

Dolores, the war is over, I hope you have found peace

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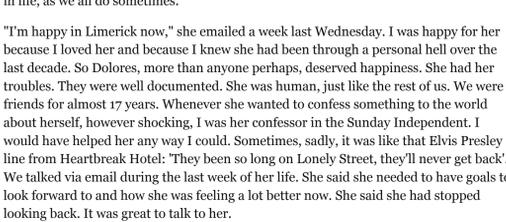


Barry Egan and his eternal friend, singer, songwriter and music legend Dolores O'Riordan. Photo: David Conachy

Barry Egan January 22 2018 2:30 AM

Dolores O'Riordan was one of Ireland's greatest ever singers with millions of fans across the world. Barry Egan remembers his brilliant, beautiful friend who died far too soon

"If you, if you could return
Don't let it burn
Don't let it fade" - Linger.



A week last Wednesday she emailed: "Love to meet up." I was going to go down to Limerick and have lunch with her later this month. That lunch will never happen now.

Heartbreaking to imagine Dolores O'Riordan's short, brilliant life is truly over. Heartbreaking to think that she is gone forever, this beautiful young woman with more talent in her little finger than a dozen Beyonces, this voice of a generation who could sing like an angel with a damaged wing soaring over Mount Olympus.

This forever lost soul, who was finding her way back after maybe wandering off the path in life, as we all do sometimes.

"I'm happy in Limerick now," she emailed a week last Wednesday. I was happy for her because I loved her and because I knew she had been through a personal hell over the last decade. So Dolores, more than anyone perhaps, deserved happiness. She had her troubles. They were well documented. She was human, just like the rest of us. We were friends for almost 17 years. Whenever she wanted to confess something to the world about herself, however shocking, I was her confessor in the Sunday Independent. I would have helped her any way I could. Sometimes, sadly, it was like that Elvis Presley line from Heartbreak Hotel: 'They been so long on Lonely Street, they'll never get back'.

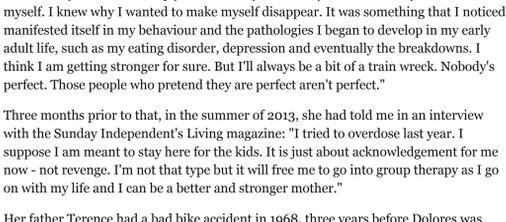
We talked via email during the last week of her life. She said she needed to have goals to look forward to and how she was feeling a lot better now. She said she had stopped looking back. It was great to talk to her.

Whenever I emailed her, she would reply, sometimes within the hour, to say that things were going positively in her life and that her counsellor thought she was making great progress. I was absolutely delighted for her. "Making music and looking forward is important," she said. "Lots of love. Dolores x".

"I have to stay positive and healthy," she said cheerily, adding that she was going to go for a swim in Limerick. "Keeping up the exercise is important.

"Keep in touch love. Much love! Dolores." She said that she would pass on my love to her mother.

The superstar who, as The Guardian put it, spent most of her adult life seeking a balance between depression and anorexia, was found dead at the Hilton hotel in Park Lane, London, last Monday morning. She was 46. Less than three decades earlier, her life changed when at the age of 18, she got a job with a Limerick group called The Cranberry Saw Us. She sang a version of a song she had written, a plaintive piece de resistance called Linger. The song, released in 1993 with the renamed Cranberries, became a giant hit globally, remaining in the Billboard Hot 100 in America for 24 weeks.



There was no one quite like her. Nor will there be again. One of her earliest memories was being about five at school in Limerick when the headmistress took her out of the class and up into the sixth class where the 12-year-old girls were. She sat Dolores up on the teacher's desk and told her to sing for them. The five-year-old loved it - singing was something she had "that could win people over". That much is true of Dolores, a bona fide genius who could stand on a stage and win over any crowd, anywhere in the world. Lady Diana attended one of Dolores's concerts in September 1995, in Modena, Italy. She was in tears by the end of Dolores's heart-rending performance of Ave Maria with Pavarotti. Diana later explained to Dolores that the reason she cried earlier at her performance was because her mother Frances loved Ave Maria.

Like Lady Di, Lady Dolores died before her time, Like Lady Di, Lady Dolores's sorrows weren't a secret from the world, her troubles known to her millions of fans.

Dolores O'Riordan's wounds weren't visible on her elfin-like body but they were deeper and more painful than anything that bleeds. Mental pain - the constant rattle in the brain - is harder to bear than physical pain. Dolores knew that better than most, after all she had been through in her life. You didn't need to be Freud to see that her heart possessed more scar tissue than positive life experience. Elizabeth Wurtzel wrote in Prozac Nation that "a human being can survive almost anything as long as she sees the end in sight. But depression is so insidious, and it compounds daily, that it is impossible to ever see the end".

In amongst the loneliness, and the moments of depression that maybe compounded daily, I would like to think that Dolores O'Riordan always believed that there was lots of hope for her (she had great support from her mother Eileen and her brother PJ) and that the future was never less than bright. Hence one of the last emails she sent to me, saying: "I'm happy in Limerick now."

Born on September 6, 1971, Dolores Mary Eileen O'Riordan was the youngest of seven children. From the age of eight, Dolores endured years of rape and sexual molestation by a person known to her family in the Limerick area. It is hard to even begin to fathom the effect, both emotional and psychological, this would have had on her. When people toss out phrases like "Dolores was dealing with her demons", they should try to understand the hellish reality of what she actually went through as a young child: from the age of eight to 12, she was raped.

"For four years, when I was a little girl, I was sexually abused. I was only a kid," Dolores told me in the Sunday Independent's LIFE magazine in October 2013 at her then home with her husband Don Burton and their children in Abington, Malahide.

How could Dolores ever be normal again after those experiences as a child, her innocence robbed from her in the most evil way? The dirty secret the child-Dolores buried inside her for most of her adult life. It came out in nervous breakdowns, in depression, in suicidal thoughts (there was an attempt to take her life in 2013), in panic attacks, in mania, in anorexia.

In Rome at Christmas 2013, (she was in the Eternal City to sing at the Vatican for the Pope and took me with her) Dolores told me she had Googled anorexia and "studied" the condition. She found out it was a common pathology that develops later on in life. "So I was putting on this charade, this perfect face. I had anorexia, then depression, a breakdown."

I told her that anorexia was a form of suicide: you want to make yourself disappear.

"I knew why," she said in reply. "I knew why I hated myself. I knew why I loathed myself. I knew why I wanted to make myself disappear. It was something that I noticed manifested itself in my behaviour and the pathologies I began to develop in my early adult life, such as my eating disorder, depression and eventually the breakdowns. I think I am getting stronger for sure. But I'll always be a bit of a train wreck. Nobody's perfect. Those people who pretend they are perfect aren't perfect."

Three months prior to that, in the summer of 2013, she had told me in an interview with the Sunday Independent's Living magazine: "I tried to overdose last year. I suppose I am meant to stay here for the kids. It is just about acknowledgement for me now - not revenge. I'm not that type but it will free me to go into group therapy as I go on with my life and I can be a better and stronger mother."

Her father Terence had a bad bike accident in 1968, three years before Dolores was born, "which left him invalidated with permanent brain damage", and he "was never the same again". He died in November 25, 2011, at home in Ballybricken, Co Limerick, after having been ill with cancer for seven years. Dolores knew that she might see the man who abused her at the funeral in Limerick. "I had nightmares for a year before my father's death about meeting him," she said, referring to the man who raped her. At the funeral, he "came over and cried and said: 'Sorry'."

"My father would have killed him [the abuser] had my poor father not been 'retarded'," she told me.

You could argue that when her marriage to six-foot-plus Don Burton - whom she married in virtually her knickers in Holy Cross Abbey outside Tipperary in 1994 - ended in mid-2014 after over 20 years, Dolores lost her protector against the world; and that Dolores's life unravelled out of control from there on. (I always liked Don. I always thought he was great, even essential, for Dolores. She needed him as much as a father figure as a husband in her life.) After the separation, the children lived with Don in Canada while Dolores bounced around the world, seeking sanctuary but sadly never truly finding it.

In November, 2014, she was arrested on an Aer Lingus plane at Shannon Airport after a troubling incident on flight EI-110.

Ten days after the incident, I got a phone call from Dolores to meet her at a house she was staying in on the Adare Manor estate. It was the worst I had ever seen her. She was clearly ill, clearly in need of urgent help. She was distressed and disorientated. She and I recorded a video of our interview. Her speech was so rambling and her eyes so full of mania that we decided not to use it.

When I suggested to Dolores that dreadful day in Adare that she should go to see someone, she replied, irritated: "Sure, I am a counsellor. Aren't I counselling the world? Aren't I after healing billions of people around the world? I talk to myself. I talk to myself in the mirror."

When I asked her what she said to herself, she answered: "That it is not your fault. And I love you. Be nice to yourself. And slow down. Because I am not going to live that long. I'm 43. If I see 50, I'll be happy," said Dolores, who was 46 when she died last Monday. "I mean that. People look at you and see a product. They don't see a soul, but an empty hole."

I was hugely concerned about her mental health. I also genuinely feared for her life. A month later, two weeks before Christmas, I got another phone call from Dolores, asking this time to come and visit her in hospital. It was a typically surreal day. I visited her with two members of her new band, Jetlag NYC - bassist Andy Rourke (formerly of the Smiths) and DJ Ole Koretsky, with whom she had developed a romantic relationship. She played her guitar on the bed and showed me a picture she had painted. We then got a taxi to my house where we put REM on the CD player and had a bit of a bonk with Ole. We all went to dinner in Locks in Portobello until midnight before Dolores went back to hospital.

I gave her a Christmas present of a book of John Lennon's drawings. I wrote in it: "Merry Xmas Dollie, the war is over."

Dollie's internal war was just beginning, it transpired. I knew she couldn't go on like she was. It was shocking and sad in the extreme to see her go downhill like this - even more shocking now that she seemed to be turning her life around finally - because, once upon a time, Dolores O'Riordan, despite her troubles, was one of the coolest, the wittiest, the warmest girls on terra firma...

Cut to Milan, 2003: The Dr Martens-shod superstar from Limerick is in the sanctuary of her own dressing room - a world of suspended candles, sumptuous cushions and calming colours. It is in here that Dolores disappears.

Before a show, she has a routine of reiki, massage and yoga. However, beneath all that Eastern calm, Dolores is desperately missing her two children. She's chartering a private jet to be home for her son Taylor's birthday on Saturday. Thirty thousand euro. Worth every cent. Giant balloons are being inflated and clowns hired. "He'll never be five again. I don't care about the money," she says. "I'm a mother more than I'm a rock star." She adds that she wants to try acting next year. Guitarist Noel Hogan says he was running the London Marathon in April.

"And L..." begins his brother, Cranberries bassist Mike, "...I'm going to have another sex change next year."

"I can just imagine you in a wig and women's underwear!" says drummer Fergal Lawler. Dolores doesn't have to imagine. She can recall the early days of the Cranberries when the Hogan brothers would break into her room, liberally applying her make-up before helping themselves to their singer's undergarments.

Like two Gaelic Danny La Rues, Dolores recalls, Noel and Mike would then appear on the tour bus imitating the two girls, young Dolores and her good friend Brefni. "They used to bust my bras and knickers all the time!" Dolores says.

Dolores remembers the early days of the Cranberries when she dating ("nothing serious") Liam O Maonlai of the Hothouse Flowers, and the times the unknown Limerick quartet played the support slots to the then hugely popular Dublin band. Starving, the male members of the Cranberries would pester Dolores into getting food from her boyfriend's band's dressing room. "Get us some!" "The Hothouse Flowers have very nice cheese," Mike, Noel, and Fergal would say. "Get us some!"

"Leave me alone!" she would reply. "I'm not scoring cheese off my boyfriend for you!" "We were the bummer opening act," Fergal remembers. "We had nothing. No food. No drink. No prospects. And no cheese!"

Cut to Howth, 2007: High up on the hill of Howth, in a sprawling mansion fit for an iconic rock star, Dolores tosses the salad while husband Don watches over the steaks and junctions on the grill in the Edenic splendour of their garden.

Her mother Eileen has two-year-old Dakota in her arms. Dakoka's big sister, six-year-old Molly, is watching Peppa Pig on the television. Dolores brings me into one of the big bedrooms where 10-year-old Taylor is playing Star Wars on his computer. She puts on the Darth Vader mask and walks around the room, pretending to be the former Jedi Knight who turned to the dark side.

Later that night, Dolores takes me into her and Don's bedroom, where Molly is tucked up in bed, refusing to go to the dark side. She wants the light left on. Dakota has long since gone to her bed, after an exhausting day in the garden.

Coming in from the barbecue, Don, 10 years Dolores's senior, brings the surf 'n' turf into the dining room, while his wife dutifully pours the wine. "When you're famous so young, become a millionaire overnight, people think you're going to crash and burn and be such a mess. I have my kids and Don," she says, pouring yet more red, red wine. "Before, if the gig didn't go too well, I'd be depressed; and if the press wrote something critical of me, I'd be depressed. You lose all sense of yourself if you take yourself that seriously. I'm completely calm now. I meditate a lot and I have my family."

Back during her low of 1995-96, when she was suffering from "serious eating", Dolores had "out-of-control anxiety attacks. I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't treating properly".

Dolores ate like a horse that night. She couldn't get the prawns into her mouth quick enough.

In April, 2014, Dolores and the true rock in her life, her mother Eileen, took me for lunch at the Bake House Bistro in Bruff, Co Limerick.

"They just saw me as a commodity, as a cash cow," Dolores said of her experiences in the music industry, which made her extraordinarily wealthy, but sucked the blood out of her, like a particularly ferocious vampire. "I was very, very lonely."

Eileen added: "I remember my own mother - who was 92 when she died in 1997 - saying to Dolores one morning: 'You'd have been better off if you'd kept your little job in Cassidy's in Limerick.'"

"I worked there part-time when I was in fifth and sixth year," remembered the multi-millionaire singer. Courtesy of her group, the Cranberries, selling over 40 million records worldwide, Dolores had plenty of money - not that the wealth mattered. "Because," as Sylvia Plath wrote in The Bell Jar of depression, "whenever I sat - on the beach or at a street cafe in Paris - I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, sitting in my own sour air".

Again, it wasn't always thus for young O'Riordan. The path to fame is not always an easy one. Those whom the gods wish to destroy are granted fame and fortune at a dangerously early age, they say. And the Cranberries were but babies. They survived where others before them had perished.

"When you become famous very young - when you become a millionaire almost overnight - people expect you to be screwed up," Dolores told me in Milan 15 years ago. "So it makes you more determined to keep your life together. It makes you more determined to make the simple things in life right."

Like? "Like a good marriage. Having children," she answered. "Being a good parent. Keep your marriage together. Staying loyal, and seeing the big picture."

Later that night, while Dolores held 20,000 Italians in thrall for two hours, her devoted husband Don took me onto the side of the stage where he gushed with the praise of the truly in love: "That's my wife! And she's the greatest singer in the world!"

I would like to think I did my best as a friend to protect her in life. And so I hope in death this tribute will show the world the real person Dolores O'Riordan was - and more than that, how Dolores truly felt she was getting to a place of happiness and peace before her untimely passing.

Hence, to repeat, one of the last emails she sent me said: "I'm happy in Limerick now." Whatever about her beloved Limerick, the divine Dolores is at peace now in heaven. She will linger, eternally.

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