

MARK GRAHAM

WAYLAND SMITH: WARRIOR OF THE MILKY WAY

The milk float trundled out of the yard and into the street-light puddle night. The Boy Rob, hood up, stared vacantly into the darkness, dreaming of Abigail's red hair tossed across a white Primark pillow.

Fox-faced Wayland Smith, eyes lusting after adventure, accelerated to a reckless 13 miles an hour.

“Earth my Body.
Water my Blood.
Air my Breath.
And Fire my Spirit.”

The silent wings of a road killed pheasant swung from the rear view mirror.

“Tomorrow is the big day Boy, your initiation, then you can call yourself a Man, a Warrior of the Milky Way.”

“Um.”

“Remember all I've taught you, give honour to the Goddess and you'll be fine.”

“Whatever.”

The milk float came to a halt outside Walkers the Bakers, where, behind the blinds and darkened door, a fluorescent sun had already risen. To the dawn chorus of Heart FM, the white robbed priests of Demeter were performing the sacred rite of bread baking.

Wayland's thin arms, as strong and knotty as the heart-wood of oak, hauled a crate of double cream from amongst the milk bottles. He jogged the cream to the bakery door, blue overall flapping against skinny legs. The Boy Rob, dragging along behind, carried a crate of semi-skimmed.

Wayland knocked. The door opened. A vision in white overalls and hairnet shimmered before them. Gloria, the baker's wife, Miss Iced Buns 1988, statuesque and alluring.

“Cream horn?” she purred.

Wayland swallowed, hard.

“Vanilla slice.” he replied.

“Oh, Wayland, you are a one.” A paper bag passed between them, discretely.

Back on the road the familiar routine began. Milk bottles lifted from crates, paths beaten to dark doors, empties collected. Birth, death, divorce, all of human experience reduced to a message in an empty bottle.

“An extra pint please.”

“No milk today.”

“Just one semi-skimmed please.”

Orders amended and milk delivered, they moved silently on.

As The Boy Rob set down a pint of sterilised milk (makes the best rice pudding) on the step of 38, the letterbox flew open and a hand proffered a mini Mars bar, which he took with grunted thanks. Walking, head down, back to the milk float The Boy Rob stopped and cringed. As the sun breached the horizon, Wayland, with due reverence, lifted a pint of full cream Guernsey milk from its crate.

The world stood still. He turned towards the Eastern horizon. The first rays of the rising sun broke from behind the old mill, and Wayland, face lit with a golden light, lifted the milk bottle high above his head in salute.

“I am a Warrior.
I am a Druid.
I am a Milkman.
My soul will never die,”
he proclaimed in a voice that rose from the earth and filled the sky.

Puncturing the golden foil, Wayland threw back his head and, with reckless disregard for the cholesterol content, drank until milk ran down his chin and the bottle was drained.

“Why do you do that?”

“Because if I didn’t, the sun wouldn’t rise.”

“It would.”

“How do you know?”

Much later, as they trundled back to the yard, empty bottles clinking, Wayland was in a reflective mood.

“We are a dying tribe,” he announced, the usual gleam in his eyes dimmed.

“Twenty years ago thirty floats rode out of this yard. We roamed the streets through rain, wind and snow. We were always there, servants of the Goddess. Kids’ cereal, Mum’s cuppa, Dad’s flask, we brought the sacred milk of the Mother to their doors. Now we are no more than a dozen, and the floats are half-empty. I can remember floats with

crates piled to the roof, to the roof! Now they barely cover the decks. We are old men, stooped like ancient hawthorn trees. We are a dying tribe.”

They joined the queue of milk floats rolling into the yard to be tethered to their power cables and fed electricity.

That night, beneath his Forest Green Rovers FC duvet cover, The Boy Rob carefully traced the route of the milk round in his head.

“Two semi-skimmed at 18, then on to Summer Street,” he pictured each delivery, front door step, back door, barking dog, possible glimpse of the beautiful Ms Emery in her nightie at 43.

The alarm bleeped. 4.30am.

Clothes on, coffee, pushbike.

The Boy Rob freewheeled through the gate and into the uncharacteristically dark and silent yard, eerie with the absence of hustle and bustle. He lent his bike against a wall, and, hands in pockets, sauntered towards the office. The lights of twelve milk floats, drawn into a circle, split open the darkness.

Standing centre stage was a figure in white, back turned. Twelve milkmen stepped from their floats, and stood as erect as their age would allow.

“Enter the Temple and approach the Goddess,” a voice commanded.

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