

'If Tommorrow Never Comes ...'

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Sunday 26th of February 1995 started out as a lovely day, warmer than it had been for a while, and I was about to go to the yard for a walk. As always, I had written to my girlfriend Brenda and our young son Shéa to thank them for the visit and a few presents they had left the day before. It was also a special day in that it was the sixth anniversary of our relationship.

I never reached the yard. I saw the chaplain coming down the wing, and when I heard him ask for me by name, I knew immediately that something was wrong. He asked if I'd like anyone to come with me, so I asked for Sean Lynch, a friend of mine. I knew then it was going to be bad news. When we went into the cell, he asked me if I had a girlfriend called Brenda Curran. I replied, 'Yes, I have.'

He said, 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but she was killed last night in a road accident in County Monaghan.' Of all the things going through my mind, this was the worst imaginable. Since coming to jail, my biggest fear was always that something would happen to Brenda or Shéa.

At the time, I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or not, it was so hard to take in. It was only when I heard my mother tell me on the phone that Brenda had been killed, I knew it was not just a dream. As I tried to come to terms with the reality of what had happened, my thoughts turned to whether I'd get out for Brenda's funeral. Because Brenda and I hadn't been married, I fell outside the stated Northern Ireland Office (NIO) criteria, so I had the added worry of possibly being refused compassionate parole. This thought was too much to bear thinking about. I couldn't sleep and hardly ate with the worry. I was eventually granted 24 hours parole.

Outside, I was met by my family and a friend from jail, Danny Pettigrew, with whom I had once shared a cell when I was on remand. On the long journey down the motorway, I was thinking of our weekly visits and what Brenda had gone through in the last two years, visiting every week without fail. It was ten a.m. when we entered Lisnaskea, and our youth together came flashing back to me. One particular place focused on my mind as I passed it. Sylvan Hill brought me back to the times when Brenda and I were in the same year at St. Ronan's primary school in Lisnaskea. I first captured her attention by knocking her over with my bike on the way home! Despite this inauspicious introduction, we became sweethearts, but didn't really start going out seriously until Brenda was fifteen. In the summer months, we would go cycling together or do a spot of fishing and in the evenings, we would sit in the town chatting with friends. As the car continued up the town, we passed the small sweet shop where Brenda had her first job; a few doors up was the Hughie McBrien's, where we had our

first kiss. We had both looked forward to the day I'd return to Lisnaskea, yet now the town had nothing but sad memories for me.

As we headed up to the chapel to see Brenda for the last time, I recalled the proud day we both brought Shéa up to the same place to be baptised. Entering the chapel, I didn't know what to expect. The reality of what had happened was starting to dawn on me, especially when I saw her name engraved on a brass plaque on the lid of the coffin. Brenda looked lovely. She wore a ring of mine around her neck, which had been taken off me when I was arrested, and Brenda had worn it on a chain ever since. In every photo and every visit it was there, reminding me of our feelings and commitment to each other. A photo of the three of us had been placed beside her. Even though it was very difficult to see Brenda lying in the coffin, it nevertheless helped me to come to terms with the reality of her death. It meant a lot that I was able to say goodbye, though I found it very hard to bring myself to leave.

The funeral mass was difficult because, as I entered the chapel, I was thinking of the day I had dreamed of since coming to jail, the day I would walk down the aisle to marry Brenda. Walking down towards the coffin was the saddest moment of my life. I stared at the coffin the whole way through the mass and felt like breaking down, but I thought I should try to remain strong for both families' sake, for they were as heartbroken as I was. At the burial, I threw in a red rose and stayed there until everybody else had gone.

After the funeral, I spent some time in Brenda's room looking at her clothes, photos – the little things that reminded me of different events in our life together. I took Brenda's engagement ring and a Claddagh ring, both of which were important to me because we had planned to get married. We had put it off because of the peace process, but in the end, we decided we had waited long enough and were to be married on February 15th, 1996. On September 1st last, we were overjoyed at the IRA initiative to push forward the political situation. Neither of us had witnessed peace in our young lives and we both continually discussed the political situation, often speaking of how wonderful it would be to live together in a peaceful Ireland, where our children could live without fear for their safety or their future.

I sat on the bed thinking to myself what it was like for Brenda to be a devoted mother and partner. I was so proud of how strong Brenda had been after my arrest. While sitting there, all aspects of her life revealed themselves. On her table were all Brenda's study materials. She had always wanted to be PE teacher and had returned to full-time study. Our separation was one of the factors in her making this decision, which I fully supported and encouraged, and likewise, Brenda always encouraged me to keep at the studying and better myself as an imprisoned republican. Brenda combined this with full-time work in a local factory, her role as a committed partner, and a perfect mother to a young son. Brenda was also active in her community as a youth club leader working with local children and as a member of the Lisnaskea Emmet's ladies'

football team. Despite coming from a strong Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) background, I was the first one to bring her to Croke Park for the 1989 All Ireland Hurling Final, and this was something we both treasured. Though grieving, I could only feel pride at her accomplishments.

The week Brenda died, she had planned to leave her job in a local factory. We both looked forward to visits during weekdays as a result. Brenda also wanted more time to get involved in Saoirse (Campaign Group for the release of Irish political prisoners) and Sinn Féin locally. When the local Saoirse committee was launched, Brenda immediately involved herself and was keen to attend all the local events. She also attended the annual Sinn Féin dinner for the first time and told me about Martin McGuinness attending and making a great speech. It had a really positive effect on Brenda and she planned to attend this year's ArdFheis (Sinn Féin's annual conference) in Dublin as a result. Given her character, talents, and values, she would have made a very effective political activist.

It was a confusing time for Shéa. He wanted to know if I was home for the wedding and wanted me to take him to heaven to see his mammy. However, one moment that I did treasure with him during those few hours was to bring him up to town and buy him some toys and sweets. These precious moments were marvellous, he felt proud to have his daddy with him for the first time in two years and showed this by telling everyone in the shop that his daddy was home. In this short period, I saw how much he had changed since I was taken away from him. He had been only a small child then, now he was showing me where to go in the shop to find the toys. That night I had my own son sleeping beside me for the first time, and waking up beside him next morning was a brilliant feeling.

I rose at six am and visited Brenda's grave. It was distressing to think that it will be over seven years before I can visit it again. I visited Brenda's parents before leaving for the prison. My thoughts were with Shéa that morning. How he would cope without his mother, to whom he was very close? I was worried about his future and whether the bond between the two of us would remain strong. The 24 hours compassionate parole was insufficient time to deal with all these concerns.

It is now several months since Brenda's death, and at times, it is still hard to believe she is gone. It's hard to come to terms with the thought that I won't be able to spend my life with her and fulfil our dreams. The men on the wing, especially Sean Lynch, have been a great help over these past few months and their support has been vital in bringing me through such a difficult period. I have tried to keep busy at some reading and learning Irish; but, it's very difficult to keep my mind on anything for too long as the thought of Brenda is still uppermost in my mind. The main thing that keeps me going is our son Shéa. I see him every week and we have developed a very close relationship. Both Brenda's and my own parents have been very good about this, understanding

how important it is to me. Over these months, Brenda, in her own way, has still been with me. I know Brenda wouldn't have wanted me to fall in jail and I know she would have wanted me to continue to contribute positively to my own needs and the needs of the Republican community in the jail. All I can do is stay strong for both families and especially for Shéa who now is the most important person in my life.

One of Brenda's favourite songs was by Garth Brooks: *If Tomorrow Never Comes*, the chorus of which goes:

If tomorrow never comes,
Will she know how much I loved her?
Did I try in every way, to show her every day
That she's my only one?
And if my time on earth is through,
And she must face the world without me,
Is the love I gave her in the past
Gonna be enough to last,
If tomorrow never comes?

Brenda always used to say these few words about 'the love I give her in the past' which would be enough to keep her alive until I'd be home. But now it's the other way about, the love Brenda gave me will keep me going for her sake and Shéa's.