

Nightwatch

by Stuart Finegan

Nula's voice cracked, and she pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead.

"I want one more day, one day where she wakes up believing everything is normal. One day, when she laughs without wondering why I'm watching her too closely. One day, when I'm just... her mum. Not a problem she has to face."

Tim placed his hand on Nula's. "Just one day?"

Nula nodded. "Just one. After that... we'll tell her together."

For the first time that evening, Tim accepted her answer with a soft exhale. He lifted himself beside her on the couch, pulling her gently into his arms. Outside, the last streaks of the storm faded from the sky, leaving the world quiet and unbroken. Nula closed her eyes, resting her head on Tim's shoulder and made a promise to herself. Tomorrow she would be ready. Tonight she would choose peace, for Una and for herself.

Nula didn't sleep.

The house settled into its usual night-time routine, the low hum of the fridge, the creak of the old heating pipes and the distant whistle of wind against the windows. But Nula lay still, eyes open, staring into the dark at the ceiling.

"How do you tell your child that something inside you is breaking?" she asked herself constantly. Beside her Tim slept soundly.

"If I say it too clinically, Una will shut down." Nula knew that particular look her daughter used to have as a child when too many questions came at once and her world tipped just slightly off balance.

"Too soft, and it feels like a lie, too honest and it might reopen wounds Una had spent years learning to live with."

Nula turned onto her side, clutching the edge of the duvet, she inhaled the clean, comforting scent Tim carried from his shower.

"I love you Tim."

She knew Una had already suffered enough heartache in her young life. The memories came frequently and uninvited. Fragile events Nula was desperate to change. Una at seven, refusing to let go of Nula's hand on her first day at a new school. Una at ten, waking from nightmares and pretending she hadn't been crying. Una at fourteen, learning to smile at the right moments, to say "I'm fine," when she wasn't.

Nula had promised herself, over and over, that she would be the stable thing in Una's life. That constant, safe place and now... her chest tightened, she closed her eyes, as the tears emerged.

Whispering to herself, "One day, just one more day, why can't Una have one normal bloody day? God she deserved truth in her world."

She sat up abruptly, her heart giving a sudden, unsteady thud. Tim shifted slightly beside her but didn't wake. She watched him for a moment, his hand still resting loosely where it had been when he held hers. They would tell her together. He would never let her tell Una alone. That mattered more than she'd allowed herself to admit.

Nula swung her legs over the side of the bed and quietly shuffled down the hall. Their house felt different at night, softer, more fragile, like everything inside it was being gently held together. She stopped outside Una's door. For a long moment, she just stood there, staring at the thin slither of light creeping out beneath it. Her hand lifted, hovered... then lowered again.

"Not tonight," she told herself

But something inside her told her different. She opened the door just enough to slip inside. Una was asleep, curled up on her left-hand side, one arm tucked under her pillow. Her long hair spilled across her face, and every so often she shifted slightly, as if chasing someone in a dream.

"There she is", she told herself, her little girl. No matter how grown up she pretended to be, no matter how carefully she'd rebuilt herself, she would always be her daughter. Soft, real yet vulnerable. Nula moved to the edge of the bed and sat down gently, careful not to wake her.

"I wish I could keep this from you," she whispered, "I really do."

Una didn't move.

A part of Nula had hoped she might, that Una would wake and somehow make this easier just by speaking first, by giving Nula the words she couldn't find. But she was-fast asleep. She reached out, brushing a stray strand of hair from Una's face. Her fingers lingered for just a second.

"You're stronger than you think Una," she whispered. "You always have been, your stronger than me."

Her voice faltered.

"I'm just scared for you, Una... scared you'll have to be again... alone."

Nula let out a deep breath and pressed her shaking hand over her chest, as if she could fix whatever was unravelling inside her. This was something they would have to face together.

Nula leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss onto Una's temple.

"Today, later... when you're awake Una, I promise you."

Nula stayed a moment longer, carefully listening to her daughter's breathing, it was different to the first time she had sat on her bed and watched her fall asleep. She slowly stood, before slipping back out into the hallway. When she returned to bed, she didn't expect to sleep, but it came eventually, enough to welcome in the morning. When the first light crept through the curtains, Nula was already awake. Tim didn't move. This day would be theirs, a family day.

And when the time came, she would tell her daughter the truth. Una deserved the truth not words blurted out like a lie detector. But as something they would face, side by side.

Tim's hand stretched beneath the duvet and lovingly found Nula's.

"You've not slept?. Don't worry, I'll make us a tea, then we can sit down as a family and talk to our daughter."

Nula silently cried, her fingers tightening around his as if anchoring herself to something steady. The tears came quietly, slipping across her cheeks into her pillow, but she didn't pull away. For a moment, she let herself lean into Tim's warm body.

"Together Tim, its important," she whispered

Tim gently squeezed her hand in response, that simple loving gesture settled her. The fear didn't disappear, but it softened, helped by his love for her and their daughter.

Nula took a slow breath.

"Together," she said again.

Tim pushed back the duvet, stood and headed for the bedroom door.

"Tea my love? it solves everything."