

Fiction

“Rabbit’s Retreat”

RAJIVA WIJESINHA

HE WAS CALLED the Rabbit because he was short and stout, and when he was nervous his nose used to twitch. He was nervous very often. I don’t think he liked teaching older boys, but he was the best teacher of English left in the whole school, and when all our boys failed the subject at “A” Level one year, he was brought in to teach us grammar. We all thought it would be boring but it wasn’t. He loved the subject, and even if he didn’t always succeed, he tried to make us love it too. I suppose that’s at least half way enough to making a good teacher.

Even at literature he was better than the large lethargic lady who was supposed to teach it. The college, an Anglican establishment founded by very earnest missionaries over a hundred years ago, didn’t like having ladies teach the most senior students. But by now it had become inevitable since male graduates wouldn’t come for the salaries available. Rabbit was just a loyal old boy who hadn’t gone very far; he was not a graduate, so he was only meant to stick to grammar, but he was certainly much better all round than the lazy woman. She used to make us read everything out loud to the bitter end, whether we understood what we were reading or not, and then she herself read out, from a dog-eared volume, a tedious note that we were supposed to copy and learn by heart. Rabbit on the other hand would read exciting passages which he introduced beforehand, rumbunctious verse and dramatic prose, ostensibly for comprehension but really I think to let us share the enthusiasm and the excitement he had experienced himself through such passages in his distant youth. His nose twitched a lot at such times, but he ploughed on bravely and his slightly husky voice even became resonant as he threw himself

into his role. There were other things of course for us to be excited about at that age, but occasionally he would succeed in rousing one or two boys and then he would be happy.

He always paid particular attention to the Burghers, the mixed, occasionally white, descendants of the European colonists. We had noticed this before when we were young but had put it down then to favouritism because they were better at their English. Now we thought we knew the real reason, and we found it funny, but we certainly didn't mind. Most of us had been through that sort of period ourselves, for more or less extended and more or less serious periods, and if Rabbit was still stuck in the same groove, it was nothing to get worked up about. In fact, we felt sorry for him because the number of Burghers had been decreasing rapidly over the years as they emigrated to Australia to escape increasing nationalism. More experienced ourselves by now, we felt it was high time he began to branch out.

Not that Rabbit ever actually did anything, or ever allowed himself to be caught out in any obviously untoward behaviour. At the very most, he could be unexpectedly petulant if a particular favourite failed to produce an essay on time. There was a story, but only one, that on a trip with the Wildlife Society he had, in drawing Lawrence's attention to a bird, kept his arm around his shoulder for a suspiciously long time. That, however, might have been purely accidental. It was the sort of thing that happened to Lawrence all the time, and he himself claimed indignantly that he had been totally engrossed in the bird and had noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

Lawrence of course would not have admitted it even if he had. His whole life was spent, incongruously in the light of his personal appearance, in attempting to conform to a vision of himself as a mature and masculine character. It was not surprising that when the lazy woman finally left and was replaced by a real *English* English teacher, he was the first to fall hopelessly in love with her. Most of the class followed soon after. Being more sensible, I did not, but it was certainly very understandable: she was a wonderful person for us to have, and a great change from anyone we had experienced before.

She was called Jenny Grundig, which made us think at first that the Principal had gone even madder than usual and got a

German to teach us English, but that turned out to be only her husband. He was working on some project in Colombo, and they had taken a house near the school, and she had wanted to keep herself occupied. From the first, she insisted on hard work, numerous essays, and informed and intelligent, as she stressed, discussions in the classroom, and after very little resistance, she got what she wanted. It was not that she was beautiful, but in a rather sharp way she was attractive, and in a rather sharp way too she could also be devastating if you did not respond to either her demands or her attractions. Lawrence was the first to suffer, and he took it like a lamb and promptly buckled down to work and adoration. Soon after that we were all concentrating harder than we had done for years.

From the first, she and Rabbit got on very well. He was shy but she ignored that, and he always followed wherever and whenever anyone led. Furthermore, she treated him with more apparent respect than I think anyone had done for a long time. Like all of us, she decided early on that the Principal was quite beyond the pale. We had no Vice-Principal at the time, and Rabbit was meant to be next in line because of seniority. But no-one had previously treated him as a figure of authority, least of all the Principal, who made no bones about the fact that he had despised the poor twitching creature. Jenny, however, managed to be both protective and respectful somehow, and the Rabbit bloomed beneath her attention. There was one memorable moment when the Principal sent a message through a boy that his wife had complained that the noise from our class was disturbing her, and that Rabbit should stop it forthwith. Jenny was with him when the message arrived, and she positively exploded, and was wonderfully rude, almost for us to hear, about interfering harridans and inconsequential old men. Rabbit simpered and tried to stop her, his nose twitching madly, but it was clear to everyone that he was having the time of his life.

Jenny, however, would probably have restrained her remarks had she not by now made up her mind that she would be leaving. I think she enjoyed teaching our class but lower down, she had said to Rabbit, who occasionally discussed such matters with us, that there was no coherent plan of work and she found it

impossible to teach without one. She had fairly recently received a diploma in teaching, and she obviously found unendurable the chaotic confusion through which we had cheerfully survived so far. She was nice to us about it, but she made it clear that she would not be returning the following term.

Rabbit did not come back either. In the course of the holidays, friends living near them told us that Jenny and her husband did not seem to be getting on too well. Then it turned out that they had never been married at all. The next we heard was that Jenny had married Rabbit—a church ceremony naturally for he was a devout Anglican, but quietly and without a fuss. We were astonished but being boys we took it all philosophically and wrote altogether to wish them well. We said that we would miss them both, and we meant both that and our fervent good wishes most sincerely.

We got a charming note back inviting us to drop in on them if we were passing by. Rabbit came from an area just beyond Galle, and they were going off there to set up a guest-house. We heard of them on and off after that from members of staff, and once Rabbit even dropped in to see us on a visit to Colombo. He seemed happier than he had been for years, and the business was apparently thriving and their buildings expanding under Jenny's efficient management. Lawrence affected to be slightly dubious about the whole business, but I told him he had no call to be jealous.

It was a year or two later that I came across a small item in the papers, to the effect that the police had had to raid the establishment. A few foreigners and some of the local fisher boys were to be charged with the making of an indecent film. There was no mention that the proprietors of the premises were in any way involved.

Thinking about it later, I found it difficult to believe that Jenny would not have been aware of anything and everything that was going on under her charge. But I reflected that the important thing was that Rabbit should continue to be happy. Despite this little disturbance, I was somehow convinced that, with him under Jenny's expert management, there was no need to worry about him.