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Eulogy for Brenda Christie

Stuart Christie

2019

My eulogy for Brenda:

Good morning everyone and thank you all for coming on this sad occasion to say goodbye to Bren, my wife, life partner, friend and comrade through fifty-one years of life's vicissitudes, caprices and blessings — the beloved mother of Branwen — and Nanna to granddaughters Merri and Mo.

Brenda was an intensely private person who— although engaging, sociable and witty — disliked being the focus of attention, but I've no doubt she would have been pleased to see everyone here, sharing this day with us.

A baby-boomer, born in Shoreditch in London in April 1949, Bren's formative years were spent in Gosport in Hampshire where her lovely dad, Bert, was a Chief Petty Officer, a 'Sparks' in the Royal Navy.

She hoped to take up a career in journalism, but despite her sharp intelligence, enquiring intellect, love of literature and creative writing skills, the breakup of her parents' marriage and her tense relationship with her mother Eliza forced her to leave home at 15 and move to London where she became a copy typist, working in a variety of temporary jobs, including at the Treasury.

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In 1967, her adventurous spirit took her to Milan where she worked for a time as companion to a glamorous American model, a job that introduced her to the *dolce vita* of Milan and Portofino, but it was a lifestyle that failed to satisfy her sense of moral integrity.

With news of the events of May 1968 in Paris and the radical political, musical and cultural turbulence that was taking place in Britain, largely provoked by the U.S. war in Vietnam, the feisty-spirited 19-year-old Brenda was drawn back to London to be part of the radical social and cultural revolution then taking place, which is where we got together on Bastille Day, 14 July 1968, shortly after my 22nd birthday.

We were together from then until the morning of her passing, just a month after she turned 70.

Those fifty-odd years of our lives together saw many adventures, good and not so good – laughter and tears – as happens in all relationships.

But it's the treasured, shared and cheery memories that are the abiding ones.

On our first date in 1968 I took her to Jimmy's Greek Restaurant, a carpeted sewer in Soho's Frith Street which to me was excitingly cosmopolitan in character, but was also cheap with plentiful Mediterranean-style food. Brenda, however, was distinctly unimpressed, particularly when she spotted the column of cockroaches marching along the wainscoting by our heads.

We made our excuses and left for the more salubrious Amalfi in Old Compton Street. From there we went on to the theatre; Unity Theatre in Somers Town to see *Little Malcolm and His Struggle Against the Eunuchs* for which I had wangled complimentary tickets.

I certainly knew how to treat a girl in those days.

After the performance we went back to my flat in Crouch End in North London where I further tried to impress Brenda with my

skill in tossing a Spanish omelette, but my hand to eye coordination was skewed that night and it ended up splattered on the floor.

Brenda, who was precariously balanced on a three-legged chair at the time, laughed so much she leaned back, lost her balance and ended up on her back on the floor with the remains of the omelette, legs akimbo, unladylike, flashing her knickers.

Despite those early misadventures, and fortunately for me, Brenda shared my surreal sense of humour, and so began a tumultuous, lifelong, genuinely loving relationship.

Brenda was introduced originally to the Marxist-led International Socialists through her best friend Valerie Packham, and the pair were deeply involved in the staff and student occupation of the Hornsey College of Art in Crouch End, which took place from May to July 1968.

Later, during the final years of the fascist dictatorship in Spain, she became increasingly committed to the anti-Francoist cause, working closely with the clandestine anarchist First of May Group, which brought her under the radar of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch and the Security Service, MI5. That, of course, ran alongside her role as a co-founder of the anarchist publishing house Cienfuegos Press and her involvement with the Anarchist Black Cross and *Black Flag* magazine.

In the summer of 1971 I was framed and arrested on conspiracy and possession charges which led to me spending eighteen months on remand in Brixton Prison, which is when Brenda came into her own.

While holding down a job as a temporary copy typist, not only did she visit me most days throughout those eighteen months, she brought me cooked meals all the way from Shoreditch to Brixton on public transport.

She also played a crucial and pivotal role in helping to organise and coordinate my ultimately successful defence — that the only incriminating evidence against me had been planted by former Flying Squad detectives, with their superiors' knowledge! — that and

working late into the night typing up the barristers' notes during the eight-month Old Bailey trial, one of the longest in British legal history.

Her character and integrity won her the grudging respect of the senior police officers involved in the case. One of them, Commander Ernest Bond, brazenly admitted to her — in the presence of a Chief Superintendent — that they knew I'd been 'fitted up', but they could live with my possible acquittal. As far as they were concerned they'd succeeded in keeping me out of circulation for eighteen months.

It's at times such as those these that we come to really know people in ways of which others remain completely ignorant. Brenda, to me, exemplified the Sufi and humanist ideal of 'faithful in loving friendship, kindness, compassion and solidarity'.

A few months after my acquittal, in May 1974, following the kidnapping in Paris by anti-fascists of a Francoist banker, a Special Branch officer visited our flat in Wimbledon and advised us to move out of London. Whether or not this was friendly advice or an implicit threat we decided not to put to the test. As Falstaff says in Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fourth*, 'The better part of valour is discretion', and so we began our life *Odyssey*.

I may not always have been her *Odysseus*, but she was certainly always my *Penelope*.

Our first house was an nineteenth century mill house in Honley, Last of the Summer Wine country in West Yorkshire, in fact its exterior featured in a few episodes of that long-running series.

As well as typesetting our books and journals, Brenda and a friend opened a competitively priced teashop called Touchwood, which became a popular eatery for local mill workers and long-distance lorry drivers on the Trans-Pennine A6024 between Huddersfield and Manchester. Their home-made pies and pasties were to die for. On Touchwood's last day, when we were preparing to leave Yorkshire for Sanday in Orkney, she and her partner Deanna

profound gratitude to Brenda for bringing purpose, happiness and a sense of fulfilment to our lives – not least for her constant part in the general effort to alleviate the burden of the darker times we've shared.

Goodbye, dear.

gave all their regular customers free lunches. Many were in tears when they learned the teashop was closing down.

Our next home was the penultimate of the Northern Isles, Sanday in Orkney, where we lived for seven years with Bren's beloved dad, Bert. It was idyllic for a time, especially made glorious by the birth of our daughter, Branwen, albeit in fairly dramatic circumstances.

Our wonderful lady doctor had been struck down by cancer and she had been replaced by a series of locums straight out of the animated cartoon Scooby Doo. When the one arrived who was to deliver Branwen he had clearly been drinking, as had the taxi driver of the Commer van that doubled as the island ambulance. To aggravate the situation, the only bottle of oxygen on the island had been used up that morning trying to revive a suicide who had jumped off the end of the pier, having filled his pockets with stones.

I lay on the bed beside Brenda dripping chloroform onto a tea towel covering a flour sieve, both of us breathing the fumes intended to ease the pain of the birth contractions, which somehow the doctor's ineptness had caused to go out of synch.

In the end we had to call for the local inter-island aeroplane to airlift her to hospital on the Orkney mainland. Even that was problematic as a heavy *haar*, a sea mist, had enveloped the islands so completely that the pilot had to fly in dangerously low, just above sea level. Even the lifeboat couldn't make it.

That and a few other run-ins with incompetent locums, some of whom had already been struck off the Medical Register two or three times, proved to be the writing on the wall, especially given our now elderly Bert's deteriorating medical condition.

From Sanday we moved south again, to Cambridge where Brenda found a job as an editorial assistant with Cambridge University Press, working with the leading historian Albert Hourani and the noted Arabist Trevor Mostyn on a number of prestigious CUP titles such as the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East and North Africa*. Both men insisted Brenda was credited by name

for her work on the encyclopedia, threatening to remove their names as authors and editors if the class-driven Press Syndics refused to comply, which they had done initially. To credit a lowly editorial assistant by name in such a distinguished publication was unheard of, and I doubt if it has happened since.

It was in Cambridge too that Brenda discovered what proved to be her true *métier* as a teacher, initially teaching Business Studies to 16- to 19-year-olds at Cambridge College of Further Education where her best friend Valerie was Senior Lecturer in charge of Secretarial Studies. Although to be honest she did think it was a thankless task trying to teach teenagers things they didn't particularly care about — and to be somewhere they didn't want to be.

However, after six years in Cambridge, Bert, Brenda's delightful dad, who'd lived with us since our Yorkshire days, passed away. It was time again to move on, this time to Hastings where we settled for twenty years, largely to ensure that Branwen, our daughter, could put down roots and enjoy some stability with regard to her education and friends.

Among her talents Branwen had a predilection for drama. But it turned out that the principal of the local after-school drama studio she attended was not only a drama queen, but a complete chancer to boot, one whose knowledge and understanding of Shakespeare and his time and plays was embarrassingly superficial. Think Donald Trump meets Danny La Rue and you'll get some idea of the kind of person I'm talking about.

The bottom line was that Brenda ended up teaching Branwen herself, and was so successful that she swept the board at the local Music and Drama Festival, as well as other festivals in East Sussex, Kent and South London, putting to shame the competing local drama schools. Other mothers approached her to teach their children, which led to Brenda setting up her own Rude Mechanicals Drama Studio. This lasted for almost 10 years and won the hearts and minds of her pupils, whom she enthused with her love

of Shakespeare — to say nothing of winning countless drama festivals across the South East.

Our final move was to Clacton. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it coincided with a decline in Brenda's health. A heavy smoker for more than 50 years, she had increasing breathing and mobility difficulties, but these were eased by the entry into her life of her two darling granddaughters, Merri — born in 2014 — and Mo, in 2017.

Their dynamic and irresistibly exuberant personalities boosted her spirits and recharged her morale enormously.

The end came much sooner than any of us expected.

Hardly a month had passed between her biopsy and diagnosis of small-cell cancer, the first chemo session, and her death.

It was sudden and unexpected — it came in the hour of the wolf, the hour between night and dawn.

What Branwen and I draw some small comfort from is the fact that it wasn't a long and painful process. She didn't suffer, she died at home, loved and cared for, not in a cheerless hospital ward or strange hospice room, and I was beside her, able to comfort her at the end. It was her time to go.

This morning we say goodbye to Brenda's body, but not to her spirit or to the love we had for her and she for us. She has joined what some African societies call the 'sasha', the recently departed, whose time on earth overlaps with people still alive. They do not die, they live on in the memories of the living, who can call them to mind, and bring them to life in stories and anecdote. Only when the last person to know an ancestor dies does that ancestor leave the 'sasha' for the 'zamani'; the generalised ancestors who are never forgotten, but are revered in memory.

Brenda was a feisty and spirited woman who found it difficult to pull her punches in her dealings with others. She didn't suffer fools gladly — or even badly, including me on occasions. But despite our sporadic harsh but soon forgotten and forgiven outbursts of frustration, words can never express my own and Branwen's