How to be Stu Gunn (Instructions for the Right Hand Only)

Nora Wendl*
To be Stu Gunn, first understand that you’re not going to do it right, and that you’ll never get good at it.

Understand that being Stu Gunn is nothing you want to experience.
Then be willing to settle for being his substitute. His right hand.

It’s not wholly unappealing. You’ll develop a sense of humor, the way a bird falling from a nest develops the ability to fly. In training to be Gunn, you will be re-introduced to errands you normally perform in mindless bliss. He will ask you to drive to the nearest McDonald’s. He will ask you to please order him the largest burger, and when it arrives he will wait quietly as you unwrap it and place it gently on his upturned palm. Remind yourself, again, of the strange miracle of a quadriplegic man with such determined control over that left hand. Your hand will brush his fingers. They are cold and waxy. The hamburger bun is hot and air-filled. Watch Stu eat it, his hand palm-up, delivering it to his face. He finishes every last bite, shaking his head and growling through his crumb-studded beard.

No. This will not do.

When he’s finished, he will berate you for feeding him red meat on a Lent Friday.

Practical, spiritual, and emotional. Every one of Stu’s errands falls under one or all of these categories. Afternoons are organized according to the Chronology of Stu, who dictates to you “the list,” first thing without fail, when you get to his house after school.

As soon as the index card is filled, the list is in your back pocket. It will bend over itself and the penciled words will smear, forgotten, against the denim of your rump. You suppose maybe he dictates the list in case he’s injured or killed in the middle of an afternoon, so that you can go on ahead, for the glory of the team, and finish the errands without him. He himself carries the list on the back of his eyes, clear as day.

You goose the Caravan’s gas pedal on command.
Hurry up. You can make it. It’s just been yellow for a second, step on it.
All this en-route to the grocery store, while you’re dialing his cell phone and addressing the envelopes to be mailed.

But don’t get too comfortable learning your role as the right hand to this man’s paralysis. There are also those chores that go unmentioned, unpenciled on your little list. Chores that happen anyplace, anytime.
Preferably public.
“I’m full.”
In the busy parking lot right outside McDonald’s Playland, empty his catheter bag on a manicured median, hosing an orange geranium.

People in a grocery store will regard a man in a motorized chair as they would a rogue cart, programmed to shop by itself. Wide berth. You walk in front of him, pushing the cart in long strides to keep pace. Now you are trapped between Stu and the cart. He barks short, gruff commands at you, as though he is your seeing-eye dog, “left, turn, go, right. Stop, lift, push, now!” You wonder if people regard the two of you together as one complete person, adding up the good parts in their minds.

And because Stu Gunn is married, you are married. Without the ceremony, of course, but not without the thoughtful surprises.

“Pull the cart over. Here. Fast. I’m going to bring Anne flowers. Walk that way, they’re that way.”

Your feet are clumsy, his wheels sure and much faster. He has movement settings that you don’t: fast, faster, and much, much faster than you. He hums along to the flower stand before you’re entirely disentangled from the cart. His face is impatient and he clicks the wheels forward, back, forward, as he waits for you to lope over to where he is. You do not apologize.

Being Stu Gunn’s right hand is a quiet occupation. You’ll never have to say a word.

There are just a few thousand varieties of flowers. He ponders six kinds of violet, and you are ordered to lift each to his face for a moment so that he can inspect them. You are instructed to pass them once, twice, before his nose, not just to hold them in front of him like that. They’re too close, he can’t even focus on them, ouch, ouch, you’re making his eyes cross. And can’t you see you’ve dropped the yellow pollen on his shirt? Tiny brilliant bombs tumble from the flowers. You can’t control them.

“One of these, one of these.”
Perhaps your hand, mid-command, pauses to examine a particular bloom or two.

“I hate those, I hate those, I hate those.”
And you learn not to suggest.

He must feel, you think, like a one-man enterprise. Stu’s predicament has created vast employment opportunities. There is a nurse to bathe him. And a physical therapist to exercise him. You, his right hand, to do everything in
between. His nurse sponges him over and over with tepid water and liquid body soap smelling of aspirin and despair. His physical therapist imposes routine on him, too, weak muscles moving in tedious circles.

Still paralyzed, one voice says.
Still alive, one voice whispers.

Throughout it, Stu Gunn does a lot of waiting. He waits for the nurse during his sponge bath.

He waits for the doctor during his exercises. While he waits, his mind tears itself apart with boredom. But when you are here, he has immediacy. He has a right hand. And almost a body, again.

“Pick up the pen to your right. No! Right there on the couch! I need you to make a list before I forget it all! Hurry, find an index card! No! In the drawer of the bureau! No, you’re walking in the wrong direction!”

And he enjoys, for your precious brief time together during the week, the puppet-mastery of it. The legs and arms that he moves on whim.

Your name in these afternoons becomes ‘Please,’ spoken in one wheedling breath, “Pleeaaaaase, would you find my glasses,” “Please would you get the mail,” “Please would you brush this powder of dry skin from my sweater,” “Please,” spoken in the same tone he might have used to say, “Oh, thank you for the broken neck.”

Be flexible. Let your young body be delivered from the idleness of your age, and put to practical use these ten hours a week. Borrowed for grocery shopping and book retrieval at the library of the private university, your Stu Gunn, Library Checkout & Archives Room AxxessCard swinging on a thin chain around your neck.

Let your body be put to spiritual use. The sun beating down on it as you rake the almost-molten sand of a Zen garden in concentric circles around Tibetan boulders. Let your body absorb, unquestioning, the obsessive-compulsive tendencies of someone else. Understand how really important it is to line up four glasses of water on the edge of the entryway table, with the purple straws all bent at the degree of Stu. You will remember better, he assures you, once you learn that it is the only angle at which he can drink without straining in his chair and inviting a seizure.

Some days, to be Stu is to listen, mostly. The stories come between the words on the list.

“Write ‘lunch’.”
L...u....n....
“Have I ever told you about the lunch I prepared for my wife on our sec­ond date?”

He tells you about it as you push the soft pencil nub along the index card, smearing the letters with the side of your hand. #2, Eat lunch. Before lists, there was leisure. Stu boiling lobster in the summer for his New England wife, wanting to take the rubber bands off the claws and watch the thing fight and cut the air.

The list is soon in your back pocket. You go as Stu to Broadmoor Market. You order a sandwich that you couldn’t make yourself eat, and that the deli guy has a difficult time taking seriously.

“That many jalapenos? You’re sure? And that gorgonzola is a little strong, miss...”

Show him the list, where lunch is specified down to the condiment.

In the van, Stu wants to know what the hell took so long.

He tells you, one day, that he wants to write. You turn around looking for a pen to place in the flesh-colored harness attached to his wrist. You think what he wants is to scratch some notes into one of his yellow legal pads.

No, he says. I’m too tired to do that. He lifts his left arm, jabs it in the air between you two.

You have to do it.

Look at the computer screen.

When you start to wonder how it came to be that you typed the line, “to realize, daily, that I’ll never make love to my own wife again...” snap out of it and remind yourself that you are only Stu until three or four o’clock this afternoon. Then you will walk home on your young legs, swing your young arms and do young things, like lounge on the couch.

His constant stream of words makes the small room warm, makes your eyes heavy.

You can type with your eyes closed. The words turn thick and syrupy in your ears. Your head leans to the right, heavy with them, weighted.

There is a cottony silence.

The words begin again, sharp.

They jab you awake and you rub your eyes, groaning.

Your mind is too fogged to locate you as you throw your arms wide, behind and above you, back arching in a stretch that ends with a cold left hand hard and fast below your right eye.

Such determined control.