

## **A black ship and a silver bus**

Someone is leaving Crow Glen. In fact, a group of eight are leaving. A mother and her seven children. They are leaving in the back of an open farm-cart, pulled along by a horse driven by a man sitting up front. These eight won't ever be back. They are leaving forever, going to a different universe. Like dying, but still in this life.

After five hours of banging along roads of dirt and stone, they will draw near to the coast at Cobh. Tall as a castle, a dark wooden ship looms up against the quayside there. With hundreds of others, they will be herded into its closed underbelly. It has been prearranged. Before their little huddle stumbles up the plank into the ship's loud creaking hull, they will get their first ever glimpse of the sea.

These kind of ships have come to be called coffin ships. This one is named 'The Lismore'. It is bound for a land of ice called Grosse Île. Their bodies already broken by famine, up to a third of the wretches in the bottom of these ships die during the two-month Atlantic crossing.

The father of the seven children left on one of these ships eighteen months earlier. He died during the voyage, his body thrown into the sea. The mother and children don't know that he died. He was meant to send a letter calling them to follow him, once he had found survival in America. They hope they will somehow find him in America, by asking people there whether anyone has seen him. But they can't wait any longer for the letter. Another week would see their little group dying, one by one. She has decided they must go now. They must try the very tiny margin of luck that is left to them.

Her name is Joanna Carney. She is from the beautiful, intensely green hillside called Doon, in the parish of Crow Glen. She dreamt that God was calling them to America, giving them a way out. She saw a watery, heaving route on which they could travel away from the deaths of the neighbours. Otherwise, Death was on its way for the eight of them too. It was coming very soon for every single one left on that hillside.

There was nothing left now around their group but four cold, wet walls. Everything had been sold, or burnt for a spark of warmth. Anything that could conceivably be boiled, they had tried to eat it. Leather, cloth, tree-branches. Stew it, shred it, break it down somehow to swallow it. A knife-twist in her gut told her to stop thinking about that now. In her stomach she had pains the like of which she hadn't felt since the birth of the youngest twenty months earlier.

She had decided. Tomorrow she would tell the landlord's man when he came to carry out of the cottages those who had died the night before. She would tell him that yes, she accepted the landlord's offer of passage on the coffin ship for herself and the children, in exchange for leaving the land and the house back to the landlord forever. She would go with the children into the ship, where they would each receive a bowl of liquid swill every day during the crossing. And maybe, please God, they would find some way to stay alive on the other side.

The day the cart pulled up into the yard for the journey, the landlord's man rang a loud hand-bell over and over. Like a smaller version of the funeral bell on the church in the Village, it was the well-known signal for the cart for Cobh. It often rang out across the fields. But today it was ringing for her.

At first, jolting along the road in the rain, she could feel only pain. Pains in her bones and muscles, pains in her stomach, pain in her head. But the beat of the horses' hooves and the swaying eventually brought a kind of numbness, a blessing she hadn't experienced for a while. But it was pierced by the flash-memory agony of leaving the house a few hours earlier. Touching the walls, close-up and in slow-motion, as her feet moved her towards the door, while the bell clanged demandingly outside. Never - however long she would remain alive - would she forget the clangs of that bell, like blows raining down on her.

Between 1850 and 1852, the Irish potato famine killed 47 people in the Village. At its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the year 2000, Norma O'Donoghue created an exhibition about it. She displayed it in the Old School in the middle of the Village, now used as a community room since a modern primary school had been built further up the Road. She put the display on during the Village's ancient Midsummer festival, which draws hundreds. Even people who have migrated to the city or beyond come back for this long day of ritual and celebration that culminates in a street party around the Bonfire at night.

Like them, I was back visiting for that Bonfire Night and I threaded made my way through the crowds to get into the Old School to see this home-made exhibition. It was an eye-opener for me. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. Norma had glued together on paper a close-up map of the Village, showing each house and the familiar names of the families who had always lived there.

As a child I had been inside every house in the Village. With my sister, when we couldn't sleep, we would play a game of mentally going into every house, from the Crossroads Below to the Crossroads Above, remembering what each house was like inside and describing it to each other.

Norma had drawn each house as a box lined up next to the next house. Inside each box, she had written the number of people who had died of starvation in that house during the Famine. She used official records of the bodies that had been carried out of each house by the authorities. She transcribed from the records the name and age of each corpse. Bernie O' Sullivan, 61. Jeremiah O'Driscoll, her grandson, aged 4. Jackie O' Driscoll, her son-in-law, the child's father, aged 31.

I ran my finger down the hand-drawn map of these houses whose interiors I knew so well. Inside most, a range of people had died of starvation, across a spread of age-groups.

I had never been told about this in the Village, neither by my family nor at school. There had been no mention of it ever. We were taught at school in passing a few remote, summary facts about the Famine. Like everyone else, I had seen in musty old books the creepy nineteenth-century etchings of writhing skeletons dying by the roadside, foaming at the mouth from trying to swallow handfuls of grass.

But I had somehow assumed all that had nothing to do with Crow Glen. That the Famine had only happened in farther, wilder reaches of Ireland. In the West, in Connemara, where the land was always rocky and barren. The land around the Village was like a different universe to that. It was as lush as a hallucination. Grass grew impossibly thick and green here. Trees, shrubs, flowers, weeds - everything planted there 'took off' in a un uncontrollable riot of dripping greenery. Farming placidly gave good yields in dairy herds, beef, potatoes, vegetables and animal feed. I had assumed the Famine had happened *elsewhere*.

Nell, the cosy granny I grew up with by our fireside in the Village, was born in 1906. And the Village's Famine shown in Norma's exhibition had happened only fifty years earlier. Neither she nor my grandfather had ever mentioned it, nor anything like it.

There was something faintly thrilling about Norma's one-night exhibition in the Old School that millennium Midsummer. The Old School always smelled of nineteenth-century mortar being eaten by damp and mould. All the old walls in the Village gave off that exact smell when broken into or crumbling. The walls of our own house had yielded up that smell when my father broke into them to build an extension.

As a child, that smell was oddly exciting. It was like a breach in the wall of normal domestic life. It meant a building was being transformed, whether being worked on or slowly falling down. And that often meant we could go and play in those altered spaces, whether for a few hours or for years, if the building had been abandoned.

The Old School had that smell. Only community officials had its keys and we only got in there occasionally. In there were stored the ritual objects used by the Village's

guilds and associations for their meetings, parades and festivals. It was quietly amazing to walk around inside the moulding-mortar smell of the Old School and see the sacred objects that created our festivals lying in storage, as if asleep naked. Banners, statues, sceptres, sashes, badges and flags lay there inert like theatre costumes backstage, waiting to be put on.

Outside in the Village, we had only ever seen these untouchable objects *in action*. Held up proudly during Processions, carried aloft, waving in the breeze, worn across the body: they sprung exotically to life bringing our festival days with them. Those days hovered outside time in a cloud of awe and excitement.

It was almost indecent to see these transformative objects lying inert in the rooms of the Old School. It was like a famous king, only ever seen parading in full pageantry, now glimpsed curled up, wrinkly, sleeping like a baby.

That bonfire Night, as I ran my finger down Norma's hand-drawn exhibition about our Famine dead, I noticed the official records said where each of the dead were found in their house. 'Agnes Reilly, 27, curled up in corner of back room'. 'John Reilly, 51, in the bed in the side room'.

The information under my finger coincided with the primitive excitement of the street-festival outside. Through the open windows, you could smell the hot take-away foods at a stall outside. Music throbbed in from the street. There was dancing, the first crackle of the Bonfire as it roared up into the black night like a dragon, the faces around it lit up in orange.

There was some kind of deep thrill in the contrast. We had survived what was in that exhibition, or at least some of our people had somehow survived it. Enough of them for us all to be there, that night, at The Bonfire.

I didn't give the exhibition much thought over the following years as I was busy with my own life and work abroad. I hadn't ever gotten the chance to ask Norma O' Donoghue the questions that eventually occurred to me about it. Where did she get that archive information? Why did she create that exhibition for that one night? Why had we never been told any of it before, either in the Village or at school? Why was it not part of the official Village history that we all took such pride and interest in?

In her exhibition, I had glimpsed those facts - that reality - for a moment, as if a thick theatre curtain had been lifted away before being dropped back down again. I did not know then that that reality would resurface vividly into my own life many years later, as if Joanna Carney had risen up from the dead in front of me through the rich black earth and thick green grass of Doon hillside.

Joanna herself, as she hustled her cold, wailing infants up the gangplank into the dark ship at Cobh, did not know - had no way of knowing - whether they would each live or die as a consequence of her decision to go. She only knew that if she had not taken this action, they would all definitely have died.

The other thing that Joanna did not know, and could not know, was that 154 years later, twelve of her descendants would return from America to Crow Glen in a silver bus. That they would arrive in Cork city and be driven in a luxurious minibus hired for the occasion, to find and visit the homestead that Joanna had to leave behind that day, and to honour her and thank her as their fore-mother.

When I got a phone-call abroad from Norma O'Donoghue inviting me to join her in welcoming those Americans on that visit, I did not know why she was inviting me. I could not know that the arrival of that silver bus would profoundly alter what I thought I knew about the Village and my own people's role in it.

The day it pulled up outside Norma's house where we stood waiting for it, that bus looked sophisticated enough to have flown all the way from Washington, where they came from.

And the effects the silver bus would have on my own life were indeed as strange as the Wanderly Wagon that used to fly into the Village on our TV screen every evening when I was a kid.