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PAUL JOHNSTON

Mastodons*

Beatrice Dart was able to come home before the end of the week. Though she was confused and awkward in her movements, more unsteady with her cane, she suffered neither paralysis nor loss of speech. For this Reverend Dunning, from the Congregational Church in town, said God ought to be praised. Virgil Dart nodded. He sat beside Bea, his hair — gray, like the old, long unpainted wood of his tumble-down barn — sticking up in back, his overalls temporarily changed to old wool slacks and a white shirt and suspenders. A frown, not understood by the minister, lurked behind Virgils's impassive face. To make the minister feel useful and welcome Virgil had to suppress his own agnostic feelings, when it seemed like it ought to have been the minister making *him* feel better. He was tempted at that moment to point out that people in more ignorant, more *religious*, times thought that strokes were strokes of God. "Well, yes," he said instead. "I suppose that's true." Perhaps that's how ministers make us better people, he thought, by making us treat them gently.

Beatrice's stroke had come in the morning, just before a rain. Virgil had been in the field with the manure spreader when Nat, the boy Virgil had staying in the room off the garage in exchange for help with the chores, had brought the news. Nat looked like he'd run all the way from the house, his legs moving in long, loping strides. Virgil shut down the power shaft which drove the rotating blades at the back of the spreader, stopping the shower of manure, then pushed in the clutch and dual brakes, bringing the tractor to a halt. The tractor idled as he waited for Nat to come up and get his breath. Something was wrong.

The boy stuttered out the news. "It's — it's — Bea — Mrs. — Beatrice had stroke. Ju — Judy called the doctor and he's on the way. Judy's sitting with her on your bed." In the instant of comprehension the Darts' forty year marriage was transformed, though at the time Virgil only felt a confused anxiousness. What was the quickest way to get to her? It was too far to run with any speed. "Unhook me," he told Nat. The boy grabbed the power shaft, pulling at it and trying to turn it at the same time,

*"Mastodons" is excerpted from a longer fictional work, which Johnston affectionately calls his "cow novel".

but it wouldn't come. "Squeeze it," Virgil reminded him, and in another moment the shaft was free. Virgil watched the boy fumble at the other catches, crusted with dried manure. The hitch dropped away and Virgil shifted the tractor into its highest gear. He let out the clutch and the tractor lurched forward. The seat dropped beneath him as the hugh rear wheels dropped into a furrow. Virgil aimed the tractor diagonally across the field. Its fastest speed was only twenty miles an hour, but that was faster than Virgil could run. He kept his eys straight ahead as he bumped and bounced across the field, ducking his head as he whipped past the bushes of the windbreak at the end of the field.

The sky beyond the house, as Virgil crested the hill, was darkening with clouds, though the morning sun still shone on the farmhouse and the barn. Both buildings showed their age, the bricks crumbling along the walls of the house, the barn's paint faded and cracked and peeling, exposing the gray wood beneath. The tractor rumbled into the yard and Virgil shoved up the throttle, stalling out the engine. A black and white patrol car from the Sheriff's Department was already parked in the drive.

Judy, the girl who lived in the front of the house with her husband and young son, sat beside Beatrice on the bed, holding her hand. Two deputies stood by, hats in hand. "Beatrice?" Virgil said, coming to the side of the bed. His wife looked up at him. Her skin was pallid and slack. She looked smaller than he expected.

"She's all right," Judy said. "She's a little dazed right now. She's had quite a shock to her system. Here." She took Virgil's hand and placed Bea's in it. It was small and cold. Virgil could detect not sign of recognition in his wife's dull, puzzled face.

The first peal of thunder rumbled from the west as Dr. Mudgett examined her sitting on the edge of the bed. The first drops of rain were falling as the stretcher was loaded into the back of the ambulance. Virgil walked with the doctor to his car. Nat was standing to one side, and Virgil told him to take the tractor back out to retrieve the manure spreader. "Finish the job first," he added. "Then bring the car into the hospital."

Reverend Dunning stood to leave. Virgil rose and shook his hand, relieved to see him going. The minister had suggested that the women of the church might help care for Beatrice in these difficult times, to which Virgil replied that it didn't look like there'd be much call, but he appreciated the suggestion. The minister also made reference to the comfort of the church in times when we are confronted by our own frailty and mortality, to which Virgil did not reply at all, damn the awkwardness.

"Now you take good care of yourself, and we'll see you in church," the minister said to Beatrice. He took her hand and squeezed it, and she clutched his with both of hers in return.

"Yes," Beatrice said, looking up at him with a girlish giggle that contrasted sharply with her white head and slackened body. "I'll do that."

Virgil's resentment went deeper than his disdain for Christian superstition. Didn't Dunning think he could take care of his wife? Virgil's shoulders had carried a lot through the years. The farm, though it now was crumbling and weed-strewn, likely to collapse into dust the day that Virgil died. His herd, that he had husbanded through both good times and bad. He could carry Beatrice now.

His forty cows in the old barn were relics of the past, like himself, like Beatrice. Old dinosaurs. The Putnam farm, just down the road, with its four hundred head, automated milking parlors and blue Harvestor silos, was not just the farm of the future. It was the farm of the present. But that present wasn't for Virgil. Ed Putnam didn't know his four hundred cows. Over the past winter, when twenty-seven days had passed without a thaw, Putnam and his crew lost thirty cows to the chill in his barns. Virgil, with no help, had gotten all his cows through, stuffing hay in every crack in the stables, piling snow against the exposed walls to insulate against the wind.

And now this minister comes by to look after his wife. Hell. But Virgil felt an old pang of doubt, long buried. Beatrice was not his first wife. She had come to the farm to help where she could after his first tragic marriage, a marriage that had left him with a baby son. A baby son and anger and guilt and sorrow and indifference. His first wife had been the Oceana County Electric Motor Queen of 1931. He'd married her the following year, when she was just eighteen. He shot her by mistake. He was hunting and she wasn't supposed to be in the woods. That was forty years ago, and was nobody's business now. And now this minister comes around, with his mumbo-jumbo, as if he can't look after Beatrice. Or wouldn't. What his marriage to Beatrice had been was none of the minister's business. Wasn't anybody's business. She hadn't been Helen.

When Reverend Dunning was gone Virgil went to the kitchen for the new pills Mudgett had prescribed and brought one back, with a glass of water. "Wash this down now, Beatrice," he said, putting the pill in her stronger hand.

"Okay Pa," she giggled. "You're good to me."

"Pa?" Virgil wondered, but only for a moment. So many things to think about, but they would pass.

As Beatrice got better, it became clear what would and what would not pass soon. In the mornings, while Virgil was with the cows or in the fields, Judy worked with her, doing physical exercises to bring back full use of her limbs. Beatrice was at first slow to follow Judy's instructions, though she was always cheerful and willing, smiling as she struggled for comprehension and facility. Her weaker hand was less sure

with her cane, and Judy tried to teach her to use only her good hand, but she often forgot. She often, in fact, forgot her cane altogether, and had to be watched lest she try to walk without it and fall. She had trouble eating, filling her mouth with food until some had to be dug back out with a helping finger. "Chew and swallow, chew and swallow," Judy or Virgil, whoever was helping her eat, had to constantly remind her. She also had to be watched that she did not put salt in her coffee or coffee on her mashed potatoes or her mashed potatoes in the sugar bowl. Unwatched, she would eat anything before her until her mouth would fill and food would start dropping back to her plate. "She's a good trencherwoman," Virgil would say when his patience was not too tried. At other times, "For God's sake!" was his only response.

Beatrice could do nothing in the kitchen. Judy did what she could to help Virgil, cooking dishes that could be reheated and leaving them for lunch or dinner. Other women — Virgil's sister Carol, other nurses who had worked with Beatrice at the hospital, women from neighboring farms and from the church — brought casseroles and cakes and pies. Judy watched Virgil to see that he didn't simply start eating these sweets for his meals, and Virgil's own concern that Beatrice eat right prompted him to have more at least for lunch and dinner, though he did eat the desserts for his own breakfasts. With all their help, however — and he wouldn't have made it for long without them, — particularly Judy — Virgil was strained and exhausted by the burden he suddenly took on in the house. Beatrice required constant watchfulness and attention, and the continual frustration took its toll on Virgil. One afternoon in the months to come, she would cut herself while Virgil slept on the couch, slicing open her palm on the blade of a butcher knife, her blood greasily smearing the Darts' old silverware spread out in a strange pattern on the kitchen counter. She looked puzzled when Virgil discovered her still sorting and arranging the silver. "For God's sake!" he hollered. He thrust her hand under the tap and wrapped it in a towel. She giggled at his attention. "We're lucky to be here, in Michigan, in the middle of America, in the middle of the country, aren't we Pa?" she said as he examined the parted flesh.

As the days passed and turned to weeks, one problem became more and more clear. While Beatrice's speech returned nearly to normal, her memory did not. She was confused about where she was, what she was doing, who people were. She substituted for the present, old memories of her younger life, living as if the world around her was the world of forty years ago, or more. Virgil could do nothing but watch as he slowly realized that the woman he was married to was gone, replaced by whatever memories of youth or past experience her disordered mind put together. She called him Pa even as they lay together in bed, and rose in the middle of the night, putting her clothes on if Virgil did not immediately awaken, saying it was time to

go home or to work. He quickly learned, these sleepless nights, to hide her clothes, hoping that her searching would awaken him before she stumbled and fell, so that he could call her back to bed.

The first winter after Beatrice's stroke hit in late November, blowing drifts of snow across the barn yard, sealing the cows inside the stables before Thanksgiving. Virgil had lost one cow that fall, a young heifer who'd gotten in the corn and died of bloat. Virgil towed it to the ravine before the woods and rolled it over the edge, leaving it there to gradually rot away with the falling leaves. Somewhere in the same ravine — Virgil didn't know where — was the rifle he'd thrown away and later found and buried after shooting Helen.

Beatrice's ability to chew and swallow her food gradually improved through the winter, though her propensity to eat anything, and too much, did not diminish. She even tried, one February afternoon, to eat the flowers embroidered along the front placket of her bathrobe. "These look good enough to eat," she said, smiling up at Virgil from her rocking chair.

"Yes, they're very pretty," Virgil agreed. He was stretched out on the couch, trying to nap with one eye open, his gray hair splayed up behind his head on the bolster. It took a few moments for the ripping to disturb him. Beatrice had torn a six inch strip free from her robe, and was working on more.

"I thought they might be good to eat," Beatrice said, her smile turned sheepish, as Virgil took the bathrobe from her and put it out of sight in their bedroom.

Nat was waiting for him when he came back to the living room. "The gutter chain broke," he said. Virgil nodded, called Judy to see if she could come tend Beatrice, and put on his red feed cap. Judy knocked at the door. Virgil told her the problem. Could she keep Beatrice for dinner? The problem in the barn was likely to last into the night. "Don't worry about us girls, Pa," Beatrice giggled. "We'll get along, won't we dear?" She squeezed Judy's hand.

Virgil, as he had feared, found that they would first have to clear the manure from the gutter to get at the chain. They opened the great door at the end of the walkway, closed since the beginning of the winter, and shoveled a path through the snow drifts beyond it wide enough for the series of boards and supports they built to carry a wheelbarrow out to the barnyard. Virgil and Nat took turns forking the manure from the gutter and running the laden wheelbarrow to the end of the boards, dumping the brown shit and straw into the snow. The loads were unwieldy on the makeshift runway, and as the sky darkened and snowflakes began to drift down, Nat twice lost the balance and dumped the wheelbarrow on its side, knocking over the supports and burying everything in the shit and snow.

The work went slowly. The gutter chain continually caught in the tines of the pitchfork. The two men said little as they took turns. Virgil watched as Nat went down the runway with the wheelbarrow. Nat had worked at the farm for a year now. He had been a quiet boy since the day Virgil had picked him up hitchhiking. He had also been slow and awkward, neither his mind nor his body familiar with the work on the farm. Had he changed in the months since he had come to the farm, or had Virgil merely grown accustomed to him? Nat was less awkward now, more useful, perhaps, but he was also still a mystery. Nat, going out the door, struggled with the wheelbarrow heaped high with manure. Virgil, looking at the boy's back, recognized himself those many years ago, when he too had been a silent young man.

Virgil turned back to the manure, assaulted with old thoughts and, worse, old feelings. The bright fall day, so many years ago, when he had killed his wife, rose up out of the leaves in his mind, rose up out of the ground. The long moment, as he remembered it, after the squeeze of the trigger and the report of the rifle, when the realization it was she he had aimed at was quickly followed by the question of what she was doing there in the woods, the desperate desire to call the bullet back, the equally desperate feat that the bullet would hit her, and finally her cry. Virgil dropped the rifle and ran though the fallen leaves to where she lay.

Helen Dart had lain in the big double bed the first night of their marriage. Helen Dart. Virgil, twenty years old, marvelled at the sound of it, marvelled at his good fortune, marvelled at the beautiful girl who was his wife, in his bed, in his house, on his farm. It was the spring of 1932, and Virgil felt strong and eager, ready to establish a farm when all about him were struggling against failure and repossession. He didn't walk but ran through the fitting and planting and harvesting, and watched with excitement and pride that winter as Helen's stomach grew large and round with the baby boy within her, the baby boy that would be theirs.

She lay on her back now, unable to move, as Virgil dropped to his knees beside her. Virgil's hands, strong from a boyhood of carrying milk pails and pitching hay, tore open her shirt and camisole. Her right breast was torn, the white flesh red with blood and milk where the bullet had ripped through,. There was little bleeding from the open tear, however, and Virgil whispered to her "You'll be all right," as he pressed a strip of her camisole against her now flaccid breast. "You'll be all right. You'll be all right." But there was a bubbling in her throat as she sucked for breath. "You shot me," was all she was able to say, her voice full only of surprise, before her body jerked forward in a convulsion and her cough sent frothy blood flying against his shirt. She fell back against his arms, her eyes staring, her chest still heaving as she sucked for air, the blood that filled her lung now choking her throat. Virgil said no more, but

gathered her up, stood, and ran slowly with her sagging body through the woods, bright with the colors of fall, and into the corn field, the stalks tall and yellow and brittle. He stumbled to his knees as he approached the house and lay her on the ground. "Helen!" he yelled at her, as he pressed his hand and then his ear to her heart. "Helen!" But no flicker showed she heard. "Helen! Helen!" he continued to yell, his voice harsh now, demanding. "Helen!"
row. He had to work between the cows, and he ossasionally poked one in the rump with the handle of the fork, causing her to jump or kick. Virgil's response — "So girl. You're all right" — was automatic, and he hardly turned to them as he worked. Johnny, seven months old, had been in the house, asleep in his crib, flat on his back beneath his baby blanket, his fingers and toes curled at the ends of his chubby arms and legs. Why wasn't she with him? What was she doing in the woods, where she didn't belong? What was she doing there? Why wasn't she in the house where she belonged?

Virgil lifted a forkful of manure from the gutter and pitched it into the wheelbarrow. He had to work between the cows, and he occasionally poked one in the rump with the handle of the fork, causing her to jump or kick. Virgil's response — "So girl. You're all right" — was automatic, and he hardly turned to them as he worked. Johnny, seven months old, had been in the house, asleep in his crib, flat on his back beneath his baby blanket, his fingers and toes curled at the ends of his chubby arms and legs. Why wasn't she with him? What was she doing in the woods, where she didn't belong? What was she doing there? Why wasn't she in the house where she belonged?

Virgil took his turn with the wheelbarrow, pushing it down the walkway and out into the winter night, which had come, cold and full of solitude, while they'd work and he'd remembered. Beatrice had come to the farm soon after, to look after Johnny. And the yext year they had married.

There was little, if any, improvement in the working of Beatrice's disordered memory as the winter worn on. She did learn to remember her cane. Virgil was glad for two reasons: it relieved somewhat his fear that she would fall and break her other hip, and it showed that she was still capable of learning. She retreated more and more from the world around her, however, or that world withdrew from her. Often when Judy would find her in the morning sitting alone, her head nodding up and down, her lips moving, she would say only that she was "counting". An item in the *Hart Journal* would catch her attention and she would repeat it aloud each time she came to it as she read the paper over and over, always as if for the first time. Virgil did his best not to nap too heavily when he was in the house and alone with her, though

he was continuously tired. Largely, he supposed, from the restless nights he spent with her, calling to her to come back to bed when she would get up to wander or look for her clothes. Sometimes she would go into the bathroom and not come back out until he would hear her running the water and flushing the toilet and running the water and flushing and he would go and get her and bring her back to bed.

He had much time, alone with her, to think, as she no longer filled the time with talk. He tried to understand what had happened in her mind. "Pa," she called him and often her eyes would sparkle and she would giggle like a young girl. She pressed her cheek to his hand each time he handed her her pills. He thought back to her first years at the farm. She had worked hard helping with the chores and the hay, while at the same time caring for Johnny and, when he was older, returning to her job at the hospital. When had she gotten a chance to be as she was now, girlish and happy? "We lucky to be here, in Michigan, in the middle of America, in the middle of the country, aren't we Pa?" Beatrice said, interruping Virgil's thoughts. Happy? No. She was bewildered, lost. If she smiled, if she giggled, it wasn't happiness, but her good nature showing through the blankness, filling up the void. "Yes we are, Beatrice," he said, patting her hand.

To see his wife's girlhood come to the surface now wasn't the completely inexplicable thing it might have been to another man. Dr. Mudgett had explained the pattern of senility that had suddenly descended, and Virgil nodded, finding a little real explanation. But Virgil had already seen it each spring as he plowed the land, for fifty springs or more, since he was a boy working his father's farm. Each season he turned over the soil a whole field of rocks, some of them boulders, came to the surface to be hauled off, though he had picked rocks off these fields every one of those fifty years. As the earth turned over, it simply brought up new rocks, or, rather, old rocks long buried, left by the glaciers that had come through Michigan thousands of years ago. It wasn't many years ago that George Thayer, over on Polk Road, had plowed up the bones of a mastodon. Beatrice and Virgil had gone to see it, as had nearly everyone in Oceana County, a huge, strange skeleton in a large pit excavated in the middle of George's corn field.

But more disturbing to Virgil was not the girlhood that had surfaced, confused and disordered, in Beatrice's mind, but all the intervening years that had become lost. Were those years gone? And if they were, what did that mean? Where had they gone? Where had they been? Tormentingly, their past, that now seemed lost, came to Virgil with great force, particularly the first years of their marriage, when in his grief and guilt and anger and resentment he had been unkind, even cruel, to Beatrice. She had suffered it all without complaint, and done her best to be a wife to

him and a mother to Johnny. He remembered the nights, so long ago now, that he had made her turn her back to him kneeling on the bed, having her the way the bull had the cows. Afterwards, he had turned away himself and gone to sleep, hearing one night as he did Beatrice's sobs. But any feelings like regret did not come until the mornings, and then the moment was past. Eventually the passage of time and his reconcilement to things as they were lessened his cruelty, though he never did consent, no matter how much he knew she wanted it, to father a child in Beatrice.

"We're lucky to be here in Michigan, in the middle of America, in the middle of the country, aren't we Pa?"

"Yes, we are," Virgil answered. But where was his cruelty now? His remorse, so long after the fact, was doubly painful for its having no means of expiation. If his past unkindness had had any existence, it would have been in the memory of Beatrice, and now that memory was gone. It was as if he'd never done these things, never hurt her, but only thought them or imagined them, for she now, sitting beside him, knew nothing of them. Do our deeds have no more reality than this, their existence in other people's minds? He thought of Reverend Dunning's visit. Is that what God is for, to be a mind in which our private deeds exist? But if there was no such God, as Virgil knew there wasn't, then what did our deeds matter? Eventually, any mind knowing of them would be extinguished — including his own? Yes, including his own, and that would be the end of them. What did the life he had led matter? But, whatever it mattered, now, his mindless wife beside him, his life bothered him. A string of spittle hung from her chin, and he wiped it away with his handkerchief.

"Thank you Pa," Beatrice said. "You're good to me and I love you."

"Un-huh," Virgil said. He put his handkerchief back in his pocket. Outside, melting water seeped into the thawing soil in the darkness, down into the earth where rocks and bones lay silent. Though snow still covered the ground, the winter was almost over.