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FICTION

THE TEACHER

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It was the girls who first brought him here. I call them “girls” because of their girlish temperaments, though they were almost middle-aged. Maeve was by far the more emotional of the two, with a habit of turning her pale-blue eyes upward like a saint or a martyr. Betty was sturdier, with a square muscular body to anchor them both. They shared an old house in the town, one of those run-down, peeling places that smell of mold inside. During the two or three years I had known them, their goodness had made them take up several needy causes in the town: pregnant teens, abandoned families, boys caught stealing for drugs. One time, they sheltered a suspected sex offender, which made them very unpopular; when he turned out to be guilty, they remained unrepentant, unshaken in the faith that they had done the right thing.

They worked at home to make their living. Maeve typed documents on a computer; Betty read manuscripts for a publisher. That was how they had first met Dr. Chacko, by way of his manuscript, which he had submitted for publication. Betty’s own publisher had been too conventional to understand it, and so had several others she had tried. She decided that the appearance of the manuscript may have been at fault—it seemed to be the product of a very old typewriter, with some letters too faded to read. So, in her spare time, Maeve had copied the entire work onto her computer; it was more than seven hundred pages when printed out, but she was as inspired as Betty, and it became their cause, along with Dr. Chacko himself.

They tried to explain his work to me, and it made them laugh that I didn’t understand it. It was so simple, they said—it was life itself, life and death—which I said didn’t sound all that simple to me. For them, they admitted, it was not the work but Dr. Chacko himself who was difficult to understand. But wasn’t it always like that, with rare human beings? They tried to describe him to me, but they couldn’t even say what nationality he was. They had taken him for an Italian, a Sicilian, until they discovered that he was partly Indian, the name Chacko coming from a Syrian Christian community in the south of India. They thought he was also partly Russian—or had he only lived in Russia? He had travelled to many distant places, but it was in England that he had started his first workshop. This had been dissolved, and so had some subsequent ones elsewhere; now they had high hopes for the workshop they had helped him start in New York City, about two hours away from our town upstate.

In the meantime, they were searching for a suitable place for him to live. Accommodation had been found in a partly converted loft in the city, but he longed for trees, open sky, water, if possible, and so, for his sake, did the girls. I knew what they had in mind. I lived by myself in my house; it was set in several acres of ground and had a separate cottage, which was unoccupied. The girls knew that I had been left alone here after ten years of what I had considered a satisfactory marriage, and in proposing Dr. Chacko for my cottage they were also hoping, I suspected, to relieve my loneliness. What they didn’t know was that solitude had come to seem natural and pleasant to me. Of course, it had been different once,

when my husband and I came here only at weekends with carloads of guests. That was before a cluster of modest homes had been built up to the back of the property—not for visitors from the city but for residents with jobs in the town, which itself had crept closer, with a diner and a Realtor’s office. The place was no longer such a getaway for the people who had been our friends, and maybe still were his and his young wife’s.



“My favorite part of being a stay-at-home-mom is when they’re at school.”

I’m not sure now why I agreed to let Dr. Chacko move into the cottage. I have a memory of him riding past on his bicycle, but it has merged with so many later memories of him and his bicycle. It was a very old model, held together here and there with string, and not quite big enough for him, so that it wobbled as he rode. I think it was this sight—of a thin gray-haired man mounted on an inadequate nag—that made me give in. He moved in the same afternoon. I had been using the cottage as a sort of storage dump, so there were some old pieces of furniture in there, which the girls helped him rearrange. Afterward, they came up to the house to assure me that I had done a good deed for which I would receive great reward. I assumed they meant that Dr. Chacko’s proximity itself would be rewarding. But I had already begun to worry that he might visit me more often than I wished, and try to impose his philosophy or his mission on me, or whatever it was that had made the girls admire him so extravagantly.

This fear turned out to be unfounded. I saw him only when he rode past the house on his bicycle, presumably on his way to the train station. The girls had told me that the members of the workshop in the city paid his fare, plus a small fee. That appeared to be his only source of income while everyone waited for his manuscript to be published and make him famous. Meanwhile, the girls brought meals for him every day in little covered dishes, waving to me as they drove past in their pickup. So his presence really should not have disturbed me—except that it did. Maybe because I had grown used to being alone on the property, or because the thought of him working in the cottage, as the girls told me he did, refining and extending his ideas, gave the place a sort of potency. It was at some distance from the house and shielded from it by a mass of old trees, but the fact that it was invisible only increased its hold on my imagination.

ILLUSTRATION: BALINT ZSAKO

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