A Heart Beating Hard

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And then, sometimes, less than sometimes, on a very, very not-usual day, Ma came home quiet and alone. Ma came home white-dusted all over and she hung her black coat up on the hook beside the door and Margie would not need to look for the shapes of Ma white on the dark fabric because there Ma would be. Sitting with them in the living room. Not just the shape of Ma, but Ma, big Ma, worn out, quiet, warm Ma sat on the brown sofa beside Gram’s chair, above where Margie lay long and rolling on the red living-room rug, and together, all together, they watched the television.

Ma sat slumped back against the sofa and she watched the stories with Gram and Margie lay below her and watched the shape of her ma sleepy in the shifting television light.

Sometimes, in one of those once-or-twice moments that later feel like always, Ma might say, Let’s see if there are any fish on tonight.

And Gram would nod and use her clicker to move through the bright channels of the television until she found some fish.

It happened that all they could find were the fishing shows, the ones with the big dark green lakes that stretched out forever around the quiet men who sat back and held their fishing poles still and watched, and watched, and watched until the moment when the fishing pole jerked and the men pulled back and the fish appeared. These fish were always big and dripping and dark green like the lake. Soaking up light like the lake. Out of water, the fish opened and closed the big slick circles of their mouths, stared out long and wild from their unblinking eyes. Gram watched, quiet, from the soft of her chair. Ma watched, body limp, relaxed, there on the sofa and almost not. And Margie, from below, watched, her small body rigid against the living room rug. Margie watched the light of the television glow bright and dark as the upside-down men held the big fish tight, as they reached their blackened fingers inside the mouths of the fish and gently pulled out the shining silver hooks. Again and again the big men held the fish and freed the fish and released the fish and flung their poles back out toward the big body of the lake and waited.

Just awful, Ma said.

What they do to those animals.

This was the time or two that we might call sometimes, these very not-usual days when Ma and Gram and Margie watched the fish pulled one after another from the dark green gape of a lake. This would do. These lake-bound caught-
and-released fish were better than nothing, but these were not the fish that Ma wanted.

The fish that Ma wanted Gram to find inside the low sounds and glowing light of the television were the underwater fish. The real fish. Sea fish. The swimming free fish. The clear-blue-sky blue of the television underwater, not the green under of the lake but the deep bubbling blue of the under of the sea. On these un, un, unusual days when Ma came home and sat quiet and white on the sofa, this unending underwater was what she wanted to see. The slow, silent moving through the sea, sunlight stabbing through in circles, in bright lines from above. Ma wanted to see the fish that lived down there, the limitless little orange ones moving as one, the round purple fish with red lips, the green fish, the square fish, the blind white fish and the big gray sharks cutting silently through the water.

Margie, Ma might say.

On a very, very not usual day, when the light from the living room windows had left and the room moved with the blue and the white and the purple and yellow and green and blue, blue, blue and silver of the television underwater, Ma might say, Margie.

Margie, get up here.

Margie, mouth sucking slowly on cracker or gummy bear or pop tart or chip, looked out from her place on the living room rug, out at the fish making shapes on the television, up at Ma there, above her, on the sofa.

Stupid Margie, Ma said.

Stupid.

And Ma would reach down and put her two hands beneath Margie’s two soft shoulders and Margie would stop chewing and stiffen, would kick her heavy legs and do her best to make her body do what Ma wanted. Together, Ma pulling and Margie trying to push, Ma and Margie lifted little Margie up and off the rug, onto the sofa. And together, all together, sitting together in the deep sea light of the television, in the flashes of red and pink and orange and gold, Gram and Ma and Margie would watch the fish and feel the quiet weight of the water.

Heart, Margie said.

Fish, Ma said.

Woof, Margie said.

No, Margie. My own stupid fault. Fish. Fish.

Ma.

Fish. Stupid, stupid Margie. Ma don’t swim. Fish. Say, fish.
Heart.
No, Margie, Ma said.
Ma looked at Margie and Ma picked up Margie’s small hand in her big, boiled hand and Ma moved Margie’s hand against Margie’s round chest and Ma said, Heart.
Here is your heart, Margie.
Ma held Margie’s arm and pounded Margie’s hand against her chest.
Heart. That’s your heart, in there.
Ma held Margie’s arm out toward the television where a fat green fish floated through long brown arms of seaweed waving in sunlight.
Fish. Out there, fish.
Ma let go of Margie’s arm and Margie put her hand back to her chest. Back to where she could feel herself warm and beating.
Ma watched. Not the fish, not the television, not Gram or the potato chips. Ma watched Margie.
What’s that?
Heart, Margie said.
Good, Ma said. Not so stupid.
Ma put her fingers in Margie’s hair and she rubbed Margie’s skin and she said, Head.
Head, Margie said, and she tried to touch up on top of her, up where Ma’s hand was.
Yeah, head. Good.
Ma touched her hand to the soft circle of Margie’s middle and she said, Belly.
Belly.
Ma moved her hands back to rest on her own belly and Margie moved to sit closer to Ma. Margie put her hands up to her head and waited for Ma to say something, but Ma was back to the television, back to the fish. Ma, there and gone, gone and there.
Heart, Margie said.
Margie pounded her small thick palms against her belly and said, Head.
Belly, Margie said.
Heart.
Head.
Quiet, Margie, Ma said.
Heart.
Belly.
Ma looked down at Margie, two hands spread out against her chest, and said,
Shutup, Margie. Quiet.
Head.
That ain’t your head, Margie. Stupid Margie. That ain’t your head you got.
Those are your thingies.
Thingies, Ma said, and Ma laughed, a little.
Margie, can you say, thingies?
Big baby thingies.
Heart, Margie said.
Quit it, Margie.
Quiet.
I need it quiet.
I’m trying to hear the fish.

13. MARJORIE

Hello.
The workers work. Taking the old time down and putting the new time up.
Christmas is over so the smell of Christmas trees and chocolate coins wrapped
in gold foil and boxes of mixes to make gingerbread houses are long gone. New
Year is not much of a time in the Store so the streamers and shining paper hats
were here and not here so fast Marjorie hardly noticed them. Time in the Store
passes in candy, in plastic, in things to show the People that time is going and
going. Valentine’s Day is next in the line of special days so today the workers
are pushing around carts of soft red stuffed smiling bears and stacking heart-
shaped boxes of chocolates on the shelves behind where Marjorie stands.
The entrance, the place where time is sure and stopped and known in things.
Today Marjorie is tired. Of time. Of things. Nights and nights of that soft
bed, that feel of the box of Ma below, and right now standing here in front
of the door Marjorie is having trouble keeping her smile a smile. Outside it is
snowing so the People are few. Big fat blown-up pieces of snow fall down and
blow around in the cold wind. Marjorie opens her eyes and closes her eyes.
Watches the snow, the door. The bright red shine of foil-wrapped hearts lit up
by white Store light. When she feels alone enough, when there are no People
here to see, Marjorie holds her hand over her mouth and yawns, long, slow,
smells the sour smell of her inside.
Commander, Steve likes to call himself. When Steve comes around, Marjorie