A Heart Beating Hard
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It’s because of my time, Margie, Lucy said, and she held her head in her hands and held her arms around her legs and made a ball of herself in the hot shade at the edge of the brook.

Summertime. Summer, the time for Margie and Lucy. Sun-lit, school-less, outside, let out, unwatched, unheard, free.

It hurts, Lucy said. Because it’s my time.

You don’t know about it yet, Margie.

You’re still a kid.

Margie sat beside in-time, in-pain Lucy and Margie put her hand soft as she could on Lucy’s hair and Margie rubbed Lucy’s head slow and gentle, the way Lucy had showed her. Margie, out-of-time Margie, did not know what time was giving Lucy this pain. But Margie would do anything Lucy asked her to do. If Lucy said she was sad, Margie would put her two arms around Lucy and squeeze her tight like Lucy told her. When Lucy was angry, Margie sat still beside Lucy while Lucy screamed out all the bad words she knew, while Lucy threw rocks against the sidewalk and kicked ant hills to dust.

You’ve got those, Lucy said, pointing to the rise of Margie’s big chest. But you haven’t started your time, yet, Margie.

Thingies, Margie said.

Boobs, Lucy said.

Yours are already bigger than mine and I bet once you start your time they’ll get even bigger.

You’re lucky, Margie, Lucy said.

Ask your ma about it, Margie. I’ve got cramps hurting me bad and I don’t want to talk right now.


Margie did not want to ask Ma about it. Margie was growing, always, but more, now. Not just wide but up, out, hanging down. Hairs, Margie was growing hairs. Breasts. Lucy and Margie, one summer day, suddenly, or over some time, slowly, by magic, by surprise, had breasts. Not the round, sexless hills that had been there before. Not just fat there in those outmost places but breasts. Breasts that bounced with touch. Breasts that stood up small and hard and pointed on Lucy’s thin chest, that grew out heavy and long above Margie’s big stomach. Lucy’s ma bought her soft bras to keep her breasts contained and Margie stretched her t-shirts out bigger, big as they could go so that hers would fit inside, so that they could hide.
Margie did not ask Ma about it. Margie hid herself quiet and away as much she could and once the weather warmed and summer started, Margie got out. Away, always, as much as she could be, from Apartment #2. Margie pulled her shirts out big as she could make them and slept with her arms stiff, still against her sides, as if Gram might forget she was there at all. Margie kept quiet, kept herself as hidden as she could, tried to be as much as she could out, away, with Lucy.

Because now there was the returning friend. The black-haired friend there every night shirtless with Ma beside. The always-there friend who Ma let in who Ma let have a key. The low, deep voice of the loud friend seemed slow coming at first, just a rumble, now and then, through Apartment #2, and slowly, slowly Margie heard more of him, and more, until she knew him, knew the sound and smell of him. Him, his voice, the loud of him, thump of him, his sounds so different from the rest of them up there in Apartment #2.

Margie was so used to Gram’s high, nails-in-a-bucket voice she hardly heard it anymore.

My pains. My heart.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Gram’s voice was part of Apartment #2, was lost in the sound of the television, the screams and sighs of the stories. Ma’s voice, too, loud and strong and ripping as it was, only hit Margie with its longest wave.

Big as a fucking house.

Stupid Margie.

Margie, always listening, eyes so often closed, concentrating, had learned the sounds and voices of Apartment #2, the pounding, the out-of-breath sounds, the behind-door laughing, the long watery flush of the toilet, Gram’s snores, the holding sounds of the pains. Margie had learned how to stay where she was and go away, how to breathe her breaths into her hand, her bunny, how not to hear. She knew how to go inside, into her wind and blood and heartbeat, where the sounds were always the same, where everything belonged only to Margie.

Ma’s sweating, shirtless, more-and-more-there friend was not like the others. The others, Margie had learned how not to hear. The others came and left and did not come back. But this friend, this chewing, huge-hairy-handed friend, was there in Apartment #2 and would not go unheard. His voice broke through, into Margie. The big, black-haired friend, his sound, his footsteps, the feeling of him in her home, sat down heavy on Margie’s wide shoulders. This friend was a staying friend, and that made Margie want to leave.

We might have stepped in and said, Go, Margie.
Get away.
Get out.

But where was Margie going to go?

Lucy. Almost every day, Margie went downstairs to Lucy’s good-smelling Apartment #1. Or outside, on the sidewalk, by the brook, and as much as possible, with Lucy. Out watching the circling hills that did not move. Even with breasts, even though we would have called them too old for such things, the two growing girls sat together by the brook with the frogs or played the pretending games Lucy wanted to play. Margie always the salesman, the doctor, the priest, and Lucy always herself, grown up, beautiful and rich and wanting and getting.

Lucy gave the speeches and Margie listened.

Forgive me Father for I have sinned, for I have bought the biggest boat and all the seas and from now on all the blue on the globe belongs to me, to Lucy, Queen Lucy, and Margie, too, Margie can have some too, and we are big, and we are sailing and we are dressed in diamonds and rubies and pearls.

Good, Margie said.

No, Margie. You’re the priest. You have to think I am bad and you have to say you forgive me for it or I’ll die.

Don’t die, Margie said.

You have to say, I forgive you for all of your sins.

I forgive you, Margie said. For all of your things.

Margie said what Lucy told her to say and Margie did what Lucy asked her to do. When Lucy said she was lonely, Margie held Lucy’s hands the way Lucy said boys should. Lucy pretended, and Margie laughed and played along. Margie saw everything Lucy wanted her to see, Lucy tall and beautiful, dressed up and sailing, shining.

How could we have guessed that Margie knew about diamonds or rubies or pearls? Or that she could see herself there, beside Lucy, bigger and darker but glittering all the same. Sailing away, together, on a sea as smooth as the brook in summer. We might have laughed at all that Margie saw inside her. Slow, soft Margie, in her purple sweatsuit, sidekick to skinny, loud-mouthed Lucy, might have shocked us with how bright and clear she could see all these beautiful things inside her. What with the stares, the circling, the rubbing her head against whatever was cool or soft, we could not imagine all that Margie was imagining. How Lucy made the worlds, but Margie was the one who really lived in them.

You just wait for your time, Margie, Lucy said.
See how different you feel.
Grown up.
And it hurts a lot.

For some time, Margie played the pretending game with the returning friend. She closed her eyes and sat down inside herself and imagined that he was not there in her home, the town, the world. She stayed away, outside, with Lucy, playing as best she could the part of all the people Lucy wanted to play with. Margie tried and tried and tried to squeeze herself shut, to keep the sound of the chewing, rumbling, yelling, laughing, pounding friend out, to forget the smell of his cigarettes and spit and white-dusted boots kicked off at the door.

He knew her name. He knew something like her name. A part of it. He knew Margie only in the parts of her she could not hide. He knew Apartment #2 and he knew where to find her inside it. The black-hair-spitting friend left pieces of himself everywhere. Dark hairs on the white bathroom floor and stuck to the toilet bowl, chewed-up pieces of paper stuck to the kitchen table and all around Ma’s bed and even on Gram’s chair where he sat sometimes to drink, to yell, to watch the television and take over the room. Ma’s friend, there, in Gram’s chair, and Ma, there, below, beside him. Gram, wherever Gram went, and Margie, who did not need anyone to tell her to get away. Margie, who did as best she could.

We didn’t know.
Or, we knew, but we didn’t know any better.

We were left alone and lonely and we liked the way he raged and pounded and wept and held us.

We were powerless, thin-boned and living out the long, slow life of our stupid mistakes.

We asked for forgiveness.

We minded our own business.

Had we noticed those breasts Margie was growing, maybe we would have told her to cover them up. Maybe we would have told her about becoming a woman. Her time, what to expect. Tried to lessen the surprise, the shock of what her body would do.

Margie, a woman.

Maybe this was difficult for us to see. Fat little Margie. Slow-moving, slow-eyed Margie sitting alone in the kitchen eating saltines smeared with butter. Margie, body ballooning out in every direction, a woman, an almost-woman. Her time, coming any minute. Had we sat with Margie, talked to Margie, held Margie, helped Margie, maybe we would have seen that all the extra Margie, all
the eating and eating and growing was a wall being built. Another Margie in the making. Maybe we would have seen how she hid herself with herself, how her breasts hung same as the rest of her, how her shoulders hunched in and her stomach stuck out.

But even if we saw, even if we noticed, what would we have done?
Margie was Margie and we were us, all of us, and much as we fucked and lied and pretended otherwise, there was no way out of us.
There we were, together and absolutely separate.
Here we are.
Together with Margie. Down low, away, in the shade of the trees beside the brook. Body-doubling and sunlight leaving. Margie, waiting for something, for her time, for the time that Lucy said was coming.

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Rough day, Marjorie?
Oh, Mac, you know. A day. Good. Rough.
Shirley Temple?
Yes. The usual.
The usual, coming right up.

Marjorie sits in her usual place and today the barstool feels not big enough for her self to get comfortable. She moves her weight from side to side to find the best spot for sitting. Suzanne waved to Marjorie when she came in but she did not stop to say Hello and Marjorie has not seen Suzanne for some minutes now. She has not yet said Hello to Suzanne so Marjorie is sitting up straight as she can, making circles with her eyes around the Club, looking for where Suzanne is. There are more People than usual in the Club this afternoon and the smells are strong and not usual. Marjorie kicks her feet a little against the bar and puts her nose up high and when she brings her wind inside she keeps it there to see what smells she can see.

Marjorie is almost sure the new smells are the smell of food. Roasted like meat cooking. Warm and thick like butter like potatoes. Light like crescent rolls. Clean like steamed green beans.

Marjorie brings the smells inside her and lets her mind taste them and the smell and the taste of the food goes right to that department where she most does not want to go and Marjorie coughs, chokes on her wind, blows hard to get the smells out, holds her hand up over her nose to keep her self safe and it