

YES

“What’s happened to the cleaner?” Sarah groaned as she entered the sitting room.

“I told her to go” Eileen said.

“Why?”

“I didn’t like her.”

“You never like them!”

Sarah looked at the floor as if it were a crime scene then poked a plate of uneaten food with her toe. Eileen only ever used the dining room, the kitchen and one small bedroom, so most of the house had been left unchanged for years, apart from dust that seemed to rise up from nowhere.

“You promised to stop smoking,” Sarah said, “You know I hate the smell of cigarettes”.

“I only told you I’d try.”

“What did the girl do wrong” Sarah asked?

“She didn’t,” Eileen replied.

Disapproval from her own children was something no-one had warned Eileen about and it didn’t seem to be done in a way that showed much love or affection.

“The garden looks good at least” Sarah shouted from the kitchen, “I suppose you like the gardener?”

“I suppose so yes.”

“Because he’s a man?”

“The gardener doesn’t have to come in the house.”

Eileen awaited more complaints as Sarah went off to the kitchen and returned with tray of tea and biscuits, her expression now changed to one of pity.

“Clearly, you can’t cope with such a large house,” she said as if she were managing a young child.

“So Simon’s been taking to you, has he,” Eileen asked, “about the house.....”

“No.”

Sarah sat down and smiled.

“Anyway, how are you?”

“I suppose I’m fine.” Eileen said as she picked up her cup of tea.

“Are you sure you’re all right - you seem to be in a strange mood. Are your legs bad?”

“My legs are fine.”

“Sorry I” Sarah said, “cleaners are hard to find in a place like this Anyway, what have you been up to since I saw you lastdo you still help at the shop?”

“Yes,” Eileen replied.

“Next time I’m down here, I’ll pop in there. Have the old paintings sold yet?”

“A few.”

“I always knew you’d like it there.”

Sarah had never been the type to stay still, a quality she’d shared with her father who always seemed to be on his way to the next thing but once he arrived, he didn’t know how to stop. He didn’t know how to reach a destination.

“Cigarettes make the house smell,” Sarah said.

“Sarah - I’m trying to stop” Eileen replied – “that’s all I said - I’d try to stop.”

“I’m only thinking of you,” Sarah said.

“I remember saying that kind of thing to you,” Eileen said, “and you never ate the food I gave you or did what I asked you to do.”

“Perhaps I’m like you then,” Sarah groaned, “but I managed to give up smoking at least. Clearly you need help, so promise to put up with the cleaner next time.”

Eileen didn’t look up or speak but picked up her cup of tea and put it before her face to hide her next groan.

“I cannot tell you how mad it’s been at work,” Sarah said with the aim of changing the mood.

“You work too hard, and you don’t need to with Simon doing so well?”

“Mum - I like work - you know how much I like work.”

“Fine,” Eileen replied.

“O.K. O.K. Have you booked your holiday?” Sarah asked.

“No.”

“You agreed last time.”

“Did I?”

“You know you did – the brochure was right there on the chair.”

“So?”

“Majorca. We agreed on Majorca.”

“Did we?”

“Mary said she’d go with you..... We agreed a break would be good. Remember what dad said - you’re going to still have to live when he’s no longer here?”, “yes?”

“Yes.”

Sarah stood up and looked for the brochure - nothing else had been moved since she’d last been there – unopened letters, magazines, cigarette packets - all in the same place - all apart from the brochure

“Did you take it to bed with you?”

“No.”

“I can have a look if you like”

“I didn’t take it to bed with me.”

“What’s this,” Sarah said, picking up a photo that had been left on the carpet. “Who’s this - I haven’t seen this one?”

“You wouldn’t have done”, Eileen replied, “it’s before you were born.”

“Is it Uncle Gerald?”

“Uncle Gerald was fat - even as a young man.”

“Who is it then?” Sarah asked.

“And bald” Eileen said, “Uncle Gerald was bald – even when he was twenty. I always thought that changed him for the worse – unlike your father who did not seem to care.”

“So, who is it then?”

“Gerald was the nervous type of course.”

“Tell me!”

“Well, you don’t know him.” Eileen replied, with a sharp voice.

“Oh – I see.”

Even now, Eileen knew how to stop Sarah in her tracks by a change in the register or tone of her voice.

“Even as a girl you always had such a serious face,” she said, as she selected a photo from the ones left on the table.

“So if it isn’t Uncle Gerald – who is it?”

“Oh - you sloved that dog.”

“Who is it?”

“Mucky thing it was – you didn’t seem to mind a bit of dirt in those days.”

“MUM!!”

“Someone you don’t know,” Eileen said.

“Oh.”

“Before you were born.”

“So, are there more of him?” Sarah asked.

“A few.”

“Oh.”

“Although most are of you, of course,” Eileen said, looking through the photos again, knowing that her daughter couldn’t stand the old ones before she was thin. “Oh this one’s nice.”

“I always pulled such a strange face,” Sarah said.

“Nonsense.”

“I always looked so fat.”

“Better than as thin as a rake as you are now!”

“You’re doing this to annoy me, aren’t you?”

“Of course not - drink your tea”

Slowly, Eileen drank her tea and smiled.

“Clearly you didn’t give the girl a chance,” Sarah said. “She didn’t even polish the table.”

“Old houses make dust.”

“I’m going to find someone else, and you have to give them a chance ...
Daddy wouldn’t have liked the house like this.”

“I always kept the house clean back then all the time”

“O.K - who is this man?” Sarah asked.

“You never give up do you?”

“No,” Sarah said.

“Just like your dad.”

“So you’ll just have to tell me then.”

Eileen looked at the photo - clearly the village – clearly the fete; a table with trophies, the corner of St Stephen’s church. Harry had the kind of awkward smile you don’t much see these days. He was holding a small trophy, hidden under his arm as if he were embarrassed by the idea of actually having won something.

“I remember, it was some race,” Eileen said, “Harry was such a good sportsman. He always won that race - nobody else had a chance.”

“Oh.”

“Remember Susan’s dad?” Eileen asked.

“Susan, from school?”

“The photo’s of her dad.”

“Oh.”

“Harry was his name.”

“I didn’t know you knew her dad?”

“Yes.”

“So, does he still live there?”

“Harry works at the shop.,,, he makes the frames.”

“Oh that’s nice.” Sarah said, picking up the photo again. Despite looking closely, she couldn’t place the face. She hadn’t lived in the Fens for twenty years. Sometimes, driving through the town to see her mum, she recognised faces from her childhood but failed to quite place them. It didn’t even feel as if those times were part of her life these days.

“Harry used to be a joiner you see.”

Suddenly, Sarah’s face broke into a smile. “My God, is he an old flame?”

“Hmm.”

“An old flame?”

“I wasn’t with your dad back then.”

“Oh. So he is?”

“Don’t look so shocked. “Anyway - you knew lots of boys ... before you met Simon ”

“And you’ve kept his photo all this time?”

“Yes.”

“Did daddy know?”

“Harry and dad were friends.”

“I didn’t mean that – I meant, did daddy know about the photo?”

“No.”

“But you kept it all these years.”

“So?”

“and daddy didn’t know?”

“No.”

“So where did you keep it all this time?”

“I just did.”

Sarah took the photo again and this time looked at it more closely.

“Oh - he wasn’t bad looking was he? In an old fashioned kind of way.....So when was this one?”

Sarah watched her mum counting back the years, her expression changed with every year that passed.

“1963 I think. June. The summer fete was in June.”

“So how many more were there - old flames?”

“Nobody else.”

“Really?”

“When I met your dad I was still young.”

“I expected the shop would be good for you but not like this,” Sarah answered.

“Harry asked me to marry him”.

“What?” Sarah cried.

“Before dad.”

“Oh my God,” Sarah said, putting her hand on her chest, “I thought you meant now. You almost made my hear stop, obviously you said no?”

“I married your dad.”

“My God - you’ve kept this quiet all these years.”

“It isn’t the sort of thing I’d tell you is it?”

Sarah picked up the pile of photos but all were of her – a single reel – taken by her dad – wielding that camera he’d loved so much. The next bundle were of her mum. The camera just loves you, her dad would say, always - Sarah had forgotten how lovely her mum had looked back then whereas she was much more like her dad with his long nose and broad features.

Sarah looked through some more of he photos of her mum but then, suddenly, her face changed.

“What’s happened to the photos of daddy– where have they all gone?” she cried,

“He isn’t in these ones.”

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“He always held the camera so...”

“He always gave it to me then to take one of the two of you... always .. always”

Suddenly, Sarah got up from the table and walked toward the large book case where other old albums were kept.

“No,” Eileen groaned.

“What’s this – what’s happened to daddy?” Sarah cried as she opened an album, only to find spaces where the photos of him had been. Some fragments of missing photos fell on the floor.

“WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE?” she cried, “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO DADDY’S PHOTOS.”

Eileen’s face turned to stone.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE” her daughter cried?

“I DIDN’T MEAN TO ... I..”.

“MY GOD....Where are they?”

“I didn’t mean to....”

“WHEN DID YOU DO THIS?”

“I don’t know.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON’T KNOW?”

“I don’t know.”

"What made you do this?"

....

“WAS IT THIS MAN?”

Eileen started to cry, mainly because she couldn’t think what else to do. Only fragments were clear to her. She’d been drinking some brandy, something she never did now she was on her own. She rarely looked at the photos but something made her get up and go to the bookcase to retrieve the albums. Eric had ordered them by the year and as she progressed through the pages, year by year, she began to feel sick and it was deepening in the pit of her stomach. Eventually, a picture of Eric, receiving an award, probably from the golf club, annoyed her so much she suddenly had the urge to rip it to pieces. Normally, such thoughts dissipated but, before she knew what she had done, hundreds of torn fragments filled her hands. “It isn’t that I didn’t love him” she said,” but tearing up the picture had opened up such a fissure of grief that she couldn’t stop herself turning to more photos and doing the same. She didn’t quite know what was happening, apart from it being wrong, but, somehow, this made her go on tearing them up. As she finished the bottle, the frenzy became unstoppable, going through each album in turn and ripping the photos of him to shreds, the debris of scraps falling down, covering the floor like confetti. Moments later, she began to weep and thinking of this made her want to do so more.

The following morning, she’d gathered up the fragments with the intention of putting them back together but they were too small; it was impossible. She didn’t know why she’d done it, but, strangely, didn’t feel horrified or shocked by what she’d done. Eventually, when she looked up,

Sarah's face had changed, looking down at her now with cold rage and disgust.

"I didn't mean to do it," Eileen said. "I was drunk."

Sarah didn't say a word, just looked down at her as if she was with a stranger.

"You've never been alone – you haven't a clue what it's like for me," Eileen said.

"But why?"

"I really need a cigarette – I know you hate them but I need one right away" Eileen wailed and took the box from her bag. "I'm sorry – I suppose I lost it – that's the term these days?"

"But daddy?" Sarah said.

Eileen took a long drag on the cigarette.

"Was it this man?"

Eileen didn't reply but took another long drag of the smoke to calm her shredded nerves. Finally she looked up at her daughter and said, "this doesn't mean I didn't love you dad.....I really did love him..... you understand that don't you"

The cigarette smoke drifted across the table and Sarah tried to flap it away with her hand.

"Are the pieces in the bin?" Sarah asked.

"Yes."

"I'm going to get them right now"

"I'm really sorry I did this to you," Eileen said.

"He's probably after your money."

"Who?"

"This man," Sarah groaned.

"It's nothing to do with him."

"Why didn't you tear up his photo then?"

Sarah hesitated as if she was holding back from saying things she might regret. She'd always had that side to her - even as a girl - a way to hold everything back.

"Everyone in the village knew about dad's money – so he must know as well."

"Your father was a snob," Eileen said – suddenly with the defiant smile. It reminded Sarah of her mum's face when she was young, her great confidence and defiance.

"Sometimes you talk to me as if you don't like me," Sarah said

"Sometimes I wonder why I come to see you. I only come here because I'm trying to here help."

"I know."

Sarah waved the smoke out of her face. "THIS IS WRONG. WRONG" she shouted and stormed out of the room, into the kitchen to return a few moments later, holding fragments of photos; dirty from the bin.

"Maybe we can fix them," she said, "perhaps a few of them at least."

She quickly put them on the table and started to sort through the pieces, her expression tense and cold. She found one small piece that had her father's face and focused on it so hard she felt a deep pain in her chest. Suddenly, she felt out of breath. Her father had loved to take photos when anyone came to the house, always at the centre, organising, always arranging people in the right position, making sure no-one would feel left unnoticed. She loved the way he took such care with these things.

"How could you do this to him," she groaned.

Eileen wanted to cry again but felt too drained. Even within these scraps, scattered before her now, was something she could not bear to look at again.

"It's too late," she said.

"No. No. It isn't too late."

"I simply can't bear this house. Sometimes being here makes me want to scream."

"So you should sell the house."

Sarah gathered at the pieces in her hands. Although it would take hours to reconstruct even a one or two the photos – she resolved to so – she didn't even care how long it would take her.

"Before dad died he told me this place would drive you mad," Sarah said.

“You agreed with him of course” Eileen said, “you always took his side.”

“He adored you,” Sarah replied, “you know he did?”

Eileen didn't know what to say – even less why a smile had formed on her lips. She wondered if this was why she'd said yes when he'd asked to marry her so soon after Harry had done the same. She so wished to be cherished and loved and Eric had made this so much more clear than Harry.

“He didn't think you'd cope on your own.... Before he died, he told me to remember this ... Anyway ... at least they were still here and I came before you threw them out,” Sarah said, as she put the pieces into an envelope then squeezed them into her bag.

“I'd like to see him.”

“Who.”

“Harry?”

“Sarah - please don't go the shop - not now - please - he doesn't know anything about this ... I'll ask him to come here the next you're here”

“So it's like that is it?” Sarah replied.

“No.....You don't know what it's like to be on your own.”

“So sell the house then - like we said.”

“But I've been here all of my life.”

....

“Promise to be nice to him won't you” Eileen said, “ when he comes.”

“Of course I'll be nice.”

Sarah picked up the photo one more time,

“I remember him now...Susan's house ... he was nice...and I'm not planning to go to the shop by the way - not now.”

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“Anyway ... I'm going to go now.”

Sarah walked to the door, not waiting to be seen out, gripping her bag tightly to her chest. `

“I need some time on my own ... before I go home so I need to go before it's too late.”

“Please don't tell Simon about this ... will you ... please?”

Sarah didn't reply and walked straight to the door.
"I'll call you," she said, "soon".