

## Take Your Medicine

by Stuart Finegan

Grace and Oisín Clarke lived on the second floor of 87 Sheriff Street. They were young, lost, and already drowning long before Una arrived. Their lives existed from moment to moment. The city's backstreets knew them better than their daughter ever could. Addiction pulled at every thread of their world until there was nothing solid left to hold. Social services stepped in shortly after Una's first birthday, and though Grace tried, Jesus she tried, Oisín always dragged her back into the shadows. Neither would see their twenty-fifth birthday.

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The social worker had briefed Tim and Nula on Una's background and the chaotic lifestyles her parents lived. Before she had a chance to go into too much detail, Nula emotionally advised her to stop.

*"How could they do that to a child?"*

*"Unfortunately, Nula, we find children in this type of situation all the time. My team deal with parents lost to addiction and the effects this has on their children every day, sadly."*

The social worker was hardened to these situations. The young couple in front of them were not. Enquiring if they wanted to know more about Una's parents and her situation, Tim bowed his head and whispered no. Slumping back into the hardened plastic chair, he was lost for words. Nula fidgeted with the tassels of her overcoat while desperately trying to hold back her emotions.

*"It's important you understand what fostering a child really means."*

*"We do," Tim advised, "we do."*

The team at Social Security had advised Nula and Tim that the first period when Una arrived could be difficult, owing to her background and her emotional state. As the years went by, Una emerged from her shell and allowed herself to attach emotionally to Tim and Nula. It would be several years until she had the confidence to call them her parents, especially in public. Nula regularly remembers the exact day this happened, as their lives changed forever. Unknown to his wife, Tim had stayed in contact with the lady at the fostering agency.

He wanted to know more about Grace and Oisín and in particular, gain an understanding as to why they allowed their child to live in such squalor while they fulfilled their addictions with petty crime.

It wasn't long before Tim became obsessed with the unknown couple who had impacted his life. By a stroke of luck, the social worker one day left a file open on her desk, and Tim happened to notice an address where Una once lived. In the years that followed, Tim mulled over what to do with this information. He hated these people for what they had done to his daughter. Staring out the window on the bus home after work on a non-inspiring Tuesday evening, he spotted a man slumped in a doorway, with a woman standing over him screaming at no one in particular. Quickly checking his notebook, his inner nervous excitement grew as he realised he was near Una's old address. Reaching overhead to engage the stop button, he hollered.

*"Next stop, driver, please."*

There was little space on the pavement by the bus stop as commuters jostled to get on and off. Tim politely pushed past a man arguing with his partner and stepped into the damp, cold evening air. Waiting until the bus had pulled away, he carefully crossed the road, then waited in a deserted shop doorway to get a clear view of the young couple a few hundred yards further down the street. He had no idea what he was doing. After what seemed like an age, the woman stopped shouting, turned and was suddenly walking towards him.

*"Excuse me, sir, you got any change? I need a..."*

Tim was caught off guard.

*"Sorry, no, no wait, I might have something, just wait a minute please."*

*"Thank you, sir."*

*"Here, it's not much. I've only got a few coins, sorry."*

Before he had a chance to say another word, a dirty pale hand snatched the coins, and she turned and walked briskly towards the corner shop.

*"Hey You don't know Oisín, do you lady?"*

*"Who?"*

*"Oisín Clarke, he lives around here, I'm a friend of his family, they are..."*

*"No, I don't, mate, but thanks for the few coins."*

Tim noticed the look on her face when she replied as she turned away. She knew him but wasn't giving it away. It didn't take him long to find the address. It was derelict, boarded up. Over the coming weeks, he returned until finally an old lady pointed Oisín out begging outside the Roundhill café. It was easy to befriend someone living on the streets. At first, the offer of a warm cup of tea and some food, then as the weeks passed, Tim would leave money on the promise that it was to be used for the local hostel. But he knew addicts cared more about their next fix instead of a warm bed. He had gained the trust of the vulnerable couple, and this is what he wanted. He was careful not to make it obvious he was befriending them, often leaving it weeks before returning and could see their slow decline into a world he knew little about, but enough that it would kill them in the end.

Family life with Una had settled into a manageable routine. She never asked too many questions, while they created a loving, homely environment that offered this once vulnerable girl a new start in life. Over breakfast one morning, Nuala read out the newspaper while Tim made the tea.

He wasn't paying much attention until he heard the brief story on an increase in deaths among street addicts owing to a recent bad batch of heroin being identified.

*"Read that again, Nula, please."*

*"What bit?"*

*"What's happened on the streets?"*

Before Nula had finished, Tim lifted his coat from the back of the chair, made up a story that he needed to be somewhere, grabbed his half-eaten bacon roll and ran towards the bus stop without saying goodbye. This was his chance, he told himself. The bus dropped him off by the garage as he needed cash from the machine. It was over an hour of walking to the usual places before he found them. Asleep in the doorway of the abandoned cinema. Stepping into the café next door, he ordered two takeaway teas and picked up a bag of yesterday's half price sandwiches.

*"Hey guys, wake up, Oisin, Grace, I've got you a tea."*

After some small talk, mainly Tim talking, they both sat bolt upright, shaking violently. They looked awful and smelled worse. Tim stared into their eyes, but there was nothing.

*"Listen I've got to get to work, take this few quid and get yourself into the hostel, it's going to be freezing tonight."*

He didn't want a thank you nor expected one; he knew what they would do next. Returning to the café, he sat in the window seat and waited patiently for them to make their move. After an hour, Oisin staggered to his feet, turned and lifted Grace. He watched them slowly walk down the street towards the back of the disused garages. He knew their routine at this stage. It wasn't long before they returned to the cinema doorway. Turning their backs towards the passing traffic, they happily went about their business in eager anticipation of the ultimate hit they had been chasing for years. Tim leaned forward, resting on his clenched fists and smiled. His plan was unfolding before him.

*"I have learned to save myself from useless emotion."*

*"Sorry, what did you say?"* the waitress enquired

*"Sorry, I was talking to myself, can I have another tea, please and a slice of your cake? thank you."*

Overhead, grey, moody clouds slowly covered the high street, rain was forecast. Grace rolled up her dirty sleeve to reveal a pot-holed scarred, skinny arm. Slapping her fingers in desperation to locate a vein, she smiled as Oisin looked her lovingly into her dead eyes and sent her away, forever. As she slowly slumped to his side, Oisin helped himself to the remaining dirty brown liquid in their syringe. Across the street, Tim wiped his finger on the plate to wipe away the last of the cream. His emotions at what he had done tore deep into his heart, but he couldn't live with himself for what they had done to Una. Emerging onto the street, he took a moment to look across at the invisible scene unfolding before catching the bus home to his loving family.