



NURSE LILY FLANAGAN

by David Hanly

Often, when recalling aspects of my boyhood, I have described myself as accident-prone. But I have always used the phrase reluctantly, because it fails to evoke that perfect picture of a childhood that was a continuum of profound shocks to the body: I did not, it seems to me, live in harmony with my childhood environment, but engaged in constant, unexpected skirmishes with it until, rather late in life, I came to terms with it, made peace with it.

I'm sure this is so much nonsense, and that my childhood was no more hapless than the next: my summers were sunny and prolonged, there were adventures of epic proportions in the 'quarry' in the Fairgreen. I was happy. Nevertheless, memory is an arbitrary editor, and I can summon a litany of such shocks. I fell out of trees in pursuit of birds' eggs; I stepped on invisible shards of glass – always when wearing wellingtons; I ran into layered concrete blocks, opening my knee so that my patella came through, gleaming and pearl-white. I had so many needles inserted in so many places that I felt that any day the stitching would come apart and those nearest me would be showered with frogs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails.

Inevitably, my stricken face became a familiar one to the casualty nightingales of Barrington's. But these were all one-night-stands, so to speak, although I was

rarely able to stand on the night in question, more often being lifted into and out of a neighbour's car.

But I did, once, spend a protected time as an in-patient in Barrington's. I was eight. I was playing soccer one summer evening in 'The Park' at the top of the Fairgreen, when the ball went between the legs of a cart-horse who was grazed there when his day's work was done. I went to retrieve it, and have no memory of the pain as his hoof crashed through my face, cutting a trench through flesh and gums and sending my just-grown second teeth flying in bits all over the park.

Joe Slattery hoisted my unconscious form on to his back and carried me down to my house, which was No. 13, an appropriate number, as far as I was concerned. I recovered consciousness in Bill O'Shea's Ford Prefect, suffocating in my own blood. Then I became oblivious once more. When I awoke again, I was lying in bed looking like someone auditioning for *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb*. My mouth was filled with cat-gut, parts of which in the following weeks I wore away with my tongue.

I was not allowed any visitors, because the prevailing wisdom at the time – for reasons which have never made any sense to me – was that parental or any other kind of visit would

be a bad thing. So I was held up to the window of the ward for my parents to gaze up at my bandaged head. They stood by the wall of the Abbey River, the avaricious gulls a screeching and wheeling garland about their heads. The idea, I suppose, was to reassure them: the picture of the midget mummy at the window probably had quite a different effect.

It was my first time away from home, and my introduction to hospital life. My memories of sights and smells and tastes are as vivid as if I had experienced them 24 hours ago. The food was like nothing I've tasted before or since, but I cannot tell whether it was the quality of the bread or the presence of all that stuff in my mouth: eating anything at all was a feat, and drinking was an experiment each time (it still is, I'm glad to say).

I was far too young to understand what had happened to me, and how deeply it would affect my behaviour in the company of others – especially girls – for a long time afterwards. It was strange, uncomfortable, and lonely. But what made it all bearable was how I was treated by the staff, and one in particular. The little figure in the corner bed, covered in bandages and full of nervous curiosity, became something of a pet, and it was probably my treatment in Barrington's all those years ago that began my lifelong habit of falling in love with nurses. They are, I believe, the most undervalued, underpaid and ill-treated of all of society's workers, and, working long



Picture of 'tall, dark-eyed, willowy' Lily Flanagan (centre) and nine Barrington nurses, taken after her wedding to Michael Crowe.

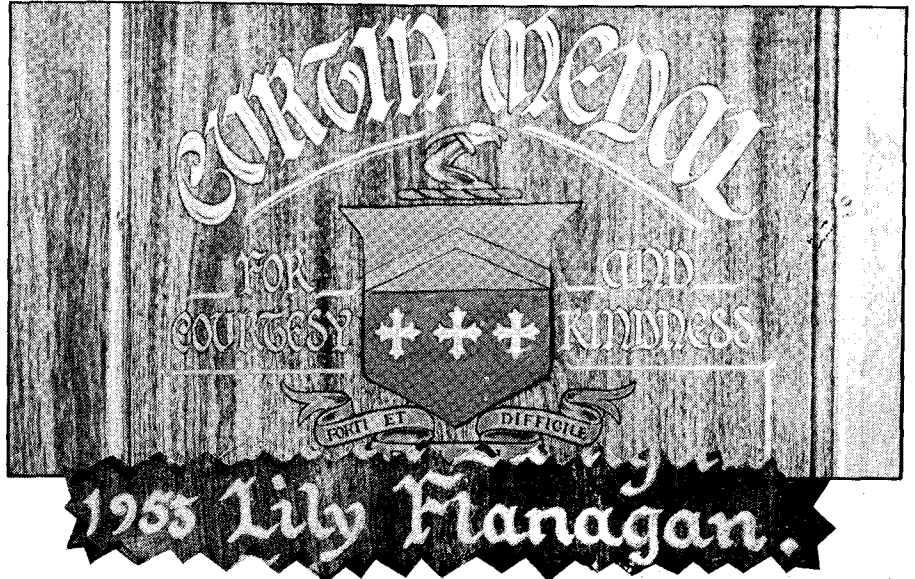


hours with people at their least attractive, they maintain a humorous amiability that is a wonder to behold.

The object of my adoration in Barrington's was a tall, dark-eyed, willowy beauty named Lily Flanagan. She must, I know, have taken some time off to sleep and tend to other matters in her own life and, since I was in a large ward, there were plenty of others constantly demanding attention. But for me she seemed perpetually on call. I was aware too – with that perfect sensitivity that children have for these things – that my calls were answered not with a tired impatience but with smiling and gentle affection, the kind that a child most naturally expects and receives from his own mother.

I find it hard to credit that in the straitened times in which hospitals now find themselves, nurses have time to show concern and affection for individual patients of the order of which Nurse Flanagan showed to me: efficiency is the order of this day. Nevertheless, scarcely creditable or not, those attributes still manifest themselves, as I found during recent brief encounters with the angels of the wards. And I was glad to note, on a final visit to Barrington's before it closed its doors for ever to the plain people of Limerick, that I was not alone in my appreciation of Lily Flanagan's wonderful and selfless work: on a wall plaque listing the prize-winning nurses year by year, her name is to be found taking the honours back then in the early 1950s.

Those are my memories of



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Barrington's: brisk, affectionate care by an undifferentiating staff; masterly surgery by Dr. Michael Roberts; bread that tasted like boiled insoles; needles coming at me day and night and from everywhere. And then of course there were the hourly bulletins on my condition, my face shredded and headbones smashed by the horse's hoof. I did not find out about these bulletins until much later. The first said there was little hope that I would survive. They were wrong

there. The second said I would pull through, but would lose my right eye. That was wrong, too. The last prognosis was that my eye would be saved but my mind would be permanently damaged. There is a body of opinion that would have that last bulletin to be correct. Be that as it may, my memory, at any rate, remains undamaged and undimmed, especially my memory of Nurse Lily Flanagan.

I honour her.



'Lily Flanagan's', New York, one of two taverns owned by her American-based sons, David and Niall, and both named after their mother.