

The Aged Have Death, and The Young Have Love: Kawabata's House Of Sleeping Beauties

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[House of Sleeping Beauties \(or *Nemureru Bijo*\)](#) is a 1961 novella about a peculiar sort of brothel that caters to very old men. These men pay to sleep next to young women who have been willingly dosed with a potent sleeping medicine. The unclothed girls fall into a temporary, but deep coma-like slumber and cannot wake, as if recently deceased. The elderly customers, who we assume are impotent, do this to obtain whatever emotional and/or physical benefits this basic human interaction provides. The restrictions are few: no sex, and no visible marks of any kind should be inflicted. These are the rules of the house. Our protagonist, Old Eguchi, sleeps next to different girls on different nights. The varying scents, textures and corporeal nuances of the almost lifeless bodies transport Eguchi through intoxicating memories of old lovers, his daughter and other women from his past.

"More than sorrow or loneliness, it was the bleakness of old age, as if frozen to him. And it changed to pity and tenderness for the girl who scent out the smell of young warmth. Possibly only for purposes of turning away a cold sense of guilty, the old man seemed to feel music in the girl's body. It was music of love. As if he wanted to flee, he looked at the four walls, so covered with velvet, taking its light from the ceiling, was soft and utterly motionless. It shut in a girl who had been put to sleep, and an old man."

Sometimes you read a story that you'll never forget. Sometimes the story is so fucked up and beautiful you just can't shake it. House of Sleeping Beauties is one of those for me. It's erotic and repulsive all at once. What does one acquire from the mere act of sleeping beside another human? What can it mean to a dying or sad person to be so close to beauty and youth? Kawabata writes with an affecting combination of feelings which quickly snowball via smell, nostalgia and the power of human skin.

There is a relatively new version of this business (that of sleeping next to people for money) in Tokyo called *Soine-ya* where a similar "sleep service" is provided. *Soine-ya* means "Sleep together shop." There was one located in the Akihabara district of Tokyo when I lived there. Customers pay to nap next to college-aged women. There is no drug-induced coma, or anything resembling sex (supposedly). The shop promotes itself as a "co-sleeping specialty shop." The clients pay anywhere from 3,000-7,000 yen to take an hour long nap next to a stranger. Options can be purchased such as foot massages, resting one's head on the lap or buttocks and even back-patting. Back-patting seems like a underappreciated service in The West. *Note to self: explore Back Pat Specialty Shop.*

[Here is a video of someone going to a sleep-together shop. \(In Japanese\)](#)

Though I'd love to imagine Kawabata's story was used to inspire these unique sleeping shops, I doubt the founder of *Soine-ya* was doing their best to bring the novella to life. Lucrative services that skim the borders of sex and innocent relaxation have, in modern times, flourished in Japan and elsewhere. Endless incarnations of massage parlors, host & hostess bars and other alternative forms of "enjoyment" have been around forever, but the idea of paying to literally sleep next to another person seems fairly new, until I read Kawabata's story. The literary connection is there. It serves a unique condition. Maybe it's something that could only have been birthed in Japan— in a book, and the waking world.

I hadn't heard of Yasunari Kawabata until my mid twenties. In 1968 he was the first Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was a close friend of the enigmatic and equally insane Yukio Mishima (still one of my favorite writers). Some of Kawabata's better-known works include the novels *Snow Country* ?? and *The Sound Of The Mountain* ????. Kawabata took his own life in 1972. After reading a few of his stories it seems the author often returned to the relationship between sex and death, which is not surprising considering that's all anyone probably thinks about anyway. This seems especially true of the Japanese post WWII writers.

–She had been stripped of all defenses for the sake of her aged guest, of the sad old man. She was naked, and would not awaken. Eguchi felt a wave of pity for her. A thought came to him: the aged have death, and the young have love, and death comes once and love comes over and over again.

Old Eguchi travels to a house of comatose beauties to rest next to young, sleeping girls in order obtain something lost and possibly irretrievable. In Akihabara, a Tokyo salaryman naps with his head placed comfortably on the buttocks of a college student for 1,000 yen a minute during his lunch break. Maybe he pays extra for a back pat. This person considers his previously untreated loneliness, and for a moment, is comforted. I know what you're thinking. This all very absurd, but that's a good reason to buy a copy of [this book right now](#). Pick it up and lie next to a person. As soon as the story is finished, fall asleep.