

A Torch in Darkness

Written for the wedding of Ruben Bloom to Miranda Dixon-Luinenburg

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I don't expect humanity to survive much longer.

Often, when someone learns this, they say:
“Eh, I think that would be all right.”

So allow me to make this very clear: it would *not* be “all right.”

Imagine a little girl running into the road to save her pet dog. Imagine she succeeds, only to be hit by a car herself. Imagine she lives only long enough to die in pain.

Though you may imagine this thing, you cannot *feel* the full tragedy. You can't comprehend the rich inner life of that child. You can't understand her potential; your mind is not itself large enough to contain the sadness of an entire life cut short.

You can only catch a glimpse of what is lost—
—when one single human being dies.

Now tell me again how it would be “all right” if every single person were to die at once.

Many people, when they picture the end of humankind, pattern match the idea to some romantic tragedy, where humans, with all their hate and all their avarice, had been unworthy of the stars since the very beginning, and deserved their fate. A sad but poignant ending to our tale.

And indeed, there are many parts of human nature that I hope we leave behind before we venture to the heavens. But in our nature is also *everything worth bringing with us*. Beauty and curiosity and love, a capacity for fun and growth and joy: these are our birthright, ours to bring into the barren night above.

Calamities seem more salient when unpacked. It is far harder to kill a hundred people in their sleep, with a knife, than it is to order a nuclear bomb

dropped on Hiroshima. Your brain can't multiply, you see: it can only look at a hypothetical image of a broken city and decide it's not that bad. It can only conjure an image of a barren planet and say "eh, we had it coming."

But if you unpack the scenario, if you try to comprehend all the lives snuffed out, all the children killed, the final spark of human joy and curiosity extinguished, all our potential squandered. . .

I promise you that the extermination of humankind would be *horrific*.

And yet, humanity is dying right now, as I say these words.

Every single one of us is marching towards their deaths, and most are already resigned to it. Do you know how often a human dies? About twice per second.

Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick. Ten deaths. Too fast for an appropriately somber pause. Barely half a second to remember that each was a sapient person, kin, fellow heir to our great birthright and all our vast potential. Barely enough time to acknowledge each one, nevermind to comprehend who they were, nevermind to mourn. Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick. Ten more. And some think they can conceive of the worth of this world.

One hundred and fifty thousand humans die per day.

One million humans die per week.

These horrors are *literally incomprehensible*.

And look at the state of those of us who are alive. How many of us are depressed? How many of us are lonely, and struggling to connect with someone, anyone?

The horrors levied against the living sometimes rival death itself. Right now, people are being tortured, abused, and raped. People are being ravaged by disease and dementia through no fault of their own. Every single one of us is aging, we are all condemned to waste away in our own skin, decaying until our minds falter and our bodies give out at last.

Do not get me wrong. If we can be happy, if we can enjoy our fleeting time—then we are sparks of light in this world of darkness. Despite the lovecraftian suffering around us, we are able to make friends and tell stories and laugh and forge lives worth living. The potential for good within us far outweighs the suffering. I have never once regretted, for a moment, that we exist, that we are here to carry the torch of humanity forward into the future.

But make no mistake, we carry that torch through darkness.

Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick.

Humanity is dying as we speak, and while we may one day have the opportunity to put an end to disease and death, we are far more likely to destroy ourselves than to cheat those ancient reapers.

Read your histories. How well do humans respond to the great challenges; we who tried to build a communist paradise and slaughtered millions, we who tried to build a capitalist paradise and built a blind machine that exploits weaknesses in our minds to increase our consumption? How close to the brink did our species come, when we discovered the secrets of the atom? How long did we teeter on that edge?

We are humanity, and our story is not some fairy tale where the plucky heroes are destined to survive. We are just one species in a cold and uncaring universe, rising up from the bottom; the dumbest possible civilization capable of inventing the technology we possess. We face the future blind and barely able to coordinate.

What, truly, do you think are the odds that an intelligent species selected at random survives long enough to gain the stars? What are the chances that nature never once in their long history presents them with a challenge that is too difficult? For this is not a storybook, and the challenges are not calibrated to our capabilities.

What are the odds that we'll survive every single threat on the horizon?

If we want to make it out of here alive, we have to avoid totalitarian lock-in, civilizational collapse, catastrophic wars, biological terrorism, nanotechnological catastrophes, misaligned intelligence explosions, and all the risks we haven't even noticed yet.

What are the base rates, do you think? How many civilizations ever manage to survive their homeworld and fill their galaxy? What are the odds we can dance the deadly dance with nature, and never miss a single step?

Because I'll tell you this:

When we look up at the night skies, they are *empty*.

And this is not a fairy tail.

And we're likely to lose.