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-
where, and Marjorie leans one hand down to rub her leg and with the other she reaches up and out and swings her arm in the air, looking for that lamp. When her fingers feel the thin cold plastic pole of the lamp, Marjorie stands up taller and turns on the switch at the top and the room is fast bright, white, naked with light.

God. Who knows how to believe? What Marjorie knows is that Ma did not believe in lamp shades. Too much money, she had said. Not needed. Dust traps. Ma did not believe in many things. Bras and crayons and the Bible and frogs. Marjorie’s face is so near the small bare bulb that it takes some time for her to be able to see anything but the big bright round shape burned into her eyeballs. She breathes, closes her eyes, waits inside until the white-hot shadow has gone and it is safe to open her eyes.

Marjorie does not mind how the light looks. Bare, not so good, no, but the left-open lamps were what Ma wanted and so long as it was Ma making the decision and not Him, Marjorie does not mind. Marjorie feels fine with things how they are.

Now that she can see, Marjorie moves a little faster. Carefully, quietly, she takes her coat off and hangs it up on its hook in its place. She listens for Gram and hears only Roberta’s television laughing above her.

Ma. Is it Ma she is listening for? Ma she is waiting for?

No. There is no Ma to hear. No Ma here anymore. A here, a place, an apartment, a life with no more Ma.

Marjorie goes to the side of the sofa and with her wind steady, hands steady, she bends down and picks up the cardboard box. The weight of it feels the same, strange, too heavy and too light. She holds the hard box close to her chest and moves fast as she can past the green chair, past the small kitchen, down the short dark hall and through the door. Ma’s was-door, Marjorie’s is-door. Through. In. Inside.

Marjorie puts the box down onto the clean sheets careful as she can. Across the hall, Gram’s door is shut and the space at the bottom is dark.

Gram, Marjorie whispers, to see.

Gram, are you good?

Marjorie does not hear Gram’s loud sleeping or the quiet sounds of the television. She hears just the nothing, and so she wants to see.

Louder, now, from across the small hall, Marjorie says it again.

Gram are you good?

Fine, Margie, Gram says.

Sleeping, Gram says.
Okay, Gram, Marjorie says. Goodnight.
Goodnight, Margie.
Better get that out of here, Margie.
No good holding on to it.
Marjorie says nothing, stands in the doorway and waits, tries to catch up with her wind and the quick of her heart. But nothing, Gram must have nothing more to say about it. Gram must be gone, asleep.
Goodnight, Gram, Marjorie says.
She shuts the door and turns on Ma’s bare-bulb light. The room is the same, but clean, but white-lit, but Marjorie’s room, now. Marjorie reaches inside her shirt and unhooks her bra. She moves her self in waves to let her self out, to get free of this painful thing that holds. Marjorie sits down into the Ma-worn shape of the bed beside the cardboard box of Ma but this room looks too naked, too bright. She reaches for the switch and sits in the dark.
This is a room that is better in the dark. More Marjorie’s, in the dark.
She taps her fingers on the top of the box and whispers, Ma.
Ma.
Marjorie taps, taps, taps and says, Ma, Ma, Ma, each time her fingers touch the rough brown box.
Marjorie does not know what People do. What she should do. Marjorie did not make a promise to Gram. Marjorie just listened, Marjorie just heard.
In the dark in her mind she sees Dr. Goodwin in his nice red tie and his black pointed shining shoes and she tries to think of what he might tell her to do.
How do you feel, Marjorie?
Talk about what you are feeling, Marjorie.
Feel, feeling, Dr. Goodwin and his feeling. Marjorie walks slowly through her departments, through her main departments, through the places in her self where she can go, where she can see and know and ask.
Fine. Marjorie has got this box of Ma to figure out, but this box does not make Marjorie feel any one way or another. People dying, People’s bodies burned up into People dust, this does not make Marjorie feel good and it does not make Marjorie feel bad. A little body gone before it had a chance to become People, a little almost-there body, maybe that is something to feel bad about. But Ma had a long enough life. Ma had her chance and her cigarettes and her Him and Ma did all the things Ma did.
This thinking is not telling Marjorie what she should do.
Well, Ma, Marjorie, soft as she can, says.
What do I do with you now?
In the dark, in the quiet, Marjorie uses her finger to make the shapes of Ma on the cardboard.
M-A.
Marjorie likes the feel of the box beneath her fingertip. She rubs her hand gentle against the surface and she keeps going, keeps making the shapes of names, all of the names.
G-R-A-M.
M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.
L-U-C-Y.
Dr. Goodwin might not like that she has shaped Lucy’s name so she rubs hard against the cardboard to erase the lines that were never really there. Or maybe he would not mind. Marjorie never knows what is going to be right and what is going to be wrong about her and Lucy.
Some days it is, Let go, Marjorie, let go.
And some days it is, Feel, Marjorie, you need to feel.
Marjorie does not know what is good and what is bad when it comes to Lucy. That department is dark and she does not like to go there and some days Dr. Goodwin wants her going there and some days Dr. Goodwin wants her to let that department go.
Okay, Dr. Goodwin. Okay. But Marjorie likes the rough feel of the cardboard under her finger and no one is here to know what she will let go. No one but Marjorie knows what the feeling is.
L-U-C-Y.
Marjorie likes the shapes there, even if the name is just felt with her fingers, even if the name is not real, is just hers, is just how she says it inside.
M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.
G-R-A-M.
L-U-C-Y.
M-A.
No other names to make but these. Again and again, in the dark, on the box. Dr. Goodwin would say, What about your father?
No, Marjorie would say.
Dr. Goodwin would say, Your step-father?
No, Marjorie would say.
No, Dr. Goodwin.
Sitting on the bed with this box heavy with Ma is making Marjorie walk
down the aisles of these departments where she does not want to be. Thinking about things she does not need to think about. Marjorie shuts her eyes and puts Dr. Goodwin away. He is one of the good People but sometimes Dr. Goodwin says words about her that Marjorie does not want to hear. Sometimes he tries to make her go to departments in her self where she does not want to go.

No father, no step-father, Marjorie would say. Nobody but Him and He is just a nobody.

Nobody. No body. No.

Marjorie moves her fingers in lines and loops over the top of the box. She closes her eyes and makes the shape of the names of who is here, of who is not.

L-U-C-Y.

M-A.

M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.

G-R-A-M.

Marjorie holds the box of Ma until the pains rise up in her knees, until both legs tingle, until she cannot feel the bottom of her self at all. She sits and touches the top and bottom and sides of the cardboard box. Still is not sure what to do with Ma. Should she get rid of Ma, like Gram said? Or keep Ma here, in her room, in her bed, here, beside Marjorie, where Marjorie is now?

No. Marjorie does not want to share this bed with the rest of Ma.

Marjorie puts the box of Ma back on the bed and bends one leg, slow, and her other leg, slow. Moves her wind in and down and deep into the places where the pains are, then puts her feet soft on the floor. She picks up the box and leans over and puts the box on the floor and slides the bits-of-Ma box as far under the bed as she can.

There. Done. Ma in a place, for now.

Marjorie puts her legs back up on the bed and leans soft against the headboard. Feels light and not so warm now with that heavy box gone under. She feels good, for now, for finding a place. Feels her body big and sinking into the soft-bed shape of Ma. Marjorie does only what she wants to do. She goes only where she wants to go. Her self belongs only to her. She cannot promise. Marjorie picks up pieces of her body and touches only what she wants to touch. In the dark, in the quiet, on the soft of her skin, on the cool clean of the sheets, with her finger, she keeps going.

M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.

M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E.

L-U-C-Y.