

Graham Todd

Love's Country

AFTER THE FINAL WAR, WE OPENED up the tanks and found the spring corpses. Everyone had a tank in his yard or crossroad. They were blown to bits, trackless, marked with high-sounding names like "Death Brethren," "Tomb Champs," "Scheisse Kampf." The dead inside were somber. A legion of ragtag end-of-war types that had once spoken in an impressive manner about liberating this land. This did not sum with the general state of things—the famine, the forlorn remnants of our world and gardens.

"Darla," the fat baker moaned, remembering. "Darla!"

These were collection days. Every man, woman, and child was employed. Daughters gathered Panzer helmets, washed and wore the most intact. Wartime pornography was secreted away for library use. The enemy's most meaningful trinkets were hung in vengeful decoration in the square—Deputy-Deputy-Mayor LeBlanc's idea—so those still streaming into town could take heart, relax, the sad animals.

The dead's cruel captain, his chest pockets emptied of their teeth trophies, was set in a chair before a field overgrown from abandonment. Portraits were taken. It might be good to remember, the feeling was, for the next time.

"Darla!" the fat baker kept on.

"Remember?" another said. "Why remember war at all?"

Together, we lamented that, perhaps we should have done differently. Cut supply routes earlier. Cracked their coded missives.

"We should have redoubled diplomatic efforts! Struck a peace before—"

"With them?"

"It shouldn't have happened at all!"

With the stink clearing, the bodies piled, and organization and healing under way, we could no longer doubt: it was over.

In the pocked steeple, bells clanged for our assembly. In the square, Deputy-Deputy-Mayor LeBlanc presided from a makeshift stage. "Of all

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the dead," he said, ferreting about the squealing planks, "there is little to understand."

This was fair and true.

"No more games and pictures," he said through a weary smile. "We return now to what we were before. We return to life."

"What life?" the fat baker shouted from his cold shop.

"What of the children of this hardship?" the Roux mother said. She stamped forward, her girl trailing behind. The girl was no more than three, wearing a dented Panzer helmet, scared and quiet and far-gone, worrying the hem of her dirty skirt above the impossible fuzz of her small knees.

LeBlanc hopped down into the crowd, brandishing his cane, and started back towards the bureaucratic offices. "We'll burn them Friday," he yelled, moving through us. "One big heap."