

## The Things That Remain

The dollar store kite with the eagle pattern, soared high enough in the sky to be almost beyond recognition. The wind at Green River Park was cooperative and Tom easily guided the bird back and forth until all that was needed was a taut line. He then crouched down and passed the line to his three-year-old son Julian, helping him maintain the tension. Julian held the line with both hands, his eyes on the kite. Maggie, sitting in one half of a gray mesh side-by-side lawn chair, took pleasure in the moment.

Two days later, Tom was dead. Five days after that, the funeral.

Maggie, and her son Julian, walked slowly down the center aisle of the small rural church. The autumn coloured carpet cushioned their steps. Maggie's sense was that the church was more full than empty but her eyes were focused straight ahead as if reading the large wooden letters above the choir loft. The words read *Peace Be With You* but Maggie didn't see them. All of her concentration was needed just to make it to their reserved places in the front row.

It was her first time inside this church. She had seen the outside of the white, weathered clapboard structure last year, when Tom drove her around Black Creek to show her his childhood which centered around the church, high school, baseball diamond and his family home. This should have taken fifteen minutes but the stories Tom told made the tour last for hours. His connection to his hometown led to Maggie decision to have the funeral here, even though they had lived in Port Alberni for four years and that was the only time he had taken her there.

"I welcome you all here on this sad morning" the minister began. "Let us pray".

At Maggie's feet, the light fell awkwardly through the stained glass, striking the floor as a frozen, fragmented kaleidoscope. This distorted image bore little resemblance to the Jonah story portrayed in the window, but it was bright enough to keep young Julian's mind at bay for the moment, as he let the colours play on the back of his hand. Another minute and his favorite car, a '57 Chevy Hot Wheels Special that his father had bought, to pacify a frantic outburst at the weekly swap meet, would be racing along the top edge of the well-worn pew, much to the distraction of most of those seated behind him. Tom, lying still for once, in his next-to-final resting place did not seem to mind the minor commotion surrounding the actions of his only son.

Maggie's mind was also not connecting with the words of the minister. Her mind was reviewing, and constantly second-guessing, the smorgasbord of choices she had made in the days following Tom's death. To bury or burn, open coffin or memorial service. These were not things you discussed casually, or even seriously, over morning coffee. At least not when you were twenty-three.

Her chief concern at the moment was the clothes she had chosen for Tom to wear. It was the charcoal gray three-piece tailor-made suit he had ordered for their wedding. He had spent at least three weeks fussing over whether he would actually spend that kind of money. In the end it wasn't the money that was the issue, it was his vanity. He had to have a vest with a lapel, because he thought it looked cool. He had seen someone wearing it in *Chariots of Fire* and it took over fifteen agonizing minutes to explain the concept to the Chinese tailor, who finally had to draw a sketch so that Tom would believe that he actually understood what was required. After all that, he only wore the handsome suit a

few times before it became a fixture in their closet, gathering dust. It was the only suit he had, but she had wondered if Julian would want it some day.

Making choices, Maggie thought, was preferable to making plans. Choices meant options, making plans meant thinking ahead. There was no thinking ahead. Maggie's plans, along with her home and security, had drowned with Tom.

Yesterday, at the funeral home, her present reality was making itself known. Maggie had dropped Julian at the sitters and arrived an hour before the open viewing. She had not seen Tom since meeting with the doctor at the hospital morgue three days earlier. There, when asked to confirm his identity, her watery eyes had scanned his puffy face and his soft and shiny remains, then she nodded twice, bit her lip and was gone. She regretted leaving the hospital so quickly. After seeing Tom in the coffin, looking wax-like but more real, she wanted to remember him differently. Green River Park would be the cut-off point for her memory of Tom.

The public viewing had been hell. There were too many people, with the constant buzz of whispering and the muted shuffle of trying to stay quiet. The pastor dealt with the ones she didn't know. The ones she had some association with, came with all the wrong words. Comments like *Don't worry, you'll be all right; You poor thing, we're thinking of you; He was sooo young; If you need something just call.* Mark, Tom's childhood friend, was the only one who asked what she did that morning and how she was coping.

At home later that night, reality and grief pounded on Maggie like waves on the Tofino coast. Relentless. Battering. Pulling. Churning. Finally retreating as sleep covered her. Then waves again. Then sleep.

*A time to be born and a time to die.* The minister's words jolted Maggie back to the current moment with the sudden shock of someone waking from a near fatal dream. She was sure the snap of her head did not go unnoticed, although on casting a backwards glance it seemed that others were also wading in their own stream of recent memories and personal regrets.

Maggie's memory wandered again, not unlike Julian's backyard adventures where his path would avoid the newly strung tire swing and construction style sandbox that Tom had built and instead with a purpose of his own, move toward last summer's deserted and swaying wasp nest or to the corner of their house where water, dripping through the slightly separated drainpipe, was slaloming down the rough cut glass stucco before it dissipated into drops too small to see. Thoughts moved from her childhood to her grocery list to first meeting Tom to how she would pay for the coffin. As her mind came to a rest, Maggie's thoughts were neither organized nor playful. They stopped where they always stopped when her eyes exploded in tears. Tom was dead, what now?

God would take him when he had done enough damage was how Tom liked to put it. It was not that he didn't want to live. His concern was his image. He preferred to die in mid-life when a funeral meant something – unexamined accomplishments, lost potential and a larger than life persona to be buried with. His fear was to die too late. Unknown. Unwanted.

As Maggie saw it, someone had to die first. This was one way out. It is rare that death doesn't do us part, whether we stay together or not, as she had discovered. In Tom's case, there would be no more damage done.

In reality there was no damage. Nothing visible. Tom was polite, even gentle at times. When his anger showed, it was directed inward, fighting demons that never quite surfaced, berating himself for some failing he could not name. Not that naming it would have helped. He constantly gnawed at this feeling trying to set himself free, but it stood firm, adding another failing to his list. He saw his life as a series of non-accomplishments. Maggie, however, in spite of Tom's moods, had seen their life as a series of minor milestones. She was not looking for any big achievement. She was moving one step at a time to somewhere secure. Somewhere she could call home.

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In their townhouse kitchen, less than a week ago, waiting for Tom, she had kept Julian at bay, alternately feeding him raw sausage shaped carrots and leftover mashed potatoes, and for the sake of protein, chicken mush. The unattended boneless pork chops could be zapped if Tom took much longer. The remains would be ground up for Julian's next meal. Her emotions cycled through wasted-meal frustration, where-is-he anxiety and the constant need of tired, hungry child. She teetered. Hoping he had gone fishing, fearing for his safety. Fearing he'd gone to the Anchor and Whale, hoping he'd stay until they paid for a cab home.

Maggie lifted Julian out of his booster seat and stood him softly on the floor. He wiped his hands on his pants before she had a chance to clean them and started playing with his toy cars on the road map rug under the window. The amusement of lining up the cars and making engine noises were enough to give Maggie time to clean up.

As she finished, Julian wandered over to the toy box kept in the corner for his afternoon naps and pre-bedtime rituals. He called for his mother. Their nightly unwind

was beginning. Julian would start with a plastic 10-piece train puzzle that he completed easily. Each shape fit into its own spot. When he was done he would hold the frame of the puzzle with both hands and swing it upward and then come to an abrupt stop half way and say 'start again' as the pieces flew in the air landing all around him. Tom had taught him this.

Depending on the evening schedule, they would let him play until he tired of the puzzle game. His next move would be either to ask for a book or snuggle with the plush bear in the corner, an indication that it was to be straight to bed. If he went on too long on his own they would say 'last time' and bring him a book. Either way he was usually asleep by seven. That day he chooses the bear.

Maggie sat on the frayed blue cotton couch like it was a chaise lounge, with her legs across the cushions and her back against the armrest. Her right arm was bent at the elbow and her hand cradled her head. *Where was Tom?* That was the question that swam in her brain.

He had left with his gear other times and ended up at the pub. Or sometimes he just drove around; aimlessly it seemed, with no particular destination. He would traverse a newly plowed logging road, visit old haunts two towns over, or circle the town for an hour or more. He always ended up back home and though she asked he could never tell her what was chasing him.

Reflecting again on the day's events, nothing stuck out. She could see no trigger. No logical start to the illogical conclusion. No phone call, no town event, no reminder of the past, no conflict between them. Not a specific one.

They had their discussions. She wanted to buy a house. Put down roots. Or perhaps move. Get off the island. Get to a bigger town. Give Julian some advantages. Tom preferred the island. Close to his hometown. His roots. Even with a mill job, on and off as it was. Work some days. Home others. Or fishing.

Even so, their home was taking shape.

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As her eyes unglazed, Maggie realized that Tom's childhood friend Mark Friesen was upfront singing. He was the only Black Creek guy Tom kept in contact with since Tom's family moved and even after he came back. Mark was the pastor's son and even though he didn't attend the church anymore, he had offered to sing a song at the funeral. He was singing *Precious Memories* and her ears just caught the song at second verse:

*Precious father loving mother*

*Glide across the lonely years*

*And old home scenes of my childhood*

*In fond memories appears*

She let the rest of the song spill through her eyes silently hoping that Tom was all right. Julian, tired of his own antics and the long speech from the front, had nestled in beside her, soothed by the music. Maggie put her arm around him to comfort herself and to gently reassure him of their connection. She thought she would ask Mark about his memories of Tom's childhood.

The funeral director and his accomplice, solemn and mechanical, performed their next duty. Maggie had wanted to see who had come. They rolled the casket to the center

of the front of the church, stood Tom's picture on the rear section and propped open the front half. The ushers lead those who could take it, to file by and view the body.

Some walked by, some looked down, some made eye contact with her or Tom's parents. Once the church was cleared, the family had their time. Tom's mother, gently touched his face with her gloved hand and bent over and kissed both his cheeks, while his father had his hand in the small of her back. He then embraced her and led her out as she used his weight to propel them forward.

Now it was Maggie's turn. The funeral pair waited silently at the rear of the church, as if protecting their body. Maggie roused Julian and after standing, with a half lift/half jump he was firmly seated on her hip with arms around her neck, legs straddling her waist and her arm unnecessarily keeping him in place. They approached the body. Tom looked good. The funeral directors had earned their pay. But she would give anything to have him back. Moods and all.

Her thoughts were lost, floating like balloons that she couldn't quite grab. As they disappeared she felt herself on the edge of a precipice with her eyes closed. A little wind could blow her away. She squeezed Julian tightly to keep from catching a glimpse of the chasm she saw opening ahead of her. His painful howl brought her back to solid ground. Eyes open, a final glance and her head cleared by Julian's shriek, she made her way out of the church with a nod to the business suited gargoyles at the back. On the way out, Julian asked where his father's legs were.

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*Julian, what will you remember?* Maggie thought. Not much she reasoned, but she was sure it would have a lasting effect regardless.



Her own memory took her back to being six. A time when the ministry removed her from her mother's care. There had been no screaming on her mother's part, just a lot of crying, a commitment to stay in touch and a quiet resignation. Maggie was promised a family that would ensure she was fed and bathed regularly and that she could start school in the fall. Mom would do rehab and be back to get her soon.

Maggie had fond memories of this new home. It had seemed quieter and warmer, there was room to explore and there weren't so many late night visitors. She was in the care of an older woman who liked to be called Mama Jane. She was around all the time, which made being away from Mom bearable.

What Maggie now regarded as one of the securest and happiest periods of her childhood, came to an abrupt end when her mother and the social worker came to pick her up two months into grade one. This time there was screaming on her part and crying on both parts, as she returned to her home.

Within a year she was back in care, her mother deciding she needed to find herself alone, but Mama Jane had moved to Vancouver to look after her grandkids and Maggie ended up cycling through a series of homes that either had too little discipline or too much control and none which compared to her first experience.

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As the limo headed towards the gravesite, Maggie wondered about the future. Not tomorrow or this coming week but after that and beyond. What were her options? Unlike three years ago, she was now a widow with an active child. Where could you go, or do you even stay in Port Alberni? Find a job. Can you pay the rent? What about Julian?

Once again her mind raced like a twister with no place to land. Her home had been blown apart. Closing her eyes didn't help and Julian was hungry. She pulled out a bag of Cheerio's, which worked in most situations.

It was six long miles to the graveyard. The vehicle turned into a driveway, lined with oak trees whose branches were intertwined as if playing red rover, red rover, and came to a stop at a reserved spot in a circular parking lot in the middle of the cemetery. As her door opened, Maggie straightened her outfit and using her hand to brush his hair, made sure that Julian looked presentable.

The ground was damp and Julian, catching the somberness of the moment stayed at her side. The sun hanging high and hot, partially obscured by a lone, long narrow shroud, alternately cast shadows and shade depending on the lateral movement. The plot was in the RC corner of the cemetery known for its high stones and crosses and even the odd pair of bronze angels standing guard. The best you could have now was a flat stone, a maintenance and cost saving issue. As was the plot. She got a deal because the previous owner had moved away 'before her time', as the cemetery salesman joked, and would not need this particular plot.

As everyone gathered around, the minister talked of paying last respects and saying goodbyes, prayed for comfort and strength for Maggie and Julian, quoted the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and dismissed them with a blessing.

They were about to leave when Tom's mother grabbed the bouquet of roses on top of the coffin and insisted that Tom be lowered into the place prepared for him. She did not want him high and dry, held aloft by the straps over a gaping hole. She had to know he was safely buried. As they lowered the casket, she handed out the roses, first to

Maggie and Julian and then to various bystanders. Once Tom was at rest, she grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it down, followed by the rose. Everyone followed suit, except Julian, who just kicked at the dirt and kept the rose in his fist.

Within a veil of hushed tones, the gathered ones made their way to their vehicles. As she bent to follow Julian into the limousine, Maggie bumped her head. This was enough to release her emotions again. The door closed behind her as she melted into the seat. Her neck descended into her shoulders and then her head fell forward being caught by her hands. Her body shook and silently the tears pooled in her palms and made their way down her wrists. It was over. And what now.

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As her eyes dried, Maggie thought back. She and Tom had met at night school, both reclaiming their high school equivalency. Black, stub-nosed cowboy boots, with a double-helix white thread trim, were the first thing she noticed. Glancing sideways her eye scoped only a head of black, shoulder-length hair as she slid into her seat, one row over and one down from the newcomer. That was her first encounter. Thinking back, it struck her as odd that she couldn't recall ever seeing those boots again.

For Tom, it was another week before he took any notice of her. It was in a chemistry class that their watery eyes met, just after their bodies collided, as they both lunged for the classroom door attempting to escape the heat of the failed magnesium and dry-ice experiment. Once safely outside, they began to talk.

She had teased him about his chivalry, saying it was supposed to be women and children first. His reply was that we lived in an age of equality and besides he was just

rushing to hold the door open so everyone could get out safely. That was enough to break the ice.

Tom thought she should still be in high school. She explained that she'd dropped out at sixteen, left her eighth foster home, moved here from Port Hardy and started working for a woman who owned the local craft store. Her social worker had helped her find a place to live and apply for some government assistance. She was saving her money and wanted to move to Vancouver, with the thought that getting her diploma would make it easier to get a job there. She had also considered a five-month career college, if she could save enough.

Maggie asked if he was a cowboy. He just shook his head and laughed. He'd bought the boots in Vancouver, along with a bolo tie because a former girlfriend had convinced him to take line-dancing lessons. But he had worked on a small ranch near Kamloops, as well as at a mill in the area. His time in Vancouver was short lived. Too busy. Too impersonal. He'd come home to the island, and although he grew up in Black Creek, he'd settled in Port Alberni and got a job at the mill.

The relationship started slowly enough. They would meet before class to compare homework. Afterwards for coffee. Then the odd weekend to work on an assignment. By the time they had their diplomas, they were living together. Three months later she was pregnant.

The potential responsibility brought focus and seemed to strengthen Tom. Brought out his serious side. He pushed for marriage. They used her college savings to buy a suit and a dress and the rest to furnish the baby room.

The wedding was at an outdoor chapel in the park. Just enough participants to make it legal. Tom's friend Mark, the owner of the craft store and a JP. And of course a photographer. Tom insisted on pictures as strongly as he did on having no guests at the wedding. He said this was their business and no one else's.

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Maggie and Julian were not the first to arrive back at the church. There were a few people there who had stayed behind to set the tables or who were not fond of graveside services. She led Julian to the washroom, helped him wash his hands and then they took a seat at the reserved table next to the mike. Tom's parents arrived five minutes later but it took them another fifteen minutes to get to the table because of the welcomes they were receiving.

"I didn't see you at the service until the very end", Maggie remarked. "I didn't think you'd made it".

"With the wind canceling last night's ferry, I didn't think we would either", Tom's father explained. "We're just glad we did."

Tom's mother offered Julian a treat and he gladly circled the table to occupy her lap and share a box of raisins. The conversation continued in a general way, amid constant interruptions from congregation members wishing to greet Tom's parents and offer their condolences to them and then to Maggie as well. It was clear this had been a very tight, caring community.

Maggie had debated whether to have the funeral in the Black Creek church or just a simple memorial service at the funeral home. Mark had encouraged, almost insisted that she choose the church. He said it was a good group and most of Tom's life had been

spent there. When she called Tom's parents to let them know, they were supportive to have the funeral in a church but were a bit reserved, as they hadn't been back to Black Creek since they left.

In the end the decision to have Tom returned to Black Creek for burial was obvious to Maggie. He always claimed it made him what he was. His parents didn't get it. They had moved to Kelowna eight years ago and left nothing behind other than a failed franchise operation and a number of unpaid bills.

Tom's contact with his parents had been minimal and therefore so had hers. He had carried their disapproval over his lack of academic success like a weight but she had not sensed that they were over critical. Something must have changed. They appeared to give Tom his space, his time to work things out and yet somehow he took that as rejection. Maggie had also noticed how he took offence at small issues that she didn't give a second thought to. Like the time she'd explained the correct placement of the knife and fork at the dinner table and he hadn't set the table for a week.

The conversation in the church basement continued to ebb and flow, as the guests finished their buns and cheese. Coffee was being poured and plates of squares were brought around. Tom's father asked about her plans. What she would do now?

"Tom's job had a small insurance policy but I don't think I can afford our place on my own. I was thinking of upgrading my education. Perhaps going to a career college. Maybe in Vancouver", Maggie said, surprising even herself. These weren't complete thoughts or something she'd even considered seriously and yet they came spilling out. A move like that would mean starting over completely. On her own. With Julian.

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Leaving Black Creek in the summer before his high school graduation year turned Tom's life upside down. He had just got his driver's license and started a job as a painter's helper. Mark and he spent their Saturday spare time riding their dirt bikes and weekend evenings were spent at the beach with the church youth group. The rest of the time they hung around town. Once in while, if he could borrow his father's pickup, Mark and he would head up to Campbell River to check out the record store.

Once in Kelowna, things just didn't fit. The church his parents joined was a little to swinging and swaying for his taste and at school he was seen as a bit of hick. He tried to maintain his Black Creek connection by going back at Thanksgiving to stay with Mark and his parents but the house was filled with the air of tension and Mark's rebellion and so he was just as glad to get back. He and Mark kept in touch by phone.

Tom's parents spent their time trying to recover and rebuild their lives, his grades slipped and he spent more time walking the streets, usually ending up pool hall in the north side of town. In the end, over the objections of his parents, he dropped his last semester of school and headed for Kamloops to look for work with one of the pool players.

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With dessert almost done and the table noise reaching full crescendo, Mark went to the mike and slowly the chatter subsided until all that was heard was mild clinking of dishes in the kitchen. He welcomed them, his voice slipping a bit and then led them in the singing of *How Great Thou Art*. This hadn't been in on the agenda but he needed a few minutes to compose himself.

Maggie had struggles with the whole concept of having a program or time of reflection after the meal. She hadn't been to a funeral before. Mark had assured her it was commonplace in their church, that he would emcee it and besides he at least wanted to get up and say something so it wouldn't be a total blank time.

"Hearing of Tom's death was the hardest day of my life," Mark began. "Second only to the day that he and his family moved away. I was glad when he moved back to the island and even happier to stand up for him at his wedding. He and his parents were like a second family to me."

Mark went on to relate a story of taking a vacation with Tom and his parents to Vancouver and how he and Tom had been caught out on a sand barge when they hadn't noticed the tide come in around them. They had to be rescued by the lifeguard dingy. Tom's parents, rather than scolding them had taken them out for ice cream to celebrate their safety. This had cemented his and Tom's friendship. Mark offered to be there for Maggie and Julian should they need anything and then sat down. He couldn't go on.

The mike sat open for a bit, then one of Tom's old Sunday School teachers got up and said that Tom had always been a good, polite child and had sometimes brought her flowers. She was glad to see his parents but was sorry it was under these circumstances.

Another peer of Tom's parents got up to say that his child had been a friend of Tom's and had moved away after high school. Then the speaker spent the next ten minutes talking about his own son. Maggie, in a daze and only half listening, couldn't see the point of this and wondered how long this would go on.

A few others Tom's age, ones that hadn't moved away, got up to tell stories. They told of times of humour, camaraderie and adventure. Beer parties at the gravel pit, ski



trips to Mt. Washington and questioning by the police for lighting firecrackers at an inappropriate time and place. This got Maggie's attention. She was piecing together a picture of Tom that hadn't been complete. She got a sense of what he had missed when he left. So different than her life, carried on the shoulders of the state, being nourished by paid non-attachment.

As the warmth of the stories, approached her reality, a panic set in. What would she do? A cold loneliness filled her stomach. She looked at Julian. He had fallen asleep in Tom's mothers lap. She caught Maggie's eye and smiled.

Maggie leant over and whispered, "How long are you staying?"

Maintaining the same tone, she answered, "We've just booked the one night here. We thought we'd see if you wanted us to stay and help or whether you wanted to come see us for a bit."

Mark motioned for his father to get up and bring things to a close. He glanced at Maggie to see if she was willing to get up. She hadn't committed earlier. She gave a slight nod and made her way to the mike.

Clasping her hands tightly together, she thanked them for coming and said that she had gotten to know Tom better through this and was glad that she at least had a piece of Tom to take with her where ever she went. That was all she could manage, so she quickly sat down.

The minister then offered the support of the congregation, read a benediction from the end of Second Thessalonians and asked them all to stand.

They all rose as a group to sing a final song. The singing was reserved, except for those few church regulars who put their voices to good use in an attempt to add some

dignity to the proceedings. Maggie realized, midway through Amazing Grace, that she had been singing along, absentmindedly.

It would have amused Tom to observe this makeshift congregation, gathered to see him off, making harmony in a way they never would have, or could have, while he walked among them. Now all that walked among them was Julian. The third verse ended optimistically Maggie thought, promising that grace would lead them home.