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TANNER'S EARTH

English sample translation by Rob Myatt

CHAPTER 1

Tanner is stood in the cowshed, his boots in the manure, looking at his Swiss Browns, at Carmen, Fiona and Vreni: he can tell them apart by their faces. He pats the cows, one after the other, a nice pat on the rump. They like that. There is a tune on Tanner's tongue, he sings: *Es Burrebüebli magi nöd / A farmer's nipper int nowt fer I*. He pinches the teats until the milk squirts out, rubs them down with wood wool, attaches teat cups. The cows let him drain their milk without protesting, *fidiri*. The machine sucks like a calf, *fidirallala*.

Spring wafts in through the shed door, the cows do exuberant little jigs. He wants to let them out into the pasture today, the first time after the winter. Only Vreni keeps its head lowered. Tanner feels her horns, they're cold. And as he milks the cow, he knows what is wrong: one of the teats is hard, Vreni has a hard quarter. He milks the other three teats into the bucket – he won't be sending this milk to the dairy. Bella has lain down after her milking, her udder in the muck, which Tanner is not best pleased about. Can't have her going the same way as Vreni, she can't go getting a hard quarter too, and so he startles the cow to her feet.

Once he is finished with milking, he cleans the four-armed contraption in the stone trough, cleaning it with a brush and cold water. In the bucket, he fetches hot water. Steam rises, milky water churning in the trough drain, slowly running clear. He empties the bucket with Vreni's milk in it, fills it with water, puts it next to the bull. He is stood apart from the rest and doesn't have a name, he's just 'bull'. Sometimes, bull rams himself against the wooden wall to the right, the spot completely worn away by his horns.

Whenever bull rams himself against the wooden wall, Tanner thinks back to the bull fight he saw on an island. The bloodied animal with the lances in the back of its neck broke his heart. Everything alright? asked Marie. Just the heat getting to me, he said. Telling her that his heart was breaking in two simply wasn't an option. They stayed until the end and Tanner was forced to watch on as they finished off the bull. He kept dabbing at his face with a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat, only it wasn't sweat he was wiping away.

He never lets bull out of the shed, a bull once casually poked his father's eye out. When a cow is in heat, he ties a rope around bull's nose ring and leads him outside where the cow is ready and waiting. Tanner doesn't make much of artificial insemination, it has to be natural mating. After mating, bull comes back inside the shed where he goes back to ramming himself against the wooden wall.

A tractor trundles onto the farm, it's Straub from the dairy, come to pick up the milk. Tanner helps him roll the milk cans onto the tractor's rear bucket.

'Had more milk from you afore, Ernst.'

'Vreni has a hard quarter.'

'You heard, Joho's switching to meat. Suckler cows. Highland cattle.'

'Can't say I'm surprised. There's bottled water costs more than milk.'

'I don't make the prices.'

'You always say that.'

'Everyone milks as much as they can. That makes the price fall. And 'cos the price is falling, everyone's trying to milk even more. Lake Milk's the biggest lake in the land.'

The milk cans are on the bucket. Straub raises a hand in farewell and trundles off.

Having rinsed the muck off his boots, Tanner opens the front door to the house. The ground floor used to be the cowshed, until his father built a separate one. Now, the ground floor is a cellar for storing must in demijohns and the fruit brandy which the travelling distiller makes for him from fallen fruit. He pulls off his boots, climbs the stairs in socks, sits down on the bench in front of the snug. There are bits and bobs lying all over, banana boxes, flowerpots, a glove, a painted flamenco dancer from their most recent holiday. How long ago was it now, nine, ten years? Theres calved shortly after and they called the calf Palma and she's how old now? Nine, not ten. There is a mirror too, dusty and almost blind. Tanner sees a farmer getting changed. His milking clothes smell rotten, he changes: down with the suspenders, on with a fresh shirt and trousers, and soon enough Tanner doesn't smell of the cowshed anymore.

He enters the snug and positions himself by the door jamb, scratching his back up and down. Marie is reclining on the bench in front of the tiled stove, knitting. The stove occupies the corner of the room, large and green. Cats loll about in front of it. The cats, like the bull, have no names. New ones turn up now and then, and in turn others make themselves scarce, it's not worth giving them names.

Marie smiles gently when she spots him scratching himself. You've picked that up from your cows, she always says. They scratch themselves on the branches just like that.

Tanner feels a warmth in his chest when he sees her smiling that smile, he would dearly love to give her a kiss on the forehead. Her hair is tied in a bun and is grey but he still sees the young woman he married. But he can't just kiss her on the forehead, not on your life, she would jump and ask, What is it, what's wrong? So he sits down at the table, in front of his bowl of milk coffee that is already waiting for him. He tears a slice of bread into pieces, dips the hunks in the coffee, takes a slurp. He reaches for the gazette.

'What do you want for lunch? I could make barley soup, there's still barley needs using up.'

Tanner nods absent-mindedly, flicking through the newspaper.

'I should knit you a pair of warm socks for the nights! You're always waking me up with your icicles. One of these days, I'll put a pair of woollen socks on you while you're sleeping!'

Marie isn't angry, she can't get angry, not even a little, she's too good-natured for that. Tanner cuts a slice of bread and spreads butter on top.

'Vreni has a hard quarter.'

'Lord in heaven'

'She's doing well.'

'I'll take her some bread later then.'

Tanner nods because Vreni really likes bread. Unlike Palma who loves apples, and Petra who can't get enough of red wine. Something Tanner gives his cows after they have calved. Palma is satisfied after half a bottle but Petra, she can't get enough of the sauce. She'll empty the bottle in a single gulp and then moo for more. But one bottle is enough, Tanner doesn't want the cow getting sloshed.

Tanner clamps the piece of bread between his teeth and tears it off, washing it down with a gulp of milk coffee.

'It'll pass,' he chews.

'Should I call Fankhauser?'

Tanner shakes his head.

'I'll milk it out and rub in some clay.'

He tears another hunk off the slice of bread, teeth grinding. Marie sits in silence for a moment, Tanner slurps, she tilts her head. What now?

No, nothing. She straightens up and continues knitting.

CHAPTER 2

Huswil lies in the midst of rolling hills. Not a speck of land is flat, all land is at an angle. The farmers struggle up these angles, they struggle up the slopes, but they never grumble. Their ancestors had it much tougher, up the angles and the slopes, only they did it with an ox and plough. Nowadays, there are machines. Who in their right mind would grumble in an age where machines have taken on so much toil. To complain is to mock your ancestors and their oxen.

Huswil is a village like any other, one that no-one outside of Huswil has heard of. Yet. Two holes in Farmer Tanner's field are what will put it on the map. The holes that will put Huswil on the map are not marked on this map. But Tanner will find them dark and steaming before his very eyes: they are undeniable.

Tanner's legs stand sturdy on the earth. He never sways. You can see it in his footprints: a clean tread, no smeared edges, you can tell where he is making for. There is something lodged in the creases of his hands that won't come out anymore, earth perhaps. It is lodged in the creases of his fingers, his knuckles, his palms and won't come out anymore. Work has made his hands enormous, real meaty hands they are, which grasp, turn, hammer, lift. If you know his hands, it is impossible to imagine them at rest. There are times when they have nothing to do, of course there are, nothing to grasp, turn, hammer, lift. When that happens, his hands hang by his sides, twitching like sleeping dogs.

A description of Tanner's appearance will come later, or it won't. Perhaps, when he wipes away a sweaty strand of hair from his forehead, you will find out what colour it is. Or if he blows his nose, you might learn how big it is and what shape. He has a hulking torso, as you can imagine, a chest and a heart beating within. His legs we have already mentioned, his hands too. His face is not much worth mentioning, it has all the necessities: nose, eyes, mouth. His hairline is slightly receding. But that's all there is to say about his appearance.

CHAPTER 3

Tanner unties his cows' tails which are tethered to a rope. He can't have their tails landing in the muck and spraying the shed when they flick away the flies. He takes off the chain at the front. The cows don't need telling twice where the pasture is and they run, spring, gallop out of their shed. Happy to finally feel the earth beneath their hoofs once more, to finally yank grass from the earth with their tongues once again. Tanner lets all of the cows out into the pasture, all except Vreni with the hard quarter. He closes the wire behind the last one, crouches down, switches on the cattle fence. It sends an alternating current through the wire with a regular ticking. Tanner stands up, looks out across his land.

What's that—

What's it doing all—

The cherry tree up the way is leaning, as if uprooted by a storm. Or as if a family of water voles has nibbled through the rootstock. And there, right next to the tree, steam rises, like clouds of breath from a panting animal. The curve of the land hides where the steam is coming from. Tanner walks up the path through the field. Wisps of fog rest on the field, the wheat is green and ankle-height.

How is that even—

It's as if a giant has taken a drill to it. Tanner can't help but laugh, it has to be a joke, someone playing a trick on him. He scans the land, looking for a pile of earth somewhere. Nothing.

There's nothing, nothing there.

But that's exactly the point: that there's nothing there. If there were nothing around the outside of the hole as well, no-one would notice it, not even Tanner. But because it is surrounded by solid earth, everyone and his uncle can tell that something is amiss.

He walks up to the edge of the circle-shaped hole and looks in. Tanner can see what is usually hidden from him, he is astonished at how stony the lower layers of the soil are. The half rootstock is jutting out into the hole, no wonder the tree is so crooked. The hole measures five, six metres across and is bursting with a dark that ought to be impossible in the bright light of day. It is the dark of an overcast night in the mountains. His gaze tumbles into the blackness, he starts to rock, back and forth he rocks. His eyes are unable to adjust to this darkness. He can't see the bottom. It is steaming. The steam penetrates Tanner's nose, not sulphur, heaven knows, no, decay blowing on him, the breath of an animal. Not the fermented-grass breath of a cow, but that of an omnivore.

Tanner struggles to think, which isn't all that easy: staring into a void and thinking. Thoughts don't appear out of nothing, after all.

Halfway back to the house, he looks over his shoulder to check if it is still there, the hole. He creaks up the stairs, enters the snug, comes to a stop in front of the tiled stove. Luckily, Marie isn't here. The window is open, the inside of the house groans, sighs. Cursed is the ground for your sake.

Tanner doesn't know what and he doesn't know how. He picks up the can, gives it a shake, there is still milk coffee in it. First a bowl of milk coffee, his hand is shaking, why is my hand shaking? He takes the crumb catcher out of the breadboard, brushes the crumbs into the bowl. He goes over to the window, the hole is out of sight, all he can see is the crooked crown of the cherry tree, the rising steam. In toil you shall eat all the days of your life.

Tanner doesn't know what he should feel, he's never been in a situation like this before. Do people get angry or sad? He doesn't know. All he can do is stand around slurping milk coffee, his fingers wrapped around the little bowl, *Das isch de Tuume, de schüttelt Pfluume* / 'ere be Tommy Thumb, 'ere be Peter Pointer. What on earth has he done? He was over that way just two days ago with the weeder, weeding the wheat and nothing happened. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field.

Tanner wraps his shaking hand around the bowl, the shaking lets up. A stiffness sets in, Tanner can no longer move, as if he were literally carved from wood. His legs are rigid, his eyes unable to focus. His nose is running, he sniffs. The stiffness is so advanced that he can no longer release the clamp his fingers have made. Still better than the shaking, better to be stiff and wooden than shaking. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, *fidiri*. Dust you are, and to dust you shall return, *fidirallala*.

He feels his way into his fingers of wood, moving first one, then another, then his whole hand. The fleshy stalks that extend from his trunk are becoming more pliable. He commands them to carry him to the table, this is just ridiculous, you have to move. His thoughts clear as he rounds the table. It can't have been that deep, he was a bit confused before, when he thought it stretched down deep, all the way to the other side of the earth. Fill it with gravel, job's a good'un, no-one even has to know.

Tanner creeps down the stairs, squints in the sun, lights a Krumme cigarette. He never normally lights up this early, it's not even lunchtime. The plume of smoke drifts high. Back to the cherry tree he goes, the one leaning over the hole. He reaches the edge, falls to his knees. He works a stone loose from the inside, drops it in. Eventually there is a dull thud, then another, then silence. Tanner laughs into the hole, the smoke coming out of him in chuckles. I'll show you, you old hole, we'll see who's stuffing up who round here.

Tanner wants a fight. He wants to go toe-to-toe with fate. In the left corner: Ernst Tanner, measuring such and such, weighing in at such and such. In the other corner, measuring significantly taller, weighing in at significantly more: Fate. Still taking bets. Everything is on the line.

There are holes in walls, in clothes, in cheese, in bodies. The holes in bodies have different duties but decency forbids discussing them. And perhaps that is the reason Tanner won't talk about the hole in his field. A hole is a hole and you just don't talk about holes. Other than a hole in someone's heart, that's a mistake that nature makes sometimes. Luckily, there are ways of repairing a hole in someone's heart. There's no hole in Tanner's heart, just in his land. Whether the end result won't be the same either way, only time will tell.