

*Stutter Buddy*

If I walk up to a drive-through instead of driving through, I can talk into the little speaker. From inside a car, I can't. This goes for banks, pharmacies, fast food restaurants.

If I've met you before, chances are better that I'll be able to talk to you on the phone. If not, chances are almost zero.

I can't explain any of this. This is the first time that I've tried to even say it.

A stutter is like a game whose rules you think you start to understand and then they suddenly change. For months and months I'm able to say things starting with S and then one day it's an impossible sound, and something else is easy. I was always grateful as a kid when the "easy" changed to M or B because those were sounds that I had to use so often due to my last name (M) or that were especially painful when stuck on them (B). It's like getting to know someone entirely new, on those days, like it's a relationship I have with the stutter itself. When it changes modes like that, I'm tasked with responding swiftly. The stutter has a lot of the power. It can shift, and so can I, but it always goes first and dictates terms of what I can and cannot say. I wander around in its wake, making adjustments. It's not malicious, but it's not out to make things nice for me either. Sometimes it feels like it has a will, a life inside my life. It's personal and yet neutral, like a parasite.

Sometimes, when a stutter comes in, it's a sign that there's something else in the room that I haven't accounted for, or something interior that's not being recognized well: a fear,

maybe, or a latent memory of some gaffe or hurt centered on whoever I'm talking to, or just a consistent sense of tension around somebody, whether I like them or know them or not. This can be useful information to track, but it doesn't usually make a difference in the matter of whether I can get words to exit in an orderly way. A room with a lot of heart in it is easier to talk in. Sometimes.

Sometimes the stutter is like a friend who plays their cards extremely close to the vest, and is also very into random shitshows, and is a consummate wrench-thrower and isolator, who you're always having to have embarrassing wrestling matches with in checkout lanes and restaurants and industry mixers, in full view of everyone, you wrestling with your invisible foe who's also your friend, who just casually gets off on fucking things up.

Lately, I laugh about it more. Because really—to have this writhing, whimsical, impulsive, mercurial force calling the shots in an otherwise sober day? Can anyone be truly a responsible citizen, a fully straight and serious member of society, with this kind of thing going on inside? This is a kind of dread-strewn absurdity you find in Kafka stories.

People have said well-intentioned things about the stutter keeping me safe, being my protector, being a truth-teller, holding memories of trauma for me so that I can go on living. Someone told me I probably heard something I wasn't supposed to when I was 2 or 3, and from then on made a choice to hold my tongue, obey some silencer. My mother said I fell out of the back of a truck onto a gravel road around that time, right onto my head, and that's when it started. Speech therapists have their theories about basal ganglia and breath/throat/tongue mechanics. It's a genetic neurological disorder. It's a shock response. It's an ancestral burden. It's a glitch in whatever brain pathways went down early, pathways that were about connection.

The only times I ever cared where it came from were times I was convinced that I could make it go away, that making it go away would be a mark of achieving some sort of healing at a deep level, that it would be a victory over what has so often felt like my own personal bully. Even doing the work to accept that it may not go away—to dwell in deep serenity—usually proves to be just another ruse in the quest to get it to go away. (Just a little deeper and maybe *that* will hit the rewire switch??)

I remember seeing other kids walking into speech therapy in elementary school as I was walking out. The shared look as we passed in the hallway: shame, first. (No one's supposed to see me going to speech therapy, and I especially don't want to be spotted by another stutterer, because the desperate illusion that *we are getting over stuttering* is primary here, especially for parents and school staff.) Then a sort of grim laugh about the utter uselessness of what happens in the therapy room, which gives us clever little techniques to deal with what feels like a fight with a giant octopus most days, an oceanic storm. Then a deep alliance around whatever had changed in our stuttering that day, that week, the exhaustion, the new set of evasive maneuvers needed to work with the new dimensions of our old companion.

Preparing to talk to someone takes ... a lot of preparation. How will it go if the person is short with me, unwelcoming, doesn't give me time before they start to laugh at what they think is some sort of joke or hijink on my part. What do I have that I can say quickly and easily so they know what's going on and stop laughing, or at least not hang up on me or edge away. What do I have that's so impressive and smart that they have to keep listening. How can I compel them with my eyes to *please just stay*. Sometimes it's better when they think I'm having a seizure.

Sometimes they think I'm making fun of *them*, and their laugh is a laugh of them trying to laugh *with* me: the most bizarre experience of all.

I try to stitch sounds together into what can pass for fluent speaking. I'm always hanging out as an observer and editor inside my language, closely surrounded by its fricative bits and languorous vowels, pulling them together quickly in some order I think I'll be able to utter. Every word has to be made intentionally. Often a stutterer's thoughtful pauses are frantic inside as he scrambles to rearrange things, choose a different word when the one he wanted is going to go badly. I can see the impending failure from several sentences away, most times, and that's sometimes time enough to swerve. And no matter how suave I think the swerve is, listeners still hear it as a glitch. Which it is, of course. That's part of the game, too—me playing like my speech is fluent, asking that you agree that it is, while watching you know that it is not and also wanting it to be, just as much as I do.

There's an undercurrent of regret in more sustained relationships: If only she didn't. It's too bad, she could be so great at this job ... if. We face each other and you say, if only, and I say, if only. If only I could say to you what I have to say. If only she could say to me what she has to say. And we stand like that, you waiting for me, me waiting for me and watching you waiting. Take your time, you say. Bear with me, I say. Sometimes I have to leave my body for a bit, come back when it's over. It's the most ridiculous sort of standoff, both of us waiting for words that we both already know, probably, like my name. Standing and waiting for what's already there, what's just struggling to make its way across the space between us.

And there's one deep internal pulse that goes like this, a silent jackhammer that's left layers of sediment inside my life that, I realize now, have accumulated to the height of a wall. It goes: *Just shut up, laughers. Shut up your vapid flow of easy speech you take for granted and*

*slow down your privileged listening for one goddamn second. There are ways that language can flow that don't sound normal to your ears and if you can't shut up your own talking long enough to even leave space for mine—and what about the talk of the deranged, the drunk, the damaged, the disabled who can't begin to pass like I often can, the deeply different, the vast ecosystem of everyone whose connective mechanism's jangled, whether by fate or force, whose voices or bodies or ways are “not right”—then I've already mostly rejected you as someone who I could ever actually share something real with. I've agreed to keep faking fluency, keep faking period, because it's more comfortable for you. And I've stayed mad about the work that this is for me, mad about the limitations of your listening, mad about my powerlessness, mad about your disappointment, mad about it all.*

I didn't realize until recently that the smudge of anger and bitterness that streaks across the bottom of all my happiness is largely the thumbprint of all this, these dozens of encounters per day (and more in my head, anticipating, remembering) spent at an unutterable standstill. The most prominent feature of my daily life for four decades somehow never got mentioned as a factor in years of treatment for chronic depression, anxiety, addiction, overwhelm. And I certainly didn't want to look it in the eye.

It feels good now to shift my gaze away from cosmic wounds, mysterious brain shit, or other people as possible sources for this anger, and let it land on a more proximate location: this bitch of a buddy, who rides with me past countless drive-throughs when we're hungry, who parks and walks with me across blazing pavement, up countless stairs, across a gauntlet of reception desks, who hunts down obscure utility company email addresses with me, so we won't have to talk to a stranger through little holes. (In person is just as bad, but still less worse.)

Something I can see now, ask questions of, give a squeeze to, maybe even get salty with and annoy with my laughing.

I've been too busy running interference—holding the line of defense between the younger, more vulnerable version of myself and the full impact of these experiences—to really take them in as being real. It's new for me to see this pile of rage from the outside. This pile of rags I've shredded while speaking and dropped where I stood, looking at you trying not to look at me. It feels good to step out and actually pick up a piece of it, detach my forehead from the sediment wall and run my hand across it.

I can't do anything about how others interact with this obnoxious friend of mine. But I can walk with it differently—side by side, maybe, rather than shoving it behind me all the time, its thousand muscular tentacles pushing into my back, knocking me down, waving outside the edges of my frame. Maybe holding the hand of my kid self on the other side. Letting that mad kid know she's no longer in a battle she's destined to lose. She's still here. Because I'm here. We did fine. We did okay. Come out and see.

I'm trying out what it's like to stop trying to get rid of this riotous, intransigent thing that's as much a part of myself as those parts that are easy to like, pleasant to work with, amenable to my own and others' preferences.

I'm trying out what it's like not to need any sort of victory over this thing in order to be well.