

My name is Jef Willemsen and I am a stutterer. Pfew, now that THAT's out of the way... in this column, lets talk about speech defects, handicaped h-h-h-homos and totally unnecessary selfpity. Yep, its Jef acting out as speaker at the European League of Stuttering Associations, the ELSA.

A stutterer who lectures at a stuttering convention... I don't know about you, but that sounds like the start of a pretty cheap joke to me. Still, reality often is funnier than you can imagine. How did I get involved in this whole ELSA-business...? Well, it all started out innocently enough. Just another cold February day, just another chat on MSN Messenger. When all of a sudden, with an all too familiar

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... An e-mail from the SvJ, or School for Journalism in Utrecht. It was from none other than Carien de Kok, of the school's internship office. I like Carien: not only does she sport a hairdo that was out of date back in 1955, she also has the wonderful task of being the bearer of good and bad news. Its her job to tell students whether or not they got the internship they wanted. With Carien, you are never too sure what its gonna be, because she always has the same sadistic grin on her face. Yeah, it's always a surprise... I remember how she wrecked my day when she cheerfully told me my internship applications at both Playgirl & Sailors Ahoy Monthly were turned down.

Damn you...

But Carien didn't come with any good or bad news this time, nope, it was just a friendly suggestion. The office had gotten a job offer from ELSA, de European League Of... Oh well, you all know it. Anita was looking for a journalist who would like to speak at their meeting. "Something tells me this is just the kind of job for you" Carien typed with so much digital sarcasm, one could almost taste it. I took a moment to gather my thoughts, drank some wine, went out for food and then wrote my introductory e-mail to Anita.

That was on February 12th. Time flew after that and before I knew it, July was in full swing. Time to get this show on the road. In the meantime, my good friend and fellow stutterer Arjan had decided he would act as moral support and joined me. I was already preparing the workshop with my co-host Gina, the British Bombshell. As Gina and I were talking things through on MSN, I started getting worried. And no matter how many times Gina assured me that "*Its gonna be wonderful luv, trust me*"... I still remained restless. But why?

Well, being asked to talk about stuttering and the media, meant facing down some long burried issues surrounding my own stuttering. I have always considered it to be a weak spot in my personality, not something I care to dwell on too long. I like to avoid thinking about it, wherever possible. Which is odd, considering I have stuttered for almost as long as I can remember. And if I don't stutter, I always manage to throw in some stammering. I've been in speech training for about eight years, so I am more than familiar with stuttering and its causes... So, all in all, it shouldn't be anything new to me. Yet, as I discovered while preparing for the workshop, I still loathe the fact that I have this speech defect. Always have, and I guess I always will.

And why not? Not being able to clearly get your point across? Struggling to say as simple a thing as your name? Continuously fighting with words...? Day in, day out...? What's there to like?! All through primary school, I loathed reading hour more than gym class and during high school a presentation or book report equalled hell. So, knowing all this, why in the world would I ever agree on speaking to a group of people for at least 1.5 hours? That makes about as much sense as a person who's afraid of water agreeing on crossing the Atlantic with a slab of concrete stuck to his back.

Well, lets keep this realistic: my stutter used to be a lot worse... Back in the day when I was still a small, round little butterball with glasses that covered half my face, I was barely able to get anything out. I once saw myself stutter on video and I was horrified... A little fat kid with big glasses and an 80s hairdo, jaws clenched feverishly, eyes locked in what appeared like a death struggle... And all I was trying to say was a simple 'hi'.

Naturally, memories like that don't really help in creating a positive selfimage. Plus, I was the only kid with a stutterer back when I was growing up. My friends and classmates never teased me, but I still felt ostracised. And every single stutter that left my mouth reminded me I was different... Ow, woe is me, I am to be pittied upon...a pathetic, sorry excuse for a person, unworthy of love... Might as well face it: my life is useless...

Man! Selfpity is fun! ...In small doses. Its like this warm blanket you can take cover in, whenever the big bad world does something mean to lil' ol' poor you. Yeah, very nice, but ultimately rather futile, as my experiences at ELSA once more taught me. There are lots of people who have to deal with a far worse stutter and on top of that, have led rather difficult lives. Niall was born in Northern Ireland, in an environment filled with angst, the fear of IRA attacks killing family and loved ones a constant presence. Or Aamen from Sweden, originally from Iraq. He told me of his experiences as a child in Iraq, the traumatic things that happened to him as a child... Events that caused him to develop a severe stutterer. Yet, despite all this, he still embraces life. He is outgoing and enjoys life, he doesn't hide from it or waste too much time feeling sorry for himself. Wow... Or should I say... W-w-w-w-w-w-wwwwow?

Regardless, I got a reality check and as a result, I got my facts straight again. Fact: I am a stutterer. Fact: That's sh*tty. Fact: There are people whose stutter is a lot worse than yours. Fact: And they don't let their stutter scare them off in any way. Take Ana from Pamplona, Spain... Despite her stutter, she's a teacher... that's like giving a presentation on a daily basis! In other words: *Jef, stop crying about your stutter, its not worth the time. Get over it!* So much for my comfortable pity blanket.

Anyways, the big ELSA-meet was about more than sharing in mutual misery and self recrimination. Hell no, it was mostly about fun. Man, the laughs we had... Arjan & I were amazed at everyone, in a good way of course. Everyone in the ELSA-party is unique in his or her own way.

Take Kaisu for instance, the 21 year old Finnish delegate. She likes Rammstein and naked visits to the sauna. But, make no mistake, not to have sex. Oh no, even though you are naked, saunas aren't meant for lovemaking. Or, as I heard Kaisu say when I was meeting the rest of the group "No-no-no...Saunas much too hot for F***ING!"... Try shaking someone's hand after overhearing THAT.

During the three days I was around Kaisu, I never saw her without her bra-straps loosely dangling from her shoulders. That's some fashion statement. When she speaks, roughly every tenth word is *f**king* and every fifth word is *strawberries*... Yesss, strawberries, she has been selling them on the market in Finland for about ten years now. And if she has a drink (not much of a question if, more like when) her preferred beverage is Kodka Vodka... "*Its Finish vodka, from Finland*", as she is very fond of telling anyone who comes near. Kaisu likes learning new languages, she was very eager to learn French. Sso Parjan taught her a few simple lines: 'Oui, oui, tres bien'... But only the 'oui' part remained firmly entrenched in her mind and that evening, when she was a little happy (and yes, a little drunk) she kept on yelling in her new French vocabulary... WIE-WIE-WIE-WIE-WIE. Sigh...well, at least it was fluent.

And then there were the five representatives from Iceland, a rather large delegation for a country as small as theirs, but I am more than glad I got the chance to meet them all. Each and everyone is a unique talent in their own right. Supercool Gudda, ravenhaired silent force Lilja, sexy & sassy Rut, Isak, a surprisingly good singer, and last but certainly not least there's Þorrun... The human alarmsystem.

Þorrun is 17 years old and she's always happy, no matter what. That makes other people happy as well, though not always in quite the same way she'd expected. For instance, Þorrun pronounces the English word 'good' as 'kut', which is a nastier version of the Dutch word for vagina. I almost choked when I heard her shout across the breakfast table that she was FEELING KUT, VERRY, VERRY KUT!

Ahhh, Þorrun, always willing to laugh, ready to shriek so loud you're almost afraid she's about to cough up her vocal cords. Everything's a big laugh to her, like she's drunk on pure oxygen. I just had to have a memento of so special a young lady. Needless to say, Þorruns incredible laughter is now serving as my cellphone's new ringtone. The first time my phone rang, my cat got so scared, he crawled under the bed and didn't come out for at least a day. Beat that, Jamba.

During my stay at ELSA, I also made a very important scientific discovery. I am sure it will be an incredible breakthrough, but before I collect my Nobelprize, I will share it here with you: There is a cure for stuttering. A cure which is much cheaper than years of speechtraining and a lot easier to master than breathing techniques. It has no known side-effects, just a small risk of a severe headache when you overindulge in it. And best of all: its available in just about every supermarket or grocery store. The name of this miracle cure? Alcohol. When you drink enough liquor, your fluency level drastically improves. Needless to say, most stutterers like to drink, as the meeting clearly showed.

When it comes to the drinking habits of stutterers, Arjan and I got some firsthand experience. Very shortly after we arrived and sat down for dinner, the bar was opened. Now, I do enjoy a good glass of red wine, but before I realised it, the sun was coming up and I was still out talking to people, while being more than a little drunk. I glanced at my watch and was shocked... It was 6.30 in the morning... Half past seven... My first workshop was scheduled at 9.00...

Crap.

I guess its a miracle I was even able to get up after three hours of booze drenched sleep. Kudos to Josy for making us all some coffee, it worked wonders. Still, I gave that first workshop is a rather bizarre, surreal state of mind... A cross between sleepwalking and dreaming. Yeah... I am such a professional. I can't remember anything I said during that first workshop, but after about an hour and a half I finished my mumblings and was treated to a warm round of applause. Probably to congratulate me on the amazing fact I hadn't crashed into a coma halfway through.

The afternoon workshop was a world of difference. After drinking about half my bodyweight in coffee, I was feeling a lot better. Maybe I was a little bit high on caffeine, but at least I was rrrrrready to go. This workshop lasted a good two hours... The first hour was Gina and me talking up a storm, the second hour was devoted entirely to answering questions. All six of them, thanks again Aamen.

After that, my official work at ELSA was done, though Arjan and I were invited to the big goodbye party. It was an offer we gladly accepted and on Friday we returned for an evening (and as it turned out morning) of barbecue, the inescapable booze and... karaoke. An ideal combination, because most stutterers can sing fluently, so all of us were singing our little hearts out. There was a massive chorus during ABBA's *Dancing Queen*. That other classic, the unofficial gay anthem *I Will Survive* was sung at least five different times. Survive we did. During those nightly singalongs, it dawned on me that a group of relative strangers had become close friends in a matter of days. We had bonded: not only as people, but as stutterers and even foreigners. The whole dream of a united Europe became reality when at 5.00 in the morning Arjan got the whole group to fonetically sing along to the Dutch song '*Geef Mij Maar Amsterdam*' (roughly translated: *I prefer Amsterdam*) The special bottle of ELSA champagne was opened and everyone had one last drink together.

But the sun inevitably showed its face, it was Saturday morning and that meant the parting of the ways. One by one, the group left the premises, packed and hungover, ready to head home. It was a time of hugging, kissing, stuttering and most of all enjoying. Enjoying the fact that we were all together for one final time. Everyone took home their own poster size piece of paper, filled with lots of personal messages from the others. On my sheet, several people wrote: *I really enjoyed your workshop*.

Well, my friends...

S-s-so did I.