

Reunion

by Nick Hamilton

'You've been gone a long time', she said, but her words conveyed no trace of accusation or rancour; her voice was light and welcoming. She was standing behind the gate resting her brown forearms on the top rail; relaxed and cool with a slight smile on her face and her black curls cascading down the sides of her long dark face. Her eyelashes flicked up and down as she spoke and her speech was vibrant and clear; a young woman in her prime.

He walked the last few steps to the gate with some difficulty, leaning heavily on his stick. As he touched the rail he looked up at the dark brooding crag that rose behind the sweep of gorse in front of him. He sighed heavily, the lines that stretched away from his eyes seemed to pulse and deepen and he lowered his gaze to her arms, noticing her long slender fingers. She looked tenderly down on his curly white hair and touched it gently with one hand.

'It's good to be back', he said as he pushed through the gate she had pulled open for him and they started up the track. It wound through the whin and sparse rowan trees towards the scree and boulders that marked the end of the in-bye and the start of the rough grazing land.

She set in beside him and chatted as if he had never been away. The steadily climbing path wore heavily on him and his breathing was laboured and shallow.

As he rested on a rock he stared at the ground and idly moved the stones about with the tip of his stick. The scent of gorse in the afternoon sunshine was heavy in the air, oily and aromatic.

'I had to go; you know that don't you. I couldn't stay afterwards, it was just too difficult'.

'You don't have anything to apologise for Douglas, I know you had to go. I'm glad you've come back though, I've been waiting a long time'.

After a little more walking he sat heavily down on a boulder at the foot of the cliff. Tears ran down his face and he lowered his head to hide his hurt.

'Oh Mairi, what a waste; I should so like to tell you everything; but I've so little time and so much I want to say to you'.

'Tell me where you went afterwards. That's a good place to start'.

'I didn't go anywhere for months afterwards. The police kept asking questions and then there was the sheriff, the enquiry and everything. It was nearly a year before I could go away without it looking as if I was running away'.

'Did you feel like you were running away', she asked gently.

'Of course I did', he said fiercely, raising his head and looking into her steady brown eyes, 'I've never stopped running away. I had a family in Canada for a while but when the children grew up I didn't want to stay any more and went off again. I couldn't get you out of my mind'.

'I'm sorry about your family but I'm pleased to think that you couldn't forget me' The anger in him subsided as quickly as it had risen leaving a pain that he had endured many times over the years but heightened and more severe than he had ever felt before. He gazed at her sitting beside him, calm and serene.

She spoke again. 'I've been thinking about you all this time; just waiting for you to come back'. Her intensity cut him deeply and he lowered his gaze again.

'But where have you been waiting? I don't understand. I know you're here and we're talking to each other but there seems to be something wrong about it'

'Oh, I've been climbing and walking most of the time. I've never gone very far away because I wanted to be here when you came back'.

'But how did you know I would come back?'

'You had to. It ended here the first time so it would have to end here finally for both of us'.

'Mairi, Am I going to die here?'

'Yes of course you are; that's why you've come back'.

He looked away and tried to get his thought into order but his gaze soon returned to her face and his ears could hear nothing except her soft voice. She was exactly as he remembered her when they last climbed together and he couldn't think of anything else but her and then.

'What about your family? Have you been seeing them?' he said eventually, more to break the spell than for any real interest in people he'd hardly known.

'Yes, I see them around occasionally but they don't notice me and I don't want to trouble them. I haven't seen my Dad or Mum for a long time though. Its easy to lose track of time you know'.

After a few moments silence she said quietly, 'Just now you said you had so much to tell me, but you've hardly told me anything'.

'I'm sorry for what happened and I'm sorry we didn't spend our lives together. That's all I really want to say. That's all that really matters'.

'Oh Douglas, we've got plenty of time together now. A lifetime really'.

'Lets go climbing' she said suddenly after a pause.

He jumped up 'OK, where shall we go?'

'I think we'd better finish what we started, don't you.'

'Of course, but this time we'll finish it properly; you know, both of us finish it. Not like the last time'.

They bounded up the scree towards the cliff, two heads of black curls flashing in the sunlight and their laughter echoing back from the rock face.

The old man lay back in the soft grass; the lines of torment that had shaped his features for most of his life had faded, dissipated. He closed his eyes.

'Well Mairi, I'm back.'