

SILENT. MOTHER I: LANGUAGE OF ANGELS

You know, I'm always thinking. I contemplate and reminisce. Reminisce and knit. They talk. But I cannot understand what they're saying. It's weird. If you are able to, you can make things of yarn. You put one piece through the other, like this and like this, like this and the other way round. And a thing is ready. A sweater or a mitten or a cap for a child or a scarf. A cover to keep you warm. You need that when it's cold. People are all freeze without it. But they don't need much. A warm cover will do. I'm not sure what everyone is thinking. What all this around us is. They talk about him. Explain and investigate. Come and say things about him ... What about me? I have been knitting today.

And he started speaking in words. He hasn't spoken to me for quite some time now. He used to. With whom? About what? He has always spoken to me. Even more before. When it all happened. At kindergarten they said that N was not quite right in the head and that children and adults were afraid of him. And the teacher gave me an address where I should take him. And I was told to go. But that was not a real doctor ...

(Pause)

The kindergarten teacher could not love him. She had a grandma herself. N was silent before THAT happened. Only afterwards did he start gabbling a lot. In the language of angels, right? Speaking loudly. With everything. With every object. That scared people.

(Pause)

But the fate of a human being is known only to God. *(Pause)*

Old age together. Giving birth is painful. Very painful. It feels like it's breaking your bones and that you're dying. But you don't die, because the one inside you may also die ... He was weak, but warm. Slept at the beginning, because he could not cope with living. Was born and fell asleep. A tired human being he was. At first all I needed to do was breastfeed him and he would fall asleep. I took him outside, under the window. There he slept. Outside the window. If the pram moved at all, it meant he was awake and moving. Feed him and he would sleep again. I changed his nappies ... Others said it was hard with small ones. That you can't manage ... But I could, couldn't I? It is important that you look out of the window carefully. If the pram moves or his eyes are open, it means he's awake. I would go and look each time. At first, he was silent, too. Later he started to walk around and pick up different things. He brought them all for me to see. A piece of cloth or thread. Picks it up and brings it to me. Shows it to me and looks at me, waiting. And what do I say?

– What is it? What did you find?

That's a doll, that's thread, that's a spoon, that's the you know ...

Grabs my hand and pulls me, you know. Points his little finger and I say: a bucket is this, a paper is this, a shirt is this, a nail is this, a glass is this, dust is this, a kitten is this, a box is this, a phone is this, a ball is this, a cap is this, a flower is this, a window is this, the sky is this, a person walking, a street is this, rough is this, asphalt is this, a car is this, a fence is this, lawn is this, a gate is this, brown is this, a house is this, clouds are these, this is old, this is new, this is an opening. You know, pointing at everything and looking at me. And I am showing him ... Looking at it.

But I can't remember what I'm knitting ... You're a good person. You know my son, don't you? Tell me honestly, where is he? Where did he go? Where can he go?

SILENT. OBSERVER I: INTRODUCTION

I met him for the first time, if I'm not mistaken, 30 years ago. I don't know how, but his mother found me. As it turned out later, they were referred by a longtime acquaintance of mine, a speech therapist [says *the name*]. At that time, I was working at the institute in the department of socio-psycholinguistics. I remember I was working late that night. Yes, right, I had to write some sort of a reserach report, something about psycho-semantics. That was my field of study. They came rather late. Stood in front of the stairway. I went down to the cloakroom, took my coat, headed towards the exit and saw them again. Their appearance was not – how to say it – compatible with the surroundings of the institute. Poorly dressed. The child looking a bit wild. Big brown eyes – even in those days. I stopped to look at him. So, it was late, I was the last to leave, practically no one else in the building. Therefore, I asked how I could help them and who they were waiting for.

Yes, they had come to see me. And I'll tell you right now that all that talk about us having looked for him in particular or any other child with such abilities is nonsense. So is that widespread myth about the department's experimental project in that sphere. (Pause)

Yes, for quite a long period of time we met sporadically, talked, and I administered tests. Later he would look me up either at work or come to my house. Sometimes he would stay the night or a few days.

He came and went. Possibly at moments of crisis. But I can't claim that for certain.

No. No, there was no closeness in our relationship. As far as I understand now, contact with him in an everyday sense was impossible. He wasn't interested and was often incapable of that. At least it never happened with me. Emotionally, I have never been close to him. He has never been focussed on me. So, I barely know him. (Pause)

During our first session I realised what his mother had meant by "the language of angels" because of which they had been asked by the kindergarten to ...

After an unusually long period of stagnation in his speech development – he had not spoken since birth, no one knows the reason, we tried to establish it but the diagnostic possibilities in this field were limited at the time – anyway, he started to talk, or rather speak, at about three or four years old. To speak, in the literal sense of the word. It had no communicative value. From age four to, I believe, six his speaking skills could be described as a mechanical and incessant listing of things. Listing the reality surrounding him. With no emotional colouring ... Only nouns in their basic forms. Things. (Pause)

It seemed like a peculiar form of dysontogenesis. Alalia ... But ... yes, in the first years it was phenomenal that this endless list of things, this naming happened in different languages, including "dead" languages.

It was hard to believe. The majority of my colleagues thought I had made it up or that it was, at best, N's autistic babble. Many of them knew his mother's background by then ... And they didn't take it seriously. Nobody believed us. Except for a couple of old-school researchers. Only later ... a younger colleague of mine who specialised in developing multilingual neural networks suggested carrying out an experiment ... Yes, he recorded N's speech and had it analysed. And by applying the neural network he found out that N was using nearly 80 languages. That is, the analysis depleted the languages database. The number of languages was probably even bigger. Then what? How could we help? Why? Yes, at first, we tried to channel his development into the boundaries of normality.

SILENT. MOTHER II: THE DOOR

He was about five years old. In those days we quarrelled. He would not listen to me at all. I tell him to stop, but he does not listen. Speaks in his own way. Nobody understands. He spoke to me in other languages on purpose. Many nights and days. And he pretended he didn't understand my language.

There was one night when he didn't sleep. Then the next night he didn't sleep. I also tried not to sleep. He wouldn't shut up. Spoke ... spoke about all kinds of things. For a moment it seems that his eyes are closed and he is about to fall asleep. He is lying down. I quietly lie down beside him. But he soon wakes up and again starts to speak loudly in languages. Bends down at my knees ... kisses. Puts his arms around me. And then laughs again, grabs my face so that it hurts. Throws things at me. Then bends down again. Even funny ... scary. And speaks again. Falls asleep for a moment, and then all over again. My little son ...

Then it's morning. Or perhaps still night, I can't remember, a longer time had passed. I wake up and he is awake. He is standing in the middle of the room, babbling to himself. I told him I would leave if he didn't stop. That I didn't get what he was saying. That I didn't understand. That I felt sick of all that! I thought I'd scare him a bit and said I would leave him for good if he didn't stop. That I would never come back. But he keeps fooling. Puts his hands over his ears. Runs to the other room. And goes on with his cryptic words. I ... I do love him. But he put me to the test. Or the Lord himself.

I step out of the room. I even slam the door loud. And then I remember that lock. It locks itself. We had that kind of a lock. Locks itself. And the keys are inside. I can't get the door open anymore. It is locked. I can no longer get in ...

So, I bang on the door and yell. Kick the lock. I can't unlock the door, I can't. There's no key. Then I ask him to open the door from inside. He doesn't hear. I beg him, because it is scary, him there all alone. I tell him I joked. That everything will be fine. I pound the door.

Finally, I'm exhausted. I feel dizzy, fall down somehow in front of the door. I must have fallen asleep.

I finally wake up. I have no idea how much time has passed. The door is open and he is standing in front of me, looking off somewhere. He is crying ... But really quietly. Little tears are falling from his eyes. His face is pale. Stands there like that, doesn't move. Only tears are falling. And then starts to murmur, quietly like this. Mmm ... mmm ... mmm ... I grabbed him in my arms ... God, my Lord, what is this all about!?

SILENT. OBSERVER II: THE DOOR

Yes, at about that time they started coming less frequently, missed several sessions in a row. I believe I had not seen them for three weeks. Calls and messages went unanswered. Not that it was anything out of the ordinary ... knowing the helplessness of this woman and her maladjustment to life. Anyway, I decided ... It had nothing to do with me directly, of course, but, nevertheless, I decided to visit them. We had developed by then, how should I put it ... a good rapport. And I was worried about the boy ... or something like that.

Somehow, I found their home. An old wooden house with many flats, close to the city centre, in the vicinity of the old railway station. It took me a while to get there, because I went straight from work, from the other end of the city. Then I had to look for the right stairwell and the right direction in that whole labyrinth. A dark, filthy hallway, things ... a wooden staircase that creaked at each step: all of that was unpleasant. Especially the staircase. I simply cannot stand things that make unnecessary noise. For example, when glasses clink in the cupboard or the floor creaks. *(Pause)* That staircase ... Things ought to be silent. Sorry.

Now, their door, at the end of the hallway, was open, ajar. I knocked and looked inside. They were sitting right there, in the dimly lit room. Maybe it was the kitchen. The child is sitting on the window sill, naked, eating something with his hand and looking out. The mother is further away, in the corner, probably knitting.

I stood there for a while, and then said hello. The mother glanced at me and carried on with her needlework. She apparently did not recognise me. I saw a chair by the door and sat down. Sat with them in silence. N was quiet the entire time, voiceless. Then, a little while later, slowly, like in slow motion, the mother lifted her eyes again, looked at me and ... probably still not recognising me, her whole body quivered suddenly. And she began rambling:

Now it's alright and nothing is coming anymore. Now everything is alright. Now N is silent the whole time and everything is fine. He did it. He's not going to start again and that is fine. Aren't we doing just fine? We got the door open and alright. He is silent – and silent! It means that it's all over, isn't that alright? So, now what? The door is open. No, he doesn't speak anymore and that's it.

She kept repeating “it's alright, it's fine, fine ...”, like a doll, mechanically. *(Pause)* And that unfocussed look, empty like a puppy's. That sticks in your memory.

Later they told me about that door. I think there is no need to take it that seriously. It seems to be that woman's fantasy, sublimation. I know that something may have happened to N during that period, but still, all that mystical aura is not worth any attention. It's a subsequent fabrication.

It's hard to say ... where the impulse came from. Weirdly enough all this came after motor aphasia and that unintelligible polyglotism. For some unknown reason N now lost all ability to speak and possibly also to understand speech. Ontolinguists claimed that this mutism, being silent, was psychogenetic. He simply does not wish to speak or to understand anything. I don't agree with that, it definitely wasn't like that. I believe he was no longer capable physiologically. I ran a test. All of his Wernicke and Broca areas, as they used to call them, had suddenly returned to the neonatal state. Practically nothing. Or if there was something, we could no longer get in ... He seemed to have shut himself off from us.

SILENT. MOTHER III: THE FIRE

That year, nobody brought us a Christmas tree. Usually somebody did. That funny person, he used to bring flowers and a tree, but this time nobody did. That's good, no need for him to spend the night then. That's why I went outside, to the park, and found a branch on the ground. I brought it home and we decorated it with sugar. So that it would look like snow: that it is cold and there's snow on the branch, except that it's sweet. Sugar is white, isn't it.

Then we cut snowflakes out of notebooks. N didn't go to school after all, so we had these leftover notebooks. I am good at cutting out snowflakes. We cut a lot of them that night. We got an entire snowdrift! N really liked doing that, because they were all alike and clear-cut.

Well, they didn't accept N for the school. At first, they wanted to, but then didn't. Because he still wasn't speaking, only murmuring every now and then. A halfwit, that's why they said they didn't take him. But I knew that in there he could say anything whatever. *(Pause)*

And then came Uncle Sasha from downstairs. The one who is always drunk and good. The one whose kettlebell went through the floor and landed in the toilet of the old lady on the ground floor!

Uncle Sasha brought us some salad he had made and a small Christmas tree. A small tree made of tin. This big *(shows with her hands)*. It worked like this: you put candles underneath the tree, you lit them and then at the top this vane started rotating and hitting little bells. And the bells started ringing beautifully. Ding-ding. We still had candles left over from church that were the right size. I can get these candles whenever I want. I go there to get them. They give them to me. They are soft and smell like honey. They are enough to make the little tree bells ring for quite some time!

N fell asleep on my lap. And then smoke started coming in. You know, through the crack under the door. Sort of grey, soothing smoke. We had like an entire sea of it on the floor. It was very beautiful! Like we were at sea. Except the sea was moving. Moving in the wrong way. Spreading on the floor around us, very beautifully, but it was hard to breathe. I opened the door to see where the sea was coming from, and the staircase was all on fire. Burning. We only have one staircase. And it's burning, the walls and ceiling, too. Now what? Anyway, there was a fire. A fire! And how can we get out now? There's fire everywhere!

N woke up, looked around, understood at once that the house was on fire. Jumped off my lap and started to bring me those snowflakes. Showing me to throw them in the fire to put it out. Helping us! But these are made of paper, sweetheart! You can't put out a fire with them. And we can't get out through the door anyway. Neither me, nor you.

I wrapped a blanket around N, held him in my arms, came to the window and opened it. I yelled: "Help us! There is a fire here! We are going to burn! Help!"

N was quiet. Didn't move, looked up at me from his blanket.

It was night and we saw no one. New Year's Eve. Who would be outside? I yelled and yelled for someone to hear and help ... Nobody. I began to wail. And then I heard a voice from the darkness: "Throw him to me, I'm right here. I'm here."

"Who's there? Who's speaking? Where do I throw him? He will die there in the dark!"

No, no” ... and then N looked at me and said: “Mother, mother, give me some water to drink so that I don’t get burnt in the fire and then let go of me, don’t be afraid of anything.” I understood his words. He talked to me. I could understand my baby’s words.

SILENT. OBSERVER III: THE FIRE

The famous fire? But are you aware that even by asking me that question you – on purpose, as far I can see – are promoting slander? Do you understand that? Have you got a conscience?

No, there was no arson. This woman would definitely not have been capable of that. According to the report the fire started in the old electrical cables on the first-floor landing of the staircase and I have no reason to doubt that. You should not either.

I have noticed the tendency to mythologise this fire and I repeat once more that according to the official report the electrical wiring started the fire. The mother discovered the fire only when the entire stairwell was burning, all the way up from the ground floor.

There was no other exit left for them. The mother dropped N out of the window and the neighbour caught the boy. It's lucky that he was in there. After that the mother jumped out herself. As a result, she broke practically all the bones in her right leg and had a limp for the rest of her life. The boy was not injured. The house burned to the ground. That's the way it was.

Yes, if I remember correctly, the mother spent half a year in a clinic first. Her injuries were awful. After a while she had some sort of psychotic episode. And she was referred for psychiatric treatment. I don't remember exactly, but the diagnosis was quite serious. They kept her there. She was able to walk again only after a couple of years.

N was initially placed in a children's shelter, because they found no relatives to send him to. N and his mother didn't see each other for two or three years, I think. The hospital is right here, near my house ... The mother was declared incapacitated and the boy was later adopted by a deeply religious family with many children, who live in our town.

After the fire, I used to visit N in the shelter frequently. The fire, being separated from his mother and the shelter itself; the whole situation had an amazing effect on him. He started to speak. Clearly. After the initial, spontaneous polyglotism and the silence that followed it was his first real full communication with the outer world. Yes ...

Neither I nor my colleagues have fully understood how ... or to be more precise, we were unable to identify the concrete factor that triggered the recovery of his, no ... not recovery but rather the emergence, for the first time, of an ability to communicate verbally.

Seemingly there was no objective reason for it, especially taking into consideration the previously recorded brain degeneration processes. We ran a few tests. The results showed mediocrity. Everything was normal for his age. Mother tongue: 5000–6500 words in passive lexis. Meaning-making and reflective operations normal. It was as though his brain development up until that time had been stable and uninterrupted ...

What is noteworthy is that the written word, easier metaphors, anything that could be described as symbolic communication remained completely incomprehensible to him ... And that is not even so important ...

One day we noticed a systematic delay in his reactions, which was also accompanied by a decline in expressive quality. The longer he talked, the more difficult it became for him. In the process of complex functional neuro-visualisation – and bear in mind that we applied all methods that were permitted – we came to the conclusion that the delay in reactions was caused by ... how can I explain it in simpler terms ... the fact that the parts

of the brain he was using in the process of verbalisation were not traditionally associated with speech. His speech activity happened mainly in the basal ganglia. Add to that the impossibility of establishing the dominant cerebral hemisphere. It still seems impossible. Basically, he constructed each phrase through an effort of will. Imagine having to say every word three times in your mind before uttering it aloud. It was roughly like that ... And then imagine having to do that through the constant alteration of the colour of your skin?

I'm not exactly sure, but it is possible that all of these changes occurred due to the shock he got from the fire, and by saying that I'm obviously repeating the wide-spread narrative about him ... To put it simply, he was able to rebuild his brain's biochemistry and physiology. But listening to him in those days I personally got the impression that he was speaking like a trained animal, against his will. Just to blend in and survive.

UNCLE SASHA AND THINGS

Soap

Book

Apple

Si tar

Whisk

TV

Wall

Moon

Sheep

Christmas

Record

Punishment

Small

Eye

Skirt

World

Time

Steel

Last

Spade

Blade

Machine

SILENT. MOTHER IV: THE KITE

So ... I learned at the hospital how to make a kite. An old man taught me. He was really old, just lay there and prayed. I looked after him a bit, when they allowed me to visit the other wards. He used to tell me about kites. That they fly on the wind like angels. He told me I had to make one. Because he no longer could, because he felt like a feather and couldn't make anything with his hands anymore. But that I was young and simply had to do it. Otherwise, nothing would make sense – that's what he said. So, I agreed.

He explained to me how to make a kite: the framework was to be made of dry straight-grain stripped branches of pine or hazel without any defects. The wooden rods had to have the following measures: length 1,016 mm and diameter 10 mm – 4 pieces; length 990 mm and diameter 9 mm – 2 pieces; length 660 mm and diameter 8 mm – 2 pieces. All around the end of each rod, you had to make a groove for fastening the strings ... All the ends of the spacer rods ... I can't remember now ... Fix them to the spacer rod with glue and string. The shape of the kite ... would depend on the shape of the rods ... the rods are: 1016 mm – 4 pieces, 990 mm – 2 pieces, 660 mm – 2 pieces ... (*dozes off, looks away, pause*) ... dense paper or fine cloth is suitable ... And then he drew on paper what the kite would look. A very simple kite. But there was nothing at the hospital to make a kite from. And with what tools? A small knife would have helped. And these special sticks ... I mean rods. All they gave me was glue and paper.

But I got everything I needed, you know. I went to sit with the old man again. And he told me quietly: "Turn me on my side." I turned him. Then he told me to look under the mattress. I looked, and there were the rods for the kite! Exactly as many as I needed! He said: "Take these, my grandson made them for you and brought them here in his pants." I went and hid them under my mattress. The doctors later found them, of course, and took them away. They said they would give them back to me later.

Time went by. The old man died. I got better and they let me go home. Well, not my real home, but you know. They took me to a house, and said I could live there. And they gave me all my stuff back: clothes, paper, glue, rods and string.

It's good in my own room. Better than in the hospital. That's where I put the kite together and went to look for N. (*Pause*) I looked around the city, walking all over. Couldn't find him. But he came to me on his own in the evening ... my little boy. I showed him the kite and told him about the old man, and he said he knew a place where we could fly the kite. We took the kite and went to a wasteland outside of town, where there used to be a landfill. There's lots of space there and emptiness all around you.

Lots of space and some wind, not much, but some. I held the kite and N took the end of the string. We were supposed to run together. He in front of me holding the string and I right behind him with the kite. And then, at the right moment, when there was enough wind, I would let go and N would keep running. Pulling the kite by the string. That's what we were supposed to do ...

We started to run. I didn't get far: my leg won't let me run fast. I fell down. But N kept running at high speed. And the kite took off! Suddenly it was so high I could barely see it. What fun! Flying in the air! (*Pause*) N kept running and shouting: "Mummy! Mummy!"

And then everything fell silent. The wind disappeared. The kite began to come down. Crashed into pieces. But N still kept running with the string and shouting. (*Pause*)

I looked for him afterwards, called him, then finally I found him. The boy was lying on the grass ... his hand was bleeding, must have been from the string chafing it ... And his eyes were a different colour.

(...) He said to me: "Go away. I'm going to live in the grass now."

SILENT. OBSERVER IV: THE KITE

Let's not waste any more time on that kite.

The mother hasn't changed and can never change: it's not in her nature. And I seriously doubt her diagnosis. If I remember correctly, it was basically some sort of an endogenous depression. It is a known fact that psychometric instruments used to diagnose depression do not give correct results on autistic patients. And she is autistic. The symptoms mentioned were derealisation and hypersomnia. Derealisation? That's ridiculous.

Also, the court decision to deprive her of parental rights was hasty. The administration of justice, when it comes to minors, is overall hopelessly primitive. And I think that this forced separation was one of the reasons why we lost N for nearly a decade.

It's good that we at least met with him during the first three-four years.

Perhaps thanks to the foster family. On the other hand, ... they were against our interaction. But luckily passively. Strictly religious people are prejudiced. And I was an atheist who never concealed her views ...

He was eleven or twelve when I last saw him. At that age, N was an extremely impressionable child, with a keen sense of justice and compassion. Kind and sensitive ... He created herbaria. I still have some of them here. He loved nature. He once brought me a handful of earthworms and said that I had to look after them, because it was cold and dark in the soil and they had come out to us ...

By that time, I had stopped working for the department. My eyesight was completely gone. That is why I no longer had access to the equipment to analyse the physiological state of his brain. My observations ... my so-called observations were rather empirical.

Those two or three years in N's development can be summarised as "hyper-normality". His verbal communication skills were excellent. How should I put it? ... When communicating with him, it sometimes seemed as though he were reading out loud from a stylistically impeccable and always appropriately selected work of literature. Some people were even intimidated by that. Ideal syntax and intonation. But he still didn't comprehend the idea of a symbol, not even on the traffic light level, to say nothing of a written text. I did several experiments with him to test that.

In the last year before he went missing, and before that kite episode you asked me about, he occasionally showed an inclination toward tautology and had difficulties in constructing the semantic hierarchy of a sentence. Sometimes there were problems with vocabulary. I believed it to be temporary ... Yet, I still can't find an explanation for his ability to speak in the first place.

SILENT. MOTHER V: THE RETURN

He is my son. And who are you? And what is all this again? That woman brought him. Brought from the outside world. She said that the priest had given her money to bring N home. And that she herself could no longer live with N because he kept repeating the same thing. Because N's life was stuck in his soul. He no longer spoke, as I told you. He couldn't. He had clouds flying in front of his eyes. The woman said he had come to their church, in the other town, and had begun to repeat over and over the same thing out loud. He was very thin and hot-tempered. People began hitting him and pushing him out of the church, but he didn't want to go. Then the priest told them to stop and to dress him and put him to sleep right there, because he was just a tired human being. Again, that woman did everything the priest said and left him to lie there. N stayed in the church and even slept there. He didn't want to leave. Made no trouble. Only kept quietly repeating his words. But one day the congregation started to complain to the priest, telling him not to let N live in the church like that or they would all leave for good. That's when that woman took him in. N agreed to go with her. She pitied and fed him. He lived at her place. Only lay in bed and repeated the same thing. That woman loved him, took pictures of his face. That's all she did. He stayed with her for a long time. She was a good woman, said that someone must have hurt N really badly and that he was in ruins. But where he was, I have no idea. He was nowhere. He heard nobody. Only repeated "I am here, I am here, I am here, I am here ..." (*repeats that for quite a long time*).

He was afraid he'd forget where he was. Or perhaps he was reassuring us ... and then he went on his way.

SILENT. OBSERVER V: THE RETURN

I know nothing about those years. There are practically no witnesses and he shared nothing with us any more.

All I know is that during those years his speaking ability followed a physiologically inexplicable trajectory from hyper-normality to total collapse. I visited him just before he began his legendary walk. I had completely lost my eyesight by then, so ... yes, as far as I understand, he was in a deep phase of a malignant neuroleptic syndrome. For a few months after his return, he was practically bedridden. Again we can assume that the paralysis was accompanied by verbal ... ah, well, it doesn't matter now. He kept repeating the same phrase. Even in his sleep. It was like an inertial residue. One phrase: "I am here". It turned out that he was in that state for three or four years. I think it was then that we lost him for good. As far as speech is concerned. That repeated phrase meant nothing. Everything suggested that the lower layers of the premotor cortex on one side, I'm not sure which, of the brain were in utter ruins.

As far as his walking about is concerned, I can't say anything. One day he stopped repeating "I am here", got up from his bed and went straight to the road where he then walked back and forth between two small settlements for years. They say he was there day and night. That is where the whole legend started. I get that. I guess we all tend to create meanings even in when there may be none. Our brain does that.

But you know, I think he was no longer capable of human contact. He was hermetically wrapped up in himself. That door was shut once and for all. And people with their stories about him ... Perhaps they don't realise that this is not the life story of a saint. This is N's life. The life of a superbly gifted boy in whose abilities I still can't quite believe. This is the story of his life. He fought against a neuro-physiological defect, a genetic error, the nature of his own consciousness. I'm not sure what it was ... Basically the physiology of his brain should have allowed no verbal activity whatsoever. Despite that, he consciously, with intent – I'm convinced of that – managed to reorganise the cooperation between the different parts of his brain. He did that by attempting, with all his might, to overcome the silence decreed by his destiny, nature, God or whatever. N wanted to tell us something, just like he wanted to survive ...

SILENT. WITNESSES

The priest

His arrival was weird. He entered during the morning prayer, went through the Holy Doors to the altar and lay down behind it next to the wall. My assistants started to kick him out. The altar area is sacred. Only the priest or the anointed assistants can enter it. So, they tried to lead him out. He was barely clothed, thin and haggard-looking; he couldn't put up any resistance, but also didn't want to leave. I think he didn't understand words. Kept repeating something to himself. I have served for a long time and have seen different things in the church. I don't know how to put it but looking at his face I was stunned by the depth of his vulnerability and piety. Something seemed to open for me from inside him and in his words... I didn't understand it at first. But somehow, instinctively, I decided to let him be and told them not to touch him. I blessed him. "Let him be." That's how he stayed in our church for many months and constantly kept repeating his words: I am here, I am here, I am here... It was like a prayer for him. You know, it might have been merely my fantasy, but I saw in him and that situation some fundamental and bright truth about the nature of man. It is clearly impossible to put into words. I can never forget his expression on that first day.

The postman

I used to travel by postal car in that area. Every day I would drive the section of the road that he walked. I cannot remember when he appeared. He was constantly walking. You could set your watch by him. Back and forth, back and forth. But nicely, on the roadside, and always wearing a bright safety vest. He did it correctly. I tried speaking with him a couple of times, but he would step off into the forest and stand there. He'd raise his hands as if begging me not to touch him. The weather was god-damned freezing. I am now retired, and never drive there any more. I am used to him walking there. In the village they speak of him being famous or a religious figure. But I don't know why he is walking.

The woman

I went to see him in February. Because we, if I may say so, used to live together. I waited quite long on the roadside. Then he came. Stopped next to me. Wretched-looking. Wearing that stupid vest, galoshes on his bare feet and with a piece of plastic in his arms. I think he recognised me. He handed me the piece of plastic and went on. I think he gave it to me... as a remembrance. That's it.

The old woman

I left some food for him next to the road. All my kids are now gone but I still have a habit of cooking. Now I am alone. Where can I put so much food? It's a shame to throw it away. Yes, he only walked back and forth. It's not known whose son he is but he is very thin. He doesn't talk and is afraid of people. His clothes are in tatters. He wears the same things in winter and in summer, and wraps a rag around his neck if it gets too cold. He has walked on the road for many years. I am quite old so I cannot say for how long. What about it? We always need people like that. And to walk like that. I bring him soup at the roadside and cross myself. Let him eat. As long as he is walking, our people have hope.

The child

It was so long ago. I was still very young. Yes, I remember how he'd walk. My mother told me not to go near him because he was a pilgrim, and you could not touch him. But we still went once. Everybody was a bit afraid of him and fooled around. I got so brave that I stepped in front of him so he couldn't pass. He stopped in front of me, looked at me, took a small stone from his pocket and gave it to me. I took it and ran away. Later at home I looked, and the stone seemed to have a smile on it. It's just a weirdly shaped stone.

The young man

We had discos on Saturdays in the civic centre. Everybody drank their share, of course. They were young. Everybody knew about him. They said that he used to be very smart back in the day, was studying to be a doctor and what not, but then started doing drugs. Went out of his mind completely. Well, he became stupid, and then started walking. Some think that there is a point to all the walking. Religious people thought he had a mission or something. I am an atheist, by the way. I cannot believe what the priests say. It's only a business. But okay, well, once we got drunk off our asses. The disco had ended. The civic centre was closed. And somebody said that we should check out our saint... They drove off. I don't know why or what happened. The rumour is that they beat him all night long in the bushes beside the road. Taking turns, whoever wanted to. I was not there.

SILENT. POST SCRIPTUM

Hush, hush,
let the cradle rock!

Sleep, my child!

Met a gammer on the road.

... A gammer on the road,
a stick in her hand, a sack on her back,
big loafers on her feet.

Sleep, my child!

Met a gammer on the road,
a stick in her hand, a sack on her back,
big loafers on her feet.