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# The Outsider (*Er*)

## A Short Story by Jacob H. Janzen

Translated from the German  
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From the beginning he was always an enigma. He still is. He was born, got married, and died. That's all that people will say about him when he's dead and buried. Many people will say that, but they will be unfair to him. It's true that he married not one wife, but two, not at the same time, to be sure. No. First one and then the other. And then, in the second place, it could truthfully be said of him that from the time he was born until now his life has been undistinguished.

I must admit that. He never particularly distinguished himself. With perhaps one exception nothing really extraordinary ever happened to him. Throughout his youth, until he reached middle age, he lived a quiet and uneventful life.

Even in school his dreamy, quiet behavior earned for him the nickname, "Philosopher." The other students teased him a great deal at first, but very soon they left him alone because their teasing didn't bother him. He always reacted to others with a calm smile. These encounters resulted in a friendly, although somewhat distant relationship. Now, as then, melancholy is his prevailing mood. He was always friendly and polite to all. I'm not sure that he ever developed a particular love for anyone.

Never a superior student, he nevertheless did his homework diligently, carefully, and accurately. While he was still very young, he became a teacher in one of our Mennonite village schools in the Russian Ukraine. His pupils loved him for his friendly serenity. His quiet steady progress assured him success in his work.

I can't say whether he felt particularly happy. If he did, he carried his happiness deep within, reflecting it in an odd way. He watched the merry, innocent children's games with a smile. If they were mischievous,

or if one of the little ones had an accident, a rueful shadow passed over his friendly face with the blue dreamy eyes.

With those eyes he led his children. When he became sad, all the children tried by their love to bring back his smile. He rarely punished his students. His most severe reprimand was to tell them, "I don't believe that you love me." Then his melancholy look would sink deep into their souls. He enjoyed the universal respect and love of the parents of his students and of his employers. Twice, within a short time, they raised his salary.

Early in life he married a woman who loved him sincerely and passionately. She was the daughter of a farmer from the village in which he taught. All who knew the shapely young woman with dark eyes and black hair considered her a beauty.

Their marriage was happy. Within a short time, they had three children, the first of which died very young. His wife cried. She could not forget her dead darling.

He remained quiet and friendly. No one would have noticed him if he had not called attention to himself on the day of the funeral in a somewhat remarkable way. When the women were preparing to dress the young boy in the usual funeral dress — a cheap white coat and several artificial flowers — he brought, completely unexpectedly, the boy's Sunday clothes. He pushed the women aside and dressed the body himself. Cutting blossoms from the houseplants and from the garden, he decorated the body of his darling child. Then he laid him in the coffin — not as it was usually done, on the back, but on the side. The boy's hand was pushed under his cheek. The little boy seemed to lie there in sweet, natural slumber.

"See how beautifully the boy sleeps!" he said to his wife. After a smiling but wistful glance at the little bed of the child, he allowed the coffin to be carried off and lowered into the grave.

For a long time the parents mourned their child. They mourned until the next child arrived, and his merry play comforted them.

What follows is certainly not a part of ordinary life.

He had traveled on official business to the principal town in the district to see the Inspector of Schools. After his visit, he set out on the journey home on the overcrowded train. Since there was no room inside the coaches, he settled on the open platform, put his feet on the steps of the car, and rode into the night. Over him arched the clear, starry sky, and the moon poured its mild silver light over the Steppes. In the distant horizon in the direction of his home lay thunder clouds from whose height mysterious lights exploded.

"At home they are still awake," he thought. Little Frieda is praying. "Beloved Savior, protect us." She emphasizes the "Sav." She has just learned to pronounce it correctly. Her fearful mother embracing her, she

is sitting on her mother's bed. Throughout the storm, little Otto sleeps peacefully in his cradle.

The teacher smiles at the thought of his good wife, always afraid during thunderstorms.

It makes very little difference whether a thousand Damocles' swords hang over the teacher, prepared to destroy him, or whether one more is added so that there are a thousand and one; this is all the more true since none of them will strike by blind chance but will be loosed only by the hand of Providence coming down at a predestined moment to end the joys and sufferings of a human being so that one cannot avoid fate either through tricks or through much-hoped-for good luck.

So he mused, while the train roared through the last part of the journey and stopped in front of the little depot in the middle of the immense flat steppes. From here it was only a little way in the cart; it was already daylight when he entered the streets of his rainy home village.

The small shaggy pony of his hired cart had barely turned down the village streets when he was stopped by an old man, one of his acquaintances.

"Where have you been, teacher?" he asked after an uneasy greeting.

"In the city," he answered calmly, waiting for what the old man had to say. The old man didn't seem to know exactly where to begin.

"Would you like to come with me into the house?" he asked. "I have something to discuss with you."

"Yes, but not right away," he answered. "I really have to go home first, to wash off the dust of the trip and eat something."

"Oh, you can do that at our house, perhaps better than at home. I urge you to come with me."

He shrugged his shoulders and slowly drove his cart into the old man's yard. He followed him into the room without laying anything aside. He wanted to do that at home. The business of the old man would not keep him too long.

"Now, what is it you want?" he asked.

"You see, when one travels for three or four days, all kinds of things can happen," the old man began with difficulty. His voice sounded uncertain.

"Yes?"

"Well, last night we had a violent thunderstorm and with it a serious accident."

"Don't you want to tell me what has happened?" he asked.

The old man's heart was torn; he would gladly have made the conversation as short as possible.

"Yes, we must bear everything patiently, because it is sent from God. Lightning struck the school."

"Has the school burned down?" he asked as he remained standing.

"Oh, if that were all," cried the old farmer. "No, it still stands. There is only a crack in the wall, but the lightning has killed your wife and Frieda."

"And where is Otto?"

"We found him early today sleeping peacefully near the dead and took him with us. He sleeps in the corner room."

Silently he went out. He did not cry.

All his life he had been enigmatic. He was enigmatic now. He found the dead still lying in his wife's bed. Sympathetic neighbors filled the house. His wife's parents were there also.

He paid no attention to anyone. Silently, with a melancholy smile, he fulfilled his obligations to his dead wife and child, refusing amiably but firmly every offer of help. He alone washed the cold sweat of death from their bodies and laid them in the bedroom.

One by one the neighbors left, and only his wife's parents remained. His wife's mother prepared coffee, which no one wanted to drink. Then he left to get a coffin.

He did not arrange a funeral with the obligatory coffee. Instead of the customary invitation on black bordered paper, he had a very simple note taken from house to house. It read: "Everyone who would like to see my wife and my little daughter to the grave is invited to the funeral which will take place tomorrow afternoon at 4 o'clock."

The next day, when the funeral guests gathered in the school room, they found the coffin with the two bodies ready for burial. The wife wore the black dress in which she had been baptized and married; a little cap covered her rich black hair. He, with Otto in his arms, stood nearby.

The pastor of the village, a venerable old man, preached a short sermon, and then mother and daughter were carried to the cemetery.

After the funeral he did not change. The utensils from the kitchen and cellar, now unnecessary, were stored in a small unheated room, and there they remained. He hired the people who cared for the school house to prepare his meals. He kept his son with him.

Since he didn't sell anything and didn't allow the child to leave, the community decided immediately that he would follow the usual custom and after several months marry again. Every house was open to him, and many women would gladly have given him their hand. But it was five years before he married the second time. Until then the kitchen utensils remained undisturbed in the store room.

On a walking tour which he made through the colonies on his vacation, he visited the village where he had held his first teaching position. Here he found her. Years ago she had been his most cherished pupil. He remembered exactly how he had once said, "I don't believe that you love me."

Then her large child's eyes had looked at him with an unspeakably pitiful expression. Her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. Finally she sobbed: "Please beat me, punish me if you want, but I love you very much." Then she threw her arms around him and did not let go until he convinced her that he believed her.

Now she stood before him an accomplished, beautiful nineteen-year-old. He held her hand in his and she looked up at him. Again, the words came back to him: "Punish me if you want; only believe that I love you with all my heart."

Then, perhaps for the first time, he experienced a great, incomprehensible, once-in-a-lifetime happiness.

She became his second wife and the unused dishes, tubs, and kettles were put to use once more. Sunshine came into his life; he smiled happily.

His happiness did not last long. Both good fortune and glass are brittle. After two years she too was carried to the grave. On this occasion he spared no expense. She was buried in the clothes that looked best on her.

Today he is again the old man with the serene, melancholy smile. He lives in his school and raises his son, who has already grown to be a handsome, lively lad.

"How have you managed," I once asked, "to accept everything so calmly?"

He threw my question back at me. "What do you expect?" he smiled. "Am I not happy? I have been allowed in this dark world to taste intoxicating happiness. That's enough for me. It is not necessary to drain the whole glass of wine in order to enjoy it. Not in pleasure and receiving but rather in devotion to others and in fulfillment of our duties do we find happiness — and true happiness is inconspicuous and silent."