

THE SALESMAN'S TALE

INTRODUCTION TO THE SALESMAN'S TALE

"For pity's sake!" the bartender said. "How bleak
Can life get? What pleasure can we seek
In such a world? You've told a tale true,
By God! But maybe just a trifle too
True. Why would we want to hear such a tale?
But please don't mind my ranting. Let us sail
On. You," he said to the salesman, "are next.
Something light, please -- a trite but tuneful text
That takes us out of life instead of in."

"I've nothing of the kind," said the salesman.
"You'll have to hear another, I'm afraid,
That's colored black." "A modern-day parade!"
The bartender cried. "What is it with us, then,
That art should find such shit to revel in,
And not be art unless it bottom feed
And make near suicides of all who read?
But go ahead, dear Sir -- do what you will,
Though too much truth cannot but do us ill."

THE SALESMAN'S PROLOGUE

A salesman, as you know, must live by greed,
Selling things that customers don't need.
For if he sold just what the world required,
Many fewer salesmen would be hired.

Creative selling creates what was not there:
A need so strong no real need can compare.

The customer must have this thing or that
Regardless of the consequence. But what
Might seem in each of us to be destructive
Is in the social aggregate constructive,
Necessary for economic health,
As each impulsive purchase creates wealth.

Thus my greed becomes your source of good;
The evil old become the modern should.
What was seen as living sinfully
Is how we prosper -- fools, perhaps, but free.

THE SALESMAN'S TALE

A doctor who devoted his career
To ridding life of death himself lay near
The moment he had hoped would never come:
Despite his greatest efforts, death had won!

By his bed his three disciples waited.
They, too, had spent their lives in unabated
Struggle against death, to clear our genes
Of peptides that evolved to be the means
By which each generation might survive --
But only if the one before it died.

No longer was that mechanism needed,
The species having finally succeeded
In taking over its own destiny.
But death revealed its secrets cunningly,
Not willing to be bested easily,
A wily foe, as you shall shortly see.

Just at the point of death, the master muttered
Words that one could barely tell he uttered:
"The code! The code!" he said. "The second
drawer!"
And then he died. He could say nothing more.

"The second drawer!" the first disciple cried.
"That bastard! Holding out until he died!"
"The second drawer of what?" the second said.
"His desk, of course! The one right near his bed.
Let's hurry up, before anyone knows
He's dead. Some executor might close
The house, or rifle through his papers fast,
And all that fame and fortune be at last

Given to a dead man! While we
Are footnotes in his hagiography!"

"Now wait!" the third one said. "I need to think!
Let's go to a bar and have a drink,
And not talk with the corpse in front of us."
And so it was agreed with little fuss
That they would meet in twenty minutes at
A bar that all three knew, and, further, that
They would all equally share what might accrue
From whatever code the old man knew.

Twenty minutes later, the three were there,
Drinking to the fortune they would share --
The Nobel Prize, the patents, and the fame
That would make each of them a household
name,
Not to speak of immortality,
Life that lasted through eternity.

"To the death of death!" the third one toasted,
"And to its murderers!" the second boasted.
"Let's meet up at the house," the first one said.
"We'll just finish up -- you go ahead,"
The third one answered, pointing to their drinks.

And so the first one left. They're drunk, he
thinks.
The road up to the master's house is steep
And winding, and the canyon very deep.
Maybe they'll go over it, and I
Will have this to myself, if they should die.
Ashamed of such a thought, he started driving
Up the mountain road, his dark thought writhing
Like a cornered snake inside his brain.

Darkness fell, and it began to rain.
It took a lot of concentration to
Stay on the road, as a throbbing grew
Under his left arm -- a gas pain, surely.
He could barely see, and drove on purely
By instinct up the narrow, winding road
Towards his master's mountaintop abode.

At a sharp, blind curve he saw a sign:
"Road washed out ahead." And right behind
Barriers across his narrow lane,
Just barely visible in pouring rain.

He swerved left, then saw a gaping hole
Just to his right, beyond an orange pole
Blocking it off. And suddenly he thought:
Suppose I move the barriers? I ought
Not think that way! But there it was: a chance
Thrown in front of him. Fortune grants
Few such opportunities. He pulled
Over, shaking. Greed his body ruled
As he stumbled out into the rain,
Not so much in cunning as in pain,
And pulled the barriers around the curve
Where they could not be seen. No car could
 swerve
Fast enough to stay upon the road,
But would go off the cliff. Far off there glowed
The headlights of two cars a mile apart
Coming up the hill. The disciple's heart
Raced painfully beneath his aching chest.

Something was wrong! Some giant finger pressed
Against his side! He barely got to where
He could watch unseen, then fainted there,
Seized by poison sprinkled in his drink
By the third, who quickly reached the brink
And tumbled off, down a thousand feet;
The second, moments later, a repeat,
As the first lay dying, nearly stilled,
The victim of the two he just had killed.

The master's papers passed to a trustee
Who sold off what was under lock and key,
But threw out junk that none could find use for,
Including what was in the second drawer.

Was it indeed the code that would kill death?
Or just the rant of one near his last breath?
Greed had got the three out of the way
Who might have known, so death another day
Ruled life, as he has done for all these years,
The tyrant whom we worship with our fears.

EPILOGUE TO THE SALESMAN'S TALE

"You live by greed, and yet you it assail,"
The bartender said, "in this old-fashioned tale.
Why not dress greed in fashionable clothes,

The dealer in delight instead of woes,
And free us to indulge our base desires?"

"I do only what this design requires,"
The salesman said, "and follow Chaucer's lead.
The tale is old fashioned out of need,
For Chaucer had the Pardoner preach against
What he himself precisely did. And whence
This need to follow Chaucer comes, I know
Nothing, but it is how I must go."

"Now you're next," said the bartender to the wife.
"Please forget this Chaucer! On my life,
I find no pleasure in this shadow tale!
Be yourself, and on your own regale
This company with a story of your own,
Not one that mimics one that is long gone!"

"I cannot help myself," the good wife said.
"But listen as I resurrect the dead."