Whitethorn Woods

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Extract

CHAPTER 1

The Road, the Woods and the Well – 1

Father Brian Flynn, the curate in St Augustine's, Rossmore, hated the Feast Day of St Ann with a passion that was unusual for a Catholic priest. But then as far as he knew he was the only priest in the world who had a thriving St Ann's Well in his parish, a holy shrine of dubious origin. A place where parishioners gathered to ask the mother of the Virgin Mary to intercede for them in a variety of issues, mainly matters intimate and personal. Areas where a clodhopping priest wouldn't be able to tread. Like finding them a fiancé, or a husband, and then blessing that union with a child.

Rome was as usual unhelpfully silent about the well.

Rome was probably hedging its bets, Father Flynn thought grimly, over there they must be pleased that there was *any* pious practice left in an increasingly secular Ireland and not wishing to discourage it. Yet had not Rome been swift to say that pagan rituals and superstitions had no place in the Body of Faith? It was a puzzlement as Jimmy, that nice young doctor from Doon village, a few miles out, used to say. He said it was exactly the same in medicine: you never got a ruling when you wanted one, only when you didn't need one at all.

There used to be a ceremony on 26 July every year where people came from far and near to pray and to dress the well with

garlands and flowers. Father Flynn was invariably asked to say a few words, and every year he agonised over it. He could not say to these people that it was very near to idolatry to have hundreds of people battling their way towards a chipped statue in the back of a cave beside an old well in the middle of the Whitethorn Woods.

From what he had read and studied, St Ann and her husband St Joachim were shadowy figures, quite possibly confused in stories with Hannah in the Old Testament who was thought to be for ever childless but eventually bore Samuel. Whatever else St Ann may have done in her lifetime, two thousand years ago, she certainly had *not* visited Rossmore in Ireland, found a place in the woods and established a holy well that had never run dry.

That much was fairly definite.

But try telling it to some of the people in Rossmore and you were in trouble. So he stood there every year mumbling a decade of the rosary, which couldn't offend anyone, and preaching a little homily about goodwill and tolerance and kindness to neighbours, which fell on mainly deaf ears.

Father Flynn often felt he had quite enough worries of his own without having to add St Ann and her credibility to the list. His mother's health had been an increasing worry to them all, and the day was rapidly approaching when she could no longer live alone. His sister Judy had written to say that although Brian might have chosen the single, celibate life, she certainly had not. Everyone at work was either married or gay. Dating agencies had proved to be full of psychopaths, evening classes were where you met depressive losers; she was going to come to the well near Rossmore and ask St Ann to get on her case.

His brother Eddie had left his wife Kitty and their four children to find himself. Brian had gone to look for Eddie – who had now found himself nicely installed with Naomi, a girl twenty years younger than the abandoned wife – and had got little thanks for his concern.

'Just because you're not any kind of a normal man at all, it doesn't mean that the rest of us have to take a vow of celibacy,' Eddie had said, laughing into his face.

Brian Flynn had felt a great weariness. He thought that he *was* in fact a normal man. Of course he had desired women, but he had made a bargain. The rules, at the moment, said if he were to be a priest then there must be no marriage, no children, no good normal family life.

Father Flynn always told himself that this was a rule that would one day change. Not even the Vatican could stand by and watch so many people leave the ministry over a rule that was made by Man and not by God. When Jesus was alive all the Apostles were married men, the goalposts were moved much later.

And then all the scandals in the Church were surely making the slow-moving conservative cardinals realise that in the twenty-first century some adaptations must be made.

People did not automatically respect the Church and Churchmen any more.

Far from it.

There were hardly any vocations to the priesthood nowadays. Brian Flynn and James O'Connor had been the only two ordinations in the diocese eight years back. And James O'Connor had left the Church because he had been outraged by the way an older, abusive priest had been protected and allowed to escape either treatment or punishment by a cover-up.

Brian Flynn was hanging in there, but only just.

His mother had forgotten who he was, his brother despised him and now his sister Judy was making a trip from London to visit this cracked pagan well and wondering, would it work better if she came on the saint's Feast Day.

Father Flynn's parish priest was a gentle elderly man, Canon Cassidy, who always praised the young curate for his hard work.

'I'll stay on here as long as I can, Brian, then you'll be considered old enough and they'll give you the parish,' Canon Cassidy often

said. He meant very well and was anxious to spare Father Flynn from the indignity of having some arrogant and difficult parish priest brought in over the curate's head. But at times Brian Flynn wondered would it be better to let nature take its course, to hasten Canon Cassidy to a home for the elderly religious, to get someone, almost anyone, to help with the parish duties.

Admittedly attendance at church had died off a great deal since he was a young man. But people still had to be baptised, given first communion, have their confessions heard; they needed to be married and buried.

And sometimes, like when in the summer a Polish priest came along to help him, Brian Flynn used to think he might manage better alone. The Polish priest last year spent *weeks* making garlands for St Ann and her well.

Not long ago he had been in the junior school at St Ita's and asked if any of the pupils wanted to become nuns when they grew up. Not an unreasonable question to ask little girls in a Catholic school. They had been mystified. No one seemed to know what he meant.

Then one of them got it. 'You mean like the movie *Sister Act*?'

Father Flynn felt that the world was definitely tilting.

Sometimes when he woke in the morning, the day stretched ahead of him, confused and bewildering. Still he had to get on with things, so he would have his shower and try to pat down his red hair which always stood in spikes around his head. Then he would make a cup of milky tea and a slice of toast and honey for Canon Cassidy.

The old man always thanked him so gratefully that Father Flynn felt well rewarded. He would open the curtains, plump up the pillows, and make some cheerful comment about how the world looked outside. Then he would go to the church and say a daily Mass for an ever-decreasing number of the faithful. He would call to his mother's house, heart in his mouth about how he would find her.

Invariably she would be sitting at her kitchen table looking lost and without purpose. He would explain, as he always did, that he was her son, a priest in the parish; and he would make her a breakfast of porridge and a boiled egg. Then he would walk down Castle Street with a heavy heart to Skunk Slattery's newsagents where he would buy two newspapers: one for the canon and one for himself. This usually involved some kind of intellectual argument with Skunk about free will or predestination or how a loving God could allow the tsunami, or a famine. By the time he got back to the priests' house, Josef, the Latvian carer, had arrived and got Canon Cassidy up, washed and dressed him and made his bed. The canon would be sitting waiting for his newspaper. Later, Josef would take the old man for a gentle walk to St Augustine's Church where he would say his prayers with closed eyes.

Canon Cassidy liked soup for his lunch and sometimes Josef took him to a café but mainly he took the frail little figure back to his own house where his wife Anna would produce a bowl of something home-made; and in return the canon would teach her more words and phrases in English.

He was endlessly interested in Josef and Anna's homeland, asking to see pictures of Riga and saying it was a beautiful city. Josef had three other jobs: he cleaned Skunk Slattery's newsagents, he took the towels from Fabian's hairdressers to the Fresh as a Daisy Launderette and washed them there, and three times a week he took a bus out to the Nolans' place and helped Neddy Nolan look after his father.

Anna had many jobs too: she cleaned the brasses on the doors of the bank, and on some of the office buildings which had big important-looking notices outside; she worked in the hotel kitchens at breakfast time doing the washing up; she opened the flowers that came from the market to the florists and put them in big buckets of water. Josef and Anna were astounded by the wealth and opportunities they found in Ireland. A couple could save a fortune here.

They had a five-year plan, they told Canon Cassidy. They were saving to buy a little shop outside Riga.

'Maybe you'll come to see us there?' Josef said.

'I'll look down on you and bless your work,' the canon said in a matter-of-fact tone, anticipating the best in the next world.

Sometimes Father Flynn envied him.

The old man still lived in a world of certainties, a place where a priest was important and respected, a world where there was an answer for every question asked. In Canon Cassidy's time there were a hundred jobs a day for a priest to do. And not enough hours to do them. The priest was wanted, expected and needed at all kinds of happenings in the lives of the parishioners. Nowadays you waited to be asked. Canon Cassidy would have called uninvited and unannounced to every home in the parish. Father Flynn had learned to be more reticent. In modern Ireland, even a town like Rossmore, there were many who would not welcome the appearance of a Roman collar on the doorstep.

So as Brian Flynn set out down Castle Street, he had half a dozen things planned to do. He had to meet a Polish family and arrange the baptism of their twins the following Saturday. They asked him, could the ceremony take place at the well. Father Flynn tried to control his annoyance. No, it would take place at the baptismal font in the Church of St Augustine.

Then he went to the jail to visit a prisoner who had asked for him. Aidan Ryan was a violent man whose wife had finally broken the silence of years and admitted that he had beaten her. He showed no sorrow or remorse, he wanted to tell a rambling tale about it all being her fault as many years ago she had sold their baby to a passer-by.

Father Flynn brought the Blessed Sacrament to an old people's home outside Rossmore with the ridiculous name of Ferns and Heathers. The owner had said it was nicer in a multicultural Ireland not to have everything called by a saint's name. They seemed pleased to see him and showed him their various gardening

projects. Once upon a time all these homes were run by Religious, but this woman Poppy seemed to be making a very good fist of it.

Father Flynn had an old battered car to take him on his travels. He rarely used it within the town of Rossmore itself since the traffic was very bad and parking almost impossible. There had been rumours that a great bypass would be built, a wide road taking the heavy trucks. Already people were in two minds about it. Some were saying that it would take the life out of the place, others claimed that it would return to Rossmore some of its old character.

Father Flynn's next call was to the Nolans' house.

The Nolans were a family that he liked very much. The old man, Marty, was a lively character full of stories about the past; he talked about his late wife as if she were still here, and often told Father Flynn about the miracle cure she had once got from St Ann's Well that gave her twenty-four years more of a good life. His son was a very decent man, he and the daughter-in-law Clare always seemed pleased to see him. Father Flynn had assisted the canon at their marriage some years back.

Clare was a teacher in St Ita's and she told the priest that the school was full of gossip about the new road that was coming to Rossmore. In fact she was asking her class to do a project on it. The extraordinary thing was that from what you heard or could work out, the road would be going right through here, through their own property.

'Wouldn't you get great compensation if it did go through your land?' Father Flynn said admiringly. It was pleasing to see good people being rewarded in this life.

'Oh, but Father, we'd never let it go through *our* land,' Marty Nolan said. 'Not in a million years.'

Father Flynn was surprised. Usually small farmers prayed for a windfall like this. A small fortune earned by accident.

'You see, if it came through here it would mean they'd have to

tear up Whitethorn Woods,' Neddy Nolan explained.

'And that would mean getting rid of St Ann's Well,' Clare added. She didn't have to say that this was the well that had given her late mother-in-law another quarter-century of life. That fact hung there unspoken.

Father Flynn got back into his little car with a heavy heart. This insane well was going to become yet again a divisive factor in the town. There would be still more talk about it, more analysing its worth, claims and counter-claims. With a deep sigh he wished that the bulldozers had come in overnight and taken the well away. It would have solved a lot of problems.

He went to call on his sister-in-law, Kitty. He tried to visit at least once a week, just to show her that she hadn't been abandoned by the whole family. Only Eddie had left her.

Kitty was not in good form.

'I suppose you'll want something to eat,' she said ungraciously. Brian Flynn looked around the untidy kitchen with its unwashed breakfast dishes, the children's clothes on chairs and a great deal of clutter. Not a home to welcome anyone.

'No, I'm great as I am,' he said, searching for a chair to sit on.

'You're better not to eat, I suppose, they feed you like a prize pig in all these houses you visit – it's no wonder you're putting on a bit of weight.'

Brian Flynn wondered, had Kitty always been as sour as this. He couldn't recall. Perhaps it was just the disappearance of Eddie with the sexy young Naomi that had changed her.

'I was in with my mother,' he said tentatively.

'Had she a word to throw to you?'

'Not many, I'm afraid, and none of them making much sense.' He sounded weary.

But he got no sympathy from Kitty. 'Well, you can't expect me to weep salt tears over her, Brian. When she did have her wits, I was never good enough for her marvellous son Eddie, so let her sit and work that one out for herself. That's my view.' Kitty's face

was hard. She wore a stained cardigan and her hair was matted.

For a fleeting moment, Father Flynn felt a little sympathy for his brother. If you had the choice of all the women around, which apparently Eddie had, Naomi would have been an easier and more entertaining option. But then he reminded himself of duty and children and vows, and banished the thought.

'The mother can't manage much longer on her own, Kitty, I'm thinking of selling up her house and moving her into a home.'

'Well, I never expected anything out of that house anyway, so go ahead and do it as far as I'm concerned.'

'I'll talk to Eddie and Judy about it, see what they think,' he said.

'Judy? Oh, does her ladyship ever answer the phone over there in London?'

'She's coming over here to Rossmore in a couple of weeks' time,' Father Flynn said.

'She needn't think she's staying here.' Kitty looked around her possessively. 'This is *my* house, it's all I have, I'm not letting Eddie's family have squatters' rights in it.'

'No, I don't think for a moment that she'd want to . . . to . . . um . . . put you out.' He hoped his voice didn't suggest that Judy would *never* stay in a place like this.

'So where will she stay then? She can't stay with you and the canon.'

'No, one of the hotels, I imagine.'

'Well, Lady Judy will be able to pay for that, unlike the rest of us,' Kitty sniffed.

'I was thinking about Ferns and Heathers for our mother. I was there today, the people all seem very happy.'

'That's a Protestant home, Brian, the priest can't send his own mother to a Protestant place. *What* would people say?'

'It's not a Protestant home, Kitty.' Father Flynn was mild. 'It's for people of all religions or no religions.'

'Same thing,' Kitty snapped.

'Not at all, as it happens. I was there yesterday bringing them Holy Communion. They are opening a wing for Alzheimer's patients next week. I thought maybe if any of you would like to go and look at it . . .' He sounded as weary as he felt.

Kitty softened.

'You're not a bad person, Brian, not in yourself. It's a hard old life what with no one having any respect for priests any more or anything.' She meant it as a kind of sympathy, he knew this.

'Some people do, just a little bit of respect,' he said with a watery smile, getting up to leave.

'Why do you stay in it?' she asked as she came to the door.

'Because I joined up, signed on, whatever, and very occasionally I do something to help.' He looked rueful.

'I'm always glad to see you anyway,' said the charmless Kitty Flynn, with the heavy implication that she was probably the only one in Rossmore who might be remotely glad to see him anywhere near her.

He had told Lilly Ryan that he would call and tell her how her husband Aidan was getting on in prison. She still loved him and had often regretted that she had testified against him. But it had seemed the only thing to do, the blows were so violent now that she had ended up in hospital and she had three children.

He didn't feel in the mood to talk to her. But since when was all this about feeling in the right mood? He drove into her little street.

The youngest boy Donal was in his last year at the Brothers School. He would not be at home.

'Aren't you a very reliable man, Father?'

Lilly was delighted to see him. Even though he had no good news for her it was at least consoling to be considered reliable. Her kitchen was so different to the one he had just left. There were flowers on the window sill, gleaming copper pans and pots;

there was a desk in the corner where she earned a small living by making up crosswords: everything was in order.

She had a plate of shortbread on the table.

'I'd better not,' he said regretfully. 'I heard in the last place that I was as fat as a pig.'

'I bet you did not.' She took no notice of him. 'Anyway can't you walk it all off you in the woods above? Tell me, how was he today?'

And with all the diplomacy that he could muster, Father Flynn tried to construct something from his meeting with Aidan Ryan that morning into a conversation that would bring even a flicker of consolation to the wife he had once beaten and now refused to see. A wife that he seriously believed had sold their eldest baby to a passer-by.

Father Flynn had looked up newspaper accounts over twenty years ago of the time that the Ryan baby girl had been taken from a pram outside a shop in town.

She had never been found. Alive or dead.

Father Flynn managed to keep the conversation optimistic by delivering a string of clichés: the Lord was good, one never knew what was going to happen, the importance of taking one day at a time.

'Do you believe in St Ann?' Lilly asked him, suddenly breaking the mood.

'Well, yes, I mean, of course I believe that she existed and all that . . .' he began blustering and wondering where this was leading.

'But do you think that she is there listening at the well?' Lilly persisted.

'Everything is relative, Lilly, I mean, the well is a place of great piety over centuries and that in itself carries a certain charge. And of course St Ann is in heaven and like all the saints interceding for us . . .'

'I know, Father, I don't believe in the well either,' Lilly

interrupted. 'But I was up there last week and, honestly, it's astonishing. In this day and age all the people coming there, it would amaze you.'

Father Flynn assembled a look of pleased amazement on his face. Not very successfully.

'I know, Father, I felt the same as you do, once. I go up there every year, you know, around Teresa's birthday. That was my little girl, who disappeared years before you came to the parish here. Usually it's just meaningless, but somehow last week I looked at it differently. It was as if St Ann really was listening to me. I told her all the trouble that had happened as a result of it all, and how poor Aidan had never been right since it happened. But mainly I asked her to tell me that Teresa was all right wherever she is. I could sort of bear it if I thought she was happy somewhere.'

Father Flynn looked mutely at the woman, unable to summon any helpful reaction.

'But anyway, Father, I know people are always seeing moving statues and holy pictures that speak, and all that kind of nonsense, but there was something, Father, there really was something.'

He was still without words but nodding so that she would continue.

'There were about twenty people there, all sort of telling their own story. A woman saying so that anyone could hear her, "Oh, St Ann, will you make him not grow any colder to me, let him not turn away from me any more . . ." Anyone could have heard her and known her business. But none of us were *really* listening. We were all thinking about ourselves. And suddenly I got this feeling that Teresa was fine, that she had a big twenty-first birthday party a couple of years ago and that she was well and happy. It was as if St Ann was telling me not to worry any more. Well, I *know* it's ridiculous, Father, but it did me a lot of good and where's the harm in that?

'I just wish that poor Aidan could have been there when she said it or thought it or transferred it to my mind or whatever she did. It would have given him such peace.'

Father Flynn escaped with a lot of protestations about the Lord moving in mysterious ways and even threw in the bit of Shakespeare about there being more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy. Then he left the little house and drove to the edge of Whitethorn Woods.

As he walked through the woods he was greeted by people walking their dogs, joggers in tracksuits getting some of the exercise he obviously needed himself according to his sister-in-law. Women wheeled prams and he would stop to admire the babies. The canon used to say that a playful greeting of 'Who have we here?' was a great get-out when you came across a child in a pram. It covered both sexes and a failing memory for names. The others would fill you in and then you could take it up from there – grand little fellow, or isn't she a fine little girl?

He met Cathal Chambers, a local bank manager, who said he had come up to the woods to clear his head.

He had been flooded by people wanting to borrow money to buy land round here so that they could sell it at a huge profit once the new road was given the okay. It was very hard to know what to do. Head Office had said he was the man on the ground so he should have a feel for what was going to happen. But how could you have a feel for something like that?

He said that Myles Barry the solicitor was exactly in the same predicament. Three different people had come into him asking him to make an offer to the Nolans for that smallholding they had. It was pure greed, speculation and greed, that's what it was.

Father Flynn said it was refreshing to meet a banker who thought in such terms, but Cathal said that was not at all the way they looked at things in Head Office.

Skunk Slattery was walking his two greyhounds and came up to sneer at Father Flynn.

'There you go, Father, coming up here to the pagan well to hope that the gods of olden times will do what today's Church can't do,' he taunted the priest, while his two bony greyhounds quivered with what seemed like annoyance as well.

'That's me, Skunk, always one for the easy life,' Father Flynn said through gritted teeth. He nailed the smile to his face for the few minutes it took before Skunk ran out of rage towards him and moved the trembling dogs onwards.

Father Flynn also went onwards, his face grim as he headed for the first time ever on his own to visit St Ann's Well. He had been here as part of parish activities, always resentful and confused but never voicing his opinion.

A few wooden signs carved by pious local people over the years pointed to the well, which was in a big, rocky, cavernous grotto. The place was damp and cold; a little stream ran down the hill behind and around the well and it was muddy and splashed where many of the faithful had reached in to take scoops of the water with an old iron ladle.

It was a weekday morning and he thought that there would not be many people there.

The whitethorn bushes outside the grotto were festooned, yes, that was the only word Father Flynn thought suitable, literally festooned with bits of cloth and notes and ribbons. There were medals and holy cures, some of them encased in plastic or cellophane.

These were petitions to the saint, requests for a wish to be granted; sometimes they were thanks for a favour received.

'He's off the drink for three months, St Ann, I thank you and beg you to continue to give him strength . . .'

or

'My daughter's husband is thinking of getting the marriage annulled unless she gets pregnant soon . . .'

or

'I'm afraid to go to the doctor but I am coughing up blood,

please, St Ann, ask Our Lord that I be all right. That it's only some kind of an infection that will pass . . .'

Father Flynn stood and read them all, his face getting redder.

This was the twenty-first century in a country that was fast becoming secular. *Where* did all this superstition come from? Was it only old people who came here? A throwback to a simpler time? But many of the people he had met even this very morning were young and they felt the well had powers. His own sister was coming back from England to pray here for a husband, the young Polish couple wanted their babies baptised here. Lilly Ryan, who thought she heard the statue tell her that her long-disappeared daughter was all right, was only in her early forties.

It was beyond understanding.

He went inside the grotto where people had left crutches and walking sticks and even pairs of spectacles as a symbol of hope that they would be cured and able to manage without them. There were children's bootees and little socks – meaning who knew what? The desire for a child? A wish to cure a sick baby?

And in the shadows, this huge statue of St Ann.

It had been painted and refurbished over the years, making the apple cheeks even pinker, the brown cloak richer, the wisp of hair under the cream-coloured veil even blonder.

If St Ann existed she would have been a small dark woman, from the land of Palestine and Israel. She would *not* have looked like an Irish advertisement for some kind of cheese spread.

And yet kneeling there in front of the well were perfectly normal people. They got more here than they ever did in St Augustine's Church in Rossmore.

It was a sobering and depressing thought.

The statue looked down glassily – which was a bit of a relief to Father Flynn. If he had begun to imagine that the statue was addressing him personally he would really have given up.

But oddly even though the saint was not speaking to him, Father Flynn felt an urge to speak to her. He looked at the young

troubled face of Myles Barry's daughter, a girl who had failed to get into law school to her father's great grief. *What* could she be praying for with her eyes closed and her face so concentrated?

He saw Jane, the very elegant sister of Poppy who ran the old people's home. Jane, who, even to Father Flynn's untutored eye, seemed to be wearing high-fashion designer clothes, was mouthing something at the statue. A young man who ran an organic vegetable stall in the marketplace was there too, his lips moving silently.

As he gave a last look at what he considered an entirely inappropriate representation of the mother of the mother of Jesus, he wished he could ask the saint through the statue whether any of these prayers were ever heard and ever answered. And what did the saint do if two people were seeking conflicting favours?

But this way fantasy lay, and madness. And he was not getting involved.

He stroked the walls of the cave as he left the grotto, damp walls with messages carved on them. He made his way past the whitethorn bushes crowding the entrance, bushes that no one had cut back to give easier access because they felt the hopes and prayers and petitions of so many people were attached to them.

Even on the old wooden gates there was a note pinned:

'*St Ann, hear my voice.*'

All around him Father Flynn could almost hear the voices. Calling and begging and beseeching down the years. He heard himself make up a little prayer.

'Please let me hear the voices that have come to you and know who these people are. If I am to do any good at all here let me know what they are saying and what they want us to hear and do for them . . .'