

## Preparing the Body

The kitchen was dark, punctuated by the intermittent green blink of numerals on the microwave and stove. Somewhere beyond the half-curtained windows a streetlight illuminated the Neighborhood Watch-protected corner. Maxine turned on the overhead light and winced, squinching up her eyes until she could see in the cold fluorescence. She pulled the worn terry bathrobe close around her slack body.

The pain had hit her belly around three-thirty and bent her into a tight fetal position as she lay on her side next to Fred. Her knees had jabbed him in the back, but he hadn't waked up, thank God. For a month the pains had grown steadily worse, depriving her of sleep at first and then bathing her in cold sweat. Lately she had vomited up blood along with the vile remains of her stomach. She clutched the edge of the countertop and heaved. "No more, no more," she thought. "Please God, no more." A thin ribbon of black bile trickled from her mouth and she stumbled to the sink to wash it away.

Fred told her she should go to the doctor, told her almost every day. Nagged her. He knew she couldn't stand to be nagged. She'd go to the doctor when she decided, and not before. Doctors didn't know so much anyway. They put you in the hospital and you died there. No, she'd decide when — and if — she'd go to the doctor.

A light flashed through the room as a car curved along the street behind the house. Maxine looked out the window above the sink and leaned over to raise the sash. Maybe some fresh air would help. The window didn't budge. She pushed harder, and a stab of pain knifed the length of her torso. Her hands lost their grip on the window and, outstretched as if clutching for an unseen rescuer, followed her body's slide from sink to floor.

How long had she lain there unconscious, she wondered. Pale light illuminated the gray sky and black treetops were silhouetted in the top half of the window over the sink. Her eyes fluttered and closed. Was Fred awake yet? "Oh, God, let Fred be awake," she prayed. A noise upstairs gave her hope, and she tried to call out, but she couldn't find her mouth. She wanted to knock on the floor, bang on the cabinet, kick her feet against the hard linoleum. "Fred, help me, Fred!" her mind shouted, but her limbs were disconnected and she no longer knew how to make them work.

Somewhere in the house Fred flushed a toilet. Maxine heard the rushing water and imagined him zipping up his trousers. In her mind, she laughed. How ridiculous he was with all his precise little habits. Next he'll brush his teeth with exactly the right amount of toothpaste and never splash it on the counter. If only she felt like it, she'd tell him again what she thought of him. If only she felt like it. But she was tired, more tired than she'd ever been in her life. Too tired even to laugh at Fred. That thought made her smile. She'd laughed at Fred every day since they'd met. At first he seemed to like it, thought she was cute. Later she laughed because he annoyed her. Did he still think she was cute? She smiled again. She thought she smiled, but she couldn't feel her face.

Maxine could sense a change in the living room. Then someone walked quietly into the kitchen, touched her, and she wanted to cry out for joy. Fred bent down beside her. He pulled back her eyelid and for a split second she glimpsed him. He had shaved and dressed completely before coming downstairs, just as he always did. This morning, when she needed him for once, why couldn't he just pull on slippers and a robe like anybody else?

Fred lifted her arm and felt for her pulse. She tried to speak and felt her throat gurgling. Why didn't he help her up? He let her arm fall back to the floor and stood up. He saw the thread of dark liquid that ran from her mouth, through her greasy tangled hair, and onto the dirty green linoleum. He stepped back and adjusted his tie. He looked at the gold watch on his thin wrist. How long should he wait?

— Carol Edge