

The Candle's Adventure by Luke Bateman

The cobblestones were confused. Where was the familiar patter of footsteps? Where were the partygoers returning at an unreasonable hour? Where was the hurried running to Hall, that flared gowns like gothic cloaks?

The walls were worried too. They hadn't echoed laughter in a while. There were no secret whispers to soak into the stone and join the centuries of speculation resting like dutiful mortar. Where was everyone?

And as for the Chapel... the candles couldn't remember the last time they'd looked on things brightly! It all seemed so gloomy nowadays. So quiet, without daily life's hymn and prayer. Sunlight came and went through the old stained glass, but it wasn't the same. It illuminated only empty space.

Word was sent to Fellows' Garden, the home of ancient trees. Surely they, in all their many years of knowledge, would understand. From birch to oak the question was asked, but the leaves rustled in defeat. They would have to ask the Mulberry Tree.

The Mulberry Tree yawned. That was all it seemed to do. The others waited around it, exchanging raised eyebrows, wondering who would be the first to suggest it was a fools' errand when suddenly they heard the creak of very old wood. In time individual words seeped out, like snippets of conversation on a distant breeze. It said, "We are not alone in being alone."

The Mulberry Tree returned to its sleep. Confusion brewed. One duck announced it had been a waste of time; why would Mulberry know anything they didn't? The trees bristled and bustled and turned away. The walls and the cobblestones sighed and accepted it was a mystery. The only member of this curious gathering who remained was a candle from the chapel. Its unlit wick tilted back and forth, pondering the Mulberry Tree's words. *We are not alone in being alone*, it thought. What could it mean?

All of a sudden, its wick flickered into life. Of course! If the answer couldn't be found in the college, then it must surely be somewhere in Oxford! Flame lit valiantly, the Candle turned to the gate and hopped through the garden, leaving waxy rings as its footprints.

To Oriel first, and when it found that college equally eery, it turned to Corpus to consult the wise old Pelican. The bird's golden plumage rippled in the sunlight, but it shook its head forlornly. There were twenty seven sundials, but none of them had ever seen a time like this.

The Candle was determined, however, and so set off once more. It skipped Christchurch, assuming there'd be very little of interest or import to find out there, and instead conducted itself past the Bear (where it was surprised to see sitting room for once!) Onwards, towards Pembroke. The Candle took a long tour of the towery city. From Pembroke to Peters, from Worcester to Wadham. By Balliol, through Trinity, near New, covering 'Cats and minding Mansfield and Magdalen. Turl Street, host of a collegial cornucopia, became dotted with the small waxy rings that the Candle left behind. And yet, there were no revelations. No matter the path of its small, bobbing flame, no one seemed to know. Everyone had disappeared and there were just no answers.

It passed Teddy Hall and Queens. Across the road, Exams School stood austere and tall, needlessly magisterial and beautiful for it. The doors were closed, and the pavements were quiet. Usually, it hummed with a deep choir of concentration. Not now.

Along the high street, it became aware that the world around it was heightening. The towers seemed to be straining further for the skies, the steps growing insurmountable. It stopped, and so did the world's growth. It continued, and after a few paces the process started again. Its flame flickered in confusion. Turning around, to see if the buildings behind it were smaller, it saw the issue.

Its waxy trail glowed in the glistening sunlight. With each step, it wore itself away. It was maybe quarter the size now that it had been setting out. Across the road, Logic Lane provided a quick path back home. The Candle stared longingly but then carried on resolute. It couldn't go back until it'd got answers.

Smaller with every step, it continued towards Radcliffe Square. The Camera rose in the centre, its dome glistening against the wide blue sky. All of human knowledge was behind those doors. If the answer would be anywhere, it would be there. The Candle hurried across the cobblestones.

All those books inside, it would have to be careful. It couldn't risk damaging any of them. It stopped midway and thought very hard. It was getting smaller by the second. The mission had so far been a failure. It'd be easier just to go home, to turn away. But it had to know.

The Candle's flame went out.

Rushing up the long pavement, the Candle wondered where it should begin. It'd take a long time to search through all the books, but one day it might alight on the right one. Maybe the librarians would hel-

The Candle stopped in its tracks. The doors were locked. The lights were off. There was no one inside. The Library was closed.

The only movement the Candle could see was its own reflection in the darkened glass. It was a shadow of its original size. A thin wisp of smoke rose from its extinguished wick. All day long it had travelled, but there were as many answers as there were people. What else could it do?

By the time that the Candle had returned to Merton, it was just a stub with a thin black wick emerging from its top. It struggled through Mob Quad and to the doors of the antechapel, but it couldn't bring itself to face the other candles just yet, to admit it had failed.

Slumped against the chapel's old stone, it looked out at the blossom trees and sighed. Another wisp of smoke filtered up into the sky.

"What are you doing there, little one?" An ancient voice rumbled.

The Candle had never before heard the Chapel speak. It had heard the Chapel hum with the chorus of voices, and chime with the ring of bells, but never before speak. The Candle said, "I looked for answers but I didn't find any."

"Answers to what?"

"To where everyone is." The Candle said. "I don't understand. They've all just disappeared.

Everywhere should be so busy, but the city is empty! I miss them, their voices and their laughter and their thinkings and their prayers. I miss it all and I don't understand. Why did they have to go away? I've never seen anything like this... but, then, I suppose I've only had a very little life."

"I've had a very long life," the Chapel rumbled, "but I too have never seen anything like this."

"Doesn't it scare you?"

"Yes." The Chapel said. "But I'm not going to wear myself away with worry, or lose sight of the light."

"How?" The Candle pleaded.

The grand old building seemed to smile. "Because I have been here for centuries, and I will be here centuries more. I've seen seasons come and go, and fashions change. If there's one thing I have learnt, it is that this will pass. We will see them again soon."

The Candle's flame suddenly flickered into life. *That* was what the Mulberry Tree had meant!

"We're not alone in being alone." The Candle whispered. With its relit flame, it settled at the chapel door to guide everyone in once more one day.