

## A House of Stories

by Stuart Finegan

*“Una Delaney, sit down please for five minutes will you, and finish the story?”* Kelly shouted above the noise from the radio, half-pleading, half-teasing.

*“In a minute. I’ve a million things to finish before the others arrive in the morning.”*

Una was still busy moving cutlery around the breakfast table like she was defusing a bomb.

*“Don’t leave me alone with this bottle. Remember what happened the last time?”*

*“Kelly Donaghue, you’re well able to take care of yourself. I’m no fool to fall for that.”*

But Una’s voice faded, her attention drifted somewhere emotionally deeper. Preparing the table was only a distraction against the memories that were beginning to fill her mind. Kelly watched her a moment.

*“Come on, you were telling me about your mam.”*

Una exhaled, finally sitting down. She held the wine glass between her tired hands, but not drinking, just grounding herself.

*“You know,”* she began, *“people throw the word hero around too easily. But Mam... she earned it.”*

Kelly nodded.

*“She had seven of us. Seven. And somehow, she made each one feel like an only child. I still don’t know how she did it. We were wild like a storm blowing through that old farmhouse. Doors slamming, someone always crying or laughing or breaking something, usually John. But Mam... she never complained. Not once. She used to say, ‘Sure, what would I do with peace and quiet?’”*

A faint smile tugged at Una’s lips.

*“She worked every hour God sent and still found a way to be there for everything that mattered. She’d cycle five miles to her job in the mornings, pouring rain or frost on the road and then still make it home in time to help with homework, cook, argue with us, laugh with us... whatever the day demanded.”*

Una desperately tried to hold back her tears

*“And when Dad died...” her voice cracked for a moment, “when Dad died, she didn’t crumble. She didn’t scream or break or disappear into herself the way some people do. She stood there in the kitchen, hands on the sink, and said, ‘Right. We keep going.’ And she meant it.”*

Kelly reached across the table, resting her hand over Una’s.

*“She held that whole house together, she took on extra cleaning jobs, sold eggs, knitted jumpers to make ends meet... all while pretending she wasn’t tired, just to keep us from worrying.”*

Una’s eyes went distant, wandering somewhere only a younger self could see.

*“I specifically remember there was one winter must’ve been ’98, when the pipes burst upstairs. The whole place was freezing. The rest of us were panicking, convinced the house would flood. But Mam? She grabbed the mop and said, ‘Ah sure, at least the floor needed a wash.’ We were all laughing before we knew what was happening. That was her magic—turning disasters into jokes. She made the world softer.”*

Una’s smile faded.

*“And then... when she got the call, the diagnosis...she was braver than all of us. You know what she said? ‘Sure I’ve had more good years than some people ever get.’ She wasn’t thinking of herself. She never did. She was thinking of us, trying to make it easier.”*

Una wiped her eyes quickly with the heel of her hand.

*“That’s why I came home Kelly. Not because I had the least to lose. But because she’d spent her whole life being everyone’s shelter. It was our turn... my turn... to be hers.”*

Kelly squeezed her hand, her own eyes now shining.

*“She was a hero Una, your mam, a hero.”*

Una nodded.

*“A proper one. No stupid capes. Just grit, kindness, and a heart big enough for all of us.”*

The house creaked gently around them, as if in agreement. And for the first time that night, Una let the silence stay for a while in the house of stories.