

When it Gets Dark

by Nicholas Rombes

The world—the natural world—was terrible and beautiful in wartime.

The leaves shuddered off trees.

The pockmarked fields.

The fallen brick chimneys.

The way the birds heaved together in enormous flocks like rescue missions and then just as suddenly turned away, abandoning you.

The smell of gunpowder.

The occasional landmine that exploded a deer—like in some Technicolor Tex Avery cartoon—in the distance, in a field you now knew you could never cross.

The high-pitch of drones so far up you could not see them.

The calm midnights.

The barns marked with the familiar green X: friendly territory.

The last scraps of food some other rebels had left for you, wrapped in cheesecloth always hidden in the east corner of the barn.

The shooting had stopped. We were still on our bellies in the field, our cheeks pressed to the cold dirt, facing each other.

“It's safe now,” she said.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I don't know why.

“Avery,” she said. “It's safe.”

She stood up, in the broad sunlight, brushed the dirt off herself.

Reshouldered her rifle.

I opened my eyes, stood up too. We walked again, towards the trees, and then what seemed to be a crude, ruined building just behind them.

"I always hoped for this," she said, not looking at me.

"For what?"

"Apocalypse. Collapse. When I was a girl. I wished for the end of the world."

"Is it the end of the world?" I asked.

She looked at me and smiled. "What do you think?"

"I'm not so sure."

"About?"

I looked around. "Any of this. I still don't know whose side we're on."

The sun was stronger now. She wiped her brow. We approached the stand of trees, and took comfort beneath the one with fullest leaves. We sat down, our backs against the broad trunk.

The building was not far away, like some elementary school that had been hastily abandoned. Trees had grown up along its sides, the sidewalks were all heaved apart, the orange doors were kicked in. Most of the windows were gone, though a few were intact. There was no graffiti. No litter. No immediate sign that anyone had been here for decades.

In the distance, the low vibration of another helicopter. Without even needing to say anything, we stopped moving, stopped talking. It came closer, in sound, very quickly, low and fast. It slowed, over the school, tossing the tops of the trees. I looked up, saw something fall from the bottom of the helicopter, about the size of a barrel, into the school, where the roof had collapsed.

It hovered for a moment, then moved on, and within less than a minute had disappeared.

I moved but she grabbed my arm, and signaled with her finger on her lips to be quiet. We waited. Soon, sounds from inside the school, no voices, just the sounds of feet and objects being moved, near where I imagined the container from the helicopter had fallen.

When it was quiet again, she leaned over and whispered in my ear, "we can't stay here. When it gets dark, we have to leave."

"Where to?" I asked.

She looked at me, her eyes tired.

"When it gets dark," she said again, "we have to leave."

