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Little Circles

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Preface

This story contains the following content warnings: heavily implied childhood abuse & trauma, violence & body horror, religious symbolism.

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i

I didn't know I was dreaming at first.

I often know, the minute I enter the fantasy and shroud myself in each intangible possibility, that I am dreaming. It's very easy to tell you're dreaming when the dream you arise in involves a life you have never lived. In most dreams, I live a life of safety. I live in a realm of peace, a dimension in which I have never known ache or rubble. The dream unfolds like unfurling cotton candy and envelops me in its sweetness and tang, forming a cocoon of security around my body, now fetal-position curled, now operating at the same capacity it reached when I took my first breath.

My dreams are always vivid. This is their only constant state. I fall asleep and awaken inside of the planet's core. Sometimes it burns; other times it revives. It's like living a double life, or perhaps moving through two different worlds on a whim. On Earth I am weak, brittle. I have not experienced much of Earth yet. I nest in my house and I sway to the birdsong. I am kept in by wooden talons closing over me. I am held down by my body's inability to propel itself forward. I never learned how to form

connections and I never learned how to love in a holistic manner and I never learned how to be anything but scared.

In my dreams I can walk.

In my dreams I can walk and I can love and the spaces I move through love me back.

If you practice hard enough, you can control the dreamscape on your own. At will, you can bring a loved one back from the dead, or you can bring death to those that have stolen from the natural cycle of recreation. You can soar through the air, weightless and bold. You can be famous and your singing voice can transition from the sound of a mercy-killed animal into the sound of a million angels holding hands and spilling choral hymns from their lips. You can ensure that every child in the universe will have enough to eat just by imagining it. You can paint the skies a soft pastel rainbow and turn the seas bubblegum pink. You can give into your waking hunger and eat and eat and eat without your frame ever shifting or your stomach ever filling. You can reach beyond imagination and pull yourself through into the astral.

I think they call it “lucid dreaming.”

Most of the time I am very skilled at lucid dreaming, and it is humiliating when I fail to adjust. I don’t tell anyone about my dreams because usually they branch out beyond words, and this is typically a good thing. It’s my little secret, the secret I share with God and the other aspects of me he created. We meet one another there and we dance in the flower fields and crown our heads with daisies. The acknowledgment that this isn’t real is supposed to be comforting because the dreamscape is a haven, an escape. The comfort is not supposed to come from the fact that the dreamscape being false means the creatures cannot hurt you once you leave it.

I didn't know what was happening at first. I am ashamed of that.

When I noticed them surrounding me, I thought it was real. I truly believed that I had left my bed, wandered into a forest until the trees became tainted charcoal onyx and the skies became crimson, too reminiscent of my inner world, and stumbled to my knees, my skin cut by the glass grass. I remember what they looked like - balls of lightning that lacked light, crackling black voids that sometimes looked circular, sometimes looked like the skeletal remains of something ancient, and other times resembled a mosaic of every fear I had ever felt in all twenty-one years of my existence, including the fears my brain swallowed to protect me.

When they realized I had discovered them, I heard a cacophonous shriek that wasn't a shriek at all—the sound originated within my soul, as if something inside me had regained consciousness and was crying for help like a newborn child. The wail was a mixture of organic and mechanical sounds, typewriter clicks and soft sobs and high-pitched fire alarms blaring through buildings, blades being unsheathed as blood was drawn from a wound drop by drop by drop.

One of the creatures looked at me with eyes like a house of mirrors embedded into the surface of a meteor and in the reflection I saw myself in a different way - not mangled or disfigured; the creature gazed at me and the parallels met my own gaze. I saw myself but it wasn't me. I saw myself but it was the version of me I have been mourning my entire life; staring back at me, mimicking each of my movements, was the girl who grew up unscathed. Plucked from a different universe and injected into this creature's torture, I watched the girl smile at me with a wide grin, like she was mocking me for my weakness.

We can't all make it out alive, I told her. You did. I didn't.

She had never been traumatized, and for me the experience was traumatizing in and of itself. Just more pain to sew onto existing pain. I'm sorry, I told her. I don't know what happened. I didn't know what was happening, I told her. What's your name? I asked her. What do you call yourself? I asked her. Are you in school? Do you know what's like to be happy? Do you have friends?

Are you a writer?

I was not blessed with an answer. Instead the creature blinked, and in the moments before its eyes closed and the ground crumbled beneath me I saw the correct version of me shed a tear of pity. It was infuriating; I didn't need to be pitied by myself. I needed to be pitied by the creatures, or by the man who hurt me, but no one in that equation was capable of pity. The ground fell away and I fell with it, hurtling downwards like I had finally been cast out of the only reality I deserved, like the universe was finally done with me, and I was destined to become something even more grotesque. I expected to crash into hellfire but instead I kept falling.

I spent a while like this, plummeting through centuries, my surroundings swapping between flashes of light's utter absence to a bouquet of light eating away at my vision, burning my eyes until they leaked from my skull and regenerated in the darkness once more. I fell and I fell until everything became stationary. I was still falling, but I wasn't falling; I was frozen in the air, encased in psychological amber for eternity. I had been trapped in the gentlest cage the human mind could comprehend and then I stopped falling and allowed time to take my place.

From my place in the stream of all that is and was and will be, I watched time move in different directions all around me,

like inverted waterfalls created by the shredding of physical law. I saw existence itself melting into puddles of potential and tragedy, and I put on my too-tight rainboots and splashed around in them, mixing the concepts until they were indistinguishable from one another. I saw birth and death with nothing in between. I saw the in-between without birth and death, things that existed before the universe sobbed itself into being and things that will remain in existence even after every form of life has flickered out. I saw beauty and I saw what remained of beauty when no one was left to witness it.

More than anything, I saw the creatures.

They were watching me through a monitor, as if they lived in a pocket of space that only they could access or understand. I couldn't see them but I saw them. My mind turned into the periscope of a submarine and I watched them watch me like I was an experiment, a candied volcano at an elementary school science fair, a poor dissected rabbit on the table. I had become becoming and everyone that I knew was beneath me only physically; in every other way they had risen above me to witness the ultimate outcome, the place I always knew I'd end up at—being absorbed by the graveyard dirt itself. I was thrashing against the mental windows, trying to reach the creatures to beg or to interrogate, like a misguided moth hallucinating a light that had left it long ago.

My world was inverted, each thought being conceived backwards and upside down. A lack of light enveloped me and drained imagination from my body until all that was left was a reality that couldn't be coped with. There has to be a balance—pure imagination carries the risk of getting lost in the fantasy, and the pure facts of reality carry the risk of developing a greater understanding, one that we're not ready for quite yet.

The moment I realized what the creatures truly wanted from me, I woke up. I have not dreamed since that night.

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ii.

In the daytime, I find myself daydreaming of dreaming more than I find myself actually present in any given moment. I rise into the world of the awake, stretch my muscles, plant my feet on the carpeted floor of my bedroom and stumble through the door on two trembling legs. Sometimes in my dreams I have four legs, like the little field mouse I plucked from my cat's grasp. Other times I have eight legs, like a giant cinematic spidermonster on the screen, crushing buildings beneath furry paws. At night I try to wake up in my sleep and it feels like anesthesia is being fed to my veins—I'm simply immobile, simply transient. I'm not dreaming, I'm not awake, but I'm not asleep either; I'm just living in the contrast, standing tall and flat on the line of the divide trying to blend in.

I find myself missing the dreams in their absence, even with the presence of the creatures. When I wake up, these days, from eight hours of peaceful sleep, I am exhausted. I try so desperately to remember it all— -the balls of inverted light, the crackling cackling of their shape— -but the memory simply guffaws and says, “No! No! I'm not ready! Don't make me!” like I did before

they took my wisdom teeth out, before they took me out. I try to recall the tainting enlightenment I felt in their hands, under their watch, but I am only left with a metallic taste in my mouth and the sense that I saw something I wasn't really supposed to see.

In my Communication class, I twirl my hair and I bite on the end of my pencil and I try so, so hard to work on my final essay but the words just won't come, just won't be tortured out. I try to conjure some idea of coherence but I think I left my coherence in the mindscape, underneath my pillow and eyelids. Oh well.

It isn't due for a while, anyway, and the professor accepts late work without penalty because she is angel-touched. I type into my Bluetooth keyboard, but I can only produce distorted hymns in praise of something no one can place quite yet. A hymn to something. A hymn to the concept of somethings—of the vagueness, its nebulousness, prayer without an addressed definition, prayer to anyone or anything that will listen.

On the screen of my tablet, I watch the letters scrape down into gibberish as my hands shake over the keys. I watch the letters as they bleed into one another, a hallucination captured on digital, the Cs and Os swirling together into small dark circles over the screen. Like eyes, or bubbles, or puncture wounds.

I shut the screen off. What I don't do is scream, because I did that when someone touched me to get my attention in class the other day and I've already embarrassed myself here beyond measure. I shut the screen off and slip it into my bag. Maybe writing something by hand will help, my sick brain wonders, still trying to anchor itself to tangibility.

But when I open the front cover of my journal, the first page—previously only etched with disjointed thoughts and introspective streams—is now littered with small circles, drawn

in heavy blots of pen ink over each word.

My pen drops on the wood of the desk, smudging ink down the side of my hand. It's supposed to be scary, probably, but I've had worse. Sometimes you need a little gap in your memory to make life worth living, and sometimes you have to talk about it like the others around you talk about alcohol. Harmless escapism, dear, not horror.

I close my eyes out of exhaustion. I'm not trying to dream, I'm trying to relax. I think I'm allowed to relax. I have to justify it to myself by coming up with someone who would tell me I'm not allowed to relax and I should push myself harder, but everyone I love loves me also and wants me to take care of myself first, which is infuriating, so I say to my brain-created opponent, "Of course I can take a second to close my eyes and relax! It's not like I'm trying to fall asleep in class!" because I just can't figure out why someone won't be mean to me yet. The guy in my brain huffs and puffs and blows it all down, though, and then I am faced with the reality, which is that I am fighting against the love, not the sleep. And then, well. I hide my head in my hands, and I fall asleep, brain guy be damned.

There is a faint pattern beyond the dark. Swirling and shimmering, as if it's using the darkness of my closed eyes as a blanket to keep itself warm. The pattern looks like moving water over checkered pool tile, each square glistening, radiating gloom inwards. I try to remember my realization—what the creatures desired for me—how can a creature desire?—but the only memories that want to resurface today are the unimaginable ones.

And then - a crackle, so loud it jolts me, sending my eyes fluttering open at my desk. My heart bangs on the meat of my chest to be let out. My heart pounds and pounds, races and races,

and still no one is staring at me, my entire essence invisible, to every eye.

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iii.

After three dreamless nights pass, I try to say a prayer before I fall asleep.

I don't *want* the creatures to come back, necessarily. I don't know what they are, and I can't remember what they want. I just miss my ability to lucid dream. I miss the ability to fall into a malleable world, to craft my own surroundings, surroundings kinder than what I have faced. I want a world around me that embraces me with warm, plump hugs and hot comfort food, tea mugs in hand. I want to go back to the world where everyone is fed and everyone is safe and I am part of the everyone.

So yes, I do pray. I clasp my hands together and everything, look at me, I'm doing so well. When I was religious I always tried to be Perfect at prayer, to Ascend, forgetting that any claim of perfection is forbidden. I understand things with a bit more clarity now. I turn off the light in my bedroom, climb into my bed, and clasp my hands close.

Please forgive me. I don't know what I did but I want to go back. Please take me back. I have to go back. It's all I have left.

I wonder, briefly, if:

- There's some psychological block preventing me from reaching my true potential, from relaxing, evaporating into rest. I have gained some unknown burden that is keeping me from seeing my true self, from the holy inversion. No, that can't be it—
- The creatures must be puppeteering it all. I must have met the Circles of Dreams. The vivid nature of the dream with the creatures was too overwhelming, and I looked too far in, and I met them and I wasn't supposed to meet them and they stole my last scrap of happiness—my escapism. No, that's insane.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Please fix me.

I turn over onto my side, and I do everything I can to fall asleep. I try so very hard. I count sheep and I cycle random words out to bore me to death sleep and I fantasize and I meditate, but it's too late, it's just not coming, I've failed.

So I open my eyes again, and I close my eyes. It feels peacefully final.

Please bring them back.

In the realm of my mind, I picture them in that forest—the holes in their faces, as if their bodies were entirely flat, holes I could see the rest of the trees and the sky right through. I picture them in front of me, their frames of thick dark lightning crouching down to meet my height. I picture the creatures and it feels forbidden to picture the creatures.

Please tell me what you want.

"Please tell me what you want," I say out loud, my voice strained. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

Maybe I've fallen asleep now, maybe I have been transported to an alien planet far away, or maybe I am simply somewhere

hidden deeper within; either way the scenery transforms around me, forests melting into childhood book fairs and days at Lake Michigan with my mother and visits to the pool on scorching summer days. I see one of them, and then I see them all — maybe every single one of their kind, unveiled to me now. It feels like scrying into my own death. It feels like biting into my own flesh, and it feels like ascending to clouds above, and it feels like swallowing stained glass, and it feels like warm hugs and mugs of warm lavender-peppermint tea. It feels goodbadgood, as the creatures stare me down. It feels like I am being sized up, judged for my deliciousness in the moment, until the decision to spare becomes apparently unanimous and they bow.

They bow, and then the lightning turns from dark into genuine *lightning*—a crackle and a flash from all of them, white enveloping my mind-vision entirely, a blinding and deafening thunderboom. In my dream I wonder if I have died. In the real world my heart slows down just for a moment. I struggle with that, you know, bradycardia. They can't figure out why, just like they can't figure out why I have those sores on my face, gaping circular wounds. It's grotesque, they tell me, all of them.

"You're not grotesque," says a voice. When I look up, I am once again faced with myself.

An army of me. A sick thing, a sad mockery. Now all the creatures resemble me at various stages of my life—the closest one to me has blue-blond hair and is approximately nine years old, still under the delusion that her life has meaning.

"This is cruel," I spit, hissing forward at the things. This is my mind too, or at least I still think I control it. I have to control it.

I allow my voice to emanate through the dreamscape, penetrating the expanse of it. A lion roar.

“We’re not grotesque,” says the creature behind her, a fifteen year old me with rainbow hair and glasses that fade from white into black. Her voice is blank and monotonous, but with each syllable uttered I feel a blade tickle over my chest. “We aren’t wrong. You are not disturbed. You don’t need to pray.” She reaches out, her palm flickering with beams of white light. “Complete the circle.”

Complete the circle.

I do consider taking her hand. There are flashes, in the mind within a mind: me and the Unimaginable Horror, bonding over a picnic in a conjured park, or meeting for coffee, or watching clouds pass together & labeling each one some fictional villain. I see us, holding one another, crying into our hands and then stroking each other’s cheeks. I see us. I see an us.

I do not take her hand.