Ditching the Universe for Katy

by Nicholas Rombes

I know this much because, they say, I saw it happen. I was there.

They also say that I was wounded in one of the attacks, and that I forgot who I was, and that I was with them now, hiding out here in this building, surviving, regrouping, waiting for our chance to move deeper into the city to meet up with the others. We don't know if they are friend or foe.

Then I discovered that none of them remembered, either. No one knows where they are from, or how long they've been here, or who their family is. We are in this building because, so far, it has been safe.

I'm in the office of the one we call Katy, the one with the nice view of what's left of what they say was the campus: the crumbled bell tower, the buildings without glass in the windows, the black trees. Katy is someone who I imagine has turned beautiful because of the conflict—she is gaunt but strong. I try to picture what she was like before: she was going to get married; she lived on a farm; she believed in God. I have no idea how old she is. Outside, we hear the distant rhythm of helicopter, and some faraway gunfire, like firecrackers might sound on a TV from a different room.

"Are you recording all this?" she says.

"As much as I can."

Some time ago, we decided to use the catapult against a helicopter that came too close. Here's what happened: John and I carried it up to the roof, navigating the narrow metal staircases, and placed it between the gray ventilation ducts. We secured it with the harness, and John aimed it while I targeted it on the copter. After three misses we finally hit. I keep re-playing in my head the part about the violent kick of the catapult, and how it shook the roof, and how the third cinder block leapt out of the throwing tin, and how

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/nicholas-rombes/ditching-the-universe-for-katy»*
Copyright © 2009 Nicholas Rombes. All rights reserved.

after the block crashed through the pilot's window the helicopter just slowed down and spiraled lazily to the ground. It had happened so many times before that we didn't even run to the edge and look over it like we did the first dozen times we shot something out of the sky. Jesus, how many helicopters could there be? We had brought down at least 40 or 50. Then one night John said to me, *the reason there are so many is because it's the same one.*

Some of us believe that the real fighting has been over for a long time, and that this is just what's left.

If we could get off the campus and out of the city maybe we could find out if there is still a war, if there ever was a war. But each time we try to leave we are shot, either by those trying to keep us in or trying to keep us out. We don't know. Finally, John and I decide to go, no matter what. He tosses me the Exploratory Bag. I open it and count the flags. We take the east stairs down, past the endless undecipherable graffiti in its faded yellow and blue and brown foreignness, and step out into the warm sunlight. To our right is the library, and beyond that the iron gate that leads out and into the city.

We are going to see if the flags that we placed last week are still there. They usually aren't. More often than not they have been replaced with black ones. We will find a spot about a mile away from campus—as far as it is known to be safe to go—and put the flags, stick first, into the ground of some vacant lot or grassy area or yard of an abandoned house. We will come back one week later to see if they have been taken or re-arranged. We call this peace talks. We call this negotiation.

The yellow flags from last week have been switched with black ones. John takes out the mapbook and checks for spacing, and then we begin to measure: the first nine flags leading away from the street are placed exactly twelve inches apart, but the space between flags number nine and ten is fifteen inches apart. This matches exactly with the original spacing of the yellow flags, at least according to the mapbook. That's either good or bad.

The spray paint on the bricks, it looks wet, and when I touch it the tips of my fingers turn red. I hold my hand up to John to warn him and we quickly turn to leave. But it is too late. Touching the red paint was the wrong thing to do, and the very first shot goes through John's neck and he leaps in the air and falls to the ground, twisted on his back like an S. So much blood is already out of him, pooling at my feet like someone else's victory. I run for the street and keep waiting for the shot. Impossibly, I worry about hurting my face or breaking my nose when I fall, I worry about not being able to stop myself from falling down the wrong way, and scuffing my elbows or breaking my wrist. But there is no shot, and after only a few minutes I am exhausted but keep running at the ramp that takes me back onto the highway.

I ditch my gun and my duffel bag. I throw off my jacket. I am running for only one thing now. For Katy. I want to touch her tattoo. I want to make her not sad. I want to make the tapes better, and full of detail so that she will smile at me, and offer me one of her cigarettes, and touch her fingers to mine as she cups the match between us.