

There is no Light

There is no electric light at the end of the universe. Just tea candles, their slow flames swaying in the dark. But the flames do not sway, there are no tea candles, and there is no light. Not in that way.

All the lights on the surface of Svabhava shut off when the last Cormorant left the city. Every neon sign and office lamp. We gave it all to them.

Satori V no longer produces energy as it once did. It has shrunk to the size of an orange, imperceptibly over time, as if it had never existed at all. And all the energy we'd gathered from the escaping radiation was finally expended. And so, the darkness was absolute. And the cold was sharp and penetrating. But we didn't mind, because neither were actually absolute. Not in that way.

There was a festive mood, despite the darkness, like a going-away party for a student leaving the village. About forty of us had decided to stay on Svabhava, so the atmosphere in the neighborhood, which usually contains thousands, was lively, but intimate. We all gathered in the temple. Everyone came with their families down the narrow streets holding candles. We pooled our light in the temple's red interior and danced to warm up the space. The candlelight reflected on the brass statues and hanging bells, and we made piles of blankets on the floor. The children, the four of them, played make-believe. We shared bread and fruit in the reliquary. The tea candles made wind by heating the air, and the prayer flags wavered in the warmth. But there was no wind, just molecules moving slower or faster in rhythm, and there were no prayer flags, just energy and vibration.

The ones who left earlier that day on the final Cormorant tried everything to get us to go with them. They felt sorry for us in the same way that we felt sorry for them. "You are all going to die," they said. "If you stay here, you are going to die."

"We are already dead," we replied. "We are dying every moment."

Satori V twinkled and the orange leaves fell down.

"There is hope of survival if you come with us. Energy reports show an unstable wormhole ten years from here. It wouldn't be enough to build another Generational around, but it would power the Cormorants for a few more decades while we search."

"There is no hope of survival," we said.

"There could still be something out there. We still have hope that we can go on surviving," they said.

"Sorry, we don't mean conventionally. We mean it ultimately. There is no hope of survival."

"I'm sorry that you think that," they said.

"It's not a bad thing," we said.

The last light to go out will be my mother's yellow candle, which will last only a few seconds longer than the Lumina's red Arhat candle. It will make a swirl of smoke that twists around itself like grey silk around an aerialist, and the black wick will still be warm to the touch in the instant before the temple is reduced to atoms. But it is wrong to say that the temple will be reduced to atoms, because the temple was already atoms, and the only difference was the illusion of stability that our minds had formed around it. Nothing is stable, and just as there is no enduring temple, there are no enduring selves inside.

My mother's candle will last longer than the Lumina's, because it has a wide, flat base and multiple wicks, while the Lumina's candle is shaped like the Arhat of Solár Ashkeivinika, who is meditating and standing on his tail. It tapers out at the end, and there is a little bit of wax at the tip of the tail that the fire will never touch.

In the last hour before Satori V annihilated the Svabhava station, the Lumina and I went upstairs to the temple observatory and warmed water for tea. My daughter joined us. She was old enough to know that she wanted to stay on Svabhava, although I can only hope this was because she understood on some level the reason people chose to stay, and not because she sensed my hesitation to depart. But I am fairly confident she would have gone if she had wanted to, and, if she did, I would have gone with her.

She asked the Lumina about the Arhat candle. The Lumina told her what I already knew, but was still impressed by: that the candle had been passed down through generations and generations of monks before them, and has survived for over three hundred trillion years. She marveled, sitting at the little table next to the Lumina.

“So this candle is almost as old as the universe?”

“Isn’t it a wonder that a thing can exist for so long?”

You might assume, as she did, that the Lumina was saddened by having to finally burn such an ancient, storied candle, but you would be wrong.

“In the first place,” they said, with a twinkle in their nine, long eyes, “the Arhat candle is just a candle, and therefore meant to be impermanent. It was bound to be destroyed one day. It is a good metaphor for all material things. They are, first and always, impermanent fixtures, and not worth clinging to.” They sipped their tea, which they had steeped with the heat of the Arhat candle, by holding the cup impractically over the flame and swirling the liquid inside it.

She nodded, understanding.

“In the second place,” the Lumina continued, “there really was no candle there to begin with. To see a candle, where there is only a collection of innocent particles, would not be to see through the illusion. The candle is only a pattern that our minds project. At best, what we call the candle is only a collection of atoms in a moment in time, bounded by nothing but context. Even the atoms don’t exist in-and-of themselves. They exist relationally. The candle is just the story of a candle, and to grow attached to it would be to cause unnecessary suffering. This is the case with everything.”

“That’s a lot, but I think I understand,” she said.

And as we moved downstairs to the main room, where everyone had gathered under the window facing the red pinprick of Satori V in the deep, black sky, in the last flames’ light, I said to her, “It’s comforting to know that it’s the same way with you and me as it is with the Lumina’s candle. We’re just collections of particles who have imagined selves where there really aren’t any. We are dying every second, and it will be no monumental loss when we die for a final time. I think the people who left on the Cormorants and Starling ships didn’t really understand that. They’re so worried about survival. And they don’t understand that it is better to die together in the light of non-existent candles, in the home you’ve always known, than alone, clinging to life in the cold of non-existent ships, in the void of non-existent space. This is my understanding.”

“This is my understanding too,” she said, “although it is a lot harder to move past that story of the self than it is just understanding it. And the... knowledge... that today is no different than any other day is fighting this feeling of... I don’t know... I don’t know the word.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

And in the final moments of our universe, we sat huddled together under the warm, red light of our orange-sized singularity floating like a leaf in a dark pond. I held her tight, and then, conventionally as well as absolutely, there was no light, and there was no darkness, and there was neither an absence of light nor an absence of darkness. And the candles blew out.