

The Islander (Chapter 1)
David W. Berner

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If Seamus Damp were asked to offer one reason why he had stayed on this rock in the sea, this treeless land thrown about by gales and wicked tides, it was the sight of God-touched clouds in the magic of sunrise and sunset, scenes Keats might have imagined. It was the light. It was always the light. This is what he would say. And it was that light that he awaited now in the darkest minutes, sitting at the window, the shutters drawn open. He had been there hundreds, no, thousands of times before. But only in recent days had he begun to accept that his mornings would change.

The island was small enough to see both the sun rise over the bay and mainland, and the sun fall across the sea, at the window in the morning or in the evening on the small stoop at the front door. And depending on the season, and how the winds moved the weather, the light offered something different each time. Despite his hard routines, the change, how the island morphed, was what kept Seamus there. It was hard for others to understand this, as he had been alone so long a time, living in the small house; leaving only when he took the ferry to town for food, hand soap, tea, and his favorite small cigars. How could it be nothing other a hard existence and monotony? But what many would never know is how living on the island was like living inside a prism, in the magnificent refracting, bouncing, and bending light. It was everything. And now, at the window with the reality of what he finally had agreed to, Seamus thought maybe on his next trip to town he would purchase a calendar, if they still sold them, to hang on his wall to mark the days. The time that remained had become a matter of enumeration, counting the number of sunrises and sunsets.

Seamus's son Aiden believed it was long overdue. No landline and Seamus had rejected a cell phone, and as the years added up, Aiden found the not-knowing unnerving. Not because Aiden had missed his father, but because he didn't like the thought of how things could possibly end—his father dead for weeks and no one would know. So, Aiden offered plans on how Seamus could leave the island and come to live on the mainland, at a senior center not far from Aiden's home. Seamus had refused, repeatedly. *Why would I want to leave the island? For what? For whom?*

But then came the first emergency.

Aiden had arrived to check on his father as a matter of duty and found him on the wooden floor of the tiny kitchen. He had fallen and had sprained an ankle, damaged a ligament. He had been there for days, unable to get up. He had wet himself. No food. No water. His dog, Olivia, at his side, refusing to leave. After his hospital stay, the doctor insisted that Seamus give up his home on the island. Living alone had become a risk, he told him. But Seamus, in defiance, had returned, and Aiden, although believing the doctor was right, had avoided the inevitable argument despite his own misgivings.

Months after the fall, on the day after Christmas, Aiden returned to the island to check on his father and discovered Seamus in a weakened state, gaunt, and struggling to lift himself out of his

bed. The flu had ravaged him, his frailty palpable, and his body no longer able to fight its own battles. Doctors said he could have died. Still, after a long recovery and a chance to regain a margin of strength, Seamus was again rebellious and he returned to the island, convincing his son that he must be allowed one last season, the best season the island offered to say his goodbye, to allow a proper farewell to the home where he had written thousands of words and hoped to write a few more, if he could.

So, now at the window, with Olivia at his feet, Seamus watched the sunrise of another day.

In the dark before taking the seat at the window, Seamus had stoked the fire and had listened to the BBC on the radio, what he sometimes did before the sun came up. There was much to do in the house before he would leave it, papers to pack and books to arrange, but there was time, a full summer ahead. He only had the heart to get after the work in spurts, and so far, he had done very little. Aiden had insisted on a cell phone after the fall and the sickness, but in the early morning when Seamus waited for the sun, he turned it off for hours, through his tea and bread, through his writing time, until the early afternoon when he was ready. Truth is, he rarely turned on the cell phone at all.

In Boston it had been the same. Early mornings alone, working. Seamus was born there. His mother and father, first generation Irish, had moved to the city as newlyweds for employment but returned every year, if they were lucky enough to find the money, to County Kerry where family had remained. Seamus grew up an American boy, but Ireland was everywhere around him. And it was Ireland where he and Gloria, his wife, had moved for good when Aiden was a small boy. Seamus had written two novels that had done well, and he had become worn down by America and the big city, and the agents and public relations people, and the obligatory interviews. Aiden grew up Irish near Dingle, and not long after he left for university, Seamus moved to the house on the island, alone. Gloria insisted he leave. Seamus had fallen into his own silence, a retreat of spirit, increasingly in need of solitude. He had become a quiet man. No longer present. No longer capable of giving enough to someone else. Seamus knew what he had become. He had had sullen days as a child, and it had followed him, like a ghost.

On the horizon, the sun now flickered over the land of silhouettes, sometimes hiding behind bruise-blue clouds, creating little sparks of light on the surface of the water. These were the glints of light that poets wrote about. To the south, out in the sea on another smaller island a half-a-mile away, the lighthouse—automated for more than ten years—became visible, And looking north, something unexpected. Moving slowly into the frame of the windowpane came a shadow, a shape. Seamus leaned toward the glass, lowering his eyeglasses and squinting, hoping for a better look. The shape progressed unhurriedly, stopping for a moment and then moving again. A man, it appeared to him now. Not an unusual sight, but surprising at this hour. Those who came to the island with a permit to hike its edges and stay in the field where a backpacker's tent was allowed, usually came later in the summer months. And when they did, Seamus paid little attention, even staying inside his house to avoid the obligation of a wave or smile. He didn't mind their presence; he understood why they came. He knew few if any would stay very long. But what he was seeing now was different—this hiker, alone at first light, in biting sea air, early in the season.

The hiker carried a small pack on his back, and wore what appeared to be a longshoreman's cap, as the mornings were most often windy. Olivia was up on all fours and against Seamus' knee, sensing that her master had found something, that something was changing.

"I'm not sure, girl," Seamus said.

The figure walked north to south along the shoreline. A few steps and then still, eyes out toward the sea. Seamus continued to watch, seeing only the figure's back as colors began to emerge in the low light—the backpack olive, pants tan, cap black.

"He must have roughed it out last night," Seamus said, rubbing Olivia behind the ear, his eyes remaining on the hiker.

It was then that the figure turned toward the house, and even in the distance, even with his old eyes, Seamus could see he was mistaken. He could see now, the figure's falling shoulders, evidence of breasts, and a soft, oval-shaped face. The figure removed the cap, and hair fell to the neck. Hikers on the island were almost always men, and when there was a woman, a man usually walked close by. But this woman, this girl, was walking at the edge of the sea, solitary, in her own time. She lifted her face to the wind and stretched her arms to her sides, standing as if on a cross. For several minutes, she held the pose.

"Olivia, girl. Someone has found some joy this morning."

In time, the woman returned the cap to her head, and continued walking south, more briskly now, and soon she was gone from the window frame. Seamus gave up his watch. He made tea, fed Olivia, and sat before his typewriter, the one he had used for over ten years, the one he had learned to repair on his own when it needed cleaning or a tweak. He had been working on a long poem for many months. Its theme meandered and he had lost the center many times over, but he had been working on it every morning. After the success of his books, he had turned to poetry. His agent had tried to steer him away, attempted to talk him out of such nonsense. No one sells poetry, he told him. No one reads it. Write another novel, he said, I can sell that. In time, Seamus dismissed him. Seamus kept writing—a screenplay and a how-to craft book on memoir to pay the bills. In time, however, poetry became everything. For the last several years, it had been all he had done, selling a few poems to *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and literary journals at colleges on America's east coast. The poem he now worked on, would be book-length verse, he had hoped, a narrative poem, an epic. But there was much work to do. And Seamus wasn't sure, even after all the time spent, what on Earth he had been trying to say.

After much time before the typewriter, gazing again out the window, petting Olivia, making more tea, eating brown bread with butter, typing and then x-ing out the words he had formed, writing more words and reading them aloud over and over again, and making still more tea, Seamus had become weary. He was tired of his own voice, of the swirling emotions in his head and heart. *Poets are annoying*, he thought. And *old poets are a pain in the ass*.

He needed a walk.

At the doorway, he lit a small cigar and called for Olivia. He stepped on the grass walkway and the treeless cliff trail toward the beach. Seals would likely be there, as they came frequently to play in early summer. Aiden had given his father a walking, as he was certain Seamus would take his walks even though had been told to end them. The ground on the island was uneven and there were rabbit holes where a boot could be lost. Dangerous walking for an old man. But Seamus refused to change. He had not used the walking stick, and he wouldn't today.

Olivia knew the trail well and walked ahead of Seamus, looking back now and then to be sure her master was close. She loved these walks, even on days when the wind was freshening. The gusts now tossed Olivia's floppy ears, flipping them upside down against her head. Seamus wore his hat, the old woolen cap, pulled down tight, and the waxed jacket he'd had for years. Together, they moved across the ridge, taking it slowly, stopping frequently to watch the sea and to puff on his cigar. On the far hill, Seamus saw the island's black-faced sheep, four of them grazing on brush and grasses. Where the ridge dips a bit, Seamus found a rock to sit on. It was then that his poem returned to his mind, and it distressed him. He thought also of the cell phone, the one Aiden had insisted on, the one he promised he'd keep at his side but never did. He had left it on the small table in the kitchen, likely void of power.

Seamus turned his face to the sea, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, the whistle of the wind and the sharp, low caw of a chough, the only sounds. In a moment, Seamus sensed a presence, the sensory reality that something was near, and when he opened his eyes, about twenty meters from where he sat, there was the hiker along the ridge, the woman he had seen in the early morning.

"Good day, sir," she said as she moved closer.

The young woman appeared as she did before—the cap, the backpack. Seamus could see now, however, that she was younger than he thought, maybe in her 20s. She smiled, her eyes on his, and she waited a moment for Seamus' response.

"Hello," he said, cautiously. Silence had become Seamus' friend, so a greeting took effort. As did a smile.

The woman returned to her stride and moved along the trail toward the cliff. Seamus had looked away after the greeting but now, along with Olivia, watched the woman. Seamus was on the island to be alone, and he understood many visitors came for the same reason, to experience the solace and its remote beauty. Occasionally there would someone who knew he lived here, some would-be writer or passionate reader, but there were few. Most day trippers and tent campers who came, wanted to be in the grips of the island's natural solitude just as Seamus did, and there was no reason to believe this woman wanted anything different.

At the edge of the ridge, the woman stopped and slipped off her pack. And like she had done earlier that morning, she lifted her face to the sea and stretched out her arms, as if trying to accept everything the air and salt and sun could give her.

"Same as before, girl," Seamus whispered to Olivia.

For what seemed a long time, the woman stood motionless, the wind ruffling the sleeves of her shirt, the legs of her pants. And in those minutes, Seamus continued to watch, absorbed in her personal meditation. After a time, the woman slipped on her backpack, turned, and walked again along the ridge path only to detour before reaching Seamus. And as she moved over the hill, her figure slowly disappearing in the elevation, she caught Seamus' eye for a moment, and she was gone.