

DEATH OF A CUCKOO

A letter. A photograph. A devastating truth.

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Strange how an innocent-looking photograph can be so explosive. Two young women, laughing into the camera, raising their glasses in celebration of a national event, without the slightest clue of the impact their image would have some thirty years later.

The disturbing truth churned around my head like a river in spate as I sat on my late mum's patio in the weak February sunshine. The lawn, on which I'd played as a child, had grown long over the mild winter months and needed attention. I gazed at the old apple tree by the fence with its low bough where I used to climb and sit, swinging my legs and looking out at the world beyond the garden fence. It seemed so long ago, in a different world. A world which was now crumbling around me.

I laid down the offending photograph on top of Carol's sympathy card and accompanying letter of

condolence and hugged my coat around me. I should contact this woman, this apparent long-lost friend of my mum's and tell her she'd made a mistake. Except she hadn't, of course. How could she? The letter said everything. Dear Gina, I'm so sorry, she'd written. But her regret was at Mum's passing and their loss of contact over the years. She could have no notion of the turmoil her photograph would create, the confusion her knowledge would cause. And I had no idea what to do.

I rubbed my eyes, letting my head slump forward so that my hair hung down over my face. In reality, I didn't actually have to do anything. I could push the matter to one side, dismiss it as an anomaly. I had plenty else to occupy me without dwelling on false testimony by some woman I didn't even know. This now redundant family home needed sorting, its unwanted contents cleared and disposed of. My parents had lived here since before I was born; it was going to take a lot longer than a few hours over a couple of wet weekends. I just needed to get on with it.

I could start with something simple. The rest of today's post, perhaps. More condolence cards to add to those in the living room from people like Carol, who'd heard the news on the grapevine rather than from me, as they weren't in Mum's address book.

But the nagging question remained. How could I ignore the truth?

The thought triggered a fresh welling of tears. I sniffed and blinked them away. I didn't have a choice, did I? I had to deal with it, and that meant looking for the evidence to confirm her claim. And force me to confront the truth.

I stood up and headed for the back door. The office. That's where my parents kept official documents. If any paperwork existed to back up Carol's words, that's where I'd find it.

I yanked open the back door and stopped abruptly. Someone was moving around inside the house. I paused on the threshold to listen. A trapped bird, perhaps? No. This was no panicked fluttering of wings. This was human. The

distinct sound of a filing cabinet drawer clanging shut confirmed it. Someone was in the office.

Fighting the overwhelming urge to flee screaming back into the garden, I forced myself to creep across the kitchen and into the hall. The office door was ajar. Muted shadows flickered in the narrow opening as the intruder moved erratically around the room.

I stood in the hall, inert with fear and indecision. Should I peer inside with the hope of identifying my uninvited visitor? Burst in and demand to know what was going on? Or retreat and telephone the police?

The latter option might be the safest but unless a patrol car was parked within a hundred metres of the front door – unlikely – I'd be wasting my time. I felt too fragile for a confrontation. Which left me with only one choice. Holding my breath, I reached out and gently pushed open the door with my fingertips.

I'd forgotten the bloody door creaked. I flinched. The intruder looked up in alarm, eyes wide and bloodshot. I

shrieked and backed away into the hall, as he came at me. He shoved me aside and pushed past. I stumbled backwards against the door of the under-stairs cupboard and crashed to the floor. I heard the front door open and he was gone.

I curled up into a foetal position and sobbed.