

Last Christmas

by

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It was at least a thousand years since Solvay had had toes or fingers. And now her toes and fingers were cold.

So she made her boots and gloves warmer and pressed on through the deep snow towards the house she could see across the fields. The Moon was full and the sky as clear as space itself. The snow sparkled as if sprinkled with fairy dust and the elves giggled as they played in the hedgerows. She called out with a voice that rattled the icicles in the trees but no-one heard and no-one called back.

The house was a large, solid, brick affair with golden light streaming from its many windows, gilding the snow-buried lawns. She pressed her face up against the French windows and fogged the glass around her mouth and nose. Inside it was warm and bright. There was a fire blazing in the hearth and a gaudily-decorated tree. Two excited children played together while their parents sat in serene silence, enjoying this blissful time.

She tapped on the glass and everyone looked at her, eager and cheerful. The man waved a welcome, so she opened the door and stepped in.

'Aunty Solvay! Aunty Solvay!' the children cried, their minds improvising a plausible scenario. They rushed at her and threw their little arms around her waist.

Their mother stood up. 'Now children, you just let Aunty Solvay catch her breath and stamp some of that snow off her boots.'

Smiling, Solvay did just that, and shucked off her heavy coat too.

'Did you bring us any presents, Aunty Solvay?' The little girl asked.

'Sarah!' the mother exclaimed. 'What have I told you about politeness?'

'But it is Christmas,' the little boy said, reasonably. 'Surely it's alright at Christmas?'

'Well, let's see,' said Solvay, loving it. 'What might I have in my coat pockets?' She delved in the big coat and found two large parcels, as she knew she would. She produced them with a flourish and the children's eyes lit up brighter than the winking lights on the big tree.

They ran off with their presents, shaking them and listening. Their mother chased after them, admonishing them for not saying thank you, insisting they put them under the tree and not open them right away. Solvay watched with delight and walked over to the fire.

'This is lovely,' she said to the man there. 'I'm so glad I found this.'

'Back to your roots, eh?' he said.

'I'll get you a drink, Solvay,' the woman called, heading for the kitchen. 'And mince pies for everyone!' The children squealed with delight and followed her out.

Solvay settled into a comfortable armchair, the bright firelight reddening her shins. 'It's extremely ancient,' she told the man. He nodded, as if he knew. 'Pre-singularity, I suppose. But isn't it wonderful?'

'Makes you wonder why people ever wanted to change, eh?'

Solvay's smile faded away. 'Yes. Especially now..'

The woman came back with glasses of sherry and a plate of mince pies on a tray and everyone helped themselves. The sherry was sweet and thick, the pies crumbly and rich. Solvay savoured them with eyes closed and face upturned.

When the children began to plead with her to play games, she lifted the girl onto her lap and the boy settled at her feet. 'Look,' she said.

Between them all, a bright ball appeared in the air. It was the image of a nebula, a huge, hollow sphere of gas and dust, five light years across, lit from within. The nebula grew as the point of view sped towards it, impossibly fast. The shell of dust zipped past and there, at the centre was the bright speck of a lone white dwarf star. In moments, the star was closer, then closer still, until it became a disc, then a ball and soon they were looking down on its bright, hot surface. Not too hot, just a few thousand degrees, and not so bright now they were close.

They seemed to skim along the surface, hard and flawlessly smooth, like one of the silver balls on the Christmas tree. A tiny black point appeared on the horizon and rushed towards them. Eventually they saw it was a squat cylinder, like a hockey puck, sitting on a vast, chromium plain.

'What is it? What is it?' the girl demanded.

'It is the source of our power,' Solvay said.

From the top of the cylinder, at its very centre, a tiny thread ran straight up into space.

'A microwave laser,' Solvay told them. 'Generated directly from the heat of the dying star. Let's follow it.'

The image followed the thread up and up into the sky where it ended in a black dot. As they drew closer, the dot became a ball, silhouetted against the bright colours of the surrounding nebula. 'That's *Placid Point*, where we all live,' she told them, smiling fondly.

'We all live in England, silly!' the little boy scolded her.

She looked down at him, still smiling. 'Of course we do. But just imagine if we lived there.'

'In a ball in the sky?' The boy didn't sound too sure that it was such a good idea.

'Oh it isn't just a ball in the sky. This is a gigantic computer, perhaps the most powerful computer in the whole Galaxy. Millions of people live there, their minds running as software inside its vast processing arrays. At least... That is..'

'Can we go and play now, Mummy?' The little boy stood up. The girl wriggled off Solvay's lap and the two of them ran off.

For a moment, Solvay was confused by their behaviour. Then she realised that the safeties had cut in. None of these people were human, of course, just simple simulations. Such constructs found it hard to cope with the reflexivity involved in knowing their true nature. She could boost their intelligence, enable them to understand, but that would spoil everything.

'Cheer up, love,' the man said, patting her knee. 'It might never happen.'

The woman raised her glass. 'Merry Christmas.'

'Merry Christmas,' the man said. They sipped their drinks and smiled at one another.

A sudden panic hit Solvay. She stood up and looked around her, not recognising anything. Her body was human. Not just human but old, old human, unmodified human. It was like waking up to find you had changed into an ape. The sherry glass fell from her hand and the four simulacra nearby turned to stare at her.

Then she remembered again. It was Christmas. Pre-singularity. The happiest time she could find in all the history of her species. It was the place she had fled to, to escape the loneliness of her infinite, empty world.

The memory lapses and the disorientation were the first symptoms. The virus had found her, as it had found all the others, all those teeming millions. She had seemed immune, untouched, as every mind around her was eaten away by disease. A whole world of immortal spirits, corroded and corrupted and now all dead. Every backup they restored, every dormant mind that was rebooted, succumbed to the disease. Their best scientists worked on it and died fighting it. Desperate measures to quarantine the virus, to reboot the whole world, even to physically destroy parts of the station, were useless. The spread of the disease was exponential. First hundreds were sick and dying, then thousands, then Solvay could find no-one left alive at all.

No-one.

'Are you hungry, dear?' the woman asked. 'I could do you some supper.'

Solvay shook her head. She wanted to immerse herself in this lovely illusion but she could feel the grief crowding in on her, suffocating and choking her.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's all go outside. This is going to be the best Christmas ever!' The children cheered and everyone bustled about putting on coats and scarves, gloves and hats.

Outside, it was snowing. Big, soft flakes swung through the air, touching her face with infinite delicacy. At the bottom of the garden was a stable and in the yellow candlelight from within, they could see another family, gathered around a manger. There were boys with sheep staring in through the door and sumptuously-dressed men rode camels through the snow towards them.

'Good grief!' the man said. The children clapped their hands with delight.

'More, I think,' said Solvay and out of the sky a bright red sleigh, pulled by large quadrupeds, swooped down towards them. Sparkling starlight sprayed up like a comet's tail from its gleaming runners.

'It's Santa!' the children cried, jumping with excitement.

'Ho, ho, ho!' The fat man's laugh boomed across the sky and Solvay could not help but smile, it was so infectious.

'More,' she said and, on a small stage beside the stable, John Lennon, in a white suit, played a white piano and sang, 'So This Is Christmas.' In the sky above them a Heavenly host appeared and sang the choruses.

The elves, who had been watching from the hedges, ran out across the lawn, laughing and tumbling. They got under the camels' feet, they danced on the piano, they chased the sheep around the stable. Everyone was laughing. Everyone was singing.

For a moment Solvay blanked out again, coming around in time to see Santa landing among the happy mayhem and reaching into his sack for presents. At the garden gate, the newly-arrived carol singers gazed at the joyful scene with their lanterns swaying and their mouths little Os of amazement. Then she was gone for good, her program scrambled beyond repair. Everything she was, lost forever.

Yet Christmas went on, a rollicking, glorious mish-mash of happy ideas, playing on and on at the bright heart of that glorious nebula. A jewel, perhaps to be discovered one far future day by astonished strangers.

Placid Point, the last great refuge of the transorganics was empty of life. But still it swung around its white dwarf, drawing the star's energy, self-repairing and self-preserving. The greatest computer ever built, obeying its last instruction until the stars go out.