

Circles a Clover

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On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.

A Song on the End of the World
by Czesław Miłosz

for Seren

Chapter One

Far away, beyond the confines of her life, there was a war.

Or there wasn't a war because war was only ever really a war when you knew someone who had been hurt in it, really knew them, not just read about them on *Humans of New York* or saw them in a wheelchair on the train to Liverpool.

Or the war was just a black flag, now risen, soon falling, soon rising.

Or maybe war, all of war, was just a story someone needed to tell because the world turns like that, story upon story, one ends and another begins, a voice speaks, the world listens.

Or there wasn't a war at all, there were only bad choices like there have always been bad choices and the regrets of men with too much power so their

tiny mistakes, their small catastrophes, were like great hammers being brought down on brittle shells. Everyone was just a brittle shell.

Or, once unshackled, even islands might be cast adrift and when the sea-storms woke there would be little to save that land from drowning; lonely, submerged to nothing, arm outstretched in search of fingers that were too far away to grip and anyway refused to grip.

Or, the worst truth to know, there was a war and it was creeping closer, stealthily, inevitably, ready to break down the walls of her world at some too-close, too-soon point in her future. No hammer, just light. Just thunder in the night.

That was what her dad had been saying for months. He knew beyond a doubt that the world was about to end. She could never believe that. The world seemed the same as always. There had been angry seasons in her life already, like the wild waking to life of spring or the choking bombardments of summer's unending heat, the fallen and settling dead leaves of autumn, cast away, trodden through by west-walking feet. Now there was only winter and the bitter morning air. Wherever the war was, it wasn't happening here and though she caught glimpses on the news of upturned boats, kneeling figures, small mushroom clouds expanding in the

night as one lonely balcony shook, the ruins of ruins, quiet bodies as if sleeping on a beach and broken cities like the crumbled remains of a half-imagined place, she didn't truly believe in it all. That was it; it was like a fantasy. Like *Game of Thrones*, like how last year on Tuesday in PE all anyone wanted to do was talk about *Game of Thrones*. Like half the world away was another world and that was enough distance to make it so unreal it could never touch hers, never touch this place. It wasn't like she didn't care. She knew that she should care, had even cared too much about things like that when she was little, so much so that her dad used to turn off the news if she was in the room but she could still listen, pretend to be playing, while the adults talked about Iraq and she wondered what Iraq meant and why it sounded so harsh and metallic in her mind. And when they talked about Afghanistan she would look up at the painting that used to hang above the fireplace. A woman and an Afghan hound. She used to think the woman was her mum even though her mum had red hair and the woman looked like she was from another place, Afghan maybe, though she wasn't sure what Afghans looked like.

No, she wasn't dead-hearted like some of the others in her class who couldn't even say a thing about the world let alone care about what was

happening as nearby as Manchester to even try to imagine what was happening over the sea, over the wide world, over the breaking. She knew what was happening, she cared, she told herself that even when her dad kept going on and on or was sat for hours on his computer, looking for the proof to what she knew was all only in his head.

She was Kyle Halfpenny and that was one certainty. She knew who she was. She knew she cared just as well as she knew her own name, that caring also a certainty. It was a truth she could never question. But she would, at times, doubt that truth until it became weak. Yes, she cared when they showed a film in school of refugees or what was left of a bomb-ruined town or when Bordeaux was attacked. But even that, Bordeaux, seemed far away. Distant, because the shouts for help were all shouted in French and the news report over-dubbed. She cried when Miss Martindale told them about gas attacks and showed them a film of children gasping for air, sweating, shaking, still burning all over and inside. Everyone had cried in class then, but even that was just a film and as far away. Everything seemed so unreal and not here. No matter what her dad said about Russian jets over the North Sea and submarines in the Baltic, wherever the Baltic was, or how Belarus was just a test or how the world was running out of

chances to be a good place. She didn't believe it, not like it was something that she could touch or see happening right there in front of her eyes like when she saw Kerry Deane run into a concrete post and heard the crack of skull on stone, saw the blood trickle so slowly down the side of Kerry's face like a trickle of melting ice cream. Not like that.

There *was* a war then but it was too far away to trouble her. Almost dreamy, hazy. A nightmare, not a good dream, but one that she knew wouldn't come every night and would, anyway, go away just like bad dreams eventually did, just like everything in the news seemed to go away, to come and go, the fear and the hope, the sudden tragedy and lasting calm. The world just ebbing and shifting.

Here, now, in this place which was her place, there was no war. Just morning, how winter brings darkness into the day and makes the world seem not yet woken when it should have woken hours ago. Just winter and the difficulty of fastening her duffel's last button with half-awake fingers, pulling the fur-lined hood close about her face then drinking the last of the tepid tea and going out into the morning. Her dad was still sleeping, had left the television on all night again and his notebooks all strewn about the table. There were empty cans of San Miguel too and he'd been smoking in the garden. She knew that because the outside light

was on, a moth still buzzing about it in the morning gloom.

She closed the door quietly. Out, into a day that wasn't even real yet, still night really, still yesterday really. She was always a little scared going out so early when there was hardly any light, few cars, barely anyone around. This time of day was just before the real day started, not early enough for the world to be completely asleep but not yet stretching its arms and blinking its eyes. Soon, in less than an hour, the streets would fill with cars and buses, block and slow. The children would go this way and that, some over the bridge to the private school, some out of the town towards the rough school, most her way. She locked the door quickly and glanced around their cul-de-sac before she even thought of heading over the front garden. It was silly; she wasn't even sure what she was afraid of. Someone jumping out? A crazy person just waiting for her on the off-chance she was leaving for school a little earlier than usual? But there was just quiet, just nothing. She let her school shoes crunch their way across the ice-brittle grass and almost slipped on the pavement, her feet unprepared for the black ice it hid, steadying herself on their car, the bonnet as cold as she felt within. She stayed still for a moment, balanced herself, adjusted her bag and breathed out so she could see her own breath, fog

against the all-around cold. There was a light on in the bathroom of their neighbour's house and she could see the misty silhouette of a man shaving, topless. She watched him for a moment, his arm lifting slowly, the blade scraping his face, then the arm dropping out of sight, the water cleaning the blade then repeat.

She walked slowly, now rightly mistrusting the ground beneath her feet. Soon her face was freezing but her body, beneath her thick coat and wool tights, was warm. At the end of their road she sneezed and startled a rabbit that had been sat on the roundabout, sending it running fast into a garden. Suddenly more rabbits ran for cover from all along the road and she wondered if they even knew what a sneeze was. It was just a sound to them, just danger. She looked up. There were buzzards sometimes out over their back garden but none today.

A bus rolled past, a few passengers on board, all huddled against the windows, half- asleep, half-reading the *Metro*. She waited for it to pass and when it was gone she crossed, her hand going into her pocket for her cigarettes. As her fingers touched the lining of her pocket she remembered they were on her windowsill, with her lighter and her *Breaking Bad* mug, the mug full of ash-tainted milk and butts losing their tan-paper covering. She ground her teeth,

a habit she hadn't shifted since she was little, ran her tongue over her front teeth and walked faster. There was no wind but the air was sharp with ice and soon her face was warming, her cheeks reddening with her quickening pace. Cerys and Hannah would be in a little early too, she remembered; maybe they would have cigarettes and they could sneak down by the woods for one before they went in. Why had she even decided to go in so ridiculously early, the question nagged as she almost slipped again as she passed the private school? It wasn't like she needed to go to the library and get some extra revision done or finish her coursework or that she was so desperate to see anyone. She steadied herself, too aware now of the ice beneath her shoes. It was her dad, she knew that. Every other morning he would be up with her no matter how much he had drunk the night before, telling her all his crazy thoughts, telling her how they needed to go away and showing her the reports he had cut from newspapers or copied word-for-word from some cookie-virused website. Better to pretend to need to revise than suffer that. Sometimes she thought that maybe she was sort of doing him a favour by not giving him an audience, like if he didn't have anyone to tell all that stuff he would just stop thinking about it, shut up and get better, maybe even go back to work. She let her hand trail along the frozen branches

of a bare hedge beside the nursery. It had been her nursery once. She stopped and looked through the mesh fence into a world she sort of remembered, vaguely. She saw the swings and slide and couldn't remember for certain if they had been there, the same ones, when she was there. She saw the milk bottles left outside the locked gate and remembered how some mornings the teacher would show the milk bottle with a hole right through the gold top and tell them about naughty magpies and they would all make yukky sounds when the teacher took a big gulp of the milk and told them now she might turn into a magpie. *Do you have anything shiny, Harry?* the teacher would say and Harry would squirm away as she tiptoed closer. *Who's got something shiny, how about you Jonah, what about you Lilly, come on, one of you must have something shiny?* And she would come to Kyle last. *I know you have something shiny, Kyle.* The teacher would tiptoe closer. Even though she knew it was a joke, still Kyle would gasp and hide her mother's necklace down her dress.

"I haven't," Kyle would say. "I haven't got anything shiny, anything."

She frowned. No, she didn't think the swings and slides had been there then. There had only been a little square of wood chippings where they would play zombies.

Memories, she hated how once one tumbled out others came with it. She could see her mum picking her up, at that door, just like it was happening now, today. She hated that. It wasn't fair.

She took out her phone and skimmed through her call history for the unnamed number. As the phone rang she watched the nursery door, still white, still pictures painted by the children stuck to the glass, still the same when nothing else was. She knew no one would answer because that was something that never changed. Every time she rang the number she half expected the line to just go dead and a robot voice tell her the number was no longer available, or worse, someone to actually answer and tell her, no, they have always had this number and no, they knew no one by that name. She ended the call. She wasn't sure which was worse, probably the dead line, maybe the stranger's voice.

She crossed at the village's hart signpost, the deer white as snow against black and it was there she saw the fox.

There were lights on in the vets and even though the lights shone right onto it, lighting it up, the fox sat in the road licking its paw as if the world didn't matter.

She stopped, took out her phone. It licked one paw and then the next and then it stood on all fours and

stretched its back. She zoomed in, took a few pictures, careful not to make too much noise, but even as she took them she wondered if the fox would really care. *Surely foxes care less about danger than rabbits.* No buzzards to swoop, no sneeze to startle. She scanned through the images, deleted a badly focused shot and chose the best. In it the fox was looking off down the road, backlit by the light from the vets, head high, tail low. She uploaded it to her Instagram and when she was done the fox was still there.

“If you stay there all day I won’t be able to cross,” she said, whispered.

The fox turned its head towards her as if he heard her. Understood her. The rumble of an engine grew closer. A car was coming down the road from the direction of town but still he didn’t move. He looked at her, grey-black eyes holding her gaze, unfazed.

She could see the headlights of the car, close. She clapped her hands in an attempt to scare the fox but still he stood there, watching her, his back now bowed a little and tail raised, almost challenging her.

“Go away!” she shouted, clapping her cold hands harder, wishing she’d put her gloves on no matter there was a hole in a palm. “Come on, go!”

The car was near. Why wouldn’t the fox move? She waved an arm, clapped. It seemed like he would

never move, just let the car hit him, run him down, end him. But at last the fox looked right, looked down the road towards the approaching car and calmly turned away from any danger before running towards the garden of the vets, gone.

When the car had passed, she kept walking. Water touched her face and looking up she saw a light snow was falling, faint flakes melting even before they reached the heat of her body, at the suggestion of her.

By the time she reached school the snow was much heavier, as heavy as it had been yesterday when it hadn't settled, even though the view outside of French was one of utter whiteness. There was a boy from her class, Spencer Munroe, leaning against the gate, smoking like he didn't care if a teacher saw him. He didn't. There were other Year 11s in early too, all milling about.

"Do you want one?" asked Spencer as she passed him.

He was frowning, like he was puzzled, like he was trying to guess her answer. "I don't smoke," she said, she lied. "Not much anyway."

He nodded and leaned back against the gate, half-closed his eyes as he took a drag. She took a breath of the snowy air instead and hurried on to the main entrance where

Cerys was waiting, not wanting to go in alone even though it was freezing. Cerys was running her hand over her thick fringe, straightening it. Her hair was curly, falling down past her shoulders but her fringe was precisely trimmed, straight.

“Did you speak to Spencer?” gasped Cerys, looking past Kyle to the gate.

Kyle looked back as the snow settled on her hood and coat. There was something of Spencer that was like the fox, stood there at the gate, still, unbothered by the world, unmoved by danger. Not a bit like her dad, not a bit like her really. The snow fell heavier so that she knew it would settle. Cerys pushed the double doors open and quickly, before any more snow could fall upon them, the two entered the warmth of school.

