

ANNA MONTAGNER

A MAN WITH NO TONGUE

He was always fascinated with his mother's ability to chat. Margaret Elizabeth Smith, who cleverly chose to keep her late husband's name (nobody knew what her maiden name was), had the natural power of stepping into a room of strangers and making it hers. She was very superstitious (or that's what she wanted other people — men, in particular — to believe) and used to begin every speech with useless, but intriguing, gestures. She would touch her left wrist with her right hand, she would close her eyes for an almost imperceptible moment (but still perceptible enough for her audience to be aware of it) and she would scratch the tip of her right shoe on the floor. It didn't matter what type of floor it was. Although, she preferred marble because it was slippery and her feet would feel as if she was dancing.

Margaret had experienced NDE, more clearly near-death experience. At the age of 22, after having successfully graduated, she had been struck by lightning and had fallen unconscious. At her awakening, she had recalled a warm, reassuring and inviting light, and had become an acclaimed witness of the afterlife (she had rapidly learnt how to use that alien energy and had decided to convey it towards social activities). There was a timeless and indestructible halo around her that attracted women of all kinds. Teenage girls used to look at her for reassurance that their troubled puberty was only a rite of passage. They were hopeful that they would someday exchange their blemishes for her proud womanhood. She was a model of reference for the next generation of feminists, but never had a girl herself. And yet, having a daughter of her own and raising her like an Amazon would have been too easy, almost predictable and, therefore, unexciting (although she liked the name Sally very much). She had a

boy, instead, who was just like his father. That's, surely, what she must be thinking of now. He could sense her fears and her desires flying away as she rested; he could see them coming out through the coffin. Was she human, still? He didn't think so. She was a daisy petal made of crystal, torn by a young girl looking for love, left alone on the grass.

“How time flies!” thought Septimus, furtively scratching his nose under the mask and looking at his feet uncomfortably settled in black varnished shoes. He remembered when he got them. They were his father's, or so he had been told by his mother. Septimus couldn't recall the day when the tragedy happened. Yet, according to the people in town, it had been him who found the body floating in the pond outside their country house. Doctors had said it wasn't a suicide (even though that was hard to believe) and had claimed his father hit his head before drowning in the pond. He had probably been unconscious when he passed away and, therefore, there was no reason for one to beat oneself up. The best hypothesis was that he had fallen from a tree near the water and had hit his head on a branch. Why would he have been in a tree? Well, it was not to be asked. And, even if someone had asked, Margaret would have reminded them what a wonderful sunny day that was, with birds chirping to the sight of Spring and a gentle, rejuvenating breeze blowing on her husband's cheeks. He must have wanted to get closer to the sun and rest undisturbed. Was that too much to ask?

“It is not your fault, Margaret ” they had repeated. Why should it have been her fault? Yes, he had been sad and people more than frequently had suggested that she bring him to therapy, but what a shame that would have been! After everything he had experienced in life, how could one not be sad? Her husband — “my husband just needs silence” she had claimed. But, despite her stubbornness, around town everyone believed that it was a case of suicide. They were convinced

of it because they had seen Mr. Smith walking in the moonlight alone (more than once) while the town was asleep, or reading Shakespeare and wetting the pages with his tears, or talking to the blue sky, talking to the extended void in front of him, as if someone was there. He had gone crazy and that's what they gossiped about during each of the following town gatherings that year.

On Christmas, it snowed and the town turned white. There was a magical atmosphere and people were surprisingly nicer than usual. It snowed on the morning of December 23rd, so the shift in people's behavior only lasted for two days. It almost felt as if they knew (and perhaps they did) that the snow was temporary and that it was better to make good use of it, conveying a sense of compassion to each other, before the white would melt. Certainly, who got the most out of it was the young Septimus Warren Smith. What a trauma, what a tragedy! The main concern was about his mental health, since he had found the corpse. They thought it was helpful to give the boy some pleasurable "gifts" and make him feel wanted. They brought him a smelly patchwork blanket, a pair of socks and boots of some older kid that didn't fit in them anymore; and then they left on the porch some frosted cupcakes, pies, bags of candies, a reinvention of Italian lasagna, that they already knew they would have been left untouched. However, Septimus was remembering how nobody rang the bell or knocked the door to wish them Merry Christmas. And so, the food remained forgotten, out in the snow, left for lonesome souls and hungry strays that might have walked through the town in the dark night. What a trauma, what a tragedy! He would be marked forever (and God only knew what other misfortunes his mother, Margaret, would have to suffer).

After this unexpected truce, the town went back to its routine and the neighbors resumed their fights over the disposal of the trash accumulated during the holidays. But those two days of

unprecedented care had raised an expectation in the town that Septimus would have to fulfill. There were two factions: the one who expected the young boy to give back the caring and the affection he had received on those two Christmas days (these individuals firmly believed that they had improved his prospects of life and that, therefore, he had to stop behaving like a dull monkey); and the one that expected him to never recover and eventually end his pain in the same way his father had done before him.

Now, as he stood in the arid cemetery up the hill where no flowers had ever blossomed (he thought that the cause of this lay under the ground), Septimus was remembering the time when “Poor boy!” reverberated on the streets. He caught himself smiling and immediately stopped this frivolous impulse that could have caused him troubles. In front of him, there was a crowd of people (strangers? Exactly so!) who were eager to witness his surrender.

Septimus had been mute since that tragic day in which his father... People thought that he must have seen something awful! And no matter how many times Septimus shook his head to prove that “No, I don’t remember,” people would still look at him with pity and a restrained smile. His mother was devastated, and couldn’t find a reason for his sudden silence except for her husband’s...

It was true, though, that he had never been a very loquacious child and that, at school, he lacked participation. How many times was he invited to share his drawings with his classmates or play with other children during the break! No, Septimus had always preferred quietness and looking at the images in books where people and children seemed to be happier, lighter, flying up and down the sky. That’s it. That was why her son was mute: he didn’t like talking, so why all that interest in extracting a truth that wasn’t true at all?

This is what people believed (and with time, the story had improved on details and plot twists). On a tedious May 10th, Mr. Smith had woken up drenched in sweat and, consequently, ran to the bathroom to wash his face and freshen himself up. While looking at his dreadful image on the golden framed mirror, he had suddenly remembered that he dreamt of his brother, Evan, who had tragically disappeared some years before (on this topic, people added a shade of mystery to satisfy their curiosity. But Evan had, in fact, left an explanatory note to his brother before his disappearance). In the dream, Mr. Smith had confronted his brother and condemned him for having been both selfish and careless regarding how some might have felt about his need to vanish. The dialogue, as people from the town assumed, had been more or less like the following.

“Why did you leave without telling me?” yelled Mr. Smith.

“Because I was tired of human nature, brother,” replied Evan.

And so on. However, Evan somehow had managed to convince his brother of the world’s despicable nature and how envy and hate were the forces that moved human beings (some claimed that he had used references to the Shakespearean world).

“Why haven’t *you* vanished yet, brother?” Evan had asked before disappearing again in a bright yellow fog and a rain of lily petals.

Why hadn’t he vanished yet? “Why haven’t I vanished yet?” Why hadn’t he gone? “But, where to?”

He took a shower and wrote “WHERE TO” on the clouded mirror (they were certain that the steam would still reveal it). Human nature was to be condemned. His brother was right and he had given voice to a sense of misunderstanding, a sense of loneliness that he had always

inexplicably felt. Where to? If he had a choice, he would have gone to Victorian London, or to Florence during the Renaissance. “You read too many books,” he would have said scolding himself.

Despite the ridiculous origin of the myth around his father’s death and despite its level of inauthenticity, Septimus could very much relate to all those feelings of estrangement. He didn’t remember his father enough to tell whether his inclination towards quietness was hereditary (besides, his mother always avoided the subject), but he knew that, even if that were true, genetics couldn’t be the only reason. Silence was a choice, at least it became one. He didn’t know how it had started, but he remembered the day he became aware of other people talking — the day he was old enough to question his quietness. Septimus was mute because that was what it was like to be a human to him. He was overwhelmed and affected daily by human nature, by the passing of time, by this inescapable helplessness of the individual and the consequential illogical trust of the whole species. Humans were to be feared. He would observe them living day after day, running from school to the bank to the doctor, setting up parties, getting married, having children, all of this as if they could suddenly reveal the mystery, break down the universe and discover the truth. Why be alive? If Septimus had known, he would have talked. But the pointless struggle of human life, its continued pain and suffering, hidden by illusive moments of joy and hope, overwhelmed him. An eternal waiting that Septimus refused to measure with time: seconds, minutes, hours, and then hours, and then hours. No! The more he thought about it, the more he withdrew into silence. His mother’s abrupt death caused an insurmountable loss in the town. In their imagination, she would have died after every single one of them, after the town was asleep and unable to witness her defeat.

As they stood sporadically around the coffin, embracing the loneliness of the fatal virus that had taken her, Septimus thought they looked pitiful. He would have wanted to help them but he knew that, in the discovery of his own mortality, a man was supposed to walk alone. So there they were, with their eyes on the corpse of a hero, seeing their lives falling gently from the sky like snowflakes and landing in the immense ocean. One day, they would have turned into water and joined the silent waves of the sea and cradled the mortals. Septimus noticed that, while they were embracing that ephemeral time, there were no tears on their faces. Then, as his mother disappeared in the arms of her Mother Earth, Septimus felt their eyes turn to him. Without making any sound, in that deafening silence, they were asking him how he had bore knowing the truth all along. He lowered his mask and smiled at them. The following morning, they would have woken up and found joy in the unexpected.

He looked over the grave for a last moment and placed a bunch of white everlasting lilies on it. He looked to the sky, that blue extended void in front of him, and whispered something (but what? And to whom?)

As he gave his back to his mother and walked down the hill, a shiver ran through his body. Was it fear? Perhaps, excitement for the hours to come?

It was her - a daisy petal made of crystal, melting in the unknown.