"THE FIRST THREE YEARS"

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FADE IN:

EXT. CAR - NEW YEAR'S EVE

You were driving slowly through the crowded road. It was almost midnight, New Year's Eve to be exact. He was supposed to take his friends home and then head back immediately because some works need to be done. Nevertheless, he forgot this is not a good day to go out.

The car ahead stopped moving. Then suddenly, the firework started.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

Oh right! This road is near the firework.
Silly me!

The phone rang. You picked up and quickly checked the messages. What a weird night!

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Happy new year!

You heard a familiar voice from the empty seat next to him. He turned around, and it was a familiar face. His face.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

Wow! You startled me. Happy new year to you too! ... But wait, is this a new year for you?

The 25-year-old you asked hesitantly.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Just don't bother!

The 25-year-old you glanced over, then decided to drop the question and got back to his messages.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Busy night, right? I am still thinking
that working on holidays is a weird thing.

The 22-year-old you just giggled.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

You will get used to it. But hey! Thank you for being quite stubborn and went back to Vietnam after graduation. Many things could have turn out differently.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

After graduation, I started working at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research, Phenikaa University (back then was Thành Tây University) in November 2017. But it was not until December 11, 2017 that I, actually we, signed our first 'professional' contract with the Centre. Since then, we have done more works than we could have imagined. Honestly, you do not remember the whole thing, but always specific memories. Fortunately, our works were recorded in written forms, so at least we can look at those papers and reminisce the old days.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

It was the old days for me, but they are your future, right?

It was quiet for a minute. Then the 25-year-old you continued.

I remember the Arts paper [1], the SSHPA database [3], and the Cultural additivity paper [3] in our first year. They were all published toward the end of 2018, when we were reaching the 1-year mark. We were learning everything slowly in our first year, so each paper was a memorable achievement.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

The SSHPA database was a new experience for me. I like technology, but working with a database was never on my checklist. It was a culmination of a two-year-long preparation from the team. By the time we joined, everything was established. It was

all we did in the beginning. Collecting data, day in and day out.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

We are still doing it now. But at least I got some help.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Lucky you! Then, the Arts paper. I remember it was very personal. The first manuscript was full of mistakes, but eventually, we did it with enormous support.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

Yeah! It would probably take me three years to finish it if I had to do it alone.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

You would never come up with that idea. It was the same for the Cultural additivity paper.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

That paper was called "the cleverly designed study" by a reviewer. It is approaching 200 citations on Google Scholar. This is the kind of original work that you may have a chance to do only once in a lifetime.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Do you think we were too lucky?

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

Perhaps. I don't know. In 2019, as the team continued exploring the concept of Cultural additivity [3], we helped to turn pictures of old houses in Hanoi into a dataset of cultural evolution [4]. The SSHPA database was also a fruitful source too. We finally finished an edited book [5].

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Do you still feel it now? That desperation in the beginning. The writing was torturous. And you keep wondering about your intelligence.

The 25-year-old you stared blankly at the firework in the sky.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

I think I got used to it. Now, I just keep working on something until I can move on to the next project. I remember the thrill, though. Each project has a different kind of excitement. While the arts was one of your passions, the SSHPA database and the cultural additivity were entirely different. They taught you different skillsets and opened new possibilities.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

That was true. I don't even know that we can turn fairy tales and folklore into data.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

I tried to mimic that method, but it is hard. The taxonomy can take years. Merely debating the definition of a variable can cost months.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

What did you do after 2019?

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

2020 was a peculiar year. It was supposed to be a disaster, consider the pandemic and everything, but it turned out to be better than expected. In the first few months, we found a brother for the Cultural additivity paper [3, 6]. Then, we had a well-received paper about the COVID-19 pandemic [7]. The publications came

slower toward the end of the year, but I got a chance to work with the Field Medalist Ngô Bảo Châu [8]. The project is similar to the SSHPA database. I hope we can finish it soon.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

Why are we here, man? I mean, why you?

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

Recently, our mentor asks that questions more often: "Were you ever at the top student of your class? Was your class ever at the top of your school? Was your school ever at the top of your school? So why are you here, doing these incredible works?" I think the answer was obvious: A big no.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

I did not know anything when I decided to work on this. I was just curious, and perhaps, a little bit resilient.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

I remember we only won a trophy in football only once or twice. Of course, I always think we were lucky, and that is why we should not be arrogant. But recently, I realize I don't want to lose anymore. I just really want to win. Sort of, when I achieve something, I want to feel like I achieve it with most of my abilities, not like 50% luck and 40% support.

THE 22-YEAR-OLD YOU

You have changed. I was more like, whatever, I will just do it.

THE 25-YEAR-OLD YOU

We grow up, I guess.

A loud honk interrupted the conversation. You started the car and moved slowly. His mind wandered, and the road was still ahead.

FADE OUT:

THE END

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