

PEOPLE OF THE GREAT JOURNEY

O.R. MELLING



HAY HOUSE

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FOREWORD

ALPHA

It began with a journey to the Outer Hebrides with my dearest friend, Dr N. At last, a suitable setting for a depiction of the Work! I have taken my time to write of it, for personal and professional reasons. Please understand that this presentation is fictional. It is not “true” in the factual or scientific sense. The characters, in particular, are my own creation, and do not represent persons living or dead. But I agree with the late great Anthony de Mello that the shortest distance between a human being and the truth is a story. And the tale was written, in the words of Gottfried von Strassburg, twelfth-century author of *Tristan*, as “a labour out of love for the world, and to comfort noble hearts”.

O.M., 21 June 2013, Ireland



CHAPTER ONE

THE CALL

Long before she arrived at Dunesfort House, where the events recorded here took place, Olwen knew she was approaching extraordinary territory. It began with the letter.

Dear Writer of Fairy Tales,

I may misperceive of what you intend, but it seems to me that you write of matters pertaining to the world of the immortal spirit; that world of which the arts are but a reflection. Perhaps, like Alice, you might wish to pass through the looking-glass and explore the source of your work?

Rose

Director, Dunesfort House

Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides

Scotland

It felt more like a summons than an invitation. Enclosed with the letter was a single-page leaflet advertising a week-long residential course called “The Great Journey”. There was no mention of what the course specifically entailed, only a black-and-white photograph of a great house overlooking the sea and a mission statement:

Humanity is experiencing the titanic struggle of death and rebirth. The contractions are under way – blood and violence, upheaval and uncertainty, pain and suffering. Yet the baby will be born. The long dark age of greed and aggression is coming to an end: a new age dawns. As midwives to this great

event, we are called to heal our own wounds and awaken. At Dunesfort House, we use ancient wisdom and visionary practices towards this end... and this beginning.

Olwen was immediately caught by the words, as well as the image of a baronial mansion on the edge of a cliff. The course took place in mid-summer. She would have finished the last edits on her new book by then. The fee was manageable with the help of her credit card. All she needed was the slightest of nudges to confirm her decision.

That came when a friend rang from Toronto. Dr N was planning a trip to Barra in the Outer Hebrides for a gathering of her clan. Would Olwen like to join her? The two women had travelled together before, most recently around Ireland, where Olwen lived, to visit megalithic sites.

The coincidence was too big to ignore.

“Synchronicity!” said Dr N, a Jungian psychologist, when she heard the story.

“A big word for magic,” agreed Olwen.



CHAPTER TWO

THE HIGH ROAD

It was getting late. They had crossed the northern hump of Scotland and were driving south towards Ullapool. Conversation in the car had dwindled. The road was narrow, continually twisting and turning, rising and falling. Dark mountains and forests shadowed their way. Again and again the coastline broke into lochs of choppy waters and moonlit cliffs. There was no other traffic. They had opened their windows to let in the balmy air and the sweet scent of peat smoke.

Dr N was driving. She changed gears as the road began another steep rise.

"You take the high road and I'll take the low road," Olwen sang softly, *"and I'll be in Scotland afore you."*

"The low road is the Path of the Dead," Dr N remarked.

"Really?" Olwen shivered.

"That's why he'll get there first...and why he and his true love will never meet again on the banks of Loch Lomond."

Olwen gazed out the window at the night. She had pushed her seat back to make room for her long legs. At forty-nine, she was often mistaken for a decade younger. The mane of auburn hair was partly responsible, any hint of grey dyed away, as well as the genes of her long-living mother; but there was also an irrepressible vitality and youthfulness that fired her speech and manner. The amber eyes

had plenty of laughter lines at their edges, and her mouth was full-lipped and generous.

"It does seem a bit like we are on the Path of the Dead," she murmured. "All these ferrymen carrying us across the waters."

They had taken numerous boat trips over the past week, beginning with the longest from Belfast to Troon. After exploring the Highlands, they had taken the ferry from Scrabster to Stromness in the Orkney Islands and then several smaller ferries within the Orkneys themselves. They were now on the last leg of their journey. They would stay overnight in Ullapool and sail the following morning to Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis.

Dr N frowned. In her mid-sixties, she had silver-grey hair cropped neatly to frame elfin features and sharp, intelligent eyes. She threw Olwen a sideways glance.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

Olwen grimaced. "Would you sign up for a mystery course in the middle of nowhere?"

"No," Dr N said honestly. "But I'm not you. My adventures tend to be interior. You, on the other hand, are more daring in the outer world. It makes sense. That kind of curiosity feeds your work."

"So I tell myself." Olwen bit her lip. She was about to say more when she was distracted. "What's that?"

In the ditch to their left, small almond-shaped lights were blinking on and off: then, suddenly, on the road ahead, a great stag. He froze in the beam of their headlamps. Antlers branching, magnificent and male, he straddled the lane, poised for fight or flight.

The two women were stunned.

"*Aisling*," Olwen said softly. Vision.

Dr N reduced her speed and dimmed the lights. "Think small. Submissive." The car inched forwards. "The fawns and does are in the ditch."

Would there be room to pass? Would he charge them?

With a great shudder of his haunches, the stag moved sideways into the verge. Still towering over the road, he held his position as they crawled past him. Even when they were a safe distance away, he continued to fill their mirrors, framed by the starry sky behind him. They drove on in silence.

The following day they were on the Isle of Lewis, lost in a wild and lonely landscape. Beyond the capital of Stornoway, the countryside looked barren, almost treeless, with only scatterings of crofters' cottages and black-faced sheep. Stark mountains brooded over vast tracts of bog. The few road signs were in Scots Gaelic. *Achadh Mór. Gearraidh na h-Aibhne.*

They stopped for a picnic on a deserted beach. A flock of gulls slept on the white sand. The sea glittered a pristine blue. When they attempted to paddle in the water, it was so cold it scalded their feet. Retreating to the blanket, they ate salmon sandwiches and sipped hot tea from a flask.

Olwen had been quiet the whole morning. It was her turn to drive. She had suggested they go sightseeing instead of heading directly for Dunesfort House.

"Will we have a look at the Callanish Stones?" she said now, as they finished their lunch. "Everything I've read says they're more incredible than any of the circles we saw in Ireland."

Dr N agreed readily, but as they returned to the car she rested her hand on her friend's arm.

"If you've changed your mind about the course, you're more than welcome to join me. There'll be many in-laws and outlaws at the gathering. It's not as if anyone will notice."

"I've already paid the fee. It may not be refundable. I can't afford to throw away money like that."

Dr N's look was sympathetic. "Why don't you make your final decision when we get there? I'll give you my honest opinion of the

place. I'll be able to view it objectively as I'm not involved. You know the old Hebrew saying, 'A stranger can see what's wrong in the first three minutes.'"

Olwen's relief was huge. "Great idea! I trust your instincts more than my own. You know me. Rose-coloured glasses. I see what I want to see, hear what I want to hear. It can even override my baseline paranoia!"

They both laughed.

"But I still want to see Callanish," she added.

"Me too," said Dr N.

Their first sight of Callanish was a shock. Nothing they had seen in Ireland had prepared them for its scale and majesty. Both the size and number of the stones were overwhelming. They were almost fifty in all, with the tallest near the centre standing sixteen feet high. A spacious avenue led to an inner circle surrounding a ruined burial chamber. Three shorter rows of stones radiated outwards from the centre. The megaliths dominated the windswept landscape. Overhead arched an expanse of sky.

The site was so immense, the two women felt as if they had it all to themselves, despite the groups of tourists that came and went. There was no loud talk or laughter. The stones inspired a muted awe and respect.

Dr N consulted her guidebook. "They're dated anywhere from 3000 to 1500 BC. Completed over generations. The stones themselves are ancient. Three billion years old!"

"But why here?" Olwen wondered. "Why such a huge monument for a small population? Could it have been a place of pilgrimage? A ritual centre to which people travelled?"

Dr N continued reading. "The Vikings used to raid the islands and ruled here for a time. The original name appears to be 'Tursachan', and a suggested translation is 'place of sadness or suffering'."

“Place of Sadness,” Olwen repeated softly. “Place of Suffering.”

Dr N wandered off to the Visitor Centre adjacent to the site, but Olwen chose to remain among the stones. She walked aimlessly, musing on their presence. These were the grandmothers and grandfathers of all the megaliths she had explored over the years. Ancient spirits of stone, millions of years old.

Removing her sandals, she went barefoot in the grass. The folds of her cotton skirt brushed against her legs.

Eventually she grew aware of a new arrival to the site. He was a striking young man with lightning-white hair that fell to his shoulders. Everything about him exuded the confidence of a male in his prime. An image of the stag on the road flashed through her mind. He wore the black-leather gear of a motorcyclist, with heavy boots, gauntlets, and bulky jacket. His look was Scandinavian, Teutonic. *A Saxon lordling. A Nordic prince.* There wasn't a woman on the site who wasn't aware of him.

He removed one of his gloves to stroke the tallest stone that towered over the central circle, the one Olwen thought of as the king-stone. She shuddered slightly as if his hand had stroked *her*. Amused at herself, she prowled the perimeter, keeping him always in her sights. A small harp-shaped case was slung over his shoulder, like a quiver of arrows. After a while, he sprawled on the grass, legs stretched out to bask in the sunlight. His leather-clad body glistened like a pelt. The harp rested on his lap. When he caught her watching him, he stared back at her with a careless grin. It was as if he had thrown down one of his gloves in front of her.

Strolling over, she hunkered down beside him, trying not to laugh. It was an old game. His features were a series of sharp angles, cleft chin, and high cheekbones.

“Will you play?” she asked, indicating the harp.

“*Ja*,” he said with a shrug.

Unzipping the cover, he drew the wired-string harp out of its case. He took a few moments to tighten the strings, and then began to play.

She remained crouched beside him, eyes half-closed. The music rippled around her and over the stones. An old Scottish air, perfect for the place, it stirred her blood.

When the tune ended, he raised his sunglasses. Wintry blue eyes regarded her.

“*Go raibh míle maith agat,*” she said, thanking him in Irish.

He was surprised. “*Gaelisk?*”

She nodded. “You?”

“*Dansk.*”

Her mouth twisted wryly. The strange repeating patterns of her life. She had once loved a Dane. Now she saw the faint trace of crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes. He was older than she had first imagined, more like thirties than twenties. He, in turn, was staring at her lips. The invitation was evident. It seemed a fair reward for the gift of his music.

She leaned forward, intending a light kiss, but his lips swooped suddenly to capture hers. She was caught off guard and lost her balance. As she fell against him, his arms grasped hold of her and his tongue forced her mouth open. He sucked on her breath. For a moment she forgot where she was. Then she pushed him away, though not harshly. She couldn’t help but laugh. With a wave of her hand she indicated the obvious. They were in a public place.

Another careless grin. Another shrug. He would have continued regardless.

Her own grin was rueful. The difference in age. *Too bad*, she reflected as she walked away from him. *Too bad I stopped.*

Dr N was waiting for her in the car park.

“The Centre is closed,” the older woman said. “I forgot everything shuts here on Sundays. Strict Sabbatarianism.”

A motorcycle roared to life behind them. The young man sped past with a beep and a quick wave of his gloved hand.

Olwen watched as he disappeared down the road, fair hair streaming in the wind.

“Did I miss something?” Dr N asked, eyebrow raised.

“Another stag.”

“You and your young men.”

“They just appear out of nowhere.”

“And you don’t ask for it?”

“All the time.”

It was late afternoon when they began their ascent up the winding road that bordered the craggy coast. Olwen was following the map that accompanied her receipt for the course. She had grown pensive again.

“What on earth am I doing?”

“Do you want my professional opinion?”

“Not if you’re going to charge for it.”

They both smiled. It was an old joke.

“We look for new answers when the old ones we are living with – or living by – no longer serve us.”

“That makes sense,” said Olwen. “A ‘turning fifty’ thing?” The sky had darkened. It began to rain; one of the many sudden showers that kept assailing them. They were travelling along the edge of a cliff, with the sea to their left. The road ahead wound ever upwards, every corner blind. She slowed to a near crawl, praying she wouldn’t meet other traffic.

“If it’s any comfort,” Dr N said after a while, “I can’t think of a single dangerous cult that was run by a woman.”

“One of the chief deciding factors,” Olwen admitted. “Female director. I also liked the way she used her first name only. Very informal and friendly.”

They had reached the top at last. The road moved quickly away from the cliffs to cross a wild moor. And there in the distance, rising darkly through the veil of rain, was Dunesfort House.