

# LEMON WATER

Daniella Sapone

For most people, asking for lemon in their water is simple. It does not require bravery or boldness; they simply open their mouths and speak. However, the world would be incredibly boring if “most people” meant “all people,” and for some, asking for lemon in their water can be more pivotal—a moment that forever alters the course of their journeys. To them, deciding to ask for lemon can be just as philosophically complex as it is simple. It can bring up old feelings, forcing them each to confront the person they never thought they could become. Or, it can just be a means to getting their favorite drink.

I am a person who stutters. I stutter when I’m nervous, I stutter when I’m happy, I stutter when I’m feeling anything and everything. I stutter in school, at home, and in plays. I stutter around my family members, friends, and restaurant waitresses. Sometimes I stutter all the time, and other times I don’t stutter at all. The soundtrack of my life has been interrupted by a series of repetitions, pauses, and long, drawn-out syllables. Like anything, stuttering can be good and bad. I can love my stutter and hate it all in one moment. I can write a book about it and still wrestle with unresolved thoughts and feelings. Most people do not stutter, but most people know someone who does. All people have a story that matters.

This is mine.

LEMON WATER

Daniella Sapone

# LEMON WATER

Daniella Sapone

© 2021 SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young

**Daniella Sapone**

**Lemon Water**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 or under the terms of any license permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

**Published by:** SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young

**Text Design by:** Life Styl Design

**Cover and Interior Illustration Design by:** Francisco Borges

**Distributed by:**

SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young  
247 West 37th Street, 5th Floor New York, NY 10018

Printed and Bound by BookBaby

*To my family, the one at home and the one at SAY.*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Dependable as Water 13
2. Two Truths and a Lie 17
3. A Smoldering Yellow 21
4. The City Mouse and the Country Mouse 27
5. The Powerhouse of the Cell 33
6. Part of Your World 37
7. To Be Smart And Human And Kind 43
8. Room 282 47
9. To Plant a Seed 55



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book because I believe that words are important. Having spent years of my life in silence, I can finally appreciate the power of words. They can tell stories, build civilizations, and create magic. Words are essential to our existence as they allow us to express ourselves and to communicate with each other. They tether us to each other, giving us the opportunity to both share ourselves with the world and invite others to do the same. For most people, words are only beautiful within song lyrics or poetic verses; the rest coalesce into a blur of everyday vocabulary. They speak without a second thought and never have to deal with other people's negative reactions. They never have to confront how they feel about something so mechanical, something automatic. Most people take words for granted.

I am a person who stutters. I wouldn't say that I woke up one morning and all of a sudden struggled to get my words out, but it does kind of feel that way. From the time I learned to talk to the time I was 10 years old, I was completely fluent, and regarded stuttering the way most people do: what I did when I was nervous or spoke too fast. Up until then, I had already developed what I thought was my identity. I was the girl who spoke all the time. I annoyed everyone by reciting random facts in school and butting into other people's conversations. I couldn't help it. I loved communicating with people and showing off all that I knew. I recognized the power of words and used it to create my character. My stutter came as a shock to everyone,

but especially to me. Having developed quite the superiority complex, I could not comprehend why stuttering chose me.

This book is full of many moments; in some I felt joyful and triumphant while in others I felt unhappy and defeated. As I experimented with different ways to tell my story, I decided that a series of smaller stories could best convey years of my complex relationship with my stutter. While a collection of moments cannot possibly capture my journey up until this point as a person who stutters, they showcase some of my most impactful, yet normal, thoughts and feelings about stuttering. Like my stutter, they are not the whole picture. This book is about my transition from childhood to adolescence, the development of my identity, and my life in general. Stuttering just happens to be a fairly large part of all three.

These moments are special to me; my heart truly lives in all of them. But in between all of these big moments, smaller, less important ones characterized my everyday life. Although mundane, routine moments do not appear as much in this book, my stutter has been there through it all, something on which I can depend, as well as something that has never made any sense. There were days when I hated my stutter, when I wished that I could swallow a pill and make it go away. I write about some of those days in this book. There are days when I loved my stutter and the person into which it molded me. I took pride in those days, and some of them are in here as well. Perhaps most present in this book are the days when my experience with stuttering could not fit into a box. Much too complicated and confusing, these are the

days that most represent my story.

If you're reading this thinking, "I don't have a stutter, what could I possibly gain from reading this book," I encourage you to keep reading for some selfish and not-so-selfish reasons. While this book centers around stuttering, I believe that its lessons are universal. Everyone struggles with accepting a part of themselves, especially one that has made them feel inadequate. Although we all face different struggles, we are alike in that we all face something and can learn from each other's pain.

Even if you do not stutter, you probably know someone who does. They might be your friend, neighbor, or family member. They might be me. We are a mighty 1% of the adult population and an equally as powerful 5% of children. I cannot possibly speak for all people who stutter, but I hope to convey a story that is often ignored or simply unspoken. If even one person better understands stuttering after reading this book, then I will have accomplished my goal. That is one more person who will approach people who stutter with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

While in this book I detail some of my most difficult moments in relation to my stutter, I must make myself clear: I love my stutter. My stutter is a part of me. It is the most special part of my identity. It is my ticket into the best family in the world. My stutter has given me a lot of pain over the years, but it has also created so much joy and even more love. I love my stutter.

Clearly, I also love words. I have not even started the

book yet and I'm already at 877. There is so much power within a string of sounds. So much power within a drop of ink. Words can share, build, and create. They can steal, demolish, and destroy. People's words should be spoken, yelled, heard, and read. I hope you enjoy reading mine.

# LEMON WATER

DANIELLA SAPONE



## CHAPTER I

# Dependable as Water

Water is dependable. It doesn't pack a sweet and tangy punch like orange juice. It doesn't glide down your throat like milk, or fizz in random carbonated spurts like soda. It is clear and cold, but there is nothing special about it.

My knuckles turned white as I squeezed my mother's hand, dry and cracking from the crisp, New York air. As we walked up a winding staircase to the rooftop of a restaurant, my tongue rested in my mouth. Vines and flowers decorated the space, cluttering my brain with endless possibilities and expectations for meeting other people who stutter. This was not my first time, but every time feels special, even to this day.

Stuttering is complex, more complicated than the

restaurant's decor. Every person who stutters is intertwined with the others, tangled in a never-ending network of people who understand them. The vines can feel constricting. Being a person who stutters can feel like you are suffocating, but when flowers start to grow not in spite of, but because of, the mess, you can breathe deeper than any fluent person. Every plant needs water to grow, and water is dependable in that way.

I took my seat next to my mother and examined the bare spaces on my nails where I had chipped off light blue nail polish. The man named Taro sat across from me, and the one named Travis sat on his left hand side. I looked up at them through thick, black eyelashes and wondered if their mouths felt the same way mine did everytime I attempted to speak. I wondered if their throats closed up and their eyes squeezed tight. I wondered if they took sips from their water bottles so that their teachers' eyes would skip over them when looking for a victim to answer the next question. Water is dependable in that way.

The waitress glided over to our table and asked what we wanted to drink. The adults spoke first. I found comfort in the way that Taro's and Travis's mouths twitched and seized uncontrollably. When it was my turn to order, I asked for water but wanted more.

"Can I have some l-l-l-l-lemon with that?"

I knew it was coming. I could feel the letter "L" burning in my brain and mouth. But water alone is boring, and I couldn't stop my mouth from continuing to speak. At the sight of my struggle, the waitress's eyes looked quietly down at her feet. I was sorry. I didn't want the lemon badly enough to make her feel uncomfortable.

She left the table with a thought bubble hanging high above her head. In it was a single question mark, the same one that everyone has the first time they hear me open my mouth. I forced myself to think only of how bright the

lemon would taste and of how much I would gain from the conversation that was about to ensue. I took a deep breath and inhaled the significance of the moment. I made sure to capture how I felt so that I could revisit it in years to come. As I grappled with all of these thoughts, the waitress returned and placed my water on the table. No lemon, just water, dependable as always.



## CHAPTER 2

# Two Truths and a Lie

I fell off a horse. I went surfing in Hawaii. I lived in New York. Each essay was about a page long, and as I wrote about each experience, I did not think about the fact that I would have to read almost three pages in front of my sixth grade English class. The essays were littered with colorful adjectives and powerful verbs. I had just learned about similes and metaphors in class and tried my hardest to infuse them into my writing. The assignment excited me. I had to write about two aspects of my life that made me special, and one that wasn't about me at all. I could put both my writing and arguing skills to the test by trying to confuse the class into thinking my truths were lies and that my lie was the truth.

As a person who stutters, you learn to lie a lot. You don't know the answer to the math problem because your mouth doesn't know how to say it. You don't want to go to the birthday party because your name is impossible to say. You don't want lemon in your water; plain is just fine. Two truths and a lie.

Returning to school after getting over the flu, I skipped to my favorite class for the first time in four days. Excited to learn about more writing techniques, I had forgotten all about the three essays, and, for a brief moment, a smile bloomed across my lips. I took my seat next to the girl who would go on to become my best friend and noticed that she did not greet me with a similar smile. She stared with intense precision at three pieces of paper that were sprawled out across her desk. Her lips moved up and down, but no sound escaped her mouth. I read the title of her page "I Got First Place at My Gymnastics Competition" and my heart sank into the soles of my shoes.

My eyes darted frantically toward the chalkboard at the front of the room. On it was a list of names, but mine was the only one that registered. I was third. That gave me time.

The first student began his speech, but I was already planning an escape route. As my classmates voted on which story they thought was the lie, I snuck over to my teacher's desk at the back of the classroom. There is a drastic difference between being small and feeling small, and in that moment, I was both. She glanced up from her notes and down at me. My cheeks were already hot, my hands already sweaty, and tears already threatened to escape the prison behind my eyes.

"I can't give this presentation," I whispered.

Her eyes softened, and her eyebrows slanted upwards toward her forehead. As a person who stutters, I have gotten used to this look. First comes the question mark, then comes the pity. Always in that order.

“It’s okay, sweetie. We all get nervous sometimes, but the class is here to support you no matter what.”

The question mark, then the pity, and then the attempt to understand your pain. It usually comes in the form of “I stutter too sometimes, it’s no big deal,” or sometimes it sounds like “don’t worry about it, no one cares.” People have an innate desire to empathize with other people and often minimize their struggles so that they can relate to them. It’s a nice sentiment, but we need to understand that there are some things we will never understand, and that is okay.

I didn’t return her empty reassurance with a soft smile or shy head-nod. Although I struggled to firmly plant my feet on the floor, my gaze was unwavering. I was small, but I didn’t feel it anymore. With one piercing look, I grew several feet, and she stared back at me in disbelief. Our brief standoff was interrupted by an eruption of cheers from my classmates. They guessed the lie, and the student at the front of the room dragged his feet in failure until he reached his seat.

“Everyone can take the next five minutes to practice their presentations!”

I followed my teacher out of the room and into the hallway. Away from the prying eyes of nosy students, I stood my ground. Each second that passed strengthened my resolve and added an inch to my height so that my eye level finally matched hers. In the reflection of her eyes, I glared back at myself. What I saw in her eyes was a little girl with tears streaming down her face, and she certainly looked small.

The me in my teacher’s eyes, the one who was crying, pleaded with the one whose mind was alive with fire. The struggle was intense, but the one in her eyes finally disappeared in defeat. It is impossible to put out a blazing flame with a couple of stray tears.

“My head hurts, please write me a pass to the nurse’s

office.” It wasn’t a question, and she recognized that.

I climbed into the back seat of my mother’s car and breathed a sigh of relief. It was easy enough to convince the nurse that I was sick. My face was red, and my head did ache. Two truths within the lie. As soon as I walked into the comfort of my own home, the spell broke and I returned to my usual height. I buried my face in my mother’s dress and allowed the tears to soak through. The cost of war had taken its toll.

I expected the same pity I got from my teacher, but this time, I was ready to welcome it with open arms. I needed my mom to smile at me, tell me that I was going to be okay, and even drag her own artillery into the fight for my right to remain silent.

The tears on the way back to school were different. They stung with betrayal and fear. What would Mrs. Bailey think when she saw me in the hallway after I had left her classroom with an “extreme migraine” and “probable fever” just an hour earlier? I couldn’t fathom it. I begged my mom to let me remain home, but my mind was no match for hers, at least not yet anyway. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel and parked the car at the entrance of my school. I hung my head and walked back through the same school doors, realizing I had won the battle but lost the war.

“I went surfing in Hawaii” was the lie, in case you were wondering.

## CHAPTER 3

# A Smoldering Yellow

I had to walk down a flight of stairs and pass several hallways before I arrived at my middle school's speech therapy room. It was quite a trek, one that I had to take twice a week during my lunch periods. While I had to strategically break off from my group of friends without them noticing, I was thankful that the classroom was far away from my classes in the sixth-grade wing. The last thing I wanted was for my friends to know that I had to go to speech therapy.

I wasn't afraid that they would discover my stutter; by then, my stutter impacted my life everyday. As much as I claimed that it was a parasite, eating away at its unwelcoming host, it was me. With every breath, every word, my stutter was there, silently directing my vocal cords and never waiting

for my input. Discovering my stutter was not the issue; it was discovering that I needed help to fix it.

Control has always been important to me. As long as I could control my actions, I could be responsible for my success. If I was ever anything less than perfect, it was my fault, and I could work to do better next time. Even in group projects, I would always take on a leadership role. Everyone could make their own contributions to the presentation, but I would make the final edits to every slide. It was instinctual, unconscious behavior. My need to control everything was the only thing I couldn't control. Then I started stuttering. Two things too many.

Admitting that I needed speech therapy implied that there was something innately broken about me. Not only did it emphasize my inability to will my stutter away but also my dependency on someone else to do it for me. It was a devastating but humbling experience to say the least.

Although speech therapy represented my greatest fears, I tried my best to approach it with an open mind. I remember how excited my speech therapist was to meet me. Focusing on her energy and kindness, I slowly began to forget my apprehension and forced myself to trust her. A masterful storyteller, she painted a glorious picture of life post-speech therapy. As long as I practiced my strategies and committed myself to fluency, I could meet new people, volunteer in classes, and regain control over my own body.

While stuttering quickly became a part of me, it was new as it had only developed in fifth grade. Every humiliating encounter nourished my stutter, allowing it to mature into a large tree. Its vines coiled around every aspect of my identity until they all suffocated in its grip. I could no longer get lead roles in theater productions. I could no longer raise my hand to answer every question in class. I could no longer have a simple conversation without gasping for air at the end. If I didn't trust my speech therapist, I feared that the vines would suffocate me too.

She taught me how to slowly initiate my sentences, bombarding me with “strategies” that failed each time. Trust quickly turned into an unhealthy obsession with proving myself to her and the rest of the world. Her classroom became a prison of shame and anxiety. The walls were a smoldering, revolting yellow. The only reprieve from staring at the toxic hue was reading the inspirational quotes that covered it up in random spots around the room. They were little sanctuaries, little islands in a sea of yellow. I let my eyes drift to them so that I could ignore my failures, but after reading them a thousand times over, they became toxic as well.

They mocked me for believing that my stutter would disappear as suddenly as it began. The thought of tearing down each “Keep Going” and “You Can Do It” became all-consuming. I imagined digging my nails into the construction paper and filling the room with a sea of laminated confetti until we all drowned: my speech therapist, my stutter, and me.

During a particular session, my therapist pulled out her phone to record our conversation. The familiar feeling of tightened vocal cords and contorted facial muscles overwhelmed me while a minute-long explanation of my weekend lasted five. She then played the recording, making sure to pause it every time I stuttered. In an effort to drill the failures into my head, she asked each time what I did wrong. I stuttered. I stuttered. I stuttered.

There was no escaping it. There was no escaping myself. A week of unsuccessful strategies turned into a month, and then a year, and suddenly I was in eighth grade. Still stuttering. Still me.

I never imagined that I would still need speech therapy two years later. Sixth grade me had been elated that I could use strategies to overcome my stutter. Rather than simply wishing that my life would change, I could work hard for a solution. I committed myself then to my strategies. I became consumed with my strategies. The notion that I never truly

gave them a chance is completely ridiculous; they were my way out, and I had fought as hard as I could to make it. But strategies don't work for everyone, and by eighth grade I was tired of waging an impossible war.

Acceptance of my stutter was a saving grace. It was at the same time a conscious decision and the only option left. It allowed me to find control in the uncontrollable. While I could not control my mouth, I had power over my own thoughts, feelings, and attitude toward stuttering. Acceptance was liberating, but it was not absolute. It began in my last year of middle school; I am still navigating it today.

Frustrated as I was that I was still stuttering in eighth grade, there was one ray of sunlight to which I had clung over the past two years: I would get to mentor another person who stutters. When I was in sixth grade, my mentor was a girl named Kara. She was a senior in high school and the President of the Speech and Debate team. She was ethereal and majestic. She was everything I wanted to be: fluent because the strategies worked for her.

As inadequate as I felt compared to Kara, I couldn't wait to step into her shoes and mentor three sixth grade girls who stuttered. There were four girls who stuttered under the same roof every school day. It was statistically impossible but all the more exciting. Free from the constraints of the strategies, I could not wait to teach the girls about acceptance and self-love. As much as Kara was an inspiration for me, I could give the girls a different but better perspective.

I waited for my speech therapist to set up our first meeting. I let the trees turn red and orange and yellow until all of their leaves fell off. I let the winter winds rage. I let the frost create a crystalized blanket over the schoolyard. It was January when I asked my speech therapist about meeting the girls. It was January when she told me that it would never happen.

When I decided to work at accepting my stutter, I did

not realize that I would no longer be granted the opportunity to mentor people who desperately needed someone to tell them that they did not need to be fixed. Along with the trust of my speech therapist, I lost the one thing that could make up for the permanence of my stutter. There was clearly much more work to be done before I could truly understand what acceptance means.

As I sat in the yellow classroom for the last time, I noticed that the walls were bare. My speech therapist had packed the quotes up into a storage box for the summer. While I would never get to feel the satisfaction of tearing them down myself, I got to leave knowing that the roles were reversed: they were the ones trapped in a box while I was the one set free.

Before leaving for the summer, I turned to look at the walls one last time. They looked quite differently than they did in sixth grade. The yellow was not as harsh, ugly, nor overbearing as it used to be. It was a soft yellow. It was a nice yellow. It was the color of lemons.



## CHAPTER 4

# The City Mouse and the Country Mouse

**M**y first experience with theater happened when I was in kindergarten during my school's production of *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*. My teacher selected me to play the "City Mouse" who lives a life of luxury in exchange for fear and anxiety. While she has an abundant assortment of cheeses and fruits, she lacks security and lives in constant fear of a cat. At the end of the story, the main moral is clear: it is better to live a simpler life in peace and tranquility than to have it all but fear it might be taken away.

And yet, there is a deeper lesson: people, or mice, can be content in any sort of situation as long as they remain true to themselves. While the Country Mouse quickly realizes that the city is no place for her, the City Mouse chooses to stay.

She defies the primary moral because she loves the constant thrill of living in the city and cannot imagine life without a banquet for every meal. Perhaps she is high maintenance, but at least she knows who she is. I prefer the story from her perspective, but maybe I still carry a bias many years later.

Rehearsing for what was probably a lot longer than anyone else in the class, I read over the script countless times and forced my family members to run lines with me. I had just learned how to read but would not let my parents read the script to me; I wanted to do it all on my own. The preparation for what was probably a 20 minute performance initiated my journey as an actress. In the following years, I would continue to practice my lines in front of the mirror, sing my songs until my family could not take it anymore, and spend all of my free time improving my performances. *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse* was my first taste of theatre, the beginning of an incessant need to continue eating for love of the food and love of the hunger.

When it came time for the performance, I applied three strokes of my mother's eyeliner to each cheek and glued two paper crescent moons onto a headband. My whiskers and mouse ears looked as good as you would expect a kindergartener's work to look, but in my mind, they were perfect.

My big scene with the Country Mouse took place in a cardboard box that loosely resembled a bed. After a long day fighting off the cat in the kitchen, she was supposed to realize that the city was not, and would never be, her home. I watched her with precision, secretly jealous of the fact that she had a couple more lines than I did. Her face grew beet red as she struggled to remember her lines. I watched her fumble through the first few before giving up. In what I thought was the most discrete fashion possible, I whispered the lines to her so that the scene could continue. This went on for the rest of the scene; I whispered every line that followed.

When I got off stage and hugged my parents, they

laughed and told me how obvious my whispering was. I didn't care, though. I was incredibly proud of my performance and knew that I did my part to put on an amazing show. Well, my part and a little bit of the Country Mouse part as well.

That summer, I joined a theatre camp and began developing my passion for the arts. My real journey with theatre did not start, however, until second grade when I graduated from the younger program of my community theatre into the one that spans from second to eighth grade. Never again did I feed lines to other actors on stage, but I continued to memorize all of my scripts and perfect my performances. I was completely fluent for my first three years of auditioning, rehearsing, and performing. I was a person who stuttered when I returned for the summer of fifth grade.

My journey with stuttering is unique in that I have not stuttered for my whole life. I briefly stuttered when I was first learning how to talk, but quickly grew out of it in time for my stellar performance as the City Mouse. I was completely fluent until I was 10 and a half years old, and stuttering came as quite a shock to someone who obviously loved hearing the sound of her own voice. Because of my time as a fluent person, I have struggled with accepting my stutter as a part of my identity. I worried that embracing my stutter would be premature, considering I had spent most of my life as a fluent person. This struggle became especially prominent when I spoke with people who knew me before I started stuttering. I wanted to convince them that nothing had changed.

That first summer back, I could get away with hiding my new stutter by speaking less frequently. For my audition, I chose a monologue that the directors had never heard before and, admittedly, switched around a couple of words so that I could make it through the piece fluently. I was cast as a supporting character and for the first time had an entire solo song. I was incredibly excited to have my first big role. Beyond rehearsing my lines, I finally had a song that I could

make my own.

My character was a cool and quirky pirate who roamed the beach in search of gold. She was curious and adventurous. She was bold and brave. My confidence took a hit that school year, making the role a bit of a challenge. The directors knew me as the embodiment of my character. Because I concealed my stutter and lack of confidence, they did not worry about my ability to perform a role that was so close to my personality. They did not see the countless hours I spent in tears while sitting in front of the same mirror that reflected the City Mouse five years earlier. They did not realize how frustrated I became with my inability to do what I had so easily done before.

On top of portraying my character everyday at camp, I had to portray the person everyone expected me to be. When I stepped off stage, the performance did not stop. I continued to act during lunch when chatting with my friends, during the last hour of camp each day when we would play acting games, and even while making small talk with my director as I waited for my parents to pick me up. While probably an amazing acting exercise, the constant pretending was exhausting.

I could not tell if I was the City Mouse or the Country Mouse. Pretending to be fluent was scary and stressful, but I got the part I wanted, meaning that the City Mouse was still very much a part of me. On the other hand, being the Country Mouse implied that if I stopped speaking, I could return to a life of comfort and ease. As much as that made sense, my story was starkly different. I never sacrificed speaking for tranquility because I never had to. I lived the best of both worlds and did not even realize it.

I ended up sticking with the City Mouse and feeling extremely insecure during my time at camp that year. In the end, I got to live a life of luxury as I performed my first big role without stuttering. As much as being that actress was natural for me, I did not truly fit the mold of the City

Mouse. I still felt out of place; I still felt like I hadn't found my home.

I wanted a place in which I could be myself. It seems counterintuitive that I wanted so badly to find it in a theatre where everyone played a part to tell a story that was not their own. But I learned the most about myself by trying on other people's shoes and realizing that none of them fit quite right. I was not a mouse. I was not a pirate. I wasn't even the girl who showed up to camp everyday. Once I hung up my costumes and removed the labels, I realized who I was, and more importantly, who I was not.



## CHAPTER 5

# The Powerhouse of the Cell

**I**n sixth grade, I wrote a poem in Earth Science about the way water moves. I was the only person in the class to receive a 100% on the project, and my teacher asked if he could keep it to show to future classes. Three years later, my little sister ran off of the bus to tell me that he read it to her class. I saw him for the first time in six years just last week. He told me he has read it to every single class since mine. My heart glowed.

I regularly joke about the fact that I am in my school's Science National Honor Society but do not know a thing about science. I am taking three Social Studies electives this year, but not one science class. My sixth grade science teacher was shocked to hear that I intended to pursue political science in college; he was sure I was going to become a geologist or

marine biologist.

“Political *science* should count!” I said with a laugh and a shrug.

He tried his best to laugh it off, but his disappointment hung in the air. I refrained from pointing out that my only assignment worth keeping was an English assignment disguised as a science project. The poem had a lot more to do with figurative language than scientific terms.

Nonetheless, I worked diligently in my seventh and eighth grade science classes. I had to check over my homework multiple times, review my notes in my free time, and attend extra help sessions with my teachers. While all I had to do in my Humanities classes was show up, my STEM classes required more effort, time, and focus. I finished eighth grade science with an A+ average and was recommended for Biology Honors. Incredibly proud of all of the work I had put into my science courses, I signed up and could not wait for high school to begin.

The excitement faded as I realized that it was no longer enough to put the extra time in after class. I could not simply look over my notes when I did not understand them to begin with. The concepts flew around my head as I struggled to grasp them. Every time I thought I had one firmly in my grip, another would zoom past me and knock it out of my hand. It was a tiring and unrewarding process. Watching Youtube videos about cellular respiration did not work, reading over the textbook until the words blurred together did not work, writing notecards until my hand cramped up did not work. There was only one method that could help me, but I refused to take advantage of it.

My idea of accepting my stutter meant that I would stutter in front of my family without feeling embarrassed. It meant that I would have one conversation about it with my best friend. I could finally say the word “stutter” without bursting into tears, but I was not yet at the point where

I could raise my hand and sit through blocks in front of my entire class. To me, acceptance was a private thing, and stuttering was as well.

My mind was bursting at the seams with questions. I rehearsed them in my head five times each, convincing myself that it would make me feel comfortable enough to raise my hand. But each time my brain paralyzed my hand while drowning in a sea of questions. Every day was a civil war; every day was a missed opportunity and a horrible quiz grade.

I still met with my teacher during lunch. I still asked her the questions in some way. But I had to switch around so many words that the meanings often became misconstrued, and the questions sounded very differently than I intended. A complicated game of Telephone that involved the language and speech centers of my brain also consumed my mental energy. The constant thinking was exhausting; how simple would it have been to ask my teacher to clarify the sentence she had said a second prior? How easy would it have been for her to answer? Instead, I dragged her through a ridiculous game of back and forth that wasted her time and mine. I often left her classroom feeling more confused than I was when I entered it. I couldn't even remember the initial question.

Using my stutter as the perfect excuse, I allowed myself to be okay with the fact that my grades were slipping. I rationalized the B's with the fact that I wouldn't have to feel embarrassed. I pretended that it was a noble cause. Everyday I was a martyr for myself: sacrificing grades and clarity to stay silent. There was not a moment when I believed that I was engaging in a fair exchange, but I force fed myself the lies until they too had a permanent home in my brain. The unanswered questions, the thesaurus of easier words to say, and the lies. A happy family of parasites in a host who welcomed them with open arms.

As the months went on, I found myself asking a

question or two for every 10 questions I had. I still struggled, but asking even 10% of my questions granted me a much-needed reprieve. Working harder than ever to make up for my lack of participation in class, I began to understand the material, and my grades improved. I finished with a 93% in the class, but I was less than proud of it. My experience in Biology Honors should not be taken as a story of triumph or success, but of reality. I should not have had to work twice as hard as the other kids in the class to get a lower grade than I was capable of achieving. I should not have had to deal with an internal struggle that anchored my hand to my desk and clamped my mouth shut. Biology Honors impacted every other science class that followed. While science subjects never came easy to me, they had been incredibly interesting and worth the extra effort. After my freshman year, however, I fell out of love with observations and experiments. Every hint of confusion in chemistry and physics reminded me of the obstacles I had faced.

I longed to write more poems about science, to find joy and beauty within the technical study of the world around me. Photosynthesis still confuses me, but how beautiful would it be to write about a rose inhaling sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water so that she may sustain herself? I still have unanswered questions about the mitochondria, but how wonderfully could I portray it as a representation of the perseverance of human life? How many terms would I be able to remember? How many science classes would I take now?

There is no lesson here, no clever ending or witty joke. There is only what is real and what is in my head. There is only science and poems.

## CHAPTER 6

# Part of Your World

*The Little Mermaid* has always been my favorite Disney movie. I love the timeless music, iconic characters, and vibrant picture of life under the sea. I dressed up as Ariel for Halloween multiple times, wearing the same cheap, plastic, purple high heels over and over again. They were not at all conducive to trick-or-treating on the cement sidewalk, but I put them on everytime despite my parents' protests. Although I always ended the night in the extra pair of sneakers they brought me, wearing the heels for a little bit was imperative. I wanted to be just like Ariel, and yet I failed to remember that she couldn't wear shoes for most of the movie. I don't think the shoes she did wear were even purple.

Listening to the soundtrack before I could talk, I

ingrained all of the lyrics to *Part of Your World* in my head where they still occupy a permanent space. Every musical theatre kid knows that the song is on a black list of songs you should not sing at auditions because they are overdone, and it pained me that I never got a chance to sing it in front of people other than my family members. When the musical director at my school announced *The Little Mermaid* as that year's show, I nearly fainted. I eagerly signed up and could not wait to audition.

I didn't audition for the show my freshman year. Having my hands full with studying for biology, I didn't think it wise to add another commitment to my plate. As a sophomore, I had an easier course load, but the fact that I would get to be in *The Little Mermaid* was really all that mattered.

On the day of the audition, I walked through the auditorium doors, aware that the directors didn't even know my name. Taking a seat on the stage next to two of my friends, I tried to push the thought of having to say my name out of my head, but it lingered, causing a minor stomach ache and major anxiety. I knew that I would have to say it at some point, but I also knew that I had one chance to get it right. I had committed myself to hiding my stutter at the audition. While I was confident in my ability to fluently say "Hello" and the title of my audition song to the directors, my name was the one wild card. I have struggled with it enough times when ordering a coffee and introducing myself to people to know that it is extremely difficult for me to say without stuttering. Whether it's cursed or a self-inflicted pattern, I can always count on my name to stop me in my tracks. And yet, an eerie sense of tranquility washes over me when I step on stage. I knew that I could just as easily stutter on my name as I could say it fluently. It could have gone either way.

The first part of the audition was a dance combination that the whole group had to learn together. I had been taking dance lessons for about six years at that point and knew that I would not have a problem with the choreography. The

choreographer taught a fairly simple combination with a few higher level steps so that she could see who was capable of executing them. She was an older woman with a maroon-colored pixie cut and tiny, piercing eyes. As a young actress, she had been a swing who had often played Fastrada in a tour of *Pippin*. When she retired from performing, she retained the eccentric but disciplined personality that playing a role such as that one requires. We were all a little intimidated by her, but I was in awe. I wanted to impress her, especially because I was new, no different than a shy freshman.

After she taught the combination, she asked us to form groups of four so that she could observe us separately. While the first four people took center stage, everyone sat in the wings and watched. Our eyes played ping-pong switching back and forth between our potential castmates and the choreographer analyzing their every move. We searched for a hint of satisfaction or disappointment on her face but only observed the same concentrated stare. She didn't say a single word the entire time beyond "thank you, next group" everytime a group finished.

After the first few groups performed, it was my turn. I tried my best to confidently walk out of the wings and to my spot, but my nerves struggled to break free. I knew that I could execute all of the moves, but I had to make sure that I didn't hop out of my double pirouette and that I got significant height in my leap at the end. Of course, I had to make sure my toes were pointed the entire time and that a smile remained plastered to my face, which were both almost as difficult as the actual dance moves.

We began the combination, and any fears I had melted away. I remembered all of the steps and performed them to the best of my ability. Still smiling while holding the last pose, I breathed a silent sigh of relief and waited for her to say "thank you, next group."

What she said instead was "Girl in the light purple, what's your name?"

The three other girls quickly glanced down at their shirts, but I didn't have to. The stretchy lavender shirt had been laying on a chair in my room for a week since I had picked it out. I knew exactly who she was talking about.

"D-Daniella" I squeaked.

It was barely a stutter. I could have imagined it, or it could have just been a product of nerves like anyone else's. It did not indicate that I was a person who shutters, just that I was a little bit nervous. The question took me by surprise, and yet the whole world stopped the second she spoke. I got away with hiding my stutter, and I relished in the small victory that only added to the amount of pressure I felt.

"What dance studio do you go to?" she continued.

I did not even consider a question like this. While I practiced my name over and over in front of my mirror, I did not anticipate answering questions in front of everyone. The stage lights felt hot on my skin, and they blinded my vision. I took a deep breath.

"I used to take dance lessons, but I stopped last year when I started cheerleading."

"What was the name of your studio?"

"A-Art in Motion."

"Thank you. Well done."

I thanked her and walked off stage. My heart was beating out of my chest, and my thoughts were racing. I replayed the scene in my head, wondering if I had just given myself up. My friends excitedly ran over to me backstage to express their happiness for me. I pretended not to notice the dirty look a senior directed at me.

The dance portion of the audition ended, but the entire process was not over yet. I showed up the next week for callbacks even more nervous and excited. I sang my

audition song well enough to get called back for a role. *The* role. Along with another sophomore and two seniors, I was called back for Ariel.

My first task was to sing *Part of Your World* in front of all of the directors and people called back for various roles. As I belted out the final notes, I knew that my years of singing the song had paid off. Better than good, it felt natural, like my entire purpose in life was to sing that song in that moment. I walked off the stage glowing, but quickly lost my excitement as I sat back down. The directors said that two people who sang each role would be called back to read for the part. I sat on my hands to stop them from shaking.

It was obvious that the two sophomores excelled during the song. Before we moved on, the directors asked all of the people called back for Ariel to sing the song a second time. I again went first, and the other sophomore, who happened to be my close friend, sang after me. When we returned to our seats for the second time, I grabbed her hand and pulled her to different seats that were farther from the stage and out of the directors' fields of vision.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I said "I can't do this. I can't read in front of everyone." The moment was reminiscent of a similar conversation we had had in seventh grade at callbacks for the show in middle school. While we were not incredibly close outside of our musical theatre endeavors, I had turned to her over the past few years about my anxiety over my stutter, and she too had revealed her insecurities to me. Theatre can bring people incredibly close together, and I knew that as long as we were in that auditorium, I could count on her.

She grabbed my hands and started deep into my eyes.

"You can do this," she whispered. "You deserve this."

I forced a small smile and squeezed her hand, but

prayed that I would not have to say the lines. When the seniors finished singing, the directors asked only them to read for the part. I don't know who I was more hurt for: my friend, who sang better than both of the girls, or myself for not having the opportunity to play a character I had loved for so long. My sadness was laced with joy, but that in itself hurt the most.

I got cast as one of Ariel's sisters and spent the next few months watching one of the seniors play Ariel. Whenever she was absent from rehearsal, I would sing her songs, but never volunteered to read her lines. To me, Ariel was the perfect role. I saw so much of myself in her. Feeling trapped in a life she didn't choose, yearning to experience a world of excitement and comfort, struggling with confidence in herself. Perhaps most obvious, Ariel and I both lost our voices. But in the end, only she got hers back.

## CHAPTER 7

# To Be Smart And Human And Kind

I wish I knew my mother when she was a child. She has told me enough about her life growing up in New York City to wish that I had a friend like her. From being chased by stray dogs to having a pet monkey, her life has been full of adventure and surprise. Take any story about the fantasy of childhood, but replace Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn with a tiny Puerto Rican-Peruvian girl from Brooklyn, and you get my mother's life. Full of danger and excitement, she lived very differently than I have.

While my mother explored the city, my grandmother worked at a school, took the bus home every night to cook the same meal of rice and beans for her family, and mostly worried about her four children. In a tiny one-bedroom

apartment that had to fit six people, she tried to create the best life possible for her family. She traded mango trees for skyscrapers, dirt roads for concrete, and the blazing Puerto Rican sun for snowy winters. My grandmother worked her whole life to give her children all that she never had. This was the environment in which my mother grew up.

My mother is brilliant. Her brain is most definitely a product of genetics, as my grandparents are both extremely intelligent themselves, but she has the added bonus of having a disciplined and focused personality. While she has told me countless horror stories of the nuns at her Catholic school, she was never their target. She has always been one step ahead of everyone else, always on top of her work, always perfect. Imagine the disappointment when I forget to take my clothes out of the dryer.

I have never known her to falter or fail. Her brain is her defining characteristic, one that she used as a corporate lawyer at a big law firm in New York, one that keeps track of four kids of her own without ever missing a beat, one that broke when I was 15 years old.

She was making rice and beans when it happened. She added the *sofrito* to the pot and then everything changed. She had been having terrible headaches and experiencing uncharacteristic behavior for a couple of months, but, before her seizure, nothing was horribly wrong. Well of course, something was horribly wrong; we just didn't know it yet.

I now know that a cavernous angioma is characterized by a blood vessel abnormality that can cause blood to seep into the surrounding brain tissue. People who have them can experience intense headaches, erratic behavior, seizures, hemorrhages, and strokes. They occur in less than 0.5% of the population and often require surgery to address. The brain surgery and angioma itself can leave lasting impacts on the brain, forcing patients to relearn basic tasks, creating new personalities for people, impairing their vision, and erasing their memories, depending on the location of the angioma

in the brain. I knew none of this when her seizure happened. All I saw was my mother's body without my mother's brain.

Home with only my mother and younger siblings, I knew that the responsibility had fallen onto my shoulders. My older sister was studying abroad in Paris, and my father was working at his office in Manhattan. I alone could handle the situation.

As I dialed 9-1-1, I focused on only two thoughts. Turn off the rice and beans on the stove when you're finished. Don't stutter.

Reciting my address for the 911 operator, I spoke quickly and clearly. Rice and beans. Don't stutter. With fear and helplessness in my voice, I explained what was happening behind the cream-colored brick walls of my house. Rice and beans. Don't stutter. I listened to the 911 operator's instructions. I answered all of her questions and asked a couple of my own. The gasping sobs of my 12-year-old sister overwhelmed my brain. It was too much.

Retelling the story for what felt like 100 times, my words burned in my throat. Everyone needed to hear every detail. It became too much to think about fluency *and* the rice and beans. I could only focus on one.

This situation was starkly different from any other that I have ever experienced. Sure, I have wanted to be fluent when ordering a Starbucks drink or talking to a customer in the frozen yogurt shop at which I worked, but this time, the pressure was insurmountable. We might have been able to spare a few seconds for me to get my words out, but I did not want to risk losing vital time. I could not switch my words around when the details were so important. I could not pretend to mishear the question when every question was crucial to ensuring that my mother got the help she needed. I could not use any of my little tricks to avoid stuttering. There was only one option: fluently saying everything I wanted to say. Fluently saying everything I needed to say.

As we pulled out of the driveway and the ambulance blared its sickening siren, I realized that I had forgotten all about the rice and beans.

When we arrived at the hospital, more questions flew at my face from every angle. More questions, but really the same questions. The same story. The same words. As I recited them over and over again, they became strangely poetic. The same words that can save people can cause others a lifetime of anxiety and anguish. The same words can be both devastating and beautiful. I would never wish the words on anyone, but at least I had the privilege to say them. At least those words were the only thing standing in between danger and safety. All I had to do was say them. And I did.

One of my favorite people once gave me a card that read “Know that, while some people choose to be ignorant and insensitive and cruel, you have chosen to be smart and human and kind, and I am so proud of you. That is what makes you you.” I challenge that. That is what makes my mom my mom. I am simply her daughter, a product of her brain, humanity, and kindness. I am the girl who fakes being sick and gets driven back to school 30 minutes later.

When I got home that night, my world had imploded. Everything I had known to be true was a lie. Your mother’s brain is not perfect. Your mother is never going to be the same. Your mother needs you to be there for her when you weren’t done needing her to be there for you.

Someone had turned off the rice and beans, but I was very aware that they had burned on the stove.

## CHAPTER 8

# Room 282

The warm scent of vanilla and autumn mingled in the air, creating an aroma quite unique to my favorite teacher's classroom. It was the kind of smell that could be way too strong if you didn't like it, but I have never heard a student complain. For a year the smell had enveloped me as I walked into her room. Over time, people usually get used to the scents of their houses or places of work until they cannot smell them anymore. This phenomenon never impacted me. The air always smelled the same.

The room belonged to my AP Capstone teacher. The two-year Capstone program entails two classes: AP Seminar as a sophomore and AP Research as a junior. In AP Seminar, students learn how to analyze research articles, properly

develop arguments, collaborate with their classmates, write research papers, and give presentations on their findings. At the time, I did not know much about it, other than that one of my friends basically forced me to sign up. Not knowing that it was going to challenge me in ways that I did not think possible, not knowing that its nickname is “AP Presentations,” not knowing that I would strongly consider dropping the class after the first week, I signed up. My friend said that it was the perfect class for me, and that was all I needed.

From the first day, I knew that I had made a mistake. My teacher seemed very nice, but she spoke a mile a minute and downed a Red Bull way too easily. Energetic and animated, she explained all that the course would entail. Struggling to understand the myriad of words that flew out of her mouth, I tried to predict my success rate in the class. Analyzing articles sounded difficult, but I knew that I was hard working and passionate. The research papers themselves seemed daunting, but writing had always been my strong suit. I could work well with others and truly devote myself to such an interesting class. Everything seemed as though it was falling into place, and then she described the presentations.

Before I became a person who stutters, I loved speaking, especially in school. I raised my hand to answer every question in class and looked forward to presentations. In fifth grade history, we were tasked with memorizing a portion of the Declaration of Independence. We had a week to learn from “We hold these truths” to “life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” I memorized the paragraph that night and gave my presentation in front of the class the next day. Perhaps my eagerness to learn the paragraph was a glimpse into my future as an aspiring politician, but more likely, it was simply a hunger to share my voice.

Sitting in my AP Capstone classroom, that little girl was but a faint memory. So distant, so foreign that she might have been a figment of my imagination. The course terrified

me, both in terms of the presentations themselves and in that I would have to confront the fact that I didn't know who I was anymore. After a week of back and forth, I decided to stay. As much as the fifth grader that annoyed her class with the Declaration of Independence seemed alien to me, I knew she was still inside of me. Buried deep deep down, but still there.

Although I struggled in the first couple of months, I became more confident in my research abilities with each paper. I tackled topics such as female unemployment, the effects of technology on the developing brain, and gender stereotyping in the toy industry. With each project, I became invested in a niche topic and committed myself to my research. Answering a complex question and discovering something new was exhilarating. As the year went on, I fell more and more in love with research, and less and less in love with speaking in front of the class.

Every presentation was mentally exhausting. My routine began in the morning. First, I would refrain from coating my lashes in mascara as I knew that it would get messed up from splashing cold water on my face in the bathroom before class. Then, I would stare at myself in the mirror until I convinced myself that I could do it. I did this every time.

In April of that year, I was at my peak of anxiety over speaking. AP exams were looming, and by then I had had enough negative experiences to have minimal hope for any sort of success while giving a 15-minute presentation in front of the brightest students in my school. While my teacher's classroom had become a safe haven for me, and my teacher herself had morphed into somewhat of a mother figure, Room 282 represented everything that I thought made me broken, everything that disappointed the girl in fifth grade.

This next presentation was particularly important to me. While all of my research topics hold a special place in my heart, this one felt meaningful and poignant. In addition to the fear that characterized every speaking opportunity,

the fifth grade girl never could have imagined that school shootings would become such a major issue in our country. Although active shooter drills at my school were common, the students' feelings of anxiety, mine included, never dissipated. We had had a particularly frightening drill the month before, and I decided that I was going to focus on the impact of school shooting drills on young children. You don't have to listen to the 15-minute presentation. The impact is quite negative.

On the day of my presentation, the room smelled artificial and toxic. The air was too sweet, too strong, too much for me to handle. The ticking of the second hand on the clock above the door acted as a metronome for my bouncing leg. Each second signified my knee gently tapping the bottom of my desk three times. I placed my hand on my leg to force it to stop. It didn't listen.

I signed up to go last that day which only exacerbated my anxiety. Although I tried my best, listening to my classmates' presentations was impossible for me. I could only replay in my head the quotes and statistics I had memorized and think about the disaster that was about to be my presentation. I willed the clock to speed up so that I did not have to give my presentation that day.

Whether the clock read my mind, or my teacher did not account for the computer issues that stalled my classmate, there were 10 minutes left in the class period by the time it was my turn. My teacher called me over to her desk so that we could figure out another time for me to present. The next day during lunch did not work for me, the day after during lunch did not work for her. I couldn't go during the next class period because all of the presentation slots were already filled up. While I secretly wished that there would never be an opportunity for me to present, I knew that I had to confront the experience at some point.

It appeared that the only day that would work for the both of us was during a so-called "Zero Period" the next day,

which occurred a handful of times during the year and gave the students an opportunity to catch up on any unfinished schoolwork. I had planned on spending the period chatting with my teacher in the classroom anyway; I thought I might as well give the presentation.

That night I tossed and turned, picturing the faces of my classmates as they watched me struggle. I didn't have to imagine what they would be thinking. By then enough people had asked me "what is wrong with you?" or whispered the classic "t-t-today, Junior" upon hearing me speak. I knew that most of my classmates were supportive of me and truly rooted for my success. Most, but not all, and I dwelled on the "not all." I also thought about how wonderful it would be if none of them showed up in the room. They were encouraged, but not required, to come and support me. I dreamed of them all realizing that they had missing assignments and only one period to finish them. They would all flock to the library, or to the cafeteria, or to any of the other classrooms to do their work in peace.

When I showed up in Room 282 the next morning, I did not find 15 pairs of eyes staring back at me. Instead, the room was full of a sea of other students. The majority of my classmates were there, but so were around 20 others from my teacher's other classes. In addition to AP Capstone, my teacher taught English, and her students were working on a big project due that week. There were more students than desks in the room, forcing several students to work on the floor. The scent of markers permeated the air, mixing with the air freshener and hand sanitizer that was already too much for me. I thought I was going to be sick.

I shot a look of alarm at my teacher as soon as I walked through the door. She returned the expression with a concerned face of her own. I tiptoed over a box of colored pencils and scurried to her desk.

"You obviously don't have to give your presentation right now. I'm so sorry I did not realize how many kids would

be in here. Do you want to do it another time?”

The sentence blurred together in my head as I struggled to filter the scent of Red Bull in with everything else in the room. I understood that I had a way out. I would probably be able to give the presentation after school in front of my teacher and no one else. It was so easy. So simple. I didn't even have to speak or stutter. I just had to nod my head.

Maybe I wanted everyone to hear about my research so that they could understand the grave impact that school shooting drills had on children. Maybe I wanted to show off all of the hard work I had done, from formulating a solid line of reasoning to matching my shirt with my powerpoint slides for the second day in a row. Maybe the ghost of Thomas Jefferson himself grabbed a hold of my vocal cords and forced them to vibrate. While every fiber of my being attempted to nod my head, one decided to fight.

“No, no, I am perfectly fine with giving it now if that's okay” I managed to blurt out.

Her look was one of confusion and awe. I smiled at her as I pulled up the Powerpoint on the classroom computer.

“Hello my name is D-D-D-D-Daniella Sapone and today I am going to be talking about the impact of school shooting drills on young children.”

In a moment of surprising serenity, I presented my research with eloquence and enthusiasm. Whether I stuttered just the one time or on every word that followed did not matter. When I began speaking, I made a commitment to more than make it through the speech, but to truly teach people about my topic. As the minutes went on, more and more students stopped working on their English projects to listen to me speak. I felt important, valued, and heard. Making more progress in 15 minutes than I had made in almost six months, I blossomed during that presentation and remembered what it felt like to command a room.

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. That among these are: life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The clock ticked to signal the end of the fifteen minutes. My teacher beamed at me from across the room. The scent of vanilla and autumn lingered.



## CHAPTER 9

# To Plant a Seed

Don't put your faith in water. Just when you think you're floating peacefully on the greens and blues of the sea, the undertow silently sneaks up behind you and drags you down under. The waves crash with violent anger on the shore, the river runs wild across sharp stones and barbed plants, the lake freezes over above your head. It bubbles and boils burning your hand, it splashes salty spray into your eyes, flash floods force you out of your home and onto the street. Don't put your faith in water.

I took a sip from my glass and let the crisp taste of New York tap water slide down my throat. It cleansed the bacteria created by the letter "L" that was eating away at my insides, stopping it from spreading to my other organs. I gripped the

glass tightly to prevent salty tears from flowing down my cheeks. Water comes in and water goes out.

My internal struggle was the product of a combination of embarrassment over my stutter and the fact that the lemon never came. Stuttering was more palatable to me when it was a means to an end. I chose my words with careful precision, never wasting a stutter on insignificance. As I navigated my stutter and the process of assigning value to words, I fell into a dangerous trap. All of a sudden, very few words were worth saying, and I allowed everything else to go by unsaid. This was the mindset I carried as I stared down at the clear ice in the clear water in the clear glass, wishing for a hint of yellow.

Taro and Travis spoke about their lives as people who stutter and about their experiences working with children like me through SAY. Recovering from the letter “L,” I at first avoided their eyes. Their speech reminded me of my own, and I resented them for making me think about what I considered to be my greatest flaw. While I confronted the self-deprecating thoughts that swam in my brain, I realized that I wanted to hear them speak.

Every negative thought I had was actually directed toward myself. I liked the soothing tone of their voices. I liked learning about their journeys and their work with SAY. I even liked listening to their stutters. There was something intriguing and almost musical about the way they spoke. It captivated my attention yet gave me pause. Their stutters made the conversation unique, meaningful, and special. I love listening to what people have to say, but this was different. This time, I loved listening to the way they said it.

I glanced back down at my water and searched for a way to rationalize these new feelings. When I looked up and into the eyes of the two people sitting across from me, I noticed that they were eagerly waiting for me to speak. They watched my tongue convulse and heard the spasm of my sound, but they still wanted to listen to what I had to say. The words that I deemed unimportant and insignificant, the

words that were never worth it to me, were priceless to them. More than that, the stuttering itself was invaluable to them.

I told them about my life, trying to capture my identity in as few words as possible. As I spoke about my family, experiences at school, and love of musical theatre, I started to allow myself to say all of the words. If I could love stuttering on someone else, perhaps I could love it on myself. Perhaps I already did love it, but learned to hate it because everyone else did. If stuttering didn't carry the weight of negative stereotypes, would I have believed that my stutter made me less intelligent, less confident, and less valuable? Would I have cried myself to sleep every night or screamed out in frustration when I couldn't get my words out? Would I have allowed myself to waste my words by not saying them?

The prospect of my feelings toward stuttering being perpetuated by what others thought of it angered me. I felt robbed of years of my life spent hating myself. I thought Taro's and Travis's words were beautiful, how could the world decide that they weren't?

This newfound respect for stuttering was but a seed planted in very infertile soil. It could only be watered by stuttering, yet stuttering created weeds that threatened to steal its nutrients and stop it from ever breaking through to the surface. It would struggle to grow through presentations, speech therapy, plays, and everyday conversations, but it would always be there, fervently reaching toward the sunlight while burying roots deep into my conscience.

Before all of that, it needed its first sip of water. And it needed it to taste like lemons.

When the waitress returned, I straightened my spine and lifted my chin. I watched as she took each of our orders, hyper-sensitive to the look in her eyes. It was as if she was talking to a baby or tiny animal. Every word she said was unusually high-pitched, and her smile was unusually warm. I tried to remember that she probably learned to question

anything that differed from the norm in the same way that I did. Her discomfort was not her fault.

Before she left the table, she asked if we wanted anything else. My mother had instinctively ordered my meal for me so that I wouldn't have to talk. I didn't have to open my mouth. I didn't have to speak or stutter, I just had to sit quietly and let her leave.

Glancing at Taro and Travis, appreciating the true value of my words, I took a deep breath.

“Can I please have some l-l-l-l-lemon when you have a chance?”

In a glass, water can be contained. It sits patiently, safe and sound, and tucked away from the world. Water nourishes and gives life to the world, but it is full of contradictions. In a moment, it could kill, in a moment it could save. A moment is all it takes to change the course of your life.

The waitress brings out a new glass of normal, boring, dependable water, and in it, a slice of lemon bobs silently up and down.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank SAY for not only making this project possible, but also for being instrumental in my journey as a person who stutters. SAY has encouraged me to share my voice with the world and has always emphasized that my words are extremely valuable. Through SAY, I have been able to explore my creativity through writing songs, plays, and now, this book.

I would also like to thank SAY for introducing me to so many amazing people. Thank you, Colleen, for helping me so much throughout the process of writing this book. You have pushed me to create my best work, and I truly would not have been able to write this book without you. Thank you to Kate and Aidan for creating this project and for showing me what it means to be authentically myself. Kate, you have completely shifted my perspective on stuttering and been such an inspiration to every SAY kid who is lucky enough to know you. Thank you, Taro and Travis, for inspiring the central story of this book and for changing my life through SAY. To everyone at SAY, thank you for everything you have done for me. I would not be the person I am without each and every one of you. You all hold a special place in my heart.

I would also like to acknowledge my family members for all of their love and support. I would like to thank my parents for caring for me and for being the best role models in my life. To Amanda, Fifi, and Eddie, thank you for being my best friends and for making me laugh and smile even on particularly difficult days. Fifi, you are one of my favorite people, and I hope you know the depth of the impact you have made on my life.

To my best friend, Priscilla, thank you so much for supporting me through so much over the years. You are the most enthusiastic proof-reader I know and have been incredibly influential in my growth as a writer and person.

To Mrs. Lonie, thank you for showing me how much my voice matters. You have spent so much time listening to what I have to say, never making me feel rushed to get the words out. You have taught me so much not only as your student, but also as a person. I look up to your kindness and strength everyday.

To my reader, thank you for caring enough to listen to my story. Thank you for having your own story, and for being bold and brave enough to tell it as well.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniella Sapone is the author of *Lemon Water*. She is going to attend Barnard College with an intended major in Political Science. She enjoys writing short stories, poems, and songs.



## **STUTTERING 101**

### **By SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young**

Stuttering is often misunderstood and can make those listening to a person who stutters feel quite uncomfortable. These tips are provided to help make your interactions with a person who stutters a more positive, communicative and supportive experience:

- Please be patient. You may be tempted to finish sentences or fill in words, but please refrain from doing so unless you know the other person well and have their permission. Although you may have the best of intentions, completing another person's sentences may feel demeaning. Of course, if you guess the wrong word, the communication difficulties only increase.
- Try to refrain from comments such as "slow down," "take a breath" or "relax." To many people who stutter, this advice feels patronizing.
- Maintain eye contact and try not to look embarrassed or alarmed. Just wait patiently until the other person is finished talking.
- Be aware that people who stutter usually have more trouble controlling their speech on the telephone. In particular, saying "Hello" often presents a special problem. Please be extra patient in this situation.
- People sometimes wonder if it's OK to ask someone questions about their stuttering. This is certainly a judgment call and stuttering should not be considered a taboo subject. However, some people who stutter are sensitive about it and may prefer not to discuss the subject. By following the rules of common courtesy, everything should be fine.

- A person's stuttering sometimes makes it harder to understand what they are saying. If you do not understand what is being said, don't be afraid to simply say, "I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you just said." No matter how much of a struggle it was for them to say it, this is preferable to pretending you understood or guessing what was said.
- Let the person who stutters know by your body language and actions that you are listening to what is being said, not how it's being said. Be yourself and be a good listener.
- People who stutter are completely normal – it may just take them a bit longer to speak. Stuttering is a complex set of behaviors that interfere with the production of fluent speech. There are as many different patterns of stuttering behavior as there are people who stutter.
- Please be kind, be compassionate and be a great listener because in the end, what ties us all together is the incredible gesture of human kindness!