

Second Chance

by Stuart Finegan

The knock came just after midnight.

It was the kind of knock that didn't wait to be answered. Sharp, urgent, wrong somehow at this hour. Nula was already awake when Tim swung his tired legs out of the bed, muttering as he pulled on his jumper. The house was cold. Nula sat up slowly, heart ticking fast for no reason she could explain.

"I'll get it," Tim said half-heartily.

"No Tim go back to sleep, please."

Nula pressed her palms into the mattress, head bowed, "I'm awake anyway."

On the doorstep stood a social worker, soaked through, a clipboard clutched protectively to her chest. And beside her, half-hidden behind her coat was a small girl with dark hair plastered to her face and a bruise blooming yellow on her cheek.

"Evening Nula, sorry to... this is Una," the woman said gently. "We weren't sure where else to take her and then my colleague remembered you and Tim. Sorry to have called so late but..."

Nula momentarily forgot how to breathe. It wasn't the bruise, the rain, or even the fact that the girl was trembling despite the blanket around her shoulders. It was the way Una stood perfectly still, eyes fixed on the floor, as if she had learned that taking up space was dangerous. As if being invisible was safer. Nula recognised that stance. She had learned it once herself. Without warning, Tim appeared behind her, confused and half asleep.

"What's happened, Nula...who is this and why is there a....?"

The social worker explained that it was an emergency removal. The child had no immediate family, and nowhere suitable for the night.

"Just until the morning, my colleague Catherine will ring you around nine-ish, but definitely before lunchtime."

"Please stand in out of the rain, Tim get a towel from the kitchen, sorry I can't believe I left you standing at the door, come in, please."

Nula didn't hear most of it. Her gaze was locked on Una, on the way the girl's fingers worked at the edge of her blanket, twisting and twisting, like she was bracing for a door to close.

"I won't be any trouble, really," Una said suddenly. Her voice was small but rehearsed, as if she had said the words many times before.

"I won't break anything I promise, Miss Grey will tell you, won't you Miss?"

“Yes Una you’re a great girl, now wipe yourself down while I talk to the nice lady, thank you.”

Something inside Nula split open. She remembered a different doorway. A different night. A different silence where someone should have spoken for her, but they didn’t. Without thinking she knelt in front of Una. The girl flinched, just slightly.

“You don’t need to promise anything trust me, You’re safe here.”

Tim looked at his wife, really looked at her and saw something he didn’t understand. Fear but also a determination.

“We can take her, Tim? Miss... sorry I didn't get your full name? for the night, or longer?”

Nula turned and stared into Tim’s deep blue eyes.

“Nula, can we talk a minute, please? Sorry, sorry Miss can you excuse us, please?”

Nula shook her head, a silent plea he didn’t yet know how to read. The social worker exhaled in relief but was nervous that a situation that looked promising was quickly changing for the worse. Nula stepped forward, stretched out her hand, and the young girl nervously placed hers in it. It was warm and loving. Later after the door closed and Una was asleep on the sofa clutching a clean borrowed blanket, Tim sat beside Nula in the dim kitchen light.

“Nula, you didn’t hesitate, not even for a second.”

Nula wrapped her arms around herself like she did when she was a child.

“Tim I know what happens when no one does, it wasn’t a lie. But it wasn’t the whole truth either, you need to trust me Tim, please.”

Nula turned and watched Una breathe, slow, unsure, it was then Nula realised that this time, she wasn’t going to stay silent. Una was asleep in Tim’s arms as he carried her up to the spare bedroom. He couldn’t help notice there was nothing to her. Finally tucked into bed with the light on low and the door cracked open, as Nula preferred. She was safe for now.

Tim was washing up, humming under his breath, the day settling into its usual quiet Sunday. Nula sat at the kitchen table, fingers wrapped around a mug that had long since gone cold. She had been carrying her words with her all day. She knew if she didn’t speak now, she would find another reason not to tomorrow.

“Tim.”

“Mm?”

“I need to tell you something.”

Nula’s voice shook with emotion. She hated that how quickly it gave her away and Tim knew this. He turned off the tap. Dried his hands slowly, like he understood that fidgeting would be annoying. When he sat across from her, his face was expectant.

“This isn’t about Una,” isn’t it?”

“Yes Tim it is. But it isn’t.”

She stared at the wood grain of the table for once lost for words. When she spoke again, the words came carefully.

“Tim, when I was eight or nine, I lived in three different houses in one year.”

“What do you mean? Why?”

“My mother used to say it was temporary, that I was just staying while she sorted things out, she always said she’d come back.”

Nula gave a short humourless laugh.

“She was very good at promises my mother, she would always make promises.”

Tim’s hands folded together nervously.

“Tim there was one night, she left me with a woman from church, some old house up by the school. Said she’d be gone a week, she never came back Tim, never and no one told me. Not for months anyhow.”

Tim shifted in his chair. His eyes were wet, though he hadn’t realised it yet.

“I did everything right, I stayed quiet. I cleaned up after myself. I didn’t cry where anyone could hear. I thought, if I made myself easy enough to keep, someone would decide I was worth it, Tim what I’m trying to say is..”

Nula’s voice broke. She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes and breathed until it passed.

“But they didn’t Tim, they didn’t, eventually, they stopped pretending I was temporary. I became a problem, especially for the old woman. I was something to be solved, but by someone else.”

Tim reached across the table, but hesitated, letting his wife decide. She covered his hand with hers.

“When Una said she wouldn’t be any trouble,” Nula whispered, “I heard my own voice. from thirty years ago, Tim I heard..”

Silence filled the kitchen.

“That’s why you didn’t hesitate,” Tim said.

Nula nodded. “I knew what would happen if we did.”

He squeezed her hand, careful but firm. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Lifting her head Nula met his eyes

“Because I survived Tim, I survived I suppose and people like survival stories, don’t they. They don’t like to hear about what stays with you, about how some open doors never feel safe and about how you spend your life bracing in fear for someone to decide you’re too much effort.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks.

“I was afraid Tim, Afraid that if I told you, you’d look at me differently, that sounds stupid doesn’t it?”

Tim didn’t speak right away. When he did, his voice was heavy.

“I am looking at you differently, I’m looking at you and understanding you Nula, why didn’t you?”

She let out a shuddering breath.

“I couldn’t save myself, but I,we can save her Tim”.

Tim stood then pulled Nula into his arms. She clung to him desperately, lovingly, the way she rarely allowed herself to.

“We’ll stay,” he whispered into her hair, “together, I promise.”

“Tim adoption I think, is like the Middle East, there’s no real solution.”

And that first time Una came into their lives, Nula believed it without reservation.