

Getting Started

SO I'M A STUTTERER. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I THOUGHT I HAD IT beat, like the January bronchitis that stays past its welcome and which clears up only after two rounds of antibiotics that leave you dehydrated and dizzy. But I've become a realist. None of that reformed stutterer business here. I've still got a case of it, low-grade but chronic.

I BEGIN TO NOTICE SOMETHING ODD IN THE THIRD GRADE. MY MOM is watching TV and she has no idea that I'm bouncing around so I can ask what Dr. Ruth is talking about. I've just heard something I don't understand and I can't get the word, let alone a proper sentence, out of my mouth. Something grim and determined, like a thick-timbered wall, sits at the back of my throat and will not let the sound pass.

My mouth is struggling even more than my brain. So the rest of me, behind the couch, bounds into the air, stockinged feet driving into the hard tile floor. I try to give life to that soft sound. Nothing. So I spring and land, hoping the inside surfaces of my mom's glasses don't catch my reflection.

Everyone knows I stutter, but it's just like Ryan drinking a two-liter of RC until he chatters himself into a laughing stupor or Jake almost failing middle school science because he didn't feel like doing his science project on tornadoes. I don't know my mom worries about the stuttering. It feels like a given, not like a problem. Right now, though, she's thinking of something else, whatever she's watching on TV.

I have an idea. I'll start off with something meaty. Nothing soft. A warm sound, one that requires my lips to touch, makes its way down behind my eyes, back to my throat and then through my jaw. I stop jumping. My lips meet up.

"Mom," I say, "what's ejaculation?"

I discover books later that year and for a while forget about everything on TV except MTV, which I can't get enough of. I fall in love with Madonna and get jealous when she marries Sean Penn, who seems like a nobody to me. I find out that my parents will write checks

if they're for books from the *Weekly Reader* I get at school. I load up on *Encyclopedia Brown*, choose-your-own-adventures with monosyllabic titles like *Zork*, and in a fit of ambition, *Tom Sawyer* because I like his last name. My favorite that year is *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, which I later detail in a book report for the rest of the class. I talk about the underground lakes and the mutant men and the other kids gasp when I tell them the book is something like 250 pages. I choose how I want to begin my sentences, a strategy I develop based on which consonants I have the most faith in. The book report goes like water.

My dad, a reporter, tells me Jules Verne was a favorite of his, too, and then buys me two thick paperbacks based on *The Wizard of Oz*. Rows of colorful spines creep across the bookshelf in my room. Once, when I forget to return a dog-eared almanac when it's due, I worry so much about getting in trouble with the librarian that I almost throw up in the boys' bathroom.

In the fourth grade, I stop reading. Mrs. Lease, a sinew of a woman who wears glasses that make her eyes huge, has us read aloud almost every day. One morning in September, we go around the room, everyone reading a paragraph from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. My heart races as the boy in the front corner begins with chapter one. He reads fast. Five paragraphs down and I feel dizzy. Five more. My ears feel like they're on fire when Heather, the girl who sits next to me, races through her paragraph as if she were proving what a good reader she is. I skip ahead to my part, with Billy still remembering the beat-up dog. Silently, I read it clearly enough: "What I saw in the warm gray eyes of the friendly old hound brought back wonderful memories."

I'm shaking, concentrating on my hate for this book. I hate these sentences. I hate this upper-case "W." I want this book, this source of my worry, to go away and leave me alone.

Heather is done and then there is silence. Mrs. Lease clears her throat. I dare not look up from my book, but I can picture her sliding her giant glasses up her long, bent nose before she stops pacing to turn and get a better look at me. She is staring at the top of my head now.

The other kids at my table look up. Eyes fixed on the "W," I kick Heather's chair. Now the whole class is looking. I still can't get the first word out but I know if I can, the rest will follow. The thumping in my chest has moved upward, and is now hammering on my tonsils. My ears are so hot I'm certain they'll explode like two tiny, coiled firecrackers.

I catch Heather's eyes following my own when I shoot up from my chair. I tower, oddly, over everyone at the table. I'm standing, but

I don't remember standing up. I pound my foot into the carpet. The trigger works.

I read fast. The words are meaningless, just my lips blurring a string of sounds that follow one another by themselves. I finish the paragraph and sit down, my eyes going all fuzzy as if I'd been holding my breath. I don't remember if we got back around to me that day.

Before I get dressed in the mornings, I stand in the shower and read the back of my mom's shampoo bottle. I fantasize about my parents rushing to work and letting me stay in there until *G.I. Joe* comes on at three. I stand in the shower so long the jets of water leave little numb spots on the back of my neck. Sometimes, my dad gets nothing but the cold when he turns the knob, but I don't care.

One day, before my mom shoos me out of the bathroom so she can curl her hair for work, I make three wild wishes to the shampoo bottle that I know are out of bounds for a nine-year-old. I make them anyway: that no one in my family will ever get sick, that someone finds a cure for cancer because on the news it sounds as if everyone dies from it, and that no kid will ever stutter. I think about these three wishes all the time, not just when I'm in the shower. They seem to me profound things, like secrets.

On the fifteen-minute bus ride in the mornings, I hide between the big green seats and draw geometric shapes on the fogged-up window, things like the diagrams of atoms I've seen in Jake's high school textbooks. My friend John, a big, simple kid who hits cleanup on our little league team, sits on the aisle. Once a week, he asks me what's wrong, if I'm OK. I feel safer that he's next to me. If any of the bullies up in the front of the bus give me a hard time, I know he'd stick up for me. Later, in middle school, John will sign my yearbook like this: "I hope I know you when you are an artetic and I am a bub." By this, he will mean "architect" and "bum."

One day, on the bus, I open my math book and read the names of previous owners scrawled on the inside front cover. I envy them for never worrying about reading out loud, wondering if they know how easy they have it.

When we get the *Weekly Reader* in class, I tuck it inside my backpack, behind all my homework, hoping my parents don't ask about it. When the orders come in, I get permission to go to the water fountain. The shelves on my bookcase gather dust.

One morning, my dad pulls up to the school and my little brother Ryan hops out. I stay in the car.

“Seth, what’s wrong?”

“My stomach hurts.” I try my best to look like a kid with a stomachache, making frowning faces and rubbing my belly.

“Are you sure you’re feeling sick?”

“My stomach hurts.” My eyes also feel hot.

“Why are you crying?”

I duck down in the seat. I want to be invisible. I want my dad to take me home, maybe to his office, where I could make myself useful emptying the wastebaskets. They wouldn’t even have to pay me. I want to be anywhere but here, this place where everyone stares at me when I read out loud.

“Seth, you’ve got to face this thing, eventually,” my dad says. “I promise you, just get through it for a little while longer and we’ll get you some help. This isn’t the end of the world.”

My dad is my dad, and I know I am not going to win this one so I decide I may as well be on time for the morning announcements. I wipe my eyes on my sleeve and force my feet out of the car. I stand up and lift my backpack onto my shoulders. It’s heavier today. I shuffle, head down, to the front doors, and try not to let anyone see that my eyes are red. I make it through math and lunch and, in reading class that afternoon, Mrs. Lease shows a filmstrip.

A week later, I get the mail on the way home from the bus stop. I find an official-looking letter from the board of education addressed to both my parents. I think I know what it’s about.

MRS. HANNA, THE SPEECH THERAPIST, IS FRIENDLY AND ASKS ABOUT my favorite sweatshirt that I make my mom wash all the time because I want to wear it on Wednesdays and Fridays. Later, in a high school art class, I’ll find out it’s a Jackson Pollock rip-off. The gray and white spackles, raised on the cotton, go in all directions: random. But the way the splotches start and stop, over and over again, there’s a strange sense of order. Mrs. Hanna seems impossibly tall for a woman, but she has a nice voice. Her hair is curly and blond, like my mom’s.

During the second session, when she gives me something to read, she gives directions softly and slowly. I read a few paragraphs about astronauts and the space shuttle and do well. She pats my hand. Hers is soft. Then I get to the reading comprehension questions at the end and I can’t do them. They’re all “Whats” and “Hows.”

Mrs. Hanna asks me questions and after a while tells me that I have trouble with the soft sounds, the ones at the beginnings of sentences.

She asks me if I knew that, and because I don't want her to think I'm stupid, I say yes, I did know that. She asks if I read outside of school. I say that I do.

"Where do you read?"

"In my room."

"When you're reading in your room, do you ever read out loud, to yourself?" she asks.

"Yeah." I used to do it a lot. I liked to see how fast I could go.

"Do you ever stutter when you read out loud, to yourself?"

I'm sure. I used to go for the cobwebbed encyclopedias in the basement that had the maps and old flags from Japan and Nazi Germany. I read baseball articles from *Sports Illustrated*. I even read out loud to my friend John and his older brother on sleepovers at their ancient, maze-like house that some people said once belonged to a slave owner. I don't know when John learned chess, but somewhere he did, and he would teach me openings and then I'd read horror stories sneaked from their dad's nightstand. I went until my voice grew hoarse or until they'd fall asleep sprawled on top of their sleeping bags. Sometimes I'd go for an hour. But I haven't done that for a long time.

She tells me to go one word at a time, not to rush. She tells me that it's OK to stutter, that no one thinks I'm weird. I try to believe her. She asks me to invite Robbie and Scott, my two best friends in the class, to the next session.

The next week, we begin by talking about my sweatshirt. We talk about how I hate getting picked last at recess. I tell them I know I don't deserve to get picked last, but I know the captains do it because I'm always the skinniest one out there. Somehow, I have a hunch this is connected with stuttering. Then I read that same paragraph about the astronauts. I start out fine and I get on a roll. Everyone's patient and I'm aware of Robbie and Scott waiting out a handful of stutters, which come on the soft sounds, like I knew they would. But I get through it and my voice grows louder and stronger by the end.

Years later, when I'm in college, my dad tells me that I had met with Mrs. Hanna for just a few months. I thought it had been for the entire year.

"So there was a difference after that?" I ask.

"Oh boy," he says. "Like night and day."

IT'S THE NINTH GRADE AND I HAVE TO PICK SOMETHING TO DO AT church so I can get confirmed. I like Sunday school only a little more

than the dentist and only the true zealots are teacher's aides, so that's out of the question. The only reasonable option is to lector. I mention this to my Sunday school teacher and before I know it, my name appears on the bulletin under "Second Reading" and I've got two fat books crammed with scripture passages planned out for masses four years in advance.

My turn comes the next Sunday just before Father DeSales gives his homily on abortion, a topic he revisits, red-faced and faithfully, at least once a month. I watch as the sun shifts behind a row of huge stained-glass windows, first lighting up reds, then yellows, and finally the deep blues. The old organ lady grinds through her sad notes and when the parish sits it's my turn. I wait until the jackets are adjusted and until the coughing stops. Then I wait for the babies in the back room to stop crying. Below it all waits deep silence that I can feel in my stomach. I climb the steps to the lectern and two hundred pale faces stare back at me.

I find the ribbon holding my place and open the enormous book with an amplified *thump*. I clear my throat and it booms back through the speakers hanging from the church rafters. I'm live.

I read from one of the letters. The first thing I notice is that my voice sounds younger than I thought it would. But it's clear. Even as I read the letter, the words mean little. Still, I like the proper nouns: *the Philistines, the Samaritans, the Ammonites*. I like how they roll off my tongue as if they're the familiar names on the baseball cards stashed under my bed. I like how the McElwees, constant every week in the front pew, fix their eyes on me and nod as if I know what I'm talking about. I like the way I stumble just once and don't mind much when I do. I command the words; they do as I tell them. After I say "The Word of the Lord," and after the church says "Amen," I walk back to sit with my family. My dad whispers to me that I was better than the first reader, bald Mr. Ottmar.

IN SCHOOL THAT YEAR, MR. GREEN, THE LOUD GEOGRAPHY TEACHER who doubles as the school's football announcer, talks about books and movies as much as he does countries and rivers. When he mentions that Ken Follett's spy thriller *Eye of the Needle* is the best book he's ever read, I scribble the title in my notebook, next to a list of the Lesser Antilles.

One day after school I ask Wendy, a sophomore girl who lives down the street, to drive me to the public library in Cumberland after

school. I discover I haven't used my library card since the fifth grade. I retrieve the novel from the shelves. The book is enormous in my hands, impossible.

I read three chapters on the drive home. It's not until Wendy switches sides on the tape that I notice we're almost to my house. The engine hums harmony.

"Must be a good one," Wendy says.

"It is," I say. I see she is smiling and I realize I'm being rude. I try to make conversation. "There's already been somebody killed in the first thirty pages. A German spy stabbed another guy with a stiletto. It's pretty cool."

"Wow, sounds like it," she says, still smiling.

Wendy moved to Maryland from Texas with her family a few years ago. The funniest thing about her is the way she says "mail," which she pronounces "mell." She laughs a lot, but I know she's sad most of the time because her dad died the year before. She doesn't smile as much as she used to and she's started smoking. I know she thinks I'm smart.

"You read a lot, don't you?" she asks after I go back to the book.

"I guess I do," I say, wondering if it's true.

I read everything the library has by Ken Follett. Later, in college, when I've moved on to other writers, the eye doctor tells me I'll need bifocals if I don't stop reading with my glasses on.

I'M GROWN UP, CAR RUNNING, SITTING IN A 7-ELEVEN PARKING LOT, listening to an interview with James Earl Jones on public radio. He's talking about how he got his start in acting, how he had a stuttering problem but kept at the auditions until he landed his first part. The interviewer reminds him that he makes his living now doing voice work. She's wondering if he thinks this is ironic.

He begins to answer, and then halts, stuttering. Pops up every now and then, he says, laughing. Kind of like a cough that won't go away, I think. I switch the car off and go in to get the cup of coffee, thinking, it's just something I do, like how my ex-girlfriend used to order imaginary students around in her sleep, or like the halftime show I watched last fall, when Bo Jackson, the retired outfielder and running back still strong as an oak, couldn't talk quite right.