

Chapter 5

It's painful: Marilyn Monroe

First time was at the orphanage, and then later in my teens I stuttered. And I was elected secretary of the minutes of the English class Then I'd say, [to announce] the minutes of the last meeting, I'd go m-m-m-m-m . . . Oh, it's terrible.

Marilyn Monroe¹

Stuttering was the least of Marilyn Monroe's (1926-62) problems. She suffered through a lonely and traumatic childhood. Her father abandoned her mother before Marilyn was born; neither her mother, Gladys Baker, nor Marilyn were ever sure who her father was, because Gladys had had liaisons with four different men in the months around Marilyn's conception.² The young Marilyn, whose name for the first twenty years of her life was Norma Jeane, had three mothers in her first eight years because of Gladys' emotional problems. A year later she was sent to an orphanage, then two years later to a relative of one foster mother, and one year after that to yet another set of foster parents. When she was sixteen and her newest parents decided they could no longer afford to keep her, she got married to avoid being sent to an orphanage.

Rejected by her mother

Norma Jeane's first eight years were stable. Her foster parents were a Pentecostal couple who took her to church and warned her against the movies. But Norma Jeane never felt she could satisfy "Aunt Ida." As she put it years later, "It was hard to please them. Somehow I was always falling short, although I can't remember being especially bad."

But the worst pain in these first sixteen years was feeling rejected by her mother. "My mother didn't want me," Marilyn later recalled. Not only had Gladys given her up to foster

parents shortly after her daughter's birth, but because of her mental distress drifted in and out of psychiatric hospitals for most of this time. Young Norma Jeane never knew when her mother would suddenly appear, and then just as suddenly disappear. It was such a strained relationship that in Marilyn's last ten years she refused to visit her mother, yet kept sending her money.

It is no wonder that Marilyn's life at many levels was a painfully insecure search for her identity. For most of her adult life, she tried to find it through work as an actress. But it was elusive. "As a person," she told an interviewer, "my work is important to me. My work is the only ground I've ever had to stand on. Acting is very important. To put it bluntly, I seem to have a whole superstructure with no foundation. But I'm working on the foundation."³

Searching for a father

She was also searching for the father she never had. This partly explains her three failed marriages. She was willing to marry James Dougherty not only to escape the orphanage but also because he was twenty-one and seemed to have the stability and maturity which she lacked. Joe DiMaggio attracted her because at thirty-seven and newly retired from the New York Yankees, his quiet and authoritative personality seemed to provide paternal protection and love. But when Joe beat her a second time for breaking her agreement not to wear revealing clothes in public, she divorced him. She was persuaded that she could make up for her own abbreviated education (dropping out of school midway in her sophomore year of high school) by marrying playwright Arthur Miller, but her discovery from his diary that she bored him brought that marriage to an end as well.

Mysterious death

Marilyn's accumulated insecurities and failed relationships drove her eventually to addiction to pills—barbituates to get her to sleep and then others to wake her up. They eventually led to her death, which has puzzled investigators ever since. There was definitely an overdose, but then there were also strange, potentially poisonous, elements found in her colon at the autopsy. Were they put in an enema by a personal assistant who is reported to have given her such intimate care? Was the overdose encouraged or managed by Peter Lawford and the Kennedy brothers, with at least one of whom it is certain she had an affair? Was she angry that the President never returned her calls after their intimate encounter, and that she threatened to go public? Rumors have swirled for more than a half-century, and while there is spotty evidence for each of these theories and more, nothing is certain.⁴

The first time

For most of these tumultuous thirty-six years of life, Marilyn stuttered. It started when she was eight. A boarder in their home put her on his lap and molested her. She ran to tell her mother, but suddenly her tongue could not get the words out. "I want to tell you something, about Mr. Kinnell. He . . . He . . ."

Her mother interrupted her, and smacked her mouth. "Take this for lying about a friend of mine. Don't you dare say anything against Mr. Kinnell," Gladys screamed. "He's a fine man. He's my star boarder."

Mr. Kinnell came into the room, handed Norma Jeane a nickel, and told her to buy herself an ice cream cone. She threw it in his face and ran out. Marilyn recalled that she cried herself to sleep that night.⁵

At the orphanage

The stammer got worse after she was sent to the orphanage. “The day they brought me there, after they pulled me in, crying and screaming, suddenly there I was in the large dining room with a hundred kids sitting there eating, and they were all staring at me. So I stopped crying right away [and] I stuttered.” She says it got so bad that she could not finish her sentences.⁶

In 1955 she recalled, “I guess you might say I gave up talking for a long while. I used to be so embarrassed in school. I thought I’d die whenever a teacher called upon me. I always had the feeling of not wanting to open my mouth, that anything I said would be wrong or stupid.”⁷

Apparently her speech got a little better for a while. But then, she recalled in 1960, “when I was about thirteen I took it [stuttering] up again. I don’t know how it happened. I just stuttered.”⁸

The M-m-m-m girl

In ninth grade Norma Jean nearly failed Rhetoric and Spoken Arts because fear of speaking “paralyzed her throat and silenced her.” Nevertheless, she was elected to be secretary of the minutes in the English class. But when she had to report on those minutes, she stammered on the words: “Then I’d say, [to announce] the minutes of the last meeting, I’d go m-m-m-m-m . . . Oh, it’s terrible.”⁹ Her difficulty in pronouncing this word became so memorable that in her ninth-grade class of about five hundred students she was among the very few who were in the June 1941 printing of the class alphabet: “A for Ambitious: John Hurford . . . G for Glamorous:

Nancy Moon . . . R for Radical: Don Ball . . . V for Vivacious: Mary Jean Boyd . . . M-m-m-m: Norma Jeane Baker.”¹⁰

When Norma Jeane was given her first screen test in Hollywood at the age of twenty, she began to stutter and perspire. To her great relief, she was told it was a silent test: she was to wear a floor-length crinoline gown, walk back and forth, sit on a high stool, light a cigarette, stub it out, and then walk toward a window. On the basis of that silent performance, she was given a contract with Twentieth-Century Fox studios.

Stuttering on her name

A month later she was told she would need a new name. Norma Jeane volunteered her mother’s maiden name for a surname: Monroe. When Ben Lyon, a studio director, suggested “Jeane Monroe,” the new actress said she wanted a complete change, and began to talk about her past. She had never known her father, her foster father had been abusive . . . and in high school she was known as the “Mmmmm Girl.”

Lyon then blurted out, “I know who you are, you’re Marilyn!” He explained that she reminded him of a lovely actress named Marilyn Miller.

When Lyon told her to pronounce her new name, she started to stutter again, “Mmmmmm . . .”

But then she smiled. “Well, I guess I’m Marilyn Monroe.”¹¹

The stuttering continued. In an early student production at the Bliss-Hayden Miniature Theater, “she knew the dialogue perfectly, but she stuttered and paused so much that she threw the other student players into total confusion.” As she went on to win roles in movies, she tended to stutter on the first takes on the set.¹²

But sometimes it was later takes as well. Her most famous line in the movie *Some Like It Hot*—“It’s me, Sugar”—took forty-seven takes before she got it right. Apparently Marilyn had the hardest time getting out the word “Sugar.”¹³

The problem persisted into her final days. It is reported that during the making of her final movie, the unfinished “Something’s Got to Give,” she was under so much stress, not to mention the influence of drugs, that her stuttering returned with a vengeance. At times she could not deliver her lines at all.¹⁴

The breathy voice

If stuttering was a recurring pattern in this troubled actress’s life, how was she able to perform? How did she become such a famous movie star that people are now surprised to hear that she was a stutterer? The answer is not crystal clear, but there are strong clues.

We know that for many of her years in Hollywood Marilyn had an acting coach named Natasha Lytess, who taught the young actress to breathe and move her lips before she actually spoke. A focus on breathing helps many stutterers. But Natasha also instructed Marilyn to enunciate every syllable, especially final consonants. Marilyn practiced over and over such sentences as “I did not want to pet the dear, soft cat.”¹⁵

This exaggerated diction might have helped distract Marilyn, as stutterers are sometimes helpfully distracted, from her problem with starting words. But at the same time the staccato style can produce a stopping and starting that makes it more likely the speaker will block on words starting with difficult consonants or vowels.

This is why it was probably Marilyn’s “next drama coach”—unidentified in the Monroe biographies—who seems to have taught her how to speak with her now-legendary slow and

breathy voice. This method helps most stutterers to move into difficult sounds without blocking on them. For “a breathy voice requires that the vocal cords remain somewhat open to permit the increased outflow of air associated with that voice quality. Open vocal cords are incompatible with locked vocal cords and engender fluent speech.”¹⁶ According to a stuttering therapist who has studied Marilyn’s case, she used this “movie voice” whenever she entered a stressful situation.¹⁷

We also know that in the 1950s “breathy breathing” was a popular therapy among speech therapists. Charles Van Riper, for example, taught stutterers to slow down speech and prolong their words, and to use gentle breathing.¹⁸

Wherever she learned it, this method worked for Marilyn most of the time. She made many movies, and her stutter was never readily apparent once the movies got to the screen. Quite the contrary, in fact. Her breathy speech became famous, and in fact is known today among speech therapists as a technique called the “Marilyn Monroe voice.”¹⁹ Most viewers have thought she was merely trying to be sexy. That might have been one reason, but her now-famous movie voice owed far more to her efforts to prevent stuttering.

A dumb blonde?

If her movie voice made her sound sexy and helped prevent stuttering, it also had the unfortunate effect of making her sound dumb. In reality Marilyn was surprisingly intelligent. Director Henry Hathaway, “not known for his friendliness to actors,” said that Marilyn was “marvelous to work with, very easy to direct and terrifically ambitious to do better. And *bright*, really bright. She may not have had an education, but she was naturally bright.”²⁰

Any reader will notice her depth in the letter she wrote to her psychoanalyst while recovering in a hospital after being locked up in a psychiatric ward at Payne-Whitney in New York City. The first two paragraphs are illustrative:

Just now when I looked out the hospital window where the snow had covered everything suddenly everything is a kind of muted green. The grass, shabby evergreen bushes—though the trees give me a little hope—the desolate bare branches promising maybe there will be spring and maybe they promise hope.

Did you see “The Misfits” [her most recent movie] yet? In one sequence you can perhaps see how bare and strange a tree can be for me. I don’t know if it comes across that way for sure on the screen—I don’t like some of the selections in the takes they used. As I started to write this letter about four quiet tears had fallen. I don’t know quite why.²¹

She went on to say that she was not able to sleep the previous night. So she “tried to be constructive about it and started to read the letters of Sigmund Freud.” She wrote that she was struck by the sadness in his face in the opening photo.

He looked very depressed (which must have been taken near the end of his life) that he died a disappointed man—but Dr. Kris said he had much physical pain which I had known from the Jones book—but I know this too to be so but still I trust my instincts because I see a sad disappointment in his gentle face.²²

Humor

Marilyn suffered through her own long bouts with melancholy throughout her adult life. But she was also full of humor, even in many of those depressed periods. When asked by a reporter if she had disrobed or played any other scenes of high drama at Payne-Whitney, she laughed.

“I only wish I had. It might have gotten something out of my system. But what I’m proud of is this: Just before I left there, I told all those doctors that they should have their heads examined.” She giggled and then added, “I believe in psychiatry—but in a sane way.”²³

In better times she could be quick on her feet. After she had sung “Do It Again” at Camp Pendleton in 1952, the master of ceremonies bounced up on the stage to say she was the most beautiful sweater girl they had ever seen at this military base. Without a pause Marilyn turned to her audience of thousands of soldiers: “You fellows down there are always whistling at sweater girls. I don't get all the fuss. Take away the sweaters and what have you got?”

She was just as quick backstage. When a sassy journalist asked her if she was not wearing falsies, she replied, “Those who know me better, know better.”²⁴

When later that year she was leading the Miss America parade, she wore “a wispy black item with little here, less there, nothing much anywhere and a neckline that plunged to the waist and threatened to keep on going.” Newspaper photographs angered church and women’s groups all over the country. When asked about the commotion a few days later, Marilyn replied saucily, “People were staring down at me all day long, but I thought they were admiring my marshall’s badge.”²⁵

Marilyn could turn even the pain of her own stuttering into a joke. In 1960 she told an interviewer about stuttering on a movie set.

Sometimes if I'm very nervous or excited or something, I stutter. In fact, one time I had a small part in a movie and the assistant director came and yelled at me. Oh, he talked awful. So when I got into the scene, instead of my lines I [said], "Wo-wo-wo-wo . . ." The director came up, he was furious, and said, "You don't stutter!!" I said, "That's what you think!"

But then Marilyn reminded herself and the interviewer that beneath the humor it hurts.

"Oh, it's painful. Oh, God."²⁶

¹ "I just stuttered," 1960 interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfBJ8HrMZUI>

² Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 13.

³ Alan Levy, "A Good Long Look at Myself," in Edward Wagenknecht, ed., *Marilyn Monroe: A Composite View*, (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1969), 36.

⁴ J. Randy Taraborrelli, *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Grand Central publishing, 2009), 391-492; Spoto, 522-98; Keith Badman, *Marilyn Monroe: The Final Years* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010).

⁵ Badman, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "I just stuttered," 1960 interview.

⁹ Spoto, 68; "I just stuttered," 1960 interview.

¹⁰ Spoto, 69.

¹¹ The story about the screen test and the name change is in Spoto, 110-15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 129, 152.

¹³ Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 159.

¹⁴ "Marilyn Monroe," *The Stuttering Foundation* <http://www.stutteringhelp.org/famous-people/marilyn-monroe>

¹⁵ Spoto, 139.

¹⁶ Martin F. Schwartz, "Memoirs of a Stuttering Therapist," http://thefluencystore.com/memoirs/30_apxa.html

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Shell, 141, 288.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁰ Spoto, 220, 222. Original emphasis.

²¹ Stanley Buchtal and Bernard Comment, eds., *Marilyn Monroe: Fragments: poems, intimate notes, letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 208.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Wagenknecht, ed., 27.

²⁴ Spoto, 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁶ "I just stuttered," 1960 interview.