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“I’m g-g-getting ... ”

Oh, dear, I muttered in an aside. I love my editor. *D* is as pleasant as she is beautiful. What’s more, she possesses extraordinary abilities as editor, writing coach, part-time counselor, friend, and occasional drinking buddy. I am fortunate to work with her. But her stammer is annoying. Not to be cruel or judgmental, but the truth is we’re quite busy at *Bookman’s Journal of Fine Music, Art, and Literature*, each of us rushing to complete our responsibilities and meet deadlines. Hesitations, delays, diversions and the like are something we intuitively abhor. Still, with *D* I know I must ... well, wait.

On the train from Florence, I sat in First Class with my computer and the latest issue of our journal spread open on the small table in front of my seat. I had completed a Skype interview with my subject, a young contemporary artist named *T*, whose work was on exhibit in Venice at the residence-now-museum of a famed New York socialite. My notes needed review and edit, and with any luck, I could begin an outline for my next article. We had barely begun to roll when my cell phone rang. I was eager to get to work, but I took the call anyway. It was *D*, calling from the home office in London.

“I’m g-g-get g-g-getting t-t-t-

For god sakes, *D*. Out with it. I didn’t say it. I thought it.

“T-t-t-treatment!”

Despite the stammer, it was obvious she was very excited. I assumed she meant she was getting treatment for some injury she had, but it soon became clear she was talking about her stammer. Of course, this is not new. *D* has informed me that she’s had treatment since childhood, so it wasn’t clear to me why she was so excited this time. Maybe there was a scientific breakthrough or something, perhaps a new drug or a surgery of some sort using the latest robotics, or some stem-cell therapy with extraordinary promise.

“*D*, that’s wonderful!”

“I th-th-th- think th-th-this w- w- will w- w- work for me.”

Our conversation lasted well into my journey, but I’ll not try to replicate the actual w-w-w words. Suffice to say that *D* had found a therapist whose understanding of speech and hearing disorders was highly regarded. She said the man held doctorates in linguistics, logopaedics, philosophy, and medicine, an unlikely combination that suggested to me a perpetual student. What’s more, she had met the man through her work at the *Journal* because of his interest in art. I could not judge; if *D* was enthused for the man’s broad skills, so be it.

From my experience with her I had learned that *D*’s principal frustration was simply expressing herself. Once, over drinks, she seemed more relaxed and forthcoming, and I ventured to broach the subject of her stammer, and she tried to explain. I’m not sure whether the alcohol helped her speak any better, but I’m sure it helped me listen more faithfully and patiently. Besides, the brew was especially cool and satisfying.

D said she was completely aware of her listeners’ impatience; she could read it on their faces. It explains, she said, why she’s far more comfortable talking with someone in person as opposed to speaking on the telephone, even though, she confided, either experience intimidates her. At least in face-to-face conversation she could watch her listener’s reactions. Conversely, she was able to use her own body language to convey her desire, if not her ability, to communicate.

At Uni, she had turned her interest and education to literature, because it was in interacting with written words that she could move quickly and adeptly. Her mind certainly was neither slow nor halting. She was brilliant; I knew that from working with her. As an editor she seemed to intuit what I was trying to express, as if she could read between my faltering lines. When my syntax, structure, organization, vocabulary selection and the like weren’t working well, she could offer, sometimes by email, sometimes by Skype, and occasionally by phone, suggestions that put my derailed essay back on the tracks.

Conversing, however, was embarrassing and painful for both her and her listeners. Her stammer failed to move the conversation ahead, as if the idea were stuck like the spinning wheels of a car on a snowy slope. Repetition is terrific for hammering away at a single idea, but it doesn’t do much for enhancing the conversation. What if all that each of us has to say is simply a repetition of the idea we had just a moment before? How boring would that be? As if there were nothing new to discuss. As if our ideas were stymied. As if our experience were singular, a mere replication of all that came before the notion we produced in the first place.

In truth, D and I had in the course of our working relationship, grown rather close. She confided in me. I actually came to enjoy our conversations. I took interest, ironically, in the stammer. The more time I spent with her, the more accustomed to her unusual speech pattern I became. I even noticed that the first letters of words that tripped her up actually *weren't* the same. I even wondered, without success of an answer, if there was information in the silences *between* the utterances. What if I could, with practice and concentration, intuit, as she did with my writing, what meaning there might be in the absence of direct language. Perhaps I could read between *her* lines.

One day while sitting at our favorite London pub, I simply continued to sip my pint as she stammered hopelessly away on a particularly difficult topic. In fact, I now recall, we were discussing my writing. She was making a point of my tendency to distrust the first mention of a concept. She said rather bluntly that I invariably found some clever way to say the same thing in different words. In a sense, she stammered, I was stammering, too. When I'd exhausted both my beer and my patience with her, I articulated a defense of my style: By elucidating I help to inform the reader. By remaining quiet, she countered, I invite reflection. Silence, I shot back, informs nothing. Repetition, she said, is more than boring; it's insulting. We continued in this point/counterpoint until we both slumped in frustration in our booth. I ordered another pint, and she excused herself with some questionable jabber about laundry awaiting her at home.

"D, I'm so happy for you," I said as we wrapped up our phone conversation. "You really think this therapy will help?"

"I d-d-d- do!"

"Wonderful!"

"Th-th-thanks!"

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I got on with my work as I swayed toward Venice. The train seemed to race to its highest speed once we cleared the tunnels near Bologna, but as we approached the city of canals it slowed and then stopped. The conductor announced that high waters had interrupted traffic and we would be arriving ten to fifteen minutes late.

I used the time to mull over a particularly troubling part of my notes. In our Skype interview, the watercolourist had nattered on about the chancy outcomes that occur when pigment, water and paper collude.

The inability to predict water's properties, she said, was part of the artistic reward for her. She had discovered that repetition of subject matter was anything but replication. Each rendition was different. At the moment, I felt rather at one with the artist's ideas of whimsical waters; just the same for my train schedule.

Eventually, we rolled again and soon arrived at the *stazione*. I collected my things and debarked. I had selected a hotel near the museum for the sake of convenience, and walked there confident that my schedule had not been thrown too far out of whack. To my dismay, another water-related delay awaited me; this time the hotel entry was blocked by a pool of rather smelly sea water.

I found a small market selling Wellies, bought the cheapest pair I could find, donned them, and returned to the hotel, a bit smug, I confess, that neither water nor chance had dissuaded me.

Thus protected from the wiles of water, I walked to the museum, a gorgeous, gleaming-white edifice that seemed to dangle from a ledge on the Grand Canal. Dozens of tourists pushed their way to the main entrance, and my patience with them was at its end when I heard my name. I turned to find *T* running towards me, her arms outstretched as if I were her missing father. She bubbled as we exchanged hellos, then she grabbed my hand and, leading me in the direction of the canal, informed me that before she would show her work, we would go together to her studio, a short ride by gondola from the museum.

"The boats are so lovely," she said. "The tourists love them, and the queues are long, but the magic of riding on top of the water is worth the wait. I take the water to work. And then, the watercolour takes me to myself. Water, water everywhere!"

I had no idea what she was talking about, but her enthusiasm was infectious. She bought our tickets and we boarded. In Italian, she asked the gondolier to take us to her studio.

"Do you think water is the best metaphor for our streams of conscious? I do! We use words for things, but they float like boats in water, colors and textures mixing unpredictably! Isn't it exciting! "

"Ah, yes."

Truth is, I was lost.

"Put an image in your mind," she said. "Look! That building ... "

I glanced in the direction of her pointing finger and saw a massive yellow structure looming above the canal.

"We give a name ... a building! But that doesn't describe it at all, does it? We need more!"

I nodded agreement, again lost. A building, yes. More information, OK. I thought of my writing discussion with *D*; certainly in this circumstance, if *D* were correct, I'd try to insert more descriptors. Boring! Insulting!

"In my work, I restate and restate, and I discover that each time, the statement is different. New information! It's the dilemma of the modern human being! We must try and try again to convey who we are, what we feel! And each time we attempt to express who we are, the set and subset of information about us has changed. We are different! Our expressions of our self cannot keep up with the collection of experiences we have! An artist must find the key and unlock this dilemma!"

Yes. Of course. I suddenly thought of my Wellies and wished I were them. How nice it would be to avoid such conversations as I was having on a canal in the watery city of Venice. Make me into a hollow, rubbery likening of a foot into which someone may slip their soggy problems. That would be a very excellent understanding of purpose, the very meaning of a Wellies' life at least. No reiteration needed, thank you.

Our gondolier pushed us ahead, his striped shirt betraying the hard muscles beneath and an improbable straw hat perched on his fine Venetian head. How about this unfortunate man's self-expression? He didn't at all seem complicated. Probably woke up this morning, had his coffee, kissed his wife and kids, and set off to push people around the canals, singing to them besides. What complications? But, alas, I wasn't here to understand the gondolier; I had an effervescent philosopher-artist on my hands.

We snaked through narrower and narrower canals until finally we tied on to a walkway dropped from a very slim building tucked between a hotel and a restaurant. We went "ashore," which was the back door to the building, and *T* led me up a spiral staircase until we landed at the door of her studio. She turned the unlocked latch and motioned me in.

Tacked to the circumference of the entire room about head high was a scroll of paper about the width of a London tabloid. On it were the facial images of the young artist herself, hundreds of portraits of *her* done in bright, unrealistic colours. This was, she said, her tenth work of the same subject – herself. She took my hand again and led me to a workbench on which another scroll was partially open, about a meter of paper exposed, the rest rolled at each end. She unrolled some of the paper to her left and revealed a completed watercolour – again of herself. Unrolling more, she revealed more – of the same.

Each portrait was positioned so that each right eye of the subject was half off the paper. The left eye was intact. Each portrait had evidently begun with the same model. When I asked, *T* said she had taken a selfie with her mobile phone one day while at the banks of the Arno near her home in Florence.

“It’s me.”

“Why so many ‘me’s’ ”?

“Perfect question!” she said. “It’s me again, only different!”

“Do you struggle with self-expression?”

She nearly jumped into my arms, hugged me tightly, then began to sob. I drew her head close to my heart and held her there as her sobs turned to whimpers, then to wails. I put my hand to the back of her head and stroked her blonde hair gently, muttering “there, there” or something equally ineffectual. The iterations of her grief continued, reminding me of the stammering ululations of grieving Arab women. As I held her trembling body, I saw across the room the scroll of portraits hanging on the wall, and instead of the variety of colors on a model in identical pose, I saw the variation of each, as if I were looking not at an image of one person, but at images of many facets of one person, similar at first glance, but markedly distinct upon closer examination.

Her emotional outburst ebbed, like the receding waters in Venice canals. She collected herself, deployed a magnificent smile, her dazzling white teeth contrasting with her olive-skinned complexion. She smoothed her blond hair, then flipped a collection of locks that had fallen across her right eye. She tilted her head slightly to her left, just as she had evidently done for her selfie. In my mind’s eye, I painted her face with translucent blues and greens, dusky oranges and greys. Then it occurred to me: What does a watercolourist do for white?

We hailed a gondola and returned to the museum. With me in tow, she slipped around the crowds and into the vast halls and scattered rooms of the late heiress’s mansion. We came to a windowed room, alive with light. Outside, threatening clouds drifted in front of the sun, flicking shadows inside the room as if a child had found the light switch.

She paused before a dull white wall into which were placed two pellucid pegs. On them was fastened a scroll that had been formed into a cone, not unlike the waffled cones for gelato, except for an opening at the bottom. The widest part of the cone opened into the room like a megaphone, the narrowest part a centimeter or so from the wall. The area behind the small opening had been painted black.

On the inside of the cone were the images of *T*, and the right eyes seemed to enlarge in those closest to the viewer.

I stood transfixed, my eyes darting from iterated image to reiterated image, some more distinct than others. As the light shifted, the images seemed almost animated, each very different.

"It's not a selfie," I said.

T smiled.

"It's me. Many me's. Me are I; I is Another."

I asked about technique and medium, more to turn the conversation to syntax I could understand than to probe artistic method.

"I have choice in color, but I cannot control the paper's absorption. The tones wander. They surprise me. They remind me of me, and so I paint me. I cannot always know where I am, where I go, who is inside and which of me gets out the moment. I paint in a zone of indeterminacy, an area of chance as surprising to me as I sometimes am to myself."

For the first time I got it. But one thing still eluded me.

"How can you know if your audience sees your message?"

She turned her head again to its common position, tilted toward her left shoulder.

"How can I know if I see myself?"

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From Venice, I returned to London. I asked *D* to join me at a small pub called the *Boat's Mooring*. We ordered pints and found a comfortable table by the window. London's summer weather hung like Victorian draperies.

"He's h- helped me. The therapist has helped." she said.

I am ashamed to say that at first I didn't notice that her stammer had almost disappeared. A remarkable improvement, if not a complete "cure."

"My god, *D*! What has happened?"

"He helped me!"

I understood that, but I wanted more; I wanted hundreds and thousands of sentences from her untied tongue. I wanted speed, a rush of information, vast amounts of thinking and emotion from inside her heart and her mind. No pauses. No waiting. At last!

We talked for hours, with little interruption. We ordered more beer, then switched to whisky, and before long her voice was slurred and my hearing fogged. But I didn't care; I was ebullient in this new discovery of a person I admired so deeply.

We staggered toward our flats, hugged tightly, then went our separate ways. I was soon called to an assignment in Canada, and it was several weeks before I saw *D* again. We had several phone conversations, and it was a great relief to communicate quickly and effectively.

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One day, I phoned the London office, and the secretary told me that *D* had suffered an apparent heart attack. The doctors had attempted to revive her, but it was too late. She was gone.

The abrupt announcement was unfair. Here, then gone. My friend who had stammered and stuttered, struggled to express herself, found healing, gushed thoughts and ideas like a Roman fountain, and then suddenly disappeared as if all the pauses in her speech had come together for the rest of time.

I found a place where I could grieve openly. When I had collected myself, I called my partner Leon and gave him the news.

"There is such a sudden absence in my life, Leon. I rather don't know what to do."

"There, there," Leon said. "There, there."

His words had no meaning, of course, but his voice -- the voice of my partner -- was a great comfort. I might have thought him a bumbler had I been looking for the perfect words to soothe me, but in truth it was just the sound of his voice that I needed, his presence, even by phone.

For weeks I grieved for the absence of my editor. Another fine person was hired at our *Journal*, and life settled like a vessel in irons.

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I often dream of *D*. She speaks to me at a pub my resting mind concocts in its immanence, always alive with bright light. I always lean into her, my hands cupped behind my ears so as to hear her words. And always in this dream is her wonderful voice, speaking in its irreplaceable stammer, softly and hopefully, and I always awake afraid that absence again will find me when my sleep is deepest.

