



THE WOVEN DREAM

By Anne Curtis

The Woven Dream is inspired by the story of the 74-day hunger strike of Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork in Brixton Prison, London in 1920
It is based on historical research. The scenes and the words spoken in them have been invented for dramatic purpose.

Cast in Order of Appearance

Mary Murphy

Josephine O'Sullivan – close friend of Muriel

Muriel MacSwiney – Lady Mayoress of Cork and daughter of Mary Murphy

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Mary

(Mary Murphy is sitting in her drawing room. She is reading a copy of 'The Times')

“Lord Mayor of Cork arrives in Brixton prison”. What must our friends think of us? I’d hoped it could be kept out of the British press but unfortunately my son-in-law has a penchant for the ‘grand gesture’.

“I shall be free within the month, alive or dead”. His ultimatum. In other words: ‘release me or I will kill myself’. If you ask me these hunger strikes amount to little more than bribery.

How on earth did Muriel end up as the wife of the commander of the IRA in Cork? I know we lost many fine young men the Great War, but even so, there was no need to choose a terrorist. Was it my fault? Did I do something wrong?

Why do young women, raised in comfortable circumstances feel this need for danger?
“Terry understands me mother. Unlike you. He has time to talk to me.”

Well of course he does. What else is there to do but listen when all your courting takes place in a prison cell? It wasn’t as if there was ever any need to discuss what the chef should prepare for dinner. Was there?

And then there was this nonsense that MacSwiney *‘thought her brave’*. Well of course Muriel could be brave. It was our money that got her out of every tricky situation. Her poor father. I am just so glad that he is not alive to witness all this. It would have broken his heart. All that care he took with her investments, his concern that no matter what happened, she would always be financially secure. And now look where it has all gone.

Geraldine O’Sullivan

(Geraldine is in an hotel bedroom. She is reading a letter)

My father cannot resist any opportunity to give me advice. *“Geraldine whatever you do, just make sure you know where you stand on this matter”*. In other words: ‘decide whose opinion you will follow’. Preferably his. He finds it impossible to conceive that I might have my own view.

Luckily, I was in London on personal business when the news about the hunger strike broke. I’ve known Muriel Murphy for years. Our fathers have the same business interests: banking and brewing and our mothers socialise regularly in Cork. Afternoon tea, bridge, charitable events. That sort of thing.

I was with Muriel, the first time that she set eyes on Terry at a recital organised by Mrs Fleischmann, our music teacher. She was smitten. Oh, she’ll tell you now, that she was interested in Irish nationalism long before she met him. Of course, she was, but let’s just say that meeting Terry did nothing to quell her passion for the cause.

We both joined Cumman na nBhan about the same time and I was her bridesmaid when they got married during his internment in Herefordshire. None of her family came which wasn’t surprising given that her mother tried to get the Bishop of Cork to stop the wedding.

Married life has not been easy for Muriel, what with Terry spending the past three years either in gaol, on the run or sleeping in a different safe house each night when things got too dangerous.

I'm worried about Terry's ultimatum. The Brits have said quite publicly that they won't release hunger strikers on health grounds anymore. Muriel might have to watch the man she loves fade away. Supposing that happens? Will I really know where I stand then?

Muriel

(Seated at the offices of the Irish Self Determination League, London talking to a journalist (offstage))

How do I feel to be here in London? Relieved. The first few days of this, when I was still in Cork were truly dreadful. I couldn't get the image of how ill Terry looked at his court martial out of my mind.

The doctors asked to see me as soon as I arrived at the prison. They want me to encourage Terry to eat but I can't intervene even if they criticise me for failing in my wifely duties. I must make it clear to everyone that this is a 'matter of conscience', for my Terry.

Anyway, I am sure that there is nothing to worry about. Terry has been on hunger strike before. The whole thing could be over in a month.

What do I do all day? Well my days are full. My husband doesn't like being left alone so Min, Terry's sister organised a rota. I do afternoons.

I spend the mornings here at the offices of the Irish Self Determination League with Art O'Brien. Art works very hard for us organising the publicity which is terribly important. We need to get across that Terry's imprisonment is illegal; that the charges against him were unjust and that the court which tried him was unlawful. He should know, he is the city's Chief Magistrate after all.

I help with letters, photos, press releases, letters, that sort of thing. It's going well, isn't it Art? The papers seem to want to give us lots of coverage and they recently took a picture of me writing to the King, whom I am told is very much in favour of releasing Terry. So, fingers crossed.

Of course, Terry receives a fair amount of post. Mass cards and letters of support from all around the world. Flowers and candles for his little altar and crucifixes that are put on the wall. Yesterday one exceedingly kind man even brought beef tea to the prison gates. The police thought he must be drunk and arrested him for his troubles. The tea was of no use to Terry of course, but it was good of him to bother.

And how am I being treated? Well I must say that everyone here is being very kind.

Mary

(Mary is seated, she is reading the evening paper, which she puts down before speaking)

For goodness sake. A riot outside the prison. Whatever next? *(Reads)* "Police on horseback had to chase the protestors down the hill whilst other demonstrators hid in people's front gardens". What must those poor people in Brixton think of us?

Sinn Fein were there of course. Surprise, surprise. *(Reads)* "The protest was organised by the former M.P. George Lansbury". Another of those godless socialists no doubt. Thank goodness the British people had the good sense not to re-elect him.

If you ask me, it's high time that Lloyd George came back from his holiday in the Alps and took control. It is a good job that Maire is staying here with me in Cork. At least Muriel knows that her child is safe. I wonder if I should write and tell her to come home.

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Muriel

(Muriel is standing by the wall outside Brixton prison following a visit to Terry)

Terry wasn't looking at all well today, so I was glad that I had some good news to bring him. There was the 'usual' of course about the big institutions in Cork passing resolutions condemning his incarceration but we've come to expect that. No what really cheered him up, was the news that Sir James Long, chairman of Cork's Harbour Board had written to the king asking him to rescind his knighthood. All because he felt that the charges against Terry had no substance.

It was good to see him smile; he hasn't done that much recently, apart from when I told him that the GAA had cancelled all their games in support of him. He didn't approve of course, thought that the 'working men' needed their recreation.

Do you know what Terry said as I was leaving? He said that he was sorry for putting me through all this. Imagine. Everything that he is going through, and he is worried about me. I wasn't quite sure what to say so I made a joke of it. I told him that I was seeing more of him now he was in prison than I did when we were married. He liked that. Well, wasn't my bravery one of the reasons that he chose me? Yes, it's important that I try and stay hopeful.

Geraldine

(Geraldine walks into her hotel bedroom very annoyed)

Sometimes I think that Min MacSwiney has a heart made of iron. Just because Terry has told her that, he thinks his death, 'will do Ireland good' she has made Muriel, Annie and I pledge that the British will never see us crying. How on earth is Muriel expected to manage that?

It's all to do with the press coverage. The press love taking photos of Muriel. Min and Art are worried that Terry might get upset, if it gets back to him that Muriel has been crying. Perhaps I probably shouldn't say this, but it might be a good idea if it does.

Muriel

(In her bedroom, reading a letter from her mother in Cork, which she screws up in anger)

If Mother wasn't minding Maire in Cork I swear I would never speak to her again. She won't respect Terry's point of view and her views about Irish freedom are atrocious.

I have been trying to explain to her for years that, although the Murphys' are rich because of the Empire the exact opposite is true for most Irish people. She makes me so mad. Why can't she understand that Ireland has no industry of its own to speak of? And why is she unable to see that, unless we gain our freedom, we will continue to be little more than a food store for the British? And, as for the atrocities, well she can't keep pretending that they aren't happening.

If I didn't have to be here, I should go straight back to Cork and make Charles our driver take her round the villages in the county so that she could see the damage Black and Tans have done for herself. That would be a far better use of her time than writing me stupid letters condemning Terry's actions. *(Rips up letter and throws in bin)*. It really is too much.

Geraldine

(Geraldine is on a London street holding an open copy of The Times newspaper)

“Irish men and women dragged out of their houses and shot. Houses burned. Creameries set on fire.”

The Bishop of Cork’s letter in support of Terry printed in full. In the Times of London, no less. Read all over the Empire so they tell me. Now let anyone in power try saying that they didn’t know about the atrocities committed by the Crown forces in Ireland.

And listen to himself! Bishop Colahan after telling his British masters how to behave. Ha!

“The men who committed these murders must be brought to justice in the proper way. There should be no place in our legal system for random executions as a means of retribution.”

And there was I thinking, that your Grace’s holy feet were planted very firmly on the side of the Empire. And that ‘soldiers to the cause of Irish freedom’ like me, were all terrorists who should be excommunicated from the Church.

But will your letter make them act? There has been no sign that it will so far. Word is, that King George and Queen Mary want to release Terry but the government won’t let them.

And this is the very same government who didn’t mind Irish soldiers dying in the Great War in support of the right of small nations like Belgium to self-determination. Are these people so blind that they can’t see that Terry only wants the same thing for Ireland?

Mary

(Mary is standing in the hallway at Carrigmoore, holding one of Maire’s dolls)

I’m delighted to say that my granddaughter can now say two words in English. Yesterday, when she wanted me to open the door to the garden, she pointed said “Doras” and I said “no that is a door”. And straightaway she said ‘door’ back to me. And then today when her doll fell to the ground. She looked at it and cried “babóg/balbhán¹”. And I said “No” that is a doll, not a “babóg/balbhán”. Say ‘doll’ and granny will pick it up for you. It was a bit of a struggle, but we got there in the end.

It’s her father’s fault of course, insisting that Maire was brought up to speak only Irish. Thank God she’s young enough to pick English up quickly so she won’t be held back. Who speaks Irish anyway these days? Those rebels should realise that the British did us a favour by getting rid of it. How Muriel thought her own father would have traded with the rest of the world if he only spoke Gaelic, heaven knows.

Muriel

(Muriel is sitting in her hotel bedroom, she holds a child’s toy to her cheek)

Mother has just called from Cork so I could say ‘goodnight’ to Maire. I am normally fine but today when I heard her little baby voice, well.....

Maire calls the phone ‘dada’. Strange I know. But you see, Terry was rarely at home with us which meant that Maire never really knew what it was to have a father. But each time the phone rang, I’d say “that’s dada”. So, she thought that Dada and the phone were the same thing.

¹ Babóg and balbhán are Gaelic for doll.
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The calls are over all too soon. When I hear Mother putting the phone down I hold the receiver very close to my cheek and I imagine its warmth is Maire's baby skin. I only wish I could tell Terry how much I miss her, but that would just upset him.

Min managed to get a motion passed at the Trades Union Congress today condemning Terry's treatment. I am told that they represent hundreds of thousands of working men. Min is hoping that they will come out on strike in support of us, so fingers crossed.

Muriel

(Standing in the office of the Irish Self Determination League going through some papers)

No? What's this? The SS Baltic has been seized by the Irish Dockers in New York, no one can disembark and the cargo has been left on the quayside. Wonderful! Terry will be delighted. Oh, a note from Art.

'Just to let you know that Marcus Garvey, the leader of the African American Dockers has sent a telegram of support to Cork Corporation'. Art must be pleased; he didn't think that there was a good enough relationship between the two groups for that to happen.

O look, the Catalonian Trade Association. It is in Spanish, what a shame. 'Tenemos 8,000 miembros' Does that mean that they have 8,000 members? Well, let's hope they are supporting us then.

What's this? Bedales School, Petersfield, Hampshire. Schoolchildren – the sweetest thing. *"We want to send you a message to show that some people still admire great courage and are not wholly insensible to the sufferings of the Irish people"*. How charming – it must be a wonderful school. I mustn't forget to thank Art and Min. They are certainly keeping Terry on the front page.

Muriel

(In her hotel bedroom getting ready to go to bed)

An Englishwoman recognised me on the tram today. She asked me the strangest thing: *'Any chance that my husband's actions could be linked to a mental condition such as depression?'* She hoped that: *'I didn't think that she was interfering; it was just that she knew someone who might be able to help bring an end to this whole dreadful business.'* I didn't tell her that I know all that there is to know about depression. I decided to get off the tram early when she asked me how I was.

It's been six weeks now and if anyone asked me what the worst thing was, apart from the ever-present fear that Terry might die. I would tell them that it is being unable to touch the two people I love the most. I miss Maire dreadfully and Terry's neuritis is so painful now that I can no longer hold his hand or kiss his forehead. The doctor has warned me that even a gentle stroke from my fingers would send a shock wave of pain through his body.

I feel very naïve. I thought that the worst thing that Terry would experience would be severe hunger, but the pain he is in is terrible. One of his nurses told me that this is the body fighting to survive.

I've been advised not to talk to him unless he asks me something. Breathing, never mind speaking is exhausting for him. It doesn't matter anyway. I can barely hear him even when I put my ear close to this mouth. I feel so useless.

Another thing I despise myself for is the amount of relief I feel when my visiting time is over and I can leave him. I hate myself for being so pleased to be out of that room. To not have to sit there, listen

to the clock ticking, the rasping sound of Terry's breathing whilst I look at him and think: "What if none of this makes any difference?"

Mary

(Mary is in her sitting room taking tea)

Our contacts in Cork Corporation have told me that a letter has been received from the King. Despite everything that Muriel had been told, he is unwilling or unable to help.

I am not surprised; we have a constitution for a reason. If the King had given way, then the whole administration of law and order would have broken down.

If you ask me, we should be concentrating more on all those poor policeman that the IRA have murdered 'in the cause'. What about their wives and children? Does anyone care about them?

I do feel for my daughter though. She had been told that the King was at least considering releasing Terry into some form of 'house arrest' so that Muriel could be with him. But it doesn't seem as if that will be allowed either. It's nice having Maire with me here in Montenotte, but it does seem wrong that she may never see her father again.

Muriel

(Seated in the lobby of the Jermyn Hotel)

More churchmen visited today. This time it was three bishops. Two from Ireland and Archbishop Mannix from Australia.

They said that they'd pray for me as they left. I didn't tell them, but the Catholic Church has never meant very much to me. Oh, don't get me wrong, I have nothing against it as an institution I have just never believed its teaching. Terry of course is devout.

He has this book that means a great deal to him. It is called "The Imitation of Christ". He likes me to read it to him but even that gets harder and harder to do now. I hate the way in which he has been 'brainwashed' with religion and politics merged in his mind.

Terry thinks that, in following Jesus, he is doing something sacred for Ireland, but I disagree. He'd be far more use to the country alive.

Sometimes, when Terry asks me to hand him his crucifix. I can't help but look at the figure of Jesus on the cross. I think of his mother Mary. I wonder whether, she felt as sad as I do watching someone she loved die. And if she did, why did none of the men who wrote the gospels, think it important enough to mention?

I know that the end is coming soon. I am about to be a widow and my daughter will grow up without a father. The strange thing is, is that no one seems to talk about that. It is all about Ireland and her victory and her martyrs. But no one thinks it important to talk about love and its loss.

Mary

(Mary is standing in the hallway. She is has returned from shopping in the city)

Sometimes I wondered if my daughter has any idea of the effect, that all this is having on me here in Cork. Terry, as you would expect, has become a national hero. Strikes here, resignations there. But

someone needs to tell me, why is it that priests are allowed to offer prayers and masses up for him? If you ask me much of the city has lost its sanity.

I'm just back from the Grand Parade. Posters everywhere with his picture and the slogan: *"It's not those who inflict the most, but those that endure the most, that shall prevail."* As if any of us know what that is supposed to mean. And tell me, what is the point of being a freedom fighter if it means spending most of your time in gaol and ends in your own death?

No, we should have insisted on his resignation back in March, the moment he made his inaugural speech as Lord Mayor with the words: *"I come to you as a soldier not an administrator"*

For goodness sake, the first citizen of this city and he thinks his duty is to take up arms. Tell me, since when have political principles taken priority over the running of a city? His duty is to Cork's citizens - their housing, public health, transport, jobs. Things a city needs to make it work. And no one is going to convince me that the whole of Cork Corporation agrees with his actions because I know that is not true. I might not mind as much if he had consulted Muriel when he was elected, but he didn't.

Muriel

(Enters the hotel bedroom looking tired)

I do find the interviews with the Press so tiring of later. All those questions and what good does it do? Terry is so weak and surely can't have long to live. Still I think that he would have been proud of what I managed to say to Forbes Fairbairn today. Of course, Art O'Brien came with me so I knew he would make sure that I didn't say the wrong thing. *(Reads from a newspaper)*

"I am positive he will see his task through, said the Lady Mayoress, "It is only his conviction that he is fighting for an ideal, that has enabled him to survive. I am fully reconciled to hearing of his death. His battle is mine, for it is the one I took on myself when I married him three years ago. Our lives since then have been mainly spent evading my husband's arrest or waiting to be united through his release from prison. The role I am now playing is one to which I have been long accustomed."

Min MacSwiney will be pleased too. No hint of what I was feeling inside. No hint of any tears there.

Geraldine

(Geraldine enters the hotel bedroom having returned from another day's leafletting)

I'll say one thing about the MacSwiney family. They've certainly got fight in them. We got more bad news today. The Labour Party announced that they won't be calling for a general strike in support of Terry. Things don't look good. So tomorrow we will be 'hand delivering' letters to all the embassies and consulates in London, Terry needs their support.

I went leafletting in the East End today. I couldn't believe that such a rich empire would allow this kind of poverty at its very heart. The effects of the war and the flu pandemic were everywhere. Limbless men begging on the streets. And, this deranged 'gas-shocked' fella ran after me ranting and waving his arms. Told me to *'get down quick'* because the Germans were about to start shooting again. And if that wasn't bad enough, the saddest site of all. Hungry children everywhere. Crying. because there was no food.

It made it a bit easier for me to understand why Terry's cause and Ireland's freedom just isn't a priority for the Labour Party right now.

Muriel

(Muriel enters the bedroom and puts her back to the door)

Sometimes Min MacSwiney is just too much. Why can't she just admit that it is over? If I hear one more mention of 'who wrote to who' or which 'important person is sure to help us' and 'who we should try just in case'. I will just scream. We have written to them all it has brought us and the most we have received is sympathy and solidarity. The only person who can do anything is Lloyd George and all he is prepared to say is that he may reconsider, releasing Terry, provided he gets a guarantee that the continuing murder of policeman will stop. My husband has been in prison for two months. Please can someone tell me how he can possibly be responsible for the murder of those men?

Mary

(Seated in her drawing room reading the paper)

This is interesting. Cardinal Bourne has refused Mary MacSwiney's request that her brother's body should lie in Westminster Cathedral in the event of his death. I should think so too. Did no one tell MacSwiney that he is committing the most grievous sin by taking his own life?

And there was me thinking that Terry's saving grace was that he was a devout Catholic.

They'll find somewhere to take him no doubt. I've been told that Bishop Amigo of Southwark in south London is a supporter. A Gibraltarian I believe. Another troublemaker who thinks a part of the British Empire would be better ruled by another country.

Muriel didn't sound too good on the phone the other night. I'm not surprised. This has been dragging on for nearly eight weeks. I hope that it is over soon. That sounds dreadful doesn't it? As if I am wishing my own son in law dead. I'm not - that would be the most dreadful sin. Mortal even. It is just that, if he is going to die anyway- then I would like it to be quick. For Muriel's sake.

Muriel

(Standing in the offices of the Irish Self Determination League)

When all of this is over, which it will be very soon, Will anyone want to know what it was like to go through all this? I think I would prefer them to ask me 'how I spent the time' because that would be easier to answer. But if they have to know, I will tell them to imagine the person that they love most dearly, hold most precious in the whole world. The person without whom life has no meaning. And then, to think to themselves, what it feels like for that person to love their country more than you. And for you, to be unable to a single thing to change that.

Geraldine

(Geraldine in her hotel bedroom getting ready to go out)

I'm going to Brixton prison for the first time today. I wasn't invited to until now because Terry's energy had to be conserved for the important visitors. But, as this is the 'seventieth day' of his hunger strike I think I must be going to say goodbye. He surely can't survive for much longer

The letters to the embassies didn't do any good. King George is still trying to persuade his government to change their mind, but they will not budge, even though Ramsay McDonald told him that the country's reputation throughout the world is in tatters.

The press have started being really horrible - the Daily Mail wrote an article saying that Terry used to make grenades in Ireland. Others, that Terry is only alive because food was smuggled into him.

Poor Muriel. And to think I encouraged her to go up and say ‘hello’ to him at Mrs Fleischmann’s musical evening.

Mary

(Mary is standing in the hall holding a doll. She is holding one of the doll’s hand and looking at its fingers. She looks up).

So. It’s over, after seventy-four days. The end.

All babies are perfect. I should know I’ve had six of my own. It’s their fingers. Tiny as ‘newly borns’ and yet ever detail from the knuckle to the nail complete in their perfection. You hold your child’s little fingers in your hand, and you thank God for the privilege of having given birth to them. And you pray, from the deepest part of your being that no harm will ever come to them.

I wonder what Terry’s mother would think if she were alive now. She must have felt the warmth of his tiny baby hand in hers. Could she ever have imagined that his life would end like this?

(The End)