

The Rememberer

By Oona McOuat
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Chapter 1

The old woman sat at her hearth, jagged flames reflected in sapphire eyes that were still and unblinking. Slowly, she moved one work-worn hand in a spiral shape, mumbling under her breath. Night after night she had come here, willing the magic to be with her before it was too late. There was just one moon cycle left now and the pattern was not yet in place. Her patience was waning and her faith, once unyielding, was giving way to despair. She reached into a willow basket of herbs and tossed some onto the fire. As the cottage filled with the pungent smoke of sage, lavender and cedar, her voice gained strength and power and her muttering became an evocation.

“Grandmothers, Ancient Ones, Keepers of the Sacred Ways, I seek your vision. My life on Earth is near complete and yet so much remains undone. The thread I weave must not be broken. Guide me now, oh Holy Ones. Reveal to me my path...”

The smoke began to swirl around the room in the same spiral shape she made with her hand. It gained momentum, propelled by memory and time. It lifted her long, white hair from the nape of her neck and brushed her sunken cheek with the tip of a raven’s wing. As she gazed unbrokenly into the fire, the flames began to waver and hiss, changing colour and shape, revealing a network of translucent threads that became a thatched house surrounded by peach trees and roses. A woman sat by its open window, humming and weaving a tapestry of silk. Suddenly, the flames

became jerky and agitated, snapping and spitting out sparks and there were arrows, silver swords, and men on horseback. There was blood. The images faded until only the unfinished tapestry remained.

The old woman leaned forward to scrutinize the weaving. It resembled an open book with a smooth cowhide cover. A sudden breeze gusted through her room; the fire stirred and the book's empty pages began to flutter. They sighed contentedly, as if revelling in their movement and then they turned, flipping faster and faster, filling with images as they went. The old woman squinted and saw a girl, a woman really, with chestnut hair and woeful eyes walking through verdant countryside, her back nearly bent by the bulging pack she carried. The page lifted and turned to reveal a strip of blue-grey ocean and a shrouded island with a towering hemlock anchored in its midst. The next page flipped open, faster and more frantically than the last, and there was a man cradling a baby against his naked chest. Mist curled towards them like tendrils of fog or whale's breath rising out of the sea. The old woman saw that it was smoke, smoke from a thousand fires that had sprung up all at once - angry, vindictive fires that crackled and roared, blackening and curling the book's creamy pages.

Outside the cottage window an owl shrieked, interrupting the old woman's trance. She jumped, startled for a moment by the rapidly billowing flames, and then reached for her bucket and dipper and doused the fire with shaking hands.

In the light of the smouldering embers, the old woman saw something flutter through the air and land at her feet. She stooped in her seat to pick it up, her gnarled fingers combing the ground until they found an owl feather with a polished spine.

"Let this be your quill," the owl called. "But make haste, my friend, for time is fleeting. You have just until the waxing moon to complete this, your final task."

A billow of acrid smoke rose from the dying fire and the old woman coughed, hugging the

feather to her chest, the rhythm of the owl's retreating wings meeting the ragged beating of her heart.

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In the days before the war began, Emma lumbered up the meandering country lane that ran from the village to the tiny hillside pub, oblivious to the ripe and golden beauty that surrounded her.

"I feel like a human pack horse," she grumbled as she stopped to adjust her backpack and wipe the sweat from her brow. To her relief she saw a plain brown sign swinging in the wind just over the rise. That had to be it. So far there'd been nothing but houses and trees along this steep slope. She squinted and made out the words "Teac Darrah" and began to perspire anew, this time from nerves. What if the rental didn't work out? She needed somewhere to sleep that night and the thought of lugging her pack around in search of a bed was highly unappealing. She tugged at her shirt that was riding up around her waist and hoped she looked presentable. As she pulled open the pub's worn door, she was greeted by a rush of warmth and comfort. The room was empty, but welcoming, the kind of place you could come to at the end of a hard day and feel at home. She slid her pack to the floor with a self-conscious thump and noticed a smooth-faced man behind the bar watching her with twinkling eyes.

"'Tis a long road ye have travelled, I take it," he called out in a clear voice. "Ye must have worked up a devil of a thirst." He beckoned for her to come have a seat at the bar and put a pint of Guinness in front of her without her asking for it.

"Hi, I'm Emma, Emma Stone". She held out her hand awkwardly. She didn't know how things were done here. "I saw the sign for the cottage to rent and I'd like to take it."

"You'd want it just like that, would ye, without even taking a boo at it first? Well, then, seeing as ye are the first to ask, 'tis your to have. I am called Damian and I am the publican here." He

held her hand between his and gave it a warm squeeze.

Emma smiled to herself. Had he said he was a republican? Politics could get messy here in Ireland so she better keep her thoughts to herself.

“Pleased to meet you, Damian”

“The pleasure is mine. Now you best drink your Guinness before it gets cold,” he teased with a grin.

Emma turned slightly on her bar stool and took in her surroundings. She liked the simplicity of the room, its white plaster walls supported by dark wooden beams. Polished wood tables circled a roaring peat fire. She imagined herself sitting at one of them with a pot of herbal tea as she scribbled in her journal on a wet winter’s day. She turned back towards Damian and was startled by a large TV flashing behind him. Once again her palms grew sweaty as ghostly images of the recent disaster were splayed across the screen. Damian was wise to have his back to the set. She wished he’d turn the damn thing off.

Suddenly light-headed, she swayed slightly and grasped the oak bar table with clammy hands. Its solidity helped her shake off the sensation that she was sinking in a surreal sea, trapped in a dream gone awry.

“Miss?” the publican asked, concern written across his furrowing brow. “Will ye be all right then?”

“Yes, of course, thank you, I’m just a bit tired from my travels,” she answered hurriedly, gripping the pint glass with white knuckles, grimacing slightly as the first bitter sip of the dark beer reached her lips.

“Ah, ‘tis a taste to be acquired, that. Unless of course ye be Irish,” Damian quipped. “But what brings ye here to Donegal? We don’t get many visitors to these parts. To hear you speak, I take it

yer from America.”

“I am from Canada, actually,” she replied.

“Ah Canada! Lovely country that. But ‘tis a terrible time to be away from yer people, is it not? Would ye not be frightened in a place like this, so far from home all by yourself?”

The Irish had such strong ties to home and family, she could hardly tell him she had no home to speak of - no husband and no babies - just a sister and a couple of aging parents that would probably be better off without her if a massive war actually erupted. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Frightened?” she asked weakly. “Of what?”

“You know, frightened,” repeated Damian, nodding his head towards the television as he ran a fleshy hand through the scraggly hair that grazed his collar.

Fear had taken on a whole new dimension for Emma since she’d arrived in Ireland. When she’d first landed in Dublin last week, jet-lagged and culture shocked, the news was everywhere. There was no escaping the nightmare everyone now shared. Women wrapped in shapeless sweaters and men in tweed caps came up to her in the street, recognizing her as a visitor, telling her they had an uncle in Boston or a daughter in New York, saying how sorry they were for the tragedy that had befallen America.

The friendly Irish who’d offered their teary condolences took in her long brown hair, round rosy cheeks and slightly lost-looking demeanour and speculated she was a student on an extended holiday whose trip had coincided with calamity. But she wasn’t a kid - she was going to be forty this year and was desperate to get her chaotic life in order. She’d poured all her savings and put all her hope for a fresh start into this open-ended journey to Ireland and now everything felt screwy, unbalanced and unpredictable. It was making it hard to think straight. Wincing, she took another swig of Guinness. Her mind was racing. She’d originally planned to stay in Donegal for

a couple of weeks, get immersed in the Irish-speaking culture and then move on. But now she needed a safe place to roost, a place where she could hole away, ride out the storm and wait to see what happened.

She glanced at Damian. He was contemplatively rubbing at a mark that marred the burnished surface of the bar, patiently waiting for her to answer his question. There was something in the curve of his jaw and the breadth of his shoulders that spoke of goodness. She looked around the cozy pub. A quiet sense of order prevailed. Maybe she would be okay here.

“No, I don’t expect to be frightened,” she answered unswervingly.

“Very well, then,” he exclaimed, looking relieved. “If it’s peace and quiet ye seek, there’ll be plenty of it. The only struggles we’ll be havin’ hereabouts would be between unruly cows and farmers herdin’ them to pasture and a woman city born and bred attempting to light a fire from damp turf.”

Emma laughed. He certainly had her pegged.

“The rent is reasonable as rents go,” he continued with a smile, “and you’ll be finding the place rustic but comfortable. The furnishings are basic but they’ll do.” He eyed the bulging backpack she’d left by the door. “I imagine you’ll be wantin’ to settle in right away, then. As we’re already one week into September, this month I’ll only charge half rent. It’s been empty for a spell; so a few things must be readied to open it up. If I had someone to watch the pub I’d come and do it for ye.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure I can handle it.”

“Do you know what you’ll do, then? You’ll be turning on a switch over the fridge to get the electricity running. That is included in the rent so I expect you to be frugal. The water heater is in the bath. Pull on the string and ye shall have your hot water. The water for the house has to be opened first, of course. Outside by the big tree, 10 meters from the door, there is a locked spigot.

This here is the key for the spigot and this is the key for the door,” he handed her two worn skeleton keys. “Will you be having any questions, then?”

“I imagine there are pots and pans. Are there any blankets?” asked Emma.

“Of that I’m not sure,” said Damian stroking his clean-shaven chin thoughtfully. “You would do well to check up in the attic. I ken that no one’s been up there for ages. You’ll be needin’ a ladder to get up into the rafters. There’s one in the shed. Mind yourself on the way up, now. The door might need a ‘prying and then you’ll need a torch. Christ knows what all is stored there but if you see anything you can make use of, please do help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

“Now I take it you don’t have a car? You won’t want to be walkin’ any more than you need to. People here will give you a lift if you thumb.”

No vehicles passed as Emma lugged her pack up the rutted road. She passed a few weathered farmhouses and a serene half-mile of rock-walled pasture before arriving at a roughly plastered and whitewashed cottage that sat in solitude at the end of the lane. Its yard was wild and untended. Mounds of grass and weeds enfolded smooth, grey stones that turned into fences. A row of gangly trees, planted as windbreak no doubt, swayed to and fro, the wind in their silver leaves whistling a mournful melody.

“It’s a bit bleak,” she muttered as she jiggled one of the tarnished keys in the brass keyhole until it clicked and turned. Taking a deep breath, she pulled open the door. Ignoring the butterflies that skirted across her stomach, she entered the house that was going to be her home. The late morning sunlight poured through smoke-streaked windows. It danced across the room’s earthen walls as if the spirits of those who’d once lived there had come to say hello. For an instant, she was a child playing in her Nana’s root cellar, breathing in the scent of moist earth and wrinkled apples, glad to be away from the bright lights and brittle edges of the world upstairs.

“God this pack is heavy,” she groaned, her aching shoulders pulling her back into the present moment. She eased her bag off her back and onto a well-packed mud floor. How many skipping, pacing, shuffling feet had it taken to compact its smooth surface, she wondered, as she slowly turned in place, taking in the room around her. There was a fireplace, its opening smudged black from smoke. And it looked like there was fuel, thank God. Beside the hearth there was a large basket filled to brimming with oblong pieces of a dark, porous substance she presumed must be peat.

With a sigh she sank into a worn, green velvet easy chair, stirring up a cloud of dust. This place was going to need a good cleaning before she’d even consider bedding down for the night on the scary-looking mattress sprawled across the floor. She got up and tested it with her toe – it had lost its spring about a century ago. She wandered over to the kitchen, staring at the rusty stove and oven with dismay. Maybe tomorrow she could find some steel wool at the local shop and give them a good scrubbing. At least there were dishes, even if they were chipped. There was an open doorway to the right of the stove. She figured it was the bathroom and her heart grew lighter when she poked her nose inside and saw a white enamel claw-foot tub. Things were looking up, she thought, and then she found the linen closet crammed full of yellowing tablecloths, mould-marked sheets, and threadbare towels. There didn’t seem to be any blankets but she found a cotton sack full of rusting clothes pegs on the bottom shelf. Gingerly, she carried the musty contents of the closet outside and hung it on the sagging clothesline. She couldn’t help but smile as the sheets were lifted and filled, transformed by the wind into fat ghosts flopping in an unruly row.

The breeze felt good on her face, and after being inside the dank cottage the grassy circle of the yard seemed more inviting than it had at first glance. The trees and grass bent in the wind, as if bowing to welcome her, although the cows, her nearest neighbours, remained indifferent to her presence.

“Pleased to meet you,” she waved, causing them to look up momentarily from their grazing all at once. “Oh please, don't stop eating on my account. I'd love to stay and chat, but it seems today's the maid's day off so it's just me against the dirt. Unless of course, you want to help,” she said, meeting the bland gaze of the nearest cow, as it continued chewing its cud. “I didn't think so. I'll catch you later then,” called Emma, as she headed back inside to set up house.

“These look like they should be in a museum,” she muttered as she pulled a rag mop and an old milking bucket out from beside the fridge. Rolling up her sleeves, she went to turn on the faucet but nothing came out.

“Damn,” she cursed, heading for the door, “I should have turned the water on when I was outside in the first place.”

She found the antiquated spigot and stopped for a moment to watch the sun and shadows dancing across the trees' leaves before turning the rusty key and resignedly going back inside to scrub away at the grime. As she cleaned, her mind crept to thoughts of war - the Third World War. A war she doubted she would survive.

She had been flying over the Atlantic Ocean when it happened. Suspended between sea and darkened sky, she didn't feel the massive cry the planet made when the bombs were dropped; the earth's sensitive energy field scrambled as intense physical and psychic pain ripped across its surface. Down below, it passed like a shudder over those who were feeding their babies, watering their gardens or kissing their sleeping lovers' backs. A jolting frequency ran through them like an electric shock. Some thought it was a hawk shrieking as it dove for unsuspecting prey, others said it was an angel shouting a warning from above, others said it was the devil, chortling in glee. Only this was agreed upon: at 3:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, invisible planes poised for attack over unlikely, yet strategic, American targets, hovering like bloodthirsty eagles - all sharp beaks, stealth and talons. Thousands of innocent people died on that night when

terror was born, a night of burning flesh, swirling chaos and unprecedented panic. Meanwhile, Emma was tucked under the wing of a silver bird that carried her safely across the sea. She stirred restlessly in her sleep. When she awoke, the world was forever changed.

Just days later, a hundred explanations for the attacks surfaced and they pointed the finger of guilt in a multitude of directions. But the American government would choose one enemy only, would hold them responsible and relentlessly begin to pursue retribution, putting the whole planet on a path of war and mass destruction.

Emma shivered. She had been sweeping, dusting and mopping all afternoon. It was almost dusk and the cottage was growing chilly. She hated being cold at night. If only she'd brought her bulky polar guard sleeping bag on the trip instead of her old down bag that was losing its feathers. She doubted it would keep her warm.

"I'd better check the attic for blankets," she said, sighing at the thought of yet another task as she eyed the trap door in the ceiling. Like Damian said, it would have to be pried open. She rummaged through a drawer until she found a screwdriver, grabbed her flashlight and went out to the shed for the stepladder. Sticking her tools in the pocket of her fleece, she dragged the ladder inside and carefully mounted its wobbly rungs. After several minutes of vigorous poking and prodding, the door became loose and swung open, releasing a cloud of powdery grime. Emma sneezed, wiped her eyes and shone her flashlight into the attic space above.

It had a low ceiling and seemed small, but the thought of the hidden treasures she might find there renewed her energy. She scrambled up onto the ladder's top rung, tested the floorboards by putting weight on her hands and then stepped up under the eaves, bending forward to keep from hitting her head on the sharply angled roof. As she waved her flashlight around the room, her shoulders moved up to her ears. Spotting an unidentifiable pile of stuff in the corner, she shuffled over to rummage through it; smiling at how goofy she must look - hunched over like a goblin and covered in cobwebs.

A layer of dust, thick as a mantle of gritty snow, had settled over the room. For a brief moment she heard the floorboards creak and the voice of a woman singing in a soothing, yet guttural, language.

“Gaelic,” she thought and the dust particles drifting in front of her flashlight became snowflakes illuminated by a full and golden moon. She shook her head.

“There must be cobwebs on my brain,” she mumbled. “I’m up here daydreaming in the dark. Stay focussed, Emma!”

She began to muck about in the gloom, soon discovering there were no great treasures - just a couple of well-worn baskets that felt like they were woven from reeds, a cracked mortar and pestle, a rocking chair, a woollen afghan and a thick, aged book with a cowhide cover. She picked up the book, enjoying the comforting weight of it in her hands. For a brief moment, her eyes drifted shut. The snow was falling faster now, hills and trees obscured by a river of frozen flakes. The Gaelic song grew stronger, carried on the howling voice of the wind. The book slipped from Emma’s fingers and landed with a thud. Her eyes popped open.

"Quit spacing out!" she chastised herself, shaking her head bewilderedly as she forced herself to shine her flashlight on her motley pile of new possessions, scrutinizing them one by one.

The baskets could be cleaned for storage. Why anyone would use a mortar and pestle in an age of electric food processors was a mystery, but once it was washed it would make an artsy garlic holder. She’d always dreamed of getting a rocking chair when she had her first baby – as she breastfed she would sing and rock her child to sleep... Well, that clearly wasn’t happening, but she would dust the rocker off and plop it in front of the fire. The afghan was a score. It was woven from lilac coloured wool that was still slightly sticky with lanolin and smelled pleasantly of sheep. As for the book, it was intriguing, possibly a journal of some sort. Maybe it would help keep boredom at bay. Making several trips, Emma eased down the rungs of the ladder with her booty. She placed it in a pile on the floor then went outside with the

afghan to shake off the dust. The sun was setting. The wind had ceased and the trees stood like purple sentinels in the dusk. They were still and silent, curiously watching this stranger in their midst. She went back into the shadowy cottage, turned on a lamp and eyed her meagre rations, thinking about dinner.

“I guess it’s pea soup,” she said aloud with forced cheerfulness, as she grabbed a lonely can from the shelf. After dinner she attempted to light a fire from the peat in the basket. The room filled with streams of smoke that made her nose stuffy.

“Geez,” she sneezed as she looked through the haze to check the flue and rushed to open the door and windows. “Is this normal for peat?”

Even though she'd just eaten, the musky smoke was making her hungry. Or maybe it was all the walking and housework. Feeling forlorn and thick in the head she ate some peanut butter and oatcakes and settled in for a game of Solitaire. Outside the wind picked up. The leaves rustled, whispering secrets that were meant only for each other. Soon the trees would be bare. She shivered slightly, snuggling under her thin sleeping bag and musty blanket.

“Tomorrow,” she thought, “I’ll take stock of my provisions. Try to find some more blankets at that thrift store I passed in town. Make sure I have enough oatmeal, at least, to last the winter just in case the worst should happen.”

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The sun was setting, golden light embracing ocean as the fog crept silently across the tiny island rising out of Clayoquot Sound. Invisible boats with outboard motors rumbled past, while a distant foghorn mournfully sang ships home. A raven called and the earth began to stir as the late February dusk whispered promises of spring.

Jordan paced across the floor of his snug log cabin. He’d built it by hand with his dad at age

eighteen. The walls were thick with ghosts – the babies born and suckled and held tenderly to his strong breast, the women loved and lost. The closets were stuffed with memories and slowly, as if asleep, he pulled out boxes labelled “Feathers”, “Bones” and “Stones” – objects once sacred made meaningless by sorrow and time. He knew he wandered precariously between two worlds – one built on a foundation of forest and fish and family that had allowed clarity and purpose to flourish and a new one that was raw and unformed and left him without substance or conviction.

Outside, the moist secrets of the island’s old growth forest reached out and were enfolded in the damp fingers of the encroaching fog. They had been lovers for thousands of years, long before the arrival of humans and their complexities. Tree and mist, root and ocean intertwined in a union that reached deep into the heart of one of the few remaining rainforests on earth.

Jordan sighed. He knew he had simply to clear out the closets, release the past, and be set free. Yet he dragged himself from task to task, his loneliness a compass, his mind sifting through memories as if within them he might find the key to his slumbering joy.

Jordan had a deep, unquestioning love for this island, but staying here awoke a lifetime of losses. It was time to move on. Forty-eight years old, tall, and slender with muscles carved by years of hard work, he was still beautiful to look at but felt old and tired. He’d had a wife, three children, and countless conflicting incarnations as a fisherman and an eco-tour guide, a logger and a protector of the trees, a sculptor, a hermit, a dreamer and a poet. A string of lovers had woven in and out of his life since the end of his marriage and his last heartbreak lingered with the dull throb of an aching tooth.

Jordan had met Patricia on a crisp autumn evening that sparkled with stars. There was a magnetic attraction between them, a knowing, a recognition, a sense of having found something that had been lost for so long it had nearly been forgotten. She was radiant, dazzling – just a flash of her smile nearly sent him reeling. Their lovemaking pulled him to a place so profound he wasn’t sure he could resurface even if he wanted to. They spent two glorious months together

before she returned to her native Argentina. They were already making plans to marry when she wrote and said she'd changed her mind. The way Jordan saw it, the depth of their intimacy became too much for her. Painfully he realized she couldn't allow a love so strong and pure to touch her, for she didn't love herself.

Ironically, the letter that broke Jordan's heart was delivered on Valentine's Day. After reading it he wandered blindly into the forest. He clung to an ancient cedar, sobbing so hard he thought his ribs would break as an endless stream of snot and sorrow soaked his flannel shirt. He wasn't sure he would survive this loss. He couldn't grasp that this, the greatest love he'd ever shared, was over. He'd been certain that Patricia was his destiny, his soul mate, a reward after years of struggle and self-sacrifice. If a love like this could end then nothing could be trusted. With her went all hope of life and love in the cabin. It was best to get rid of everything and begin anew.

