

# Two Angels

William Burns

*ADJUDICATOR'S NOTE: Beautifully written short story about a man's relationship with the land, his farm animals, his late mother and above all his late wife. The writer manages to convey the strength of the bonds he has with these formative life influences without descending into the maudlin. Lovely piece.*

TOM BOHAN shaved, put on his Sunday clothes and didn't forget the aftershave. Susie loves its sweet warm smell! With a soft pat to Shep's drowsy head, he eased himself into his Toyota Corolla and after turning left at Kilnagross School he headed for Cloone. Tom drove at a careful speed, mainly so he could take in the emerging views of the countryside and whatever else the morning would conjure up. The thick greenery canopying the narrow roads, familiar well-kept houses and sheds with their red roofs unfolded in front of him. A hare calmly ran along the road and into a gap up ahead. Tom loved those natural surprises. Passing the signpost for Kesh, he saw a peaty smoke-stream dreamily meandering its way upwards from the chimney of a small cottage.

It brought him right back to that morning in April so long ago.

He remembered being half-asleep as usual but, still managed to avoid the cow-dungs on the grassy lane as he made the short distance down to the gate tied with twine where he would cross the main road, go into the tiny fields and feed the few cattle. It was dry and frosty that April Saturday morning.

He had liked the weekends to a degree then. He didn't have to hide behind the ramshackle corrugated shed or the small reek of hay at weekends. There were no children passing on their way to the school. On schooldays the younger ones were frightened of him when they saw him. The old-fashioned clothes, bushy hair and the big glaring eyes seemed to be the fault. The bigger children were braver and liked to throw pebbles or funny remarks when they felt they were at a safe distance. Of course, Saturday meant there would be a dance in Roosky, but there was no chance of his mother Nellie ever letting him go. Even at thirty-nine Tom didn't feel he was able to challenge her.

He smelt the white-grey smoke blowing from the house, where the two of them lived, on his way back. He remembered wondering if the comforts for the cattle were better than theirs. He was looking forward though to his porridge, hot strong tea and good homemade soda bread. The clean wellingtons and the yearling eating again should leave the way clear for a quiet breakfast.

But things were unusually quiet as he entered the house that

morning and, beside the kindling fire, he remembered seeing his mother resting aslant on the small armchair.

"Something's strange happening to me Tom...quick! Go to the Post Office and get Dr Carron in Mohill to come out" prayed Nellie.

"T'll be the same as last month, you'll be grand, Nellie"

"Go!"

He remembered rushing back to his mother after phoning, but she was already dead and there was nothing Dr Carron could do when he arrived a half an hour later. The doctor offered his sympathies and said Nellie had a good long life even though it must have been hard losing her husband with such a young family at the time.

After the burial Tom remembered walking out of Kiltubrid Cemetery with his sister Breege. She would be going back to England the next day. He was alone and sad now, but somehow he felt free and quite excited as well. He would be able to see the showbands at Roosky at last. Drumshanbo was supposed to be good as well. And what about the dance carnivals in the summer? He had heard the music on the small portable transistor radio and all about the dances from his

neighbour Francis who said they were always packed and great craic. He wondered about the women and the strange goings-on and wondered if they were true. He had listened to the self-elected smarts, outside Kiltubrid Church on Sundays after mass, questioning one another as to how they had got on the night before. But amidst the freedom, excitement and the great wish to finally go to a dance he had lots of doubts about himself. He wondered if he would be out of his depth.

He remembered feeling nervous when he saw Susie coming over towards him at Cornageeha carnival that summer.

“Will you dance? You wanted to ask me, didn’t you?” Susie said.

“Hmm...I will... I suppose I did”

“Oh only supposing! Saw you making a few tries to ask me before seeing you been swept away by the surge of fellas asking the others, you’re not used to these places, are you?” Susie teased.

“Suppose not”

“Ah don’t worry, me neither” Susie assured warmly.

Tom remembered that clumsy first dance where he more or less stood up beside Susie and generally went wherever she went. She did most of the talking. He couldn’t hear her all the time, but he mostly nodded agreement especially when she was talking and looking up at Joe Dolan on stage.

Outside, he remembered that lovely, warm kiss that Susie gave him. His first kiss! Holding her tiny and soft body he remembered feeling that a new world was being created. His fears and insecurities seem to be disappearing as he was looking into eyes that were as bright as stars. Loving calm was coming over him like a summer’s dawn.

“How are you getting home, Tom?”

“Me Bicycle”

“To WHERE?”

“Kilnagross.”

“Ah God bless us Tom, that’s far too far, my brother Pat can put the bike in the boot and we’ll drive you home”

Tom remembered the motorbike that replaced that bicycle. It was a blue BSA that belonged to Susie’s brother before he got the car. When the world thought that Tom would kill all before him, Susie didn’t and it wasn’t long until she sat up behind. Leaving her home after the dances he felt the trusting grasp of her hands. He remembered the togetherness and how it still remains today.

Tom couldn’t believe that he was in Cloone already and when he got out of his car the gentle breeze brought him back somewhat. He got the flowers, in the back-seat where he put them just before his shave, and quietly walked into the graveyard. The busy jackdaws, with their chaking sounds, curiously

seemed to increase the silence and tranquillity.

When he got to the gravestone marked Susan (Susie) Bohan, he replaced the older flowers with the new ones and tidied around. He sat down beside her and told her he loved her.

Looking at the small gravestone, Tom found it hard to believe she was three years dead now because to him she wasn’t dead at all and not that much has changed. Susie used to say there was only Heaven and that when humans go there, they think like angels who, in turn, think like God. Angels open their hearts and they are fearless! They don’t judge or begrudge! They light the way!

Wasn’t Susie like that when she was alive? Of course she was, Tom thought. She sat beside him on that motorbike, shone the way for him during all those years, and loved him as a husband and person without fail. He knows she is still sitting close beside him and doing the same things.

As he was leaving the graveyard Tom knew it wouldn’t be too long until he was there for good himself. Echoing Susie’s thoughts he would live as long as he could and die when he couldn’t help it. Would he be afraid? Not at all, he thought! Sure he knew already what Heaven was like. And wouldn’t Nellie be an angel there too.