

BALLEA WRITERS

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the third publication in the series titled 'The Barn and other short stories'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was John O'Connell, a founder member and Vice Chairman of Ballea Writer's Group.

Lillian

By John O'Connell



The Home was cold before she arrived. Her name was Lillian and I have loved her since I first set eyes on her. She was with the choir. I walked the mile and a half to Mass every Sunday morning when the weather was not too grim. Lillian played the flute with a fluidity and clarity that took my breath away and when she sang I could have died and gone to heaven.

Before Lillian moved into the Old Oaks Retirement Home I would have tentatively agreed with the sentiments in the 'little ditty about Jack and Diane'. For the residents it seemed that life had gone on a long time 'after the thrill of living had gone'. We ate meals in relative silence with the odd mumbled greeting. We read solitary books in our rooms trying not to be too much trouble. We had our games of bad tempered forty-five in silence, bar the odd disgruntled exclamation at a poorly played hand. We were the picture of people waiting for something to happen or to stop.

She changed the uninspiring life of the home on her first day when she engaged in a game of, progressively louder, animal snap with her grandsons right in the middle of the residents' lounge. It may have been innocuous enough if she hadn't insisted on being a pig while Luke, the younger of them, had to be a gibbon and Trevor an elephant. She invited several of the younger residents to join the fun but got polite refusals for her efforts.

I knew that first day the place would change one way or another. Lillian would never be contained by the bad tempered paper rattling or unfriendly stares of the long-term residents. She paid little attention to the boundaries others had erected to protect themselves from the consequences of their infirmity, real or imagined. I would have to say, however, that the breath of the changes that were wrought over the following months were life transforming. The penny poker sessions that had seemed so daring at first became quite tame when compared with some of the videos she introduced. Best of all were the theatre excursions where she drew all the wrong sort of attention to herself and the rest of us. I imagine that the place must have acquired something of a reputation in the outside world.

It came as a complete mind shift when Lillian insisted that the home should have a PC with broadband Internet access. Most of us had never used any sort of a computer but she took some residents in hand and showed them how to search the web for items that interested them. The excitement that was generated when the website was set up spread

through the home like milk in tea, swirling out from her clique until it affected everyone. This reinroduction of the outer world into our lives had the inevitable effect of drawing us out of the home. The gardeners amongst us took to landscaping the local school's flowerbeds with the enthusiastic approval of the children and staff. They even gave impromptu lessons in horticulture to the awestruck children who surrounded the 'grannies' and 'granddads'.

I loved the affect she had on the life of the home. More especially I loved her. I wasn't blind to her appearance as she wobbled by and I'd heard the 'big boned' remarks of some of the more staid inmates. My hearing was still sharp and my eyes weren't failing that fast. So still I loved her. She didn't know then, never will now.

I have observed her carefully, not stalking or anything, just casually taking note of her. Whenever she was around I was drawn to her. 'You could hardly miss her,' my friends said. But it was not her size so much as her presence; she affected the whole world around her.

Lillian didn't mind what people thought, she was free to be herself and word the signs of her individuality like a medal of honour. She was joyful, exuberant and full of the love of

life. She indulged herself without restraint, not just in what she said, but in how she sang, played the flute and dressed. 'Live your lives,' she'd shout, 'it's not a dress rehearsal you know.' her size was irrelevant but reflected her carefree individuality. When she laughed, the entire place knew she was happy, when she cried she was oddly contained. It may be that only she and I knew that she cried.

The strangest things seemed to affect her. I remember once seeing her stop on a footpath, reach down and move a snail onto the grass. When a sparrow lay shuddering in the driveway I saw the pale shock on her face and a sorrowful tear trickle down her cheek. I wondered why such small things should affect her. So, it came as a surprise to me when I heard she was a vegetarian. As I recalled her habits I realised that I had never seen any meat pass her lips. I don't know why I should have been surprised; she certainly seemed to care deeply about the creatures around her. It was a natural extension of her concern that she would avoid eating the corpses of the things that gave her such joy in life. It must be that her size did affect my judgment after all. I thought I had been more objective but stereotyping is so pervasive.

The day she died will stay with me forever, haunting my dreams. I was

strolling to Mass and there she was across the street, a little way from where the bus had dropped those who couldn't manage the walk. She was a vision in purple, bouncing along, ice cream cone in hand; she liked to moisten her throat before the singing. I saw the sudden shock on her face before she had even changed direction. A tabby cat had scurried onto the road chased by a mongrel dog and it had stopped, staring as if transfixed, at the oncoming bus.

Lillian seemed to jump onto the road crying out. The cat broke its trance and sped away but Lillian was not so fleet of foot. Her size made her ungainly and changing direction was too much for her.

The bus driver had no chance to avoid her. She was too close for him to stop. The traffic was too heavy for him to swerve. I saw it in slow motion; her pointless hand came up to fend herself from the bus. She flew through the air with all the grace of a penguin and when she fell to earth, head first, there was little doubting that she would not get up again.

A crowd gathered around in an instant; many of them knew her to see, mass goes like me. She was clutching urgently at the nearest woman. 'Is it okay? Is it?'

The woman looked at Lillian's blood flowing away and couldn't answer; perhaps she didn't even understand the question. 'She means the cat,' I said. 'Yes, it got away.' I had raised my voice. Lillian heard me probably for the first time, more likely again for the last. She cried then with relief for a tragedy averted. I wondered if the home would be cold again.

CC. John O'Connell 2007



Sharon O'Neill; Secretary, John O'Connell; Vice President, George Olden and Mike Brady; Secretary. Members of the Ballea Writers raise a toast to their Vice President at the announcement of his success in Bealtaine, a literary competition run by Cork County Arts Office.