

What Remains II

by Teri Pastore

After cocktails, wine with dinner, and open bar, assigned seating had lost all its comportment. Guests sat in front of cold coffee cups, empty breadbaskets, and wine-stained tablecloths not of their doing. Waiters hovered near tables adorned with hydrangea arrangements and scraped filet mignon green beans, and double Idaho bakers off Lenox china. Silver linen napkins lay strewn upon tabletops as though abandoned for even more gruesome stories of divorce at the next table.

Greg hands me a plastic cup with gold foam running down its side. I grip the cup and sip the foam to a more manageable height. It's a taste of stale heave, but I decide to stick with what I know. "Thanks," I say.

Greg is the shortest groomsmen. That's how we got paired. His Armani hangs comfortably on his swimmer shoulders. My tea length in periwinkle blue has a drop waist, a rusched bodice, and the sweetheart neckline dips low enough to hint at the fullness hidden.

Guests over forty migrate off the dance floor as though a bell had rung to signal a Diaspora; the under forties remain where the last song left them, ready for more. Shimmering stars strung along the top of the tent bounced colored light on everything underneath.

Greg gulps down almost the entire cup, and then presses his lips together like two wash machine rollers eking out the last tiny remnant of hops. The rose pinned to his lapel already looks worried about the drive home.

"Who's this?" Greg says.

"I think it's a Springsteen cover of Roy Orbison," I say. I know it is. But I don't say that.

"Right, right," Greg says. "I knew it sounded familiar." I can barely hear Greg over the over-woofed amplifiers, but the bride,

groom and their guests don't seem to notice as they herky-jerky bust their moves on the dance floor. Whitney probably didn't know it was a Springsteen cover either. She'd only discovered Springsteen after I'd played *Darkness* for months, and then *Nebraska*. "Do you have any Chanel Five, 'cuz this shit stinks," she complained once. When Whitney realized Springsteen's stink was spreading, she wanted in. Her faux blonde swayed in reverence to the Boss's vocal stylings, a motion she'd picked up from true Springsteen fans.

Greg turns his head in my direction, "Would you like to dance?"

"Maybe the next one," I say.

"What? You don't like The Boss?" Greg says, and sticks his chin out like it was going to draw something in the air. I smile back a smile I hope signals he'd just said something amusing. This guy has no idea how Springsteen got his nickname. The closest he'll get to "getting" Springsteen is assuming hiding on the backstreets is a round trip ticket seated in coach. But I don't say that.

Greg shifts his weight from heel to toe and back again, and takes a more modest sip of his beer. It was my turn to spin the wheel of conversation; I knew that much, but my voice had been kidnapped, and my fingers were not supposed to be like they were, all stricken and stiff. I stare at my fingers and will them to relax. Beads of water clung to my cup and hung on for their life.

"Whitney's having fun," I say, and tilt my head toward the dance floor.

How do you know Whitney?" Greg asks, and twists his head to stretch the closure of his space of his collar.

"We met when we both won scholarships to U of I," I say. My scholarship was for academic achievement and financial assistance, a term foreign to Whitney as *my treat*.

"Is that right," Greg says, and points his chin toward the tent's apex. I recognize the preppy pine scent of Greg's Grey Flannel, but I don't say that. Instead I say, "Yeah," and take another sip of my beer, all the time hoping the action looked natural, real, relaxed.

"So you're a brainiac?" Greg says.

"Hardly," I say.

"Ha!" shoots out of Greg's mouth with a force that carries it all the way to my forehead. My curly brown is done up in a 'do' with a bun in the back. It's not how I wear my hair, but it was Whitney's wedding. Whitney also insisted her wedding to be on Independence Day; this way no one could forget it. Every Fourth of July from here on out belonged to Whitney.

My turn at the wheel. I say, "How about you?"

"What about me?" Greg says.

"Scholarship, school," I say, but it comes out in a tone of as if! Of course! Dah! I don't explain the tone is unintended, that my spin at the wheel had come out all wrong. Greg looks at his shoes; black, spotless mirrors. He lifts his cup to his mouth, but doesn't drink. "Pre-law. Columbia," he says, and stares straight ahead at nothing.

"Environmental?" I say.

A smile, shy and sly, takes root in the corners of his mouth.

"Yah, did Whitney tell you that, Hannah?" Greg says.

Environmental law had been a guess, but I don't say that. Instead, I say, "I think she mentioned it at the rehearsal dinner." She didn't. Whitney was too busy putting on "The Whitney Show." Laughs so deep she lost her breath for minutes; smiling at someone passing by in the face of someone else; pointing across the room at an interaction only she was sharp enough to catch; slapping her leg, sharp and quick because he/she/they were so, so witty, and only Whitney appreciated the nuances; interrupting anyone that held court on her turf with a bigger, wilder, crazier interjection. It's what I liked most about Whitney. There was always a place to hide in the cool corners of her shadow.

"Yeah, well dams have really been fucked by Salmon," Greg says.

I raise my eyebrows to display astonishment over a brilliant insight, but my surprise is over the absurd sound of Greg's sentence. Encouraged, Greg's arm moves away from his body like a divining rod about to locate an underground well. "Salmon are

federally protected, and meanwhile we're paying through the nose for electricity," Greg says, and continues to deliver his divination.

Fish or foul, animals have it easy. Evolution heaped their *who am I* question on its scrap plate long before DNA had double strands. A poodle doesn't question how it knows to tear ass when a pit bull is nipping at its back legs; birds leap from a ledge and just know their wings will take flight; a mama-moose will *track* any predator she *assumes* may be a danger to her calves. She doesn't have the dramatic horn regalia of her male counterpart, but she's a dangerous three hundred plus pounds of wild-eyed estrogen with iron hooves, and an all-in instinct to protect her babies.

Moose calves recognize the brown hairy skin that smells of warm blood and earth, the stark naked eyes adorned with flirty long lashes, and a snout that can take down a small tree just as easily as it can nuzzle the petal of a flower. Calves look up into the eyes of their mama-moose and see themselves, see her looking back at them, they see generations, cycles of evolution; they recognize themselves in the genetic imprint of their mama-moose, and they *know* who they are.

"Native Americans believe salmon are their ancestors. That's what makes dams such a hot bed of contention, " Greg says and looks at me for a sign of accord. I nod.

On the bridal dais, a guest taps a spoon against a glass; the other guests pick up the signal, and tap their glasses until the tinging reaches a crescendo and is extinguished by a kiss from the newly minted Mr. and Mrs. A breeze faints against the back of my legs, and tipples the hem of my dress. Greg's eyes follow the breeze up past the dropped waist and rusching, up to my sweetheart neck. He sees me looking at him looking, and he looks away. A waiter with a tray of beers is serving fresh rounds nearby. "You ready for another one," Greg says.

"I'm good," I say.

Greg salutes with two erect fingers, and the waiter steps over to us so Greg can exchange his empty for a full. He takes another long pull of his beer, and does the wash machine thing again

with his lips. Outside the tent the sun begins to sink in an exit parade of yellow, pink and orange as light blue darkness creeps into the margins of the sky.

"There's a quiet place to sit out back by the old kitchen. Do you want to go check it out?" Greg says.

I know what this is. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was in Greg's genes. That was easy. Instinct lights the path, and our bodies follow the light. The real mystery is the *who am I question*. It's taken the Human Genome Project over forty years to decoded ninety five percent of the DNA code, and yet only five percent is understood.

"Alright," I say, and take another sip of the stale heave.

"You sure you don't want another drink?" Before I can answer Greg hands me his beer and says, "I'll be back in a sec. Men's room. Wait for me?" he says.

"I'm fine," I say. Greg pats the pockets of his Armani jacket, and heads off into the crowd toward the men's room. Just watching Greg walk to the men's room, it's clear he grew up in a Brady Bunch kind of family: two adoring parents, tennis lessons, Columbia then of course Pre-law. Greg knew who he was, who he would become, no questions about his ancestors.

When I was around fifteen, my mother used to make me clean house before she'd let me go out and play. One Saturday I was cleaning her bedroom, dusting, changing the sheets, tossing her dirty clothes in a laundry basket, scrubbing her bathtub. Her bedroom was small and occupied mostly by a queen size bed, two nightstands, and a long dresser. The only light was from a single double window with wooden blinds. The blinds were always closed except when I cleaned. A goofy gene must have kicked in because the toilet scrubber became a microphone, the bed, a spring for attempting somersaults, and the upright vacuum a willing dance partner. Michael Jackson's soulful, skillful dance voice was throwing down the beat:

*Bille Jean's not my lover;
she's just girl who claims I am the one*

I didn't hear her come in, didn't see her face, or watch as she pulled the vacuum plug out of the wall. It was her Sassy Coral nails on my shoulders. They dug in and spun me around. Before my feet caught up with my shoulders, a slap from the flat of her hand flung my head to the side, and my hair flew past my face. She was inches from my eyes in her teal top and Capri pants, the loops of her gold earrings, and the Clairol Ash Blonde #9 of her hair. I could see the freckles that dotted her chest, little red stars in a far away galaxy. Her breath came and went in fierce strokes like a boxer who's thrown a knock down punch and is just waiting for his opponent to get up. In seconds a red swell formed on my cheek and chin, stinging hot, followed by hot tears I could not hold back.

"You're just like your father," she'd screamed, as if he and I were a shared disease she'd caught and couldn't cure. And then she shook me back and forth until the fury in her was satisfied.

She could have spoken in clicks of her tongue, or used sign language, or drawn hieroglyphs and I'd have had a better understanding of what she meant. She'd compared me to a specter, to someone I'd never heard speak, or laugh, or watch shave, sat with on the front steps, made a ceramic ashtray for, scored baseball with, or smiled at me when I walked into a room. After the slap all that remained were the dents, debris and the twisted rebar of a barely there self.

"You're still here," Greg says, as he reaches for his beer, and swigs a quick gulp.

I press my lips together and signal an appropriately banal expression. I lift my heel and pretend the strap needs adjusting, since I have no idea what the fuck he means.

Greg takes another short swig, turns and heads toward the open space outside the tent. I follow as he moves around tables, through lines of people, past the dance floor and outside the tent. I knew it was chilly outside; I knew my wrap was somewhere on the bridal dais, and I knew I was going to need it, but I don't say anything. Instead, I follow Greg as he moves around tables, through lines of people, past the dance floor and outside the tent.

Sparklers were lit, and cracklers popped their signature machine gun noise. Greg's Armani moves past bushes, lawn, flowerbeds, and turns left at four-story oak. A line of evergreens about one hundred yards beyond us marked the end of the lawn. An old stucco structure that had escaped remodeling was being used as a staging area. A patch of light escaped through its screen door, and was accompanied by calls for more champagne.

"We can probably still see the fireworks from here," Greg says.

Duh. It's all the same sky. Instead I nod, and don't say anything.

Someone had left a chaise lounge chair unfolded on the back lawn, the kind with an aluminum frame and plastic crisscrossed straps in white and green, the kind of straps that never tear, but shred. Greg taps his foot on the grass to find a level spot to rest his beer. He bends down, and puts his cup on the ground with all the care of a father putting his kid on a two-wheeler for the first time.

"Here," Greg says, and places my still almost full cup inches from his.

"We can both fit," he says, as he dusts off the chaise.

I know we both can't fit, not in the way the chair was designed for fit, but I don't say that.

A flare zooms to the top of the sky and burst into an umbrella of blue, green, gold, and then flowers into a spray of red. Easing his weight onto the chaise, Greg settles into a spooning position, and waits for the other spoon to join him.

So I swing my legs up off the ground, smooth my dress at my backend, then tuck my curves into the spaces not taken up by Greg's body. His arm is under my neck; the other loops around my waist. He was already hard.

Greg's hand travels up to my breast and he squeezes like he's waiting for a hidden trap to snap down on his fingers.

"Is this ok?" he says.

"It's fine," I say. But it's not.

Another and another, and another rocket flares upward, and the sky fills with dots of sparkling color, blinding bright and shiny. Thousands of sparkles fall toward earth, hover as if unsure of what to do next, then fade out and disappear as if they'd never existed.

"And what have you two been up to," Whitney says; her perfectly shaped eyebrows are raised, and her tongue paces her front teeth like it's sharpening a blade. Most of the guests had left. The DJ was packing his gear. Waiters had flipped chairs on top of tables, and collected dirtied plates and glasses on large trays.

"Watching the fireworks from behind the kitchen." Greg's shy sly flashes and his baby blues crinkle with cut glass. His Armani tie was untied, his dress shirt unbuttoned, and he was holding my hand.

"Uh huh," Whitney says, and draws out the *uh huh* long enough for it to be its own song.

The ta-dump, ta-dump, ta-dump of my heart sounds unusually loud in the emptied space. I know I was supposed to I signal Greg with some sort of so long gesture, but I don't know as what: *a member of the wedding party, soul mate, one nighter, friend w/ benefits, friend, fellow traveler?* I don't want them to see the banner written across my mental sky that says *clueless, unlovable, damaged*. I don't want them to know that of my ninety-five percent, only five percent was understood.

Below my skin a familiar shimmy begins to travel up and down the main routes of my body. I press my right thumb into the pocket of my left hand. Greg's seedy deposit wets my cotton underwear, and out of nowhere the room begins to dip and sway like a country waltz. My free hand touches my chest. I want to untie my tie, only it's a sweetheart neck.

"Shouldn't you be on your way to your honeymoon?" I say. My words fall out in bits and pieces and fade like a dropped call.

Whitney's features snap on a mug that transforms her face from stunning bride to borscht belt comedian. "Soon as the limo is ready," she says as she leans her chin in between her index finger and thumb.

In the space where the dance floor had been Plywood folding tables were stacked a dozen deep on metal carts. The bridal dais had been stripped of its linens and disassembled. Beyond the cart, past the tent poles, night held open its exit door.

"So how *were* the fireworks?" She gives me a cursory once over; it's clear her interrogative is meant for Greg.

"The fireworks were awesome," Greg says, and again flashes cut glass with his baby blues.

I wrangle loose my hand from Greg's with the excuse of corralling a stray hair at the back of neck. My eyes backtrack over the stacked tables and stripped risers. I see my wrap hanging off the podium where the groomsmen and maid of honor gave their speeches.

The first time I hyperventilated I thought I was dying, prematurely being taken out by a heart attack. But it was just an uncontrollable shimmy of my insides; all it took was a paper bag and I was fine. Without a paper bag it got worse. If I fought to contain it, it got worse. Either way, there was no winning. It was only a matter of time before I'd be clawing for air.

A bruise began to form in the pocket of my palm. I clamped my jaw closed to keep rockets of uncontrollable breath from escaping, but my heart was pumping its Morris code for panic. Too much oxygen was fucking with my dam of carbon dioxide.

From somewhere outside my body, I watched as I point to the podium, turn my head to hide my clenched jaw, and in a voice that is all squeaks, consonant-powered sighs, and distorted vowels I say, "Greahh wed-ng; I. .ing. . .wrapah. . .over errrr." Bead-filled legs make the motions necessary to carry me past Whitney and Greg. Thumb still pressed two layers deep into my epidermis, I hope I look natural, real, relaxed as they watch me walk toward the podium.

I make it around the first table, hydrangea arrangement gone, chairs stripped of their dressage, gouges exposed. The night looked so big beyond the tent, a universe that I could hyperventilate into, where mystery ruled and not knowing is welcomed.

I'd make it past a second table, was halfway to my wrap, almost out from under the tent into the soft embrace of night when I hear Greg say,

"Thanks Whit; the chaise was perfect."

"What I'd tell you," Whitney says. "The girl's as predictable as rain."

Last thing I remember was looking up at the strung stars, on my back like a bug, clawing for air.

