

Here's one of Martha A. Hood's best stories so far. It's a real page-turner.

Missing Piece

by Martha A. Hood

For the better part of a minute, Dori hugged the side of the ravine. Perfectly balanced she was, and Amy could see that she was terrified, breathing only in shallow gasps.

Such a beautiful, warm day in the mountains. The breeze blew through the pine trees and broadcast their scent. But perhaps Dori was too frightened to notice.

Amy glanced at her cell phone, then back at Dori. She gave a little shrug.

A lizard darted out from under some brush, right next to Dori's face.

For three days after Dori's funeral, Amy thought she was free. When she awakened that third morning, it was to sunlight streaming in her window and the happy belief that Dori was gone.

After she used the toilet, she stood over the sink and brushed her teeth. The skylight above her head was cracked open, and the early morning atmospheric inversion layer carried the roar of trucks and diesels from miles away. As she reached for a hairbrush, she felt an unexpected wave of dizziness, enough to make her steady herself by leaning against the sink. She picked up the brush to run through her hair, and then she noticed: a portion of her head was missing.

She wasn't surprised. Dori had tormented her for twenty-four years; she wouldn't let go easily, even for death.

Amy explored the missing piece with her fingers, a jagged-edged chunk over her right eye. Baby-blond fuzz grew in the depression and blended into the darker blond of the rest of her head.

She heard Baby's toenails in the hallway. Baby, the poodle mix, Dori's dog, though really David's, now left in Amy's care.

Baby was in the bedroom now, barking like crazy. Amy hurried out of the bathroom. It was something in the corner, there, on the floor, in front of her dresser. At first, she thought it was a dead mouse with a long blond tail, but then she saw that it was the missing chunk of her head. She froze, fearing Baby would snatch it up and tear it to pieces, like he did his squeak toys. But the dog held back, heeding some innate caution.

Amy thought it curious that the piece of her head did not bleed, nor did it ooze, but looked as though it had been neatly cut with pinking shears. She felt certain that if she could get hold of it, it would fit right back in, like the missing piece of a puzzle.

She reached for it, but it hopped away.

Baby had stopped barking. Rather, he wagged his tail, he danced, and he panted happily, looking somewhere in the spaces between the dust motes for the unseen hand that had pulled the invisible string attached to the chunk of Amy's head.

Amy started to cry. "Damn it, Dori!" She tried again for the chunk of her head; this time, she was permitted to seize it.

Trembling, she faced the mirror. It fitted back perfectly into her head.

Amy started a new school in tenth grade. The first day, a girl sat next to her at lunch and introduced herself. "I'm new here, too," Dori told her. "What do you think of it?"

The two chatted for a few minutes about this and that. Dori looked a bit like Amy, at least in general terms. Both were blonde, and about the same height and weight. Amy's eyes were blue; Dori's, a bit greenish.

Dori asked, "Who do you like? Who do you think is cute?"