

Candle

There once was an old man on a hill. The old man was poor, and he grew sadder every day as he watched his face get older in the mirror; his skin become more and more wrinkled, and his hands become weak and frail. The old man lived alone, supported by the garden that grew behind his house.

He sat alone at his dinner table one day, reading. The sky grew darker as the sun slowly fell behind the horizon, the pastel sky of blue and pink slowly covered by the dark, navy blue canopy of the night. The light in his room grew dimmer and dimmer, until soon enough no light remained in his house at all. Stumbling around, the old man stood up and looked for his candle, walking carefully, holding onto the wall so he wouldn't trip. He found his candle, or, what was left of it; he looked at the stump of wax sitting on the counter where the candle had once been. Frustrated, he walked outside, tripping over several objects in his living room on the way. Outside, he took in a deep breath of fresh air, gazing at the wonderful landscape in front of him. His feet sunk into the cool, soft wet grass, and his eyes focused upon the beauty of the scene in front of him. He spread his arms open and let the breeze caress his body, cooling him down, gently blowing away the sweat and dirt from his body collected from his toil earlier in the day.

In front of him lay the sea and moon, dancing together in their endless cycle. The glimmering sea reflected the dark sky and its infinite wonder, sparkling with the reflections of the thousands of stars resting quietly above it. The quiet, moonlit area was only disturbed by the occasional, distant howl of wolves, worshipping the immortal, fluorescent cratered moon which hung still in the sky, and the rhythmic crashing of waves onto the rocks below. The old man lay back on the grass, closing his eyes and falling asleep, his sleeping body protected by the gentle gaze of the night sky.

The next morning, he went to the market to buy a new candle. As he approached the market, he could hear the distant noise of the bustling market (yelling mostly) get closer to him. As he reached the entrance, he was almost overwhelmed by the symphony of voices that greeted him; chefs yelling orders every other stand, worried parents yelling their children's names, and lost children crying out for their parents- there were also animals screeching from cages, dogs loudly barking and monkeys rattling the metal bars viciously, as well as the usual uproar hundreds of conversations seemingly all placed on top of one another; the wave of sound crashed onto the old man, knocking him back in a deaf stupor. Slowly he regained his stead, and he continued on into the bustling crowd of market-goers.

He walked through the crowd, observing the wild scenes unfolding before his eyes, gazing at the strange creatures that passed by him as he went on. The dirt road he walked on stretched for miles, giving space for an endless hall of food stands and shops, filled from head to toe with merchandise.

One stand was painted bright red, decorated with a large, gleaming red sign in the shape of a tomato. Below the sign lay tables filled with rows of the biggest tomatoes the man had ever seen,

all identical to each other and seemingly perfect. He stared at them in awe for a second, then quickly snapped out of it, realizing he was standing in the middle of the road looking at tomatoes. He continued on, slowly becoming more intrigued by the seemingly limitless and bizarre market around him. A stand full of rare and exotic caged birds caught his eye- they squawked nonstop at every passerby; some were almost three feet tall while others you could hold in the palm of your hand, others had three eyes and some had transparent beaks. The stand next to it had a unit of a man dressed in a chef's outfit, singing joyously while mixing an enormous boiling cauldron. The sign on his stand read "Sue's Magic Stew", and directly below it lay bowls of piping hot, fresh stew, still steaming from coming out the cauldron. He continued walking, trying not to forget his main purpose in coming, but with difficulty; the stand he had just passed was filled with boiling flasks and brightly colored liquid moving through a maze of glass containers and tubes, which came out at the end as a fluorescent, bright blue juice. It took him everything not to go back and try it, but he knew he had to continue, his energy running low from so much noise and walking.

After a few more minutes of increasingly bizarre market stands and even stranger people, he had arrived at the stand selling candles. It boasted hundreds of rows of candles, almost too many for the old man to handle. He gazed at them, reading off their descriptions one by one (Ocean mist- a calm, relaxing flame whose smell may remind one of a journey on a faraway sea, surrounded by simply the calm waters and the cool morning mist. Lavender dream- a beautifully crafted candle with a persuasive yet gentle smell, which may guide one to dreams of butterflies and flower fields in their sleep). He looked up at the man behind the candles, who was enthusiastically talking to a kid, very clearly trying to sell whatever he could.

"Hey kid, you know what's better than sniffing all my candles? Having one at home to always have that great smell around!", said the salesman. The kid picked up a candle named Tangerine fever and took a great big whiff, then immediately picked up another one and sniffed it again. "Do you like that one?", he asked the kid.

"Not really", replied the kid, picking up another one. The salesman switched his attention to the old man. "Is this kid bothering you at all? I know it must be hard to pick candles with so much commotion"

"No, I'm quite alright", said the old man.

All of a sudden, it dawned on him why he chose to go to this hell hole of a market. He rubbed his hands together and chuckled to himself, growing a sinister grin on his face. He had come there not for just a candle, but THE candle. The candle had been shrouded in rumor for ages, and news about its abilities had brought almost everybody in the city to the market that day. He stood there now in broad daylight, face to face with it, and unfortunately, the salesman as well. It stood there tall and proud, the wax on the sides untouched, boasting a whale of a flame, large and bright, producing the light of four candles at once. He looked back up at the salesman who was still focused on the kid, who was making him noticeably frustrated. The candle was right in front of him, ready to be stolen- but the watchful eye of the salesman, as well as the others huddled around it prevented it. He knew he needed a plan, some distraction tactic that would allow him to swipe it

and quickly be on his way. He quickly tried to think of one, observing the salesman closely, trying to find a pattern in his behavior he could take advantage of. The salesman was now focused on the candle, waving people towards the legendary artifact in the flesh. The kid picked up another candle and the salesman turned his eyes on him, staring at the candle he was holding, sweating and twiddling his fingers. The kid put down the candle, and the salesman went back to trying to attract customers, luring them in with the candle as a fisherman does with his bait. Right then, it came to him. The old man grabbed the candle out of the kid's hand and put it back on the display table.

"Hey!", shouted the kid. The old man pulled him to the side, trying his best not to frighten the boy.

"I've got a proposition for you.", he said.

"I don't talk to strangers", said the boy, fearing for his safety,

"I'll give you twenty bucks", said the old man.

"I'm listening", the boy said with a smile on his face, immediately forgetting about his safety.

"Well, all I need you to do is cause a big, big distraction."

"Why?"

"No questions."

"Seriously?", whined the boy.

"Yes seriously, unless you don't want any money"

"Okok, just tell me what to do sir"

"Well, please grab two candles off the display table over there you were just looking at. After that, throw them both against the wall. Grab another two and start running- don't go back even if the salesman starts calling you. If and when he does, just keep going."

"This sounds dangerous, mister."

"It's all a game, don't worry kiddo. Besides, you'll get twenty dollars right?", said the old man, smiling at him behind a mask of desperation. The boy sighed, unenthusiastically shaking the old man's hand. The old man sat down at a table in front of the stand, ready for the inevitably chaotic scene to occur. The boy walked up to the stand and grabbed two candles. The salesman noticed him and quickly started antagonizing the boy once again.

"Back again, eh? And now you're picking up two at once. Oh, the audacit-" he was cut off suddenly as he watched, mouth wide open in horror as the boy flung his precious candles towards the wall.

"MY CANDLES, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?", he yelled in agony, as the candles shattered violently, sending shards of glass flying everywhere. The boy quickly grabbed another two candles and started walking off. "Hey kid where do you think you're going? Come back here!". The boy continued walking. By now, all the attention had turned on the boy, and the candle stood there forgotten about by all in this moment except the old man. The boy quickened his pace. "COME BACK HERE! THIEF!", shouted the salesman, leaving the stand and beginning to chase after the boy.

The old man quickly stood up and removed the glass cover over the candle and blew it out, then quickly pocketed it. He reached for a candle from the top and put it in the place of the original, wishing he could see the look of horror on the salesman's face when he sees the wax dripping and the candle becoming shorter. The commotion around him had lessened but not

stopped- many had started to chase after the poor boy, who had by now dropped the candles and gone into a full-on sprint.

The pudgy salesman, bent over and out of breath, picked up the candles, glad that he didn't have to continue chasing after the boy- instead, he shook his fist in the boy's direction, yelled "Dirty thief!", and started walking back to his candle stand, deciding that would suffice. Why they would put such a man in charge of the stand on such an important day, the old man did not know. However, it was too late; the salesman's failures would be realized in a couple of hours, but by then, the old man would be long gone. The old man walked out of the market gates, twirling the candle in between his fingers, smiling as he heard the distant shouts of the salesman.

Later that evening, the old man sat in his home, toying with the candle. He had already spent hours that day simply marveling at the flame; from the top to bottom one could see every shade of red, yellow, and orange in existence, all separating and mixing together as the flame flickered. At the bottom was a searing shade of blue, darker than the night sky at the going down yet the color of tropical waters going up.

The candle flame was abnormally large and warm as well, as the old man noticed that his house grew warmer the second he lit it. Filled with curiosity, and now in possession of the legendary object- he began experimenting, trying to discover all of its magical capabilities. Immediately upon lighting it, his eyes grew wide with awe as he saw the flame grow, watching the swirl of warm colors rise up in the air. "Woah", he said to himself out loud, unable to hold back his wonder. His entire body filled with warmth as he brought himself closer to it, holding his palms over it which were freezing from his walk home. He lifted his hands from the flame, and looked at his palms in shock. His once rough and calloused palms were all of a sudden soft- he placed them on his cheeks and felt the touch of a young man who hadn't worked a day in his life. He chuckled to himself, then chuckled a bit more, then started laughing, and soon enough he couldn't hold back his joy- he started laughing hysterically, jumping up and down; as soon as he did he fell onto the floor in pain, holding onto his knees which he forgot had become cursed with old age. "No worries", he said, as he started to hold the candle flame over his left hand. He watched in astonishment as his wrinkles slowly faded and the color returned to his skin. Soon his hand looked as if it was part of a completely different body, the old man looking at his old wrinkled arm with the hand of a young man at the end of it. He continued to move the flame over his arm, watching his skin become younger by the second, trying not to fall back into laughing hysterically but still smiling madly as would any man who held in his hand the secret to immortality. He held the flame over his face, nearly burning his beard as he almost fell into a trance while staring at its color slowly change from gray to black.

After a while of moving the candle up and down his body, he took a look at himself in the mirror and saw staring back at his twenty-year-old self. He jumped in the air, shouting with glee, only this time he felt no pain at all- in fact, he felt the most energetic he had felt in decades. He took off his shirt and flexed in the mirror, laughing with glee as he saw muscles in the place of wrinkles and a cut body where a collection of saggy skin used to be. He started doing jumping

jacks and push-ups, hopping onto and off his bed, laughing the entire time feeling like the happiest man alive.

He went outside to his garden and curled his toes in the wet soil, grabbing an apple and biting into it without having to worry about harming any of his teeth. He took a few deep meditative breaths and pictured his life, where he had gone wrong, what mistakes he made that led him into hermitage. He smiled to himself, knowing that now he had a brand new life ahead of him- new adventures, new friends, new lovers; he shivered ecstatically at the thought of being able to start a family again. He looked up at the large moon that gazed at him, and said, "It'll be me and you for thousands of years, my immortal friend". The moon said nothing in reply. The once old, now young man walked back into his house and looked around in contempt, realizing what a sheltered hermit he had been these past couple of years. All he had was a single room, with a bed with a bookshelf above it, a kitchen which included only a small sink, two stoves and a few wooden cupboards, and a small kitchen table with a mirror and a bookshelf on opposite sides of it. This is all he thought he needed, but now a young man, he realized he could have so much more. Tired, he went to bed, dreaming that night of his future life; he owned a large house in the middle of the city, which was brightly lit both by the array of candles and an expensive chandelier, as well as the small children and his beautiful wife which occupied it. He slept that night with a smile on his face, turning in his sleep only when he proceeded to his next pleasant dream.

The next morning, he ran back to the market, eager to simply experience life as a young man again. Upon his arrival, he saw countless posters with the candle pictured on them, reading "Stolen- if found, please return for a 10,000 schmeckle reward". He almost turned to head back and get it, deciding not to as he quickly realized it was most likely a ploy to get the thief to turn himself in. Choosing to forget about the posters, he walked along the market, only this time enjoying the vibrant atmosphere, full of life and wonder. He stopped at many stands along the way, including the tomato stand he had seen the day before, experiencing instant bliss the moment he bit into them. "Tonight, I'm going to make one hell of a sandwich", he said to himself. He continued walking along, enjoying the fresh air and the not-so-crowded market, since the main attraction he had stolen the day before.

Curiously enough, he thought he saw the boy from yesterday in the distance. He ran closer to where he saw him, and sure enough, it was the boy. The boy was in handcuffs, each of his arms being held by police officers who were dragging him along; it had been foolish of him to come back to the market. The boy looked back at the young man with tears in his eyes, not recognizing him due to his change in appearance. The boy had a look of dire anguish on his face, tears running down his cheek as he yelled "I'm innocent, I swear mister, please let me go". The officers carrying him ignored his pleas, continuing to drag him towards the jail cell that undoubtedly awaited the poor boy. Suddenly, the young man felt an overwhelming sense of dread crawl over him. His stomach started doing cartwheels, his mind becoming filled with dark thoughts as he felt a sense that something terrible had happened. This feeling nearly paralyzed him for a few seconds, he thought he was having a heart attack, as he stood unmoving within the crowd clutching his

stomach and breathing heavily. He quickly turned around and started sprinting out of the market, towards his home, so burdened by this sudden anxiety that he ran with a limp.

He ran for what seemed like hours, or days, or minutes; he couldn't tell- he just knew he needed to get back to his home immediately. By the time he got back, the stars had already taken their spot in the sky.

He arrived upon a scene straight from his nightmares- where his house had once been stood its charred skeleton, his house burnt to a crisp, no doubt by the very flame that had given him life just a few hours before. The candle was the only thing that survived, standing untouched, staring back at the old man with its eternal flame, flickering in the night. He fell to his knees and cried out in pain, and to his horror, he looked down at his hands and saw that they were old and wrinkled once again.

The old man let out a tortured scream, punching the ground, weeping, burying his head in his arms. The ancient moon looked upon the scene, not comforting the suffering old man, only watching; the candle did the same.

The candle watched as the old man cried the life out of his body, slowly becoming quieter, fully collapsing onto the cold grass he had once slept on happily a few days before. The old man soon lay quietly in the ground, unmoving and not making a sound, eyes wide open as he let death seep into his mind. The candle's flame imprinted in his mind, he did not fight death; instead, he closed his eyes, letting the infinite darkness of the afterlife wash over him.

As the old man lay on the ground unmoving, the candle's flame continued forever dancing in the background. Everything turned to black around him as he listened to the distant howl of wolves, and waves crashing onto the rocks hundreds of feet below him. The moon soon forgot about him, and continued its everlasting ballad with the sea below, applauded by the thousands of glittering stars surrounding it.