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marbled pebble picked up off a faraway beach a lifetime ago.

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2019



White rabbits. Those were the first words I uttered this morning. For as long as I can remember, I've said those two words on the first day of every month. It's supposed to bring you good luck, and even though that might sound crazy, today's my one hundredth birthday, so who knows?

Some people call my living so long a miracle, but I think it's more likely preordained from the minute we're conceived rather than a triumph of human spirit or a medical marvel. Or anything to do with rabbits. It was always meant to be this way. When I was twelve, the doctors said I'd be lucky to see twenty. I've outlived them all. I've given fate a helping hand along the way. Looked after myself as best I can. I don't do things to excess, but I don't deny myself too much either. I have a vanilla slice every now and then, a quarter of jelly babies, that sort of thing. Well, you're a long time dead, after all. I've heard some folk credit their old age to a tot of whisky each night. 'Just a wee dram,' they'll say, even though they've never been anywhere near Scotland. I prefer the odd gin myself. Bog-standard gin, none of this new-fangled stuff. I believe there's one flavoured with rhubarb and ginger, if you can believe that. Anyway, fate, destiny, call it what you will, here

I am about to clock up a century. You don't need to worry, though. Ancient I may be, but I still have all my marbles. I'm not one of those unreliable narrators. You can trust me.

The room's normally tastefully decorated, all soft caramel, taupe and fern, with squashy sofas that give you a giant hug as you sink into them. Tonight, though, it's garlanded with pastel-coloured paper chains, the sort kids make in primary school. I suspect they've been made by members of the Craft Club. Three silver balloons, a number one and two zeros, gently sway above the air vents. Black-clothed tables are sprinkled with glittery stars, which some poor soul will have to clear away in the morning. They'll be stuck in the carpet until Christmas, no doubt.

In the corner, a four-tiered cake towers over the makeshift dance floor, way too many candles anchored in the icing. This is Frank's doing; only he could come up with such an ostentatious offering. We'll be eating Victoria sandwich for weeks.

Can you picture a hundred-year-old woman, I wonder? I'll furnish your imagination with some details if you like. Let's see now. My once honey-blonde hair is now silver, but you've probably worked that bit out. Granted, it's nowhere near as thick as it used to be, but what there is of it is cut into what Candice informs me is a 'graduated messy bob'.

The skin on my hands is translucent and spangled with liver spots, the blue veins clearly visible. Hands are always a giveaway. Hands and neck. Arthritic knuckles mean my rings will have to be cut off my fingers when I eventually shuffle off, and beneath my nail polish (yes, really), my ridged nails are yellowing. I won't go all lyrical on you and try to find a word to describe my eyes, because nobody has ever been able to

decide if they're blue or green. Depends what mood I'm in. There's a slightly cloudy look to them these days, though.

People say I'm lucky with my complexion, and I suppose some of it *is* in the genes, but I'll let you into a little secret. I've been using a special cream on my face for nigh on eighty years. Down on the farm when the cows' udders became sore and cracked, we used to rub on a thick, calming unguent. Yes, you read that right. My secret to good skin is chapped-udder cream. You're welcome. I'm fortunate with my teeth as well. Oh, they're not as white as they once were, obviously, but at least they're still in my mouth and not in a glass beside my bed. Back in the day, I used to stick my finger up the chimney and rub soot into them. I've never shied away from using a bold lipstick either. Well, why not accentuate your best feature? The colour I'm wearing tonight is Ruby Woo by somebody called Mac. Candice bought it for me. I hope it wasn't too expensive, because she doesn't earn a lot. She bought me a five-year diary, too. The optimism of youth is staggering sometimes.

I'm wearing a plain black immaculately tailored dress. That level of couture doesn't come cheap, let me tell you, but fortunately the two old dears who work at the charity shop have no idea what they're doing. A tenner they wanted for it. A tenner, I ask you! Now, I'm not one for ripping off charity shops, so I gave them thirty and left them dithering over what to put on the newly naked mannequin.

I'm looking around the room, scanning faces for those I recognise. I'm not even sure who all these people are, and don't like to ask. It's my guess they've been drafted in from somewhere to make up the numbers. Some people will go

anywhere for a free buffet. The lights have been dimmed, but I can still make out Frank over in the corner, sitting in a wing-backed chair.

Frank's my best friend in here now. He only moved in a few months ago, and at first he was a bit distant, but I won him over in the end. I give him a little wave and he doffs his imaginary cap in return. What else can I tell you about him? I can't say he's the nicest person on the planet, because I haven't met everybody, but I'm confident he would make the podium. He's devilishly handsome, with his geometrically manicured moustache. I think he must use a ruler and nail scissors to get that Errol Flynn effect. His eyes are still as blue as a cornflower and his hair's thick, white and wavy, as though it's been piped onto his head by a Mr Whippy machine. I'm rather envious of his hair. He's young, too, somewhere in his eighties, so obviously I'm too old for him. In any case, I'm not his type. Frank was with his Ernest for fifty-eight years, married for the last four. He even took Ernest's surname and they were known as Mr and Mr Myers. That's true love, that is.

For some inexplicable reason, the music has been cranked up to a foundation-crumbling volume and has a dreadful bass I can feel deep inside my ribcage. It's as though someone is stamping on my chest. I shan't moan about it, though. If there's one thing that shows your age, it's asking folk if they can turn the music down.

My fingers fumble with the gold clasp on my patent leather handbag. It's just like the one Her Majesty carries. I often wonder what she has inside hers. A quarter of lemon sherbets, or some Polo mints for the horses, perhaps. After all, she

doesn't need to carry money or house keys, but it's always with her, tucked into the crook of her elbow, never out of her sight. She's sent me a card, you know. It's a picture of herself in a canary-yellow suit with the obligatory matching hat. She's pleased to know I'm celebrating my hundredth birthday and sends me her best wishes. She looks good for her age too.

Oh, watch out, Candice is coming over. She has her fingers in her ears and tuts towards the ceiling.

'Hello, Candice.'

'Who *are* you talking to, Jenny? I've been watching you muttering away to yourself. First sign of madness that is, talking to yourself.'

'Oh, I'm just reflecting, love. Don't go fretting about me.'

'I've asked them to turn that racket down a notch. Now, can I get you a refill?'

'Go on then, you've twisted my arm. I'll have another glass of that fizzy stuff.'

'Your lipstick's bleeding a little. Hang on, I'll fix it with me tissue.'

She dabs her grotty tissue onto her tongue then wipes it round my mouth as though I'm a sticky little kid. She means well, but I'm perfectly capable of fixing my own lipstick, thank you very much. I'm not being unkind, honestly. Candice is a sweet girl and I'm rather fond of her. I know this job's only a stopgap for her. She's desperate to do some beauty course or other, and she seems to be the main breadwinner in her household. She lives with her boyfriend, who sounds like a waste of space to me, but she's smitten. It's all 'my Beau this' and 'my Beau that'. At first I thought she was being a bit of

a drama queen, but it turned out Beau's his actual name, can you believe? At least Candice says it is. He's a musician. A struggling one, but a musician all the same. I bet he's really called Keith or something.

She's coming back over now with two glasses of ersatz-champagne balanced in one hand and a plate of buffet fodder in the other.

'Here you go, Jenny. A couple of salmon and cucumber on brown, a Scotch egg, and a few of those little tomatoes you like.' She flicks a napkin over my lap, then perches on the arm of my chair and takes a sip of her drink. 'A hundred years old, eh? What's it like being a centurion?'

'I've no idea, love. I've never been a Roman soldier.'

'You what?'

'I'm a *centenarian*.'

'Oh, right. Well, anyway, I just can't imagine living that long.'

The lights have been turned up and the music is now playing at an acceptable supermarket level.

'By the time you're my age, Candice, it won't be that unusual. I can't imagine it'll warrant a card from the monarch, whoever he is. How old are you now?'

'I'll be twenty-three this year.'

'So, you were born in what, ninety-six?'

She leans in and gives me a playful shoulder charge. 'Yes, wow! Nowt wrong with your brain, is there? You're dead clever, you. I wish I were that good at maths.'

You'd think I'd just performed a series of quadratic equations instead of simply subtracting twenty-three from two thousand and nineteen. I sometimes despair of the youth of today.

I feel the vibration of her phone at the same time she does. She stands up and fishes it out of her pocket, frowning as she stares at the illuminated screen. She taps out a message, her thumbs a blur of black nail varnish.

‘I told him I was staying late,’ she sighs. ‘Honestly, he’s so forgetful sometimes.’ She shows me a photograph of a grown man pulling a sulky face, his bottom lip protruding like a spoilt child’s. Tendrils of jet-black hair curl over his bandanna and, behind his lilac-tinted sunglasses I can see he’s wearing eyeliner. Never trust a man who wears sunglasses indoors, and as for eyeliner? Well, I expect you can imagine how I feel about that.

‘That’s Beau, is it?’

She strokes the photo with her forefinger, smiling at the image. ‘Isn’t he gorgeous? He’s taken a selfie to show me how sad he is that I’m not at home with him. He’s not had anything to eat apparently, poor thing.’

‘Lost the use of his legs, has he?’

‘What? No, of course he hasn’t. It’s just I usually get the tea on.’ She thrusts the phone back into her pocket. ‘I’ll fetch him a little doggy bag from the buffet.’

She takes another sip of her fizzy wine and surreptitiously glances at her watch. ‘I feel bad now,’ she says. ‘I should’ve reminded him this morning, but he was still asleep when I left and I didn’t want to wake him.’ She drums her fingers on her thigh.

‘Candice, you go home if you want to. No need to stay on my account.’

She pats my arm. ‘Absolutely not. This is your special night and I’m not going anywhere until I’ve seen you into bed.’

‘I don’t want to get you into any trouble, love.’

She frowns. ‘Trouble? There’s no trouble. Beau’s not like that. As long as he knows where I am, he doesn’t mind me going out once in a while.’

‘That’s good of him,’ I say, but the sarcasm seems to go over her head.

I suddenly can’t be bothered any more. The little paper plate on my knee’s not up to the task. It’s too flaccid, and a couple of cherry tomatoes have rolled onto the floor. ‘I think I’d like to turn in now, Candice.’

‘What!’ She jumps up, knocking my glass off the coffee table. ‘Oh bugger,’ she says, bending down to retrieve it. ‘Well, at least it’s not broken. I’ll fetch you another and then we can have the toast. You can’t go to bed before we do the cake.’

She claps her hands and manages to get everybody’s attention. ‘Okay, listen up now, peeps. Jenny needs her beauty sleep, so we’re going to cut the cake and sing “Happy Birthday”.’

As Candice lights the candles, somebody makes the inevitable gag about having the fire brigade on standby. There aren’t a hundred candles – that would be ridiculous – but there are at least fifty, spread over the four tiers.

Frank suddenly appears at my side, offering his elbow. ‘May I?’

He smells divine; he always does. I shuffle to the edge of my seat and brace myself. With one hand planted on the arm of the chair and Frank hefting me by my elbow, I manage to stand on the first attempt. He pulls my walking frame towards me and doesn’t let go of me until he’s sure I’m safe. The cake is over on the other side of the room, and I’m worried the candles will have burned down before I reach it. Candice hasn’t planned this very well. As I lumber across towards it,

a tuneless rendition of 'Happy Birthday' is sung at an agonisingly slow pace. To a round of applause, I manage to find enough breath to blow out the few candles that haven't burned down to the icing. I feel Frank's arm around my shoulders as he gives me a squeeze and a kiss on the cheek. 'Happy birthday, Jenny.'

'Speech,' shouts Candice, cupping her hands round her mouth.

The room falls silent with expectation and I suddenly feel choked. Most of the people here are virtual strangers, cajoled into attending the birthday party of an old woman who's outlived everybody who ever mattered to her. In my mind's eye, the years roll back. It's like looking at one of those old newsreels with stuttering black and white images, people moving faster than they did in real life.

Back in my room, I sit on the edge of my bed as Candice kneels on the floor and rolls down my tights. She notices my swollen feet and absently massages them. I don't know what they pay her in here, but it's not enough.

'Did you have a nice time, Jenny?'

'I did, love,' I say with sincerity. 'It's a long time since anybody did something like that for me.'

She stands up and tosses my tights into the linen basket. 'Do you need any more help getting into your nightie?' Without waiting for my answer, she unfastens the zip on the back of my dress. 'There, I'll leave you to it. Be back shortly with your cocoa.'

I appreciate the gesture. She's done the difficult bits for me – the tights and the zip – and now she's left me to get on

with it. It's important to instil self-worth and a level of independence even for someone my age. I still have my dignity. I'll forgive her for the lipstick incident earlier.

I'm sitting up in my single bed by the time she returns, udder cream still dewy on my skin. I reach out for the mug with both hands. I'm not really a shaky person, especially considering my age, but I'm not taking any chances. Neither is Candice. She's only filled the mug to three quarters. I stare at her face, marvelling at the freshness even at this time of day. Her eyebrows alone are something to behold. They're the most important feature of the face, so she tells me.

She wanders over to my dressing table and picks up a framed photo. 'Who's this beauty?' she asks.

I dug out the photograph this morning. Thought it would be nice to remember I used to be able to turn heads. 'It's me, you daft article. Can't you tell?'

She holds the picture up next to my face and blows out an appreciative breath. 'Absolutely stunning, Jenny. You must've been fighting them off in your day.'

Modesty prevents me from going overboard, but she's not far off the mark. I've often wondered if my life would have turned out differently if I'd looked like the back end of a bus.

She returns the photo to the dressing table and her eyes settle on the polished wood of my jewellery box. 'I haven't seen this before either.' Her fingers fumble with the catch and she lifts the lid. There's a fine line between nosiness and interest.

'Fetch it over here, love.'

She carries the box across to my bed and settles herself on the duvet. 'It's gorgeous, Jenny.'

I'm glad she appreciates the craftsmanship that went into making this box, but it's what lies within that makes it truly special. Not jewellery, but a lifetime of memories.

Uninvited, she sticks her hand in and pulls out a wooden carving of a girl, her arms outstretched, encircling an empty space. I stiffen as she turns it over in her hands.

'Looks like there's something missing from it.'

I take a sip of my cocoa. 'There is.'

I don't elaborate as Candice has another root round and pulls out a pebble, a pink marbled pebble picked up off a faraway beach a lifetime ago. I hold out my hand and she drops it into my palm. The familiar contours are comforting, even though my heart aches at holding it again. I promised to treasure it, and I have for many years. I still do.

Candice is rummaging through letters, photos and old newspaper cuttings yellowed with age. She pulls out a two-column clipping, one that has only resided in the box for a few months. The paper is still white and the ink has not lost its sharpness. The headline jumps out at me, and even though I've seen it countless times before, it never loses its impact. I close my eyes for a moment. There's just one word: *Slaughtered!*

She peers at the article, her eyes narrowing. 'What's all this?' she asks.

I take the clipping from her, fold it in half, then take a breath. 'I need to ask a favour of you, Candice.'

'Sure,' she says, breezily. 'What can I do for you?'

She sounds as though she's expecting me to ask her to pop out for a loaf, but she'll soon realise it's more than that. Much more.

'There's something I need to do, and I can't do it by myself.'

I need someone I can trust to help me. By the time I've told you my story, though, I hope you'll understand just how important it is that I make this journey.'

'Journey? What journey?'

'It's the last chance I'll have to lay the past to rest.' I take her hands in mine, squeezing them until my knuckles turn white. 'Please say you'll come with me, Candice.'