

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, praying, waiting, believing, but her patience was waning and her faith, once unyielding, was giving way to despair. There was just one moon cycle left now and the pattern was not yet in place. 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 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, I 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 me.

"I feel like a human pack horse," I grumbled as I stopped to adjust my backpack and wipe the sweat from my brow. To my relief I 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. I squinted and made out the words "Teac Darrah" and began to perspire anew. What if the rental didn't work out? I needed somewhere to sleep that night and the thought of lugging my pack around in search of a bed was highly unappealing. I tugged at the shirt that was riding up around my waist and hoped I looked presentable. As I pulled open the pub's worn door, I 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. I slid my pack to the floor with a self-conscious thump and noticed a smooth-faced man behind the bar watching me 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 me to come have a seat at the bar and put a pint of Guinness in front of me without me asking for it.

“Hi, I’m Emma, Emma Stone”. I held out my hand awkwardly. I 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 yours to have. I am called Damian and I am the publican here.” He held my hand between his and gave it a warm squeeze.

I smiled to myself. Had he said he was a republican? Politics could get messy here in Ireland so I’d better keep my mouth shut.

“Pleased to meet you, Damian”

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

I turned slightly on my bar stool and took in my surroundings. It was a simple room - white plaster walls supported by dark wooden beams; polished wood tables circling a roaring peat fire. I could see myself sitting at one of them with a pot of herbal tea as I scribbled in my journal on a wet winter’s day. I turned back towards Damian and was startled by a large TV flashing behind him. Once again my 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. I wished he’d turn the damn thing off. Suddenly light-headed, I swayed slightly and grasped the oak bar table with clammy hands. Its solidity helped me shake off the sensation that I 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,” I answered hurriedly, gripping the pint glass with white knuckles, grimacing slightly as the first bitter sip of the dark beer reached my 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’m from Canada, actually.”

“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, I could hardly tell him I had no home to speak of - no husband and no babies - just a sister and a couple of aging parents who would probably be better off without me if a massive war actually erupted. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Frightened?” I 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 since I’d arrived in Ireland. When I’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 me in the street, recognizing me as a visitor, telling me 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 my long brown hair, round rosy cheeks and slightly lost-looking demeanour and probably thought I was a student on an extended holiday whose trip had coincided with calamity. But I wasn’t a kid - I was going to be forty this year and was desperate to get my chaotic life in order. I’d poured all my savings and put all my 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, I took another swig of Guinness. My mind was racing. I’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 I needed a safe place to roost, a place where I could hole away, ride out the storm and see what happened.

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

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

I laughed. He certainly had me 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 I’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 me two worn skeleton keys. “Will you be having any questions, then?”

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

“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 I lugged my pack up the rutted road. Weathered farmhouses, placid rock-walled pasture, and then, at last, a roughly plastered and whitewashed cottage sitting in solitude at the end of the lane. A yard wild and untended. Mounds of grass and weeds enfolding smooth, grey stones that turned into fences. A row of gangly trees swaying to and fro, the wind whistling mournfully through their silver leaves.

“It’s a bit bleak,” I muttered as I jiggled one of the tarnished keys in the brass keyhole until it clicked and turned. Taking a deep breath, I pulled open the door, butterflies fluttering in my stomach as I entered the house that was going to be my home.

The late morning sunlight poured through smoke-streaked windows, dancing across the room's cob walls, the spirit of the cottage teasing, greeting me. The scent of moist earth and wrinkled apples, and I was a child again, playing in my Nana's root cellar, far from the bright lights and brittle edges of the world upstairs.

"God this pack is heavy," I groaned, easing my bag off my aching shoulders onto the mud floor. How many skipping, pacing, shuffling feet had it taken to compact its smooth surface? Slowly, I turned in place, breathing in the room around me. A stone fireplace, its opening smudged black from smoke. And fuel, thank God. On the hearth, a large basket filled to brimming with oblong pieces of a dark, porous substance that must be peat.

With a sigh I sank into a worn, green velvet easy chair, stirring up a cloud of dust. This place was going to need a good cleaning before I'd even consider bedding down for the night on the scary-looking mattress sprawled across the floor. I got up and tested it with my toe – more dust and little spring, but a bed. I wandered over to the kitchen, staring with dismay at the rusty stove and oven, the chipped dishes, the mismatched assortment of pots and pans.

I poked my nose inside an open doorway to the right of the stove and my heart lightened when I saw the white enamel claw-foot tub. Then I found the linen closet crammed full of yellowing tablecloths, mould-marked sheets, and threadbare towels. There were no blankets. I grabbed a burlap sack full of rusting clothes pegs that sat on the bottom shelf and gingerly carried the musty contents of the closet outside to hang on the sagging clothesline. The sheets were lifted and filled, transformed by the wind into fat and friendly ghosts flopping in an unruly row. The breeze was sweet on my face and 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 in welcome. I turned to the cows that grazed in the neighbouring pasture.

"Pleased to meet you," I waved, causing them to look up blandly and all at once for a very brief moment, still chewing their cud, before turning back to the grass that was clearly more engaging than me. "Oh please, don't stop eating on my account. I'd love to stay and visit but I've got some cleaning to do. So we'll catch you later then," I called. Bemused and a little hurt by the cattle's rejection, I headed back inside to set up house.

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

I sighed and headed back outside and searched for the antiquated spigot, stopping for a moment

to watch the sun and shadows dancing across the leaves before I turned the rusty key and resignedly went back inside to scrub away at the grime. As I cleaned, my mind crept to thoughts of war - the Third World War. A war I doubted I would survive.

I had been flying over the Atlantic Ocean when it happened. Suspended between sea and darkened sky, I 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 her surface. Down below, it passed like a shudder over those who were rocking their babies 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, for others, it was an angel shouting a warning or 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, I was tucked under the wing of a silver bird that carried me safely across the sea. I stirred restlessly in my sleep. When I 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.

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

"I'd better check the attic for blankets," I said, sighing at the thought of yet another task, eyeing the trap door in the ceiling. Like Damian said, it would have to be pried open. I rummaged through a drawer and found a screwdriver, grabbed my flashlight and went out to the shed for the stepladder. Sticking my tools in the pocket of my fleece, I 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. I sneezed, wiped my eyes and shone my flashlight into the attic space above.

The thought of the hidden treasures I might find there renewed my energy. I scrambled up onto

the ladder's top rung, tested the floorboards by putting weight on my hands and then stepped up under the eaves, bending forward to keep from hitting my head. I waved my flashlight around the attic, my shoulders moving up to my ears. I shuffled over to rummage through an unidentifiable pile in the corner, smiling at how goofy I 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. The floorboards creaked, followed by the distant murmur of a woman singing in a soothing, yet guttural, language.

"Gaelic," I thought and the dust particles drifting in front of my flashlight became snowflakes illuminated by a full and golden moon. I shook my head, forcing myself to stay focussed on the task at hand and began to muck about in the gloom. I soon discovered 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.

I picked up the book, enjoying the comforting weight of it in my hands. My 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 my fingers and landed with a thud and my eyes popped open. I looked around a bit bewilderedly until my flashlight landed on my motley pile of new possessions. Snapping out of my daydream, I began to scrutinize them one by one.

The baskets could be cleaned for storage. The cold, smooth stone of the mortar and pestle felt anchoring. Maybe I could grind oatmeal in it and make my own oatcakes. The rocking chair.... I'd always dreamed of getting one when I had a baby, singing and rocking my child to sleep... Well, I could dust it off and plop it in front of the fire. The afghan was a score. It was heavy and warm and still slightly sticky with lanolin and smelled pleasantly of sheep. As for the book, it was intriguing, possibly a journal of some sort. With any luck, it would help keep boredom at bay. Making several trips, I eased down the ladder with my booty, placing it in a pile on the floor.

Ignoring my growling stomach, I picked up the afghan and it took it outside to shake off the dust. The sun was setting, the wind quiet. The trees stood like purple sentinels, still and silent, curiously watching this stranger in their midst.

Back in the darkening cottage, I turned on a lamp and eyed my meagre rations.

"I guess it's pea soup," I said aloud with forced cheerfulness, as I grabbed a lonely can from the shelf. After dinner I attempted to light a fire from the peat in the basket. At last the fire took, but

the room soon filled with streams of smoke. With a stuffy nose and teary eyes, I dashed around checking the flue and opening the door and windows. As the tears streamed down my cheeks, I was uncertain if they were caused by the blue-tinged smoke or by my sense of absolute ineptitude.

It seemed like all this musky smoke was making me hungry. Or maybe it was the walking and housework. I opened my coveted jar of peanut butter, thought about stirring it but couldn't be bothered to look for a spoon. So I dipped an oatcake into the oil on top and pulled out the cards for a game of Solitaire. Outside the wind picked up. The leaves rustled, whispering secrets that were meant for each other. Soon the trees would be bare. I shivered, closed the door and windows, and snuggled under my thin sleeping bag and musty blanket.

“Tomorrow,” I 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.