

Dead Man Sleeping

by Nathaniel Tower

Joyce Addleberg hated sleeping alone, so when her husband died in his sleep one night, it was only natural that she kept him around.

At first, even though he was cold and stiff, he provided her with the warmth and companionship she needed.

But soon, and it settled in slowly, his body began to emit a rather unpleasant smell. It was a mere distraction at first, but she soon found sleeping next to him almost impossible. She began going to bed with a doctor's mask covering her nose and mouth, but the putrid smell quickly found a way to penetrate the thin fabric.

She started to think that preservation was in order, to at least make the man tolerable again. She thought of formaldehyde, but her knowledge in the usage of such substances was limited, so she decided to seek the assistance of a professional. She called a local taxidermy.

"Hello, Frank's Taxidermy, covering all your needs for the last thirty years," a man she assumed to be Frank answered.

"Yes, how much to stuff my husband?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" Frank seemed genuinely surprised.

"I would like to stuff my husband. He's about 5'10" and 170 pounds, if that helps."

"Lady, I hope you're joking," Frank said before hanging up.

"Well, he certainly didn't cover my needs," she said before scanning the phonebook for a more reputable-sounding business. Surely someone could meet her needs, even if Frank couldn't.

But no one could, so she simply masked the odor with an assortment of plug-in air fresheners and sprays.

She continued to sleep next to her rotting husband, but their relationship quickly changed. She no longer offered him a kiss before bed, and she didn't tuck his decaying arm around her fragile skin. After awhile, she didn't even sleep under the covers with him, keeping as much distance as she could.

Soon, she met someone else to take to bed, a man with a similar build to her dead husband's, a man she met at the grocery store while loading up on ice cream and air fresheners. Of course, when he came home with her, she hid her husband underneath the bed, fully aware that this new suitor would probably not become a permanent replacement.

"What is that awful smell?" he asked the first time they made love.

"It's my past," she told him.

"Well, perhaps we best do this at my place from now on."

Joyce nodded her head in agreement as they prepared to make love again.

When the suitor left in the morning, Joyce apologized to her husband's body as she pulled it out from underneath the bed. She felt terrible as she looked upon the rotting corpse, now covered in cobwebs and dust bunnies. She vowed to him that she would vacuum under the bed before placing him there again. To make it up to him, she allowed him to spoon her that night. The curious smile on his sunken face in the morning told her that he had forgiven her, and he didn't even complain when she resorted back to treating him like a leper the next night.

Three nights later, Joyce's new suitor, Bradley Hemperden, requested dinner and a movie at his place, and suggested she bring something comfortable for sleeping. She gladly acquiesced to his requests. However, Joyce did little sleeping that night at Bradley's place. A terrible fear arose in her that her husband might not only be hurt by her sleeping with another man, but he might also be very lonely. She tossed and turned almost the entire night, wishing that she could exchange the warmth of this man for the cold grasp of her husband's festering arm.

In the morning, Joyce said to Bradley, "I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore."

Bradley stared, his mouth agape, as if wondering how any woman whose home smelled so foul could possibly reject an opportunity to sleep with him at his chic loft.

"Say something," she said after the silent staring grew uncomfortable.

"Okay, then we can go back to your place, I suppose," Bradley told her with an eagerness that suggested she satisfied his sexual needs quite satisfactorily.

"No, no, I mean, I can't do this with you anymore. The sleeping together thing. It's just not right."

"I'm confused," Bradley stated. "You were so eager to jump into bed together the other night, and you came running as soon as I beckoned *last* night. What's the problem?"

"I'm married," she said with a blush of shame.

"Where was your husband the other night?"

"Under the bed."

Again, Bradley gave her that open mouth stare.

"Say something."

This time, Bradley had nothing to say.

"Relax," she said. "He's not alive anymore."

"Oh," he responded, sounding rather relieved. "So you keep his ashes under your bed?"

"His ashes? Heavens, no. Frederick would never go for cremation."

"Then what precisely is under your bed?" He sounded nervous but looked surprisingly calm.

"Well . . ." she began.

"You mean . . ." His face began to turn green.

"I'm afraid so. Obviously, you understand that I must end this, for Frederick's sake."

"You know what you are doing is illegal, right?"

"Goodness, why would it be illegal? He's my husband. I'm rather sure he's quite happy where he is."

"But how do you deal with the smell?"

Looking at Bradley, Joyce wondered why the man would even converse with her, but it occurred to her that this couldn't really be any worse than any of his previous lovers' flaws. Deep down, in fact, he must deem her behavior commendable. After all, one had to

admire such lasting fidelity, and that's all Joyce really was — a good and faithful woman.

"Oh, you get used to it, I suppose. It was rather difficult sleeping next to him at first, but I've grown accustomed to it. On the bright side, he doesn't disturb me in the middle of the night like he used to, and he never tries to get frisky with me when I'm not in the mood." She beamed with pride at the thought of her lovely husband.

"But don't you miss those things? They always say that it's the little things about someone that really get you. What does he really have going for him now?"

Joyce thought about it for awhile before settling on, "He's my husband. He's the only one I've ever had. He's the only one I ever want." Tears swelled in her eyes. She hadn't cried since he died, and she felt embarrassed now for doing it in front of this man.

"It's okay, Joyce, I'm here for you now. And I always will be, if you'll let me," he told her as he held her hand and wiped a tear from her cheek.

Joyce stared at Bradley, trying to evaluate what exactly he wanted. He was certainly a strikingly handsome man, and he seemed rather sincere in his intentions. He must obviously care for her since he didn't run screaming when she told him that she slept with her dead husband. Although she found it comforting, it was rather odd. In fact, it was downright disturbing that this man, whom she had only known for a few days, was so desperate that he wanted to share her bed with a dead man. And then her thoughts drifted back to that lonely bed back home.

"I'm sorry, Bradley," she said. "I must go home to my Frederick. He's so lonely and he's been so good to me. I've been a terrible wife the last few days."

Joyce could tell by the look in his eyes that he understood her feelings, but was hurt that she preferred a rotting corpse over him. He planted a gentle kiss on her cheek and let her go.

When Joyce returned home, she breathed in deeply, but her husband's distinct smell had virtually vanished. In a panic she

rushed to the bedroom to make sure he was still there. There he was indeed, in the precise spot she had left him, but somehow he didn't look as rotten. In fact, he looked almost as good as he had before he died. With a warm smile, she planted a kiss on his lips and curled up next to him for the rest of the day, promising him that she would never sleep with another man as long as she lived. She had everything she needed in a husband right at her side, and for that, she was eternally grateful.

