

# All that Remains

*by* Terri Moran

The drapes are closed against the sunlight, but Ginny can feel someone in the room. She peers through barely open eyes so as not to let on she's awake. She adjusts her position in a way she hopes mimics sleep, turns her head to the side. A woman sits in silhouette. Ginny doesn't hear the TV. Ed must not be home.

She remembers. He told her last night that someone would be coming to stay with her today. He had to take the truck into Clayton's for a lube and oil change. He's been taking his trucks there forever. Ginny used to tag along, years ago. She'd ride with him into town, wander through the Woolworth's, look at yarn and buttons. Sometimes she would eat lunch at the counter, a fish sandwich and a Black Cow, before she headed back to Clayton's waiting room with its ripped, vinyl chairs. She remembers the vending machine that was always half full, the smell of overheated coffee and car exhaust. Ashtrays were rarely emptied, you just pushed out a little clear space so your ember didn't catch the rest of the butts on fire. Sometimes she would try to tidy it up a bit, but Ed said he didn't like his wife cleaning up after other people, so she stopped. They closed the Woolworth's down almost thirty years back.

Ginny considers letting the woman sit in the half-light until Ed comes home and sends her away. Nothing would seem amiss. But she may be needing her pills. She doesn't know how long she has slept. She never knows time any more. Often she doesn't know she has slept at all unless Ed tells her.

She could move a bit, shift her position, make some sound. If the woman's worth her salt, she should realize what Ginny needs and offer it to her. But no, that doesn't work. Now the woman is out of the chair, honeying, pulling the drapes aside, opening the window. Fresh air, she says. When she tells Ginny it is good for her, Ginny nearly laughs in spite of herself. The woman is coming close to look at her now. She doesn't want to be seen, half-gone, skin slack, nails

thick and spooned. Ed took the mirror off the wall over the dresser so she is left to imagine what she must look like whole. She risks a glance at the woman, meeting her eye. She sees her blink it back. Quickly—she is skilled. But Ginny sees it.

“Ginny, honey,” she says, “My name is Pat. I'm going to sit with you today while your husband runs some errands.” When Ginny says nothing, just holds her gaze, Pat walks closer, surveys the bed. “I bet you'd feel a lot more comfortable if we got you cleaned up.”

Then she's off, out of the room. Ginny hears cupboards opening in the kitchen, water running. Footsteps, now the dry squeak of the linen closet door.

Pat returns and sets the bowl of water on the floor by the bed. She turns back the covers and raises Ginny gently, spreading a beach towel underneath her. She eases her back down and begins to sponge her with the washcloth. The warm water feels good. She's put lemon in it, it seems. Ginny remembers making lemonade in the hot summers, taking a glass out to Ed as he worked in the yard. The smell of cut grass and citrus. The sun warm on her skin.

She ponders the fact that a stranger is bathing her. Although that's no longer unusual. Her life, her body, what's left of them, have become open to strangers. They have discussed her, taken her blood, infused things into her, radiated her bones. Not so much anymore, though. She thinks they've given up, decided to move on to battles they stand a chance of winning. She battled, herself, for a considerable time. Now she waits to feel the peace she has heard comes with giving over.

Not that she doesn't have fear. She does. Not for herself, because try as she might she can't think of anything she might have done that would send her to eternal damnation. She did the best she could and asked forgiveness when she did wrong. Her mark is no greater and no less, no better and no worse than most, so she believes she has reason to expect some sort of salvation.

She is afraid for Ed because she has taken care of the two of them. Of course he worked, earned their living, but she did the daily-life things. Shopping, cooking, bills, savings, taxes. Things he

can't even imagine needing done, let alone knowing how to do. She tries to go over these things with him, but he will have none of it. He brings her the files and notebooks she asks for and listens, arms crossed, brow knit. Then suddenly he remembers something he has left undone. Did he lock the back door? Put gas in the truck? Always some reason to up and go. So these things remain untold, and she fears that when she is dead, Ed won't know what to do.

Pat has finished bathing her. Ginny thinks about making an attempt at conversation, but the thought tires her. She does feel better. Her skin feels clean and cared for. Pat has put lotion on her, and she is soothed. It feels good to wear a fresh nightgown. She can't recall the last time she had a bath.

"Honey, I'm going to go ahead and change your sheets, if that's okay with you." She doesn't wait for permission, though, simply begins the tricky process of changing a bed with a person in it. Ginny knows the routine from the hospital, and she finds she can still manage to roll onto her side. It is a tiring effort. When the bed is changed, Ginny lies back against her pillow, breathing hard. Pat stands above her, smiling, as she quickly wads the sheets into a manageable ball. She is a sturdy woman, medium height. Her hair is a steely gray helmet, sensibly cropped. She wears a light blue cotton dress with small yellow flowers, washed to a faded softness. Her blue eyes in her round face are warm and kind. Her smile reaches them.

When Pat offers her something to eat, she says that all she can keep down anymore is Ensure. There is a supply in the kitchen. Pat says she has brought a Thermos of homemade chicken soup, maybe Ginny would like to try a bit of that. At first she thinks not. Then she drifts, remembering the fragrant steam from a bowl of soup, the broth golden with small, shiny islands of chicken fat, the vegetables orange and green. The noodles. She hears herself saying yes, she would like to try some of Pat's soup.

Pat is back out to the kitchen then. Ginny hears cabinets open, bowls on the counter, the hum of the microwave, the *ding* that signals the soup is ready. She bunches her pillow against the

headboard, places her hands at her side, tries to move herself upward. Rests and tries again. Settles for arranging the bedclothes neatly over herself. She folds her hands. Waits for the soup.

Pat returns carrying a bed tray, and the steaming bowls, two of them. She helps Ginny sit, then places a bath towel over her chest, the tray across her lap

“This is hot, honey. You need to eat it slow and be careful. If you find that it's making you feel sick, you just let me know and I'll go get you one of your Ensures.”

But Ginny doesn't want Ensure. She wants soup. She wants to feed it to herself. She leans forward a bit and feels the steam soft on her face. She breathes it in and it warms and moistens the inside of her nose. Slowly--her hand shakes--she dips the spoon into the soup. Skims the surface. Just the broth first. She sees her arm is so thin, watches her shaking hand move toward her mouth. She has planned for this, though. She has taken a very small spoonful so she won't shake everything off before it gets to her. And she has done it. She has raised the spoon to her lips. She blows on it a bit, then sips the soup into her mouth, feeling its heat, tasting its salt. She holds it there, testing it in different places on her tongue as she lowers her spoon. Then she swallows, rests her head back, closes her eyes and smiles. She has an entire bowl of this soup.

As they eat, Pat talks about how she knows Ed from the Safeway pharmacy where she works, how they got to talking about Ginny's illness because of the prescriptions he was having filled. She is finished long before Ginny, but doesn't offer to help her along, just keeps talking of this and that. And when she can eat no more soup, Ginny tucks her spoon beside her bowl and continues to listen, as if she were at a friend's kitchen table. As if she had just stopped by for a visit. As if things were still the same.

Ginny must have drifted again. When she opens her eyes, Pat is gone. The bed tray is removed, she is covered with her quilt. The afternoon light has shifted, and the shadows are longer. She hears the television now. Ed must be home. Her pills. She turns her head

and sees that the water pitcher is full. Condensation has run down the sides and puddled on the plate beneath. Ginny works herself onto her side, reaches toward the pitcher. Her hand settles on its cool metal handle. She closes her fingers, tries to lift it, hopes to pour herself a glass of water. She feels a slight tensing of her bicep, a soreness in her wrist. The pitcher doesn't move. She lets go, and as she does, she sees a basin on the floor, the basin from her bath. Pat must have forgotten to take it away after lunch. The water in it is murky and brown. She touches her arm, feels its unfamiliar softness. She thinks about the look on Pat's face when she first came to her bedside. She thinks about her wadding the sheets so quickly. And she knows.

It is twilight now. She has been watching the sunset play on the wallpaper. There is a rectangle over the dresser that is sharp, bright. The colors are those of the paper when it was new, red cabbage roses on a golden background, trails of green vines. She chose this paper years ago when she and Ed first moved into this house. Over the years, she thought about replacing it, but never could find anything she liked as much. Now this rectangle is all that remains of what she remembers. The rest is faded, the colors no longer true. She wants to cover it, to protect it, to keep it like it was. The mirror is just across the room, in the closet, but she can't get over to it. She can't put the mirror back. She knows that. She knows there's nothing to be done.

