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At the market I have a stall from which I sell satin shoes made by my mother, my sister, my cousins and my sister-in-law. Last year I was eavesdropping in the local tavern as I do each Saturday when I pass through this town on my way home. I overheard a conversation between a man and two women. They knew each other quite well and the discussion was heated accordingly. The argument was about an incident that we had all observed and been disturbed by in the town square that very morning. We were haunted by the image of a convicted murderer who 'danced upon nothing on the scaffold'. The fine details of the event were unfortunately printed on my mind. Although public hangings were not uncommon in this part of the country, and it was after all the dark days of 1694, it always came to my attention how the onlookers were affected each time. The regular rhythm of everyday life seemed to be discombobulated. There was a subtle syncopation of habitual movements and gestures. Where there was usually a regular and measured pace there were now distractions, a nervous exchange of glances and I noticed that people quite often fell over.

At that moment, the young man at the next table with a wild gesture of exasperation slammed his tankard of beer onto the wooden table, leapt to his feet and fell to the floor. His friends were astonished. He lay there with his arms and legs twitching. An old man in the corner peered over and crossed himself saying over and over 'Sancti Viti! Sancti Viti! Sancti Viti!' The inn keeper entered with a bucket of cold water that he threw over the head of the fallen man who came to his senses and sat up. He was unperturbed and glanced amiably from face to concerned face until his eyes rested on those of the old man.

'Ah, old man! You are the fellow who sold me the horse last year—the one you called Dancer!'

I remember the handsome grey horse. The rider had trouble controlling it as it passed dangerously close to my stall. It tossed its head up and down with a jerky motion. It seemed to skip and step with regular turnings and movements of its limbs and body. I recall the rather odd alignment of the horse's movements to the sharp but rhythmic squeaking of a block flute played by a passing jongleur. Yet, there was something compulsive even convulsive about the horse's movements.

'That horse had the dance-plague!' said the young man.

The old man's head bobbed up and down. There was fear in his small black eyes as he danced attendance to the younger man—did he wish for another tankard of ale, would he like some more dried meat, did he feel well after his fall, would he like to sit down. Both knew however that the time had well passed since they had

signed the Bill of Sale and that the money paid for the horse could not be refunded. Nevertheless, the old man knew that more than one tune could be played for this dance. His thoughts flew to his barn with the store of sweet corn and fresh beets for winter fodder and the sweet smell of new dried hay in the loft. Fearfully, the vision of a dark plume of smoke and the flicker of flames played on his mind.

'Never mind old man. By some miracle the horse has recovered and my heart dances—although not for joy because the brave beast has developed an appetite for juicy beets and sweet corn cobs and I, being a humble locksmith, have none!'

How quickly, I thought, we ordinary folk can be diverted from the larger events of the day, the memory of the scaffold and the loss of a life put to one side for the hope of a few grains of profit or the rush of a strong emotion that causes us to leap, spring or jump up and down from excitement. But then, as I recall, apart from that outbreak of St Vitus's Dance the year before, that had so affected both men and their horses, there was this strange tendency of people to fall down. The baker's boy had collapsed beneath a heavy hod of coal. The watchmaker's wife had fallen in the street at the sight of a rat scurrying into an alleyway. The vicar had simply dropped to his knees and pitched forward onto his face for a reason not known to human kind. I myself had stumbled several times at the slightest rise of one cobblestone above the other. Then my heel would catch on some rotting vegetable matter and one foot would slide forward in front of the other till I felt my groin might split. Sometimes in order to avoid a fall as soon as I felt myself to be deep in the arms of Gravity, I would twist in the air and fling myself to the side to land back on my feet. Once I saw the vicar's horse stop to nibble at a piece of the said discarded vegetable matter. As it dropped its head, its rider flew through the air with his dark cassock sweeping the breeze to land feet first with a smile of immense relief on his face. Some workman ceased their measured pacing on the scaffold that was erected on the walls of the cathedral to slap each other and guffaw loudly at the sight of the vicar's descent. Many a *jeu de mot* danced its way from ear to ear for the rest of the season. 'How the vicar found a dance', 'How the vicar fell from grace' (it seems that his horse was in fact named Grace), 'Would he call his next horse Hope?' And so it went on.

That night, fitfully, I dreamed of Death and that final dance in which he leads all men to the grave.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nola Farman.