each cherry around in her mouth and squishes them between her teeth. The birthday-party People are having a very good time and Marjorie is happy about it and the sugary smell of their cake is making her hungry. She will go home and heat up some supper for her and Gram.

And Ma. Not supper for Ma. Just the remembering of Ma. Ma in the cardboard box beside the sofa. Delivered. Waiting. For what? Marjorie will go home and there Ma will be and what do People do with a box of their Ma dead in the living room?

Maybe Dr. Goodwin will know. Of course Dr. Goodwin will know. Probably all the People know. But Marjorie does not. Marjorie will have to spend some time in that department, will have to think about what place is the right place for stacking Ma.

She sucks hard on the straw and moves it around between the ice cubes and does her best to drink down the whole drink. Marjorie gets up slow from her stool, lets her toes stretch out inside her socks, bounces a few times on her feet to make sure they are strong enough to hold her up. She zips up her puffy purple coat and puts down two dollars on the bar, which is one dollar more than she usually gives. Marjorie puts her hands deep in her pocket and calls down to Mac at the end of the bar.

See you tomorrow, Mac.
See you, Marjorie, he says, and he waves.

Marjorie keeps her head down and her hands hard at her sides as she walks sideways against the wall of the Club, out of the way of the birthday People.

Get home safe, Mac says, as she pulls the heavy door of the Club toward her, as the cold air blows in.

10. MARGIE

The quiet of a usual day sounded like the television talking and Margie chewing. The not-there of Ma. Ma gone, out, away, at work or somewhere else far from Apartment #2. Usual days were down. Down-day Gram sat low inside the soft of her green chair and Margie laid out low and long as she could make herself on the rough living room rug. Gram watched her stories and did not speak. Margie rolled from side to side, looking up at the ovals of Gram’s pink slippers, looking at the bright moving lights of the television. She put her eyes up close to the hard brown shining square of the coffee table and touched her tongue gently to the side of Gram’s soft chair, just to know, to taste the taste of green-chair green. Margie put her small, thick fingers deep down inside the
box of whatever Gram had given her to eat and felt the shape and size and weight of the food before she put it into her mouth. Margie with her fingers felt the small dry circles of chocolate chip cookies, the big rough circles of yellow potato chips, the bright orange squares of cheese crackers. With her tongue she tasted the sting of salt, the slow drip of sweet, the pain of the scrape of cracker against the soft spots inside her mouth.

Margie ate. Gram watched. Margie chewed and rolled and reached. Time went on and on. Slowly, steadily, potato chip by potato chip, one day by one day, Margie was growing, getting every day longer and wider and softer. This is how we grow, chew by chew by swallow, in secret, quietly, lying low on the living room rug. Margie living along with her usual days. Looking and tasting and touching and feeling and starting to understand. Eating and eating and eating.

Circle, Margie said.
Heart, Margie said.
Woof. Wind. Green.
Gram, Margie said.
Quiet, Margie, Gram said. I’m watching my stories.

Gram watched her stories and Margie made circles on the floor and Margie watched Gram watching her stories and Margie chewed and chewed. Margie felt her teeth hard and her tongue soft and her jaw, moving, her throat, moving, her breath moving in and out and in and her food sliding down. Down deep inside her, to the center of the circle of herself, down to where her chest beat, to all the small parts, to the slowly gaining shapes that together shaped Margie.

Usual days, Margie was left mostly alone and unseen.

Other days, the other-than-usual days, the sometimes-days when Ma came back to Apartment #2 after work, Margie was watched. Margie was poked and squeezed and touched. Margie was seen and told to get out of sight. Margie was taught.


Most days when Ma did come back, she came through the red front door loud and kicking and dusted white all over. Ma came home smelling like french fries and cole slaw and cigarettes. Coconut. Fish, if it was Friday. Ma came home, white dust all over her black coat in spots in streaks in shadows of handprints and the left-behind of shapes Margie did not yet know.

Ma came in and yelled and said, to Margie, to Gram, to no one, Stay put. Mind your own business.
Don’t look at me, Ma might say.
I’m not here.

The sometimes–days when Ma did come back to Apartment #2, she came back as a ghost, as white powder all over. Ma came back smelling like onions and ketchup and whatever had burned up that day. Ma yelled and banged and disappeared.

Ma worked in the cafeteria at the quarry. We all worked at the quarry. We all knew her. Or someone like her. Or something like this. We all came home dirty with white, with lime lining our skin, with grease, blood, sweat, with leftovers of days spent sifting through explosions. We picked up big white boulders and we smashed the rocks to pieces to dust. To make glass and cement and toothpaste and plastic and pills. We can understand the coming home a little angry, the not coming home at all. Her days were heavy with hot-washed cafeteria trays and the hard pinch of scarred fingers. Who cares what goes on behind the big silver buckets of cafeteria food? We can understand needing a drink at the end of the day. We can’t say we really knew anything at all. We were all a little angry, all a little drunk. Whole long days spent watching the earth blow up and then picking up the pieces. Whole long lines of big-bellied men covered in white and calling for more chicken, more beans, more gravy, more coffee, more salt and sauce and skin fried crisp. We probably walked in rough and loud just like her.

Ma worked in the cafeteria at the quarry and even though she spent most of her time frying potatoes and pouring out heavy gray rivers of uneaten chowder, when she came home her black coat was always coated in white dust. Sometimes Ma came home with a friend and the friends were always heavy-footed and even more white all over than Ma. Friends with hairy faces, with circles of white in their eyebrows, their beards, with white blown into the scars carved into their skin. The friends never said anything to Margie or Gram, just banged doors with their big hands and the floor with their big feet and disappeared into the bathroom, the orange bedroom, to wherever Ma had gone.

Sometimes–days Margie closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of Ma and the friends moving through and around and inside Apartment #2. She did not stop rolling or wash her hands or sit up straight. Margie did not know about minding business. She did not know that she had her own business to mind. Days when Ma brought friends into their home, Margie stopped chewing so that her inside could be more quiet, so that when she put her ear against the hard of the floor she could hear the shapes the weight of Ma and the friends made inside Apartment #2.
The up-and-down of Ma and the friends. The long groaning lines of sound they made the rooms make. Margie listened to the floors, to the wood, to the wave-shaped sounds that came from Ma’s room. Margie, waiting, listening, learning the slow sound of the heartbeat Ma and the friends made within the walls.

Who hasn’t done such a thing?

Margie listened and Gram turned the television up louder. Margie stayed down low on the floor, feeling the alive of everything around her.

And when the inside was quiet, when Margie could not hear anything more from the smooth hard of the floor, when she had looked at Gram and was sure Gram was down deep in her television, Margie would crawl over to the place where Ma had dropped her black coat and there Margie would look for the white shapes of Ma. Margie’s two hands small inside the big black fabric of Ma’s coat would spread and hold and look. Margie put her nose into the black of the coat and smelled the fried of Ma, the sweet of Ma, the sweat of Ma, the smoke and burn of Ma. Margie held the coat as well as she could and looked for the white left-behind parts of Ma. The white slope of her shoulders where they had touched the inside, the white streaks in the shape of fingers or hands left on the outside. Margie touched her tongue to the white and tried to see what taste Ma had left behind. And Margie did not have the word for it yet, but what Margie tasted there, all Margie could touch and taste of Ma, was chalk, was dust.

11. MARJORIE

Marjorie is still standing in the living room in the dark, listening, waiting for a thing she cannot name. She still holds her arms stiff at her sides so her puffy coat will not make the swish sound coat makes when it touches coat. Marjorie moves her wind slow in and slow out, stills her self, holds her self still and waiting.

But what is the wait for?

Above her, Marjorie can hear Roberta’s television and Roberta’s coughing. Outside in the street she hears the slow slide of a car moving through slush. Marjorie turns her head toward Gram’s room to hear what is there. Pages turning, scissors cutting, the television talking, bed springs squeaking.

But nothing. All Marjorie hears is her self breathing and the sounds of the outside small enough to call quiet.

Marjorie steps a few steps forward in the dark and her leg bumps into the sofa and here, in her, is the bright of pain. There is a lamp nearby here, some-