A Heart Beating Hard

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Goodman, Lauren Foss.  
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You look worried, Marjorie.
Not worried. Thinking.
What are you thinking about?
Suzanne said she put her ma into the ground and that was that.
Where do you think your mother was happiest?
Oh, who knows. Ma was never much happy or not happy. Chick’s, maybe?
But that’s burned down now. Maybe Ma was happy in bed in front of the television.
Well, maybe it’s best to find a nice container and keep her at home with you.
I will have to think about that, Dr. Goodwin.
Of course.
What do you believe happens to us when we die, Marjorie?
What? When we die?
I’m just wondering. We’ve never talked about it. Do you believe there’s a good place where people go when they die?
I have not thought about that, Dr. Goodwin.
Maybe it’s a good thing for you to think about. Maybe it could help you to think about Lucy in a good place. And maybe your mother, too.
All I know is me, Dr. Goodwin. Here. Where I go. Alive. I don’t know about where else there is to go.
Maybe you can think about it.
What time is it, Dr. Goodwin?
It is almost 5:00. 4:52.
Oh, okay. So eight minutes left.
Eight minutes left. Anything else on your mind?
Oh, you know.

18. MARGIE

Climbing mountains, Margie, Gram had said, her dry, gray, wrinkled hand held around the fat, pink softness of Margie’s hand.
M.
Margie.
Climbing mountains.

Margie, alone on the floor of her and Gram’s high-up bedroom in Apartment #2, pressed her fingers against the smooth yellow sides of a long, perfect pencil and pushed against the paper with the rough silver downward curve of the sharpened, sharp, extra-extra sharp tip. Up. Down. Up. Down.

M. M. M.

Margie, alone with the sunlight coming through the big window, alone on the floor beside the bed with her big gray pad of paper, practicing what Gram had taught her. Margie, the smell of peanut butter and graham crackers and grape soda sweet on her breath, breathing in and out and in. Up. Down. Up. Down. Margie breathed in the smell of the pink, smooth, unrubbed, unsmeared eraser. The musty smell of the yard sale pad of paper. Margie pressed her pencil tip down.


M-A.

A break.

The point of the pencil pressed too hard, to breaking.

Margie moved the pencil in slow circles inside the small, pink, plastic sharpener. Circling, circling, unbreaking the tip, making her pencil sharp and perfect again.

Margie and all the time in the world for her to take. No place to go. No one there to tell her to go faster.

We would have liked to ask the world to always be so, for Margie. Warm, slow, purple pajamas soft in the sunlight. Making herself, there, quietly, in curving shapes on smooth paper.


M-A-R.

Margie stopped to touch her tongue to the little metal circle that held the eraser to the pencil, to touch the rough, sour surface of it. She bit gently down on the eraser and made teeth marks in the soft pink of it.

Margie knew all the letters. She practiced slowly, stopping to sharpen, stopping to touch and taste and feel the sunlight. Sometimes Margie fit herself inside the lines and sometimes Margie filled a whole page with just one shape, one page filled with the huge mountain of M or the house of A or the lying-down lines of E.

M-A-R-G-I-E.
Margie wanted to show Gram what she could do. She held her fingers tight to the pencil and held the pencil close to her chest and Margie rolled over her gray pad of paper and to the big white of the wall next to the window. Margie held the gray triangle of the pencil’s point hard against the white square of the wall and there on the big bare wall she pressed and made huge mountains that could not fit inside the space of the paper.

Margie made the wall her wall. Stopping to sharpen, stopping to feel and taste.

Margie was curled asleep on the floor when Gram came back and saw what she had done.

Gram, down, as usual. Down-day Gram had nothing to say to Margie. No words, only Gram’s hand hard on Margie’s shoulder, only Gram’s arms pulling Margie up, Gram’s fingers pointing to the wall, to the long gray mess of what Margie had done.

Gram, down, held her hand hard around Margie’s hand, made Margie rub the pencil wrong-end up against the wall. Gram took the pencil away from Margie and pink-eraser-end rubbed gray pencil more and more into the white wall, made Margie’s mountains into big gray rivers and clouds still there in the shapes of her.

Your ma is going to kill you, Margie, Gram said.

And maybe Margie understood, maybe not, but Margie could see that Gram was down, could see what she had done was not right, knew that for down-day Gram to say any words at all meant that something was happening.

Okay, Margie, Gram said, rubbing the eraser hard against the wall.

I’ll keep this secret for you, Gram said. But just this one. One secret. No more, Margie.

Gram rubbed the wall until the eraser crumbled away. The big gray of M-A-R-G-I-E was still there, only softer now, bigger and lighter, floating, like a storm passing over the white of the wall.
By now the sun had set and Margie and Gram were alone in their room with Margie’s mess in the gray-blue light of almost night.

No more, Margie, Gram said.
Say you are sorry, Margie.
Say, Sorry, Margie.

Sorry, Margie said. Another word. A long snake of a word. Not a shape, not a place to go or a thing to touch or a taste to taste. So many words expected of Margie.

Sorry, Margie said.
Sorry.
Sorry.

You better be sorry, Gram said. Now crawl under the bed and get me my magazines.

Gram pointed to the dark under the bed and pushed Margie toward it and Margie crawled and reached and pulled out what Gram wanted.

Gram shut the bedroom door and told Margie to get in bed and Gram pulled the covers up to Margie’s chin. Gram took out her scissors and her tape from the top drawer of her dresser and sat down on the bed on the Gram side, the wall side, her bent back to Margie. Gram opened her magazines all around her and Gram licked her two fingers and flipped pages and Margie closed her eyes and listened to the sound of Gram’s scissors slicing through the thin paper skin.

Margie lay quiet under the covers and listened, and slept, and Gram cut and cut and cut and taped and cut and taped, covered, covering up the secret of what Margie had done.

M-A-R-G-I-E.
M-A-R-G-I-E.
M-A-R-G-I-E.

In the morning, when the bright sunlight opened Margie’s eyes, the scissors were gone, the cut-up paper swept away, and Gram was there sleeping loud and slow beside her. Margie used her arms to hold her head up, to see beyond the rising shape of Gram, and there, all over what had been the white wall next to the window, Margie saw every color of blue the world had ever made. Squares of bright light swimming-pool blue, circles of deep-sea blue, white-cloud-spotted blue-sky blue, dark blue-painted-house blue, blue-car blue, blue-eye blue, globes of blue-and-green-globe blue, triangles of blue-fish blue and round snakes of running-river blue. Gram had found and cut and taped all that blue down on top of the secret M-A-R-G-I-E. A whole window of blue on the wall beside the window. And on top of the blue Gram had taped the cut-
out shapes of people, fish, sharks, cats, cows, lamps, suitcases, televisions, chairs, shoes and crosses and coats and pairs of pants. Things, so many things and people and animals, floating or flying in the sea or sky that Gram had made over the mistake of M-A-R-G-I-E on the wall.

Margie, eyes heavy, squinting, still sleepy in the early-morning brightness, stared at the shapes and the shades of the blue and all the things that Gram had brought to live there. Margie stared, and smiled, and watched this whole world of color and life that lived now on top of the gray-smeared mountains of M-A-R-G-I-E beneath.

Margie, staring, smiling, put her hand on the slow up-and-down of Gram’s shoulder and squeezed her, gently, and Margie said, Sorry.

Sorry, she said, and slow, dried-sleep-eyed Margie stared at all the colors that covered up her secret, her one secret that Gram had promised to keep.

19. MARJORIE

Marjorie sits in the chair beside Gram’s bed and together they eat graham crackers with peanut butter and watch the television. Gram is quiet and chewing, a down-day, probably. Mostly down-days, now. Mostly down-days always, but, before, Gram could get around better. Gram went out to her yard sales and church and wherever else Gram went. Now Gram and her bad heart and her bad hip and her bad knees and bad ears and eyes mostly sits up against some pillows in her bed and watches television and does her cutting. Marjorie has her own no-sound television to watch now in Ma’s room, but she likes sitting here with Gram. Marjorie likes hearing what the People on the television have to say and even on the most down of a down-day, Marjorie likes feeling next-to Gram.

Mostly they watch the Stories. Good ladies and bad ladies and good men and bad men. Many doctors and nurses and not many children and if there is a baby the baby is talked about but never seen, ever. Marjorie likes the way the People in the Stories talk. How strong they are about things. So angry when they are angry and so happy when they are happy. So beautiful. Bright white teeth in red, red mouths. Marjorie likes it best when the men with their big muscle arms grab the ladies in their short dresses and say words like, I want you, I need you, I love you. I must have you, they say. Sometimes Marjorie’s face burns up and her heart beats fast and her hands shake a little when the Stories show men with no shirts kissing ladies in bed under the sheets. The men big as mountains and the ladies disappear in the shade beneath. And the sounds. Marjorie is very