

THE

SILENT

HI  
ISTORY

A NOVEL

VINTAGE

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

**A generation of children is born without speech, without comprehension, without language entirely.**

At first, they are just medical curiosities. But their numbers swell, and soon they grow into an established underclass, occupying squats and communes around the world. To some they are seen as a threat; to others, as a salvation. Some suspect they may have other abilities beyond our understanding.

The children cannot tell you their story. Instead we rely on *The Silent History*, a collection of testimonies from those touched by the phenomenon. Parents, doctors, opportunist inventors, cult leaders and vigilantes recall what they have endured and what they have inflicted on others. They will take you from a recognisable present to a real and unsettling future. You will not want to look away.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*The Silent History* was originally serialised as an awardwinning app before being re-edited and rewritten in this definitive text. It is the work of three authors – Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby and Kevin Moffett.

**ELI HOROWITZ** is the former managing editor and publisher of *McSweeney's*. He is the co-author of *The Clock Without a Face*, a treasure-hunt mystery, and *Everything You Know Is Pong*, an illustrated cultural history of ping pong. His design work has been honoured by *i-D*, *Print* and the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

**MATTHEW DERBY** is a writer and designer and the author of the story collection *Super Flat Times*. His writing has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Believer*, *Guernica* and *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*. He also works at a video game studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts.  
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**KEVIN MOFFETT** is the author of two highly praised story collections, *Permanent Visitors* and *Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events*. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, *American Short Fiction*, as well as in three editions of *The Best American Short Stories*. He is the winner of the Nelson Algren Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the National Magazine Award. He lives in California.  
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# THE SILENT HISTORY

ELI HOROWITZ  
MATTHEW DERBY  
KEVIN MOFFETT



Jonathan Cape  
London



# PROLOGUE

# HUGH PURCELL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WASHINGTON, DC  
2044

I WAS TWENTY-TWO and desperate for work, desperate for any human contact at all, so when I saw an opening for a junior epidemiological archivist, no experience necessary, I applied on the spot. The listing was vague, just something about “our continuing efforts to better understand the scope of the silent phenomenon.” I got the job on a Friday, and by Monday morning I was already out on the streets of the Charlotte financial district with a list of names and a scripted greeting.

My duties appeared simple—find people who had come into contact with silents and record their testimony. The streets at dawn were empty, which was mostly a relief, given the infamous state of the neighborhood at that point. My first interview was with a bird rehabber, a weathered man with a severed pinky, who I found as he was raising the steel gate on his shop. I intercepted a pastor ushering a crowd of churchgoers out of a storefront chapel. There was a boy in the square whose brother was a silent. Most of what I recorded was speculative thirdhand info, wispy urban myths about how silence was a plague, or a conspiracy, or some sort of vague metaphor. Some people were convinced it was caused by food-borne toxins, some blamed the parents, some suspected the kids themselves.

I heard the term “mutetard” a lot that day.

By late afternoon, after getting mugged and dry humped by a group of teenage girls in football uniforms, I was beginning to question how much I actually wanted the job. But I had one more interview subject on the list, a repo man who'd been hired by the city to orchestrate a resettlement of silent squatters from the buildings along Trade Street, where they wanted to put in a high-end artisan pet arcade. His name was Camara, but he referred to himself as "the Camara," and within minutes of me finding him idling in a tan Burgoyne outside a Pulp Hulk he'd already shown me his blowgun collection and offered to give me a Key West salad. He didn't know much about the silents, aside from a two-day sensitivity training course he'd taken as a condition of his hire. "You don't need to know much," he said, chewing on a cone of fruit meat. "People see the Camara coming and they pretty much get that it's time to move. Even just a shadow tells them this. Just a silhouette of the Camara passing by a window. You don't need words to tell someone they're not welcome." He didn't know why there were so many of them living in the burned-out center of the city, and he didn't seem particularly interested in the question. "So long as they don't have a grenade launcher, it's easy money."

We waited in the cab of his truck until the dispatcher called. We were to drive over to the Bank of America building on East Fifth, where we'd meet the contract crew that would go in and take the place by force once Camara had them assembled. I asked if it wasn't overkill to involve armed men in a resettlement operation, and Camara said, "A home's a home. That's basic info, DNA shit. Animal knowledge that even these silents have. When you've got a home, you're going to do whatever it takes to keep it that way."

We pulled into a lot off a side street about a block from the bank building. The crew of contract soldiers stood around the transport truck that would take the silents to a

camp outside the city limits. They hung around smoking fakies and telling dick jokes while Camara spoke with the CO. They were to surround the building while Camara gathered the silents in the lobby. On his signal, they'd enter through the designated access points and get everyone zipped and dipped. The whole thing should take about fifteen minutes, Camara estimated. The CO nodded, and gathered his men to brief them. Camara took a suitcase from behind the passenger seat of his truck. I asked him if it was a weapon case and he made a little wheezing sound. "Hygiene kits, brother," he said. "Everyone loves a free toothbrush. You ready?"

We walked down the vacant block to the front entrance of the bank building. Camara carefully pried away a sheet of plywood, and we slipped in through the shattered revolving doors.

I'd seen plenty of silents before. There were two in my first-grade class—sullen, withdrawn kids who seemed to exist on another planet. They were eventually pulled from the system, and I think my classmates and I all felt relieved. There was a family down the street that had a silent boy, and another one who folded pizza boxes at a restaurant on the square. In college I'd heard rumors about silent enclaves, groups of them living in the wilderness or abandoned sectors of the city, but I assumed those were trumped-up tales by the same people who told me about the mad heart-eating cult in the financial district. But inside that decaying bank lobby I saw how wrong I'd been about them, about everything.

There must have been fifty of them in the cavernous space, but I'd never have known if I hadn't been directly observing them from my spot in the shadows of the foyer—they were that quiet. It seemed impossible that so many people in one place could generate so little noise, just the rustling of fabric and the occasional cooing of the pigeons that clung to the massive chandelier.

Camara and I stood in the shadows. I could see him taking a head count, whispering the numbers as he surveyed the area. They were all over, scattered among a curvilinear maze of beat-up chairs and couches that let out onto a circular gathering area underneath the frescoes of human industrial progress. Old whiteboards leaned against the walls, revealing indecipherable, abstract drawings that appeared to be the work of multiple artists. Reams of copy paper were used as a sort of crude papier-mâché to construct oblong containers. In one corner a man was sewing pants out of the coarse gray fabric from old cubicle walls. A young woman took handfuls of twigs from a canvas bag and passed them out to a group gathered in a circle on the floor. They seemed fixated on her. She knelt in the center of the floor and braided some twigs into a sort of rope. Then a man sitting behind her braided his bundle and bound it to the bundle she'd made. The next person did the same, and the next, until they had made a large wreath. They laid it out on the floor and ran their hands along its surface, like it told them some kind of story. The significance of that wreath still mystifies me even today, but at the time I was simply fascinated that they'd been able to collaborate on such a project at all.

Without warning, Camara strode out into the light, holding up a pair of hygiene kits. "Everybody, listen up," he said in a firm voice that shattered the cool stillness of the space. Everyone turned. "You may not understand me," he said, "but the Camara is here to help you. I understand that this is your home, but the city has different plans for this space. I am here to transport you to a facility just north of here, where you can live in peace. There is running water, three meals a day, and cots for everyone. I understand that it will be difficult for you to leave. And that is why I am providing you with these kits, free of charge. They contain a full day's worth of meal strips, vermin spray, first-aid gel, and a shelter bag." He turned to show the room the kits.

The silents watched him carefully. They couldn't possibly have had any idea what Camara was saying, but they seemed to respond to him. As he displayed the contents of the kits, their fear seemed to dissipate. They appeared genuinely curious and interested, and began to congregate in the center of the lobby. Camara's act was working.

"Is everybody in here?" he asked. Again, they continued to stare. "I'm going to go get the kits for you. Do you understand? I'll be back in one minute." Camara scanned the people in the room, nodding encouragingly. They nodded in response, but did not move. "Okay? Just wait right here."

We went into the foyer. Camara winked at me and said, "Real bunch of troublemakers." He checked his watch and called the contract soldiers. "Okay, they're all in the lobby," he said. "Roger that," a thin voice replied, and we waited. There was a dull burst as four soldiers broke down the front doors with percussion cannons. They rushed in with gas guns drawn, right past us. I could hear them converging on the lobby from every access point, quickly and quietly, spreading out into the space like a rolling cloud. Their boots ground against the concrete subfloor as they secured all of the exits and moved in.

I waited to hear some sort of struggle, but the building sounded oddly dead. I ventured into the lobby and saw that it was empty, save for the soldiers frantically pacing back and forth, searching the rafters with Maglites. The silents were nowhere to be found.

"You had the place surrounded, didn't you?" Camara asked the CO, who nodded in irritation. There was no sign of an alternate exit anywhere. The soldiers began tipping over tables and kicking chairs. "Over here," one of them said, standing over a vent in the floor, which led down into darkness. Camara knelt and peered in with a flashlight. "I'll be shitcut," he said, scratching the back of his head. The hatch was no more than two feet wide. There was no way it

could accommodate more than one person at a time. But somehow a group of fifty silents had managed to spontaneously coordinate an escape without being detected.

We quietly filed out of the building, and I walked all the way back to the sanitary district on the outskirts of town, my head still buzzing. The next morning I was back out on the streets. All summer I recorded more testimonials, seeking out communities of silents and observing everything I could. Up until that moment in the bank building, I, like most people I knew, had defined silents by what they lacked. I thought of them as hollow vessels, defective parasites feeding upon the speaking world. But in that lobby I saw them for what they might *possess*. What unknown abilities had filled this void? Was the world somehow brighter, more tangible, without the nagging interference of language? Was the absence of words actually a form of freedom? I've often tried to quiet that constant voice in my mind, to try to experience the world the way they might—but always the questions rush in faster than I can carve out a moment of true silence.

That September I was promoted to regional coordinator, and sixteen years later I'm still here, now the director of the project. For years my colleagues and I scoured the globe to interview parents, siblings, teachers, health professionals, law enforcement, faith healers, neighborhood-watch groups, businesspeople—a diverse chorus of voices touched in some way by emergent phasic resistance. Starting in 2021, we introduced Mémo, the ambient dictation application that allows key subjects to record testimonials at their convenience from anywhere in the world, expanding our reach even further. Every day we are learning more about this strange condition, and every day there are more questions—questions that are, themselves, bound by language, a chamber sealed so

tightly that we can hardly even imagine an experience beyond its walls.

But, of course, it's this experience that waits for us all. It's inside our brothers and sisters, daughters and sons and lovers. This document presumes nothing about the future; it is strictly a record of the past, of what we looked like before, and how we got here. Are words our creation, or did they create us? And who are we in a world without them? Are there wilder, more verdant fields out beyond the boundaries of language, where those of us who are silent now wander? Each of us must find our own path through these questions. We enter and leave the world in silence, after all, and everything else is simply how we walk that middle passage.



# VOLUME ONE

# THEODORE GREENE

EL CERRITO, CA  
2011

SHE ALREADY LOOKED half-dead on the drive to the hospital, but I wouldn't admit this until much later. I was pretty determined, I guess, to remain upbeat. In all the classes we'd taken to prepare for the birth, that was the one thing the instructor kept repeating to the men in the room, the future fathers. "There's no magic involved," she said. She told us that what our wives needed most was our support. Our patience. The idea was—and I totally believed this—that a calm mother would produce a healthy child. It had a logic to it, and we had no reason to doubt the instructor. We were all first-timers except for this one guy who showed up to class with a wife half his age. He already had three or four kids, I think, from previous marriages, and the instructor pointed to him and said, "Mitch has been through this before. He knows all about the idea of support, right, Mitch?" Everyone laughed but Mitch, who just kind of stared back at the instructor with a look of bemusement. It was almost more of a—even though his wife was pretty attractive—more of a look of defeat.

There were other aspects of that day that made me feel like something bad was coming. Things that made it hard to focus on the goal, that one task of keeping the birth free of panic and dread. First there was the humidity. Everything was drenched in it. By the time I got home from work my clothes were damp. I went inside the house and Mel was on the couch with her head back, sweating with the fan off.

“Why are you here?” I said, and she said, “I stayed home today.” I said, “What?” and “Why didn’t you call me?” You know? “I would have come home.” But she didn’t say anything. Just stared at the ceiling with her eyes half-closed like she was drugged. I went to the kitchen and took off my shirt. I put half a box of noodles in a pot, and when I went back to the couch to check on her she was crying. “Are there contractions?” I said, and she nodded. “Are they close together?” I said, and she nodded again, and I was like, This is it. I put my shirt back on even though it was soaked, and I helped her out to my car. She had her full weight against me. I felt like if I let go of her she would just collapse into a pile. I tried hard not to get worked up. But then when I opened the passenger-side door the half-eaten taco from my lunch break slid off the seat and onto the driveway. I looked at the taco on the blacktop and I felt this, like, pulsing kind of terror.

Of fatherhood, yeah, I guess. I remember thinking, This is the car we’ll use to bring Flora home. This will be her first car ride, in my ten-year-old hatchback with mismatched seat covers that smell like burning human hair. Mel’s car was newer, but I’d blocked her in and there was no time. No time left to back out into a more respectable set of circumstances. I was working at a company I hated and wolfing down tacos in the parking lot of a strip mall down the road. It was not where I wanted to be, and anyway what difference would it have made? Mel and I were the people we were, and there wasn’t anyone to blame but ourselves for how we lived.

I got Mel in the car and started driving, like I said, toward the hospital. The clouds were wild and dark like right before a heat storm. They looked almost like smoke from a fire, sort of billowing in reverse behind the cell towers at the interchange. I glanced over at Mel, who was doubled over in the passenger seat. Her eyes were rolling around under her closed lids and her skin was a sort of

light gray color. I looked hard at the road and told myself that we were all going to make it through the day, but only two-thirds of that statement was actually true.

# NANCY JERNIK

TEANECK, NJ  
2011

I STARTED TAKING Ambitor about a year before I found out I was pregnant with Spencer. This was right around the time it first went on the market, and almost half the women at Yan Talan started taking it. I remember seeing this ad for it, a three-panel foldout in the front of *Fortune*. It had a picture of a woman sitting behind a huge wooden desk in a corner office with floor-to-ceiling windows. She had her legs propped up on the desk and she was sitting back—like, reclining in a big upholstered leather chair, smoking a cigar. She was in the middle of blowing a smoke ring, and the caption said something like *Call the Shots*. That was it, except for the Ambitor logo and the tiny text that described all the side effects, which seemed like a small list to me, as someone who had taken a bunch of different antidepressants and weight-control pills and stuff. I looked at this woman in the ad and thought, That's me. That's where I want to be. I want everything in that picture. Not in a shallow way. Not like, I want to have a big desk, or smoke cigars, or I guess anything in the actual picture, which actually was really not very well done. But more of a feeling like, I want to be in control.

So I started taking it, and suddenly I had this capacity to *do* things. I had access to a whole new reservoir of energy. It was pretty incredible, actually. I mean, I still think about what it was like to be on Ambitor, and I would probably be taking it right now if I could. If it was still on the market.

I found out I was pregnant in December, and Ron, who I thought would be scared or upset, given that we were just a few months into our marriage, was actually really excited. I can remember that first trimester being the last really happy time. Because I was made VP in February and put in charge of the whole Schick Quattro for Women account. And I won't bore you with the whatever hours I spent at the office or at Schick headquarters in Milford, but it had the effect on my marriage that you'd expect. I saw it all happening. Like, I could remember watching as my relationship with Ron sort of split apart like a dissolving glacier, but—and maybe this was the Ambitor doing what it did best—I saw things drifting, but I didn't really care so much. Or, I cared, but only in the way you care for the people in a movie, watching them as their lives go down the tubes.

I hardly remember anything about Spencer's birth except that it took forever. Forty hours from start to finish. In the end they had to do a C-section, because he just wasn't coming. Or I wasn't trying hard enough. So I was completely out of it for the actual birth, and I didn't know that Spencer came out without making any noise. Ron was really worried about that, but the doctor told him it was a myth that all babies come out crying. Of course, nobody knew at that time about Spencer—about what was wrong with him. So Ron just sort of took the doctor at his word. If I'd been awake I would've said something. I wouldn't have let that go.

We took Spencer home a few days later. Ron had a week of paternity leave from his job and we were almost able to get back to that place where we were happy. But Spencer wasn't nursing. Nothing at all. They said that you should wait a few days before panicking, that sometimes the kid just doesn't want to nurse in the beginning. But by the fifth day of nothing we started to get really stressed out. Ron was going to have to go back to work the following Monday,

and it suddenly seemed so small, the window of time we had to be all together. I didn't know what I was going to do alone in the house with this kid who wouldn't eat. We called the doctor and she asked if we'd tried formula. I was like, "You said we should never give the kid formula." And she said that normally breast milk is the best, but if the kid is not nursing, you try the formula, so Ron went out in the middle of the night to a drugstore and got this stuff. He put the nipple of the bottle to Spencer's lips and he immediately started nursing. I remember lying on my side in the bed watching Ron hold the bottle while Spencer was just nursing like crazy, like he'd been starving—which he was, I guess. And Ron started laughing with this mixture of relief and joy, because finally here was something, here was Spencer showing that he needed something. And I focused on Spencer—I tried to block Ron out of my vision, because I could see him glancing over at me, trying to get me to laugh about it or even smile, but I just felt sick, absolutely sick to my stomach. I couldn't see it as anything other than a line on the battlefield, and Spencer, this baby that had wanted so much to stay inside me that they had to cut him out, had just crossed over to Ron's side. I eventually got him to take my milk, but I couldn't rid myself of that feeling.

The three months of maternity leave were like being underwater. Everything was so still and silent with me and Spencer alone in the house. He'd cry when he was hungry or tired, but that was about it. He never made any of those little trickling sounds that babies make. He'd stare at me, but it was like I was some kind of complex math problem on a chalkboard. I don't know how to explain it, but it just seemed like he didn't need me that much. And if I'm being honest, I guess it irritated me. I somehow expected that when I had a baby, we would be connected by a golden thread. There would be this bond between us that I could feel, even if we were in separate rooms or cities. But I

didn't feel any connection to him at all. He was like an alien in my house.

I went back to work, and it was like finally crawling ashore. My team had held down the Schick account in my absence, and within a few weeks we launched a huge online campaign for the new Quattro with Flex-Edge technology. I was then up to 750 mg of Ambitor a day, which was only slightly over the recommended daily dose. This was around the time that the article appeared in *Harper's*, the one that was like, Ambitor is dangerous, Ambitor has these unknown side effects. Ron encouraged me to stop taking it—at first he was sort of sweet about it, but he eventually turned belligerent. He started blaming the Ambitor for Spencer's behavior, which I thought was a little ... I mean, no one was saying anything about birth defects. This was just classic Ron, making a problem out of everything. I was still hoping that eventually Spencer would just sort of emerge from the depths, so to speak. Like, one day I'd wake up to the sound of his babbling in the next room, and I'd go in and he'd look at me and smile and say "Mama" for the first time. But it never happened.



# AUGUST BURNHAM

NEWTON, MA  
2012

MY NAME IS Dr. August Burnham, and I direct the Center for Neurodevelopmental Services at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. I administered the M-CHAT screening for Calvin Andersen shortly after returning to Boston from the tour for my first book, *The Wide Empty Sea: Living with Childhood Disintegrative Disorder*. My publicist reminded me on more than one occasion that the tour was a success, but I couldn't help feeling like it had been a lot of wasted time. A lot of sitting around in hotel rooms just to talk for a half hour in a chain bookstore in front of a dozen people who seemed to have wandered in accidentally. Radio interviews with hosts who hadn't read the book. The awkward exchanges with parents of CDD kids.

When I got back to Boston I was completely drained. I hadn't expected it to be so difficult to get back to work. I'd lost interest in almost everything. This of course had an impact on my domestic life. My partner, Bruce, and I had recently adopted a boy from Honduras, a special-needs kid with a cleft palate and some mild developmental delays—a beautiful boy named Hector, which was the perfect name for him. Little warrior prince. Hector had just undergone his first cleft palate surgery and he needed a lot of attention, and I was already—well, I'd missed the surgery because of the book tour, and I think Bruce expected me to

come back and be twice as attentive and supportive. But I just couldn't bring myself to the task.

All of this is to say that when I screened Calvin I was not in the greatest shape. Calvin wasn't speaking at thirty months, and his parents had driven him to McLean from Hadley in Western Mass. Their pediatrician had diagnosed Calvin with an oral-motor delay that she thought could be corrected with speech-language therapy. They worked with a speech pathologist who told them that she'd never seen a case as pervasive as Calvin's, where there was just no trace of speech development. They were determined to get a more satisfactory diagnosis. Apparently he'd developed normally as an infant, but at eighteen months, when typically the rudiments of language are apparent, Calvin had no words or signs. The thing that was most disturbing to his parents was that not only was he not talking, but Calvin didn't seem to want to communicate with them or anyone else. He seemed to have no desire to express himself in any way.

They came to me thinking I'd be able to detect this thing. As if I were some sort of medicine man who could commune with the spirit that possessed their son. Any validation from the medical community would be an anchor for them. It would allow them to move forward in whatever direction the diagnosis pointed. But they were—it was like they were not going to leave there without a diagnosis. I was already burned-out, as I said, and their determination only put me in a worse mood. But I went ahead and led Calvin through some exercises for the M-CHAT. I asked him to go over to the padded mat in the center of the room. He didn't respond to the command, but he looked at me when I asked him, which meant that he heard me and was acknowledging me. I pointed at the mat and asked him again, and he just fixated on my face. I pointed again and asked a third time, but his gaze didn't waver. I found this very curious. Not at all like a kid with, say, autism. I went

over and knelt on the mat and he followed me there. He seemed interested in what I was doing, right? Again, this is not the type of behavior you'd typically see with autism or similar conditions. I made a face at him, a sort of clownish smile, and I asked him to make the face too. But he did nothing. I made a raspberry and asked him to make one, and he gave no response. No sound, acknowledgment that he understood what I was asking, but still displaying a level of attentiveness that would be odd for any child. Something cold and analytical about it, almost as if he was examining me.

In the end he came up short on a few of the critical questions in the diagnostic. There was something going on, but I had to tell Calvin's parents that I wasn't entirely sure what it was. It clearly wasn't childhood disintegrative disorder—which, frankly, I was sick of talking about anyway. But Calvin also didn't show any of the classic ASD symptoms, aside from the language issues, which were profound. I was at a loss, to be honest, but I was intrigued by Calvin, and I asked to see him again and run some more tests. I felt a charge inside, like something I'd lost was returning to me. It was exactly the kind of focus I needed. Exactly the sort of uncharted space I'd always wanted to explore.

# MONICA MELENDEZ

HOUSTON, TX  
2014

THE PARENTS DROVE their kids in from as far away as Odessa to take part in the study. Others registered online, sending video clips and testimonials. One man flew in from Oakland once a month with his daughter, a beautiful girl named Flora, who clung to him during the tests, burying her head in the crook of his arm. I got to know all of the parents quite well. They were so consumed—to the point of obsession, really, which was understandable. By the end of the first year we had twenty-seven families in our study.

It all happened very quickly. I remember hearing Dr. Reyes describing the symptoms to a colleague at a dinner party at the provost's house, and then a few months later we'd publicly identified the condition and had thirteen diagnosed cases at the center. It was almost as if the announcement of the thing caused all of these cases to emerge. But really, who knows how long it's been around. We might never find out how many kids were just misdiagnosed over the years, living with this condition that no one understood. I heard there's a team working out of Douglas Hospital in Montreal that's searching through medical records to try to find the earliest cases—apparently there's an account from the 1980s of a factory worker with permanent aphasia who led a relatively normal life in a small town near Ottawa. I'm willing to bet there are others, but the year we conducted the study definitely had the flavor of an epidemic. Maybe *epidemic* is too strong a word,

but you get the picture. Cases started showing up across the country. It hadn't really broken to the press in a big way at that point, but the mental health community was, I remember, starting to become obsessed.

How it started was, Dr. Reyes had noticed these clusters of otherwise normal kids who seemed to have a total language impairment. They weren't on the autistic spectrum, they had normal motor development, and aside from the obvious developmental delays from the language impairment they seemed to hit all of the baseline cognitive markers for children of their age. She was interested in finding out whether there was a pattern to this oddball phenomenon. I was brought in, because at the time I was the only nurse practitioner in the Houston metro area who had experience with the Hoekman tracking device. The Hoekman is a STEM imaging helmet that can capture neural activity footage at six hundred frames per second, which allows you to get an incredibly detailed look at the whole human head in situ. You can watch a subject examine an object and see exactly what areas of the brain are processing that information. So we fitted the kids with Hoekmans and had them sit at a table in the exam room. We brought in one of their parents and had them sit across from the child. They would greet the child and ask whether it was day or night—you know, just an easy question, to see if the kids were processing the utterances as language or as pure sound. Then the parent would sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and ask the child to sing along. Again, just to see what happened when the question was posed.

What we found was fascinating. The Hoekman showed us that there was a dramatic spike in neural activity in the areas of the temporal lobe where we process sounds and recognize faces, but almost no activity whatsoever in the perisylvian region, where speech is received and produced. Usually, even with a developmentally disabled kid, you'd see activity there. You'd see them trying to parse the

language of the voice they heard. But the kids in our study showed no activity, even though the tissue was completely healthy. Even though there was nothing else about their brain that would cause this type of inactivity. It was almost like part of their brain had been unplugged from birth.

Once the condition had been identified, we began forming coalitions with other early-identifier doctors around the country. Avula in Richmond, Burnham in Belmont, Yu in New Haven, all sharing case studies. The data was exhaustive, but no matter how much analysis we did on the brain scans and the behavioral surveys, we couldn't answer the real question, the one the parents were afraid to even ask: Why? Why them, why their kids, why this? And just behind that: What did I do wrong? They didn't want to ask, which was a secret relief to us, because we had no clear idea.

Meanwhile, the parents formed coalitions of their own, support groups that met regularly outside of the study sessions. They weren't going to wait around for us to provide the solutions. They invited me to one of their meetings and I went because I felt I owed it to them. It wasn't at all what I expected. There were about thirty parents in the room—almost all of whom were taking part in our study—and they all took turns getting up in front of the group and projecting home video footage of their kids. Most of the footage was from before the diagnosis. Really normal stuff—toddlers on swings, kids running around the beach or sitting at the table mashing food with a plastic fork. If you didn't know what was going on with these kids, you might not notice anything unusual. But we could all see the signs hiding in plain sight. The absence of even babbling, the staring, the frequent disengagement—all of it was as clear as day once you knew what you were looking for.

The parent showing the footage would narrate, you know, "This is Joanie—I thought she was just shy." And the other