

# DAFFODILS FOR BELA

*Ursula Deane*



I'VE COME DOWN from the green field above our house and am back in my room over the kitchen. I am quiet now. The screaming has stopped. My father and mother are below at the fire. I can hear their voices rising and falling and the talk of action. Joe has gone. My ring finger is bare. I threw the ring straight into his face as I ran out of the house.

My room is small, with a gable window overlooking the meadows below our old farmhouse. If I look down I can see the red roofs of the sheds where we keep pieces of machinery. There is a kitchen garden beside them but the rows of vegetables and potatoes are mostly taken out now.

I was engaged to Joe Whelan. We were to have a Christmas wedding. My dress is hanging in the big old wardrobe in my parents' room. It's a lovely dress. Snow white to bring out the jet-black colour of my hair and, as Joe often told me, the redness of my lips. My mother has her suit and great-coat bought and a felt hat with a long pheasant's feather reaching sky high. My father, wise man, has held off, waiting for the prices to come down before buying, or was it for that he was waiting?

A ray of light comes through the window. The sun is setting behind the hills. The curving road to Carrick lies between them and our farm. Joe lives on

the other side of the hills but he was to come and live here with me. The extension you'd see at the east gable of the house is almost complete. It was to be our first home together. We were rightly kitted out with a sitting-room, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom. What more would we have wanted? It is finished, actually, but for the painting that Joe said he'd do after the wedding. I've made curtains and cushions and we have some furniture in there too. The bed, our bed, was to come next week. It has no purpose now.

I am an only child, so Gracie Forde was to be my bridesmaid. I haven't told her about Joe and me yet, though the way news spreads around here it's likely she's heard about it already. Her heart will be breaking, I'd say, when she finds out, breaking with joy that is. Friend and all as she is, she's always envied me at the dances when Joe and I moved close in the splayed lights of the crystal ball as the band played *'All I Have to Do is Dream'* or Ruby Murray's *'Softly, Softly'*. They're big hits now.

I hear my father's voice getting louder, my mother, begging him to calm down.

"Bela is a good and a beautiful girl. She can go to my brother in Bray for the rest of the winter and she might even meet a fine young city man up there,"

I hear her say. But father is intent.

"There's a law against this," he says, "and I intend to go after that blackguard. Didn't Annie Joyce over there near Ballyrush get a lob from a ne'er do well for exactly the same thing? Why should I let my daughter be belittled compared to her."

"Now, stop yourself there," mother argues. "God protect us if Bela gets like her, lost in mind and body."

I try to remember what I should know of Annie Joyce, but nothing comes to me.

All I want is for Joe to come back and take me out of my disgrace, to save me from my mother who wants me out of her sight and from my father who is planning on taking Joe to court.

I want to get a job, not just the farm work and the knitting I have been doing. Sometimes I look after the twin babies for Mrs Finch, the doctor's wife, but she doesn't always need me. I am between everybody and nobody.

Joe was messing me about lately. I could see that. Once he even said I shouldn't wear the ring, that we weren't engaged at all. He upset me a lot in this way. Then he didn't want any of his people at the wedding. I couldn't understand why. Joe said Christmas was the wrong time of year to marry; we

should break off our engagement and make a new date in the summer. That seemed odd to me. But I think what really made me see the change in him was when he held me. He didn't want to kiss me much any more and at the dances he'd sit down a lot and tell me to find someone else.

Once he beckoned to Willie, from over the road, to dance with me. Then he slipped out of the hall for a good while. After the dance stopped I was left to stand by myself near the mineral bar. Gracie and another friend, Imelda Baker, came up to me asking, "Where's Joe?" or "Is Joe not here tonight?" When he came back in I was afraid to ask him where he'd been. He had such a cross face on him. Had I vexed him in some way?

Then today he walked straight into the house at dinner time, pulled his chair up to the table as bold as you like, and told the three of us, my father, mother and me, that there was not going to be a wedding. He was heading for England before Christmas. He was fed up of Ireland and I suppose of me too. He didn't feel ready to marry.

"Aren't you twenty-five, nearly twenty-six years of age? How ready do you have to be?" my father roared at him. "You'll marry our Bela or you'll regret it, I can tell you, me young hero." I could see where this would end. I wasn't going to be a parcel, so I jumped away from the table and ran screaming out of the house. I ran up the green field to the top of the hill, roaring "Joe won't marry me, Joe won't marry me" at the top of my

lungs. I knew my shouts would be heard, as sounds bounce off the sides of our valley and off the roofs of the schoolhouse and the teacher's house and the Mallon brothers' house. Everyone heard the news at the same time. Everyone knows about Joe now.

"Come down here, child." My father is calling me. I go to the kitchen and shuffle to my seat by the fire.

"We've decided, Bela, to go after this blackguard. I'm going to town this minute to see Jim Malone. He'll put us on to a good man of law. We won't leave this lying. Our family pride is at stake here"

What can I say? My tongue and lips are swollen from screaming. I shake my head. Mother takes my hand.

"Maybe it's for the best, Bela. With a few pounds and this farm you'll get a better man than Joe Whelan ever was." She doesn't look convinced.

"But what about Annie Joyce?" I say. "What happened to her?"

"That's a different case altogether, Bela. Annie didn't have land behind her."

Father is gone. I stay hunched up by the hearth. Mother makes tea and stokes the fire. My stomach is acid tight. I hold it with my arms to stop the hurt when my body is sobbing. My legs and knees are shaking from the running. The clock ticks and neither of us speak.

I hear Jim Malone's car on the street outside. Men's voices. His and my father's.

Jim Malone raises his hat to my mother and to me as he

comes in the door. I don't move.

"It happens to the best of us, Bela," he says as he takes father's chair by the fire. "But there's always a comeback and we've started that already."

I hate Jim Malone, big swagger from the town, hard crusted returned Yankee, with white shoes and money to burn. What has he to do with me and Joe?

"Leave me alone!" I shout and I run up to my room.

I came back from Bray last week. I didn't find a man up there. I couldn't even look at a man and now it is the day of the case. Father, mother and I are getting ready to go to the county courthouse. Jim Malone is coming to collect us in a few minutes. There is silence in the house.

I hear the car. Mother beckons to me. She throws holy water at me from the font inside the door as we pass. Father gets the long black key and locks the door behind us.

"Hah, hah!" he says as he takes his seat beside Jim Malone in the front of the car. Mother and I look out opposite windows from the back. The yellow daffodils on the bank beside the extension are waving to me. The bulbs were a present from Joe. We planted them together.

"Will Joe be here today?" I ask know-all Jim Malone.

"If he has any sense he will. Even blackguards have to obey the law. He has to answer to us for his actions."

"Do I have to talk, to answer questions too?"

"Listen now. We have it on reliable information that they

want to settle so with the help of God, you won't."

I wonder who 'they' are. I am afraid to ask. I wonder if Joe really has come back from England. There have been rumours about another woman over there.

Jim Malone parks the car and we walk up the high steps into the main hall of the courthouse. I am very cold. I keep my head down. There's a big crowd waiting. Gracie and Imelda are inside the door. They seem afraid to look at me. The crowd goes quiet as we come in. The photographer from our local paper moves in to take a picture. I lower my head even further but Father tells me to straighten up. Men in suits and flowing gowns approach us. Solicitors dressed like crows. I am looking out for Joe. I don't see him anywhere.

One of the crows puts his hand

on my shoulder. He is pushing me towards a door, into a small room. My father and Jim Malone and mother come into the room too.

"We have an offer to settle," I hear the solicitor say. "Sixty pounds and costs."

"Six hundred!" my father says.

"Not a shilling less," Jim Malone agrees.

The solicitor leaves.

"Isn't it too much?" my mother speaks for the first time. "The Whelans are poor people."

"She's worth every penny of it." Jim Malone hits the dust off his hat.

I don't want Joe's money. I only wanted Joe. I have a sour taste in my mouth. I long for Joe to kiss it, to put his arms around me and take me away with him

The door swings back.

"They're offering a hundred,

with costs. That's as far as they can go."

"They can sell cattle, can't they?" Malone and my father agree. "Or even a field if they have to."

I look at my mother. Take me out of here, I plead with my eyes. My mother stands up slowly and hits the table hard with her fist.

"That's more than plenty. That's enough," she says firmly.

Then taking me by the arm my mother walks me quickly through the door, across the hallway, still full of people, and out the front door. Mrs Finch runs after us, puts us in her car and drives us home to the farm. She parks beside the daffodil bank.

"Flowers are a great blessing, Bela," she tells me as we walk calmly towards the house. "Especially those that come every spring."

## HARNESSING CREATIVITY

An innovative 'Harnessing Creativity' project has secured €799,880 of funding from the European Union's INTERREG IVA programme. Harnessing Creativity will be delivered by Leitrim County Enterprise Board who have developed this project from incubation, in partnership with the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), Leitrim County Council, Fermanagh District Council, Omagh Enterprise Agency, Tyrone Donegal Partnership and the Leitrim Design House. This cross border project will be rolled out in two phases over a 35 months, running until May 2015.

The Harnessing Creativity Project is open to people working in the creative sector and people in business (SME's, micro business), who are based in Leitrim, Fermanagh, Tyrone, and the surrounding region. This project will provide professional development training, support, & advocacy for people working within the creative sector, and help to raise the profile of creative professionals through networking, showcasing, and a collaborative platform website. The project aims to nurture creative talent and to foster partnerships and collaboration. Creative professionals participating can gain from the business thinking and product development experience of participants from the business community, these in turn can benefit from the fresh and creative approach brought by artists and designers.

