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Frank Christianson

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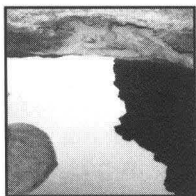
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NIGHT OR DAY
FRANK CHRISTIANSON



Maggie wakes to find she is too exhausted to move. She puzzles. It is mid afternoon. The television set on the dresser is at full volume. Most of the day-time talk is over and she has forgotten to set the recorder.

“On the Phone. Judy. Hates sex.” Host, guests and audience wait sympathetically while Judy explains her dilemma.

A long while later Maggie wakes again and remembers that she was up all night in her dreams. Mama Lufkin has returned and wants her to clean. She has come back smaller than before as if even death could not stop the shrinking. After thirty years, Mama can now sit on the mantel shelf and dangle her legs, looking no larger than her own picture beside her.

So Maggie cleans. And it takes her all night. No wonder she is so exhausted. Such a work.

But now she is up and walks herself to the kitchen, where she makes eggs. She scrambles

the eggs and scrapes them onto a plate and eats them with a dash of pepper.

She pulls to the parlor and sees the mantel where Mama Lufkin sat through the night and pointed her in the right directions. On the sofa, in the hall, a pile or a smear without pattern or shape. Like mud but not and no use pretending.

She cleans alone, breathing through her mouth.

This is when Howard would find his way to the door remembering something to be done in the orchard, preferring the mosquitos to the signs of his mother's age.

In bed, Maggie watches Reverend Schuler on 36. Always a serious message and a prayer line that is toll free. She never calls but likes the gesture. Sunday mornings at nine on *The Cry-stal Cathedral* they hear about sin and punishment, divine retribution.

It is night in Mama Lufkin's house. And it is the same air from four hours before when Helen came to clean. The chirping outside is loud enough it does not fade. Maggie sits on a wood stool beside the bed, so hot she can't abide its touch. Howard's shiny face stares up off the pillow. I don't know what you had to throw a fit for, Howard says. Maggie sits mouth tight and breathes as little as possible. Howard says, You ought to apologize to both of 'em. Draggin' poor Helen over here. I would've . . .

Maggie stands and walks out and down the hallway of Mama Lufkin's house. Mama's house by squatter's rights of more than twenty years before Maggie even met Howard. And Maggie a guest for twenty-seven years after that. That is when Mama dies and Howard three years later. And Maggie still a guest though she has now spent more time with the house than Mama Lufkin ever did.

She stops in the parlor and leans before a tan and gold wing-back chair. Carpet, wall-paper, other furniture all replaced or sold over three decades, all except the chair. She sees faint outlines. She sees Mama Lufkin, vaguely desperate, more lucid than she has been in years, trying to make it all disappear with the hem of her smock. In her confused movement, Mama manages to spread herself over the entire room. But the chair, the only thing Maggie brought from home, is the worst.

Mama says nothing when Maggie finds her. She stops her effort and stands staring at the wing-back while Maggie calls her sister-in-law and loses her mind.

She wakes and opens her eyes and sees black. She wonders if it is time for another stroke. She hears the television shriek static at her from the dresser. She hears the hum of the heater and the hiss of air coming out of the vent. She hears the clock.

She hears the soft footsteps of her pulse in the pillow and turns face up into night or day.