

CRUISE TO
NOWHERE TALES

A MODERN VERSION
OF CHAUCER'S
CANTERBURY TALES

THE CHEF'S TALE

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THE CHEF'S TALE

THE CHEF'S PROLOGUE

A silence greeted this ungodly tale,
As though whatever words one spoke would fail
To resonate in depths so dark and cold
As those that drowned the tale the sheriff told.

Until the chef, whose turn was next, spoke out,
And said, "Now there's your truth and play, no doubt,
For art arranges happenings just so,
To make us see again the world we know.
I have an epiphany as well
To grace the tale I will shortly tell –"

"God forbid!" the bartender broke in.
"We've had enough of brutal tales and grim
Epiphanies. Now leave that stuff alone,
Or all these lovely people will go home.
Give us something lively, light, and fun,
Or I'm afraid our tale telling's done."

"All right," the chef agreed. "I'll do my best.
But you have put my powers to the test.
I have no tale in mind ... Ah, yes! Here goes!
But how I'll ever finish it, God knows."

THE CHEF'S TALE

There was an assistant manager whose work
Would once have been intended for a clerk.
But nowadays we make the ego king
And so inflate the worth of everything.

Assistant manager's the lowest rung,
But sounds much better on the ignorant tongue
Than clerk or secretary or cashier,
Words that we no longer wish to hear.
Hard work and real achievement get the same
Recognition, title, status, name
As mediocrity, or often worse.

Now this young man was to his boss a curse.
He hated work and often loved to play
Computer games to while the time away,
Or chat online with strangers, friends, whomever.
When his boss came 'round, he would endeavor
To look as though he had no time to spare,
So overworked he was, and full of care.

Yet at five o'clock, right on the dot,
He was gone, overworked or not,
To happy hour at a nearby bar
Or home to find friends for his avatar,
A cartoon he called Perkin Reveler
After Chaucer's uncouth character.

This Perkin chatted gaily with cartoons,

Avatars he met in closed chat rooms,
Where they had sex (in words – they had no flesh),
Two avatars in virtual congress.
The person – Stanley – had a friend named Steve,
Whose wife was somewhere out there, he believed,
Since Steve once said he caught her in the act
Of having sex in words, if not in fact.

She promised him that she would stop if he
Would satisfy her in reality,
But Stanley knew quite well her avatar
Was having better sex online by far.

There was no way, of course, that he could know
What lay behind each avatar, and so
He fantasized right through the fantasy
That it was Steve's wife in reality,
Enjoying all those layers –

At this the chef broke off, and to us said,
"I am afraid my inspiration's dead."
"Oh, go on!" the baker urged. "You've made
Us anxious to hear more. The plot you've laid
With Steven's wife is quite intriguing, and
Your character is quite the modern man."

"Have a drink!" the sheriff said. "And then
You'll get your inspiration back again."
"I'm sorry. You don't understand. He's dead,"
The chef insisted. "Chaucer. Chaucer's dead."

"Chaucer wrote this tale of avatars,
Computers, chat rooms, happy hours at bars?"
The lawyer asked, as though it could not be.

"Not exactly," said the chef. "But he
Set out the bones. The flesh, it's true, is mine.
This isn't a translation, line for line,
But let us say an adaptation that
Rides through our own brief time on Chaucer's back.

"But somehow I was drawn to tell a tale
That Chaucer left unfinished, doomed to fail.
Well, there it is. I've tried to do my best.
Now I'll sit back and listen to the rest."