

CRUISE TO
NOWHERE TALES

A MODERN VERSION
OF CHAUCER'S
CANTERBURY TALES

THE STUDENT'S TALE

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THE STUDENT'S TALE

THE STUDENT'S PROLOGUE

"Why look so serious?" the bartender said
To the student. "Is there so much in your head?
You're next, so please, indulge us just a little
With your great knowledge – but only on the fiddle,
Not the violin. Some simple sounds,
Plain words, in which our English tongue abounds,
And not the kind of stuff you fellows speak
To one another in journals. What we seek
Is merriment and pleasure, with just a dash
Of meaning – just for taste – not much to ask.
So dive into your treasure trove to find
A tale more of the heart than of the mind."

"All I can do is try," the student replied.
"I have an ancient tale, known far and wide
From Chaucer's Tales, that I'll bring up to date,
Modernize, so people can relate,
With greater ease and pleasure than they might,
To times of which their knowledge is but slight,
When princes ruled, and women were supposed
To bear whatever wrongs their lord proposed.

"Still, a tale's a tale, and we are we,
All one in our deep down humanity.
The tale's wearing clothes you'll recognize,
For naked beauty's only for the wise."

THE STUDENT'S TALE

There lived on Sutton Place a billionaire,
A bachelor on whom all women set their eyes –
Handsome, strong, well-built, and with an air
Of being somehow more than simply wise,
Perhaps some sort of god in human guise.
They all set out to win his lucrative heart,
Enticing his desire with all their art.

Yet though he oft enjoyed a bit of pleasure,
Not making any promises, he still
Reserved the sharing of his ample treasure
For someone who not yet had touched his will,
For all his many partners' wit and skill.
He did not really know just what he wanted,
But knew that by some demon he was haunted.

As he grew older, he began to think
He ought to marry and start a family.
Yet when he pushed himself up to the brink,
And all his close associates would agree
This was the one, he backed away, for he
Still had it in his head that he should wait
Until some sign might signify his fate.

One day when he came early to his office,
He found the maintenance contractor within,
And one of the workers cleaning the glass surface
Of his huge desk. She stopped and looked at him
For just one second, and blushed, as if some sin

Had raced across the highway of her mind
And into the woods to hide with its own kind.

She was a tall, strong woman, black, with hair
Cropped in tiny curls across her skull,
And features cut so perfectly, they were
As if outlined in charcoal, her bosom full,
Her movements, even cleaning, musical,
As though life were a song, and work a dance,
And one's fate might be turned by just a glance.

The billionaire stared at her so hard and long
That she looked up, and smiled, and said to him,
"Could it be I'm doing something wrong?"
"Not at all," he said. "Please. I'll go in
The outer office. It's too early to begin –"
"No, please stay!" she said. "I like you here.
If you don't mind. You have a lovely stare."

He laughed and looked away, self-consciously,
But then looked back, as though by magnets drawn,
And knew at just that moment it was she
For whom he'd waited obstinately and long.
She looked back, by fear and longing torn,
And in that locked embrace of eyes both saw
A naked demon, angry, rough, and raw.

Again they looked away, and she went back
To cleaning, finishing the desk, and then
Gathering her things to leave, her black
Skin burning into memory. So when

She finally reached the door, he looked again
And said, "Don't go yet, please. What's your name?"
"Theresa," she said. "Theresa Ste. Lorraine.

"And yours I know – it's written on the door:
Walter Young III. Just like a king!
But now I have to go and talk no more,
I'll lose my job –" "You won't lose anything.
Your boss will dance to any tune I sing."
She grimaced. "Don't control me!" she ordered him.
"Court me!" And her anger did him in.

So court her he did, as though she were the queen
And he the commoner, grateful for
The chance to win her favor, and to glean
Whatever bit of pleasure he could draw
From being in her presence, nothing more.
And though he showered her with gifts, each day
She cleaned his office for the same low pay.

This went on for months, until one night
He begged for mercy, pointing out that many
Women would such steadfast love requite,
And yet he saw from her no sign of any
Interest or affection, not one penny
Of return for all his spending of devotion,
Nor gain from his investment of emotion.

"Please tell me now," he said, "just yes or no,
So I may weep with either pain or joy.
I have for months endured this one-way flow –

One night a word that would my spirits buoy,
The next a look that would my heart destroy,
But never an answer to my earnest suit!
My eyes and lips say love, but yours are mute!"

For a long time she was silent. Then she said,
"Sometimes I wish this love would pass from me!
For all my dreams that someday we'd be wed,
And all my joy in you, I cannot see
How we might manage in reality,
I, a cleaning woman, coarse and dull;
You, so rich, so smooth, so masterful!

"Soon you'll tire of me, regret your choice,
And be ashamed of me before your friends,
While I myself will flinch at my own voice
And bear the burden that that message sends,
Knowing even now how such love ends!
I've tested you, and you have passed the test!
But I have not – please! It's for the best!"

"My darling Theresa!" he answered. "Your words
make me
So happy, since you've spoken of your love!
These months of torturous uncertainty
Have tested me, and made me certain of
My love for you. Now tell me how to prove
That we can be happy together, even though
We are so different. My love can only grow

"As I see your spirit, brave and strong,

Meet the daunting challenge of a life
So different from your own! Even more I long
To make you my own precious, treasured wife,
The jewel of my days, sweet partner of my nights!
Believe me, your reluctance makes me more
Determined to have you than I was before!"

"Your jewel?" she said. "Your own? But I am mine,
And ever will be, even when I'm yours.
No ownership implied! Nor neon sign
Proclaiming property! The secret cause
Of so much marital woe! Love knows no laws,
But like a cat must follow its own will,
Though it stay within its harbor still."

"Then be my cat!" Walter replied, "or what
You will!" And then he dared a kiss, which she
Returned with equal fervor, as she shut
The door to all her doubts, and happily
Let go her passion, long starved for such glee.
Soon they were married, amid much speculation,
As for one month they riveted the nation.

Who was this beautiful black cleaning woman?
Cinderella, clearly! What a story!
Marrying Prince Charming, as the common
Folk watched, hungry for vicarious glory,
Imagining themselves, with all the fury
Of empty hearts, the love and happiness
That must accompany such large largesse.

And for a few years, yes, the two were happy
As two children came, a girl and boy,
Though Theresa lived but modestly,
Insisting that although she might enjoy
Great wealth, no cheap indulgence would destroy
Her family, but their wealth would be for naught
Unless well used, as Christ and others taught.

She was a gracious hostess, and a jewel
That brought great luster to her husband's life,
Yet something in him, primitive and cruel,
Demanded that he wound his loving wife,
Abandoning this harmony for strife.
What it was, he had nor thought nor clue,
But in him slowly this strange impulse grew.

It began with little offhand insults, slights
That she could feel but barely recognize;
Some arguments (you couldn't call them fights)
That festered unresolved, for all her tries;
A little discontent around the eyes
That tightened into anger at a word;
An attitude when nothing had occurred.

"What's the matter?" finally she asked
One evening when they both had gone to bed.
"You seem unhappy. Why?" And then at last
He told her what he long had in his head.
"This isn't working – not for me," he said,
While part of him turned towards the other part
And plunged a six-inch knife into his heart.

"What isn't working? What?" she asked, dismayed.
A sudden storm swelled up, with fury filled.
How quickly love's sweet harmony can fade
When just one drop of dissonance is spilled,
If neither partner is in passion skilled!
Immediately, she thought that her black skin
Was what had turned the power off in him.

She waited for his answer, as in her grew
A certainty from what had been a doubt:
She knew that this would happen! Yes, she knew!
And fear within became cold rage without.
"Please let me know what this is all about!"
She said, her voice an adamant shield,
Signaling a choice she would not yield.

"I need some time alone," he said. "It's not
Anything you've done, or failed to do.
It's me, just me. I know that what I've got
Is more than I deserve – the kids and you –
But now inside I long for something new.
Please wait for me, just until I find
What might resettle me in my own mind."

"What are you?" Theresa asked. "Man or boy?
We have two children! You are past such things!
What demon in you now wants to destroy
The happiness that love acknowledged brings,
Love that weaves with wonder as it sings?
Tell me now! Is it yes or no?"

If it's yes, I'll stay; if not, I'll go!"

He did not answer, so Theresa left
With their two children, finding a small place
In a slum, of all they had bereft,
Surrounded by poor people of her race,
And leaving for her husband not a trace.
She found employment as a home companion,
Enjoying the sweet flow of her compassion.

Meanwhile, Walter, in self-inflicted pain,
Lived alone. No other woman pleased him,
No interest touched his heart. He tried in vain
To care about his fortune, but what seized him
Was bitter rage at life. No thought released him
But dreaming of Theresa and their children,
Imagining some unlikely reunion.

Still, he would not look for her, but drove
Himself into a deep and lonely hell,
As though by loving her he only strove
To find something of worth to wound him well.
But of such demons, who can really tell?
Two years passed, and then he thought he would
Take the children from her, if he could.

An army of detectives soon discovered
Where she lived and worked, and found the school
Where their children went. Walter hovered
Over them awhile, his cravings cruel,
Knowing well this woman was a jewel,

Yet wanting to inflict on her such pain
As would bring him the touch of life again.

One afternoon he took them home with him,
Telling them their mother soon would come.
Overjoyed to see him once again,
The children hugged him happily, as from
The moment that she left, his wife was mum
About his cruelty, and why they left
Him there, of him and of their home bereft.

When Theresa came for them at school
And found them gone, she hoped that it was he
Who'd taken them, though she knew well the rule
That wealth wins all. She called immediately,
Relieved to find them safe, and said that she
Would come to get them soon. And then she let
Herself think what might come of this, and wept.

She'd lost them, that she knew, though she would
 fight
With what she could to get them back! What more
Could Walter do to her? And by what right
Could he deprive her of her children? Law
Was on her side, and yet grief through her tore!
Never would she see them, never again!
Ahead of her she saw but lonely pain.

Anger gripped her in its hard-clenched hand!
She hated Walter, hated him! And yet
She'd loved him once. Were such foundations sand?

Were such sweet days so easy to forget?
God! She wished, she wished they'd never met!
The demon rose in her, a puissant knight
In armor dressed, ready for the fight.

She went to his door on Sutton Place and rang,
Knowing well he'd see her on his screen.
Inside her head the righteous anger sang,
Shading at each cadence into scream.
Her face appeared on camera hard and mean,
As Walter's demon, dressed in iron, too,
Rode towards hers, lance aloft, to battle do.

He came down quickly to the door, quite white
With righteous rage, while unaware above
The children played at princess chained and knight
Riding to her rescue, fraught with love,
Ready to cross swords and honor prove.
Face to face they came with beating hearts,
Primed to play their pain-appointed parts.

"You think you could just kidnap them from me?"
He screamed, an echo of the very words
She was about to scream, as suddenly
She had a vision of two screeching birds
Upon a branch above the dusty herds
Of cattle being driven to their death,
Screeching, screeching hatred with each breath.

And in that mirror of Walter and herself,
She saw the ugliness of what she was

And turned away to gaze across the gulf
Between what one demands and what one does.
She leaped across and looked through Walter's eyes,
And saw a truth that burned through all her lies.

"Forgive me," she then said. "Forgive me, please.
I swore to love you always, all our lives.
We should have separated, yes, agreed,
But in a way that faithful love survives,
As is the case with truly loving wives.
I should have thanked you for your honesty
And let you have your taste of being free.

"I acted out of anger, fear, and pride,
Without one thought of you and of the pain
You must have felt to keep such thoughts inside,
And courage to reveal them. Mine the blame!
We should have talked things out, sincere and sane!
What was my wish? That you would choose to lie?
Who should have shared your secret, if not I?"

"The fault lies not entirely with you,"
Walter said involuntarily,
As though some long-lost obligation due
Now weighed upon his will, and let the sea
Come rushing in, impervious to his plea,
To sweep away his demon, who had long
Ruled his will and led him to do wrong.

"Yes, you acted out of injured pride,
Understandably. I did you harm.

Of free will I took you for my bride
And promised to be faithful. What strange charm
Did my demon give me? So soon gone!
Swallowed by the bitter joy I found
In hating you, by pain and fury bound.

"Forgive me, too, then! Please, forgive me, too!
And let us once again attempt to love
With more humility in what we do,
Moved by what good grace might in us move,
The best in us, that will our conscience prove,
And bring us back to where we were before
I turned away, and our sweet love restore."

So it was: The two became again
A loving man and wife, and parents good,
Remembering well their self-inflicted pain
And taking care to do the things they should,
As humankind has so long understood:
Faithful to their vows and to each other,
Steadfast as a father and a mother.

Let all couples take good heed of this,
And like Theresa put aside their pride,
Countering wrong with right. The key to bliss
Is seeing oneself from the other side,
Imagination both one's map and guide.
And may we let such stories be the eyes
Through which we see the pathways of the wise.