

## **Mother's Day**

*Brenda Murphy*

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**D**awn. I lie awake. Nausea has been sweeping over me for hours leaving me in a cold sweat. A foot away my cell mate Lorraine lies snoring, her long hair covering most of her face, her arm hanging out of the bed, white and thin, and dangles there, it looks unreal, like a cheap prop from a Hammer horror movie. She looks about sixteen. She is in fact nineteen, serving two life sentences, for murder and attempted murder of a policewoman and policeman. The cell is full of gray, weak light, its high arched ceiling gives the impression of a lot more space than the reality of this ten foot by twelve foot world we share.

On the wing I hear the muted sound of footsteps and the crisp jangle of keys, it is the night guard, doing her hourly check, I have been waiting on her. I climb off the bed awkwardly, my belly, swollen with nine months of baby makes me clumsy. I press the buzzer on the wall beside the cell door, and hear the soft clicking, and see the glow of the flashing light under the cell door. This is how we summon help. The screw will see the flashing light and she will either come or ignore it, depending on her mood. A few moments later the cover on the spy hole in the door slides back, an eye looks in on me, a voice asks, "What is it"? I tell her there is a medicine in the guardroom for me, and I need it. She listens and tells me, not unreasonably, that in an hour I will be out of the cell for breakfast and I can get it then. If she gives it to me now she will have to fill in a report and she has enough to do. With that she slides the cover back on the spy hole, switches off the flashing buzzer and walks away. I lean my back against the cell door, I feel very calm, not angry at all. I am surprised at myself, I am known for my bad temper, I am too weary to argue. In the bed Lorraine moves then sits up, pushing her hair away from her face, seeing me standing at the door she asks if I am all right. I tell her I have been feeling sick. That I had asked for my medication but the screw can't be arsed. She springs from the bed. "We will soon see about that, the bastard!". I start to laugh, tell her to forget it, calm her down. We return to our beds and talk quietly in the growing light until the cell door opens.

This is Sunday morning, the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1977, it is Mother's Day. We are glad it is Sunday because we are allowed out of our cells on a Sunday, we can mix with one another, clean our cells, do our washing. We are (Irish) Republican prisoners, there is a war going on in our country, we see ourselves as prisoners of that war and demand to be treated as such.

So we have been on protest, refusing to cooperate with prison authorities; that includes refusal to do prison work, and refusing to recognize prison authority over us. When we must communicate with them we do so through our own command structure, we do not take orders from screws, we ignore them. Our punishment for this is to lose a day's remission for each day we do not work, lose our weekly food parcel, and weekly visit. We can only have one half hour visit a month. We also lose our right to attend education classes, and lose the right to free association with fellow prisoners. Total overkill as usual. But it is Sunday, and there is no compulsory work on Sunday, and so we are allowed out.

All of a sudden the wing is awash with sound. As the day shift of screws arrives on the wing, keys in locks, doors flung open, the trail of bleary eyed women, each holding chamber pots of piss and shit walk to the sluice room to dump the detritus of their bodies down the loo. I stand in line. I piss a lot now, my pot is over flowing, and the smell of the sluice over powers me. Rosie Callaghan, a young woman from the Short Strand, takes my pot from me, tells me to go and sit down, she will empty my pot. I am grateful. On the wing I breathe in deeply, and start to feel better. Mairead Farrell shouts across the wing to me, she is the OC of our wing. No sign of that brat popping out yet Murphy, a wee bit of semtex might help get things moving." I remember this is her birthday, I can't remember if she is 20 or 21 today. I wish her happy birthday. We have a system for birthdays, we all pool any spare food, biscuits, whatever we can get our hands on during the week and on a Sunday we have a party for whoever's birthday it was during that week. I had been losing weight and I have been allowed a food parcel once a month from when I was in the sixth month of pregnancy, and so we have a good bit of decent grub for the party this time. We banter a bit and I go down to the MO and get the anti nausea medicine.

I sit on a chair outside our cell, while Lorraine cleans it. The wing is all noise and jokes and talk of visits, and gossip, and the pain starts in my back, nothing too bad, but I know all the same that this is the start of labour and I am frightened, but I say nothing. It's early, people are looking forward to the party, I am too. This afternoon, the party is in full swing in the association room, the record player is on, the girls are dancing, I get up, walk to the door, call Lorraine my cell mate and tell her I am in labour. She screams, tells the others, they flock round me. Mairead demands the Principle Officer, she goes to the guardroom to inform her. I go up to my cell to get a bag that

I can put the baby things into. The MO arrives, examines me, and confirms that I am in labour. I wait in the cell with all the women squeezed in there with me, making me laugh. Eileen Morgan informs me having a baby is a doddle, Peggy Friel asks how the fuck would she know, she replies, ``it must be, her Ma done it fourteen times``.

About an hour later the wing gate opens and my name is called. I leave the cell followed by the entire wing of women, two male screws and two female screws are waiting on me. I go to them and they escort me off the wing. All the girls are yelling and cheering, my cell mate is crying. I am brought through the prison to the reception area, where armed police are waiting. They handcuff me and take me out to the yard. There are two police land rovers there, and a British army personnel carrier, a Saracen. There are British soldiers standing about with their rifles. I am in a dressing gown, slippers, with a nightdress underneath, handcuffed. They are all looking at me, I want the ground to open up and swallow me. A policeman points at the Saracen and says, "You get in there." I can't believe it. I am five foot tall, the step into the Saracen is really high off the ground. I walk towards it, everyone watching, then a British soldier walks towards me, looks at the cop and says, "Why can't she travel in the land rover"? The cop says, "Because I say so, put her in". The soldier tells the cop he is just being a bastard, a row goes on for a few moments, but in the end I have to go into the Saracen.

The soldier jumps into the Saracen in front of me, calls to his mates, and they literally lift me inside it. There are two wooden bench type seats running along each side of the Saracen. I sit on one. The soldier sits beside me and the rest of the soldiers pile in behind him and take their places. The doors close, we drive off. The soldier says "You all right love"? I say yes and I thank him. He takes his jacket, rolls it up and puts it behind my back like a cushion, he lights a cigarette and hands it to me. I stopped smoking because I was pregnant but I take it, grateful, he chats away to me. When we arrive at the hospital I have to wait for quite a while in the Saracen, the other soldiers get out but the nice guy sits with me, he is from Newcastle, his name is Ben. A wheelchair arrives. Ben helps me down, young nurse smiles at me, tells me to sit in the wheelchair, I do. The policeman who insisted I ride in the Saracen, steps forward, he opens the handcuffs on the wrist then locks it onto the arm of the wheelchair. The nurse objects, he ignores her. I am pushed into the hospital, two armed policemen on either side, two female screws behind, everyone staring at me.

The day passed in a series of arguments between the police and doctors about their presence in the room, the handcuffs. The final stage of labour arrives and I was to be brought to the delivery suite. They all came along, screws, cops, the lot. Once they had me on the bed in the labour ward, they produced a chain that went around my body and the labour bed, then round each wrist, the doctors went ballistic but it made no difference. The cops informed me I would be giving birth to a deformed provo-bastard and made a few other choice comments. The doctors insisted they remove themselves to the far end of the labour ward, and mobile screens were brought into allow me some privacy for the last stage of labour. I could still hear them talking and laughing, but by then I was beyond care. I was determined not to cry out, at least I could control that.

Just after midnight my mother and sister were allowed in to the labor ward and a few moments later my baby was born, a beautiful girl. Less than 48 hours later I was back in Armagh gaol, at my request. The doctors finally realized that having to stay in a side ward with armed police with me every minute was just too much stress. Back at the prison the other women went crazy over my child, a baby in prison is a cause for great joy. After six weeks the governor came to my cell, he told me I had a choice to make. If I continued with the protest my baby would have to be sent outside to my family, or I could come off the protest and keep my baby for a year at which time they would review my case with the potential to keep her with me until my sentence was served. It was emotional blackmail and more, it was another way of breaking your will, another rub on the grindstone that was the system. More than anything that happened to me in the prison system, this would haunt me forever.

**Brenda Murphy** is a writer and actor living in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She was interned on two occasions for her support of Irish Republican struggles, including membership in the Irish Republican Army.