

GENERAL PROLOGUE

When sweet April, with its gentle showers
Winter's desert turns to Spring's bright flowers;
And Daylight Savings Time the early gloom
Banishes, that restless souls might soon
Emerge from their long labors into light,
Enjoying the long segue into night;
And Spring Break the youthful heart invites
To travel south for undisclosed delights;
Then do folks again seek out their muses,
Making pilgrimage on tours and cruises.

Some spend ten days on islands in the sun,
While others tour three cities on the run;
Still others like to gamble, win or lose,
On land or on a luxury liner cruise
That sails to nowhere two nights and a day
For time out on the sea to rest and play.

On such a cruise a friend and I set sail,
She to gamble, I to hug the rail
And search the emptiness for long-sought peace,
As she in poker looked for her release,
Both of us worn ragged from the fray
That was the substance of each working day.

After dinner and a little dancing,
A stroll out on the deck, some light romancing,
She went down to try her luck at cards,
Leaving me to turn back to the stars,
Wondering why neither of us said
The words we acted out each night in bed.

After a while, the chill drove me inside
Into a bar, where others chanced to bide
Their time until their partners finished playing,
And so I listened to what they were saying.

"By God!" the bartender said. "I swear TV
Holds not a candle to a tale at sea
Told with vigor, sailing with the wind
Till it reach port, no sailor left behind!"
"Here, here!" a soldier said, in uniform,
With rows of bright bronze medals to adorn
His chesty chest, and on his head there lay
The honorific of a green beret.
"These stories that you speak of, I have many
That I could tell, could I be sure that any
Of you my simple tales would like to hear."
A bearded backwoods farmer at the rear
Said, "Yes, as long as I can tell one, too,
Though not, perhaps, as skillfully as you."

"Damn the skill!" our host cried. "Just say what
Happens next! The spirit trumps the plot,
And vivid characters are vastly more
Important than what tricks you have in store.
For tales to bring us clarity and pleasure,
We must have characters that we can treasure.
But enough of this philosophy! I say
That while we wait, we while the time away,
Each to tell, with energy and grace,
A tale, be it beautiful or base,
Long or short, with farce or fancy full,
Just as long as it is never dull."

And heartily all in the bar agreed
To tell a tale, as you shall shortly read.
But before I tell the tales that were told,
In imitation of a bard of old
Let me first describe the company,
At least as they that night appeared to me.

There was a SOLDIER, a military man,
Who, from the time that he first began
To fight, loved battle and its savagery,
And lusted for it when he could not be
At war, as gamblers lust to be at risk,
Life shrunk to win or lose, the heart a husk,
Though he himself had little use for cards.
His lover, though, a friend of many wars,

Would gamble money when he could not life,
Addicted as he was to fear and strife.

This soldier fought the first war in Iraq
And then the second, just now coming back;
Fought in Somalia and Afghanistan,
Sometimes straying into Pakistan.
Regardless of whose blood he might be spilling,
He was a master at the art of killing.

He felt a kinship to the men of yore
Who, like him, for their people went to war,
Guarding the frontier or gaining ground
So those who wished them harm could not surround
Them and then slaughter them at will,
For men do often wish their fellows ill.

He had only contempt for those who sneered,
And claimed to love those whom they should have feared,
Like children safe from harm only because
Their parents keep an eye on predators.
They think their playpen is the world, and toys
They hug and talk to are the real McCoys.

He loved his country and democracy,
Freedom, God, and Christianity;
Proud to be a warrior, and true,
A man who'd gladly give his life for you.

There was a NUN, though in civilian dress,
Who came out on the cruise under duress,
Accompanying a friend, also a nun,
Who liked roulette as much as anyone,
But kept her bets and aspirations small,
Uncomfortable that she played at all.

These faithful brides of Christ would often see
Their pent-up longings as adultery,
And pray to be forgiven for their sin,
Though chaste, for they would often stray within.
Thus the sin of gambling was a small
Peccadillo, looked at overall,
And though the non-gambling sister disapproved,
She could not censure someone she so loved.

She had a figure large and manly built,
With pale blue eyes set in a cup of milk,
Lips just barely pink and cheeks so white

They looked near corpse-like in a certain light,
Though she was passionate and full of life,
To Christ and her good friend an untouched wife.

A GURU sat beside her, ghastly thin,
Though full of mystic consciousness within.
He could survive with neither food nor water,
And, as he told a skeptical reporter,
Could feed forever on the energy
Within the atoms of his cells. And he
Once demonstrated this for weeks in deep
Meditation, deeper far than sleep,
And then arose at the appointed time
As though awakened by some inner chime.

This guru with the animals could speak
And into past lives take a tactful peek,
Identifying what, so long ago,
Had blocked some energy that would not flow;
And, for a fee, reach back into the past,
And free it to flow easily at last.

He packaged well his secrets so that they
Could be acquired, more or less, by lay
Gurus, who then could pass them on
In seminars for those who would life hone,
Looking for a better way to be
In touch with truth and cosmic energy.

Although he had no need for goods or wealth,
They came in great abundance of themselves;
Nor did he give one cent of them away,
But he enjoyed them, and would often play
With beautiful young women in his pool,
Then bed them in his mansion. For the cruel
Fates of billions gripped by poverty
Were rightly their responsibility,
And all that he acquired rightly his.

He had a Jesus beard, his hair a frizz
High off his narrow head, and haunting eyes
As big as saucers wandering the skies.
His mistress of the moment down below
Was giving baccarat another go,
While he, like a bodhisattva, sat serene,
The perfect guru -- lithe, long-limbed, and lean.

There was a THERAPIST, a woman fair,

Who cared much for the patients in her care,
Mostly girls who were, as she had been,
Afraid to eat and dangerously thin.
She would have died but for her therapist,
Whom she became, but with a common twist:
For she could copy only what she saw,
But in her mentor there was much, much more.
So she became a stripped-down version of
The woman who had saved her through her love.

She loved her patients, too, but could not be
Beyond that love a person, whole and free,
As though she were an algorithm, used
To debug children who were self-abused,
And had no function other than that one,
Leaving her, her emptiness when done.

She was quite wealthy inadvertently,
Having little urge to spend the fee
That came along with what she did of need.
Nor could she but of her disorders read,
Anxious not to miss one single study
That might clear up some vexing difficulty,
And be of use to her in therapy.

She was demure, but still she could not be
Inconspicuous, for she was blessed
Or cursed with beauty. And though she always
dressed
In modest skirts and blouses not too tight,
Her body fought her clothes with all its might.
Even without makeup, her thin face
Drew stares attracted to its classic grace.
Her eyes were cobalt blue, and her hair gold,
Held in a bun to hide it, though the bold
Colors said what she refused to hear.

And though she told her patients not to fear
Their bodies, but their urges to enjoy,
She herself could never find a boy
To give herself to freely without shame.
Her present boyfriend gambled, and she came
Reluctantly with him, she knew not why,
And now sat with these random passersby
Waiting like some knick-knack on a shelf
As she, the doctor, fought to heal herself.

There was a MERCHANT who imported wine,

The finest that did ever grace a vine.
He knew not only Dole from Beaujolais,
But also the best vintners in Valais,
And which *terroir* produced which subtle taste.

He was full 50 inches at the waist,
An epic epicurean connoisseur,
As much consumer as entrepreneur,
Enthusiast who loved to share his joy
And looked for like elan in his employ.

He made good profit on the wines he sold,
And when he bought, his word was good as gold.
He knew the worth of every drop divine,
And paid and charged precisely for each wine.
None could cheat him, none could feel
 shortchanged.

He was a generous man, and oft arranged
For tastings of the finest vintages free,
Enjoying the vivacious company,
Yet knowing shrewdly some in time would buy
Wines that else they'd never dare to try,
Educating all who came there well
For pleasure and for future clientele.

He was a man whose work and play were one,
Who made each move for profit and for fun,
Calculating both with equal verve,
For each the other god ought ever serve.

There was a STUDENT there, of history,
Who hung his new Phi Beta Kappa key
Proudly from the pocket of his vest,
Displaying his achievement on his chest.

Summa cum laude and valedictorian,
He hoped to be a great historian,
Discovering the secrets of the past,
Then telling them as stories that would last
As long as there were memory and time.

He thought the old historians sublime
And venerated Parkman and Prescott,
Henry Adams, Gibbon, and the lot,
And loved old letters, ledger books, and rolls
Of who paid taxes, judgments, fees, and tolls,
Springing most to life among the dead

Although he was but thirty hours wed,
His bride now gambling happily below.

He loved her, yes, but couldn't wait to go
To where some letter or some ledger book
Might contain a clue where next to look,
And next, and next, and next, as endlessly
He witnessed what would else no longer be.

There also was a LAWYER there, who could
Turn topsy into turvy, bad to good,
Convince a jury one way, then the other,
And make you think your sister was your brother.

He had a silver tongue that said what paid,
And was worth every penny that he made,
Charging by the second on the phone,
So some, to say hello, took out a loan.
And if you could not pay, that was too bad,
For he'd take all the money that you had
Or borrowed, begged, or stole from who knows
where.

He would save Bin Laden from the chair
Or Hitler from the charge of genocide,
Just so long as they could pay to ride.
He said that all men had a right to him;
It wasn't his place to inquire within.
The law gave all the right to a defense
Regardless of their guilt or innocence,
As long as they could pay the lawyer's fee.

And so he argued well enough to be
Convinced he was not only rich, but good,
And served the law, as every lawyer should.

A COUNTY SHERIFF lingered at the bar,
A man who knew the limits of the law,
And what should be enforced, and what should not,
For laws can overregulate, and ought
To be applied with wisdom and restraint.

When battered women filed a complaint,
This sheriff would invite the husband in
And match him shot for shot with scotch or gin,
Allowing him to growl about his wife
And how the bitch was ruining his life,
Then twist his arm until he screamed with pain

And tell him if he touched his wife again,
He'd personally beat him till his balls
Went bouncing like two ping pongs down the halls.

He kept his county orderly and clean,
And was by reputation fair and mean.
No gambling was allowed unless he got
Each Monday night his customary cut;
And no construction could take place till he
Made sure there was enough security
Supplied by his men working on the side,
Or suddenly the law would be applied
So strictly that no truck could leave the site
Without somehow running a red light.

He was a big man, mountain-like, with hands
Like melons, and a paunch above his pants
That weighed a hundred pounds all by itself.
Nor did he ever flaunt his well-earned wealth,
But lived just like folks, who liked the way
He ran things, and so each Election Day
Gave him their votes, as many times before,
More interested in order than in law.

A FARMER who was just as big as he
Sat near the back, his first time out at sea,
And struggled with his nausea as the ship
Just barely rolled, biting on a lip
All but buried in his massive beard.

It was, in fact, far worse than he had feared
When wife and daughter dragged him on this boat.
He was never meant to be afloat,
But loved the land, its fields and wooded hills.
Now he felt the emptiness that fills
The heart so full it bursts with passionate pain:
O never would he put to sea again!

He was organic, strictly, and his farm
Would never do its ecosystem harm,
But balanced this with that so expertly
That bounty could be gleaned eternally,
The only input being sun and rain,
And compost, turning garbage into gain.

He grew fresh vegetables for restaurants
And raised goats to make cheese for true gourmands,
Had fruits and berries customers could pick,

And nothing to make man or nature sick,
But everything was fed with nature's food,
Grown and cared for as was right and good.

He talked to plants and animals all day
And understood just what they had to say,
Sensitive to nuances of needs
Expressed through colors, textures, blooms, and
seeds,
And taught his interns everything he knew
So they might be organic farmers, too,
And help him nurse to health the sickly earth
That to all living things had given birth.
His farm was not a business but an art
Whose beauty gave sweet comfort to his heart.

The CHEF was also visiting the bar,
Having finished for the day, a star
Among sea-going master chefs, who could
Make even cheap and frozen foods taste good.

He made a single cream stock and pureed
Each day a different vegetable; so made
Of one soup many, and he did the same
With gravies, sauces, toppings, in the name
Of offering his guests variety,
Though there was little to be had at sea.

He was well paid and had invested well,
But cared not whether markets rose or fell,
For he spent all his days alone at sea
And planned to leave his wealth to charity.

He loved his literally rootless life,
And never wished for children, home, or wife,
But had good fellowship enough on board,
And took his pleasure with whoever would
Enjoy, in all due haste, his narrow bed,
Then leave, for he was resolutely wed
But to the sea, whose grip none could annul,
That wrenched him from all rivals with its pull.

The ENGINEER was also there, a man
Who made quite different choices, and began
A family when he was a boy, by chance,
But then made providence of circumstance.
Each day away he missed his family;
However, his vocation was the sea.

He loved well a well-designed machine
And kept its innards oiled and wiped clean
Of grit that might it prematurely wear,
For he protected all within his care,
Human and machine, and did his duty
Not for gain or honor, but for beauty.

There was a DOCTOR, skilled at fixing bones,
Whose husband was among the band's trombones
Playing in the club two decks below.
She was young and beautiful, and so
Black she shone like night among the stars,
Whose voice and figure spoke of soft guitars,
Yet whose intellect was sharp and bright
As any operating table light.

Each day she cut and sewed, screwed down and clamped,
Installed new hips and knees, and wrists revamped,
Carpal tunnels cleared and bone spurs shaved,
For this was, yes, the life that she had craved
And studied for, for ten long, lonely years,
The only black and woman. But her fears
Of finding no one who would share her life
And love such an intimidating wife
Soon met their match in Lionel, who played
Trombone with all the best bands, and who made
Her feel like some sweet song he had composed
And now could savor any time he chose.

They lived quite well, of course, but with some guilt
For those on whom their consciousness was built.
They served on boards and gave to charity,
Spoke in schools and were exemplary,
Paid their nanny and their part-time maid
More than most, and oft came to the aid
Of friends and family sunk in desperate need.
But still they felt some vital organ bleed
Within; for busy, busy all the time,
That was one wound that they would never find.

There was a woman, seven times a WIFE,
Who traded up in husbands all her life,
As some do houses, buying first a small
Two bedroom with no ground around at all,
Then moving up to something a bit better
Until the last, whose settlement would net her
Seven million, give or take ten grand.

There was no better lover in the land,
So good that of her husbands there were many
Who still believed she was worth every penny,
For they were just as cold and hard as she
And had but little heart or charity.

She saw no reason she should not be rich,
And liked to hear herself be called a bitch,
For that meant she had won, the lover's rage
Merely helping her to turn the page.

She made good use of surgery and gym,
And kept her little body neat and trim,
Her white hair blond, her wrinkles all smoothed out,
Her perfume and her makeup thick. No doubt
She was a good deal older than she seemed,
But still her ancient eyes with avarice gleamed.

A MINISTER, devoted to the Lord,
Was there to wed two congregants on board,
Who with their friends and families played below
While he remained above, contented so.

He was a liberal, and tolerant
Of much that might make other preachers rant,
Believing as he did that faith should be
A choice one struggled with continually,
Not made once and then forever closed.
And so in church the questions that he posed
Were those to which he had himself no answer.

His wife died early on of bladder cancer,
And now their son was stricken with the same,
Arousing anger difficult to tame.
But he was not averse to arguing
With God, as Abraham once did, using
His own principles against Him, thus
Insisting He be ethical and just.

To him God was the personality
Of all that is, was, and would ever be,
One with whom he laughed and wept and played
And had a heart-to-heart each time he prayed,
Sometimes angry, sometimes full of joy,
A friendship that his doubt could not destroy.
For why give up so beautiful a love
For something he could not be certain of,

And live a life of such diminished grace
When one had but to look to see His face?

This minister believed it was his duty
To counter modern anomie with beauty,
And find a place for faith where science reigned
That would be neither backward nor constrained,
But would become a choice, not wrong or right,
But bountiful and sane and full of light.

A BAKER and a BUYER, also there,
A MAYOR, SALESMAN, and ENTREPRENEUR,
And I were all the others that there were.

The BAKER baked in the old-fashioned way,
By hand, as did his ancestors. Gourmet
Delis, grocery stores, and restaurants
Paid him well to do what his *paisans*
Used to do in rural poverty,
Now become a rare commodity.

How strange! he thought, that what the poor would
eat
Was now exclusively for the elite,
The same ingredients, techniques, and taste
That were ubiquitous before erased
By modern greed, that made of people things,
And severed them from all that gave life wings.

And so it was his pleasure to preserve
What else would disappear, and thereby serve
A family line of bakers stretching back
Beyond the curve of memory, one speck
Of ancient craft, now far more lucrative
Than then, but still a life less fit to live.

His sons and grandsons learned the ancient ways
Precisely in the glare of his strict gaze,
But he was old, though vigorous and thin,
And knew quite well the moment he was gone
A corner would be cut, and then another
And what was his life's purpose lost forever.

The BUYER worked for a large clothing chain
With stores in malls from Brooklyn to Bahrain,
And though she earned a modest salary,
Much depended on the choices she
Might make on what to buy the coming season.

Now little gifts would never be the reason
She made the choice of this or that new line,
But she enjoyed the choicest food and wine,
And on her way to visit factories
Stopped off at Waikiki and Tuileries,
And got free tickets to whatever shows
Or concerts, plays, sights, sports events she chose,
And dressed far better than she could afford.

Of course she never asked for a reward,
And always chose the lines that best would sell
And be most in demand and profitable.
She had good business sense, an expert eye,
And knew somehow what customers would buy
Two years ahead, what numbers would be hot,
And figured in her head right on the spot
The price that should be charged and what would be
The markup on whatever she might see.

She thought only of her employer's good
Because she knew that all her vendors would
Shower her equally with gifts galore,
And so she could be loyal to her store.
She was past middle age, but trim and pert,
And still looked pretty good in her slit skirt.

With her was a SALESMAN, much younger,
Who came to share her cabin out of hunger,
Not for her body, but her company,
That is, the one she purchased for, for he
Was desperate for a lucrative commission
And hoped thereby to narrow her decision
With just a little romance on the side,
Perhaps a bit more suasive than a bribe,
While she enjoyed the sexual attention
Without the slightest post-coital intention
Of buying anything he sold, which was
Too risk averse to generate much buzz.

These lovers, then, were sitting at the bar
Holding hands, as though no truth could mar
Their happiness, as both parlayed their parts,
Haunted in the hollows of their hearts.

The MAYOR was part-time, of a tiny town
Of neither interest, quaintness, nor renown,
Now a bedroom of a major city.

Once, long ago, some might have called it pretty,
But now it was developments, the same
As any town called by a different name,
Just rows on rows of models ABC,
Sprawling out as far as one could see.

This mayor was an associate professor
Of urban planning, no less, and, God bless her,
Had tried hard to apply the principles
That she laid out in learned articles.
But, alas!, sometimes the plainest truth
Cannot with real life share a leaky roof,
For life is devious, while thought is clear,
And what one thinks is there is often here.

And so it was with her: the plans she wrought
Sat like lovely toys that no one bought.
Developers would maximize their profit,
While citizens would do their best to stop it.
To court and back, and forth and back things went
Until, when funds and energy were spent,
A compromise was reached, in which her plans
Just barely peeked their heads above the sands,
A textbook case of textbooks being wrong.

She knew she should have known that all along,
And turned her posture totally around,
Keeping both feet firmly on the ground.
Her first priority was reelection,
And so she made each personnel selection
Not on competence but loyalty,
Rewarding those who worked most valiantly
To get her votes, or gave to her campaign
And got their wealthy friends to do the same.

The next was keeping taxes low, and then
Keeping things just barely going when
Previously she would have called for change.
For things that are, are hard to rearrange;
The ecosystem works, and what is new
May often key relationships undo.

Self-interest was the only constant here,
And so the mayor learned to hold it dear,
Championing no sensible solution
Unless it meant a campaign contribution
With which she could reward her loyal friends,
An army dedicated to her ends.

Nor could construction in that town occur
Without some agent representing her
Receiving in a bag a wad of cash,
Which she secreted in a good-will stash
Dedicated to earning her good will
As she gave freely from the common till
To local clubs and charities and teams,
A Robin Hood of far more certain means.

It all worked well, as she well understood,
And wrote it down, though of course she could
Not publish it or teach it anywhere,
For these were crimes, as she was well aware.

Now here she was, away upon the sea,
Though still in constant touch through her
 Blackberry,
A handsome woman, smart, and single still,
Whose work had withered what had been her will.

The ENTREPRENEUR sat near her, on the phone,
Physically, not virtually, alone,
Emailing, texting, talking to someone
24/7, always on the run
Even when most sitting still, as now,
Supposedly vacationing. But how
Could he unwire when a deal was just
Unraveling, or some plan might go bust
Without a well-timed word from one whose clout
Alone could bring the bursting wallets out?

The world moved on; one had to be connected,
Else what one might miss might be perfected;
One might miss the boat as it set sail,
And all because one missed one freaking email!

Like a little child afraid to miss
Whatever lay beyond his goodnight kiss,
This entrepreneur would, if he were able,
Never sleep, nor slip the virtual cable
Umbilical, that kept him live and well
And loving every minute of his hell.

For hell it was, as he well knew, and yet
He was addicted to this real roulette,
The kind that governed quantity and price,
Just as his wife was wed to cards and dice.

Money was to both of them just chips
To gamble on the market or on ships.

He won, she lost, both equally obsessed,
Both caring only for what happened next,
Both aware of their own grotesque dance
Yet slaves to power, potency, and chance.

Now that I've described the company
And how we came that evening to agree
Each to tell a tale to pass the time,
Let me tell the tales, both coarse and fine,
Instructive, useless, fun, sad, gripping, true
In ways no truth could tell the truth to you.
The bartender was judge, who took a jar
And numbered slips put in for all there were.
Each took one, and so he made a list,
And said that at the end he'd choose the best.

The soldier was the first to tell a tale
As we to nowhere through the night did sail.
"I guess it's fitting I be first," he said,
"Since I was first to go where our host led,
And said I'd like to tell a tale if you
Would like to hear it, and it seems you do.
So here it is, and may our judge judge well,
For all have well-loved tales they long to tell."