

## Something lost or found

### Elizabeth Shove

75 Woodside Road

I poured myself a cup of coffee. The kitchen window looked out on the narrow yard at the back Granny's house. I had known the place since I was a child but now that it was mine, I'd decided to make some improvements. I'm good with tools and if things had worked out differently, I might have been a joiner. It was raining outside and although it wasn't the most urgent job on my list, I decided to remove the hardboard that had been pinned over the back of the door. In the 1960s a simple painted surface meant less cleaning and someone, maybe Grandpa Arthur, had covered up the Victorian panelling.

I gently prised the hardboard away and as I did so, a letter, a postcard and a crumpled advert for a pizza delivery service fell out. Instead of passing through the door and dropping on to the mat below, these items must have slipped down the side of the letterbox and got lost in the void.

The card and the letter were both addressed to Granny – Mrs Alice Brown, 75 Woodside Road. The pizza delivery leaflet announced a special offer for Christmas 1987. On the front of the postcard there was a picture of a beach. I turned the card over and studied the back. The postmark was Hunstanton, 12 August 1973. The spidery writing sloped to the left.

*Dear Mum, I'm having a lovely time with Freddie and Angela. It has been raining a lot. We saw a seal yesterday. Love Frank.*

Wow! The card was from dad. He'd obviously been sent to the seaside with some other children. I checked the date again. He'd have been just 13. Dad was now in a care home about two miles away. I visited him every week but these days he didn't recognise anyone, not even me. He called all the nurses Susan, imagining that mum was still alive and that she was looking after him. How things change.

I put the postcard down on the table and turned to the faded yellow envelope. The postmark was smudged and there was no date on the letter inside, but this is what it said.

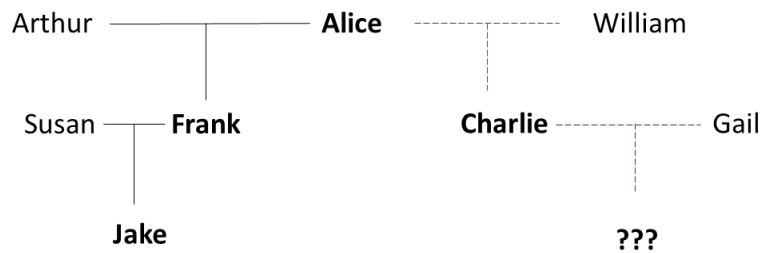
*Dear Alice*

*I promised I would not write, but I have to tell you about Charlie. He got married last year and moved a few miles away, just outside Belfast. He and Gail - that's his wife - are expecting a child! Charlie has no idea that Jenny is not his real mother but whenever I look at him, I am reminded of you, of our time together, and of the sacrifice you made. I thought you should know - we are going to be grandparents.*

*Yours, as ever, William.*

I was mystified. Who were these people? I read the letter again. There was no mistake about it. Granny had a secret son called Charlie. This Charlie's father was called William. That meant dad was not an only child after all, he had a half-brother in Ireland. What had happened? What was the sacrifice that Alice had made? As these questions bubbled up it dawned on me that that there was a branch of my family tree that I knew nothing about.

If I was right, the letter referred to an uncle and a cousin I'd never heard of before. I did a quick sketch.



This was a lot to take in. Granny's will had been clear. 75 Woodside Road was left to her 'surviving grandchildren' – but what if that wasn't just me? I studied the envelope again. It was impossible to read the date or to tell where the letter had been posted.

I looked around the house: my house. What if some stranger had a legitimate claim to it?

It was then that I remembered that the letter had never arrived. Granny never knew I was not her only grandchild. By now, William was almost certainly dead. If he was still alive, my new-found uncle, Charlie, probably never learned about his real mother, Alice, and in any case, he wouldn't know about her will or what it said. If I got rid of the evidence that was in front of me, no one would be the wiser. I tore up the envelope, the letter and my sketch and put the shreds in the compost.

I made space for the empty coffee cup in the dishwasher and got some pliers to remove the remaining pins that were still in the door.

That was years ago. Sometimes I wonder about that letter. What if I'd sold the house and someone else had found it? What if it had not got stuck in the first place? Come to that, if William had been true to his word, the letter wouldn't have existed. I never tried to find my long-lost cousin in Ireland, and as far as I know, he, or she, hasn't tried to find me either. Sometimes I wonder about that as well, but not for long: as Granny used to say, its best to let sleeping dogs lie.