

## A Small Little Circle- Sahil Armaan Kumar

---

I hate hospitals. I hate the squeaky-clean floors, making you overwhelmingly conscious of each step you take. I hate the colorful walls trying their best to distract, the white lights that shine so bright you have to squint till your eyes adjust, the noxious odor of a thousand inconsequential flowers brought by well-meaning relatives intermixed with the sweet, sickly scent of lemongrass that makes your nose twitch and your head throb. Most of all, I hate the smiles. Oh, the smiles! Everywhere you look, someone looks back. They catch your eye, there's the awkward split-second of nothing and then, with a feigned sense of selflessness, they smile at you, and you smile back. "I'm reassuring them. I'm helping." Lies. Your smile is no act of charity, we both know who it's really for. You think by "helping" others, by being charitable, by doing that small act of kindness, you will in some way be rewarded for your courage? No. What kindness? What courage? Your smile is as much a show of cowardice as any. I hate hospitals.

---

I got back home. It was dark. I didn't remember the time. I didn't care. All I knew was it was late. I didn't know how I got home either. The subway, maybe? Did the subway run that late? A cab? I was tired. And hungry. So hungry. I took off my coat, dropping it on the floor by the rack I just bought. I didn't bother taking off my shoes. They were muddy, and wet. The water had seeped through the sole and I could feel my toes webbed, the skin wrinkled. I used to find that interesting.

My apartment smelled like shit. "Purr." It took me a second, but then I saw them. A pair of slanted yellow eyes, barely visible, partially hidden behind the cheap, surprisingly functional futon I got off Craigslist a couple weeks ago.

“Ah, so you’re the culprit, then? A sneaky little one, aren’t you?”

Seemingly satisfied with my inference, she elegantly jumped onto the arm of the futon and, in one swift motion, was on the kitchen counter, right in front of me. She stood there for a second, as if to let me digest her presence, walked around in a small little circle, and sat right down, proceeding to lick her beautiful jet-black fur without a care in the world.

“Well, I guess now that you’ve decided to stay, I might as well make you comfortable.”

I turned back around, bent down and opened my fridge. “Creak!” Fuck, I had to get that fixed. I’d do it next week, maybe. As the door of the fridge swung open, I was met with the satisfying aroma of grilled chicken breast, green beans and poached eggs- leftovers from my meal earlier in the day. My stomach rumbled and I remembered how hungry I was.

“Purr.”

“Refined tastes, have we? Fine, have it your way.”

I put the meal in the microwave, heated it for a minute and a half, placed it carefully on a disposable plate, and set it in front of my new guest, along with a small bowl of milk. Content, she licked my finger- permission granted to grab myself a meal. I took out a relatively bigger bowl than the one she was now sipping from and filled it to the brim with ‘Cap’n Crunch’. I dug through the fridge for a few seconds and, realizing we were out of milk, poured myself a glass of OJ instead.

“Guess I’ll be having dry cereal tonight.”

No response. A sudden wave of fatigue overcame me, and I fell to the couch, spilling my juice all over me and nearly dropping my bowl of dry cereal. Too tired to clean up the mess, I kicked my boots off and, with a short-lived mastery of gymnastics, elaborately stripped down to my underwear without getting up from my comfortable laze.

Exhausted, I snarfed down the cereal and what was left of the orange juice, stretched out and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, I felt Maggi- yes, I had decided to call her Maggi- crawl onto my bare stomach and, as before, walk around in a small circle before sitting down. She was warm, comforting. I reached out and gently stroked her soft fur. It tickled my fingers. I lay my hand down on her stomach, feeling her chest contract and relax. Her breath too was graceful, rhythmic, and it lulled me to sleep.

I woke up freezing, my teeth clenched in a desperate attempt to control my shivering. Maybe sleeping in just my underwear wasn't the best idea. What time was it? 7:00 am. Fuck, I was up early again. Why do I do this to myself? I should go back to sleep. Who am I kidding, has that ever worked out? I'll just have to have an early start today, that's all.

I sat straight, started to get up, and remembered Maggi nuzzled against my stomach. With as much care as I could muster, I picked her up off my stomach, holding her like a pirate would his treasure, and put her down on the pillow I'd just been lying on. I waited a moment, holding my breath in anticipation, hoping not to see her small head turn, brows furrowed in rage, eyes staring into the depths of my soul, making me repent for my sin. Another moment passed and no head was turned. I exhaled.

Pleased, I decided to treat myself to a nice breakfast. I took a quick shower; the scalding hot water was therapeutic, setting my skin ablaze. I got out, brushed my teeth, threw on black denim pants, a worn-out Queen t-shirt, a pair of mismatched socks (my specialty), my old Nikes and walked out the door. Instantly, I was smacked in the face with a wave of ice-cold air and the breath was knocked right out of me. I stepped back inside, took a second to gather myself, grabbed the coat I had hastily thrown on the floor the night before and stepped back out. Prepared, I closed the door behind me and pushed through the cold, unfazed.

Fifteen minutes later, I was at the restaurant. ‘The Shady Lane Café.’ A fitting name for a café that, as you may have guessed, was always covered in shade from a majestic oak situated right outside. By now, the waiters had started to recognize me.

“Hey there, Tony. The usual?”

“Yep, you bet!”

“Alright, seat yourself down wherever you like, I’ll send your food over in just a minute.”

I walked through the restaurant, grabbed a copy of ‘The New York Times’ from a stack they kept by the entrance along with a pen they had in a bowl next to the newspapers, and sat down at a table outside, determined not to back down from the cold.

The Sunday Crossword, a true challenge. An amalgamation of years of American cultural references, obscure word definitions and puzzling puns, all brought together on a simple, monochrome interface. Yeah, I loved my crosswords.

True to her word, the waitress brought my food soon after I sat down. Two blueberry pancakes, whipped cream on top, syrup on the side. Three strips of crunchy bacon on a paper napkin to soak up the extra oil. A bowl of fresh fruit. A cup of coffee- black, no sugar. Delicious.

Upon finishing my meal, I resumed my daunting task.

‘Surroundings, 6 letters.’ Milieu. Last one. ‘Reduce the illumination?, 7 letters.’ What was it? Light? What prefix? Un? No. De? Delight? Yeah, that works. I’ve never heard that before, wow. Delight. Deli. Eli. Ellie. I’m so stupid. Ellie. I’m sitting here, eating a great meal, doing a crossword, happy. Ellie. Fuck, I need to go. Ellie.

I left.

I didn't sleep that night. I stayed in bed, fully clothed, shoes on, eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Maggi noticed something was wrong. She left me alone. I would have stayed there, unmoving, but for the faint glow of sunlight shining through the blinds. It was morning.

I got out of bed, slowly. Got into the shower. Got out of the shower, took my clothes off. Got back in. Water on. Cold. So cold. My phone rang. I was going to be late. Did I care? I cared. They were coming today. I had to be on time. I rushed. Black pants. White shirt. Matching socks. Loafers.

I drove like a maniac, swerving through lanes like I was in a James Bond movie. I wasn't thinking straight. I reached school just as the bell rang and made it to class before the lesson begun.

"Mr. Tony, aren't you going to take attendance?" It was Phillip. He was kind, and smart. He deserved a better teacher.

"Right, yes. Of course." I replied. As I called out their names, I was on autopilot. They could've said anything, I wouldn't have noticed.

When I got to the E's, I stopped. I couldn't breathe, I was suffocating. I felt sick, like I would hurl at any moment. I dropped my pen. The pen rolled on the floor, stopping by the front desk. Stacy bent and picked it up. She walked up to the front of the class and handed it to me. They were all so good, so kind, so innocent. I smiled at her.

"Thanks, Stace. I'm so clumsy today, whoops. Must be all the caffeine."

I held the pen. It was heavy, unbearable, my hand hesitated, weighed down. I forced it up, bringing it to the register, to the E's, to where her name was written. I looked up, eyes darting around the classroom, settling on the fourth seat from the back in the last row on the right.

That was her seat. I could picture her there, her blonde hair glinting in the sunlight, her inquisitive, dark brown eyes- the color of cocoa- so attentive. I crossed her name out.

“Emanuel?” I called out, continuing with attendance.

“You missed Ellie, Mr. Tony,” Phillip said. “Is she not coming today?”

Smart boy. “Ellie’s not going to be coming to school anymore, class. She had to move away for a bit. I’m not sure when we’ll get to see her again. I’m sorry guys.” What was I doing? Did I think I was doing them a favor? They’d find out soon enough. Everyone would. Selfish. I was selfish. I just didn’t want to tell them myself. Is that bad?

“Oh, alright then. I didn’t know that.” Phillip sounded sad. I think he knew. Maybe not explicitly, but some part of him knew.

The rest of the class was a disaster. I misquoted Shakespeare five times, messed up my references and spaced out again. The bell rang, and it was finally over. I got up; I was shaking. My legs were wobbly. I could barely stand straight. I saw Phillip walking towards me, he was going to ask me if I was okay. I rushed out of the room and went straight to the teachers’ bathroom. I washed my face four, maybe five times. I still felt like shit.

Someone knocked on the door, one of the other teachers, asking if I was alright. I wasn’t, but they couldn’t know that. They said someone was here for me. I freaked out. They were early, I couldn’t do this. I had to.

I wiped my face clean with a paper towel and left the restroom. There they were.

Ellie’s dad was a big man. Over six feet, easily. He was bulky too, the kind of guy you shied away from at your short-lived, spontaneous decision to go to the gym, because he made you second guess yourself. His face was visibly worn. He had those small trails of dirt you

get from crying and not wiping your tears. His hair was a mess and his clothes were wrinkled. He probably hadn't showered in days. I didn't blame him.

Standing next to him, arm in arm, was Ellie's mom. She was gorgeous. She had Ellie's blonde hair, her wide, carefree smile. She was dressed neatly, in a blue silk dress and low heels. A daring outfit. She had an air of confidence, and always stood straight. She reminded me of that oak tree, standing tall and proud, others being cast aside in her shadow.

"Hi Tony," Ellie's mom said. "Once again, thank you so much for being with us at the hospital on Saturday. You didn't have to, but we really appreciated the support." Her voice was deeper than you'd expect and, although she wasn't too loud, you could always hear every word she spoke.

"Of course. I'm so sorry, it's a horrible thing that happened. To such a great girl too. If there's anything else, anything at all, please do let me know." I croaked in response; the words barely audible. If only they knew.

"Yes, thank you. As you know, we came here for her things. Do you mind showing them to us? I'm sorry to hurry you, we're in a bit of a rush." Mrs. Myers replied, moving aside to make a path for me to the door.

I walked out, motioning for them to follow. We went back to the classroom and I gathered Ellie's things. Her pink, polka dotted pencil box. Her notebooks- filled to the brim with notes and ideas and whatever random fleeting thoughts she managed to hold on to. Her sketchbook with pages she sneakily filled while she thought I wasn't looking. All these things, so characteristic of Ellie, I put in a big cardboard box and gave to her father. As he closed the lid, I tried to hold on to the way they felt, how they looked. I didn't want to forget.

“We’ll be going now. Thanks for all the help. Please do come visit some time.” It was Ellie’s mom again. She turned around and walked briskly to the front gate, out of sight, bringing her husband with her. And with that, they were gone.

The rest of the day was a blur. I had two more classes but didn’t bother trying to teach. Instead, I just assigned reading and sat in my chair, not thinking, not doing much of anything. I stopped at the grocery store on the way home, picking up some more chicken and milk for Maggi, and another box of cereal for me. It was about six by the time I got home. I put out some food for Maggi and, sure enough, there she was, standing in the doorway, just a few feet away.

Like last time, she leapt on to the kitchen counter like a ballet dancer, feet barely touching the ground, it seemed. Rather than going for the food, however, she walked past it, to the front of the counter, her whiskers inches in front of my face. There she stood, staring at me, eyes fixed on mine, motionless.

“What is it? I’m not in the mood. If you don’t like the food, find something else to eat.”

“Stop looking at me like that, it’s creepy.”

“Stop it! I’m warning you, stop it!”

“What. Would you rather me tell them? Do you want me to call them and tell them that I, their daughter’s stupid fucking teacher, am the reason she died?”

With that, Maggi walked around in a small circle and sat right down, ears pricked, her eyes still focused on mine.

In the moment, it escaped me that I was, in fact, talking to a cat. To me, Maggi was just as understanding, just as intelligent as any other person. So, I told her. Everything. I told her how Ellie had been one of my brightest students. She was infatuated with reading and had



approached me after class on Friday about how to improve upon her writing. I had always found it easiest to write from experience, so I told her to go explore the world. To put herself in new situations, meet new people, make herself uncomfortable and learn new things. I told her that experience was the best way to develop as a writer.

That night I was feeling especially good about myself and decided to go out and watch a movie. When I got out of the theater two hours later, I noticed I had gotten five missed calls from Ellie, and two from her father. I tried calling her back, but she wouldn't pick up. When I called her dad back, he picked up on the first ring.

"Hi. Mr. Tony, right? This is Ellie's father. I was wondering whether the study group was done so I could come pick her up. It's getting late."

"Study group? I'm sorry, I don't know about any study group." At this point, I was worried. I desperately scrambled through the jumbled heap of papers carelessly strewn across my study table. Finally spotting my deceptively crumpled prize, I grabbed the barely legible Post-it I'd jotted my students' numbers on at the start of the year for phone-call sessions while school was closed. I called her friends, asking if any of them knew where she was, but thirty minutes later I had learned nothing.

Her parents called the police and together they spent all night looking for her. I too helped them search, looking in the blocks around my house and around the school in case Ellie had tried to come look for me and gotten lost somehow. Streaks of orange illuminated the starless sky and, finally, my phone rang.

Expecting they had found her, I picked up excitedly. I hadn't even bothered considering the alternative. Stupid.

I reached the hospital ten minutes later, and found Mr. and Mrs. Myers in the lobby, holding each other, sobbing. I thought to ask them what happened, but decided it was best to

leave them alone. I saw an officer sitting nearby and asked him about Ellie, hoping he'd know.

"The Myers girl? Yeah, we found her. She was down by the expressway, had been hit by a car. Doesn't look too good for her. If only we'd been a few hours earlier, now I'm not so sure. Wonder why she was out so late all by herself. She had a notebook with her, found it a few feet away from the body. Guess she was writing, might've ran away for some fresh air. Maybe been jotting something down in her diary, caught off guard. Beats me," the officer said with a shrug.

His nonchalant tone angered me; how could he not care; this was Ellie we were talking about. Ellie. And then I registered what he said. Ellie. Hit by a car. Out late by herself. This was my fault. What had I done? What was I thinking, telling a 15-year-old to explore the world? Fuck. I'm so stupid.

I stayed with her parents at the hospital that day, and for most of the night. They held hands, I watched them. Watched them torn apart from the inside, lives disrupted by this sudden chaos, chaos I was responsible for. No one spoke.

The doctor told us later that night. She had been hurt too bad, nothing they did could save her. I wanted to blame the doctors for not saving her. I wanted to blame the police for taking so long to find her. I wanted to blame the dumbass who hit her and didn't even bother calling it in. I couldn't. I blamed myself.

As I finished my tale, Maggi stood upright, balancing on her hind legs, and licked my face. She turned around, went to the plate of food I had left out for her, walked around in a small little circle and sat right down. Maggi ate. I wept.