

For the Woman Who Has a Hundred

by Alison Earls

Mr Jonan stood on the corner outside the ladies' dress shop. He'd asked his question more than half a dozen times and still he didn't have the answer.

And the day was getting warm.

He twitched his hat and adjusted his shirt sleeves under his jacket. Someone must have an idea.

A woman passed with a child hanging doggedly from her arm.

"Excuse me," Mr Jonan began.

"I'm in a hurry," the woman said apologetically as she scuttled on, dragging her burden. "Harry, just walk! Come on, walk properly!"

Mr Jonan watched them as they pulled and grimaced down the street. They had their own problems. They wouldn't have his answer anyway.

He glanced around. There was no one approaching. He turned and looked into the window of the dress shop. Perhaps something there might inspire him. He didn't know her size and she'd never been one for fancy clothes. He would never pick the right thing. And it had to be the right thing.

He heard some footsteps. A young man was walking towards him.

"Excuse me," said Mr Jonan, taking a step out from the window. "Excuse me, I wonder can you help me?"

The man stopped and looked inquiringly down. Mr Jonan was a tiny man.

"My cousin has just telephoned."

The man looked baffled.

"She'll be a hundred, you see. One hundred years old. And she's invited me to her birthday."

The man was smiling politely, but still waiting.

“What would you get? What should you give a lady who's one hundred for her birthday?”

The man's face relaxed a little. “Oh, ... I'm not sure.”

“The only thing I can think of is flowers. And they're not special enough,” Mr Jonan explained.

“Well, how about jewellery — a brooch or something?” he suggested.

Mr Jonan shook his head. “She's never really been one for bits and pieces. Decorations and frilly things. She'd likely put something like that into a drawer and never wear it.” He paused, hoping that another suggestion would follow. The right suggestion.

The man shrugged.

“She called me, you see. Just telephoned and asked me to her party.” He was so pleased that she'd included him. He hadn't seen her for so long, he was surprised that she had thought to telephone. Miss Gerry he had called her. She had been so much older but she'd taken him to the cinema, and for ice-creams. And then a few years on, she had listened to his tragedies when no one else would bother. Girls, jobs, family. She had taken time to hear about his troubles. But that was a long time ago. A lifetime. Not Miss Gerry's, but somebody's lifetime.

“Some sherry maybe? Does she drink?” the man asked.

Mr Jonan smiled and shook his head. “No, she doesn't, I'm afraid.”

“Chocolates then,” the man said. “How 'bout chocolates?”

“Perhaps,” said Mr Jonan doubtfully. “I'm not sure they'd be exactly right. It's her hundredth birthday party.” The man might not have understood this great achievement. Mr Jonan thought if he reminded him, he might suddenly know the perfect gift.

But the man was nodding and starting to move away. “Chocolates'd be right. Get chocolates.” And he walked away nodding to himself, a grin twisting at the corners of his mouth.

It had been so long since he'd seen her. He didn't think she really liked sweet things. He wasn't sure. Mr Jonan could still only think

of flowers. Now were roses her favourite or was that Marilyn? Too many details to remember. And he was eighty-two.

Joey — that's what she'd called him. He remembered that. It sounded happier than Victor. Perhaps he had been happier when he was Joey.

He shook himself and straightened his collar. Two people were coming to the corner. She had a large pink hat with one black feather and his suit coat was slung over his arm. She was laughing quietly and bumping against him as they walked.

"Excuse me," Mr Jonan said.

Their heads leaned in together as they continued walking. As if no one was standing near them. She turned her face towards him. Away from Mr Jonan. Who watched them meander down the road towards the racecourse.

A shame, Mr Jonan thought. She might have had the answer.

He took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. The day was getting warmer. Mr Jonan stepped back towards the window, into the darkest shade that he could find.

She could dance. He knew that. He'd seen her dance once at a wedding. People had all stopped to watch her dancing with ... who was it? Mr Jonan couldn't remember. Too many details.

Two girls crossed the road.

"Excuse me, excuse me, ladies."

They giggled.

"Can you help me, please?"

The one in blue looked as if she might walk on. But the one in red slowed down.

"I have to buy a gift for my cousin. She has her hundredth birthday party tomorrow. She invited me. What should I get?"

"A hundred ... wow. I dunno." The one in red smirked. "A car? I'd want a car."

Mr Jonan smiled. "So would I. The bus can get quite crowded in the mornings. ... But I don't think that would right for her present."

The one in red smiled back. "What about perfume? Old ladies like perfume."

"Yes, that's true. Some ladies do. But which one would be right? Every lady has a favourite, doesn't she? I couldn't guess her favourite from all those bottles. I'd get it wrong. And she would never use it."

"I suppose," the one in red agreed. "What about a plant, a pot plant? My gran loves those. She's got them all over the place. Old ladies love gardening and stuff."

"Perhaps," said Mr Jonan. "I'm not sure if that would be right, but perhaps. Thank you. Thank you for your help."

"S 'OK," the one in red said. "C'mon Dee, stop staring in there or I'll tell Drew you like scarves and hats and shit."

The one in blue, Dee, shoved the one in red and said something Mr Jonan didn't understand. But they didn't seem to be angry. They were just playing, Mr Jonan thought.

Not jewellery or biscuits, not perfume or something to drink, not soap or a plant or a lacy handkerchief. All the people had given nice ideas, but not the perfect gift, the right answer Mr Jonan needed.

"What should I buy her?"

"Marmalade."

"What would someone like when they turned a hundred?"

"Cake."

"What should the present be?"

"A tapestry. They like those things."

"She doesn't like sweet things / to drink / fancy decorations."

"Then I don't know."

"Not sure."

"Can't think of anything."

Mr Jonan walked back home. He had hoped he would be making this journey with the perfect present in his head. But he would have to settle. He'd have to get her the first thing that he had thought of. Flowers. He'd get red roses. A dozen. If he was giving flowers, he would give the best, the most beautiful bouquet that could be bought.

The next day, Mr Jonan took the bus. And then another. And another. And then he walked a little way. The people in the Post Office read the address he'd brought from his notepad by the phone and explained that the street he wanted was just a left and then a right. And he was there. The birthday party.

He walked up the stairs. His flowers did look lovely, but he wasn't certain they would be the perfect present that he'd hoped to get. He twitched his hat and set his shoulders. Then he rang the bell. Inside there were voices — delicate and light. Someone's footsteps came from another room. The door was opened.

A smile greeted Mr Jonan. One that looked familiar, but not. "Hello, you must be Joey. She's been talking about you all morning. Please come in."

Mr Jonan nodded and took off his hat as he stepped inside.

"I'm Alice, her granddaughter. Did you ever meet my mother, Jessalyn? Gran wasn't sure."

Mr Jonan thought. "I think ... perhaps when she was a little girl. She might have had a white dress with a flower. Could that be her?" He smiled. "But you wouldn't know, of course. ... But yes, I think I did. It's all so long ago. Too many details to remember."

Alice nodded. "I know what you mean. I feel like that myself sometimes. I'm very impressed that you remembered the dress. Come on in. Would you like to leave your jacket here?"

"No, thank you, Alice. I think I'll keep in on for now, if that's alright."

She took his hat and hung it by the door. "The roses are beautiful. She'll love them," Alice commented as they walked into the room.

"I do hope so," Mr Jonan said sincerely.

And there she was. Miss Gerry. She was sitting in a chair with ladies of all ages twittering around her. There was a little wooden table near the chair with a teacup and a saucer, and a slice of untouched cake sitting on a china plate. Beside her on the floor was a bag filled with scraps of wrapping paper. A lady reached down to

put another piece inside. Underneath the bag was a cane and a loose piece of red ribbon snaked out of the bag across the stick.

Mr Jonan looked up at Miss Gerry. She was smiling. That lovely smile he knew. That he'd forgotten almost.

"Gran, he's here. Your cousin, Joey. He's got a beautiful bunch of flowers for you too."

Mr Jonan walked towards her and she put her arms out. Her eyes moved up. Too high. Mr Jonan was a tiny man. He reached her chair and still she looked ahead.

Miss Gerry was blind.

Mr Jonan reached out and held her hands. Her fingers wrapped around them. Her hands were warm and soft. But when he looked at them, they looked wrinkled.

"Joey, so good of you to come. So good. I couldn't have had my party without you."

"I'm glad you asked me, Miss Gerry." Mr Jonan paused. "I wish I had remembered it myself. But there's too much ..."

"I know," she interrupted. "So much to remember. I can't manage it myself. Too many years, too many things. If only we could call up all our favourite memories when we wanted to. I said that to Jessie just the other day. Do you remember, Jessie?" She reached her arm out to the side as if she was trying to touch something.

An old lady with a blue dress took her waving hand. "I'm here, Ma. Hello, Mr Jonan. I'm Jessalyn. I'm sure you don't remember."

"Of course I do," Mr Jonan said. "Of course. You had a white dress with a flower."

"That's right, that's right, Joey. She was three, I think. So long ago. You loved that dress, Jessie. With the flowers on the collar."

The old lady in the blue dress smiled. "I'm sure I did, Ma. Would you like some tea, Mr Jonan?"

"Yes, please," Mr Jonan answered. "I've always found it best on days like this."

Alice gestured to a chair and Mr Jonan sat. "I'll put the roses in a vase, Gran, that Mr Jonan brought."

“Thank you, Alice. Thank you, Joey — such a lovely thought.”

Mr Jonan took his cup of tea. It was the wrong thought, though. The wrong gift. He'd brought something that was beautiful to someone who couldn't see. He'd tried so hard to get the right gift but he'd made a horrible mistake.

The other ladies gave their presents — chocolates, perfume, shortbread — and Jessalyn put the wrapping paper into the bag sitting on the floor. They drank their tea and ate some sandwiches and crackers with a savoury spread. Mr Jonan talked to several of the ladies. The weather, prices, outings and their gardens. He looked over at Miss Gerry. Her eyes had closed and her hands were folded in her lap.

Jessalyn noticed his gaze. “It was so nice of you all to come,” she whispered, looking at her mother.

The ladies took their cue and stood, murmuring goodbyes and clasping hands with farewell wishes. Alice brought Mr Jonan's hat and walked with him to the door.

“Thank you so much for coming. It will have made her day, I know.”

Mr Jonan smiled. “I was honoured to be invited. I really should never have left it so long myself. But life ...”

Alice nodded. “I know,” she said. “So much ...”

Mr Jonan made his way down the steps. When the door closed behind him, he shook his head. So stupid. So wrong. He had brought flowers and Miss Gerry couldn't see. He'd wanted so desperately to give her the perfect gift.

And he set off to the Post Office so he could get his bearings for the bus stop.

Inside the house, Alice and Jessalyn quietly tidied up. They took the cups and plates into the kitchen and washed and sorted things in there.

The breeze blew the bag with wrapping paper. And she opened up her eyes. A hundred years. A party for a hundred years. What gift could anybody want for that? She'd had a hundred years to collect knick-knacks, nibble food, buy clothes, dab on perfume. All

those things were nice but she had done them all. A hundred times. Her hips ached. Her back was sore. Why had she been here for so long? What for?

There was a smell. She stood. She felt her way towards the mantle. Carefully. She held herself upright on the ledge and with the other hand, she touched the vase. Her fingers climbed. Moist soft leaves, thorny stems. And roses. Thick velvet petals, soft, gently folded. She breathed in their scent. Her fingers stroked the cool thick layers. They felt rich and red and deep and full of ...

that day in the country

Jessie's graduation

the evening before Christmas

her Valentine

the morning of the wedding

the dinner on the lake

his love

her favourite dress

her babies.

That was why. That was why she'd been here until a hundred. All the times, the good times she had had. And she had given. She forgot her back, her neck, her knees. She smelt the sweet red roses.

Joey had given her the perfect birthday present.

