

Global short stories competition

December 2009 Winner

HARVEST SEASON

Paul A. Freeman

When José Quintos arrived home in Mexico after an ill-fated summer of fruit picking in California, he thought his luck had finally changed. For in the hotel on the edge of town the man known as 'The Harvester' was still in residence. So in spite of having lost all his money Stateside, José had a chance to redeem himself.

Calling from the shantytown hovel he called home, he whispered into the telephone receiver, "Hotel Romero?"

At the other end of the line the receptionist grunted affirmatively.

"I must talk with the Harvester."

Another grunt, and José's call was redirected.

"Yes?" said a voice, simultaneously gruff and wary.

"I'm José Quintos, and I have something to sell you."

A moment's silence as the Harvester considered.

"What do you have to sell?" he replied.

He was cautious about mentioning specifics, like a hooker fearing entrapment.

José vacillated. Then, to overcome his reticence, he forced himself to recall the drunken summer nights in California when he threw away his future. Shame flooded him as he remembered the poker games and a string of dubious nocturnal assignations. If his family or fiancé ever discovered what became of the money he worked so hard for...

"I don't have all night," said the Harvester, his guardedness replaced by impatience. "I've a plane to catch. Tell me what you have to sell."

"A kidney," José blurted out. He looked about himself in panic, making sure mamma and his beloved Maria had not overheard him. He resumed in a whispered. "I have a kidney to sell."

"Room two-oh-one. You've got one hour to get over here," the Harvester said abruptly, and hung up.

So, like many other young (and not so young) poverty-stricken townfolk, José Quintos decided to take up the opportunity of selling the American 'doctor' at Hotel Romero one of his kidneys.

It won't be a great sacrifice, he convinced himself, since apart from a stitched up wound on the left side of the abdomen, the operation's after effects were slight. Besides, he had another kidney, didn't he? Best to think of the organ he was selling as a spare part. As for the ragged, five-inch scar that would remain, in his deprived Mexican community, two thousand dollars far outweighed such an unsightly disfigurement.

With the expectancy of an impending windfall, José left his mother's shack intent on submitting himself to the Harvester. To curb his anxiety though, he called to mind old Pepe and his grandson showing off their brand new TVs and sofa sets to him. All this and more could be José's - if only he could fortify his suddenly

flagging resolve.

His feet did the fortifying, however, and finally brought José to Hotel Romero on an unseasonably warm autumn's evening.

The dilapidated, two-storey edifice - a monument to the dual businesses of prostitution and drug-dealing - stood across the street like an uninviting proposition. In the branches of the tree above José a cicada trilled, the sound drilling into his skull. It was the first and only cicada he had heard during a long, hard summer of excess and heartache. The insect was a maverick, an omen perhaps of better things to come. Even so, José again vacillated; but his feet had a mind of their own.

In the hotel foyer, a grunted room number and a nod of the head from the receptionist directed José to the stairs. At the end of the landing was the door to room two-oh-one, its paint peeling and its brass digits tarnished with age and neglect.

Tentatively, José knocked.

Almost immediately the door opened a crack, a steel chain securing it against forced entry. A fug of cigarette smoke drifted through the gap, and the middle-aged American on the other side of the door gave a yellow-toothed smile through the opening.

"You José Quintos?" he asked, his breath a mix of whiskey and stale cigarettes.

José nodded.

"I'm the Harvester." Then, seeing hesitation in the other's eyes, the American's smile widened. "Seeing as you're my last customer in this dump of a town, why don't we make it two-and-a-half grand instead of just two - as a kinda bonus?"

His misgivings allayed by the promise of an extra five hundred dollars, José acquiesced and gained admittance to the Harvester's squalid lodgings.

José's eyes swept the room. Along one wall an antiquated TV set was playing a poorly-dubbed Columbian soap opera. Opposite the television stood the bed. It had a lumpy-looking mattress that was covered by a threadbare blanket. One side of it was darkly and ominously stained. The other side of the blanket was sunken into the mattress and held the impression of a man. This was apparently the side of the bed the Harvester slept on.

On the bedside table was a half empty glass with an open bottle of whiskey beside it, whilst next to them, in an aluminium ashtray, a cigarette smouldered.

Yet it was the far corner of the Harvester's hotel room that gave José pause, for plugged into a wall socket was a steel tray with a heating element. The tray was filled with boiling, red-stained water, and immersed in the water was an array of surgical implements.

"You'd best take a pee first," the Harvester suggested. "Before we get started." Then, detecting once more that José was wavering, he went to the bedside table and pulled open the top drawer. "Look!" he said, counting out twenty-five hundred-dollar bills and leaving them spread out on the tabletop in a fan. "Two and a half grand."

Despite his reservations, José dragged his feet over to the bathroom, desperately trying to keep his mind focussed on the ultimate outcome of his adventure - the financial boon awaiting him. Yet the bathroom held even more disquieting discoveries than the bedroom; a rack of anaesthetic gas cylinders on a trolley, a stack of cooler boxes and, when he closed the bathroom door, a bloody surgeon's apron hanging on a hook.

The door burst open while José was in mid-pee, causing him to urinate on his shoes.

"Sorry!" said the Harvester, suppressing a snigger. "I need my apron, the gas cylinders and a bath towel if you don't mind." Seeing José's glance alight on the cooler boxes, he tapped the lid of the topmost box. "Today's harvest has been good," he explained.

When José had cleaned himself up, he returned to the bedroom to find preparations for his medical procedure well in hand. The surgical instruments lay side by side on a bathroom towel, and once the face mask and a length of tubing had been attached to the gas cylinders, all was ready.

"Take your shirt off and make yourself comfortable," said the Harvester, pointing to the bed and the blood-stained side of the blanket. "Face down, if you will."

Reluctantly José did as instructed. He lay on his front, his head inclined to the right so the gas bottles were in view.

Now in the guise of an anaesthetist, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, the Harvester adjusted the knobs on the canisters of gas, regulating its flow. He gave José the thumbs up and strolled over to his supine patient with the face mask in his hand.

"Just breathe in deeply," the Harvester advised, placing a face mask over José's nose and mouth and fixing the elastic over his head to hold the mask in place.

José did as instructed. Immediately a feeling of well-being overwhelmed and enveloped him. His thoughts turned to the symbols of wealth Pepe and his grandson had acquired, of the riches awaiting himself, mamma and Maria once this operation to remove one of his kidneys was over. His eyelids drooped, his breathing became shallow and all about him the world took on a dreamlike quality.

However, unconsciousness eluded José, and as the Harvester wielded his scalpel, the Mexican tried to shout out that insufficient anaesthetic had been administered, that perhaps the cylinders were low on gas. Yet no sound emerged from José's lips, not even when the scalpel blade cut into his flesh, opening up an incision long and deep enough through which his left kidney might be extracted.

In spite of the pain José was experiencing, as the Harvester removed his left kidney, tied off the blood vessels and carried the excised organ to one of the ice-filled cool boxes in the bathroom, José attempted to blink a message to his torturer. He was lying on his front though, facing away from the Harvester, so the American was unable to observe José's frantically flickering eyelids.

Finally the worst of the agony came to an end. The scalpel clattered into the steel tray (drained now of water), and the Harvester sutured the wound in his reluctant donor's left side. Then, while José was thanking the Virgin Mary for an end to his suffering, a cell phone sounded.

José heard a sliding sound as the drawer to the bedside table opened. The ring of the mobile phone intensified. Seconds later the Harvester answered his call.

"I'll be at the airport in under an hour," he said. "So make sure my money's ready when I get there. I'm just finishing with a final patient."

There was a high, chirruping sound as the Harvester's employer spoke excitedly on the other end of the line.

"You're right," the Harvester concurred after a long pause. "I'm unlikely to come back to this fleapit of a town again. So theoretically I could take a complete harvest from this last patient; kidneys, liver, heart, corneas - the full Monty. I'll give it some thought," he said and ended the call.

While José screamed out for mercy from the locked in confines of his mind, out of the corner of his eye he saw the Harvester picking up a second sterilised scalpel from the instruments laid out on the bathroom towel.

Highly commended
I used to live here
Mike Watson

"I Used To Live Here."

The words were no more than a whisper, spoken in confidence, spoken as if they had been held close for a long time and, finally today, found their release.

He was standing alone on the pavement beyond the low stone wall that separated my front garden from the quiet street. His attention was not with me but on the house I owned and he stared at it as if it were a magnificent palace.

The morning was bright and polished, a fresh clean day that hadn't been used yet and, from the ancient trees in the field behind the house, I could hear the squabbling and squawking of rooks. They sounded agitated, alarmed and full of indignation.

Pushing the trowel into the soil, I got to my feet and rubbed the dirt from my knees and hands. Shading my eyes I scrutinised the stranger. He was tall and narrow and standing erect, with brown trousers and a dark fleece zipped up to the chin, he resembled an exclamation mark. His hands were thrust into his pockets and both his face and hair were thin and pale.

Unsure how to respond, I just stood facing him and said nothing. There we were a few feet apart like actors on a stage waiting for our cues. Taking a shallow breath, he repeated,

"I used to live here."

His eyes found mine and they had the blankness of being preoccupied, of being unconnected to anything except his own thoughts.

"A long time ago." He nodded at each word. "But now, it's your house." He smiled slightly but only with his mouth. "And you live here."

The sun was beginning to warm the air but I shivered involuntarily. I had promised myself a long session weeding and tidying up in the garden and maybe a quick trip to the Garden Centre to buy some more bulbs and sweet peas for planting out after lunch. A simple, predictable few hours of ordinary life that had now been nudged to one side by the appearance of a stranger outside my front gate.

His manner gave the impression that he regarded me as a squatter on his property. I could feel the anger blooming in my chest and my skin prickled so, taking a couple of steps closer, I quickly glanced over my shoulder to the house, folded my arms and declared,

"Yes. I live here now."

My aggressive attitude was blatantly obvious. I had never been one for the give and take of diplomacy or negotiation but instead much preferred the rugby tackle of confrontation. Here I was stamping on the ground of my territory....alpha male. And the rooks in the trees had taken up their alarmed chorus again. "Yeah," they were screaming, "and we're right behind him!"

The stranger didn't move or flinch or show any sign of concern. He simply kept the same condescending smile on his lips, quickly sniffed and spoke without any emotion as if reading from a pre-prepared statement.

"We used to have a lawn over there with daffodils and tulips in the spring. People on their way to the shops used to stop and smell the perfume. Sweet like wine it was. And in the corner, where you've been digging about with your trowel, we had a rockery. Lovely large stones from the Lake District and Scotland. Quartz and Granite. Limestone blocks full of fossils. Glittered like snow those rocks did. And the lawn....well, the lawn was a bowling green."

He removed a gloved hand from the pocket of his fleece, crouched on the pavement, and rolled an imaginary bowling wood down the street. Foolishly, without thinking, I stared in the same direction as the stranger half expecting to witness a gleaming brown ball rushing towards a jack. He stood up and turned towards me wearing that smile that now appeared to be permanently etched on his face.

This is crazy I thought. I've never met this guy before. Haven't a clue who he is except that he says he used to live in my house. Who cares? All I want is a bit of peace and quiet and now I've ended watching a game of bowls!

My hands had unfolded and were now firmly attached to my hips.

"Do you know," I spat out, "I don't care if you had daffodils or tulips or if you had a rockery and people stopped to smell it." I hesitated realising that in my haste to fire out words I had shot myself in the foot.

"Smell the flowers, I mean. Whatever! I don't care! I really don't care." My voice was climbing up the stairs. "And do you know why I don't care? I'll tell you. I don't care because now it's my house and my garden. And I'll do whatever I damn well like."

I almost stamped my footbut didn't.

Apart from the blood thumping in my ears, all was quiet. Even the rooks were speechless. Perhaps they were embarrassed by my outburst. However, the silence didn't last long because suddenly next door's dog came bounding down the drive and hurled itself, yapping and growling, against the fence. It's abrupt appearance made me jump back in surprise. I'd never seen such frenetic energy in the normally calm and docile creature.

Its lips were drawn back in a snarl and flecks of spit sprayed from its mouth. The creature seemed desperate to get into my drive at all costs and yet, at the same time, terrified that it would succeed. The nails of its front paws scratched away in a frenzy at the fence and splinters of wood littered the ground like spent matches.

Without looking at the dog, the stranger spoke in the same measured tone as before,

"Don't care for dogs myself. Noisy, dirty creatures. Eat off the floor. Never had a dog. Wouldn't have one in the house. Smelly animals. Leaving mess everywhere."

He glanced briefly at the small white haired terrier yapping and growling on the other side of the fence and then raised his foot and brought it back down with a thud. The dog yelped as if it had been stung and went whimpering back down the drive with its tail curved between its legs. I just gawped and had the shrinking sensation of not being in control of events.

"Now cats is a different matter," sniffed the stranger. "Got a bit more class. Bit more pride. Dignity. Don't see cats sniffing around lampposts or cocking legs everywhere."

The stranger made no gesture or emphasis. His eyes displayed no light. His hands remained firmly plunged into the pockets of his fleece and the only moving parts of his body were his pale lips that opened and closed to allow words to escape.

"We used to have a cat. Like to sit in the sunshine on the windowsill where you've got those cards. Birthday cards are they? Well, hardly Christmas cards....not this time of the year. Your birthday is it? He asked the question without the slightest interest in hearing the answer.

"As a matter of fact," I snarled, teeth grinding like mill stones, "...it's none of..."

"Oi!" came a piercing yell from the other side of the fence. "What's your game then?"

It was my next-door neighbour and his face was swollen with rage. He came stomping down the drive cradling the small dog against his chest. The animal was visibly trembling and there was a sad, woeful plea in its brown eyes.

"What you been doing to Mitzie?" The dog flinched and buried further into its owner's cardigan. "It came crying into our house like she'd seen a ghost. What you done to her?"

I felt sure that if my neighbour hadn't been holding the dog he would have punched me.

"Me!" I shouted back. "I've done nothing!"

We had never been on first name terms and now it looked certain we never would be.

"Don't give me that," he roared, "there's nobody else here. Stands to reason you must have done something nasty to Mitzie."

I spun around. He was right. There was nobody else. Just me. The garden. The trowel sticking out of the soil. Dirt on my hands and an empty street. We could have been the last two people left on Earth.

"You leave Mitzie alone," he hissed, "or else there'll be trouble."

He kissed the dog on the snout as he walked off and the dog yapped twice in my direction as if to say "so there".

Dashing to the small wall, I peered up and down the street but there was no sign of anyone. Even if the stranger had run there was no way he could have vanished so quickly. I stepped into the street and searched the two parked cars and the immediate front gardens. Nothing. Strolling back I wondered if it had all really happened? Of course it did. I could hear his insipid voice now, "I used to live here." What a weird bloke I thought. Him and his rockery and his lawn. Yes, he'd been here all right. Scared the dog didn't he? I paused at the front gate and surveyed the street....hmm....I suppose he could have had a bike. That's it, I decided, a bike....and pedalled away to annoy somebody else.

I knelt down and continued with the job of weeding between the wall flowers idly thinking about the stranger. Lovely large stones from the Lake District. Now cats, that's a different matter. I chuckled. What an idiot. Wandering around the streets. I bet he stops at every house saying "I used to live here." Better not come back here.

A soft thump on the front room window halted my mental dawdling. It was the kind of sound you hear

when a bird accidentally flies into glass. It sees the reflection of sky, thinks it's space and then whumph! A dull noise. A gloved tap. And that's exactly what it was....a gloved tap against the window.

There he was attracting my attention by tapping the glass with a gloved hand and when he was sure I was watching he began stroking the cat that had replaced the cards on the windowsill. It was him....the stranger....in my house. He was still wearing the fleece but the zipper had been pulled down. He was still wearing the smile but now it had reached his eyes. Beyond the house in the trees the rooks were squawking and alarmed again and, next door, Mitzie was yapping.

He opened his mouth and began to speak. He was repeating the same words over and over again like a mantra. And, as if in a dream, I tramped slowly through the flower beds towards the front room window. Closer I got....closer and closer.... I couldn't hear the words but I knew exactly what he was saying....over and over and over again....

"I used to live here.... I used to live here....I used to live here....

Commended

The scent of violets

Helen Holmes

I haul my sweating carcass up to the flat, bottles clanking in a slimy plastic carrier bag. The kitchen is dispiriting. I need to tackle the teetering piles before I can attempt dinner. Or even a cup of tea. I grinch the top off one of the bottles, sluice a glass with tepid water, pour. I'll cool off in the shower, then make a start.

When I surface, clammy and dehydrated, it's beginning to get dark. From my position face down on the settee I squint at an empty wine bottle and two crumpled crisp packets on the coffee table. A reality show is barking from the television. My right arm's resting on an overturned glass on the floor. I'm surprised to see my great aunt Louisa sagging in my Ikea armchair, glaring at the screen. I haven't seen her for a while, but the upholstered bosom, beaky nose and snowy hair are unmistakable. She's wearing a fur coat.

Blinking, I struggle into a sitting position and zap the TV.

'Auntie, what a lovely surprise! Can I take your coat? Would you like tea? Or sherry, perhaps? I'm sure I've got some somewhere.'

Louisa fixes me with her penetrating amber stare. The bosom heaves with a tempestuous sigh.

'Thank you, no. This is not entirely a social call. My time is limited. I am here on behalf of the family. You are causing some concern.'

My father's side of the family produces feisty women. Louisa established a furriery business, bought a house in North Shields and safeguarded an independent lifestyle at a time when a woman's lot was to marry and have children or care for ageing parents. Great Aunt Gertrude was a diminutive but doughty teacher who spit-polished her reputation as a battleaxe. Children stole her raspberries once. Aunt Dora, a nurse, waged war on unruly youths – and triumphed where the local plodders had failed. All three were unconventional but comfortable in their own skin, which, as if to emphasise the point, remained silky and supple into old age. My mother's family is insecure, self-deprecating, shrivelled. Already my thirty-year-old skin is beginning to slacken. Tender puckers and pouches accumulate and respond submissively to gravity.

'It's very kind of you to worry about me, Auntie,' I say, 'but there's really no need. I'm fine. As you see. Never better.'

I follow Louisa's gaze as it catches on tacky surfaces, peers through greasy windows, snags on gap-toothed curtain fittings. I know she's thinking of her own dust-free ornaments, plumped cushions and gleaming windows.

'I'm sorry it's a bit of a tip. I've been very busy at work these last few weeks.' It sounds lame even to me.

'Really?' Louisa raises an eyebrow a fraction.

'You know, new staff coming in needing support. Lots of paperwork. You wouldn't believe the bureaucracy in the library service these days.'

'Oh,' Louisa says, 'I hadn't realised that you had a managerial position.'

'Well, no. I haven't. Not exactly. But you know what it's like. Some of the extra work trickles down. Inevitably.'

'Ah,' Louisa says.

'I have been offered extra responsibility,' I listen to myself becoming defensive, 'but the increase in salary was derisory. Not worth the candle. I told the boss I was happy as I was.'

'I see,' Louisa says, her eyes ranging round the room again and zooming in on a spider's web in the corner. The spider flinches.

'Tell you what, Auntie, I'll just go and pop the kettle on. I'm sure you've got time for a quick cuppa. Won't be a sec.'

Sidling into the kitchen, I furtively wash crockery and clatter about making tea. When I emerge, Great Aunt Louisa has left.

I inhale a lungful of air as I struggle up the steps, clutching my carrier-bag. I notice that my hand is quivering as I turn the key and ease open the door. No-one, a lingering whiff of violets the only trace of last night's encounter. I grunt with relief and disappointment, turn on the radio for company. The kitchen is startling, naked and glowing after its late-night scrub. I unpack milk, rich tea biscuits, a china milk-jug scattered with forget-me-nots, window-cleaner. I put the kettle on. Leaning against the worktop, cradling a mug of tea, I look through the door into the sitting-room, take stock. Windows first, perhaps.

'So, where do you see yourself in five years' time?' the Human Resources Manager asks, flicking an invisible

fleck from her immaculate black suit with scarlet finger-nails.

'Well, judging by the last five years, pretty much where I am now.' My laugh sounds forced.

'What do you mean?' Her glossy smile is pained.

'Well, I don't seem to be making much progress, do I?'

'Have you tried?'

'Sorry?'

'Have you tried?' she repeats, raising her voice and speaking more slowly, as if my hesitation is caused by hearing difficulties or linguistic limitations. This is not going well. I feel a red tide rising inexorably up my neck.

'I'm not sure what you mean,' I say. She looks at me, startled, blue eyes filled with sudden concern. Oh, God, she thinks I'm a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic. I raise my hand to my throat.

'Have you been on any courses, for example?' she asks more gently.

'No.'

'Or asked for additional responsibility?'

'No.' My hand is over my chin now.

She puts down her pad and pen. 'Are you interested in professional development?'

My face is blazing. What can I say to make this stop? I think of Louisa, smell violets. 'Yes. Yes.'

I pop out between programmes for a pizza and a bottle of wine. When I get back, Louisa's there again, this time wearing a fox-fur stole with the head still attached. Two pairs of beady eyes gleam at me in the twilight. I put the light on.

'Oh, Auntie,' I say, 'That's good timing. You must have smelt the pizza. I hope you like American Hot.'

She gives me an eloquent look, one that conveys an equal measure of disappointment and disbelief. I dump my dinner in the kitchen.

'I just called in to see how you're getting on,' she says, which sounds to me like a demand for a progress report. I'm relieved that the flat looks presentable. I've been keeping it neat in case she put in another appearance. She doesn't mention the improvement, but she's glancing round with a marginally less disapproving expression. The spider has been evicted.

'I'm going on a course,' I say.

'And what, exactly,' she asks, 'is the purpose of this course?'

'It's about presentational skills,' I say. 'It's supposed to help me present information more confidently, so that I can get involved in training people new to the service.'

'Well,' she says, 'it's a start.' She frowns at my frayed jeans and shapeless T-shirt. 'You'll have to smarten yourself up a bit.'

'Oh, heavens, I don't wear this at work,' I say, which is true: not this particular combination. 'And then they might send me on an IT course.' I am like a puppy, fawningly anxious to please. It's all I can do to stop myself from licking her hand.

'IT?'

'Oh, sorry – jargon! Information Technology ... computers and stuff.'

'I see. No doubt an essential skill these days.'

'That's what the Human Resources Manager says,' I say.

'Ah,' she says, 'well in that case ... And what about your social life? Do you go about with a nice crowd? In my day, we all went to the same church. You know, St Nicholas, the one opposite my house – very convenient.'

'I can see that,' I say, dredging desperately for inspiration. 'Er, well I'm thinking of signing up for a ... cookery class.'

'Excellent idea. On several fronts. But don't let me keep you from your supper, dear. It's time I got back, anyway.'

'Well, I'll just go and stick it in the oven,' I say, making a dash for the kitchen and brief respite. When I return, Louisa and the fox have gone, leaving behind the faintest scent of violets.

Tom leans back, sighs. 'That was delicious. Will you let me have the recipe?'

'Of course,' I say, 'in exchange for your Lamb and Spinach Pie. Coffee?'

'Please.'

'Are you up for a stroll later?'

'Certainly am. Let's wash up first, and then we can relax. We could do with a bit of exercise after

that meal.'

'I'd like to introduce you to my Great Aunt Louisa.'

'Oh, right. Fine.'

We walk hand in hand, as always. I love the feel of Tom's skin against mine, cool and dry. He has long, musician's fingers, slender but strong. He smells of resin. I've taken the tiny bunch of violets from the forget-me-not jug on the table and wrapped them in a twist of tissue. Louisa's sweet scent mingles with Tom's astringent tang. We cross the road and stand with our backs to the church.

'That's hers,' I say, pointing to a mid-terrace Victorian house with steps leading up to the door.

'Quite a character, from what you've told me,' Tom says. 'Were you named after her, Lou?'

'Yes,' I say, 'I think that's why she's always taken an interest in me, as though I should be living up to my name. Shared birthday, too. Very high standards, Louisa; strong on disappointment and disapproval. Supportive, though, too, in her own peculiar way.'

'When did you last see her?' Tom asks.

'Ah, well, the straightforward answer is on her hundredth birthday.'

'Which birthday was that for you?'

'Twenty-first. She was in hospital.'

'What was wrong with her?'

'Chest infection. They wouldn't let her go home for her birthday. She was absolutely livid. I think that's when she threw in the towel, when she couldn't get her own way any more, no matter how much she manoeuvred and manipulated.'

'She would hate that.'

'She was determined to hang on for the Queen's telegram. Then that was a bit of a let-down, too.'

'In what way?'

'Well, she seemed to expect something more ... I don't know ... fulsome. Personal, anyway. She could be quite naïve for such a wily old bird.'

'Remember Louisa's generation still wrote letters longhand, wrote off anything else as sloppy practice. Ours is astonished not to get a standard letter.'

'Yes, I'm sure that was part of it. The hospital staff did their best. They were fond of Louisa, even though she made their lives hell! She had a cake the size of Wales, enough flowers to open a florist's, a sack of cards and bus-loads of visitors.'

'A good day, then?'

'I'd say so. She sat up in bed, holding court, looking for all the world like a giant baby, with her fleecy pink bed-jacket and fluffy halo of hair. And that perfect skin.'

'Did she get back home?'

'No. The infection turned into pneumonia. She died in her sleep a few days later.'

Our walk has taken us through the churchyard back towards my flat. We stop next to a small plaque set into the grass.

'Here she is.' I inhale the rich perfume of the violets, stoop to place them on the ground. 'Auntie, this is Tom. Tom, this is Great Aunt Louisa.'

'I'm delighted to meet you,' Tom says.

'So what's the complicated answer?' Tom asks, as we arrive back at the flat.

'Sorry?'

'To the question "When did you last see Louisa?"'

'Oh. Well, let's just say the old girl's spirit lingers on.'