

Equity Release

A short story by Maggie Handsley

I don't know what to do with mother. She's getting as bad as our Louise and that's saying something. Since she broke her ankle at the Savile Park tea dance, it's been one thing after another. She blames Norman for tripping her up. Me, I blame the shoes. Since Vittorini's opened down Westgate, she's become a shoeaholic. The higher the heels the better she likes them. Those particular ones had hardly anything to hold your foot at all.

'Mother,' I said. 'What are you playing at? You'll cripple yourself in those.'

'Oh, give over Brenda,' she said. 'If I can't please myself at my age, when can I?'

'That's just it, Mother. You're over eighty, too old to be tripping round in high heels.' Course, she didn't like that.

'Well, Brenda, you'll be old yourself one day.' Huh, what with one things and another, I feel as old as the hills already. And I've got a bus pass.

She was only in the General for a couple of days before she was demanding to be let out.

'Hospital's a dangerous place,' she said. 'There's a killer bug about.' She told them I would look after her so they let her out.

'You might have asked me,' I said, settling her in the armchair with her bad foot up on the pouffe.

'You might have said no, then where would I be? I'd go bananas if I had to stay in that place,'

Norman arrived in a fluster.

'I've just been down to the General and they told me you'd gone home.' He sounded quite put out. 'And I'd brought you the things you wanted.' He handed her a bulging Tesco bag.

'Thank you, Norman,' said Mother. 'Sit yourself down, love. Our Brenda'll make you a nice cup of tea.' I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Goodness knows what was in the carrier bag. A six-pack of Guinness, I expect.

After a couple of weeks, she was back on her feet and I decided to leave her to it.

'I'd better be getting back home,' I said. 'See what our Louise has been up to. Our Louise came back to live with me after she got divorced, again, and I'm sorry to say, she's the kind of girl who'd organise a knees-up once your back was turned. She's always been the same. I remember cleaning vodka jelly off the ceiling after her

eighteenth. Well, she's in her thirties now and old enough to know better.

'Tell her to come and see me,' said Mother. 'She hasn't been for ages.'

The next thing I knew, our Louise came home with the news that Mother was selling up.

'What!' My stomach sank. 'What on earth is she up to now?' She never used to be so feckless. Lucky for me, she was a model mother or Goodness knows how I might have turned out. Maybe she was going bananas after all.

'Where's she going to live?' I said. Oh no, I thought, not here. Please don't let me have to cope with the both of them.

'She's booked herself in at the *Willows*,' said our Louise.

'The *Willows*? She can't. That's for old folk.'

'She *is* old.'

'But not *that* old.' I was all of a dither. I reached for the phone.

'Mother, what's all this about?'

'What's what all about?' She sounded cagey.

'Louise says you're selling up.'

'Well, yes, I'm thinking about it.'

'So you haven't booked yourself in at the *Willows*?'

'Well, yes. A bit.' A bit? There was only one thing for it. Go and see for myself.

The agent's board was unambiguous. Mother's flat was up for sale alright. I rang the bell but there was no reply. Then I remembered. Tuesday afternoon. Tea dance. She'd be there with her cast on, keeping an eye on Norman. So I went straight back home and phoned the *Willows*.

'Oh, yes,' said Mrs. Woods. 'We're expecting your mother at the weekend.'

'You mean this coming weekend?'

'Saturday morning, about eleven. Is that alright?'

Well, what could I say?

'Perfectly alright, thank you Mrs. Woods.' I have to say I was worried. What had possessed Mother to make such an important decision without even consulting us? I made myself a cup of coffee and sat mulling things over for a while.

It gradually dawned on me that it could, just possibly, be my fault. I had been a bit sharp with her. If she wanted to show herself up going dancing in supermodel shoes, what right had I to spoil her fun? Then, I was a bit mean when she coerced me into looking after her. I should have been more gracious. And, If she likes the odd Guinness, so what? She's probably got hold of the idea that I don't want her and has taken herself off in a

huff. Well, I shall jolly well go and get her back. I mean, she is my mother.

We went round in the car after tea.

'We'll just have to make her see reason,' said our Louise. 'If she goes into a home there'll be nothing left by the time she passes away.'

'Louise!' I was shocked, I can tell you. How any daughter of mine could be so cold and calculating is beyond me, I'm sure.'

'Well, it's true isn't it?'

'That's not the point. She can do what she likes but it must be for the right reasons. Can't you see things from her point of view?' Louise said nothing for the rest of the journey. I hope she was feeling contrite.

Mother was watching *The Simpsons* with a plate of ham sandwiches on her knee.

'Oh, hello,' she said, 'just let me finish watching this.' She turned back to the telly. So I made us a pot of tea before we got round to the serious business.

'So, Mother, you've no need to go and live in a home. You're coming to live with me.' And I meant it.

'Thank you, Brenda,' she said, 'but don't be offended if I don't.'

'But why?' I could think of no possible reason whatsoever why she shouldn't.

'Well, to be honest,' she said, 'it could be a bit dull living with you,' Our Louise laughed like a drain.

'Good for you, Gran.' Then she had a flash of inspiration. 'Tell you what, Gran, I'll come and live here with you.' I see, I thought, she's got her eye on inheriting the flat.

'No thanks,' said Mother, 'you'll be getting married again if I know you.'

'Mother,' I said, 'have you made up your mind?'

'Yes,' she said. And that was that.

We went round to the *Willows* on Saturday evening to see how she was settling in.

'Hello,' said Mrs. Woods, 'your mother's in the lounge.' Well. There she was, organising a game of Bingo. I had no idea she played Bingo.

'All the sixes, clickety click,' she called to appreciative chuckles. She didn't even glance in our direction until the game was over.

'Hello,' she said, 'come and meet the gang.' The gang was in a jolly mood. Particularly Fred, who took the opportunity to slap mother on the backside whenever she passed his chair. Mother was quite flushed with excitement.

'We'll send out for fish and chips,' she said, 'and our Brenda'll go down the off licence and get a few drinks in.' Well, I don't know how she got away with it but she did. The *Willows* hadn't known such hilarity in a long time. And there wasn't a single heart attack amongst them.

'Now,' said Mother when we left at bed time, 'you will make sure Norman comes to visit me, won't you?'

'Alright.'

'Well,' said Louise, starting up the car, 'what do you make of that?'

'I don't know, I'm sure.'

Mother's asked us over today. Not to the *Willows* but to the flat. The sale board's gone. Norman answers the door holding a plastic bucket.

'It's the Champaign,' he says. 'On ice.'

'Come in, come in.' There's Mother in her best floral frock with a diamante shoe on her good foot. 'We've got news for you,' she says. 'We're getting married.'

Well, my head's in a spin, I can tell you. I open my mouth but can't think of anything to say.

'Gran!' Louise is thrilled. She likes a wedding, does our Louise

'Yes, says Mother, leading the way to the lounge, 'I've decided it's time to release my equity. In more ways than one. If you see what I mean.' Actually, I think I do.

'The only problem was bringing Norman round to my way of thinking,' she says. 'It was seeing me in the *Willows* that did it. Course, he didn't know I was only there for the week.'

'For the week?'

'I told them it was respite,' she said, giving me the wink. Well, fancy.

Actually, I've come round to thinking of releasing some equity of my own before it's too late. In fact, I might go down to Vittorini's first thing tomorrow and give myself a treat. Why not?