A Heart Beating Hard
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two big, soft hands she takes the box. He says words Marjorie does not hear and nods and takes the pen and paper and puts them back inside his coat. The man lowers his head one last time, touches his finger to the front of his hat, turns and walks away, closing the door quietly behind him.

Marjorie stands in the living room and holds the box. She watches the man out the window hold his coat close for warmth. Watches him light a cigarette and pull his short body up into the inside of a big blue pickup truck. Watches him drive away into the gray winter morning. A good man, small, kind, quiet, clean, gone.

Marjorie holds the cardboard box close to her body. It is heavy and light, light and heavy, thick and wide and so much smaller than she ever thought Ma could be.

What to do with this?

This box. A box of Ma. The cardboard shape of what is left of Ma.

Marjorie would like to talk to Dr. Goodwin. To see what People do with boxes of what People leave behind. But Marjorie has missed her chance for this month. She will have to wait for the days to go by.

Marjorie holds Ma in the middle of the small living room. She looks down at the brown sofa with the bed inside, looks up at the green clock passing the time. Today, still today, still the quiet of the early parts of today.

Marjorie puts the box on the floor beside the sofa. She has cleaned Ma up and signed her name and she cannot think of what else there is for her to do here in the apartment. Gram is quiet today, must be deep down in a down-day, must be sitting in her bed waiting for her Stories to start. Marjorie is here, awake, alive, and Marjorie has People who need her. Marjorie has her job to do, the Store out there, waiting for her. Today is a day like all the days, and like all the days the People need someone there to say Hello. And there are days and days to wait for her time with Dr. Goodwin.

Marjorie does not mind. She has things to do. Friends to see and People to help. Marjorie goes into the kitchen to begin the making of her toast with butter and grape jelly, the pouring of her milk over cereal.

Because there is nothing more to do here. No need, right now, and so, for now, Marjorie is going to forget about taking her vacation day.

6. MARGIE

Margie learned about lines. She did not know the word, line. But Margie saw lines all around her. Straight lines like walls, like pretzel sticks, like candy bars.
Lines curved all the way around to make circles. Circles, too, Margie saw. Margie started to see. To know and remember and recognize. Shapes. Margie, little Margie, began to understand her shapes. Curved lines all the way around like eyes and donuts and the brown centers of the yellow flowers that grew in the weeds at the end of dead-end Summer Street. Some up-days, Gram walked with Margie down to the end of the street, to the tall-grass place where the stones started, where the trees grew, where the street stopped and the cool wet-line curve of the brook was. Gram held Margie’s hand and Margie squatted in the tall grass and there Margie saw green growing lines that scratched against her cheeks, her arms, her nose. Smooth gray circles of stones soaking wet and shining in sunlight. The changing white-light shapes of leaves cut out bright from the shadows of the great big trees that grew at the dead end of the street where they lived.

Margie saw circles and lines long before she knew there were words to say these things out loud. She touched her small finger to the four corners of Gram’s book and around the box of cereal and Margie could not say square or rectangle, but Margie knew the shapes. Margie could feel the shapes inside her. The sweet crumbling circles of cakes Gram sometimes brought back from church. The shape of her sleeping ma seen through a door, cracked. Trunks of trees were a lot of lines touched together. The bent, broken-in-two circle backs of the hills that circled the town. Cakes cut up into pieces made small hand-sized triangles. Margie’s stuffed bunny was made of lots of lines and circles and was soft, was a shape of its own that we still have found no name for.

We don’t remember seeing the world this way.

Though we must have, we must have.

And colors. Margie’s apartment, red-door Apartment #2, up the big dark stairs on the second floor of the old white-and-gray wooden house on dead-end Summer Street with the dark blue creaking front porch and the high glass windows the color of dust in sunlight. Inside Apartment #2, the colors were worn out, were the colors of what could be held, tasted, of Margie and Gram and Ma. White-powdered-donut white, the yellow box of cereal and the red box of cereal, the cakes another kind of yellow, a sponge yellow, a soap yellow, the cakes black, pink-frosted and the pink of the soft inside of the stuffed bunny’s ears. The blue of the bunny’s outside. The hard black of the bunny’s eyes and nose. Ma’s room painted orange and off-limits to Margie. The wooden floor brown, the carpet green, the rough red of the living room rug. The purple pillows and sheets on the bed where Margie slept beside Gram, the purple of
Margie’s pajamas, the purple of pink lips pressed too long and hard and tight together.

For Margie, little, growing, big-boned Margie, the things made the colors. There was the dark red-book red of Gram’s book and the gold shapes of letters, the B-I-B-L-E, each letter its own shade of gold, each shape shining in its own way. There was the pale blue of toilet porcelain and the gray of fingerprints on wall, a gray not the same as the gray of stones by the brook or the peeling-paint gray of the big wooden house that held up Apartment #2.

The colors of what was held in a hand, a mouth, and people, too. People and their colors. Ma, the brown-black and yellow of Ma, of Ma’s long hair. The sun-brown of Ma’s skin in the summertime, the pink of Ma in the winter, the orange burn at the end of her cigarette and the see-through gray smoke that curled up into shapes that disappeared as soon as Margie tried to touch them. The cafeteria-worker-white of Ma’s shirts and the tight black of her pants.

The color of Ma getting ready for work was sometimes the color of a kiss. Sometimes Ma stopped to kiss her fat, quiet, smiling child. Sometimes Ma carried her to the kitchen sink and with her smoke-smelling fingers. Ma did her best to wash and comb and straighten Margie. This was the color of Margie, quiet, waiting, watching, being touched.

Stupid little pain in my ass.

Words were colorless. Sounds, rising, falling. The slam of front door same as Ma yelling at Gram, same as Gram’s television turned up loud.

Gram and all her gray, her gray hair, the gray of her skin, the gray spots on her hands and the gray nightgown she wore down-days, most days. Gray all over except her eyes, the bright blue of Gram’s eyes, like the plastic of Margie’s cereal bowl, like the watery waves Margie watched on television, like the sky on a perfect yard sale day.

And Margie. The shapes and colors of Margie. Wordless Margie liked rolling, spinning, circling. Down low on the red living-room rug, Margie turned in slow circles and watched the colors of Apartment #2 bleed together. Margie’s little legs grew into plump shapes that could bend, crawl, walk, but Margie liked the feel of the floor. Forced by Gram or Ma to get up and walk, Margie got up and walked, but left alone and in charge of herself, Margie moved in circles.

Picked up by Gram, held in front of the bathroom mirror, Margie smiled, saw, tried to see the colors of Margie. The light sun-dried mud brown of her hair, the red of her tongue stuck out. Margie lay in her place on the rug and looked at her hands, her body, at the shapes and colors of her. The pink of Margie’s arms and knees and the white, not milk white or wooden-house white
or powdered-donut white, but another white, a too-long-left-indoors white, a no-color color we might call white, the particular white of Margie’s soft plump legs. Margie’s fingers turned the color of whatever she touched, the pink and black and yellow of cakes, the red of Gram’s lipstick, the brown of the dirt on the bank of the brook at the end of their dead-end street.

Margie, down low, rolling, becoming. Turning the colors of there, of where she was, of green insects squished, of strawberry pudding swallowed. Margie listened to the loud of Gram’s stories and felt the shape of Ma’s footsteps leaving. From her warm place in bed beside Gram, Margie saw the quiet dark of the inside. Left alone for the day to sit beside the big high-up bedroom window, Margie felt the cool flat glass against her cheek and Margie watched the bright alive of the outside.

Had we thought to look up, we might have seen the shape of her there.

Margie, moving her mouth, opening and closing, making circles and lines. Circles and lines with tongue and teeth and throat and lungs and up there behind the bedroom window was Margie trying to make the shape of the world into words. Margie, behind glass, looking out. Trying to make the sounds of the brook, the frogs, the sounds of the television. Margie, small mouth moving, circling, sounding out something like the shape of Gram, of Ma. Beginning to make the sounds of how we ask, of how we say.

7. MARJORIE

Marjorie stands here in her self in her pains in her place in front of the swinging door at the front of the Store and waits for the People to come. She smiles wide and holds her hands together behind her soft back. The door is long and glass and when the People step toward it the door slides to the side to let them through. Outside it is cold wind and gray ice and hills of black-spotted snow. Outside is home and the Club and Ma in a box beside the sofa and Gram and her Stories. Outside, the lined-up hills that surround the town are covered in white, are powdered, like donuts, coated, like white chocolates, round and circling like arms like walls. Outside there is the mountain rising. Inside it is bright white light and warm. Hot. Heat blows down from the light-lined ceiling right here right on the place where Marjorie stands. Marjorie stands here in the blowing heat because here is the first step the People take in out of the cold. Here is where the snow falls off boots and melts in pools. Here there is a puddle that Marjorie stands in, a puddle made by the boots and coats and hats of all the People who step into the warm around her.