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# **The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared**

Written by Jonas Jonasson

Translated from the Swedish by Rod Bradbury

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THE HUNDRED-  
YEAR-OLD MAN  
*Who Climbed Out of the  
Window and Disappeared*

JONAS JONASSON

*Translated from the Swedish by Rod Bradbury*

ABACUS

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*'Things are what they are, and whatever will be will be.'*

# ONE

*Monday, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2005*

You might think he could have made up his mind earlier, and been man enough to tell the others of his decision. But Allan Karlsson had never been given to pondering things too long.

So the idea had barely taken hold in the old man's head before he opened the window of his room on the ground floor of the Old People's Home in the town of Malmköping, and stepped out – into the flowerbed.

This manoeuvre required a bit of effort, since Allan was one hundred years old, on this very day in fact. There was less than an hour to go before his birthday party would begin in the lounge of the Old People's Home. The mayor would be there. And the local paper. And all the other old people. And the entire staff, led by bad-tempered Director Alice.

It was only the Birthday Boy himself who didn't intend to turn up.

## TWO

*Monday, 2nd May 2005*

Allan Karlsson hesitated as he stood there in the flowerbed that ran along one side of the Old People's Home. He was wearing a brown jacket with brown trousers and on his feet he had a pair of brown indoor slippers. He was not a trendsetter; people rarely are at that age. He was on the run from his own birthday party, another unusual thing for a hundred-year-old, not least because even being one hundred is pretty rare.

Allan thought about whether he should make the effort to crawl back in through the window to get his hat and shoes, but when he felt his wallet in his inside pocket, he decided that it would suffice. Besides, Director Alice had repeatedly shown that she had a sixth sense (wherever he hid his vodka, she found it), and she might be nosing around in there even now, suspicious that something fishy was going on.

Better to be on his way while he could, Allan thought, as he stepped out of the flower bed on creaking knees. In his wallet, as far as he could remember, he had a few hundred-crown notes saved – a good thing since he'd need some cash if he was going into hiding.

He turned to take one last look at the Old People's Home that – until a few moments ago – he had thought would be his

last residence on Earth, and then he told himself that he could die some other time, in some other place.

The hundred-year-old man set off in his pee-slippers (so called because men of an advanced age rarely pee farther than their shoes), first through a park and then alongside an open field where a market was occasionally held in the otherwise quiet provincial town. After a few hundred yards, Allan went around the back of the district's medieval church and sat down on a bench next to some gravestones to rest his aching knees. It wasn't such a religious town that Allan worried about being disturbed in the churchyard. He noted an ironic coincidence. He was born the same year as a Henning Algotsson who lay beneath the stone just across from his bench. But there was an important difference – Henning had given up the ghost sixty-one years earlier. If Allan had been more curious he might have wondered what Henning died of, at the age of thirty-nine. But Allan left other people to themselves, dead or alive. He always had and he always would.

Instead, he thought that he had probably been mistaken all those years when he'd sat in the Old People's Home, feeling that he might as well be dead. However many aches and pains he suffered, it had to be much more interesting and instructive to be on the run from Director Alice than to be lying rigid six feet under.

Upon which thought the Birthday Boy, despite his complaining knees, got up and said goodbye to Henning Algotsson and continued on his badly planned flight.

Allan cut across the churchyard to the south, until a stone wall appeared in his path. It wasn't more than three feet high, but Allan was a centenarian, not a high jumper. On the other side was Malmköping's bus station and the old man suddenly realised that his rickety legs were taking him toward a building

that could be very useful. Once, many years earlier, Allan had crossed the Himalayas. That was no picnic. Allan thought about that experience now, as he stood before the last hurdle between himself and the station. He considered the matter so intently that the stone wall in front of his eyes seemed to shrink. And when it was at its very lowest, Allan crept over it, age and knees be damned.

Malmköping is not what you'd call a bustling town, and this sunny weekday morning was no exception. Allan hadn't seen a living soul since he had suddenly decided not to show up at his own hundredth birthday party. The station waiting room was almost empty when Allan shuffled in. Almost. On the right were two ticket windows, one closed. Behind the other sat a little man with small, round glasses, thin hair combed to one side, and a uniform waistcoat. The man gave him an irritated look as he raised his eyes from his computer screen. Perhaps he felt the waiting room was becoming too crowded, because over in the corner there was already another person, a young man of slight build, with long, greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard, and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back.

It seemed as if the young man might not be able to read, since he was pulling at the door to the handicapped toilet, even though there was a sign saying 'Out of Order'.

After a moment, he moved to the other toilet, but there he faced a different problem. Evidently he didn't want to be parted from his big grey suitcase on wheels, but the cubicle was simply too small for the two of them. It seemed to Allan that the young man would either have to leave the suitcase outside while he relieved himself, or allow the suitcase to occupy the cubicle, while he himself remained outside.

But Allan had more pressing concerns. Making an effort to move his legs in the right sequence, he shuffled with small steps



up to the little man in the open ticket window and enquired as to the possibility of public transport in some direction, any at all would do, within the next few minutes, and if so, what would it cost?

The little man looked tired. He had probably lost track of things halfway through Allan's enquiry, because after a few seconds, he said:

'And where is it you want to go?'

Allan took a deep breath, and reminded the little man that he had already stated that the actual destination, and for that matter the means of transport, were of less importance than a) the time of departure, and b) the cost.

The little man silently inspected his timetables and let Allan's words sink in.

'Bus number 202 departs for Strängnäs in three minutes. Would that work?'

Yes, Allan thought it would. The little man told him that the bus departed from outside the terminal door and that it would be most convenient to buy a ticket directly from the driver.

Allan wondered what the little man did behind the window if he didn't sell tickets, but he didn't say anything. The little man possibly wondered the same thing. Allan thanked him for his help and tried to tip the hat he had in his haste not brought along.

The hundred-year-old man sat down on one of the two empty benches, alone with his thoughts. The wretched birthday party at the home would start at three o'clock, and that was in twelve minutes. At any moment they would be banging on the door to Allan's room, and then all hell would break loose. He smiled at the thought.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Allan saw that somebody was approaching. It was the slightly built young man heading straight for Allan with his big suitcase trailing behind him on

four small wheels. Allan realised that he might not be able to avoid engaging the long-haired youth in conversation. Perhaps that wasn't so bad. He might gain insight into what today's young people thought about this and that.

A conversation did take place, but without the depth of social analysis Allan had anticipated. The young man came to a halt a few yards away, seemed to study the old man for a moment, and then said:

'Hey.'

Allan replied in a friendly tone, saying that he wished him a good afternoon, and then asked him if there was some way he could be of service. It turned out that there was. The young man wanted Allan to keep an eye on the suitcase while the owner relieved himself. Or as he expressed it:

'I need to take a dump.'

Allan replied that, although he was old and decrepit, his eyesight was still in good repair and it did not sound like too arduous a task to keep an eye on the young man's suitcase. He did recommend that the young man relieve himself with some urgency – without, of course, using the young man's own terminology – as Allan had a bus to catch.

The young man did not hear the last bit. His urgent need drove him toward the toilet before Allan had finished speaking.

The hundred-year-old man had never let himself be irritated by people, even when there was a good reason to be, and he was not annoyed by the uncouth manner of this youth. But he couldn't warm to him either, and that probably played some part in what happened next.

Bus number 202 rolled up outside the entrance to the terminal, just a few seconds after the young man had closed the toilet door behind him. Allan looked at the bus and then at the suitcase, then again at the bus and then again at the suitcase.

It has wheels, he said to himself. And there's a strap to pull it by too.

And then Allan surprised himself by making what – you have to admit – was a decision that said 'yes' to life.

The bus driver was conscientious and polite. He stepped down and helped the very old man with the big suitcase to get on the bus.

Allan thanked him and pulled out his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket. The bus driver wondered if the gentleman was possibly going all the way to Strängnäs, while Allan counted out six hundred and fifty crowns in notes and a few coins. But Allan thought it best to be frugal and so he held out a fifty-crown note and asked:

'How far will this get me?'

The driver said jovially that he was used to people who knew where they wanted to go but not what it would cost, but this was quite the opposite. Then he looked in his schedule and replied that for forty-eight crowns you could travel on the bus to Byringe Station.

Allan thought that sounded fine. The driver put the newly stolen suitcase in the baggage area behind his seat, while Allan sat down in the first row on the right-hand side. From there he could see through the window of the station's waiting room. The restroom door was still closed when the bus rolled off. Allan hoped for the young man's sake that he was having a pleasant time in there, bearing in mind the disappointment that was awaiting him.

The bus to Strängnäs was not exactly crowded that afternoon. In the back row there was a middle-aged woman, in the middle a young mother who had struggled on board with her two children, one of them in a pram, and at the very front an extremely old man.

This passenger was wondering why he had stolen a big grey suitcase on four wheels. Was it because he could and because the owner was a lout or because the suitcase might contain a pair of shoes and even a hat? Or was it because the old man didn't have anything to lose? Allan really couldn't say why he did it. When life has gone into overtime it's easy to take liberties, he thought, and he made himself comfortable in the seat.

So far, Allan was satisfied with the way the day had developed. Then he closed his eyes for his afternoon nap.

At that same moment, Director Alice knocked on the door to room 1 at the Old People's Home. She knocked again and again.

'Stop fooling around, Allan. The mayor and everyone else have already arrived. Do you hear me? You haven't been at the bottle again, have you? Come out this minute, Allan! Allan?'

At about the same time, the door opened to what was, for the time being, the only functioning toilet in Malmköping Station. Out stepped a young man who was doubly relieved. He took a few steps toward the middle of the waiting room, tightening his belt with one hand and combing his hair with the fingers of the other hand. Then he stopped, stared at the two empty benches, and looked left and right. Upon which he exclaimed:

'What the bloody damned hell . . . !'

Then words failed him, before he found his voice again:

'You're a dead man, you old bastard. Once I've found you.'

# THREE

*Monday, 2nd May 2005*

Just after three o'clock in the afternoon on 2nd May the calm of Malmköping was shattered for what would be several days. At first Director Alice at the Old People's Home was worried rather than angry, and pulled out her master key. Since Allan had not concealed his escape route, it was immediately obvious that the Birthday Boy had climbed out of the window. Judging by the tracks, he had then stood among the pansies in the flower bed, before disappearing.

By virtue of his position, the mayor felt he should take command. He ordered the staff to search in pairs. Allan couldn't be far away; the searchers should concentrate on the immediate vicinity. One pair was dispatched to the park, one to the state-run liquor store (a place that Allan had occasionally frequented, Director Alice knew), one to the other shops on Main Street, and one to the Community Centre up on the hill. The mayor himself would stay at the Old People's Home to keep an eye on the residents who hadn't vanished into thin air and to ponder the next move. He told the searchers that they should be discreet; there was no need to generate unnecessary publicity about this affair. In the general confusion, the mayor forgot that one of the pairs of

searchers he had just sent out consisted of a reporter from the local paper and her photographer.

The bus station was not included in the mayor's primary search area. In that location, however, a very angry, slightly built young man with long, greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard, and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back had already searched every corner of the building. Since there was no trace of either a very old man or a suitcase, the young man took some decisive steps toward the little man behind the only open ticket window, to find out where either or both had gone.

Although the little man was generally bored with his work, he still had his professional pride. So he explained to the loud-mouthed young man that the passengers' privacy was not something that could be compromised, adding firmly that under no circumstances whatsoever would he give him any information of the type that he wished to obtain.

The young man stood in silence for a moment. He then moved five yards to the left, to the not very solid door to the ticket office. He didn't bother to check whether it was locked. Instead he took a step back and kicked the door in with the boot on his right foot so that splinters flew in every direction. The little man did not even have time to lift the telephone receiver to phone for help, before he was dangling in the air in front of the young man, who grasped him firmly by the ears.

'I might not know anything about privacy, but I'm good at getting people to talk,' said the young man to the little ticket seller before he let him drop down with a bump onto his revolving office chair.

At which point the young man explained what he intended to do with the little man's genitals, with the help of a hammer and nails, if the little man did not comply with his wishes. The description was so realistic that the little man immediately

decided to say what he thought, namely that the old man in question had presumably taken a bus in the direction of Strängnäs. Whether the man had taken a suitcase with him, he couldn't say, as he was not the sort of person who spied on his customers.

The ticket seller then stopped talking to ascertain how satisfied the young man was with what he had said, and immediately determined that it would be best for him to provide further information. So he said that on the journey between Malmköping and Strängnäs there were twelve stops and that the old man could of course get out at any one of those. The person who would know was the bus driver, and according to the timetable he would be back in Malmköping at ten past seven that same evening, when the bus made its return journey to Flen.

The young man sat down beside the terrified little man with throbbing ears.

'Just need to think,' he said.

So he thought. He thought that he should certainly be able to shake the bus driver's mobile phone number out of the little man, and then call the driver and say that the old man's suitcase was actually stolen property. But then of course there was a risk that the bus driver would involve the police and that was not something the young man wanted. Besides, it was probably not so urgent really, because the old man seemed dreadfully old and now that he had a suitcase to drag around, he would need to travel by train, bus or taxi if he wanted to continue his journey from the station in Strängnäs. He would thus leave new tracks behind him, and there would always be somebody who could be dangled by the ears to say where the old man was heading. The young man had confidence in his ability to persuade people to tell him what they knew.

When the youth had finished thinking, he decided to wait for the bus in question to return so he could interview the driver without undue politeness.

When he had decided, the young man got up again, and explained to the ticket seller what would happen to him, his wife, his children and his home if he told the police or anybody else what had just occurred.

The little man had neither wife nor children, but he was eager to keep his ears and genitals more or less intact. So he gave his word as an employee of the national railways that no one would get a peep out of him.

That was a promise he kept until the next day.

The two-man search groups came back to the Old People's Home and reported on what they had seen. Or rather hadn't seen. The mayor instinctively did not want to involve the police and he was desperately trying to think of alternatives, when the local newspaper reporter dared to ask:

'And what are you going to do now, Mr Mayor?'

The mayor was silent for a few moments; then he said:

'Call the police, of course.'

God, how he hated the free press!

Allan woke when the driver kindly nudged him and announced that they had now reached Byringe Station. Shortly afterward, the driver manoeuvred the suitcase out the front door of the bus, with Allan close behind.

The driver asked if he could now manage on his own, and Allan said that the driver had no need to worry in that respect. Then Allan thanked him for his help and waved goodbye as the bus rolled out onto the main road again.

Tall fir trees blocked the afternoon sun and Allan was starting to feel a bit chilly in his thin jacket and indoor slippers. He



could see no sign of Byringe, let alone its station. There was just forest, forest, and forest in all directions – and a little gravel road leading to the right.

Allan thought that perhaps there were warm clothes in the suitcase he had on impulse brought along with him. Unfortunately the suitcase was locked and without a screwdriver or some other tool it was surely hopeless to try to open it. There was no other option but to start moving, otherwise he would freeze to death.

The suitcase had a strap at the top and if you pulled it, the suitcase rolled along nicely on its small wheels. Allan followed the gravel road into the forest with short, shuffling steps. The suitcase followed just behind him, skidding on the gravel.

After a few hundred yards, Allan came to what must be Byringe Station – a closed-down building next to a most definitely and absolutely former railway line.

Allan was a prize specimen as far as centenarians went, but it was all getting to be a bit too much. He sat down on the suitcase to gather his thoughts and strength.

To Allan's left stood the shabby, yellow two-storey station. All the windows on the bottom floor were covered with planks. To his right you could follow the no longer used railway line into the distance, straight as an arrow even deeper into the forest. Nature had not yet succeeded in entirely eating up the tracks, but it was only a matter of time.

The wooden platform was evidently no longer safe to walk on. On the outermost planking you could still read a painted sign: Do Not Walk on the Track. The track was certainly not dangerous to walk on, thought Allan. But who in his right mind would voluntarily walk on the platform?

That question was answered immediately, because at that very moment the shabby door of the station building was opened and

a man in his seventies wearing a cap and solid boots stepped out of the house. He clearly trusted the planks not to give way and he was entirely focused on the old man in front of him. His initial attitude was hostile, but then he seemed to change his mind, possibly as a result of seeing the decrepitude of this trespasser.

Allan sat on the newly stolen suitcase, not knowing what to say and in any case lacking the energy to say it. But he looked steadily at the man, letting him make the first move.

‘Who are you, and what are you doing in my station?’ asked the man with the cap.

Allan didn’t answer. He couldn’t decide whether he was dealing with friend or foe. But then he decided that it would be wise not to argue with the only person around, someone who might even let Allan inside before the evening chill set in. He decided to tell it like it was.

Allan told the man that his name was Allan, that he was exactly one hundred years old and spry for his age, so spry in fact that he was on the run from the Old People’s Home. He had also had time to steal a suitcase from a young man who by now would certainly not be particularly happy about it; his knees were not for the moment at their best and he would very much like to give them a break.

Allan then fell silent, awaiting the court’s verdict.

‘Is that so,’ said the man in the cap; then he smiled. ‘A thief!’

He jumped nimbly down from the platform and went over to the centenarian to have a closer look.

‘Are you really one hundred years old?’ he asked. ‘In that case, you must be hungry.’

Allan couldn’t follow the logic, but of course he was hungry. So he asked what was on the menu and if a nip of the hard stuff might be included.

The man with the cap stretched out his hand, introduced

himself as Julius Jonsson, and pulled the old man to his feet. He then announced that he would personally carry Allan's suitcase, and that roast elk was on the bill if that suited, and that there would absolutely be a nip of the hard stuff to go with it, or rather enough to take care of the knees and the rest of him too.

Julius Jonsson had not had anybody to talk to for several years, so he was pleased to meet the old man with the suitcase. A drop of the hard stuff first for one knee and then for the other, followed by a drop more for the back and neck, and then some to whet the appetite, all in all made for a convivial atmosphere. Allan asked what Julius did for a living, and got his whole story.

Julius was born in the north of Sweden, the only child of Anders and Elvina Jonsson. Julius worked as a labourer on the family farm and was beaten every day by his father who was of the opinion that Julius was good for nothing. When Julius was twenty-five, his mother died of cancer – which Julius grieved over – and shortly afterward his father was swallowed by the bog when he tried to rescue a heifer. Julius grieved over that too – because he was fond of the heifer.

Young Julius had no talent for the farming life (in this his father had essentially been right) nor did he have any desire for it. So he sold everything except a few acres of forest that he thought might come in handy in his old age. He went off to Stockholm and within two years had squandered all his money. He then returned to the forest.

With great enthusiasm, Julius put in a bid to supply five thousand electricity poles to the Hudiksvall District Electricity Company. And since Julius didn't concern himself with such details as employment tax and VAT, he won the bid, and with

the help of a dozen Hungarian refugees he even managed to deliver the poles on time, and was paid more money than he knew existed.

So far, all was well. The problem was that Julius had been obliged to cheat a little. The trees were not yet fully grown, so the poles were a yard shorter than what had been ordered. This would probably have gone unnoticed if it hadn't been for the fact that virtually every farmer in the area had just acquired a combine harvester.

The Hudiksvall District Electricity Company stuck up the poles, with cables criss-crossing fields and meadows in the area, and when it was harvest time, on one single morning the cables were pulled down in twenty-six locations by twenty-two different newly bought combine harvesters. The entire region had no electricity for weeks, as harvests were lost and milking machines stopped working. It was not long before the farmers' fury – at first directed against the Hudiksvall District Electricity Company – was turned against young Julius.

'The town slogan "Happy Hudiksvall" was not on many people's lips at that time, I can tell you,' Julius said. 'I had to hide at the Town Hotel in Sundsvall for seven months and then I ran out of money. Shall we have another swig of the hard stuff?'

Allan thought that they should. The elk had been washed down with beer too, and now Allan felt so comprehensively satisfied that he began to be almost afraid of dying.

Julius continued his story. After being nearly run down by a tractor in the centre of Sundsvall (driven by a farmer with a murderous look in his eyes), he realised that the locals weren't going to forget his little mistake for the next hundred years. So he moved a long way south and ended up in Mariefred where he did a bit of small-time thieving for a while until he tired of town life and managed to acquire the former station building in

Byringe for 25,000 crowns he happened to find one night in a safe at the Gripsholm Inn.

Here at the station, he now lived essentially through handouts from the state, poaching in his neighbour's forest, small-scale production and sale of alcoholic spirits from his home-distilling apparatus, and resale of what goods he could get hold of from his neighbours. He wasn't particularly popular in the neighbourhood, Julius went on, and between mouthfuls Allan answered that he could imagine as much.

When Julius suggested having one final snifter 'for dessert', Allan answered that he had always had a weakness for desserts of that kind, but that first of all he must seek out a toilet if there possibly happened to be one in the building. Julius got up, turned on the ceiling lamp since it was starting to get dark, and then pointed to the stairs saying that there was a functional water closet on the right. He promised to have two newly poured drams ready and waiting when Allan returned.

Allan found the toilet where Julius had said it would be. He stood in position to pee, and as usual the last drops didn't quite make it to the bowl. Some of them landed softly on his pee slippers instead.

Halfway through the process, Allan heard a noise on the stairs. His first thought was that it was Julius, going off with his newly stolen suitcase. The noise got louder. Somebody was climbing the stairs.

Allan realised that there was a chance that the steps he heard outside the door belonged to a slightly built young man with long, greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard, and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back. And that, if it was him, then it probably wasn't going to be a pleasant encounter.

\*