

Corpses

by S.H. Gall

It was not my intent to be nosy. I just wanted to be the best neighbor I could be. Having never had anyone close growing up, I wanted to get involved and be a part of my community, such as it was.

My only neighbor was Edna Phelps. She was one hundred years old, had a dozen cats, strays who had wandered into her life and never left. A stereotypical old woman and her brethren of cats.

As a diabetic nonegenarian with fibromyalgia, Edna required frequent hospitalizations. When Edna had to go to the hospital for a day or two, she never enlisted anyone to feed her charges. "They'll fend for themselves," she said with her century-old serenity. I wasn't convinced. Some of those cats were as aged and frail as their owner. They needed comprehensive care.

For the first year we were neighbors, I respected Edna's privacy. And the cats seemed to weather the hospital interludes well. Until that night last month when I couldn't sleep and stood at my bedroom window, sipping bourbon and watching Edna settle four feline corpses into the soft April soil.

Two weeks later she went to the hospital, and I let myself into her house with the key from under the azaleas on the porch. There were seven cats still prowling around.

And there was Edna's secret.

I wasn't entirely surprised to find the corpses. Shocked at first and creeped out - I did throw up a little - but Edna had preserved her embalmed twin and husband pretty well. They still looked semi-human after a year and a half from the grave. Irene sat in a rocking chair in the front room, in a crisp-from-the-laundry housedress, her glasses sparkling upon her leathery razor cheekbones. Samuel was in an armchair which had been moved into the kitchen.

Edna always did love for him to watch her cook and bake.

Edna had lost her twin sister and her husband the year before I moved here. There was some speculation when their bodies were mysteriously exhumed just two days after the burial, but not much. These things happen in the rural South.

I was conflicted about what to do. Was this a crime, or extreme family loyalty? Did corpses have established owners, like they'd care? Was love really transferable like this?

Well-preserved corpses as placeholders for kindred spirits...My instinct said this would be a problem for society at large, so I decided to keep Edna's secret safe. She wasn't a sick person. She simply refused to be lonely. When privacy is respected, everyone wins.

