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WHEN THINGS STOPPED DECOMPOSING

by

Meg McManama

You came home from work and found me watching the news. The experts were stumped and theorizing.

You adjusted to the new world before I did. You reminded me that we would go on living. You reminded me that I'd always cried too much at funerals, been too scared in zombie films, and now I'd never be buried and eaten by worms; now my fear had decomposed—you laughed when you told me that.

You sat by me on the couch and kissed my cheek. We watched the theorists describe the scavengers and decomposers.

The earthworms stopped first. Slugs, bacteria, and fungi followed. There was a debate about whether the actinolites had become extinct altogether. Scientists were scrambling. Some of them were optimistic—anticipating and predicting how the ecosystem would adapt.

The lack of cavities caused the dentists to go out of business. Some went back to school, others took an early retirement and ran off with their hygienists. The taxidermists likewise found different professions.

A man in the next town was on the news last night. His wife died—they don't know how long ago. He sat her up at the kitchen table, and she remained there each day, part of the kitchen, part of the home.

Flowers frozen in their freshness filled tabletops, rooftops, fields, and hillsides for years and years. When the flowers became too much, they were gathered and buried in a pauper's grave in the south side of New Mexico.

We visited Hawaii a few years ago, before things stopped decomposing. We were on a beach, and we saw a turtle on the shore in the distance. It was enormous. We cautiously jogged to it, excited to see it close up, but as I got closer, I saw that the turtle lay on its back, its head bobbing side-to-side. Something was off. You said, *stop*. As we got closer, I realized it was dead. My gaze immediately fell on its eyes, on the white substance falling out of the sockets.

After things stopped decomposing, the tradition of burying loved ones became cruel. They didn't become dust and ashes—Ephesians didn't apply anymore. The burial-service industry gradually changed to the encasing-service industry. The deceased were now referred to as "the sleeping." Wood coffins were replaced with glass coffins. The mausoleums, which quickly changed their names to "rest homes," became one of the most popular and profitable businesses. When the mourners, now called visitors, would come alone, they would read to their dead, pray with them, cry on them, shut the case and return home. The rest homes were remodeled to accommodate large parties of visitors who often came to celebrate birthdays. Each rest home would limit the amount of visits per year depending on the package purchased.

