

Idyll for Old Men

Klapschies is hungry. Why actually? He has nothing to do, he is old, the oldest man on the estate. He has his maintenance, which doesn't stretch very far, but nevertheless as far as eating yourself full, and he has employment too at the hay harvest, guiding the large rake or at the covering business — not horses any more, just the oxen now; there is many a thing to attend to with the cattle, time of day and day of the week, mustn't be any thunderstorm in the area either; the fencing wire round the steed garden is more reliable than a barometer. But that's certainly not everything, and whatever he turns his hands to he makes a good job of. Klapschies knows that. When he talks about that people listen to him all right.

Klapschies gets up every morning at five.

Else I can't eat five times, can I? Man is set limits.

And now Klapschies is hungry. That is a feeling. You could literally describe it, how it comes up. Just that the wife isn't there. Gone to get berries. Blueberries. Evening time a little bowlful with milk and sugar.

Of course you can fetch yourself something from the pantry. But the husband takes his nourishment from the hand of the wife, that's the way it is, and so Klapschies now goes around with his feeling. And herding feelings, out or in, when it's dusk, in — that means into the parlor, when it's light, out — that means past the smithy, along the street, turn off down at Mill Mountain, to the sub-farm. Quite a pretty road. Over there sand and towards Lasvehlen clay, and here not too sandy and not too clayey. After the rain the water stands almost an hour and afterwards the road is firm and dry. Like the *alphalt* on the highway, maybe even better, at least not so black. And on the one side elder bushes and on the other the ditch, a pretty road. For vehicles and for cycling. Like on the highway. Last autumn they were steam-rolling, stank all right.

This is how you can talk to yourself, step-wise, and every once in a while stand still, look at the feeding-turnips, behind them there's nothing more, only rye. But because

Klapschies is on the *alphast* again for the second time, the rolls dawn on him and whether the wife will remember to bring some along. Alphast, that's namely the baker's name in Laswehlen, for those who aren't aware of it. Klapschies is aware, and having gotten on to the idea from the black highway coating, which has the same name, but not quite, Klapschies is aware of this and his hunger even more so. Klapschies will have to get a move on. You know the way horses go when the oats are calling!

The sub-farm is called a nursery, but it isn't except that there are a lot of flowers there. Looks good and brings in nothing. Frau von Parbandt runs it, Frieda, Ferdinand von Parbandt's wife, and this Ferdinand is treasurer on the sub-farm, which is called a nursery and isn't. Just a lot of flowers and it brings in nothing. Looks good though, Klapschies thinks so too. And Frieda is in the garden, even if more among the parsley than among parma violets, Aaron's rods, columbine, mignonette.

Klapschies doesn't linger by the fence. Well Frieda, and: 'Ready at the flowers again huh? That's all, and even that just flung over the fence; and on the way to the gate back over his shoulder: Is the old man at home?

Frieda straightens up. She props herself up with her left hand, draws her right knee for-

ward and then the other, and when she's standing she rubs her hands off on a hunk of weed, smooths out her apron, stoops once more and lifts up her headscarf. Herr von Parbandt is at home, she says, busy writing. She takes the hoe, and sets herself in motion.

Von Parbandt. A story, long time back. A Fräulein von Parbandt lost her pants there at the harvest festivities and didn't know where and didn't say anything. That's where Ferdinand came from, always been better than other people, but then again not so very much better. Grew up in the Rotstein orphanage or whatever you want to call that, where otherwise only the extramarital progenies of the Rotstein Count — the acknowledged, recallable — were accommodated, instructed by a tutor, cooked for by the former castle stewardess, sewed for and patched up by two old women, all under the eyes of Parson Tiresomeness and his sister. The Count is dead, the institute doesn't exist any more, but this Herr von Parbandt does, and that he's busy writing won't matter to Klapschies, writin' is more something for teachers — grown man, this here Parbandt. So Klapschies goes into the house, all the same he leaves the clods outside the door, unbuttons the jacket though before he sits down on the window-seat, places his cap next to him. Day, Ferdinand.

Ferdinand stays seated. He raises his head, squints a bit towards the window, as usual stretches his lower jaw forward, and since Klapschies doesn't say anything, just sits there like usual, it dawns on him again that he's busy writing. The settling of the first hay to Ragnit, to the military, ready cash so to speak. But Klapschies is sitting there now, so he pushes the slips of paper together, picks up the broad carpenter's pencil and sticks it into the dried-out inkwell, lifts the pencil out of the little bottle, and there hangs the fly.

I'm hungry, you know. Klapschies means business. The sentence sounds almost dangerous.

I'll tell her. With that Parbandt rises. Klapschies also rises. And hears while he's getting up how Frieda grumbles about in the kitchen: What'm I goin' to make anyway — couple a eggs. But that's not right, so Klapschies marches to the kitchen door and expounds there his view concerning the alimentation of man, in particular of the male, by means of eggs, more or less to the effect that eggs choke. In other words something else. Something salted down and Frieda's own homemade beer, that's better, also quicker, and outside under the maple.

The round table the men are sitting at is one of the many round tables in the area,

which all descend from one and the same tree. Three years ago the oak behind the estate granary was chopped down and then simply one slice after the other sawed off, each a table top. Such German oaks, hearty and enduring like the plague. The Parson had given a sermon about it, the congregation should be guided by this miracle of faith and constancy, they should saw off a spiritual slice, when the proper ones had already been distributed and the tree all gone.

As soon as the first hunger is chased off they'll talk of this and that. Things is all right, O.K.! says Klapschies. Parbandt always asks something of the sort, a melancholic to a certain extent. Gets up and goes to the cemetery without any reason and sometimes in the evening gets on Frieda's nerves with exact particulars about how he fancies his grave. Bit of hedge, sixteen inches high, bearberry and the mound with border, at the head a small tree, red maple for all I care. No especially outlandish wishes, but you've got to check yourself once he's started on about it. First die, says Frieda, the rest'll take care of itself. She goes away quickly, finds what to do.

But now Klapschies has to go home, the wife is probaby back. Blueberries. A little dish. And the rolls too that she'll have brought along from Alphast.

That guy has got a car, Ferdinand says and stands at the gate, landlord Cheese-worm's old Studebaker. Crazy guy, that Alphast. And what the hell for! Klapschies has heard about it too. The old man is like a shadow, leaps over the fence and he's on the other side.

Thus ends a conversation among men. They know life from early morning till late evening and have seen the world from Ragnit to Darkehmen, in between training camp Arys, anno 'seventeen Flanders, Wytshaete-Bend, anno 'twenty-eight Insterburg, horse tournaments.

So the visit began with hunger and ends now with an appetite for blueberries and Laswehlen rolls and is a pause in man's endless soliloquy; about feelings when the world is bright and man is satisfied without knowing why.

For all I care, Klapschies says, every dog does his own mess, meaning Alphast's stupidity, but then after all, more the Laswehlen rolls the wife'll have certainly brought back. And with these thoughts he reaches the village and the smithy. There's Allisat shouting inside, and lanky Hermann Siebert comes out and says: Just keep your trap shut. So Allisat knows something and straightway Klapschies gets to hear it. The Spirit of Truth has sold his heifer.

Cows don't wear any shoes, least not till now, and the few cow chains, not much for a smith. Hermann sends him packing and goes in again. Disappointing for Allisat, who lives someway out of the village, and who has to spend quite a bit to keep up with the latest on time and footwear, but also on schnapps and beer, in other words a pretty penny, which the wife doesn't know about, or so you imagine as a man.

What man stands talking on the street, in front of the door anyway? Sit down comfortably, then the thoughts come, but even then not right away. So — the heifer.

I knows, said Klapschies. That'll be worth two beers, while walking Allisat considers what this guy knows, and in front of Find-eisen's Red Jug — Groceries, Inn, Hotel, Banquet Halls, *Gartenetablissement* — he says: Well whaddaya say. One on me.

In broad daylight, says Klapschies reprov-ingly and goes in at once in front of Allisat. So the Spirit of Truth's heifer. I knows, Klapschies says for the second time now loudly, for now they're sitting there in the yellow room next to the tap room, where the pocket billiards is. Prince Heinrich in Admiral's uniform is hanging on the wall above it, blue and gold, and on the frame below Find-eisen has tacked up a cardboard sign saying: *Use 10 pfennigs.*

That the heifer is good for nothing, nothing at all, is the first thing Allisat learns, and that such wheelchair cattle should be slaughtered and not be fed long in the first place. Didn't use to be like that. And because Allisat, shoving his beer up and down the table seemed to doubt this, he once more says firmly and candidly: No, it didn't.

Now it's not just a matter of any heifer. Just you keep quiet, says Allisat, and in that same moment a thin hoary voice is heard from the tap room, not strong, but piercing, and a wizened old man, white goatee, white hair parted in the middle, steps into the room with short paces.

Allisat immediately stands up. Good day, Reverend, did you sell the heifer? Yes, says the Pastor, I've got rid of my cow for a good price.

With God's help, says Allisat and knows too what the heifer brought, for the Pastor as well as for dealer Fröhlich, because the animal was already sold again within an hour.

O come thou Spirit of Truth, descend to us. The Parson's favorite hymn, he has it sung every Sunday, the children have to learn it, and so that's where he's got his name from, and now he himself is here, in broad daylight in Findeisen's yellow guest room, that's almost the limit definitely, the end to

all Klapschies' talk and his trying to bewilder a pious person such as Allisat.

In this manner the Spirit of Truth descends, even for Klapschies: Klapschies rises likewise and says likewise: Good day, Reverend. But the devil still has him in its clutches, because Klapschies also says: Did you at least chisel him?

Old people are without respect towards others, they know life, and Klapschies still has his merits, even if not with the horses anymore, at least still with the cows, but he never had anything to do with heifers like the one the Spirit of Truth has just sold, at that point the spirits really do part.

But why quarrel? Klapschies scratches his neck and sits down again. And then in his customary tone the Spirit of Truth says: I may invite you gentlemen to a little glass, mayn't I?

Schnapps in broad daylight. So he really did chisel Fröhlich, no other explanation, even for Findeisen who carries the glasses in himself on the round tray. And to crown it all Fröhlich comes in and doesn't look at all chiseled and straightway calls out for the next round, fine man, this Fröhlich. But Satan still has Klapschies by the scruff of the neck, he's got to scratch himself anew. None the less he just managed to keep back what was on the tip of his tongue, because Allisat

looked him in the eyes like a cornflower without water. Without waiting Klapschies just says cheers and knocks back his schnapps, he's got to do something, and it doesn't disturb him that Herr Fröhlich is a bit astonished. Still the jaunty artillerist, says Fröhlich, always up and at 'em.

Why doesn't the old twister shut up, thinks Klapschies and suddenly notices, first in the ears, but then all the way down into his stomach too, that it must be dinner time. Suddenly it all dawns on him: the Laswehlen rolls and that the wife'll be home and then the blueberries. He says: Great Caesar's Ghost, draws himself up on the table so that the glasses tumble topsy-turvy and notices that something's wrong with his legs, with both of them at any rate with the backs of his knees, but because the Parson says: But Herr Klapschies! and Fröhlich is talking about Firing Position and Keep a steady eye, he straightens out his leg, steers clear of the table over to the door, where he lunges out with his left arm and manages to grab his cap from the hook, and because nothing crosses his mind he goes out without a word.

Got his slips full, says Allisat afterwards, but because that's not quite what is expected of Allisat the Parson says: Never you mind, Herr Allisat. And Fröhlich just calls over to Findeisen: D'ya see'm, Eddie?

But now, home. And where's the dignity, Klapschies? Gone a good fifty yards and knees still rickety. Isn't going to get any better either. Up top yes, but not in the legs. Careful, Klapschies.

That's the encouragement of a man and it helps. As Klapschies comes by the District Overseer's, sitting now, as every day, on his veranda having coffee, that is as a civilian, and on the point of speaking to Klapschies, Klapschies feels strong. Just you be quiet, you infernal three-toed baboon, he says hinting therewith at the District Overseer's short leg, and because he's actually past the veranda he stands still, turns around and shouts back: Spiwok's gonna get you!

Just let this gentleman sit with his coffee, pondering why people like Klapschies are so gross. He can sit there a hundred years and still not understand them.

And then Klapschies is home. Opens up the door, sees the wife standing in the kitchen, hears her greeting, which runs: About time, too.

That on top of it all. Now, at home, where the husband can hang his dignity on the door hook because he doesn't need it at all, and just when he's not feeling good, when his hunger, with all its stowed-up might, had descended upon him afresh right in front of the house.

Klapschies flings his cap on the table. He sags down onto a chair and says bitterly: That's a fine way to greet me. Husband comes home sick . . .

A vile coughing stops him from going on. Klapschies lays his head down on the table, notices that there's a hole in the oil cloth, points to it with his thumb and deeply moved falls asleep.

Matters of importance, hunger after rolls and blueberries, trade in bad cattle, the life people carry on with one another. You talk a lot when the day is long, it all has a place, the years, morning, evening, summer, winter. When death comes it takes off its cap and says: Now don't turn over to the wall. And cabinetmaker Thetmeyer comes afterwards and takes the measurements.

It's better to have your own coffin in the attic, as is proper, and the linen ready in the press and the rue in the pot on the window.

