to relax, it was impossible.

Maybe at this point, for people reading that have no idea about what it's like, it would be good to clarify some things. 'Impossible' means literally **impossible**.

Urination requires two actions:

1. Consciously relaxing the pelvic floor
As you know, you can generally contract and relax the pelvic floor at will; it's a conscious action.
2. The bladder sphincter's subconscious release
The control of this muscle is entirely in the subconscious. You can't force it to relax. Normally, its constant contraction prevents leaks, perfect. But under stress, when it won't relax- horrible.

No sphincter release = no pee. Period. IM-POSSIBLE.

So, after this started happening, for the next year, I could only pee in locked stalls with no time pressure. It was difficult, and there was definitely reason to worry, but life was okay. It was manageable.

Then at a friend's house, in a safe toilet, with a locked door, a sound outside froze me. And I locked up. Shit.

This was the first time it happened to me in a context where previously I had no issues. Where I shouldn't have had issues.

From here on out, things started getting worse very quickly.

I can tell of untold experiences where I wasn't able to go from this point on.

Where before, outside, I could just step into the bushes, now I needed to get enough range to feel safe. A rustle or a glimpse of movement would be enough to lock up. It led to searching for a spot, failing to go, moving, failing, moving, etc. And progressively, of giving up.

I started hating spring and summer and loving fall and winter. Since a lot of my time was spent outside, most of the time I also relieved myself outside. Summer meant people everywhere- problematic. That made it so much harder to find a place where I felt safe enough. It would also be light out until late in the night. Obviously, in the fall and winter, things were much easier. A lot fewer people outside and an early cover of darkness making me feel safe(r).

By the time I was 16, it was practically impossible to pee in toilets at friends' houses. Neither could I go in toilets with doors and locks at public places. In the warmer months, I would generally not be able to go outside either.

When I graduated from high school and changed school, I wasn't able to pee in the toilets there. Stalls and locks offered no help anymore, I would enter already full of anxiety. Any sound, no matter how small, would cause me to lock up.

School days would be from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and so a lot of my time at school would be in pain, not being able to be fully present because of the constant pull of attention from my bladder.

I would sometimes spend more than 30 minutes going to different sections of the building to try different toilets in the hopes of finding one that was empty. Hyper-alert, any noise instantly triggered a no-go. Success required impossible conditions: total silence and unlimited time. In that paranoid state, there is always someone coming, always someone there. The longer I needed to relax, the more likely it was for someone to come in. Each interruption increasing the next attempt's chance of failure. Fuller bladder, more fear of pain, more pressure and so time needed, more risk of being interrupted- impossible to go. A vicious circle.

It started to dominate my world. There wouldn't be 10 minutes where I wasn't either worried about needing to pee or in pain because I already had to.

Yeah. Safely at home.

I wouldn't leave the house anymore if I didn't pee at the last moment. And if I couldn't because of a lack of liquid in my bladder, I would force it by taking a hot shower. Hot water would always stimulate enough relaxation that I would be able to go even when my bladder was basically empty.

The thing is, the anxiety rewired my bladder's signals completely. Even after a hot shower and relieving myself of the little bit still in my bladder, I'd start feeling phantom urges again within minutes of closing the door behind me.

Example: cycling to meet friends, 'empty' from the shower, yet having strong urges after five minutes.

Taking a 15-minute detour to find a secluded spot, just to not be able to go. *Of course, there was nothing in there.* Still, I'd keep trying just to give up in the end and know that again, I'd be uncomfortable at best and in pain at worst for the rest of the evening. This became daily life for me.

What's interesting is that I would keep going out and meet the group of friends outside every day. I could have also just stayed at home to not have to deal with it. *Why?*

Because I wanted to get high. Weed made me want to go out socially while at the same time deepening the disorder- cruel irony. When I was still able to 'go' in situations where I generally couldn't anymore, it was always in the sober state. Weed guaranteed failure.

The thing was, I was high basically every day.

Wanting to be high would sometimes get me in difficult situations. For example, even though I learned not to go to clubs with horrible toilet situations, there were some places I still went. Never exactly because I enjoyed them and wanted to go, but because friends did. In that case I could choose to either go home and stay sober, or join them and be able to get high again. I did not yet smoke weed by myself, at this point.

One of those places was a bar where you could play pool. The bar had toilets with doors, and, in my experience, I was able to go if it wasn't too crowded. So, weekdays.

It wasn't a weekday but a weekend here, I drank about 10 beers, ignoring the fact that I maybe wasn't going to be able to pee. It was usually a little bit easier when I was drunk, so maybe I hoped that would be the case. But after trying multiple times, I couldn't. I was in so much pain at some point, I wanted to leave, but to just leave my friends without explanation would be weird... So, hours passed with a bursting bladder. I kept drinking, too ashamed to stop or say no to rounds. To be clear, no one knew of my 'problem,' and the last thing this 17-year-old guy wanted was that ANYONE would.

At some point, it wasn't just the pain of my bladder anymore- my kidneys started hurting. And they started hurting bad.

I now know urine was backflowing into my kidneys... I don't want to know what this could have led to. Pain finally overrode my shame and pride and I ran out. After trying different spots, I was finally able to go, my kidneys hurting even more while peeing.

Unfortunately, I had more experiences like this until I learned to change some things. First lesson: no heavy drinking without guaranteed safe bathroom access. Second: change the friends who liked going out. The whole 'racist' group thing didn't suit me anymore either; this was one of the few benefits of weed, you start thinking less in black and white. Gradually, I fell out of touch with the group. Finally, only two like-minded stoner friends remained.

The experience of the pain of urine flowing back into my kidneys pushed me to go to therapy for the first time. I ended up going for about six sessions. Each session required a forty-minute bus ride each way. Almost three hours total for one hour of therapy. That was very difficult for me. I went there straight out of school and, as said, often wasn't able to relieve myself at school and so would be in pain for the bus ride there, the session itself, and the bus ride back home. Mainly because of this, I quit after six times. The sessions themselves didn't help me. She had no experience with the problem itself, but she tried. I did retrieve a memory that I didn't remember anymore. When I was about six years old, once, I came back into the classroom, crying, because I wasn't able to pee. Interesting. But it was an isolated incident, possibly irrelevant. Later I realized it was around that same time that another boy told me to show him my penis in class, an event that made me cry and left me very disturbed. I can't say for sure they're directly connected, but now, it makes sense that they were. Connecting exposure and a need for safety.

Otherwise, I didn't gain anything. I think partly this is because she used to do many visual meditation-like exercises, and I have an inability to visualize. So, if someone asks you to picture a hallway with six doors and that's already near impossible, answering what I saw after opening door number three was definitely impossible.

So, after six sessions of this, I stopped.

Then came a six-month internship at my father's company. The aging building had an abandoned part. There was a toilet there, that I could use. No water so it couldn't flush, a lot of cobwebs and dust- but much needed isolation. I could use it when no one saw me sneak there. Sneak, because I didn't want to have to explain what I was going to do there. So, when possible, I could relieve myself in that toilet. Compared to my time at school, with often full days of not being able to go, working here was better.

After my internship and another year of study, I started working at this company and would work here for the next 10 years.

Also, here, I met someone I would be in a relationship with for the next 7 years. She was 16 years older than I was. At this time, I was 19 years old. After a year of dating, I moved in with her. Despite initial fears about living together and sharing a toilet, it soon felt safe. After you've been completely naked in front of someone a couple of times, a feeling of safety inevitably follows.

My life became a lot easier after this. Since I could smoke weed in my own house now, the main motivation to leave the house left. I would just go out to see the two stoner friends that remained.

And so, with this easier life, came isolation and avoidance.

Easier, yes- leaving the house less frequently meant fewer failures. Of course, sometimes they would still happen. Going to visit her parents, for example. Six stops on a two-hour drive, desperately searching for spots I could go. It goes without saying that in their house I wasn't able to. Two hours in the car there, two hours back, and we'd stay there for over four more hours. A painful day. I was nervous for days to weeks before it came.

But outside of this or the occasional happenings for work, that was basically all I needed to deal with. No new people, no new experiences. Every day became exactly the same. Go to work, come home, smoke a joint, and play World of Warcraft. On the weekends, I would generally net about 10 to 16 hours a day, just playing World of Warcraft. My escape. An escape from the boring real world. A way to explore an exciting world.

When my free time wasn't spent like this, it was spent with my remaining two friends, getting high. Life would continue like this for the remaining six years of the relationship.

I had my first orgasm with her after six months. It was the first orgasm I had that wasn't caused by myself. After this, it would be rare, but it happened sometimes. Still, sex was often stressful for me. It was easy to get stuck in my head, especially when I knew an orgasm wouldn't happen. So slowly but surely, I also started avoiding that. Sabotaging it by smoking weed beforehand, getting high to kill any desire.

In the end, the relationship didn't survive. Mainly because, in all this time, I never grew up. She did everything. I contributed absolutely nothing. I didn't clean, didn't cook, I didn't do groceries, no dishes, almost nothing really. I was getting high and playing video games, or I wasn't at home, getting high with friends.

Maybe she felt like she couldn't do it to me, taking away the safety I had created, and that's why it lasted for this long. Who knows. But what I do know is that my life crashed down when she told me that she did not want to continue, and to please move out. Suddenly the anxiety that, although hidden, was with me every day still, came roaring back. What am I going to DO?

Living with an anxiety disorder like this makes you fear the future, assuming always it will be as negative and scary as you imagine. I knew I had to go back to live with my parents, but... would I still be able to pee there? Was that a safe place? Visits were manageable, but moving back in? I must have tried so hard

to convince her I would change and that I would make sure she'd be happy with me again. Begged her. But it was too late. Two days later I'm sobbing on my parents' doorstep, asking if I could move back in.

In the end, I lived in my parent's house again for 8 months. I was hurt most of this time. I still saw her every day since we worked at the same company. This pain though, became fuel, I'd prove my transformation. I'd show her I was worth it.

And so a few months after the breakup, I started going to the gym. Weed munchies and the weight-gain caused by it, had me weigh 85kg. I'm not a tall guy, and a healthy weight for me is about 65kg. I had already stopped smoking weed on week-days. I didn't want to continue smoking daily while living with my parents. I lost the excess weight quickly and started getting fit.

Thanks to the gym, I got fit, and had a small widening of my social circle. It made me feel much more confident. Since the gym was close to my parents' house, and I generally wasn't there for more than 2 hours, my paruresis didn't give me so much trouble. Meeting new people outside of work felt good. From this new confidence came an idea to go to Thailand, if I could change this much, maybe I could travel too.

Scared but confident that I could do it, I booked a flight to Thailand for 5 months later. Almost immediately after booking, I decided to go into therapy again. I was ready to finally get over it and become normal. Thanks to therapy, I would receive the tools to be able to travel Thailand anxiety-free, and surely after being able to do that, I would be beyond all of this and finally free.

With an appointment a week, it became apparent quite soon that maybe therapy wasn't a guaranteed solution to my problem. After a couple of sessions, I very much disliked going there. I didn't like the therapist and felt like we were making no progress whatsoever. I wanted to finally be rid of this after so long, wasn't that what therapy was about? Why did he insist on talking about the relationship with my father? Why did we focus on my apparently repressed anger and the need to release it so much? But worst of all, WHY DIDN'T HE KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

You see, after a month of sessions, he would start to basically sit there and say nothing. So, I would also sit there and say nothing... As you can imagine, very uncomfortable. Because of this, more and more resistance grew inside of me. I started forgetting appointments, and less and less did I believe that therapy would be what would cure me before my trip to Thailand.

I see very clearly now what he was doing, and I don't think it was the wrong approach. But it didn't work. In the end, I guess I wasn't ready to really do the work myself. I was hoping he could fix me by himself.

Because of this, I started looking for solutions online again, with renewed hope and, maybe more importantly, renewed motivation. I came across a technique called the '*breath hold*'. The idea is that because muscles in our body need oxygen; by depriving the body of oxygen, it will slowly reclaim it from muscles that are actively tensing. In the case of someone with paruresis or shy bladder, the sphincter muscle of the bladder and the unconscious tensing of it are what make urinating impossible. So, through this technique, which meant inhaling deeply, exhaling for about two-thirds, and then holding the breath for as long as possible, the idea is that the bladder muscle relaxes, and you can start to pee between thirty seconds and more than a minute after starting the hold.

I practiced with passion. Every day, all the time, I would hold my breath and stretch it further and further and further. I became interested in free diving (read: I had a YouTube obsession) and started practicing with apps that help you train your breath hold. I learned that gasping for breath has nothing to do with oxygen but with CO2 buildup in the blood. Meaning, if you can hold your breath until you're starting to feel like you're gasping for air, you can train doubling it from that point on. Training willpower to withstand the extreme discomfort of the raising CO2 levels in your blood.

For me, discomfort was not an understatement here. It's a strange mix of almost-but-not-quite pain, almost-but-not-quite panic, and, for lack of better words, just too muchness.

Anyway, it never worked for me. I must have practiced and tried for months, with no success.

So, yeah... Thailand was around the corner, and neither therapy nor a technique I had so much hope for, worked.

Living with paruresis is, in a lot of ways, being trapped in time. You can be free with a safe toilet. So, depending on the distance between you and said toilet, meaning, really, the time it takes to get from wherever you are back to the toilet- that's the freedom you have.

At home? Great. No need to worry about anything, assuming there are no visitors.

A friend/family member that knows about this and lives relatively close? Fine. Worst case, you can explain and leave. I'm saying that as if that was easy, it was not. Admitting it, even to people that already knew, was near impossible. But still.

The gym? Groceries? Shopping? Also, fine. You know you won't be there for much longer than an hour or tops 2, and within this timeframe there's really nothing to worry about. Assuming you made sure not to drink too many liquids, that is.

Very quickly, everything beyond that is a danger zone. You don't want to go there; you don't want to experience it, and you'll do everything to avoid it. Think 5+ hour events, or anything where the time needed for traveling the distance in combination with whatever duration the event itself has exceeds 5 hours. For me, within 3 hours was safe, and everything longer than that, if at all possible, I would avoid.

So, having a 13-hour direct flight, being boxed in and LITERALLY having no possibility of urinating for that long, stressed the hell out of me. Thirteen hours, which easily becomes sixteen hours or more with the travel to and from the airports. It goes without saying that I was not able to go in an airport toilet either.

So, I decided to stop drinking two days before. I was so anxious and paranoid about it that the day before I didn't eat either, thinking there might be enough water in food to make me have to pee still. So, I basically water fasted for over forty hours and didn't eat for around twenty-four hours before getting on the plane.

Honestly, it worked wonders. You would say dehydrating yourself for such a long time is horrible and would come with its own set of problems, but I don't remember any. This isn't surprising. The anxious focus on my bladder drowned out all other discomforts.

Even though I prepared like this for the flight, I told myself I would do things differently in Thailand and would make sure to never have my problem hold me back. I would use this time in a strange land where

no one knew me, to change and conquer the fear. I would not avoid toilets but go whenever I felt the need to go. I would use public toilets whenever needed. I came with high hopes that after this experience, I could and would prove to myself that things would be different from then on.

I was too shy to communicate and haggle for transport- no tuk-tuks, no taxis. That's how I moved myself the three days I had in Bangkok, walking. The first day I explored, I went out with the motivation to use whichever toilet was available and to show myself I could do it.

I still remember the public toilet I found in a park; it had doors, and they could lock, perfect.

But, seeing people leaving while on the way there, made me so anxious that once I stepped in, and realized I couldn't go: all the willpower I thought I had built up over all the months up until this trip, vanished. All thoughts of challenging myself and getting over this once and for all and using this new context of traveling in a faraway land- gone.

I spent a month in Thailand and, with two exceptions, met no one. I made sure to only book private rooms (read: safe toilet) and had a time-distance radius around that room (read: safe toilet) to explore. I spent a couple of days in Bangkok, pretty much doing everything on foot except for a bike tour around the city that lasted 3 hours, and the start-and-end point were very close to my hotel (read: close to a safe toilet).

After the time in Bangkok, I took a night train to Chiang Mai, for which I was prepared. My 'solution': a pee bottle for the 8-hour journey. I had done my research about this train journey and so knew I would have a mattress and a curtain and, so, a bit of privacy.

I must have tried with the bottle for an hour in total, spread over the night. No way. Impossible to get relaxed enough. Too scared to even TRY to go to the actual toilets. So, I told myself for every next journey, I'd repeat the tactic I used for the flight.

While waiting for the train, a guy came up to me, telling me he had bad cramps and really needed the toilet, and whether I could watch his backpack. Sure.

I was sitting on a chair on the far end of the row, with an aisle next to me. He puts the backpack on the other side of the aisle. Ten minutes pass, paranoia creeps in. What am I supposed to do if someone grabs the backpack and runs away? It's too far to grab, and I have my own backpacks, so I can't really run after someone either! I consider grabbing the backpack and putting it in front of me, making sure in that way that no one can get to it. But... what if this is a scam? Or worse- a setup? Drugs? A trap?

After twenty difficult minutes of guard duty, he's back. He turned out to be a nice guy, traveling and just actually having stomach trouble and needing that much time on the toilet.

We exchanged numbers because he told me was going to Pai later on and that I should definitely come too, since it was relatively close to Chiang Mai. I assumed then it was just something said and not particularly meant to be followed up on. Well... he did. More about that later.

In Chiang Mai, the time-distance radius increased thanks to renting a scooter. But I didn't explore much. The reason: there stood a Belgium waffle stand at the entrance to the dead-end street my hostel was on. A Thai girl worked there, and after passing twice, she'd got me to agree to join her to the Loy Krathong

festival. Now I was trapped. Company meant guaranteed situations of pain and discomfort. The day before the festival, I kept myself in the hostel, avoiding the waffle stand. Turns out she wasn't letting me off the hook. That evening, I stepped out for a smoke- and there she was. Shit... Why did I tell her the name of the hostel?

Seeing no way around it, I spent that evening with her and her friends after she convinced me to join. I drank a couple of beers (bad idea) and had the exact experience I was afraid of. A full bladder and no way to pee. Unable to leave because *'If I bail now, what will they think?'*. Everything that I had avoided since the start of the relationship with my ex, seven years ago, I was reliving again. This trip was supposed to change me. Instead, I realized I was still exactly the same. I was just less aware of it since I'd avoided everything for so long.

Eventually the pain forced me to make up an excuse after I told myself I stayed for an appropriate amount of time.

But, of course, the festival would be next day, and there was no escape. I went to sleep hating the fact that I had just made accidental friends and the pain that would bring.

In the end, it wasn't that bad. That day I didn't drink, and the festival was actually nice with a local. We hung out nightly after this. I realized I could get drunk on hard liquor and not have to pee at all. Actually, that was the beauty of Thailand for me. It's so hot and humid, you basically pee like once or twice a day if you limit your fluid intake.

The train guy actually followed through on meeting in Pai. I loved my safe Chiang Mai routine, but somehow agreed to meet him in Pai. The van from Chang Mai to Pai took about 6 hours. Same drill: dehydration prep. No more fluid intake the day before. The couple of days in Pai were packed with experiences. Nonstop activities, constant new faces. Meaning: pain in my bladder and loads of anxiety. But also, a lot of fun. I wouldn't have wanted to miss any of it.

I met more people in those few days than I did and would in the entirety of my month in Thailand.

But after those days in Pai, I was happy to go back to Chang Mai. I had a good time with the Thai girl, I had companionship and safety through routine, and so I had already convinced myself to just stay there for the rest of my time. Luckily, I told my Pai friend about this, and he made me see that I would regret staying. That I would look back on this journey and feel like I wasted opportunity, staying in one place. I left Chiang Mai two days later, reluctantly.

Back in Bangkok, Koh Chang was next.

I somehow picked Lonely Beach, a place known for partying... There isn't much to say about my stay here. My sea bungalow became my cave. The walks past the bars each night were very awkward. One victory: I did get my first tattoo here, a 5-hour session. I'd wanted a tattoo for a long time and was always too anxious when I considered the duration.

So, a month in Thailand, zero progress on my disorder. Did I enjoy the experience? Absolutely. Was it brave? Fuck yes. But then the experience passed, I was back home, and everything was still exactly the same. One difference: my own apartment weeks later. For the first time, a place of my own.

Routine took over again. Weekends: weed, movies with friends. Weekdays: work, gym. Filling the rest with playing video games. For years, this became life again. Not that I didn't want change- I'd just stopped believing it was possible.

Then, some hope. My ex told me she was going to do Ayahuasca in a few weeks. A woman would come to her house and hold a ceremony there. There would be a couple of friends joining too. I wanted in. Everything I'd read said it could cure things like chronic depression. If it cured depression, maybe social anxiety too? I never seriously considered it though, because everything about it was exactly what was outside of my comfort zone. Trapped for hours with strangers, sharing a toilet? Hell no.

But this was in our old house! A house I felt safe in, a house I'd lived in for years. Plus, the garden cabin had its own toilet. An emergency escape. I was excited and it felt amazing to receive this opportunity. Unfortunately, the next day, she told me her friends advised her I shouldn't come. It wouldn't be a good idea to do this with an ex-partner present, was their advice.

It felt to me like it was my only opportunity, and now it was gone. No way to know if it could've healed me. It hurt and it stung.

Apart from this, the 3 years that passed after Thailand, just passed. Same routine, same safety. No relationships, no risks- just my comfortable prison.

I did buy an apartment after a year of renting. The silver lining of routine, I had a steady job so I managed to receive a mortgage. Thanks, paruresis! Without you, I'd probably never have stuck working in the same company this long.

Still, after 3 years of this, the monotony became too much, and I became deeply unhappy. No love, no adventures, just this job and video games forever. I had to try something.

I went into therapy again. This time it would be a combination of CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) and exposure therapy.

CBT to rewire my brain, exposure therapy to measure progress.

My therapist was a woman my age, and attractive. I actually looked forward to the sessions. We clicked instantly. Night-and-day difference from the last therapist. Unfortunately, she also did not have any experience with the specific problem I was dealing with. Hadn't even heard of the term paruresis. This meant we both had to kind of figure it out as we went along. She gave me exercises to do at work. A couple of examples of these exercises:

- Don't flush after not peeing.
I would always flush after an appropriate amount of time when I couldn't go. To hide I didn't go, and so keep the façade of there being nothing wrong with me.
- To time and stay in the toilet for 5 minutes, whether I succeeded or not.
5 minutes felt like forever. I felt like people would notice something. They'd wonder why I was in the toilet that long. Again, the fear people would 'find out'.
- Use the 'danger zone' toilets I always avoided.
The ones close to the offices and hence, people. So instead of using the same safe toilet, furthest away from people, go to the ones that were closest.

We practiced in hospital bathrooms too. Her office was in said hospital. I would go to a toilet while she'd wait outside.

These are some examples of the exposure part of the therapy.

Outside of that, of course we would talk. Try and figure out why I had such fear and shame about not being able to pee. To change my perception and thought patterns. The focus for me, was to 'get rid' of the problem. To become 'normal', to be able to pee whenever and wherever, like everyone else.

To make sure we covered all the bases, she sent me to a pelvic floor therapist and a urologist. To make sure to exclude any physical reasons for any of this. The result after all the tests: everything worked fine. This was all in my head.

The urologist was an especially difficult experience- they needed a urine sample... The test required arriving with a full bladder and peeing into a sensor-equipped bowl. The sensors... hell if I knew their purpose. After an hour of agony in a blessedly quiet room, I managed. I mean, I passed some drops. Apparently, that was enough for the sensors, and the test showed there was no physical reason for me not to be able to pee.

Of course, it made sense. Alone at home? Zero problems. I never once expected there was anything else than a psychological issue at play. Still, it was good to have everything checked, since I never did that before nor thought about it.

I was in therapy with her for over a year, the first months the main focus was my paruresis. Eventually we also touched on my issues having an orgasm, which led to a focus on relationships. Obviously, it's a bit harder to devise exposure exercises to practice orgasms with partners when you can't even meet new people.

For this she 'made me' create a profile on a dating app. I say *made me* because it really felt like that at the time. Every fiber of my being was against it. I chose Bumble. An app where only women can message first. Less pressure. My logic: if they have to message first, I'd never have to meet anyone.

A single notification from the app would get me so anxious, I had to put my phone away for hours before I built up the courage to actually open the app and see what it was. Funnily, 99% of the time it was just some bullshit ad from the application itself.

There was one match with some actual conversation, but I sabotaged any possibility of it going anywhere. I made sure to be nice enough that I could feign ignorance in front of my therapist, knowing also that the messages were so basic and lacking in character that it would never lead to anything. The swiping started to exhaust me. I started feeling very conscious about my looks and wondering why some women matched and others didn't. This exercise didn't lead anywhere.

During this year, I also started the Wim Hof method. Only cold showers coupled with breathing exercises. The logic was that if I could choose to be deeply uncomfortable every day, maybe that would translate into my life. The cold showers never got any easier. Especially because I started doing this at the end of summer and kept going deep into winter. Every morning would be a fight with myself: *'Maybe today I'll skip the shower and avoid the icy shock?', 'Maybe I can start with hot water?', 'Maybe just end with hot water?', 'Maybe I should just do it **every other** day?'* Always seeking ways to avoid the discomfort. But I kept going.

Did it help with my paruresis? Not at all.

Still, this year, I tried. I put a lot of effort into changing myself for the better. The therapy, the gym, the cold showers- all became rituals. For months, I woke at 4:30 AM, inspired by YouTube success stories. I also hoped this might somehow alleviate my paruresis through changing my relationship with myself. I should stress, I'm definitely not a morning person!

I won't say all these efforts didn't have their positive effects, I'm sure they did. But since my focus was always on the anxiety disorder and the need become 'normal', it's hard to say what the benefits were exactly. All I know is they didn't help me pee. Talking about positive effects, the gym was the exception. The benefits from that were obvious.

One night, amid my usual video game routine, I received a message. A message from a friend of my ex.

'Do you want to join an Ayahuasca weekend in a couple of weeks?'

...

It came out of nowhere. Though I'd considered Ayahuasca before, I hadn't thought about it for years. I'd like to say I jumped at the chance, but of course dread and anxiety filled me first. My default was avoiding discomfort, and this was a long way from even approaching my comfort zone...

But here, in the end, the cold showers, the therapy, the WILL to change, and the commitment I'd placed into trying to make change happen, rewarded me.

Because after a week of doubt and multiple calls with the woman who organized the ceremonies, I decided to do it.

She assured me there would be plenty of nature outside, and I would be able to roam around if I had to pee. Find a safe place far away from everyone. She also told me there was only one toilet for nine participants and two helpers. So, a total of eleven people and one toilet...

Worse, during the ceremony, I would NOT be allowed to leave the ceremony space to pee.

Three days of being with eleven other people in a confined space, sleeping in the same area, and sharing one toilet. Having ceremonies that last six-plus hours and not being able to leave during those hours. My. Worst. Nightmare.

Claiming I had no fears about this situation would be a big lie. I was terrified, and it was a rough couple of weeks leading up to the ceremony.

This was especially true because I followed the diet religiously. You see, Ayahuasca requires strict preparation: avoiding specific foods, drinks, and all drugs. Complete sexual abstinence is also mandatory, even from masturbation.

Before eating anything, I scoured the internet, and if I could find ANY website saying I couldn't eat something, I didn't. For two weeks I ate only bland food, always finding the one thing that would have been nice to eat listed as a no.

Eventually, the day came, and I had to get in my car to drive two hours to the place where the ceremonies were held. Normally, I'd never even consider a two-hour drive. Let alone a two-hour drive to stay with strangers for a **couple of days**.

As always, I already thought I needed to pee before even arriving. With nervous energy, I entered and greeted the group. Then I asked the organizer where I might attempt to pee. It turns out, there was nature outside, yes, but also a fence. I couldn't actually get far enough away from the space, which was a big shed at the back of a farm house. Also, having looked inside, the bathroom was actually a small cubicle, built inside the ceremony space. The shed's high roof left the cubicle ceiling open. It meant I would hear everyone, and everyone could hear me. Shit.

After a couple failed attempts outside, we were called to gather at a kitchen table. Behind a curtain separating us from the ceremony space, we shared our intentions. I decided beforehand I would be completely honest and tell everyone the real reason I was there.

It was terrifying. The words stuck in my throat; I was so ashamed to confess my 'problem' like this, in front of a group of strangers. With a shaking voice and unable to make any eye contact with anyone, I did. After everyone had their turn, we went into the ceremony space. I tried once more to pee outside, and again failed. At this point, my bladder was full enough to be constantly nagging me, and I knew pain was near. The ceremony hadn't even begun yet...

Everything I feared and imagined was coming true. I'd experience the medicine's effects while suffering pain in my bladder. I had no idea what the experience would be like but was sure it would be extremely unpleasant if combined with a full, painful bladder.

We started with a meditation where I just couldn't get comfortable or in any sort of meditative state. Fear, anxiety, and obsessive thoughts consumed me. After the meditation ended, the ceremony started. My heart beating like crazy, I braced for the unknown.

We each received a shot glass of MAO inhibitor first, with the DMT containing glass to follow in thirty minutes. The MAO inhibitor is the Ayahuasca vine, which shuts down enzymes in the stomach and intestines so the DMT, normally broken down immediately, can cross the blood-brain barrier and make it possible for the mind to enter the psychedelic state.

It was a long half hour for me. Others began feeling effects from the first glass immediately. I felt nothing. I was probably too distracted to feel anything subtle anyway.

Finally, the time came to drink the second glass. Thirty minutes later, I started feeling funny. To me, initially, it resembled an XTC high. Sometimes on XTC I would be able to pee, so I decided to try. I went into the little bathroom, just meters from the group.

I sit down and notice that because of the physical and mental strangeness, I can distract myself from the fact that there's a group right outside the door. My mind still tries to warn me with thoughts like *'what if someone else needs to go?'* But the medicine's effect in my mind is so strong, it's distraction from my situation is enough: I pee!

Best. Pee. Ever.

With that, so much weight fell off my shoulders, at least I would not have to worry the next couple of hours. After peeing and going back to my mattress, the experience starts. I started having a vision.

Darkness envelops me, there's a window-like opening ahead. In the distance, I see a little kid. The window moves closer, and I realize the kid looks unhappy and lost. Then the view widens, and I see why. It's a gym class where there are two groups of kids on either side of him. - In my school, teachers would select two kids who'd pick teammates one-by-one. This was what I was looking at -

I realize the kid standing there, lost, sad, abandoned, is me. Being picked last and still waiting for one of the two kids picking to call out his name. Empathy floods me and as I hold my child-self, I feel waves and waves of love emanating from me, into him. I tell myself that everything is okay; it doesn't matter; nothing here matters in the long run. Everything will be okay. I feel so full of love and so full of empathy; it was an incredible experience.

Later I understood: it wasn't a vision; it was a memory. A memory I completely forgot. That I was a kid that was picked last wasn't something I remembered anymore. But then, thinking back, remembering how small I was for my age, that I used to suck my thumb, that I was scared of balls, and that I preferred to play with girls, I knew. I realized that it was a memory that resurfaced at that moment.

The rest of the ceremony, as far as I can remember (I'm writing this almost 6 years later), brought only relentless nausea.

Nausea that lasted for hours upon hours. The ceremony started around 7 PM and ended around 4 AM. The nausea started between 8 and 9 PM. By the time I was finally able to let go and vomit, it was probably between 2-3 AM. So, around five hours of heavy nausea and not being able to let go. Ouch.

But in the end, I did. And it felt so good not to be nauseous anymore.

As the ceremony concluded, we ate briefly before sleeping. Just to do it again the next day.

Immediately after this ceremony, I realized peeing was difficult, as always. Being sober again made me the same old me. Again, highly aware of the group of people, sleeping right outside the toilet, I wasn't able to go anymore. Luckily, it was early morning, and still dark outside. So, with everyone being asleep, I was able to go outside where I hadn't been able to during the day.

The next day would feel much the same as the day before. But at least now I felt a kinship to the people around me. They knew about my secret, so I managed to pee once during the day when half the group was wandering outside. I felt safe enough with fewer people left behind. I did still have to go outside for it.

I wasn't feeling particularly good this day. My shy bladder persisted, seemingly unhealed by the ceremony. Again, I had to spend hours lying on a mattress feeling nauseous, and I had no idea what the use of it all was. I was disappointed and maybe even a little angry.

Of course this wasn't going to heal me; what was I thinking?

The second ceremony rolled around, and it started much like the one the night before. For hours, with everyone returned, I hadn't been able to pee in my little corner outside. Again, during the meditation before the ceremony, I had a full, painful bladder, and was deeply uncomfortable. My anxiety was, of course, telling me: *what if THIS TIME I WON'T be able to go when it all starts? What if this will be the horrible ceremony with constant nausea AND pain in my bladder?*

Luckily, another thing was similar to the night before. After anxious waiting for the second glass, the experience began. Again, the altered state let me distract myself enough to be able to let go and pee.

This ceremony now defies description. It was completely different from the first. Highly psychedelic. I traveled the universe, touched infinity, got stuck in bizarre loops that were surprisingly entertaining, and really enjoyed myself throughout. Though there was still nausea, I vomited easily, so the experience of the night before did not repeat itself.

Near the end, my attention focused onto the girl beside me. Playing with shawl or something, her dreamy eyes drew me in. I felt deeply connected to her.

When the ceremony ended and others left for food, we remained lying there. While I was looking at her, she suddenly looked at me, and we simultaneously reached out our hands and clasped them, remaining like this while keeping eye contact.

Later, we spent time on the couch in the kitchen, cuddling. After so long without touch, I was overwhelmed. Love, or something like it, flooded me. I would only later understand this connection's significance.

The next day we shared experiences during integration, then the weekend ended. And I felt different. Partly because I was in love, but also something else, something deeper. Something I couldn't put my finger on exactly. But it felt good. I felt good. I felt connected to the participants and deeply content within myself. Only in the coming days would it become clearer what this feeling, this change, was.

Back home, this contentment persisted. I took a couple of days off work, so I had time to observe myself and the way I felt. I felt full of love, first for myself, but also for the world around me. I felt happy. I dove deeper into topics like meditation and started meditating. I also found Alan Watts, a lecturer, on YouTube. I listened to him a lot, his lectures resonated deeply with me. I spent a lot of time in the dunes and the beach to reflect. Listening to the music that was played during the ceremonies helped a lot to reconnect back to them. I maintained contact with the girl I'd connected with. We planned to meet a couple of days after the weekend but couldn't make it work. We would eventually meet, although it would be almost a month later.

The day before going back to work, I received a call from a colleague. She was curious about my experience of the weekend.

I had mentioned the Ayahuasca weekend to coworkers. Of course, I did not tell them why. Not really anyway. I had told them I was doing it to learn to get out of the comfort zone. My life felt too safe, and I wanted to learn to be more outgoing and daring. I had not told anyone about the real reason because, of course, that was my biggest secret, my biggest shame.

Seeing her name on my phone, for the first time, I recognized another change beyond self-love. In these last days home, I had considered what to tell my colleagues. Surprisingly, the truth had already felt possible. I felt no fear about honesty. But I hadn't fully committed to it yet. Now that I was receiving this call, I knew. I felt that it would be easy to tell her and didn't feel the usual resistance to the idea of it. I picked up, she asked if she and a coworker could visit to hear about my experience. I told her they were very welcome and that I'd love to share. A few minutes later, they were in my house.

And I told them everything. I described my lifelong social anxiety, the shame, and how this drove me to participate in the weekend. It felt amazing. I was able to share my always deeply hidden, shameful truth as if it was nothing. The liberation came from realizing my fears; *They'll know me as a failure... They'll think I'm not a 'real' man... They'll mock me-* were just that, fear. In truth, I felt only freedom, and deeper self-love.

From this moment on, it became easy to tell. I told pretty much everyone at work. Before the week was over, most of the ~40 people at the office knew my story. Suddenly all knew about my struggle, after spending years beside them, hiding it.

I'd always feared confessing to it would make my delusions reality. That people would start to care about me being able to pee. That every time I went to the toilet, they would start to actually be aware of the amount of time I spent there. It wasn't even that I was afraid it would be negative attention. The idea of someone rooting for me to be able to go was just as bad and would, I thought, create the same amount of pressure.

It turned out that, with everyone knowing, I just didn't care anymore.

Before, I'd count the seconds moments after stepping into a toilet, terrified someone would realize something was 'wrong' with me, now I stopped feeling pressure. Everyone already knew! Who cares how long I'm here? Who cares whether I go or not? But mainly, I didn't worry anymore that people could discover this. I couldn't be found out anymore.

Suddenly many things that I was taught in CBT and exposure therapy started making sense.

You wouldn't believe the progress I made. Was I suddenly able to pee everywhere all the time? No. But did I never suffer from a 'misfire' anymore? Also, no.

I'd simply go again later, sometimes multiples times- success always came. Soon, every toilet in the office was safe, and I could use all of them.

I began intentionally going to the gym with a full bladder. I realized within days that I would often just be able to go straight after entering. Sure, sometimes I wouldn't when someone knocked or tried to open the door, but that was fine. Here also, I would just come back later and try again.

I also confided in gym friends about everything. The ceremonies, the weekend, and my lifelong social anxiety. Every time I shared it with someone new, I felt a little bit of the weight come off of my shoulders. Each time it made new bathrooms feel safer.

To give some idea of how far I went in telling people, a week after the ceremonies I joined a yoga studio with a coworker. We went to an introduction day. Again, like the weekend, there was a sharing circle beforehand. Why were we here? Why did we have an interest in yoga?

Not a place to expect personal revelations. Yet I shared. My 15-year shame, that led to the ceremonies, and to this new interest in spirituality. And I shared it happily. Such a contrast to the sharing circle at the start of the Ayahuasca weekend, where I could barely get the words out of my mouth. Now I revealed my deepest shame to strangers as if discussing hobbies. Incredible.

In subsequent weeks and months, I kept pushing boundaries. I would go to the McDonald's after the gym, just to order a coffee and sit there until I had to pee, and push myself to use the urinal.

With the help of others, I started going out again. Their support took many forms: invitations, gentle nudges, or simple availability. And so that way, little by little, I started realizing I could actually DO all these things; I could go to all the places I used to avoid. I wasn't afraid anymore. Failures still occurred, but they never dragged me down into despair. I would just be able to try again until I succeeded.

But. I was still scared every day. I knew myself as someone who couldn't pee so well for such a long time, it seemed too good to be true. What if, one morning, I'd wake up and be back to who I was before? The memory of my anxious self, felt much closer to me than my new freedom.

This brings me back to the girl from the ceremony. A month after the weekend, we finally met. Even though it had already become clear she didn't feel the same way.

The process after the ceremonies was both beautiful in that I realized self-love, it was also difficult because of a broken heart. Each day since the weekend, she was responding less and clearly not showing the same enthusiasm I did. Many lessons there, but not particularly relevant to this story.

She is relevant though, because when we met, we talked about her life. She'd traveled for two years. The inspiring stories planted a seed of wanderlust in me. I also wanted to travel one day.

When asked about her favorite experience, she told me about Nepal's Annapurna circuit.

So, some weeks after this, still afraid my change wasn't permanent but experiencing daily improvements, I decided to go hike the Annapurna circuit. A 200-kilometers hike around the Annapurna Mountain range

in Nepal. I decided that once I did that, I would give up on the fear. A 200-kilometer hike without possibility of routine and with new toilet situations constantly?

If I was able to do that, I would believe I was a permanently changed man.

And so, a few weeks later, I was in a plane flying towards Nepal. This was less than three months after the Ayahuasca weekend.

It was an amazing month. Though prepared to solo hike, eventually I did the trek with nine wonderful people. Did I have moments of difficulty? Definitely. Especially higher up the mountains, where the terrain became empty of trees and lacking in out-of-sight spots. So yes, I absolutely spent time with a full bladder and all the anxiety that came with it, but all in all- it was perfect. I loved the experience.

I loved it so much that, inspired by the seasoned travelers around me, one afternoon while having lunch on a terrace overlooking the massive, white Himalayas, is where I decided: that's it. I'm not going back to life the way it was before. I will sell my apartment, quit my job, and travel indefinitely.

And that's exactly what I set out to do. Five months later, apartment sold and job resigned, I flew to India. As I write this, five years have passed. I've been away from home ever since. Traveling. Though now rooted in Pisac, Peru.

I've lived through many adventures since then, but those are not part of this story. Who knows, one day, I might write another one.

And so, in the end, the reason I'm writing this story, my story, is to offer hope, hope for anyone reading this suffering from paruresis (or any other social anxiety disorder) convinced they will never overcome it, never heal from it. To give you the depth of my personal journey and the understanding I've reached over the years. Hopefully you can find parallels to your own situation. Who knows what kind of healing that can bring for you?

I'll start with the single most important message. The one thing that changed my life. The one thing that made me overcome my crippling anxiety disorder, my paruresis. The one single thing that gave me freedom.

Self-acceptance.

Another way to say self-acceptance is, of course, self-love. But in my specific case, I like self-acceptance better. Why, after all these years, trying things like cold showers, breath holds, and having therapy for extended periods, did nothing help?

Because I didn't want to have what I had, and I didn't want to be the way that I was. I didn't want to be **who I was**.

My motivation had always been to get rid of the paruresis, the inability to pee. I wanted to be 'normal'. I wanted to be 'a man'. I was always in a state of comparison. I wanted to be like others. They seemed to not have anything wrong with them. In my case, specifically, other men who could just take two steps away and take a piss without caring whether someone saw them. I also wanted to be able to carelessly pee in a urinal, instead of feeling ashamed and forced to wait for a small chance at being able to go in a stall.

I didn't want to be like this!

But with self-acceptance- *Fine, I need a higher-than-average amount of safety to pee. Fine, I have a social anxiety disorder. Fine, I am not 'normal'*, came everything I needed to heal. It took away the shame, the secrecy. It took away the pressure. It took away the need to act like I was someone I wasn't. It made me more authentically me than I had been since I was a child.

I know now I'm not a 'tough guy', nor was I ever meant to be. I'm kind, I'm gentle, maybe a little weird. I'm very connected to my feminine side. I now feel whole. I feel free. Free also because now everyone who knows me, *knows* me. Knows about my past, about my social anxiety disorder, my shame and past feelings of inadequacy.

Considering I've been traveling for many years since then, that's a lot of people!

And over the years, I realized again and again that really, no one cares. The only care that is there is coming from empathy. And surprisingly, often also from understanding. Either because people recognize this exact issue or they relate to something similar.

So how and why did I develop this paruresis? What perfect storm was necessary to develop a social anxiety disorder so bad it would control me and take so much from me for 15 years of my life?

I remember that as a young kid, when I'd done something bad that day, I'd lie in bed and think about the 'fact' that if you do bad things, you go to hell. And I would try to imagine what it would be like to go to hell for such a long time, for all eternity.

I'd think: it will be as long as I'm alive now, and that felt very long. Then I added ten years more. But

eternity was much longer so I added one hundred years more. Then another one thousand years more. Even though, obviously, I couldn't actually grasp what one thousand years was or how it felt, I would still get this strange sensation of leaving my body. Of getting a glimpse of the understanding of what eternity was. This sensation became so intense that I got scared and immediately stopped thinking about it. Suffice to say, I was scared of hell, and because of that, scared to do 'bad' things.

The freedom that came when I became a teenager, brought many opportunities to push boundaries. At fourteen, I began crossing them. Sex, smoking, drugs/alcohol, all 'bad' by my childhood standards. My inner child still held the belief that doing bad things meant you'd go to hell. The teenager just wanted to rebel. He didn't care what was right or wrong. He just wanted to explore and cross the boundaries that came with exploring. Since I was raised very sheltered in the religion, I'd missed many typical child experiences. So, once I discovered boundaries, I didn't just cross them, I jumped as far as I could.

Drugs. High doses, and always craving more. Sex. Losing my virginity at 14 when I wasn't ready. Porn. Starting to consume since I was 13. A daily habit of weed and tobacco. Always seeking out the darkest music I could find.

Looking back now, I can see how my inner child must have felt: aware of all these 'evil' choices, afraid for the consequences.

Was I aware of that at the time? The younger me calling out warnings and wanting me to stop? Definitely not. I was a teenager; I was stubborn; I was rebellious. I didn't pay any attention to what the deeply conditioned part of me still believed. I repressed that deeply enough not to be bothered by it. But then, after nearly a year of pushing boundaries- doing things I knew were wrong, things I shouldn't have been doing, it all culminated in the one act that had always been a kind of 'theme,' the thing I knew was truly 'bad': going to a disco.

Now, looking back, I realize what was really happening. The repressed child inside me, unheard but desperate to protect reckless teenage me, finally took control. He made himself known in the most limiting way possible: slowly, steadily shutting down my ability to pee, and with it, my freedom to keep testing limits. Without me even realizing it, he started keeping me safe.

But, in developing the anxiety disorder, of course there was more at play. A big part was me trying to be someone I wasn't. I was around all the wrong people, proof I'd stopped knowing myself.

A huge part of why this happened traces back to what happened to my childhood friend, and the innocence we both lost there. I needed a tribe and I needed safety. So, I found one: a group of rebellious kids, each lost in their own way.

This was exactly the kind of group that introduced me to cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. The kind that dragged me to the discotheque- the catalyst for my social anxiety disorder. The first experience of being unable to pee, and to an extent, the first realization of a deep need to feel safe.

I spent years in these groups of guys where everyone was trying to act tough. And of course, I wanted to be tough too.

And that's how the paruresis could grow. Because of not being honest with myself in who I was. Because

of being ashamed of who I was. This part of me, wrapped in secrecy, hidden from almost everyone, just pushed me further away from myself.

After all, if the thing you are constantly battling with and suffering from, is not known to any of the surrounding friends, how well can they know you at all? How well could I know myself at all? We mainly know ourselves through our peers at that stage in our lives.

From there, stepping into full avoidance and escaping in video games and a weed addiction definitely did not help. Even when my difficult teenage years ended, when I supposedly had the time and space to finally look at myself- I didn't. Escape and isolation became my tools. Escaping into digital fantasy worlds and isolation by reducing the number of people in my life to a bare minimum.

All of this because I hated who I thought I was. I just wanted to be someone who was normal. If I were normal, everything would be perfect; I would be whole. Not broken like I felt like I was for so long.

And now, having deeply accepted myself, including my shy bladder, I am whole. I am the same person, and I love myself. The paradox: embracing the paruresis, the shy bladder, made it go away.

Gratitude. So important. Now I can look back and take all the things that hurt me, that made life feel so unfair, and turn them into the greatest gifts I've ever gotten. I'm thankful to my parents for my strict Christian upbringing. I would not want it any other way. It shaped me, in more ways than I can count, and most of them for the better. I'm grateful for the struggles -direct and indirect- around sex. They shaped me into a lover who truly understands, who cares deeply, who's learned to release selfishness. They forced me to accept parts of myself I'd never have faced otherwise.

And I'm so grateful for those fifteen years. For the paruresis. I'm so grateful for having lived through it. It protected me from so much. It taught me so much. And in the end, it also gave me so much. It led me to the life I am living now. In a country far away from mine, with a beautiful tribe around me and a purpose in life.

So, we've come to what life is like now. What my purpose is. I'm living in Pisac, Peru. After traveling for years, this is where I landed. I have a deep passion to learn to facilitate plant medicine ceremonies and, through that, be able to share the healing, the change, and the self-love I received. To guide others on their healing paths. To keep working on myself. To always uncover something new. To try to be open and see through my own bullshit. To, through these teachings, change the way I interact with myself, people, and the planet.

And now- to pass on what I've learned. The hard lessons, the love, all of it. To anyone reading this who's trapped in their anxiety, their limits, their pain: You won't be stuck here forever. I know because I made my way out. There are ways to break free, always. I would love to help you find those ways. Not via coping mechanisms (though valuable), but through radical self-acceptance. I promise you; huge transformations will come from that.