She Died Young

BRENDA FRICKER

She Died Young

A Life in Fragments



An Apollo Book

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To Liz Duffy

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FRICKER – February 17, 1945,
at Wentworth Nursing Home, to Bina, wife of
Desmond F. Fricker, 34 Annaville Park, Dundrum,
a daughter (Brenda).

Births, Marriages and Deaths. Irish Times, 10 March, 1945.



Brenda's parents Bina and Des with her sister Gránia,
aged about two weeks.

Sometimes I Falter



Sometimes I falter. I don't know who I am.

This leaves me open to attack. That's when the depression sneaks in.

I write these words that you're now reading. I feel obliged to inform or entertain you, to tell you about my battles with the human condition, about being young, about being old.

But I'm blank.

Do you falter?

Kerry



The arrival of the Dublin gang caused consternation in the front yard of the Kerry house. My Auntie Nora (my mother Bina's only sister), Uncle Ritchie, seven country cousins, Bina, Des, Gránia and me, were a big crowd in the small courtyard of a small farmhouse in a tiny village, Gneeveguilla, in the beautiful kingdom of Kerry. Bina was a teacher. She had plenty of time in the summer to bring us down to Kerry. Des was a journalist for the *Irish Times*. He was always busy, busy, busy, but he found time for this.

Bina, Des, and Gránia would stagger over the yard, bruised and exhausted from the seven-hour journey, hugging and kissing each other loudly and happily. It was one of the few times I saw my parents happy together in a way that didn't make me suspicious.

I always hung back a bit. Leaning on the hot car. Watching.

I needed to do my private arrival ritual before joining the family in this rare state of happiness. I would bend over and, with my city-white hands, unbuckle my clean white city sandals, rip off my ironed white socks from my clean city feet, and push those feet down hard again and again until I could feel the dirty Kerry soil soaking through the soles of my feet and into my heart.

I would gasp at the strength of the feeling that flushed through me, which always told me I was safe. The freedom to be dirty. In Dublin, my mother would tell me twenty times a day or more to wash my hands, wash my face, wash my knees. If there was no water, she'd spit on her fingers and rub it on my face. It was disgusting. In Kerry, I could be dirty. To be dirty – to be filthy dirty – was all I wanted from life.

To jump into the car in Dublin and jump out of it in Kerry gave me more happiness than I could bear. It was as if my body changed with that first touch of Kerry ground. I became a different child. To see Nonee standing there, her arms outstretched, waiting to hold me tight and say words of warmth and welcome that made my heart dance. I would run straight to her, throwing my arms around her fat legs, pushing my face into her fat belly, into her flowery wrap-around apron, smelling of bread, grass, cattle, sweat. I held so tight and smelled so deep that I was drunk with happiness. Knowing this, she would cradle my head in her hands, wiggle her nose against mine, and say, 'You're welcome, welcome, welcome.'

'They're all laid out in boxes. Go up and take what you want. Oh, and your favourites are sitting under the windowsill.'

On hearing those words, I would run across the yard, into the house, up the stairs and turn left into the front bedroom and there they were: five or six large cardboard boxes filled with all sorts of clothes. The boxes had old cardigans, pyjamas, dresses, knickers, shirts: anything you could possibly need.

Changing my clothes in Kerry was part of my secret ritual. It had a profound effect on me. I would become aware of the room around me, its walls keeping me safe, as I ripped off whatever silly, frilly dress and shiny leather shoes Bina had dressed me up in for the trip from Dublin. All you had to do was find something that fitted you. It didn't really matter what you wore in Kerry. It was so easy, here, to get dressed in five minutes, smiling from ear to ear as I picked a shirt, a

skirt, and socks, and put them on like a nun putting on her garb.

At this point, I would stop. Turn my head towards the window. I would cast my eyes down beneath the window and there *they* were, exactly where I had left them one year ago. I felt utter contentment as I reached out to touch them.

My wellingtons.

All mine, no sharing. The outside of each boot was unwashed. All the dried dirt and muck. The sweet smell of cattle, the warm smell of pigs, had been waiting there all year for my return.

Nonee had asked me once or twice did I want them washed. I screeched in horror, no, no, no. 'I love the way they smell. I love them being dirty.' The dirt proved that I had done some proper farm work and I loved the muck.

Nonee understood this completely, so she never moved my wellingtons from that spot. When I was in Dublin, it gave me comfort to know that they were there, and Auntie Nonee knew that.

I could not handle this respect, this kindness. I would burst into a flood of happy tears, fling my arms around her waist and push my face against her tummy again. I would listen to the music in her voice as she said lovingly, 'It's all right, Brenda. Everything is fine. There is no danger here. You're safe here.'

She knew the wellingtons were central to everything in my transformation from Dublin jackeen to country kid, changing my life into a thing of delight. She completely understood that and protected it for me.

The joy I got from wearing the wellingtons is hard to explain. They made me feel safe. They made me feel strong. They made it possible to feel that I was *me* – the child who lived in Kerry. Was I worshipping here? Probably. No word I choose is good enough to describe that transformation, from



Brenda's Aunt Nonee.

an uptight, nervous child into an observant, thoughtful, curious, happy little girl.

I would stand and stare at them. Then I would pick them up so carefully, so slowly, as if they were made of gossamer. Touching them again sent shivers down my spine. I would lift my right leg and then, holding both sides in my city-clean hands, I would push down hard and, in one swift movement, experience a happiness that almost made me scream. As I pushed my left foot down the full length of that other boot, there was now magic in my life. I was okay now. I was no longer afraid. I was a proper, true, legitimate Kerry girl crying to God, 'Now I'm me! No sins in me here; no lies; no cover-ups.'

Auntie Nonee was a large, comfortable woman, pale-skinned from slaving indoors to keep her small farm and family turning over. She carried her smile with her and, when she was pleased with you, you would hear the softest laugh

behind the smile. I adored her and everything about her, especially the false teeth, which she had had since she was twenty. When she spoke, it was like castanets fighting inside her mouth and, although I rudely laughed out loud at that, she took it all with good humour, never once chastising me. She only wore them on special occasions, like when I came. She smiled at me now, showing them off, reminding me again that my arrival from Dublin to stay with her for the summer months would be the happiest time of the whole year for me. She'd gently curve her hand around my head. She'd pull my arms around her legs. I'd cling to her as tightly as I could, pushing my face into her dirty apron to breathe in the smells I had missed so much. The smell of the baking bread she'd made to welcome us made me feel a little drunk with happiness. I could hardly bear it.

Within hours of landing, I was given things to do – this was a proper small farm – like going to the well. The well she used was a three-mile bike ride up the road. I would turn at the fourth boreen and there was a well full of clear, clean water. I managed to get onto the huge old bike while my cousin Deirdre hung two buckets on it, one on each handlebar. I had a few false starts, and everyone around me laughed. The old man from across the road held the bike, coming close to me so that I could see, behind his unwashed face, a smile to break my heart. He leaned across to push me off and there it was again … the smell of tweed, old tweed. Dirty tweed. It always made me dizzy with love. For what? My father, probably.

Nostrils flaring, I cycled off. I passed Bina and Des, still unpacking in the yard, and pedalled off down the road, down beyond, where I entered into the Kerry air: not the absence of sound but the presence of silence. Once I knew that I was past the bend, out of sight and sound, about a hundred yards on, I stepped off, leaning my bike and buckets against the ditch. I climbed over the stone wall. Then I would lie there on the grass among the buttercups and daisies and spread my arms

out like Jesus on the cross. I was listening and drinking in these overpowering feelings. The world was mine: the world was safe here and I consciously cherished it. I cried from happiness again: the same fat tears I cried from fear. I felt complete. I was completely safe. I smiled down at my wellingtons. I lifted my legs up in the air and danced them against the summer clouds, feeling so much at one with it all, so much a part of life. I burst out laughing when I waved up to the clouds and they waved back. My contentment was physical and I thanked God for giving me this feeling every year.

There was no rush in Kerry, so I dawdled along on the creaking old bike, loving it, myself, Nonee and the world. I could taste the happiness as I rode along past the fields I knew so well, the fields I would soon be working in, helping farmers to tend their farms.

On my daily adventures, I would wander into the farmers' yards and, without hesitation, they would recruit me as a helper in whatever was going on that day. Children were always part of the running of the farm. Paid help was expensive, so an extra pair of hands, no matter how small, was always welcome.

For years I didn't know that people used to smile and laugh at my obvious delight at putting on my boots and morphing from a troubled urban kid into a happy rural child. They would roar laughing behind their hands as I walked behind the farmers, trying to imitate their stride. My boots were a little too big for me so I had to drag them along, which delighted me, as it added authenticity to my outrageous mimicry. The farmers' walk was my favourite. Now I was in; I could feel it. I was allowed to talk and walk like the farmers. Little did they know that I was walking on air because I was no longer an imprisoned doll.

Nonee had seven children; there had once been nine: she had had two sets of twins, and one of each had died. Now she had Gránia and me too, in a home with no running water, no

electricity and no bathroom. There were big green fields to do your number ones and number twos in and lots of dock leaves there for you to wipe your arse with. I listened to everything she said, and from the moment I arrived, I would unashamedly imitate her accent, which was a source of real delight to her. I loved living with her, living in her house, being her niece and part of the family.

Water was liquid gold, as we had to travel those miles to get it, and in Kerry it was treated with the deepest respect. I loved going to the well. We usually went in twos and threes but sometimes I went alone. We walked or cycled the distance, banging our empty buckets together and calling out wild music of our own: nonsense sounds, happy noises that filled the air. We'd arrive at the small well and lie flat on our bellies to give us extra reach down to the fresh water. We'd lean over, scoop the buckets until they were full, and then scoop some more with a small can until our buckets were overflowing. Carrying full buckets back along that road was hard work and hard fun. Whoever had the bike would put a bucket over each handlebar and perform a feat of balance worthy of a circus act, aiming to have at least half the water left in each bucket when we got home.

In the house, we poured the water into jugs and bowls and left the rest under the kitchen table. This water was all Nonee had to clean, cook, drink, wash ourselves and our clothes in, and also water the animals. This, of course, suited me completely. I wouldn't have to wash myself morning, noon and night, with Bina shouting, 'Behind your ears!' and 'Between your toes!' Proper washing happened only on a Saturday night, when every inch of your body was scrubbed red-raw, cleansed to receive the Blessed Host on Sunday morning.

There were no rules, just a natural shape to time. This was measured by day and night, dark and light. The days moved smoothly and quietly along, so completely different from the jarred and jagged sounds of the city.

We slept in bundles – seven cousins, Gránia and me – the nine of us in two beds, a double and a single. Night had no time, as we'd sing songs and have pillow fights. We would tell stories to each other until, exhausted, we'd collapse and pull worn old blankets, old towels, anything we could find, over our tired little bodies. And we'd sleep deeply in a pile of entangled limbs.

Sometimes, when I looked at Nonee and thought of how much I loved her, I could not contain myself. I would fly across the room and fling my arms around her legs, pushing my face into her apron. I would cry and cry and tell her how much I loved her. Sometimes, in a panic, I would kiss her gnarled fingers and beg her not to die.

'Never, ever die!' I would plead.

She would sit down on the nearest chair and put her arms around my troubled body, saying quietly how she loved me like she loved her own children. She would rock me back and forth in a smooth and soothing rhythm until my heart was still again. Then she would sit me up and bounce me on her knee, wiping tears and snots away with her dirty apron.

The feeling of being loved was always new to me. Why did my mother and father not do things like that with me? Why did I never feel from them the kind of love I got from Nonee? Why did they never give me anything as beautiful and valuable and simple as a hug?

Without those deliriously happy holidays in Kerry, I have no idea what I would be now.

The darkness in my mind was beginning to make itself known to me, but it never came to Kerry.

Kerry never let it in.

Horse Betty



I suddenly woke up. I had fallen into a summer snooze, and dusk was close. The unwritten rule was to be home by dusk. After all, I was completely free all the daylight hours to go anywhere and do anything. Trusted to trust myself.

I looked around and saw that the nearest house was several fields away, so I set off to find someone there to take me home.

I sang and skipped across the fields, hearing no noise except my body moving through the grass. I climbed over two low ditches, and then over a metal gate, landing noisily on gravelly ground. The sound of that always startled but delighted me.

I walked over to the big timber door. The red paint was peeling, making it look beautiful in the evening light. It was an enormous house. I could just reach the door handle, so I stretched up and pulled it down and opened the door to a kitchen where Kitty Loftus was leaning over a line of lamps, lighting them for nightfall.

Kitty stepped back and threw out her arms, saying, 'Brenda, Brenda, Brenda. You're here again. It must be summertime.' She spread her arms as wide as they would go, saying, 'Come over here to me, my darling girl, come here, come here.'

I did. The hug she gave me nearly broke my back. She asked me what I had done with my day and told me not to worry,

that Eamonn was above in the room and he'd come down to take me home to Nonee, safe and sound. With that she screamed Eamonn's name out so loud it blew my ear off.

Loud, clumsy noises from upstairs. Then the bold Eamonn appeared. I didn't know him all that well. I had seen him in the crowd of men that gathered at the back of the church on Sundays. For some reason, they became a gang, all scrubbed up with shaved and shiny faces, but they never actually went inside to Mass. I had marked him down as shy. So many Kerry men were shy.

He passed a window halfway down the stairs. His head was silhouetted against the light for just a flash, but long enough for me to hold my breath and drink in the beauty of the shape. His face. His smile.

'Brenda, Brenda, Brenda, now what are you doing out at this time of the night, eh? It's almost dusk. You know the rules. Your auntie will be worried. What delayed you?'

From someone else this would have been a reprimand, but there was so much laughter in his voice that I answered easily: 'I fell asleep in the long grass behind the well.'

'Ah yes,' he laughed. 'I know that spot. Indeed, I've fallen asleep there once or twice myself when I was gathering in the hay.'

'So now,' he said, 'there's four forms of transport for me to take you home safely to your lovely Auntie Nonee. There's the bicycle, the car, the donkey and the horse and cart. It's too long to take you sitting on the bar of the oul' bike. Poor Ted the donkey has been working all day long and he's tired out; Ted is in Killarney with the car. The cart is having the metal on both wheels replaced, which leaves us with Betty, my beautiful horse.'

I jumped up and down on the spot, saying, 'Oh yes, yes, yes, Eamonn, you know how much I love Betty!'

And I did love her. A huge, honey-coloured horse, unusual around there. She never seemed to do much work. The other

horses did; I had seen them bringing milk to the creamery in Rathmore, working in the fields, making hay, ploughing. They were all dark-haired, unlike Betty, who seemed to have an easy time of it. She really was beautiful.

He tightened his trouser belt, then lifted me into the air as if I weighed as little as a feather. My tummy jumped and my pulse began to race. He swung me around his head, landing me perfectly onto his shoulders. I can't explain to you the mix of pleasures – visceral, visual and vocal – that took my body to another place whenever men did this with me.

Betty was shaking her head at us, nudging it out the half door of her shed. She was keen – I could see that – but not half as keen as I was. I had ridden on horseback before and I loved it.

Eamonn opened the bottom half of the door, coaxing Betty out across the yard to me. She was so big! I wasn't even as high as her belly. But she was happy and I felt it; I was happy and she felt it.

In another sweeping move, Eamonn lifted me up to the sky and plonked me down onto her back so firmly that I thought my body would split in two. I felt Eamonn jump on behind me. Betty was as quiet as a lamb, welcoming us aboard in her own inimitable way. Eamonn pulled me tight against his body, his right arm around my waist, his left reaching for the reins. I felt his thighs squeeze Betty's body as he spoke to her in loving tones. And off we went across the fields to home. I could feel Betty's backbone moving underneath me. Her pelt was warm and soft. My feet barely reached around her middle, but Eamonn held me tight and I felt free.

'I'm going the long way around,' he said, laughing into the dusk.

The sky was purple with evening light. The mountains moving far away. Eamonn's arms were huge, sunburned from working outside, and stinking of dirt. It was a heady smell. A

smell I loved. A smell I'd chase all over Kerry. He tightened his arms, trapping me like a vice, then put my hands on Betty's mane and whispered with his mouth against my ear, 'Hold tight. Don't let go till I say the word.'

Betty's body rocked from side to side as we walked across the yard through a gap in the ditch and moved gently into a trot. I felt safe with Eamonn's arms around me. He balanced the movement as the ride shifted from a lazy trot to a gentle canter. Betty whinnied as we turned the corner, moving into a smooth gallop. I knew my hair was blowing into Eamonn's face. I didn't mind and nor did he. My happiness and trust in him were so complete that all I felt was love.

Now I knew the pleasure of no saddle. I could feel it; I could smell it as we galloped on through the open fields to home. There never was and never has been since a sense of safety, danger and love as there was on that enchanted ride.