Chapter 1

Returning to Crow Glen

You arrive along the road from Cork, a city thirteen miles to the south on Ireland's south coast. You'll reach the Crossroads, gateway to the village of Crow Glen.[1] But first, you hit the Wood - a dense, dark barrier of exceptionally tall trees that wraps around the Village and its edges. The Wood looms over them, enfolding them. Protectively? Menacingly? Whatever you like. The Wood gives the Village a sleeping beauty feel as if, like the princess in the story, the Village exists in a slightly other dimension. A zone where things happen differently and time runs at its own pace.

You move forward and step in under the canopy of the Wood. You meet the Crossroad, where you must pause. To your left: the massive, white, baronial pillars and black wrought-iron gates of the Manor, the colonisers' estate from which English aristocrats dominated us natives.

Straight ahead, a wide, inviting road will sweep you up the gentle slope into the Village. The trees crowding in over this road are so vast that their canopies soar fully from one side of it to the other, like a cathedral. They gently darken this roadway, no matter what the light is like outside.

These are giant, 250-year-old beeches: serried masses of them, still standing like a redundant army since the colonisers planted them long ago. They loom out over the Wood-Wall, a very old dry-stone wall, six feet high, that runs like a ribbon at their feet for half a mile, right through the Village and beyond. Measuring ten feet around their trunks, the beeches are high as six-storey houses. But if you know them well and intimately - up-close at ground-level inside the Wood Wall - each at its base has a ring of over-ground roots that form mossy indentations. And these gothic arches recede back into the trunk - green caves a foot high and deep, where little fairy-like plants live and thrive.

Moving on up the slope into the Village, two rows of neat, brightly-painted houses open up along either side of a street broad and bright enough to host a cattle-market in the old days. Here the beeches stand back a little, peering down into the Street without darkening it. The houses are pink. Yellow. Tortoise-shell blue. Mauve. Like a

[1] The Village's name in Gaelic is *Gleann an Phréacháin* which means Crow Glen. The English colonisers anglicised the name to Glenville and called the Manor they built there Glenville House. In English, the Village is still called Glenville today.

photo from the tourist board. And dotted up along the two sides of the Street: a country shop, a pub, a church, a school.

If you keep on going up to the top of the Village, you'll meet the Crossroads Above. It would take you out of the Village towards the north mountains. Its sits 300 yards from the Crossroad Below where you came in. When I was a child and until I was 19, this was my world and it felt like a big world.

The Village has been called Crow Glen since human time began. Many hundreds of navy-black crows live in the canopies of the giant beeches. The crows each stand a foot tall on the ground, with broad triangular beaks the colour of sea-rocks. When the beeches are in leaf, their interlocked canopies form a dense-green, bouncy cloud that runs the length of the Village. The crows' homes sit on top, dotted a few yards from each other. Their heavy nests are three feet wide and a foot deep, thick and solid-woven, the edges left untidy. This strip of high-rise real-estate for crows runs well beyond both the Crossroad Above and the one Below.

Mysteriously, the Crows have always flown away together in unison every morning, and returned together at dusk. I have never known where they go or why. When they come drifting back in on the twilight, many hundreds of black, outstretched bodies block out the Village sky. They circle in big, slow, collective, overlapping wheels. This circling is smooth and lazy but their thousands of raw, criss-crossed Caws are urgent, contradictory, deafening.

All this lasts for about fifteen minutes until each has relocated their own nest and sat down heavily into it, jabbering angrily at their neighbours. Those in adjoining trees continue to pass comment loudly to each other for another five or ten minutes until dusk folds over them like a cloak, settling them into an invisible group silence.

To us, this drama was as normal as the sun going down. For some years, I did not know that they didn't have this at every village in the wider world. I thought this vast, black, squawking sky-event was just part of the day, like washing your face. But for visitors who stood and witnessed it unwarned, it was terrifying. As a teen, when I saw the horror-scenes where crows attack people in the Hitchcock film The Birds, I finally realised how visitors perceived ours.

Ours were exactly like the crows in the film - just as big, black, loud, flapping, soaring and numerous - but they never swooped down on us. Busy occupying their own stratum of the Village air, they seemed not to notice us at all, down below.

As a child, all I knew was that the crows' return told you it was time to stop playing and start making your way back to your family's house for your supper. That was also the time of day when the children's television programme 'Wanderly Wagon'

was broadcast on the Irish TV channel (the only one we had). Wanderly Wagon was a sweet and clever programme about a bunch of rag-tag individuals, some animal and some human, who lived a caring, cooperative life together in a little flying house on wheels.

When I was very young, I assumed it was the crows' return that made the TV programme come on. Both the crows and Wanderly Wagon came flying in on the twilight sky, both were mysterious and strange, and both happened punctually every evening at the same time.

When I was growing up, we Villagers believed that many spirits, saints and angels lived in our houses with us. We believed that each of us also had a personal angel who moved everywhere with us, throughout the night and day. As best they could, they protected us individually from accident, illness and spiritual problems.

I grew up in a multi-generational household. As newly-weds, my parents moved in with my mother's parents and sister. Over the years my father extended the house. And in old age, my grandparents took up their station in armchairs at either side of the fire. Like statues of lions guarding a cosy castle door.

I was very fond of my grandmother. When I was 19, shortly before I emigrated to work abroad, I asked her what she really - honestly, secretly, in her own heart of hearts - thought about religion. When no-one was looking, away from any keeping up appearances or pressure from priests, what did she really think? She said: 'I believe the air is full of spirits'.

This Village capped with Crows was our epicentre but connected away from it, unfolding out across the landscape like a treasure-map, were other focal places that gave the Village its flavour, its solidity, and made life there an adventure. The pilgrimage to the Holy Well, a mile away. The Mass Rock, a mile further on. These were hidden places that, for us, glowed with animation but for passers-by, could not be seen. For political reasons, our ancestors sited them in folds in the landscape that disappear when you look across it from a distance or from the roads. Often protected by lookouts, those places couldn't be spotted or accessed without invitation.

The Village was the more banal place where we did our daily living but those were the magical, outlier places that gave us our festivals. In summer, the Procession saw hundreds of us parishioners processing the Virgin Mary up and down the length of the Village, and beyond the perimeters of the Crossroads. She was carried aloft on a platform on the shoulders of a guild of sash-wearing men dedicated to her, who sang hymns to her as they bore her along. We children ran ahead strewing flowers on the ground just in front of the Procession. Flowers, hymns, incense, flags, the beautiful statue of Our Lady and us parishioners singing in our Sunday best – all of it snaked

along like one living carnival thing, streaming colours and perfumes and music. On that day, as well as on Midsummer night for the Bonfire, the Village itself got to be one of our sacred spaces too, like those further out on the landscape. It got the power to make festival, make frisson, like the sacred sites in the land did at other times of the year.

And I am going back now. I'm Back from Abroad. I'm pausing at the Crossroads Below and I'm walking back up into the Village. I left when I was 19 to find work abroad. I've spent nearly three decades of my adult life working in other countries, like so many others from the Village before me. And like they all eventually do, I'm coming back. To see the old places. To try to recall for myself how the old places and the old ways felt back then. And to see how they feel today.

I walk slowly up the Road, the beech canopy arching over me. Countless other Returners have made this journey that I'm making. And often much longer journeys, stretched painfully - like skin - across the centuries. They come back to the Village from the USA. From Canada. From Australia. From South Africa. Some left the Village themselves, as I did. But mostly, their grand-parents or great-grand-parents left it for them. In the 1920s, heading to Sydney. In the 1890s, to New York. Or most common of all, in the 1850s when the Famine starved to death a swathe of the parish population. Another swathe were sent on 'coffin ships' to places they'd never heard of with names like '*New-found-land'*, on the frozen iceberg shores of Canada.

There is a person in the Village to welcome those Returners. They go into the shop or the pub asking for memories of their family name, and they are sent to her. Both on paper and in her memory, she holds the tangled threads of records that remain, and she has the time and the interest and the talent for it. So Returners knock at her door, go in to the little front room. And after consulting her records, both the inner and outer, she can tell them which cottage or smallholding in the parish their people came from.

Then they drive there together. The Returners walk those fields and weep. She has many accounts of six-foot-two American millionaires on their knees in the deep pastures around the Village, sobbing long wet tears into the muddy grass. Eventually, they all go back to her house. The Returners are shaken, giddy with emotion. She gives them tea and home-made scones by the fire. Calms them down. The worst is over now. They have found the old home - they have stood in it, like in a new home - and now they can come back any time.

And they do come back, regularly. Often bringing other relatives, always calling to see her before going on to 'the old place'. Her Facebook friends include CEOs from across the English-speaking world. In her house on the right as you go up the slope into the Village, she waits for others. She is the Rememberer, the Welcomer. Her

name is Norma O'Donoghue. I want her to ask her to help me recall exactly how we did things back when I lived here. She knows me, knows my people. A small child in the 1970s, I left in the late '80s, shortly before the Celtic Tiger boom that made the whole country's economy so much richer. I'm just a Village girl who's been away for a few decades. Most of her Returners are making exotic journeys much more far-flung than mine. They come from Tasmania, or from the 1850s.

My own most vivid and tactile sense and memory of the Village – pervading everything else like a perfume - is of the trees. The touch, feel, smell and mood of specific, individual trees. Each had its own personality, ambiance, shape and texture - an overall feel like a house or a person has. First, each species of tree had its own character. An hour playing under any Sycamore was very different from an afternoon among Blackthorns. And then each individual tree of that species had its own unique flavour, composed like a recipe from the site where it was growing, what was around it, the way the weather had hit it, the shape its branches had grown into…

In those days, children lived mainly outdoors in our free time and we unthinkingly, automatically, used trees as our buildings. They were our private dwelling-spaces away from the adults. I realise now that trees did the babysitting - the equivalent of paid nannies nowadays. We spent entire weeks playing in the canopy of the big Horse Chestnut tree at the end of our back-yard. Or trespassing on the dry, sweet-scented circle of ground under the giant Sequoia in the priest's garden. Or - with even less likelihood of detection - clambering around inside the towering cliffs of Rhododendrons dotted like small mountains around the Manor's estate.

The most intimate of these spaces was the little house that four or five of us small girls made for ourselves in the middle of the Ball-Alley Wood. We were three pairs of sisters from the Village houses, all matched in age. The Ball-Alley Wood was an unvisited half-acre of high, impenetrable shrubbery behind a very old stone hand-ball alley beside the Village. It was an immense thicket of Blackthorn, guarded by a perimeter of gnarled, entangled Laurel that we loved. The Laurel leaves were long, fresh oblongs twice the length of your little hand, of an impossibly glossy green. Like a beautiful object you might receive for your birthday or for Christmas. The Blackthorn sits on the ground forming a cloud of spindly, thin branches with black, woody thorns an inch long pointing in every direction. Being small and agile, we found the macabre thorns easy to avoid. We broke pathways through this Blackthorn and cleared a 3-D space in it, tall enough for us to stand up in and for it to be our house, once we had meticulously swept the earth in there with branches.

I can't explain it. There was nothing 'there' - not even a semblance of makeshift furniture or rugs or cups. But we must have furnished all that with our imagination. Because I remember our house in the Ball-Alley Wood as being vivid, palatial, private fun.

The one prop we did use was dried brown seeds from the dock plant, which we gathered to use as Tea. They looked like the brown-black tea leaves that our mothers bought in packets at the Village shop. Unseen at the heart of the wood, we served each other this Tea in cups made from the shiny laurel leaves. There was no attempt to improvise any semblance of plates or trays of cakes and biscuits. Those were just ‘there’ - in full technicolour and flavour - hanging in the thick air of the game. Sitting on logs on the carefully swept earth, we sipped each other’s tea and enjoyed those delicacies.

No-one else ever knew we were in there. Adults had no idea where you were when you were Out Playing. If one of our Ball-Alley Wood tea parties was for a special occasion, we hooked fuchsia flowers over our ears. Little chandeliers of scarlet and pink, those soft earrings glowed like fairy sculptures on our cheeks in the dark wood.

Children weren’t a focal point of society then, as they are now - little queens whose every move is fascinating to their relatives. Adults saw us more as works in progress, on our way to becoming full people. Adults never spent ‘quality time’ with children or questioned them about their thoughts or experiences. They felt no obligation to invent activities to keep us entertained. That suited us just fine, giving us a lot of physical and mental freedom in how we spent our time. Our time could head off for days on a tangent of its own in a universe separate from the grown-ups’ world.

I realise now that we experienced our chosen trees as friendly, care-taking adults. Adult relatives, neighbours, teachers and priests were remote personages compared to these trees in whose arms - between whose feet - we spent all our free time.

The Horse Chestnut at the end of our back-yard was warm, ample, strong and welcoming. Arms open wide like a sunny day, like a strong, muscular friend who could look after everything.

The giant Beeches in the Manor Wood: cool and aloof. Ancient and tall. Their thin skin is always cold to the touch. Slightly eerie, as if metallic or out of a fridge. Down at the roots were those caverns where fairies lived inside moist, mossy doors. Up above, those Beeches are beyond knowing. All we know is that in Autumn, they throw down beautiful seeds that you can keep and play with for a long time. They look valuable, like things you would buy in shops. Crafted, chiselled, triangular objects, rigid and sharp-edged. They are shiny and lustrous. Rich, mahogany hues are burnished into their woodgrain, when you look close-up.

The giant Sequoia at the turn in the driveway into the priest’s garden is quite the opposite of the Beeches. The floor around its base is always mysteriously dry - dryer than anywhere else in our wet Irish world. That Sequoia has a laughing, sunny energy as if it’s still standing in a hot, dry country, enjoying itself. It’s somehow a self-

contained microcosm of a lovely, lazy, drying heat. The ground up to a yard out from its base is carpeted six inches deep with tiny, soft-but-firm catkins that the tree drops there each year (are they flowers? seeds? branch-tips?). Green and scaly like little worms half an inch long, they turn orange-brown when they dry out. They build up a soft, bouncy cushion around the base of the Sequoia.

Bizarrely, the bark of that tree's vast trunk is soft too. It's much thicker and more fibrous than any other bark we knew. More like something from the jungle. Layered strips of it curl off spontaneously in great chunks, showing more underneath. And it's as soft as the cushion on a sofa. For fun, we would kneel down and bang our heads off it, just to feel how it didn't hurt. Your head bounced back off it with no sensation. The resinous, exotic perfume under that canopy was truly wonderful. It was like no other smell we knew except perhaps the incense in the church. But the Sequoia smelt sweeter, lighter and more airy, like a natural breeze.

Just a hundred yards away, our Blackthorns in the Ball-Alley Wood had a very different, fairy-like vibe. Blackthorn draws you in like a spell, when it's a big, multi-dimensional bush or thicket. A timeless, magical feeling of security, space and secret freedom once you get inside. Like a silent music playing. Very odd.

The Laurels in the Ball-Alley Wood - and all Laurels - felt to us protective and comforting. An old-fashioned '*will look after everything*' feeling. And yet the façade of a Laurel tree is glamorous, pert and shiny. Like a smart lady in her Sunday best, heading off somewhere business-like.

Laurel is adult, responsible, safe and holding, like a nice mother or teacher. It holds the space and the boundary, so that you can play invisibly behind it. The branches are only a couple of inches thick and they grow in every direction - up, down, out sideways and around - not just straight up. Interlinked Laurel trees make a kind of spaghetti network that you can clamber around inside or swing from like monkeys. The branches aren't very thick but they're smooth, welcoming, extremely strong and just slightly flexible. They don't mind you swinging off them and unless you choose one too young, they won't break. Their skin is thick and even, warm to the touch like the skin on a slim, lean, muscular human arm. All this goes on behind the scenes while to the passing world Laurels show only their unmoving wall of rigid, glossy leaves.

Hawthorn: cute, diminutive trees no taller than a man. Attractive to children because as if scaled to their size. In May they produced the most beautiful blossoms. Exquisitely crafted ivory-white roses no bigger than a child's fingernail, with little crimson-pink hearts, scenting faintly of honey. We associated them with Saint Teresa, the girl in our Book of Saints who was known as 'The Little Flower'. Once, while picking my way around on my own in the dimness of the Manor Wood, I

suddenly came upon a Hawthorn tree in an impossible glory of scented blossom. Unusually, I picked a bouquet of flowering branches to take home to my mother as a rare romantic gift.

When she saw me walk in the door with them she opened her mouth and eyes wide and started screaming. It's the only time I have ever seen that woman panic. Mouth distorted, arms flailing wildly at me to get back out, get out, as if she could expulse me back out the door by making enough wind with her arms from across the room. Her shouts backed me out of the house and out of our yard, across the road and got me to throw the blossoms back over the Wood Wall where they had come from.

She calmed down then and explained something I hadn't known. That the Hawthorn is the tree of the Fairy People and must never be plucked. And above all, that its blossoms must never - *ever* - be brought into a human home. I felt ashamed to have made such a mistake. But she said it was fine to play around them outside, so long as you never picked one of their flowers.

Having understood the rule, I continued to enjoy playing in and under Hawthorns. They had a much older, wilder, craggier feeling than the other types of trees, as if Hawthorns stepped directly out of the ancient Irish mythology books that we read at school. They are angular, dense and thorny, but for some reason it felt safe and cuddly once you were settled inside a suitable Hawthorn. Then they seemed to tell you stories and lore from other times and places - stories that you both could and could not actually hear.

Sycamore: thin skin. Fairly cool and aloof. But they countered this by sending down wonderful toys in Autumn: spindle-seeds that made their long flight down to the ground in slow pirouettes, like fancy parachutists showing off. You could gather those seeds and keep them. They had a little green knob at one end and a gossamer wing like that of a dragon-fly, stretching away at the other end. These little structures were covered in a fine green skin so resilient you couldn't penetrate it with your fingernail. They were very different from the burnished triangular seeds of the Beeches. But put together with the pricelessly shiny, wood-coloured conkers of the Horse-Chestnut, the three different types of seeds made a great collection to head into the winter with.

Camellia: Up near the Manor House in the Manor Wood there was a secret, overgrown Camellia that stood tall and narrow as a two-storey house. It leant against the outside of the old Walled Garden, covered by the canopy of the Arboretum, in a corner that was always shady, wet and dripping. Very few people knew of this Camellia tree. You had to be a dedicated crawler of the undergrowth to come across it. Its big tropical flowers opened deep scarlet inside that tall, wet, black-green

corner. They were sensual, luxurious - almost obscene - in a way that nothing else in our world was.

By our mid-teens, we had given up those earlier intimacies with trees. Commuting on the slow bus to school in the city and coming back with much longer, harder homework kept us indoors more. But one tree did still dominate my free time in the Village in those teen years. Whenever we were free, it called like a siren. It took a bit of effort to get there: first, because it was deep in the heart of the Manor Estate and second, because it was beside the driveway exposed in full view of the Manor House.

My companion was 18 and I was 16. He was gay. We were best friends. Coming from the two Village families living closest to the Manor Estate, we were lifelong, experienced trespassers who knew every growing, mucky inch of it better than its aristocrat owners ever did. From age 4 or 5, once we could get over the Wood Wall, we would each separately spend our days crawling, wading and clambering through its undergrowth behind bunches of older siblings who wouldn't let us hang out with them yet.

The Estate was - and still is - an abandoned wonderland of exotically planted walled gardens, landscaped valleys, overgown courtyards, covered walkways, streams, dams, mills, moats and islanded lakes. Throughout the Occupation of Ireland by the British, it was carefully curated and maintained for the family of English aristocrats by teams of professional gardeners, game-keepers and other staff who were long gone in our time. By then, the family retreated for most of the time to their other estates in England or India. They only visited occasionally for a few days' damp, mouldy stay in the neglected grand House.

Like resident rats or squirrels, we kids knew every inch of their Estate up close. But it was he who showed me that particular tree when we were teenagers. Normally we wouldn't ever approach it because of the exposed line of view up to the House. One of the few places where the owners could ever spot us, Village kids always avoided it.

But he showed me how to sprint out from undercover keeping low to the ground and - on the side of the tree facing away from the House - make the quick, easy climb up the seven or eight feet into the tree's bosom. This broad space opened out like a shallow cradle or the palm of a giant hand. A ring of branches each a foot thick curved out and up from the edges of this platform, so no-one could ever see you were in there. Not even if they stood right beside the tree.

This became the place that he and I found most relaxing at that time in our lives. It became a necessary luxury to flee there together as often as possible and just lie

around up there, smoking, day-dreaming, asking each other questions. I don't know what we talked about but in those years conversation swilled between us in a dreamlike flow that we never had to think about.

Like many of my own relatives nearly a hundred years earlier, he emigrated to Australia. I've never seen him again. We've both been back to the Village but never at the same time. I know he always visits Norma O'Donoghue when he's there. I know he sometimes brings his Australian husband and they all drink tea by the fire.

But now, it's my turn to approach her. With some trepidation, I reach her door. She throws me by opening it before I knock. She says 'Ah, there you are. I saw you coming up the road.'

'I knew you'd turn up eventually', she said as she settled us by the fire with tea and plates of scones. 'I heard you were around.'