

## Imagined Lives of the Dead

We're at an estate sale and Marta is getting pissed off because I'm looking through photo albums. "It's so morbid, looking through dead people's memories," she says. She's got this throaty German accent that makes her sound scary and sexy even when she isn't trying to be. "We're looking for a bed for me anyway. Look for a bed," she insists. I ignore her and look through the albums, at photographs of boys holding fishing poles and trophy fish, of group shots at family reunions, snapshots of naked children in bathtubs. A woman who looks disturbingly like my grandmother appears in many of them.

"Does anyone buy the photos?" I ask the woman sitting at a card table with a ledger and a small cash box. She sits very upright and tells me that sociologists sometimes buy the albums for their research.

"They count how many women have beehive hairdos, how many family members suffer from hair loss and the like," she says, sounding every bit the part of the schoolmarm. "They tell me it's a very important research tool."

"Will you come on," Marta pleads, leaning over the railing half way up the stairs. "We have four more sales after this one," she says. "I want to get there before all the good stuff's gone." She hrumps and frowns at me. "You can be so morbid sometimes, looking at dead people's pictures."

I follow after her up the stairs. "Well you want to buy a dead person's bed," I say. "That's pretty morbid too, you know."

She stops where she is and thinks for a second. "That's different, beds aren't people's, you know."

"What does that mean?" I ask. "That doesn't even make sense."

"I'm a foreigner, I don't have to make sense," she replies as we reach the landing. "I don't care, I want a bed, even if somebody died in it two days ago!"

Two ladies who are just emerging from a bedroom stare at Marta.

"Shit," Marta mutters as she head toward the master bedroom dominated by a huge walnut four- poster bed. The bedposts are as thick as trees. It reminds me of the huge bed in my grandparents' old house I'd played on when I was very young.

"It's very, uh, big," I say.

"It's beautiful," Marta whispers. She crawls onto the light blue mattress and runs her hand over the material. She sits in the middle of the bed and reclines on her elbows, drawing her leg up, a mischievous look crossing her face.

"This isn't right," I say. "Maybe we should go to Mattress World."

"I don't want to go to Mattress World," she insists, still leaning back on her elbows. "I want to have you on this bed." Sensing my unease, she tosses her hair back with one hand, and unfastens one of the buttons of her blouse.

The two ladies walk into the room. One quickly turns away, but the other just stands there, frowning at Marta. She stands firm in the doorway looking from Marta to me, before turning to join her friend.

"What was their problem?" Marta asks as she crawls off the bed. She looks at

me and sees there is something wrong. "What?"

I stare at her.

"Oh." Marta bites her lip regretfully. We walk back down the stairs in silence, and she turns to me when we reach the bottom.

"I want to buy it," she says, squeezing my hand. Before I can say anything she walks up to the lady at the card table and starts negotiating a price.

The old ladies gingerly walk down the stairs glaring at Marta and then at the sales lady. They shuffle towards the door with their eyes trained on the floor, clutching each other's arm.

At a table by the window, an old man is looking through the photo albums. He looks at me and I turn away, pretending to examine the titles of the books on a bookshelf. Out of the corner of my eye I see him tear a page out of an album and slip it into the pocket of his coat.

"I can give it to her for three hundred," the sales lady says to me. "There's no family left, so I can give you a deal."

Marta smiles at me and writes out the check, and the old man tugs on the lady's sleeve and asks if she has any picture frames for sale.