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The Collection

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Frank Shumann sat crouched in a ditch, his rifle in his hands. He wondered what was behind the hedgerow in front of him. He could hear the sound of exploding mortar and the spurts of machine-gun fire behind him. He was terribly frightened. He slowly extended his gaze from one end to the other of the hedgerow; he spotted an opening and decided to make for that opening. He crawled along the ditch, trying to make as little noise as possible on the fallen leaves, stopped in front of the opening, looked around and then scurried through. What the hell, a graveyard! He dropped behind a gravestone and peered carefully around the right corner. He saw no movement. He turned back and twisted his six-foot frame into a sitting position, his back leaning against the stone. He laid his rifle across his legs and removed his battered helmet. His dark hair was matted and badly in need of cutting. He rubbed his dirty hand across his grimy, bearded cheek. He looked around and noticed broken and shattered gravestones that were covered with dirt and filth. He knew that someday the war would end, but the collection would be bigger. He turned his gaze upward and watched the wind tear the dead leaves from their branches. Once they had been green and fresh, but now the wind carried them to earth, to dust . . .

He was tired. How long had it been since he had had sleep? Was it a day, two, or three? He wanted so badly to go home. Home wasn’t a big town, just a small farm town where you knew everybody. It was a funny town in a way. In the summer the streets were always crowded with transit workers, but then again, with the beginning of fall, like now, the streets were practically deserted. The one and only drug store was out of date but there were plenty of taverns, modern too. God, what he wouldn’t do for a beer, just one beer. Joe, his younger brother, liked beer too. Poor Joe. He was in the war, too. He said that he’d be one of the lucky ones to go home; he just knew he would. Yeh, Joe was right, but poor Joe; he went home in a box, a stinkin’ pine box; just like Frank’s whole company, wiped out, dead. How cruel this war was, how damn cruel . . .

Off in the right corner of the graveyard, perhaps fifty yards in back of Frank, Klaus Schmidt crawled noiselessly behind a gravestone. He was tired, so dead tired. He propped his rifle against the grave-
stone and then leaned his tired body back. He removed his helmet, laid it on the ground and then, as befitting a tired man, he ran his hands through his blond hair. He pulled his knees up and dropped his head on them. He closed his eyes for a few minutes, then suddenly jerked up. What had he heard? He looked around carefully but saw nothing. His nerves were jumpy from constant fear and lack of sleep; but he didn’t dare go to sleep; it might cost him his life. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad after all. No, he loved life too much, and he wanted to get home to his wife in Bonn. They had only been married for two years, two wonderful years. Klaus was soon to be a father, maybe he was already, he didn’t know. He wondered if it would be a boy or girl, but Klaus really didn’t care. He just wanted this damn war over before the baby came. What could a baby do in wartime? Not a thing. There’d be no place to play or grow up decently. He wouldn’t even be able to take the kid on picnics. What fun’s a picnic with nothing but rubble and ruins to look at? Tears began to form in his eyes. He bowed his head and the pent up tears burst forth as water from a broken dam. His tired body shook with each oncoming flood . . .

. . . Frank snapped back to reality with a start. He grabbed his rifle and got to his knees. He huddled behind the stone and carefully put his helmet back on his head. He peered cautiously around, but seeing nothing he settled back once again to his sitting position. He’d give anything to stand up, walk aimlessly across the graveyard and out onto the road. Just walk away. Well, why couldn’t he? There was no one here anyway, no one but the dead. Out of habit though, he sat there motionless, trying to decide. He firmly clutched his rifle in his hands and sat in a position much as a little boy who wanted to get a closer look at the treasured toy he held in his hands.

. . . Klaus lifted his head and rubbed his hand across his tear-stained face. His face was left smudgy from the tears and the filth on his hand. He suddenly stood full upright. He didn’t know where he was going; he only knew that he had to get out of this damn collection field. Everywhere, everywhere were constant reminders of death. He turned and began walking toward the road. A light wind began to spring up, tearing the leaves from their trees. Klaus had a sudden chill. Suddenly not fifteen yards in front of him a man stood up. Both saw each other at the same time. It appeared as though they were going to speak, for they stood facing each other for almost a full minute. Almost instinctively, Frank fired. Klaus was knocked backward by the impact of the bullet that ripped a path into his stomach. He slumped to the ground, and with his last effort he squeezed the trigger of his rifle and watched the American drop to his knees, then over on his face . . .

The wind was brisk now. The dying and dead leaves whirled and swirled and covered the ground much like the lid on a box.