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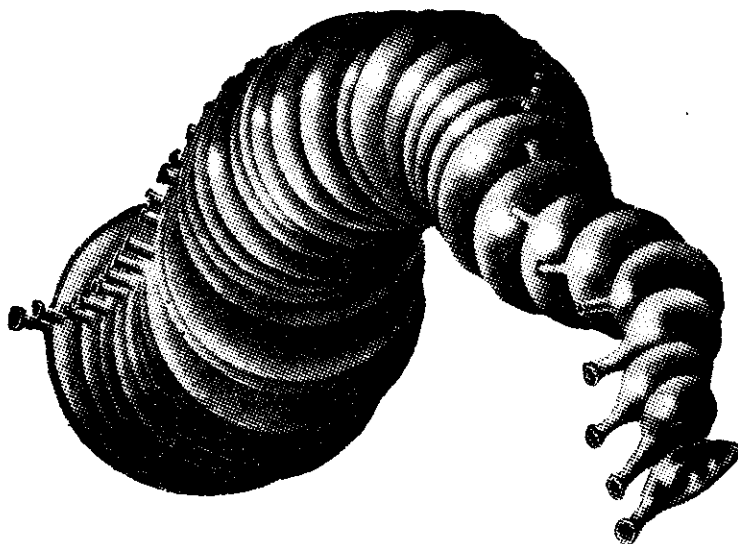
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SHORT STORY

(continued from previous page)

Did Aunt Mary feel it too, I wondered, or were the baleful looks she cast on it just part of her general hatred of her world, and the deadly routine which the clock imposed on her? Aunt Mary's day was ordered to the minute, by the clock, and grandmother.

At nine o'clock each night Aunt Mary folded her knitting, impaled the ball of wool upon the needles, and heated milk for supper. Grandmother gathered her cards together with neat, firm hands. How many games she played in her life I can't imagine. She never cheated, and very rarely did a game defeat her. There seemed no limit to the time she could spend, turning the cards again and again, till they all found their appointed places. It was grandmother who taught me to play Old Maid, and Strip-Jack-Naked.

And every evening, before she went to bed, grandmother wound the clock. Aunt Mary put out the milk-billy, shut the cat in the wash-house, and locked the doors and windows. Yes, every window was closed, and locked at the top of the sash. But grandmother wound the clock slowly and steadily and put the key back on top of it. And when Aunt Mary had gone into her room and shut the door with a bang and locked it, and I was in my tiny room off the dining-room, where they had pushed the dining-room couch for me to sleep on—after grandmother's first idea of my sleeping with Aunt Mary had been so obviously disliked by us both—after we were settled, and not before, grandmother retired to her room. Here, where any life the room might have had was drowned by the bedstead with the brass knobs, and every conceivable piece of furniture used in a bedroom, from a wash-stand with a battery of china (large, heavy, and slippery) to a lowering wardrobe—here grandmother spent her nights, and every morning and evening recited her lengthy devotions. It never occurred to me to wonder until I was older how exactly grandmother regarded God. For surely grandmother required no fortification of spirit. Rather one could imagine her communing on more or less equal terms with the Deity. Bargaining would be too harsh a word, yet on the other hand, there was nothing of supplication in grandmother.

One wonders how she came to death, whether, at the last minute, if she was conscious, her spirit quailed. We never knew. For one morning she was late in rising, and Aunt Mary went to call her. She lay as though she were asleep with no sign of disturbance, and none of faltering.

Aunt Mary and I were shocked. Yes, shocked is the word. It was as though the unbelievable had happened, in fact as though God himself had disintegrated. Surely people like grandmother never came to the cold husk. Surely they couldn't disappear like that, in a twinkling.

"May her soul rest in peace." There was the awful finality.

"May her soul rest in peace. May her soul rest in peace."

The words went echoing through my mind, just as the priest had spoken them at the graveside. They went on and on, and even when I stopped thinking them they went on and on. But for some time I didn't find it strange—until I began to wonder where the words were coming from.

It was the clock. For the first time Aunt Mary and I were alone. Aunt Susan with her patient face had gone back home, and Uncle James had seemed to wipe the dust of the house from off his feet at the door as gladly as he had always done. Aunt Mary and I were sitting at the fire with only the cat and clock for company.

You're tired, I told myself. You only imagine that the clock sounds louder. You only imagine those words because you're over-wrought, and everything's so quiet. Otherwise you wouldn't imagine there's still a tension in the room. There can't be. There's nothing to make it. But the clock went on with its ponderous intonation. *May her soul rest in peace. May her soul rest in peace.* And drowned the comfortable rumbling of the cat and the click of Aunt Mary's needles.

I knew I was overtired. But when Aunt Mary said abruptly, "Get off to bed now," put away her knitting and began to settle the house down, I wondered if she had felt anything too. She locked the house carefully, then came to the fireside. Her hand went up to reach the key of the clock, and hesitated. But finally she took the key down, wound the clock, and returned the key to its place. "Get off to bed Maureen," she said sharply.

The next day I went back to school.

Aunt Mary seemed her usual self—grim and taciturn, but for pudding that evening there was queen pudding with meringue on top, sweet and slightly sticky and delicious. Grandmother would never have countenanced such flummery. But we ate the lot.

After dinner I had homework to do, and with that life seemed a little more normal. I did not notice the clock, until, as time went on, I saw that Aunt Mary was restless. She sighed a lot, and every now and again cast on the clock such a look of hatred that I wondered. But then she had always looked at the clock like that. You never knew whether she was annoyed with the clock or with something quite different.

But that night when we went to bed she did not wind it. I'm quite sure, and I'm quite sure she didn't forget, either. Because when she had done all her other jobs she came back and looked at the clock very hard for a minute and then went off to her bedroom and shut the door without a word.

The next morning the clock had stopped. Aunt Mary said nothing, but I noticed that the clock from her bedroom was now in the kitchen. The dining room was still, as though it were dead.

When I came home from school Aunt Mary was out. This was remarkable. And I couldn't find the key anywhere. There wasn't a recognised place for the key, since there was seldom no one at home, and I poked all round the place until I gave it up as a bad job and sat down on the doorstep to wait for her. It wasn't long before she came hurrying in, obviously flustered at being late, and rather self-conscious about her parcel, which she took to her bedroom without offering to show me. But I didn't need to be told what it was. Any woman could see it was a new hat.

It was during this evening that I began to feel quite lost and hopeless. For grandmother to die was bad enough. But for Aunt Mary to stop the clock and then go off and buy a new hat was too much. I should have welcomed such spirit, and yet, instead, I felt young and

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