

It was a small class. And special.

There were only five youngsters, three girls and two boys, their ages ranging from six to eleven. Dr Martin had his hands full with them, but in one respect at least they gave him no worries: he had no need to discipline them. Peace reigned unchallenged in the classroom. It was so quiet that at times Dr Martin actually longed for a little commotion, some kind of unruly unrest. But all he received from his wards was silence.

They sat silently at their low desks, physically present but mentally absent, detached—worse than that: unattached. They were wrapped in an almost impenetrable autistic shell—certainly, one with no shortcut leading through it. Were there a path, to trace it would require endless patience, heroic kindness and attention on a grand scale—not that even these could guarantee success.

Although he liked to regard himself as a teacher, Dr Martin was truly no such thing. He never taught his pupils anything; nor did he test them, or even talk to them. He did address them, of course, but he could never be certain that they took in any of his words. There was rarely any reaction; when there was, it was enigmatic.

Even so, something was emanating from those five closed, inaccessible worlds. It was hard to understand, but at least it existed. When Dr Martin had first given the children blank sheets of paper and pencils, he had done so with no great expectations. It was simply part of the standard program. First he had shown them how to use the pencils, which took a wearisome time. Even more time and

persistence had been required to persuade them to use them for spontaneous self-expression. The final result was certainly disproportionate to the effort it had cost, but this was true of every aspect of work with these children.

Ana, the oldest but also the smallest in the group, with a face dominated by extremely large eyes, was the first to master the skill of freestyle drawing on paper. She held the pencil in a white-knuckled grip, but her movements were quick, short and nimble. She filled sheet after sheet, but Dr Martin never saw any of her productions. Should he approach her as she drew her densely cross-hatched lines, she would quickly turn the paper over to prevent him from looking at it. When she decided that a drawing was finished, she would start to tear it up. She did this with geometric precision, first in half, then in quarters, and so on until her desk was piled with tiny squares of grey confetti. These she would carefully sweep into the pocket of her smock, taking them with her at the end of class. Dr Martin never learned what she did with them.

Sofia was a plump nine-year-old with a round, pimply face which she bent over the desktop because she was very near-sighted. She drew only on the edges of the paper, leaving the middle untouched. She filled this narrow frame with curving lines of surprising accuracy. They were snaking waves, spirals and open loops that never crossed or touched each other, creating a complicated tangle reminiscent of fingerprints. She would interrupt her work occasionally and stare for a long time at what she had drawn. In the end she would hand her work to Dr Martin with a grimace in which he thought he recognized a shy smile.

Alex, a tall, thin ten-year-old with unruly hair and glasses that were usually halfway down his nose, didn't draw anything. He scribbled over the paper with broad, nervous movements, helter-skelter, until there was not the slightest bit of white left. Then he would turn the paper over and continue on the other side. The sides of his hands were constantly smudged with graphite, and he often broke his

pencil. Once filled, the papers no longer interested him. He would push them aside or crumple them and throw them on the floor. He paid no attention when Dr Martin came to pick them up.

Maria was a dark-skinned, slightly cross-eyed girl of eight with a harelip. She always flinched when Dr Martin gently addressed her, and never changed pieces of paper. From the beginning she had drawn the same complicated design in which a certain regularity could be discerned, although nothing was recognizable. She worked slowly, spending considerable time on details which she constantly embellished, while adding new ones. Sometimes she would mutter, quietly and inarticulately, as if talking to someone in the drawing whom only she could see. During the two months that the drawing class had lasted, she had filled barely half of her first sheet of paper.

Philip, the youngest pupil in the class, had weak capillaries in his nose, so from time to time his nose would bleed spontaneously. If Dr Martin was slow to notice this, a red spot would spread over the paper in front of the boy. Philip was not bothered by the blood and paid no attention to it; he was completely devoted to his unvarying work of drawing endless rows of little circles on both sides of the paper. His hand was unsteady so the rows were rarely horizontal, and the little circles would gradually get smaller or larger, often distorting into ovals. He would put the completed sheets on the side of his desk next to the blank sheets, paying no attention to Dr Martin should he take any of them away.

The drawing program did not call for music, but did not preclude it either. Dr Martin reached gratefully for the idea, once it occurred to him, as relief from the oppressive silence to which he could never acclimatise. There could surely be no harm in some quiet but tuneful composition. It might even have an invigorating effect on his pupils. One never knew—although, of course, one should never allow one's hopes to become too buoyant.

The choice was biased. Dr Martin brought his favourite CD from

home: Chopin's second piano concerto in F minor, opus 21. It had the effect of a sedative, although not in the least like those that rendered you numb and insensitive; rather it was calming, making one tranquil and receptive to those vibrations of reality that one might easily miss in an ordinary mood.

When he listened to Chopin alone at home, Dr Martin always closed his eyes. That would be improper here in the classroom, but a twinge of disappointment got the better of him. He watched the children for a few moments after the concerto started, secretly hoping for some sort of sign that they were at least aware of the sound of the piano and orchestra, but there was none. The five youngsters sat there, engrossed in their usual drawing, as if their ears had been plugged with wax, as if completely untouched by the harmony that so enchanted the teacher. Dr Martin had been plagued by doubts about his work before; there had been moments when it seemed archetypally futile. But he had never before plumbed the depths of such despair. He closed his eyes to remove himself from the scene, if only for a moment.

The first movement, *maestoso*, was already well under way by the time the music at last suppressed the rising tide of rancour within him. He realized that he was actually being unfair to his unfortunate wards. He had greatly overestimated them. Of course they were insensitive to Chopin, just as they were to many other, far less complex joys freely available in the world from which they had withdrawn. It could not be otherwise, as he should have known. He should not have expected miracles.

He opened his eyes and looked at the children in front of him. There was no change: the same bodily positions, the same movements of five pencils on paper. He put out his hand to turn off the player. He could have let the concerto play to the end, for it wasn't bothering anyone, but it suddenly seemed senseless for him to go on listening to it by himself. Yet his finger never reached the stop button; just then he noticed that there had been a change, after all. And he was to

blame. Had he not closed his eyes, irrationally and improperly, for several minutes, he would have noticed Philip's nosebleed.

By the time his rapid strides brought him to the boy, almost one-third of the sheet, tirelessly filled with little circles, was stained red. It was a distressing sight, though it represented no real danger. The bleeding could easily be stanchd by inserting a piece pulled from a cotton-wool ball into Philip's left nostril, and Dr Martin always kept a supply to hand with just that in mind. The young boy did not object. He obediently put his head back, as so many times before, and patiently awaited what came next.

After wiping Philip's mouth and chin with a tissue, and mopping up the remains of the gushing blood, Dr Martin picked up the damp paper and wiped off the desktop with another cotton ball. Then he took a new sheet from the pile in the corner and put it in front of the boy. He was just about to crumple the paper and throw it away when his eyes strayed briefly to what was written. The red film covered something which should not have been there at all.

Dr Martin had never even tried to teach his young pupil how to write numbers. It simply would not have been worth it. Even normal six-year-old boys have trouble with them, and it was out of the question for autistic children of that age. Nonetheless, here was a long row of numbers, covered by the blood from his nosebleed. There was no interruption to set them apart. The circles suddenly stopped and numbers appeared in their place. Three rows of numbers once again gave way to little circles, except that now they all looked like zeroes. The numbers were not written very skilfully either, but they were easy to recognize, even so.