



BRIEF CANDLES

MATT MOORE

“Brief Candles”

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-Matt

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Brief Candles

By Matt Moore

With another set of neighbours talking to James at the end of the driveway, the doubts crept again along the edges of Mary's mind. Doubts that moving out of the city would improve things with James's parents. Doubts that she and James should have moved to this new neighbourhood without a flame burning in a translantern.

Outside, the mom pushed the stroller back and forth to soothe the sleeping infant wrapped in a pink blanket while the dad held his toddler daughter's hand as she twisted and pulled, bored by grown-up talk. And James smiled and chatted, motioning to the house and street while he no doubt tried to hide that it all just reminded him that they didn't have anyone they could ask to die so they could have a baby.

Snatches of the conversation drifted through the open bedroom window while Mary organized the clothes scattered across the bed from one of the last unpacked boxes. "... great schools" "Love it so far" "... safe" "... good neighbours" "... away from the half-and quarter-souled coloureds." Mary kept her head down, folding his shirts into a pile, socks and underwear in another, her skirts and blouses on the opposite side of the bed. Yet the emptiness ached in her belly with thoughts of the other neighbours they'd met during the first three weeks in their new home. It was a gorgeous start to summer, with young families pushing strollers and

guiding toddlers while moms-to-be glowed with their beautiful bellies. At backyard barbecues or cocktails parties where they'd meet their just-moved-in neighbours, it was almost as if some of the moms intentionally taunted her. Their accents hinting that they came from up the valley or down east, these women told Mary about a sister back home who felt too old to have a second child, or the tragedy of a young niece or nephew passing away suddenly. Regardless of the details, these women had received a flame and, with it, the rare blessing of a third child. "The Cycle turns," they'd beam, absently stroking their bellies.

Not fast enough, Mary wanted to, but couldn't, reply. Five years of marriage and still using condoms and tracking her cycle like couples who already had their two children. She envied, and in darker moments even hated, her girlfriends whose letters exclaimed that they were pregnant and, a few months later, described the hardships as their bodies swelled and changed.

She hadn't expected the wait to be so trying. They'd been married less than a year when she'd urged James to give up the flame holding the soul of his paternal grandmother to his brother Leonard so they could maintain peace in the family. She'd believed Vivian, James's mother, would find another flame for them soon enough. But the short wait she'd envisioned had stretched over four years and now the emptiness of this house, with its two other bedrooms still primer-white instead of baby blue or soft pink, pressed in like night air before a storm.

A storm she hoped to avoid this evening with James's parents coming for dinner for the first time since moving in.

Everything sorted on the bed, Mary began placing things in their proper drawers. Glancing outside, she saw that the couple had left. But James had crossed the street and was heading down the sidewalk for a house near the end of the block where an older man awkwardly yanked a lawnmower's the pull chord. After a moment, Mary realized the man was left-handed and the

right-mounted chord gave him trouble. Another moment still and, taking in his white hair and stooped posture, she realized he wasn't just older but *old*.

James greeted the man and they began to talk, motioning to the mower, the man's house, James's house and then back to the mower. After a minute, James gave the handle a sharp yank. The engine's roar filled the mid-afternoon summer air. Rather than returning home, the two men let the mower run for a few seconds, shut it off and disappeared into the garage.

Clothing put away, Mary descended to the kitchen to start on dinner. She wondered why an old man had moved to a new neighbourhood filled with young families and if he felt as out of place as she did.

#

"Just met a new neighbour," James announced, coming up the stairs. "Name's Alvin Rusk. Interesting guy."

"Was he the one you were helping with the mower?" Mary replied. He'd been gone over an hour, enough time to put dinner in the oven and have a quicker shower. "Yeah. Moved in a week ago." James stripped off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper.

Mary buttoned up the dress she'd bought for that night. . "How old is he?"

"Seventy-two." His jeans went next. "Can you believe that?"

Mary could. Her parents' letters described a commune up the valley with inhabitants in their eighties and even nineties. The younger residents revered, respected and cared for them rather than waiting for, or even urging, them to die.

"No kids, though," James added, filling in a missing piece. "That he knows of. Sounds like he had his fair share of company in Europe during the wars." He stood naked in the bedroom, looking around. "Where are the towels?"

Even after five years, the sight of him thrilled her. The effort of moving in and setting up had left them drained most nights, but right now they had time. If they were quick. To be with him, his arms holding her, inhaling the smell that was his. “I don’t know,” she said, teasing. She began to undo the buttons up the front of her dress. “Come find them.”

He looked at her, then the bedside clock, and his shoulders slumped. “Not now, OK? Are there towels in the bathroom?” He didn’t wait for an answer before moving into the hall and shutting the bathroom door behind him. A moment later, the shower spit a few times before the flow steadied.

Mary re-did her buttons, forcing her thoughts away from James and onto what was left to do that evening. It would have been a mistake, anyway. It had been two weeks since her period, her most fertile time.

What would she do if she got pregnant without a soul for their baby? In another letter, after Mary had told her parents about giving James’s trans lantern to his brother, they’d suggested she get pregnant “by accident” and force James to confront his beliefs. Would he side with his mother, who’d no doubt pressure Mary to end the pregnancy, or support her in finally starting a family?

But the scheme never took into account what she believed. *Which was what?* she asked herself.

Mary pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, forcing back the building tears. Thoughts like those didn’t help. She has to be strong and calm tonight. It had been her suggestion to host James’s parents for dinner. James had resisted, reminding her they’d moved out to the suburbs to put some distance between them, but she’d insisted.

The truth, she admitted to herself but could not admit to James, was she was terrified to face pregnancy and childbirth without her mother. Yet her parents had settled permanently in that

commune. Their letters were cordial enough, but Mary hadn't seen them in years and didn't honestly know if they would leave after the horrible things she'd said to them. So despite James's feelings toward his mother, Mary had no other choice than to rely on Vivian when they finally had a flame and could start a family.

The shower shut off. Knowing James would be in a mood and seeing her so upset would make it worse, Mary went downstairs to check on dinner.

#

The doorbell rang.

In the living room, James let out a groan Mary could hear over the boiling pots. With her hair done up and new dress fitting perfectly, she felt ready. She hoped James was. At least he had thawed a little as they had finished tidying, cracking jokes and his hand "accidentally" brushing her breast or bottom.

But hearing James move to the door, a familiar fear twisted in Mary's belly—that tonight would be the night James's simmering anger would boil over at Vivian and he'd vent the four years of rage he'd been carrying. Just as she'd driven away her parents, James would drive away his, leaving them alone and without any hope of getting a flame except buying one.

And, Mary feared, would James's anger turn on her for putting them in that situation? Her breath caught. At twenty-seven, the time where they could start a family was slipping away. Another fear crept cool and tight up her neck that James might leave her for a younger woman with a flame who could give him a child.

"Hello, sweetie!" Vivian boomed, breaking Mary's thoughts. Wiping her hands on her apron, Mary moved into the hall and toward the door. "Hello Mary!" Vivian cried, shrugging out of her coat and pressing her bright reds lip to Mary's cheek. Thomas, James's father, followed

silently behind, offering James a handshake and a barely audible “Nice to see you, son.” Mary pecked him on the cheek and, after a few words of greeting, returned to the kitchen.

Vivian followed, lifting pot lids and looking in the oven. “Make sure to baste that,” she offered. “Need to turn this down,” she added, changing a jet’s dial. After “Make sure that doesn’t burn” and “use butter, don’t use oil,” Mary said, “Thank you, Vivian, but I think I can handle the rest. Why don’t you go sit and enjoy yourself?”

“Oh, I don’t mind.” She looked over her shoulder at the doorway and took a step closer to Mary. Voice low, she asked, “I really wanted to ask: have you talked to your doctor? About ‘the pill’?”

Mary’s breath caught. “He’s not sure it’s the best,” she lied. “For me. Who still wants children.”

“Well, I hope you and James are careful,” Vivian replied. “You especially. It’d be a shame if . . . well. It would be shame.” Her bright red lips curled up into a smile. “If you need any help in here, just let me know.” She turned and left, saying, “Now what are you men talking about?”

Mary shut her eyes, letting out the breath she’d been holding.

Having time to let things simmer, she untied her apron and moved into the living room where she found a gin and tonic waiting. She sipped at it as Vivian went on about how much faster the new highway made the ride out from the city. She shifted to how she wanted Thomas to close down his practice so they could get out of the city and move to the suburbs themselves. With so many young families out here, a doctor would be in high demand. “And with that latest Negro riot,” she added, “who can say where it will happen next?”

Mary looked to James, worried he’d take the bait and correct his mother that most “riots” began as peaceful marches for the equality Negroes had been promised by following the Cycle.

They became riots when police turned fire hoses on the protestors or sicced attack dogs on them. Or perhaps he'd remind her of the Negroes he met every day who were as smart and reasonable as any fully ensouled follower of the Cycle. Working in settlement services for new immigrants, James's job brought him into contact with Negroes, Orientals and Hispanics from all over the world seeking a better life in this country. At least once a week he described a family, or sometimes a young man on his own, who only wanted to work hard and make their own way. Hardly the savages that Vivian believed anyone who didn't follow the Cycle had to be.

But James sat on the couch, swirling the ice in his glass. He resembled his father so much, silent and letting Vivian ramble about how well Leonard was doing with his new auto dealership. To say nothing of her three wonderful children who were growing up so fast. Thomas spoke about his practice when Mary asked him directly, but Vivian would interject, steering the conversation back to one topic or another.

By the time coffee had been served and cleared, Vivian's musing had veered from Vietnam ("Their resistance to accepting the Cycle only shows how badly they need it") to President Johnson ("More trustworthy than that Orthodox Kennedy") to elderly distant relatives ("Your second cousin Stanley still lives alone up in that shack"). Mary despised herself for how her attention had piqued at the mention of James's cousins and aunts and uncles, hoping that someone's health had taken a bad turn, or worse, so that when they died James and Mary might receive a flame and finally start their family. She debated casually suggesting to Vivian that these distant relatives consider not waiting for a natural death and do the honourable thing by cycling on. If they were all as devout as Vivian claimed, they'd consider it an honour for their soul to live in the newest member of the family. But the news was of good health all around, leading Vivian to assure them that the Cycle does indeed turn, to have faith and be accepting of a flame in its due course.

When Vivian and Thomas left around 9:30, James shut the door and leaned against it, head bowed and mouth set in a thin line.

“I’m sorry,” Mary began. “I shouldn’t have—”

James held up his hand. He didn’t look at her. “This buys us some time. She’s wanted to see the house. She’s seen it. I don’t need to see her again. Unless she has news on a flame.”

Bringing plates into the kitchen and wanting to take her mind off Vivian, Mary said, “Tell me more about Alvin.”

“More fun than my parents,” James replied, sorting clean silverware from used.

“Oh?” She carried in more, placing everything on the counter.

“He’s lived quite a life. A man constantly in motion.” As James sorted plates from bowls, cups from glasses, his movements softened, his anger draining. “Played baseball. Fought in the wars. Ran his own store for a while.”

Mary said, “I’d like to meet him.”

“Yeah,” James said, moving behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. “We need some friends around here.”

Mary stripped off her rubber gloves and placed her hands over James’s, knowing what he’d left unsaid. That it would be good to have a friend without kids or translanterns reminding them of their home’s crushing emptiness.

#

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Rusk,” Mary said, balancing the plate of hors d’oeuvres on a hip and taking Alvin’s offered hand. The gentleness of the older man’s grip surprised her.

“No need to be so formal,” he replied. “It’s Alvin. Here, let me grab that.” He reached out and took the tray from her, holding it in his left hand before sweeping his right into his home. “Come on in.”

Mary stepped past Alvin into the living room where faded black and white photos covered the wall behind a simple, plaid couch. An old, wingback chair with the worn fabric faced a tiny television. Through the archway into the dining room Mary saw a small circular table with two wooden chairs.

“Simple, I know,” Alvin said, setting the tray on a coffee table. “But it’s all I need. What can I get you to drink?”

James asked for a beer and Mary did as well while examining the photos. As Alvin milled about in the kitchen, she spotted younger versions of him in photos of muddy fields and dense jungles, or looking dashing in a baseball or postal uniform.

“I was quite the handsome young devil,” Alvin said. When Mary turned to take her drink, he winked. “Always the active sort. Thought France would be a big adventure, but . . . well.” He waved his hand, clearing away the subject and moving on. “But when the Japs bombed Pearl I re-enlisted. Forty-two and could still fit in my uniform.” He patted his barely-there paunch. “I could out-run, out-fight and out-drink those young sprouts. And those over-eager jackrabbits didn’t know how to treat a lady.” He chuckled and Mary noticed how the left side of his face curled up, while the right remained still. “But hell, listen to me, rambling on. Mary, my dear, I’ve met James. Let’s hear about you.”

Mary told how she was born and grew up in the city’s west end. She mentioned her older brother David and how she’d been twelve when he’d been killed in Korea. Not wanting to ruin the mood, she didn’t tell Alvin that no one had been with David to light a flame and capture his soul

when he'd died. She recalled vividly, but did not describe, their priest explaining how David's soul would not be lost. Instead, it would have entered into a Korean newborn, saving the child from the wild, uncivilized life of a quarter- or eighth or even no-souled who were so common over there. Which was why, the priest went on, that part of the world was constantly beset by things like wars and famine, and susceptible to dictators and communists.

She skipped over the change in her parents, who'd never been faithful in attending church, as they attended fewer holiday services and decorated less for equinox celebrations. And by the time she started high school, boys and clothes and music filled her life, not how long her father's hair had grown or that they visited unnamed friends some evenings, leaving her home alone.

So there was no need to tell Alvin about coming home from school on the Friday after the Vernal Equinox to find her father home from work. With her mother, they sat her down in the kitchen and told her that they had converted to Christianity. She couldn't breathe, trying to process that her parents had joined this new religion, though they insisted it was 2000 years old, that rock musicians had brought back from visits to the Middle East. It was people in their twenties who were growing out their hair, quitting respectable jobs, moving to remote camps and reproducing like Africans or Orientals because they believed their all-powerful god could create as many souls as it wanted. And because those souls returned to this god after death, the idea that one could trap a soul in a flame when someone died and release it into a newborn baby by extinguishing the flame was ridiculous.

It was that realization that made her leap from the kitchen table and run to the living room to find the candle in each of the two translanterns on the mantle extinguished. Smoke still curled from the candle in the 14-inch high octagonal translantern, which her mother brought into the marriage and would have been Mary's. She snatched it up, its brushed chrome sides still warm.

The squat, cone-shaped trans lantern with circles stamped into its copper sides, which would have gone to David, was cool. Her legs nearly gave out with the realization that she'd had gone from the enviable position of bringing two souls into a marriage, the one thing that could get some boys' attention over her friends' pretty faces or curves under their sweaters, to none.

She's wheeled on them, unleashing hateful rants about blasphemy and heresy, spouting conservative politicians' rhetoric on how breaking the Cycle would lead the country down a path of depravity, hedonism and idleness. She didn't know if she believed it, just that she wanted it to hurt. And lastly, the one thing she *did* know, is who would marry her if she could not bring a flame to the marriage?

They told her God loved her, would love her children and place souls within them, but by then she was halfway up the stairs. She slammed the door and flopped onto her bed, sobbing into her pillow with the knowledge that the life she had imagined had been wiped away by something as simple as two breaths. Men without a flame could still succeed in life, but women grew into crazy old spinsters or, sometimes, prostitutes. Now she'd be was one of them. And she found that this realization fuelled her grief, not that her grandparents' souls had been let loose to wander until they entered a newborn who might otherwise have been soulless. Because, in that moment, she realized she didn't believe in the Cycle. There was comfort in the traditions and the notion of a population that wouldn't explode out of control, but the idea of trapping a soul in a flame was as unbelievable as a single god who could create souls from nothing.

But others did believe and would judge her for what her parents had done. Whispers behind cupped hands followed her through the halls at school. At home, her parents' overtures to follow Christ ended in screaming fights with her storming out and spending hours alone at the library since she wasn't welcome in her friends' homes any longer.

And when high school ended, she moved out and told them she never wanted to see them again.

Of course, she told Alvin none of this. Not even James knew all these details. With his parents so devout, she didn't dare risk telling him of her own lack of faith. A pang of guilt still soured her stomach over how she had lied to him when they had first met that her father had been killed in WWII and so she was eligible for the Potsdam Dispensation of having a child without a flame. By the time she'd confessed, they'd been so deeply in love he had forgiven her and told her if they only had one child they'd have to love it twice as much.

Instead, she told Alvin that she and her parents had had a falling out after she'd finished high school, so she'd moved into an apartment with three other girls. She'd worked as a secretary at an insurance company, met James through some common friends, fallen in love and then married. And once married, of course, quit her job to take care of the home in preparation for children.

"Well. Quite a story," Alvin said, finishing the last of his can. "So who's ready for another?"

#

Head buzzing but not quite spinning, they thanked Alvin and headed for home. Past midnight, the night air was still warm.

"What's so funny?" James asked, slipping his arm around her waist and slowly tracing a fingertip up her side.

"Just that Alvin is not what I expected," she said, giggling and then realizing she'd been giggling for some time. James's finger tickled and teased and her giggles became squeals. She put

her hand around his waist. “And not full of baby talk or how great it is not to be surrounded by Negroes.”

They reached the front door, Mary having just enough self-control for James to open the door for her, follow her inside and shut it before grabbing him, pressing against him, kissing him. “Upstairs,” she breathed and turned, awkwardly mounting the steps, flying into the bedroom and flopping on the bed on her back. A moment later, James’s was above her, lips on her neck, hands everywhere.

She let James strip off her clothes, her hands too clumsy and drunk. Her fingers stroked the swell in his pants. “Hurry . . .” she said.

Voices from teachers in those all-girls classes in high school piped up in her mind as clothes fell away and cool air licked her skin. “. . . boys can’t help themselves, so girls must be control.” “We have our own cycle to track and protect . . .” “. . . a woman’s hips and breasts are curves to remind her of the Cycle’s endless curve . . .”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Huh?” James asked, confusion in his voice and suddenly still.

“Nothing,” she panted. She caressed his face, his neck, his chest. “Nothing.” When he remained unmoving, she slapped his shoulder. “It’s nothing now come on.”

“OK,” he grunted, leaning to the side. She heard the bedside table open, his hands rummaging through contents.

“Oh just do it,” she begged.

“Without—?”

She reached out in the dark, following his body down and guiding him inside her. “Yes.”

James obliged, thrusting forward.

#

A noise woke James out of a restless sleep. After a second, he shut his eyes and tried to doze back off. A dull pain coated the front of his head.

Stopping by Alvin's after the Autumnal Equinox fireworks had seemed like a good idea. Alvin had had some beers in the fridge, tomorrow was Saturday, so why not? Besides, it was better than going to the Sutherlands' or Atwoods' and listening to the dads talk about little league, new school year schedules or what a pain setting up a swing set could be. Sure, he kept a smile on his face, but sometimes he wanted to shake one of them. Didn't they read the paper? Watch the news? Who cared what their kids were doing when kids were dying in Vietnam. And for what? Or the hypocrisy of the so-devout southern governors claiming Negroes could never be fully ensouled no matter how hard they worked despite scripture saying the opposite. The country was changing. Hell, the whole world was.

And they knew he and Mary wanted kids, but didn't have a flame. Talking about little Michael on the swing or Jennifer losing a tooth just twisted the dagger a little more.

That's why he and Mary had spent so much time with Alvin over the summer. They could talk baseball, movies, politics. Crack some jokes. And his opinions surprised James. The first time watching Walter Cronkite report on a Negroes' equal rights march, James had braced for comments like his mother's. A century after slavery, his mother would have started in, Negroes had more babies than they could support. Got mixed up in crime. No better behaved than their no-souled ancestors brought over from Africa. At least under slavery, his mother had once said, they had a chance to become fully ensouled through hard work and following their masters' teachings.

But Alvin, more than fifteen years older than his mother, sided with the protestors. As for 'Nam, Alvin kept repeating it was a mistake.

And unlike the young families that turned in early, Alvin was game to stay up until midnight or later.

“You awake?” Mary asked again, pulling him from his drifting thoughts.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Mary said after a moment. “What if we asked Alvin to cycle on?”

James let the idea roll around his head. He’d never considered going outside the family. Or, he had to admit, feared his mother’s reaction to it.

But lying there, staring at the ceiling, the idea gave him hope.

Over the summer of getting to know the older man, Alvin’s happy veneer had slipped at times. He’d talked about playing baseball or walking his route. Being young and strong. Endless energy. But he’d given up the route when the winters got too hard. Tried his hand at running a plumbing store owned by an army buddy, but the demands of lifting heavy boxes proved to be too much. So did his fourth floor walk-up in the city.

He’d thought a house in the suburbs would be easier, but found its upkeep taxing. Even one flight of steps seemed too much at times. And he didn’t always trust his eyesight to drive.

“I don’t know how much time I got left,” he’d said once, empty beer cans covering the patio table. “When I’m gone all that’ll be left are some army records and old box scores.”

Alvin didn’t speak much of friends. Said he and his sister didn’t talk. So it didn’t seem there would be anyone wanting his soul when he passed. With some luck, Alvin might consider it an honour to cycle on. To take his own life before the last of his strength faded and have his soul go to someone he knew.

James would miss his friend, but the Cycle taught that Alvin had had his time. A pang of selfishness at using scripture he didn't even believe to justify asking Alvin to cycle on weighed on him, but the thought of finally holding his own child pressed back.

Next to him, Mary continued, "I know your mother won't approve at first, but over time—"

"We don't need to tell her," James said, hoping the hang-over didn't put too much anger into his voice. "We say it's from your family. A second cousin or something. Someone distant."

Her hand found his. "The guilt I have, even to this day, over lying to you about the Potsdam Dispensation," she said. "It eats me up. I don't want another lie—"

"It's none of her business."

"OK," she said again, squeezing his hand.

"Yeah, let's ask Alvin," James said, squeezing Mary's hand back. "Should we . . ." He paused, not sure what to say. His mom would be a natural at asking Alvin to cycle on, but James didn't know where to start.

"We could have him for dinner," Mary suggested, like she could read his mind. "I could make something nice, tell him how much we want kids. What it would mean to us."

"Alright." He gave her hand another squeeze and she slid closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her, grateful. Mary went still, her breathing deeper. But thoughts of what lie he would tell that would satisfy his mother's curiosity kept him awake. When his sister-in-law, Sharon, learned she was pregnant for the third time, Leonard had wanted to go to a publicly funded hospital. Find some poor, old person and buy their soul when they passed.

Neither Leonard nor James had expected this to be a problem. The church encouraged it. Better a soul be born into a middle class or wealthy family than again into poverty. Less of a drain

on social programs. One less fully ensouled person in menial work. Let a Negro take that job to work toward becoming fully ensouled.

But Vivian had called James, demanding he give the flame of his grandfather on his mantle to Leonard. She'd hear no other alternative. When James asked for an explanation, she described her life as a girl in Germany after World War One, telling him things he'd never heard before. The war had caused havoc with the Cycle. The peace treaties' conditions had broken the people's spirit. Flames were used as currency. Women without flames bought counterfeit trans lanterns. Souls split and split again as babies without flames were born. Who else but a half- and quarter-souled people would fall under the thrall of a madman? Her family had barely escaped when the country had fallen into war again.

So, she'd declared, this baby would have a flame from inside the family. Not a homeless beggar who'd ended up on the street because he probably wasn't fully ensouled to start. If James didn't give in, she'd convince his father to cut him off. And Leonard. At the time, Leonard's car dealership still needed their father's backing. And James and Mary would need help when the time came to buy a house. Not finished, her voice like ice, Vivian promised to wear Sharon down. Force her to have an abortion. And he'd be to blame. His sister-in-law wasn't strong like Mary. James knew his mother could do it.

Before he could tell his brother about the threat, Mary had said he should give up the flame to keep the family together. They'd only been married a few months. They'd find another way. A fight like this wasn't worth it.

James knew Mary's parents were Christian. Though he and Mary didn't attend church regularly, he suspected Mary's faith ran deep if she'd estranged herself from them due to their conversion. So he'd given in. And spent four years hiding his jealousy of co-workers' photos of

their kids on their desks and pretending seeing dads playing with their kids in the park didn't cause an ache in his heart.

Mary shifted in his arms, her breathing slow and steady. James released her, shifting further to his side of the bed. Staring at the ceiling, he kept thinking how he'd tell his mother.

#

His parents arrived fifteen minutes early. "Are we early?" his mother asked, looking at her watch. "Why, I guess we are." His father silently handed over his hat and coat.

Mary called out greetings from the kitchen, but stayed there.

While James mixed drinks, Vivian started in on the young women out in San Francisco she'd seen on the news. Dressed in leather and denim, showing off their swollen tummies for the television cameras. "They seem so proud to be pregnant and not have a flame for their poor babies." James handed out the drinks and mixed a new one for himself having had two already.

They'd already fought it out, but his anger at Mary for inviting his parents to the dinner when they were going to talk to Alvin still boiled. Didn't it make sense, Mary explained to James, that his parents at least meet Alvin? If Vivian and Thomas liked Alvin, she and James might not need to endlessly repeat some lie of where the flame came from. Since Thomas and Vivian always left early, James and Mary could talk to Alvin after.

He could have refused. Told his mother they needed to reschedule. But in the end, he gave in. Like always.

The doorbell rang, cutting off Vivian. James stood and answered the door to find Alvin with a bottle of wine.

"So, Alvin," Vivian said after introductions had been made, "tell us about yourself."

Alvin talked about his life and asked about Vivian and Thomas. Vivian told him about herself, about Thomas, his practice, their life together. She was her usual self, but Alvin held his own. They got into it, politely, over 'Nam and Negroes and the changing times. James watched, sipping his drink and getting refills. This would not end well. Meeting Alvin wouldn't affect her opinion of asking Alvin to cycle on. But he wanted a child more than his mother's approval. And with that realization, a calmness that even the booze couldn't provide settled over him.

It was like a schism in his mind cleaving his life in two. Before, his mother controlled whether he would have a family. After, he would make the decision. There would be no lies about some distant cousin of Mary's or worrying over whether his mother would forgive him for going outside the family. Whether or not his mother would be a part of her grandchild's life was a decision she would have to make.

He waited until after dessert. As his mother transitioned from one story to another, James took Mary's hand and interjected: "Sorry, Mom, there's something I've been meaning to asked Alvin. A favour."

"Certainly," Alvin replied, taking a sip of coffee.

Mary squeezed his hand, though encouraging him or wanting him to stop, he didn't know. "You know Mary and I want to have a baby."

"Of course he knows," Vivian said, sitting at the table. "We've been talking—"

"And," James went on, "we were hoping you'd do us the honour of cycling on."

"What is this?" Vivian asked, suddenly still and voice icy.

Alvin held James's gaze for a moment, then delicately set his coffee cup down.

“You said you don’t have any children,” James went on. Mary squeezed his hand again. “What you said about not being remembered really struck us. And how hard things are for you. So . . .”

“No,” Vivian said. “No, I forbid this. I *forbid* it.”

“Mom,” James said. And for the first time, put some threat in it.

“I will not have some stranger’s soul in my grandchildren.”

“I, um . . .” Alvin began, dabbing at this mouth with his napkin. “That is to say . . .” He folded his napkin, folded it again. “I’m a Christian, James. Mary.”

Mary’s grip loosened.

“I wondered if you might be, too,” Alvin went on.

“How dare you?” Vivian said.

“Mom—” James started.

“Young couple like them?” Alvin said, facing Vivian. “No translanterns? I wanted to ask. Wondered if you’ve given your life to Christ, but if I was wrong . . . Well . . .” He cleared his throat and stood. “Thank you for a lovely dinner.”

James stood as well. “Alvin, I’m so sorry—”

“People like you,” Vivian started, “would have us breed like animals. Souls dividing. People spreading too far. Using up our resources.”

“People like me?” For the first time, James heard anger rise in Alvin’s voice. “You watch the news? The population is increasing faster than the number of immigrants we got coming in. But it’s not Negroes doing it.” Alvin grimaced and his hand rose to his temple.

“Foreigners sneak into this country,” Vivian replied. “Dirty, no souls with no respect—”

“Take a walk around this neighbourhood,” Alvin continued, “Some families got three kids. The Sutherlands? They got four. Good, proper families.” He gesticulated with his left hand, emphasizing each word, but his right hung by his side. “Sure, maybe they had flames for their kids. Maybe. Or maybe between here and wherever they came from they lit a candle. Tell folks here it’s some distant cousin back home. But they tell folks back home they got it from some homeless guy here.” Alvin paused, placing his left hand against the side of his head. The left side of his face bunched up, but the right hung limp.

James expected his mother to explode, but she sat stunned, mouth set in a thin line.

Instead, his father asked, “Alvin?”

Alvin waved his hand at Thomas. His voice shook with barely contained anger, but the words came out slurred. “And resources? How many more roads out of the city and houses with huge yards we goin’ to build? One of the reasons more people are followin’ Christ is they’re seein’ the Cycle for what it is. A way to get rid ‘a old people ‘stead of takin’ care of them. Justify centuries of slavery. Justify racism and ‘bortion. But people ‘re—” He shook his head and forced out: “People ‘re livin’ . . .”

“Well,” Vivian said. “Nothing more to say?”

“Alvin,” Thomas said, his voice steady as he rose to his feet. “You need you to sit down. I think you might be having a stroke.”

The word struck James. The son of a doctor, he hadn’t noticed the symptoms. He moved around the table to Alvin. “Let’s get you into the living room.”

Alvin stumbled back, the right side of his face frozen. “God pr’tect me.” He limped down the hall, left hand up, right arm lifeless. “Pastor Dean warned me ‘bout this.” He bounced off a wall, unable to keep his balance.

“Call an ambulance,” Thomas called over his shoulder, following Alvin, a hand out.
“Alvin, please.”

James followed his father as Mary reached for the phone. Behind him, Vivian snapped,
“Don’t you dare! The Cycle turns.”

“Shut up, mother,” James said, motioning for Mary to call and following his father after Alvin.

“And no one is getting a candle?” Vivian remarked, still seated. “A coloured family could benefit from his soul.”

“I didn’ believe ‘im,” Alvin was saying. “That desperate Cyclers ‘d poison someone t’ get their soul.” By then Alvin had reached the front hall. He groped for the handle, opened the door and stepped outside onto the porch.

James and Thomas followed. The sun had set, but the streetlights had not come on. As Alvin descended the front steps, James said, “Alvin, we didn’t do anything.”

“Alvin,” Thomas added, “we need to get you to a hospital.”

Alvin’s legs wobbled stepping off the curb and into the street. “Leave me ‘lone.”

Headlights caught James’s eye. In the dimming evening, he made out a big Ford Fury convertible, its top down. It barely slowed for the stop sign at the Fuller Avenue intersection and roared down Ridgeline Crescent toward them.

James charged at Alvin. The headlights swelled, massive. The engine deafening. He wrapped his arms around Alvin and they tumbled, wind from the passing car whipping his shirt and hair. Together, they landed hard on the opposite sidewalk.

The car skidded, clouds of grey smoke flying from its squealing tires, and came to a stop. Rock music from some British band blared from the radio.

“Sorry, pops!” the driver shouted, standing in his seat. His dark hair reached his shoulders. “Didn’t see you there.”

“You could have killed us!” James shouted.

A teenaged girl in the passenger seat, a tie-dye T-shirt draped over her and sunglasses so large they covered half her face, stood. “Hey man, Jesus forgives us. So should you.”

She sat down and the car sped away.

“Alvin?” James asked, gently shaking him. Alvin, eyes closed and jaw slack, didn’t respond. Thomas appeared at their side. He put his ear to Alvin’s mouth and chest, then ran his fingers along the back of Alvin’s head. To James he said, “Back inside, son. Get me your First Aid kit. Flashlight. Some ice and a wash cloth.”

James ran back to his house, noticing neighbours gathering on their front walks. His mother waited at the bottom of the porch steps. “Is he hurt bad?” she asked, an unlit candle in hand. James snatched it and threw it down the street before mounting the stairs.

Mary waited on the porch. He explained what he needed. They gathered the items quickly. On their way back out, James and Mary passed his mother, rigid and fuming. The ambulance arrived moments later. In a blur of motion and shouted instructions, the paramedics loaded Alvin into the big, white vehicle. Its siren wailing, it rushed off down the street.

The spectacle over, neighbours retreated back inside. James, Mary and Thomas returned to the house. Vivian waited, scowling.

“People saw you save him,” Vivian said. “The Cycle turns. It was his time. What are they going to think about you now?”

“I don’t care,” James said.

She glared at him for a moment before saying, “I thought I raised you properly. In the church.”

“A church that says it’s OK to leave a friend to die because he’s old isn’t one I want to be part of!”

Vivian took a step back, shocked. Gathering her composure, lips pressed white, she turned to Thomas. “Get our coats. We’re not welcome in this home.”

James let her go.

#

His father called to let him know Alvin was awake and asking for him, but the prognosis wasn’t good. “His attending told me he’s had a series of small strokes over the years,” Thomas had explained. “This one was bad. The hospital’s keeping him comfortable. But they won’t treat him.”

“The Cycle turns,” James had said.

“Indeed it does,” Thomas had replied.

James asked about his mother. Thomas told him she was still mad, but would settle down in time. She loved her sons too much to hold that much of a grudge. James wasn’t so sure.

#

Following the coloured lines on the hallway floor, James wondered what Alvin wanted to talk about. Finding the right hall, he heard voices coming from the open door of Alvin’s room. Peering in, a dozen people stood around the bed. The youngest was a teenager, the oldest older than Alvin. Half were white, the others Oriental, Negro and Hispanic. Their heads bowed, a woman his mother’s age recited some kind of poem. The language was difficult to follow, but ended with “. . . dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.”

A prayer, James realized. He'd just heard a Christian prayer.

Alvin's eyes met James's. "James," he said. He lay propped up on pillows with bandages wrapped around his head. His left eye glistened, but the right was lifeless. The entire right side of his face drooped. The group turned to look at him. Voice still slurred, Alvin explained: "Friends, this is the young man who saved me."

A murmur went through them. James felt paralyzed, not sure what would happen next.

The woman who had led the prayer said to him, "God bless you, James." She motioned for him to enter. "You are welcome to join us."

"That's OK," James said. "I just wanted to see how Alvin was."

"All are welcome to hear the word of the Lord."

"Let 'im be, Ellie," Alvin said. To James he said, "We won't be too long."

James found a chair and waited. Finally, the group left, most smiling at James as they passed. He stood and went into Alvin's room.

"'lo, James," he said, left side of his mouth curling up in a smile.

"How are you feeling?" James sat in a simple chair next to the bed.

"Comfortable as I can, I s'pose. Docs say it won't be long. A big 'un 'll come and get me." He cleared his throat. "Thank you for, um . . . Well, f' saving my life. I'm sorry. For what I said, that is." He tapped the side of his head. "Brain wasn't workin' right."

"Apology accepted," James said, smiling. "And I'm sorry for asking you like that. And my mother . . ."

"You can't help that. Don't think there's any man who can keep your mother from sayin' what's on 'er mind." He swallowed. "I have t' ask, though. I've been thinkin' 'bout it. Why save

me? Why risk your own life? The Cycle says th' old die so th' young can live. That stupid kid would've run me down and you and Mary could be parents in nine months."

"Because . . ." James said, "it was the right thing to do."

"That's very Christian of you, but not th' Cycle."

"I guess . . ." His mind spun. "Sometimes we get mixed up in what our religion says and not what it means. I could have let you die and said 'The Cycle turns', but it wouldn't have been right. The Cycle's about having the best world we can. Don't take too much from it. Work hard. For me, the best world is one with you still in it. Even if it means waiting a little longer for a baby, it's too selfish to ask you to die."

Alvin nodded, sunlight catching tear tracks on his cheeks. "I've been thinkin', James. 'bout that night. If I'd been home when th' stroke hit." He swallowed. "I'd be dead right now. God wanted me at your place. I'm sure 'a it. He moved through you so I'd live." He wiped at his tears. "There's some message in this. Some meanin' t' m' life."

James remained silent, not sure how active a role Christians believed their God had in their lives.

"I should have discussed this with you man-to-man," James began, frustration creeping up. "Mary invited my parents over. I should have said 'no'. Or talked to you first."

"Too late for that, James. God works His will. Or 'the Cycle turns,' you might say." He reached out and took James's hand. "Don't be mad. You an' your mom; your feelin's run deep. You got that from 'er, but got your dad's soft spoken side. Your mom knows what she believes. I think you get into fights with 'er 'cause you don't. And Mary. She's a keeper. She's got no family but you. I know what it's like t' lose family. When I gave my life t' Christ my sister cut me off. Just like that." He wiped at his eyes again. "Hey, listen t' me ramblin' on."

“It’s OK,” James said and meant it.

Alvin cleared his throat and asked, “So, you think the Sox are going all the way?”

#

James passed the letter to Mary. He’d read the shaky writing twice at the hospital.

Dear James and Mary-

The doctors have told me my chances are not good, so I am going to write this while I can.

We believe different things, but I’ve come to see there’s no harm in someone lighting a candle when I die. My soul belongs to God and I’ll face His judgment, but if you take comfort from a candle and it reminds you of our friendship, it’s a blessed thing. And if you choose to blow it out when your first child is born, where’s the harm?

My church doesn’t agree. They say it’s blasphemy to consider it. But I think about what you said. That sometimes the words of our faith get in the way of what they’re trying to teach us.

And I think that’s what God wanted me to realize. With everything I’ve done in my life, I don’t think God will mind one candle. It’s an act of Christian charity.

I hope you’ll tell your little boy or girl about me. That I tried to live a good life. I did some terrible things in the wars, but I hope I’ve made the world a better place. And I hope your son or daughter will learn that lesson from me.

That's what I want to leave to this world. The meaning of my life. We can make the world better even with small actions.

I hope you never see this letter and we can go back to drinking beers and watching the ballgames. But if not, I thank you for giving me this time so I could see what God had to show me.

Sincerely,

Alvin

As Mary read, James placed the simple trans lantern that the nurse had given him on the mantle. Through the few round holes in the thin metal frame, a candle burned with Alvin's soul.

At least, that's what he'd been taught to believe. What his mother believed and what Mary believed.

She finished reading the letter and hugged him.

"Does this mean . . ." she started, her words slightly muffled with her face against his chest. "Your mom—"

"Alvin was more like family than some cousin I've never met. My mom will have to accept it."

She squeezed him tighter and began to cry. He held her for a few moments, then she asked, "Did you mean what you said to your mom? About not wanting to be part of the church?"

James went cold. After his parents had left that night, James had been terrified of Mary's reaction. In that night bed, he'd stared at the ceiling, wondering if his marriage was over, his mother would disown him and Alvin would die.

In the days since, she'd never mentioned it.

But now here it was. He picked his word carefully. “It’s her insistence on being right. On following so many rules. So many of them are hers. They’re not even the church’s.” He glanced at the trans lantern, the flame burning inside. It didn’t hold a soul for his child, he admitted to himself. Just permission to have one. “It’s not her decision. Why should she—why should anyone—get to say when we can start a family?” Frustration flared now. “Like our kids would be . . .? What? Monsters killing small animals? People new to this country act like they’re fully ensouled. But downtown, white people who should have been fully ensouled live on streets, break into cars.” Mary shifted against him, pulling away, and his anger collapsed to fear.

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. “I’ve wondered,” she said, “why is it that a Negro or Oriental, even as an adult, can become fully ensouled through hard work and accepting the Cycle, but a white baby *must* have a soul when it’s born?”

James nodded, fear melting to surprise—shock even—at Mary’s question. He told her of the time as a teenager when he’d asked his mother something similar. “She wouldn’t answer. Said only a half-souled person would ask.”

“I think about what Alvin said,” Mary went on, “about abortion and slavery. The Conklins and Sullivans with their three kids.”

The night when they’d made love without a condom after returning from Alvin’s house came to mind. “Do you believe in the Cycle?”

Mary was still for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t think my parents are right, either, but I don’t think I believe. Not anymore. It doesn’t make sense.” She hugged him tighter, her face against his chest. “I’ve been so scared that you’ll lose your parents like I lost mine. I said such terrible things to them, things that your mother would have said. I— I didn’t want you to lose your parents, but I see now.”

“My mom won’t risk losing touch with her kids. And grandkids. Things will have to change. But we have a flame now and . . . and I don’t even care about that. It’s our decision.”

They held each other for a while.

#

Not everyone Alison invited came to her birthday party. Only about half the girls who’d gone to Jennifer Conklin’s party and Karen Sullivan’s party went to Alison’s. It made Alison sad, but Mommy told her to be happy about the girls who did come.

There were games and presents and cake. They listened to music on Daddy’s radio and sang along with the songs they liked.

At least Rebecca Okafu came. Alison had never seen Rebecca at other birthday parties. Sometimes Rebecca would play with the girls in the neighbourhood, but Alison didn’t know anyone who’d been to her house. And some of the other girls said mean things behind her back. Alison thought it was just because Rebecca was black.

After everyone had gone home, Mommy said it wasn’t Alison’s fault that some girls hadn’t come. Alison wanted to play with her presents, but Mommy sat her down and Daddy sat down, too. That meant they were serious.

They told Alison that some of the parents didn’t like that Mommy was going to have another baby, but didn’t have a translantern. That’s why some of the girls hadn’t come to the party. It wasn’t that they didn’t like Alison, but their parents had told them not to go. Some people, they said, believe you had to have a special candle before you could have a baby. That was the Cycle, Alison knew. Daddy’s mommy and daddy believed that. But Mommy’s mommy and daddy believed anyone can have as many babies as they wanted. They were Christians, Alison also knew.

What Mommy and Daddy believed was somewhere in the middle. They said even if people believe different things than you, you had to do what you thought was right. They told her again about their friend Alvin. She was named after him, she knew, even though it was funny to be named after a boy. Alvin had done some things some of his friends didn't like. But he did them because he thought they were right and could make the world better. Even a small thing can make a difference.

Alison asked if Alvin's friends stopped being his friend.

No, they told her. His friends forgave Alvin because he was a good man. When he passed away, they followed their traditions to remember him and show him respect.

Alison thought about that, then asked if some girls didn't come because she'd invited Rebecca. Alison said her friends said black people aren't fully ensouled. They said their parents said the Okafus were going to wreck the neighbourhood. "Next thing you know," Alison said, imitating Karen's daddy, "there will be coloureds all up and down the damn street." Alison giggled, imagining Ridgeline Crescent on top of a dam. She hoped her backyard would be on the water side, not the side with the big wall going down.

Mommy and Daddy didn't laugh.

"They're 'black', sweetie," Daddy said. "Coloured isn't a nice word."

Alison thought about that for a second. "But black is a colour."

"Alison," Mommy said. Mommy only needed to say her name like that for Alison to be quiet.

They asked her if she understood and she said she did. She helped Mommy and Daddy clean up from the party and had a small supper. She was stuffed from the cake and chips. Mommy helped her get ready for bed and tucked her in.

Lying awake, she heard the older kids yelling and playing outside. Downstairs, Mommy and Daddy watched television. For a little while, she thought about her presents and the great day she'd had playing with her friends. Especially Rebecca.

She thought about Alvin. He'd been a brave man. A soldier. And brave enough to believe something different than other people because he thought it was right. And he thought it would make things better for other people.

She wanted to be brave like Alvin. And Mommy and Daddy. She didn't care what some of the other girls thought. Rebecca was nice and fun and smart.

Tomorrow, she'd go to Rebecca's house to play.

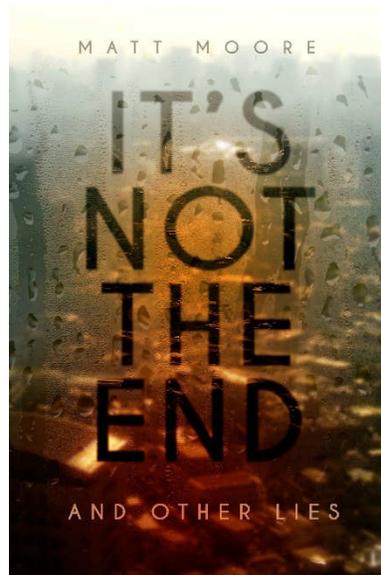
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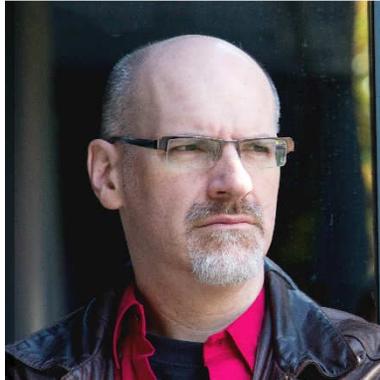
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About the Author



Matt Moore is an Aurora Award-winning author, poet and columnist of horror and dark science fiction. His short story collection, *It's Not The End And Other Lies*, is available from ChiZine Publications. He is also the Co-Chair of the Ottawa Chiaroscuro Reading Series (ChiSeries), an award-nominated, quarterly reading series, and a Contributing Editor with *AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review*. Raised in small town New England, a place rich with legends and ghost stories, he now live in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

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