By Frances Reed

This an excerpt from Canterbury, a novel about the pilgrimage told from the point of view of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

The revel at Ospringe went on long after the last bone of the last roast goose had been licked clean, the wine and ale flowing freely. A few tipsy minstrels led us in some decidedly unholy songs of the road—"welcome Bacchus, glorious god"; "we made our bed beneath the bowers, where now you see the broken flowers," and so forth. With each of the many puns about cocks rising in the morning, mugs were raised to father John, saviour of the day. He sat in the midst of his adoring circle, utterly unperturbed by the gleeful ribaldry and looking very rosy. Having travelled and supped together the last few days, overcoming such hardships as fleas, mud, and monkish gloom, most of the pilgrims seemed to feel they'd been friends forever; tonight was for pleasure—tomorrow meant Canterbury and at least the pretense of piety.

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noisy here, it's too bright, it's too crowded, and I don't fancy a walk in the garden” (for more reasons than he knew); “why don't you come up to my room?” He looked like he thought I'd never ask.

"Why, that would be splendid, Alison. I do believe my work here is done”; (those who could still walk were freely helping themselves at the taps, and weaving back with reinforcements to their bench-bound fellows). We crept upstairs.

Harry was as pleased with the room as I'd hoped.

"Why Alison, this is just lovely. How did you ever manage this? It's like a dream come true. I can't believe it."

"Well," I said, "I wanted us to be comfortable while we talked." I noticed that Harry was looking around uncertainly. "There's no chair, Harry. I'm sorry about that, but I had to turn it into a table. You'll have to sit here beside me—but don't worry, it's not a bed anymore. I've turned it into a sort of divan, like the saracens have, for sitting on. I saw them when I was in the Holy Land—they're much better than our wooden chairs and benches, really. Try it."

Harry sat gingerly on the edge. "No, you have to sit back. Give yourself over to it, Harry. Lean against the cushions. Put your feet up. That's right—how does it feel?" He was starting to smile. I went on. "The problem with England is that comfort is only supposed to be for the upper classes. You can believe they have plenty of soft stuff to sit upon. Well, just for tonight, Harry, I'd like to pretend that you are royalty. You deserve it. Soon enough we'll both be back at work." He moved a little deeper into the cushions.

"It does feel wonderful, Alison, I have to admit. I guess those pagans aren't all bad."

"Right—and now let me serve you. You've been waiting on everyone else all night, and taking care of us since we left London. It's your turn," I filled up the goblets, offering one to him and taking the other. "Let's drink to each other, to our time together." Harry drank, and so (needless to say) did I. "Now we have to get really comfortable. Give me your foot." He did, and I took off his boot. I looked meaningfully at his other foot, and he gave it to me. I took off the other boot, and set them both on the floor. "Now, isn't that better?" He had a funny look on his face. "Now I'll just rub your feet a bit, as you must be tired from all that running around downstairs. Meanwhile, why don't you have something to eat?" I passed him the platter of treats and started working on his feet. He took a few of the oysters and sighed with pleasure.

After a bit a shadow came over his face. "But Alison, this isn't fair. What about you?"

"Oh, you get to take my shoes off, too, Harry," I said, and draped an ankle across his knee. He fumbled a bit with my shoe, but soon had it off.

"Now for the other?" he asked. "Please."

"You don't have to be so polite, Harry," I said, placing the other ankle a little higher on his thigh, and showing off a bit more leg, "this one will be easier." And sure enough he slipped it right off and set the pair next to his boots on the floor.

"And shall I rub your feet as well?" he asked.

"As you like, milord. But first I have a favour to ask. Will you please let my hair down—I can't relax when it's bound up like this." I turned and arched my neck back towards him. "Just pull out those pins." He did, one at a time, quite timidly, but finally my wonderful (if I do say so) auburn hair came tumbling down, right to my waist. I heard Harry let out his breath. "Oh, thank you, Harry—you can't imagine how good that feels. Now you can do my feet."

My feet are not exactly delicate, but in his huge hands they seemed so. He stroked them ever so softly, as if he feared they would break. It felt glorious. I didn't want it to stop.

"Oh, I forgot!" he suddenly said, and passed me the plate. I tried a fig and an oyster together, a lovely combination, sweet and smoky. "Now," he said, still keeping one hand gently round my feet, "let's drink to each other. Am I right?"

"An excellent plan, milord." So we drank, and worked some more on the figs and oysters. "One more favour, though. Would you mind brushing out my hair? It gets so uncomfortable, being on the road all day." Without waiting for an answer, I handed him the brush, and he began to run it through my hair. Now I have to say that I find these sensations—having my feet stroked and my hair brushed—utterly exquisite. The air was heady, fragrant with cinnamon. The wine was warming my blood. I was beginning to tingle."

"No, you have to sit back. Give yourself over to it, Harry. Lean against the cushions. Put your feet up. That's right—how does it feel?"
Maybe I was going a bit too fast—we were supposed to talk, after all, and I didn’t want it to be over too soon.

"And now—" asked Harry a little hoarsely, "now you get to brush my hair?" He was catching on fast. Slowing down was going to be a challenge.

"Very good, milord. But for me to do that you’ll have to put your head in my lap. You’re so tall, you see, I won’t be able to reach your hair otherwise." He obeyed, and I slowly ran the brush through his thick locks, spreading them out over my lap. Harry’s eyes were closed, and he was breathing deeply. "Now you don’t look so much like a lord as a god from the other world. What a fine forehead you have," I said, stroking back his hair. Harry gasped and reached up for me. The brush went flying. It was wonderful against my chest. With a little help from me we soon had my bodice off and I fell into the fur. It was wonderful against my skin on skin, revelling in the plushness of the cloak, whose unsuspecting owner had no idea. With a little help from me we soon had my bodice off and I fell into the fur. It was wonderful against my skin on skin, revelling in the plushness of the cloak, whose unsuspecting owner proceeded with his stupefaction below.

"Harry," I managed to whisper, as I struggled with the rest of my clothes, "Let’s take our time."

"That’s fine . . . with me," he said, catching his breath. So we did. We took it as slow as we could manage, and it was grand— one of those times when the pleasure of the journey was such it was almost a pity to reach the destination. Afterwards, we finished what was left of the wine and the sweetmeats. A sort of dessert.

I suppose neither of us really wanted to break the spell, but falling asleep didn’t seem like a very interesting alternative. "Harry," I finally said, "I thought we were going to talk."

"Yes, of course, Alison, sorry— of course, that’s why I’m here, isn’t it? I guess I’ve been awfully selfish."

"No more than I have," I replied, surprising myself with my frankness. "And in truth, milord, I’ve loved every minute so far. But I am curious to know more about you."

"Well, thank you—but why don’t you go first? I want to hear your story too."

I obliged, and gave him a shortened account of my first three husbands, the unholy trinity—how young I’d been, how they’d used and abused me. I didn’t think I needed to mention my extracurricular dalliances, but did tell him about number four’s infidelities, and Jankyn’s sudden death. By the time I’d finished, tears were streaming down Harry’s face and collecting in his beard. "Oh—my dear Alison, that’s terrible! Terrible!" He took my hand and pressed it against his wet cheek. "I wish the world knew of such things. You know, I think you’ll have to tell your tale first thing tomorrow—or is it today by now?—and perhaps others who have daughters may learn from your sad experience." I privately doubted that too many girls would be saved by my story—from all I knew, their commercial value most always outweighed parental devotion. But I was pleased at the prospect of having my turn, being the centre of attention and shocking the prigs. I thought about this a moment.

"Harry," I said, "don’t be surprised if tomorrow’s version is a little spicier than what I’ve told you. You know, I don’t want to be depressing. And it’ll be a challenge to penetrate all those hangovers."

"Of course, dear Alison. Whatever you want. I’m so pleased that you’ve been able to confide in me tonight."

I felt a pang of conscience, but what could I do? I had told Harry the truth—just not all of it. I squeezed his hand. "And now, please tell me your story."

"I hardly know how to start," he said sadly. "I don’t want to be depressing either, but there’s no way around it. The fact is that my marriage has been hell on earth. My wife—her name’s Goodelief— dear good one, now that’s a poor joke— despises me. I don’t know how else to put it. I don’t know what she wants from me. It’s true I’m not rich, but I work hard and get her whatever I can afford. We have no children—soon after we were married she declared me a failure in bed and would have no more of that."

"I promise you she’s dead wrong there," I interposed. "Well, I can’t say I enjoyed it either, she was so cold, and complained all the way through. But I would dearly have loved a few little ones to brighten my days. She insults me at home, telling me I’m useless and a weakling. If one of our servants disobeys and I have to use the switch—which I hate to do—she brings me a staff and shouts ‘slay the dogs! break their backs!’ When I refuse she calls me a milksop and wonders why God has sent her such a miserable creature for a husband. If someone at church does not treat her with what she sees as the respect she deserves she cries out in front of everyone that I’m a coward—an ape—who dares not defend his own wife. She says she should take the knife, and leave me the spindle, to do a woman’s work. What she would like is for me to fight my neighbour, and slay him, to restore her honour. She gets me so worked up—so humiliated—that I’m afraid some day I will. Of course I hate the thought, but I hate her insults more—they burn into me. Sometimes I find myself believing her—maybe I am as worthless as she says. Sometimes I even wonder if she might despise me less if I did the ‘manly’ thing and broke the servants’ bones, or killed someone for her sake. But then I realize it would do no good. I would hate myself, my life would be destroyed—and she’d still hate me too."

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We took it as slow as we could manage, and it was grand—one of those times when the pleasure of the journey was such it was almost a pity to reach the destination.
Now I was crying. This Goodelief was making me look like a saint, and that took some doing. I had been hard on the unholy trinity, but they'd offended first—and they'd been nothing like the man Harry was—sensitive, gentle, courteous—a rare enough combination—and on top of all that a warm, generous lover. I wondered briefly what my life would have been like if he'd been my first husband—but that would not have been possible—my father must go for the best offer, get the highest price. Of course. I knew I'd survived by growing an ever thicker skin, by learning to laugh and learning to lie. I wondered how Harry had managed.

"Harry—oh Harry," I cried, and hugged him to me. "How is it possible you are still so sweet? How can you live with such pain and not be angry?" I really wanted to know.

"Dear Alison, I'm not so wonderful. Don't forget I'm a man, and I'm not stuck at home as you were. To tell the truth, the reason I offered to come on this pilgrimage was to escape. My position at the Tabard allows me to get away often. Now don't think there are other women—you may believe it or not, but you're the first, and after our wonderful night I don't mind if you're the last—after you anyone else would be a disappointment.

"No, I go with the pilgrims when I can, and I try—I try to pull them together, to head off or to settle grievances, to make sure they have a good time, love one another if they can, be healed of their hurts, feel somehow—it's different with each one—but somehow better about themselves and their lives for having come to Canterbury. And you know, it's not so bad. There's a lot of gratitude—people realize I've made a difference, and then that makes me see that Goodelief must be wrong, there are other ways to be strong than to go after someone with a knife. And I do see them feeling better. Many a time—most times—pilgrims think they are just going for a lark—but they are changed—almost despite themselves—by this journey. There's something about it that moves people, makes them more open, more able to love.... I don't know how else to describe it. But for me, to be a part of it makes life worth living—you might almost say, restores my faith. So there you have it, Alison. I hope you don't think me an ape."

"Hardly, milord—you're as fine as a man can be." I hugged him some more, and we lay down beneath the monk's fur and cried together until we slept, close in one another's arms.

Frances Reed is a Toronto teacher and editor with an abiding admiration for that feisty proto-feminist, the Wife of Bath.

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MONIKA LEE

sun, pines and prophecy

beneath the pines splayed needles abound,
spiky to eye — yet unthinkably soft.
are visors for the sun,
with such glare;
rays' caress direct and unatoned,
in those fields she wanders
a Cassandra cursed, deviant and prophetic.
vision and knowledge are merciless solar fire
piercing an eggshell retina.

let eyelids enfold and encrust
willing blindness,
glare-resistant urge,
so an eyeless wanderer, purged of prophecy,
stroke her body with sunlight and pine.

Monika Lee is an English Professor at Brescia College. She has published poems in literary journals such as The Antigonish Review and Canadian Literature.