

LAST RESPECTS by Trevor Denyer

John sat in his car in the middle of the town square. As the mists of evening rose, the temperature dropped. He felt the mist as it touched him through the open window. He pulled his coat tighter, unwilling to reject the icy dampness.

"You've come back." Heather sat next to him in the car, her form solidifying out of the mist.

"I had to. You knew I would." John took her in his arms. They kissed. He felt the stirring of a buried passion. "Come to the house," she said.

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It stood at the edge of town - a dark, looming fortress of a place. Its chimney stacks stretched into the night, trying to touch heaven.

John parked the car. Heather took his hand. She led him into the building. When he entered the musty lounge, hung with dusty tapestries and dark canvasses, the others rose to greet him.

Patrick hugged him with well muscled arms. John felt cold breath against his cheek. The scent of something over-ripe filled his nostrils.

"It's good to see you again," Patrick said. "It's been a long year."

The others greeted him. He shivered at their touch, but only for a moment.

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In the morning they took him to the mountain. Rising above the town, its summit lost in clouds, it challenged him - an old enemy. He began to climb. The others stayed below, gathered together like mourners at a funeral.

John felt perspiration beading on his forehead as the exertion took its toll. He rested on a ridge, allowing his heart to calm. It pounded in his chest, the drumbeat rhythms metalling his saliva.

Low cloud had greyed out the town. He searched for his friends, but could not see them. Loneliness clawed at his wandering thoughts. He stood up, feeling the stiffness in his joints, and continued to climb.

At last he reached the place - a rocky outcrop where the burden of clouds dragged away the light. He sat down, breathing the silence in.

Memories of falling, tumbling, crashing to earth brought tears to his eyes. He saw again the bodies, motionless like broken dolls strewn around the base of the mountain. Heather lay across the rock, her limbs twisted obscenely; her blood staining the stones.

John had waited out the months, counting each day until he could return and be with his friends again. He could not understand why he had survived.

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Until now he had been unable to accept that he should carry on living. It had been a year since the accident, and throughout that time he had been living in a half world, sensing their presence, just beyond sight. They had called him back here.

He stood on the edge. One more step would take him to them. He hesitated. Something was holding him back. He slumped to the ground and wept away the uncertainty.

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Lying in bed with Heather, John almost lost her. She began to break up and dissolve into the air. He hugged her until she became solid again.

He remembered the time, an age ago, when they had been happy. He tried to recall the scents of her body, the warmth of her skin against his. John felt tears fill his eyes, blurring Heather's image. He wondered for a moment whether her being here with him was wishful thinking. It was a dream of a reality that he could no longer have.

"I don't want to lose you," he whispered, knowing that the choice had already been made.

"Don't be silly, John. Nothing lasts forever, my love."

She wiped the dampness from his cheeks.

"I should have died on the mountain."

"It wasn't meant to be. You must wait until your time comes."

He knew she was right. He ached for her. If only things could be the way they had been before the accident. He wanted to make her whole again. Squeezing his eyes closed, he willed her back to life.

John knew that it was impossible. The miracle had happened and he was with her now. That was as far as unreality could take them.

They made love, clinging together in the darkness. In the silence of the room, the shadows of their unborn children moved. Reality had shifted, and two worlds met in a small town at the edge of time.

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The graves were huddled together in a shady corner of the churchyard. His friends waited by the lych gate. He stood over the graves, feeling the stirring of a breeze tugging at his hair and hinting at Spring. The clouds were thinner today and a pale smear of sunlight brought colour to the town. The promise of life was all around him, even in the churchyard.

"I want to come with you," he said to the headstones. "Why didn't you take me as well?"

John knew the answer now. His mind was calmer, and these few words were said out of loyalty to his dead friends. The ghosts of the mountain had been exorcised.

When he left the place, they'd gone. He regretted not having said goodbye.

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When he returned to his car he found a dog-eared photograph on the passenger seat. They were all there, including himself, arm in arm and smiling. That had been their last time together before the climb to oblivion.

As he drove away, he felt chill breath against his cheek. Heather whispered in his ear one last time:

"Goodbye, my love - until forever."

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