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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

California King Size

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After my husband died my bed became enormously large, mutated from California King to a Siberian snow field that extended from Vladivostok to eternity. The deeper I sunk into it, the vaster it seemed. I knew right away that the bed was going to present a problem. I couldn't lie in the center. It reeked of death, no matter how painstakingly cleaned. I couldn't lie on his side. His side was stiff. Hours with nobody on top of it and the mattress had already become cement. Like a heart deserted. His side was intent on punishing me for the blood streaming through my veins as it always did. No welcoming party on his side. There was no hugging of my shoulders' arcs or gentle bending under the weight of my buttocks. Just a firm rejection of my entire body: Want to be alive? Not on my watch.

My side of the bed was mozzarella supple. Made me feel guilty. Made me guilty. Didn't make me guilty. I *was* guilty. Guilty of being warm beneath the skin. I tried my side again, the very side that had been duly mine, even though I'd slept on the edge of my side for months and months, giving him space, giving him comfort, giving him everything I could give so he wouldn't have an excuse to die on me, because, while illness was fated, dying was a choice. He won't die, I thought, unless he's decided to give up. Don't give up. Life isn't that bad. Not yet. Look, I've given you three quarters of the bed. I've replaced the mattress four times. Firmer when you needed support, softer when it hurt, springier when you couldn't walk any longer and turning from side to side in bed was your only workout, and one more time—I don't remember why; because you asked me to, because you thought it would help, because you had to be reassured there was no limit to what I'd do to keep you wanting to live. We cheated death for a long time, I—by making life too nice to want to depart from, he by playing along. I tried to cheat death a bit longer but suddenly it didn't work. Death was winning. I could see it in his eyes, the way they withdrew deeper into the sockets. Then it came, sneaking in behind my back.

I was sleeping on the edge of my side, hoping I wouldn't fall off and crack my head. I didn't mind dying but I refused to become a vegetable. And maybe I did mind dying because, come to think of it, even though I slept on the edge of my side, and could have easily lost my balance and fallen to the floor, I never did, which proves that I did not want to die, not even after he had. All those stories about Juliets and Toscas. Why did *they* want to die after their beloved had when I did not? Why didn't I want to die with him? Or after him? I loved him. I loved him very much. I loved him so much that I cared for him at home until the very last minute. Caring for the well-being of an adult with a body you can't lift, with physical impulses you don't want to hear about, desires you can't fulfill and fears you can't alleviate is hard. More than hard, but I did it. That proves that I loved him. And yet I didn't want to die just because he had.

I felt an urgent need to explore the subject. How can you love someone so very much and still not want to die with him? Is that a betrayal or a natural instinct? I wanted to discuss it with him in detail, with all its nuances, like we did other matters of importance in our lives. He would have said that I had always been my own person and that was the way he loved me and wanted me to be. Just don't forget me but live, and live well. Or he'd have said something like, "If you had died I wouldn't have wanted to live without you," but I would have known it was a fib because he liked good wine and cigars and tennis too much to just die with me. And that would have lessened my guilt for not falling off the edge of my side of the bed and crashing my head into oblivion. Only I couldn't discuss it with him. I couldn't even look at him to discern his thoughts. I couldn't do anything. A lot was happening after he died but the only thing that felt real was the nothingness of it all.

As soon as I saw him dead I called the children. Then I put on my black slacks and sweater and ran downstairs. Why did I dress and run downstairs? There was nothing to do and no place to

go. The lobby was deserted, apart from the relief night watchman on duty whose name I didn't know. I took the elevator back up. The children would be here soon. I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the deafening silence of the end.