

Degree Zero, My Love

by Nicholas Rombes

So we waited for it to get dark. I smelled her there beside me against the tree, and fell asleep and dreamed of an unbombed stone church whose steeple was so high it pierced the clouds.

It's time, came a voice from one of the back pews.

"It's time," she said, nudging me. "We have to leave now."

Blackness had filled the world. It was cooler now. I remembered where I was.

"Avery," she said, we have to leave."

"What's inside the school?"

"You don't want to know. I wish I didn't know," she said. She stood up and stretched. She switched her rifle from one shoulder to the other, pulling its leather strap close to her body.

I stood up, too.

"But there are certain opportunities in life for gaining knowledge," I said.

In the blue velvet/black sky above us, the fluttering of bats.

"Isn't that a line from an old movie?" she said.

I shrugged. "If you want me to trust you, you have to show me what's in the school."

A night wind swayed the tree branches above us. For a moment, we thought we heard the distant vibration of a helicopter, but it turned out to be faraway thunder. It always thundered, but rarely rained.

I could see her more clearly now, in the dark as the clouds parted beneath a sliver of moon. The gun strapped across her shoulder, the way it made her dangerous and beautiful, the breathing of her small body, the scar just below her left earlobe.

"There's nothing to be gained," she said, "from going inside."

"Knowledge," I said.

"What do you want to know?"

"How can I trust you'll tell me the truth?"

“In exchange for us not going in,” she said, “I’ll tell you the truth. But just one question. And then I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Okay?”

Her voice trembled. I understood now that if she told me what was inside the school, it would destroy something inside her. In a different era, I would have reached out to her, taken her in my arms. But this was a time of rifles and landmines and poisons and traps and dark chambers and unseen enemies and man-made tar-pit traps and scrambled ideologies and lost formalities and static and history re-written so quickly there was no such thing as history.

“You know what?” I said, “I think you’re right. It’s probably better I don’t know.”

“Really?” she said. “I told you I would, and I will.”

“That’s okay,” I said. The sky darkened again. She practically disappeared before my eyes. “I guess we better get going, huh?” I said.

In that moment, she leaned forward, and gently kissed my cheek. Her rifle touched my chest.

There was a bright yellow flash from inside the school, throwing—for a split second—the entire landscape into sharp light and shadows.

Without saying a word, we began running.

I followed her, in the dark.

I ran right behind her across the night-smelling field, away from the school.

I couldn’t see her, but I could hear her breathing, her panting.

I stayed very close.

