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Nida is majoring in Social Development & Policy with a minor in Comparative Literature. While she has studied literature courses at Oxford University and is getting a series of articles published at Newsline Magazine, this is her first time writing a creative piece. The Stutter is inspired by her surmount of a personal struggle. She believes her piece will touch the hearts of those holding onto the ride of life.

THE S.T.U.T.T.E.R

The image lingers on in my mind as I prepare myself for the terrifying ten seconds before I have to speak. Suddenly, the silent atmosphere of the room has been replaced with an orchestra of my heartbeats coupled with what sounds like galloping horses in the distant; chaotic thoughts racing here and there.

Today's the day I will reign and will not turn these ten seconds into utter humiliation.

The girl next to me has done her job well; without any pauses, interruptions or breaks, she has delivered her speech successfully. So have the rest of the kids. Now it's my turn.

The teacher inquires, "What's your name? Can you tell us a little about yourself?"

My mind had already become victorious in knocking my hopes to the ground, whispering the words, "you'll fail miserably" in my ear. A chain seems to emerge from the ground pinning my dreams and ambitions down, unable to break free.

The stutter takes over.

"M-My name is--"

The worst happens. The burden of my shattered hopes is so heavy, I cannot seem to create sentences anymore, let alone speak them.

“M-my name-“

The first letter starts to terrifying to me, almost as if a demon is sitting near my destination with a huge grin. I have to reach it, no matter what.

It’s taken me more than ten seconds to utter my name and to my despair, the teacher asks me again with a hint of annoyance and humor,

“Did you forget what your name is?”

Students across the classroom start to giggle and mutter under their breaths. I feel like bursting into tears.

“Her name’s Nida, ma’am.” The girl next to me remarks.

Another battle lost.

I was never in sync with my speech and thought patterns since a young age. I cannot distinctly remember what it was that caused me to develop a stutter but from what I could calculate, I carried it around with me like a wound, for everyone to notice and hear the moment I opened my mouth to speak.

“I think it’s psychological, honey,” my mom would say, in a very matter-of-fact tone, but both of us knew that we knew nothing of its roots, just that it had risen in my life as an obstacle I feared would be the death of me someday.

My mind became my arch foe, tying my tongue into knots I could

not untangle.

A memory came flooding back to me. Soon after the debate disaster, my mom, in fear of what effect this speech defect might have on my mental health, took me to the local speech therapist a couple streets away.

We go upstairs in the building and sit down in waiting for a woman in a room to call on us. Apparently, she's a speech therapist, trained exactly for tackling cases like these.

"Take long deep breaths," she says on one of the days of my regular appointments. She hands me a bottle of water with a straw in it and tells me to breathe into it. I sit there blowing at the straw for a good ten minutes, getting a bit excited by the prospect of my stutter finally fading away.

The speech therapist has me do a couple more breathing exercises, and that's it. I'm done for the day. For about a month, this goes on and I anxiously wait for the next time someone converses with me so that I can finally speak with fluency.

It didn't work as well as I had anticipated.

Despite telling myself to breathe every time before uttering the sentence, words broke and fell apart before I could finish it. I confided in my mom- how I was losing hope again and everything seemed like a dead end to me. She insisted it was mind over matter.

And perhaps she was right for it turned out that it was indeed psychological. It took a while for me to realize. The level of my anxiety affected my speech on a major level. It was a battle to be fought every day - not with the stutter, but with my mind. People mocking and laughing at my disability appeared like monsters to me, bumps on that already shattered and broken road that I had to walk every day. I yearned for peace with those monsters and prayed that my voice would

reach the ears of those I wanted to speak to.

From that day on, silence and isolation became my close acquaintances. As time progressed, I found a home for my inner voice but lost the sound of my real one and the ability to engage with the external world. In other words, I grew so quiet, I started thinking the world had finally forgotten me.

Living in my skin was the toughest, especially when it came to making friends. There's no fun talking to the shy girl - because she doesn't speak at all!

"It's like sitting in a funeral," I once heard one of the kids behind me sneer. Another memory sprang up and clouded my mind.

I take out my notebook and start jotting down my rapidly flowing thoughts on the back page. I might as well write it than speak it. Writing is therapeutic and the pain of a stutter doesn't bother me so much when I'm writing what I want to say.

"Why are they saying this? They don't know my story at all." I scribble on the page. Sentence after sentence, I keep writing. It's free period and everyone has a friend to talk to. I talk to my conscience through words on a page. A Nida talking to another more confident and wiser Nida.

Maybe I'll be able to be her someday.

High school begins.

This was my chance to give it a second try. I tried not go unnoticed here. I vowed to make a bunch of friends and finally be who I wished to be. The Nida that I always wanted. Another memory hits me.

"For your last assignment, you will have to deliver a presentation next

week,” my literature teacher tells the class. My heart feels like it just dropped. How am I going to speak in front of the whole class? My racing thoughts and anxiety will take over me and it will be a disaster. I gather up the courage to talk to the teacher after class ends. My question, punctuated with tongue slips and breakages, comes out as this:

“Um, is there any way I can maybe substitute the presentation with something else? I stutter and won’t be able to present so well.” I felt my heart turning heavy when I struggled to say these words. In reality, I did not want to be the odd one out who could not present because of some circumstances.

It felt unfair to me.

I felt I had no choice. I would take up too much time trying to get the words out and probably won’t make sense. They’d rather listen to someone more fluent and confident. They’d probably laugh. They’d probably get bored. A sea of negative thoughts swept me away from the courage to say I could do it. Knowing the result of my stuttering in front of the whole class, I forfeited.

“Well, okay if you feel comfortable writing it, then please write it out and submit. I will tell the class why you could not present.”

Another battle lost.

Time after time, I dangerously made it a habit of passing up any opportunity that involved speaking. Time after time, I kept losing wars where I thought I could have done an outstanding job. I felt people would forget me here yet again.

Once during high school, the principal of my school called for me. I reached his office with a knot in my stomach, wondering what he could want me for.

“Nida, please sit,” he said ...

I take a seat.

“You know Nida, I had a student last year. He was president of the student council and had a stutter just like you. He was one of the most hard-working pupils I’d ever met. I’ve heard he’s doing wonders with this life right now.”

I was taken aback. It was beyond me to expect my principal of all people to talk about something so personal to me. In my eyes, he wasn’t just the principal – he was the ruler here. People listened to his every word and witnessed his every gesture to figure out the next move they will make. They were under his authority. His words mattered like their life mattered to them.

“He’s successful because he did not let his fears get the best of him,” he continued with an air of resoluteness and warmth in his eyes. “No matter if he took time to say what he wanted to say. It was WHAT he said that was important, not how he said it. The world is a big place, Nida. If you decide to shut yourself up for good today, the world will pass you by tomorrow, before you even realize it. Seize your days and go forth.”

I wasn’t used to a reaction like that with anyone I’d ever tried talking to before. The truth was, I was in search of a kind of reassurance like this for so long, I had lost the voice to call for it, and with that, my courage.

The world is a big place. Why would I give up when I had so much to explore, conquer and own? Slowly, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders like knowing that there was hope somewhere. That it wasn’t shameful for me to speak with pauses and breakage, like I could make someone understand how difficult it was trying to orchestrate the rapidity of my thoughts with the pace of my speech. That I could convey my message

across successfully without giving up halfway.

It definitely felt like my destination wasn't so hazy anymore and the broken road not that bad.

"I w-will, sir. T-Thank you so much for these k-kind words," I said, and joyfully walked out of his office. A sudden urge to speak up and newly-acquired strength filled me with adrenaline and I found myself in front of my literature teacher again, this time telling her that I will present, and my stutter will not get the best of me.

I was charted to speak the next week.

It was a terrifying ten minutes. Once again, the atmosphere in the room seemed to become quite nerve-wrecking and I began hearing the chorus of my throbbing heartbeat and thoughts again. I started to say,

"H-hello, I'm N-Nida, and today I w-will talk a-about Sh-Shakespeare's f-famous play, L-Love, Labour's, L-lost."

The first letter of each word appeared like demonic creature but no matter how much effort it required to speak those words, I gave it my all to not go unheard that day. I glued my eyes to the floor but in those brief moments when I did look up to the audience, they were smiling and nodding, as if encouraging me to walk the broken road anyway.

It was worth the journey.

The ten minutes finally finished.

"T-thank you."

The students broke into a thunderous applause. I was so incredibly happy, I got teary-eyed. Nothing seemed more joyous than feeling

what I felt that day. Wings to fly, a sky to fly in. The image in my mind changed with every second. Maybe they'll remember me as the shy girl or the girl who stuttered, but this time I felt as that was simply a day away from changing.

I've spoken various times as of now, stuttered my way through but never given up. The principal's words remind me each day that people who wish to hear my voice exist in this world too. There are so many like me who wish to reach mountainous heights but are scared to do so.

Fear is natural.

My stutter, I realized, was a product of the inner workings of my mind. My chaotic thoughts with my thoughts of conviction. My critical thoughts and my mediator thoughts—all combined to create a cauldron of broken pieces of words, waiting to be assembled and brought into the surface.

I am breaking the glass wall around me every day by conversing with more and more people. The horizon is in the distance, birds in the sky fly towards it as if someone's calling out to them, it looks like an arduous journey. The road is broken but the walk is worth the memory of a lifetime.

This memory is Nida.

