



Portraits

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MARY¹

People in the neighborhood were used to the evening wind bringing
Mary's voice into their houses

Everyone in the little town knew what would happen at the end of
the day

As soon as twilight fell, crazy Mary would sit on the deck of her
ramshackle little house-boat and call out for at least 15 minutes:

Salina . . . Salina . . . come, come on . . .

No one any longer heard the despair in that voice

No one still felt pity

Mary had been calling into the evening now for so many years!

It had become as insignificant

as the whimpering of a yard-dog

2

Children and strangers would sometimes ask for the meaning of the
calling

Then the story was told with words from which the heart had long
departed

Oh well, they would say, many years ago that crazy Mary had a child
Imagine, Mary and a child!

The authorities thought it impossible

A local official and the social worker put the small crate in which
Mary had carefully tucked her daughter in a police car and left

For the better, people had said

No one had ever told Mary where the police car had gone that day

That too had been for the best, people had said

In the little town lived many mothers who cherished their babies

Mary could only call a name, in the twilight

For years

And always in vain

No one ever had walked to the little boat to say something pleasant
to Mary

Never in all the twenty years that she had called so pleadingly

Then, just like that, on a summer evening, someone joined her on
the deck, said hello, and filled his pipe

Mary did not answer him, she wouldn't have known how to, for had anyone ever addressed her before?
The man told her a simple and short story
But it must have seemed a wonderful tale to Mary
He said: "Through my work I have known your daughter Salina
And now you need to listen carefully, Mary
She always had enough to eat
Always enough clothes
And every night a bed with nice warm blankets
But she became ill one day. She had no pain, but she lives no longer"
"That is good," Mary said, as if she had received a gift
"That is good," she said again
And she sat motionless on the deck
As deeply absorbed in herself as one can get when an old wall of loneliness has been pulled down

After that evening people in the little town said:
"Mary is getting crazier still
No, she doesn't yell that much any more, not that
But you know what she does now?
She waves at the clouds
And laughs!"

296

SOMETHING LIKE THAT²

It is busy in the supermarket
Carts with groceries fill the aisles
In the parking lot cars drive to and fro
Everyone is hurrying
The stores close in half an hour

Andy is there too
With his mother
Andy cannot see very well
That's why his head is always bent a little forward
as if he were trying to pull objects within the reach of his vision
His legs don't work as he wishes and intends them to
And his saliva comes too quickly for him
Who wants to see, sees beautifully waving hair
Blonde, with a wonderful glow to it
And his hands have a dignified shape
As if he only engages in delicate acts

Andy is not in a hurry
He does not have to achieve things
And his mother has learned to adjust to his tempo

Everyone is anxious
As if after this day famine will undoubtedly strike
Andy is waiting quietly
Perhaps he is using a bit more space than those who have command
over their legs

A customer watches all this with great irritation
His calmness disturbs her
He keeps her from running behind her cart filled with groceries
She wonders who is with Andy
A woman with that same blonde hair
The mother probably?
Then she is the one to complain to
And so she says to Andy's mother:
"You don't take something like that to the store on a Saturday
afternoon"
She points to Andy
The mother does not answer
Besides adjusting herself to her son's tempo she has learned
something else
To be silent

MOTHER³

"Hello Frank. Hello Boy," and she kisses him.
"Hello big boy. I got something for you. Here, look . . ."
She puts a stuffed animal next to Frank's head
"The weather is nice," she chats. "I'll push your bed a little closer to
the window, so you can feel the sun on your face. That may be nice.
And who knows,
maybe the sun enjoys shining on your face . . ."
The sun shines on Frank's face
Perhaps he likes it
And perhaps the sun likes to greet Frank that way
But Frank cannot speak in words
Nor can the sun
In that they are alike

"The cattle are already out, there is lots of grass," says the woman
"And I brought you clean clothes . . . and also a surprise, look . . . A
new pyjama. A red one.
I thought you'd like red, don't you Frank?"
Frank is silent
Frank is dozing
And he hardly moves his eyes
"I'll put everything on your shelf. The nurse will find it, don't you
think so?
I hope you treat her nicely. Don't you tease her!" she jokes

Frank sighs
He moans some, and takes a deep breath
Twenty-five years it has been this way
And no one knows if he has any awareness of what it is to think,
to experience,
and to feel
“Am I tiring you with all my talking? Well then, you take a nap while
I knit for a while. You go to sleep now”
She tucks him in
She knits
For hours
All through the afternoon
And Frank sleeps
As if retreated to a place even further away
As if he were dead tired from climbing the mountain that is his life

This quiet visit needs an explanation, the mother felt
Which comes in words full of austerity
and full of tears that will never dry
“Frank is our son
He is twenty-five
A son should be visited by his parents
That is the way it should be
And every Wednesday afternoon when I get on the train, I think:
Maybe he’ll smile at me today . . .”

ST. FRANCIS⁴

Bobbie is very small
And very quiet
“He is autistic,” the caretakers tell whomever wants to listen
That does not help Bobbie very much
He withdraws into himself, as far as possible from anything that
makes noise
And he often smiles to himself
As if, deep inside of him, contentment dwells
They don’t disturb him
He can be who he is
In a very special way happy with those who belong to him
There is the cat, who, as soon as there is a chance, climbs on Bobbie’s
knee, and curls up as if forever . . .
The canary sings to its heart’s content when Bobbie enters the room
It too, is part of his life
And the dog lies down at Bobbie’s side in such a way that he can rest
his paw in Bobbie’s hand
Some people can’t believe it
They first need to see
That is no problem, for it happens again and again

When the weather is nice, they put Bobbie outside
In the sun, in his own special spot
With the cat
With the dog's paw in his hand
The canary in its cage may also come
And so they sit, the four of them, for hours in the sun
Nowhere else would one find so many singers as around the place
where Bobbie sits
As if a courier had announced: Bobbie is in the yard
The other day an old man watched this scene for hours, with big eyes
He knew for absolute certain what he had seen
"St. Francis," he said.

BABY⁵

The teacher is expecting a baby
In her class at the institution for multihandicapped children, this is
THE topic
Lengthy discussions!
The children in the class are being meticulously kept up to date
It is now this big, it moves this way or that . . .
Sometimes they may feel how the baby is growing
In the mother's stomach
And they know: It is coming!

The words by which the teacher explains are carefully chosen
The children have to depend on words and sounds
Mentally handicapped . . .
nearly or completely blind . . .
That characterizes these students
And so, in their own way, they absorb the news
Follow the events
And wait anxiously
Bets are being made
A boy? A girl?

When the baby is born the teacher returns
But not alone
The baby comes along
Pictures won't do, would they?
That's why the baby comes in person
Hairs, ears, little feet, they are carefully touched
Fingers and toes counted
Approving shouts fill the room
But Tina is not content
After meeting the baby, back in her seat, she cautiously finds her
way to the teacher again

She needs to ask something
Whispering very softly in the teacher's ear
"Can it see?"
"Yes."
Only now is it a real celebration.

FRANS⁶

When is it Saturday? Tomorrow? Today?
The question dominates his life, embraces all, and
sparkles as the sun
Tomorrow?
No!
Today?
Not either. But when is it?
"You have to go to bed twice, get up twice, shave twice, and then it is
Saturday," they tell him
The morning arrives upon which everyone who is willing to answer
the eternal question, says:
"Frans, now it is Saturday"
Unstable legs, as those that belong to Frans, can move miraculously
fast!
Very early in the morning he is waiting for the bus
And with eyes brimming with hope he watches the door of the bus
as it swings open
Men, women, children, coming to visit at the institution
But no one says: "Hello Frans!"
No reason not to longer cherish hope; for anything more precious
than hoping does not exist for Frans
And the most precious you hold on to all your life
The joy of it being Saturday cannot be taken away by anyone
and there is nothing that can dampen it
Joy because of the father who is sure to step out of the bus fills
Frans' life,
and the voice that will say: "Hi, my Frans," will be there some day
Of that he is sure
"He'll bring me a watch," Frans knows with a confidence that stands
firm as a rock that has defied the years
And as always, when telling his joyful story, he taps with his right
index finger on his left wrist: That's where the watch will go
Sometime . . . one day
This Saturday too, passes
The last bus arrives without mercy and leaves without the father
who was expected to step out
No reason to feel bad!
No reason to despair
There will be more Saturdays!
When is the next Saturday again?

Seven more times going to bed?
Seven more times getting up?
Seven more times using the shaving brush?
Then it will be Saturday
Then comes . . .
And he will bring . . .

DINA⁷

How beautiful Dina's child is
A miraculous beauty that can hardly be expressed in words, though
Dina tries hard
Blonde curls! How the hair curled is shown by Dina's bent finger
that draws circles in the air
And when her daughter laughed, she had a dimple in her left cheek
The left cheek? Yes, the left cheek, because the heart is on the left
side, Dina knows with absolute certainty
The heart and dimple on the same side has a deep meaning that only
she understands
Blue eyes and long slender fingers
Yes, that daughter of Dina . . . beautiful!
And Dina has taken care of her well. Of that she is certain
For, though you have a harelip and a hunchback, you still
can care for a child and make it laugh . . . !
Dina tells the story to whomever is willing to listen, and more often
still to herself
And sometimes, she'll put her hands on her body, as if she still
happily carries and hopes and expects . . .
It is beautiful, she then says
Teeth as white as snow, that she had too. Yes, everything about her
was perfect
Do I have a child?
No?
Dina looks at me compassionately with a mixture of pity and disdain
"Nothing is only nothing," Dina says. "It is beautiful to have a child"
And in a sudden rush of intimacy she leans over and whispers. "It is
the most beautiful thing you can imagine.
There is nothing more beautiful"
Abruptly she stands up. Others don't need to see or think that Dina
would take someone into her confidence so easily
"Where is your daughter now, Dina?"
Dina hesitates, for isn't her story no more than a paper balloon?
Lovely, as long as no one pricks it . . .
Mockers have so often told her that she lies, that she doesn't have
any daughter at all;
but what to do with the question of where the child is now?
Suddenly she knows
The child was too beautiful

Too beautiful for this ugly world
You shouldn't be too beautiful. People don't like it
You don't fit
And that's why her daughter died
Well, died . . .
"She is now an angel," Dina explains and does not add anything
more to her statement
Her stillness is as a tent where she lives in deep silence with a smile
on her face
With her daughter . . .

NICE⁸

Do I know the latest top forty?
No, I don't
That disappoints him
Then what shall we talk about? He has clearly decided to entertain
me this afternoon
Shall he play checkers with me?
I have to admit that I don't know how to play
He is noticeably surprised
That means some more thinking
Shall we go swimming then? He could get me a swimming suit from
the house-parent
I tell him I don't know how to swim
Now pity takes the place of surprise
But the possibilities have not yet been exhausted
Then we'll go for a nice long walk, he decides
I try to explain that, due to a back problem, one hour has to be the
maximum
With that, the disappointment, the surprise, and the pity are
transformed into compassion
Not to know anything about the top forty . . .
Not to know how to play checkers . . .
No swimming . . .
No more than one hour walks . . .

He takes my hand and says:
"Don't worry, it does not really matter
We all are very nice here for people like you"
And to underline his words he puts his arms around me and gives me
a kiss
And then we can go for a walk
The Down's syndrome child and I
Together for an hour through the woods
Hand in hand

Notes

1. From: *Mijn Armen Zijn te Kort*. Nijkerk, the Netherlands, Callenbach-Intro, 1976.
2. From: *Zoiets Neem Je Niet Mee Naar de Winkel*, 1981.
3. From: *Mijn Armen Zijn te Kort*, 1976.
4. From: *Zoiets Neem Je Niet Mee Naar de Winkel*, 1981.
5. From: *Zoiets Neem Je Niet Mee Naar de Winkel*, 1981.
6. From: *Mijn Armen Zijn te Kort*, 1976.
7. From: *Mijn Armen Zijn te Kort*, 1976.
8. From: *Zoiets Neem Je Niet Mee Naar de Winkel*, 1981.