

## THE NUN'S TALE

### THE INTRODUCTION TO THE NUN'S TALE

"Bravo!" the bartender cried. "Well done, I say!  
I recognize them all! That's just the way  
We carry on, we folk of venal sin,  
All fully liable for the fix we're in!

"But Sister, now it's your turn next to tell  
A tale for us, if that would please you well."  
"Well it would," the nun said with good cheer.  
And so began the tale that you shall hear.

### THE NUN'S PROLOGUE

If you will just bear with me, I will pray  
To God and Christ, and to the Virgin Mother  
Before I start my tale. It is my way  
To ask for Heaven's help, I know no other,  
Though most of you, I realize, would not bother.  
But I have little talent and less skill,  
And so I must add faith and hope to will.

O Lord, whose word across the Earth has spread,  
And whose love encompasses us all,  
The living and the still-awaiting dead  
Who shall arise the moment that You call;  
And Christ, Whose sacrifice reversed our fall:  
Please help me tell this modern miracle  
With feeling, grace, simplicity, and skill.

And blessed queen, who loved your martyred child,  
Yet knew the sacrifice for which He came,

Knew that on your soul Heaven had smiled,  
Yet knew how sharp would be a mother's pain,  
Help me, too, I pray, this tale sustain  
Of a mother who would lose a son  
Who'd save his killer through his martyrdom.

### THE NUN'S TALE

In Chicago there lived a single mother  
Who had one child, a boy named Lionel.  
She had just one, she could not have another,  
And so, perhaps, she loved him far too well  
For both their good, as shortly I will tell.  
She made a meager living caring for  
The elderly, as poor as she was poor.

She would not send her child to public school,  
For the local one taught little and cared less,  
Ruled by gangs, ubiquitous and cruel,  
Who would for sure cause Lionel distress.  
And so, with little, she had to do with less,  
And sent him to a Catholic school, though she  
Was not religious, nor wanted her child to be.

But little Lionel soon fell in love  
With the Virgin Mother, and prayed each day,  
Looking up towards Heaven, where above  
His ceiling, cracked and peeling, angels lay  
Their heads upon her lap, or oft would play  
Their harps and sing, full of love and joy  
That touched the heart of this unearthly boy.

Often he would sing a childish song  
That he was taught in school, that went like this:  
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son  
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss,  
Come to us, and all our sorrows kiss  
Away, as once you did for God when He  
Was still a child and sat upon your knee.*

He sang this prayer on his way to school  
In his little sing-song childish way,  
And also swinging when his mother Jewel  
Would take him to the park to romp and play,  
Until the toughs who to that park did stray  
Could stand no more of it, and took offense  
At words that spoke of love and innocence.

They planned to silence him, but only when  
His mother wasn't sitting right nearby.  
They had to listen to him until then,  
Sick to death of words that did not lie,  
Though at the time, they could not tell you why.  
Their hearts were hard in preparation for  
A life of vicious crime and outright war.

One day Jewel was sick and could not go  
Downstairs when Lionel desired to play.  
She felt bad for him, he wanted so  
To be outside, and so she thought that day  
She'd take a chance and let him have his way.  
So down he went to his beloved swing  
Where as he swung it was his joy to sing:

*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son  
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*  
Yet now the toughs could see he was alone,  
Which was a chance they did not want to miss,  
And so surrounded him, and spoke like this:  
"Shut up, you little bastard, or we'll kick  
Your freaking ass! Your singing makes us sick!"

But little Lionel, now scared to death,  
Never having had to face before  
Such brutal talk, could scarcely take a breath,  
But whimpered in a way that somehow bore  
Resemblance to the song he sang no more.  
"We warned you!" one boy said, whose name was Chris,  
And smashed him in the temple with his fist.

As Lionel fell off the swing, the boys  
All crowded round him, making sure that none  
Could see them kicking him, and made some noise  
Like cracking jokes, so none could hear him moan  
Until they stopped, and he lay like a stone.  
"That'll teach you," Chris said as he spat  
On him, "to sing a stupid song like that!"

Little Lionel, with sightless eyes,  
Just stared up at them. Nor did his chest,  
As they watched it, either fall or rise.  
Chris dared touch him, for the final test,  
Ear to heart, to put all doubt to rest.  
"He's dead," he said. "The little bastard's dead."  
And then, in anger, kicked him in the head.

Chris carried him in the middle of a crowd  
So none could see the nature of his load,  
Urging them to joke and laugh out loud,  
Taking care that none of Lionel showed  
Until they got the body safely stowed  
In a dumpster, where, throwing him in, he leaped  
In himself to bury him down deep.

When Chris climbed out, they heard a voice sing  
this:

*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son  
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*

It was Lionel, it could be none  
Other than he who sang, the only one  
Inside the dumpster, from where the faint voice  
came,  
And so Chris sighed and jumped back in again.

Digging down through garbage, he got to where  
Lionel was buried, but the singing  
Stopped, and all he saw beneath him there  
Was a dead body. There was no point in bringing  
It back out of the dumpster, or in swinging  
Over the side himself, and so he stayed,  
Hoping he'd hear nothing, but afraid;

And then, clearly, once again heard this:  
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son  
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*  
Coming from the body, which alone  
Could be the source of that uncanny song.  
Amid the garbage, Chris got on his knees  
And prayed, "O God! Dear God! Forgive me, please!"

And sweet forgiveness came to Chris's heart,  
But with a price that he would gladly pay,  
A love from which he could not bear to part,  
That sang from little Lionel as he lay  
Amid the garbage. Again Chris knelt to pray,  
To Whom he did not know, but he knew this:  
That somewhere beyond death lay life and bliss.

Chris waited for Lionel to sing again in vain.  
Instead of miracles, there came a shout,  
A voice possessed, calling Lionel's name,  
Desperately a woman crying out,  
Lionel's mother, Chris had little doubt.

"Here!" Chris called. "He's here! Here in this bin!"  
And Chris stood up, garbage all over him.

Jewel turned to see a motley specter rise  
Up from the dumpster, dripping bags and slime,  
Motioning down as if to some lost prize,  
A monster making do with pantomime  
As though in horror at some ghastly crime.  
And then she knew, and screamed a scream that tore  
The sky in two, till she could scream no more.

Years later, she finally visited Chris in jail  
Where he was serving life without parole.  
He was strong and healthy, she was frail;  
His life was full of meaning, rich and whole,  
While she was still in mourning, sick of soul.  
"I cannot give him back to you," he said.  
"But he's in Heaven. Don't think of him as dead."

"There is no Heaven!" she almost growled in pain.  
"Only life here. And after that, just nothing.  
You took from me all that I had. Refrain  
From pep talk, please, or fairy tales, the puffing  
Up of truth to salve your conscience. The thing  
That is true is that you killed him! That fact  
Is all there is. No talk can take that back!"

"I wish you could have heard his body sing!"  
Chris said. "It was a miracle, no doubt  
Of that. One that would my lost soul bring  
To Christ and love and goodness. Hear me out!  
My call for your forgiveness was not about  
My need but yours. It came to me in prayer  
That in your suffering, I should be there.

"It is a cruel irony, I know,  
That murdering your son was my salvation.  
Can I thank God for it? The fatal blow  
Gave life to me, a pure abomination  
That brought about the grace of revelation.  
I would share this with you, that you might hear  
Your dead son sing to me of Mary dear."

"You brought me here to preach to me?" Jewel cried.  
"To save my soul? Wasn't killing him enough?  
I have to see you smug and satisfied,  
Full of this pretense that lets you slough  
Off guilt so easily? I'd like to stuff

You full of just one breath of what I feel,  
So you might know one second that is real!"

Chris wept at this, and suddenly Jewel saw  
The truth behind the miracle of grace,  
Something passionate and ever raw  
That lived untenanted by time and place.  
"Please, please don't cry," she said, and wiped her  
face.  
"Of course I forgive you." And then they wept  
together  
For Lionel, for themselves, and for each other.

Then Jewel went home, filled with grief and love,  
Renewed by the sweet moment of her tears,  
While Chris, chastened, prayed to God above,  
Tormented by the salience of his fears.  
"Was it real?" he asked. It had been years  
Since the miracle that saved his soul  
And made his life harmonious and whole.

No answer. So to Mary then he prayed:  
"Dear Mother of God, did I really hear that song?  
Or was the death of that boy just delayed,  
And I have been deluded all along?"  
No answer whether he was right or wrong,  
As though a door had been slammed shut above,  
And he was left with nothing but his love.

He got up off his knees within his cell  
And looked around him, where he'd spend his life,  
Fit punishment for killing Lionel:  
No home, no kids, no wandering, no wife;  
No safety but his prowess with a knife;  
No Heaven, faith, work, worship, guidance, goal;  
Just love within the precincts of his soul.

If that's the case, he thought, I answer this:  
*O Mary, Mary, Mother of God, whose Son  
Shall save all who believe in Him for bliss ...*  
Embracing what I have and what I've done,  
Forever free, forever not alone!  
He knelt again to pray. We leave him there  
In joy and silence, wholly rapt in prayer.