

Kristi Koo Ngai Sum

### Help Me Speak

The doorbell rang, and I looked up from the couch to see the last group to arrive. It was Cousin Joey, her husband, Finn, and their little daughter, Nova. I hadn't seen them in a while. My father's side of the family would have family gatherings every Saturday evening in my Granny's place, but I hadn't been attending them recently since it clashed with my part-time job as a barista. Granny also lived quite far away from where my family lived, so usually just my parents and my brother would go. This week, however, I had the chance to take the day off. So here I was, sitting on my Granny's couch and meeting all the relatives that I had not seen in a while.

We were a big family. I had a bunch of cousins who were all at least ten years older than me. A few of them, including Cousin Joey, had children. A swarm of greetings entered the room with the entrance of Cousin Joey and her family. Joey and Finn greeted us as they assisted little Nova in taking her jacket off. Little Nova was about four to five. She was the first great-grandchild and the youngest member of the family tree. The next in line was me already, with about 15 years in the gap. Having my brother was one of the biggest blessings to me. When we were still little kids, all our cousins were young adults already. Being the only two kids in the entire family was intimidating. My brother, especially since he had always been loud and extroverted, could help share a lot of the adults' attention. Little Nova's case was different. Everyone's attention was on her.

"Nova, say hello to Great Granny," Joey said while pulling on little Nova's arm. Little Nova frowned, looked down, and took a step back. "You can't be so rude, Nova. Come to Great Granny and say hello to her," Joey said again. Little Nova continued to shy away. She shook her head while fixing her gaze on the floor. With her right arm held by Joey, she put her left arm behind her back and hid herself behind Joey's legs. Finn then grabbed her left arm from behind and pulled her towards Granny with Joey.

"Don't be such a bad kid again, Nova," said Finn. "We all have to greet one another. This is basic courtesy."

"How difficult is it to just say hello?" one of my uncles said. "We saw a little boy today at the park. He was younger than you, but he was brave and greeted me saying 'Hello, uncle'. You are a grown girl; you should be better than a little boy."

"Don't be so harsh on her every week. She is just a bit timid," another one of my uncles replied.

"You need to learn to greet people and be polite, Nova," said one of my aunts.

It got my palms sweaty just watching this.

Granny smiled at little Nova, who was now standing in front of her with her right arm still held by Joey. Little Nova looked like she was about to cry. As my mother would always say to me when I was younger, the frown was so deep that it could pinch a fly to its death.

After more fuss and little Nova's long stare at the ground, Nova's lips and cheeks finally moved a little. Her lips opened just the slightest bit and whispered some words that I could only guess to be "Hello Great Granny". Her whisper was too quiet for me to hear, especially when the TV was playing. She could've mouthed the words only without voicing the words. I couldn't tell. Little Nova's parents let her get away with this whisper greeting.

"Good, Nova," Joey said while patting her head, "next time, you should greet Great Granny and the other aunties and uncles, okay?"

Little Nova was then let off to one of the bedrooms to do her own thing. Now the living room was just the adults.

"Nova is just like Kristi, isn't she?" my mother said.

"Oh yeah. You two are so similar. Both shy and stubborn," Joey said while looking at me.

I gave her an awkward smile.

"Kristi was so difficult," my mother said. And the two started chatting about me and Nova.

There were many reasons for me to not want to attend these family gatherings. Maybe when my employer was planning the roster, I could've made her not give me shifts on Saturday evenings. I was a grown young adult. Socializing with the family should not be something I avoid. It was just that seeing little Nova brought me to look at my unwanted amber of memories.

We were at a McDonald's birthday party. My mother was in the toilet. She let me off to the rest of the kids. I was about four at the time.

"Hello, Kristi!" one of the kindergartners waved at me.

I waved back.

"Where is your mother?" she asked.

"Toilet," I said in a voice I could barely hear. I cleared my throat and said again, "In the toilet."

"Okay! Remember to put your present on the table there!" she told me.

I replied with a simple nod. There were a lot of adults. My face was stiff. My mother soon came back. She asked, "Is that girl talking to you your friend?" Did she see me? I didn't realise she was coming back already. My heart started beating a lot faster. I shook my head.

"Go talk to your friends," she said.

I refused. I just stood there, looking at one of the empty tables, hoping that she would bring me to it.

"Let's just grab a seat first for now," my mother said finally.

We ordered some food and waited for the party to start. After eating a nugget or two, Mr McDonald walked out.

"Hello everyone! Look at all of these happy faces!" he said.

My mother and I chose a seat quite far away from the centre. I had to turn around, with a nugget still in my hand, to see Mr McDonald.

"Now that we have all eaten something," he continued, "let's have some fun! Come and get into two queues in front of me!"

All the kids came rushing out. My eyes were following them, one by one, they all queued up in front of Mr McDonald.

"Follow your friends and go out, Kristi," my mom said.

My body was heavy. I felt a hand on my back nudging me.

"Go play, Kristi," mother said.

I shook my head.

No matter how hard my mother ordered me to go out, I would not budge. We watched the kids play a few games of *The Egal Catches the Chicks*. Mr McDonald asked, "Are we all having fun?" The kids screamed a big yes in response. But then he looked at me and started walking to me. *Please, no.*

He bounced and bounced, and he crouched in front of the small little me.

He smiled and said, "Hey pretty! What is your name?"

My blood felt cold.

Kids gathered next to Mr McDonald. Their parents' eyes were on me. My mother was still behind me, with her hand on my shoulder.

I looked at Mr McDonald, then at my feet that were dangling off the floor.

“Tell Mr McDonald your name,” my mother bended down next to me and nudged me again.

My hands were gripping tight on the sides of the chair, and my teeth were biting on the inside of my mouth. *Speak, Kristi, speak.*

“Look at Mr McDonald, Kristi,” mother said.

“What’s the matter, Kristi?” Mr McDonald said while pulling a sad face with his fingers. “You can talk to me and be happy again!”

He pushed his cheeks up and down repeatedly. The kids behind him were laughing.

“Kristi is not talking again!” one of my classmates said.

“What is your favourite colour?” Mr McDonald asked, finally back to just smiling. “Do you want a balloon?”

*Pink. Pink. P- Ink, pink. I can say it.*

I felt a lump in my throat.

“Is she mute?” I heard one of the parents say.

*Mute*

Mother stood up straight

“I’m sorry. She is very shy,” she said.

*Get me out of this.*

Eventually, Mr McDonald got up and left to play with the rest of the kids. Another one of my classmates came to me and said, “Kristi, come join us!”

*I am sorry, just go away. Please.*

“You are very sweet, but Kristi is feeling a little unwell. Go have fun,” my mother replied.

Finally, the attention was off me. Mother got back to her seat while I resumed eating my nuggets.

“Why are you here then?” she whisper-shouted at me. “Why did you make me bring you to the party if you are going to just eat and stay in the corner?” she continued.

Mother kept looking at me, expecting me to give her a response.

She spoke again, “I could’ve just brought you to McDonald’s any time if you are just here for the food.”

I knew. Of course.

“Now I’m a mother with a not-participating child. You are embarrassing me.”

I was embarrassing her. I knew that too. I was embarrassed myself. I was ashamed of myself. Why couldn’t I do it? Just talk like a normal child. I was so scared.

Since I was very little, as little as one to two, I had been terrified of talking to adults. They would judge. They would tell you off. It seemed almost like I couldn’t do anything without having my actions commented on. Even without doing anything, as long as I was with some adults, I could get judged. “You look skinnier.” “You should smile more.” “Kristi is a quiet kid, isn’t she?” I didn’t like looking at them, even. It felt like when they were complimenting me, their gentle yet fault-finding smiles were fake. Criticisms were behind their lovely words. “You did well today, talking to your classmates.” I could barely lay my eyes on the adults. Allowing them to see me laugh or open my mouth was just as frightening. “You see, you look prettier when you smile.” I hated it. This was why I was in this situation: I was invited to a McDonald’s birthday party, but I was too terrified to expose myself and talk to the other kids. So, I just sat there at the table with my mother, eating chicken nuggets.

“So, you’re going to just keep eating nuggets and ignoring your mother like you ignored all the other people, huh?”

My heart was pounding. My throat was tight. My face was frozen.

I had another bite of the nuggets.

*Chew, chew, chew.*

“Kristi Koo Ngai Sum. Answer me. Are you going to participate?”

*Chew, chew, swallow.*

I shook my head.

“No? You are not going to join the other kids?”

I shook my head again.

“Then we leave,” she said. I followed her. I cleaned my hands, got up, and followed my mother out of the party zone. Mother went to the other parents.

“I am sorry, I am afraid we have to leave early,” she said.

“Why? Is Kristi feeling all right?”

“She is just being a bad kid today,”

*A bad kid.*

“It’s okay, we know Kristi is quiet.”

“I will punish her at home.”

*Punish.*

“Let’s go, Kristi.”

I followed her in silence.

Looking back now, I wondered how my mother had felt. How could she allow that to happen? How could she not tell that I wanted to be like the other kids so bad? I just couldn’t.

“Kristi Koo Ngai Sum,”

We talked again that night, I wasn’t the kind of kid to cry in front of other kids, so I didn’t let a tear slip at the party. At home, however, my tear glands seemed to be out of control.

“Do you know what you did was wrong? Don’t just cry. Don’t be so stubborn again next time.”

*Stubborn.*

That night, she got me to stand and pull on my earlobes with my hands for an hour. My arms were raised the entire time.

By punishing me, she thought I would stop isolating myself and be a good kid one day. Mother, you were so wrong.

A few months later, there was another McDonald’s party invitation.

“Do you really want to go? You didn’t seem like you wanted to last time,” she asked.

I nodded.

“You promised to not behave like last time?”

I nodded again.

This time, Mother used a new strategy on me. Besides making me promise to behave well, my mother also brought my brother. I was the most relaxed around him. In family gatherings, I struggled as much as little Nova. Yet sticking with my brother could sometimes encourage me to talk a little. And with him, I would at least not isolate myself.

“Sister! Your plushy said she wanted to come with us! Would you like to bring her?” my brother asked me.

I got a new plushy the day before the party. My mother bought me the plushy because she knew I had been obsessed with that cartoon character. So, with my new plushy, my brother, and my mother, I attended the McDonald’s party again.

At the party, I went to wherever my brother went. He went to grab food; I went to grab food. He went to play with the other kids; I would stick by him, or rather, he would hold my hand and pull me from place to place. My brother would talk to both me and my plushy. I would laugh and smile with him. I still wouldn’t talk to the others but I would whisper to my brother so I could communicate through him. He was my shelter, my spokesperson. “Brother, plushy wants to eat this.” “Okay, sister! Let’s take a burger. Eat faster though! We will have a mass game soon!”

He had this magical power over me. He took away my nervousness. In retrospect, it seemed that since I had expected the adults to know that I could be close to my brother, and when they judged, they would be judging both of us as a pair. I had thought that my brother could protect me. And with him, I forgot about the adults.

There was a moment when I glanced at my mother. She was smiling at me. I blocked my face with the plushy and tried not to creep in a smile but failed. I felt embarrassed. She commented afterwards that I was a good daughter that day. It made me uncomfortable. Regardless, I had fun at the party.

A few months ago, I watched a documentary named *Help Me Speak*: a documentary showing children who were suffering from a social anxiety disorder called selective mutism. Selective mutism was common in children. It was, however, often overlooked. Children with selective mutism were afraid of getting told off by adults. The fear was so great that whenever they were in front of specific adults (they called it “the code”), the muscles around their throats got extremely tense. During those moments, they physically could not speak. How funny adults thought that punishing the kids, shouting at them and telling them to stop being stubborn would make them “obedient” and “disciplined”; those actions were the exact reasons why the kids were not speaking.

In my situation, adults in general were my code.

I started speaking a little more eventually. After all, I was now a functional adult who could talk to customers easily in my barista job. The adults around me tried helping young little me speak. Other than my mother, schoolteachers would also use different methods to “help” me overcome my “shyness”. In primary school, one of my teachers made me, in front of the whole class, scream at the fan at the back of the classroom from the teacher’s desk. How ridiculous. A usual kid would be too shy to do this. I would now guess that she was using some vocal practice techniques on me to make me talk louder. Well, I could talk loudly, just not in front of you, teacher.

It was natural selection that made me train myself to speak, I guess. It was too exhausting to be on edge all the time, so I pushed myself into being the Kristi today. I would take every chance to talk to strangers as a practice. I would force myself to say thank you to the cashier and drivers. This training I gave myself, however, did not start until I was about ten to eleven when I was allowed to go to school on my own. There was no chance for me to do such things in front of my parents. No way. At that time, I was still a teenager who struggled to say a simple good morning in front of my parents. Actually, I still struggled to do that today as a twenty-year-old. In the presence of my parents, when I had to say good morning, thank you, or “Hello Granny”, I would grab my plushy and speak with the plushy like a puppeteer. Yes, I was still scared. Yes, hiding myself away with a plushy made me feel safe. Yes, comments from my parents such as “Be polite” still gave me discomfort. My parents were now still my code.

In the documentary, all the kids ended up seeing a speech therapist. They gave them specific practices to slowly bring the poor kids out of their anxiety. My brother used to see a speech therapist. The primary school teachers noticed that he talked too fast, especially when he was excited, and the words would be unclear. Mother demonstrated to me the kinds of activities my brother would go through in his sessions, “I was next to your brother, and the therapist asked him to talk at the speed of the walking figure on the desk blah blah blah.”

My brother and I studied in the same primary school. I never saw a speech therapist. Instead, I was just forced by some teacher to scream at a fan.

I could not be sure that I had selective mutism. Self-diagnosing was never credible. I, however, could be sure that I was not simply “stubborn”, “shy”, and “impolite”. It was not important now to find out what kind of social anxiety I had when I was young. I just wished my mother, and all the adults would not simply dismiss the struggles into “bad kids’ behaviour”.

“Her classmates at the kindergarten would come to me and say, ‘Nova doesn’t talk’,” Joey said to my mother.



“I had that too! She was in primary school, and she still wouldn’t talk. But she was so noisy at home with her brother. She was so shy outside,” my mother and Joey were still having this conversation. “I think her brother was way more popular amongst her classmates. He loved finding her little sister during recess. Kristi probably made friends with her classmates through her brother. Nova will eventually get better like Kristi. Don’t worry”

*Nova will eventually get better like Kristi. Don’t worry.* Shut the fuck up. Yes, when you realise you are alone during recess and you have no one to play with because you don’t talk sometimes, yes, you will then try your very fucking best to struggle out of this fucking trap and be better. *Don’t worry.* Fucking worry about her and give her the help she needs, you useless adults.

I didn’t know if they had intended for me to join the conversation, but I left to go to the bathroom instead. Then I saw little Nova sitting on the windowsill in Granny’s bedroom. She was looking out at the kids playing in the playground downstairs while hugging a little stuffed giraffe. I left her there alone and went back to the couch. Mother and Joey seemed to finally have ended their chat about me and Nova. They were both on their phones.

Amber. A beautiful yellow stone made from fossilised tree resin. Little insects living in the tree could get trapped in the resin for years and years. Amber is like a crystal. It is clear. You could see the trapped animal from outside.

I wish to smash the resin into pieces, and let the trapped little Kristi go.

“Mom,” she looked up at me. “Do you remember the time when we were at a McDonald’s birthday party, but we left early because I didn’t want to talk to the kids and play?”

“Oh really? I don’t remember that, but it doesn’t sound surprising.”

“Yes. The others were having fun with the McDonald’s clown, but I was just sitting on the side eating nuggets.”

“Now that you say more about it, yes, I do remember. You were such a strange kid, you know? You would not budge. All the other kids were out there playing, and you just wouldn’t go out.”

My mother sat up straight, turned her body towards me and continued, “Do you understand how stupid it was? You didn’t need to go to a party just to eat McDonald’s. I was explaining that to you, but you still wouldn’t go.” She had her telling-off voice on. “It was so awkward for me to just sit on the side with her kid there while the other parents were on the other side watching their kids play.”

At that moment, my twenty-year-old body reacted like a 4-year-old body: I wanted to cry. I could feel tears gathering under my eyes. My heart was pounding; my throat was tight. I knew we were just having a casual chat but young little me seemed to have possessed my body. My body

remembered. Upon a similar stimulus, my body gave a similar reaction. I could not control it. I pretended to scrub my eyes and looked away. Pinching my neck just a little, I forced some blood and adrenaline into my throat area, hoping to calm myself.

I am sick of all the eyes on the amber. I grab the stone and crush it.

I made sure I would not look like I was about to cry, and I said to Mother, “A little after that, I got another invitation to a McDonald’s birthday party. I urged you to let me go,” I turned to my mother without looking at her face, “and you made me promise to not behave like last time.”

You will be free, Kristi.

Air entered the crushed resins, creating white blobs.

I spoke again, “Could you not tell I obviously wanted to join the kids in the first party?”

“I could tell.”

“Then why did you not help me?”

“What else could I do? You were really stubborn.”

Little Kristi, you won’t be held out for criticism anymore.

“Maybe by not scolding me for being silent and being too shy and too stubborn, I would have been less scared. I wasn’t just ‘stubborn’? Was it not obvious that I was struggling?”

She stared at me, and said, “Do you think we didn’t try to help? All of your teachers were saying how bad your situation was. No one could get you to talk. We were worried that you wouldn’t have friends. We were discussing a lot of ways to help you improve.”

Little Kristi, future Kristi overcame it.

There were a few seconds of silence.

“Maybe the simplest way to help me was to just bring me to a speech therapist.”

I got up from the couch and went to my brother, who was sitting by the dining table.

“Brother, let’s go play with little Nova.”

“Sure! I was waiting for you to say this.”

Little Nova had a few more other toys with her along with the stuffed giraffe. As the big child that I was, I would still carry a little plushy with me, so I brought that to Nova as well, hoping the little plushy would make me feel less awkward. I could not be sure if Nova recognised me. It was

more likely for Nova to recognise my plushy than me. She should recognise my brother though. We went to little Nova and my brother started to entertain her. I was just sitting there watching.

They were pretending to make dinner on the portable cooking playset. My brother then looked at me and said, "Let's give Kristi and her plushy the soup we made." My brother handed me an empty plastic bowl. I took the bowl and pretended to feed my plushy the soup. In a plushy's voice I said while holding the toy, "Wow, that's quite sweet." I held up my plushy and walked it to the kitchen set. "Hmmm, let me see," I voiced the plushy, "Brother, did you mistake sugar for salt?" Then my brother made a loud gasp, "Oh!" And I gave my plushy a little facepalm. My brother continued, "Oops Nova, let's just say we made a dessert instead of some soup then!" Nova was holding back a smile by sucking in her lips. Then she used her stuffed giraffe to hide her face.

Gosh, this was so silly. How could my brother do this on his own with Nova? Our silly interactions eased up little Nova quite a lot. She was not frowning anymore. After a while, with still just me, my brother, and little Nova in the room, I said, "Mother and cousin Joey were just talking about how we both wouldn't say hello to people. They don't understand how scary it is."

Both pairs of eyes were on me. I grabbed my plushy and voiced it, "Nova, next time, find Kristi and me when you need to greet people. I will help you say the words and you can just mouth them."

I wasn't quite sure why I said what I said. That was awkward for me to say these words. My brother held Nova's giraffe and spoke in a squeaky voice, "Kristi, then you should remember to bring your plushies every time you see my mama! Otherwise, I will need to substitute for you and help my mama say hello to others."

"Hey, kids! Dinner is ready!" Uncle Finn shouted out from the living room. The three of us got up. Before we left the bedroom, I gave little Nova my plushy and let her hold it for me for the rest of the evening. "Let's go, Nova, I am hungry," I said to her while holding her hand.