

PopSoo

It is still dark when I awake and as always, my first thoughts are for my horse, Kloppa. Today he must have a mixture of warm oats, bran and molasses to sustain him for the journey ahead. I will curry-comb him too until his withers shine gloss-black like an Irish bracken lake and I shall plait his mane with ribbons. But first I inspect him from hoof to teeth. I'm gratified to find no trace of torsion, twisted bowel, canker or any of the manifold ailments which bedevil the horse-owner. He is in perfect health for an elderly beast.

I smell snow on the way.

I wonder about this. Is it really the snow I smell or just the feel of the cold, dry air prickling my nostrils? There are so many alien odours these days; so much filth and debris that when snow threatens I can smell it like a knife. A cold iron blade lancing the pustulant tumour of the air around us. I can remember when we would touch iron to ward off evil. Like snow, iron is a sharply cleansing element.

Kloppa can feel it too. I haul him back into the traces and even though he's no prancing yearling he wants to be off. Those gaudy ribbons quiver with impatience.

As always, I wrap myself in a huge yellow coat and throw a heavy, cracked leather apron over my head. The apron is not strictly necessary, not for driving a cart. It provides little by way of warmth and is scarcely a thing of beauty. But I'm too old now to change my ways and so I wear it.

I climb aboard the lumbering cart and give a cursory flick of the whip; a brief snap in the air above the old horse's head and off he trots. There was a time when even the whip was an irrelevance; an absurdity. We were both young then and I carried my goods in two sacks slung across Kloppa's broad back. Like the Roman cavalry I would

literally vault my horse, one kick of my legs and off we went like the wind; not even a saddle between us.

We're slower now, but steadier I think. The cart behind me is loaded with bright new footwear, glistening under the billowing edges of tarpaulin like half-peeled conkers. This is the precious fruit of my last. These shoes of mine have been a year in the making, crafted with love and all my skills; so what matters a few more hours on the road?

Today is Samhuinn eve; onset of winter. We've seen many chill days like this old Kloppa and I, far more than one or two lifetimes. And I've had more names than I can remember too: Bruder Schue, Old Tack-tack, Grosppapa Fuss, and Leather Apron to name but a few, but of all, my favourite is PopSoo. Today is our day. The day that Kloppa and PopSoo together, bring winter shoes to the poor.

I've been forgotten before. If the truth be told, it is my lot to pass from the memory of man with the coming of spring. By the first day of February, PopSoo's worn-out winter shoes would be thrown on the feast-fires of Imbolc and thereafter people went barefoot, so they might sense the changing of the seasons by the feel of the wild grasses between their toes. They ploughed and harvested, waxed, waned, lived, died and danced and frittered their time away. But by autumn I would always be remembered. By the time the final scrap of copper flesh floated from oak or rowan's skeletal fingers they would already be praying to PopSoo for shoes to see them through the winter.

And do I listen?

Of course I listen. It is my allotted task. And yet sometimes I wonder if we have outlived our usefulness, old Kloppa and I. It's so easy not to notice as the years pass; an insidious thing. But if I watch, I can see it clearly in the faces of the children. They used

to beam at the sight of us. Now they sneer or simply look away. Or worse, not see us at all. Not one in a thousand now would know that today is Oidhche Shamna or Samhuinn eve. And even if they did, not one in a thousand-thousand would care. The ancient beliefs are dying to be replaced by what? A soulless free-for-all; this brutal compassionless melee.

It may be that mankind has become, as some say, nothing more than a crop-blight with shoes; and not very good ones at that. But Kloppa and I have our duty. We stick principally to the ancient highways and byways to deliver our gifts but are not above using the occasional Roman Road to make up a little time. And despite the fact that there is little enough evidence of the ancient faith, this year the cart seems more heavily laden than ever. I raise my cowl as night falls along with the promised snow and although there are many hundreds of miles to make before we return home, I still have no desire to use my whip on Kloppa's faithful back.

As we make our way slowly north up Watling Street, the sun is setting to our right and in the dying rays I can see the patches of sweat across Kloppa's jet-black withers, like whitecaps on a midnight sea. I lean back and fossick about in the half-empty cart. A beautiful pair of sturdy brown shoes. I toss them out. And yet another. I fling it out with all my love.

The ghost of another vehicle flashes past us at Godlike speed but Kloppa merely plods along, unperturbed, like the loyal beast he is. I throw more of my shoes from the cart.

On this Samhuinn's day and night, I deliver my beautiful shoes to the unshod of Britain just as I have for hundreds of years. But in this new age when people have

forgotten Samhuinn, Imbolc and Beltane and even the very Gods in whose honour those feasts were devised, I wonder if there is anyone at all who remembers PopSoo, Bruder Schue?

Perhaps there are some, who as they pass along these highways at fantastic speed, do see my gifts; these shoes on the sides of their roads and wonder how they come to be there.

There may be a few I would hazard, but not many. Not so many now.