

Life and Death in the Chicory Kiln

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Soon as the hands reach nine o' the clock, Hutsebolle sees it. He straightens himself up and wriggles out of his shirt and trousers. The others know what that means; they rise to their feet and get ready. The farmer wishes them good evening and goes. Side by side, the three drying-men climb the stairs with their lantern, into the warm, odorous vapor that hits them like a hot fog. It smothers the light of the lantern till all that's left is a smoldering rag haloed in red; everything else is milky paste. Working by touch, they scoop, stir, and turn the greasy chicory with wooden casting-shovels, digging all the way down to the stone drying floor, and then spread it into an even layer with wooden rakes. Dripping with sweat and condensation, the men trudge out of the thick haze, into the hot air of the fires below, where they wipe their faces and put their clothes back on. The lantern, hung on the wall again, casts a shimmer of brightness into the middle of the room, but the depths and corners, and the shadowy peak of the roof, remain in velvet darkness. The three men take their usual spots: one in the stowage, the other on a heap of empty burlap sacks, and Fliepo, who is never at ease, on the lumps of coke. They wolf down their dinner. Now all is quiet in the kiln, the solemn quiet of the approaching night; the fires are glowing. The men seem to have no more to say to each other—as if they've become utter strangers. The rain patters; the wind gusts, ramming the loose iron gates, which make a ghastly rattle. It gives the men the comfortable feeling of being sheltered there from water and wind, their limbs cradled in the wholesome heat that fills every nook of the drying room.

How much time has passed?

On the far-off cobbled road, as the foul weather rages, the clapping of horses' hooves goes racing over the stones, making the farm dogs bark. (The young farmer, giving free rein to his appetites...) The whinnying of the wild stallion is heard for miles around, as brazen as the laughter of the reckless pursuer himself. (It's as if they can hear its breath, two mighty streams of air blasted through its nostrils.)

At a stroke, this sound summons up, in the mind's eye of all three drying-men, the tale of the young farmer's deeds; they survey his existence in a single flight: his promising childhood, the beginning he made in the middle, when he came home from school as a lad, still green, took up his place on the farm, and proved himself a man. From various directions and in different orders, the events come back to mind; each has his own opinion, which remains unspoken – they see no point in sharing their thoughts with each other; it's all old news. The father's plans went wrong from the start – though he clutched the reins ever so tight, things took a different turn, against his will. He'd

seen himself finding a wealthy farmer's daughter for his boy, from a respectable line, as distinguished as his own – and now here was the third lass meddled with on the farm and tossed out on the street in disgrace! A fine beginning for a boy from such a family – not to speak of the jokester's riotous antics away from home, which cost money to make good and keep quiet and in spite of that had earned him the reputation of skirt-stalker for miles around.

Hutsebolle thinks of last summer's rough music, nine days on end, people gathering in the farmyard every evening, the infernal racket of pots and kettles, snapped whips, crackers... He can still clearly hear the harsh wail of the slug-horn, calling down scorn and reproach upon everything around it – symbol of the wrath of the people, rendering their own justice. (Crazed with bitter remorse, in impotent rage, the old farmer had shot wildly into the crowd, and then brought in the gendarmes.) As if the old man had forgotten what he himself got up to as a colt! The old folks who saw it with their own eyes remember it well – what goes around comes around. Respectability grows with the years. Dry your tears, old farmer: once your boy's first fury has run its course, why shouldn't he marry some quick, rich girl of quality? Money straightens what's askew and makes a wise man of a fool. The jilted lasses are paid to hold their tongues, and even if those tongues do wag, who'll listen? They went looking for trouble, sought out their own shame – now they're carrying the can... Ain't a high-class farmer's daughter in this world would be scared off or spurn a rough-tough wanton like that one for no better reason than the high jinks of his youth – long as he brings her a big patch of soil and a chest of nails.

"Marriage'll fix that," mothers try to persuade their daughters. "Ah, you weak-kneed whimperer, just see you keep him on a short leash. That sort make the best husbands and fathers in the end!" Property and fortune turn those antics into a thing of the past – youthful indiscretions, they call them – give the young buck time to cool his hot blood, farmer – there's lineage in that lad! Later he'll be as dutiful as you are – he'll keep the farm respectable and free of high jinks, watch sternly over the lads and lasses, just as you do now – and when you're gone, he'll take your place on the church board... Everything in its season!

Fliepo tosses and turns in the murk, following the direction of the horse's clatter, trying to guess: where to tonight, whose turn this time? Knowing full well his thoughts and desires are sins against the ninth commandment, he keeps his hypocritical self in the dark. (Sinking his teeth into the particulars of what he's heard. In his mind's eye, the young lad grows into an Odin, riding a winged steed through the sky. Compared to that colossus, his own scrawny form is like a worm alongside God the Father.)

Blomme's thoughts trace every angle of the farmer's wife's stinginess. (If the devil's meaner, it's only cause he's older.) She's worked and slaved to scrape together all her pennies, and her son throws them away on floozies and loose women – making life that much harder for the two daughters. But the wild stallion clattering over the cobbles sets his thoughts on a different track, bringing another incident to mind. Soon enough he can see it before him in every particular, leaving him no choice but to speak aloud.

"Reminds me of the time I saw a farmer fall straight off his horse, boom, at the Holy Procession in Ronse: a sturdy old fella round the age of sixty on a fat grey mare – he was doin' the circuit of honor round the church, spied an acquaintance, whipped his head round, the horse slithered, and there lay the farmer, his head on the cobbles – dead as a doornail!"

Blomme's spontaneous outpouring hangs in the air unsupported, like a pointless piece of news, without drawing a single response. The two others are following their own trains of thought, on the heels of the young farmer as he goes a-rutting. This gives Blomme the chance to survey his own younger days, in connection with the event at the Holy Procession in Ronse. He remembers it bathed in the mood of a day weighed down by eternal silence, the whole scene outlined in diaphanous brightness. All the particulars come back to him, each with its own character, in the original order and arrangement – it all springs to life, he gazes down on it like a distant view. The

image fills him with an agreeable feeling, and he can't resist teasing out his enjoyment by telling the story. As if for himself alone, he begins by remarking:

"That was a day full of perturbations..." (Now he has to go on.) He falls straight into his stride, finding the thread of the story:

"We had a date with our best girls. I was s'posed to pick up mine in Ronse, where her sister had gone when she married. Round noonday I set off with Polfliet and Wipper – them two were my reg'lar pals then, and we went out every Sunday. I had business in Avelghem first, so we arranged to meet at Polfliet's aunt's place near the bridge across the river. By the time I got there, they was havin' coffee and flirtin' with a cousin who lived with Polfliet's aunt. Quick as a flash I was sittin' with 'em, close as I could get to the cousin, who was a friendly slip of a thing. We was shootin' the breeze for a spell, and I understood soon enough what sort of birdie that cousin was – she said she'd walk us as far as the bank of the Scheldt. We had no trouble gettin' her to come in her house clothes, her cotton blouse and apron. One way or another, I got Cuzzy to myself as we was crossin' the washlands. I soon had her talkin', and quick as a wink, her arm was in mine – we let Polfliet and Wipper walk on ahead. She was a fine willow of a lass with jet-black eyes – and no flies on her, lemme tell ya! In five minutes flat I had her stuck on me, her ears pricked up like a racehorse and her eyes gogglin' straight into mine – she was latched onto my arm and her feet wasn't touchin' the ground. (In my day, I could set any girl's head spinnin'. You gotta know how to approach 'em, with plenty of sweet talk... but this 'un as good as set *my* head spinnin'!) That witch had somethin' in her eyes and her whole body I'd never run into and couldn't account for."

After the bald report of that accident in Ronse, which Blomme had muttered as if talking to himself, and which had sunk into the silence without response or echo, his story now proceeds as if a large audience is giving it their full attention. And from the first words, it begins to work its magic: the confined space of the drying-room falls away, the black panels of the walls slide open like screens on the stage, and there, large as life, is the blue sky shining over the broad green of the washlands; they breathe in the warm summer air, the very air of that third Sunday in June when the Holy Procession marches out of Ronse; they can hear the lads mimicking the call of the blackbird:

Where's the sot?
He's on his cot!
What's he doin' there?
Eatin' eggs
with arms and legs.
Are those eggs good to eat?
No, sir, they're sayin' tweet-tweet! Tweet-tweee-eet!

For Hutsebolle and Fliepo, this vision passes into personal recollections of their youth. Following the thread of what they've heard about the Holy Procession, they're happy to go down the path that Blomme clears for them, witnessing the place and action before their eyes as the story unfolds.