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## The Irish Mail at Llanfairfechan

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By Kevin O'Hara

Thursday, Dec. 24  
PITTSFIELD

My mom, who passed away in October, was happiest at Christmas with her eight children gathered about: Mickey and Mary, the eldest, carrying the hopes of our family into the New World after we had emigrated here from England in 1953; her three rascallions -- Jimmy, myself, and Dermot -- on best behavior for the season; and the three American-born -- Eileen, Anne Marie and Kieran -- with faces glowing like Advent candles. Dad, too, was full of inexhaustible mirth, bringing home fruitcakes the weight of bowling balls -- gifts from the nuns at St. Luke's Hospital where he worked. Why, even the colored bulbs on our tree lent a cherry warmth to our drafty duplex on Wilson Street.

Christmas cards from the Old Country also brought joy to Mom. At the thump of the mailman's boots on our front porch, we three musketeers would race out in bare socks to retrieve them, and run back inside to stack them up gleefully on Mom's aproned lap, claiming the colorful stamps for our collections. These Yuletide greetings came from Irish girls with whom Mom had nursed in England in the 1930's and '40s -- Margaret Egan, Lizzie Dwyer, Mary Brennan, Sissy Lannon -- names that were as much a seasonal tradition as peanut brittle and ribbon candy.

Sitting in the light of our front room, Mom would relate the contents for all to hear. "Dear 'o dear, Mary Rattigan and her husband, Jim Curran, have finally settled in Wolverhampton." Yes, it was the holidays that brought out Mom's fond memories of her fellow nurses from County Roscommon -- young girls like herself called to St. Andrew's Hospital in Northampton, England, to commence their training.

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St. Andrew's, the largest psychiatric facility in Europe, had opened its doors "for private and pauper lunatics" in 1838. Many notables received care there, from John Clare, the famous "Northamptonshire peasant poet," to James Joyce's daughter, Lucia. During Mom's time, there were many members of the decaying European aristocracy as well.

Mom's favorite was the Honorable Violet Gibson -- daughter of the former Lord Chancellor of Ireland -- who attempted to assassinate Benito Mussolini in Rome in 1926, and resided at St. Andrew's till her death in 1956. Her shots struck him twice in the nose, but Mussolini took the attack lightly and saved her from an angry mob, saying, "Calm yourselves. It is just a simple joke with a pistol shot." Rather than convicted he had her committed, and the nurses at St. Andrew's believed her attempt was brought on by a lover's quarrel.

"Lady Gibson rarely spoke to anyone," Mom told us, "but one morning, out of the blue, she asked if I'd help her sew little pouches into the shoulders of her black dress. She'd go filling these pouches with bread crumbs and sit perfectly still in the rose garden, where sparrows and redbreasts would alight on her shoulders and begin to feed. She did this for years, mind you, and we'd often tell her that her cheeks had been caressed by the wings of a thousand birds, and our words never failed to make her smile."

But nursing at St. Andrew's wasn't always a rose garden. Mom told us of a female patient in Ward Three who tore her hair so viciously that she had to soak her head in antiseptic solution for a week. But Mom refused to blame the patient for the attack. "It was her illness giving out, not herself."

During the Blitz, Mom and her two sisters, Mary and Nancy, were among the nurses assigned to accompany patients to the relative safety of North Wales. They spent several Christmases at the majestic estate of Bryn-y-Neuadd in Llanfairfechan. In fact, Mom's older sister Mary would marry a local carpenter, Eric Griffiths, and raise their family in this picturesque seaside town.

Mom often marveled at the splendor of Bryn-y-Neuadd with its ancient woodlands, Grand Lodge, and Italian gardens. But she, like many others, believed the mansion was inhabited by ghosts, and often heard the wails of bygone patients. But the most haunting sound for Mom was the whistle of the Irish Mail train that hurtled between mountain and sea shortly after midnight, traveling from London's Euston Station to Holyhead, Wales, where it would ferry its mail and migrants across the choppy Irish Sea to Dun Laoghaire, south of Dublin.

"The train's whistle was lonelier than a curlew's cry," Mom explained, as she arrayed her Christmas cards atop the small bookcase. "Especially at Christmas, knowing some of your mates from St. Andrew's were headed home for the holidays. When off-duty, I'd walk the terraced paths down to the railway station, hoping to catch a glimmer of them as they passed. Foolish, really, for the Irish Mail seldom stopped at Llanfairfechan, and the carriages would flicker by faster than a shuffling of playing cards.

"But one Christmas Eve, the train made a rare 'request stop,' so I dashed down the platform like a schoolchild, wiping away frost from carriage windows and peering inside. And, sure, didn't I come upon Molly and Ellie Ganley and, I can tell you, I gave them quite a hop! All I could do was blow them a kiss before they were off again, leaving those Welsh coalfields for the green pastures of home.

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"Twas a long walk back to Bryn-y-Neuadd that night," Mom concluded with a sigh. "Christmas in Ireland was all I pined for at the time -- morning Mass, helping Mama ready the goose, neighbors rambling in the whole day " Her voice quavered, but she caught herself and mussed up our hair with her fingers. "But what's the use of talking? Isn't it Christmas in America! And haven't I pies to mind in the oven."

Now on this, my first motherless Christmas, I find myself as if at Llanfairfechan Station, pacing its platform long before the Irish Mail is due. And if by chance the train does stop here, however briefly, I'll run its length as quickly as any two legs can fly, hoping to catch one last glimpse of Nurse Kelly -- my dear Mom -- smiling joyfully and bound blessedly for home.

Kevin O'Hara is a 30-year psychiatric nurse at BMC. His second book, 'A Lucky Irish Lad,' will be published by Forge Books in February.

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