

## A Faithful Friend Called Stutt

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Time for a riddle! If you really want to find us, the secret lies not in our looks, but in our silences. If you really want to find us, make us read out loud – we are hereby discovered. What are we? We are a tribe of tongue-twisted misfits. We are the stutterers. It sounds almost like an insult, or even a legend. Do we actually exist? Yes, we are as real as you and the next person. But we are a mystery to many. Today we shall come forward and introduce ourselves to the world: we exist, we matter, we stutter.

Have you ever met one of us? You probably have not. We are timid human deer, we hide, we fear society. However, you may be unaware that, as a matter of fact, you invariably know some of us. What do Moses, Charles Darwin and King George VI have in common? Nothing, you might think. They did not even coexist in time! But it goes beyond that: according to the Exodus, Moses was never a “fluent speaker”; Darwin’s children tell that he would sometimes trip over his tongue, especially when trying to pronounce words beginning with the letter W; and King George’s story has lately had a great international impact thanks to the famous film about his life. They all had a mutual friend: his name is Stutt. Our breed is as old as the Bible, our breed was the author of one of the most revolutionary scientific theories of all times, our breed were even kings!

Still, this is not enough to make us see the world through rose-coloured glasses. My name is not Legion, for we are not many. Only 1% of the world population is friends with Stutt; we stutterers are scattered all over the world, and finding each other is indeed a challenge – it is not as though we can lift up a stone and a similar specimen will come out! However, as was stated before, we can be found worldwide. We are often acclaimed by film critics – and not just for King George’s film: Bruce Willis, Marilyn Monroe, Anthony Hopkins, Nicole Kidman. We even sing in your ear and you do not even realise it: Elvis Presley, Marc Anthony, Ed Sheeran, Noel Gallagher. And it goes without saying that we find writing easier than speaking: Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, Somerset Maugham, David Mitchell. The list goes on and on. Unlikely as it may sound, Stutt was what caused many of these people to give their best and become what they eventually became. We may not be many, but we sure have friends in high places.

Nevertheless, most of us mortals live closer to the ground, in a dystopian reality that is unprepared to deal with our harmless condition. The world is well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we are still mistreated. Neglected. Cast aside. Disposed of. Mocked. As if being tongue-twisted in a superfast-paced society were unnatural, a mistake. Oh, how easy life would be if we were dumb! In fact, we would live mutely if we could – but unfortunately, life goes on, and we must face the world, sooner or later, with or without Stutt’s company. But we are not alone: the most sociable of our kind are the ones who normally organise meetings and self-help groups for the shiest of the species to find each other in the silence of our existence. Sometimes we wish we

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could be like the rest of the world, or that the rest of the world could be like us, for that matter – but in either case we would lose what makes us different. Embrace your uniqueness, they say. However, I would gladly unfriend Stutt, let me tell you that! Some friendships are better when they end.

This friendship is a special one, though. Stutt is a very peculiar friend indeed. He calls himself our friend, and yet makes our lives difficult by appearing when we specially need him to be gone. He gives us the rare opportunity to stop to think for a while – only mid-sentence. And not really to think what to say, but *how* to say it. And we curse him for doing that so often. He even keeps us from entering the rat-race by introducing himself to our job interviewers even though he knows nobody will like him – and, in consequence, will not like us either. He has also caused us to be beaten up emotionally so many times that life has turned us oddly tender and compassionate – we have hence become easy targets of the mischief and evil of the rotten part of society. And he has taught us to look thrice, listen twice and speak once – why else would we have three eyes (yes, three – as Saint-Exupéry said, ‘It is only with the heart –the third eye– that one can see rightly’), two ears and one mouth? Such would be his argument. The conclusion is obvious: Stutt loves us so much that he wishes to be our only friend and companion, and he does so by repelling any potential friends –in other words, his enemies– by means of a million repeated syllables like bullets through their ears. And not only that, but he also wishes us to be strong and to confront those who deliberately make us feel inferior for being friends with someone as unpopular as Stutt. Poetic indeed!

Understanding is too demanding in a world that spins at a thousand miles per hour. Stutt forces us to pause for a moment and think, for once. But, as we grow up, we reflect on our condition from a more mature perspective: is it not “teaching” rather than “forcing”? Because, what is a friend but a teacher of life? Stutt is a friend to few, yet the truest of friends. He will always be there to stop us on time and think twice what we are about to say. And most importantly, he has helped us slow down (something unachievable these days!) and experience life in a whole new different way: with eyes that observe, a tender heart... and a twisted tongue. No pain comes without a lesson to learn. So from the bottom of my scarred heart I say: thank you, Stutt, you have taught me how to live. I would go on, but even when receiving a compliment will Stutt twist my tongue. Can you believe it? What a friend!