

Duane Dyer could see how one thing led to another, from curing his stuttering to cheating on his wife. It was a matter of him taking things too far, but he thought everything was worth doing and that his biggest problem now was what to do next. He had spent his summer nights having an affair with his neighbor, until she put an end to it when her husband switched to the day shift. Duane began the therapy for his stuttering earlier in the year, at the same time Max Headroom was popularizing the impediment with his own network television show.

Duane's wife, Sue, an air traffic controller, worked nights, while Duane worked accountant's hours, which made the affair possible. She never noticed any change, because she always was busy with her own projects. She would come home pumped up from her shift at the control tower, as if energized by the glow of her radar screen. Immediately she would plunge into some venture around the house. Although they had an agreement never to interfere with each other's sleep, early one muggy morning she began refinishing the furniture. Duane was awakened by the whirl of the electric sander. He opened the door to the garage and confronted a wood-dust mist. "I hate all the furniture in our house," Sue said, hunched over a tabletop. "All the surfaces are scratched."

"Shouldn't you be doing that by hand?" Duane asked.

Until he met Wendy Thomas, Duane filled his time alone by playing racquetball at his club and by reading books about revolutions—the French and Russian were his favorites. His game got rusty; his books remained piled on a dusty shelf.

His stuttering never had been serious enough to cut him off from the rest of the world, but the fear of stuttering had tormented him for years. He would refuse his words in anticipation of those he could not say fluently, as if he were madly paddling a canoe to avoid

dangerous boulders in midstream. It had become a joke at the office, with people jumping in to finish his sentences, or to mimic Max Headroom. "So-so-so-sue me!" was Norman Carter's refrain, which would demolish anything Duane was trying to say. Norm had the rhythmic head jerk down, too. Duane, who rarely watched television, never grasped what was going on.

At home, his stuttering was not a problem. When he had trouble speaking, Sue would stand over him and offer silent, placid encouragement. It was no big deal, and yet it was everything, the foundation of their marriage. He felt free to display his imperfections; she felt free to display her patience, which she reserved only for him, when she reserved it at all. He wondered how things would go, now that he was without his most palpable imperfection.

Duane's psychologist, Grantz, had told Duane not to expect a cure, "per se," for his stuttering, but there he was, not stuttering, at least not much, and not worrying about whether he might. Only Duane called it a cure, because it allowed him to feel that a horrid part of his past had been exorcised. Since he was a child, Duane had been to speech therapists who told him how to practice moving his lips and tongue. Grantz put them all to shame. "Your stuttering is a learned response," he said. "We probably will never know what the response is to, because that would entail digging into your childhood for answers that aren't accessible. But we can work on unlearning the response." The therapy is called systematic desensitization, a technique used in treating phobias, Grantz said. The patient masters his affliction by encountering it in increasingly stressful but controlled increments. He asked Duane to make a list of ten uncomfortable speaking situations that would cause him to stutter, and rank them in order of increasing stress. Number ten would be the worst fear imaginable, in Duane's case, making a speech in a packed auditorium. When Duane flinched at this thought, Grantz said, "Maybe you won't have to climb that far up the ladder." Grantz gave Duane a mission: "Begin with lowest item on the list. Put yourself in the situation and do the thing you're afraid of doing—intentionally. Produce the stuttering, listen to yourself, observe the reaction. When you're convinced you've mastered the situation, move up to the next one." Once they drew up the list, they tackled the first item in Grantz's office by calling auto repair shops and checking the price of a t-t-t-t-tune up. "You see, nothing really happens," Grantz said. "They're just waiting for you to finish. No problem. If they give you trouble, you can handle it." As for Duane's unplanned stuttering, Grantz offered no prescriptions. "Don't feel pressured to change

your behavior. Just concentrate on the exercises," Grantz said. Already, Duane felt relieved. He buried himself in the process of unlearning, reporting to Grantz each week about his rapid progress through the list:

2. Butcher: "T-t-t-two pounds of ground beef, please." (No problem.)

3. Police officer: "W-w-w-which way to Walnut Street?" (No problem.)

4. Locker room chat: "N-n-n-nice backhand." ("G-g-g-great ceiling shot" was the mocking reply. Easily ignored.)

5. Client: "Th-th-th-that would be a savings of f-f-four percent." (Double take, questioning look, but, finally, a slight smile of gratitude.)

6. Small group of strangers, three women eating Chinese food at the fountain outside his building: "S-m-m-mells good. Where c-c-can I get some of that?" (A laugh, a scowl, a blank stare. "You gotta be kidding," the scowler said. More trouble than expected.)

7. Business lunch: "F-f-filet mignon." (Piece of cake.)

8. Larger group of strangers: "H-h-h-how do you know it's done?" (Grantz talked him into attending a one-night wok class at a supermarket. Duane found the astonished stares unpleasant; he was the only man.)

9. Presentation at the office: "It's not s-s-s-something we've tried b-b-before, but it's the d-d-direction we ought to be moving in." It was a watershed experience, revolutionary. Norm stood up and applauded energetically. Duane couldn't tell whether Norm had caught on to the therapeutic exercise, but Duane loved for the outburst. Then Norm said, "So-so-so suit me up. I'm ready to play!" before the director told him to shut up. When Duane found that he could endure even that, he felt unburdened, fearless. His subsequent stuttering blocks seemed anticlimactic; the overwhelming importance, the anxiety he had attached to them vanished. The next day, Norm presented Duane with a videotape of a Max Headroom episode. "Time you checked out a kindred spirit," Norm said. Duane accepted the tape with faint thanks.

Immediately Duane became more outgoing. He couldn't help noticing the unfamiliar figure in shorts and a bikini top, watering her garden on summer evenings in the back yard behind his back yard. With an elbow resting on the chain-link fence, he met Wendy. She and her husband, Vern, had just moved. He worked at the post office and she was looking for a job. "Vern works nights, and I just sit around and go crazy," she said.

"My wife works nights, too," Duane said, staring at her glistening belly.

"Want to come over for a drink?" she asked.

"I d-d-don't think so," he said, feeling the first wave of stuttering anxiety since the office display. He tried to shake it off; Wendy didn't seem to notice. "Maybe we could get together sometime, all four of us."

"I don't know when," she said. After that meeting, Duane took care to position himself in the back yard in early evening, when their spouses were gone. He often found Wendy across the way, coaxing him. He came over several times, once to start her lawn mower, once to admire her zucchini vines, again to taste her zucchini casserole. He always retreated quickly, resisting her invitations to enter the house, and, later, fantasies inflamed, wishing he hadn't. He was concerned about how it would look. Gossip was rampant in the neighborhood, and back yards were like open theater.

They discovered each other one night when the electricity went out on the Thomases' block. Wendy passed through the gate in the back fence and knocked on Duane's door. She was wearing a long T-shirt that stretched to her knees and covered whatever else she was wearing. She asked for a candle. "The power was off on my street. It's dark all over," and, tilting her head and smiling, added, "I saw your light." On the authority of this explanation, which she made enticing, she stepped inside. Duane was surprised at how easy it was to begin cheating.

After that encounter, Duane always was the one who ventured through the gate. Using Wendy's bed made her feel safer; she wanted to be there in case Vern called. He was possessive and always wanted explanations. Wendy and Duane had a system. She kept the back light on until after Vern called on his eleven o'clock break. Then Wendy would shut off the light, a signal for Duane to come. He would creep into the sparkling night, faintly lit by occasional lights left burning in the neighborhood—yard lamps in the next block, dim lights in bedrooms and bathrooms, and lights shining brightly in unoccupied kitchens and dens. He would sneak into the no-man's land of facing back yards and become aware of a neighbor's insect-killing light, a lurid molten violet, crackling with each dispatch. He had to be wary of the neighbors. Often a light would switch on and a door would open, perhaps to emit a cat. Duane would be pinned down on the open lawn, freezing in a crouch, a love commando. It was thrilling. Once, when Wendy shut off the back light and Duane began his approach, she suddenly turned on the kitchen light and did

a striptease as Duane scrambled for cover. The neighboring houses were dark, Duane noticed with relief; the show was just for him.

Duane never had taken much interest in other women until he met Wendy. He was satisfied with Sue's slim body, proud that she did not have to work at being slim and pleased that she did not have to resort to trendy cosmetics. With Wendy, on the other hand, Duane frequently was surprised at how striking an ordinary woman could look with a ninety-dollar perm and a little mousse, a thought that only increased his fascination. Though Wendy's demands on him were strenuous, Duane felt free. She was the first one with whom he did not share the lumpy baggage of stuttering.

When the end came, it was not especially turbulent. Wendy broke the news: "Vern's going on days next week. It's been in the works, but I never said anything, because it wasn't definite until now. He wants to start a family."

"Understandable," Duane said.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Well, I'm just wondering how long you can keep your hands off of me." He adopted sarcasm as he grew edgier.

"You better worry about yourself first. What are you going to do?"

"Lots of things. Go back to playing racquetball. Refinish the furniture." He wanted to thank her, but Wendy was doing a good job of being aloof.

"I thought we would be screaming at each other."

"We would be, if what we had wasn't so, so recreational." He kissed her goodnight. "Be seeing you," he said, forming a smile that left him as he turned into the darkness, startled at once by emptiness. What would he do with himself? He could do anything, he supposed. Could he have as much fun with Sue as he had with Wendy? He once did and still could, if Sue would lighten up. What would he do with all those free nights, looming like raw material to be strip-mined for personal development? Chances are, racquetball would not do. He could work longer hours at the office, where he never had been as good as he could be, because of his impediment. Now there was nothing to keep him from excelling. He had no impediments he could think of. He could get into management, but that always seemed boring. He could start his own business. What business?

To distract himself, Duane put Norm's Max Headroom tape into the VCR and tried to watch. It was strange—television executives with British accents, a petulant adolescent computer whiz, and a

young man outfitted with electronic gear, apparently the hero, with an American accent. Max Headroom seemed to be a minor character, with occasional spots of jerky epigrammatic techno-babble. He appeared on a screen, against a background of modulating parallel lines, now horizontal, now diagonal. The animated head didn't stutter, exactly; rather, it repeated certain words and movements with computerized speed. Duane found Max annoying and switched him off. He flipped through a book on Marat that was overdue at the library, and nodded off.

He awoke with the shock of Sue's entrance. "What's this blip I'm detecting on the couch?" she asked. She tossed her purse in an easy chair and flipped on the light. Typically, she was invigorated and he was groggy. He arose, squinting, and embraced her. He kissed her on the neck. "How nice it is to have someone to come home to," she said. He couldn't remember the last time he had tried to wait up for her; it was clear she was enjoying the attention. "Why so affectionate?" she asked.

"Don't know."

"You must be hiding something."

"Probably."

"Well, save it for tomorrow. I'll put you to bed." She helped him off to the bedroom, and he was asleep before she tucked a sheet under his chin.

Duane awoke with new energy the next morning, which was Saturday, their day together. They hadn't planned anything, and he was scanning the events listings of the morning paper. As he read, he turned on the Max Headroom tape. Now he found Max easier to take. "Hi. Welcome to the big time. This is Max Headroom and welcome to the b-b-big time television." Duane was fascinated, even though he couldn't follow the plot because he had forgotten what he had seen the night before. "If you're watching me, who's watching Network 23? — a network with a great future behind it." Duane went to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. It was nearly eleven. Sometimes the smell of coffee was enough to wake Sue up. On his trip back from the kitchen, he looked out the window and saw Wendy and Vern on the deck. Wendy was wearing a bikini top and shorts, as usual. Duane thought about their times together, how quickly she would remove her minimal clothing, how eagerly she rendered herself his to explore. He hadn't felt guilty about his affair until now, when it was over. He remembered Sue's smile the previous night when he unexpectedly kissed her. For the first time he regretted having betrayed her. He noticed that his emotions, dissociated

from the thoughts that provoked them, were not unlike the stuttering anxiety he had mastered. Could he master these new bad feelings as well? He had a reckless desire to confess — but maybe not so reckless. Maybe he could confront what he dreaded, under conditions he could control, in a manner he would find comfortable. He went to the bedroom and nudged Sue. "Get up. Come out and watch Max Headroom," he said.

"Max Headroom? Good grief. OK, I'll be up in a minute."

He went back to the television and backed up the tape to a good part. He finished with the paper, having found nothing, and tossed it aside. When Sue appeared, he poured her a cup of coffee. "What service," she said. "You're buttering me up for something. I just know it."

"No, I just want you to watch this." He turned on the tape, which he had set up for a Max spot:

"And d-d-don't forget, if you can't hit a three-iron out of a bunker, change your grip!"

"So this is Max Headrom," Sue said. "It's nonsense."

"That's right, but it's great nonsense," Duane said. He took the coffee pot back to the kitchen, pausing to look out the window at Wendy. Now she was sunbathing. He could see sections of shiny flesh between horizontal slats of the deck.

"What are you staring at?" Sue asked.

"Nothing."

"The hell you aren't. You're staring at the neighbor who always prances around in her swimsuit."

"No, I'm not," Duane said. "Well, yes, I am."

"I knew it. I've seen you out in the yard staring at her. You know, it would be really embarrassing if she saw you. And I'm sure her husband wouldn't like it."

Duane knew this was his opportunity for mastery, and he trembled at the thought. "You don't know the half of it," he said. It was a reckless thing he was doing, climbing the ladder by leaping to the highest rung. He tried to remain composed. "Her husband works nights, too," he said, willing a light-hearted leer. "Wendy and I have been seeing each other for months, creeping around at night while our spouses were hard at work."

"You even know her name?"

"Well, of course, why wouldn't I? Adulterers sometimes exchange names."

Max Headroom interrupted with a mindless aphorism: "Don't let the bedbugs bite. Sleep on your feet!"

"You're crazy," Sue said. "You've been acting stranger and stranger ever since you started going to that shrink. He fixed your stuttering, but I think he warped the rest of your brain.

Another burst from Max: "If at first you don't succeed, clear your screen and try again! Try again! Try again!"

"Who, me?" Duane said, hamming it. "I never felt so good in all my life." He had to remind himself that, to Sue's way of thinking, nothing ever was particularly wrong. He listened to himself and watched Sue. He accepted his last remark as essentially correct. She smiled and stared at him as if he were some kind of nut, gleefully telling teasing lies. That was good. She did that when they were getting along. No problem. ♣