

IN THE JELLY GROUND

By Amy Purcell

Editor's Note: This short story portrays behavior that someone with Alzheimer's Disease might exhibit. We suggest that parents and teachers read the story before sharing it with students.

Mother is trying to breastfeed the doll. She has her shirt raised above her breast and she has that ugly doll pressed tightly to her chest, its mouth puckered in a perfect, needy O. The doll's eyes are zombie-blue and they clack open and shut every time Mother moves her. I try not to look directly at the doll but it keeps looking at me, following me around Mother's tiny room. There is no place to hide in here. Only a twin bed, a nightstand topped with ancient bottles of imitation perfume, her falling-apart armoire, and framed pictures of family she no longer remembers. A crucifix hangs above her bed along with a cheap watercolor painting of sunflowers that belonged to a former resident. I haven't bothered to remove it. It's all public property in here; no one knows what belongs to whom or who belongs to what.

"This baby needs to eat," she says to me, her face scrunched in determination. "I haven't been able to find food for her all day."

"It's a doll, Mother. It's fake." I keep my voice level like the nurses instructed, like this thing she is doing is completely normal.

"She cried all morning. Someone must have left the poor thing. I always wanted my own baby."

"You had your own babies. Like me? Your daughter?"

That doll is pretend." I am trying not to take things personally. This on advice from the head nurse whose mother still

After reading *In the Jelly Ground*, I felt as if I had just read the work of a great, undiscovered talent. This is a beautiful story, made up of wonderful layers that the reader keeps peeling back to reveal a beating heart of character and plot. The sense of place is palpable and well used, the dialogue is always sharp and full of tension, and the characters seem like real, living people to me. I expect big things from this author because this is a great story.

— Silas House

plays tennis every morning in Boca Raton. I am not very good at taking advice.

I reach for the doll but Mother backs away, her nipple a withered strawberry resting on its ugly little head. I put my hands out and wait. "Please."

"Don't take her. She's all I have." Now Mother is crying.

"Okay." I sigh. I am exhausted. "Let's go to lunch. To that deli with the coconut cream pie you like so much."

"I feel sick. My head feels this big." She stretches her hands away from her head, smiling apologetically.

"We're going to lunch. I dressed up for you and everything." My voice is sugary and the fake sound of it makes me shudder. I point to my ugly pink blouse, the one she gave me for my birthday five years ago when she still remembered things like birthdays, her subtle way of suggesting I could look more feminine if only I applied my intelligence to the task. "Smart ones scare the boys more than pretty ones," she always said.

"I already ate. I couldn't eat another bite."

"Then you can watch me eat," I say.

I open her armoire to find a sweater. A heaviness moves around me and there's a sudden pressure on my back, pushing me into her sweaters. They become bones, a field of bones with Mother and me standing among them. I am sixteen and wearing her cardigan with the pearl appliqué, my favorite. She hands me her red lipstick, her good going-out lipstick, and she watches me slide the color over my lips, clapping her hands at my attempt to pretty myself for someone else. And then it is gone. The sweaters are just sweaters again.

"Are you ready?" I ask, sucking in a quick breath. Mother's look is blank. "For lunch."

"Yes, I'm famished."

"Right." I can do this. This non-personal agreeing thing.

Even though it's August and brutally humid, I drape the bulky wool sweater over her back. She has the posture of a question mark now, humped and lean and always asking for something. We pass other residents. They are sitting in rows of junky, mismatched chairs lined in front of the windows. Their white tufted heads bob like dandelions in the wind. Mother turns to me. Recognition passes over her face as if she just remembered something she's been trying hard to remember, a happy little miracle.

She bends toward a sleeping woman, yelling proudly, "My daughter Georgia is taking me to lunch."

Tomorrow she will not remember my name or our lunch. But right now she does. I cup her elbow in my hand, steadying her, holding her there with me as long as I can.

* * *

Marty is waiting for me at the picnic table just like I had asked. He is not a looker or a keeper, Mother would have said, but he is a good listener and his hands are strong, always smelling faintly of the orange he eats each afternoon. You can judge a person by their hands. Bad hands—the soft, un-worked kind—are hands I don't trust.

He is a paleontologist on my dig team at Big Bone Lick State Park. Kids get a kick out of the name, especially the teenagers who put everything in sexual terms. Sometimes I laugh too, at the park's name, and at what Marty and I do for a living. We raise the dead, search for the bones of mastodons and mammoths that perished in Kentucky's salt marshes thousands of years ago. Sometimes it seems pointless. You can dig your whole life and never discover anything important. That's probably why I spend so much time digging. I don't want to come up empty-handed.

Marty and I kissed once, out of loneliness and the excitement of finding half a mastodon femur. When it ended,

we shoved our hands back in the dirt and looked for more bones, too afraid to research the feelings that might have surfaced.

"Nice blouse," he says.

The ugly pink blouse is splotted with perspiration. Marty dusts off the top of the picnic table and I take a seat next to him. "I look like a giant salmon. The things we do to please our mothers. She loves pink. I thought maybe it would trigger a memory. I must be desperate."

In the distance, children are lining up near the museum for the sunset fossil hunt. Joe, a volunteer with a personality that matches his clownish red hair, holds up a mammoth tusk and the kids' arms wave like cattails as they reach to touch it. Some of them shriek when they feel the tusk, expecting the softness of ivory instead of nicked-up bone.

"Do you ever see weird things, sort of like déjà vu in reverse?" I ask.

"All the time. A few weeks ago I dreamed that I was at a party with a mammoth. I had on this nice tuxedo and the mammoth kept sneezing on me, all this yellow goo. And then there was so much goo, I had to swim out of it. That was a few days before that mudslide."

"I'm not talking about dreams. I mean when you're awake."

"Well, no, Georgia. That would be called crazy. Or a bad batch of pad Thai."

"Oh."

"Is your mother seeing things now?"

"No. Worse." I don't tell him about the heaviness in the room or seeing my mother surrounded by bones. It seems silly now, unreal. We watch the children disappear along the trail, the last child straggling behind, making a slingshot out of low-hanging branches.

"Why do you think kids get so excited about finding fossils?" I ask.

"That's an odd question coming from you."



The Mammoth Site in Hot Springs, South Dakota.

"I mean it. They have the Internet. The past is totally accessible to them. There's no mystery anymore." Marty pinches his bottom lip between his fingers, thinking. That is one thing I can't do. That philosophical-thinking-before-speaking thing.

"It helps us make sense of the past. Like we can understand it better if we actually touch a piece of it. Like we aren't just telling them stories."

"But we are telling them stories," I say, suddenly more irritated with his academic tone. "We have no exact explanation for the extinction of our mammoths. It's all theory. There's so much we'll never know. So much lost."

Marty runs his hand down my arm, leaving brown trails of dirt on the Ugly Pink Blouse.

"My mother told me today that she always wanted to play the tuba."

"Why not buy her one?"

"She also told me that she was Kennedy's housekeeper, and she'd been to a ranch in Wyoming, though I know for certain she has never traveled west of Iowa. She said a dog comes every night to turn down her thermostat. I asked her what kind of dog and she couldn't describe it. But she was so specific about the tuba that I almost believe her. I almost believe it's for real."

"Sort of like this." Marty leans over and places a bone fragment in my hand. A mammoth tooth, a small piece of a larger molar. We have been digging near a creek bed for the past month and have uncovered all sorts of molars. Mammoths had six sets, dying once the last molar was cast off. From our findings so far, we know there had to be a dozen or more mammoths in or near the creek bed. Reporters have been hanging around the park, waiting for the big discovery. If I keep the tooth, it will go missing from the field notes and have no historical significance, other than what I personally assign to it. I hand it back to Marty but he pushes my hand away.

"Keep it. We follow enough rules."

I roll the tooth between my palms. It's long like a carrot but thicker. Marty scoots closer to me and wraps his arm under mine. I am not accustomed to touching or loving the soft parts of things. My heart skitters up to my throat.

"I bet you have nice bones under this blouse," Marty says.

"I bet you say that to all the paleontologists."

His hand, wrinkled and scarred from too many excavations, folds into mine. I sense the heaviness again, a wooly pressure surrounding me. Everything slows, my breath, his voice.

I will keep the tooth. I won't give it back.

* * *

When the phone rings, I am in bed, not sleeping. I let it ring three times in case it's Marty. I don't want to seem too

anxious.

"Georgia? Is that you?" Mother. Of course it's Mother.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's the baby."

"What about the doll?" I correct her, annoyed at my optimism over Marty.

"She needs clothes. Someone must have stolen them. Everyone steals my things. If you don't take me home, I'm going to throw myself in the Ohio River."

"Really? How will you get there?"

"I'll walk." I do the non-personal agreeing thing and don't respond.

"I better go now. My head feels big."

I put the phone back on its cradle and it rings instantly. It is probably Mother. Or maybe Marty. I am tired, tired of nothing making sense—Mother, Marty, the tooth, the years spent searching for the absolute reason why those mammoths disappeared. I let the phone ring me to sleep.

* * *

I set the tuba on the sofa. It seems like a nice tuba. Kind, jovial even, with a hint of innocence. Tuba replaces doll. Like evolution, only louder. I haven't been to work in days. I have message after message from Marty. And just as many from Mother who is convinced the doll has colic. I pull the tooth from my pocket. Last night, I scrubbed it with baby oil until it shined like tanned skin.

I try playing the tuba. It sounds like burping.

* * *

Mother is sitting on her bed with the doll. She pats its back gently. I park the tuba next to her and wait. Mother, the tuba, and I watch *The Price Is Right*. Bob Barker looks ancient and so do his leggy models who achieve the same level of excitement whether a contestant wins a new minivan or a toaster oven. People think they're lucky winning all that stuff but who wants the black lacquer bedroom set? Where is the historic value in lacquer?

"Bob is such a nice man," Mother says. "Danced with him in a club in Newport, Kentucky, once." I nod and tell her I always thought she was a good dancer.

At the commercial, Mother asks, "How are the children?"

I finger the tooth in my pocket. "I don't have children."

"Well, when you do have them, I'm sure they will be very pretty. I always feel sorry for women with ugly babies."

"Do you think the tuba is pretty?" I nudge it toward her.

"Oh good. I love music. What are you going to play?" I press my mouth against the spit valve and play a little tune, more like one long *ppphbbwwaaaaddttt* until my breath runs out. I wipe off the spit valve and put the tuba on her lap. Mother screams and pushes the tuba away.

"Remember how you said you wanted to play the tuba?"



Editor's Note: Several years ago, on a road trip through Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park, we stopped to see the many fascinating national monuments of South Dakota, including Mt. Rushmore National Memorial, Wind Cave National Park, and Jewell Cave National Monument. We also visited Custer State Park, the Crazy Horse Memorial, and The Mammoth Site in Hot Springs. A significant archeological site that will take years, maybe even decades, to completely uncover, an enormous building was constructed over the dig site to preserve it as work progresses. It is easy to imagine the jelly ground that mired these remarkable animals and preserved them for us to find. For more information visit www.mammothsites.com and many of the other sites dedicated to this long-term project.

She lies back on the pillow and pretends she's sleeping.

I grab a photograph from her nightstand with my free, non-tuba-holding hand. Mother and I are standing in the butterfly garden at the conservatory. There is a black and gold monarch on the top of her head. I had asked a stranger take our picture before the butterfly flew away. We have the same smile, the same narrow neck and pointed shoulders, the same rounded hips. I can see her DNA, see how I might look in forty more years. What I don't see is how she can forget me so easily. How one day she knows how I got the scar under my chin at age five and how the next day she presumes I am the local tuba player. The science of her memories makes no sense.

I point to the photo. "Do you know who this is?"

"Of course I do," she says, irritated. "That's me."

"And who is this standing next to you?"

"Oh, I know her."

"You do?"

"Of course."

"Who is it?" Mother rocks back and forth with the doll, humming now. She stares for a moment and frowns.

"Would you like to hold my baby? She has my eyes, don't

you think?" I hold the baby for a moment and the heaviness I have felt before pulls at me. I look at Mother and I see her walking on the beach. She is holding my hand and we are sunburned and barefoot. She picks up a shell and places it against my ear. I try to hear the big ocean inside but the sound is too faint, too distant.

Mother claps her hands and I drag myself back into her dingy room. The contestant on *The Price Is Right* has won his showcase prize, a speedboat and a new car! I kiss Mother's forehead, leaving a smudge of red lipstick on her pleated skin.

* * *

The note at the museum says to get down to the creek bed as soon as I can. Last night's rain brought cooler temperatures and more people out to the park. I wind my way around the mothers and the children pointing at the life-sized sculptures in the dioramas—the huge mastodon and the mammoth, a giant sloth and a few of the minor players of the Pleistocene Age, the ones the kids don't care about as much.

Before I cross the small footbridge, I study the mammoth. Bog water lolls around her chest and covers most of her tusks. Leftover rain glistens on her stone back as if



This is a diorama of animals that might have been caught in the mud hundreds of thousands of years ago, there to find in the striated layers of sediment at Big Bone Lick State Park.

she were sweating. As she should be. She is supposed to be dying. This is not Disney World. We show death in all its glory, animals stuck in the quagmire—the jelly ground, we call it—on their way to the salt licks they never reach, their massive bodies sinking into the oozing grasslands. All that power reduced to nothing by something as simple as mud. I blow a kiss to the mammoth, following its imaginary path to her gray tusk.

Near the creek, haze hangs between the trees, turning orange wherever the sun finds an opening. Marty is on the opposite bank, standing among pointy sticks that look like fence posts. And then I realize they are bones. Ribs. The tips of a rib cage.

I hop from rock to rock trying to keep my shoes dry and then give up and step into the water. It comes up to my knees, but it runs gently so I don't have to struggle.

"Probably just a bison," I say when I reach Marty.

"You know it's not. Look at the size. This is our mammoth. We were digging too high. The rain exposed him for us." My chest tightens. It is wrong. All wrong.

"Let's put him back," I say, gripping the tooth in my pocket. "I don't want him to be found." Marty pulls me close. His shirt is soaked through and he smells ancient, not of this world's air.

"Do you know what this means?" Marty whispers. There is a reverence in his voice, a funereal quality. I wriggle out of his arms.

"It means we have a lot of work to do. Digging him out, making some big deal about him. What if he never wanted that? I wish you'd never found him!" Marty glares at me, his eyes wide and bulging, hurt.

"You're the first person I called, Georgia. We're sharing something here. This can be our past together. No one else will have this." For a moment, I think he is going to kiss me again. My head feels this big. The mammoth shouldn't be here. The tuba needs to be returned. Mother doesn't know

me anymore. She will crawl back under her blanket for another nap, slip into her jelly ground and dream of nothing.

"There is no such thing as a past together. There is so much we forget. It's all so random. It scares me."

Marty kicks one of the bones. "You can't remember your entire life."

I look at the bones. Time shivers between us and moves me slightly, like a glacier shifting forward, leaving a different landscape. I say nothing as he turns back to the bones, bends over them like a concerned father looking into a newborn's crib.

Marty will be on the news with his mammoth, bone by bone. The crowds will come; the people will gasp and secretly wish they were paleontologists instead of doctors and accountants and sales clerks. There will be a local contest to name the mammoth. We will create stories to fill the gaps of the unknown.

In the distance, I hear the first group of children on the trail, heady with the thrill of discovering a fossil that has pushed its way into the present. I climb out of the creek bed to join them, to say here I am. †

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