

Take it Back

by Stuart Finegan

Una didn't feel the rain at first. It soaked through her jumper, plastered her hair to her face, but inside she was still raging with the cruel splitting pain of betrayal.

"Una!" Nula's voice cracked as she hurried after her, her oversized slippers slipping on the wet path.

"Una please...just listen?"

"Listen?" Una turned to face her mother, her eyes wild, shining with tears mixed with the rain.

"You want me to listen now, after what you just said?"

The postman slowed at the gate, unsure of where to look, then quietly moved on. The blackbird had long stopped singing.

"You both lied to me," Una said, her voice trembling with every word.

"All of this time, you knew and you just carried on like everything was normal, why didn't you tell me Mam?"

Nula stood frozen to the spot, her dressing gown flapping around her thin frame. For a second, she looked smaller than Una had ever seen her.

"Una...Una... I didn't lie, I... I was trying to protect you."

"Protect me?" Una laughed. "That's what you call it? After everything, after being sent away as a child, after never knowing when things were going to fall apart again you thought hiding something like this would help, really?"

Behind them, the kitchen door creaked open. Tim stood in the doorway, one hand gripping the frame just to hold himself steady.

"Una, we were waiting for the right moment. We didn't want to frighten you, please believe us, we wouldn't..."

"Well congratulations Dad, you've managed that perfectly...Jesus, Dad you sound just like..."

A silence grew between them, filled by the steady sound of the wind and the rain.

Nula took a small step forward.

"It's serious, but it's not hopeless. The doctors, Dr Lighthouse he believes there's a treatment. There's time, Una, we still have time."

Una's shoulders shook. For a moment, she looked like a child again, lost, scared, bracing for the worst.

"That's what you always say, there's always time, until suddenly there isn't. Until someone leaves, or disappears, or... or changes everything without telling me."

Tim carefully walked slowly towards his daughter, he knew she was fragile in this critical moment in their lives.

"No one is leaving you, not now, not ever, Una, not like before we promise."

Una looked at her dad, frantically scanning his face, trying to measure the truth of his words.

"Dad, you don't know that?"

Tim hesitated just for a second and that was enough. His daughter saw it. That flicker of uncertainty. The crack in his promise.

"There it is, Dad. You don't even believe it yourself."

"Una please."

Una backed off,

"Dad I can't do this, seriously I can't, I can't sit in that house pretending everything's fine while you both decide what I should and shouldn't know."

Nula's voice broke.

"You're not a child anymore. We know that Una. We just... we didn't know how to tell you without hurting you."

"It hurts more now, Mam, because you've chosen not to trust me."

For a long time, none of them moved.

Then, slowly, Nula reached into the pocket of her dressing gown and pulled out a folded letter. The paper was soft at the edges, worn from being handled too many times.

"This is what Tim, sorry your dad tried to give you, not because we wanted a letter to speak for us but because we were afraid we'd say it wrong Una."

Una stared at the letter in her mother's left hand.

"Take it Una... Please... not now, not if you're not ready. But when you are... it will tell you everything. No secrets, we promise."

Una hesitated, then stepped forward and snatched the letter from her mother's hand.

For a brief second, their fingers touched. A warm, familiar, loving warmth flickered between them.

Una pulled back.

"Mam I need space, I need to... think."

Nula nodded, tears slipping silently down her cheeks. "All right, we understand."

Tim cleared his throat.

"I'll drive you into town."

Una shook her head.

"No thanks Dad I'll walk."

"It's a long way."

"I know."

Una turned, clutching the letter tightly in her hand, and began walking down the lane. A soft rain became a mist that blurred her vision, the hedges, the road, even the house behind her. Nula stood watching until Una disappeared. Suddenly, she lost her strength, Tim caught her as she sagged against him, her body trembling.

"Do you think she'll come back?"

Tim wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

"Yes," she will my love, she will."

As the morning stretched into early afternoon, the house remained quiet, too quiet. Both Nula and Tim knew that something had shifted. The secret had not just been revealed it had cracked open something that love alone may not mend.

Somewhere down a long wet road, Una walked on, the unopened letter growing heavier in her hand with every step.